Aegon's Conquest

The maesters of the Citadel who keep the histories of Westeros

have used Aegon’s Conquest as their touchstone for the past three

hundred years. Births, deaths, battles, and other events are dated

either AC (After the Conquest) or BC (Before the Conquest).

True scholars know that such dating is far from precise. Aegon

Targaryen’s conquest of the Seven Kingdoms did not take place in a

single day. More than two years passed between Aegon’s landing and

his Oldtown coronation...and even then the Conquest remained

incomplete, since Dorne remained unsubdued. Sporadic attempts to

bring the Dornishmen into the realm continued all through King

Aegon’s reign and well into the reigns of his sons, making it impossible

to fix a precise end date for the Wars of Conquest.

Even the start date is a matter of some misconception. Many

assume, wrongly, that the reign of King Aegon I Targaryen began on

the day he landed at the mouth of the Blackwater Rush, beneath the

three hills where the city of King’s Landing would eventually stand.

Not so. The day of Aegon’s Landing was celebrated by the king and his

descendants, but the Conqueror actually dated the start of his reign

from the day he was crowned and anointed in the Starry Sept of

Oldtown by the High Septon of the Faith. This coronation took place

two years after Aegon’s Landing, well after all three of the major

battles of the Wars of Conquest had been fought and won. Thus it can

be seen that most of Aegon’s actual conquering took place from 2-1

BC, Before the Conquest.

The Targaryens were of pure Valyrian blood, dragonlords of ancient

lineage. Twelve years before the Doom of Valyria (114 BC), Aenar

Targaryen sold his holdings in the Freehold and the Lands of the Long

Summer, and moved with all his wives, wealth, slaves, dragons,

siblings, kin, and children to Dragonstone, a bleak island citadel

beneath a smoking mountain in the narrow sea.

At its apex Valyria was the greatest city in the known world, the

center of civilization. Within its shining walls, twoscore rival houses

vied for power and glory in court and council, rising and falling in an

endless, subtle, oft savage struggle for dominance. The Targaryens

were far from the most powerful of the dragonlords, and their rivals

saw their flight to Dragonstone as an act of surrender, as cowardice.

But Lord Aenar’s maiden daughter Daenys, known forever afterward

as Daenys the Dreamer, had foreseen the destruction of Valyria by fire.

And when the Doom came twelve years later, the Targaryens were the

only dragonlords to survive.

Dragonstone had been the westernmost outpost of Valyrian power

for two centuries. Its location athwart the Gullet gave its lords a

stranglehold on Blackwater Bay and enabled both the Targaryens and

their close allies, the Velaryons of Driftmark (a lesser house of Valyrian

descent) to fill their coffers off the passing trade. Velaryon ships, along

with those of another allied Valyrian house, the Celtigars of Claw Isle,

dominated the middle reaches of the narrow sea, whilst the Targaryens

ruled the skies with their dragons.

Yet even so, for the best part of a hundred years after the Doom of

Valyria (the rightly named Century of Blood), House Targaryen looked

east, not west, and took little interest in the affairs of Westeros.

Gaemon Targaryen, brother and husband to Daenys the Dreamer,

followed Aenar the Exile as Lord of Dragonstone, and became known

as Gaemon the Glorious. Gaemon’s son Aegon and his daughter Elaena

ruled together after his death. After them the lordship passed to their

son Maegon, his brother Aerys, and Aerys’s sons, Aelyx, Baelon, and

Daemion. The last of the three brothers was Daemion, whose son

Aerion then succeeded to Dragonstone.

The Aegon who would be known to history as Aegon the Conqueror

and Aegon the Dragon was born on Dragonstone in 27 BC. He was the

only son, and second child, of Aerion, Lord of Dragonstone, and Lady

Valaena of House Velaryon, herself half Targaryen on her mother’s

side. Aegon had two trueborn siblings; an elder sister, Visenya, and a

younger sister, Rhaenys. It had long been the custom amongst the

dragonlords of Valyria to wed brother to sister, to keep the bloodlines

pure, but Aegon took both his sisters to bride. By tradition, he would

have been expected to wed only his older sister, Visenya; the inclusion

of Rhaenys as a second wife was unusual, though not without

precedent. It was said by some that Aegon wed Visenya out of duty and

Rhaenys out of desire.

All three siblings had shown themselves to be dragonlords before

they wed. Of the five dragons who had flown with Aenar the Exile from

Valyria, only one survived to Aegon’s day: the great beast called

Balerion, the Black Dread. The dragons Vhagar and Meraxes were

younger, hatched on Dragonstone itself.

A common myth, oft heard amongst the ignorant, claims that Aegon

Targaryen had never set foot upon the soil of Westeros until the day he

set sail to conquer it, but this cannot be truth. Years before that sailing,

the Painted Table had been carved and decorated at Lord Aegon’s

command; a massive slab of wood, some fifty feet long, carved in the

shape of Westeros, and painted to show all the woods and rivers and

towns and castles of the Seven Kingdoms. Plainly, Aegon’s interest in

Westeros long predated the events that drove him to war. As well,

there are reliable reports of Aegon and his sister Visenya visiting the

Citadel of Oldtown in their youth, and hawking on the Arbor as guests

of Lord Redwyne. He may have visited Lannisport as well; accounts

differ.

The Westeros of Aegon’s youth was divided into seven quarrelsome

kingdoms, and there was hardly a time when two or three of these

kingdoms were not at war with one another. The vast, cold, stony

North was ruled by the Starks of Winterfell. In the deserts of Dorne,

the Martell princes held sway. The gold-rich westerlands were ruled by

the Lannisters of Casterly Rock, the fertile Reach by the Gardeners of

Highgarden. The Vale, the Fingers, and the Mountains of the Moon

belonged to House Arryn...but the most belligerent kings of Aegon’s

time were the two whose realms lay closest to Dragonstone, Harren the

Black and Argilac the Arrogant.

From their great citadel, Storm’s End, the Storm Kings of House

Durrandon had once ruled the eastern half of Westeros, from Cape

Wrath to the Bay of Crabs, but their powers had been dwindling for

centuries. The Kings of the Reach had nibbled at their domains from

the west, the Dornishmen harassed them from the south, and Harren

the Black and his ironmen had pushed them from the Trident and the

lands north of the Blackwater Rush. King Argilac, last of the

Durrandon, had arrested this decline for a time, turning back a

Dornish invasion whilst still a boy, crossing the narrow sea to join the

great alliance against the imperialist “tigers” of Volantis, and slaying

Garse VII Gardener, King of the Reach, in the Battle of Summerfield

twenty years later. But Argilac had grown older; his famous mane of

black hair had gone grey, and his prowess at arms had faded.

North of the Blackwater, the riverlands were ruled by the bloody

hand of Harren the Black of House Hoare, King of the Isles and the

Rivers. Harren’s ironborn grandsire, Harwyn Hardhand, had taken the

Trident from Argilac’s grandsire, Arrec, whose own forebears had

thrown down the last of the river kings centuries earlier. Harren’s

father had extended his domains east to Duskendale and Rosby.

Harren himself had devoted most of his long reign, close on forty

years, to building a gigantic castle beside the Gods Eye, but with

Harrenhal at last nearing completion, the ironborn would soon be free

to seek fresh conquests.

No king in Westeros was more feared than Black Harren, whose

cruelty had become legendary all through the Seven Kingdoms. And no

king in Westeros felt more threatened than Argilac the Storm King, last

of the Durrandon, an aging warrior whose only heir was his maiden

daughter. Thus it was that King Argilac reached out to the Targaryens

on Dragonstone, offering Lord Aegon his daughter in marriage, with all

the lands east of the Gods Eye from the Trident to the Blackwater Rush

as her dowry.

Aegon Targaryen spurned the Storm King’s proposal. He had two

wives, he pointed out; he did not need a third. And the dower lands

being offered had belonged to Harrenhal for more than a generation.

They were not Argilac’s to give. Plainly, the aging Storm King meant to

establish the Targaryens along the Blackwater as a buffer between his

own lands and those of Harren the Black.

The Lord of Dragonstone countered with an offer of his own. He

would take the dower lands being offered if Argilac would also cede

Massey’s Hook and the woods and plains from the Blackwater south to

the river Wendwater and the headwaters of the Mander. The pact

would be sealed by the marriage of Argilac’s daughter to Orys

Baratheon, Lord Aegon’s childhood friend and champion.

These terms Argilac the Arrogant rejected angrily. Orys Baratheon

was a baseborn half-brother to Lord Aegon, it was whispered, and the

Storm King would not dishonor his daughter by giving her hand to a

bastard. The very suggestion enraged him. Argilac had the hands of

Aegon’s envoy cut off and returned to him in a box. “These are the only

hands your bastard shall have of me,” he wrote.

Aegon made no reply. Instead he summoned his friends,

bannermen, and principal allies to attend him on Dragonstone. Their

numbers were small. The Velaryons of Driftmark were sworn to House

Targaryen, as were the Celtigars of Claw Isle. From Massey’s Hook

came Lord Bar Emmon of Sharp Point and Lord Massey of

Stonedance, both sworn to Storm’s End, but with closer ties to

Dragonstone. Lord Aegon and his sisters took counsel with them, and

visited the castle sept to pray to the Seven of Westeros as well, though

he had never before been accounted a pious man.

On the seventh day, a cloud of ravens burst from the towers of

Dragonstone to bring Lord Aegon’s word to the Seven Kingdoms of

Westeros. To the seven kings they flew, to the Citadel of Oldtown, to

lords both great and small. All carried the same message: from this day

forth there would be but one king in Westeros. Those who bent the

knee to Aegon of House Targaryen would keep their lands and titles.

Those who took up arms against him would be thrown down, humbled,

and destroyed.

Accounts differ on how many swords set sail from Dragonstone with

Aegon and his sisters. Some say three thousand; others number them

only in the hundreds. This modest Targaryen host put ashore at the

mouth of the Blackwater Rush, on the northern bank where three

wooded hills rose above a small fishing village.

