Open Library of Humanities Journal

Paul, NL 2025 Remembering the Angevins: Introduction and Commentary. *Open Library of Humanities*, 10(1): pp. 1–12.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.20266

Open Library of Humanities

Remembering the Angevins: Introduction and Commentary

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The Angevin dynasty were the rulers of a medieval European empire. Although their control of their cross-channel domains were relatively short lived (1154–1204), they occupy a central place in the modern imaginary of the Middle Ages. This introductory essay to the collection *Remembering the Angevins* explores how the administrative and legal reforms, building projects, and literary culture fostered by the Angevins created a robust framework of cultural memory, one that carried their legacy into the modern era. Since the Reformation, the Angevin world has acted as a backdrop or screen onto which modern fantasies and anxieties have been projected. The essays in this volume explore the intellectual, social, and political contexts in which modern Angevin representations were forged. They show how representations of historical Angevin figures and the larger 'Plantagenet Cinematic Universe' or 'Robin Hood Times' (as contributors refer to the settings of the films) can be effectively read, critiqued, and taught. The link that is demonstrated by the contributors between Angevin memory and contemporary politics raises the issue of American attachment to the story of Magna Carta, enshrined within American political identity in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but likely to occupy a more uncertain place if unchecked executive power is allowed to take hold.

Once upon a time in medieval Europe there was a very powerful family. Their domains stretched from the Scottish border in the north to the southern reaches of France, and from the banks of the Seine near Paris to Bordeaux and Limerick in the west. These territories amounted to an area of some 200,000 square miles and included a variety of principalities and peoples. The inhabitants of these lands had no single name for their rulers; they were the kings and queens of the English, the dukes and duchesses of the Normans and the Aquitainians, the counts and countesses of the Angevins, and the lords of Ireland. But the dynasty that began in 1154 with the succession to the English crown of King Henry II, scion of the houses of counts of Anjou and dukes of Normandy, and Queen Eleanor, duchess of Aquitaine, has demanded a moniker in historical hindsight. So, the successors of Henry and Eleanor that ruled England for more than three hundred years came to be known as the Plantagenets. But Henry himself and his more immediate heirs are more often known by the name of Henry's paternal family: the Angevins (Aurell, 2007: 2).

The continental side of the Angevin domains was relatively short-lived. All but a fraction of their lands in Europe were conquered by the king of France after 1204, their claims to sovereignty there finally abandoned in 1259 (Carpenter, 1999). But the Angevin dynasty and the social and cultural worlds that it encompassed made a considerable mark in history and historical memory. Whether we choose to call the Angevin territories, as some scholars do, an 'empire' in the political sense, there can be little doubt that they, like the medieval ruler Charlemagne before them, had constructed an 'empire of memory' that continues to dominate modern perceptions of the medieval past (Gabriele, 2011). This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the world of cinema, where the number of feature films explicitly set in the Angevin world must run into the dozens, including at least eighteen films related to the legend of Robin Hood. Two, *Becket* (1964) and *The Lion in Winter* (1968), serve as the heart of what Lucy Barnhouse memorably terms: 'the larger Plantagenet Cinematic Universe' (Barnhouse, 2023: 2).

That some events, peoples, and phenomena of the past might have afterlives that far outmatch their own transitory existence is understandable, especially when those subjects relate to pivotal, epochal moments in the making of a religion or a nation. In the modern period, it is far more common for commemoration to be focused on the relatively recent past. James Pennebaker and Becky Banasik showed that of 20,000 films produced between 1920 and 1990, the majority depicted periods of time roughly 25 years before the date of production (Pennebaker and Banasik, 1997: 13). With regard to the cinematic empire of the Angevins, we are clearly dealing with a phenomenon more in the realm of the mythic very long-term 'cultural memory' than the social or communicative memory passed down from one generation to another (Assmann, 2011).

