

Richard the Lionheart Exhibition

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Author: Historisches Museum der Pfalz Speyer

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Reviewer: Emily A. Winkler

The exhibition honouring the legacy of Richard the Lionheart (d. 1199) - king of England, knight and crusading leader - at the Historisches Museum der Pfalz Speyer, Germany, offers a royal tribute to the legacy of this famous medieval ruler. Pageantry, stateliness and effective design create a compelling narrative, supported by displays of the most important treasures of Richard's reign. The exhibition and its impressive catalogue propose three identities for Richard: king, knight and crusader. But the word which best describes the effect of the exhibition - and indeed, the word which it exhibition opens and closes - is 'Held': hero.

Richard the Lionheart is, unequivocally, a hero in this exhibition. His younger brother John, on the other hand, is never in the exhibition referred to as a king or as 'King John', only by his epithet 'Ohneland' ('Lackland'). Although John has been the subject of a great deal of revisionist history in recent years [\(1\)](#) the dogged epithet essentially excludes John from the historic image of the English throne. The exhibition implies that John's lacklandish legacy will endure in the same way that Richard's glamorous and knightly legacy promises to do in the centuries to come.

The opening lines of the exhibition claim: Richard 'bleibt der Held dieser Ausstellung, aber ist er auch ein Held der Geschichte?' Being a hero in history is not a simple question, not least because one must ask: a hero to whom? To the Islamic peoples he encountered on Crusade, Richard was an aggressor; to some of his own men, he could have been a better leader; by some medieval standards, he could have been considered unsuccessful for failing to provide an heir to the throne. A review of the exhibition published in *Der Spiegel* [\(2\)](#) opens with a tag line that suggests a sensationalist paradox: although Richard had children massacred and brought England 'an den Rand des Ruins', he nevertheless remains a knight, nobleman and true king. An image of Sean Connery as Robin Hood adorns the page with the predictable caption 'Fake News', but there is nothing 'fake' about the popularity and vibrancy of Richard's legacy: this is very real indeed. The review stresses an important point about the exhibition: that it concerns primarily the *image* of this famous sovereign. As the exhibition introduction asks in its first words, 'Was ist Ihr Bild von Richard Löwenherz?' The viewer is invited to create, as well as to view, images of Richard. The exhibition is explicitly as much about Richard's heroic reputation as it is about Richard himself.

There is a sense too in which a medieval hero is a safer hero than any candidate in a more modern age. Yet without doing any disservice to historical enquiry - indeed, by enhancing and enabling it through clever design, intellectual content and interactive content - the exhibition extends a candid and eager invitation for the viewer to explore without cynicism the contemporary human imagination, and the historic ideals of heroism and leadership.

The lavish exhibition catalogue is an international and thematically diverse team project. It includes high-quality images of the exhibition's collections, and features articles by international experts on Richard and the Angevin world. As such, the volume represents one of the most cosmopolitan collaborations on Richard in recent memory, and will be a valuable resource for both scholars and the interested public. Here, Richard's role as a monarch and knight of Europe receives full attention; he is not isolated as an Aquitanian duke, an English king or a crusader. Speyer too receives more than an honourable mention: in Caspar Ehlers's essay, we discover the importance of the public presence of ruler and negotiations between kings, and Speyer's role as the bookend on either side of Richard's captivity in Trifels. The local dimension of the past is not effaced in the grand sweep of the book's coverage: this balance is the best indicator of the book's success.

The exhibition itself gathers materials from museums and libraries (including those in Germany, France and England) that represent some of the finest treasures associated with Richard's life. Manuscripts of the historical works of Richard de Templo, Richard of Devizes, Gervase of Canterbury, Gerald of Wales (the first writer to call Richard 'The Lionheart'), and the famous 13th-century British Library manuscript of Matthew Paris with a fourfold image of the Angevin kings, framed by graceful columns against a blue and red chequered backdrop. As the exhibition reaches its finale, a pulsing red light draws the eye in a darkened room. Atop this case is the box from Rouen in which Richard's heart found its final resting place, its inscription silently proclaiming: 'Hic iacet cor Ricardi Regis Anglorum'.

The space of the Historisches Museum is ideally suited for an exhibition concerning the Middle Ages, as the turrets and rounded arches on the interior evoke a romantic past, and leave ample room for display. One feels that one's route is decked out with the trappings of a royal procession. The visitor is taken through a grand room displaying stone effigies of Richard's parents, King Henry II and Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, before being escorted into the presence of Richard's image. Brilliant red and gold lighting - including a golden lion on a red field, echoing Richard's seal - project the sense of kingship into the space.

Flanking the main progress are small corner ('Ecke') exhibits, each on a single related theme that complements and offers context for Richard's activities. One of these, featuring a cross, serves as a meditative side chapel for contemplating not the scale of the heavens, but the scope of Richard's influence. Other displays include the stories of the Staufien Empire, the Capetian dynasty, and Richard's diplomatic relations with Philip II Augustus of France (provocatively entitled 'Freund und Feind'), explaining the relevance of each to Richard's career and context. Considered together, these side exhibits present a clear and persuasive argument that Richard was a European ruler, whose personal and political relationships with rulers in Britain, the Continent and the East shaped his life, his reign, his adventures and his legacy. It is a theme fully sustained in the exhibition catalogue: Chapter IV includes several essays on the relationships between the English royal house and German and French dynasties; the final essay of the book, by Martin Kintzinger, considers Richard through the lens of *Kulturtransfer* and the consolidation of royal lordship in western Europe.

