

IRON, FIRE AND ICE

THE REAL HISTORY THAT INSPIRED
GAME OF THRONES

ED WEST



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INTRODUCTION

A young pretender raises an army to take the throne. Learning of his father's death, the adolescent—dashing and charismatic and descended from the old kings of the North—vows to avenge him in combat. Despite his youth, he has already won several battles and commands the loyalty of many of the leading families of the realm; he is supported in this war by his mother, who has spirited away her two younger sons to safety far from the rampaging armies of their father's enemies. Against them is the queen, “passionate and proud and strong-willed”¹ and with more of the masculine virtues of the time than most men. She too is battling for the inheritance of her young son, not yet fully grown but already a sadist who takes delight in watching executions.

This tale will sound familiar to fans of George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, and its HBO television adaptation *Game of Thrones*, but this is not the story of Westeros; rather of the real-life realm of England in 1461. On March 29 of that year, the deadliest battle ever fought on British soil took place on a spot now called Bloody Meadow in Yorkshire, deep within what was once the old kingdom of the north. Lasting into the night, despite a thick blizzard, the Battle of Towton was marked by extreme brutality, and by the end of the fighting some twenty-eight thousand men lay dead, many executed after the battle's end.² It was the climax to six years of violence and would decide which family ruled the kingdom.

On one side was an army led by Edward, Earl of March—the name was pronounced “Eddard” at the time³—the eighteen-year-old heir to the House of York, who had claimed the throne that year following the beheading of his father, Richard of York. Facing him were the forces of the House of Lancaster, fighting in the name of the queen, Margaret of Anjou, and her husband, the mad King Henry VI, whose weak mind had been the cause of York's rebellion.

Edward had recently won a victory at Mortimer's Cross, close to the Welsh border, weeks after his father and brother Edmund were slain at Wakefield. Richard of York, a descendant of the great warrior king Edward III through both his mother and father, had emerged in the 1450s as the most powerful man in the kingdom, but he would not win the throne. Instead his head was stuck on a pole in the city of York with a paper crown placed on top in mockery of his ambitions; his son Edward had sworn vengeance and would get it. Still barely a grown man, he went on to win a series of battles before his success was imperiled by his choice of bride.

By the time the conflict between the Houses of York and Lancaster had burned itself out, the bones of three or even four generations of some families would be scattered across the battlefields of England, the Plantagenet line destroyed in the fury of the Cousin's War. During this period, 25 percent of male aristocrats in the kingdom died violently, and some houses were entirely wiped out in a cycle of vengeance that came to break all the laws of warfare.⁴

The story would fascinate future generations, retold in the plays of William Shakespeare and later by the nineteenth-century novelist Walter Scott, who popularized the name "the War of the Roses" in reference to the emblems of the two families. It was this dynastic conflict that would provide much of the historical inspiration for George R.R. Martin when he wrote his fantasy series. Martin, a keen fan of popular history, has spoken on occasions about the people and periods that he drew on. *A Song of Ice and Fire* is set in "the Realm," or Seven Kingdoms, a country comprising the southern half of the island of Westeros. These books tell the story of the struggle to win the Iron Throne by a number of competing families: among them are the Lannisters, the richest clan in the Realm, who have gained control of the capital, King's Landing, in the southeast of the island; the Starks, who are the leading family of the old northern kingdom; and the Baratheons, who trace their roots to an ancestor who helped a great conqueror several generations earlier. It is a brutal and tragic world, one where the only options for those playing the game of thrones are victory or death.

As well as being an epic fantasy in its own right, *Game of Thrones* is also a fantastic (in both senses of the word) retelling of the story of the real Realm—England. It was inspired, in the author's own words, not just by "The Wars of the Roses . . . but also the Hundred Years War, the Crusades, the Norman Conquest,"⁵ and along the way the story takes in a sweep of European and Near Eastern history, from the ancient

worlds of Egypt, Rome, and Greece, through to the flowering of medieval civilization and beyond to the Renaissance and the birth of the early modern world. And the struggle for the throne of England, from the Saxon invasion in the fifth century to the downfall of the House of York a millennium later, is as fascinating as any fiction on earth.

George R.R. Martin first laid out the concept for his novel *A Game of Thrones* in a letter to his agent in 1993. He called it “a cycle of plot, counterplot, ambition, murder and revenge, with the iron throne of the Seven Kingdoms as the ultimate prize.”⁶ Westeros was to be, in the words of one historian, “a loose tribute to the British Isles at some unfixed point in the Middle Ages, where the mood of the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy is mashed together with the merciless family feuding that engulfed England during the [fifteenth]-century War of the Roses,” a mixture of fantasy and history that delighted in squalor “torture, prostitution, incest, sodomy and rape.”⁷

Or as novelist John Lanchester wrote of the series: “The Wars of the Roses, in this reimagining, are—as they surely were in real life—a blood-soaked, treacherous, unstable world, saturated in political rivalries, in which nobody is safe . . . It’s not a world any sane person would want to live in, not for a moment.”⁸ The show is also utterly amoral. There is no right or wrong. And that is the attraction.

History is the underlying inspiration, but *Game of Thrones* is also influenced by the genre of medieval heroism that originated with the tales of King Arthur and Chrétien de Troyes, epic stories from the birth of medieval Europe that informed how people thought of the world. But unconstrained by a need for accuracy, fantasy allows the author and reader far greater freedom, so what we have is an “epic retelling of the War of the Roses without the burden of history.”⁹ Any historical comparison can only go so far, and no character exactly matches a real historical figure, and yet most of what takes place in Westeros can be found in a specific period of European history that historians refer to as the Crisis of the Late Middle Ages, when England and France were ruined by war, famine, plague, and social and religious upheaval. It is this period, 1315 to 1461, that this book will mostly cover, telling the backstory of European history as the narrative progresses.



The medieval realm was a delicate political body that depended on a strong king who could unite the aristocracy, but tragically, and within half a century, England

was ruled by two monarchs who were mentally unbalanced; firstly, Richard II, a boy-king whose paranoia and sense of personal majesty bordered on the pathological, and later the feeble minded, and possibly schizophrenic, Henry VI.

Likewise, *Game of Thrones* begins in the aftermath of a rebellion against a violent and paranoid monarch who has alienated the great magnates of the land. In Westeros, the rebel lords overthrow the mad king Aerys II Targaryen, a revolt led by Robert Baratheon, who in turn takes the crown and marries Cersei Lannister, a beautiful, cunning, and ruthless individual from the country's leading house. Like many powerful women of the late medieval period, she is accused of being unfaithful, although in this case the allegation is true; her twin brother, Jaime, is the real father of her three children, including the eldest, Joffrey, a monster in the making.

The usurper Robert Baratheon is the eldest of three brothers; of his siblings one is cold and calculating, the other jovial but facile; and with Robert gorging himself to an early grave, the two maneuver for power. Simmering conflict is emerging between the Lannisters and the Starks, the latter descendants of the old rulers of the North and the most powerful family in that kingdom. Eddard Stark had been Robert Baratheon's childhood friend, his comrade-at-arms and then his Hand, charged with administering the Realm on behalf of the monarch. Drunk and bloated, King Robert is killed in a hunting accident before his fortieth birthday, mauled to death by a boar; it is this event, not entirely an accident, that triggers a fresh conflict, with the succession of Joffrey opposed by his uncles, the claimants Stannis and Renly Baratheon.

Ned Stark, having learned the truth of Joffrey's parentage, gives his support to Stannis, only to be arrested by Cersei Lannister and then executed on Joffrey's orders. This is despite the new king being betrothed to Sansa Stark, Ned's daughter. After Stark's death, his son Robb declares himself the King of the North, as his ancestors were before they bent the knee, while Ned's bastard son Jon Snow has joined the Night's Watch, the body of men sworn to guard the wall that protects the Seven Kingdoms from the wildings to the north.¹⁰

Within King's Landing various figures jostle for power: Varys, a eunuch nicknamed "the Spider" because of his network of spies; Petyr Baelish, a moneylender and brothel-keeper who has risen to the council from a relatively lowly station; Tyrion Lannister, the dwarf brother of Jaime and Cersei; and their father Tywin Lannister, an imposing and brutal aristocrat warrior whose sole motivation is to further the interests of his house, whatever the costs. The War of the Five Kings begins, pitting the

Lannisters, with their powerbase in the south, against the pre-eminent family in the north, the Starks.

And so it was in real life—sort of. Edward IV, as the Earl of March became, was in Martin's words an inspiration both for Robert Baratheon and Robb Stark. Like the Starks, March was descended from the old ruling family of the most northerly of Anglo-Saxon England's seven kingdoms, Northumbria, a distinctive, independent land, tougher and poorer than the south, before the realm was united in the tenth century. Like Robb, he never lost a battle during his successful adolescent military career; like Robb, too, he faced a formidable and fearsome queen whose machinations had already cost his father his head.

This conflict marked, in British history, the end of the medieval period and the start of a new era. An era of new weapons capable of killing on an awesome scale, a technology that arrived from the east and was far more terrifying than dragons: gunpowder. It was a dangerous new world, of increasing instability around the throne and of worsening violence in politics, for as one historian put it, "a deposed monarch has nowhere to fall but into the grave."¹¹ Or as Cersei tells Ned Stark: "This is the game of thrones, you win or you die."¹²

This great crisis starts in the year when the long winter came.



1

THE REALM

Dead history is writ in ink, the living sort in blood.

