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THEY NEVER REIGNED

Heirs to the British Throne Who
Never Became the Monarch

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Chapter 1

Off Crusading: Robert of Normandy

The Duchy of Normandy—a region in the far north of France and thus closest to England—was founded in the tenth century by Rollo, a Viking adventurer from what is today Norway, who became the first Duke of Normandy. It was named for the Normans (North men), Viking invaders from Scandinavia who later intermarried and mixed with the native population. One of Rollo’s descendants, William, later called the Conqueror after becoming King of England, was born around 1028, the illegitimate son, but also the only son, of the Duke of Normandy. Despite his illegitimacy, a significant stigma in those days, he became the Duke of Normandy himself in 1035. He married Matilda of Flanders, who bore him four sons. Robert, called Curthose, was the oldest. Next was Richard who, however, died young in a hunting accident. William, called Rufus (probably because of his ruddy complexion), was the third son, followed by Henry. William Rufus and Henry became kings of England after their father’s death. Robert, despite being the oldest son, became the Duke of Normandy, but never King of England. He is, thus, the first of the heirs who never reigned.

Robert was born in Normandy. His birth might have occurred in 1051. It might have occurred in 1054. Or it might have occurred sometime in between. We do not know for sure. The lack of certainty in the records—typical of those times, even among the nobility—might reflect the lack of interest in the birth of children in an age of high infant mortality. Robert got his nickname, Curthose, from his father because of his short legs and, accordingly, short leggings. In his youth, he often acted as the king’s regent in Normandy alongside his mother. Robert did well in military exercises and was considered courageous. William of Malmesbury, a twelfth-century chronicler, said he was “already a young man of established prowess...his courage was proven, although he was small in stature

and pot-bellied.”¹ According to Orderic Vitalis, another twelfth-century chronicler, “He was talkative and extravagant, reckless, very courageous in battle, a powerful and sure archer with a clear, cheerful voice and a fluent tongue.”² But he was also considered lazy and weak. Regarding him later in life, Orderic said that Robert “exercised no discipline over either himself or his men. He was prodigal in distributing his bounty and lavish in his promises, but so thoughtless and inconstant that they were utterly unreliable.”³ As time would show, he could also be rebellious.

As a child, Robert often quarrelled with his younger brothers, something that, as will be seen, continued with a vengeance later in life. He was betrothed as a child to an heiress named Margaret of Maine, but she died long before the marriage could actually take place. As it turned out, Robert was not to marry until late in life. His future prospects took a considerable turn for the better in 1066. Before his father left to conquer England that year, he declared Robert, his heir, as Duke of Normandy. Then his father won the Battle of Hastings and became King William I of England. Robert, then a young teenager or close to it, could expect to inherit big things, probably including a kingdom. Unfortunately for him, he had a younger brother, William Rufus, and would soon have another brother, Henry. William and Henry would also be ambitious and would prove to be more capable or, at least, more devious than Robert.

In 1073, King William campaigned in Normandy and conquered the province of Maine. Robert fought alongside his father and did well, so well in fact that he pointedly suggested that the king return to England and let the son rule over Normandy. This might have been the first time Robert’s rebellious nature surfaced. It would not be the only time Robert would chafe under his

¹ R.A.B. Mynors, ed. and transl., *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Regum Anglorum, A History of the English Kings, vol. I*, Oxford University Press (1998), p. 701 (hereafter, *William of Malmesbury, vol. I*). William, who lived around 1095 to 1143, was a monk at Malmesbury, an Abbey in Wiltshire. He is a highly regarded source.

² Marjorie Chibnall, ed. and transl., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis, vol. II*, Oxford University Press (1969), p. 357. Orderic, who lived from 1075 to around 1142, was a Benedictine monk who lived in a monastery in Normandy. He is generally considered reliable.

³ Marjorie Chibnall, ed. and transl., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis, vol. IV*, Oxford University Press (1973), p. 115 (hereafter *Orderic Vitalis, vol. IV*).

father's rule. William refused to give his son autonomy in Normandy or any other significant independent rule.

Robert's quarrels with his brothers reached a crisis in 1077. It appears that, as a prank, William Rufus and Henry poured the contents of a well-used chamber pot over his head. A chamber pot was the medieval equivalent of a toilet, so the prank was quite unpleasant for Robert, to say the least. Robert was furious and, egged on by his friends, he assaulted his brothers. They fought fiercely until their father intervened and stopped the fight. Robert became angry with his father for what he viewed as the father's lenient treatment of his brothers. He thought the king was taking his brother's side when he considered himself the aggrieved party. He thus began his first rebellion, one that, as with most of his endeavours in life (with one notable exception), ended badly for him.