In the days of the Hundred Kingdoms, many petty kings had claimed

dominion over the river mouth, amongst them the Darklyn kings of

Duskendale, the Masseys of Stonedance, and the river kings of old, be

they Mudds, Fishers, Brackens, Blackwoods, or Hooks. Towers and

forts had crowned the three hills at various times, only to be thrown

down in one war or another. Now only broken stones and overgrown

ruins remained to welcome the Targaryens. Though claimed by both

Storm’s End and Harrenhal, the river mouth was undefended, and the

closest castles were held by lesser lords of no great power or military

prowess, and lords moreover who had little reason to love their

nominal overlord, Harren the Black.

Aegon Targaryen quickly threw up a log-and-earth palisade around

the highest of the three hills, and dispatched his sisters to secure the

submission of the nearest castles. Rosby yielded to Rhaenys and

golden-eyed Meraxes without a fight. At Stokeworth a \_ few

crossbowmen loosed bolts at Visenya, until Vhagar’s flames set the

roofs of the castle keep ablaze. Then they too submitted.

The Conquerors’ first true test came from Lord Darklyn of

Duskendale and Lord Mooton of Maidenpool, who joined their power

and marched south with three thousand men to drive the invaders

back into the sea. Aegon sent Orys Baratheon out to attack them on the

march, whilst he descended on them from above with the Black Dread.

Both lords were slain in the one-sided battle that followed; Darklyn’s

son and Mooton’s brother thereafter yielded up their castles and swore

their swords to House Targaryen. At that time Duskendale was the

principal Westerosi port on the narrow sea, and had grown fat and

wealthy from the trade that passed through its harbor. Visenya

Targaryen did not allow the town to be sacked, but she did not hesitate

to claim its riches, greatly swelling the coffers of the Conquerors.

This perhaps would be an apt place to discuss the differing

characters of Aegon Targaryen and his sisters and queens.

Visenya, eldest of the three siblings, was as much a warrior as Aegon

himself, as comfortable in ringmail as in silk. She carried the Valyrian

longsword Dark Sister, and was skilled in its use, having trained beside

her brother since childhood. Though possessed of the silver-gold hair

and purple eyes of Valyria, hers was a harsh, austere beauty. Even

those who loved her best found Visenya stern, serious, and

unforgiving; some said that she played with poisons and dabbled in

dark sorceries.

Rhaenys, youngest of the three Targaryens, was all her sister was

not, playful, curious, impulsive, given to flights of fancy. No true

warrior, Rhaenys loved music, dancing, and poetry, and supported

many a singer, mummer, and puppeteer. Yet it was said that Rhaenys

spent more time on dragonback than her brother and sister combined,

for above all things she loved to fly. She once was heard to say that

before she died she meant to fly Meraxes across the Sunset Sea to see

what lay upon its western shores. Whilst no one ever questioned

Visenya’s fidelity to her brother-husband, Rhaenys surrounded herself

with comely young men, and (it was whispered) even entertained some

in her bedchambers on the nights when Aegon was with her elder

sister. Yet despite these rumors, observers at court could not fail to

note that the king spent ten nights with Rhaenys for every night with

Visenya.

Aegon Targaryen himself, strangely, was as much an enigma to his

contemporaries as to us. Armed with the Valyrian steel blade

Blackfyre, he was counted amongst the greatest warriors of his age, yet

he took no pleasure in feats of arms, and never rode in tourney or

melee. His mount was Balerion the Black Dread, but he flew only to

battle or to travel swiftly across land and sea. His commanding

presence drew men to his banners, yet he had no close friends, save

Orys Baratheon, the companion of his youth. Women were drawn to

him, but Aegon remained ever faithful to his sisters. As king, he put

great trust in his small council and his sisters, leaving much of the day-

to-day governance of the realm to them...yet did not hesitate to take

command when he found it necessary. Though he dealt harshly with

rebels and traitors, he was open-handed with former foes who bent the

knee.

This he showed for the first time at the Aegonfort, the crude wood-

and-earth castle he had raised atop what would henceforth and forever

be known as Aegon’s High Hill. Having taken a dozen castles and

secured the mouth of the Blackwater Rush on both sides of the river,

he commanded the lords he had defeated to attend him. There they

laid their swords at his feet, and Aegon raised them up and confirmed

them in their lands and titles. To his oldest supporters he gave new

honors. Daemon Velaryon, Lord of the Tides, was made master of

ships, in command of the royal fleet. Triston Massey, Lord of

Stonedance, was named master of laws, Crispian Celtigar master of

coin. And Orys Baratheon he proclaimed to be “my shield, my stalwart,

my strong right hand.” Thus Baratheon is reckoned by the maesters

the first King’s Hand.

Heraldic banners had long been a tradition amongst the lords of

Westeros, but such had never been used by the dragonlords of old

Valyria. When Aegon’s knights unfurled his great silken battle

standard, with a red three-headed dragon breathing fire upon a black

field, the lords took it for a sign that he was now truly one of them, a

worthy high king for Westeros. When Queen Visenya placed a Valyrian

steel circlet, studded with rubies, on her brother’s head and Queen

Rhaenys hailed him as, “Aegon, First of His Name, King of All

Westeros, and Shield of His People,” the dragons roared and the lords

and knights sent up a cheer...but the smallfolk, the fishermen and

fieldhands and goodwives, shouted loudest of all.

The seven kings that Aegon the Dragon meant to uncrown were not

cheering, however. In Harrenhal and Storm’s End, Harren the Black

and Argilac the Arrogant had already called their banners. In the west,

King Mern of the Reach rode the ocean road north to Casterly Rock to

meet with King Loren of House Lannister. The Princess of Dorne

dispatched a raven to Dragonstone, offering to join Aegon against

Argilac the Storm King...but as an equal and ally, not a subject.

Another offer of alliance came from the boy king of the Eyrie, Ronnel

Arryn, whose mother asked for all the lands east of the Green Fork of

the Trident for the Vale’s support against Black Harren. Even in the

North, King Torrhen Stark of Winterfell sat with his lords bannermen

and counselors late into the night, discussing what was to be done

about this would-be conqueror. The whole realm waited anxiously to

see where Aegon would move next.

Within days of his coronation, Aegon’s armies were on the march

again. The greater part of his host crossed the Blackwater Rush,

making south for Storm’s End under the command of Orys Baratheon.

Queen Rhaenys accompanied him, astride Meraxes of the golden eyes

and silver scales. The Targaryen fleet, under Daemon Velaryon, left

Blackwater Bay and turned north, for Gulltown and the Vale. With

them went Queen Visenya and Vhagar. The king himself marched

northwest, to the Gods Eye and Harrenhal, the gargantuan fortress

that was the pride and obsession of King Harren the Black.

All three of the Targaryen thrusts faced fierce opposition. Lords

Errol, Fell, and Buckler, bannermen to Storm’s End, surprised the

advance elements of Orys Baratheon’s host as they were crossing the

Wendwater, cutting down more than a thousand men before fading

back into the trees. A hastily assembled Arryn fleet, augmented by a

dozen Braavosi warships, met and defeated the Targaryen fleet in the

waters off Gulltown. Amongst the dead was Aegon’s admiral, Daemon

Velaryon. Aegon himself was attacked on the south shore of the Gods

Eye, not once but twice. The Battle of the Reeds was a Targaryen

victory, but they suffered heavy losses at the Wailing Willows when

two of King Harren’s sons crossed the lake in longboats with muffled

oars and fell upon their rear.

In the end, though, Aegon’s enemies had no answer for his dragons.

The men of the Vale sank a third of the Targaryen ships and captured

near as many, but when Queen Visenya descended upon them from the

sky, their own ships burned. Lords Errol, Fell, and Buckler hid in their

familiar forests until Queen Rhaenys unleashed Meraxes and a wall of

fire swept through the woods, turning the trees to torches. And the

victors at the Wailing Willows, returning across the lake to Harrenhal,

were ill prepared when Balerion fell upon them out of the morning sky.

Harren’s longboats burned. So did Harren’s sons.

Aegon’s foes also found themselves plagued by other enemies. As

Argilac the Arrogant gathered his swords at Storm’s End, pirates from

the Stepstones descended on the shores of Cape Wrath to take

advantage of their absence, and Dornish raiding parties came boiling

out of the Red Mountains to sweep across the marches. In the Vale,

young King Ronnel had to contend with a rebellion on the Three

Sisters, when the Sistermen renounced all allegiance to the Eyrie and

proclaimed Lady Marla Sunderland their queen.

Yet these were but minor vexations compared to what befell Harren

the Black. Though House Hoare had ruled the riverlands for three

generations, the men of the Trident had no love for their ironborn

overlords. Harren the Black had driven thousands to their deaths in

the building of his great castle of Harrenhal, plundering the riverlands

for materials, and beggaring lords and smallfolk alike with his appetite

for gold. So now the riverlands rose against him, led by Lord Edmyn

Tully of Riverrun. Summoned to the defense of Harrenhal, Tully

declared for House Targaryen instead, raised the dragon banner over

his castle, and rode forth with his knights and archers to join his

strength to Aegon’s. His defiance gave heart to the other riverlords.

One by one, the lords of the Trident renounced Harren and declared

for Aegon the Dragon. Blackwoods, Mallisters, Vances, Brackens,

Pipers, Freys, Strongs...summoning their levies, they descended on

Harrenhal.

Suddenly outnumbered, King Harren the Black took refuge in his

supposedly impregnable stronghold. The largest castle ever raised in

Westeros, Harrenhal boasted five gargantuan towers, an inexhaustible

source of fresh water, huge subterranean vaults well stocked with

provisions, and massive walls of black stone higher than any ladder

and too thick to be broken by any ram or shattered by a trebuchet.

Harren barred his gates and settled down with his remaining sons and

supporters to withstand a siege.

Aegon of Dragonstone was of a different mind. Once he had joined

his power with that of Edmyn Tully and the other riverlords to ring the

castle, he sent a maester to the gates under a peace banner, to parley.

Harren emerged to meet him; an old man and grey, yet still fierce in

his black armor. Each king had his banner bearer and his maester in

attendance, so the words that they exchanged are still remembered.

“Yield now,” Aegon began, “and you may remain as Lord of the Iron

Islands. Yield now, and your sons will live to rule after you. I have eight

thousand men outside your walls.”

“What is outside my walls is of no concern to me,” said Harren.

“Those walls are strong and thick.”

“But not so high as to keep out dragons. Dragons fly.”

“T built in stone,” said Harren. “Stone does not burn.”