—RODERICK HARLAW

Alnwick Castle was the first line of defence if ever the wild men from beyond the wall poured over the border. A forbidding fortress built on a slope and controlling the only passable road on the English side of the Cheviot Hills, it was built to hold the North. The only way in to the citadel was via the barbican, the intimidating gateway overlooked by a tower, and through this narrow passage, with thick wooden doors at either end, the daily traffic of horses and men would bring supplies to the castle. When the invaders came to rape and pillage the villages of the North, as they had done for centuries, men and women would swarm into the castle seeking the protection of their lord.

Built in the eleventh century, Alnwick is deep inside Northumberland, England's most northerly county, and just twenty miles from the border with Scotland, inside a frontier country that had become increasingly lined with fortresses. The castle had been enhanced over the years with a solid portcullis gate protecting the entrance, with heavily-defended battlements, a twenty-one-foot drop below the drawbridge and walls seven feet thick, as well as a moat. Looking down at the surrounding area was an octagonal tower decorated with thirteen stone shields representing the families who had married into the House of Percy down the generations.

If the outer door of the barbican was ever penetrated by invaders, it still presented a daunting prospect, overlooked by four high towers from which loyal northern men could fire at the enemy below—using arrows or missiles, boiling water or fat. Inside the barbican, an attacker would be surrounded by high, thick walls and arrows firing down at them from all sides. Below them they would feel the mesh that led to the dungeons.¹ If the barbican fell, the castle still had two courtyards, or baileys, from

which last gasp fighting could be carried out. The fortress of House Percy had been built to keep them in the North.

Just as in Westeros the King's Road heads from King's Landing to Winterfell and to beyond the wall, so in real life the Great North Road led all the way from London to Edinburgh—Castle Rock, as its fortress was called—passing by the stronghold of Alnwick. Whoever controlled Alnwick therefore controlled the main route from Scotland to the South, and by the catastrophic year of 1314 this was the House of Percy. From Alnwick, the Percys dominated the frontier with the Scots beyond the great wall once built by the Romans (although in reality Alnwick, like a tiny portion of England, lies north of the wall).

The Percys were the leading house in the North, and if the Scots came it was their burden to raise men from five northern counties to repel them. They had rivals, of course, so while Henry de Percy, the First Baron Percy, was recognized as the strongest northern lord, there was also Neville, Lord of Raby, Clifford, Lord of Westmorland, Lucy, Lord of Cockermouth, Dacre, Lord of Gilsland and Umfraville, Lord of Redesdale. They were all proud families with their own pedigrees, but the Percys were kings in the North. In the words of historian Alexander Rose, "In that tumultuous place, the Westminster-based, Southern king's writ hardly ran. In Percy country, there was Percy law backed by a Percy army paid for by Percy money."²

Like most of the country's leading clans, they had not always been from the island. The Percy histories claimed as their oldest ancestor Mainfred, or Manni, who in the year AD 896 arrived in France after pillaging in England. He was a Dane, or as we would call him now, a Viking, and like many of his kind, settled in a region of Francia that came to be called Normandy. From the Percy lordship in Pays de Caux, northwest of Rouen, one of their number had arrived in England alongside William the Conqueror in 1066 when England's ruling class was ruthlessly eliminated and replaced by a French-speaking elite.

From minor lords in the wilder, rougher north of the country, which the Normans had treated with special brutality, the Percys had risen to become the most powerful family in the region. Just eleven generations after arriving on the island, a Percy was made Earl of Northumberland.

Although they had marched with the hated conqueror, the Percys had over time made themselves true men of the North. First settling in Yorkshire, they were a minor family who, in 1166, were still only the seventh largest tenant-in-chiefs in that county.

However, Henry de Percy had that year married Isabel, daughter of Adam de Brus II, Baron of Skelton; it was an advantageous marriage, in return for which de Percy and his heirs swore to every year ride to Skelton Castle “to lead the lady of the castle from her chamber to the chapel for Mass, and then escort her back to her chamber and take meat with her before withdrawing.”³ This they did, honoring their debts, until the Reformation in the sixteenth century swept away such ancient traditions.

They were not just powerful and rich, but well loved too. Northern men followed them with their arms and their hearts, and at their command thousands would appear in the field, men to whom the king in London was a distant figure who spoke a strange dialect: “To them, the last man standing between Northerners and destruction was not the faraway king, but a Percy. He was their commander, their protector, their judge and their sheriff.”⁴

And the Percys had always looked after their men. The records down in London show Henry de Percy writing to the chancellor on behalf of a valet: “Aleyn, son of Sir Thomas de Heton, who might have lost his land”⁵ had his lord not defended his corner. Percy’s son would speak on behalf of attainders who had fought loyally for the crown so that they might be spared punishment for the violent crimes they had committed at home. The Percy soldiers were paid out of his own pocket, knowing that silver promised from the crown might take an age to reach men with hungry families, a level of diligence to vassals few southern barons would have bothered with.

The Percys came to dominate the local honors, among them Warden of the East March, whose role it was to secure the eastern portion of the border with Scotland. They were in charge of justice, too. In Westeros, “the man who passes the sentence should swing the sword,”⁶ and executions are carried out in the king’s name without any sort of trial. It was not quite the case in real life, although local lords were tasked with the grim task with punishing lawbreakers after their guilt was determined, for “he who prosecutes shall carry out the judgement,” as the twelfth century code of Preston in Lancashire goes.

The most recent Henry de Percy had, in 1294, adopted the lion as the symbol of his house, having married Eleanor, daughter of the Earl of Arundel. The Arundels, an Anglo-Norman family with their base on the Welsh border, had for generations displayed a golden lion on a red field, and could trace their ancestry back to Adeliza, widow of King Henry I. Percy now adopted the animal to show his Arundel blood, and in tribute to a founder of the Percy dynasty, Joscelin de Louvain—*leeuwen* being Flemish for lion.

Their new heraldic symbol—called sigils in Westeros—was appropriate for the Percys' rising status. The art of heraldry was in its infancy, reflecting the importance of lineage and the most important thing to a man in the medieval world: *who your father was*. And just as the ruling houses of Westeros traced their lineage back to obscure and semi-mythical kings, in medieval England those of royal blood descended from the rulers of Wessex, Mercia, and Northumbria, the ancient kingdoms of the island, which were eventually united before being conquered in 1066 by Normandy's Duke William. Families placed great importance on their pedigree, in particular a link to the Conqueror and his companions, and through him to the ultimate forefather of medieval Europe, Charles the Great, King of the Franks, who in AD 800 had been crowned Emperor of the West in Rome.

And so heraldry was more than just about team colors; it was a reminder of who your father was, and his father before him, and what would be passed onto the next generation. It gave courage in battle, so that "a knight of good lineage would be emboldened in the field by recollection of his ancestors' brave deeds and spurred on in bravery himself by a desire to add to the family roll of honour."⁷

Henry de Percy, First Baron Percy, had been born in 1273, from a family that almost went extinct after his six paternal uncles all failed to produce children and his two brothers died without issue. His maternal grandfather was John de Warenne, the powerful Earl of Surrey who, back in 1278, had been served with a royal writ of *quo warranto* ("by what right"). King Edward I, determined to learn which subjects had usurped royal privileges in order to claim them back, demanded of each man proof of how he came by his property. De Warenne, approached by the king's men, drew his rusty sword and declared that *this* was his warrant, for "My ancestors came with William the Bastard, and conquered their lands with the sword, and I will defend them with the sword against anyone wishing to seize them."⁸

Alnwick had been erected during an intense period of castle-building following the Norman Conquest, during which five hundred such fortresses were erected in a generation. Raised as a show of strength against the Scots across the river Tweed, it was a motte-and-bailey castle, the standard type of the period used by the Normans, characterized by a raised and defensible central keep, the motte, surrounded by a courtyard (bailey) with a ditch around it. De Percy had now added a heavily fortified barbican, as well as new circular towers, more efficient than the older square towers as they could not be battered at the corners or easily undermined (that is, dug under

and set fire to). A moat was added, along with a well, a portcullis, a drawbridge, and eight semicircular bastions to the keep, castle-building technology reaching its apex during this period. Erected on a peninsula, with the River Aln to the north and a ravine to the east and south, Alnwick was almost invulnerable, for a garrison of sixty men within could easily defend such a castle against six hundred outside.

Which was just as well, as in de Percy's lifetime relations between the kingdoms of England and Scotland had deteriorated sharply, and he had spent almost twenty years fighting on the border, leading raids into enemy territory and defending the north from attack. De Percy had been knighted by King Edward in March 1296 while besieging Berwick, Scotland's largest city; three years later he became the first Lord Percy as his reward.

The border wars came at great cost; in March 1307 Percy and three hundred of his men were at Turnberry Castle in Carrick when they were attacked by the Scottish leader Robert the Bruce. The fighting was so horrific it was rumored afterwards that Percy was afraid to go into Scotland again. In the autumn of 1314, as the harsh Northumbrian winter approached, Percy was forced to defend nearby Newcastle and lead a raiding party north. He died in early October, most likely fatally wounded while fighting Scottish raiders.

He died, but his house survived. As Tywin Lannister put it, "Before long I'll be dead, and you and your brother and your sister and all of her children, all of us dead, all of us rotting underground. It's the family name that lives on. It's all that lives on. Not your personal glory, not your honor . . . but family."⁹ Of 136 barons summoned to Westminster between 1295 and 1300, only sixteen of their houses were left in 1500, and the Percys were among the survivors. In fact, they still survive today, and still live in Alnwick six months of the year, the other half of which it is used as a film set to fund its maintenance. Fans of the Harry Potter films will recognize it as Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

THE NORTH

The Great North Road is still there too, this real-life King's Road now going by the less romantic name of the A1 and M1 motorway, and still following mostly the same route, one of four ancient paths in Britain dating to Roman times and beyond. The Gough map, commissioned during this period, shows three thousand miles of main roads by 1360, 40 percent of which were built by the Romans.