Some of Robert's friends, as well as discontented Norman lords, supported Robert. The lords believed that encouraging conflict between him and his father would further their own ends. Robert and his young supporters tried to capture the castle in Rouen. The attempt failed and William ordered their arrest. They fled. Robert eventually went into exile in Flanders, where he lived with his uncle, the Count of Flanders, also named Robert. There he continued his rebellion. Orderic wrote that he "foolishly rebelled against his father in his youth and, as an exile leading a great band of robbers, disturbed Normandy with raids and many outrages."⁴

Money concerns also seemed to contribute to Robert's disaffection. In his view, the king never supplied him with enough. Robert played one parent off against the other. Queen Matilda, Robert's mother, "feeling a mother's affection for her son, often used to send him large sums of silver and gold and other valuables without the King's knowledge."⁵ When William learned of this, he became furious with both her and Robert. Their quarrels soon escalated. Robert rebelled again, this time seeking to rule Normandy while his father was still alive. In the winter of 1078-9, William besieged the fortress at Gerberoy, in the North of what is now France, where Robert had assembled his forces. The two sides fought a significant battle in front the fortress in January 1079. During the battle,

⁴ Marjorie Chibnall, ed. and transl., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, vol. V, Oxford University Press (1975), p. 283 (hereafter, *Orderic Vitalis*, vol. V).

⁵ Marjorie Chibnall, ed. and transl., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, vol. III, Oxford University Press (1972), p. 103 (hereafter, *Orderic Vitalis*, vol. III).

Robert “clashed with the father, wounded him and cut down his horse.”⁶ When he recognised his father’s voice, he stopped the attack. William, humiliated, cursed his son and possibly never forgave him.

In early 1080, the king’s army and that of Robert and his supporters were posed to fight another battle in Normandy. But then father and son were reconciled—for a while. Members of the church convinced the warring parties to make peace and a battle was averted. Over Easter of that year, Queen Matilda, frustrated with the interminable quarrels and finding it difficult to remain loyal to both her husband and her firstborn son, arranged a more lasting informal truce between the two. The truce lasted until the queen died in 1083.

In the summer of 1080, during this period of reconciliation, Robert, who mostly resided in Normandy, came to England, possibly for the only time while his father was alive. William entrusted him with an army to invade Scotland, whose King, Malcolm III, was causing trouble in the northern regions of England. The parties made peace without much effort on Robert’s part and Robert visited the Scottish royal court. There he met the Scottish Queen, Margaret, later canonised as St Margaret. This Margaret had a daughter who later married Robert’s brother Henry and was destined to become a queen consort of England. (Chapter 2.) Robert remained in England for several months.

After the death of Robert’s mother, Queen Matilda, relations between Robert and the king deteriorated again. Orderic reported that “the peace between the king and his son which had taken so long to achieve was soon clouded. The stubborn young man contemptuously refused to follow or obey his father; the quick-tempered king continually poured abuse and reproach on him in public for his failings.”⁷ It was probably not chance that these events occurred soon after the queen was no longer alive to mediate between them. Robert left his father’s court and once again went into exile. What he did during the next four years is poorly documented, but he probably travelled through the Low Countries, France, Germany and Italy. In Italy, he unsuccessfully sought to marry a rich heiress, Matilda of Tuscany. During these years of wandering, he reportedly fathered several illegitimate children.

Robert’s period of wandering ended in 1087. In September of that year, in the city of Rouen, William the Conqueror died of injuries suffered when he fell off his horse during a battle two months earlier. Even though Robert was

⁶ *William of Malmesbury, vol. I, p. 477.*

⁷ *Orderic Vitalis, vol. III, p. 113.*

William's oldest son, he did not succeed to William's English throne. Instead, as he was dying, William summoned his younger sons, William Rufus and Henry. Robert was not present; he was probably at the French court. The king was tempted to disinherit Robert, his rebellious son, entirely. But, as he told his younger sons, Robert had been named and recognised as his heir to the Duchy of Normandy back in 1066, before the Battle of Hastings, something that could not, or at least should not, be undone. So, William divided his possessions between Robert and William. Robert received Normandy and became the Duke of Normandy, which he remained until 1106. One reason Robert did not inherit the English throne was that he was barely known in that country. He had lived most of his life in Normandy. William Rufus, the non-rebellious son, became King William II. The youngest son, Henry, received money to buy his own lands. Later, when Robert found it difficult to live within his means, Henry used the money to purchase the County of Cotentin in the west of Normandy from Robert.

