

A black and white illustration of Napoleon Bonaparte on a white horse, wearing a bicorne hat and a military cloak, with his right arm raised. A large, vibrant red diamond shape is superimposed over the center of the image, containing the title and author's name. The background is a solid light gray.

# A HISTORY OF FRANCE

JOSEPH BERGIN

PALGRAVE ESSENTIAL HISTORIES

# A History of France

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Joseph Bergin



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*For Edward and Olivia  
That they may continue to love France*

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# Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xi
Introduction	1
1 Capetian Beginnings	9
2 A Society and Polity in Crisis and Recovery	41
3 The <i>Ancien Régime</i> in the Making	75
4 From Enlightenment to Empire	107
5 Obstructed Paths	141
6 Dangers and Difficulties	171
7 Two Wars and a Peace	203
8 The <i>Trente glorieuses</i> and After	234
Epilogue	267
<i>Bibliography</i>	279
<i>Index</i>	291



# List of Maps

1	The Frankish kingdom and its principalities, c. 1000	11
2	France on eve of Hundred Years' War, 1328	42
3	France at end of Hundred Years' War, 1461	51
4	The principal fiefs and apanages of medieval France	53
5	France under Louis XIV	96
6	The New France and its <i>départements</i> , 1790	117
7	The Zenith of Napoleonic France, 1811	135
8	The France of Vichy, 1940–44	225

# Preface

France has unfailingly challenged historians to write both general and specialised scholarly works on its past. The international reputation of its own historians has led historians elsewhere not merely to emulate their efforts but also to research and write on French history itself, especially since the 1950s. The resulting bibliography in English alone is impressive in both its range and volume. Translations into English, in full or in part, of some French-language series of general histories, further attest to the subject's enduring interest for English-language readers. But while single-volume accounts of France's history abound in French, English-language counterparts are remarkably few, despite the numbers of English-language historians of France being greater than ever before. Perhaps it has become more difficult than in the past to identify the potential readers of such books, especially that great will o' the wisp, the 'intelligent lay reader'. Such uncertainty has scarcely encouraged either historians or publishers to undertake a venture whose purpose and audience seem so elusive.

Yet the continuing attraction of French history to a non-French public, Anglo-Saxon or other, is undeniable. It may seem trivial to relate it to the huge numbers of tourists who visit France every year. Even if the majority of them have no burning desire to familiarise themselves with the detail of its history, they 'consume' French history in their choice of itineraries and destinations, as anyone who has joined the endless queues to visit its great cultural patrimony will concede. More than most of its neighbours, France still personifies some of the key developments of European history, from its largely unproblematic relations of state and nation to its experience of enlightenment, revolution, or secularisation, to mention just a few. The connections between the frequency of political upheaval and the continuity of social formations must rate among the most difficult challenges for an outsider historian of France to grasp and convey to readers. The echoes of the Revolution of 1789 may have weakened in recent generations, but the changes that it unleashed, inside and outside of France, remain foundational in many respects. That heritage is another reason why France still attracts the curiosity of outsiders, even at a time when its major artists, writers, and intellectuals appear less pre-eminent than in earlier generations.

This book's centre of gravity lies, broadly speaking, in the connections, sometimes visible but often subterranean, between political power, social

change, and cultural forces over time. Its brevity necessarily limits the scope for extended analysis of numerous topics. If it offers a framework for further reading and reflection on the essential features of French history, as the title of the series to which it belongs promises, it will have served its purpose.

In writing this book, I have accumulated several debts that I am happy to avow here. Firstly, I am grateful to several friends and colleagues for assistance and guidance in those areas of French history that are far removed from my habitual 'comfort zone'. I have an additional debt towards those among them who, despite the other calls upon their time, accepted the thankless task of reading my chapters in draft. Paul Fouracre, Mark Greengrass, Malcolm Crook, and Stuart Jones were especially generous with their time, offering both sound advice and shrewd comments on my early efforts. At Palgrave Macmillan, I would like to thank Jenna Steventon and especially Rachel Bridgewater for smoothing the path towards publication with unfussy efficiency.

# Abbreviations

ATTAC	Association pour la taxation des transactions financières et pour l'action citoyenne
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CDD	Contrat de durée déterminée
CFDT	Confédération française démocratique du travail
CFTC	Confédération française de travailleurs chrétiens
CGT	Confédération générale du travail
CPE	Contrat première embauche
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
EDC	European Defence Community
EEC	European Economic Community
EMS	European Monetary System
ENA	École nationale d'administration
FLN	Front de libération nationale
FN	Front National
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HEC	Hautes études commerciales
MRP	Mouvement républicain populaire
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OAS	Organisation de l'armée secrète
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
ORTF	Office de radiodiffusion-télévision française
PACS	Pacte civil de solidarité
PCF	Parti communiste français
PS	Parti socialiste
RER	Réseau express régional
RMI	Revenu minimum d'insertion
RPF	Rassemblement du peuple français
RPR	Rassemblement pour la République
SFIO	Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière
SMIC	Salaire minimum inter-professionnel de croissance
SMIG	Salaire minimum inter-professionnel garanti
SNCF	Société nationale des chemins de fer
STO	Service du travail obligatoire

TGV	Train à grande vitesse
UDF	Union pour la démocratie française
UDR	Union des démocrates pour la République
UMP	Union pour un mouvement populaire

# Introduction

If the past is a foreign country where things are done differently, then what is it that makes a country 'foreign' except its past? Neither isolation nor distance alone can explain it, as the numerous differences between those nearest of neighbours, England and France, suggest. Endlessly commented upon, yet never quite clarified, the centuries-old friction between them has notoriously been a breeding ground for xenophobic or nationalist sentiments on both sides of the Channel. The presence of France has been so familiar on the map of Europe for the past millennium that it can feel like a simple fact of nature. Its shape – a subject to which we shall return later – seems no less 'obvious', but on examination it proves a far more complex question. Of course, it helped that, apart from England (or Britain), France did not have enduringly 'noisy', let alone dangerous, neighbours until the mid-nineteenth century. The Habsburg empire of the early modern period is often considered as such. But formidable as it was in its time, that empire's loose, composite structure and its internal problems ensured that its efforts to 'encircle' France, which were much exaggerated at the time, never produced invasions remotely like those of 1870, 1914, or 1940.

