

## SECTION 2

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### Was the reign of King Stephen a period of 'anarchy'?

#### INTRODUCTION

England faced another succession crisis in 1135; the fourth out of four successions since 1066. But Stephen moved so swiftly that no war or rebellion broke out in 1135. His rival was an unpopular woman, and it looked at first as if peace would prevail. But war broke out in 1139 and raged intermittently until 1147; it split the nation. England had been at peace since 1072, but now witnessed sieges and battles. The king was captured and ransomed. The Londoners rejected his rival. This chapter will look at how this situation came about and its consequences for law and order in England.

#### WHY WAS STEPHEN ABLE TO TAKE THE THRONE?

- The series of *coups d'état* since 1066 had prevented a sound procedure of succession from developing.
- All the chroniclers admit that Stephen was Henry I's favourite nephew. Henry enriched Stephen, granting him the county of Mortain in western Normandy and vast estates in England.
- Furthermore, Henry arranged for Stephen to marry Matilda, niece of the late Queen Matilda, which would have made their offspring descendants of the Old English ruling house, a fact that cannot have been lost on Henry.
- Stephen, like Henry when he took the throne in 1100, was in the right place at the right time, sailing immediately from Wissant (Boulogne) to England.
- Stephen was at liberty to move, unlike many of the barons at court, who were bound by a solemn oath to stay in Normandy until the king was buried properly.
- He gained the support of Roger of Salisbury, justiciar, Henry of Blois, Bishop of Winchester (his brother) and Archbishop William of Canterbury. These were some of the most powerful men in the kingdom, and all had resisted Matilda's succession in 1126 and the Angevin marriage alliance.
- They justified their decision by claiming that the oath was invalid because the king had imposed it on them; furthermore, one story came out that the king had released his nobles and bishops from the oaths as he lay dying.

#### KEY PERSON

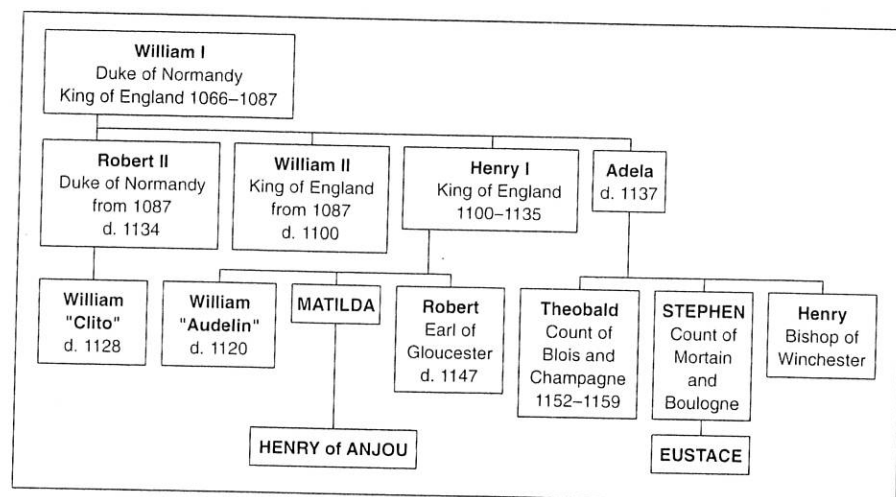
**Stephen of Blois** Born around 1096, the younger son of Adèle, daughter of William the Conqueror. His father, Stephen, count of Blois, was killed fighting in the Holy Land in 1102. In 1113 Stephen went to England for the first time and spent the next twenty-two years in the court of his uncle, Henry I. He established himself as a capable soldier and his marriage to Matilda, daughter and heiress of the Count of Bolougne, placed him at the forefront of the Anglo-Norman magnates in terms of power and wealth. He was considered to be an honourable and pious man, and the obvious choice after Matilda.

#### KEY THEME

**Anarchy** Unlimited, widespread political and social chaos; the total breakdown of law and order and the complete failure of the routines of government.