After their father's death, William Rufus, who never married, and Robert, also not yet married, agreed to be each other's heir. However, this agreement did not last long. William the Conqueror's decision to divide his lands between his two sons caused grave difficulties. The barons with lands both in Normandy and England, and they were many, owed feudal allegiance to both William Rufus and Robert. They found the situation difficult, if not intolerable, given the hostility between the two brothers. They feared that if they served Robert well in Normandy, they would lose favour with William, their English overlord; and if they served William well in England, they would lose favour with Robert, their Norman overlord. Many wanted the realm reunited. Many also welcomed Robert's becoming their overlord. He was considered weak and pliable and the lords believed they would have considerable autonomy under his rule. Thus, Robert had supporters, at least in Normandy, who wished him to become king in William's place.

In 1088, several Norman lords, led by the powerful Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, a half-brother of William the Conqueror, rebelled against William Rufus with the intent of replacing William with Robert. They invaded England and established several rebel strongholds. But, to their surprise, William's English lords remained loyal to him and William was able to crush the rebellion. Part of the reason the rebellion failed was that Robert never appeared personally in England with his own troops. He claimed bad weather prevented him from crossing over to England, but Orderic stated that he "was delayed through his

inertia and love of ease.”⁸ William treated the rebel lords leniently in the hope and expectation that, because he had been lenient, they would remain loyal to him in the future.

The struggles between William II and Robert continued. In 1091, William invaded Normandy and forced Robert to agree to a treaty that divided the duchy between them. The two then joined forces against their youngest brother, Henry, to deprive him of his lands in Normandy. Henry retreated to a castle where, after a 15-day siege and with water running low, he was forced to capitulate and abandon any claims to Normandy. After that, Robert went to England with William for a few months, returning to Normandy in December 1091. Over the next few years, Robert struggled, with limited success, to maintain control over the Norman barons and administer the duchy. In 1094, Robert renounced the previous treaty with William. William returned to Normandy with troops in February 1094 and the conflict continued without a decisive outcome. During this time, William formed an alliance for a while with Henry against Robert. By 1096 a stalemate had arrived and the struggle promised to continue, seemingly interminably. Then came an interruption, one that Robert probably welcomed. History called.

At the Council of Clermont in 1095, Pope Urban II called for a military expedition to aid the Christian Byzantine Empire against Islamic incursions. For most of its history, the Byzantine Empire had controlled Anatolia (roughly the Asiatic part of modern-day Turkey). But at the disastrous Battle of Manzikert, fought in eastern Anatolia in 1071, the Seljuk Turks, followers of Islam, decisively defeated the Byzantines. As a result, the Turks occupied most of Anatolia, threatening the nearby Byzantine capital of Constantinople, as well as the land route for pilgrims going to Jerusalem. In this crisis, the Byzantine Emperor Alexios Komnenos (Latinised as Alexius Comnenus) requested assistance from the West. The Pope was persuaded and called for the expedition that was later called the First Crusade. The Crusade’s immediate goal was to help the Byzantine Empire recover Anatolia. It is unclear whether, in the beginning, the goal was even more ambitious: recapturing the Holy Land, including Jerusalem, from the “infidel.” Yet that is what the Crusade ultimately accomplished.

The Crusade was to become a humanitarian catastrophe, as, among other atrocities, the Crusaders massacred most of the population, civilian and military,

⁸ *Orderic Vitalis, vol. IV, p. 127.*

of Jerusalem, slaughtering Christians, Jews and Moslems indiscriminately. But, from the perspective of those who called for the Crusade and the Crusaders themselves, it became a spectacular success. Against all odds, the Crusaders did, indeed, capture the Holy Land, including Jerusalem. For a while, the Holy Land was under Christian, primarily Frankish, control. Future Crusades, and there were several, merely sought to defend and consolidate what the First Crusaders had won. Some of the later Crusades were utter failures, some were partial successes, some were diverted to other ends, none was a total success. Unlike later Crusades, no king or emperor participated in the first. But many high nobles did. Robert of Normandy was among those who heeded the call. In contrast to most of his endeavours in life, which generally ended in failure, he was to play a substantial part in the crusade's success.

