

The Legend of Richard the Lionheart:

- A figure between legend and reality

Who was he?

The man:

Richard the Lionheart was one of the most famous figures of the Middle Ages. Recently, the cinema and literature have made him one of the most emblematic figures of this period, by means of romanticised stories such as Robin Hood and Ivanhoe. We perpetuate his image as a warrior king going on Crusade and fighting valiantly in the Holy Land and Europe. But the real man and his time are little known and often seen by means of stereotypes and received ideas. As always, the reality was more complicated and more subtle.

- His physical appearance:

It is difficult to know precisely what the famous figures of the Middle Ages looked like. The few representations that we have of them, whether as illuminated manuscripts, bas reliefs, frescos or funeral effigies, are very imprecise and correspond to aesthetic and artistic attitudes which do not represent the real appearance of these people. Their features are often idealised and correspond more to the aesthetic principles of the period.

The descriptions of the physical appearance of characters mentioned in the chronicles are rare and often imprecise; Richard the Lionheart is no exception. It is nevertheless possible, by gathering together various pictorial and written sources, to gain an idea of what he may have looked like, although to try to establish his actual appearance would be totally illusory.

The chronicler Matthew Paris said, "Although physically comparable to the most handsome of men, he sometimes had, however, a terrifying look." Richard was also compared to his father Henry II, about whom some things are known. His father was described as a man of middle height, red haired, well-built and having the strength of a warrior. He was also described as struggling with excess weight, which seemed equally the case with Richard.

Nevertheless, Richard the Lionheart was described as having great strength and physical capacities more than sufficient to practise the profession of arms to the full. We have, therefore, the image of a man possessing the physique of a knight, of a warrior. Numerous chroniclers qualified this aspect of him by referring to his obesity at the end of his life and the fact that he had suffered the effects of the many battles and journeys that he had lived through.

- A psychological portrait:

We meet the same difficulties in trying to understand Richard's character. The texts of the Middle Ages repeatedly describe the King's conduct during the course of his life. But they are often biased, either favourably or critically, in describing his personality. Furthermore, they define these traits of character according to a system of values and a way of thinking that are different from ours. In this period, individualism was considered out of place and it is very difficult to discern what is characteristic of the person rather than what is attributed to them on the basis of their rank and status.

Even the powerful were described according to pre-established archetypes. Thus, numerous qualities and faults were ascribed to Richard the Lionheart, but they were entirely the same as were ascribed to other figures of his rank. There again, one notices many similarities with his father Henry II and other members of his family.

Richard the Lionheart was seen, in the 12th century as in the 21st, as a warrior king with an impulsive character. He was often criticised, even in his lifetime, for behaving more like a knight than like a king, travelling through his kingdom on a quest for personal glory rather than actually governing it. In this period, one expected a king to lead his men in battle and to lead them by example. But Richard had been personally involved in his military campaigns to the extent of being frequently wounded. It was, furthermore, this impulsiveness and thirst for glory in combat that led him to expose himself to danger beneath the walls of Châlus in 1199.

Unlike him, his enemies, particularly the kings of France, behaved much more like monarchs. Richard seemed to show great courage. The chroniclers of the time sang his praises for it and none of them omitted to emphasise this aspect of his character. His ferocity in combat was pointed out, although some events were exaggerated for the sake of propaganda, especially in the context of his incessant rivalry with his brothers, his father and the king of France.

His nickname “Lionheart” reflected this reputation. One becomes aware of this character trait when authors like Bertran de Born, a bellicose troubadour knight often very critical of the great figures of his time, praised Richard’s courage and valour. While considering this warlike aspect of his character, one must remember that Richard was regarded as a bloodthirsty and cruel man, particularly by the Muslims after his massacre of prisoners at the Siege of Acre during the Crusade, but equally, at other times, as a fearsome adversary, worthy of respect.

