

## Was the 'anarchy' of King Stephen's reign a reaction to Anglo-Norman government?

The first thing to note regarding the turbulent period of 1139-53 is that the 'anarchy' described by many people never took the form of a general uprising against the principle of monarchy or royal government. Instead the 'disturbance and wickedness and robbery'<sup>1</sup> which the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* notes dogged Stephen's reign was a deliberate act of rebellion by 'the powerful men who were traitors against him'<sup>2</sup> And, indeed, it is difficult to find any participant who rose up because of the *system* of Anglo-Norman government up to that point. Henry I's authority was in sharp contrast, supreme, and even Orderic Vitalis was driven to comment that 'I confidently assert that no king of the realm of England was ever richer or more powerful in that which pertains to worldly glory than Henry.'<sup>3</sup> Up to a point, however, that stability was dependent of Henry's leadership. It was his legacy, or rather (since 1120) lack of it, which had a major impact on destabilising England after 1138. In common with many strong leaders, his successor was unable to command the prestige of the old regime.

Essentially, it is highly unlikely that the disturbances and continual noble uprising of 1138-53 could have occurred if Henry had left a legitimate son to succeed to the throne after him. Although England had seen politicking over the succession after the death of every monarch since Harold Harefoot, the successful candidate had always proved himself strong and capable of retaining loyalty within a short time. At this juncture, however, there were no very strong candidates for the throne. Henry I's reaction to the loss of his heir after the disaster of the White Ship was to have his nobles to swear allegiance to Matilda, his daughter. As probably all present could recognise, such an oath would quickly be forgotten. William of Malmesbury's comment on the wreck of the White Ship that 'no ship ever brought so much misery to England'<sup>4</sup> may well be right, for it ushered a power vacuum of sufficient force to allow ambitious noblemen to become kingmakers. As he also said about William Ætheling 'it was confidently expected that in him the hopes of England, like the tree cut down, might through this youth blossom and bring fruit. But God saw otherwise, for this illusion vanished into air.'<sup>5</sup> The lack of strength of the claimants to Henry's throne served to throw the office of kingship onto the goodwill of nobles whose interests lay much closer to home. No occupant of the throne after Henry's death could therefore have sat easily.

Henry, in common with his father had moulded a system of administration which was largely run by men personally indebted to him. To a few of these 'new men' Henry was able to entrust the bulk of central bureaucracy; to more, he gave the shrievalties and the responsibilities of implementing central decisions. As it was to a great extent his own invention, and he understood that it depended ultimately on himself. Stephen, demonstrably, did not and RHC Davis pin-points a major cause of the disturbances as being the arrest of this ruling bureaucracy in the shape of the bishops of Salisbury, Ely and Lincoln<sup>6</sup>. What Stephen thought was a dangerous accumulation of power was the direct policy of Henry I, and its removal certainly also destabilised the English system of government. This is to say nothing of the unfortunate manner with which Stephen accomplished this, to which I will return.

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<sup>1</sup> ASC version E 1035

<sup>2</sup> ASC version E 1035

<sup>3</sup> quoted in Green *The Government of England under Henry I* p.219

<sup>4</sup> *English Historical Documents* volume 2 no.8

<sup>5</sup> *English Historical Documents* volume 2 no.8

<sup>6</sup> Davis *King Stephen*

Another of the tools used by Henry I to maintain his authority was a common one in the medieval era: dispossession and redistribution. While this technique worked well for strong rulers, such as Henry, it stored up trouble for rulers less secure on their thrones. For while redistribution created supporters for the king, it also created a class of people whose interest lay in uprooting the *status quo* of land tenure. Thus being opposed to Stephen, dispossessed nobles would naturally become supporters of Matilda. More widely, it polarised society between those who had the lands they claimed, and those with grievances over what they perceived to be theirs. As RHC Davis notes, 'Wherever we turn, the politics of Stephen's reign dissolve into family history.'<sup>7</sup> Two opposing parties existed, and it was the personal power of the king which enforced the *status quo* of land-holding, and the peace. Dividing the nobility between the two claimants for the throne meant that support for royal power was no longer sufficient to crush the threats at hand.

Some historians have argued that the lawlessness of Stephen's reign, was a reaction by the barons to the fact that land-tenure under the Anglo-Norman system was non-hereditary. Citing in this instance the various charters to Geoffrey de Mandeville, it is clear that part of his price for support to Stephen in 1140 is that he should be 'earl of the country of Essex in hereditary'<sup>8</sup> while in 1141 he receives 'the ward of the Tower of London...to have and to hold by him and his heirs from me and my heirs... and the offices of justice and sheriff in London and Middlesex in hereditary.'<sup>9</sup> However, this as I see it was not a novel idea - perhaps the novelty might be that such charters implied an exemption from the system of relief. One of the most common baronial complaints, it gave a cause for grievance against the king. It certainly did not constitute a major reason for revolt and rebellion against Stephen personally. As Geoffrey's writs show, barons used hereditary as a price for their support against either king or empress, but not as a *causis belli*.

These factors relating to the Anglo-Norman system of government are insufficient to account for the lawlessness of Stephen's reign. A power vacuum could easily have been filled and with the assumption of authority by a successful candidate, order could quickly have returned to England. That it did not, is the result of political pressures caused personally by Stephen in the first years of his reign.

