

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by historian Dr. Gabby Storey to talk about the medieval queen Berengaria of Navarre. So first, can you give us a bit of introduction to who she was and her place in history?

GS: Berengaria is born we expect around 1165. Some people argued for a bit later towards 1170, but I've plumped for 1165. She's born to Sancho VI, who's king of Navarre. Now for listeners who don't know, Navarre is a medieval kingdom in northern Spain, and it's kind of on the borders with France. And Berengaria's mother is Sancha of Baffia or Baccia, also within the Iberian Peninsula at this time. So we don't know much about Berengaria's early life, and that's not that uncommon for medieval women or even medieval royal children, so to speak. But she doesn't really come on the scene much until about 1185, from what she pops up as a witness in a charter for the royal family, so that's really where we get our first idea of her. And then she starts to turn up more and more around, as time as we get towards the negotiations for her marriage to the future king of England, Richard I.

Now, I think most people probably know about Richard I, or Richard the Lionheart. If you're into medieval history, he's probably one of the most famous English kings that we've got. But no one knows about his wife, and I think that's really interesting that, when you think about some of the other kings we have like Henry VIII, for example, everyone knows his wives, and it's interesting that we've got such a famous king here, and I'll move on to the Crusade in the moment, but just his wife doesn't appear up at all. So with these marriage negotiations. They're a little bit thorny because Richard is actually already engaged to be married. He's retrieved to Alys, Princess of France, and this decision to repudiate Alys for Berengaria will come and bite him on the backside a little bit later. So it's an interesting decision to have made to switch alliances, but Richard is very much thinking of going on the Crusade. He's engaged and his family, the Plantagenets are engaged in ongoing conflicts with the king of France, and Richard really needs to think about protecting his southern borders in Aquitaine, because at this time the kings of England have a vast amount of territory in France. You've got Aquitaine along the southwest, you've got central territories in Anjou, Maine and Touraine, you've also got the northern duchy of Normandy. So there's really a huge amount of territory across the north, eastern, southern France, that the kings of England have control over. So Richard's got to think about how this is going to stay together, how this is going to be defended whilst he's on Crusade, and this marital alliance, it's a really key way of doing that, making sure that his borders remain defended whilst he's away. So Navarre looking like a good marital ally here. His mother, Richard's mother Eleanor goes to meet Berengaria and to escort her over land, and to meet Richard, who has already started to set ahead and go off on the first Crusade. Now we know Eleanor and Berengaria travel together over land as opposed to a sea route because we've got a record of her witnessing a charter at Lodi, which is at this time is within the Holy Roman Empire. So there's again further evidence for Berengaria taking place in early politics and diplomacy.

AT: I don't think we mentioned, but when you're saying Eleanor, that's Eleanor of Aquitaine, and I don't know what their situation was in terms of whatever rapport they might have had, but I for one would love to road trip with Eleanor of Aquitaine.

GS: She's one of these women who almost define what we know about medieval history in terms of she's so long lived. She lives through the reign of three English kings, and that's pretty impressive. She's a very formidable figure, I don't think it's unfair to say. She's got a reputation for being a woman who gets things done, a woman who wants to rule, a woman with a lot of power. So unfortunately, we really don't know much about Berengaria and Eleanor's relationship as they're undertaking this journey, and it's almost, would she have been a really imposing figure to Berengaria because she's already got this reputation of being strong-willed and very powerful, but we know that Eleanor is a loving mother. We know she's a caring woman towards her family, so there's no reason to not think she wouldn't have extended that affection towards her daughter-in-law as well. It's just really difficult to say with that lack of evidence what their relationship would have been like. But yeah, absolutely, she's the one you'd want to be rocking across France and Italy, that's quite a journey to be undertaken. Definitely one of those women you'd love to spend some more time with, but you need to know about as well.

