

PART 1: THE REIGN OF HENRY II, 1154–1189

1 The Restoration of Royal Authority, 1154–1166



The focus of this chapter is on the beginning of Henry II's reign. Henry fought to establish his authority over his lands in England, the English Church and the territories that he had a claim to in France. We will look into:

- the political, economic and social condition of England in 1154: the character and aims of Henry II; the strengths and weaknesses of Henry II's position at his accession
- the restoration of royal authority under Henry II: Scotland and Wales; the role of the barons; the role of royal finance; the role of justice and the law
- the place of religion in society: the political role of the Church; ecclesiastical courts; the importance of the Church in finance and the economy
- Henry II and England's overseas territories: Henry II's relations with France; Normandy, Gascony and Aquitaine; the lordship of Ireland

The political, economic and social condition of England in 1154

In 1154 England was emerging from one of the most traumatic periods in its recent history. In 1135, Stephen, the nephew of Henry I, had seized the throne upon his uncle's death. Henry's daughter, known as Empress Matilda, had opposed this. The consequences of this were that the barons of England picked sides and there was political and military conflict. This period of intermittent civil war, known to historians as 'the anarchy', occurred between 1135 and 1154. Although some barons, such as

A/AS Level History for AQA: Royal Authority and the Angevin Kings, 1154–1216



Key terms

Manor: a unit of land usually held by a knight and with its own local court.

Demesne: land held by a lord or king for his own use and not granted out to a follower.

Gratian's decretals: a collection of canon law compiled in the 12th century based on the previous rulings of popes on matters of ecclesiastical importance.

Fitz: an Anglo-Norman prefix meaning 'son of', sometimes used to indicate parentage.

Robert of Gloucester for Matilda and William of Aumale for Stephen, remained loyal to their cause throughout the period, others switched loyalties in return for patronage. This meant that they grew more powerful at the expense of royal authority. By 1154, therefore, it is undeniable that royal authority in England had diminished from the heights achieved in the reign of Henry I. Various nobles had even gone so far as to mint their own coins in Stephen's reign, a sure indication of the loss of royal control, especially in western and northern England.

English society remained overwhelmingly rural, although there had been a growth in market towns since the Norman Conquest. The **manorial** system, in which peasants provided labour service to work on their lord's **demesne** lands continued, although manorial demesne was slowly shrinking and being replaced by an increasing number of rent-paying tenures (landholdings). Urban wealth was based primarily on trade and there was a growing ambition for towns to obtain a degree of self-government, primarily through charters and the establishment of communes. The wool trade was the most important and had continued to develop despite the disruption and uncertainty in Stephen's reign.

In the period between 1100 and 1154 there had been significant change in the English Church that in most cases reflected wider European trends. The ability of rulers to control the appointment of bishops had been challenged across Europe and in Stephen's England elections had become increasingly free of overt royal intervention as stridently advocated by the papacy. There had been a growth in the law of the Church, known as canon law, and the increasing dissemination of **Gratian's decretals** (which outlined previous papal decisions) in particular, increased its usage further. There had also been a huge growth in the number and types of monasteries and monastic orders. At first the development of the Cluniac and Savigniac monastic orders as well as the Austin Canons were popular but by 1154 the Cistercians were starting to dominate. These centres of learning were beginning, in tandem with the growth of canon law, to establish an intellectual and religious revival.

The middle of the 12th century marked the high point of so-called chivalric culture among the aristocratic classes of Europe, including England. This code of conduct for the knightly class had been gradually developing and had established social norms valuing military skill, loyalty and generosity. During Stephen's reign it had been demonstrated that women at the highest levels of society could act decisively both in the case of Matilda and Stephen's queen, Matilda of Boulogne. Women could stand in for their husbands in certain situations but marriage remained tightly controlled and its main purpose was to secure political alliances, financial gain and to produce children to inherit. Although women could rise to important positions, especially within nunneries, they had limited and well-defined traditional roles. They transmitted authority but could not always successfully wield it in their own right.

The character and aims of Henry II

Henry **Fitz** Empress was the eldest son of Matilda, the daughter of Henry I of England, and Geoffrey, count of Anjou. He was born in 1133 at Le Mans and it had been his grandfather Henry I's intention that he would eventually inherit the throne. However, England was seized by Stephen, Matilda's cousin, upon the death of the old king in 1135. As a consequence, Henry FitzEmpress was raised in an environment of perpetual conflict between his mother and Stephen for control of England.