By the same token, few European countries can boast of a history as long and distinctive as that of France. That history is not merely something 'objective', based on measurable territory or shape, but is a 'subjective' chronicle of an 'imagined community', of a people and a nation conscious of its own existence over a very long period of time. As this suggests, the most visible dimension of that history is, in the widest sense of the term, political. By European standards, France reached an effective level of such self-awareness by the later Middle Ages, when it was buttressed by a well-honed historical narrative whose earliest chronicles dated from the seventh century. At that point, its monarchy was both the focus and the vehicle of these early forms of pre- or proto-national sentiment. Such sentiment was mainly confined to France's elites, clerical and lay, until the experiences of the Revolution of 1789 rewrote the script and diffused it throughout the population. Underpinning the earlier mix of political attitudes was a very powerful religious charge, one which closely associated the king with God's designs and which also made him 'the eldest son of the church'. However focussed on the monarchy they might usually be, such sentiments could survive and thrive on adversity, as was demonstrated by the extraordinary

saga of a peasant girl, Joan of Arc, galvanising that same monarchy into action during the crucial years of the Hundred Years' War with England and its French (or Burgundian) allies. In modern times, the disaster of defeat in 1870 and 1940 (prolonged by the 'Vichy' years until 1944) represented another such moment. The state and the political elites of the day were so thoroughly discredited as guardians of French-ness that alternatives were desperately sought. The nearest France got to having a second Joan of Arc was Charles de Gaulle.

Such shocks were all the greater as they cut across a history covering several proud centuries, from at least the end of the Hundred Years' War onwards, during which France was Europe's single most powerful country. Its prolonged conflicts with neighbours like England, Spain, or (later) Germany shaped it not merely territorially, but also institutionally. French hegemony of the kind that Louis XIV and Napoleon embodied was only buried by the outcome of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars respectively. Since then, the steep decrease in French power has been a constant challenge – and, at times, a genuine obsession about wider national decline. It has involved a continuous search for a '*grandeur*' that corresponds to its imagined, glorious past. In pre-modern times, the size of a country like France was not decisive in determining its power. Indeed, Europe's larger states – Poland is the best example – were more likely to be vulnerable unless they had a correspondingly effective infrastructure of institutions and communications to mobilise resources. France potentially faced similar problems, but for centuries after the Hundred Years' War, its population density and its network of internal communications were sufficient to deter would-be invaders.

Above all, France could also draw on a long culture and framework of governance extending back to Roman times in some respects. Well-known and extended periods of serious internal disorder and political weakness – the Hundred Years' War, the wars of religion, successive royal minorities, and so on – make it easy to forget that France had by far the most continuous and stable form of dynastic monarchy of any European country before 1789. Of course, dynastic monarchy inevitably had its own weaknesses, with failure to produce heirs leading to a search for successors that might precipitate either civil war or the well-known European phenomenon of 'wars of succession' – or both. The Hundred Years' War was one such conflict, whose dynastic lessons were learned in the rejection of royal succession in the female line (the Salic law). Less well known but equally vital was another 'fundamental' law of this period that declared the integrity and inalienability of the royal domain. This denied monarchs the right permanently to sub-divide or give away any part of the kingdom in the form

of dowries or apanages to sons or daughters on marrying. The Franks, Carolingians, and their successors had regularly practised sub-division, as did European neighbours like the Habsburgs and German princes until the eighteenth century, with territorial fragmentation as its inevitable consequence. France's handful of fundamental laws may not have prevented disruptive internal conflicts, but they were, in their time, a kind of constitution, which jurists and other commentators defended and systematically expounded. This is not to deny that the contours of France were primarily determined by dynastic expansion based on military strength, yet the maxims enshrined in its fundamental laws helped to copper-fasten concepts of the territorial integrity of a stable state, without which a basic sense of 'French-ness' would have been both less precocious and certainly more precarious. France's historical experiences were singular in many ways, but they did not prevent it from being widely seen as the model of the modern nation-state.

Some years ago, the eminent French medievalist, Jacques Le Goff, wrote that 'France took shape between the middle of the ninth and the end of the thirteenth century'. This assertion was made in relation to France's monarchy, but it sidestepped the question of whether there was – or indeed could be – an entity recognisable as 'France', as distinct from the 'monarchy of the Franks', at that time. With its northern, western, southern, and south-eastern boundaries determined primarily by seas and mountains, it was from (roughly) Geneva to the English Channel that there was no 'natural' demarcation line. Throughout the Middle Ages, this eastern 'march' was considered to be defined by the 'four rivers' – the Rhône, the Saône, the Meuse, and the Scheldt – which corresponded to the sub-division of Charlemagne's empire in 843. French interest in these eastern borderlands varied considerably over the centuries. Of the four rivers, the Rhône offered the least resistance to an expanding French monarchy, which acquired Lyon (and its region), but also the Dauphiné and Provence on its left bank, by the later Middle Ages. Other smaller neighbouring entities (Gex, Bresse) would duly follow around 1600, with the acquisition of Savoy and Nice completing the process as recently as 1859.