Richard’s other character traits are even more difficult to define. His generosity and his open-handedness towards his allies and servants seemed to have been counterbalanced by a tendency to get carried away by violent anger which led him to make ill-considered decisions. Once again, one can cite the example of the massacre of Muslim prisoners after the fall of Acre during the Third Crusade which brought about the breaking-off of diplomatic relations with Saladin and the Muslim armies. It seems that Richard had a volatile character, quick to lose his temper. Bertran de Born, in one of his songs, gave him the soubriquet “oc et no” (“yes and no” in Occitan) because he was always changing his mind.

Richard was also opportunistic and proud. He didn’t hesitate to ally himself with the king of France against his own father, although he was fighting him several months earlier. Equally, he showed himself to be arrogant and resentful.

The final point that the medieval texts emphasise about Richard’s character is that he was a bon viveur, a lover of all the pleasures of life, particularly entertaining. He was also literate and was interested in literature and poetry. He wrote several poems and songs during his captivity in the Holy Roman Empire in the manner of the troubadours whose art reached its peak in the Plantagenet fiefs of Aquitaine and Poitou. It is not easy to construct a portrait of Richard the Lionheart, as his character is so surrounded with legend. His death also contributed to the legend.

- The death of Richard

The events surrounding the death of Richard the Lionheart remain something of a mystery. The texts are often contradictory concerning the circumstances of his death, who it was that killed him, and the place where he died. By consulting several contemporary chroniclers, historians have been able to trace the events of Richard’s final days with a degree of accuracy. The Viscount of Limoges had not stopped stirring up rebellion against Richard, although the viscounty he held was part of Aquitaine, a Plantagenet domain. In 1198 the viscount rebelled anew against Richard. There was also talk of treasure, which he had found and refused to hand over to the king of England. This story shows that even in the Middle Ages a legend was growing around him.

Richard the Lionheart was furious and raised an army to go and subdue his vassal's rebellion. Therefore, he came to Perigord and then to Limousin, in the south-west of modern day Haute-Vienne. There he laid siege to the strongholds of the viscount and his vassals. At Châlus there was a stronghold belonging to the viscounts, the castle of Châlus-Chabrol. Mercadier, Richard's loyal captain for more than fifteen years, came and besieged the castle. Richard joined him there in March 1199.

On the evening of 3 March, after dinner, Richard went out to inspect the defences of the castle, and the siege works of his own men. The castle of Châlus-Chabrol must have been very different then from the ruins which can be seen today. Constructed in the 11th century and perhaps modified in the 12th, it probably consisted of a curtain wall and several towers. The ruins visible today date back to the second half of the 13th century, except for the chapel which dates from the 11th century and therefore must already have been there when the castle was besieged by Richard the Lionheart's army.

On this day, 3 March, a crossbowman, probably a Limousin knight by the name of Pierre Basile, targeted him, meanwhile defending himself from the arrows of Richard's soldiers, apparently with the aid of a frying pan, according to some texts. The bolt struck the king of England in the shoulder. We do not know exactly where the king was standing, or where the arrow was fired from, though it was probably from a tower or from a part of the curtain wall that no longer exists.

The point of the missile was driven deep into the King's shoulder. Having a tough attitude and caring little for his personal safety, Richard apparently tried to pull the bolt from his shoulder himself, breaking it and leaving the point in the wound. He suffered agonisingly from this wound for several days. With the limited skill of their time, the surgeons were not able to prevent the wound from becoming infected. Gangrene set in and the king died on 9 April 1199 at the side of his mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine. He was buried at the abbey of Fontevraud, near his father, although his heart was sent to Rouen and his entrails buried in the chapel of the castle of Châlus-Chabrol, which was finally taken by Mercadier just after the King had been wounded.

This death, though not very glorious in comparison with the events of Richard's life, is wreathed in mystery. Several versions of it were given in the Middle Ages and certain points remain unexplained. The story of the frying pan, of the hidden treasure, of Richard angrily tearing the bolt from his shoulder, are in all probability the stuff of legend. Even today, it is thought that a stone a few hundred metres from the castle marks the place where Richard was hit. In spite of the improbability of this legend, at the end of the First World War, a regiment of American soldiers wanted to dynamite the stone in order to take home the fragments, such is the power of the legend which surrounds Richard.