Henry's first military intervention in England occurred in 1147 but he achieved little and was forced to flee, returning again in 1149. He was then knighted by his great-uncle, David I of Scotland but was unable to successfully prosecute a planned invasion of York. By 1153 Henry was Duke of Normandy, thanks primarily to the previous actions of his father Geoffrey of Anjou. He had also become Count of Anjou upon his father's death in 1151. Henry was therefore in a much stronger position and in 1153

1 The Restoration of Royal Authority, 1154–1166

he finally forced King Stephen to recognise him as his heir when Stephen's older son, Eustace, died. When Stephen died in 1154 Henry II became the first **Angevin** King of England.

Although at the end Stephen had recognised Henry as his heir, Henry II saw himself primarily as the heir and successor of his grandfather Henry I. This played a large role in determining his aims with regard to the English crown as he was determined to have the same power and authority as Henry I. He perceived that royal authority had significantly diminished during Stephen's reign and he sought to restore it. This policy extended to include dominance over the English nobility, control of the English Church, power over royal officials such as sheriffs and the restoration of central governmental institutions including the **exchequer**.

The aspect of Henry II's character that most fascinated his contemporaries was his extraordinary energy. His rule eventually extended, in varying degrees, over England, Ireland, Normandy, Anjou, Maine, Touraine, Brittany and Aquitaine and he was perpetually on the move to govern these widespread territories. It is important to remember that of the 35 years Henry II reigned as king of England, he spent about 21 in France, therefore it was important for him to build structures that could govern England without his constant presence and he needed to rely on loyal servants who could act for him.

The strengths and weaknesses of Henry II's position at his accession

Strengths

Henry II inherited a situation that helped to strengthen his position as King of England in 1154. Many of the most powerful and independent **earls** in the period of civil war during Stephen's reign died in the early 1150s before Henry II became king of England. These included Gilbert de Clare, the Earl of Pembroke, who died in 1148 and his nephew Gilbert de Clare, the Earl of Hertford, who died in 1152, both of whom had proved willing to join Ranulf of Chester's rebellion against royal authority. Significantly, Ranulf of Chester himself died in 1153 and this removed a very dangerous noble who had grown excessively powerful during the civil war. Simon II de Senlis, the Earl of Huntingdon, a very loyal supporter of Stephen and diehard opponent of the Angevins, also died in 1153.

The new king of Scotland, Malcolm IV, came to the throne at the age of 12 as a consequence of the death of David I in 1153. David had been a keen supporter of Matilda and had even knighted the young Henry II, but his death was fortuitous as Henry had promised his great-uncle that he would grant Northumbria to him when he became king of England. David's death and the succession of his young grandson Malcolm IV made it much easier for Henry II to renege on this unpopular arrangement that would have weakened his position as King of England.

Eustace of Boulogne, Stephen's elder son and heir, had died in 1153 and this had played a significant role in ending the remaining opposition to the Angevin succession. King Stephen had agreed to the succession of Henry II by the Treaty of Wallingford (also known as the Treaty of Winchester) and Henry II had been able to establish himself unopposed after Stephen's death. Henry II had been adopted by Stephen but in addition his position was greatly strengthened by the fact that his dynastic claim combined descent from the Norman kings through his grandfather, Henry I, with descent through his maternal grandmother, Matilda of Scotland, from the pre-Conquest English kings of the house of Wessex.

Theobald of Bec, the Archbishop of Canterbury, had supported the Angevin succession and the English Church proved to be a willing partner of Henry II. This was important



Key terms

Angevins: the dynasty that came to rule England. They were descended from the counts of Anjou in France.

Exchequer: the part of English central government responsible for managing taxation and other revenue.

Earl: the highest title attainable, at this time, for an English baron.

A/AS Level History for AQA: Royal Authority and the Angevin Kings, 1154–1216

as the English Church had demonstrated its influence previously when it had initially and decisively backed Stephen's usurpation in 1135. It had also grown in power and influence within England during the so-called anarchy that had led to a reduction in royal authority during Stephen's reign.

Henry II was also in a position to distance himself from the unpopularity of his mother Matilda, and his role as both his mother's heir and that of Stephen made him a figure that the remaining nobility could rally around. Prominent and respected supporters of Stephen were eager and willing to serve Henry II including, most significantly, Robert de Beaumont, the Earl of Leicester, and Richard de Lacy.

Weaknesses

The exchequer system, upon which royal finance rested, had been undermined during the civil war. This was of great significance as the ability of the central government to tax the kingdom, as recorded in the **pipe rolls**, was key to royal authority and the ability of the king to keep the nobility in place. The justice-in-**eyre** system developed by Henry I had also broken down. The ability to provide justice was a key element in the coronation oaths of English kings and the risk of being reliant on local officials was that they could easily be swayed by local barons. This risked the creation of areas where the **king's writ** did not, in effect, run and this had happened in vast swathes of western and northern England during Stephen's reign.