- Stephen had the support of London, too. The Londoners, who had been harshly taxed by Henry, claimed their ancient right to choose the king in times of danger. Stephen was well-known in the city and was a patron of two churches, St Martin-le-Grand and Aldgate Priory. London, as we shall see, was crucial to the struggle between Stephen and Matilda.
- Matilda was a woman, and that made it very difficult for twelfth-century society to accept her as a ruler in her own right.
- This was compounded by the fact that Matilda was married to an Angevin, the traditional enemy of Normandy; thus the count of Anjou, in his wife's name, would be virtual ruler of England and Normandy.
- Matilda's position was further weakened by the fact that her father had not provided her with a landed power base in England or Normandy. She did not have control of a single castle – she was quarrelling with her father over this at the time of his death.

Stephen went to Winchester where he was given the keys to the treasury, and from there he was crowned on 22 December 1135. Ten days later he carried the coffin of his uncle at the royal funeral at Reading.



Stephen's  
genealogy

### HOW DID STEPHEN SECURE HIS HOLD ON THE THRONE?

All that Matilda and Geoffrey accomplished on hearing of Stephen's triumph was the seizure of several border castles north of Maine. The majority of the Norman barons refused to accept them. However, Stephen needed to gain international recognition and to ensure that Matilda was well and truly out of the running. Much of this was due to the activities of Stephen's brother, Henry, Bishop of Winchester:

- Henry gathered testimonials from the bishops of England and Normandy, King Louis VI of France and Count Theobald of Blois (their elder brother).

- A high-powered embassy was sent to Pope Innocent II in Rome and persuaded him to accept Stephen's claims.
- The Pope sent a letter endorsing Stephen, which was circulated around England and Normandy.
- Stephen's advisors claimed that Stephen had quelled the potential breakdown of law and order following the death of King Henry (this was an exaggeration and was to backfire on Stephen when his own reign slipped into disorder).
- Stephen went north after Henry I's funeral and made his peace with King David of Scotland (his wife's uncle). David had recently occupied Cumberland and Northumberland. Stephen's impressive army funded from the vast treasury built up by Henry I sufficiently impressed David.
- Stephen held his Easter court at Westminster in 1136; his wife was crowned and a great banquet was held and gifts were given out; the barons swore oaths of allegiance to him.
- Stephen confirmed the liberties of the Church, granted pardons, and allowed barons to divide up their estates when they left several daughters as heirs.
- Stephen visited Normandy in March 1137; after meeting his brother the count of Blois, he met the king of France on the border, who recognised him as the king of England and accepted homage from Stephen's ten-year-old son Eustace for Normandy.

#### KEY EVIDENCE

##### From a Charter of Stephen addressed generally (1136)

'I allow and concede that jurisdiction and authority over ecclesiastical persons and over all clerks and their property, together with the disposal of ecclesiastical estates, shall lie in the hands of bishops ... I will observe good laws and the ancient and lawful customs in respect of pecuniary exactions for murder and pleas and other causes, and I command them to be observed.'

#### WHY DID STEPHEN LOSE THE SUPPORT OF EARL ROBERT?

The key to the security of the entire Anglo-Norman realm lay in Normandy; Stephen failed to appreciate this. He raised a large force to crush the Angevins but his army, containing large numbers of Flemish mercenaries, fell out with the Normans, and he achieved only a three-year truce. When Stephen left for England, never to return again to Normandy, he left behind Robert, Earl of Gloucester.

Robert claimed that the oath he had sworn to Stephen in 1136 was conditional; he had only sworn fealty to Stephen if the king continued to be faithful to him. Furthermore, he decided that his oath had been unlawful, given the oath he had sworn to Matilda in 1126 and Stephen's seizure of the throne in 1135. It is possible that Robert only supported Stephen in 1135 by default; he could not at that time support Matilda because she was in the middle of border warfare with her own father, Henry I.

#### The influence of Waleran, Count of Meulan

Waleran's prominence at Stephen's court squeezed out Bishop Henry and Earl Robert and possibly engineered the downfall of Bishop Roger of Salisbury and his family. Waleran, son of the great Robert of Meulan, was an identical twin (his younger twin brother, Robert, was earl of Leicester). He had vast estates in England (where he was count of Worcester) and in

## KEY EVIDENCE

**Concerning a council at Winchester in 1139, from William of Malmesbury's 'Modern History'**  
The legate [Henry, Bishop of Winchester] observed that it was a dreadful crime for the king to have been led astray by sinister persons as to have laid violent hands on his subjects, and especially on bishops in the security of his court.

