

The 'Madness' of King John

The past is full of controversial characters. It would be difficult by the standards of any period to find a good word to say about individuals such as Emperor Nero ('the enemy of mankind' according to one contemporary) or Ivan the Terrible, Tsar of All the Russians and prime despot of the sixteenth century. In more recent times, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin or Pol Pot are names that chill the blood and bring to mind images of the twentieth century's worst atrocities. Drawing up a shortlist of history's main villains and miscreants would be an impossible task; suffice to say that every period has produced individuals who would fit the bill. An interview with Medieval historians, or a closer look at the works of observers chronicling the British Isles at the turn of the thirteenth century, might persuade us to add one more name to our list of historic villains. Here is a taste of what to expect when reading the opinions of contemporaries of John, king of England from 1199 to 1216. According to Gerald of Wales (d. c.1223), one of the shrewder observers of that period, John surpassed 'every unjust oppressor ... with ragerd to the abhorrence of his misdeeds'.¹ Matthew Paris (d. 1259) painted a very similar picture some decades after John's death, describing him as 'more of a tyrant than a king, more of a subversive than a ruler' ('potius tirannus fuit quam rex, potius subversor quam gubernator').² For now it is fair to suggest that later historians portray King John in a similar light. On summarising John's reign, Kate Norgate argues that many of his deeds were absolute

proof of his 'superhuman wickedness'.³ Similarly, he was described by Maurice Powicke as '[a] thoroughly bad man'.⁴ And even though Lewis Warren, in his biography of John, paints a fairer and possibly more balanced picture, he also highlights the king's more obvious failings and his tendency to act the 'petty tyrant' rather than the 'great king'.⁵ The charges against John are therefore very serious. However, rather than tarring him with the same brush as other objectionable tyrants and dictators, it is only fair that we study the evidence before judging his character. Almost eight hundred years after his death, should we question king John's position amongst the villains of the past? Was John really a devil in human form as many contemporary observers claim, or was he an energetic and ambitious king who went to extremes to fight for his rights? The aim of this article is to assess to what degree John deserves his reputation.

One of the least of God's creatures

Before focusing on John's career and infamy let us first consider his background. John was the son of Henry II (d. 1189), king of England, and his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine (an area in south west France) (d. 1204), and the youngest of the royal couple's eight children. The family was not immune to scandal. His mother Eleanor, a beautiful and gentle lady, had once been married to Louis VII of France, travelling with her husband to the Near East during the Second Crusade (1147-9). She was referred to by one contemporary as 'a unique lady: beautiful

¹ H. Pryce and G. Carr, *Be' Ddywedodd Gerallt Gymro am ei Gyfoeswyr? (What did Gerald of Wales Say About his Contemporaries?)* E-publication 2013, <https://llyfrgell.porth.ac.uk/media/be-ddyweddodd-gerallt-gymro-am-ei-gyfoeswyr> (accessed 30 June, 2014), 24.

² *Matthaei Parisiensis, Monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica Majora*, ed. H. R. Luard (Rolls Series, 1872-83), 2:562-63.

³ K. Norgate, John Lackland (London, 1902), 286.

⁴ F. M. Powicke, 'England: Richard I and John', in J. R. Tanner, C. W. Previté-Orton and Z. N. Brooke (eds), *The Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge, 1929), 6:205-51, on 220.

⁵ W. L. Warren, *King John* (London, 2nd edition 1978), 259.



The wedding of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII (©Bodleian Library, Oxford University)

According to contemporaries Eleanor, John's mother, was a beautiful and graceful lady. This image is taken from the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, Douce manuscript 217, fol. 192r, dating from the end of the fourteenth century.

yet generous, determined yet kind, unpretentious yet wise (an unusual combination of virtues in a woman).⁶ Putting aside such male prejudice, it is evident that she attracted the attention of a number of knights and noblemen. It has been rumoured that she had many lovers in the course of her marriage to Louis, including, according to some, her father's brother Raymond of Poitiers, prince of the Crusader State of Antioch. Such unfaithfulness is a serious matter in any period, but Louis was more concerned with Elaenor's failure to bear him a son and heir (even though she did bear him two daughters). It is no surprise therefore that Louis had the marriage annulled in 1152. With so many men wishing to marry her (including some who were prepared to kidnap her and force a marriage), it was not safe for Eleanor to remain single for long. She soon found a suitable match in Henry, eldest son of Empress Matilda, daughter of king Henry I of England (d. 1135), and her husband Geoffrey Plantagenet, Earl of Anjou (western France). Despite the age difference – he was still a teenager and she was almost thirty – Henry possessed the virtues and status to make Eleanor a good husband. As Duke of Normandy and Earl of Anjou, and on the verge of gaining supremacy over the kingdom of England, Henry was one of the most powerful princes in Europe at the time. Besides her famed beauty, there were many practical reasons for securing Eleanor as his wife. Marriage to