The other three rivers proved far more problematic, especially with the sudden emergence in the early sixteenth century of a Europe-wide Hapsburg empire, which acquired formerly French Burgundian lands spreading from the Franche-Comté to northern Flanders. The resulting wars saw French gains, especially in the north-east (around Lille and Cambrai) and the Franche-Comté, which finally became French under Louis XIV in 1679. With the subsequent decline of Spanish Hapsburg power, the Rhine was increasingly seen France's new 'natural' eastern frontier. But the



absence of a major state on either side of the Rhine until the emergence of Bismarckian Germany in 1870, made such a need somewhat less than urgent. It should be realised that for centuries, the modern concept of fixed or 'natural' frontiers (such as the Rhine) was simply not dominant, but was subordinated to the possession of strategic sites that would both prevent invasion or facilitate military action beyond France's normal frontiers. Territory alone – and thus frontiers – was not decisive until the national unifications of the nineteenth century. It was only after 1945 and the tentative steps towards a European union that it became possible to think of France in more politically neutral ways. The term hexagon is now widely used to describe France, but most of those who employ that term are oblivious of how recent it is.

Around 1000 AD, a full millennium after Julius Caesar famously but erroneously declared that 'all Gaul is divided into three parts', there was still no name to describe the area governed by the early Capetians other than 'the kingdom', while the term *Francia* itself still applied only to the modern Ile-de-France region around Paris. In 1083, Philip I was described in an official document as the king 'reigning in Francia'. Educated clerics employed a vocabulary inherited from Rome, so they referred to *Gallia* rather than to *Francia*, which belonged to 'profane' parlance. On the other hand, certain Latin terms, such as the highly charged *patria*, had lost their Roman resonance by then. Although the word *pays* served as a French equivalent of *patria*, until the Revolution it almost always signified one's own locality, adopted or otherwise, and far less the kingdom as a whole. Not until the heady days of the Revolution would *la patrie* would become sacred again and, literally, to die for. It was now a nation owning a claim on all citizens. Long before then, however, the gradual increase of royal power in northern France from around 1100, which was partly driven by conflicts with the English kings over possession of the duchy of Normandy, had stimulated the desire to move beyond the earlier imprecision. It was in 1204–5, soon after capturing Rouen from the English, that for the first time Philip Augustus described himself as 'king of Francia' rather than, as hitherto, simply 'of the Franks'. His realm began to be officially styled the 'kingdom of Francia', and from the 1250s onwards Louis IX was the first to consistently identify himself as 'king of France'. Thereafter, with the gradual replacement of clerics and Latin by lay officials and the French vernacular in royal service, such terminology became increasingly common in official documents, inscriptions, and seals; from there it spread outwards to literary texts generally. For centuries the 'France' to which they referred remained a shifting patchwork of often-unconnected territories ruled by the monarch of the day, and not necessarily some ideal construct, whether gallic or hexagonal.

The identity of the 'French' themselves was no less heatedly debated for centuries. In our time, the nostalgia for reassuringly ancient origins has enabled phrases such as 'our ancestors, the Gauls' to become a staple of French popular culture; packaged in humorous cartoons, the Gauls remain infinitely more appealing to the age of *Asterix* than the Barbarians (with or without more specific tribal names) who swarmed across the Roman imperial provinces. By the end of the fifth century, it was the least disliked and most assimilated of these successive invaders, the Franks, who came to control the largest portion of north-eastern Gaul, thanks mainly to the conquests of their king, Clovis. The Franks were themselves keen to retain Gallo-Roman institutions in order to facilitate their rule, not least because like earlier Germanic invaders, they were simply too few in number to replace the older Celtic-Gallic population. Clovis's conversion to Christianity around 500 voided a major objection among the already christianised Gallo-Roman elites towards the previously pagan Franks, and seriously facilitated their efforts to absorb the Gallo-Roman elites. But it would be several centuries before the rest of the non-Frankish subject population was included in references to the 'Franks'.

From the seventh century onwards, the literate elite began describing the Franks as 'really' descendants of the Trojans – like the Romans before them. Moreover, the legend had it that they had merely 'migrated' to France and had emphatically not conquered it, which in turn meant that their right to rule there was not based on the laws of conquest. It was not until the Renaissance of the sixteenth century that this myth was seriously challenged, as a result of which there was a return of the Gauls as the ancestors of preference among the educated classes. The very first printed map of France (1525) was actually a map of Gaul as understood by Renaissance humanists! It would be easy, from a twenty-first century perspective, to deride such shifts of identification as pure fantasy, but they were regularly mobilised to support successive causes, social and political, down to the Revolution. Indeed, with the rise of nineteenth-century Romantic and nationalist histories, there was more scope than ever for constructing political parables based on the history of France before it became known as France. These waters having now receded, it has become easier to argue, as many historians do, that France was not an eternal nation with a corresponding territorial extension, but a historical product with its own changing characteristics.