To which Aegon said, “When the sun sets, your line shall end.”

It is said that Harren spat at that and returned to his castle. Once

inside, he sent every man of his to the parapets, armed with spears and

bows and crossbows, promising lands and riches to whichever of them

could bring the dragon down. “Had I a daughter, the dragonslayer

could claim her hand as well,” Harren the Black proclaimed. “Instead I

will give him one of Tully’s daughters, or all three if he likes. Or he may

pick one of Blackwood’s whelps, or Strong’s, or any girl born of these

traitors of the Trident, these lords of yellow mud.” Then Harren the

Black retired to his tower, surrounded by his household guard, to sup

with his remaining sons.

As the last light of the sun faded, Black Harren’s men stared into the

gathering darkness, clutching their spears and crossbows. When no

dragon appeared, some may have thought that Aegon’s threats had

been hollow. But Aegon Targaryen took Balerion up high, through the

clouds, up and up until the dragon was no bigger than a fly upon the

moon. Only then did he descend, well inside the castle walls. On wings

as black as pitch Balerion plunged through the night, and when the

great towers of Harrenhal appeared beneath him, the dragon roared

his fury and bathed them in black fire, shot through with swirls of red.

Stone does not burn, Harren had boasted, but his castle was not

made of stone alone. Wood and wool, hemp and straw, bread and

salted beef and grain, all took fire. Nor were Harren’s ironmen made of

stone. Smoking, screaming, shrouded in flames, they ran across the

yards and tumbled from the wallwalks to die upon the ground below.

And even stone will crack and melt if a fire is hot enough. The

riverlords outside the castle walls said later that the towers of

Harrenhal glowed red against the night, like five great candles...and

like candles, they began to twist and melt as runnels of molten stone

ran down their sides.

Harren and his last sons died in the fires that engulfed his

monstrous fortress that night. House Hoare died with him, and so too

did the Iron Islands’ hold on the riverlands. The next day, outside the

smoking ruins of Harrenhal, King Aegon accepted an oath of fealty

from Edmyn Tully, Lord of Riverrun, and named him Lord Paramount

of the Trident. The other riverlords did homage as well, to Aegon as

king and to Edmyn Tully as their liege lord. When the ashes had cooled

enough to allow men to enter the castle safely, the swords of the fallen,

many shattered or melted or twisted into ribbons of steel by

dragonfire, were gathered up and sent back to the Aegonfort in

wagons.

South and east, the Storm King’s bannermen proved considerably

more loyal than King Harren’s. Argilac the Arrogant gathered a great

host about him at Storm’s End. The seat of the Durrandons was a

mighty fastness, its great curtain wall even thicker than the walls of

Harrenhal. It too was thought to be impregnable to assault. Word of

King Harren’s end soon reached the ears of his old enemy King Argilac,

however. Lords Fell and Buckler, falling back before the approaching

host (Lord Errol had been killed), had sent him word of Queen

Rhaenys and her dragon. The old warrior king roared that he did not

intend to die as Harren had, cooked inside his own castle like a

suckling pig with an apple in his mouth. No stranger to battle, he

would decide his own fate, sword in hand. So Argilac the Arrogant rode

forth from Storm’s End one last time, to meet his foes in the open field.

The Storm King’s approach was no surprise to Orys Baratheon and

his men; Queen Rhaenys, flying Meraxes, had witnessed Argilac’s

departure from Storm’s End and was able to give the Hand a full

accounting of the enemy’s numbers and dispositions. Orys took up a

strong position on the hills south of Bronzegate, and dug in there on

the high ground to await the coming of the stormlanders.

As the armies came together, the stormlands proved true to their

name. A steady rain began to fall that morning, and by midday it had

turned into a howling gale. King Argilac’s lords bannermen urged him

to delay his attack until the next day, in hopes the rain would pass, but

the Storm King outnumbered the Conquerors almost two to one, and

had almost four times as many knights and heavy horses. The sight of

the Targaryen banners flapping sodden above his own hills enraged

him, and the battle-seasoned old warrior did not fail to note that the

rain was blowing from the south, into the faces of the Targaryen men

on their hills. So Argilac the Arrogant gave the command to attack, and

the battle known to history as the Last Storm began.

The fighting lasted well into the night, a bloody business and far less

one-sided than Aegon’s conquest of Harrenhal. Thrice Argilac the

Arrogant led his knights against the Baratheon positions, but the

slopes were steep and the rains had turned the ground soft and muddy,

so the warhorses struggled and foundered, and the charges lost all

cohesion and momentum. The stormlanders fared better when they

sent their spearmen up the hills on foot. Blinded by the rain, the

invaders did not see them climbing until it was too late, and the wet

bowstrings of the archers made their bows useless. One hill fell, and

then another, and the fourth and final charge of the Storm King and

his knights broke through the Baratheon center...only to come upon

Queen Rhaenys and Meraxes. Even on the ground, the dragon proved

formidable. Dickon Morrigen and the Bastard of Blackhaven,

commanding the vanguard, were engulfed in dragonflame, along with

the knights of King Argilac’s personal guard. The warhorses panicked

and fled in terror, crashing into riders behind them, and turning the

charge into chaos. The Storm King himself was thrown from his

saddle.

Yet still Argilac continued to battle. When Orys Baratheon came

down the muddy hill with his own men, he found the old king holding

off half a dozen men, with as many corpses at his feet. “Stand aside,”

Baratheon commanded. He dismounted, so as to meet the king on

equal footing, and offered the Storm King one last chance to yield.

Argilac cursed him instead. And so they fought, the old warrior king

with his streaming white hair and Aegon’s fierce, black-bearded Hand.

Each man took a wound from the other, it was said, but in the end the

last of the Durrandon got his wish, and died with a sword in his hand

and a curse on his lips. The death of their king took all heart out of the

stormlanders, and as the word spread that Argilac had fallen, his lords

and knights threw down their swords and fled.

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For a few days it was feared that Storm’s End might suffer the same

fate as Harrenhal, for Argilac’s daughter Argella barred her gates at the

approach of Orys Baratheon and the Targaryen host, and declared

herself the Storm Queen. Rather than bend the knee, the defenders of

Storm’s End would die to the last man, she promised when Queen

Rhaenys flew Meraxes into the castle to parley. “You may take my

castle, but you will win only bones and blood and ashes,” she

announced...but the soldiers of the garrison proved less eager to die.

That night they raised a peace banner, threw open the castle gate, and

delivered Lady Argella gagged, chained, and naked to the camp of Orys

Baratheon.

It is said that Baratheon unchained her with his own hands, wrapped

his cloak around her, poured her wine, and spoke to her gently, telling

her of her father’s courage and the manner of his death. And afterward,

to honor the fallen king, he took the arms and words of the Durrandon

for his own. The crowned stag became his sigil, Storm’s End became

his seat, and Lady Argella his wife.

With both the riverlands and stormlands now under the control of

Aegon the Dragon and his allies, the remaining kings of Westeros saw

plainly that their own turns were coming. At Winterfell, King Torrhen

called his banners; given the vast distances in the North, he knew that

assembling an army would take time. Queen Sharra of the Vale, regent

for her son Ronnel, took refuge in the Eyrie, looked to her defenses,

and sent an army to the Bloody Gate, gateway to the Vale of Arryn. In

her youth Queen Sharra had been lauded as “the Flower of the

Mountain,” the fairest maid in all the Seven Kingdoms. Perhaps hoping

to sway Aegon with her beauty, she sent him a portrait and offered

herself to him in marriage, provided he named her son Ronnel as his

heir. Though the portrait did finally reach him, it is not known whether

Aegon Targaryen ever replied to her proposal; he had two queens

already, and Sharra Arryn was by then a faded flower, ten years his

elder.

Meanwhile, the two great western kings had made common cause

and assembled their own armies, intent on putting an end to Aegon for

good and all. From Highgarden marched Mern IX of House Gardener,

King of the Reach, with a mighty host. Beneath the walls of Castle

Goldengrove, seat of House Rowan, he met Loren I Lannister, King of

the Rock, leading his own host down from the westerlands. Together

the Two Kings commanded the mightiest host ever seen in Westeros:

an army fifty-five thousand strong, including some six hundred lords

great and small and more than five thousand mounted knights. “Our

iron fist,” boasted King Mern. His four sons rode beside him, and both

of his young grandsons attended him as squires.

The Two Kings did not linger long at Goldengrove; a host of such

size must remain on the march, lest it eat the surrounding countryside

bare. The allies set out at once, marching north by northeast through

tall grasses and golden fields of wheat.

Advised of their coming in his camp beside the Gods Eye, Aegon

gathered his own strength and advanced to meet these new foes. He

commanded only a fifth as many men as the Two Kings, and much of

his strength was made up of men sworn to the riverlords, whose loyalty

to House Targaryen was of recent vintage, and untested. With the

smaller host, however, Aegon was able to move much more quickly

than his foes. At the town of Stoney Sept, both his queens joined him

with their dragons—Rhaenys from Storm’s End and Visenya from

Crackclaw Point, where she had accepted many fervent pledges of

fealty from the local lords. Together the three Targaryens watched

from the sky as Aegon’s army crossed the headwaters of the Blackwater

Rush and raced south.

The two armies came together amongst the wide, open plains south

of the Blackwater, near to where the goldroad would run one day. The

Two Kings rejoiced when their scouts returned to them and reported

Targaryen numbers and dispositions. They had five men for every one

of Aegon’s, it seemed, and the disparity in lords and knights was even

greater. And the land was wide and open, all grass and wheat as far as

the eye could see, ideal for heavy horse. Aegon Targaryen would not

command the high ground, as Orys Baratheon had at the Last Storm;

the ground was firm, not muddy. Nor would they be troubled by rain.

The day was cloudless, though windy. There had been no rain for more

than a fortnight.

King Mern had brought half again as many men to the battle as King

Loren, and so demanded the honor of commanding the center. His son

and heir, Edmund, was given the vanguard. King Loren and his knights

would form the right, Lord Oakheart the left. With no natural barriers

to anchor the Targaryen line, the Two Kings meant to sweep around

Aegon on both flanks, then take him in the rear, whilst their “iron fist,”

a great wedge of armored knights and high lords, smashed through

Aegon’s center.