As with most major life decisions, there were undoubtedly many reasons Robert took up the Cross and risked all in an uncertain military expedition to places far away. The perpetual wars with his brothers and restless barons must have worn on him. He simply could not rule peacefully over his duchy. He had an adventurous spirit, courage and military experience. He seemed to have had a love for travel, as his wandering years attested. Unlike many of his fellow Crusaders, Robert was unmarried, so he had no wife or family to worry about. Indeed, separation from the life he was then living and from his family might have been welcome. Maybe, he sought glory and renown as a warrior for Christ, which, he could hope, would help him regain control of his realm on his return. That is, *if* he returned, something that, given the vagaries of the enterprise, the distances involved and the unknown nature of the enemy, was far from certain.

Religious fervour certainly played a role in Robert's decision to go crusading. Most people, in those days, were religious, or purported to be, and emissaries of the Church whipped up support for the Crusade among nobles and commoners alike. Orderic states that Robert "resolved on the advice of certain men of religion to hand over the administration of his duchy to his brother and, himself taking the cross, to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to make amends to God for his sins"⁹ But before he left, he needed to ensure, to the extent possible, that he would have a duchy to return to. He also needed money to finance the expedition.

To protect those who left their homes and domains to go crusading, the Pope ordered the local barons to cease, for the duration of the Crusade, the petty local

⁹ *Orderic Vitalis, vol. V, p. 27.*

wars endemic in the region. This order promised to bring a period of peace to Normandy. Members of the Church helped negotiate a truce between Robert and William. William gained control of Normandy in Robert's absence in exchange for a payment of 10,000 silver marks that Robert sorely needed to pay for the enterprise. The truce was no guaranty that William would actually cede Normandy back to Robert when he returned. Nothing could be a firm guaranty. But Robert accepted the truce (and money) as the best he could do.

Robert did not go on crusade as a mere pilgrim but as one of the leaders. Many of his comrades joined him, including his uncle, Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, who had supported Robert in his earlier attempt to seize the throne from William Rufus. Odo died on the way and thus never made it to the Holy Land. Robert joined forces with two other major French nobles. One was Stephen of Blois, Robert's brother-in-law, the husband of his sister Adela. (This Stephen was the father of another Stephen of Blois, who became England's King Stephen and is a key figure in chapter 3.) The other was Robert's cousin, Robert of Flanders. With the money acquired from William, Robert gathered and equipped a substantial army. It is difficult to determine how large his army was, probably a few thousand strong. Historians believe it was roughly the same size as the army of Godfrey of Bouillon, who was to play an even more glorious role in the Crusade than Robert. Having created a crusading army, Robert set off for far-off Anatolia.

The French armies, including Robert's, left France around September 1096, going first to Rome. Pope Urban received them in Italy. Because of inclement weather, they did not attempt to cross the Adriatic until spring and spent the winter of 1096-7 in Italy. During this time, Robert probably met his future wife, the wealthy heiress Sybilla of Conversano, a town in southeast Italy. He might have begun negotiations to marry her should he return from the Crusade.

In the spring, the armies crossed to Durazzo, a city in modern-day Albania. They then continued on towards the lands of the Byzantine Empire. They were late joining other crusader armies, arriving in Anatolia around May 1097. Up to this point, they had been in friendly territory and, unlike other crusading armies, had seen no hostile action. But Robert would soon be put to the test.

By June 1097, crusading armies had captured the key city of Nicaea, which was only 50 miles from the Byzantine capital of Constantinople. Thereafter, to ease problems of supply, the crusaders divided their forces in two. One force, led by Robert and others, marched towards Dorylaeum, a city to the southeast of

Nicaea. The leader of the Turkish forces, Kilij Arslan, knowing he could not defeat the combined crusading armies, chose to attack and try to annihilate this isolated force. He planned an ambush on 1 July 1097. That morning, Robert and his allies were horrified to observe several thousand Turkish horsemen in their way. No one knows for sure the size of the opposing contingents, but Arslan's forces probably outnumbered the Crusaders substantially. The Battle of Dorylaeum ensued. The First Crusade had arrived at a crossroads. Defeat meant almost certain annihilation. If Arslan's planned ambush had succeeded, the remaining crusading armies would probably have returned home and the crusade would have failed. The later crusades would never have occurred.

But Robert and the others were up to the test. The Turkish forces attacked ferociously and in large numbers. The Crusaders formed a defensive line and held firm. A historian of the First Crusade wrote, "In a moment of extraordinary courage and composure, Bohemond [another crusading leader] and Robert kept their heads and stayed the pulse of panic rushing through their forces." Despite heavy losses, the Crusaders held off the Turks until reinforcements from the second crusader army arrived in the afternoon. "Through five dreadful hours, the Franks waited,...inspired by Bohemond's and Robert's immutable stance. This was an extraordinary feat of martial discipline, the product of inspired Generalship...Bohemond's and Robert's achievements in the battle near Dorylaeum were of the highest order."¹⁰

When the second crusader army arrived, Alp Arslan, unable to defeat the single isolated army, gave up and fled the battlefield. Despite suffering some 4,000 casualties, it was a complete Crusader victory and it opened the door to Jerusalem. Robert had much to do with it.

