Eleanor of Aquitaine
(1122-1204 C.E.)

**Eleanor of Aquitaine enters Constantinople, 1147 A.D.**

**Eleanor of Aquitaine** was one of the most powerful and fascinating personalities of feudal Europe. At age 15 she married Louis VII, King of France, bringing into the union her vast possessions from the River Loire to the Pyrenees. Only a few years later, at age 19, she knelt in the cathedral of Vézelay before the celebrated Abbé Bernard of Clairvaux offering him thousands of her vassals for the Second Crusade. It was said that Queen Eleanor appeared at Vézelay dressed like an Amazon galloping through the crowds on a white horse, urging them to join the crusades.

While the church may have been pleased to receive her thousand fighting vassals, they were less happy when they learned that Eleanor, attended by 300 of her ladies, also planned to go to help "tend the wounded."

The presence of Eleanor, her ladies and wagons of female servants, was criticized by commentators throughout her adventure. Dressed in armor and carrying lances, the women never fought. And when they reached the city of Antioch, Eleanor found herself deep in a renewed friendship with Raymond, her uncle, who had been appointed prince of the city. Raymond, only a few years older than Eleanor, was far more interesting and handsome than Eleanor's husband, Louis. When Raymond decided that the best strategic objective of the Crusade would be to recapture Edessa, thus protecting the Western presence in the Holy Land, Eleanor sided with his view. Louis, however, was fixated on reaching Jerusalem, a less sound goal. Louis demanded that Eleanor follow him to Jerusalem. Eleanor, furious, announced to one and all that their marriage was not valid in the eyes of God, for they were related through some family connections to an extent prohibited by the Church. Wounded by her claim, Louis nonetheless forced Eleanor to honor her marriage vows and ride with him. The expedition did fail, and a defeated Eleanor and Louis returned to France in separate ships.

On her way home, while resting in Sicily, Eleanor was brought the news that her fair haired uncle had been killed in battle, and his head delivered to the Caliph of Baghdad. Although her marriage to Louis continued for a time, and she bore him two daughters, the relationship was over. In 1152 the marriage was annulled and her vast estates reverted to Eleanor's control. Within a year, at age thirty, she married twenty year old Henry who two years later became king of England.

In the papal bull for the next Crusade, it expressly forbade women of all sorts to join the expedition. All the Christian monarchs, including King Louis, agreed to this. But by this time Eleanor had problems of her own in her marriage to King Henry II of England.
After the Crusades...

In a way Eleanor of Aquitaine's life had barely begun after she returned to France from her travels on the Second Crusade. She lived until her eighties, becoming one of the great political and wealthy powers of medieval Europe.

Eleanor was wealthy because she was heiress of the duchy of Aquitaine, one of the greatest fiefs in Europe. Aquitaine was like a separate nation with lands extending in southwestern France from the river Loire to the Pyrenees. Eleanor's court was a trend setter in the medieval world, known for its sophistication and luxury. Heavily influenced by the Spanish courts of the Moors, it gave patronage to poets and encouraged the art of the Troubadours, some of whom were believed to be in love with the beautiful Eleanor. One story is that in her effort to shed her rough knights of their unruly ways, she made up a mock trial in which the court ladies sat on an elevated platform and judged the knights, who read poems of homage to women and acted out proper courting techniques. The men wore fancy clothes - flowing sleeves, pointed shoes - and wore their hair long.

During their adventures on the Second Crusade, it became apparent that her marriage with dour, severe King Louis VII of France was ill matched. The marriage was annulled on a technicality, and Eleanor left her two daughters by him to be raised in the French court. Within a short time Eleanor threw herself into a new marriage, a stormy one to Henry of Anjou, an up and coming prince eleven years younger than she. Their temperaments as well as their wealth in land were well matched; her new husband became Henry II king of England in 1154.

For the next thirteen years Eleanor constantly bore Henry children, five sons and three daughters. (William, Henry, Richard I "the Lionheart", Geoffrey, John "Lackland", Mathilda, Eleanor, and Joan). Richard and John became, in turn, kings of England. Henry was given the title "the young king" by his father, although father Henry still ruled. Through tough fighting and clever alliances, and with a parcel of children, Henry and Eleanor created an impressive empire. As well, Eleanor was an independent ruler in her own right since she had inherited the huge Duchy of Aquitaine and Poitiers from her father when she was 15.

However all was not well between Henry and Eleanor. When her older sons were of age, her estrangement from her husband grew. In 1173 she led her three of her sons in a rebellion against Henry, surprising him with this act of aggression so seemingly unusual for a woman. In her eyes it was justified. After two decades of child bearing, putting up with his infidelities, vehemently disagreeing with some of his decisions, and, worst of all, having to share her independence and power, Eleanor may have hoped that her prize would have been the right to rule Aquitaine with her beloved third son Richard, and without Henry. The rebellion was put down, however, and fifty-year-old Eleanor was imprisoned by Henry in various fortified buildings for the next fifteen years.

In 1189, Henry died. On the accession of her son Richard I to kingship, Eleanor's fortunes rose again. When Richard was fighting in the Holy Land she repeatedly intervened to defend his lands - even against her son John. When he was captured on his way home, she used her considerable influence to
help raise the ransom and secure Richard's release. Her relentless work on behalf of her favorite son increased her fame as an extremely able politician.

Eleanor traveled constantly, even in her old age. Running from one end of Europe to another, she often risked her life in her efforts to maintain the loyalty of the English subjects, cement marriage alliances, and manage her army and estates. By this time she had many grandchildren. Possibly one of her wisest acts was to travel to Spain to chose and collect her thirteen year old grand daughter Blanche of Castile to become the bride of Louis VIII of France, the grandson of her first husband Louis VII! Blanche eventually proved a rival to Eleanor in political influence and success as queen of France. Eleanor also, when almost seventy, rode over the Pyrenees to collect her candidate to be Richard's wife, (Berengaria, the daughter of King Sancho the Wise of Navarre). She then traversed the Alps, traveling all the way down the Italian peninsula, to bring Berengaria to Sicily. Berengaria then travelled to Cyprus, where Richard married her at Limossol on May 12, 1191.

Eleanor died in 1204 at her favorite religious house, the abbey of Fontevrault, where she had retreated to find peace during various moments of her life.

![Fontevrault](image)

*Fontevrault*

*A religious community where older aristocratic women and ill-used wives came to recover their self-respect and find sympathy and spiritual comfort.*

**Resources:**


A WEB site essay on Eleanor: [Eleanor of Aquitaine](#)
"You have been the first among my joys 
and you shall be the last,
so long as there is life in me."
Verse sung by Bernart de Ventadour, a famous troubadour said to be in love with Eleanor.

"The many bends along the highroad of my life conceal the vistas between this fleeting moment of pure being and ancient recollections coursing like deerhounds through my head. In a life of fourscore years and more, who can look so far back? The very richness of experience crowds and clouds the brains."

Eleanor, "Power of a Woman", chapter 1

"How fortunate I was in my husbands: the monk, and the young bull in spring. Whether they would or not, they placed me on a promontory against which tides of time have crashed and fallen back. They left me worn, these men and their tides, but they did not level me."

Eleanor, "Power of a Woman", chapter 45