

History Topic of the Month

Empress Matilda: England's forgotten Queen

If you ask people who the first female ruler of England was, not many would say "Empress Matilda". But in the twelfth century, Henry I (son of William the Conqueror) named his daughter, Matilda, his heir. It was the first time a woman had ever been made the heir to the throne of England. It was also the last time for nearly 400 years.

Perhaps this was because after Henry I's death, the country collapsed into a civil war that lasted nearly twenty years. The war was fought between Matilda and Henry I's nephew, Stephen, who also claimed the throne. It was such a time of chaos that historians later called it "The Anarchy".

Matilda was a determined, intelligent and proud woman. If she was a man, she would probably have been called one of the greatest princes of the age. Because she was a woman, some people didn't trust her, and thought her strength was unnatural. She was forced to fight for everything she had.



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A portrait of the Empress Matilda from a 15th century manuscript



Contributer: © World History Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Henry I was the son of William the Conqueror. He succeeded his brother William II but had very few legitimate children.

Matilda's early life: Becoming Empress

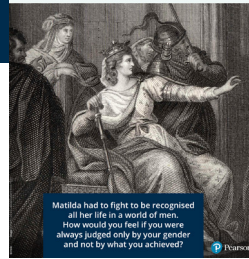
Matilda was the first child born of Henry I's marriage (Henry I also had dozens of children outside of marriage). When Matilda was 12 years old in 1114 she was married to Henry V of Germany. Despite her young age, she governed Germany in her husband's absence. When Henry V was made the Holy Roman Emperor, Matilda claimed the title of Empress. Henry V died in 1125. The couple had no children, so Matilda returned to Normandy (part of her father's lands).

Note: There were not very many first names in medieval England! This story contains two Matildas, three Henrys and then most of the lords were called either Robert, Thomas, Geoffrey or William!

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Disaster!

Henry I had a son, Prince William. In November 1120 Prince William and 300 of his friends and servants boarded a ship, *The White Ship*, sailing from Normandy. Prince William hosted a drunken party onboard. Some of the guests were so drunk they had to leave the ship – Henry I's nephew, Stephen of Blois, was one of these. Prince William ordered *The White Ship* to sail for England at top speed in the middle of the night. In the dark, the ship hit a rock and sank. Only one person survived. Prince William and several important lords were drowned. Overnight, Henry I was left without a male heir.



Contributer: © Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo

The realms of Henry I
and Matilda



Contributer: © Chronicle / Alamy Stock Photo

The sinking of *the White Ship* – in the English Channel near the Normandy coast off Barfleur, on 25th November 1120. Those who drowned included Prince William, the only surviving legitimate son and heir of Henry I.

Who will be the next King?

Henry had many other male children. Unfortunately, none of them were legitimate – and the tradition in England was that only legitimate children could inherit. In 1126, Henry I decided he had no choice: the only legitimate child he had who could succeed him was Matilda. Over Christmas that year he made his lords swear an oath to support Matilda as Queen.

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Married again

To help Matilda's claim, in 1128 Henry I arranged for her to marry Geoffrey, the 15-year-old Count of Anjou (Matilda was now 26). The couple had a difficult marriage, but Matilda gave birth to a son, another Henry, in 1133. She now had a male heir, which would help her claim to the English throne.

Matilda and Geoffrey were worried that there was not enough support for her claim to the throne in England. They asked Henry I to give them control of his castles in Normandy, which would help make her claim to the throne stronger. But Henry was worried about losing Normandy and refused.

Out with the old king, in with the new

In December 1135 Henry I suddenly died. While his body was prepared for burial, his nephew, Stephen of Blois (the one who had left The White Ship before it sailed), rushed to London, arriving a week after the king had died. Stephen had sworn to support Matilda – but instead he seized power, claiming Henry I had left him the throne on his deathbed.

It did not take long to persuade people that it was “more natural” that a man become king. Stephen was crowned on Boxing Day 1135. Matilda was furious – but was heavily pregnant and stuck in France. Matilda ordered Stephen's lands in Normandy attacked.



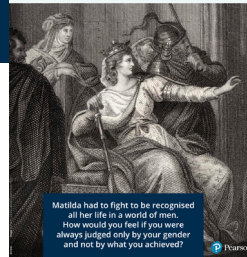
Contributer: © World History Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Empress Matilda and her forces march to Gloucester in this Victorian engraving.

Anarchy: Civil War breaks out

In 1138 Matilda's powerful half-brother, Robert Earl of Gloucester, declared he would support Matilda's claim. Revolts broke out in Kent and the South West. The Scots also announced they would support Matilda, and invaded North England. Matilda again attacked Normandy.

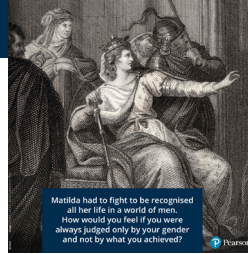
Stephen's armies beat the Scots and fought the rebels in England. Meanwhile, Robert of Gloucester and Matilda prepared an army to invade England.



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Matilda's early victories

In 1139 Matilda invaded England. She set up her court in Gloucester. By 1140, she controlled an area of England that stretched from Cornwall and Devon to Gloucester, Bristol, South Wales and Oxford.



Contributer: © Niday Picture Library / Alamy Stock Photo

At the Battle of Lincoln, 1141 King Stephen was taken prisoner by Matilda's forces

In February 1141 Robert of Gloucester defeated Stephen in the Battle of Lincoln and took him prisoner. Stephen was imprisoned in Bristol Castle. Matilda seized the royal treasury and persuaded the Church to support her. Many lords now joined her side. In Easter, Matilda was named "Lady of England". With her army she travelled to London to be officially crowned Queen.