The map was ordered by a king intent on extending his power beyond the south of the island, outside of which most monarchs had little experience. Southern kings had often had only fragile control over the North, a naturally distinct region of England defined as the area between the great Humber river and the Scottish border. It has “older, harder rocks and hillier terrain,”¹⁰ compared to the flatter and more fertile South. The narrow width between the vast stretch of the Humber and the hills of the Pennines made the region hard for southern armies to control. Even thirty-five miles inland the great river is a mile across, and so dominance of just one small gap between river and mountain allowed an army control of York, the largest city in the region, as well as the rivers Ouse, Ure, Aire, Don, Derwent, and Trent—and so the whole North.* Any army arriving from the South would find themselves in a corridor between the Humber swamps and the Pennines, the mountain range that forms a spine down northern England, removing any numerical advantage southerners had.

People of the North were different: “When the earl and his Northern retinue travelled to London, locals would stare at the foreigners,” as one historian put it. “The Northerners were poorer and rougher, and it showed. Northern soldiers, overdressed for the summer climate,” had “outmoded armor; even the earl’s warhorse was a feeble creature compared to the splendid steeds favoured by Southern magnates. The Northerners were permanently wary and clannish.”¹¹

Yorkshire, the largest of the northern counties, formed the southern extent of this region. Beyond that, the four most northerly shires, Northumberland, Westmorland, Cumberland, and Durham, were a patchwork of miniature fiefdoms run by warring families in which the laws passed in Westminster were of lesser importance than ancient traditions and local custom, including long-held vendettas.

The North of Westeros “is like its Warden: stark, unforgiving, masculine and wild.”¹² Likewise William Camden, who in the Tudor period wrote the first geographical study of the British Isles, described a “rough and barren” land: “You would think you see the ancient nomads, a martial sort of people,” he concluded.

Geoffrey of Monmouth, in his *History of the Kings of Britain*, wrote that “it was a frightful land to live in, more or less uninhabited, and it offered a safe lurking place to foreigners. Indeed, by its very geographical position it lay open to the Picts, the Scots, the Danes, the Norwegians and anyone else who came ashore to ravage the

*The Trent roughly occupies the same point of the map of England as the Trident does in Westeros.

island.”¹³ According to the twelfth century chronicle, the *Gesta Stephani*, “the root and origin of all evil arose in that part of England called Northumbria to produce plunder and arson, strife and war.”¹⁴ Or as a fifteenth century writer put it: “The north, whence all evil spreads.”¹⁵ But then, of course, these men were all from the South.

Long ago it had been a kingdom in its own right, Northumbria, one of seven in early medieval England, a chaotic and violent time commonly called the Dark Ages. Its two warring kings brutally killed by Viking invaders in 865, Northumbria had been heavily settled by Norsemen, a Scandinavian legacy still reflected in Yorkshire dialect today. A century later it had been the last region to come under the sway of the southern kings of Wessex who had united the country, and retained a distinctive, semi-Scandinavian identity for far longer. Reluctant to help the southern lords fight off the Norman invaders in 1066, the northern men had afterwards most ferociously opposed the conqueror and been crushed as a result. Hundreds of thousands died, whole villages were destroyed, and the region never recovered.

Border life was still tough, centuries later, as it always had been. The Flemish chronicler Froissart wrote of men there forced to consume “small poor wine” and “bread evil baken in panniers” which “was sore wet with the sweat of horses.”¹⁶ Up in the North, saddles were “all rotten and broken, and most part of their horses hurt on their backs . . . nor they had nothing to make fire but green boughs, the which would not burn because of the rain.”¹⁷

In the North, some traditions held on longer: stories of shapeshifters that dated back at least to Saxon times before the conquest. Beyond lay the terror of Scotland, a barren, cold land with its folk tales of *sith*, or *aes sídhe*, supernatural undead beings who lived in the Land of the Dead, having been driven into remote areas by invaders.¹⁸ In Scottish folklore, these creatures formed the *slaughe sídhe*, the “fairy horde,” an army of the undead. Few on the English side of the wall believed that anymore; the living Scots were terrifying enough, and that year the army of the realm headed deep beyond the wall to fight them—only to meet with disaster, a catastrophe that would plunge the kingdom into civil war.

But worse still, people across the Realm and beyond had noticed that the weather was turning. On the colder fringes of the known world those on the margins felt it first as the temperatures plunged; they did not know it yet, but the following year the cold rains would begin, and the crops would fail. Winter was coming.

KING'S LONDON

As the fifteenth century chronicler Polydore Vergil observed, “The whole Countrie of Britaine . . . is divided into four partes; wherof the one is inhabited of Englishmen, the other of Scottes, the third of Wallshemen, and the fowerth of Cornishe people. Which all differ emonge them selves, either in tongue, either in manners, or ells in lawes and ordinaunces.”¹⁹

The Realm of England had grown out of several small kingdoms carved out by three Germanic tribes, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, arriving on the island as Rome’s control of western Europe collapsed. The kingdom, united four centuries before Henry de Percy’s time, shared the island of Britain with various peoples beyond a wall on its northern frontier, speaking a mixture of tongues, as well as surviving British speakers on two peninsulas in the west and south-west.

The island’s thriving economic hub had for many years been London, settled on the north bank of the River Thames by the Romans, and with access to the continent, especially the rich markets of Flanders, northern France, and the German “free imperial cities” across the North Sea. Here the king of England sat in Westminster Hall, once part of a tiny island a mile upstream from Lundenberg (as the Saxons called it) but now a western suburb of the city. Like the Great Hall of the Red Keep, this is where the monarch kept court.

The throne sat at the south end of the hall by a twelve-foot-long marble slab, the King’s Table, which long symbolized the monarch’s power. The current King’s Table dated to the reign of Edward I’s father Henry III, replacing a far older wooden slab that once would have travelled around the country with the monarch. The throne itself, the King’s Seat, was modelled on the Biblical throne of Solomon and carved with lions, emblems of the kingdom. Marble thrones had become symbols of great imperial prestige, used by the still surviving eastern Roman emperors in far-off Constantinople and by Charlemagne, Emperor of the West. The palace of Westminster had also recently become home to semi-official meetings of lords and commons now called the Parliament (“to talk” in French, from where English also gets “parley”, to talk with an enemy).

London, from where the king ruled his realm, was perhaps home to sixty thousand people, far smaller than Granada, Seville, Venice, or Milan, or countless other cities to the south. London’s merchant elite were English-speakers, as they always had been, although the kings and higher aristocracy had spoken French for two and a half

centuries. A teeming, bustling, and squalid city, London was surrounded on three sides by a Roman wall with seven gates and on the other by the river (these gates were not pulled down until 1760). The city had by now long sprawled out of its ancient wall and extended from the Tower in the east to the River Fleet to the west.

The Tower of London, built by the Normans in order to control the city and intimidate it, was a royal fortress, apartment block, and even zoo, home to an elephant and leopard during the reign of Henry III. It was also a prison, from which only one man had ever escaped, Ranulf Flambard in 1101, a bishop notorious for scamming both rich and poor out of their wealth. The Tower also had a library of 160 volumes, one of the biggest in England²⁰—although in real life people’s reading tastes were rather lowbrow, fifty-nine of these books being trashy romances, with the Queen of England among the keenest borrowers.²¹ In Westeros, The Citadel, headquarters of the Order of Maesters in Oldtown, has the “largest library in the Known World”²² but in England at the time even the greatest book collection scaled into insignificance compared to their ancient equivalents, and would do so until the seventeenth century.

London was grotesquely unhygienic, a city drowning in its own filth. One Londoner complained of the slaughterhouse nearby that had made his garden “stinking and putrid,” another that blood from animals filled nearby streets “making a foul corruption and abominable sight to all dwelling near.”²³ A complaint against William E. Cosner, resident of the ward of Farringdon Without, stated that “men could not pass” by his house “for the stink [of] horse dung and horse piss.”²⁴ It was not unknown for men to drown in shit, or for the smell and squalor to drive people to murder, hardly surprising when they lived and worked in “lanes barely wide enough for a fat man to turn around in.”²⁵ It was not until later that century that slaughterhouses and other unhygienic places were forced to locate outside of the crowded city.

Across the river Thames, Southwark was famed for its very strong beer made from brownish Thames water, but also for its large numbers of brothels—“stews”—most of them, strangely, owned by the Bishop of Winchester. Many of the women were Flemish, relatively exotic migrants from across the sea, working in Cock Lane and Gropecuntlane, among the many colorful street names in the city (there was also Shitbrook Street and Pissing Alley). Londoners in trouble with the authorities could always run off to Southwark and because it was a separate jurisdiction, they often escaped justice; later this seedy underbelly would become host to the city’s most famous playhouse, William Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre.

