

## Explain the survival of the Capetian monarchy in France 1000-1180

The decline in real power of the West Frankish kings since the division of Charlemagne's kingdom was great in relation to their brethren in Germany. Yet we must not assume that Hugh Capet at his accession was entirely powerless. Indeed, as the experience of his son Robert shows, this was not so: when in 1015 there developed a dispute between the count and archbishop of Sens, Robert the Pious was sufficiently powerful to march into the town and enforce a settlement highly lucrative to himself. Yet it is also true that outside their immediate demesne, royal influence at around the year 1000 was almost negligible. Hugh Capet, for instance left only a handful of acts, and even for his son Robert the Pious, only 108 acts remain or are mentioned despite the fact that he ruled for almost 35 years<sup>1</sup>. It might seem to a casual observer that in an era where comital justice was observed all over France that the king was simply one of many petty princes in a fragmented 'kingdom'. Yet it is to ignore several advantages which the Capetians possessed over their vassals, which they were not slow to take of. This is reflected by the bitter comment from Adalberon of Laon to Robert the Pious that 'though first among the Franks, you are but a serf in the order of kings.'<sup>2</sup> - although he recognised their lack of effective force, they remained kings and 'first among the Franks', a title to which no unruly count could legitimately aspire. The fact that the monarchy under them emerged into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries not merely intact but enhanced is to show what stability and latent power was at the root of their tenure of this crucial office.

The first advantage for the dukes of Francia was that they were undeniably kings, along with all the prestige this brought. The Capetian kings notoriously offered no allegiance to any mortal, except for the deference they owed to the pope in spiritual matters. Therefore when for instance Louis VI declared himself a vassal of St Denis in 1124, he declared that he would be willing to do homage to his abbey *si rex non esset*. The mere fact that his patron was a saint again placed him symbolically above the other magnates of France. In a similar fashion, when Philip Augustus in 1184 acquired the county of Amiens, the abbey's charter says that it 'decided and of its own free will consented to allow us to hold the said fief, without doing homage, it being understood that we can neither owe nor do homage to anyone', with the reservation that 'if the said lands should in the future come into the hands of anyone who can do homage to the church of Amiens, homage shall once again be taken.'<sup>3</sup> If the kings could not do homage to any of their subjects, they certainly did not recognise themselves as vassals of the papacy in the same way as many other states on the other sides of the Pyrenees or Alps did. Henry I conspicuously avoided the Council of Rheims in 1049, and in 1078 Philip I even forbade William VIII of Aquitaine to attend the Council of Poitiers by saying that he and the bishops present would be breaking the fealty they had sworn to the king if they attended this 'pseudo-synod'. Likewise as regarded what was regarded as the ultimate temporal power - the Emperor on France's eastern border - Capetian monarchs regarded themselves as in no way subservient. The bizarre stand-off on the banks of the Meuse between Robert the Pious and Henry II in 1023 - where both parties waited four days for the other to cross the river in order to visit the other - showed that though there was mutual respect each other, neither considered themselves humbler than their counterpart. The continued French support for the papacy in its battles with the emperor - with evicted popes seeking sanctuary in France - was hardly the action of a vassal to its liege-lord.

If the Capetian kings acknowledged no earthly master, they continually pressed their claims to lordship over French vassals, and no matter how hopeless the task may have appeared at the

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<sup>1</sup> quoted in Fawtier *The Capetian Kings of France* p.8

