

## How successful was Louis IX in his ambitions?

Louis IX was the Capetian who managed to bring to the French monarchy the sobriquet of 'Most Christian King', and the only king of any nation who in the thirteenth century succeeded in being canonised. His hagiography in itself is a proof of a very great measure of success, and the fact that canonisation process started just five years after his death signifies a success which was recognised as much in his own time as by those who came after him. However, the qualifications for sainthood alone are insufficient to decide if Louis was successful even as king of France, let alone in comparison with his own ambitions and intentions. As a monarch with aspirations to act on the international stage, Louis's ambitions were of course on a grand scale, and as other Capetian kings had found, extremely difficult to achieve in practice. However the fact that Louis's policies were focused around a single international project in the shape of the crusades did have several advantages. His central crusading aim was a unifying theme in his foreign, baronial, administrative and religious policies; and an aim that also offered reconciliation among all of his potential enemies. It is in light of his success in converting this potential support into actual support that we must judge his achievement as a monarch.

Although his early biographers of course inevitably stress his personal religiosity in an attempt to hold him up as the saint that he swiftly became, there is no reason to doubt Louis's piety. Thus although there is no need to believe every one of Joinville's anecdotes about how the king charged him to wash peasants' feet on Maundy Thursday; or that he bade him warn King Thibault of Navarre not to endow the Preaching Friars of Provins 'lest he burden his soul with the great moneys he was putting into it'<sup>1</sup>; yet we should nevertheless not doubt the sincerity of Louis's commitment to the church. The stubbornness and single-mindedness with which he set about his crusade - not coming home after the *debacle* of 1250 as he could easily have done for instance - show a sincere personal faith. Certainly from the accounts of Joinville in particular, Louis seems to have been prone to periodically demonstrating his faith by having 'all those he could attain that they had said of God or of his Mother any foul thing or scurvy oath punished grievously'<sup>2</sup> and by extravagant statements such as 'I would be branded by a hot iron, if by that covenant all evil swearing might be driven out of my realm'<sup>3</sup> - a fact attested to by even the somewhat critical monk Matthew Paris when he has Louis say on his return from crusade 'if I alone could suffer the shame and adversity and my sins not rebound upon the church, I could endure with equanimity, but woe is me, by me all Christendom has fallen into confusion.'<sup>4</sup> If we believe that Louis was even half as pious as these statements allege him to be, it must surely be fair enough to count personal spiritual aims as being at least among the most important aspects to him of his rule. In this Louis seems to have been broadly successful according to what he set out to do. His patronage of the new mendicant orders was a fact in which he apparently took special pride, and he is reported to have wished to remain in Palestine permanently as a pilgrim or abdicate his kingship in order to join the friars - only to recognise that his obligations as anointed king stood in the way.<sup>5</sup> Mendicant groups also received a substantial percentage of his donations of sacred relics, and as the example of the Dominicans of Barcelona show, they need not even be in his own kingdom at all<sup>6</sup> - this in the teeth of criticism which even went as far as tutting him to his face.<sup>7</sup> If patronage over what became known as the Court Style of ecclesiastical architecture can also be ascribed to Louis personally, there is no doubt that the building of some

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<sup>1</sup> Joinville *History of St Louis* chap v

<sup>2</sup> Joinville *History of St Louis* chap cxxxviii

<sup>3</sup> Joinville *History of St Louis* chap cxxxviii

<sup>4</sup> quoted in Siberry *Criticisms of Crusading* p.86

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Paris v.466

<sup>6</sup> quoted in Jordan *Louis IX and the Challenge of Crusade* p.192

<sup>7</sup> quoted in Jordan *Louis IX and the Challenge of Crusade* p. 129

of the greatest medieval cathedrals of Europe were carried out in his name, such as Amiens, Troyes and Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris itself. We should be very cynical if we dismiss the creation of masterpieces of the new Gothic style such as the Sainte-Chapelle - designed solely to exhibit the relics of the True Cross and the Crown of Thorns - as merely examples of Saint Louis being motivated by reputation. His hatred also of Jews through his life again appears to us only as a religiously-motivated policy - it was not through jealousy of Jewish wealth that he persecuted them, but rather because of their denial of Christian values: as Joinville recounts him saying 'And so I say to you that no man, unless he be a very good clerk, should argue with them; but the layman, when he heareth the Christian law reviled, should not defend it but by his sword.'<sup>8</sup> There is also no obvious other motive for Louis's obsession with crusade. That he ultimately failed in his desire to be martyred despite being on campaign at the time seems a severe irony to his chroniclers, who said 'I cannot but think that it was an injustice to him not to include him in the roll of martyrs, when you consider the great hardships he suffered as a pilgrim and Crusader during the six years I served with him'<sup>9</sup> According to his own standards of piety, there is no reason apart from this for us to suppose that on spiritual grounds Louis would have considered his life a failure.