Aegon Targaryen drew his own men up in a rough crescent bristling

with spears and pikes, with archers and crossbowmen just behind and

light cavalry on either flank. He gave command of his host to Jon

Mooton, Lord of Maidenpool, one of the first foes to come over to his

cause. The king himself intended to do his fighting from the sky, beside

his queens. Aegon had noted the absence of rain as well; the grass and

wheat that surrounded the armies was tall and ripe for harvest...and

very dry.

The Targaryens waited until the Two Kings sounded their trumpets

and started forward beneath a sea of banners. King Mern himself led

the charge against the center on his golden stallion, his son Gawen

beside him with his banner, a great green hand upon a field of white.

Roaring and screaming, urged on by horns and drums, the Gardeners

and Lannisters charged through a storm of arrows down unto their

foes, sweeping aside the Targaryen spearmen, shattering their ranks.

But by then Aegon and his sisters were in the air.

Aegon flew above the ranks of his foes upon Balerion, through a

storm of spears and stones and arrows, swooping down repeatedly to

bathe his foes in flame. Rhaenys and Visenya set fires upwind of the

enemy and behind them. The dry grasses and stands of wheat went up

at once. The wind fanned the flames and blew the smoke into the faces

of the advancing ranks of the Two Kings. The scent of fire sent their

mounts into panic, and as the smoke thickened, horse and rider alike

were blinded. Their ranks began to break as walls of fire rose on every

side of them. Lord Mooton’s men, safely upwind of the conflagration,

waited with their bows and spears, and made short work of the burned

and burning men who came staggering from the inferno.

The Field of Fire, the battle was named afterward.

More than four thousand men died in the flames. Another thousand

perished by sword and spear and arrow. Tens of thousands suffered

burns, some so bad that they would remain scarred for life. King Mern

IX was amongst the dead, together with his sons, grandsons, brothers,

cousins, and other kin. One nephew survived for three days. When he

died of his burns, House Gardener died with him. King Loren of the

Rock lived, riding through a wall of flame and smoke to safety when he

saw the battle lost.

The Targaryens lost fewer than a hundred men. Queen Visenya took

an arrow in one shoulder, but soon recovered. As the dragons gorged

themselves on the dead, Aegon commanded that the swords of the

slain be gathered up and sent downriver.

Loren Lannister was captured the next day. The King of the Rock

laid his sword and crown at Aegon’s feet, bent the knee, and did him

homage. And Aegon, true to his promises, lifted his beaten foe back to

his feet and confirmed him in his lands and lordship, naming him Lord

of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West. Lord Loren’s bannermen

followed his example, and so too did many lords of the Reach, those

who had survived the dragonfire.

Yet the conquest of the west remained incomplete, so King Aegon

parted from his sisters and marched at once for Highgarden, hoping to

secure its surrender before some other claimant could seize it for his

own. He found the castle in the hands of its steward, Harlan Tyrell,

whose forebears had served the Gardeners for centuries. Tyrell yielded

up the keys to the castle without a fight and pledged his support to the

conquering king. In reward Aegon granted him Highgarden and all its

domains, naming him Warden of the South and Lord Paramount of the

Mander, and giving him dominion over all House Gardener’s former

vassals.

It was King Aegon’s intent to continue his march south and enforce

the submission of Oldtown, the Arbor, and Dorne, but whilst at

Highgarden word of a new challenge came to his ears. Torrhen Stark,

King in the North, had crossed the Neck and entered the riverlands,

leading an army of savage northmen thirty thousand strong. Aegon at

once started north to meet him, racing ahead of his army on the wings

of Balerion, the Black Dread. He sent word to his two queens as well,

and to all the lords and knights who had bent the knee to him after

Harrenhal and the Field of Fire.

When Torrhen Stark reached the banks of the Trident, he found a

host half again the size of his own awaiting him south of the river.

Riverlords, westermen, stormlanders, men of the Reach...all had come.

And above their camp Balerion, Meraxes, and Vhagar prowled the sky

in ever-widening circles.

Torrhen’s scouts had seen the ruins of Harrenhal, where slow red

fires still burned beneath the rubble. The King in the North had heard

many accounts of the Field of Fire as well. He knew that the same fate

might await him if he tried to force a crossing of the river. Some of his

lords bannermen urged him to attack all the same, insisting that

northern valor would carry the day. Others urged him to fall back to

Moat Cailin and make his stand there on northern soil. The king’s

bastard brother Brandon Snow offered to cross the Trident alone

under cover of darkness, to slay the dragons whilst they slept.

King Torrhen did send Brandon Snow across the Trident. But he

crossed with three maesters by his side, not to kill but to treat. All

through the night messages went back and forth. The next morning,

Torrhen Stark himself crossed the Trident. There upon the south bank

of the Trident, he knelt, laid the ancient crown of the Kings of Winter

at Aegon’s feet, and swore to be his man. He rose as Lord of Winterfell

and Warden of the North, a king no more. From that day to this day,

Torrhen Stark is remembered as the King Who Knelt...but no

northman left his burned bones beside the Trident, and the swords

Aegon collected from Lord Stark and his vassals were not twisted nor

melted nor bent.

Now Aegon Targaryen and his queens parted company. Aegon

turned south once again, marching toward Oldtown, whilst his two

sisters mounted their dragons—Visenya for the Vale of Arryn and

Rhaenys for Sunspear and the deserts of Dorne.

Sharra Arryn had strengthened the defenses of Gulltown, moved a

strong host to the Bloody Gate, and tripled the size of the garrisons in

Stone, Snow, and Sky, the waycastles that guarded the approach to the

Eyrie. All these defenses proved useless against Visenya Targaryen,

who rode Vhagar’s leathery wings above them all and landed in the

Eyrie’s inner courtyard. When the regent of the Vale rushed out to

confront her, with a dozen guards at her back, she found Visenya with

Ronnel Arryn seated on her knee, staring at the dragon, wonder-

struck. “Mother, can I go flying with the lady?” the boy king asked. No

threats were spoken, no angry words exchanged. The two queens

smiled at one another and exchanged courtesies instead. Then Lady

Sharra sent for the three crowns (her own regent’s coronet, her son’s

small crown, and the Falcon Crown of Mountain and Vale that the

Arryn kings had worn for a thousand years), and surrendered them to

Queen Visenya, along with the swords of her garrison. And it was said

afterward that the little king flew thrice about the summit of the

Giant’s Lance, and landed to find himself a little lord. Thus did Visenya

Targaryen bring the Vale of Arryn into her brother’s realm.

Rhaenys Targaryen had no such easy conquest. A host of Dornish

spearmen guarded the Prince’s Pass, the gateway through the Red

Mountains, but Rhaenys did not engage them. She flew above the pass,

above the red sands and the white, and descended upon Vaith to

demand its submission, only to find the castle empty and abandoned.

In the town beneath its walls, only women and children and old men

remained. When asked where their lords had gone, they would only

say, “Away.” Rhaenys followed the river downstream to Godsgrace,

seat of House Allyrion, but it too was deserted. On she flew. Where the

Greenblood met the sea, Rhaenys came upon the Planky Town, where

hundreds of poleboats, fishing skiffs, barges, houseboats, and hulks sat

baking in the sun, joined together with ropes and chains and planks to

make a floating city, yet only a few old women and small children

appeared to peer up at her as Meraxes circled overhead.

Finally the queen’s flight took her to Sunspear, the ancient seat of

House Martell, where she found the Princess of Dorne waiting in her

abandoned castle. Meria Martell was eighty years of age, the maesters

tell us, and had ruled the Dornishmen for sixty of those years. She was

very fat, blind, and almost bald, her skin sallow and sagging. Argilac

the Arrogant had named her “the Yellow Toad of Dorne,” but neither

age nor blindness had dulled her wits.

“T will not fight you,” Princess Meria told Rhaenys, “nor will I kneel

to you. Dorne has no king. Tell your brother that.”

“T shall,” Rhaenys replied, “but we will come again, Princess, and the

next time we shall come with fire and blood.”

“Your words,” said Princess Meria. “Ours are Unbowed, Unbent,

Unbroken. You may burn us, my lady...but you will not bend us, break

us, or make us bow. This is Dorne. You are not wanted here. Return at

your peril.”

Thus queen and princess parted, and Dorne remained unconquered.

To the west, Aegon Targaryen met a warmer welcome. The greatest

city in all of Westeros, Oldtown was ringed about with massive walls,

and ruled by the Hightowers of the Hightower, the oldest, richest, and

most powerful of the noble houses of the Reach. Oldtown was also the

center of the Faith. There dwelt the High Septon, Father of the

Faithful, the voice of the new gods on earth, who commanded the

obedience of millions of devout throughout the realms (save in the

North, where the old gods still held sway), and the blades of the Faith

Militant, the fighting order the smallfolk called the Stars and Swords.

Yet when Aegon Targaryen and his host approached Oldtown, they

found the city gates open and Lord Hightower waiting to make his

submission. As it happened, when word of Aegon’s landing first

reached Oldtown, the High Septon had locked himself within the

Starry Sept for seven days and seven nights, seeking the guidance of

the gods. He took no nourishment but bread and water, and spent all

his waking hours in prayer, moving from one altar to the next. And on

the seventh day, the Crone had lifted up her golden lamp to show him

the path ahead. If Oldtown took up arms against Aegon the Dragon,

His High Holiness saw, the city would surely burn, and the Hightower

and the Citadel and the Starry Sept would be cast down and destroyed.

Manfred Hightower, Lord of Oldtown, was a cautious lord and godly.

One of his younger sons served with the Warrior’s Sons, and another

had only recently taken vows as a septon. When the High Septon told

him of the vision vouchsafed him by the Crone, Lord Hightower

determined that he would not oppose the Conqueror by force of arms.

Thus it was that no men from Oldtown burned on the Field of Fire,

though the Hightowers were bannermen to the Gardeners of

Highgarden. And thus it was that Lord Manfred rode forth to greet

Aegon the Dragon as he approached, and to offer up his sword, his city,

and his oath. (Some say that Lord Hightower also offered up the hand

of his youngest daughter, which Aegon declined politely, lest it offend

his two queens.)

Three days later, in the Starry Sept, His High Holiness himself

anointed Aegon with the seven oils, placed a crown upon his head, and

proclaimed him Aegon of House Targaryen, the First of His Name,

King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven

Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm. (“Seven Kingdoms” was the

style used, though Dorne had not submitted. Nor would it, for more

than a century to come.)