Even a century earlier the city was home to over 350 ale houses, taverns, and inns, notorious dens of vice and crime. Across the sea in Flanders, beer was already made with hops, but it was not until the Hundred Years' War that Englishmen would first taste this drink, recognizable to modern palates as beer. The "beer" consumed at that time would have had a texture more like porridge, muddy and foggy, although it had its enthusiasts and lasted well into the Tudor period. A later poet described his love of the native ale:

Ich I am a Cornish man, and ale I can brew
 It will make one to cacke also to spew
 It is thick and smokey and also it is thin
 It is like wash of pigs had wrestled therein²⁶

Like with all significant towns in the fourteenth century, London's citizens could entertain themselves with plays, although before the first theaters they would have been done by travelling amateurs on major feast days. These performances were very bawdy, featuring sex, sadism, rape, nudity, drunkenness, and torture (with entrails from local butchers as props). But the violence on stage reflected the violence off it, with murder rates comparable to modern central America.²⁷ At night, the bell in the church of St Mary-le-Bow would sound the start of nightfall, and while this was no longer the signal for the curfew, as it had been in William the Conqueror's day, men and women were wise to head indoors.

HERE BE DRAGONS

London's dominance of Britain was due to its position on the Thames, giving its large class of merchants—considerable even in Roman times—access to the markets of Europe's richest regions: Flanders, France, the Rhineland, and northern Italy. This interconnected economy, once abysmally poorer and more primitive than the East, had begun to catch up and even surge ahead economically; already Flanders and Holland showed signs of the economic advances that would later lead to the seventeenth century Dutch invention of modern capitalism. This Catholic Christian world would have been familiar to educated Englishmen, but beyond that it would be a matter of "here be dragons." (The phrase is not a myth, for there are indeed two

recorded incidents of maps bearing the Latin phrase *HC SVNT DRACONS*, “here are dragons,” both from the 1500s.)

Martin’s world is composed of four known continents: Westeros, Essos, Sothoryos, and Ulthos, the latter two of which we’ve heard little of in the first books, although Sothoryos is supposedly filled with steaming jungles and tropical diseases and is presumably a bit like Africa. Between Westeros and Essos lies the Narrow Sea, on the other side of which are a group of city-states called the Free Cities, and to the south and east of them fallen civilizations as well as nomadic peoples such as the Dothraki, who cross the vast expanses of the continent on horse, occasionally terrorizing and enslaving the continent’s cities, and sometimes trading with them instead.

Westeros is nine hundred miles long, with a wide range of climates and peoples: the southernmost kingdom, Dorne, is Mediterranean-like, warm and dusty and filled with “scorpions and sand,” and noted for its hot-blooded people who hail from various, racially-diverse invaders. The North is snowbound, even in summer, while beyond the wall the climate is arctic. The Realm itself covers only the southern portion of the island, and is protected by a three hundred-mile wall, beyond which are the Free Folk, or wildlings, descendants of the original inhabitants of the island, as well as other less savory and more fantastical beings. At the very far north is the Land of Always Winter, from where the feared White Walkers are supposed to hail, although the existence of these ghost-like creatures is disputed by many.

To Western Europeans at the time, just as in Martin’s fantasy, there was the known world, of Europe and the near East, and the unknown world beyond. Distant lands such as Persia and India were, in historian Barbara Tuchman’s words,

seen through a gauze of fabulous fairy tales revealing an occasional nugget of reality: forests so high they touch the clouds, horned pygmies who move in herds and grow old in seven years, brahmins who burn themselves on funeral pyres, men with dogs’ heads and six toes, ‘cyclopeans’ with only one eye and one foot who move as fast as the wind, the ‘monoceros’ which can be caught only when it sleeps in the lap of a virgin, Amazons whose tears are of silver, panthers who practice the caesarean operation with their own claws, trees whose leaves supply wool, snakes 300ft long, snakes with precious stones for eyes, snakes who so love music that for prudence they stop up one ear with their tail.²⁸

Most people in the realm of England would never have met anyone from these far-off lands, although some might have seen their exotic exports, of silk, gold, and ivory, among other things. Even further away than Persia or India, as far as the world reached, Western European maps at the time feature “Seres,” a land so-called because its people wear silk, a precious material grown by worms, which these Eastern people had tried to prevent foreigners from acquiring (until a monk sneaked a pair of silk worms to Byzantium). Yet little was known of this Seres, “China,” or the rumors that a sophisticated island-kingdom lay even beyond it.

People thought India covered half the world, while others believed that there were three Indias, one ruled by Prester John: a legendary central Asian king Europeans believed would help them win the Crusades. Letters supposedly from the magnificent ruler circulated in the twelfth century stating, “I, Prester John, am the lord of lords, and I surpass all the kings of the entire world in wealth, virtue and power . . . Milk and honey flow freely in our lands; poison can do no harm, nor do any noisy frogs croak. There are no scorpions, no serpents creeping in the grass.”²⁹ This exotic far-away kingdom was filled with diamonds, emeralds, and other precious stones, as well as peppers and elixirs that would cure all sorts of ailments.

Men dreamed of huge and unfeasible wealth in the East: “gem-bearing trees and mountains of gold” guarded by snakes and Ophir, a land filled with “giants, pigmies, dog-headed men, a river that flowed to Paradise, precious stones, a fountain of youth, a sea of sand, a river of stones, beyond which lived the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, also tributary to Prester John.”³⁰ There were other magical lands—“Atlantis, El Dorado, Rio Doro, the River of Gold, the Empire of Monomotopa, Island of the Seven Cities of Cibola, discovered by seven bishops and St Brendan’s Isle discovered by the Irishman during the 6th century.”³¹ St Brendan the Navigator, well into his seventies when he went on his outlandish journey, and trusting in God rather than any navigational tools, may have ended up in the Azores or Iceland.

People at the time knew of three continents and believed that across the great ocean there was the *Terra Australis Incognita*, the unknown southern land. It was too hot for men, but among the races that could be found there were the Sciopods, monsters with one large foot; when it became too hot they simply lay on their back and used their feet as shade. Also expected to be found in this faraway land were the Antipodes, whose feet point backwards; the Amazons, who had a single breast; Cynocephales, men with the head of a dog; Panoti, men with elephant trunks; and

Blemmyae, who have no heads at all but faces on their chests. Outside of the known world there could also be found Headless Men, or Ethiopian Troglodytes, and some groups in the east supposedly ate their parents—although there were certainly cannibals in remote parts of Asia, even until relatively modern times. Of these Marvels of the East, a twelfth century manuscript now at the Bodleian Libraries in Oxford included two-headed snakes, centaurs, and unicorns, this worldview influenced by classical mythology.

Perhaps nothing better captured the imagination than dragons. Faraway Sri Lanka, to the south of Prester John's empire, was full of them, according to popular belief, but these terrifying creatures featured as objects of fascination in almost every culture. Carl Jung, founder of analytical psychology, saw the dragon as the arch-enemy of the archetype hero, the monster that had to be defeated in order for good to triumph—by the Norse hero Sigurd, the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf, or the Christian St George—but also the monster within us.

Great men of the thirteenth century such as Albert the Great and Roger Bacon thought that the equator was incapable of sustaining life because of its heat, and so men only inhabited the northern hemisphere; this was believed until the fifteenth century when Portuguese explorers proved it wrong by sailing all the way around the Cape of Good Hope. Little was really known of the world beyond, and European maps were still primitive compared to those of antiquity; typically, they showed a T-shape of the world with Asia at the top, Europe and Africa below. In contrast, in the more advanced Chinese model, the equator is seen as a circle around the globe, an idea the Europeans would borrow from the East one day, along with eyeglasses, paper, and gunpowder.

Before the mid-thirteenth century, no European had gone further east than Baghdad and returned. Then, between 1276 and 1291, an explorer from Venice called Marco Polo had reached the court of the faraway Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan. The Polo company had on their travels reached Lop, an “immense, dry, salt-encrusted lake bed covering extreme northwestern China, the wasteland . . . notorious for its special hazards” and which was “synonymous with the edge of the unknown.”³² In the Desert of Lop, it was said, merchants often heard malignant spirits calling out to them to follow, never to be heard of again.

Polo found many cultures utterly alien to Europeans. The women of Kamul, now Hami in western China, had a custom whereby “the stranger stays with his wife in the

house and does as he likes and lies with her in a bed just as if she were his wife, and they continue in great enjoyment,” with the approval of their menfolk.³³ In Burma, in contrast, Polo found people who poisoned strangers, inviting them to lodge in the house and then killing “him by night either by poison or by other things so that he died.”³⁴ That way their soul would never leave the house and so bring it good fortune. Polo found Buddhists in south China who “eat all coarse things and they also eat human flesh very willingly, provided that he [the deceased] did not die a natural death”—they preferred those who died by this sword as they had “very good and savoury flesh.”³⁵

Polo had also visited Russia, where he saw dog sledding and wrote that the people “have all their houses underground because of the great cold that is there.” In this icy land “these are sables and ermines and squirrels . . . and black foxes” from which they make skins and furs. After this he found another region in Russia, the “the land of shadows,” where men “live like animals . . . and it’s so cold that people’s urine gets frozen.”³⁶

London’s merchants had recently begun trading with this far-off country which they called their “land of darkness.” It was still at the very edge of their slowly expanding consciousness; centuries earlier Alfred, King of Wessex, had received a visitor who had travelled to the far north of Norway where reindeer herdsman scraped a living, and told fantastic tales. Beyond that, in the frozen wastes of the Arctic, there lay a land where it was forever winter, sailed only by hardy Viking adventurers three centuries earlier and named, with some irony, Greenland. As one approached the coast of this vast landmass, a visitor would find “rising out of the frigid, white-capped sea” a land of always winter that “gazed up at monstrous cliffs of silvery ice shimmering in the brilliant, bitter sunlight.”³⁷

The people here lived on the very edge of existence, dependent on supplies from across the sea, and towards the end of the last century they would have been among the first humans to notice that the winters were getting harsher. People in London or Alnwick might not have known it yet, but the world was getting colder and a great disaster was unfolding.