Normandy. The Beaumont twins had a vast network of kinship connections: William de Warenne, earl of Surrey, was a step-brother; the earl of Warwick a cousin; the earl of Northampton a son-in-law, and the earl of Pembroke a brother-in-law.

### Loss of support from the bishops

Stephen sent Waleran ahead to Normandy in 1136 to establish peace in his name. Waleran was by now the king's son-in-law, having been betrothed to Stephen's two-year-old daughter; he was also a cousin of Louis VI of France. After the failure of the summer campaign against Anjou, Bishop Henry, the king's brother, fell out of favour, and it was Waleran who accompanied the king back to England. In 1139 Stephen began to arrange the marriage of his son Eustace to the sister of King Louis of France and it was Waleran who acted as ambassador to Paris. In June of that year a court conspiracy sponsored by Waleran brought about the downfall of Bishop Roger of Salisbury. Roger was suspected of awaiting the arrival of Earl Robert and, following a street brawl involving the bishop's men, he and his family were arrested, and their castles seized.

Although some thought that Roger of Salisbury was too powerful and should not hold castles, the Church was bitterly offended at the way the bishop and his family were treated. Stephen now began to lose the sympathy of the Church. Stephen's brother, Henry of Winchester, now a papal legate, attempted to find common ground, but failed. See pages 214–15 for Stephen's relations with the Church.

## KEY WORDS

**Defection** Leaving a political group or party for another group, thus betraying them – or at least changing sides.

**Civil war** The worst type of warfare: war between people of the same country for political, social or religious reasons. A war that pits father against son, brother against brother.

### Rebellion in England and the return of Robert and Matilda

The timing of the loss of support from the Church was crucial, for it was in September of 1139 that Earl Robert and Matilda landed in England. Rebellion had broken out across England after Robert's defection the previous summer, but Stephen had crushed them all in a brilliant campaign. When Matilda came in person to England, however, all the grievances and discontent had a focus: rebellion now became **civil war**.

### WALES AND SCOTLAND Wales

Henry I's achievements in Wales and Scotland were largely destroyed after his death. In the years following 1136 the Welsh reconquered Norman castles in Carmarthen, Oswestry and Mold. The southern areas of Cardiff and Newport continued to be heavily Anglicised but the upland valleys of the north remained strongly Welsh. The barons under Stephen were too concerned with the politics of England to make war against the Welsh.

### Scotland

In Scotland, the situation after 1135 was plunged into open conflict. King David I, brother-in-law to Henry I, was entirely committed to Matilda's

cause, not to Stephen's. He invaded England after Stephen's coronation and seized Carlisle, which remained a chief seat of power until his death in 1153. In 1138 David was defeated at the Battle of the Standard, but managed to gain control of Cumbria, so weak was Stephen's position. David's greatest gain was Northumberland, which Stephen granted to his son Henry in 1139. David's wife was the daughter of Earl Waltheof of Northumberland, executed for his (minor) part in the 1075 rebellion. David's son Henry held the earldom, with his base at Corbridge, until his death in 1152, when it passed to his younger son, William.

The succession crisis of 1135 caused paralysis and retreat in Wales and outright loss of English territories to the Scottish, altogether a major reversal on the Norman advances made since 1066.

### **'WHEN CHRIST AND HIS SAINTS SLEPT': A TIME OF ANARCHY?**

Much has been made of the rest of the reign of Stephen as a time that historians once called 'the anarchy' when the barons fought out their private feuds across the kingdom. In fact, Stephen retained control over much of his kingdom; the core of the rebellion remained in Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and Somerset. Here the fighting was fiercest, as it was here that Earl Robert headed the Angevin party in England, along with Flemish and Welsh mercenaries. Stephen could damage and contain the rebels, but could not eradicate them.