Sheriffs were the king's representatives in the English shires and they therefore represented royal authority in their local areas. Henry I had been careful to control their appointment and had even started to appoint humbler men with loyalty entirely to him. But by the beginning of Henry II's reign they were in danger of becoming the hereditary positions of nobles rather than removable royal officials and some were even held in plurality by some powerful barons. Many of the barons had installed sheriffs local to them.

Stephen's remaining family posed possible threats to Henry II's throne. His younger son William of Boulogne was a potential claimant, as he remained Earl of Surrey as well as Count of Boulogne. Stephen's daughter Mary was a nun, but it was not unprecedented to take a woman out of holy orders to marry her, and there were clear dynastic attractions to such an act. Stephen's brother Henry of Blois was the richest and most powerful bishop in England. As Bishop of Winchester he held many castles and his influence in the Church, although waning, was still significant.

English barons had encroached on the royal demesne during Stephen's reign. This had diminished it and therefore they had increased their financial strength by weakening that of the Crown. Henry II needed to reverse this if he were to dominate them. Many castles had been built without royal consent (known as adulterine castles) and powerful barons including William of Aumale, Roger of Hereford and Hugh Mortimer initially refused to surrender them to Henry II. Owain Gwynedd was at the height of his power in North Wales and the Earl of Chester was still a child. This put the north-west of England at considerable risk.

Owing to the lack of royal authority during Stephen's reign the English Church had circumvented many of the customs that the Norman kings had enjoyed over it. While the English crown was weakened by civil war, the Church had been able to elect bishops without reference to the king. Given the importance of such positions to the government of the country, this tended to undermine royal authority.



Key terms

Pipe rolls: central government records kept of the annual audit of the exchequer; they were rolled into narrow 'pipes' when stored.

Eyre: a visitation to an area by the king or his justices to uphold the law.

King's writ: the king's writ was said to 'run' in the places where the king's orders were obeyed.

1 The Restoration of Royal Authority, 1154–1166

ACTIVITY 1.1

The challenges that Henry II faced upon becoming King of England in 1154 can be divided into (at least) three areas. Copy and complete the table and compare the relative severity of the problems facing Henry II and how effectively you think he dealt with them.

	Economic and financial situation	Political situation	Social and legal situation
What was the nature of the problem facing Henry II in 1154?			
How did Henry II deal with the problem?			
How successful was Henry II in resolving the problem?			



Key terms

Feudal: a term used to denote a system based on land being held in return for service to the granter of the land.

Marcher lords: traditionally powerful nobles who had a higher level of independence than others from the Crown, responsible for guarding the border between England and Wales.

The restoration of royal authority under Henry II

Scotland and Wales

English kings had relationships with both Scotland and Wales that were integral to their ability to protect their authority within England. These could not be ignored and Henry II acted swiftly to establish his position.

The King of Scotland and members of his family were also barons of English territories and Henry II acted to assert his authority over them in this capacity, regardless of the older claim of English kings to a degree of overlordship in Scotland. In 1157 Henry II met Malcolm IV at Pevensey Castle and demanded the return of Cumbria and Northumbria. Although he had promised them to Malcolm's grandfather, David I, in 1149 in return for his support he had no intention of honouring that previous agreement. In return for surrendering his claim and performing homage as a baron Malcolm received the earldom of Huntingdon, which his father, Henry, and his grandfather, David I, had also previously held sporadically since 1113. This bound him more tightly to Henry II as he had **feudal** obligations as an English baron and his valuable English territory could be confiscated if he threatened northern England. This clearly worked because Malcolm IV did perform military service for Henry II when required. He served the English king on his Toulouse campaign in 1159 where he was knighted and also against the Welsh in 1165.

Henry II needed to act in Wales in order to restore his royal authority. During Stephen's reign the native princes had made significant gains at the expense of the English **marcher lords** and the Crown itself. North Wales was dominated by Owain of Gwynedd and in the south Rhys ap Gruffudd, the ruler of Deheubarth was growing in power and status. Henry II invaded Gwynedd in 1157 but although Owain submitted little had changed. He invaded Deheubarth in 1158 to secure the submission of Rhys and again in 1163 when he temporarily stripped him of his lands before returning them. In July 1163 Henry II received the submission of both Rhys and Owain as well as hostages from them at the Council of Woodstock. But in this Henry II was far less

A/AS Level History for AQA: **Royal Authority and the Angevin Kings, 1154–1216**

successful than it first appears because the tough terms imposed by Henry II united the Welsh princes in opposition to him and a general rising occurred in 1165 that Henry was unable to crush.



Figure 1.1: Angevin England with neighbouring Scotland and Wales. Scottish kings held land in England as English barons, and many English barons held lands in Wales.