By way of introduction to the essays in this collection *Remembering the Angevins*, we might ask: how were cultural memories of the Angevin period, which manifested in these films, shaped and transmitted? Jan and Aleida Assmann, whose work on cultural memory is cited in the essay by John Jenkins, would have us look to certain types of long-term institutions, practices and rites, or monuments that would act as storage facilities for aspects of the Angevin past. Here we can acknowledge that the Angevin commemorative legacy must be due to the explosion in specific types of monuments (in texts, structures, and artworks), and practices that occurred during their reign. Henry II and his heirs oversaw nothing less than a revolution in administration and oversight, most notably in their English lands (Sabapathy, 2014). The administrative reforms of the Angevins and their courtiers and officials led to a dramatic rise in the kinds of information that the crown recorded and a concomitant proliferation of the technologies and varieties of record keeping (Clanchy, 2012). The vast revenues these documents recorded funded the building and endowment of religious communities from Yorkshire in England to Hérault in southern France, strengthened fortresses from Ireland to Normandy, and ornamented the bodies and treasuries of bishops and barons with reliquaries, rings, and robes (Thomas, 2021). Those revenues built the actual, remarkable, sepulchral monuments to Henry II, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Richard I, and Isabella of Angoulême that still survive with traces of their original color at Fontevraud Abbey (Nolan, 2003). The tomb monuments, which today attract thousands of visitors per year, are stark physical reminders of the dynasty's desire to control and propagate its commemorative legacy. In their peaceful repose, the statues mask the turbulence associated with Angevin rule. For with their vast resources, the Angevins fought wars of conquest and subjugation: against the Irish in Ireland; against the Scots and the Welsh in Britain; against the Byzantine ruler of Cyprus; against the empire of Saladin in Palestine; against the French king in Normandy; and against one another from Yorkshire to the Limousin. And they dreamed of ever greater dominions in Toulouse, Germany, and Sicily.

The dynasty's violent attempts at supremacy both within and beyond their immediate domains were matched by their attempts to reform and control legal practices and the exercise of justice. Henry II's reign is associated with major legal reforms and the rise of a 'common law' tradition encompassing all the communities of his English realm. The justice they offered to their subjects, which came to feature itinerant royal courts, juries, standardised writs to activate judicial procedures in disputes over property, inheritance, and rights, was broadly popular. The pleas heard by royal justices were recorded, and their judgments became precedents (Hudson, 1996). What the kings and their councils decreed and conceded, what their scholars such as Glanville and Bracton

rationalised, and what the courts decided became the basis for legal procedures and terminology that survived not only in modern Britain but also its colonies, including the United States. A cultural memory of the Angevins survives in practices like the convening of a Grand Jury and in the courtroom recitation of Old French and Latin phrases (*en banc*, *voir dire*, and *habeas corpus*).

Crucially, theirs was an empire of stories. The Angevin era is termed 'the golden age' of English historical writing as monks and clerics throughout their domains chose to embark on great projects of storytelling, experimenting with form and language and, in their manuscripts, with word and image (Gransden, 1974; Staunton, 2017; Cleaver, 2018). These historians painted the indelible portraits of Henry II, Eleanor, and their children, and framed the dramatic conflicts between them, replete with love, jealousy, and betrayal. The stories told by these learned Latinate men were joined by the vernacular voices of women like Marie de France and Clemence of Barking, and by a cacophony of lyric song exploding outwards from the empire's southern reaches (Wogan-Browne, 2009; Cheyette, 2004). When, in a shocking turn of events, four of Henry's knights infamously murdered his former friend and chancellor, Thomas Becket, at the high altar at Canterbury, the result was a flood of narratives— in Latin, French, and Old Norse, and from a variety of perspectives (Staunton, 2001). These were joined by over 700 miracle stories, those of people's interactions with Thomas the Martyr, some of which were subsequently transformed into stunning stained-glass images in Canterbury cathedral (Koopmans, 2011). The stories that were told in the Angevin world had far-reaching implications. With them the English forged their national saints, their outlaw heroes, their deep enmities with Celtic and Gallic neighbors, and the terrible myth of Jewish ritual murder (Cohen, 2006). Although the legend of King Arthur first appeared before the Angevin ascension, it was in their era that his name gained wide currency, invoked from Cyprus to Iberia (Aurell, 2007).