2

THE IRON KING

No matter how much I make up, there's stuff in history that's just as bad, or worse.

—GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

It could take up to half an hour for a burning man to die. The Flemish chronicler Froissart's description of a criminal going to the flames during the reign of France's Mad King Charles captures the horror of the punishment:

They hustled him on. The fire was ready. A gibbet had been set up in the square, and at the foot of it a stake with a heavy iron chain. Another chain hung from the top of the gibbet with an iron collar attached. This collar, which opened on a hinge, was put round his neck, then fastened and hauled upwards so that he should last longer. The first chain was wound round him to bind him more tightly to the stake. He was screaming and shouting. As soon as he was secured to the stake, great heaps of woods were piled against it and set on fire. They flamed up immediately. So was he hanged and burned, and the King of France could have seen him from his window if he had wanted to.¹

The stake was a terrifying and agonizing way to die, and so reserved for the most heinous of crimes—and there were few as abominable as heresy. And so, in March 1314, the people of Paris had gathered on an island in the center of the city to watch four old warriors being led to their deaths for such a crime. The men were members of the Knights Templar, an order of sworn brothers founded two centuries earlier to protect Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. Over the years the Templars had grown into a military power fighting a holy war, the most famous order of brothers sworn to take no wives and to defend civilization, recognizable by their white tunics. And yet

the brothers had become more than that; with their reputation for honesty and their muscle, and with bases across Europe and the Near East, the group had also begun handling large amounts of money, growing into a sort of international banking organization, enormously powerful and wealthy. But like bankers through the ages they had become resented—and so when the Crusades were lost in 1303, they were inevitably vulnerable to rival powers.

And there was no one more powerful in Europe than the King of France, the country being at that point by far the leading state in the Christian world. France was “supreme,” in the words of one historian, “her superiority in chivalry, learning, and Christian devotion was taken for granted, and as traditional champion of the Church, her monarch was accorded the formula of ‘Most Christian King.’”² French was the language of the ruling class in England, Flanders, and much of Italy, the language of law as far away as Jerusalem, and everywhere in Europe the language of scholars and poets. Kings of French blood sat on thrones from the eastern Mediterranean to the rocky Atlantic coast of Ireland; French words in their thousands found their way into languages across the continent.

Tracing descent from the barbarian Frankish kingdom founded in the ruins of Roman Gaul, the kings of France sat in the royal court in Paris, the center of the Western world. And the current monarch, Philippe *le bel*, “the handsome,” was a domineering and icy-cold man intent on expanding his power.

Philippe IV, also known as the Iron King, was likened to a statue for his coldness, or an owl who says nothing but simply stares (the bishop who made that remark soon regretted it). Philippe was a pious man who wore a hair shirt and regularly whipped himself, and “those who met him found his fixed stare, his long silences and his mysterious manner disconcerting.”³ But for all his religious devotion, he was not a man to be crossed, and the punishment dished out to the Templars was not even the worst of his cruelty; other enemies he had flayed alive.

The head of the Capetian dynasty, Philippe’s line had begun with Hugh Capet in 987; further back the Franks had once been a Germanic tribe who overran the northern part of Gaul and accepted the submission of the Gallo-Roman population there. Embracing Christianity soon after the fall of the empire, they had steadily adopted the language of the native Latins, a tongue that had evolved into Old French.

The Iron King had been crowned at the cathedral in Reims, north of Paris, like his forefather Clovis eight centuries earlier, where the archbishop handed him the sword

once wielded by his ancestor Charlemagne, fastening it to the king's side and reciting "Accipe hunc gladium cum Dei benedictione"²⁴—Accept this sword with God's blessing. Philippe had now ruled for thirty years and foresaw a strong and long dynasty ahead of him, with three sons grown to manhood and one surviving daughter married to the king of England. They had just two years earlier produced a grandchild for him, a boy called Edward.

Yet the august and sovereign kingdom of France was in financial trouble, and Philippe's ruinous spending led him to search for new sources of revenue. So without even asking the Pope, Clement V, Philippe conspired to have the brotherhood destroyed and to take their wealth. In 1307, he sent secret orders to arrest all fifteen thousand members of the brotherhood in France for crimes, in the words of Philippe's secret orders, "horrible to contemplate, terrible to hear of . . . an abominable work, a detestable disgrace, a thing almost inhuman, indeed set apart from all humanity." Only two dozen escaped that day, Friday the thirteenth.*

Numerous men who had been thrown out of the Knights Templar were brought forward as witnesses, happy to make all sorts of allegations against them. The Templars were accused of selling their souls to the devil, sex with each other and with *succubi*—female demons who supposedly had carnal relations with men—and various other sordid activities. They were also supposed to have drunk a powder made from the ashes of dead comrades and their own illegitimate children.

The crimes were totally implausible even to a credulous public, although most of the Templars confessed to their guilt—but then most people probably would admit to sex with demons after prolonged torture by the Holy Inquisition. Among the methods authorized were the rack, in which the victim was horribly stretched until they confessed; the *strapedo*, whereby a man was raised over a beam by a rope tied to the wrists bound behind his back, until he confessed; or rubbing fat on the soles of the victim's feet and placing them before a fire, until he confessed. Sometimes, as with one knight called Bernardo de Vado, this went wrong and his bones fell out, which was not the intention.

With the *strapedo*, weights were sometimes added to the testicles to make the experience even more painful. Many others were strapped to the rack, and their ankles

*The theory that this is the origin of the superstition was only first mentioned in the historic novel *The Iron King*, which was published in 1955, and further made popular by the *Da Vinci Code*. It's probably not true.

and wrists dislocated by a device that slowly pulled joints from sockets. By January 1308, 134 of the leading 138 Templars arrested in Paris had admitted their guilt to a range of charges, among them blasphemy, various sexual degradations, and a ceremony where they worshipped a demon who took the form of a cat. They were also accused of negotiating with the Muslims over the Holy Land, the Christian world being desperate for some explanation for their failure in war.

Grand Master Jacques de Molay eventually confessed to blasphemy but denied sodomy, and a month after this admission the reluctant Pope Clement V sent letters to all European rulers instructing them to arrest Templars in their countries. In Paris, some fifty-four knights were soon put in carts and taken out of the city and burned to death, and the finale came on March 18, 1314 when Molay and the other leading Knights were executed in dramatic style on Paris's Island of Jews (now renamed the "Island of Templars").⁵ They had spent seven years in dungeons suffering various tortures by that point.



The knights had built their first Temple in Paris the previous century, and by the time of their destruction it was a fortress in itself, a vast *donjon*, or keep, flanked by four towers just beyond the city walls, and rivalling the Palais Royal in its grandiosity.

Paris was home to as many as 210,000 people, the largest in the Christian West and perhaps four times as big as London (which did not overtake its rival until the eighteenth century). The city boasted six paved streets, including its main thoroughfare Le Grand Rue, as well as Les Halles, where farmers brought produce on Fridays, and St Jacques-la Boucherie, the butchers' quarter, where "fierce Paris wind made little ripples in the pools of animal blood."⁶ Nearby was the Champs-Dolet—the "field of suffering and cries,"⁷ where the animals were slaughtered, while the Parisian tradition of roasting stray cats alive on Place de Greve lasted until the seventeenth century.

Medieval Paris was a dangerous, noisy, and malodorous place, but the city now boasted its first hospital, the Hôtel-Dieu, where patients slept three or four to a bed and the clothes of the dead were sold at monthly auctions. Its great cathedral Notre-Dame had been completed on the site of a temple to Jupiter dating to the Roman city of Lutetia (although most of the interior today is a nineteenth century restoration, much of the original having been vandalized in the Revolution). Then there was the

stunning Sainte-Chapelle, built by Philippe's grandfather Louis IX and containing many of the most priceless relics in Christendom, taken from the Middle East by crusaders. The city's Left Bank was already a student quarter, and home to the famed Paris University, the second oldest in Europe.

Toward the end of the early medieval period, around the turn of the millennium, the Italian cities of Venice, Naples, and Milan were the first to reach population levels seen in antiquity, followed by Florence and the Hanseatic port towns of Germany. But Paris was by now supreme, economically and culturally, and the flowering of what was later called Gothic architecture is testimony to the dominance of northern France, soon imitated across England, Germany, and the rest of Europe.⁸

English medieval history is impossible to understand without France, which exerted a huge cultural influence over its northern neighbor well into the modern era, and so the story of the Seven Kingdoms is not just that of England but rather Britain, France, and Spain in one. In Martin's words, "Westeros is much much MUCH bigger than Britain. More the size (though not the shape, obviously) of South America."⁹ Although the Seven Kingdoms all speak the same language, they are varied in their ancestry and racial appearance, while the geography varies hugely; so, while the five most northerly kingdoms correspond to Britain, the Reach strongly resembles France and Dorne is Moorish Spain. Paris is the model for King's Landing, and in the books appears far less tropical than in the television series, which is filmed in Malta and Croatia.¹⁰

The Reach is:

a vast and fertile land, with a more pleasant climate than much of the rest of the country. It's home to an island called The Arbor that, like the French regions of Burgundy and Bordeaux, makes what is widely considered the best wine in the world. The city of Oldtown is the biggest and most sophisticated in Westeros, much as Paris was for some time the biggest and most sophisticated city in Europe. And the inhabitants of The Reach are invested in chivalry, art and culture to a significantly greater extent than those in the rest of Westeros.¹¹

France is big, roughly the area of Texas, while England is about the same as New York state, a quarter of its size. Before modern technology, it took twenty-two days to cross from the north of France to the south, and sixteen from east to west, making it

extremely hard for one man to rule.¹² Historically it had therefore been controlled by dukes and counts, with the king in Paris only as overlord.