A major reason why France was long considered the epitome of a nation-state was the French language itself. Of course, not all French-speakers are French, and France itself continues to have its own non-French languages, such as Breton, Provençal, or Occitan. Despite rejecting a Protestant

reformation in the sixteenth century that might have made French even more dominant within France, the use of the vernacular grew substantially, and French Catholicism was far less averse to using the vernacular than its European counterparts. The monarchy also became a key promoter of such linguistic diffusion by insisting on French as the language of the courts and the administration. The Renaissance and post-Renaissance flowering of French as a literary, even philosophical and scientific language, was vital in widening its appeal beyond France to Europe's social and intellectual elites by the eighteenth century; it was culture as much as language per se which subsequently sustained that appeal. Yet within pre-nineteenth-century France itself, the use of French was not as uniform as is sometimes imagined. In many, especially southern or western regions, speaking and writing French signified belonging to a wider national elite, but without necessarily cutting oneself off from the local *patois* spoken by the majority. The Revolution's rejection of old-regime provinces was duly extended to local languages, but it was the Third Republic's drive for universal education a century later that did most to discredit them for their supposed backwardness. This may well overestimate the impact of schooling on local societies, and justify the view that it was the trenches of 1914–18 that did most – and not just linguistically – to make Frenchmen of provincials.

France's particular trajectory, seen from a wider European perspective, requires that attention be paid to a wide range of factors that may help to explain both its differences and similarities to other countries. When foreign observers or travellers tried to explain France's power from about 1500 onwards, many, like the Italian Machiavelli, drew attention to its 'populousness'. They were clearly awed by its demographic superiority, which made France virtually three times more populous than its greatest rival of the time, Habsburg Spain. France's own proto-economists regularly repeated the maxim of the great sixteenth-century political theorist, Jean Bodin, that without an 'abundance of men' there could be neither power nor wealth. That perceived advantage was only lost to its emerging rival, the increasingly populous Germany, during the nineteenth century. Anxious debate on the subject, and its wider social features, by economists, sociologists, and politicians ensued for a century until the 1960s.

Despite its demographic 'abundance', French society had a comparatively low proportion of town-dwellers to peasants, a long-term characteristic that lasted well into the twentieth century. This contrasts sharply with the neighbouring territories running from Lombardy via the Rhineland to Flanders, where precocious urbanisation during the Middle Ages produced a geo-political map that was seriously hostile to the development of extensive territorial states. Within France, towns and *bourgs*, many of them of

Roman origin (especially in the Midi), were numerous but unevenly distributed across its many regions, and for centuries the bigger they were the more heavily they depended on continuing rural immigration to sustain their often modest population levels. These factors had a considerable impact on France's long-term social structures. Like most of their counterparts, in western Europe at least, France's peasants gradually shed the shackles of serfdom by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, although in some provinces, such as Burgundy and Brittany, strong traces of serfdom remained until the Revolution. Elsewhere, the peasantry was still mostly bound to attenuated forms of lordship which involved a mixture of financial obligations and subjection to numerous symbolic forms of social domination down to August 1789. France's nobility was numerically superior to England's – because based on different principles – but far inferior to those of Spain or Poland. It was constantly renewing itself, however, especially from the sixteenth century onwards, thanks to the influx of newly ennobled office-holders of bourgeois origin whose service to the monarchy gradually won them the formal right to noble status. These new nobles often slipped, via intermarriage, into the shoes of older noble families in decline.

Such developments were of major consequence for the bourgeoisie, to whom Karl Marx assigned the role of the motor of modern historical change. Some historians have turned Marx on his head, asserting either that there was no distinctive middle-class in pre-Revolutionary France or, if there was one, it was a middle-class intent on class treason, given that its principal ambition was to enter the ranks of the nobility. Regardless of which verdict is the most credible, it provides clear evidence of how closely connected the social and political were under the pre-1789 *ancien régime*. The monarchy could not (re-) shape society 'from above' singlehandedly, but its alliances with social or economic groups gave it considerable 'leverage' in the process of social change. The scale of the dismantling of the *ancien régime* that commenced in 1789 was testimony to that past.

No account of French history could underestimate the long-term significance of the Revolution, which was both a key slice of history and an 'idea' that would divide future generations, horrifying some while inspiring others to repeat it for their own time. One after another, the Revolution's attempts, for example, to devise a formal constitution or to re-create France's institutions – indeed to re-make society and human beings – involved scrapping historical precedents and taking 'nature' and 'reason', as understood by Enlightenment thinkers and their disciples, as their rationale. From the outset, the Revolution sought to define and defend universal values, which transcended mere historical precedents. It created the notion of an 'ancien régime' that was consigned to the dustbin of history, as the

colossal destruction of archives, titles, and monuments during the years after 1789 attests. The Revolution's first major source of enduring conflict concerned Catholicism, whose transformation into a national – but not 'established' – church and religion at the hands of a parliamentary assembly was itself a huge shock in 1790. This was the beginning of a major divide that would produce civil war in the short term and deep political hostility in the long term. Pitting clericals against anti-clericals, and conservatives against republicans (or radicals), these divisions would long be associated with particular regions of France. The regicide of 1793 had similar repercussions, ones which often overlapped, socially and geographically, with those concerning religion. These are only a few examples of the kinds of mobilisation and polarisation that the Revolution stood for until recent times. For Socialists and Communists who identified themselves as heirs of the Revolution, it was unfinished work that needed to be completed by a new social and economic revolution. Thus, where one stood on one or other legacy of the Revolution sufficed to situate individual French people, politically and culturally, for generations. Because of its enormous impact, it introduced an un-erasable caesura into French history – a 'before' and an 'after' that was unrivalled elsewhere in Europe. The Revolution's first centenary was celebrated in 1889 as an indivisible 'block' – the term used at the time. Decoded, this meant that its less savoury aspects (e.g. the reign of Terror 1793–4) were considered intrinsic to its legacy. The 1989 bicentenary studiously avoided evoking the 'blood and guts' years of Robespierre and the accompanying Terror by focussing on 1789 itself and its universalist legacy, namely the rights of man and civil society. The simultaneous transfer in late 1989 to the Pantheon of the remains of the philosopher Condorcet, the abbé Grégoire, and the mathematician Monge – a noble, clergyman, and commoner respectively who had lived through the Revolution – was another gesture symbolising compromise and consensus which would have been virtually unthinkable only a few decades earlier. As the Revolution recedes into an older historical timescale, its contentiousness and capacity to serve as a guide for the present seems likely to decline even further.