Made of wood and hides and bones and stone and law and taxes, the Angevins had erected a massive edifice of cultural memory that served as a resource for English (and later, British) empires and the societies they helped to create. In the early modern period, the intellectual circle around Henry VIII drew upon Angevin historians such as Matthew Paris to bolster their arguments for royal (and not Roman) Supremacy over the English church (Garnett, 2020: 282–85). As ballads began to appear that identified the outlaw Robin Hood with the reign of King John, poets speculated about the passions of King Henry and Queen Eleanor (Sullivan, 2023). For the Reformation, the Angevin drama contained both great villains (Thomas Becket) and tragic heroes (King John), the latter of which was the subject of arguably the earliest history play, John Bale's *Kynge Johan*, which subsequently caught the attention of Shakespeare (Ribner, 2013: 34–5).

Eventually, the enormous stacks of tally sticks and sacks of treasury receipts, legal forms, and incoming and outgoing correspondence stockpiled in Westminster Palace and the Tower of London forced themselves into the consciousness of the great constitutional historians who forged an understanding of the origins of English (and hence Anglo-American) legal traditions (Vincent, 2019). British historians of the Victorian era looking to illustrate the world where their legal and administrative structures had originated found a familiar scene, in which monarchs (some indeed, foreign born) ruled from Westminster a patchwork empire of distant lands. Stephen Church has recently observed that it was precisely the generation of historians who had seen their monarch Queen Victoria proclaimed 'empress of India' in 1876 who coined the term 'Angevin empire' and advocated for the idea that the Angevin realms should properly be understood in imperial terms (Church, 2022). If the unfolding of a modern British Empire helped to shape historians' understanding of the Angevin past, that past was also on hand to act as romantic scaffolding for that empire. So, in 1917, when the British army captured the city of Jerusalem from Ottoman forces, *Punch* magazine published a cartoon with the Angevin king and crusader Richard I gazing upon the scene, captioned 'MY DREAM COMES TRUE!' (Horswell, 2018).

The Angevins bequeathed to the modern world a rich legacy of stories, images, and ideas. The essays in *Remembering the Angevins* show how this edifice of Angevin memory has acted as a screen upon which modern writers, filmmakers, scholars, and students project their anxieties and fantasies, using that past to fashion new narratives, interpretations, and knowledge about the modern world. Esther Liberman Cuenca addresses the theme of conflict between Anglo-Saxons (or 'Saxons') and Normans in three Angevin films as constituting what she terms the 'cinematic imaginary' of 'medieval class antagonism along racial lines' (Cuenca, 2023: 8). In Cuenca's essay, the group divisions depicted in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), *Ivanhoe* (1952) and *Becket* (1964) can be understood in the very American contexts of the New Deal, the rise of fascism, the Cold War, and debates over religious tolerance. Three movies set in late 12th-century England help tell the story of race and nation in the United States during the 20th century.

Although addressing a different place and period (Britain in the early modern era), John Jenkins likewise argues that it was the great social and political change of the Reformation that led to changes in the appellation of Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury (*c.* 1120–1170). Jenkins notes the relative stability in the range of appellations associated with Thomas and the static nature of his posthumous 'ecclesiopolitical and sociodevotional roles' (Jenkins, 2023: 10). With the coming of political and religious heterodoxy, first in the form of the Lollard dissenters and then with the Reformation,

Thomas was increasingly the focus of criticism, and his name began to change first to 'Thomas Becket' and then, in the work of Thomas Nashe, to the rustic, playful 'Thomas à Becket'. Ironically, Jenkins shows, it seems to have been a desire for academic sophistication that led to the widespread adoption of Nashe's invention as the correct framing of the name.

