

ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE

Eleanor of Aquitaine (1137-1152) was one of the most powerful and influential figures of the Middle Ages. Inheriting a vast estate at the age of 15 made her the most sought-after bride of her generation. She would eventually become the queen of France, the queen of England and lead a crusade to the Holy Land. She is also credited with establishing and preserving many of the courtly rituals of chivalry.



ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE: EARLY LIFE

Eleanor was born in what is now southern France, most likely in the year 1122. She was well educated by her cultured father, William X, Duke of Aquitaine, thoroughly versed in literature, philosophy, and languages and trained to the rigors of court life when she became her father's heir presumptive at the age 5. An avid horsewoman, she led an active life until she inherited her father's title and extensive lands upon his death when she was 15, becoming in one stroke duchess of Aquitaine and by far the most eligible single young woman in Europe. She was placed under the guardianship of the king of France, and within hours was betrothed to his son and heir, Louis. The king sent an escort of 500 men to convey the news to Eleanor and transport her to her new home.

Did You Know?

Eleanor of Aquitaine is said to be responsible for the introduction of built-in fireplaces, first used when she renovated the palace of her first husband Louis in Paris. Shocked by the frigid north after her upbringing in southern France, Eleanor's innovation spread quickly, transforming the domestic arrangements of the time.

ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE BECOMES QUEEN OF FRANCE

Louis and Eleanor were married in July 1137, but had little time to get to know one another before Louis' father the king fell ill and died. Within weeks of her wedding, Eleanor found herself taking possession of the drafty and unwelcoming Cité Palace in Paris that would be her new home. On Christmas Day of the same year, Louis and Eleanor were crowned king and queen of France.

Louis and Eleanor's first years as rulers were fraught with power struggles with their own vassals—the powerful Count Theobald of Champagne for one—and with the Pope in Rome. Louis, still young and intemperate, made a series of military and diplomatic blunders that set him at odds with the Pope and several of his more powerful lords. The conflict that ensued culminated in the massacre of hundreds of innocents in the town of Vitry — during a siege of the

town, a great number of the populace took refuge in a church, which was set aflame by Louis's troops. Dogged by guilt over his role in the tragedy for years, Louis responded eagerly to the Pope's call for a crusade in 1145. Eleanor joined him on the dangerous—and ill fated—journey west. The crusade did not go well, and Eleanor and Louis grew increasingly estranged. After several fraught years during which Eleanor sought an annulment and Louis faced increasing public criticism, they were eventually granted an annulment on the grounds of consanguinity (being related by blood) in 1152 and separated, their two daughters left in the custody of the king.

ELEANOR BECOMES QUEEN OF ENGLAND

Within two months of her annulment, after fighting off attempts to marry her off to various other high-ranking French noblemen, Eleanor married Henry, Count of Anjou and Duke of Normandy. She had been rumored to have had an affair with her new husband's father, and was more closely related to her new husband than she had been to Louis, but the marriage went ahead and within two years Henry and Eleanor were crowned king and queen of England after Henry's accession to the English throne upon the death of King Stephen.

Eleanor's marriage to Henry was more successful than her first, although not lacking in drama and discord. Henry and Eleanor argued often, but they produced eight children together between 1152 and 1166. The extent of Eleanor's role in Henry's rule is largely unknown, although it seems unlikely that a woman of her reputed energy and education would have been wholly without influence. Nonetheless, she does not emerge again into a publicly active role until separating from Henry in 1167 and moving her household to her own lands in Poitiers. While the reasons for the breakdown of her marriage to Henry remain unclear, it can likely be traced to Henry's increasingly visible infidelities.

ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE AND THE COURT OF LOVE

Eleanor's time as mistress of her own lands in Poitiers (1168-1173) established the legend of the Court of Love, where she is reputed to have encouraged a culture of chivalry among her courtiers that had far-reaching influence on literature, poetry, music and folklore. Although some facts about the court remain in dispute amidst centuries of accumulated legend and myth, it seems that Eleanor, possibly accompanied by her daughter Marie, established a court that was largely focused on courtly love and symbolic ritual that was eagerly taken up by the troubadours and writers of the day and promulgated through poetry and song. This court was reported to have attracted artists and poets, and to have contributed to a flowering of culture and the arts. But to whatever extent such a court existed, it appears not to have survived Eleanor's later capture and imprisonment, which effectively removed her from any position of power and influence for the next 16 years.

ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE: IMPRISONMENT

In 1173, Eleanor's son "Young" Henry fled to France, apparently to plot against his father and seize the English throne. Eleanor, rumored to be actively supporting her son's plans against her estranged husband, was arrested and imprisoned for treason. Once apprehended, she spent

the next 16 years shuttled between various castles and strongholds in England, suspected of agitating against her husband's interests and said by some to have played a role in the death of his favorite mistress, Rosamund. After years of rebellion and revolt, Young Henry finally succumbed to disease in 1183 and died, begging on his deathbed for his mother's release. Henry released her, under guard, to allow her to return to England in 1184, after which she rejoined his household at least for part of each year, joining him on solemn occasions and resuming some of her ceremonial duties as queen.

ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE: REGENCY AND DEATH

Henry II died in July 1189 and their son Richard succeeded him; one of his first acts was to free his mother from prison and restore her to full freedom. Eleanor ruled as regent in Richard's name while he took over for his father in leading the Third Crusade, which had barely begun when Henry II died. On the conclusion of the crusade, Richard (known as Richard the Lionheart) returned to England and ruled until his death in 1199. Eleanor lived to see her youngest son, John, crowned king after Richard's death, and was employed by John as an envoy to France. She would later support John's rule against the rebellion of her grandson Arthur, and eventually retire as a nun to the abbey at Fontevraud, where she was buried upon her death in 1204.

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