So once Eleanor and Berengaria have kind of undertaken their little journey, and I say "little" in a very understating way. They do travel across France and in Germany into Italy, and they first land up in Sicily. Now, Sicily's interesting because this is where Richard's sister, now the widowed Queen of Sicily, Joanna, is and Richard has stopped there en route because there is conflict. Once Joanna's husband, William II had died, the throne was taken by his illegitimate nephew, Tancred. Tancred has seized Joanna's land and her revenues, and therefore Richard has come along to try and reclaim these for Joanna, to ensure that she's not left bereft by her husband's death. So Berengaria arrives at Sicily, meets Joanna, meets Richard, but because it's now bang into Lent, they can't get married in Italy, so they decide to travel onwards.

And it's then as they travel onwards that we get an really interesting little interlude. Richard has gone ahead with the army, Joanna and Berengaria are in a separate boat. They are shipwrecked, and as they try to make landfall, they're actually at risk of being held hostage with the emperor of Cyprus, Isaac Komnenos. And this is a really interesting moment because they don't know whether to then try and make landfall on Cyprus. If they step ashore at this point, they are very likely to be held as hostage, but otherwise their situation is to remain on the boat, and they decide to stay on the boat. They wait there, they prevaricate and hope that rescue is coming. They delay meeting Isaac, there's all these messages going back and forth saying, "oh, sorry, we can't come ashore at the moment, X, Y and Z." And Richard comes to the rescue, he manages to save Berengaria and Joanna from being held hostage by Isaac. And it's a really strange thing, you don't expect necessarily to be held hostage at this point in your journey. It's really unusual. But it's an interesting moment because it's somewhere where we can see Berengaria and Joanna working together, working to show their agency and evading capture against this tyrannical emperor. Now, Richard goes ahead and captures Cyprus as well, deposes Isaac effectively for the moment. And it's just another string in his bow in terms of being a military king that he's now just taken over another kingdom on the way to the fair Crusade.

Now, after this, Richard and Berengaria get married at St George's Chapel, which is on Limassol, Cyprus on the 12th of May 1191. So finally able to marry. Berengaria is crowned queen of England the same day as her marriage. And she continues to travel on Crusade with Richard and Joanna of Sicily. So after Cyprus, we know they go on to Acre, which is now in

Israel, and they take residence there. We know that as Richard undertakes further campaigns that they do also move alongside him, being at another fortification, Jaffa, quite a few months later. So although she's not obviously on the front line of Crusading campaign, she is at places where there are active sieges going on. She is at places where there's conflict. But for such exciting and dramatic time, we really don't know what she's up to. We can only assume that she's in the palaces with Joanna with a relative amount of comfort because it is still a royal palace. And that they're undertaking the activities that we expect most royal women to be undertaking at this point. They're still gaming, they're reading, they're sewing and so forth.

AT: And where is Eleanor at this point? Because I think we may have lost track of Eleanor. And I know that when she had been queen of France, she went on the Second Crusade with her husband.

GS: Eleanor that goes back to France and on to England after Sicily. So she pretty much drops Berengaria off with her new husband-to-be and her new sister-in-law and skidaddles back off because kingdoms need to be ruled and looked after whilst Richard's gone. But yeah, it is interesting, would she have been imparting advice about what life would be like on the Crusade from her own experience as queen of France? It's not unusual but also not very common to have queens being on Crusade. And actually, the 12th century and 13th century are interesting for where we see queens on Crusade. And indeed, you've got many reigning queens of Jerusalem. So we do see queens pop up on the Crusades as well. It's interesting, with Eleanor now off scene back in England looking after things alongside the Regency Council whilst Richard is away.

Berengaria does leave the Holy Land earlier than Richard, we know that her and Joanna leave around September 1193. So they spend the best part of two and a half years on Crusade, which actually is quite a long time when you think about it, to be on Crusade and we do not have a lot of knowledge as to their whereabouts and what they're up to. They come back earlier, ahead of Richard. They stop in Rome for six months, which is interesting because this is where we get the only piece of evidence for Berengaria's time as queen because she witnesses a charter alongside Joanna for a loan. And they stay in Rome for six months. However, they stayed longer because Richard is then kidnapped on his way back from Crusade. He takes a different route to Joanna and Berengaria. He's kidnapped by Leopold, Duke of Austria, who then in turn plans Richard over to his overlord, Henry VI, Holy Roman Emperor. And this is a really tense time. We've got a King that's under capture. And again, it's one of those points in history where we're like, what's going on? But we'll come back to this moment later because it's really interesting to think about what a king is like under capture. But Berengaria, we know, returns to France after her journey in Rome, not quite sure where she stays at this point. We've got a couple of rumors, residences. And that is really it for her story in a way until Richard's death in 1199. We know that she then appears again at Fontevraud Abbe shortly after Richard's funeral, whether she's there for the funeral or not, has been contested. I think it's very likely that she was there because I think it would be strange for her to travel all that way, for her to travel to where her husband is buried, to witness charters, to have these exchanges with Eleanor of Aquitaine, but to have not actually attended with the funeral herself. So again, suspect she is discussing