The Reach is a highly fertile area that provides its neighbors with wheat and wine, just as France did; it is also the home of courtly love and courtly manners, and the trendsetter in fashion, as France was. Northern France, aside from Brittany and western Normandy, is a huge wheat-growing region, among the most fertile areas for this staple on earth, along with England and Denmark.¹³ Wheat is the best natural produce for state-formation, being easy to tax and record, so it aided the creation of strong centralized authorities with functioning revenue-raising powers. The Île-de-France, the region around Paris, became a state earlier than almost anywhere else in Europe, although as the country expanded it became harder to maintain control over its more Latin south and Celtic west. France's castles were spoken of being held "in the hand of the crown of France," and French writers specifically used the metaphor of a hand to describe the monarch's power.¹⁴

According to Carolyne Larrington in *Winter is Coming*: "The Reach is a land of rolling hills and terraced vineyards; the huge river Mander runs through, watering its fertile fields and nurturing the fruit for which the region is renowned."¹⁵ It is "the garden of the Seven Kingdoms, famous for its vines and the wine," with the Sunset Sea to the west and Red Mountains of Dorne to the southeast, and it also produces numerous crops and flowers as well as supplying grain, wine, and livestock. France has eight wine producing regions, mostly in the south (although Champagne, its most northerly, is beyond Paris) and whereas in England wine was an expensive drink reserved for the aristocracy; in Paris even the low born might enjoy it.

The forefathers of the king resided at the royal mausoleum at St Denis, just outside Paris; Philippe's grandfather Louis had had the tombs in the necropolis rearranged, and on one side resided his ancestors the Capetians and on the other his more distant forefathers, the Carolignian dynasty of Charlemagne and the even more ancient Merovignians, who dated all the way back to Clovis, the first of the Franks to abandon the old gods.

The Iron King had constructed a new assembly hall in the city, the Grande Salle, a cavernous room with a gilded ceiling on eight columns with windows colored with the *fleur-de-lis*, the arms of France, and several gigantic fireplaces with seating along the walls. Statues of previous kings looked down on the visitors who came to seek the king's support.

Nearby was the Conciergerie prison, attached to the Palais de Justice and where witnesses were “put to the question,” that is brutally tortured; there they endured prolonged sleep deprivation, immersion in cold water, and having water forced down the throat to the point of suffocation. North of the city walls was Montfaucon Hill, where felons were hanged “by the dozen on great stone gallows nearly forty feet high, their rotting corpses left to dangle for weeks as a warning to others.”¹⁶ Witnesses and heretics condemned to be burned often wore black, as did the executioner, to mark the gravity of the situation.

Medieval Paris had been largely built by King Philippe Auguste in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century, and much of it lasted until the 1860s and the age of photography. The Palais de la Cité had four great defensive towers, one of them known as the Tour Bonbec, or Blabbing Tower, because that’s where people talked after they were put to the question. It was here that, in 1307, Philippe had twenty-eight rioters tortured and then hanged on the eve of Epiphany from elm trees at four entry points to Paris. Philippe also had counterfeiter boiled alive.

Nearby the Grand Chatelet had been founded to keep out the Norsemen and now it became the offices of the *prevot*, or governor, and later regarded as the most sinister of the city’s many prisons, the thick walls blocking out the screams of the tortured.

Philippe had put up a large donjon, complete with turrets, on the river, on the center of which was a great tower, forty-five meters in circumference and thirty meters high. It became known as the Louvre, perhaps from *louve*, a female wolf:¹⁷ rebuilt in the eighteenth century, it is today the largest and most visited museum on earth. Opposite the Louvre, on the Left Bank, was the Hôtel de Nesle, a fenced tower that later became a palace. The Iron King turned it into apartments for his three sons and their families, and it was here in the old towers that two of their wives took lovers, sparking a series of disastrous events that reverberated around the kingdom.

Medieval cities were, by our standards, grim. There was a famous story “told of the peasant in the city who, passing a lane of perfume shops, fainted at the unfamiliar scent and was revived by holding a shovel of excrement under his nose.”¹⁸ This is no doubt a joke, told by the early moderns to congratulate themselves, but many Parisian streets still testify to the large amounts of excrement once found there—rue Merdeux, rue Merdelet, rue Merdusson, Merdons, Merdiere—and the city reeked with the waste of tanneries and butchers. When he was twenty, Philippe Auguste had gone to

the window of his palace and was so appalled by the stench, the roads being little better than open sewers, that he ordered for the first streets to be paved.

Having human fecal matter dropped on your head was an ever-present danger, and it was obligatory for city-dwellers to shout “look out below” three times before dumping the contents of their waste. At ground level there was barely any sunlight, each story of the surrounding buildings jutting out over the one below so that on the fifth-floor people might even shake hands with those on the other side of the street; this method, called jettying, was used to maximize space.

Violence was an ever-present concern for Parisians, and at night the town was sinister and frightening, “despite being patrolled by watchmen who, once clocks arrived, would call, ‘One o’clock and all’s well!’—and heavy chains were stretched across street entrances to foil the flight of thieves.”¹⁹ The area by Notre Dame was assigned as the red-light district, “the warren of mean hovels becoming a bastion of vice, bawds, whores and ponces.”²⁰ Parisian street names such as L’Ecorcherie, or knacker’s yard, and Pute-y-Muce, “whore in hiding,” described their purpose before the development of modern niceties.

Entertainment came from the *jongleurs* who played a *viele*, a sort of triangle-shaped proto-violin; jongleurs would have travelled all around the known world at a time when most hardly left their village, telling fantastic tales of the east. Under Philippe’s grandfather, there had been a cultural flourishing, expressed most strongly in the poem *Roman de la Rose*, an allegorical story told in the form of a dreamy vision. It was the most widely read work of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, and condemned by many for its carnal overtones, the rose symbolising female sexuality.

The poem concerned the “wheel of fortune,” an idea that fascinated the medieval mind, at a time when people were helpless in the face of catastrophes, whether from acts of God or princes: “The image of Fortune’s wheel took root in the collective consciousness, turning faster and faster as it raised some and secured the downfall of others. The key themes were destabilization and emulation, and ‘winning’ (*gagner*) became a watchword for the period.”²¹ The wheel of fortune became a theme obsessing the European mind as the twelfth century gave way to the thirteenth, talked of in men’s battles over trade, land—and war.



As the old knights were taken to the stake, there were shouts of “heretic” and “blasphemer,” and out of the crowd someone threw a stone at them. The wind from the river had aggravated the mob’s anger at the condemned men, but once the fire was lit there was only silence. Then, as the flames lapped up, Jacques de Molay issued a summons to King and Pope ordering them to join him within a year, and put a curse on the king’s house.²² Over the screams and burning embers, he shouted: “Pope Clement, iniquitous judge and cruel executioner, I adjure you to appear in forty days’ time before God’s tribunal. And you, King of France, will not live to see the end of this year, and Heaven’s retribution will strike down your accomplices and destroy your posterity.”²³

The following month the pope died suddenly, aged just fifty; his body was taken to a church to lie in state when lightning struck the building, almost burning it down. In November, Philippe was hunting just outside Paris when he suffered a stroke; he was taken to bed to rest, but succumbed a few days later. Chancellor Guillaume de Nogaret, Philippe’s main minister, had expired the previous year of mysterious causes, his tongue thrust out, according to one story.

Philippe the Fair’s fateful decision to destroy the Templars and burn their leading men became linked in the popular mind with a period of disaster for the royal family and for France. This was the story behind the popular French historical series, *Les Rois Maudits* (The Accursed Kings) written in the 1950s by Maurice Druon, which Martin credits as a big influence.²⁴ The books feature Philippe’s daughter Isabella, a beautiful, blonde princess commonly known in English history as the She-Wolf of France, a strong-willed and cunning queen who is forced to compete against cruel kings: in this case, her brother Louis and husband Edward, a weak man who is only in his position on account of his birth and sex. Isabella, who takes a lover and loathes her husband, is nevertheless loyal to her own blood relations and will do everything for her young son who must take the throne.

The Templar’s curse would also plunge France and England into a bitter, horrific conflict, which, in the Victorian age, became known as the Hundred Years’ War, costing three million lives. The century that followed was one of unmitigated tragedy, marked not just by war but by the Black Death, the schism in the Catholic Church, and the first international banking crisis. This Crisis of the Late Middle Ages would culminate, for the English, with defeat and destruction in France at the hands of

explosive, terrifying new technology called gunpowder and the country's descent into a dynastic conflict later called the War of the Roses.

But more immediately something more sinister threatened. In the spring following the Iron King's death, temperatures plunged across the known world; in April the rains came down and would not stop, a downpour that lasted until August without pause. The crops failed, and France—and Europe—faced a long winter that would last centuries.

3

THE LION OF ENGLAND

A lion does not concern himself with the opinions of sheep.

—TYWIN LANNISTER

The Iron King had another enemy more dangerous than the Knights Templar—his cousin Edward, King of England, Duke of Gascony, Hammer of the Scots, and one of the most brutally effective medieval monarchs. *Game of Thrones* is not history, and as historian Dan Jones put it: “It is alt-history, not a reconstruction of a known past. It is historically literate without ever claiming to be history.”¹ And yet there are some clear and obvious historical parallels, and one that George R.R. Martin has spoken of is between Tywin Lannister and King Edward I.