### **Ranulf of Chester and the battle of Lincoln (1141)**

Stephen's determination to close with his enemies led to the greatest catastrophe of his reign. Pitched battles in medieval warfare were very rare, precisely because they could be decisive, as at Hastings and Tinchebray. For that reason, medieval rulers and rebellious barons preferred besieging castles and skirmishing, where an advantage could be forced without taking a great risk. But in Stephen's situation, with the continuing festering sore of rebellion and betrayal in his kingdom, a pitched battle could solve the situation once and for all.

The immediate cause was the seizure of Lincoln Castle by Earl Ranulf of Chester. Ranulf was a powerful baron but wanted to extend his powers into Lincolnshire. One contemporary source says that Ranulf ruled nearly a third of the country; he was Earl of the great earldom of Chester; he had inherited large estates in Lincolnshire; his half-brother, William de Roumare, was Earl of Lincoln. Ranulf also wished to recover the barony of Carlisle which his father had held and which Henry I had granted away to the son of the king of Scotland.

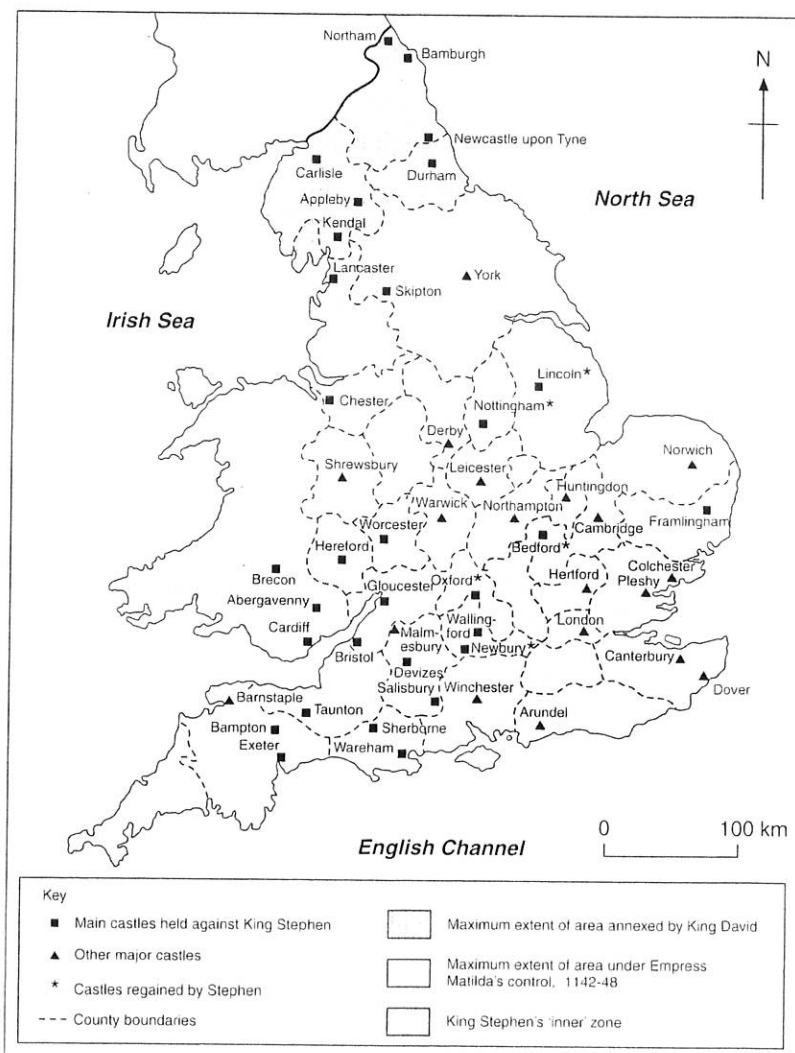
Before Christmas 1140, Stephen met Ranulf and agreed for the earl to keep the castles of Lincoln and Derby. But when the Bishop of Lincoln sent a

### **KEY EVIDENCE**

**From *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (written after 1154)** 'Wherever the ground was tilled the earth bore no corn, for the land was ruined by such doings; and men said openly that Christ and his saints slept.'

message in January 1141 telling the king that the earl and his family were in the city without a strong garrison, Stephen took his chance, storming north so suddenly that Ranulf fled the castle at night, leaving his family behind.