Robert participated in the subsequent siege of Antioch, south of Anatolia on the route to Jerusalem, and the capture and siege of Jerusalem itself in June and July 1099. His forces besieged the north side of Jerusalem. But his most famous exploit occurred after the July 15 capture of Jerusalem. An army from Egypt led by al-Afdal Shahanshah, the vizier of Egypt's Fatimid Caliphate, with perhaps 20,000 troops, invaded to try to recapture Jerusalem. An army of Crusaders, with around 10,000 troops, led by Godfrey of Bouillon, but including Robert and his forces, left Jerusalem to confront the threat. The opposing forces met on August 12 1099, near the city of Ascalon, southwest of Jerusalem. Badly outnumbered,

¹⁰ Thomas Asbridge, *The First Crusade: A New History*, Oxford University Press (2004), p. 135-6.

the crusaders, consisting now of only the toughest and most battle-hardened of troops, decided to attack. An early morning attack achieved total surprise. The vizier's army was routed. Another historian of the First Crusade wrote, "The hero of the day was Robert of Normandy, 'a fearless warrior,' who spotted the standard of al-Afdal by the golden apple at its tip. The duke charged at the vizier, drove away his men and thus broke the entire enemy's will to resist. Robert later presented the standard before the Holy Sepulchre [in Jerusalem]."¹¹ The Battle of Ascalon is considered the last battle of the First Crusade.

After accomplishing what they had set out to accomplish, most of the crusaders who survived the lengthy military campaign left the Holy Land to return to their former homes. A few—too few, as subsequent events were to prove—remained behind, some to carve out small Frankish principalities for themselves and some to establish and try to defend the new Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem. Godfrey of Bouillon, Robert's comrade in arms, became the first ruler of the new kingdom.

Robert was among those who returned. But he did so at a leisurely pace. Alexius Comnenus, the Byzantine Emperor, provided him with funds as a reward for his service and allowed him free passage through his territory. Robert stopped in Italy during the winter of 1099-100. There he finally married. His bride was Sibylla of Conversano, whom he had probably met and possibly wooed during his earlier stay in Italy. Orderic described her as "truly good in character, endowed with many virtues and lovable to all who knew her." He tells us that Robert fell in love with her.¹² Her dowry was also a welcome addition to his resources. When the couple returned to Normandy, Sibylla became popular, even beloved, among the barons and general population. She and Robert took a pilgrimage together to the commune of Mont Saint-Michel, where they gave thanks for his safe return from crusading. In 1102, she gave birth to their only child, William of Clito. She died a few months later. The marriage, brief as it was, seems to have been a happy one.

During Robert's dalliance in Italy, startling news reached him from England. By the year 1100, after 13 years of misrule, William Rufus had become despised throughout his realm. On August 2 1100, William died of an arrow shot through his heart while hunting. It might have been an accident. It might have been

¹¹ Jay Rubenstein, *Armies of Heaven: The First Crusade and the Quest for Apocalypse*, Basic Books (2011), p. 309.

¹² *Orderic Vitalis, vol. V*, p. 279.

murder. No one cared and no one investigated. Robert was widely expected to be the king's successor. It was not to be.

Because Robert was in Italy, news of his brother's death did not reach him for quite some time. When he heard the news, he belatedly returned to Normandy. One man, however, acted promptly after the king's death. The youngest brother, Henry, was nearby when his brother was killed and might have been part of the same hunting party. No evidence exists that Henry was complicit in William's death, but he acted decisively to win the throne. He argued that because, unlike Robert, he was "born to the purple," that is, born *after* his father had become king (he was born around 1068, after the Battle of Hastings), he was entitled to succeed to the throne. Far more important than any legalistic argument, however, was the fact that Henry was on the scene and Robert was far away. Henry raced to Winchester and seized the royal treasury. Although some of the nobles espoused Robert's claim, Henry was able to persuade enough of the barons to support him. With the money he had seized and the support he had won, Henry was crowned as King Henry I at Westminster Abbey on August 5, just three days after William Rufus's death.