<sup>2</sup> quoted in Dunbabin *France in the making* p.133

<sup>3</sup> quoted in Fawtier *The Capetian Kings of France* p.80

accession of Hugh Capet. Robert the Pious's thirteen-year battle with the dukes of Burgundy over the right to decide the future of the duchy after 1002 showed first of all the depths of reserves which were available to the king despite the apparently impotent situation he found himself in; and its successful conclusion demonstrated once again the rights and prerogatives of the king to intervene in the affairs of his vassals. It is also noticeable that despite the consolidation of power over their regions, no single count ever was tempted to declare himself independent of royal jurisdiction, and all willingly performed homage for their lands. This ceremony was doubly important since the very symbolism of homage implied a personal bond much stronger than the *realpolitik* of mere military strength. The best example of this comes from the homage of Henry II of England, when he said 'I King Henry, will safeguard the life, limbs and landed honour of the king of France as my lord, if he will secure for me as his vassal and *fidelis* my life and limbs and lands which he has settled upon me, for which I am his man.'<sup>4</sup> Although Henry was perfectly capable of crushing the forces of his overlord, the concept was simply unthinkable to him. Therefore when at the siege of Toulouse 1163 he heard that Louis VI was inside the city, he called off the siege. To attack one's overlord was not merely a great sin, but in an age when all lands were sub-infeudated it also unbalanced one's own position.

Yet we must not assume from this that royal interventions were always unwelcome to the king's vassals. Indeed expansions of the royal demesne usually came about following an appeal by a rival claimant to the king for justice. The same incident at Toulouse which I have just mentioned came about because of a letter from Raymond of Toulouse to his overlord saying that 'We have lost our lands, or rather, not our lands but yours, for we are your man, and all that is ours is yours.'<sup>5</sup> It was royal justice, however arbitrary, which provided the definitive solution to problems, and this is especially seen in the aftermath of the murder of Charles the Good in 1127. Abbot Suger records Louis VI's 'love of justice and affection for a kinsman arousing him to avenge such great treachery, and warfare with the English king and Count Theobald did not hold him back.'<sup>6</sup> Although it is true that when the Capetians 'subdued the disobedient and either seized troublesome castles or made them submissive by any means possible'<sup>7</sup>, these were primarily in the royal demesne itself, Suger's prediction increasingly became true, when he said 'A king's power should never be thought of as being limited only to the narrow borders of any part of his lands, "for kings are known to have long arms".'<sup>8</sup>

The second main difference which marked out kings from mere princes was that on their anointment, kings could claim to be spiritually marked out for government. The Capetians above all other European monarchs integrated this spirituality into their self-image; where Frederick Barbarossa sought to mould himself as successor of the Caesars, Louis VI and VII made themselves into 'the most Christian kings'. French kings receive noticeably better reviews than other monarchs of their time, and this cannot have been unrelated to the increased protection they gave to influential monasteries such as Cluny. Fleury, the monastery attended by Helgaud was unsurprisingly under direct royal patronage, and it is therefore extremely questionable whether the water Robert the Pious washed his hands in cured a beggar of his blindness. Indeed Pope Gregory VII pointed out to Bishop Herman of Metz in 1081 'What emperor or king has raised the dead, cured the leprous, made the blind to see? Consider Constantine the Emperor of pious memory, consider Theodoric, Honorius, Charles, Louis, all lovers of justice, zealous for the Christian religion and protectors of the churches. The Church praises and reveres them, but

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<sup>4</sup> quoted in Dunbabin *France in the making* p.262