The role of the barons

Henry II was swift to act against those English barons that did not recognise his authority. In this way he made an example of those who resisted, and encouraged others to support his restoration of royal authority. Immediately after his coronation at the Christmas court at Bermondsey priory Henry acted to reduce the military force

1 The Restoration of Royal Authority, 1154–1166

available to barons who might wish to rebel or in any way oppose him, by issuing instructions for the expulsion of Flemish mercenaries from England. Stephen's old supporter and mercenary captain, William of Ypres, although treated leniently, retired to Flanders in 1157. In 1155 Henry II ordered that all the royal lands that had been lost to the crown (through **purprestures**) or granted away in Stephen's reign be restored and he acted against those barons who refused to do so.

Henry II moved against Hugh Mortimer and Roger, Earl of Hereford in 1155 when they resisted his authority. Roger had fortified Hereford and Gloucester and Hugh was preparing for open revolt when he fortified his personal castles, including Wigmore, Cleobury and the royal castle of Bridgnorth in open defiance of the King. Henry II moved rapidly to the Welsh marches and his demonstration of strength was enough to force Roger to submit. Hugh's castles were taken from him by force. When Roger died in October 1155 Henry kept his possessions and disinherited his heir, Walter.

Another enemy, William Peverel, fled the country rather than face the King. Later that year Henry seized the castles of Henry of Blois, the bishop of Winchester. As the younger brother of the former king his loyalty was still suspect and Henry acted to limit his power. Henry of Blois withdrew to the abbey of Cluny in France until 1158. Henry II also demanded that all private castles built without royal permission in the reign of Stephen be handed over to the crown or destroyed. He moved against William of Aumale, the Earl of York and a former close supporter of Stephen, when the latter refused to surrender Scarborough Castle. In 1157 he seized the castles of Stephen's remaining son, William of Boulogne as well as those belonging to Hugh Bigod, the Earl of Norfolk, as a consequence of the rivalry between the two that threatened to spiral out of control.

Henry II appointed two competent and loyal barons as chief **justiciars**. Robert of Beaumont, Earl of Leicester, was a man who had been loyal to Stephen as well as to Henry I, and Richard de Lucy had also been an important servant of the late king. The role of chief justiciar was one that Henry II seemed to have modelled on the more informal position held by Roger of Salisbury in his grandfather's reign. Holders of this office acted as the king's deputy during his absence from the kingdom and the exchequer came under their control, increasing royal control of finances.

The role of royal finance

The exchequer system had developed in Henry I's reign. Twice a year, at Easter and Michaelmas, the court sat at a table with a check-patterned cloth (hence the name) to audit the accounts of sheriffs and other officials. A summary of each account, usually per shire, was recorded on a document that came to be known as a 'pipe roll'. There is considerable debate as to the condition of this efficient system for recording royal finances during Stephen's reign but it was certainly degraded at the very least. Henry II restored the exchequer system by placing it under the control of the experienced Bishop Nigel of Ely. Nigel had been at the heart of the system in Henry I's reign and at Henry II's urging he came out of retirement to repair the damage done to it during Stephen's reign. Nigel was both highly educated and industrious and had been educated by some of the finest mathematicians in Europe. The exchequer was then supervised by Richard FitzNigel, the illegitimate son of Nigel of Ely, who became treasurer from 1158 until 1196. Richard's role was a vital one in ensuring Henry II's ability to restore royal authority as he oversaw the transfer of funds to the king's Chamber, which was the financial department of the king's household, the body that travelled with the king. It was through the Chamber that money was directed for the purposes of warfare.

In 1158 Henry II took decisive action to restore the credibility of English coinage. The English silver penny had, prior to Stephen's reign, been a stable and respected currency but during the anarchy exclusive royal authority over it had been lost and



Key terms

Purprestures: unlawful encroachments on to royal lands and estates.

Justiciars: increasingly used, by this period, to refer to a powerful deputy appointed by the king to represent them in England during their frequent absences.

A/AS Level History for AQA: Royal Authority and the Angevin Kings, 1154–1216

some barons had taken to minting their own versions. Henry II brought an end to this situation. His re-establishment of royal authority in the north in 1157 was possibly connected to the timing of this initiative. The new coins bore Henry II's name for the first time and the so-called 'cross and crosslets' design was a distinctive one that remained in use until 1180. The new coinage was created at approximately thirty mints. The restored national coinage improved the confidence of traders and reasserted royal authority over a system that, prior to Stephen's reign, had remained a cherished symbol of the king's power. Once again, Henry II showed a keen desire and ability to restore the authority enjoyed by his grandfather, Henry I.

Carta Baronum was the product of a royal investigation undertaken in 1166. Henry II demanded that all his barons send him in writing the names of their tenants and how much **knight service** each of them owed to the king. It was designed partly to give Henry II greater control of the barons by identifying their military strength and support but it also had a significant financial motivation. Henry used it to determine whether a baron had more knights **enfeoffed** than the number of knights-service that baron owed to the king under the terms of the feudal *servitum debitum* (knights-service owed). This feudal service had been commuted into a money payment (known as **scutage**) made by each baron in lieu of providing the knight to the king. By ascertaining if his barons had more knights than they traditionally had to pay for, Henry II was determining if he could charge them more and thus raise more money.

