

# Ranulf le Meschin, 3rd Earl of Chester

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**Ranulf le Meschin, 3rd Earl of Chester** (1070–1129) was a late 11th- and early 12th-century Norman magnate based in northern and central England. Originating in Bessin in Normandy, Ranulf made his career in England thanks to his kinship with Hugh d'Avranches - the earl of Chester, the patronage of kings William II Rufus and Henry I Beauclerc, and his marriage to Lucy, heiress of the Bolingbroke-Spalding estates in Lincolnshire.

Ranulf fought in Normandy on behalf of Henry I, and served the English king as a kind of semi-independent governor in the far north-west, in Cumberland and Westmorland, founding Wetheral Priory. After the death of his cousin Richard d'Avranches in the White Ship Disaster of November 1120, Ranulf became earl of the county of Chester on the Anglo-Welsh marches. He held this position for the remainder of his life, and passed the title on to his son.

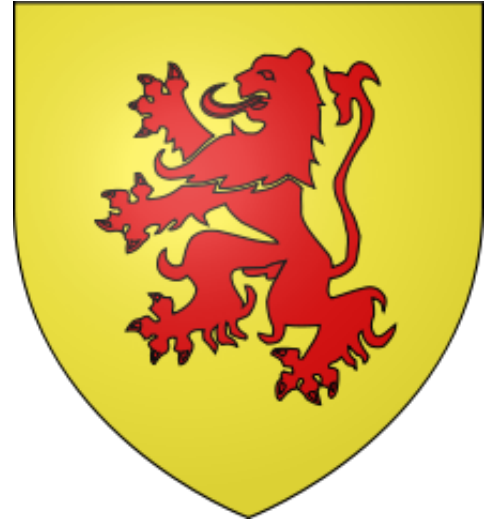
## Contents

- 1 Family and origins
- 2 Early career
- 3 Lord of Cumberland
- 4 Earl of Chester
- 5 Notes
- 6 References

## Family and origins

Ranulf le Meschin's father and mother represented two different families of viscounts in Normandy, and both of them were strongly tied to Henry, son of William the Conqueror.<sup>[2]</sup> His father was Ranulf de Briquessart, and likely for this reason the former Ranulf was styled *le Meschin*, "the younger".<sup>[3]</sup> Ranulf's father was viscount of the Bessin, the area around Bayeux.<sup>[4]</sup> Besides Odo, bishop of Bayeux, Ranulf the elder was the most powerful magnate in the Bessin region of Normandy.<sup>[5]</sup> Ranulf le Meschin's great-grandmother may even have been from the ducal family of Normandy, as le Meschin's paternal great-grandfather viscount Anschitil is known to have married a daughter of Duke Richard III.<sup>[6]</sup>

**Ranulf le Meschin**



A depiction of the arms of Ranulf le Meschin, though the colour is not actually known<sup>[1]</sup>

<b>Died</b>	January 1129
<b>Resting place</b>	Chester Abbey
<b>Other names</b>	Ranulf de Briquessart
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Norman French
<b>Title</b>	Earl of Chester (previously) Lord of Cumberland
<b>Term</b>	1120–1129
<b>Predecessor</b>	Richard d'Avranches
<b>Successor</b>	Ranulf de Gernon
<b>Spouse(s)</b>	Lucy of Bolingbroke (Countess-consort of Chester)
<b>Children</b>	Ranulf de Gernon, Alicia
<b>Parents</b>	Ranulf de Briquessart Margaret Goz

Ranulf le Meschin's mother, Margaret, was the daughter of Richard Goz.<sup>[2]</sup> Richard's father Thurstan Goz had become viscount of the Hiémois between 1017 and 1025,<sup>[7]</sup> while Richard himself became viscount of the Avranchin in either 1055 or 1056.<sup>[8]</sup> Her brother (Richard Goz's son) was Hugh d'Avranches "Lupus" ("the Wolf"), viscount of the Avranchin and Earl of Chester (from c. 1070).<sup>[9]</sup> Ranulf was thus, in addition to being heir to the Bessin, the nephew of one of Norman England's most powerful and prestigious families.<sup>[10]</sup>

We know from an entry in the Durham *Liber Vitae*, c. 1098 x 1120, that Ranulf le Meschin had an older brother named Richard (who died in youth), and a younger brother named William.<sup>[11]</sup> He had a sister called Agnes, who later married Robert de Grandmesnil (died 1136).<sup>[3]</sup>