Henry promptly set about consolidating his hold on the throne, rewarding many of his supporters with positions of power to ensure their loyalty. He issued a Charter of Liberties (or Coronation Charter), promising to undo many of his predecessor's unpopular policies and practices and to guarantee the rights of the Church and nobles. This charter, while not particularly famous today, was, in some of its terms, a forerunner of the Magna Carta a century later. Henry also deposed one of William Rufus's key advisors, the unpopular Ranulf Flambard, Bishop of Durham, and imprisoned him in the Tower of London.

When Robert finally returned from crusading, he administered his duchy and sought to gain what he considered his rightful position as King of England. He did both poorly. If he thought that his reputation as a returning crusader would aid him, he was soon to become sorely disappointed.

To support his claim to the throne, Robert invoked the short-lived agreement he had reached with William Rufus after their father's death that Robert and Rufus would be each other's heir. Some of the nobles supported his claim. Chief among these was Flambard, the deposed Bishop of Durham. Flambard managed a daring escape by climbing down a rope from the Tower of London. He made his way to Normandy, where he met with Robert. They planned an invasion of England to make good Robert's claim to the throne. Robert formed a small army

of a few hundred men and organised a fleet of ships. In July 1101, he crossed the English Channel, landing at Portsmouth. There, some, but not many, of the barons joined Robert's forces. The measures Henry had taken since his coronation had proved popular and many of the nobles, including, importantly, Anselm, the powerful Archbishop of Canterbury, continued to support the King. Henry moved swiftly to thwart the invasion, bringing his forces to nearby Pevensey.

With his claim to the throne in the balance, Robert probably should have marched promptly to Winchester, where the royal treasury was located. But he hesitated, giving the king time to react. Henry raised an army and went to meet Robert. According to Orderic, the king "sent messengers ahead to inquire searchingly on his behalf why he [Robert] had presumed to enter English territory with an armed force. Duke Robert answered to this effect through his envoys, 'I have entered the kingdom of my father with my magnates and I demand the right due to me as the eldest son.' " The king and his forces met Robert's army at Alton in Hampshire. There was no battle, however, but instead peace negotiations. Orderic again: "When they met feelings of brotherly love surged up in both...The two brothers conversed alone in the midst of the circle of onlookers and openly and honestly voiced what they had in their hearts. Finally, after a few words, they embraced one another and, exchanging affectionate kisses, were reconciled without a mediator."¹³ Diplomacy, probably mixed with Robert's awareness of how weak his position was, prevailed. The brothers agreed to the 1101 Treaty of Alton.

In the treaty, Robert renounced his claim to the English throne. In return, Henry renounced any claim to Robert's territories in Normandy, retaining possession of only one small portion of the duchy. He agreed to provide Robert a pension of 3,000 pounds a year for life. Any baron whose lands had been seized for supporting one brother or the other was to have them returned and there would otherwise be no reprisals against Robert's supporters. Flambard was reinstated as Bishop of Durham. The brothers agreed that if either died without an heir (neither had one at the time; soon both would), the other would inherit that brother's lands. The two agreed to campaign together in Normandy to defend their mutual interests. After signing the treaty, Robert remained in England for a few months with Henry before returning to Normandy.

¹³ *Orderic Vitalis*, vol. V, pp. 317-9. Other chroniclers said the brothers negotiated through mediators. See *id.* at pp. 318-9, fn. 2.

Peace between the brothers did not last long. Henry soon stopped paying the promised pension. Robert quarrelled with his barons in Normandy and his control over his lands was weak. Orderic wrote that “Robert, a weak duke, fell far below the might of his ancestors: sunk in sloth and voluptuousness he feared the vassals in his own duchy more than they feared him, with the result that terrible disorders appeared and spread throughout his duchy.”¹⁴ The situation in Normandy became chaotic. One particularly troublesome baron was Robert of Bellême, Earl of Shrewsbury. This Robert had rebelled against King Henry and quarrelled with Robert of Normandy. But then, with dwindling support among his barons and in an effort to maintain some kind of control over his realm, Robert chose to ally himself with Robert of Bellême.

Henry claimed that doing so violated the terms of the Treaty of Alton. In 1104, he crossed the English Channel to Normandy, where he met with Robert’s disaffected barons. Henry then summoned Robert to a conference, where he berated him for breaking the treaty. According to Orderic, the king also charged that “sunk in lethargy, he [Robert] had abandoned all Normandy to thieves and robbers and other evil-doers.” Orderic says that at the time, Robert “was both foolish and friendless, because he did not value the company of good men or the counsel of wise ones, but unhappily chose companions of the opposite sort, thereby harming both himself and many others.”¹⁵ On this occasion, however, Henry and Robert made peace and Henry returned to England.

