Henry VII’s Ascension to the Throne

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On July 6th, 1483, Richard III was crowned King of England in Westminster Abbey. Richard III became king after having Edward V, son of the recently deceased King Edward IV, declared illegitimate, seizing the crown for himself. This act was part of a broader pattern of political instability and power struggles that characterized the Wars of the Roses, a series of civil wars that began in 1455.[[1]](#footnote-30880) During this turbulent period, various factions vied for control of the English throne through battles, alliances, and strategic marriages. One such contender was Henry Tudor, who, despite his weak claim, aimed to end the Wars of the Roses and stabilize England. Motivated by ambition and the need for stability, Henry VII's conquest and pivotal coronation solidified his claim to the throne.

Henry’s claim to the throne was controversial due to his weak lineage, which was dependent on his descent through the female line and the questionable illegitimacy of the Beaufort line. The dispute begins with King Henry V, monarch from 1413 to 1422, and his queen Catherine of Valois. After King Henry V’s death, Catherine remarried Owen Tudor, resulting in Edmund Tudor, Henry’s father. Edmund Tudor married Margaret Beaufort, Henry Tudor's mother, who became the head of the Beaufort house after her uncles and brothers passed away without legitimate heirs. While the house of Beaufort was legitimized as a sub-branch of Lancaster a respected royal family by both Richard II and Pope Boniface IX. After all male Lancasters died out, supporters of the branch saw the Beaufort line as successors.[[2]](#footnote-20950) The complexity of this bloodline highlights the fragility of Henry's claim. However, the Wars of the Roses created a context where claims to the throne were often contested and settled with military victories. This gave Henry the opportunity to push his legitimacy on the battlefield, which he successfully did at the Battle of Bosworth.

The motives for which Henry sought the throne were to bring an end to the civil wars, bring stability to England, and secure his own power and wealth, thereby ensuring his family's lineage. It is the combination of these factors that made Henry pursue the throne so vigorously. During the Wars of the Roses, in 1461 after the Battle of Mortimer’s Cross, Henry’s own grandfather Owen Tudor was executed by the future King Edward IV for being a favorite of King Henry VI.[[3]](#footnote-596) The instability of the Wars of the Roses led to thousands of similar examples where Englishmen fought and killed each other for the ambitions of power-hungry rulers. However, Henry was not too dissimilar from these other self-interested rulers. Henry himself sought the throne partially for his own greed, wealth, and family lineage, as described by the Italian scholar and historian Polydore Vergil, who was asked by Henry himself to write about him. Vergil wrote, “but all these virtues were obscured latterly only by avarice, from which...he suffered.”[[4]](#footnote-1430) Henry’s actions, driven by a desire to end the civil wars between the houses of Lancaster and York, were aimed at unifying the country and securing his and his family’s future. The Wars of the Roses had devastated England, making a unifying leader such as Henry essential for recovery.

Significant opposition from Yorkist claimants delayed Henry’s accession to the throne. Richard III, the reigning king and a member of the house of York, along with other Yorkist claimants such as Edward, Earl of Warwick, posed substantial challenges to Henry's claim. However, Henry was not without his allies, particularly the Duke of Buckingham, Henry Stafford, who became disaffected with Richard III and supported Henry’s claim to the throne. In October of 1483, during Buckingham’s Rebellion, which ultimately failed, it was revealed the significant opposition Richard III faced and the support Henry had.[[5]](#footnote-6940) The Wars of the Roses were characterized by shifting alliances and claims, making the political landscape highly unstable, especially with a prospective ruler like Henry, whose legitimacy was questioned. However, with an army from France, Henry was able to lead his men against Richard III in the Battle of Bosworth Field on August 22, 1485. This battle was a pivotal moment in English history as it marked the end of the Wars of the Roses and the beginning of the Tudor dynasty. Henry’s victory over Richard III not only secured his claim to the throne but also brought an end to the disastrous conflicts that had scared England. The Battle of Bosworth Field proved Henry’s military prowess and the crucial role that battlefield success played in legitimizing his rule.

The coronation was a key event in legitimizing the rule of King Henry VII. On October 30, 1485, Henry VII’s coronation was held in Westminster Abbey. On the morning of the coronation, as Henry processed through the streets, celebrations, crowds, and bonfires were present to celebrate the new king. The excitement of the people was an important factor in legitimizing his rule; however, it was far from the only one. One important decision Henry VII made about his coronation was to hold it before Parliament could take their seats, thus ensuring no question that he obtained the crown on his own. He also made sure he was crowned before his planned wedding to Elizabeth of York, Edward IV’s older daughter, proving that Henry was king in his own right. Finally, Henry had the coronation completed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Bourchier, who had crowned two earlier kings before.[[6]](#footnote-15943) The ceremony and later celebrations were meticulously planned to help solidify Henry’s position as king. This was essential in securing the loyalty of the nobility and subjects, as coronations had done for centuries past.

Henry VII's ascension to the throne, motivated by a goal of stability and ambition, led to the end of the Wars of the Roses. Despite a weak claim to the throne and illegitimacy, Henry won the crown through conquest, and a pivotal coronation solidified his claim.

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