As he retreated to Derby, Ranulf summoned aid from his father-in-law, who happened to be Robert, Earl of Gloucester. The two earls met in Leicestershire with a large force and marched on Lincoln and offered battle. Stephen, eager to accept, marched out of the town, even though his army was smaller than the rebel army. The royalist cavalry charge on the Welsh infantry failed and the king was then surrounded by the main English rebel army. Dismounted, the king fought bravely with his axe until it broke and then with his sword. His bodyguard were either killed or captured and he was taken prisoner. The battle lasted only about an hour.



## WHY WAS MATILDA NOT CROWNED QUEEN OF ENGLAND?

Stephen spent the night under guard in Lincoln Castle, then went to Gloucester Castle and finally to Bristol Castle, where his triumphant cousin Matilda ordered him to be kept in chains. But before the year was out, he was released and Matilda's forces were in disarray.

It has been suggested that Matilda lost support because she was a woman in power in an age when women were expected to be subordinate. Other medieval women wielded great power and were not treated in the same way as the sources treat Matilda (for example, Matilda's own mother and grandmother, both Matildas, had wielded real power at the courts of Henry I and William I during their monarch's absence, and Matilda's aunt, Stephen's mother, Adela, governed Blois in the long absence of her crusader husband). However, these women were queen consorts who held office by virtue of their husbands' position; Matilda's situation was different.

Matilda lost her advantage over Stephen after Lincoln for three reasons:

- Baronial loyalties were divided.
- The personality of Matilda.
- The achievements of Queen Matilda. The concept of a queen ruling in her own right (as queen regnant) was foreign to contemporary minds.

### Baronial loyalties

After the battle of Lincoln, Stephen's position was by no means hopeless. Waleran of Meulan had escaped the field of battle to Worcester; William of Ypres, the great mercenary captain, was in London with the Queen, and William Martel, the king's steward, was in Sherborne. Neither Ranulf, Earl of Chester or David, king of Scotland, added their forces to those of Matilda (or the 'Empress' as she was known from her days as wife to the emperor Henry V of Germany). After the disaster of Westminster, Bishop Henry (who said that he only allowed the Empress into Winchester to be in a better position to help his brother) did not return to the Empress's side. Only five bishops were in regular attendance on the Empress, and the magnates were her uncle and half-brothers.

There were defections, however; in June, the powerful East Anglian barons Geoffrey de Mandeville, Aubrey de Vere and Hugh Bigod went over to Matilda; in July, Waleran of Meulan defected, but only to save his lands in Normandy, to which he returned shortly afterwards.

### The personality of Matilda

Matilda was a woman of fierce and harsh temperament. She played on her imperial status; she lacked judgement and flexibility. She openly lost her temper at court and she threatened men who ought not to have been

### KEY EVIDENCE

**The Battle of Lincoln, from 'The History of the English', by Henry of Huntingdon (1141)**

'Then a fresh shout arose and every man rushed at the king while he in turn thrust back at them all. At length his battle-axe was shattered by repeated blows, whereupon he drew his trusty sword, well worthy of a king, and with this he wrought wonders, until it too was broken. At sight of this, William de Cahaigues, a very valiant knight, rushed upon him and, seizing his helmet, shouted with a loud voice, "Hither, all of you, hither, I hold the king." Everyone flew to his aid and the king was taken prisoner.'



## KEY EVIDENCE

### From Henry of Huntingdon's 'History of the English' (1141)

'For she was swollen with inufferable pride by her success in war, and alienated the affections of nearly everyone. Therefore either by crafty men or by God's will – though all human activity is subject to God's design – she was driven out of London. With a woman's anger, she forthwith ordered the king, the Lord's Anointed, to be bound with fetters.'

threatened; she chained and confined Stephen for almost a year, which Henry I and William I – both brutal men in their time – had avoided doing to their captives – and she lost the support of London, which proved crucial to her coronation. Due to the fact that she was a woman, she was criticised more harshly by the author of the *Gesta Stephani*.

In the spring of 1141 the Empress Matilda entered Winchester and stated that she was now queen of England. But political reality in the twelfth century was that nobody was king or queen of England until they had been crowned. The bishops insisted that she call herself 'Lady of England and Normandy'. In June the Empress moved her army to St Albans and then occupied the Palace of Westminster. Queen Matilda, wife of Stephen and resident in the Tower of London, moved south, into Kent.

