Richard I of England

Richard I was born in England in 1157, the son of King Henry II of England and Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine. Richard spent most of his life in France, the home of his mother. He became Eleanor’s favorite son. Richard frequently fought with his father. Twice he participated in rebellions against King Henry, with Eleanor’s support. However, Henry forgave Richard, and when Henry died in 1189, Richard was crowned king. Powerfully built, Richard was well suited for fighting. As a child, he was educated in poetry, music, and literature. He learned the refined manners and courage of the chivalric knight, and was respected for his cleverness in designing fortresses and planning military attacks. Because he had such a strong reputation for bravery in war, Richard was known to the English as Richard the Lionheart.

Stop Here and Discuss

- Who were Richard’s parents?
- What kind of relationship did Richard have with his parents?
- What personal characteristics was Richard known for?

When Richard became king of England, he taxed the people heavily to raise money for himself and his soldiers to fight the Third Crusade (also called the Crusade of Kings). When money from taxes was not enough, Richard sold government offices to the highest bidders. Desperate to find enough money to fight in the crusade, Richard declared, “I would have sold London herself if I could have found a buyer.” Although passionate about fighting in the crusade and recapturing Jerusalem, Richard was also practical. The crusading spirit of defeating non-Christian infidels had led to anti-Jewish laws and murders of Jews in England. Richard, however, tried to protect the Jews in England so that their tax money could help pay his expenses. By organizing the best equipment, the largest ships, the greatest number of troops, and the most money, Richard became the leading fighter in the Third Crusade.

Stop Here and Discuss

- Why did Richard tax the English so heavily?
- What was another way Richard raised money for the Third Crusade?
- Why did Richard want to protect the Jews?

Despite Richard’s organization, the Third Crusade was long and hard. The European crusaders needed to cope with a radically different environment (largely desert), disease, and fierce fighting by the Muslims, led by Salah al-Din. Richard and his troops conquered Sicily and Cyprus. In June 1191, Richard arrived at the Muslim town of Acre. Fellow crusader King Phillip II of France had begun to surround and attack Acre two months earlier. The Muslims gave up and surrendered to the crusaders. However, when Richard felt that Salah al-Din was too slow to follow through on a promised exchange of prisoners, he became frustrated and ordered the deaths of all 2,700 Muslims inside Acre’s city walls.

Stop Here and Discuss

- What made the crusades long and hard?
- Who led the Muslim troops?
- What did Richard do when it took the Muslim leader too long to follow through on a peace treaty?
By the time Richard and his soldiers finally neared Jerusalem, the men were exhausted and many had been hurt badly in battle. Realizing that he could not capture the city from the Muslims, Richard turned around without ever seeing Jerusalem and headed back to England. During the journey home, he was captured and handed over to Emperor Henry VI, who accused Richard of plotting against him. Eleanor worked hard to raise the enormous amount of money needed to pay for Richard’s release, and the English people were forced to pay even more taxes. Richard finally returned to England in March 1194.

Stop Here and Discuss
- What happened when Richard reached Jerusalem?
- What happened on his journey home?
- How was Richard freed from his kidnappers?

Richard was devoted both to the Catholic Church and to the knightly ideals of courage and honor in battle. He loved the thrill and challenge of battle and the respect he received for leading the fight in God’s name to capture the Holy Land. According to legend, when Richard and his troops were close to Jerusalem, Richard rode his horse to the top of a hill overlooking the Holy City. When he realized that after so long and so many battles, he might finally be able to see Jerusalem, he threw his shield over his face to cover his eyes and began to cry, pleading to God that he never wanted to look upon the city if he could not have the honor of capturing Jerusalem from the Muslims. Richard refused to enter Jerusalem as a loser. He promised, “O Holy Land, I commend thee to God, and, if His heavenly grace grants me so long to live, I hope, pledge to come one day to succor [help in time of distress] thee.”

Stop Here and Discuss
- What was Richard devoted to?
- Why do you think Richard felt so passionately about fighting in the crusade?
- What was Richard’s reaction when he rode up the hill that overlooked Jerusalem?