<sup>5</sup> quoted in Fawtier *The Capetian Kings of France* p.62

<sup>6</sup> Suger *Deeds of Louis the Fat* p. 140

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p.40

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.109

she has never acknowledged that they were the doers of miracles.<sup>9</sup> However it did not stop the Capetians claiming these powers, and Suger certainly reports Louis VI as touching for scrofula before the year 1122. It also did not stop them becoming beloved of the common people, who from this time even up until the Revolution of 1789 considered the kings as their main protectors against the machinations of the aristocracy. The Capetians opposition to the Emperor (therefore by default support for the papacy) throughout the investiture dispute - while simultaneously maintaining its own sovereign temporal rights - reinforced the religious image of the monarchy without the accompanying loss of face. As Suger says: 'Pope Paschal wished to confer with the king of the French and his son, the king-designate Louis, and with the Gallic church about the recent quarrels over ecclesiastical investiture' - the French king, though sharing the same anxieties as his imperial counterpart nevertheless retained the goodwill of the papacy to the extent that the Pope would even travel to France for the former's advice. Likewise, when Suger says of 1112 'With the help and counsel of the lord-designate Louis, the Gallic church came together in a well-attended council and bound the tyrannical emperor with anathema.' we can see the influence French royal policy had on Roman affairs. This religious image proved extremely useful not only from a prestige point of view, since increasingly when bishops and bishoprics fell under royal patronage, the lay rulers of their dioceses also fell within the sphere of royal jurisdiction. The notional acquisition of the archbishopric of Sens, then subsequently the bishops of Autun, Auxerre, Mâcon and other Burgundian bishoprics for example greatly expanded the royal network of *fideles* at a point when feudal ties began to harden. As for purely temporal reasons, the king's person was becoming more sacrosanct, simultaneously he was assuming more sacred characteristics spiritually.

A third and unrelated development throughout this period is the great increase in agricultural production. This for the first time now could convert the latent fertility of the soils of northern France, and especially the Ile-de-France, into genuine wealth. As the resources available on the royal demesne increased, so too did the powers available to implement royal policies, and the two cannot be unrelated developments.

If this explains the advantages which led the Capetians to create a lengthy dynasty, it ignores somewhat the interest French magnates had in maintaining some royal control from Paris. Certainly as the eleventh century developed it became clear that there was a real power over the Channel which by the time of Henry II of England provided a real threat to local liberties. In his struggle with Louis VI, Henry I for example found not one single French supporter. Later on, when Henry III landed with a force at St Malo in order to aid rebellious barons against Blanche of Castille, these same barons changed sides and gave their forty days military service in ejecting the invader. On the other flank, when Emperor Henry V threatened an invasion, the fact that the dukes of Burgundy and Aquitaine, the counts of Blois, Troyes, Nevers, Brittany and Anjou came in person to Louis VI's muster showed categorically where their interests lay. Government from Paris, even if it had increased from one or two writs per year under Hugh Capet to almost 60 under Philip II, secured their future more safely.

Yet why the Capetians as a family and dynasty became so strong is also due to other causes in which they particularly fortunate as well as clever. Firstly, they had the infinite advantage of being a long-lived clan. Aside from Hugh Capet himself, the first seven Capetian kings all ruled for over 25 years apiece, with Philip I sitting on the throne for almost half a century. They also had the good fortune or shrewd match-making-and-breaking to secure themselves male heirs who until St Louis all acceded to the throne in their majority. Dynastic failures and the politics therefrom, while it destroyed so many of their greatest magnates, therefore did not feature in the

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<sup>9</sup> *Letters of Gregory VII*

royal household. In sharp contrast with England, the royal policy of crowning the son in his father's lifetime was carried out extremely smoothly and without great rancour. Where the Young King caused trouble to Henry II of England, successive crown-princes, or 'kings-designate' as Suger continued royal policies almost without question. One place where the Capetians certainly did find difficulty in maintaining their position was in the indisputable fact that their house had usurped the throne from the existing Carolingians. Yet even this was quickly smoothed under the carpet by judicious use of monastic chroniclers. Odorand of Sens wrote in 1045 in his chronicle that *donato regni Hugoni duci* - that Duke Hugh Capet of Francia had been given the crown directly by the last Carolingian king Louis V, and that even then he had received it *invitus* - unwillingly. Without a break in the succession, however, it became increasingly difficult to foresee a return to the old bloodline, especially with some judicious marriages on the part of the Capetians. Yet even this harking back to the old regime confirmed a central fact about the way the Capetians saw themselves. As Suger is at pains to point out, the important feature of Charlemagne was not really that he was a Frankish emperor, but that he was king of France. As such the Capetians genuinely felt themselves to be legitimate successors to his title, especially as time went on. Survival, despite the precarious situation of the late tenth century, was something which was becoming more and more certain as the dynasty progressed.