

Stephen's Claim to the Throne

Rebecca

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle informs us that King Henry I of England died in 1135. Before his death, he had forced all of the Baronage and the Church to swear fealty to his daughter Matilda. However, following his death, Stephen of Blois ascended the throne instead of Matilda. Stephen was able to do this for several reasons. He had a hereditary right to the throne, he was the first to make a claim when England needed a King, he had the support of the Church and the Baronage, and he was probably considered to be more appropriate for the job than Matilda.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle informs us that Stephen, brother of the Count of Blois in France, was the grandson of William the Conqueror through his mother Adela, and the nephew of Henry I. He therefore had two direct links to the throne. He had been related to three previous kings, including the most recent. This would certainly have provided Stephen with a very legitimate claim. However it is interesting to compare his claim to that of Matilda. Matilda was actually the legitimate daughter of Henry I, and so you would assume that she would have had a more valid claim, being more closely related.

At the time of Henry's death, both Stephen and Matilda were overseas. Stephen's prompt action was a major factor in his coronation. It was literally a case of who succeeded in getting to the throne first. In his *History of the English Speaking Peoples*, Winston Churchill informs us that Stephen was in Blois at the time of Henry's death, whereas Matilda was in Anjou with her husband Geoffrey the Count of Anjou. So it was, history tells us, that Stephen was the first to arrive, and was able to claim the throne for himself, as the Chronicle tells us in the following words.

"uring this was his nephew come into England, Stephen of Blois, and came to London; the folk of London received him, sent after archbishop William Curbeil, and hallowed him king on midwinter's day" (ASC, 1135)

Matilda did not actually manage to appear in England to challenge Stephen until 1139, four years after Stephen had seized the throne. More importantly, Stephen had the support of the Baronage and the Church. All of the Baronage and the Church had sworn fealty to King Henry's daughter Matilda, but after Henry's death, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle tells us that the barons and leading Churchmen transferred their allegiance to Stephen. These nobles and leading Churchmen included Geoffrey de Mandeville, Ranulf the Earl of Chester, Chancellor Roger, Archbishop William Curbeil, Bishop Roger of Salisbury, Bishop Alexander of London, and Bishop Nigel of Ely. Obviously all were in the state of mind that Stephen was more appropriate for the job than Matilda. With such support, Stephen was able to take full control of England, and was crowned in Westminster Abbey before Matilda was even able to challenge him. An interesting point to consider is that Stephen was among those who had sworn fealty to the Empress because he owned vast estates in England. However, he ignored his oath and seized the throne when the opportunity arose.

Today we may consider that hereditary right is more important than support for a person to succeed into positions in a monarchy. However this was not completely true for the time at which this particular accession occurred. Winston Churchill (pg.337) informs us that in Anglo-Saxon times in England, all that was needed for someone to succeed to the throne was for them to have the most support. However during the time of Stephen and Matilda, the idea

of hereditary right applying before support was only just developing, so at this time a king needed to have both hereditary right and support. A king with a legitimate claim in both these areas would also have been required to be involved in many practical duties such as warfare and fighting. This meant that many probably saw a woman as unfit for the role of being King. So it may have been that this was another reason for many to reject the Empress Matilda as the leader of England.

R.H.C. Davis, in writing about this particular incident, says that the English throne was Maud's by hereditary right; Stephen's by election and coronation (Davis, in Churchill, p.350) The fact remains that Matilda was overlooked in her claim to the throne. It was Stephen who gained the throne, not just because he was crowned before Matilda could challenge, but also because he had hereditary right, was probably considered more appropriate for the position, and had the support of the Church and Baronage(a must for a king of the time). Without these advantages, Stephen may not have succeeded in seizing the crown of England.

Bibliography

Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 1996, Coombe Books, Surrey(England).

Hallam, Elizabeth, 1986, *The Plantagenet Chronicles*, George Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London.

Churchill, Winston, 1969, Anarchy in England, in *History of the English Speaking Peoples*, Vol.11, pgs.337, 342-344, 350-356.