The legend of Richard the Lionheart in the Middle Ages:

The end of the 12th century was marked by numerous changes, social, cultural and economic. Among them, the emergence of chivalry- elite combatants linked by their own particular system of values- was very significant. Richard the Lionheart liked to think of himself as a paragon of this "order of chivalry" and was regarded as such.

The heir of one of the most powerful families of his time, he behaved from every point of view as a simple knight, seeking glory and fortune through his prowess as a warrior. Moreover, some chroniclers criticised him for this attitude, the role of a king being to command and govern, not to involve himself in actual combat.

In spite of that, his reputation was forged in combat and by the numerous campaigns that he led. His

nickname “Lionheart” reveals this warlike and heroic character which has been gradually amplified and exaggerated by the chroniclers in creating his legend. In the warlike and chivalric culture of the Middle Ages the lion was a symbol of ferocity, strength and courage.

Unlike his brothers, particularly Henry the Young King, he was not a keen participant in tournaments. He preferred “real” war. After his coronation in 1189 the legend really began to take shape. His exploits in the Holy Land were retold and exaggerated. His involvement in battles, whether at Acre, Arsouf or Jaffa, was from then on repeated and contributed to the creation of the legend of the “Knight King”, brave and fierce in combat, showing his generous largesse off the field of battle. Even some Muslims, like Al Adil, Saladin’s brother, acknowledged Richard’s qualities as a warrior and knight.

Wounded many times, he was often criticised for the foolhardiness that put his life in danger. His death from a crossbow bolt at Châlus confirmed the fears of his entourage. Although Richard, a knightly Crusader king, had been able to gain the respect of fearsome enemies like Saladin or Philip Augustus, he came to besiege a little castle in Limousin, his umpteenth minor feudal conflict, and there died from an arrow and not from a sword wielded on the field of battle. Right from the start, however, this inglorious death was embellished and embroidered into the legend.

In the centuries that followed his death, Richard continued to be a symbol of chivalry and its values. He became the subject of numerous epic poems and romances. He was compared to the greatest heroes: Julius Caesar, Roland and the Knights of the Round Table.

His father, Henry II, had already tried to identify himself with King Arthur, the model of a just and wise king. The myths attached to King Arthur and his knights were used from the end of the 12th century to the end of the medieval period to exemplify the chivalric culture at its best. Richard was compared to Lancelot or Gawain, models of chivalry, and even to Arthur himself. Like his father, he instigated a search for the tomb of this mythical king. By attaching themselves to the Arthurian myth, the Plantagenet dynasty tried to establish their legitimacy by means of the myths associated with England, Brittany and part of Northern France.

Very soon his life was considered legendary. His feats of arms, his role in the Crusade, his exploits in the Holy Land were all glorified, despite the fact that he had not taken Jerusalem. This is a typical aspect of the medieval mentality: appropriate behaviour matters more than the result. Thirty years after Richard’s death, Frederick II, the German emperor, succeeded in recapturing Jerusalem where Richard had failed. Yet Frederick was virulently criticised by his contemporaries because he retook the Holy City by negotiation and diplomacy, not by acts worthy of a knight.

Although Richard the Lionheart ruled for a relatively short time, the legend has come down through the centuries. A vast and diverse literature has been inspired by this figure, from the Middle Ages to the present time. His story has been widely exploited since the 19th century, a time when authors and other artists with a taste for heroic and colourful figures embraced him and his legend.

The legend of Richard in the 19th and 20th centuries:

The legendary exploits of Robin Hood took place, in the most recent versions, during the reign of Richard, and in particular during his period of captivity. The legend, more or less based on reality, appeared during the 13th century. However, one had to wait until the 16th century for this legend to be associated with the time of Richard the Lionheart. It was Walter Scott, in his novel *Ivanhoe* at the beginning of the 19th century who modernised and popularised the myth. Later, it served as inspiration to authors like Alexander Dumas.