Orderic reports an incident during Easter 1105 that reflects on Robert’s character and suggests reasons he had such difficulty administering his duchy. Robert was supposed to attend a sermon by a “venerable” bishop but did not appear. In his sermon, given to an audience that included King Henry, the bishop said that Robert “does not truly hold Normandy, nor does he govern the people as a duke should...Sad to relate, he squanders the wealth of a great duchy on trifles and follies, while he, himself, often fasts until noon for lack of bread. Often, he dares not rise from his bed and cannot attend church, because he is naked and has no breeches, socks, or shoes. Indeed, the jesters and harlots who constantly keep company with him steal his clothes at night while he lies snoring in drunken sleep and guffaw as they boast that they have robbed the duke. So, when the head is sick, the whole body is afflicted; when the ruler is foolish, the

¹⁴ Orderic Vitalis, vol. V, p. 27.

¹⁵ Marjorie Chibnall, ed. and transl., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, vol. VI, Oxford University Press (1978), pp. 57, 59 (hereafter *Orderic Vitalis*, vol. VI).

whole province is in danger and the wretched people suffer utter deprivation.”¹⁶ To the extent this account is accurate, it helps explain why Robert did not endear himself to those who should have been his supporters.

Henry invaded Normandy again in 1105. Many of Robert’s barons were prepared to side with the king. However, as in the previous year, the campaign ended inconclusively. The king captured and burned the city of Bayeux, after which Caen surrendered to his forces. But the fighting between the opposing forces reached a stalemate and the brothers opened negotiations that resolved nothing. Because of difficulties arising back home, the king returned to England around Christmas time.

The next year came the final confrontation between Henry and Robert. Henry returned to Normandy in July 1106. He laid siege to the castle on the hill above the town of Tinchebray, in the southwest of Normandy. The castle was held by William, Count of Mortain, one of Robert’s few remaining allies among the Norman nobility. Within a few days, Robert arrived with a small army to aid his ally. Robert of Bellême and the Count of Mortain remained loyal to Robert. But few, if any, other important barons supported him. Most flocked to Henry’s side. The showdown came in September 1106. Henry gave Robert an ultimatum: “Hand over to me all the castles, all judicial and administrative business throughout Normandy and half of the duchy and keep the second half for yourself without toil or responsibility, receiving the equivalent value of the first half annually from my treasure-store in England.”¹⁷ Robert refused the ultimatum scornfully. At this point, both Henry and Robert seemed to want to resolve the conflict finally one way or another. The decisive Battle of Tinchebray ensued.

Most of the soldiers on both sides, including dismounted knights, fought on foot, which was unusual given the cavalry tactics the Normans usually employed. The battle lasted only one hour. Robert’s forces, which contained veterans of the Crusade but were probably outnumbered, attacked bravely at first. But soon, they were routed and most of his army was captured or killed. Robert of Bellême, who commanded the rear guard, “took to flight and abandoned the duke’s shattered army to the victors.”¹⁸ He escaped. Not so fortunate were the Count of Mortain and Robert himself. Both were taken prisoner. It is unknown how many

¹⁶ *Orderic Vitalis*, vol. VI, pp. 61, 63.

¹⁷ *Orderic Vitalis*, vol. VI, p. 87

¹⁸ *Orderic Vitalis*, vol. VI, p. 91.

causalities the two sides suffered. But it is likely that most of Robert's troops were captured rather than killed.

Robert's status as a glorious warrior for Christ helped him not at all in gathering and maintaining supporters and in fighting his own battles. As a result of his victory, Henry deposed Robert as Duke of Normandy and left Robert no title. Robert's then three-year-old son, William of Clito, was excluded from the inheritance. When this William became older, he made several attempts to win what he believed was his birth right. But all failed and Henry managed to keep the title. Winston Churchill called the Battle of Tinchebray the most important battle since Hastings itself.¹⁹

Henry released most of the prisoners. But he imprisoned Robert for the rest of Robert's long life, which would last another 28 years. The conditions of imprisonment were gentle. Orderic said that King Henry provided Robert "liberally with every comfort."²⁰ William of Malmesbury said Robert "had nothing worse to suffer than solitude—if solitude it can be called when he was enjoying the continual attention of his guards and plenty of amusement and good eating." It was unusual for a nobleman to imprison another noble, much less an older brother. But Henry might have felt he had little choice. He wanted to preserve his dynasty and, to the extent possible, achieve peace in his domains. To that end, he could not simply release Robert to fight another day. Given the violent times, he probably could have had Robert executed or simply murdered. He chose not to do that. Instead, he kept Robert a prisoner. William of Malmesbury ascribed Robert's imprisonment, rather than a worse fate, to "his brother's praiseworthy sense of duty."²¹

Robert's life in captivity began in the Tower of London. Later he was moved to Devizes Castle to the west of London. In 1126, he was moved again, this time to Bristol and then to Cardiff Castle in Wales. He undoubtedly learned of the death in July 1128 from a battle wound of his only legitimate son, William of Clito. William was 25 years old when he died. This William was childless and thus Robert's line came to an end. Because William was less than four years old when Robert was imprisoned, Robert never had a chance to see his son grow up.

