

CHRIS TREMELLEN : ELEANOR OF ACQUITAINE –

The life of Eleanor of Aquitaine

Eleanor was born in 1122. She was the daughter of William, Duke of Aquitaine , Count of Poitiers and owner of one of the largest domains in France (larger even than the King's). She was raised in one of Europe's most cultured courts and had an excellent education.

When both her father and brother died in 1137 leaving a vast inheritance to her, she became at 15 the most eligible heiress in Europe. The same year she married Louis, son of the King. Within a month Louis's father had died and he became king – Louis VI.

She was therefore a Queen at 15, a beautiful, capricious young woman who exerted considerable influence over Louis who adored her.

Ten years later she accompanied her husband on the second crusade. By then relations were poor between her and Louis and the failure of the crusade made things worse. Eleanor had produced 2 children, but both were girls and the lack of a son exacerbated the tension in the marriage.

In 1152 they were divorced and according to feudal custom Eleanor regained her possession of Aquitaine. Eleanor was now 30 and very wealthy.

Two months later she married Henry Plantagenet, Count of Anjou and Duke of Normandy and the grandson of Henry 1 of England.

In 1154 Henry became King of England and Eleanor was once again a Queen Consort. Under Henry's rule England, Normandy and West France were united.

For the next 20 years she played an active role in running Henry's empire, travelling between England and France.

During this time she had 5 sons and 3 daughters. William, who died aged 3, Henry, Richard (who later became Richard the Lionheart, Geoffrey, Duke of Brittany and John (known as Lackland until he became king in 1199). Their daughters were Matilda who married Henry, Duke of Saxony and Bavaria, Eleanor, who married Alphonse 8th, King of Castile and Joan who married William, King of Scilly and later Raymond, Count of Toulouse, creating strong links throughout Europe.

In 1173 two of her sons staged a revolt against Henry and involved Eleanor. However, Eleanor was 11 yrs older than Henry and had resented his infidelities for years so she may have instigated the revolt herself. The revolt however, failed and

Eleanor sought refuge in France but was captured and put in semi-imprisonment which only ended on Henry's death in 1189, 16 years later.

Her son Richard became King and Eleanor played her greatest political role as she prepared Richard's coronation.

By now she was 67, elderly by middle ages standards but she became closely involved in government and in 1190 acted as Regent while Richard went on the 3rd crusade. She kept the kingdom intact while Richard was away thwarting the intrigues of his brother John and Phillip of Spain.

Richard was taken prisoner by the Duke of Austria on his way home but Eleanor negotiated his release and travelled to escort him home after paying the ransom.

Richard died in 1199 without an heir and his brother John was crowned King. Eleanor was now nearly 80 and fearing the

disintegration of the Plantagenet domain, crossed the Pyrenees in 1200 in order to fetch her granddaughter Blanche from the Court of Castile and marry her to the son of the French King hoping that marriage would bring peace between the Plantagenets of England and the King of France.

During the same year she helped defend Anjou and Aquitaine against her grandson Arthur of Brittany securing John's French possessions.

Eleanor died on April 1st 1204 aged 82 and was buried in the Abbey Church at Fontevault next to Henry.

Her contribution to England extended beyond her lifetime. After the loss of Normandy in 1204 it was her own ancestral lands and not the old Norman territories that remained loyal to England.

Eleanor had been the most powerful woman in 12 century Europe.

She was described as being beautiful, imposing, just and humble and a patron of poets and writers and one of the most powerful and influential figures of the middle ages.