with Eleanor about her future. And we then get this interim period of about five years, again, where it's difficult to establish where she is. Now, I argue in my new biography of her that we think that she's at the court of her sister, Blanca, Countess of Champagne for much of this period, because Berengaria and her sister Blanca or Blanche of Champagne do have a close relationship. We can see through charters over the next 20 to 30 years that they're still very much active together. And I think this is a place where Berengaria would have sought refuge. I think she witnesses Blanca's wedding to Thibaud or Theobald, the third Count of Champagne. And we can see all these instances where they pop up together. And I think Champagne is where she would have gone to seek refuge at this point. I think that's really interesting. Berengaria comes back onto the political scene, really, around August to September 1204, when she exchanges her Norman dower lands with the King of France, Phillip Augustus. And from this exchange, she gets the lordship of Le Mans. This is where she is for the next 26 years of her life, acting as a lord. And again, this is where we get far more evidence for our activities, her interactions with hope, her interactions with the church, very much remaining on the political scene. But she's got her own territory now. She's got her own little region where she's able to act as a lord, rule as a lord. And this really sets her up for the rest of her life in terms of her activity, how we define her. She doesn't remarry. She doesn't have children. She is an independent woman. And I think that's really fascinating for someone who we know so little about as Queen of England, that we actually see her interceding, acting as a diplomat, ruling in this point. And that's where she is until she dies on the 23rd December 12th. So I would say that's her life summed up in a nutshell.

AT: She was very clearly well traveled from everything we do know about her. She didn't really have much impact during her time as Queen of England. And in fact, there is a popular misconception that she is an English queen who never set foot in England, which is technically not true. But from a practical standpoint, she didn't produce an heir. She didn't have anything to do with the running of the country, or even courtly duties. So technically she was queen, but was she really queen?

GS: So she doesn't come to England while she's married to Richard. And again, we've got little evidence for what her activities are at this point. And even though we've got her and Richard as king and queen of England, Richard himself doesn't actually spend that much time in England either. So they're very much absentee monarchs for want of a better phrase. It's very much Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Regency Council who are doing much of the rulership of England itself. As I mentioned, the kings of England have got all these territories in France at this point, but that's not what the English subjects are going to think of as being important. They are going to want to see a monarch in England. So yeah, really interesting.

Berengaria doesn't actually come to England until about 1220. So we kind of thought she'd never come to England at all while she was alive. But she does appear much later in her widowhood, per the translation of Thomas Beckett's relics at Canterbury Cathedral. We know she is then also at Westminster after Thomas Beckett's translation petitioning for revenue, petitioning for money from her dower lands. So dower is what is granted to the wife upon marriage. It's usually land and properties. It can be forms of revenues and cash as well. And

dower is usually for the wife's assistance after the husband has died. But in some cases, and particularly in queenly cases in the 12th century, they can have access to it during their time as wife whilst the husband's still alive. So this is a source of income for her that she doesn't actually get whilst she's queen consort because we do still have Eleanor of Aquitaine running around. Once Richard has died, Eleanor holds on to it. It's not granted to Berengaria. In 1200, once we've had John on the throne, he marries his second wife, Isabella de Angoulême. She then also has claim to do dower lands. So John's actually in a bit of a difficult position because he's got three women who all want access to these lands and to revenues. And Berengaria spends much of her widowhood really fighting for access to revenues. And this again is one of those times where we see her pop up on the historical record because we've got letters largely to her, as opposed to many in her own voice. But we know that she actively campaigned for nearly all of her widowhood. The last instance we have about this dower issue is around 1226. So she never gives up. She rarely keeps fighting to try and have this revenue apportioned to her. And that visit to England 1220 is really part of that, part of her ongoing campaign to get this money.

