Henry VIII
(1491-1547)

English king and Renaissance prince, who solidified the Tudor dynasty, broke with the Catholic Church, and oversaw the centralization of government, but who was also plagued by the woes of succession and marital mismanagement.

"Henry's reign in many ways left a deeper mark on the mind, heart and face of England than did any event in English history between the coming of the Normans and the coming of the factory."

J. J. Scarisbrick

Who does not know at least something about Henry VIII? Here was a king cloaked in as many contradictions and contrasts as he had wives. He was a product of man and a force of nature. He was distinguished as much by what he succeeded in doing as by what he failed to do. He was a reincarnated Prince Hal, characterized by an unparalleled zest for life who metamorphosed into a sour, diseased, and often evil combination of royal Falstaff and grotesque Goliath.

As an infant and child, Henry is little known to us because he was a second son who was inevitably overshadowed by his elder brother Arthur. Ironically, his first public act seems to have come in 1496, at age five, when he witnessed a royal grant by charter to the abbot and convent at legendary Glastonbury; 43 years after this official debut, when he spearheaded the dissolution of the monasteries, King Henry would bring about the ruin of the abbey and have its last abbot hanged for treason.

When Arthur died in 1502, Henry was transported, figuratively speaking, from the back of the palace, where the unneeded but not unim-

Contributed by Robert Blackey, Professor of History, California State University, San Bernardino, California
CHRONOLOGY

1509  Succeeded father as king; married Catherine of Aragon
1513  Defeated French and Scots
1516  Princess Mary born; Thomas More wrote Utopia
1521  Granted title "Defender of the Faith" by Pope Leo X for written attack against Martin Luther
1527  Sack of Rome by imperial troops of Charles V increased pressure on Pope not to grant Henry divorce from Catherine
1529  Fall of Cardinal Wolsey; Thomas More became Lord Chancellor
1533  Act in Retract of Appeals to Rome made divorce from Catherine of Aragon possible and national sovereignty a reality; married Anne Boleyn; Princess Elizabeth born
1534  Act of Supremacy confirmed Henry as Head of Church of England
1535  Thomas More executed
1536  Dissolution of monasteries began; Anne Boleyn beheaded
1537  Jane Seymour died giving birth to Prince Edward
1540  Married and divorced Anne of Cleves; married Catherine Howard; Thomas Cromwell executed
1541  Catherine Howard beheaded; married Catherine Parr
1547  Henry died; succeeded by Edward VI

Henry had charm and intelligence. Fluent in six languages, a gifted musician, a patron of the arts, he had a grasp of theology remarkable for a monarch and was an apt student of mathematics. It was not uncommon for Henry, according to Thomas More's son-in-law and biographer, William Roper, to sit in his private room and confer with the great humanist on "matters of astronomy, geometry, divinity and ... his worldly affairs." Henry was also a superb athlete who could tire out horses in a chase and opponents in tennis; he could shoot an arrow straighter than his archers, and he took the lead in tournaments and jousts. He could also dance women off their feet and drink most men under the table. This truly Renaissance king, at over six feet tall and with a 35-inch waist (based on surviving suits of armor), was in every respect striking.

There was, however, a dark side that would loom larger with the passing years. And in spite of occasional appearances to the contrary, Henry determined to be his own master: "I do not choose anyone to have in his power to command me, nor will I ever suffer it." Early on, Thomas More sensed that the man who embraced him with affection would just as easily have his head if it "could win him a castle in France." Henry was high-strung and unstable, and he was capable of gross cruelty. In the first part of his reign, he devoted his energies to the pursuit of pleasure and to war (with some success against France, with more against Scotland, but all at great cost), and he otherwise left the business of government in the capable but greedy hands of Cardinal Wolsey. But then, beginning in about 1527 and coinciding with problems of divorce, the beast in Henry began to overwhelm the beauty.