Empress Matilda then offended and alienated so many around her that when she dismissed the delegation from the city of London, those still loyal to Stephen rang the city bells and invited Queen Matilda back into the city. As the London mob stormed the palace, the Empress had no choice but to flee.

### The achievements of Queen Matilda

It was to be the other Matilda who proved to be the better woman. As niece of King David of Scotland, Queen Matilda claimed descent from Ethelred II of England, just as her cousin the Empress did; Queen Matilda's father and uncle were also famous crusaders, the latter having been proclaimed king of Jerusalem in 1101. Stephen's queen spent the year 1141 rallying the bishops and the barons to her cause, reminding them of the king held in chains and of her son's rights.

The queen based herself in London, where the city fathers were divided as to what to do. After the queen was forced to leave, when the Empress took her army to Winchester, the queen and William of Ypres seized their chance to give the bishop a lesson. The queen cut off the Empress's forces in the city and although the Empress escaped, Earl Robert was captured.

## THE RETURN OF THE KING AND THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR: 1141–47

Matilda's cause was lost without Earl Robert. In order to negotiate his release, the Empress was forced to exchange him for Stephen in November 1141. Stephen appeared in state with his queen at Canterbury, where he held his Christmas court. Almost a year in jail had taken its toll, however, and the king fell gravely ill in the spring. Devon and Cornwall and most of Normandy were in the hands of the Angevins. In the summer, however, the king recovered and moved with speed to Dorset, seizing Wareham, an important Angevin port, then striking north to Oxford, where he trapped



the Empress. Matilda escaped but Oxford was taken by Stephen, thus keeping the Angevins back beyond the Cotswolds.

### **Geoffrey de Mandeville and the 'Anarchy'**

1143 was not a good year for Stephen; he and his troops were surprised at Wilton in Wiltshire and had to flee for their lives. William Martel was captured and Stephen had to hand over Sherborne Castle to secure his release and accept a truce. Robert of Gloucester now dominated the territory from Bristol to the Dorset coast.

To make matters worse, Stephen then provoked the wrath of one of his own barons, Geoffrey de Mandeville. The situation was similar to that of Ranulf of Chester; another 'overmighty' subject having too much power, wanting more and then rebelling. Neither was necessarily motivated by loyalties either to or against Stephen. Personal gain seems to have been the main factor.

Geoffrey de Mandeville had been made earl of Essex by Stephen in 1140, but allied himself first to the Empress after the Battle of Lincoln and then to the queen after Matilda's failure to become queen. Each time he swapped sides he gained more cash, land and offices; by 1143 he was sheriff and justiciar in three counties and Constable of the Tower of London, a crucial post. In September of that year Stephen arrested him at St Albans on suspicion of plotting to rejoin the Empress. Geoffrey surrendered the Tower and his Essex castles but then went on a prolonged spree of violence in Cambridgeshire and the Fens until the summer of 1144. He ransacked and burned Cambridge, turned Ely into a fortress, made the Abbey of Ramsay a military headquarters and inflicted death and destruction on the surrounding population; famine followed. Stephen was unable to get to him in the Fens and only a mortal wound from an arrow ended the violent career of Geoffrey de Mandeville.

In 1892 the historian J.H. Round produced a book on Geoffrey de Mandeville. He was portrayed as the king's arch-enemy, out for everything he could get, typical of the barons of the time. But Geoffrey's career was by no means typical of Stephen's reign. His activities only affected a small area. Furthermore, he made no attempt to join the forces of the Empress.

### **Stalemate and the death of Earl Robert (1147)**

Both sides were short of resources and found that people simply did not want to fight. Stephen knew that he had to capture Gloucester to strike at the heart of the Angevin party; he was close in 1146, and a peace conference was held, although nothing came of it.

Then in October 1147, Earl Robert died. This was the end of Empress Matilda's cause. She did not stay in England longer than four months, but left for Normandy, never to return. The civil war in England was over. The West Country remained an Angevin stronghold, which formed a future launch pad for Matilda's son, Henry.

