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7. The Making of France as a National State

Abstract

The west Frankish kingdom of Charles the Bald, which he had received in 843 as his portion of his grandfather's great empire, is geographically the genesis of modern France. In the century of disorder and confusion following the partition of Charlemagne's realm into three kingdoms, government fell into the hands of powerful vassals. From the first, therefore, great lords in France exercised the functions of independent rulers. In 987 they chose one of the weaker of their number, Hugh Capet (987-996), to be king. He and his successors faced two great problems in establishing nationhood in France: how to recover and unite the territories by wresting control of the land from the great barons; and how to create and develop an effective central government. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Charles the Bald, France, government, nationhood, kingdom

Disciplines

European History | European Languages and Societies | History | Medieval History | Political History

Comments

This is a part of [Section V: The Rise of Capitalism and the National State to 1500](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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7. The Making of France as a National State

The West Frankish kingdom of Charles the Bald, which he had received in 843 as his portion of his grandfather's great empire, is geographically the genesis of modern France. In the century of disorder and confusion following the partition of Charlemagne's realm into three kingdoms, government fell into the hands of powerful vassals. From the first, therefore, great lords in France exercised the functions of independent rulers. In 987 they chose one of the weaker of their number, Hugh Capet (987-996), to be king. He and his successors faced two great problems in establishing nationhood in France: how to recover and unite the territories by wresting control of the land from the great barons; and how to create and develop an effective central government.

Formidable obstacles prevented an early solution to the first problem. The great semi-independent fiefs (Normandy, Brittany, Burgundy, Gascony, Aquitaine, Champagne, and others) kept the territory divided and the government decentralized. The geographical extent of France and its population, roughly four times that of England, tended to entrench local laws and institutions. The first loyalty of most men was not to the king, but to the local lord. In the beginning the effective authority of the Capetians was confined almost entirely to their own estates, a consolidated territory in north central France so surrounded by rivers that it was known as the Île de France. Hugh Capet founded a dynasty that was to rule France continuously for eight centuries (987-1792) but he himself never succeeded in enlarging to any extent either the Capetian boundaries or authority.

Yet the Capetians enjoyed certain potential advantages in their ambition to consolidate political power in their own hands. In the first place, in the very nature of French kingship their person was regarded as sacrosanct. They were the recognized legal overlords of France, and as such had the support of the Church. Secondly, their personal estates, though small in area, were compact, fertile, and located on important trade routes. Finally, until 1328 they succeeded in providing France with an uninterrupted line of male heirs to the throne, thus avoiding the perils of civil war over royal succession. The first hundred years of Capetian effort, however, were marked with indifferent success. After 1066 their problems were complicated by the fact that perhaps their most powerful vassal, Duke William of Normandy, had become king of England, and as such possessed means sufficient to tempt him and his successors to ignore their feudal obligations to the French sovereign. As late as the beginning of the twelfth century the Capetians were hard put to it to remain masters of their own domain.

Royal efforts to unify France were accelerated during the reign of Philip II (1180-1223), who by intrigue, diplomacy, and a convenient lack of scruples won power and territory for the French throne. While he depended on contingents of troops contributed by his vassals for military manpower, he took steps to create an army loyal only to himself. He chartered towns and accepted their fees and taxes as a welcome supplement to his personal income. In contrast to the experience in England, the creation of a national monarchy in France was accomplished by the absorption into the royal domain of the large semi-independent duchies. This took place through warfare, marriage, or escheat to the crown. During his long reign Philip tripled the size of the area under his direct control. Shrewdly he forestalled rebellions in the fiefs which he had absorbed by retaining local offices yet handing over their duties to his own agents. The key official in his system was the bailli, who exercised royal financial, judicial, and military powers in the territory to which he had been appointed. The principal qualification of the bailli, trained by the king, well paid, and

often chosen from the royal retinue, was undeviating loyalty to the monarch.

Despite his successful wars against the English, which established royal authority over much of western France, Philip Augustus, as Philip II came to be called, never won the affection and esteem of his people. This essential to a permanent strengthening of the monarchy came during the reign of his grandson, the saintly Louis IX (1226-1270). Louis sought to make the government serve the interests and purposes of monarch and subject alike and in so doing became the medieval ideal of a king. His reputation for just dealing (he was known as "a justice in ermine"), his piety without subservience to the Church, and his energetic devotion to the welfare of the people won him their affection during his lifetime and canonization after his death. It is as an administrator and consolidator, however, that he contributed most to strengthening the French state. He made use of an advisory council, a French curia regis, and extended the scope of royal justice. He tried to eliminate private warfare between feudal lords albeit with only partial success. When he died on a crusade in 1270 he left France the strongest power in Europe, with an enhanced monarchy, growing cities, and developing national feeling. Yet a number of great feudal duchies still remained outside the royal authority.