At this point, it may be worth saying the obvious: historians make bad prophets of future developments. Like good cobblers, they should stick to their lasts. Such advice probably applies even more to a book like the present one.

# 1 Capetian Beginnings

Anyone searching for an unarguable birth-date for the entity that would become known as France in the centuries following the collapse of the Roman empire is likely to be severely frustrated. During the half-millennium or more after the invasion and settlement of Germanic peoples across Roman Gaul, successive kingdoms rose and fell, partly because their rulers all shared an imperative habit of sub-dividing their territories among their surviving sons. The numerous partitions of these lands show scarcely any wider logic or continuity beyond dynastic considerations. The tripartite division of Charlemagne's vast empire in 843, which many have seen as a key moment precisely because its western kingdom came close to resembling the France of later centuries, was no exception. If anything, notions of territorial continuity weakened even further because of the numerous partitions made and unmade *after* 843.

By comparison, the election as king of the Franks of Hugh Capet (c. 940–96) by an assembly of magnates (lay and clerical) near Paris in 987, may seem a rather unspectacular event in what was then just west *Francia*. Nobody thought of it then as an attempt to guarantee a stable Frankish monarchy. Indeed, the choice of Hugh was prompted by the new-style Holy Roman Emperor, Otto III, king of Germany, supported by his current ally, the 'middle' kingdom of *Lotharingia* ('Lorraine'), both of whom wished to keep the western kingdom in a dependent position. On that occasion, the eloquence of Archbishop Adalberon of Reims was apparently crucial in persuading the electors to choose Hugh. The enduring connection between the future French monarchy and Reims was direct and intimate from the outset. The biggest challenge to Hugh and his successors was how to exert their notional primacy in dealing with these major political figures who, like Hugh himself before his election, personified the real power that resided in the kingdom's principalities. By then, Charlemagne's great imperial monarchy had shrivelled into a congeries of such principalities. Yet their rulers had been partners rather than mortal enemies of the Carolingians, and they continued Carolingian forms of rule within their lands. Their growing autonomy was a consequence of royal inadequacy rather than mutual incompatibility. Although the principalities lay mainly between the Loire and the Rhine, easily the largest of them were 'Aquitaine' and 'Burgundy', both far bigger than their later incarnations.

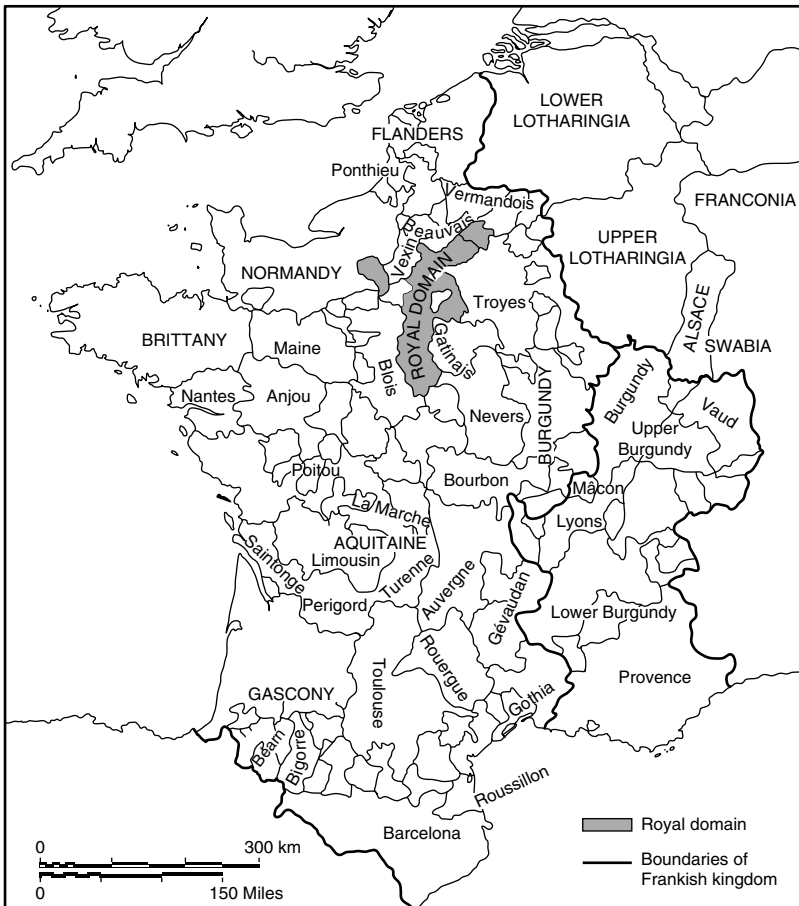
The electors of 987 merely envisaged choosing one of their own – one to whom most of them were connected by ties of marriage – as a *primus inter pares*. There was no intention, let alone guarantee, that the new Capetian monarchy after 987 would be more coherent or successful than its predecessors. But in due course, by avoiding dynastic partition as much as possible and solidifying their grip on their existing lands, the Capetians did restore the boundaries agreed in 843. One important result of this was the emergence of a linguistic border running through the middle kingdom of Lotharingia, on the western side of which ‘French’ emerged as the dominant language. The significance of such developments would only become clear with hindsight, which explains why they remain such a fixture in France’s pantheon of myth and memory.