The interplay between political forces and intellectual attitudes is also at the heart of Hilary Rhodes' essay concerning modern representations of King Richard I who ruled the Angevin domains for ten years (1189–1199) and famously led the armies of the Third Crusade in their struggle against the Ayyubid empire of Saladin. Rhodes' particular concern is to explore the relationship between queer history, which has fitfully claimed Richard as an example of premodern same-sex desire, and the complex role of Richard as a crusader in modern British historical memory. Given the power that Richard exercised as a king, and his undeniable role in the prosecution of medieval Christian holy war, Richard represents a problematic figure for queer historical study. Revealing how modern historians, with the important exceptions of John Boswell and William Burgwinkle, have essentially disregarded or actively erased the evidence of Richard's same-sex attraction, Rhodes confronts the dissonance between the project of queer history and place of the crusades in contemporary Britain (Boswell, 2009: 231-32; Burgwinkle, 2004). While championing the position that a premodern queer history is possible, queer historians 'cannot view him as a heroic gay or bisexual man admirably overcoming the blinkered prejudices of his time' and must instead find a way to address the full complexities of premodern queer identities (Rhodes, 2023:13).

Modern anxieties and sociopolitical concerns once more come to the fore in Rachel Ellen Clark's study of race and disability in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991). Here, Clark reconstructs a detailed context of American culture and tensions into which the film was released. At the time of the film's blockbuster opening across the country in June 1991, many Americans were still in shock at the video of the televised beating of Rodney King, a Black motorist, in Los Angeles on March 3 of that year. David Duke, a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, was a leading contender in the race for governor of Louisiana. Americans with disabilities were fighting for their rights; Clark spotlights the March 1990 Wheels of Justice rally in Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, Clark shows, signs of a lazy Orientalism in a post-Gulf War America appeared in comparisons between Los Angeles and war-torn Beirut and in the tropes of Muslim cruelty and barbarity that appeared the following year in Disney's *Aladdin*. Engaging with the Media Studies concept of 'Star Image', Clark adds to this social and political context the layers of representation that stars like Morgan Freeman carried into a role. Clark concludes that, in *Prince of Thieves*, 'disability and race often work together to produce a profound

and compound exclusion from society. In this film, the contrasting nonstandard bodies of Mortianna and Azeem personify the battle over who gets included or excluded in Angevin England' (Clark, 2023: 22).

For Clark, Cuenca, Rhodes, and Jenkins, the purpose of inquiry into the postmedieval representation of the Angevin past is to tell us chiefly about modernity, about the desires and anxieties of the modern authors and filmmakers, and their audiences. For Lucy Barnhouse, however, these representations may yet serve as an avenue to learning more about the medieval past. In a classroom setting, Barnhouse argues, both *The Lion in Winter* and *Becket* 'encourage historical imagination and analysis' (Barnhouse, 2023: 15). Through a close critique of these films, students can engage in 'an expansion and revision of our Middle Ages' and can interrogate 'to whom these fantasies are open' (Barnhouse, 2023: 3). Barnhouse offers distinct arenas—politics, gender and sexuality, and religion—in which the films can open discussion with students. In each case, students are invited to ask about the disjunctures between the representations of the Angevins and their world in the films, as well as what they find in source material from the period. Why is the conflict between Henry II and Becket essentialised in the film *Becket* in a way that is never mentioned in primary sources? Why is the queenship of Eleanor so marginal in these films? What is the role of sexual desire, and particularly same-sex desire, in these films and why does this 'remain much rarer in Hollywood's Middle Ages than in the historical Middle Ages'? Why is the place of religion represented so differently in the two films?

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The story of medievalism in the modern world, although the subject of greater and greater scholarly attention, is only beginning to be written. Within the larger modern appetite for the central Middle Ages, the Angevins and the world they ruled clearly occupy a special place. Contrasted with the brutally violent, mostly cold and alien world we find in Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Name of the Rose* (1986), Luc Besson's *The Messenger: the Story of Joan of Arc* (1999), Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) and *Last Duel* (2021) or Robert Eggers' *The Northman* (2022), the cinematic Angevin world anchored in the 1960s is allowed to have color, summer, gaiety, queerness, Christmas, humor, fundamentally modern political discourses, and self-awareness.