The magnificent young king evolved into a prematurely aged, white-haired, monstrously obese figure. He began to suffer from headaches, and he developed notorious ulcers on his legs which became elephantine and smelled badly; these may have been varicose ulcers which became thrombosed or they may have been a result of osteomyelitis—a chronic septic infection of the
thigh bone, in this case caused by a jousting injury and bringing about a discharge of pus. In 1546, his weight was reportedly close to 400 pounds, and his waist had expanded to at least 57 inches. He had to be carried about in a chair and hauled up stairs with ropes and pulleys. As a contemporary wrote, "He had a body and a half, very abdominal and unwieldy with fat."

Some medical historians have suggested that Henry may have been afflicted with syphilis, which could also be responsible for his ulcerated legs and which in turn may have either caused or aggravated his cruelty to friend, foe, and faceless masses. He would become vicious and unbending in pursuit of More, who wished to avoid confrontation, and Thomas Cromwell, who served him loyally and constructively for ten years. He would relentlessly hunt down potential dynastic rivals, including a 68-year-old countess who would be butchered in the Tower of London. He would slaughter religious opponents, Catholics and Protestants alike, and he even oversaw the passage, in 1531, of a new and frightful punishment, "boiling to death." Observing this record from the safety of two generations, Sir Walter Raleigh wrote: "If all the patterns and pictures of a merciless Prince were lost in the world, they might all again be painted to life, out of the story of this king." In addition, Henry's problems with fathering children and, therefore, keeping wives might have become more pronounced, or even been caused by syphilis.

Henry Marries Catherine of Aragon

Henry's first marriage, within seven weeks of his accession, was to Catherine of Aragon, his brother's widow and the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. To overcome the biblical caution (Lev. 20:21) that a man who takes his brother's wife shall be childless, a special dispensation from the pope was received. Henry married Catherine freely and willingly, and although she was five years his senior, she was probably both physically and intellectually appealing; there was also the prospect of a Spanish alliance to support his antagonism toward France plus his hope to rebuild England's continental glory that provided added inducement. The happiness of their early years together was interwoven with disappointments relating to childbirth. The happiness of their early years together was interwoven with disappointments relating to childbirth. Repeated pregnancies produced only one surviving child, Princess Mary, born in 1516; by 1525, Catherine was 40 years old and had not been pregnant for five years. Such a natal history, physicians say, is not atypical where one parent is syphilitic. (Mary would later exhibit signs of possible syphilitic congenital infection.)

The extent to which this is true suggests that Henry's difficulties in having a son may have been mostly his own fault.

But having a male heir was of vital importance. As only the second reigning Tudor, Henry was sensitive to the potential insecurity of his family's claim to the throne. (His father's succession came as a result of victory on the field of battle in 1485, but Henry VII's lineage and the fact that he was more Welsh and French than English made him aware of the need to fortify the upstart Tudor dynasty. His own marriage to Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV, and the marriages of his children to the royal houses of Spain and Scotland reflect these concerns. England had no clear-cut laws of succession, and Henry VII's claim was through his mother, an illegitimate Plantagenet whose descendants Parliament had earlier expressly excluded from inheriting the throne.) This claim had to be strengthened, but the succession of Mary as queen in her own right, although not illegal, was without precedent. To a 16th-century mind, this prospect was fraught with danger: disputed succession and civil war at one extreme, domination by a

Henry VIII and his second wife, Anne Boleyn, who was later beheaded after being found guilty of incest and adultery.
Wolsey was forced from his political office in 1529 and surely would have been tried (for exceeding his divorce. At this task Wolsey failed and, for political reasons, the papacy kept its involvement at a minimum and itself uncommitted. For his failure, responsibility for persuading the pope to grant the divorce and remarriage.

A divorce (an annulment, really) granted by the papacy was not an unreasonable expectation since precedents existed. But there were also complications: Pope Clement VII's hesitation, generated by diplomatic and military pressure from Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, who was Catherine of Aragon's nephew, and Henry's growing desire for the new love of his life, Anne Boleyn. For her part, Anne craftily withheld her favors from her anxious suitor because she wished to become his queen, not merely his mistress.