## Early career

Historian C. Warren Hollister thought that Ranulf's father Ranulf de Briquessart was one of the early close companions of Prince Henry, the future Henry I.<sup>[5]</sup> Hollister called Ranulf the Elder "a friend from Henry's youthful days in western Normandy",<sup>[12]</sup> and argued that the homeland of the two Ranulfs had been under Henry's overlordship since 1088, despite both ducal and royal authority lying with Henry's two brothers.<sup>[13]</sup> Hollister further suggested that Ranulf le Meschin may have had a role in persuading Robert Curthose to free Henry from captivity in 1089.<sup>[14]</sup>

The date of Ranulf senior's death, and succession of Ranulf junior, is unclear, but the former's last and the latter's earliest appearance in extant historical records coincides, dating to 24 April 1089 in charter of Robert Curthose, Duke of Normandy, to Bayeux Cathedral.<sup>[15]</sup> Ranulf le Meschin appears as "Ranulf son of Ranulf the viscount".<sup>[15]</sup>

In the foundation charter of Chester Abbey granted by his uncle Hugh Lupus, earl of Chester, and purportedly issued in 1093, Ranulf le Meschin is listed as a witness.<sup>[16]</sup> His attestation to this grant is written *Signum Ranulfi nepotis comitis*, "signature of Ranulf nephew of the earl".<sup>[17]</sup> However, the editor of the Chester comital charters, Geoffrey Barraclough, thought this charter was forged in the period of Earl Ranulf II.<sup>[18]</sup> Between 1098 and 1101 (probably in 1098) Ranulf became a major English landowner in his own right when he became the third husband of Lucy, heiress of the honour of Bolingbroke in Lincolnshire.<sup>[19]</sup> This acquisition also brought him the lordship of Appleby in Westmorland, previously held by Lucy's second husband Ivo Taillebois.<sup>[3]</sup>

Marriage to a great heiress came only with royal patronage, which in turn meant that Ranulf had to be respected and trusted by the king. Ranulf was probably, like his father, among the earliest and most loyal of Henry's followers, and was noted as such by Orderic Vitalis.<sup>[20]</sup> Ranulf was however not recorded often at the court of Henry I, and did not form part of the king's closest group of administrative advisers.<sup>[21]</sup> He witnessed charters only occasionally, though this became more frequent after he became earl.<sup>[22]</sup> In 1106 he is found serving as a one of several justiciars at York hearing a case about the lordship of Ripon.<sup>[23]</sup> In 1116 he is recorded in a similar context.<sup>[3]</sup>

Ranulf was, however, one of the king's military companions. When, soon after Whitsun 1101 Henry heard news of a planned invasion of England by his brother Robert Curthose, he sought promises from his subjects to defend the kingdom.<sup>[24]</sup> A letter to the men of Lincolnshire names Ranulf as one of four figures entrusted

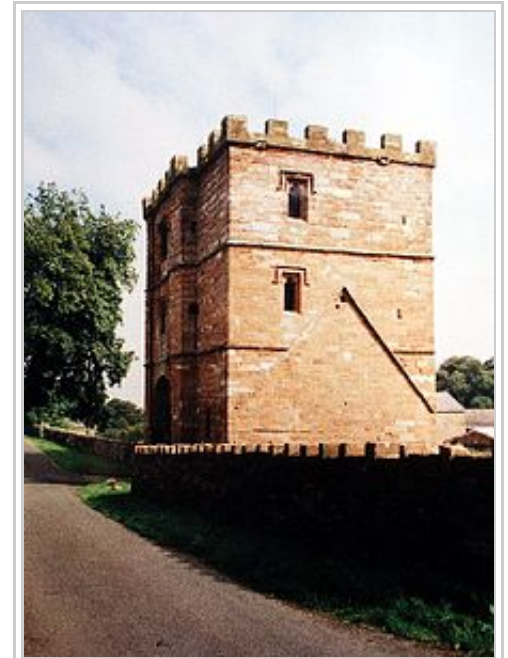
with collecting these oaths.<sup>[25]</sup> Ranulf was one of the magnates who accompanied King Henry on his invasion of Duke Robert's Norman territory in 1106.<sup>[26]</sup> Ranulf served under Henry as an officer of the royal household when the latter was on campaign; Ranulf was in fact one of his three commanders at the Battle of Tinchebrai.<sup>[27]</sup> The first line of Henry's force was led by Ranulf, the second (with the king) by Robert of Meulan, and third by William de Warrene, with another thousand knights from Brittany and Maine led by Helias, Count of Maine.<sup>[28]</sup> Ranulf's line consisted of the men of Bayeux, Avranches and Coutances.<sup>[29]</sup>

