



## History

## The head that wears the crown: Henry VIII and traumatic brain injury



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## ABSTRACT

Henry VIII of England is one of the most controversial figures in European history. He was born on 28 June 1491 as the second son of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York and became the heir to the English throne after his elder brother died prematurely. A contradictory picture of Henry's character emerges from history: the young Henry was a vigorous, generous and intelligent king who saw early military and naval successes. In contrast, in his later years he became cruel, petty and tyrannical. His political paranoia and military misjudgements are in direct contrast to his earlier successes and promise. Several hypotheses have been put forward regarding his transformation from a renaissance king to a later medieval tyrant, including endocrinopathies, psychiatric illnesses and traumatic brain injury. In this paper we examine the historical evidence linking the change in Henry's personality and health problems to traumatic brain injury. To our knowledge this is the first systematic neurological study of traumatic brain injury in Henry VIII.

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## 1. Introduction

Historians have struggled to explain the transformation of Henry VIII of England from a vigorous, generous and intelligent youth to a cruel and petty tyrant in old age (Fig. 1). In this paper we examine historical evidence linking the change in Henry's personality and health to traumatic brain injury.

## 2. Methods

We searched Pubmed and Google Scholar databases with the terms "Henry VIII", "Henry 8" and "Henry Tudor". We read several authoritative biographies of Henry [1–5]. Our primary source for material pertaining to this period was "Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 1–21" available from <http://www.british-history.ac.uk>.

## 3. Health of Henry VIII

The Spanish ambassador wrote of the 16-year-old Henry in 1507, "There is no finer youth in the world than the Prince of Wales" [6]. Henry is known to have suffered from an episode of smallpox in 1514 [1,2,7,8]. He returned to his normal state of health in the following year, when he met the Venetian ambassador

who characterized him to be "prudent and wise and free from every vice" [9]. Henry had a bout of malaria in 1521 but he soon recovered from that disease [8]. He had another bout of malaria in 1528 from which he also recovered. Erasmus said of him in 1529, "... a man of gentle friendliness, and gentle in debate; he acts more like a companion than a king" [10]. Suzannah Lipscomb agrees: "Henry seems to have been lighthearted, merry, and easily given to laughter" [3].

Henry's "Sorre legge" [11] is first mentioned in 1527 when he was confined to bed in Canterbury because of painful ulcers on his legs [2,11]. These ulcers appear to have never completely gone away. We hear of the king's sepsis and fistulating cellulitis in 1538 and again in 1541 and 1544 [2,11,12]. By 1546 his mobility was greatly impaired and he was transported around the palace in a sedan chair [2,11]. One of the most noticeable changes in Henry was his weight gain. Estimates of his weight based on the size of his armor or his portraits vary but there is no doubt that he gained large amounts of weight in his lifetime. One estimate is that he went from a body mass index of 25.6–27.0 kg/m<sup>2</sup> in his twenties to 47.7–50.3 kg/m<sup>2</sup> by the time of his death [13].

## 4. The year that changed Henry

In her book *1536: The Year That Changed Henry VIII* historian Suzannah Lipscomb reviews the evidence regarding the timing of the change in Henry's personality. Two dates seem to have been noted amongst historians regarding this change. One according to psychiatrist Miles F. Shore was around 1525–27, while the other more commonly quoted date is 1536 [3].

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**Fig. 1.** (A) Field armor of Henry VIII of England, which is Italian, Milan or Brescian make from about 1544. (Metropolitan Museum of Art by Matthew G. Bisanz) (licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0). (B) Commissioned by Henry VIII, Swiss artist Hans Holbein the Younger (1497–1543) and the Royal Workshops at Greenwich produced this suit of richly-gilded armor ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org), Arms and Armor: Armor for Field and Tournament, Accession number: 19.131.1.2) (licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0). (C) Portrait of a young Henry VIII. (D) Portrait of Henry VIII by Joos van Cleve around 1535. (E) Engraving of an older Henry VIII by Peter Isselburg based on work done by Cornelis Metsys.

## 5. Current hypotheses about Henry's health

One of the hypotheses regarding the health of Henry VIII is that he had Cushing's syndrome [1,2]. There appears to be a temporal relationship between Henry's documented head injuries and the stepwise worsening of his health which this hypothesis cannot explain. Another older hypothesis is that Henry had syphilis [8] but this is now largely abandoned [14]. Other hypothesized mechanisms for Henry's change include diabetes [15] and hypothyroidism [16], neither of which can account for the whole picture. Another recent hypothesis regarding Henry's health is that he had McLeod syndrome with infertility and psychosis [16]. Henry, however, is not reported to have had choreiform movements or dystonic reactions.

## 6. Frederick Chamberlain's hypothesis revisited

The historian Frederick Chamberlain in his book *The private character of Henry the Eighth* first put forward the hypothesis that the change in the character of Henry VIII was due to head injuries sustained in 1524 and/or in 1536 [4]. The science of traumatic

brain injury and its consequences have progressed since 1931 when the book was first published. We revisit this hypothesis and contend that traumatic brain injury could have caused diffuse axonal injury which lead to a change in the psychological makeup of Henry, and traumatic brain injury may have contributed to his other medical issues by causing pituitary dysfunction and endocrinopathies.

## 7. Concussion histories

Henry sustained several sporting head injuries during jousting and other sports. In March 1524 the king was unseated after a jousting lance found its way into his open visor and broke into many splintered pieces. Henry was de-horsed and dazed, although he continued to joust for the rest of the day. He is said to have had recurrent headaches after this point [4]. In 1525 the king had another accident while hawking. He attempted to vault a hedge but the pole broke under his weight and he fell in a ditch of water. He may have been dazed or unconscious because it is said of the incidence that if Edmund Mody had not pulled him out of the ditch, legs first, he may have drowned [4,8,17]. On 24 January 1536 the King had his most significant instance of head injury when while

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