

King John's Loss of Normandy in 1204

A From: Roger of Wendover, *Flores Historiarum*. Roger of Wendover was a monastic chronicler who lived through John's reign and wrote his account in the 1220s. He was generally very hostile to King John.

The castle of Chateau Gaillard fell into the hands of the French king on 6 March 1204. On hearing about its fall, the castellans in the overseas territories, with the citizens and other subjects of the king of England, sent messengers to England to tell King John what a precarious situation they too were placed. To which King John answered to all of them, that they were to expect no assistance from him, but that each was to do what seemed best to him. And thus, all kinds of defence falling, the whole of Normandy, Touraine, Anjou and Poitou fell to the dominion of the king of the French. When this was told to King John, he was enjoying all the pleasures of life with his queen, in whose company he believed that he possessed everything he wanted. Moreover, he felt confidence in the immense amount of money that he had collected, as if by that alone he could regain the territory he had lost.

B From W L Warren, *King John*, published in 1961. This historian thinks that John's major problem in 1204 was that the Norman barons were very willing to come to terms with Philip Augustus.

The real reason for John's helplessness before Philip's attack was treachery. Treachery ran through Normandy like an epidemic at the end of 1202. John, in fact, was deserted by the duchy's natural defenders, its barons. Local resistance to Philip played no effective part in the campaign and the only castles to hold out resolutely were ones commanded by English castellans. Treachery did not merely rob King John of the support of his vassals; it robbed him personally of resolution so that he could bring no help to the besieged because he went all the time in fear of his subjects' treason. The roots of the Norman reluctance to defend go back before John's reign. Loyalty to the Angevin house had sagged badly in King Richard's day [reigned 1189-1199]. In fact, the Normans had already become weary of Angevin rule before Henry II died in 1189.

C From: J C Holt, 'The End of the Anglo-Norman realm', an article published in 1975. This historian suggests that we should look to the relative resources of the kings of England and France for an understanding of the events of 1204.

By 1202-03, the revenues of the French king amounted roughly to the equivalent of £73,000. The English total for that year is very speculative, but may have been no more than £30,000. By that time, the English Exchequer was involved in hand-to-mouth measures exporting revenues and treasure urgently to Normandy. In Normandy itself, these monies were totally committed to fortification and to the payment of troops. Angevin revenues failed to match the extraordinary advance in Capetian resources that is revealed in the French 'budget' of 1202-03. One of the causes of Philip Augustus's success in 1204 was good finances. Equally, one of the reasons for the Angevin failure in 1204 was that their resources were inadequate for the task.

D From: J Gillingham, *The Angevin Empire*, published in 1984. This historian has investigated further the incomes of the Angevins and Capetians and considers that finance was not the root cause of John's failure in 1204.

In 1202-03, Philip's recorded revenue came to roughly £72,000. In 1202-03, recorded revenue in England amounted to about £34,5000. Norman revenue could have varied between £20,000 and £34,000 while a conservative estimate for Ireland might be £1,500. Adding these amounts together we arrive at a total sum between £63,000 and £77,000. These calculations, however, leave out of account the revenues of Anjou and Aquitaine. There is not much doubt that the overall resources of the Angevin empire were a good deal greater than those of Philip Augustus. John and Philip made roughly similar amounts of cash available for military operations on the Norman frontier during the summer of 1203. John's problem was that he was unable to mobilise the huge resources of his empire and bring them to bear in the armed struggle against Philip Augustus. By 1202, he had driven all the most powerful nobles of Poitou and Anjou to rebellion. The rebels did Philip's fighting for him.

Using these four Passages and your own knowledge, assess the view that John lost Normandy because his financial resources were inadequate for the task of fighting a war against Philip Augustus.

Some ideas

- (i) **Compare the views expressed in Passages A and C about reasons for John's loss of Normandy in 1204.**

Similarities

- ✓ Passage C makes it clear that Philip had vastly superior resources & Passage A talks about the capture of Chateau Gaillard which would seem to bear this out

Differences

- Passage C refers to the financial failings of the English Exchequer ("hand-to-mouth measures") but Passage A indicates John had an "immense amount of money" at his disposal
- Passage A blames both John's pride and lack of concern and his luxuriating with his wife. Passage C fixes on his financial shortcomings (compared to the Capetian financial reforms), though does say this is only "one of the reasons".
- Passage C says that all the money John has collected has been "totally committed" to building fortifications, paying troops etc. Passage A does not imply that all this money has been spent on the defence of Normandy – and implies that John did little to help Normandy, telling the castellans "to expect no assistance from him".