## I

The founder of the new dynasty only survived his election by less than ten years, but thereafter the reigns of virtually all the Capetians until their disappearance in 1328 were, with the exception mainly of the last three kings, remarkably lengthy for any age. Such regnal longevity (over forty years was not uncommon) guaranteed, if nothing else, substantial – and novel – continuity for the post-Carolingian monarchy. Biological good fortune played its part, too, as successive Capetian monarchs regularly produced legitimate male heirs – a much bigger challenge than might be imagined at a time when the church was increasingly hostile towards the rights of bastards. But good luck alone would not have sufficed for the Capetians to escape the fate of earlier powerless, ‘seat-warming’ rulers. Henceforth, the kings routinely ‘inducted’ their heirs as co-rulers and had them formally crowned *before* their actual succession, a tactic that had precedents under both the Merovingians and the Carolingians, but which now imperceptibly transformed a theoretically elective monarchy into a *de facto* hereditary one. The royal coronation at Reims duly registered this shift, by introducing an ‘acclamation’ of the new king by those present that effectively replaced the previous elections. This tactic also helped to stave off the familiar political upheavals that so often accompanied a transition to a new reign. The Capetians were anxious to identify their rule with that of Charlemagne and to use the same icons of power, such as the *oriflamme* (the royal military banner), to symbolise that continuity. But as in other European monarchies, there was no escaping factional in-fighting involving different combinations of queen-mothers, uncles and younger brothers seeking to either regain or obtain political influence. Such conflicts often became violent,

leading to civil wars, prolonged hostilities, and vendettas between major political figures.

The early Capetians of the 1000s and 1100s had to survive within a constantly shifting world of regional principalities (see Map 1). What has often been called the 'feudal anarchy' saw power drain away from large-scale, and downwards to regional and local political units. In their efforts to deal with them, it helped that the Capetians were themselves the product of such a process. Hugh Capet and his father, Hugh 'the Great', had gradually built up



**Map 1** *The Frankish kingdom and its principalities, c. 1000*



during the 900s the largest political entity in west Francia after Aquitaine and Flanders, which enabled them to become dukes of the Franks. But attaining kingship was no sure protection against future sorcerer's apprentices with ambitions to undermine their new suzerains; ultimately, royal titles and emblems were of only limited use unless buttressed by extensive lands and lordship. The early Capetians were realists enough to avoid direct confrontation with the major princes; like a typical landholder, they focussed on consolidating their own still quite limited royal domain in the wider Paris region – scattered through the Seine-Oise-Marne-Essonnes river valleys from Soissons to Orléans, roughly – by recovering lands previously granted out and then tightening their grip on them. Hugh Capet's reign began with only one 'city', Orléans, within his domain. He and his successors decided to 'retain' under direct control a number of key counties, which included Paris, rather than confer them, as was expected of Frankish kings, on *vicomtes* to administer and, most likely, to make their own in due course. The Capetians also acquired full patronage rights to bishoprics and the major abbeys in the same region (and to some well outside of it), which was of considerable benefit, given the church's enormous landed wealth and influence in the region. Archbishop Hincmar of Reims (806–82), a former monk of Saint-Denis, had already embellished the story of Clovis's baptism at Reims as a royal anointment, one that each new coronation at Reims repeated and amplified. The foundations of the myth of a monarchy enjoying divine origins already existed, and further elements would be added in the following centuries. These abbeys, famously led by Saint-Denis, the historical burial-place of French monarchs just outside of Paris, played a major role in devising and disseminating propaganda (lives, chronicles, genealogies, etc.) for the successive dynasties. The connexion between the two proved invaluable in establishing – and inflating – the monarchy's claims to rule and, by extension, its superiority to other forms of authority and legitimacy.

The early Capetians were probably fortunate in that for some time the greatest principalities developed primarily on the peripheries of west Francia; that trend only later affected the centre of the kingdom. The duchy of Aquitaine (which stretched from Poitou almost to the Pyrenees) was probably the least threatening towards the early Capetians, since its mainly Gallo-Roman population, legal customs, and culture rendered it unreceptive to Frankish ways, and especially to the so-called feudal institution of vassalage. Consequently, with a greater affinity towards Catalonia, Aquitaine largely ignored the Franks until its incorporation into the Plantagenet 'empire' in the 1150s rendered that impossible. Other southern principalities – Gascony, Catalonia-Provence and, to a lesser

extent, 'Burgundy' – were primarily concerned with developments in the Mediterranean region, and notably the Saracen and Moorish incursions of the ninth and tenth centuries.