Foremost amongst these was the extreme suspicion which many nobles had regarding Stephen's character, and the way he carried his political career. We can see from William of Malmesbury's account of the Council held in Winchester in 1138, following Stephen's arrest of the bishops involved in the administration of the realm. It talks of 'the disgraceful detention of the bishops'<sup>10</sup> and 'a dreadful crime for the king to have been so led astray as to have laid violent hands upon his subjects...in the security of his court'<sup>11</sup>. This was hardly the way a king should act, and cast severe doubt over the legitimacy of not only Stephen's actions, but also his very position. Davis postulates that Miles of Gloucester's defection to Matilda's camp was a result of this. Yet it did not stop Stephen from committing the same actions twice more, firstly by arresting Geoffrey de Mandeville in 1143 and then Rannulf of Chester in 1145. The fact that the king resorted to devious means to rid himself of potential threats had two results. The first was to devalue the king's reputation and honour, the second was to implacably create enemies. Both directly led to more turmoil; violence in suppressing these needless rebellions; and an increase in the sense of malaise as regards the upholding of the law. Davis quotes the abbot of St Albans saying to a recluse: 'I am going to court. Of my return I know nothing, for I fear the inconstancy of the

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<sup>7</sup> RHC Davis *What happened in Stephen's reign*, **History** 1964

<sup>8</sup> *English Historical Documents* volume 2 no.255

<sup>9</sup> *English Historical Documents* volume 2 no.45

<sup>10</sup> *English Historical Documents* volume 2 no.8

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

king'<sup>12</sup> which is a clear indictment on the sense of stability around the king. Stephen did also have other methods for debasing his own reputation other than merely violating his own peace. Robert, earl of Gloucester's defection was caused by an attempted ambush on him when fighting against Geoffrey of Anjou, a story that is recounted in Orderic Vitalis's, William of Malmesbury's and Robert de Torigni's accounts. Stephen appeared extremely able at creating new enemies from among his nobles, though possibly, his treatment of captured prisoners was too lenient, not too harsh. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* describes Stephen as 'a mild man, gentle and good, and did not exact the full penalties of the law'<sup>13</sup> - that is to say that unlike his uncle, Stephen did not blind or imprison for life those unfortunate enough to see the interior of his castles.

Stephen's actions also succeeded in alienating the Church from supporting the throne. Although William of Blois was Stephen's own brother, William of Malmesbury quotes him as saying 'Justice was no longer enforced against the presumptuous; peace was brought to nought almost within a year; bishops were made captive and robbed; abbeyes were sold; churches stripped of their treasures; and the counsels of the wicked prevailed, while those of the good were despised.'<sup>14</sup> Although we must remember the timing of the speech (while Stephen was imprisoned) and the bias of William of Malmesbury himself, it remains the case that Stephen's shaming of the administrative bishops was one of the touchstones of rebellion at the outset of his reign. Cistercian influence in both England and Rome also gnawed away at his reputation at the end of his reign.

This much can be attributed to Stephen personally as regards the destabilisation of the country in the early part of the civil war. Wider trends were also coming to the fore, over which Stephen had no direct control. Many of these were due to the fashion in which the war was developing. Its character, at least in the early stages, provoked an atmosphere where defection from one faction to the other was common. After he was imprisoned at the battle of Lincoln, an understandable wish to appear to support the victorious side led to nobles forgetting oaths made at Stephen's Easter 1138 court; following the rout of Winchester, barons changed sides again. In this way, normal ties of loyalty and fealty were destroyed, and one can easily see how the word 'anarchy' is applied to this period. Round has attempted to show that much of this was attempts by barons to jockey for greater concessions from one side or the other. Another reason for the fluidity of loyalty lies in the essential fact that many nobles acted to preserve their own patrimonies as best they could. Norman magnates often still had lands on both sides of the Channel, and Geoffrey of Anjou's successful invasion of Normandy encouraged many barons (including Waleran of Meulan) to change allegiance, in the hope of saving their French lands.

With this general collapse of authority at the centre, is it surprising that lawlessness should spread to the localities? A normal tactic of rebellious nobles was to garrison a castle and ravage the area around it (as shown especially by Geoffrey de Mandeville in 1143)<sup>15</sup> This of course had a very drastic effect on the local population, such that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says that 'If two or three men came riding to a village, all the villagers fled, because they expected them to be robbers.'<sup>16</sup> In Normandy, the invading army of Geoffrey of Anjou was forced to live off the land, and as Orderic notes, although he tried to restrict damage, and the desecration of holy objects, he could not keep his men in order<sup>17</sup> Local populations bore the brunt not only of financing the warring armies, but also of coping with the direct results of war in general ravaging.

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<sup>12</sup> quoted in RHC Davis *What happened in Stephen's reign*, **History** 1964

<sup>13</sup> ASC version E 1137

<sup>14</sup> *English Historical Documents* volume 2 no.8

<sup>15</sup> cf. Davis *King Stephen* pp80-86

<sup>16</sup> ASC version E 1137

<sup>17</sup> quoted in Bradbury *Stephen and Matilda*

This, as far as I can see was the complex series of causes which destabilised England in this period. Although the institutional structures bequeathed by Henry I were difficult for an incoming ruler to assume - in particular the perennial problem of disaffected and dispossessed nobles - they were manageable. The cause of the disturbances of Stephen's reign lie to a great extent on the way that Stephen himself handled the legacy of Henry. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle's* verdict on Stephen is that he took 'action without judgement'<sup>18</sup>. He did not foresee consequences of actions such as the arrest of the bishops in charge of the king's chancery and treasury. He arrested nobles and bishops in a sly and deceitful manner, yet when they were in his power he released them, at which point they rebelled almost to a man (and in the case of Matilda at Arundel, to a woman). In conclusion, the Anglo-Norman system contained the seeds of disturbance, but it took Stephen's flawed political actions to reap the full harvest of anarchy from them.

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<sup>18</sup> ASC version E 1137