A core theme of the exhibition is the centrality of marriage to the Angevin world, though it is not stated explicitly as a theme. Rather, the narrative series of chapel-exhibits makes it clear that a successful or failed arranged marriage was often the lynchpin in securing a diplomatic truce, or embittering relations. The thematic design of the exhibition in this regard is excellent. Rather than taking a 'gendered' approach and reserving a single 'Ecke' for the women of the Angevin world, this integrated (and historically accurate) approach shows that these relationships were important in all aspects of rulership.

It is also a sensible approach to a world in which personal relationships and politics were often indistinguishable. Marriages discussed include the marriage of Eleanor to Louis VII of France, the seismic territorial and political shifts in Europe when she remarried Henry II, and the wedding of Richard's eldest sister Matilda to the Welfen ruler Henry the Lion. The marriage of Richard's sister Joanna to King William II of Sicily, and her career in Sicily, feature prominently in Richard's career: after her husband's death, Joanna was imprisoned for her wealth in a succession dispute, but Richard demanded her release when he landed at Messina in 1190 as a crusader. Richard's own marriage arrangements, of course, remain crucial elements of the narrative, in particular the negotiations about a possible marriage between Richard and Princess Alice of France. Here again, marriage is a turning point: Richard's rejection of Alice and his decision to marry Berengaria appear in the exhibition as core causes of subsequent friction between Richard and the French king. Despite his marriage to Berengaria, Richard's lack of an heir meant the sure succession of his brother John to the English throne.

Naturally a significant portion of the exhibition concerns Richard's 1193 captivity in Burg Trifels, which is under 50 km. from Speyer. One room is set up with shelves of scrolls and the question 'Was kostet ein König?' ('What does a king cost?') Not far away is a splendid model of the Exchequer, complete with tally sticks and scrolls. The interested reader can read more about the nature, the financing and the numismatic components of royal captivity in the complementary essays of the exhibition catalogue's chapter VI, 'Die Gefangenschaft'.

One of the circular rooms (in the turrets which form the four corners of the exhibition corridor), entitled 'Europa Nach Richard Löwenherz' ('Europe after Richard the Lionheart'), is draped with banners of the European Union flag. The impression of a modern international summit is so strong that it takes a few moments to realize that the content of the labels is actually about Europe *immediately* after Richard - not about Europe today. It is unlikely that this momentary disorientation is a coincidence. The picture implies that at least in part because of 'John Ohneland', England played less of a role at the European table after Richard, and that France emerged as the new power in Europe. One cannot help but wonder whether Richard is being cast as a hero anew - this time not as a king, a knight and a crusader, but as a symbol of a Europe bound together in an altogether different common endeavour.

The lighting of the exhibition is professional and well-done, which can be challenging when low light is required for preserving the manuscripts and artifacts on display. One ingenious strategy was the 'stained glass' approach: the backs of display cases often displayed back-lit images (for example, of an alluring Mediterranean coast in the section on Richard's southern ventures), which cast their glow on the objects in the case such that the objects were well-lit from all sides. The uncluttered displays permit each object to tell its own story.

The greatest strength of the exhibition is its ability to inhabit the mind - to create a space and a structure for organizing the information on the part of the viewer. As we read about the Glastonbury legends of Arthur popular in Angevin days, we cannot help going around a sword in a stone in the middle of the room. Whether inviting us to try our hand at proving our right to the monarchy, or attempting only to convey the allure of these stories to medieval people and their kings, the display is consistent in its commitment to involving the visitor in creating a picture of Richard.

A highlight is the series of videos creating a virtual flyover that follows Richard on his journey to the Holy Land and back. The running calendar and impressive graphics of medieval settlements on the coast of France, Cyprus and the Levant enable the viewer to get a sense of the scale of the Crusades, the distances crossed, and how long the journeys would have taken. There is a personal element too: Richard sends 'live' tweets from the journey which provide entertaining updates about real encounters, complete with rapidly-corrected spelling errors and an expression of surprise that the fighting at Acre started without him. (His tweet about his marriage to Berengaria features the hashtag '#royalwedding'.) Complemented by reliquaries and other treasures from the Crusades, these virtual journeys are educational and arresting to visitors of all

ages (as I observed from the rapt expressions of others in the gallery). Most important, they go a long way towards making the past more real. Speyer has once again captured the king.

Notes

1. Stephen Church, *King John: New Interpretations* (Woodbridge, 2007); Stephen Church, *King John: England, Magna Carta and the Making of a Tyrant* (London, 2015); see also the myriad new studies on Magna Carta in honour of its 800th anniversary in 2015.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Guido Kleinhubbert, 'Ritter Doof: Die wahre Geschichte des Richard Löwenherz', *Der Spiegel*, 37 (2017), 116–19.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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[\[1\] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/296957](https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/296957)