Henry II was also the first English king to borrow heavily and rely upon credit. He used the money borrowed to raise mercenary armies and reassert the authority of the crown over the barons, as well as in his continental possessions. This allowed him to spend money quickly and then repay it over time from later exchequer revenues. In the years between 1154 and 1166 Henry II borrowed mainly from William Cade, a Flemish merchant who had become enormously wealthy through the wool trade. It has been estimated that Cade lent an average of £600 per year to Henry II over this period.¹ Furthermore, William Cade was certainly not the only lender to the king at this time and in total between 1155 and 1166 Henry II seems to have borrowed over £12 000.²



Key terms

Knight service: service owed by a baron to the king; it was calculated by the number of knights the baron had enfeoffed.

Enfeoff: to grant somebody property or land to hold in return for service.

Scutage: a payment instead of military service owed by landholders to the king.



Voices from the past

Roger of Howden

Roger of Howden was a Yorkshire man who entered royal service in the early 1170s. He was well-informed, became closely connected to the royal court and undertook sensitive errands for Henry II. His understanding of the period between 1148 and 1169 was most likely based on a series of works, including the *Chronicle of Melrose*. After that date his personal knowledge became a greater influence. His writing continued until his likely death in 1201. Roger's works are impersonal but tend to demonstrate admiration and support for Henry II who is presented as a great king. The extract that follows is from his history of the early years of Henry II's reign.

In the year 1155, Henry, son of the empress Matilda, laid siege to the castles of his enemies in England, and captured them; some of which he retained in his own hands, and some he levelled with the ground. In 1156, Henry returned from Normandy to England, and caused

nearly all the castles, which had been erected in England in the time of king Stephen, to be demolished, and issued a new coinage, which was the only one received and current throughout the realm; he also established peace in the kingdom, and commanded the laws of King Henry, his grandfather, to be observed inviolably throughout the whole of his kingdom, and in many matters followed the advice of Theobald, archbishop of Canterbury.³

Discussion points:

1. What problems does Roger of Howden identify as challenging royal authority in 1155 and 1156?
2. What actions does Roger of Howden claim were taken by Henry II to restore royal authority?
3. What impression of Henry II is given by Roger of Howden?

1 The Restoration of Royal Authority, 1154–1166

The role of justice and the law

The position of sheriff was vital to royal authority in that it represented the king in each of the shires of England. The sheriffs had financial as well as judicial functions within shire communities and were often the recipients of **writs** bearing royal instructions. It was, therefore, essential that the sheriffs were men who were trusted by the king. Henry II acted swiftly to prevent the position of sheriff becoming hereditary or concentrated in the hands of a few of the nobility, which had become increasingly the case during Stephen's reign. In 1155 he dismissed approximately two-thirds of the sheriffs he had inherited and replaced them with trusted supporters. About half of the sheriffs were replaced again in 1162. There would be more replacements later in the reign, most notably after the Inquest of the Sheriffs in 1170.

Another vitally important institution regarding law and justice was the Chancery. This was the writing office that was originally part of the king's household but had developed increasingly into a fixed part of central government. The Chancery, which was run by the **chancellor**, issued writs. These often impelled the recipient to do justice in a particular case. During his early reign, between 1155 and 1162, Henry employed Thomas Becket as chancellor. He was both energetic and highly able and rapidly became a key player in Henry II's government.

Henry II restored the eyre system of justice that his grandfather, Henry I, had initiated. The country was divided up into circuits made up of a number of shires. Groups of itinerant (travelling) justices toured each shire on their circuit to hear legal cases. Each visit was known as an eyre and therefore it was known as the 'justice-in-eyre' system. This system increased royal authority over a period of time, standardising justice according to a centralised system rather than relying on local officials who could easily be influenced by barons into acquitting a baronial ally or prosecuting an enemy.

In 1166 Henry II went further than Henry I had done. The **Assize** of Clarendon was the Act of that year that began to transform English law. First, regarding criminal law, it established hunts for criminals, and those denounced as robbers, murderers, thieves of harbourers of criminals. The power of nobles to exclude the sheriffs from their properties was removed. Those accused were to suffer ordeal by water and even if they survived it they were often obliged to leave England. With regard to civil law the Assize of Clarendon of 1166 established the 'proprietary' or 'petty assizes'. *Novel disseisin* was one of these and it was a legal action to recover lands of which the plaintiff had been disseised, or dispossessed. It was extremely popular because it was initiated by a writ that could be purchased from the Chancery and followed a simple, standardised process led by the local sheriff. If the plaintiff could establish that he had been dispossessed of land without judgement then he would be restored to it.