Elaenor would add the prosperous duchy of Aquitaine to Henry's vast territories, and thereby expand his authority 'from the Pyrenees to the far reaches of the North Sea in the west', in the words of an admiring contemporary.⁷ Henry II was an energetic and ambitious man, possessing the necessary qualities to become ruler of such an 'empire'. It is said that he hardly ever rested, being far too occupied with the running of his kingdom or out hunting on horseback. Gerald of Wales was bold enough to bemoan the fact that he was more devoted to his hunting dogs than to God!⁸ However, keeping control of his extensive territories was a constant problem for Henry II, as it would be for his sons in later years.

The spawn of the Devil: John and his brothers



Henry II and his children (© The British Library)

John was the youngest of Henry's sons with his wife Eleanor. This image is taken from the British Museum manuscript Royal 14 B VI dating from the early fourteenth century.

When John was born in Oxford on Christmas eve 1167, his brothers were already old enough to ride and were considered to be almost adult at the time. Henry ('The Young King') (d. 1183) was the eldest of the sons to survive childhood, followed by Richard (d. 1199) (later king Richard I 'Lionheart'), then Geoffrey (d. 1186), and finally John. At the time a king's youngest sons were relatively marginal characters and John was not expected to inherit much land, least of all his father's authority. It is in this context that we are given a glimpse of John's appearance. Physical descriptions are relatively rare in sources from the Middle Ages, but in John's case it is possible to say a little of his looks. He was a man of average height for his time, if not slightly 'shorter than average' according to a contemporary.⁹ When John's tomb was opened in 1797 his remains measured five feet five inches in length. Although not very powerful of body, he was apparently quite handsome. Unlike his father, '[a] red haired man with grey eyes and a large round head', we cannot elaborate on John's looks.¹⁰ After having judged his external appearance, what did

⁶ Quoted in Warren, *King John*, 17.

⁷ Pryce and Carr, *Be' Ddywedodd Gerallt Gymro am ei Gyfoeswyr?*, 17.

⁸ Pryce and Carr, *Be' Ddywedodd Gerallt Gymro am ei Gyfoeswyr?*, 19.

⁹ Pryce and Carr, *Be' Ddywedodd Gerallt Gymro am ei Gyfoeswyr?*, 19.

¹⁰ Pryce and Carr, *Be' Ddywedodd Gerallt Gymro am ei Gyfoeswyr?*, 19.

contemporaries have to say about John the youth? We know very little about his childhood and education. He certainly received an education and, judging from his library he was probably an enthusiastic reader. Despite this, some complained that the boy John was too fond of his pleasures in life and tended to be rather immature – he was, however, an obedient son (a virtue lacking in his older brothers).¹¹

With four healthy sons Henry II did not need to worry about the succession. However over the years there were many disputes between father and sons. Keeping everyone happy was not an easy matter for Henry II as his sons became more experienced in managing the family's extensive lands. John could not expect to inherit the best lands, but Henry II wished to secure a fair living for his last born – after all, here was a boy whom he mockingly called 'Lackland'. When John was six years old, his father endeavoured to arrange an advantageous marriage between him and the daughter of Earl Humbert of Maurienne (a strategically important area on the border between Switzerland, France and Italy today). As part of the bargain and as a wedding gift to his son, Henry decided to present John with the castles of Chinon, Loudun and Mirebeau. Although the marriage plans never came to fruition, Henry 'The Young King', annoyed at his father's decision to give his younger brother these mighty castles, which were after all part of his inheritance as eldest son and heir, rose in revolt against the king. The situation worsened when Henry 'The Young King' fled to Paris to join Louis VII (his father-in-law and his mother's former husband), where his brothers Richard and Geoffrey soon joined him. The family quarrel was in danger of developing into a deadly war between two kings. Henry II succeeded in tipping the balance by responding to the threat with force and determination and his sons soon returned, begging their father's forgiveness. This would not be the last dispute between father and sons, but the incident at least warned Henry II of the need to strike a fair bargain when dealing with his male offspring. According to contemporary rumours the family possessed a vicious streak, and so it came as no surprise that the sons should challenge the father!