NB There is NO need to deal with the provenance of the Passages in this question – it doesn't matter that Roger was a 'hostile monk' – it's his views you are considering!

Using these four Passages and your own knowledge, assess the view that John lost Normandy because his financial resources were inadequate for the task of fighting a war against Philip Augustus.

Probably a good idea to start with **Passage C** as this agrees with the question. Holt stresses the importance of finance – this represented a very important step in understanding John's loss, as money was essential to pay for war. Holt compared the revenue of the Angevin and Capetian monarchies and decided that the Capetian financial reforms pushed them into a strong position. However, not all historians have accepted this view. Gillingham (**Passage D**) has concluded that Holt underestimated John's finances and when you look at all the different revenues John could collect, the two monarchies could raise rather similar resources and so money was not a reason for John's failure. You could support this by mentioning how some historians (like Barratt) have not only examined the total revenues the two kings could raise but also how far this money would go when paying soldiers' wages. He concludes that Philip was faced with more expensive military costs, which negated any financial advantage he might have had over John. Barratt agrees that there was probably not much gap between them but does emphasise that Philip enjoyed the reserves he had built up in previous years whereas John was taxing his subjects more and more. It is always a good idea to indicate why there is controversy over this financial question – the lack of evidence. Although we have almost all the pipe rolls for England covering the reigns of Richard and John the French account for 1202-03 is the only record of annual audit to survive in its entirety for Philip's reign. Likewise we do not have the complete Norman pipe rolls for 1202-03. This lack of data has led to speculation and disagreement. Gillingham, rejecting the financial argument, claims that the crucial factor was that John had alienated barons in key areas of the continental lands, and this gave Philip the edge. John's treatment of Arthur, the Lusignans, Aimeri of Thouars & William des Roches can all be used to emphasise John's personal failings. Gillingham also points to a strategic disadvantage faced by John and often emphasised by military historians. John lost many of the allies his brother had built up and so was faced with various enemies whereas Philip could concentrate his forces where and when he chose.

Warren (**Passage B**) agrees that the role of the Norman barons was vital in John's failure but he does not agree with Gillingham that it was all John's fault. Warren represents a group of historians who have argued that you have to look at the reign of his brother to see the source of some of the problems John faced. He argues that Normandy was alienated from its ruler and its barons were prepared to defect to the French king, and had been for some time. The constant warfare and taxation in the later years of Richard's reign (especially with the expensive business of stone castle building) had hit the Norman barons heavily and as fewer and fewer barons had land on both sides of the Channel, the Norman

barons were drifting more towards support for the French king. Philip was adept at propaganda to encourage this whereas John's personal failings only speeded up the process. Gillingham does not agree with this interpretation as he believes that there is no evidence to show either that Richard had been, in financial terms, a more oppressive king than Philip, or that, by 1199, his dominions were any more 'exhausted' than the Capetian kingdom. In the period 1194-8 Richard I had the upper hand in the war against the Capetians so, according to Gillingham, the most obvious explanation of the fact that a winning war turned into a losing one is the change of commander.

Roger of Wendover (**Passage A**) backs up the idea of it being John's fault but he concentrates more on John's poor character. This view was, for a long time, accepted by historians in the classic view of John as an incompetent and immoral tyrant. John's inactivity and his enjoyment of "all the pleasures of life with his queen" are typical of the many stories that circulated about John, stories which monks like Roger were quite happy to exaggerate. The rather simplistic view of John as a lazy commander cannot be fully accepted. As a monk, Roger was not in the best position to comment on military affairs and John's spectacular success at Mirebeau shows the military skill John did possess.

John's failure in 1204 was due to combination of factors and historians have emphasised the importance of several of them. Studies of Philip Augustus have shown that he had learnt from his contacts with Henry II and Richard and this meant that John faced an experienced commander. Some have argued that indeed Philip Augustus was much wealthier than John and have seen this as a determining factor. However, the evidence is sketchy and the consensus seems to be that the two kings' resources were roughly equal and that money did not play a vital part at this stage. Certainly many blame John for the defeat, though disagree on whether it was his character or military expertise that was at fault.

Notice how I have dealt with each Passage – and shown how they agree or disagree with each other. I've used my knowledge to either back up what is said in the Passages or to suggest why it might be wrong. I've shown how each Passage fits into the historical debate about John. Other reasons are mentioned (the experience of Philip Augustus for example) but not at any great length.