Darrein presentment was another possessory assize action established in 1166 that was brought about to enquire into who was the last patron to appoint a priest to a church. It occurred when a plaintiff complained that he had been unlawfully deprived of the right by the defendant. Like *novel disseisin* it required a royal writ to initiate and relied upon a local jury, working with the sheriff, to resolve it.

A key innovation during Henry II's reign was that of the so-called 'returnable' writ. Writs predated the Norman Conquest but now, once a case had been dealt with, the sheriff and the jurors involved were then named on the document, along with the outcome. This could be handed to an itinerant justice. It increased accountability by requiring those in receipt of a writ to confirm its receipt and record the outcome of the action (e.g. a trial or investigation). Records could also be kept that allowed for greater standardisation of justice in the future based on the precedent of previous similar cases.

The process of developing what became known as the **common law** was by no means complete by 1166 but Henry II had begun to develop a popular and effective legal



Key terms

Writ: a formal written order or set of instructions made by the English king, through the Chancery, to a local official (often a sheriff).

Chancellor: the senior royal official responsible for the Chancery (writing office).

Assize: a rule or regulation enforced by the authority of the Crown; it came to be applied to legal procedures.

Common law: the body of law in England that was based on custom and judicial decisions.

A/AS Level History for AQA: Royal Authority and the Angevin Kings, 1154–1216



Key terms

Clergy: a term used to refer to all members of religious orders not just priests. These were exempt from secular courts.

Secular: a term describing something that is not religious and not part of the Church.

Papal legate: a representative of the Pope empowered to act on his behalf.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Using the information from this book and your own research, rank in order of importance the reasons why Henry II was able to restore royal authority. Justify your choices.



Figure 1.2: A typical medieval depiction of the king, in this case Henry II, as the supporter of the Church

system that was accessible to freemen within England. It gave them opportunities to appeal over the heads of barons in the localities while at the same time reinforcing royal authority over them. As these procedures and innovations could not be used by the barons against the king it did not endanger his own position.

The place of religion in society

The political role of the Church

Henry II, like virtually all medieval English rulers, was deeply committed to exerting some control over the English Church. It would have been impossible for him to do otherwise. The English Church played an utterly essential role in English society. Members of the **clergy**, who were literate in an age where this was uncommon, were involved in all levels of administration, especially the key departments of the chancery and the exchequer. Henry II's desire to build up central government so as to increase royal authority meant that they were even more important than before his reign. Henry's long absences meant that England had to develop what historians refer to as 'administrative kingship', that is an ability to run smoothly on a day-to-day basis without the intervention of the king upon administrative affairs. This simply could not happen without members of the clergy.

At the top of the church hierarchy were bishops and abbots. These were major landholders and, since the Norman Conquest, they had held important military functions and service, just like the barons. Many of them acted as judges in the courts he established or in the eyre circuit system of justice. Therefore, it was important to Henry II that the men he trusted were also capable of dealing with the administrative and political functions that bishops and abbots held. Henry II, like both his predecessors and successors, was keen to control the appointment of these prelates to secure the promotion of royal servants that he trusted. The problem was that this ran contrary to the growing movement within the European Church to limit the influence of **secular** rulers in the election of bishops and abbots.

The Church had also played an important role in securing Henry II's own accession to the throne. Pope Innocent II had initially tilted the Church in favour of Stephen's claim to the throne and had been vital in granting him legitimacy but after the Pope's death both the papacy and the English Church had become increasingly hostile to Stephen and his family. Innocent II's successors, especially Celestine II (1143–1144) and Eugenius III (1145–1153) favoured the Angevin cause. Archbishop Theobald of Bec had openly refused to crown Stephen's son Eustace as his successor in 1152 and had been temporarily driven into exile as a consequence. Theobald had also played a role in negotiating the Treaty at Wallingford, which had recognised Henry II as Stephen's heir and successor.

Nevertheless, Henry II was also aware that the English Church had become much more independent during Stephen's reign than it had been when his grandfather, Henry I, had ruled England. This was hardly surprising. Royal authority had been much diminished during the period when Stephen fought with Henry's mother, Matilda, for the English throne. The Church had been forced to step into the vacuum in many areas. It had also been left alone to run itself and many of the customs that the Norman kings had jealously guarded to assert their authority over it had fallen into disrepute. In this respect the English Church was merely catching up with reforms that had already spread throughout the rest of the Latin Church as a consequence of the reform movement that had been increasingly supported by the papacy itself. Royal controls on access for **papal legates** and communications with Rome had been relaxed and English bishops increasingly attended Church councils. The growth of canon law, especially Gratian's decretals, undermined royal customs by refuting them and encouraging further appeals to Rome. The reform movement also demanded, most dangerously for kings like Henry II, that the election of bishops be free of secular

1 The Restoration of Royal Authority, 1154–1166

interference. Henry II regarded these developments as damaging to his royal authority and, as in so many other areas, he was determined to restore the authority that he believed his grandfather, Henry I, had enjoyed over the English Church.