## Lord of Cumberland

A charter issued in 1124 by David I, King of the Scots, to Robert I de Brus cited Ranulf's lordship of Carlisle and Cumberland as a model for Robert's new lordship in Annandale.<sup>[30]</sup> This is significant because Robert is known from other sources to have acted with semi-regal authority in this region.<sup>[31]</sup> A source from 1212 attests that the jurors of Cumberland remembered Ranulf as *quondam dominus Cumberland* ("sometime Lord of Cumberland").<sup>[31]</sup> Ranulf possessed the power and in some respects the dignity of a semi-independent earl in the region, though he lacked the formal status of being called such. A contemporary illustration of this authority comes from the records of Wetheral Priory, where Ranulf is found addressing his own sheriff, "Richer" (probably Richard de Boivill, baron of Kirkclinton).<sup>[32]</sup> Indeed, no royal activity occurred in Cumberland or Westmorland during Ranulf's time in charge there, testimony to the fullness of his powers in the region.<sup>[33]</sup>

Ivo Taillebois, when he married Ranulf's future wife Lucy, had acquired her Lincolnshire lands but sometime after 1086 he acquired estates in Kendal and elsewhere in Westmorland. Adjacent lands in Westmorland and Lancashire that had previously been controlled by Earl Tostig Godwinson were probably carved up between Roger the Poitevin and Ivo in the 1080s, a territorial division at least partially responsible for the later boundary between the two counties.<sup>[34]</sup> Norman lordship in the heartland of Cumberland can be dated from chronicle sources to around 1092, the year King William Rufus seized the region from its previous ruler, Dolfin.<sup>[35]</sup> There is inconclusive evidence that settlers from Ivo's Lincolnshire lands had come into Cumberland as a result.<sup>[36]</sup>

Between 1094 and 1098 Lucy was married to Roger fitz Gerold de Roumare, and it is probable that this marriage was the king's way of transferring authority in the region to Roger fitz Gerold.<sup>[37]</sup> Only from 1106 however, well into the reign of Henry I, do we have certain evidence that this authority had come to Ranulf.<sup>[3]</sup> The "traditional view", held by the historian William Kapelle, was that Ranulf's authority in the region did not come about until 1106 or after, as a reward for participation in the Battle of Tinchebrai.<sup>[38]</sup> Another historian, Richard Sharpe, has recently attacked this view and argued that it probably came in or soon after 1098. Sharpe stressed that Lucy was the mechanism by which this authority changed hands, and pointed out that Ranulf had been married to Lucy years before Tinchebrai and can be found months before Tinchebrai taking evidence from county jurors at York (which may have been responsible for Cumbria at this point).<sup>[39]</sup>



The gatehouse of Wetheral Priory, founded by Ranulf c. 1106

Ranulf likewise distributed land to the church, founding a Benedictine monastic house at Wetheral.<sup>[40]</sup> This he established as a daughter-house of St Mary's Abbey, York, a house that in turn had been generously endowed by Ivo Taillebois.<sup>[31]</sup> This had occurred by 1112, the year of the death of Abbot Stephen of St Mary's, named in the foundation deed.<sup>[41]</sup> In later times at least, the priory of Wetheral was dedicated to St Mary and the Holy Trinity, as well as another saint named Constantine.<sup>[42]</sup> Ranulf gave Wetheral, among other things, his two churches at Appleby, St Lawrence's (Burgate) and St Michael's (Bongate).<sup>[43]</sup>

As an incoming regional magnate Ranulf would be expected to distribute land to his own followers, and indeed the record of the jurors of Cumberland dating to 1212 claimed that Ranulf created two baronies in the region.<sup>[44]</sup> Ranulf's brother-in-law Robert de Trevers received the barony of Burgh-by-Sands, while the barony of Liddel went to Turgis Brandos.<sup>[31]</sup> He appears to have attempted to give the large compact barony of Gilsland to his brother William, but failed to dislodge the native lord, the eponymous "Gille" son of Boite; later the lordship of Allerdale (including Copeland), even larger than Gilsland stretching along the coast from the river Ellen to the river Esk, was given to William.<sup>[45]</sup> Kirkclinton may have been given to Richard de Boivill, Ranulf's sheriff.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Earl of Chester

1120 was a fateful year for both Henry I and Ranulf. Richard, earl of Chester, like Henry's son and heir William Adeling, died in the White Ship Disaster near Barfleur on 25 November.<sup>[3]</sup> Only four days before the disaster, Ranulf and his cousin Richard had witnessed a charter together at Cerisy.<sup>[3]</sup>