Only a handful of lords had been present for Aegon’s first coronation

at the mouth of the Blackwater, but hundreds were on hand to witness

his second, and tens of thousands cheered him afterward in the streets

of Oldtown as he rode through the city on Balerion’s back. Amongst

those at Aegon’s second coronation were the maesters and

archmaesters of the Citadel. Perhaps for that reason, it was this

coronation, rather than the Aegonfort crowning on the day of Aegon’s

landing, that became fixed as the start of Aegon’s reign.

Thus were the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros hammered into one

great realm, by the will of Aegon the Conqueror and his sisters.

Many thought that King Aegon would make Oldtown his royal seat

after the wars were done, whilst others thought he would rule from

Dragonstone, the ancient island citadel of House Targaryen. The king

surprised them all by proclaiming his intent to make his court in the

new town already rising upon the three hills at the mouth of the

Blackwater Rush, where he and his sisters had first set foot on the soil

of Westeros. King’s Landing, the new town would be called. From there

Aegon the Dragon would rule his realm, holding court from a great

metal seat made from the melted, twisted, beaten, and broken blades

of all his fallen foes, a perilous seat that would soon be known through

all the world as the Iron Throne of Westeros.

Reign of Ae Dragon

The Wars of King Aegon I

T he long reign of King Aegon I Targaryen (1 AC-37 AC) was by

and large a peaceful one...in his later years, especially. But before

the Dragon’s Peace, as the last two decades of his kingship were later

called by the maesters of the Citadel, came the Dragon’s wars, the last

of which was as cruel and bloody a conflict as any ever fought in

Westeros.

Though the Wars of Conquest were said to have ended when Aegon

was crowned and anointed by the High Septon in the Starry Sept of

Oldtown, not all of Westeros had yet submitted to his rule.

In the Bite, the lords of the Three Sisters had taken advantage of the

chaos of Aegon’s Conquest to declare themselves a free nation and

crown Lady Marla of House Sunderland their queen. As the Arryn fleet

had largely been destroyed during the Conquest, the king commanded

his Warden of the North, Torrhen Stark of Winterfell, to end the

Sistermen’s Rebellion, and a northern army departed from White

Harbor on a fleet of hired Braavosi galleys, under the command of Ser

Warrick Manderly. The sight of his sails, and the sudden appearance of

Queen Visenya and Vhagar in the skies above Sisterton, took the heart

out of the Sistermen; they promptly deposed Queen Marla in favor of

her younger brother. Steffon Sunderland renewed his fealty to the

Eyrie, bent the knee to Queen Visenya, and gave his sons over as

hostages for his good behavior, one to be fostered with the Manderlys,

the other with the Arryns. His sister, the deposed queen, was exiled

and imprisoned. After five years, her tongue was removed, and she

spent the remainder of her life with the silent sisters, tending to the

noble dead.

On the other side of Westeros, the Iron Islands were in chaos. House

Hoare had ruled the ironmen for long centuries, only to be

extinguished in a single night when Aegon unleashed Balerion’s fires

on Harrenhal. Though Harren the Black and his sons perished in those

flames, Qhorin Volmark of Harlaw, whose grandmother had been a

younger sister of Harren’s grandsire, declared himself the rightful heir

“of the black line,” and assumed the kingship.

Not all ironborn accepted his claim, however. On Old Wyk, under

the bones of Nagga the Sea Dragon, the priests of the Drowned God

placed a driftwood crown on the head of one of their own, the barefoot

holy man Lodos, who proclaimed himself the living son of the

Drowned God and was said to be able to work miracles. Other

claimants arose on Great Wyk, Pyke, and Orkmont, and for more than

a year their adherents battled one another on land and sea. It was said

that the waters between the islands were so choked with corpses that

krakens appeared by the hundreds, drawn by the blood.

Aegon Targaryen put an end to the fighting. He descended on the

islands in 2 AC, riding Balerion. With him came the war fleets of the

Arbor, Highgarden, and Lannisport, and even a few longships from

Bear Island dispatched by Torrhen Stark. The ironmen, their numbers

diminished by a year of fratricidal war, put up little resistance...indeed,

many hailed the coming of the dragons. King Aegon slew Qhorin

Volmark with Blackfyre, but allowed his infant son to inherit his

father’s lands and castle. On Old Wyk, the priest-king Lodos,

purported son of the Drowned God, called upon the krakens of the

deep to rise and drag down the invaders’ ships. When that failed to

happen, Lodos filled his robes with stones and walked into the sea, “to

seek my father’s counsel.” Thousands followed. Their bloated, crab-

eaten bodies washed up on the shores of Old Wyk for years to come.

Afterward, the issue arose as to who should rule the Iron Islands for

the king. It was suggested that the ironmen be made vassals of the

Tullys of Riverrun or the Lannisters of Casterly Rock. Some even urged

that they be given over to Winterfell. Aegon listened to each claim, but

in the end decided that he would allow the ironborn to choose their

own lord paramount. To no one’s surprise, they chose one of their own:

Vickon Greyjoy, Lord Reaper of Pyke. Lord Vickon did homage to King

Aegon, and the Dragon departed with his fleets.

Greyjoy’s writ extended only to the Iron Islands, however; he

renounced all claim to the lands House Hoare had seized upon the

mainland. Aegon granted the ruined castle of Harrenhal and its

domains to Ser Quenton Qoherys, his master-at-arms on Dragonstone,

but required him to accept Lord Edmyn Tully of Riverrun as his liege

lord. The new-made Lord Quenton had two strong sons and a plump

grandson to assure the succession, but as his first wife had been

carried off by spotted fever three years earlier, he further agreed to

take one of Lord Tully’s daughters as his bride.

With the submission of the Three Sisters and the Iron Islands, all of

Westeros south of the Wall was now ruled by Aegon Targaryen, save

Dorne alone. So it was to Dorne that the Dragon next turned his

attention. Aegon first attempted to win the Dornishmen with words,

dispatching a delegation of high lords, maesters, and septons to

Sunspear to treat with Princess Meria Martell, the so-called Yellow

Toad of Dorne, and persuade her of the advantages of joining her

realm to his. Their negotiations continued for the best part of a year,

but achieved nothing.

The start of the First Dornish War is generally fixed at 4 AC, when

Rhaenys Targaryen returned to Dorne. This time she came with fire

and blood, just as she had threatened. Riding Meraxes, the queen

descended out of a clear blue sky and set the Planky Town ablaze, the

fires leaping from boat to boat until the whole mouth of the

Greenblood was choked with burning flotsam, and the pillar of smoke

could be seen as far away as Sunspear. The denizens of the floating

town took to the river for refuge from the flames, so fewer than a

hundred died in the attack, and most of those from drowning rather

than dragonfire. But first blood had been shed.

Elsewhere, Orys Baratheon led one thousand picked knights up the

Boneway, whilst Aegon himself marched through the Prince’s Pass at

the head of an army thirty thousand strong, led by near two thousand

mounted knights and three hundred lords and bannermen. Lord

Harlan Tyrell, the Warden of the South, was heard to say that they had

more than enough power to smash any Dornish army that tried to

stand before them, even without Aegon and Balerion.

oe

No doubt he had the right of that, but the issue was never proved, for

the Dornishmen never offered battle. Instead they withdrew before

King Aegon’s host, burning their crops in the field and poisoning every

well. The invaders found the Dornish watchtowers in the Red

Mountains slighted and abandoned. In the high passes, Aegon’s

vanguard found its way barred by a wall of sheep carcasses, shorn of all

wool and too rotted to eat. The king’s army was already running short

of food and fodder by the time they emerged from the Prince’s Pass to

face the Dornish sands. There Aegon divided his forces, sending Lord

Tyrell south against Uthor Uller, Lord of the Hellholt, whilst he himself

turned eastward, to besiege Lord Fowler in his mountain fastness

Skyreach.

It was the second year of autumn, and winter was thought to be close

at hand. In that season, the invaders hoped, the heat in the deserts

would be less, water more plentiful. But the Dornish sun proved

unrelenting as Lord Tyrell marched toward Hellholt. In such heat, men

drink more, and every waterhole and oasis in the army’s path had been

poisoned. Horses began to die, more every day, followed by their

riders. The proud knights discarded their banners, their shields, their

very armor. Lord Tyrell lost a quarter of his men and almost all his

horses to the Dornish sands, and when at last he reached the Hellholt,

he found it abandoned.

Orys Baratheon’s attack fared little better. His horses struggled on

the stony slopes of the narrow, twisting passes, but many balked

completely when they reached the steepest sections of the road, where

the Dornish had chiseled steps into the mountains. Boulders rained

down on the Hand’s knights from above, the work of defenders the

stormlanders never saw. Where the Boneway crossed the river Wyl,

Dornish archers suddenly appeared as the column was making its way

across a bridge, and arrows rained down by the thousands. When Lord

Orys ordered his men to fall back, a massive rockfall cut off their

retreat. With no way forward and no way back, the stormlanders were

butchered like hogs in a pen. Orys Baratheon himself was spared,

along with a dozen other lords thought worth the ransom, but they

found themselves captives of Wyl of Wyl, the savage mountain lord

called Widow-lover.

King Aegon himself had more success. Marching eastward through

the foothills, where runoff from the heights provided water and game

was plentiful in the valleys, he took the castle Skyreach by storm, won

Yronwood after a brief siege. The Lord of the Tor had recently died,

and his steward surrendered without a fight. Farther east, Lord Toland

of Ghost Hill sent forth his champion to challenge the king to single

combat. Aegon accepted and slew the man, only to discover afterward

that he had not been Toland’s champion, but his fool. Lord Toland

himself was gone.

As was Meria Martell, the Princess of Dorne, when King Aegon

descended upon Sunspear on Balerion, to find his sister Rhaenys there

before him. After burning the Planky Town, she had taken

Lemonwood, Spottswood, and Stinkwater, accepting obeisances from

old women and children, but nowhere finding an actual enemy. Even

the shadow city outside the walls of Sunspear was half-deserted, and

none of those who remained would admit to any knowledge of the

whereabouts of the Dornish lords and princess. “The Yellow Toad has

melted into the sands,” Queen Rhaenys told King Aegon.