Faced with the difficulties of attempting to secure a portion of the brothers' inheritance for John, Henry II turned his attentions to other means of supporting his youngest son. A simple option was to disinherit some of his subjects and confiscate their estates: in 1175 the king took advantage of the Earl of Cornwall's death, transferring his estates into John's name; and in 1176 a marriage was arranged between John and his cousin Isabella of Gloucester (even though the marriage was not officiated until

soon after the death of Henry II in 1189). In both cases, the true heirs were disinherited in order to promote John's status. However, land and estates were not enough and in 1177 Henry II devised a much more ambitious plan for his youngest son: he would be established as king of Ireland. Since first meddling in the politics of Ireland in 1169, some of Henry II's noblemen had gained increasing power and influence. The most prominent Anglo-Norman leader in Ireland was Richard fitz Gilbert de Clare (d. 1176), lord of Striguil in Gwent, a great warrior who had earned the name 'Strongbow' for his mastery of the bow. Strongbow, with his Anglo-Welsh army, swept aside his Irish opposition and successfully gained authority over much of south-east Ireland. There was a danger that Strongbow's success would undermine Henry II's authority. One way of stamping the king's authority on the Anglo-Norman conquerors as well as the indigenous Irish was to establish John as king of the Emerald Isle. Gerald of Wales was amongst the party who accompanied John on his visit to Ireland in 1185. In his book *Expugnatio Hibernica* ('The Conquest of Ireland') Gerald draws a memorable picture of John's attempts to undertake his new responsibilities. John found himself in hot water very soon after his arrival. Some of the Irish leaders were faithful to the English crown, but they were gravely disdainful of the behaviour of John's followers. According to Gerald, the Irishmen's long thick beards were a source of much amusement for the young prince's followers, and during one assembly some entertained themselves by dragging a few Irishmen around by their beards!¹² Worse still, John was accused of trying to donate their lands to those who had followed him to Ireland. Another error according to Gerald – who is far from impartial in this case – was John's decision to ignore the advice of the Anglo-Norman noblemen who were already familiar with Ireland, turning instead to his own young, inexperienced followers. At best, John's efforts were naïve and irresponsible and at worst they were careless and disastrous. After six months, with the situation in Ireland deteriorating fast, John returned home.

Two of John's elder brothers, Henry 'The Young King' and Geoffrey, both died within three years of each other, and Henry II died in 1189. Now Richard, the second brother, reigned over all the family's territories, although John had also benefited from his brothers' misfortunes. Richard was more than willing to provide for his younger brother, granting him vast estates in England and on the continent. Territories in Wales also came into his possession through his wife, Isabella of Gloucester. Despite this, John craved more authority and eventually set his sights on a far greater prize: the English crown. With

¹¹ *De Principis Instructione Liber*, ed. G. F. Warner (1891) in J. S. Brewer, J. F. Dimock and G. F. Warner (eds), *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera* (Rolls Series, 1861-91), 8:179.

¹² *Expugnatio Hibernica: The Conquest of Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis*, ed. A. B. Scott and F. X. Martin (Dublin, 1978), 237.

Richard's attention focused on fighting the Third Crusade against the Islamic leader Saladin, coupled with the long periods spent in the Holy Land and later as a prisoner in Germany (he was continuously abroad between 1189 and 1194), John had plenty of time to plot and fantasise about ruling his family's lands single-handedly. Although Richard had made a name for himself as a renowned crusader, there were those who were only too willing to conspire against him. One of John's most prominent and powerful allies was the new king of France, Phillip II 'Augustus' (d. 1223), who had returned home early from the crusade to put his kingdom in order and to disrupt lands held in France by the king of England. Matters came to a head in 1193 when John decided to raise a rebellion against his brother. Despite John's audacity however, the majority of the barons were unwilling to betray an outstanding king and crusader such as Richard. John's hopes were further dashed by news from the continent. In a message warning him of Richard's impending release from prison, the king of France wrote 'The devil is free' ('quia diabolus jam solutus erat').¹³ Within a few months John was compelled to kneel in front of his brother begging his forgiveness, having to swallow his pride and accept his subordinate status.