The story relates the exploits of an outlaw finding refuge in Sherwood Forest near Nottingham. He was known for stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. Having become a popular story over time, this legend has been the subject of numerous adaptations in the 19th and 20th centuries, notably in the cinema. The latest, by Ridley Scott (2010), shows an image of Richard that is the opposite of what we are used to seeing. This image has the merit of showing a different aspect of the character but also remains the caricature of the good king of England, just and generous, for whose return everyone is waiting.

Richard the Lionheart embodies some of the fantasies that clothe the Middle Ages. This period is sometimes seen as a gloomy and obscure time, sometimes as a period of heroic adventures where damsels and knights lived in the shadow of castles. Richard the Lionheart was one of those figures, some real, like him, others mythical, like Arthur and his knights, who embody the Middle Ages in the eyes of the people of today. His era, the period of the Crusades and the troubadours, is also emblematic of this fantasy Middle Ages, and Richard the Lionheart was one of its principle figures.

Films featuring Richard the Lionheart:

(list not exhaustive)

Robin Hood and His Merry Men (1908): Percy Stow

First film adaptation of the legend of Robin Hood; silent film

The Crusades (1935): Cecil B de Mille

The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938): Michael Curtiz

Famous film starring Errol Flynn in his most celebrated role.

Ivanhoe (1952): Richard Thorpe

Starring Elizabeth Taylor; based closely on the novel by Sir Walter Scott this film depicts an English society divided between Saxons, Normans, and Jews. Richard the Lion Heart is only mentioned as a background figure.

Richard the Lionheart (1954): David Butler

Recounts the “exploits” of Richard the Lionheart during the Third Crusade.

The Lion in Winter (1968): Anthony Harvey

The adaptation of a stage play recounting a romanticised version of the intrigues and conflicts between Henry II, Eleanor of Aquitaine and their sons, including Richard the Lionheart.

Robin and Marian (1976): Richard Lester

Starring Sean Connery and Audrey Hepburn; a film about the legend of Robin Hood which depicts the death of Richard the Lionheart at Châlus, taking up again the legend of the treasure that Richard coveted.

Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves (1991): Kevin Reynolds

Another very romanticised cinema adaptation of the legend of Robin Hood. Here, the usurper of the throne of England during the captivity of Richard is not his brother John but the Sheriff of Nottingham. Richard the Lionheart (played by Sean Connery) appears at the end, on his return from captivity. He appears as the image of the good king whose return has been long awaited.

Kingdom of Heaven (2005): Ridley Scott

This film gives an approximate and romanticised rendering of the events which led to the Third Crusade: the resumption of hostilities between the Muslims and Christians in the Holy Land, and the taking of Jerusalem by Saladin. Richard the Lionheart appears at the end of the film as he

prepares to leave for the Crusade.

Robin Hood (2010): Ridley Scott

A recent re-telling of the famous legend of the outlaw of Sherwood Forest, which the director attempts to attach to specific (though not particularly relevant) historic events from the start of the 13th century. Richard the Lionheart appears at the beginning of the film as a tormented and less-than-glorious character, which has the merit of presenting him in a different light. In particular, the massacre of the prisoners at Acre during the Third Crusade and Richard's responsibility for this are covered. His death at Châlus is shown, though rather imaginatively.

Music and Literature featuring Richard the Lionheart:

(list not exhaustive)

Richard Cœur de lion (1784) : Grétry

Opera, staging the captivity of Richard the Lionheart after his return from the Crusade.

Ivanhoe (1819): Walter Scott

A novel which takes for its context the period of Richard's captivity, during which time his brother John is portrayed as a tyrannical ruler attempting to usurp the throne. *Ivanhoe* popularises the myth of Robin Hood and sets it at the time of Richard the Lionheart.

Maid Marian (1822): novel by Thomas Love Peacock

Le Prince des voleurs (1872) and *Robin Hood le Proscrit (1873)* : novels by Alexander Dumas
(*The Prince of Thieves* and *Robin the Outlaw*)