Henry probably could not wait long to replace Richard, as the Welsh were resurgent under the charismatic leadership of Gruffydd ap Cynan. According to the *Historia Regum*, Richard's death prompted the Welsh to raid Cheshire, looting, killing, and burning two castles.<sup>[46]</sup> Perhaps because of his recognised military ability and social strength, because he was loyal and because he was the closest male relation to Earl Richard, Henry recognized Ranulf as Richard's successor to the county of Chester.<sup>[47]</sup>

In 1123, Henry sent Ranulf to Normandy with a large number of knights and with his bastard son, Robert, Earl of Gloucester, to strengthen the garrisons there.<sup>[48]</sup> Ranulf commanded the king's garrison at Évreux and governed the county of Évreux during the 1123-1124 war with William Clito, Robert Curthose's son and heir.<sup>[49]</sup> In March 1124 Ranulf assisted in the capture of Waleran, Count of Meulan.<sup>[50]</sup> Scouts informed Ranulf that Waleran's forces were planning an expedition to Vatteville, and Ranulf planned an to intercept them, a plan carried out by Henry de Pommeroy, Odo Borleng and William de Pont-Authou, with 300 knights.<sup>[51]</sup> A battle followed, perhaps at Rougemontier (or Bourghthéroulde), in which Waleran was captured.<sup>[52]</sup>

Although Ranulf bore the title "earl of Chester", the honour (*i.e.*, group of estates) which formed the holdings of the earl of Chester were scattered throughout England, and during the rule of his predecessors included the cantref of Tegeingl in Perfeddwlad in north-western Wales.<sup>[53]</sup> Around 1100, only a quarter of the value of the honour actually lay in Cheshire, which was one of England's poorest and least developed counties.<sup>[54]</sup> The



Chester Cathedral today, originally Chester Abbey, where Ranulf's body was buried

estates elsewhere were probably given to the earls in compensation for Cheshire's poverty, in order to strengthen its vulnerable position on the Anglo-Welsh border.<sup>[55]</sup> The possibility of conquest and booty in Wales should have supplemented the lordship's wealth and attractiveness, but for much of Henry's reign the English king tried to keep the neighboring Welsh princes under his peace.<sup>[56]</sup>

Ranulf's accession may have involved him giving up many of his other lands, including much of his wife's Lincolnshire lands as well as his lands in Cumbria, though direct evidence for this beyond convenient timing is lacking.<sup>[57]</sup> That Cumberland was given up at this point is likely, as King Henry visited Carlisle in December 1122, where, according to the *Historia Regum*, he ordered the strengthening of the castle.<sup>[58]</sup>

Hollister believed that Ranulf offered the Bolingbroke lands to Henry in exchange for Henry's bestowal of the earldom.<sup>[14]</sup> The historian A. T. Thacker believed that Henry I forced Ranulf to give up most of the Bolingbroke lands through fear that Ranulf would become too powerful, dominating both Cheshire and the richer county of Lincoln.<sup>[59]</sup> Sharpe, however, suggested that Ranulf may have had to sell a great deal of land in order to pay the king for the county of Chester, though it could not have covered the whole fee, as Ranulf's son Ranulf de Gernon, when he succeeded his father to Chester in 1129, owed the king £1000 "from his father's debt for the land of Earl Hugh".<sup>[60]</sup> Hollister thought this debt was merely the normal feudal relief expected to be paid on a large honour, and suggested that Ranulf's partial non-payment, or Henry's forgiveness for non-payment, was a form of royal patronage.<sup>[61]</sup>

Ranulf died in January 1129, and was buried in Chester Abbey.<sup>[3]</sup> He was survived by his wife and countess, Lucy, and succeeded by his son Ranulf de Gernon.<sup>[3]</sup> A daughter, Alicia, married Richard de Clare, a lord in the Anglo-Welsh marches.<sup>[3]</sup> One of his offspring, his fifth son, participated in the Siege of Lisbon, and for this aid was granted the Lordship of Azambuja by King Afonso I of Portugal.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Notes