'The madness of John': from failure to Magna Carta, 1199-1215

Following this stormy episode it is surprising that, in 1199, it was John who was chosen as Richard's successor when the latter died unexpectedly of wounds received in a scuffle with a discontented nobleman. Although Richard had no children who could inherit the throne, Arthur, son of Geoffrey and Duke of Brittany, and nephew to John and the late king, held a claim to this inheritance. Since the time of the crusade, Richard had toyed with the possibility of naming the boy Arthur as his successor, but on his deathbed had decided in favour of his brother. Despite this, as the son of one of John's older brothers, Arthur had inheritance rights, as well as plenty of supporters to plead his case. To some extent, Arthur was a mere puppet in the hands of John's opponents, but there was a very real threat to John's objectives, especially when Arthur fled with his mother to the court of Phillip II 'Augustus'. In 1200 John caused more trouble for himself by ending his marriage to Isabella of Gloucester and marrying Isabella, daughter of the Duke of Angoulême (western France) who was already engaged to Hugh de Lusignan. Crossing a family as powerful as the Lusignans was not a wise move and John made matters worse by transferring some of their lands to his new family. The Lusignans' appeals, along with John's unwillingness to conciliate, gave the

king of France an excuse to go to war. At the start of the struggle in 1202 John achieved numerous decisive victories on the continent, and above all managed to capture Arthur. However at the peak of his success John adopted an offensive and vindictive attitude towards his enemies and his supporters alike, and managed to raise the hackles of a number of his own barons, many of whom turned to Phillip II 'Augustus'. By 1203 there were rumours of a far more serious offence: John had supposedly disposed of Arthur for good. It is not known for certain how Arthur met his death, but according to the Latin annals of Margam Abbey in Glamorgan, it was John himself who committed the terrible deed. Whilst 'drunk and possessed of the devil' ('ebrius et daemonio plenus') John apparently killed Arthur with his own hands and ordered that the body be tied to a heavy stone and thrown into the River Seine.¹⁴ As would be expected, these rumors of Arthur's fate caused much ill-feeling towards John. In the meantime, with the vengeful Bretons bearing down on his lands from the west, the king of France was busy breaching John's support in the east, and in Normandy in particular. John was facing a military and political crisis.

1204 was a crucial year in John's reign. He was deprived of his lands on the continent and lost the core of his inheritance, namely Normandy and Anjou. Despite salvaging some of this loss by regaining Gascony (south west France) in 1206, the heavy losses of the previous years had already put paid to any hopes he harboured of stepping into his father's shoes. By antagonising and making enemies of his own supporters, John was facing ruin: his military prospects were very poor without the support of his barons. In the end, his efforts to change the course of the fighting were ineffective and futile, and he was subsequently given the epithet John 'Softsword'. Losing Normandy in particular was a turing point in John's career, if not in the history of Europe.¹⁵ On the one hand the kings of France excelled on the continent and on the other the kings of England channelled their efforts more decisively towards domination of the British Isles. Issues on the continent brought with them more problems for John, problems that would eventually lead to rebellion and conspiracy in England. In order to regain his inheritance John needed money to pay his mercenaries and buy support. This financial burden fell upon England: heavy taxes were raised on agricultural produce; substantial penalties and levies were set; merciless sheriffs were appointed; and the Jews of the kingdom were relieved of much of their wealth. Every part of society felt the pinch, from the clergy and the nobility to the freemen and the peasants. One very unpopular burden borne by noblemen and barons

¹³ *Chronica Magistri Rogeri De Houedene*, ed. W. Stubbs (Rolls Series, 1870), 3:216-7.

¹⁴ *Annales Monastici*, ed. H. R. Luard (Rolls Series, 1864-9), 1:27.

¹⁵ D. A. Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery: Britain 1066-1284* (London, 2003), 270.