Aegon’s answer was a declaration of victory. In the great hall at

Sunspear, he gathered together what dignitaries remained and told

them that Dorne was now part of the realm, that henceforth they

would be his leal subjects, that their former lords were rebels and

outlaws. Rewards were offered for their heads, particularly that of the

Yellow Toad, Princess Meria Martell. Lord Jon Rosby was named

Castellan of Sunspear and Warden of the Sands, to rule Dorne in the

king’s name. Stewards and castellans were named for all the other

lands and castles the Conqueror had taken. Then King Aegon and his

host departed back the way they had come, west along the foothills and

through the Prince’s Pass.

They had hardly reached King’s Landing before Dorne erupted

behind them. Dornish spearmen appeared from nowhere, like desert

flowers after a rain. Skyreach, Yronwood, the Tor, and Ghost Hill were

all recaptured within a fortnight, their royal garrisons put to the sword.

Aegon’s castellans and stewards were allowed to die only after long

torment. It was said that the Dornish lords had a wager over who could

keep their captive alive the longest whilst dismembering them. Lord

Rosby, Castellan of Sunspear and Warden of the Sands, had a kinder

end than most. After the Dornishmen swarmed in from the shadow

city to retake the castle, he was bound hand and foot, dragged to the

top of the Spear Tower, and thrown from a window by none other than

the aged Princess Meria herself.

Soon only Lord Tyrell and his host remained. King Aegon had left

Tyrell behind when he departed. Hellholt, a strong castle on the river

Brimstone, was thought to be well situated to deal with any revolts. But

the river was sulfurous, and the fish taken from it made the

Highgardeners sick. House Qorgyle of Sandstone had never submitted,

and Qorgyle spearmen cut down Tyrell’s foraging parties and patrols

whenever they strayed too far west. The Vaiths of Vaith did the same to

the east. When word of the Defenestration of Sunspear reached the

Hellholt, Lord Tyrell gathered his remaining strength and set off across

the sands. His announced intention was to capture Vaith, march east

along the river, retake Sunspear and the shadow city, and punish Lord

Rosby’s murderers. But somewhere east of the Hellholt amidst the red

sands, Tyrell and his entire army disappeared. No man of them was

ever seen again.

Aegon Targaryen was not a man to accept defeat. The war would

drag on for another seven years, though after 6 AC the fighting

degenerated into an endless bloody series of atrocities, raids, and

retaliations, broken up by long periods of inactivity, a dozen short

truces, and numerous murders and assassinations.

In 7 AC, Orys Baratheon and the other lords who had been taken

captive on the Boneway were ransomed back to King’s Landing for

their weight in gold, but on their return it was found that the Widow-

lover had lopped off each man’s sword hand, so they might never again

take up swords against Dorne. In retaliation, King Aegon himself

descended on the mountain fastnesses of the Wyls with Balerion, and

reduced half a dozen of their keeps and watchtowers to heaps of

molten stone. The Wyls took refuge in caves and tunnels beneath their

mountains, however, and the Widow-lover lived another twenty years.

In 8 AC, a very dry year, Dornish raiders crossed the Sea of Dorne on

ships provided by a pirate king from the Stepstones, attacking half a

dozen towns and villages along the south shore of Cape Wrath and

setting fires that spread through half the rainwood. “Fire for fire,”

Princess Meria is reported to have said.

This was not something the Targaryens would allow to go

unanswered. Later that same year, Visenya Targaryen appeared in the

skies of Dorne, and Vhagar’s fires were loosed upon Sunspear,

Lemonwood, Ghost Hill, and the Tor.

In 9 AC, Visenya returned again, this time with Aegon himself flying

beside her, and Sandstone, Vaith, and the Hellholt burned.

The Dornish answer came the next year, when Lord Fowler led an

army through the Prince’s Pass and into the Reach, moving so swiftly

that he was able to burn a dozen villages and capture the great border

castle Nightsong before the marcher lords realized the foe was upon

them. When word of the attack reached Oldtown, Lord Hightower sent

his son Addam with a strong force to retake Nightsong, but the

Dornish had anticipated just that thing. A second Dornish army under

Ser Joffrey Dayne came down from Starfall and attacked the city.

Oldtown’s walls proved too strong for the Dornish to overcome, but

Dayne burned fields, farms, and villages for twenty leagues around the

city, and slew Lord Hightower’s younger son, Garmon, when the boy

led a sortie against him. Ser Addam Hightower reached Nightsong only

to find that Lord Fowler had put the castle to the torch and its garrison

to the sword. Lord Caron and his wife and children had been carried

back to Dorne as captives. Rather than pursue, Ser Addam returned at

once to Oldtown to relieve the city, but Ser Joffrey and his army had

melted back into the mountains as well.

Old Lord Manfred Hightower died soon after. Ser Addam succeeded

his father as the Lord of the High Tower, as Oldtown cried out for

vengeance. King Aegon flew Balerion to Highgarden to take counsel

with his Warden of the South, but Theo Tyrell, the young lord, was

most reluctant to contemplate another invasion of Dorne after the fate

that had befallen his father.

Once again the king unleashed his dragons against Dorne. Aegon

himself fell upon Skyreach, vowing to make the Fowler seat “a second

Harrenhal.” Visenya and Vhagar brought fire and blood to Starfall.

And Rhaenys and Meraxes returned once more to the Hellholt...where

tragedy struck. The Targaryen dragons, bred and trained to battle, had

flown through storms of spears and arrows on many occasions, and

suffered little harm. The scales of a full-grown dragon were harder

than steel, and even those arrows that struck home seldom penetrated

enough to do more than enrage the great beasts. But as Meraxes

banked above the Hellholt, a defender atop the castle’s highest tower

triggered a scorpion, and a yard-long iron bolt caught the queen’s

dragon in the right eye. Meraxes did not die at once, but came crashing

to earth in mortal agony, destroying the tower and a large section of

the Hellholt’s curtain wall in her death throes.

Whether Rhaenys Targaryen outlived her dragon remains a matter

of dispute. Some say that she lost her seat and fell to her death, others

that she was crushed beneath Meraxes in the castle yard. A few

accounts claim the queen survived her dragon’s fall, only to die a slow

death by torment in the dungeons of the Ullers. The true

circumstances of her demise will likely never be known, but Rhaenys

Targaryen, sister and wife to King Aegon I, perished at the Hellholt in

Dorne in the 10th year After the Conquest.

The next two years were the years of the Dragon’s Wroth. Every

castle in Dorne was burned thrice over, as Balerion and Vhagar

returned time and time again. The sands around the Hellholt were

fused into glass in places, so hot was Balerion’s fiery breath. The

Dornish lords were forced into hiding, but even that did not buy them

safety. Lord Fowler, Lord Vaith, Lady Toland, and four successive

Lords of the Hellholt were murdered, one after the other, for the Iron

Throne had offered a lord’s ransom in gold for the head of any Dornish

lord. Only two of the killers lived to collect their rewards, however, and

the Dornishmen took their reprisals, repaying blood with blood. Lord

Connington of Griffin’s Roost was killed whilst hunting, Lord Mertyns

of Mistwood poisoned with his whole household by a cask of Dornish

wine, Lord Fell smothered in a brothel in King’s Landing.

Nor were the Targaryens themselves exempt. The king was attacked

thrice, and would have fallen on two of those occasions but for his

guards. Queen Visenya was set upon one night in King’s Landing. Two

of her escorts were slain before Visenya herself cut down the last

attacker with Dark Sister.

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The most infamous act of that bloody age occurred in 12 AC, when

Wyl of Wyl, the Widow-lover, arrived uninvited at the wedding of Ser

Jon Cafferen, heir to Fawnton, to Alys Oakheart, daughter to the Lord

of Old Oak. Admitted through a postern gate by a treacherous servant,

the Wyl attackers slew Lord Oakheart and most of the wedding guests,

then made the bride look on as they gelded her husband. Afterward

they took turns raping Lady Alys and her handmaids, then carried

them off and sold them to a Myrish slaver.

By then Dorne was a smoking desert, beset by famine, plague, and

blight. “A blasted land,” traders from the Free Cities called it. Yet

House Martell still remained Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken, as their

words avowed. One Dornish knight, brought before Queen Visenya as a

captive, insisted that Meria Martell would sooner see her people dead

than slaves to House Targaryen. Visenya replied that she and her

brother would be glad to oblige the princess.

Age and ill health finally did what dragons and armies could not. In

13 AC, Meria Martell, the Yellow Toad of Dorne, died abed (whilst

having intimate relations with a stallion, her enemies insisted). Her

son Nymor succeeded her as Lord of Sunspear and Prince of Dorne.

Sixty years old, his health already failing, the new Dornish prince had

no appetite for further slaughter. He began his reign by sending a

delegation to King’s Landing, to return the skull of the dragon Meraxes

and offer King Aegon terms of peace. His own heir, his daughter Deria,

led the embassy.

Prince Nymor’s peace proposals encountered strong opposition in

King’s Landing. Queen Visenya was hard set against them. “No peace

without submission,” she declared, and her friends on the king’s

council echoed her words. Orys Baratheon, who had grown bent and

bitter in his later years, argued for sending Princess Deria back to her

father less a hand. Lord Oakheart sent a raven, suggesting that the

Dornish girl be sold into “the meanest brothel in King’s Landing, till

every beggar in the city has had his pleasure of her.” Aegon Targaryen

dismissed all such proposals; Princess Deria had come as an envoy

under a banner of peace and would suffer no harm under his roof, he

vowed.

The king was weary of war, all men agreed, but granting the

Dornishmen peace without submission would be tantamount to saying

that his beloved sister Rhaenys had died in vain, that all the blood and

death had been for naught. The lords of his small council further

cautioned that any such peace could be seen as a sign of weakness and

might encourage fresh rebellions, which would then need to be put

down. Aegon knew that the Reach, the stormlands, and the marches

had suffered grievously during the fighting, and would neither forgive

nor forget. Even in King’s Landing, the king dared not let the Dornish

outside the Aegonfort without a strong escort, for fear that the

smallfolk of the city would tear them to pieces. For all these reasons,

Grand Maester Lucan wrote later, the king was on the point of refusing

the Dornish proposals and continuing the war.