AT: The Norman dower lands that she had basically traded to Phillip Augustus in 1204. Who's Phillip, by the way?

GS: So Phillip Augustus is king of France. He becomes king of France around 1180. He's with Richard on the first Crusade for a little bit, but obviously they have a very tense relationship anyway because of conflicts between England and France. But also because, as I mentioned earlier, Richard repudiates Phillip's sister Alys in order to take Berengaria as queen. So that's really going to put some shortness in that relationship there. Then Phillip comes back from Crusade earlier as well. And there's just ongoing conflicts between these two kings for much of the 1190s. Phillip very much expands his territory as king of France. He seizes Normandy in 1204, which is part of the reason why he's able to make this exchange with Berengaria for her dower lands as well. So, Berengaria has dower land in Normandy, in England, across pretty much all the territories the kings hold. But she doesn't have actual physical access to the revenues from them. So she's got access to them in name.

AT: So for practical purposes, she's not actually trading anything of substance. She's just basically saying, "I give up my claim to this. I'll transfer my claim to this and you can fight him." Now, the fact that there is so little documentation about her is, as you said, it's understandable. It's not unexpected for this time period, but it's also simultaneously tantalizing and deeply frustrating.

GS: Definitely. So the third Crusade's one of those really interesting and actually very well documented events in terms of the chronicles, in terms of the history of the time. So, we know what Richard's up to. We know what the army's up to. Don't know as much about what Berengaria's up to. But again, we've got this really fascinating moment of kidnap when Richard's on his way back from the third Crusade, where he's captured by Leopold of Austria and then exchanged to Leopold's overlord, Henry VI, and remains in captivity. And this would have been a really key opportunity to have seen Berengaria raising money for his release. We know that

Eleanor of Aquitaine's very much involved in petitioning the Pope for Richard's release, in terms of raising money, in terms of working with the Regency Council. But we don't see Berengaria here. And I don't think it's unlikely that she wasn't involved, I suspect she was involved in terms of raising money, but we just don't have the evidence for it. I think it's really interesting why we don't see her active in England, obviously, because she doesn't visit while she's queen consort, but that doesn't mean she was inactive on the continent. It's very much possible that she was involved in raising money here.

Now, once Richard's released, he does come back to England. He's crowned for a second time at Winchester Cathedral in 1194, but it's Eleanor of Aquitaine he chooses to have at his side, not Berengaria. Now, there's a couple of reasons for this. Eleanor had done a lot in terms of ruling the country whilst he's been on Crusade. So this really kind of certifies Eleanor's status as ruling, showing her power, showing her authority there, and her importance still as queen mother, she's still a very powerful woman in her own right as Duchess of Aquitaine. But this was a really prime opportunity to show Berengaria to new subjects. So it's really interesting why he decides not to bring her in at this point and focuses on showing Eleanor off. And it doesn't take long for Richard to then decide to go off on campaign again. So he spends much of the rest of his reign in France, on campaign in Normandy, which is facing threats from Phillip Augustus, king of France, or touring around the other territories in France at this point. Whether he actually meets Berengaria again during this time, we don't know. It's a really difficult to say.

AT: It is interesting when we're talking about regencies, because that is often a role that the queen will fill while the husband is off doing something like fighting a war. And I mean, we see this certainly plenty of times in English history. And I have to wonder if Eleanor of Aquitaine wasn't already filling that role, if Berengaria had actually been in England and had had a chance to build a reputation there, form relationships, all the things that you kind of need to maintain political power. Would she have had that regency if the timing had been a little different? But I mean, it's speculation. We'll never know.