### **SECURING THE SUCCESSION: EUSTACE OR HENRY?**

After 1147 the issue was not whether Matilda would become queen but whether her son Henry would succeed Stephen, instead of Stephen's son Eustace. For the last six years of his reign Stephen struggled to pass on his dynasty to his son. Eustace came of age in 1147, aged 21, was knighted by his father and invested with the county of Boulogne. Eustace was a capable young man of military experience and some diplomatic wisdom. He knew that to ensure his succession he would have to either capture or kill his opponent, Henry, son of the Empress. Eustace attempted this in 1149, when Henry met King David of Scotland at Carlisle and rode back via the Cotswolds into Angevin territory in the West Country. Henry escaped the ambush but contemporaries were well aware of the competition between the two young men.

Stephen pursued two policies to ensure Eustace's succession:

- Crowning his son in his own lifetime.
- Forming anti-Angevin alliances in Europe.

Both policies failed. The custom of crowning the heir was common in France but unknown in England; even so, it was a realistic prospect for Stephen. However, the Church refused to comply, citing the ambiguity of Stephen's own coronation. Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury flatly refused to crown Eustace.

Stephen's second plan, an Anglo-French alliance against the Angevins, was agreed in 1151. Count Eustace struck deep into Normandy in the summer of 1151, getting within 20 miles of Rouen, but the king of France, Louis VII, fell ill in Paris and dismissed his army.

### **Disease and deaths**

The period 1151–53 saw the deaths of many leading nobles and rulers in north-west Europe, possibly following the devastating famine of 1150 and its ensuing diseases. In September 1151, Geoffrey of Anjou died, leaving his son Henry the duchy and county of Anjou. But if Henry could not now leave his new territories safely to pursue the crown of England, any hopes Eustace had of exploiting this were dashed with the death first of King Louis's minister, Abbot Suger, then of Eustace's uncle, Count Theobald of Blois-Chartres, and finally of Queen Matilda, in 1152.

## Fiasco at Wallingford and the death of Eustace

Early in 1153 Duke Henry landed again in England and found great support in the West Country; Stephen discovered the unpleasant fact that people did not want to fight against Henry.

August 1153 saw the final and decisive confrontation between Duke Henry and King Stephen outside Wallingford Castle. The king outmanoeuvred the young duke but his sword broke in his efforts to finish off the Angevin. The king's army refused to fight and instead opened negotiations. In a fury, Count Eustace rode to Cambridge, but was struck down by disease and died within a week.

## Peace and reconstruction within the realm

In November 1153 Stephen recognised Henry as his adopted son and heir in a treaty signed at Winchester. Henry in turn allowed Stephen to remain on the throne for his lifetime. Henry left for Normandy in the spring of 1154 and in England peace had begun in earnest; Angevin barons paid in accounts to the Exchequer and the West Country obeyed the king's law once again. Stephen held a great court at York and impressed upon the northern barons that the heady days of Ranulf of Chester were over. In October the king was in Kent, discussing the return of Flemish mercenaries to Flanders when he fell ill, probably with dysentery, and died.

## CONCLUSION: WEAKNESSES, MISTAKES AND 'ANARCHY'

The civil wars of Stephen's reign could be seen as a result of his weaknesses and mistakes or as a reaction to the merciless grip of Henry I and his leaving a daughter as his heir.

### Weaknesses or piety?

Stephen (and no other English king) was referred to by later twelfth-century writers as *rex piissimus* 'most pious king'. He was deeply devout by contemporary standards; he had an Augustinian father confessor licensed to hear him by the archbishop of Canterbury. Many of Stephen's actions were motivated by piety. Such piety might be seen as weakness by modern generations. For example, in 1138 he avoided besieging Ludlow, which was commanded by a woman. When he trapped the wives of the earls of Chester and Lincoln in the castle of Lincoln in 1141, he let them go. In 1152, when besieging Newbury Castle, he had with him as a hostage the son of the rebel John Marshal, five-year-old William. Urged by the barons to kill the boy to make an example, Stephen refused. Instead, he took the boy on as a page and that boy rose to become one of the great twelfth-century magnates (see below, pages 204–9). Stephen was a chivalrous king. He was a successful military commander and a brave man; he was pious and generous. He allowed honourable enemies to go into exile or to go free, and only in one case did he execute opponents who surrendered.