By 1527, another plot line was added to the story of what is known as the King's Great Matter: conscience. Henry became convinced that his marriage to Catherine had been a great sin; the curse of Leviticus was real indeed. Reason might call attention to the existence of Mary to remind Henry he was not childless, and there was also the biblical injunction (Deut. 25:5), which said it was the duty of a man to marry his brother's widow. But to Henry, Catherine's many stillbirths and miscarriages were a more telling reality. When he said his conscience was violently troubled by the sin of his false marriage, he was not being hypocritical. Henry was an egoist and had convinced himself he was right. No doubt it was this conviction that enabled him to survive all the troubles of the divorce and the break with Rome.

Although this was the Age of the Protestant Reformation, and the divorce would pave the way for England's role in it, it should also be remembered that Henry was a Catholic at heart, albeit not one who would be subservient to the papacy, even a papacy that had only recently granted him the title, "Defender of the Faith." In this respect Henry was little different from his fellow European monarchs. Still, there was deprivation and corruption within the Catholic Church, and the general attitude of the English people toward the clergy was unfavorable. Moreover, the rich, corrupt, and uncelibate Cardinal Wolsey, who was also Henry's chief minister, symbolized the worldly aspects of the Church in its worst light. And it was Wolsey who was charged with the responsibility for persuading the pope to grant the divorce. At this task Wolsey failed and, for political reasons, the papacy kept its involvement at a minimum and itself uncommitted. For his failure, Wolsey was forced from his political office in 1529 and surely would have been tried (for exceeding his authority) and executed had his natural death not beaten the executioner's ax.

Henry then began to pressure Rome and, using the anticlericalism prevalent among members of Parliament, to turn threats into hostile legislation. By 1531, little progress toward divorce had been made. At this point Thomas Cromwell, a former aide to Wolsey and a member of the Privy Council, emerged with a plan that would not only take care of the divorce but also help in creating England as a sovereign national state. Cromwell was the driving force in the decade of the 1530s, and it was he who gave a coherence and purpose to policy that had otherwise been lacking during Henry's reign. In 1532, the English clergy became fully submissive when they accepted the king in the pope's place as their supreme legislator. Also, the machinery for halting the flow of English money to Rome was set in place. By 1533, with the papacy as stubborn as ever, the English Reformation hit full stride.

The crucial Act in Restraint of Appeals became law in March, and henceforth all decisions of the English church court would be final and not subject to appeal to the pope. Two months later, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer opened court; he declared Henry's marriage to Catherine void, and he announced Henry's earlier—and secret—marriage to Anne Boleyn. So ended the King's Great Matter. Catherine was legally and physically cast aside, as was daughter Mary, and the new heir to the throne that Anne had been carrying for several months would be legitimate.

**Act Declares England Sovereign State**

The Act in Restraint of Appeals, formulated by Cromwell with Henry's support, essentially stated a new doctrine: the king was supreme head and the country was a sovereign state free from all foreign authority. This was a giant step toward total independence and national sovereignty, but among critics of such a posture was the righteous and medieval-thinking Thomas More. An Act of Supremacy in 1534 made Henry the "Supreme Head of the Church of England." It was More's refusal to support this new order which culminated in More's dramatic trial—in Westminster Hall—and beheading in 1535. The man Erasmus had once called "a man for all seasons" died, according to his final words, "the king's good servant, but God's first." While many historians find flaws in the seeming nobility of More's position, none condone Henry's actions. Nevertheless, More's death did not excite much public sympathy, and the Eng-
lish Reformation proceeded, most importantly with the dissolution of the monasteries.

The destruction of the monasteries ("putrified oaks" one contemporary called them) eliminated the last sources of papal support in England, and it provided vast amounts of land (about one-tenth of the country) and income—first from the revenue and then from the sale of more than half of that land—to a financially troubled government. Moreover, the sale of those lands, to the gentry and the nobility, tied these powerful segments of society to the new order.

The last 11 years of Henry’s life were filled with much less happiness than the king expected was his due. His doctrinal wavering left the religious position in England unstable. His return to war with France briefly gained the coastal town of Boulogne but cost outrageous sums; this led to other financial ventures, including loans and currency depreciation, which combined to fuel a European-wide inflation and to swell the royal debt. And his private life continued to disappoint more than please.