GS: No, we won't know. And I think if Eleanor wasn't around, Richard would have had to have used Berengaria because it's a difficult one because she's not as politically experienced as Eleanor. And that's really what keeps Eleanor in ascendancy in the way. It's the fact that she's got all this political experience. Eleanor's the only woman to have been queen of France and queen of England. And she's got that wealth of political know-how about her, and therefore she's an obvious person to leave in place. But yes, had Eleanor not been around either in terms of she'd actually died, in terms of she may be decided to take residence up in a convent or a nunnery, if she'd withdrawn from the political scene, we could have seen a lot more of Berengaria. And again, just interesting that Richard doesn't decide to make more use of her during this time as rulers.

AT: Well, I think it makes sense in the context because he barely knows her, for starters. But his people don't know her. You can't just send a foreigner to England and be like, "she's running things now" when she doesn't know anyone or anything, and people don't know her.

GS: Yeah, absolutely. Which I think is why 1194 would have been a really key opportunity because at that point, they've only been married three years. Obviously Richard doesn't know that he's only going to die five years later. So 1194 would have been a really key moment to have brought her to England, to have perhaps crowned alongside himself at Winchester Cathedral, introduce her to the subjects, and then build up that potential for her to act as regent whilst he's away on military campaigns. But he doesn't. And again, whether that's just saying more about Eleanor's status and authority, or if it's an indication of what their relationship's like. Again, we know very little about their personal relationship as well. We know that they don't have a child together. So perhaps don't spend much time together in terms of being intimate either. And whether that is because of their own interest in one another, whether this is just because of the sheer amount of time they actually spend apart because Richard is on campaign so much. And I don't think Richard would have been unaware of the, very much the need to have a male heir. But it doesn't seem to have concerned him. Again, he's not expecting to die in 1199. So perhaps he's just still thinking he's got a lot more time to bear an heir than he does.

AT: And as you were saying, Eleanor of Aquitaine is a known quantity. I mean, she's his mom. Like he knows that she can handle this. He knows that she is already embedded in terms of people know her, people trust her. She knows exactly what she's doing. And he trusts his mom. I mean, it does make sense in that regard. But yeah, very frustrating for us from a historical documentation standpoint.

GS: Eleanor is very much fore and center for so much of not just the reign of her husband Henry II, Richard's dad, but Richard's reign and John's reign as well. She's really a one-stop shop in terms of being able to rule and hold things together. And indeed, I think things would have been a lot worse at certain points during Richard and John's reign if she hadn't been there as a stabilizer. Again, a very experienced ruler, someone who can get things done for them all.

AT: But in terms of what we do have documentation of, what can you tell us about her time as lord of Le Mans?

GS: Not uncommon to have female lords at this point. We see basically at the level of duchess and countess that we do have women acting as independent rulers in their own right. But I think it's really interesting for Berengaria because it's very much a choice. She chooses to exchange her Norman dower lands with Phillip and to take up this lordship. And it's where we can see her size of power. It's where we can see her. Again, working for 26 years, with the local nobility, but also internationally, she still has interactions with Phillip Augustus, king of France. She had interactions with the papacy, with John and Henry III, John's son who becomes king of England in 1216. And we know she's involved with local religious institutions. She found her own abbey, Abbaye de l'Épau, which is just on the outskirts of Le Mans in 1229. And this is later where she's buried as well. We can see that she's at the heart of religious conflict in Le Mans. For instance, excommunication is imposed upon the city, but Berengaria's exempt for it because she has papal backing and support. And I think that's really important because that shows her position as being a vulnerable widow and therefore deserving of protection from the papacy, but also

shows how strong she's been as a diplomat in terms of cultivating these relationships to always have the pope on her side. So I think in her widowhead, in her dowager period, we can really see her as a strong woman. We can see her as an independent woman and see the political and diplomatic skill she's got. And it's such a shame to not see this while she's queen consort. So when we were speaking earlier about the fact she doesn't necessarily have that political experience to be regent in those early years while she's on Crusade certainly, but we can see that she's got political skills as lord of Le Mans. And our political skill happened from somewhere. So why wasn't that put to use further or is it, so we don't have the evidence to show it was used further whilst she was queen consort of England. So yeah, I really think she's a fascinating figure because she does have power. She is independent and it has proved such a striking contrast to her time as queen consort. And I think we really ought to remember her as a lord of Le Mans as well because she has that power.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.