

FORUM

Capetian France (987–1328)

Introduction

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If “France is a creation of its medieval history,”¹ the rule of the Capetian dynasty (987–1328) in particular is traditionally regarded as the beginning of France as a nation.² Following the narrative established by Joseph Strayer’s influential book *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State*, historians situate the construction of the French nation-state in the thirteenth century, under the reigns of Philip Augustus (1180–1223) and Louis IX (1226–70). Territorial expansion, the development of bureaucracy, and the centralization of the royal government all contributed to the formation of the state in France.³ Thus it is only at the end of a long process of territorial expansion and royal affirmation that the Capetian kings managed to turn what was initially a disparate and fragmented territory into a unified kingdom, which prefigured the modern state.

In this teleological framework, there is little room or interest for the first Capetian kings. The eleventh and twelfth centuries are still described as the “*âge des souverains*,” a period of relative anarchy and disorder during which the aristocracy dominated the political landscape and lordship was the “normative expression of human power.”⁴ Compared to these powerful lords, the early Capetians pale into insignificance. They controlled a royal domain centered on Paris and Orléans and struggled to keep at bay the lords dominating the powerful surrounding counties and duchies. The famous anecdote reported by the

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¹ Bernd Schneidmüller, “Constructing Identities of Medieval France,” in *France in the Central Middle Ages*, ed. Marcus Bull (Oxford, 2002), 15.

² In an influential 1882 essay Ernest Renan already referred to the origins of the French nation at the time of the Capetians (“What Is a Nation?,” in *Becoming National: A Reader*, ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny [Oxford, 1996], 42–56). In his recent history of the Capetians, Dominique Barthélémy notes: “La dynastie fondée en 987 par Hugues Capet a commencé, lentement mais sûrement, de faire la France comme nation” (The dynasty founded by Hugh Capet in 987 began, slowly but surely, to make France as a nation) (*Nouvelle histoire des Capétiens* [Paris, 2012], 9).

³ Joseph Strayer, *On the Medieval Origins of the Modern State* (Princeton, NJ, 1970).

⁴ Thomas Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2009), 577.

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chronicler Adhémar of Chabannes between King Hugh Capet and Adalbert, count of Périgord, is often quoted to underline the king's limited authority. Hugh had urged Adalbert to abandon the siege of the city of Tours and had reminded him that counts were to defer to the king. Hugh asked Adalbert: "Who made you count?" To which the latter replied: "Who made you king?"⁵

Only in recent times did historians alter this negative, and somewhat simplistic, view of the first Capetians as weak rulers, struggling to impose their authority against a constellation of powerful magnates. The year 1987 certainly represented a turning point. With the thousandth anniversary of Hugh Capet's accession to power, a complete "réhabilitation" of the king's reign was in order:⁶ French president François Mitterrand himself ordained, with an odd combination of national pride and monarchical nostalgia, an official celebration of the king "mal aimé," who usurped the throne from the Carolingian line. Commemorating the first ruler of the Capetian dynasty had implications far beyond a historiographical shift: it was, more important, a way of consecrating the "birth" of France and its founding monarchy.⁷

The contributions gathered together here do not attempt either to reconstruct the origins of the French nation-state or to reclaim the lost glory of the early Capetian kings. Rather, the authors highlight the complexities of royal power, how the Capetian kings ruled and conceived of their rule, their difficult and constant interplay with the aristocracy, and the means by which they gradually expanded and unified their kingdom.

Geoffrey Koziol's article addresses the issue of the royal legitimacy of the first Capetians through a minute analysis of their diplomas. The question he tries to answer is a complex one: why were Robert the Pious's diplomas totally different from previous royal diplomas, including those issued by his father, Hugh? Whereas traditional royal diplomas bore only two subscriptions (those of the king and his notary), Robert's diplomas often included third-party subscribers, such as lay magnates and ecclesiastical leaders. How do we interpret this important change? Did it reflect the relative weakness of a king who had to negotiate with a constellation of competing, violent, and greedy lords?

⁵ *Chronicon Aquitanicum et Francicum or Historia Francorum*, ed. Jules Chavanon (Paris, 1897), 205.

⁶ Michel Parisse, "Hugues Capet et la France de l'an Mil: Une réhabilitation," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 131, no. 4 (1987): 774–81.

⁷ The incorporation of the Capetian legacy into the national *patrimoine* embodies France's complicated and ambivalent relation to its past as a monarchy. The commemorative "fever" that has shaken France in the past decades—a movement, it must be noted, contemporaneous with the development of the notion of *patrimoine*—has translated into the publication of numerous histories of France, best exemplified by *Les lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, 7 vols. (Paris, 1984–92).

For Koziol, the new format and language of Robert's diplomas rather capture the king's conscious attempt to create a new kind of kingship that was infused with monastic spiritual values and required the participation of different parties.

The nature of the relationships between the king and the aristocrats is also at the center of Kathryn Dutton's contribution, a micro-study of Tours during the second quarter of the twelfth century. Tours is a particularly interesting example of competing powers in the French kingdom, as it was under the authority of both the Angevin count and the French king and was home to the prominent royal monastery of Saint-Martin. Dutton explores in detail the shifting spheres of influence of the Capetian king and the Angevin count in relation to different ecclesiastical and secular institutions.

The political situation in Anjou, which threatened to undermine the authority of the Capetian kings, dramatically evolved during the reign of Philip Augustus, largely because of his military victory at Bouvines in 1214. Bouvines represented a landmark event for the formation of the kingdom of France, as John W. Baldwin and Walter Simons show. On July 27, 1214, Philip Augustus defeated a coalition of German, English, and Flemish soldiers led by Otto IV of Germany at the bridge of Bouvines near Lille. Philip's victory meant the end of the Angevin empire and the control of the territories (Anjou, Brittany, Maine, Normandy, and the Touraine) that had hitherto belonged to King John of England. In a famous book published in 1973, the French historian Georges Duby attempted to reconstruct, or re-create, the "first national victory," as Ernest Lavisse had it, based on its multifaceted "traces" in contemporary documentation (nearly a hundred chronicles throughout western Europe).⁸ Beyond the military achievement meticulously studied by Duby, Baldwin and Simons analyze the significance of Bouvines not only for the kingdom of France but also for the other European forces such as England, Spain, and Flanders. For Bouvines signaled a profound reconfiguration of power at the European scale and paved the way for a redrawing of national borders as they still exist today.

The Capetians' gradual consolidation and extension of the French kingdom were accompanied by the development of royal administration and bureaucracy. Marie Dejoux's article sheds light on the use of judicial inquests among the Capetians, in particular by Louis IX. The inquests functioned as a means of "taking stock" or audits—that is, surveying the rights and domains owed to the king—but also were used in judicial matters, aimed at deciding between contending parties

⁸ Georges Duby, *Le dimanche de Bouvines* (Paris, 1973).

and solving conflicts. According to Dejoux, a singular shift occurred at the time of Louis IX. Inquests not only served to better administer the kingdom but also had an important penitential dimension: they were conducted for the salvation of the king. Louis IX's successors turned his "enquêtes de réparation" into "enquêtes de réformation." However, they followed, and responded to, a common objective: to administer, to rule, and, in the end, to build a centralized state.

Aristocratic power and dissent, royal legitimacy and authority, territorial expansion, the development of bureaucracy and centralized royal administration: here are some of the key elements that contributed to the making of the French state. But even at the time of the last Capetians, in the early fourteenth century, the idea of France was much more the product of royal ideology than the expression of territorial unity and identity.