Louis IX's political aims were much more diverse, though even then it is easy to see that the main overarching goal was to prepare the way for a new and preferably international crusade to recapture Jerusalem. Louis's policy towards the papal conflict with the Empire for instance was to be conciliatory up to a point to both sides, yet always seeking to create a framework in which the (as he saw it) damaging dispute which merely served to divide Christendom in the face of external threat. Thus he allowed the pope to take sanctuary in the 'borders' of France at Lyon - protecting the former from the menace of Frederick II yet not alienating the latter. On the other hand Louis did not recognise the former's deposition of the latter without breaking off ties with either party. Yet despite his efforts to draw both parties into his crusade, Germany sent practically no troops to Egypt with Louis, and after Louis's departure, Blanche of Castille as regent found that the papacy was continuing its attempts to divert French knights into its own crusade against the Hohenstaufen - prompting her to say according to Matthew Paris that 'Those who fight for the Pope should use the Pope's resources and they should leave France never to return.'<sup>10</sup> However, we must not see Louis's policies towards these two factions as being entirely toothless, in that the Protest of Saint Louis - with its rejection of papal and sacerdotal claims over kingship and studied mention of Charlemagne's rights over the church - raised the possibility of severely weakening the papacy's political position by removing its chief secular ally. As regards the Empire, Louis ended his reign by authorising Charles of Anjou's conquest of Sicily. Yet peace did seem to be very much the aim of Louis's diplomacy, and it is noticeable that it was he who initiated discussions with Henry III of England which eventually led to the Treaty of Paris in 1259 even though they cost a bankrupt France 100,000 *livres tournois* and the resignation of his rights in Limousin, Périgord and Quercy. Surely it is inconceivable that the lord Edward would have led an English crusading contingent in 1268 if this treaty had not been signed? Yet nevertheless it remains the case that in Louis's crusade of 1248, only one other European monarch promised any support whatsoever, and even then Haakon of Norway failed to produce the troops for the expedition. In terms of success on a diplomatic level, Louis's manoeuvres failed to attract any support for his crusade until the very end of his reign and so consequently we can say that at least some of his ambitions were frustrated. This is not to say that Louis was ineffective diplomatically, since his influence over other peoples' disputes very clearly gives the lie to this assumption - he offered himself as arbitrator several times and in the process effectively supplanting the pope as the supreme arbiter of Europe - the civil strife in

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<sup>8</sup> Joinville *History of St Louis* chap x

<sup>9</sup> Joinville *History of St Louis* chap i

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Paris v.260

England in 1264 was essentially an attempt to overthrow the results of Louis's mediation in the shape of the Mise of Amiens.

In Louis's relations with his barons the emphasis of Louis's policy was once more on removing differences in the face of the greater challenge of the crusade to which all of his barons would feel obliged if not compelled to accompany him. A youthful trick as recounted by Matthew Paris has Louis ordering his tailors to sew crosses onto the garments that he would give his magnates in traditional court ceremonies.<sup>11</sup> Certainly it is noticeable how Louis did indeed do his best to ensure that rebellious or formerly-rebellious magnates such as Raymond of Toulouse and the Lusignans of La Marche and Angoulême accompanied him to Egypt - and largely the greater baronage did indeed follow him on crusade, though most returned home as soon as possible after the humiliation of Damietta. It was not only barons whom Louis encouraged to go on crusade with him, but also others who had come into his jurisdiction by means of falling foul of the law for example. Joinville recounts the tale of a clerk who killed three of his officers who were oppressing the population - Louis's judgement however is 'Sir Clerk, you have lost your priesthood by your prowess; and for your prowess I will keep you in my pay, and you shall come with me overseas.'<sup>12</sup> The resulting roar of approval from the crowd which Joinville recounts may or may not have happened, but nevertheless Louis IX certainly tried to use the crusade as a way of easing the assimilation of newly-acquired parts of the country into the royal structure. The creation of the port of Aigues-Mortes for example brought home royal power quite firmly into the south of France quite apart from its role as embarkation-point for the crusading armies. This quite separate aim of Louis's baronial policy therefore could be included under the aegis of his preparations for going abroad. Louis also aided his cause by deft use of dynastic policies - his brother Alfonse married Jeanne the heir of Raymond of Toulouse, while he arranged for Charles of Anjou to marry Beatrice of Provence, sister of his own queen. Louis curried further noble support by his sporadic opposition to clerical demands over noble power. An example of this is in Louis's refusal to arrest excommunicates, as he said that 'in what concerned himself he would never make them cognisant nor ever order his officers to constrain the excommunicate to seek absolution from them "And I will show you a precedent, which is this: that the bishops of Brittany have held the count of Brittany full seven years in excommunication and then he hath had absolution from the Court of Rome; and had I had him constrained from the first year, I should have constrained him wrongly."<sup>13</sup> By this, noble interests could be seen to coincide with Louis's to some extent, and resentment of his presence could be soothed somewhat