### KEY EVIDENCE

#### Charter of Stephen describing the 'Treaty of Winchester', 1153

'Know that I, King Stephen, have established Henry, Duke of Normandy, as my successor in the kingdom of England, and have recognised him as my heir by hereditary right; and thus I have given and confirmed to him and his heirs the kingdom of England.'

That said, contemporaries also spoke harshly of Stephen's weakness as a ruler. 'In King Stephen's time justice was banished from the kingdom and everything open to plunder' wrote one chronicle. 'He was soft and easy-going and did not justice', proclaimed *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 1137.

### Mistakes

Stephen was also subject to several serious failures of judgement. He misjudged the issue with Roger of Salisbury and his family. He was influenced by a court faction with its own vested interests and lost the support of the senior clergy as a result. His arrest of Geoffrey de Mandeville, again influenced by vested interests in the royal court, led to Geoffrey's rampage through East Anglia.

#### KEY EVIDENCE

##### From the *Gesta Stephani* (1143)

'You could see villages with famous names standing solitary and almost empty, because the peasants of both sexes and ages were dead, fields whitening with a magnificent harvest but their cultivators taken away by the agency of a devastating famine.'

### Comparisons with Henry I: perceptions of civil unrest and 'anarchy'

Stephen's actions against members of the clergy and aristocracy were not unprecedented. Henry I had acted in a similar way. Contemporaries agreed that Roger of Salisbury was far too powerful. What made it difficult for Stephen was that his kingship was undermined by the civil unrest of his reign.

Contemporaries bemoaned the state of the country during the fighting. Of the fourteen sources that describe the reign, only six were contemporary and of those, only two describe the entire reign. The other four cease by 1142. The two contemporary sources that describe the entire period were written by Robert, Bishop of Bath and Wells (the *Gesta Stephani* 'Deeds of Stephen' – the most important source and close to Stephen) and by Henry, Archdeacon of Huntingdon (*History of the English*), who distrusted Stephen and disliked Matilda. Both these sources had two different local perspectives and both talk about the horrors of the wars.

The extent of these horrors has been much debated by historians. Large amounts of land in the south-west, the north and the Midlands were recorded as 'waste' in sheriff's accounts between 1154 and 1160. This was where the fighting had taken place in Stephen's reign. So unruly and brutal had this been that the period has been termed an 'anarchy' by historians. Society and order collapsed as every man scrambled for power. The state of coinage is often used as evidence for the breakdown of centralised government in certain regions during Stephen's reign. After 1140, the centralised system with its national distribution of standard official dies from London broke down. Mints at Bristol, Cardiff, Swansea, Oxford and Wareham struck coins in the name of the Empress.

The word 'anarchy' is a powerful word and is wrongly used for the reign of Stephen. Contemporaries did not use this word. A nineteenth-century

historian and bishop, William Stubbs, used it first in 1867. To Stubbs, Stephen was a weak king, unable to control the forces of feudalism. J.H. Round, writing in 1888, followed this, calling it the 'anarchy', and wrote in 1892 that Stephen was at the mercy of an unscrupulous aristocracy.

Only in the last twenty-five years has the dominance of the word 'anarchy' been challenged. 'Waste' may simply have recorded land not assessed for taxation, rather than damaged land, or it may have signified that the taxpayers could not be established on those lands. Professor David Crouch argues that 'time and time again throughout the conflict they [those fighting] showed themselves willing to discuss peaceful solutions ... at no level did the conflict involve the dissolution of the social or political order'. Stephen's struggles with the aristocrats had more to do with his personality – his piety, his chivalry and his poor judgements – than with the forces of feudalism out of control.

Government did not break down completely in Stephen's reign. The Exchequer continued to function and coins were minted. The great barons did not change sides as often as used to be believed, and only then reluctantly. The great test for an 'anarchy' in Stephen's reign is to be found in the first years of the reign of Henry II. If England had been so devastated by warfare and government so limited by feudal barons, then how was it that peace was established and that the government functioned smoothly within two years?