A different sort of monarch was Philip IV (1285-1314), grandson of Louis, whose handsome countenance and friendly demeanor won for him the sobriquet, "the Fair." Calling for assistance upon lawyers trained in Roman law, Philip applied to the government which he had inherited the famous precept: "what pleases the prince has the force of law." To man his enlarging bureaucracy he sought out capable men of the middle class who were entirely dependent on him for favor. The main organ of royal government remained the bureaucracy, and consequently no agency existed to provide either the experience or the incentive for a popular challenge to monarchical authority.

In an effort to gain popular support in his struggle with Pope Boniface VIII (see Chapter III above) Philip summoned a national assembly in 1302 composed of clergy, nobility, and commoners. This assembly of the three orders of medieval French society, generally known as the Estates General, met at almost the same time as England's Model Parliament, but it never attained an equal prestige and influence. We can only suggest reasons for this. In the first place, the Estates General never gained control of the power to tax. Again, its sessions never exercised either judicial or legislative powers throughout the kingdom. Although its composition reveals that Philip recognized the value of including representatives of the merchants, professional men, and other townspeople to better persuade them to approve taxes, the Estates General never became a rallying point for opposition to the king. One explanation of this failure is that France had never been subject to reorganization by a conqueror as had England under the Normans,

and its feudal lords were not practiced in cooperative action. In addition, the geographic length and breadth of the land promoted diversity of feudal institutions and made genuine representative government difficult.

The death of Philip IV in 1314 marked the beginning of a decline in the French monarchy which lasted for over a century. Even as late as 1314, much remained to be done before the French could call themselves a national state. There were, for example, no general taxes paid by all subjects, an omission which embarrassed later kings. Strong provincial feeling existed despite the efforts of the crown to create a national civic spirit. Moreover, Philip had three sons who were not only weak kings but even lacked the Capetian luck of siring male heirs. The youngest of these sons died in 1328, whereupon French lawyers revived and extended an old Frankish law to bar females from the throne. This was intended to eliminate the claims of Edward III of England, who was the grandson of Philip the Fair through his mother. The claim of Philip of Valois, a nephew of Philip IV, was recognized by the French and his ascension to the kingship led to a challenge from Edward III. The pretensions of this English monarch helped precipitate the Hundred Years' War. The significant issue in this conflict was whether the English were to be expelled finally from the Continent or whether France and England were to be united as a single state under an English king.

Final victory for France did not come until the middle of the following century after Joan of Arc (1412-1431) rallied her countrymen and provided the French with the inspirational leadership which their royal family could not offer. She nerved the heir to the throne, Charles VII (1422-1461), to exert himself and infused French troops with the necessary morale. Joan's mission ended with the coronation of Charles at Rheims in 1429, and although the fighting dragged on until 1453 France was again united under a king whom the people credited with victory over England. Neither the self-centered French nobility, many of whom had allied themselves with the hated English, nor the Estates General, which had proved itself incapable of providing effective leadership, emerged from the conflict with sufficient reputation to capture the loyalty and respect of the population. The commercial class particularly welcomed the prospect of a strong monarchy which would once more maintain order and promote trade and industry.

France, like England, emerged from these troublous times with monarchical authority enhanced. This fact was most apparent during the reign of Louis XI (1461-1483), who profited from the wartime weakening of France's traditional institutions. Many Frenchmen had concluded that strengthening the hand of the king was a prerequisite to expelling the English. As a result Louis was able to make use of a right granted to his father during the war to levy a series of taxes, chief of which was the taille, a property tax that provided the bulk of royal revenue until 1789. He called the Estates General into session but once during his

reign, and even then summoned only those persons whom he thought would not oppose his designs. He stamped out the ambitious plan of the duke of Burgundy to make of that powerful duchy a separate and independent kingdom and reduced other nobles by setting them against each other. He could turn his attention almost entirely toward subjecting the French nobility since he had little fear of outside interference. Italy and Germany were disunited and he staved off a potential English threat by buying off Edward IV and bribing the English ambassadors. A master at diplomatic intrigue, never loath to employ bribery, and not bothered by charges that he was faithless, he tightened his hold on the machinery of government and extended his influence throughout France. Louis' closest allies were the townsfolk whom he courted so much that he earned the title, "king of the bourgeoisie," and the growing tax burden was offset by revived prosperity. His constant journeys into all parts of his kingdom gave him valuable first-hand information and kept him alert to all movements which might threaten his position.

During Louis' reign the two-fold objective which the Capetians had set for themselves five hundred years before had been in large measure achieved. Civil and financial administration was now centered in the king, most of the great fiefs had been annexed to the royal domain, the old feudalism had been seriously weakened, and the English had been driven from the Continent. Royal power existed unchecked by parliamentary opposition or a tradition of civil rights such as hampered the absolutist ambitions of English monarchs. Yet, French kings by 1500 had not yet achieved the mastery within their realm that Henry VII was to acquire in England.