Another manner in which the assimilation of the south was increased was not confined only to the areas which had suffered the ravages of the Albigensian crusades, but which operated under St Louis's command across the country - inspectors checking for royal abuses of power and oppression by royal officials. As Joinville quotes Louis: 'he used to say that it was an evil thing to take another's goods, "for to restore was so hard that only to say *rendre* flayed the throat because of the 'r's in it, which signified the rakes of the Devil"<sup>14</sup> - and that his agents especially in the aftermath of the Albigensian crusades were more culpable than most in looting local populations and oppressing the people. Yet these inspectors were active throughout the country - in Normandy and the Ile-de-France as much as in the south - and proved to be also a much more effective means of calling to account provincial *baillis* and other administrators in the localities than had existed up until this time. The increase in numbers of appointments of bailiwicks (or in other words the increase in the number of terminations in the employment of previous incumbents) in the years before and after Louis's first crusade show an increase in direct royal

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<sup>11</sup> quoted in Jordan *Louis IX and the Challenge of Crusade* p.13

<sup>12</sup> Joinville *History of St Louis* chap xxvi

<sup>13</sup> Joinville *History of St Louis* chap cxxxv

<sup>14</sup> Joinville *History of St Louis* chap v

control over the localities probably at least partially to do with the results of the inspections coming back to Paris. Another popular reform was the limitation in the size of the *gîte* or the liability of a district or diocese to pay for royal visits - the size of royal entourages were invariably daunting for a somewhat unwilling host. On the other hand, increased royal control allowed much greater revenue collection, and the figures for the *baillage* of Gisors for example showed a five-fold increase in income between 1238 and 1248.<sup>15</sup> That this income was destined for the Near East should also be unsurprising. The result of these reforms amongst others, when added to enormous clerical taxation, meant that Louis not only succeeded in maintaining peace and security within his realm, but also finance a ruinously expensive crusade for five years until 1253.

Yet in the actual military outcomes of the crusade, Louis's success was far from complete. The short-lived triumph of Damietta was followed by abject humiliation at the hands of the Muslims, in which the king only redeemed himself by his stoicism in captivity. The one aim which he surely held above all others - the capture of Jerusalem - ended very disappointingly. Louis appears to have blamed himself for the failure of the expedition, as Matthew Paris recounts: 'if I alone could suffer the shame and adversity and my sins not rebound upon the church, I could endure with equanimity, but woe is me, by me all Christendom has fallen into confusion.'<sup>16</sup> before going onto claim that defeat was a judgement from God upon him as the plunderer of the poor and the church. This certainly was a view which was shared in some circles, as Joinville said to the Legate 'They say, sir (I know not if it be true) that the king hath not yet spent any of his own moneys, but only the moneys of the clergy.'<sup>17</sup> In the one area where Louis had placed all his hopes, he was disappointed, but this is not to say that the results of his preparation for crusade were all in vain. At home and on the European stage, Louis was a figure to be admired, but in terms of his real ambitions, he was no more successful than all his predecessors.

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<sup>15</sup> quoted in Jordan *Louis IX and the Challenge of Crusade* p.83

<sup>16</sup> quoted in Siberry *Criticisms of Crusading* p.86

<sup>17</sup> Joinville *History of St Louis* chap cxxxiv