It was then that Princess Deria presented the king with a sealed

letter from her father. “For your eyes only, Your Grace.”

King Aegon read Prince Nymor’s words in open court, stone-faced

and silent, whilst seated on the Iron Throne. When he rose afterward,

men said, his hand was dripping blood. He burned the letter and never

spoke of it again, but that night he mounted Balerion and flew off

across the waters of Blackwater Bay, to Dragonstone upon its smoking

mountain. When he returned the next morning, Aegon Targaryen

agreed to the terms proposed by Nymor. Soon thereafter he signed a

treaty of eternal peace with Dorne.

To this day, no one can say with certainty what might have been in

Deria’s letter. Some claim it was a simple plea from one father to

another, heartfelt words that touched King Aegon’s heart. Others insist

it was a list of all those lords and noble knights who had lost their lives

during the war. Certain septons even went so far as to suggest that the

missive was ensorceled, that it had been written by the Yellow Toad

before her death, using a vial of Queen Rhaenys’s own blood for ink, so

that the king would be helpless to resist its malign magic.

Grand Maester Clegg, who came to King’s Landing many years later,

concluded that Dorne no longer had the strength to fight. Driven by

desperation, Clegg suggested, Prince Nymor might have threatened

that, should his peace be refused, he would engage the Faceless Men of

Braavos to kill King Aegon’s son and heir, Queen Rhaenys’s boy,

Aenys, then but six years old. It may be so...but no man will ever truly

know.

Thus ended the First Dornish War (4-13 AC).

The Yellow Toad of Dorne had done what Harren the Black, the Two

Kings, and Torrhen Stark could not; she had defeated Aegon Targaryen

and his dragons. Yet north of the Red Mountains, her tactics earned

her only scorn. “Dornish courage” became a mocking name for

cowardice amongst the lords and knights of Aegon’s kingdoms. “The

toad hops into her hole when threatened,” wrote one scribe. Another

said, “Meria fought like a woman, with lies and treachery and

witchery.” The Dornish “victory” (if victory it was) was seen to be

dishonorable, and the survivors of the fight, and the sons and brothers

of those who had fallen, promised one another that another day would

come, and with it a reckoning.

Their vengeance would need to wait for a future generation, and the

accession of a younger, more bloodthirsty king. Though he would sit

the Iron Throne for another twenty-four years, the Dornish conflict

was Aegon the Conqueror’s last war.

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Governance Under King Aegon I

a ese argaryen was a warrior of renown, the greatest

Conqueror in the history of Westeros, yet many believe his most

significant accomplishments came during times of peace. The Iron

Throne was forged with fire and steel and terror, it is said, but once the

throne had cooled, it became the seat of justice for all Westeros.

The reconciliation of the Seven Kingdoms to Targaryen rule was the

keystone of Aegon I’s policies as king. To this end, he made great

efforts to include men (and even a few women) from every part of the

realm in his court and councils. His former foes were encouraged to

send their children (chiefly younger sons and daughters, as most great

lords desired to keep their heirs close to home) to court, where the

boys served as pages, cupbearers, and squires, the girls as

handmaidens and companions to Aegon’s queens. In King’s Landing,

they witnessed the king’s justice at first hand, and were urged to think

of themselves as leal subjects of one great realm, not as westermen or

stormlanders or northmen.

The Targaryens also brokered many marriages between noble

houses from the far ends of the realm, in hopes that such alliances

would help tie the conquered lands together and make the seven

kingdoms one. Aegon’s queens, Visenya and Rhaenys, took a special

delight in arranging these matches. Through their efforts, young

Ronnel Arryn, Lord of the Eyrie, took a daughter of Torrhen Stark of

Winterfell to wed, whilst Loren Lannister’s eldest son, heir to Casterly

Rock, married a Redwyne girl from the Arbor. When three girls,

triplets, were born to the Evenstar of Tarth, Queen Rhaenys arranged

betrothals for them with House Corbray, House Hightower, and House

Harlaw. Queen Visenya brokered a double wedding between House

Blackwood and House Bracken, rivals whose history of enmity went

back centuries, matching a son of each house with a daughter of the

other to seal a peace between them. And when a Rowan girl in

Rhaenys’s service found herself with child by a scullion, the queen

found a knight to marry her in White Harbor, and another in

Lannisport who was willing to take on her bastard as a fosterling.

Though none doubted that Aegon Targaryen was the final authority

in all matters relating to the governance of the realm, his sisters

Visenya and Rhaenys remained his partners in power throughout his

reign. Save perhaps for Good Queen Alysanne, the wife of King

Jaehaerys I, no other queen in the history of the Seven Kingdoms ever

exercised as much influence over policy as the Dragon’s sisters. It was

the king’s custom to bring one of his queens with him wherever he

traveled, whilst the other remained at Dragonstone or King’s Landing,

oft as not seated on the Iron Throne, ruling on whatever matters came

before her.

Though Aegon had designated King’s Landing as his royal seat and

installed the Iron Throne in the Aegonfort’s smoky longhall, he spent

no more than a quarter of his time there. Full as many of his days and

nights were spent on Dragonstone, the island citadel of his forebears.

The castle below the Dragonmont had ten times the room of the

Aegonfort, with considerably more comfort, safety, and history. The

Conqueror was once heard to say that he even loved the scent of

Dragonstone, where the salt air always smelled of smoke and

brimstone. Aegon spent roughly half the year at his two seats, dividing

his time between them.

The other half he devoted to an endless royal progress, taking his

court from one castle to another, guesting with each of his great lords

in turn. Gulltown and the Eyrie, Harrenhal, Riverrun, Lannisport and

Casterly Rock, Crakehall, Old Oak, Highgarden, Oldtown, the Arbor,

Horn Hill, Ashford, Storm’s End, and Evenfall Hall had the honor of

hosting His Grace many times, but Aegon could and would turn up

almost anywhere, sometimes with as many as a thousand knights and

lords and ladies in his train. He journeyed thrice to the Iron Islands

(twice to Pyke and once to Great Wyk), spent a fortnight at Sisterton in

19 AC, and visited the North six times, holding court thrice in White

Harbor, twice at Barrowton, and once at Winterfell on his very last

royal progress in 33 AC.

“It is better to forestall rebellions than to put them down,” Aegon

famously said, when asked the reason for his journeys. A glimpse of the

king in all his power, mounted on Balerion the Black Dread and

attended by hundreds of knights glittering in silk and steel, did much

to instill loyalty in restless lords. The smallfolk needed to see their

kings and queens from time to time as well, the king added, and know

that they might have the chance to lay their grievances and concerns

before him.

And so they did. Much of every royal progress was given over to

feasts and balls and hunts and hawking, as every lord attempted to

outdo the others in splendor and hospitality, but Aegon also made a

point of holding court wherever he might travel, whether from a dais in

some great lord’s castle or a mossy stone in a farmer’s field. Six

maesters traveled with him, to answer any questions he might have on

local law, customs, and history, and to make note of such decrees and

judgments as His Grace might hand down. A lord should know the

land he rules, the Conqueror later told his son Aenys, and through his

travels Aegon learned much and more about the Seven Kingdoms and

its peoples.

Each of the conquered kingdoms had its own laws and traditions.

King Aegon did little to interfere with those. He allowed his lords to

continue to rule much as they always had, with all the same powers

and prerogatives. The laws of inheritance and succession remained

unchanged, the existing feudal structures were confirmed, lords both

great and small retained the power of pit and gallows on their own

land, and the privilege of the first night wherever that custom had

formerly prevailed.

Aegon’s chief concern was peace. Before the Conquest, wars between

the realms of Westeros were common. Hardly a year passed without

someone fighting someone somewhere. Even in those kingdoms said to

be at peace, neighboring lords oft settled their disputes at swordpoint.

Aegon’s accession put an end to much of that. Petty lords and landed

knights were now expected to take their disputes to their liege lords

and abide by their judgments. Arguments between the great houses of

the realm were adjudicated by the Crown. “The first law of the land

shall be the King’s Peace,” King Aegon decreed, “and any lord who goes

to war without my leave shall be considered a rebel and an enemy of

the Iron Throne.”

King Aegon also issued decrees regularizing customs, duties, and

taxes throughout the realm, whereas previously every port and every

petty lord had been free to exact however much they could from

tenants, smallfolk, and merchants. He also proclaimed that the holy

men and women of the Faith, and all their lands and possessions, were

to be exempt from taxation, and affirmed the right of the Faith’s own

courts to try and sentence any septon, Sworn Brother, or holy sister

accused of malfeasance. Though not himself a godly man, the first

Targaryen king always took care to court the support of the Faith and

the High Septon of Oldtown.

King’s Landing grew up around Aegon and his court, on and about

the three great hills that stood near the mouth of the Blackwater Rush.

The highest of those hills had become known as Aegon’s High Hill, and

soon enough the lesser hills were being called Visenya’s Hill and the

Hill of Rhaenys, their former names forgotten. The crude motte-and-

bailey fort that Aegon had thrown up so quickly was neither large

enough nor grand enough to house the king and his court, and had

begun to expand even before the Conquest was complete. A new keep

was erected, all of logs and fifty feet high, with a cavernous longhall

beneath it, and a kitchen, made of stone and roofed with slate in case

of fire, across the bailey. Stables appeared, then a granary. A new

watchtower was raised, twice as tall as the older one. Soon the

Aegonfort was threatening to burst out of its walls, so a new palisade

was raised, enclosing more of the hilltop, creating space enough for a

barracks, an armory, a sept, and a drum tower.

Below the hills, wharves and storehouses were rising along the

riverbanks, and merchants from Oldtown and the Free Cities were

tying up beside the longships of the Velaryons and Celtigars, where

only a few fishing boats had previously been seen. Much of the trade

that had gone through Maidenpool and Duskendale was now coming

to King’s Landing. A fish market sprung up along the riverside, a cloth

market between the hills. A customs house appeared. A modest sept

opened on the Blackwater, in the hull of an old cog, followed by a

stouter one of daub-and-wattle on the shore. Then a second sept, twice

as large and thrice as grand, was built atop Visenya’s Hill, with coin

sent by the High Septon. Shops and homes sprouted like mushrooms

after a rain. Wealthy men raised walled manses on the hillsides, whilst

the poor gathered in squalid hovels of mud and straw in the low places

between.