A silver penny from the reign of King John (© Fitzwilliam Library, Cambridge University)

This penny, minted in Cambridge in 1205, shows an image of King John. The heavy financial demands made by the king were amongst the main grievances against him.

was the scutage. This was a financial payment made by a baron to the king *in lieu* of providing military service. A baron was expected to pay £1 (equivalent to hundreds of pounds in today's money) for every knight he owed the king. John raised the rate of scutage significantly and compelled the barons to pay this tax almost annually. John's financial demands were without precedence. To stir things up even more the king took hostages as security against his debtors and promoted his own friends (many of whom were foreigners). It was also rumored that John was only too willing to seduce the wives and daughters of his barons. Worst of all, in an act of cruelty for cruelty's sake, John imprisoned baroness Matilda de Braose at Windsor castle and starved her to death because he was displeased with her husband. Nor did he show any mercy towards the twenty-eight Welsh hostages that he executed in Nottingham in 1211. Trouble was also brewing between John and the Pope. John was dissatisfied with the Pope's decision to elect Stephen Langton Archbishop of Canterbury and his unwillingness to accept the Pope's chosen archbishop led to England being placed under an interdict in 1208, followed by the king's excommunication the following year. As a result, church services were prohibited in England except in the case of baptisms and the administration of the last rites. Although this again offered John an opportunity to benefit financially, the Pope's influence on the English bishops far outweighed that of the king. Nor did he fully understand the consequences of his imprudent and inconsistent policies concerning Scotland, Wales and Ireland. For example, John turned against his son-in-law, Llywelyn ab Iorwerth (d.1240, later known as 'Llywelyn the Great'), prince of Gwynedd, and in 1211 led attacks on north Wales. Although difficult to believe today, one of John's major war crimes during the 1211 conflict was the burning of the city of Bangor. Not only were such military campaigns costly, but they also created enemies and

encouraged dissension. By now John's problems were piling up and the balance was about to tip against him. At grass roots level, his subjects were furious.

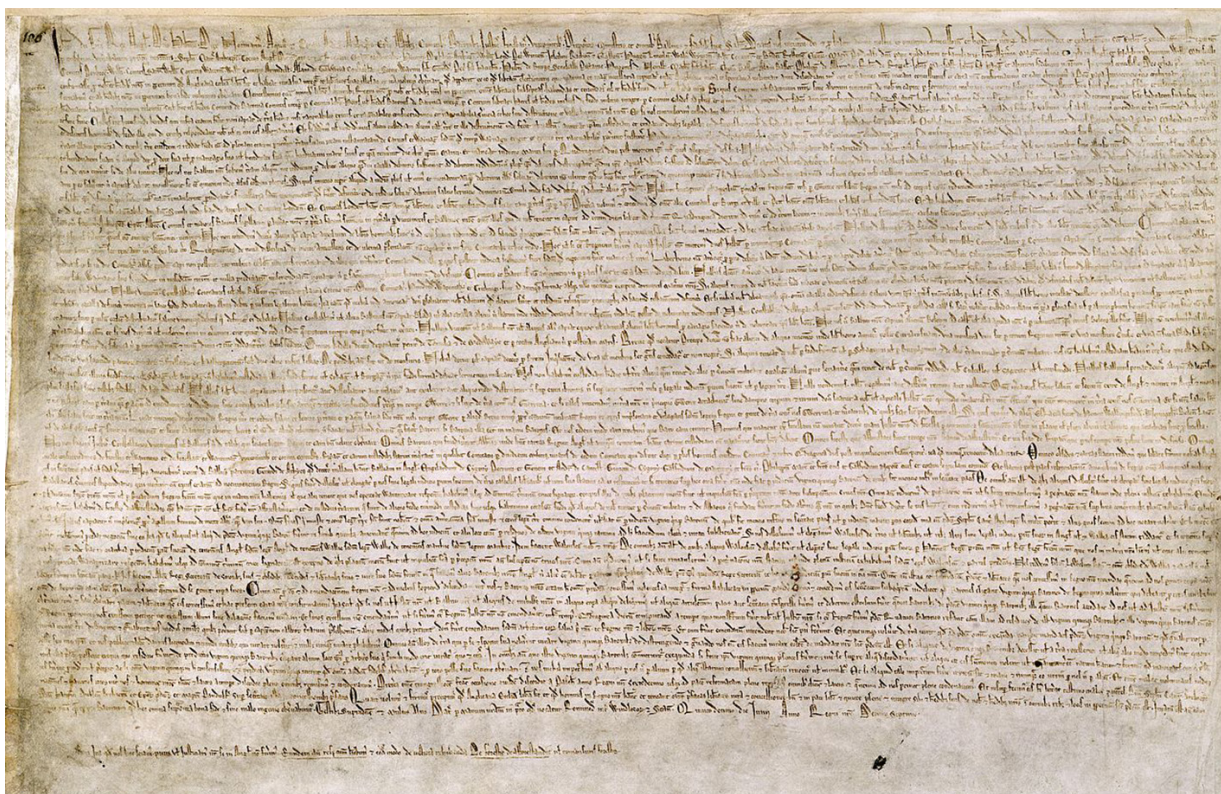
The king's authority was starting to crumble, and by 1212 plans were afoot to have John murdered. Despite his attempts to lighten the burden of his previous heavy-handedness and to win favour with the Pope by accepting Stephen Langton as archbishop of Canterbury, the king was not yet out of the woods. In 1214 John was given the opportunity to utilise the substantial wealth that he had gathered against his old enemy, Philip II 'Augustus', king of France. Together with the Holy Roman Emperor and the Earl of Flanders, John launched an attack on the French king's territories. However, hope soon turned to despair as Phillip's armies destroyed the alliance gathered against him in the battle of Bouvines.



