AROUND THE WORLD IN...

1200

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The English
A Family Feud Shapes History

The year 1200 in Europe was the high point of the Middle Ages, the period from about 500 to 1500. People often think of life back then as a fairy-tale world, full of kings, castles, knights in shining armor, and ladies in tall pointy hats.

The reality was different. Most people didn’t live in castles and couldn’t afford armor. The pointy hats were only in fashion for a few decades. Even the kings didn’t have fairy-tale lives. For example, look at King Henry II of England and his wife, Queen Eleanor. These days we’d call them a dysfunctional family. In their own time people said they were descended from the Devil.

Henry ruled England and more than half of what is now France. His great-grandfather William I had been the Duke of Normandy in France before conquering England and making himself its king in the year 1066. The family kept its lands in France, and Henry II gained more French territory when he married Eleanor. She was the countess of the rich French province of Aquitaine.

Henry and Eleanor had a long marriage and a large family. They founded a line of kings,
known as the Plantagenet dynasty, that lasted nearly 250 years. Their marriage, however, was not always peaceful. They fought a lot, often leading armies against each other. When Henry defeated Eleanor in 1173, he had her locked up in Salisbury Castle. She was only set free sixteen years later, when Henry died.

Henry and Eleanor had four sons: Henry, Richard, Geoffrey, and John. Today two of them are still famous. People think of King Richard the Lion-Hearted as a great hero, and John gets remembered as wicked King John, the enemy of Robin Hood.

When the boys were growing up, the writers of their time said other things about them. A monk named Gerald of Wales wrote that all four of them were handsome and smart but couldn’t stay out of trouble. Young Henry was popular with everyone, but people said he spent too much time partying instead of learning how to

After decades of fighting each other, King Henry II and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine were buried side by side at Fontevraud Abbey in France. Today these beautifully carved and painted tombs are empty. When the abbey was raided during the French Revolution, six hundred years after Henry and Eleanor’s time, the royal tombs were broken open and the bones were thrown away.
rule. Richard was a famous poet and one of the most skillful warriors in the kingdom, but some people worried that fighting was all he cared about. Geoffrey was fun and probably the smartest of the four, but he loved to talk people into fighting, just to see what would happen. John had the bad luck

This romantic picture of King Richard the Lion-Hearted feasting with Robin Hood and his merry men was painted centuries after the king's death. It may not tell us much about what life was like for real kings and outlaws in the twelfth century, but it says a lot about Richard's lasting popularity as a warrior king.
DEVIL'S BROOD

King Henry's sons had always known the legend that their family was related to the Devil. They laughed about it and used it as an excuse when people complained that they fought too much.

The story went that one of King Henry's ancestors had been married to a beautiful woman named Melusine. He loved her very much but couldn't help noticing that she was always absent from church when Communion was given. One day he made her stay. As the church service began, she screamed, flew out the window, and was never seen again. It turned out that Melusine was the daughter of the Devil. But by then she and her husband had two sons, half human and half demon. So Henry, Richard, Geoffrey, and John could say that they came by their devilishness naturally.

Their parents probably got very sick of that excuse!

When this sculpture from Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was carved, Henry and Eleanor's three elder sons were around eight, six, and five years old. Every time they went to church they saw images like this of devils and angels weighing human souls.