Despite his clear desire to assert greater control over the English Church Henry II was cautious in his dealings with Theobald of Bec. He was mindful of the old man's role in his succession and had other, more pressing, problems to deal with in both England and France. Henry II was willing to wait and, given the advanced age of the Archbishop, he undoubtedly felt that time was on his side. Furthermore, Theobald was a shrewd political operator willing to give ground on some issues in order to get what he wanted. It is notable that even in a climate where Henry II was seeking to gain greater control over the bishops Theobald was able to get one of his clerks, Bartholomew, elected as bishop of Exeter with Henry II's agreement, despite the king's preference for another candidate.



Key terms

Ecclesiastical: relating to the Church.

Benefices: usually referred to a church appointment for which property and income were attached.

Ecclesiastical courts

Henry II took his coronation oath to maintain justice very seriously. He took a personal interest in the legal process and made major reforms to the legal system. However, the English Church was almost entirely exempt from the changes because matters involving members of the clergy could be referred to **ecclesiastical** courts. This was a problem because these courts were much more lenient than the king's own courts. This therefore created resentment and in many cases the leniency of the ecclesiastical courts caused a scandal. By 1163 at least three cases attracted the king's personal attention and he was not satisfied with the Church's resolution of them all. In Salisbury a priest accused of murder denied his guilt but was unable to establish his innocence. In response, Becket announced that sentences of death or mutilation would no longer be carried out by Church courts within the ecclesiastical province of Canterbury (which was most of England). The offending priest merely had his **benefices** removed and was imprisoned in a monastery. The Archbishop prevented a clerk from Worcester, who had been accused of killing a man in order to rape his daughter, from being tried in a royal court. Furthermore he had him put in the bishop's



Voices from the past

William FitzStephen

William was a cleric and personal household clerk for Thomas Becket for over ten years. He served his master both when he was Chancellor of England and later when Becket was Archbishop of Canterbury. He was exempted from the banishment that Henry II placed upon Becket's friends and family after their quarrel broke out. He resumed his service to Thomas Becket when the Archbishop returned to England in 1170 and he was a witness to his murder. William made his peace with Henry II shortly after Becket's death and became both the sheriff of Gloucester and an itinerant justice. The extract that follows is from his work, *The Life of St Thomas Becket*, written after his master's death, to praise his life.

After Henry II had been crowned king of England Thomas was made the king's chancellor in preference to all others. Being a man of diligence and industry, and experienced in many and great affairs, he discharged

the onerous duties and obligations of his office to the praise of God and the well-being of the whole realm ... Through the energy and counsel of the chancellor and the wholehearted co-operation of the clergy, earls and barons, this noble realm of England enjoyed, as it were, a second springtime. Holy Church was respected; vacant bishoprics and abbacies were bestowed upon honest clerks without simony; the king, by favour of God, prospered in all his undertakings, the realm of England increased in riches.⁴

Discussion points:

1. How important was Thomas Becket to the restoration of royal authority according to William FitzStephen?
2. How does William FitzStephen account for the success of Henry II? Why might this be the case?

A/AS Level History for AQA: Royal Authority and the Angevin Kings, 1154–1216



Key terms

Criminous clerk: member of the clergy who had committed a serious secular crime

Mark: a measure of silver; in England it was equivalent to two-thirds of a pound sterling.

ACTIVITY 1.3

Using the material from this book and your own research, construct written arguments for a debate about the value of the English Church to Henry II. Consider both the advantages that a good relationship with the Church gave the King and the problems that it presented him with between 1154 and 1164. Leave space to add information to this after reading Chapter 2.

prison so that the royal judges could not get hold of him. Becket also protected a clerk who had been arrested for stealing a silver chalice from his own church, St Mary-le-Bow, London. He did agree to the branding of the offender but this only partially appeased the angry king.

The most famous case of a so-called ‘**criminous clerk**’ in this period was that of Philip de Broi. He was a canon of Bedford who had been accused of murdering a knight. His innocence had initially been accepted by the bishop of Lincoln and by the King but he had subsequently threatened and insulted a royal justice who had sought to reopen the case. This was an outrage and personal insult to Henry II who threatened severe consequences but was unable to enact them because Philip was protected by Thomas Becket. Philip was eventually fined, flogged and sent into exile for two years but Henry II still regarded this as too lenient and a clear insult to his royal authority. By the early 1160s it was increasingly apparent that the King and the Archbishop of Canterbury were on a collision course as the Constitutions of Clarendon and Becket’s flight into exile in 1164 were to vividly demonstrate.