Like Tywin Lannister, Edward “Longshanks” was the ultimate medieval warlord, unafraid to inflict any misery when pursuing a war, and using relatives in power games that would further his goal. And yet his cruelty always had a purpose, and though he used torture and murder to further his aims, drove bankers to extinction, and caused misery for the small folk of Wales and Scotland, his violence was never mindless; indeed, he reprimanded those around him who committed atrocities for their own sake.

In the television series, Tywin is played by English actor Charles Dance, who specialises in portraying cold-hearted aristocratic types lacking in sympathy for the lower classes. King Edward was certainly in that bracket, and is probably best known in the popular imagination as the villain of the Mel Gibson historical epic *Braveheart*. In reality, both Edward and his Scottish enemy, Robert the Bruce, were French speakers, and the film is not exactly pedantic in its accuracy—but the king was every bit as brutal as it makes out.

Both Tywin and Edward were very tall; Edward was 6'3", a giant for a time when the average man was no more than 5'7", which is how he got the nickname

Longshanks. He was one of the finest swordsmen of the age, and the earliest Robin Hood stories have him in single combat with the outlaw, such was his renown. Historian Michael Prestwich argued that his “long arms gave him an advantage as a swordsman, long thighs one as a horseman. In youth, his curly hair was blond; in maturity it darkened, and in old age it turned white. His speech, despite a lisp, was said to be persuasive.”²

The king was described as having “a sinking, or dip, between the chin and underlip” which “was very conspicuous. Both the lips were prominent; the nose short, as if shrunk . . . there was an unusual fall, or cavity, on that part of the bridge of the nose which separates the orbits of the eyes.”³ He inherited the drooping eyelid of his weak father, King Henry III, although not his temperament.

Quite the opposite, for Edward was famous for his ruthlessness. As a young man, he ordered his attendants to put out the eyes and cut the ears of an adolescent who angered him.⁴ Archbishop Corbridge of York had an interview with the king and was so shaken that afterwards he took to his bed and died. In another famous story attached to Edward, a cleric dropped dead with fear upon approaching the king with a request for lower taxation.

Unlike his gentle father, Edward had the characteristic violent rage of the House of Plantagenet. The dynasty originated with Geoffrey of Anjou in the mid-twelfth century, whose descendants later earned their name after the *planta genista* broach he wore.⁵ Geoffrey came from a line of warlords in western France so brutal they were considered by some to be descended from Satan himself. His father Fulk IV Rechin, count of Anjou, was excommunicated for abusing his authority by keeping his brother in a dungeon until he went mad. Geoffrey’s great-grandfather, Fulk III the Black, son of Geoffrey Greycloak, was a violent pervert of “fiendish cruelty” who had his first wife burned at the stake in her wedding dress and later tortured his own son. Legend had it that that Fulk’s grandmother had been Melusine, a dragon disguised as a woman who was one day exposed during Mass, only to fly off shrieking with two of her children.

Melusine was a popular figure of early medieval folklore in western and northern France, often appearing as a fish or snake, seductive and supernatural, but a bringer of evil (like her near-namesake Melisandre, the red woman of Westeros). Melusine often appears in “spinning yarns,” stories told by ladies as they spun cloth, and was most likely once a pagan-era water fairy: magical creatures believed to be capable of

bringing all sorts of disasters, and who sometimes swapped people's children with changelings. (In the tales of King Arthur, the "Lady of the Lake" is supposed to be a water fairy.)

In reality, the Plantagenet line originated with the earliest counts of Anjou, a region to the south of Normandy that was the birthplace of medieval cavalry; with lush, fertile lands growing wheat and wine in abundance, it was the most heavily contested territory in western Europe, and only the most belligerent of warlords emerged to become its rulers. The House of Anjou was one such, as were their bitter enemies the Dukes of Normandy—a rivalry that came to an end with a marriage alliance between Geoffrey of Anjou and Matilda, daughter of Duke Henry. Henry was also King Henry I of England, so the House of Anjou came to rule that land in 1154—but over the next century and a half the line would collapse dramatically with Edward's descendants slaughtering each other.

Lannister and Plantagenet share the same sigil, or as they were called in real life, coat of arms. The Lannister sigil is of one lion rampant, the same as that of the kings of Scotland; in England the symbol of the three lions came about from the union of two duchies, combining Normandy's flag of two lions with the one lion of Aquitaine, the region to the south of Anjou for many years joined to the English crown. By adding two lions to one, Edward's great-uncle Richard the Lionheart had created the famous symbol now most recognizable as that of the England national soccer team and its occasionally marauding supporters.⁶

Lions were well regarded in Europe, and medieval people had strange ideas about the animals, which they believed were heroic and honorable and would not devour injured men.⁷ A theory best not tested. The thirteenth century *Bestiary* in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, a sort of medieval guide to the natural world, states that "the merciful nature of lions is confirmed by numerous examples. They will spare men lying on the ground and will lead captives with whom they meet to their home. They will attack men rather than women. They only kill children if they are exceptionally hungry."⁸

This is obviously untrue and anthropomorphizes the animals to give them the qualities most idealized in chivalry—strength, Christian mercy, and deference toward women. But then men would want their family emblems to reflect the traits they hoped to be known for, and so lions appeared on one in six coats of arms, five times as often as the second most popular animal, the eagle. The lion displaced more

traditional Germanic imagery, of wolves, bears, and boars, these being the animals most commonly found in the forests of northern Europe. Lions were also popular because of their symbolism in Christianity, especially with the gospel-writer St Mark, a link which continued in the Arthurian legend when Yvain rescues a lion, and most recently in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, in which Aslan represents Christ.

Lions in heraldry were sometimes also referred to as leopards, which at the time were believed to be a cross between a lion and the mythical pard. Edward was regularly compared to both. The *Song of Caerlaverock*, written in praise of Edward's military adventures in Scotland by one of his soldiers, told that "the king confronting his enemies was like the three lions embroidered in gold on the red of his banner—dreadful, fierce and cruel."⁹ More commonly he was known as the Leopard because the animals were believed capable of changing their spots, just as Edward would switch sides or do anything to win.

Like Tywin, he was shaped by having witnessed a weak father troubled by unruly vassals. Tytos Lannister faced a rebellion from two houses, Reyne and Tarbeck, and so his elder son Tywin raised an army to defeat Lord Robert Reyne. As Tywin's brother Kevan stated: "Our own father was gentle and amiable, but so weak his bannermen mocked him in their cups. Some saw fit to defy him openly . . . At court they japed of toothless lions."¹⁰ In real life Edward would do the same to take on those who humiliated his father, with brutal effectiveness.

Henry III had become monarch at the age of nine during a civil war between his father King John and the country's leading magnates, in particular a group of Northerners who objected to the king's cruelty and rapaciousness. Unlike John, who openly mocked religion and would sit in church fidgeting, Henry was an extremely holy man who went to Mass several times a *day*, a gentle soul described as "simple" by a chronicler. He was "pious, amiable, easy-going, and sympathetic,"¹¹ and he cried during religious sermons. He also rebuilt Westminster Abbey, the equivalent of the Great Sept of Baelor, and idolized its founder Edward the Confessor, even naming his first son after him.

But Henry could not inspire fear or respect among his people. One day he and his half-brother Geoffrey de Lusignan and some other noblemen were walking through an orchard when they were pelted with "turf, stones, and green apples" by one of Geoffrey's chaplains, a man "who served as a fool and buffoon to the king . . . and whose sayings, like those of a silly jester . . . excited their laughter."

The chaplain pressed “the juice of unripe grapes in their eyes, like one devoid of sense.”¹²

Desperately short of money, Henry III began to meet the most powerful subjects in the realm for informal talks, where they would discuss their grievances and in return grant him money. The meetings were given the name of Parliament in 1236, but between 1248 and 1249, four such parliaments refused Henry any money, complaining about corruption, and the influence of foreigners. Then, in 1258, the country was hit by famine and disease, and while Henry went on a tour of East Anglian shrines, order seemed to be breaking down. A group of rebellious barons were led by the king’s brother-in-law, Simon de Montfort, a French nobleman who had arrived in England at the age of twenty-two to claim his peerage after a youth spent fighting a particularly bloodthirsty crusade, this one against heretics in the south of France.

The de Montforts originally hailed from the House of Reginar, a Frankish dynasty of the tenth century who had been dominant in Lothringia, today’s Lorraine. And despite his own origins, de Montfort was able to exploit the xenophobia directed at the family of Henry’s queen, Eleanor of Provence, who were widely hated. Young de Montfort displayed a terrifying ability to lead and a ruthlessness in battle, as well as religious fanaticism extreme even for the age; he drove the Jews from Leicester with as little pity as his father had slaughtered the Cathar heretics, and Henry III was known to fear him greatly. Simon had even married the king’s sister Eleanor despite the monarch’s objections.

De Montfort had demanded that the realm should be governed only by “native-born men,” and under his radical proposals, Parliament would meet annually, and would not need to be summoned by the king. These terms were unacceptable to the monarch, and, in 1260, the conflict descended into full-on civil war, with de Montfort close to controlling the country—but for Edward.