No one planned King’s Landing. It simply grew...but it grew quickly.

At Aegon’s first coronation, it was still a village squatting beneath a

motte-and-bailey castle. By his second, it was already a thriving town

of several thousand souls. By 10 AC, it was a true city, almost as large

as Gulltown or White Harbor. By 25 AC, it had outgrown both to

become the third most populous city in the realm, surpassed only by

Lannisport and Oldtown.

Unlike its rivals, however, King’s Landing had no walls. It needed

none, some of its residents were known to say; no enemy would ever

dare attack the city so long as it was defended by the Targaryens and

their dragons. The king himself might have shared these views

originally, but the death of his sister Rhaenys and her dragon,

Meraxes, in 10 AC and the attacks upon his own person undoubtedly

gave him cause...

And in the 19th year After the Conquest, word reached Westeros of a

daring raid in the Summer Isles, where a pirate fleet had sacked Tall

Trees Town and carried off a thousand women and children as slaves,

along with a fortune in plunder. The accounts of the raid greatly

troubled the king, who realized that King’s Landing would be similarly

vulnerable to any enemy shrewd enough to fall upon the city when he

and Visenya were elsewhere. Accordingly, His Grace ordered the

construction of a ring of walls about King’s Landing, as high and strong

as those that protected Oldtown and Lannisport. The task of building

them was conferred upon Grand Maester Gawen and Ser Osmund

Strong, the Hand of the King. To honor the Seven, Aegon decreed that

the city would have seven gates, each defended by a massive gatehouse

and defensive towers. Work on the walls began the next year and

continued until 26 AC.

Ser Osmund was the king’s fourth Hand. His first had been Lord

Orys Baratheon, his bastard half-brother and companion of his youth,

but Lord Orys was taken captive during the Dornish War and suffered

the loss of his sword hand. When ransomed back, his lordship asked

the king to be relieved of his duties. “The King’s Hand should have a

hand,” he said. “I will not have men speaking of the King’s Stump.”

Aegon next called on Edmyn Tully, Lord of Riverrun, to take up the

Handship. Lord Edmyn served from 7—9 AC, but when his wife died in

childbed, he decided that his children had more need of him than the

realm, and begged leave to return to the riverlands. Alton Celtigar,

Lord of Claw Isle, replaced Tully, serving ably as Hand until his death

from natural causes in 17 AC, after which the king named Ser Osmund

Strong.

Grand Maester Gawen was the third in that office. Aegon Targaryen

had always kept a maester on Dragonstone, as his father and father’s

father had before him. All the great lords of Westeros, and many lesser

lords and landed knights, relied upon maesters trained in the Citadel

of Oldtown to serve their households as healers, scribes, and

counselors, to breed and train the ravens who carried their messages

(and write and read those messages for lords who lacked those skills),

help their stewards with the household accounts, and teach their

children. During the Conquest, Aegon and his sisters each had a

maester serving them, and afterward the king sometimes employed as

many as half a dozen to deal with all the matters brought before him.

But the wisest and most learned men in the Seven Kingdoms were

the archmaesters of the Citadel, each of them the supreme authority in

one of the great disciplines. In 5 AC, King Aegon, feeling that the realm

might benefit from such wisdom, asked the Conclave to send him one

of their own number to advise and consult with him on all matters

relating to the governance of the realm. Thus was the office of Grand

Maester created, at King Aegon’s request.

The first man to serve in that capacity was Archmaester Ollidar,

keeper of histories, whose ring and rod and mask were bronze. Though

exceptionally learned, Ollidar was also exceptionally old, and he

passed from this world less than a year after taking up the mantle of

Grand Maester. To fill his place, the Conclave selected Archmaester

Lyonce, whose ring and rod and mask were yellow gold. He proved

more robust than his predecessor, serving the realm until 12 AC, when

he slipped in the mud, broke his hip, and died soon thereafter,

whereupon Grand Maester Gawen was elevated.

The institution of the king’s small council did not come into its full

bloom until the reign of King Jaehaerys the Conciliator, but that is not

to suggest that Aegon I ruled without the benefit of counsel. He is

known to have consulted often with his various Grand Maesters, and

his own household maesters as well. On matters relating to taxation,

debts, and incomes, he sought the advice of his masters of coin.

Though he kept one septon at King’s Landing and another at

Dragonstone, the king more oft wrote to the High Septon of Oldtown

on religious issues, and always made a point of visiting the Starry Sept

during his yearly circuit. More than any of these, King Aegon relied

upon the King’s Hand, and of course upon his sisters, the Queens

Rhaenys and Visenya.

Queen Rhaenys was a great patron to the bards and singers of the

Seven Kingdoms, showering gold and gifts on those who pleased her.

Though Queen Visenya thought her sister frivolous, there was a

wisdom in this that went beyond a simple love of music. For the

singers of the realm, in their eagerness to win the favor of the queen,

composed many a song in praise of House Targaryen and King Aegon,

and then went forth and sang those songs in every keep and castle and

village green from the Dornish Marches to the Wall. Thus was the

Conquest made glorious to the simple people, whilst Aegon the Dragon

himself became a hero king.

Queen Rhaenys also took a great interest in the smallfolk, and had a

special love for women and children. Once, when she was holding

court in the Aegonfort, a man was brought before her for beating his

wife to death. The woman’s brothers wanted him punished, but the

husband argued that he was within his lawful rights, since he had

found his wife abed with another man. The right of a husband to

chastise an erring wife was well established throughout the Seven

Kingdoms (save in Dorne). The husband further pointed out that the

rod he had used to beat his wife was no thicker than his thumb, and

even produced the rod in evidence. When the queen asked him how

many times he had struck his wife, however, the husband could not

answer, but the dead woman’s brothers insisted there had been a

hundred blows.

Queen Rhaenys consulted with her maesters and septons, then

rendered her decision. An adulterous wife gave offense to the Seven,

who had created women to be faithful and obedient to their husbands,

and therefore must be chastised. As god has but seven faces, however,

the punishment should consist of only six blows (for the seventh blow

would be for the Stranger, and the Stranger is the face of death). Thus

the first six blows the man had struck had been lawful...but the

remaining ninety-four had been an offense against gods and men, and

must be punished in kind. From that day forth, the “rule of six” became

a part of the common law, along with the “rule of thumb.” (The

husband was taken to the foot of the Hill of Rhaenys, where he was

given ninety-four blows by the dead woman’s brothers, using rods of

lawful size.)

Queen Visenya did not share her sister’s love of music and song. She

was not without humor, however, and for many years kept her own

fool, a hirsute hunchback called Lord Monkeyface whose antics

amused her greatly. When he choked to death on a peach pit, the

queen acquired an ape and dressed it in Lord Monkeyface’s clothing.

“The new one is cleverer,” she was wont to say.

Yet there was darkness in Visenya Targaryen. To most of the world,

she presented the grim face of a warrior, stern and unforgiving. Even

her beauty had an edge to it, her admirers said. The oldest of the three

heads of the dragon, Visenya was to outlive both of her siblings, and it

was rumored that in her later years, when she could no longer wield a

sword, she delved into the dark arts, mixing poisons and casting

malign spells. Some even suggest that she might have been a kinslayer

and a kingslayer, though no proof has ever been offered to support

such calumnies.

It would be a cruel irony if true, for in her youth no one did more to

protect the king. Visenya twice wielded Dark Sister in Aegon’s defense

when he was set upon by Dornish cutthroats. Suspicious and ferocious

by turns, she trusted no one but her brother. During the Dornish War,

she took to wearing a shirt of mail night and day, even under her court

clothes, and urged the king to do the same. When Aegon refused,

Visenya grew furious. “Even with Blackfyre in your hand, you are only

one man,” she told him, “and I cannot always be with you.” When the

king pointed out that he had guardsmen around him, Visenya drew

Dark Sister and slashed him across the cheek so quickly the guards had

no time to react. “Your guards are slow and lazy,” she said. “I could

have killed you as easily as I cut you. You require better protection.”

King Aegon, bleeding, had no choice but to agree.

Many kings had champions to defend them. Aegon was the Lord of

the Seven Kingdoms; therefore, he should have seven champions,

Queen Visenya decided. Thus did the Kingsguard come into being; a

brotherhood of seven knights, the finest in the realm, cloaked and

armored all in purest white, with no purpose but to defend the king,

giving up their own lives for his if need be. Visenya modeled their vows

on those of the Night’s Watch; like the black-cloaked crows of the Wall,

the White Swords served for life, surrendering all their lands, titles,

and worldly goods to live a life of chastity and obedience, with no

reward but honor.

So many knights came forward to offer themselves as candidates for

the Kingsguard that King Aegon considered holding a great tourney to

determine which of them was the most worthy. Visenya would not hear

of it, however. To be a Kingsguard knight required more than just skill

at arms, she pointed out. She would not risk placing men of uncertain

loyalty about the king, regardless of how well they performed in a

melee. She would choose the knights herself.

The champions she selected were young and old, tall and short, dark

and fair. They came from every corner of the realm. Some were

younger sons, others the heirs of ancient houses who gave up their

inheritances to serve the king. One was a hedge knight, another

bastard born. All of them were quick, strong, observant, skilled with

sword and shield, and devoted to the king.

These are the names of Aegon’s Seven, as written in the White Book

of the Kingsguard: Ser Richard Roote; Ser Addison Hill, Bastard of

Cornfield; Ser Gregor Goode; Ser Griffith Goode, his brother; Ser

Humfrey the Mummer; Ser Robin Darklyn, called Darkrobin; and Ser

Corlys Velaryon, Lord Commander. History has confirmed that

Visenya Targaryen chose well. Two of her original seven would die

protecting the king, and all would serve with valor to the end of their

lives. Many brave men have followed in their footsteps since, writing

their names in the White Book and donning the white cloak. The

Kingsguard remains a synonym for honor to this day.

Sixteen Targaryens followed Aegon the Dragon to the Iron Throne,

before the dynasty was at last toppled in Robert’s Rebellion. They

numbered amongst them wise men and foolish, cruel men and kind,

good men and evil. Yet if the dragon kings are considered solely on the

basis of their legacies, the laws and institutions and improvements

they left behind, the name of King Aegon I belongs near the top of the

list, in peace as well as war.