The importance of the Church in finance and the economy

The English Church was exceptionally wealthy. After the Norman Conquest it held over one quarter of all the land in England and by the mid-12th century this had grown as a consequence of donations by prominent and pious individuals. The wealth that existed within the Church explains why Henry II, like his predecessors, was keen to prolong vacancies that occurred when bishops and abbots died. In these cases the revenues of their ‘temporalities’ (their secular possessions and properties) went straight to the Crown until such time as a replacement was elected.

One of the major causes of tension between Henry II and the English Church in this period was that he sought to exploit its wealth for his own political and military ends. Henry II began to impose scutages on those who owed him military service. This included the prelates themselves. There was a scutage in 1156 which was connected to Henry II’s actions against his brother Geoffrey and there was another in 1159 which helped to fund his Toulouse campaign. There were further scutages in 1161 and 1162 and the ones in 1159 and 1161 were at the exceptionally high rate of 2 **marks** per knight owed, rather than the more usual 1 mark. But in addition to this Henry II demanded ‘gifts’ from the English Church as well as the rest of society. Five bishops (York, Durham, Lincoln, Bath and Winchester) were each assessed at 500 marks, three bishops at 200 marks (London, Norwich and Worcester), Exeter at £100 and Chester at 100 marks. Nineteen abbots and four abbesses were also assessed and had to pay sums that ranged from 220 marks (St Augustine’s Canterbury) to £5 (Pershore and Shrewsbury). The total paid in ‘gifts’ in 1159 amounted to £2233 from the bishops and £904 from the abbots.⁵

Henry II and England’s overseas territories

Henry II’s relations with France

Henry II was not only the King of England, but by 1154 he was also the Duke of Normandy, Count of Anjou, Count of Maine, Count of Touraine in his own right and Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Poitou by right of his wife. Henry II was therefore a very powerful French prince. Technically, in a feudal sense, he owed allegiance for all of these French lands to the King of France, Louis VII. Louis VII was, however, in a much weaker position than Henry II. Although he was King of France his direct authority did not extend much beyond the territory around Paris, the Île-de-France (French royal domain). The relationship between the two men was complicated further by the fact that Henry II’s wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, had previously been the first wife of Louis VII. When Louis had their marriage annulled in 1152 he had lost Aquitaine and

1 The Restoration of Royal Authority, 1154–1166

had been galled to see it quickly gained by Henry. The combination of Aquitaine with Greater Anjou (Anjou, Maine and Touraine) and Normandy threatened, potentially, to completely overwhelm the authority of the French crown. Relations were also blighted by the fact that Louis's marriage had been annulled primarily because of its failure to produce sons, but in the decade that followed her marriage to Henry II Eleanor went on to produce five sons for Louis VII's Angevin rival.

Henry II was outwardly respectful of his French overlord and repeatedly performed homage to him but he made no effort to disguise the discrepancy between their real power. A good example of this was the embassy that Henry II sent to Paris in 1158. Thomas Becket was sent to represent Henry II and he made open and ostentatious displays of the wealth granted to him by Henry. The message that even a humble servant of Henry II was so extremely wealthy was not lost on the French court.

Nevertheless relations with France remained mostly cordial in the years between 1154 and 1159. In 1155 Louis VII called northern French princes from Flanders, Champagne and Nevers, together with the Duke of Burgundy, to the council of Soissons and established rules for good lordship. This also established the court of the King of France as the final avenue of appeal in the event of the denial of good lordship and clearly marks the Capetian (the royal dynasty of France) king's feudal ambitions. Louis VII extended this to include Henry II in 1158 by agreeing to arrangements for the marriage of his daughter, Margaret, to Henry's son, Henry. Henry II swore an oath of fidelity to the French king and relations seemed better than anybody could have dreamed possible. But Henry II's invasion of the County of Toulouse in 1159 and Louis VII's decision to block it by placing himself in the city itself undermined the peace between them. Louis VII sought to repair the damage by restating his commitment to the eventual marriage but was then tricked by Henry II, who arranged for papal dispensation that allowed the marriage of the very young children many years before Louis VII had envisaged. This was crucial because Margaret's **dowry** was the vital territory known as the Vexin and included the castle of Gisors that dominated it. Henry II had secured his revenge for Louis VII's intervention in Toulouse and secured the defence of Normandy but the hope of amity between the two men had taken a serious knock and the French king was humiliated. A peace was negotiated at Freteval in 1161 but, by that point, nobody was under any illusion as to the nature of the relationship between the two men.



Key term

Dowry: property transferred from the bride's family to the groom's after a medieval marriage.