Henry’s elder son had once been close to his uncle, but as de Montfort had become more power-crazed, he had switched sides. At one point, rebels held both the king and his son prisoner, but the prince escaped after asking his jailors if he could try out the horses in the yard, before riding off on one. As he sped off Edward shouted: “Lordlings, I bid you good day. Greet my father well and tell him that I hope to see him soon.”¹³

He then negotiated the king’s release, and Henry went away for recuperation in Gloucester castle, while Edward arranged negotiations with rebel leader William de

Clare at his camp, with an offer of a compromise. The next day de Clare woke up with severe stomach pains and died, while his brother lost all his hair, fingernails, and toenails. In 1264, the two sides came to blows at the Battle of Lewes, where the royalists flew the dragon banner “that signalled the intention of fighting to the death, taking no prisoners.”¹⁴ At the battle were London infantry volunteers described by chroniclers as “bran-dealers, soap-boilers and clowns,” and utterly destroyed by Edward’s cavalry.¹⁵ However, the battle proved inconclusive, so the following year the two sides met again at the Battle of Evesham, at which Edward displayed a shocking ruthlessness.

Although the rebel leader did not know it, Edward had engaged de Montfort’s son in battle and defeated him. De Montfort’s barber, an expert at recognizing heraldry, saw Simon’s banners in the distance at the front of a large army and informed him that his son was arriving with his men. As it got closer, though, and too late, it became clear that the Leopard was using trickery, and as Edward’s forces came closer, the barber panicked and shouted: “We are all dead, for it is not your son as you believed.” De Montfort replied calmly, even gleefully: “By the arm of St James, they are advancing well. They have not learned that for themselves but were taught it by me.”¹⁶ (Again, this was similar to a trick used by Tywin Lannister in Robert’s rebellion, as related in *A Game of Thrones*, when the gates of King’s Landing were opened to Tywin in the belief he had come to help. “So the mad king had ordered his last mad act,” Ned told Robert.)

Henry, helpless in combat during the battle, was almost killed by his own side who did not recognize him, until his son came to his rescue; but de Montfort was seized from behind by a royalist knight and stabbed to death. His two eldest sons were also killed, and afterwards thirty of his knights were executed on the spot. Edward had his uncle’s testicles cut off and hung around his nose, his body cut up into four pieces and sent around the country, and his head delivered to a noblewoman who had helped him escape from de Montfort’s imprisonment, as a token of appreciation. In coldly killing his defeated opponents, Edward had broken the rules of medieval warfare, where aristocrats were ransomed, executions were rare, and it was condemned as murder by one contemporary. Edward had begun a precedent, and by the end of this period, the rules of war had disappeared completely, and rival barons were only intent on exterminating their enemies.

And yet just as *The Rains of Castamere* immortalised Tywin’s eradication of House Reyne, so *The Song of Lewes* praised the royal heir and compared him to a lion,

“because we saw that he was not slow to attack the strongest places, fearing the onslaught of none, with the boldest valour making a raid amidst the castles.” It also gave warning to any other uppity house that “if Fortune’s moving wheel would stand still for ever; wherein let the highest forthwith know that he will fall, and that he who reigns as lord will reign but a little time.”¹⁷

Unrest continued in much of the countryside for the next couple of years, and it was during this period, when defeated aristocrats known as the “Disinherited” were blamed for numerous atrocities, that the Robin Hood legend was first set. Yet soon the realm was pacified, and the monarch and his son in any case gave the rebels much of what they wanted; in 1275, the new king Edward signed the Statute of Westminster formalizing Parliament, and for the first time, commoners—knights and burgesses (city men)—were allowed into the Privy Council, the king’s inner circle of advisers.

Like Tywin, Edward was a dedicated husband who did not even have mistresses; Tywin is devoted to his wife, his cousin Joanna Lannister, and their wedding day is supposed to be one of few in which he smiled openly. After she died giving birth to their son, Tyrion, he never smiled again. Likewise, Edward and his beloved Queen Eleanor were cousins, both great-grandchildren of her namesake Eleanor of Aquitaine. The couple were betrothed when he was fifteen and she just nine, a marriage brokered to make an alliance with Castile, to the south of France, but it was an enduring romantic attachment unusual for the age. When she died, in 1291, he was so devastated that he had twelve “Eleanor crosses” built by the route her coffin had taken from Lincoln down to the village of Charing, three of which still survive. (Although today’s Charing Cross, by Trafalgar Square in London, is a replica.)

And like Tywin, Edward would have a violently difficult relationship with his son, who was an outcast in medieval life.

The royal couple’s marriage was marked by tragedy. In *Game of Thrones*, Cersei reflects on losing her child, who unlike her later offspring is actually Robert’s, and such misery was the norm. In medieval Europe infant mortality was widespread—indeed it was very unusual for a couple to not lose a child or two. Edward and Eleanor had sixteen, of whom only six survived childhood and just four outlived the king; of these, seven died in their first year. Even for the wealthiest of aristocrats, life was unbearably tragic.

Until the early eighteenth century, when infant mortality rates began to fall in western Europe, childhood was bleak and often short; indeed, child death rates in

seventeenth century Europe were no better than in hunter-gatherer societies.¹⁸ In this period, between 30 and 50 percent of people died before the age of five, the bulk of those being in the first year of life.¹⁹ Today the rate in the industrialised world is 0.1 per one thousand.

And even queens were not immune to such horror. Edward's mother Eleanor of Provence had nine children, of whom just five survived, and Margaret Tudor, wife of Scotland's James IV, had just one child make it out of six, and her daughter-in-law Mary of Guise saw only one in five live to adulthood. The most luckless monarch was Queen Anne, who died in 1714, after enduring seventeen pregnancies, but giving birth to only five live children—of whom none survived childhood.

When the couple were young, Eleanor made a present to her husband of a French translation of *De Re Militari*, the Roman writer Vegetius's treatise on war. The most popular and well-read martial manual of the time, this *Concerning Military Matters* was required reading for anyone who wished to be a warrior and, in 1270, Edward duly went off on crusade, taking his wife and two young children with him. While there he almost died in Haifa, in modern-day Israel, after being seriously wounded by an Assassin, a member of a secretive death-cult; the dagger was poisoned, and his life was only saved when his wife sucked out the poison.²⁰ Edward was in Sicily in 1272, on his return, when he learned that his father had died, but it took the new king almost two years to get home, stopping off in France along the way to take part in a tournament that almost killed him.

Edward was a terrifying figure whose men feared and respected him, even if they did not love him. Unafraid to get his hands dirty, he would sleep out in the cold with his troops on campaign; in one later offensive, while besieging Conwy in Wales, he shared his one barrel of wine with his soldiers: Edward was in his fifties or sixties by then, an old man for the times.

His long reign would be dominated by wars across Britain, first in Wales and then in Scotland, although the simmering hostilities with France also intensified. Conflict had begun in the west after the Prince of Wales, Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, refused to turn up to Edward's coronation because the King of England had given shelter to his arch-enemy, Dafydd, who also happened to be his brother. Wales was for most Englishmen still a wild and strange place; Anglo-Normans had been encroaching on the south of the country for two hundred years, but in deepest Wales where Llywelyn's rule held sway, the old laws called *Hywel Dda* still applied, with disputes settled by

blood feuds. The country was extremely poor, even compared to England let alone France or Italy, and its mountainous terrain made it difficult to unite, and yet Llywelyn had come to extend his lordship over most of the land.

Edward raised an army and marched west, crushing opposition and building a series of castles, most of which still stand, among them Caernarfon, Flint, Rhuddlan, Conwy, Criccieth, and Aberystwyth. These fortresses could be defended by as few as twenty soldiers and, with stairs that led directly to the sea, could withstand a siege for several years. Slowly, but steadily, they ensured English domination of the country, which had already been heavily colonized under the reigns of Edward's predecessors.

Llywelyn had married Edward's cousin Eleanor without his permission and so in response Edward kidnapped her, then allowed her to wed the Welshman when it became expedient; but after she died in childbirth he had her daughter Gwenllïan jailed, in case she might be used by his enemies. She remained a prisoner her entire life, dying at the age of fifty-four—but with the royal blood of Wales and England in her veins she was a threat to Edward. Also imprisoned with her in far-off Lincolnshire, on the North Sea coast, were the daughters of Llywelyn's brother Dafydd. His two young sons were not so lucky: they were sent to Bristol castle where one, another Dafydd, died after four years and the other, Owain, was placed in a cage of wood bound with iron. He was never released.

By the end of 1282, all Welsh resistance was over; Llywelyn himself died in December that year, at the hands of an English soldier in Powys but Dafydd had a more gruesome fate.

For many centuries the first thing that would have greeted visitors to London was the sight of decapitated heads, either at the Tower or at the southern entrance of the bridge, a reminder of the king's dreadful power. It was Edward who had built a moat around the Tower and also erected its most notorious spot, Traitor's Gate, where heads were placed on spikes.

Among those now on display was Dafydd, captured in 1282 and convicted of treason, murder, sacrilege, and plotting against the king. As punishment, the Welshman underwent four corresponding punishments for his four crimes, respectively dragged by horses, hanged, disembowelled, and quartered. Before he was dead, his intestines were slashed from his body and burned in front of him, and his corpse was then sent to various English cities, leaving only his head to rot at the Tower of London, along with his brother's.

In 1284, Edward formally absorbed Wales into the Realm, ending its independence forever. To celebrate, the king held an Arthurian-style Round Table celebration, presenting himself as heir to the mythical British king and the rightful ruler of all Britain. It is recorded that the party was so popular, with attendees coming from all over the country and keen not to snub the Leopard, that the floor gave way, killing many.

Dafydd's grim fate was a sort of joke, a mockery of ancient Welsh tradition. For almost a millennium, since the Angles and Saxons had crossed the North Sea and driven the native Britons into the mountainous west, there had been prophecies about a Welsh king once again looking over London. Finally, to Edward's grim amusement, it had proven true.