Unfortunately, London supported Stephen. They saw Matilda as unwomanly and arrogant and she was very unpopular in the city. Matilda may have been proud – but so was nearly every male king that came before her (and after her). In June 1141 London revolted against Matilda and she was forced to flee to Oxford. She never visited London again. It was the closest she came to a coronation.

Frustrations and defeats for Matilda

Stephen's wife (also, confusingly, called Matilda!) raised an army to free her husband. In September 1141 they trapped Robert of Gloucester in Winchester. While trying to escape, his army was nearly destroyed and Robert was captured.

Robert of Gloucester and King Stephen were then released in a prisoner of exchange – it is possible this was agreed without Matilda's knowledge. The Church switched sides to support Stephen and he was crowned again on Christmas Day 1141. Many lords who had changed sides earlier, changed back again to support Stephen.



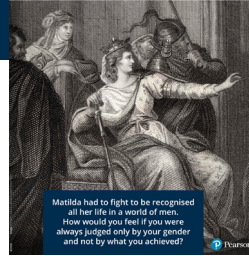
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Empress Matilda refuses the pleas of Stephen's wife, Queen Matilda, to release her husband. Some of Empress Matilda's lords may later have decided to exchange Robert of Gloucester for King Stephen without her agreement.

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The Great Escape

Matilda and her armies regrouped. Robert of Gloucester campaigned against Stephen's castles in Normandy. While he was gone, Stephen attacked Matilda's English lands in 1142.



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In summer 1142, Matilda was trapped in Oxford castle surrounded by Stephen's army. Oxford Castle was almost impossible to capture and Stephen started a long siege. Just before Christmas, Matilda made a daring escape. With just a few loyal knights, she sneaked out of the castle at night and crossed a frozen river. They wore white as camouflage against the snow.

Matilda's daring escape from Oxford Castle in December 1142 is shown in this Edwardian illustration.

The war becomes a stalemate

Matilda set up her new court in Salisbury. Her army nearly captured Stephen again at the Battle of Wilton in July 1143 but he escaped. Neither side was strong enough to completely beat the other.

For much of the rest of the decade, although there were some battles, there was stalemate (today we'd call it a 'cold war'). Robert of Gloucester died in 1147 and in 1148 Matilda returned to Normandy.

A new Henry ends the war

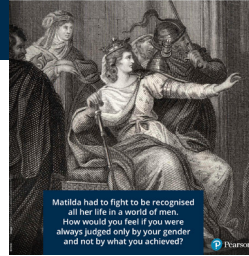
When he grew older Matilda's dynamic son Henry took control of his mother's campaign. He was already Duke of Normandy and he was married to the ambitious and brilliant Eleanor of Aquitaine, a woman as remarkable as Matilda. By 1153 Henry and his allies controlled a third of England.



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Eleanor of Aquitaine was the wife of Henry II and another very influential and powerful queen – what can you find out about her?

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Stephen's son, Prince Eustace, died in 1153 – now he no longer had an heir. That summer an agreement was made: Henry would become Stephen's heir. Stephen may have only agreed to this until he had another son: but he then died suddenly of an illness in 1154. Matilda's son Henry was crowned Henry II.

What about Matilda?

Matilda lived the rest of her life in Normandy, governing the area for her son, and was one of his closest advisors.

Matilda was never to be crowned Queen of England. While many at the time called her a proud woman, she was probably no different from the hundreds of male lords at the time. In fact, if she was a man her determination and ambition would have been praised!

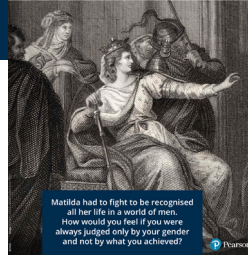
Her fight to be crowned Queen of England shows what was possible for women at the time – but also the limits placed on them. People could accept a woman governing lands – but many of them still could not accept one ruling the whole country.

Discussion points

- Matilda had to fight to be recognised all her life in a world of men. How would you feel if you were always judged only by your gender and not by what you achieved?
- How do you think the people around her would have reacted to Matilda if she was a man?
- For centuries *The White Ship* was one of the most famous disasters in British history, as famous as the Titanic is today. It was like Air Force One crashing. Can you imagine the impact if something like that happened today?
- Stephen nearly drowned on *The White Ship*. If he had died, do you think Matilda would have been able to claim the throne?
- During the Anarchy, the people of England thought they lived in a time "when Christ and his saints were asleep". Civil war can see neighbours and even families fight each other. How would you feel if you were caught up in a war like that?
- Many people fought and died for Matilda's claim to the throne. What does this tell you about their attitude to having Matilda as their Queen?
- Matilda had Stephen as her prisoner and she let him go. Do you think this was a mistake?
- Eleanor of Aquitaine was another remarkable woman – what can you find out about her?

About the author

Alistair Nunn, Pearson's Product Manager for Humanities Teaching and Learning resources has a degree in History. He created this worksheet using various sources included below.



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Bibliography



Books

Matilda: Empress, Queen, Warrior by Catherine Hanley

She Wolves: The Women Who Ruled England Before Elizabeth I by Helen Castor

The Anarchy: The Darkest Days of Medieval England by Teresa Cole

Stephen and Matilda: The Civil War of 1139–1153 by Jim Bradbury

The White Ship: Conquest, Anarchy and the Wrecking of Henry I's Dream by Charles Spencer

Websites



[Historic UK – Empress Maud](#)

[History Extra – Empress Matilda, daughter of Henry I: a queen in a king's world](#)

[Reading Museum – Death and Anarchy: The White Ship Disaster](#)

[History Extra – Your guide to the Anarchy, the bloody battle between Stephen and Matilda](#)

[Sky History – 9 facts about 'The Anarchy': England's dark period of lawlessness and war](#)



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