The Battle of Bouvines (© The British Library)

The Battle of Bouvines (27 July 1214) was a deadly blow, which put paid to John's objective of regaining his family's lands on the continent. This image is taken from the British Museum manuscript Royal 16 G VI f.379, dating from the period 1332-1350.

John was forced to retreat back to England, empty handed and defeated. In the meantime, his attempts to levy a scutage to finance his campaign had once again infuriated the barons. Rather than try to kill him, the barons (and in particular those in the north of England) decided to impose definite restrictions on the king's conduct. The remarkable document drawn up in June 1215 for this purpose is known as Magna Carta, or 'The Great Charter'. The charter restricted the king's ability to raise money arbitrarily, it insisted that justice be administered fairly, and it guaranteed the freedom of the church. It is not possible in this short article to detail the whole and varied content of the Magna Carta, suffice to say that it broke new ground by attempting to curb John's tendency to go to extremes. John's turbulent reign reminds us that the Magna Carta, one of Europe's most important historical documents, is not a document to be considered out of context. The restrictions imposed did not please John, but it is fair to say that he had no choice but to concede as he had, in effect, been cornered. However, John soon attempted to disengage himself from the charter's demands and this led to renewed fighting with the barons. Facing the forces of Prince Louis, son of Phillip II 'Augustus', who had crossed the Channel to England, as well as



The Magna Carta (© The British Library)

The aim of the Magna Carta was to curb the dictatorship of John's government (Cotton MS Augustus II. 106).

the armies of his own barons, John died of dysentery in October 1216 whilst attempting to hold his ground.

A devil incarnate? Evaluating John's reign

On weighing John's reign in the balance of history, it becomes evident that his contemporaries found him wanting. One contemporary even refers to John's 'madness' rather than his 'reign' between 1199 and 1216.¹⁶ There is, in my opinion, much truth in the negative picture of John conveyed by our sources, but we should also keep in mind that the mindset behind this evidence is as relevant as the king's despicable acts. As we present these varying views, it is easy to forget that we are seeing King John through the preconceptions and prejudices of his contemporaries. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that there is a grain of truth in the scathing accounts given by them. After all, in the bitter political climate of King John's reign, it is only natural that he should be condemned by church-goers and enemies alike. As his reign drew to a close, it was felt that he was being driven by a certain wickedness, an unnatural force. The way that he treated not only the hostages that he held, but also his own family, illustrates the worst of John's arrogance. At best, he could act decisively and effectively and at worst vindictively and imprudently. And so despite his administrative and political capabilities, the truth is that it was through tyranny that John succeeded in retaining his crown for so long. Gradually, however,



King John's tomb

John died in October 1216 and was buried in Worcester Cathedral.

the hatred that was felt for him surpassed any fear, and in the end this was enough to destroy his kingdom.

Further reading

- D. A. Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery: Britain 1066-1284*, London, 2003.
- S. D. Church (ed.), *King John: New Interpretations*, Woodbridge, 1999.
- W. L. Warren, *King John*, 2nd Edition, London, 1978.

¹⁶ Pryce and Carr, *Be' Ddywedodd Gerallt Gymro am ei Gyfoeswyr?*, 24.