

November 25, 1120, was one of those days that changed the fate of British royal history.

by Susan Flantzer



In 1120, the third of the Norman kings, [King Henry I](#), had been on the English throne for twenty years. Still uneasy about the fate of the Norman dynasty his father William the Conqueror had started in 1066 with the defeat of the Anglo-Saxon King of England, Harold Godwinson, at the [Battle of Hastings](#), King Henry I had made a strategic dynastic marriage in the year of his accession. His choice of a bride was [Matilda of Scotland](#) (originally known as Edith), the daughter of King Malcolm III of Scotland and [Saint Margaret of Scotland](#). Margaret was born an Anglo-Saxon princess and through her, Matilda was the niece of [Edgar the Ætheling](#), the great-granddaughter of [Edmund Ironside](#) and a descendant of [Alfred the Great](#). The blood of the Anglo-Saxon kings would flow in the veins of Matilda's children. By marrying Matilda of Scotland, King Henry I increased the legitimacy of the Norman dynasty. King Henry I and Matilda had two children who survived childhood: a daughter [Matilda](#), sometimes called Maud, who was born in 1102 and a son [William Ætheling](#), born in 1103. In Anglo-Saxon England, Ætheling was used to designate males of the royal dynasty who were eligible for the throne and by using Ætheling as part of his only son's name, Henry made a further connection to the Anglo-Saxon kings.

Because the Kings of England still held Normandy (in France) and were Dukes of Normandy, they were often in Normandy, and this was the case in November of 1120. After the successful military campaign in which King Henry I of England had defeated [King Louis VI of France](#) at the [Battle of Brémule](#), the English were finally preparing to return to England. King Henry I was offered the *White Ship* for his return to England, but he had already made other arrangements. Instead, Henry suggested that his son William sail on the *White Ship* along with his retinue which included William's half-brother [Richard of Lincoln](#), his half-sister [Matilda the Countess of Perch](#), [Richard d'Avranches the 2nd Earl of Chester](#) and many of the heirs of the great estates of England and Normandy.

William Ætheling and his retinue boarded the ship in a festive mood and barrels of wine were brought on board to celebrate the return to England. Soon both passengers and crew were inebriated. By the time the ship was ready to set sail, there were about 300 people on board. William and his retinue ordered the captain of the *White Ship* to overtake the ship of King Henry I so that the *White Ship* would be the first ship to return to England. Unfortunately, the *White Ship* hit a submerged rock and capsized. William's bodyguard quickly got the heir to the throne into the safety of a dinghy. However, William Ætheling heard the screams of his half-sister Matilda and ordered the dinghy to turn back to rescue her. At this point, the *White Ship* began to sink and the many people in the water desperately sought the safety of William's dinghy. The chaos and the weight were too much causing William Ætheling's dinghy to capsize and sink without a trace. The chronicler Orderic Vitalis claimed that only two people survived the shipwreck by clinging on to a rock all night.

King Henry I holds the record for the British monarch with the most illegitimate children, 25 or so illegitimate children, but the tragedy of the *White Ship* left him with only one legitimate child, his daughter Matilda. Henry's nephews were the closest male heirs. In January of 1121, Henry married Adeliza of Louvain, hoping for sons, but the marriage remained childless. On Christmas Day of 1126, King Henry I of England gathered his nobles at Westminster where they swore to recognize Matilda and any future legitimate heir she might have as his successors. That plan did not work out. Upon hearing of Henry's death on December 1, 1135, Stephen of Blois, one of Henry's nephews, quickly crossed the English Channel from France, seized power, and was crowned King of England on December 22, 1135. This started the terrible civil war between Stephen and Matilda known as The Anarchy. England did not see peace for 18 years until Matilda's son acceded to the throne as King Henry II of England in 1153.