Though Anne Boleyn had been flirtatious with others, her only "crime" was that she had failed to provide the required son; daughter Elizabeth was seen as an unnecessary replication of Mary. Henry’s passion for Anne wilted. Evidence against her was gathered, some by the torture of her brother, and so it was no surprise that she was found guilty of incest and adultery. In 1536, shortly after Catherine of Aragon died—an occasion Henry celebrated with a festive ball—Anne’s neck rested briefly on the chopping block in the Tower of London before being severed. Wife number three, Jane Seymour, a lady at court, had caught Henry’s eye during Anne’s waning days, and they married quickly.

Edward Is Born

Jane did not live long enough to be a crowned queen, but her death in childbirth did produce a son, Edward, born at Hampton Court in October 1537. After a year and a half of mourning, a new wife was urged upon Henry by Cromwell. This marriage—by-proxy mismatch was filled with tragi-comedic elements (Anne of Cleves, cruelly nicknamed “the Flanders’ mare,” was somewhere between plain and ugly; upon first seeing her, Henry—no longer the handsome prince himself—kept his distance; they were divorced after six months, although financially she was left secure enough to live as “the King’s good sister”); Cromwell was blamed for the fiasco, and he paid for it with his life.

From 1540, no single minister emerged to serve the king as loyally and as effectively as had Cromwell. Government, dominated by religious-political factions, weakened. As the French ambassador noted:

This King, knowing how many changes he had made, and what tragedies and scandals he has created, would fain keep in favour with everybody, but does not trust a single man, expecting to see them all offended, and he will not cease to dip his hand in blood as long as he doubts his people.

With his fifth wife, Catherine Howard, a vivacious and frivolous 17-year-old, Henry believed the vigor of his youth to be reborn. He called her his “rose without a thorn,” and he believed she had married him for love. But his self-delusion barely lasted a year as her infidelities cost her her head in 1542. Henry’s last wife, the twice-widowed Catherine Parr, managed to survive the reign by dealing with the increasingly angry and vile temper of an aging and soured egoist, made much more bitter by ill health and by a complex that led him to believe he had had more than his share of tribulations. Henry retained the reins of power until the end, despite his physical decay. Having arranged the hoped-for smooth succession of his son Edward (VI), he died on January 28, 1547, convinced, no doubt, of his own righteousness.

On balance, Henry VIII achieved some critical successes: the position of the Crown was strengthened and monarchy in England was raised to near-idolatry; control of the country was exercised—and not without some justification since there was neither a police force, nor a standing army, nor a modern bureaucracy—through fear and the suppression of dissent; the papacy was excluded and the clergy subdued; the administration was reformed; a navy was created (Henry inherited only five ships from his father, but he left 53 to his son); Wales was incorporated and Welshmen were granted equal rights; and much of the great wealth of the Church came under royal control.

There were, however, notable failures and shortcomings as well: the succession may have been set by law, but the prospects—one sickly son and two princesses—were grim and questions of legitimacy would shadow Henry’s children; the religious settlement was so far from being resolved that a dangerous schism resulted; the wealth of the Church may have paid for government policies, but it also strengthened the gentry and nobility and helped to move them to positions whereby they could begin to resist the Crown; cooperation with Parliament to effect the Reformation also
provided lessons and precedents with which that body would later be able to challenge the monarchy; the new world and the new trade routes that were being brought to European attention were ignored by the king and, larger navy aside, maritime expansion languished; the wars with France and Scotland cost far more than was ever gained; the debasement of English coins hastened the country into runaway inflation; and the king, who prided himself on being a Renaissance prince and who built more than any other Tudor, was also responsible for the destruction of more beautiful structures and other works of art than the Puritans.

Both for good and for ill, Henry VIII was a man who left his mark on history. Sadly, it seems, he had it in himself to be so much more than he was. Perhaps that is why we can still identify with this larger-than-life man.

SOURCES:

FURTHER READING: