

Peter of Blois: Letter of 1177 to Walter, Archbishop of Palermo

Since however you have demanded from me with all insistence that I should send to you the shape and habits of the lord king of England in an accurate description - which exceeds my faculties, and for which indeed the vein of Mantuan genius would seem insufficient enough - I nevertheless will communicate to you what I know without envy and detraction. About David it was said [I Kings 16] to the commendation of his beauty, that he was red-haired; however you will know that the lord king has been red-haired so far, except that the coming of old age and gray hair has altered that color somewhat. His height is medium, so that neither does he appear great among the small, nor yet does he seem small among the great. His head is round, just as if the seat of great wisdom, and specially a shrine of lofty counsel. Such is the size of his head, that so it matches with his neck and with the whole body in proportionate moderation. His eyes are round, and white and plain, while he is of calm spirit; but in anger and disorder of heart they shine like fire and flash in fury. His hair is not in fear of the losses of baldness, nevertheless on top there is a tonsure of hairs; his leonine face is rather square. The eminence of his nose is weighed to the beauty of the whole body with natural moderation; curved legs, a horseman's shins, broad chest, and a boxer's arms all announce him as a man strong, agile and bold; nevertheless, in a certain joint of his foot the part of the toenail is grown into the flesh of his foot, to the vehement outrage of the whole foot.

His hands testify grossly to the same neglect of his men; truly he neglects their care all the time; nor at any time, unless carrying birds, does he use gloves. Daily in mass, in counsels and in other public doings of the realm always from morning until vespers he stands on his feet. And, he never sits, unless riding a horse or eating, although he has shins greatly wounded and bruised with frequent blows of horses' hooves. In a single day, if necessary, he can run through four or five day-marches and, thus foiling the plots of his enemies, frequently mocks their plots with surprise sudden arrivals; he wears boots without a fold, caps without decoration, light apparel. He is a passionate lover of woods; while not engaged in battles, he occupies himself with birds and dogs. For in fact his flesh would weigh him down enormously with a great burden of fat, if he did not subdue the insolence of his belly with fasts and exercise; and also in getting onto a horse, preserving the lightness of youth, he fatigues almost every day the most powerful for the labour. Truly he does not, like other kings, linger in his palace, but traveling through the provinces he investigates the doings of all, judging powerfully those whom he has made judges of others.

No one is more cunning in counsel, more fiery in speech, more secure in the midst of dangers, more cautious in fortune, more constant in adversity. Whom once he has esteemed, with difficulty he unloves them; whom once he has hated, with difficulty he receives into the grace of his familiarity. Always are in his hands bow, sword, spear and arrow, unless he be in council or in books. As often as he is able to rest from cares and anxieties, he occupies himself by reading alone, or in a crowd of clerics he labours to untangle some knot of inquiry. For while your king knows his letters well, our king is more literate by far. Truly I have judged the abilities of both in learned matters. You know that the king of Sicily was my student for a year, and had had from you the basic arts of versification and literature; he obtained more benefit of knowledge through my industry and solicitude. However as soon as I had departed the kingdom, that one turned himself over to abject books in imperial

leisure. But yet in the household of the lord king of the English every day is school, in the constant conversation of the most literate and discussion of questions.

No one is more honest in speech than our king, more polite in eating, more moderate in drinking; no one is more magnificent in gift-giving, no one more munificent in alms-giving: and therefore his name is like poured oil, and the entire church of saints describes the alms of such a one. Our king is peaceable, victorious in war, glorious in peace: he is zealous for the things to be desired in this world and he procures peace for his people. He considers whatever pertains to the peace of the people, in whatever he speaks, in whatever he does; so that his people may rest, he incessantly takes on troubled and enormous labors. It aims to the peace of his people that he calls councils, that he makes laws, that he makes friendships, that he brings low the proud, that he threatens battles, that he launches terror to the princes. Also that immensity of money aims at the peace of his people, which he gives out, which he receives, which he gathers, which he disperses. In walls, in ramparts, in fortifications, in ditches, in enclosures of wild beasts and fish, and in palaces there is no one more subtle, and no one more magnificent to be found.

His most powerful and most noble father the count [of Anjou] extended his borders greatly; but the king added to his paternal lands with abundance in his strong hands the duchy of Normandy, the duchy of Brittany, the kingdom of England, the kingdom of Scotland, the kingdom of Ireland, the kingdom of Wales; he increased inestimably the titles of his magnificent inheritance. No one is more mild to the afflicted, no one more friendly to the poor, no one more unbearable to the proud; he always strives to oppress the proud with the semblance of divinity, to raise up the oppressed, and to stir up against swelling of pride continual persecutions and deadly troubles. When however he may according to the custom of the kingdom have had roles in making elections of most important and most powerful, he nevertheless always had his hands pure and free from all venality. I merely touch upon, I will not describe these and other endowments of soul as much as body, with which nature has marked him out before others; truly I confess my insufficiency and would believe that Cicero and Virgil themselves would sweat under such a labor. I have briefly tasted this little morsel of his appearance and habits at your request; truly I shall seem either to have undertaken an unbearable work, or to have cut back much about the magnificence of so great a man through jealousy. Nevertheless I, serving your charity, do what I can do, and what I know without envy and without detraction, I communicate with most prompt good will, and also among other great men, who write in praise of my lord, I put my might of devotion in a treasure chest along with the poor widow.