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Richard of Devizes

*Chronicle of the Deeds of
King Richard the First*



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The Chronicle of the Deeds of King Richard the First by

RICHARD OF DEVIZES

(fl. late 12th century)



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Chronicle of the Deeds of King Richard the First, King of England (1192)

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Richard of Devizes (1900) by William Hunt

The Delphi Classics Catalogue



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RICHARD OF DEVIZES



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Chronicle of the Deeds of King Richard the First by Richard of Devizes



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Cover illustration: *Richard the Lionheart at the Battle of Ascalon* by Abraham Cooper, c. 1828.

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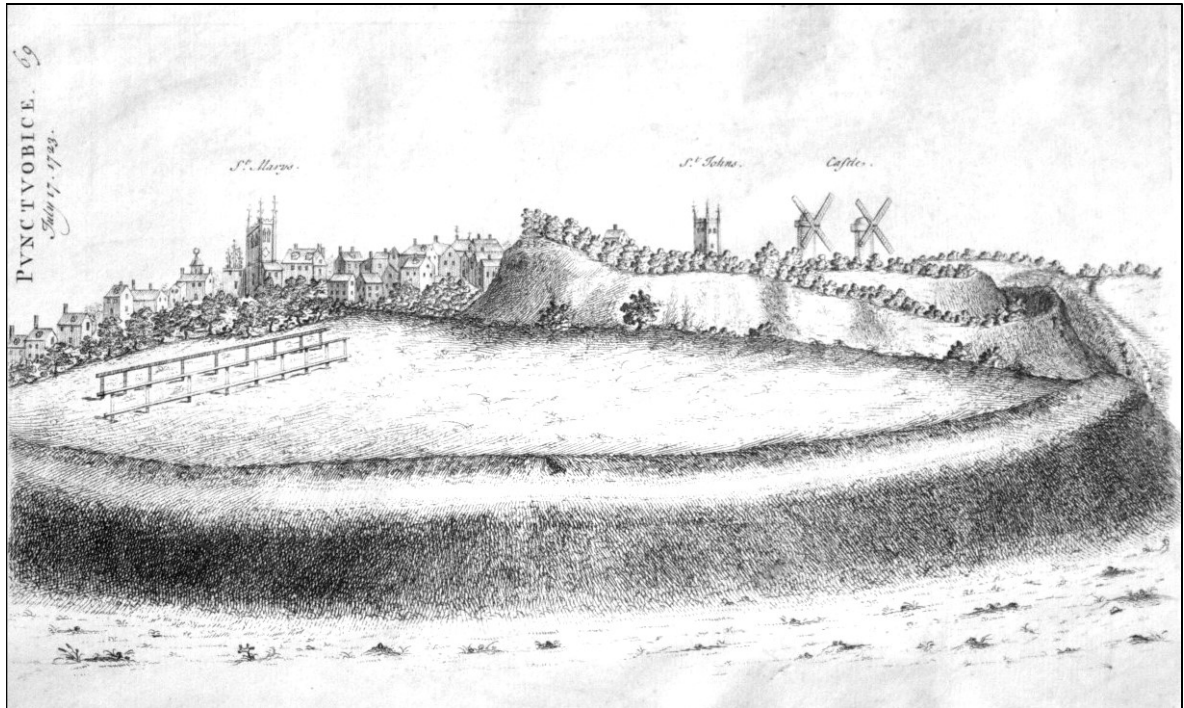
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The Translation



An early eighteenth century print of Devizes, a market town in Wiltshire, England



The Market Square of Devizes in the nineteenth century



Devizes today

Chronicle of the Deeds of King Richard the First, King of England (1192)



Translated by John Allen Giles, 1908

Richard of Devizes was a monk and English chronicler of St Swithun's Cathedral Priory at Winchester, who flourished in the late twelfth century. His birthplace is likely indicated by his surname, Devizes, a town in Wiltshire, though little is known about his life. He is chiefly known today for his *Chronicon de rebus gestis Ricardi Primi* (1192), which covers the first three years of King Richard I's reign, providing a practical account of events in England and the Holy Land during the Third Crusade.

The text stands as one of the most distinctive and brilliant examples of Angevin historiography. Written around 1192, it emerged during a period of immense political and religious upheaval. King Richard I (the Lionheart) had recently ascended the English throne in 1189 and promptly departed for the Third Crusade, leaving England under a fragile and fractured domestic administration, governed by his appointed chancellor, William Longchamp. Richard of Devizes composed this work within the cloistered walls of the St Swithun's cathedral priory in Winchester — then a vital administrative and cultural centre, giving the monk unique access to high-ranking church and state authorities. Dedicated to Robert, a former prior of St Swithun's who had departed to join the Carthusian Order, the chronicle was intended for a small, highly literate, and intimate monastic audience rather than broad public circulation. This granted Richard with the artistic freedom to write with an extraordinary level of frankness, subversion and stylistic experimentation that was rarely found in official royal biographies or grand state histories.

The extant text is narrow in chronological scope, though remarkably dense, spanning the first three years of King Richard I's reign (1189-1192). Structurally, it acts as a split history, balancing two primary settings: the volatile domestic politics of a leaderless England and the military logistics of the Third Crusade unfolding across Europe and Palestine. For the events taking place in the Holy Land, Richard relies on second-hand reports, making him a less reliable authority on the Crusade itself compared to eyewitness accounts like the *Itinerarium Regis Ricardi*. Yet, Richard's description of the domestic preparations for the Crusade — and the ensuing political chaos in England during the king's absence — is remarkably vivid and valuable to historians. The chronicler subtly captures the fierce power struggles between the chancellor William Longchamp and the king's treacherous brother, Prince John, utilising historical allusions and keen political astuteness to explore the stability of the Angevin realm.

The most important feature of the *Chronicon*, however, is its inclusion of local English affairs and its sharp social commentary. Richard famously recounts the anti-Jewish riots that marred Richard I's coronation in 1189. Indeed, he is the first recorded author to apply the word "holocaust" (in its classical sense of a whole burnt offering) to describe the mass murder of London's Jewish population. His text also features a highly creative, arguably satirical passage written from the perspective of a French Jewish cobbler, who provides a sweeping, deeply critical assessment of various English towns. The author uses this device to mock the moral failings, urban vices and hyperbole associated with late twelfth-century cities, sparing only his native Winchester.

In the wider landscape of medieval chronicle literature, the *Chronicon* occupies a unique and important position due to its literary sophistication and subversive tone. While many contemporary medieval chroniclers aimed for a sober, linear reporting of providential history, Richard of Devizes brought a classical humanism and dramatic flair to his writing. His Latin prose is heavily laced with classical and biblical references, demonstrating a mastery of rhetoric that modern scholars have suggested borders on elegant satire rather than strict, objective historical recording. Furthermore, Richard's work is important due to how it tackles the logistical and intellectual challenges of writing contemporary history in the twelfth century. His surviving autograph manuscript reveals a highly deliberate page layout. It provides a physical testament to how a medieval monk processed, organised and structurally handled the fragmented and delayed information traveling between the Middle East and Western Europe.

Richard of Devizes was clearly willing to challenge the conventional myths of his time. Instead of producing a straightforward hagiography of Richard the Lionheart or a standard institutional history, he composed a witty and independent critique of his society. Although its limited contemporary circulation meant it did not heavily influence later medieval writers, the text remains an invaluable text for modern historians, offering a rare window into the intellectual depth, dark humour and literary self-awareness present within high medieval monastery society.



Portrayal of King Richard I from a twelfth century codex



Richard I being anointed during his coronation in Westminster Abbey in 1189, as depicted in a thirteenth century chronicle



The seal of William de Longchamp (died 1197), the Lord Chancellor, Chief Justiciar and Bishop of Ely in England. Born to a humble family in Normandy, he owed his advancement to royal favour. Although contemporary writers accused Longchamp's father of being a peasant's son, he held land as a knight. Longchamp first served Henry II's illegitimate son Geoffrey, but quickly transferred to the service of Richard I, Henry's heir. When Richard became king in 1189, Longchamp paid £3,000 for the office of Chancellor and was soon named to the Diocese, or bishopric, of Ely and appointed legate by the pope.

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The Near East, c. 1190, at the inception of the Third Crusade



A 1494 depiction of Richard Lionheart watching on as 3,000 Muslim captives are being executed at the city of Acre in 1190



The translator, John Allen Giles (1808-1884) was an English historian. He was primarily known as a scholar of Anglo-Saxon language and history.

PROLOGUE



TO THE VENERABLE Father Robert, his very good Lord, formerly Prior of the Church of Winchester, health to persevere in the good work he has begun, his faithful servant Richard, surnamed of Devizes, sends greeting: —

[1] AFTER YOU HAD happily proceeded to the Charter House [At Witham.] from our church of Winchester, much and often did I desire to follow you who had thus departed, peradventure to remain with you, but certainly to behold what you were about, how you lived, and whether the Carthusian cell is more exalted and nearer heaven than the cloister of Winchester. It pleased God at length to satisfy my wish. I came, and oh that I had come alone! I went thither making the third, and those who went with me were the cause of my return. My desire displeased them, and they caused my fervour, I will not say error, to grow cold. I saw with you that which elsewhere I had not seen, which I could not have believed, and which I could not sufficiently admire. In each of your cells there is one door according to custom, which you are permitted to open at pleasure, but to go out by it is not permitted, except so much as that one foot should always remain in the cell within the threshold. The brethren may step out with one foot, whichever they lease, but the other must remain in the cell. A great and solemn oath is to be taken that the door by which it is not permitted to enter or depart should be kept open. I am astonished also at another thing; abounding in all the good things of this world, as having nothing, yet possessing all things, more compassionate and humane than all men, having the most perfect love one to another, you divide the affection of charity to strangers, you bless without giving supplies to your guests. Nor do I less admire, in the third place, that living to yourselves apart out of society, and singly, you understand all the great things achieved in the world as they happen, and even sometimes you know them prior to their being accomplished. Do not, however, consider it want of respect in me to your more than Pythagorean taciturnity, if I shall dare presume to address men of so great gravity, and so arduous profession, rather with the trifles of the world than mere idle gossip.

[2] Nevertheless, although, as it is thought, the Omniscient God is with you and in you, and through Him you know all things, and not from man, nor yet by man, you were pleased, as you said, that my essay would be a solace to you, inasmuch as in the first place I should write to you a history of the fresh changes, which the world has produced, turning squares into circles (more especially since your transmigration to the celled heaven, by means of which the world may appear more worthless to you, having its fickleness before your eyes), and, secondly, that a well-known hand might recall to you the memory of one beloved.

Oh! what delight! if that holy spirit, if the angel of the Lord, if the deified man who is become already of the number of the gods, should deign to remember me before the great God, me, who am scarcely worthy to be accounted a man. I have done that which you desired, do that which you have promised. And that the little book may have a commencement of some importance, I have begun a little higher than was stipulated, making our Royal house troubled like that of Œdipus, the bounds of my work, commencing at the latter part, not daring to hope to unravel the whole. Why, and how, and when, the father may have crowned his son; how great things and of

what importance thence ensued; who and how often and what regions they embroiled; with what success they all ended I have left to those who produce greater works; my narrative serves only for the living.

IN THE YEAR OF THE LORD MCLXXXIX.



[3] NOW IN the year of our Lord's incarnation 1189, Richard, the son of king Henry II. by Eleanor, brother of Henry III., [Henry, son of King Henry II., is frequently styled Henry the Third, in the early Chronicles.] was consecrated king of the English by Baldwin, archbishop of Canterbury, at Westminster, on the third of the nones of September (3 Sept). On the very day of the coronation, about that solemn hour, in which the Son was immolated to the Father, a sacrifice of the Jews to their father the devil was commenced in the city of London, and so long was the duration of this famous mystery, that the holocaust could scarcely be accomplished the ensuing day. The other cities and towns of the kingdom emulated the faith of the Londoners, and with a like devotion dispatched their bloodsuckers [Jews, so called probably from their usurious practices.] with blood to hell. In this commotion there was prepared, although unequally, some evil against the wicked, everywhere throughout the realm, only Winchester alone, the people being prudent and circumspect, and the city always acting mildly spared its vermin. It never did any thing over-speedily; fearing nothing more than to repent, it considers the result of every thing before the commencement. It was unwilling, unprepared, to cast up violently through the parts the indigestion by which it was oppressed to its bodily peril, and it was careful for its bowels, in the mean time temperately concealing its uneasiness, until it should be possible for it, at a convenient time for cure, to cast out the whole cause of the disease at once and once for all.

[4] Not without the anxious solicitude and amazement of many, a bat was seen, in the middle and bright part of the day, to flutter through the monastery, inconveniently recircling in the same tracks, and especially around the king's throne.

[5] William de Longchamp, who had been the chancellor of the earl of Poitiers before his accession, when the earl was crowned king, considered his office to have profited as much for the better, as a kingdom is superior to an earldom.

[6] A circumstance happened on the selfsame day of the coronation in Westminster Abbey, a presage of such portentous omen, as then was hardly allowable to be related even in a whisper. At Complin, the last hour of the day, the first peal that day happened to be rung, neither by any agreement, nor even the ministers of the church themselves being aware of it, till after it was done; for Prime, Tierce, Sext, Nones, and the solemn service of vespers and two masses were celebrated without any ringing of peals.

[7] Stephen de Marzia, [Stephen de Marzia, otherwise called Stephen de Turonis.] seneschal of Anjou, under the king lately deceased, he great and mighty, singularly fierce, and the master of his lord, being taken and cast into chains, was dragged to Winchester, where being made a gazing-stock to angels and to men, emaciated with woeful hunger, and broken with the weight of his irons, he was constrained to the payment of thirty thousand pounds of money of Anjou, and the promise of fifteen thousand pounds, for his ransom. Ralph de Glanville, justiciary of the realm of England and the king's eye, a man not inferior to Stephen, except in manners and riches, being deprived of authority and given into custody, redeemed merely his liberty to go and come for fifteen thousand pounds of silver. And whereas this name, Glanville, had been so great the day before, a name as it were above every name, so that whosoever, to whom it should be given by the Lord, would converse among

princes, and would be adored by the people, yet the next morning there remained not one in the land who could be called by this name. That was the ruin of those two, to wit, of Stephen and Ralph, which also it is certain has been the ruin of thousands before them, and which hereafter may ruin others, namely, a suspicion arising from the confidence of their former lord.

[8] John, the king's brother, who alone of the sons of his mother, queen Eleanor, survived his brother, besides the earldom of Mortain, which, by his father's gift, he had long enjoyed, was so greatly enriched and increased in England by his brother, that both privately and publicly it was affirmed by many that the king had no thoughts of returning to the kingdom, and that his brother, already no less powerful than himself, if he should not restrain his innate temper, would, impelled by the desire of sovereignty, endeavour to drive him vanquished from the realm.

[9] The time of commencing his journey pressed hard upon King Richard, as he, who had been first of all the princes on this side the Alps in the taking up of the cross, was unwilling to be last in setting out. A king worthy of the name of king, who, in the first year of his reign, left the kingdom of England for Christ, scarcely otherwise than if he had departed never to return. So great was the devotion of the man, so hastily, so quickly and so speedily did he run, yea fly, to avenge the wrongs of Christ. However, whilst he kept the greater matter in his mind, giving himself in some little measure to deliberation for the kingdom, having received power from the pope that he might withdraw the cross from such of his own subjects, as he should desire, for the government of his kingdom, he first appointed Hugh Pudsey, bishop of Durham, to be chief justice of the whole realm, and with design, as is thought by many, further creating him a young earl of Northumberland out of an old bishop, the custody of as many castles as he liked being yielded to him, he diligently cleared from his coffers ten thousand pounds of silver. Geoffrey Fitz Peter, William Briwere, and Hugh Bardulf being permitted to remain at home, the cross being withdrawn from them, the king's treasurer transferred the whole collections of the three as three nuts into the Exchequer. All the sheriffs of the kingdom, on any trivial accusation falling under the king's displeasure, were deprived of their unlucky power, and scarcely permitted to see his face, even by the mediation of inestimable treasure. Ralph de Glanville, than whom none of his time was more subtle whilst he was in power, now being reduced to a private person by his prince, was so stupefied through grief, that his son-in-law, Ralph de Ardenne, utterly lost, by reason of his careless talk, whatever he had previously acquired by the judgment of his mouth. He too, himself, because he was an old man, and not able to bear fatigue, if he had been willing to give the king that little which remained after the payment of the fine, as a gratuity, would easily have obtained a remission of the peril of the journey. The king received security from the tributary kings of the Welsh and of the Scots, that they would not pass their borders for the annoyance of England during his absence.

[10] Godfrey, son of that renowned Richard de Luci, Richard (Fitz Neale) the treasurer, Hubert Walter, and William de Longchamp, four men of no small virtue, and of no mean praise, were elected at Pippewelle to the four vacant sees, viz. Winchester, London, Salisbury, and Ely. They all obtained sufficient canonical nomination, and especially the elect of Winchester, who obtained his nomination to the dignity on the seventeenth of the kalends of October (Sept. 15), while the election of the other three was delayed till the morrow, the king consenting and the archbishop confirming what was done, although at the first he would rather have had it somewhat otherwise: concerning which it wonderfully happened that he, who had been nominated to one of the sees by the archbishop's means, died that very day. William,

bishop elect of Ely, retained the king's seal on the payment of three thousand pounds of silver, although Reginald the Italian had bid one thousand more. The bishops elect of Winchester and Salisbury were consecrated at Westminster, by Baldwin, archbishop of Canterbury, on the eleventh of the kalends of November (Oct. 22). On that day, Hugh de Nonante, bishop of Coventry, laid his complaint before the archbishop and bishops assembled at the consecration of the bishops elect, against his monks of Coventry, for having laid violent hands on him and drawn his blood before the altar. He had also expelled the greater part of the congregation before his complaint, nor did he cease from his importunity until he had obtained the sanction of all the bishops in attestation to the pope against the monks.

[11] Godfrey, bishop of Winchester, mindful of his profession, suing for the restoration of the possessions of his church, which had been taken away, as no one had any right of replevin against the church of Winchester with respect to its two manors, namely Meones and Weregrave, recovered them by judicial decree, three thousand pounds of silver being privately given to the king. Nor did the considerate man omit at the same time to pay a fine to the king for the indemnity of the church's treasure, for his patrimony, for the county of Hampshire and for the custody of the castles of Winchester and Porchester. And because the time for the payment of so much money was nigh at hand, as he could not pass over the day fixed for the payment without detriment to the whole business, and he could find no nearer resource under heaven, although against his will, he laid his hand on the treasure of his church, to restore which, however, he obliged himself and his successors, providing security to the convent by the testimony of a sealed bond. A man of such courtesy and moderation, who not even when angry ever did any thing to those who were under him, but what savoured of mildness; truly of his family, and one of his familiars, of whom it is said, under whom to live is to reign.

[12] The king readily disburthened all, whose money was a burthen to them, such powers and possessions as they chose being given to anybody at pleasure; wherewith also on a time an old acquaintance in the company joking him, he broke off with this evasion, "I would sell London if I could find a chapman." Many a one might have been forewarned by that expression, had it been uttered sooner, not to learn to be a wise merchant, after the English proverb, "by buying for a dozen, and selling for one and a half."



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