Cinema, of course, is only one element of the Angevin domination of modern medievalism; the same audiences who were entertained by stories of Queen Eleanor, King Richard, and Robin and Marion on the silver screen also met the Angevins and their world in a range of other settings. Jan Ziolkowski's monumental study of the reception of one 12th century miracle story 'The Juggler of Notre Dame' reveals the

immense scope of medievalism that manifested in the twentieth century in books, plays, magazines, and pageants (Ziolkowski, 2018). With more ephemeral expressions faded and filed away, the films of the 20th century remain influential as an ageing generation (who still very much hold the reins of political power) look to the fictions of their youth—and the myths that those fictions fostered—as objects of nostalgia and political identity. A clear example would seem to be the proclamation, issued from the White House by Donald J. Trump on December 28 2020, marking the 850th anniversary of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. The remarkable proclamation is freighted with language of Christian supremacy over secular institutions and values, and it connects the martyrdom of Becket directly to Magna Carta and thence to George Washington and the Constitution of the United States. Its debt to mid-20th century popular depictions of Angevin history, however, is made clear with its direct quotation of the 1964 film, '[f]inally, the King had enough of Thomas Becket's stalwart defense of religious faith and reportedly exclaimed in consternation: "Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?"' (Cuenca, 2022). The hold that the mythic Angevin past has on the political imaginary of American conservatives is considerable. In 2012, the New Hampshire House of Representatives introduced House Bill 1580 seeking to introduce the simple but sweeping rule that '[a]ll members of the general court proposing bills and resolutions addressing individual rights or liberties shall include a direct quote from the Magna Carta which sets forth the article from which the individual right or liberty is derived' (General Court of New Hampshire, 2012; Lyall, 2015).

Although extreme, these invocations of Angevin memory would seem to be allied with an understanding of the history of democracy that was central to American political identity in the 20th century. The entrance to Cuyahoga County Courthouse in Cleveland Ohio, for instance, is flanked by figures of de Simon de Montfort, sixth earl of Leicester (d. 1265) and Archbishop Stephen Langton (d. 1228), originally sculpted by Herbert Adams in 1911 (Rarick and Witchey, 1986: 60-70). When the United States Capitol rotunda in Washington, D.C. was remodeled in 1949–1950, twenty-three marble relief portraits that 'depict historical figures noted for their work in establishing the principles that underlie American law' were installed (Architect of the Capitol, 2025a). Among the group of exclusively male figures, one is meant to depict Simon de Montfort, who fought against the royal forces of Henry III in the name of Magna Carta (Ambler, 2019). In 1976, for the bicentennial, this image of de Montfort was joined at the Capitol by a replica of Magna Carta itself accompanied by a gold plate with images meant to evoke a medieval manuscript (Architect of the Capitol, 2025b). Less than a decade later, businessman and politician Ross Perot purchased a 1297 copy of Magna Carta that he placed on loan with the National Archives. In 2007, Perot put

that copy of for sale again, and it was purchased by billionaire philanthropist David M. Rubenstein who immediately tendered it into the possession of the US National Archives on long term loan ‘as a gift to the country’. He did so, he explained, because he believed that the principles of common law that it enshrined were at the heart of the governing structures of the thirteen colonies, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution (Rubenstein, 2010).

For an American medievalist writing from the perspective of 2025, this particularly American reception of Angevin memory now seems highly unstable. Within weeks of his second inauguration, President Trump subscribed a written public statement with the words ‘Long live the King!’ (Oreskes, 2025). At a meeting broadcast live to the country, he responded to a state governor’s challenge to the legality of his policies: ‘we are the federal law’ (McCreesh, 2025). And he announced his plans to oust David M. Rubenstein, who loaned America his Magna Carta, from his role as chair of the Kennedy Center. Trump initially announced that he himself would replace Rubenstein as chair (Bumiller, 2025). Can the Angevin component of American legal and political identity be reconciled with this new style in American politics? Every representation of the Angevins in the modern world, from Robin Hood, to Becket, to Magna Carta, celebrates the defiance of kings. The return of the king may indicate that the sun is setting on one era of American Angevin memory. But as opponents of this new regime demand due process (guaranteed by Magna Carta) and petition for writs of *habeas corpus* (introduced by Henry II in the Assizes of Clarendon) to seek the release of political prisoners, a potential new world of projection, interpretation, and remembering, dawns.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Esther Liberman Cuenca, Patrick DeBrosse, and the editorial team at the Open Library of the Humanities.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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