1. ^ Strutt & Hulbert (eds.), *Cheshire Antiquities*, p. 28
2. ^ *a b* Hollister, *Henry I*, pp. 53–54
3. ^ *a b c d e f g h i j k l m* King, "Ranulf (I)"
4. ^ King, "Ranulf (I)"; Newman, *Anglo-Norman Nobility*, pp. 97–99
5. ^ *a b* Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 60
6. ^ Douglas, *William the Conqueror*, p. 93
7. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 53
8. ^ Barlow, *William Rufus*, p. 298, and Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 54, give the name "Margaret" for Ranulf's mother; King, "Ranulf (I)", gives the name "Matilda", as does Douglas, *William the Conqueror*, p. 93, who gives *Maud*
9. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 54; Lewis, "Avranches, Hugh d"
10. ^ Newman, *Anglo-Norman Nobility*, pp. 57–58, 78, 81, 119, 120, 125, 133, 167–68, 191
11. ^ King, "Ranulf (I)"; Rollason & Rollason (eds.), *The Durham Liber Vitae*, vol. i, p. 159
12. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 200
13. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 54; argument is based on a passage in Robert of Torigny, which says that in 1096, when Robert Curthose went on Crusade and pawned the duchy to William Rufus, Henry received *ex integro* the counties of Coutances and Bayeux save only Bayeux and Caen, a grant Hollister thought was probably a "renewal" rather than a new patronage
14. ^ *a b* Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 342
15. ^ *a b* Davis and Whitwell, *Regesta Regum*, no. 308; King, "Ranulf (I)"
16. ^ Barraclough (ed.), *Charters*, no. 3; King, "Ranulf (I)"
17. ^ Barraclough (ed.), *Charters*, no. 3, at p. 7
18. ^ Barraclough (ed.), *Charters*, pp. 7–11

19. ^ King, “Ranulf (I)”; Newman, *Anglo-Norman Nobility*, p. 40; Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, pp. 45-46
20. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, pp. 116, 200, 257 (n. 90 for the reference to Orderic, which is book 6.222)
21. ^ Newman, *Anglo-Norman Nobility*, p. 98
22. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, pp. 342–43
23. ^ Green, *Henry I*, p. 116
24. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 136
25. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 136; Johnson, Cronne, and Davis (eds.), *Regesta Regum*, vol. ii, no. 531
26. ^ Green, *Henry I*, p. 90; Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 200
27. ^ Kapelle, *Norman Conquest*, p. 200; King, “Ranulf (I)”
28. ^ Green, *Henry I*, pp. 91–92
29. ^ Green, *Henry I*, p. 91
30. ^ King “Ranulf; Phythian-Adams, *Land of the Cumbrians*, p. 149
31. ^ *a b c* Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, p. 47
32. ^ Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, p. 48
33. ^ Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, p. 51
34. ^ Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, pp. 39–40
35. ^ Phythian-Adams, *Land of the Cumbrians*, p. 24; Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, p. 34
36. ^ For details, see Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, pp. 36–38
37. ^ Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, pp. 41–42; Sharpe also cites (p. 42) the “unexplained interests in Westmorland in the 1130s” held by Richard fitz Gerard of Appleby, the son of the marriage, as additional evidence for this
38. ^ Kapelle, *Norman Conquest*, p. 200; King, “Ranulf (I)”; see also Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, pp. 43–44
39. ^ Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, pp. 44–46
40. ^ King, “Ranulf”; Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, p. 47
41. ^ Knowles, Brooke and London, *Heads of Religious Houses*, vol. i, p. 84; Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, p. 47
42. ^ Knowles, Brooke and London, *Heads of Religious Houses*, vol. i, p. 97
43. ^ Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, p. 49
44. ^ Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, pp. 46–47
45. ^ Kapelle, *Norman Conquest*, p. 200; King, “Ranulf (I)”; Phythian-Adams, *Land of the Cumbrians*, pp. 8–10
46. ^ Hinde (ed.), *Symeonis Dunelmensis Opera*, p. 117; Green, *Henry I*, p. 172; Stevenson, *Simeon of Durham*, p. 190
47. ^ Green, *Henry I*, p. 173; King, “Ranulf”
48. ^ Green, *Henry I*, p. 182
49. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, pp. 294, 296–7; King, “Ranulf”
50. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 298; King, “Ranulf”
51. ^ Green, *Henry I*, p. 185; Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 298
52. ^ Green, *Henry I*, pp. 185–86; Hollister, *Henry I*, pp. 299–301
53. ^ Thacker, “Introduction”, p. 10
54. ^ Lewis, “Formation of the Honor”, p. 42
55. ^ Thacker, “Introduction”, p. 9
56. ^ Davis, *Conquest*, p. 42; Thacker, “Introduction”
57. ^ King, “Ranulf (I)”; Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, pp. 51–52
58. ^ Hinde (ed.), *Symeonis Dunelmensis Opera*, p. 119; Green, *Henry I*, pp. 176–77; Summerson, *Medieval Carlisle*, p. 25; Stevenson, *Simeon of Durham*, p. 192
59. ^ Thacker, “Introduction”, p. 11
60. ^ Sharpe, *Norman Rule in Cumbria*, p. 52, n. 135
61. ^ Hollister, *Henry I*, p. 343

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<b>Peerage of England</b>		
Preceded by <b>Richard d’Avranches</b>	<b>Earl of Chester</b> 1120–1129	Succeeded by <b>Ranulf de Gernon</b>

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