This was just as well, since north of the Loire several formidable principalities – the counties of Flanders and Champagne to the east, and Normandy and Anjou-Maine in the west – hemmed in the Capetians. Such political geography meant that they were for long completely landlocked. Normandy is the best known of the principalities, for the obvious reason that in 1066 its duke was powerful and confident enough to invade and conquer England. The formidable Norman duchy owed its origin to the Viking sea-borne expeditions, whose incursions far inland both revealed and exacerbated the weakness of the later Carolingians – and indeed of other principalities already mentioned from Flanders to Guyenne. Paris was sacked several times in the 840s and 850s, and the Carolingians were eventually forced, in 911, to concede to the Viking-Normans the county of Rouen, with its extensive allodial lands (i.e. not subject to feudal lordship) and the attached rights of church patronage in the surrounding lower Seine valley. The future duchy soon became co-terminous with the church province of Rouen, which gave it far greater institutional density than the more artificially constructed territorial entities of the time; it also facilitated its expansion westwards towards Brittany. Thus, without being typical, Normandy was probably the strongest principality by the time of Hugh Capet's election in 987; its strength made it an effective defence against the newest wave of Viking expansion in the next century. Closer still to the Capetian heartlands were the ambitious counts of Vermandois-Vexin and, especially, those of Champagne. In 1023, Champagne acquired, via dynastic inheritance, the older, 'composite' principality that included the Loire valley counties of Blois, Chartres and Tours. Further north again, the county of Flanders, stretching southwards almost to the Ile-de-France, was the most powerful vassal and neighbour of the Capetians. Its famed wealth, based on its textile production and its trade with England and Germany, made it a desirable acquisition for any neighbour, but also made it a formidable adversary.

All of these 'princes' were seeking to expand their lands, often through marriage alliances, which placed enormous pressure on the Capetians trapped at the heart of this immense patchwork of lands, jurisdictions and patronage rights which defy easy or legible mapping, since they did not express or require territorial exclusiveness. Rivals as much as allies, each of these princes sought their individual advantage. That in turn meant the Capetians' strategy had to be one of exploiting differences among them and taking advantage of their own royal 'superiority' and good fortune, most

of all by recovering lands from princes without heirs. The territorial patchwork of these centuries would have been infinitely more complicated if the bishops of northern France had sought, like their German counterparts, to turn their extensive landholdings into territorial principalities.

If dynastic solidity and longevity gave the Capetians an advantage over their rivals, it still had to be actively exploited. As king, Hugh Capet and his successors were suzerains and lords to most of the dukes and counts encountered above, but without a firm power base within their own lands formal royal or imperial titles made little difference. During the reigns of Hugh Capet's four immediate successors, who totalled 140 years between them (996–1137), such consolidation seems to have been their primary focus; their efforts understandably remain rather obscure in comparison with the exploits of their better-known successors. Philip I (1060–1108) is a good example here: his role as king over almost fifty years is largely invisible apart from his assiduity as lord of his domain, which he rounded out by a mixture of unspectacular local purchases and conquests; he also reorganised the administration of his household and estates, strengthened royal authority within the towns, and increased the number of royal strongholds. He actively used the bishops of the region, conferring the status of counts on them. His successors Louis VI (r. 1108–37) and Louis VII (r. 1137–80) appear to have done largely the same, but more anonymously still. Louis VI 'the Fat' is known primarily for his increased recourse to 'new men', rather than the more independent aristocrats, in running his affairs, a lead that many of his successors would follow.

## II

For centuries the Frankish monarchy was also an itinerant one, since the royal ability to move around the kingdom, and especially in the form of encounters with vassals, was a critical indicator of a king's authority. Without such surveillance, local officials usually found it much easier to privatise the royal authority delegated to them; the immobility practised later by Louis XIV and his successors at Versailles was unthinkable because it signified powerlessness. But the more the Capetians strengthened their grip on their core lands, the more sedentary they – or rather certain elements of their as-yet rudimentary administration – could indeed become, which in turn made possible the emergence of Paris, thanks to its convenient location along or near the main rivers of the Ile-de-France, as a quasi-capital. It was not until around 1200, thanks to new fortifications, which included the Louvre, built by Philip II Augustus (1180–1223), that such a status would

have become apparent. In the longer term, however, the expansion of royal power beyond that historic nucleus made it imperative that the kings engage in yet more extensive progresses. However, even when confined within their Paris-centred domain, the Capetians were not disconnected from the wider world of European politics, from England to Aragon and Sicily; the web of dynastic interests alone made sure of that. Participation in the Crusades from 1147 onwards expanded their horizons further afield, as is well illustrated by possibly the first grand royal 'progress' which Louis IX conducted on his return from the crusade in 1254; such expeditions became familiar, and were still felt to be necessary as late as the 1560s and 1570s.

Although the powerful duchy of Normandy was a potentially dangerous neighbour by the mid-1000s, the most consistently antagonistic one was the extensive Blois-Champagne dynasty whose lands, as its geography suggests, hemmed in the Capetians far more tightly. It was not until the reign of Louis VII (1137–80) that this roadblock to Capetian expansion eastwards finally began to be lifted, commencing with a three-way partition (1152) of the lands in question and, thanks to intermarriage, the onset of better relations between the Capetians and the counts of Champagne themselves. However, almost simultaneously, another set of dynastic events that would spell a different kind of trouble for the Capetians, was in train. In 1152, Louis VII, just returned from the Second Crusade, divorced his wife Eleanor, who duly recovered her enormous Aquitaine inheritance in the west and south-west. Within two months she had married Henry of Plantagenet, duke of Normandy, as he then was, a union that on its own represented a major geo-political transformation. But this already enormous conglomerate soon grew even further, with her husband's accession as King Henry II of England in 1154. A Plantagenet 'empire' – also labelled 'Angevin' because Anjou was its historic nucleus – was suddenly born, one which dwarfed the Capetians' still modest lands; and it had active designs on neighbouring areas such as Brittany (which it annexed for a time), Auvergne and Toulouse county. Admittedly, Henry II consented to pay homage to the king of France for his French lands, in addition to Normandy, possibly because up to then such formalities had little real significance. But when the two royal dynasties began seriously to lock horns either side of 1200, the political capital incrementally accumulated by the successive Capetians, especially in enforcing their conception of royal suzerainty over vassals, great as well as small, was capable of paying substantial dividends. It also helped that they were by now extracting substantial revenues from the areas under their direct control.