¹⁹ Winston Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*: vol. 1, *The Birth of Britain*, Dodd, Mead and Company (1966), p.183.

²⁰ *Orderic Vitalis*, vol. VI, p. 99.

²¹ *William of Malmesbury*, vol. I, p. 707.

Robert Curthose, the former Duke of Normandy, finally died at Cardiff Castle in February 1134, over 80 years of age, very old age for those times. The fact that he lived so long suggests that he was, in fact, treated well in captivity. He was buried in Gloucester Cathedral. There, “Henry I endowed a light to burn before the high altar for the repose of his soul.”²² His effigy, carved about 100 years after his death, is decorated with the arms of the “Nine Worthies” of medieval lore (with Edward the Confessor’s replacing Joshua’s). The Nine Worthies included Robert’s fellow crusader, Godfrey of Bouillon, who helped found the Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem.²³

Robert had the good fortune to be born the son of William the Conqueror, King of England and Duke of Normandy and thus he grew up in an exalted and privileged position. But his life was unfortunate in many respects. Much less able in matters of statecraft than his younger brothers, they continually stymied him. He was clearly courageous. But he could be indolent and was a poor strategist. He seemed unable to govern people or win them to his side. When he had to fight his cause, he was generally a failure. Repeated attempts to gain the English crown failed ignominiously. He could not even retain the Duchy of Normandy, which he had inherited from his father.

Richard was at his best during the First Crusade, where his heroism helped to prevent the Crusade from failing at the outset and to preserve its hold on Jerusalem at the conclusion. Robert was not the most romanticised or glamorised of the English crusaders. His great-grandnephew, Richard, called the Lion-Hearted, has that distinction for his efforts in the Third Crusade. In effect, Richard had the medieval equivalent of good press. Robert did not. But Robert was the most *successful* of all the English crusaders. His illustrious descendant failed to recapture Jerusalem, which was his goal. Robert—and his many allies—succeeded where his descendant would fail. No one, not even his brothers, could take that away from him.

²² *Orderic Vitalis*, vol. VI, p. 380, fn. 4.

²³ The Nine Worthies were nine men, all warriors, whom the post-First Crusade medieval world considered particularly great. They were divided into three groups of three: pagans, Jews and Christians. The pagans were Hector of Troy, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. The Jews were Joshua, David and Judas Maccabeus. The Christians were King Arthur, Charlemagne and Godfrey of Bouillon. The first eight of these remain famous today. Godfrey’s reputation has suffered greatly since medieval times.

An explanation for Robert's success while crusading and failure while fighting his own battles might be that the Crusade was a relatively straightforward affair. You knew who was on your side and who was not. If you were attacked, you courageously held your position as long as it took. If you had to attack, you did so without hesitation. Robert excelled in the world of crusading, where courage and steadfastness were often required but were also, by and large, sufficient. But he could not thrive in the devious world of his brothers, with continual negotiations, often in bad faith, manoeuvring for advantage and shifting allegiances. In this world, where courage and steadfastness were also often required, but were seldom sufficient, Robert's brothers badly overmatched him.

William of Malmesbury summarised Robert's long life and death: "[H]e was held in captivity until he survived all the companions of his journey [i.e., the Crusade] and was never released until the day of his death. He was a good speaker in his native tongue and no one was better company; in the case of other men a wise counsellor, surpassed by none; an experienced soldier if any man ever was; yet for his softheartedness never thought fit to rule a commonwealth."²⁴

Robert's long period of captivity in old age must have been bitter. At Cardiff Castle, he learned Welsh and wrote poetry in that language. One of his Welsh poem states, in English translation, "Woe to him who is not old enough to die."²⁵ The line might serve as his epitaph.

²⁴ *William of Malmesbury, vol. I, p. 707.*

²⁵ William M. Aird, *Robert 'Curthose', Duke of Normandy (c. 1050-1134)*, Boydell Press (2008), p. 275.