It was the challenge represented by the Plantagenets' composite monarchy which gradually obliged the Capetian monarchy to look beyond its

usual ken, especially south of the Loire. During the long reign of Philip II, a mediocre Crusader but the only French monarch to have the sobriquet (Augustus) of the Caesars routinely attached to his name, 'internal' and 'external' challenges, as well as royal responses to them, dovetailed. These years were to prove decisive for the monarchy's future. Only fourteen on his accession, Philip needed a regent, his god-father the count of Flanders, to govern for several years; the days when French kings came of age at thirteen rather than twenty-one only came much later, in 1374. Regencies were and would remain moments of uncertainty and danger: the solidity of the Capetian polity was not yet indisputable, and the neighbouring principalities remained potentially as predatory as before. But Philip Augustus enjoyed some good fortune, as virtually all his major rivals died in quick succession – several during the Third Crusade (1190–2) – while his careful deployment of his own numerous siblings from his father's successive marriages proved invaluable, not least via marriage alliances, which duly brought further lands into the royal domain. During his forty-three years of rule, Philip Augustus capitalised on his predecessors' work, mainly through family inheritance or the growing invocation of his rights as feudal overlord. Most of the gains occurred in the two final decades of his reign, after 1202. In the process, he increased the royal domain threefold and took possession areas that had historically been the most problematic – the Vexin, Vermandois (which included much of Artois and Picardy) and, above all, Normandy and several other Plantagenet lands in the Loire-Anjou region. Likewise, he almost doubled the number of bishoprics to which he could provide to over forty.

Not all of these gains were peacefully made. Normandy was the major problem either side of 1200, with Philip Augustus exploiting the hostility between the English royal brothers Richard II and John from the 1190s onwards. In dealing with John, now king of England, after 1202, Philip used another familiar tactic: John's 'failure' to attend a court of Philip's barons allowed him to declare John's French fiefs forfeit and his vassals free to recognise another suzerain. After ten years of campaigning, Philip occupied most of the Plantagenet lands in northern and western France. No less significant was his victory at Bouvines (1214) over the German Emperor and his Flemish allies. Bouvines was a landmark in several ways. Perhaps its greatest value was to enhance the military prowess (hitherto rather mediocre) of the Capetians, thus making the king the natural commander of his aristocracy. It also secured Philip's annexation of Normandy, Anjou (with Maine and Touraine), Brittany and large parts of Aquitaine over the previous decade, at the expense of the Plantagenets. It established Capetian dominance across the kingdom as it then was for the first time, whereas a

Capetian defeat would almost certainly have unravelled the process of territorial aggregation. In a largely forgotten coda to these campaigns, Philip's son, the future Louis VIII (r. 1223–6), defeated King John before conducting the last French invasion of England on the invitation of its barons, then in revolt against King John. Although Louis failed in this by no means preposterous attempt of 1217 to repeat the Norman conquest, the Capetian kingdom had, for the first time, not one but three windows onto the sea, in Normandy, western Poitou (La Rochelle and its environs), and the county of Toulouse by the 1220s.

That change was partly a consequence of the Plantagenet empire compelling the Capetians to turn their attention, to an unprecedented degree, to southern France. Despite the north-south differences already mentioned, the world south of the Loire was not wholly *terra incognita* to the Capetians before 1200: they already had a foothold in certain areas south of the Loire (Berry, Burgundy), and were increasingly careful not to allow their regalian prerogatives over their great vassals there to lapse by default. In addition, the more powerful the Capetians became, the more their assistance or intervention was solicited by southern 'parties', especially when disputed dynastic successions occurred. Consequently, the southwards expansion of the Capetian monarchy was always likely to be haphazard, the fruit of opportunities offered and taken and, by the same token, potentially reversible. It began with the Albigensian crusades of 1209 and 1226 which brought northern armies for the first time to the Toulouse-Carcassonne region, where fighting, characterised by numerous massacres, mass executions and pillaging, continued into the 1240s. But the northern aristocratic crusaders, initially led by the Montforts, proved unable to survive there without royal assistance, which was slow in coming; when it did finally show, in 1226–9, the Montforts had effectively to surrender their claims on the huge county of Toulouse to the monarchy via a marriage alliance. This pact brought a huge windfall in 1271, when Poitou and Saintonge, as well as the counties and *sénéchaussées* that constituted the future province of Languedoc, reverted to the crown on the death of Louis IX's brother, Philip, whose marriage to the southern heiress Jeanne de Toulouse, had been childless.

Dynastic fortune was still evidently smiling on the Capetians, the shape of whose crazy-paving kingdom defies modern geographical logic, but which evidently only sharpened their appetite for more. By marrying another heiress, Jeanne de Navarre, Philip IV (r. 1284–1314) was behaving as contemporaries would have expected him, since he could expect to acquire not just distant Navarre, but above all Champagne, which was by now in Navarre hands and which opened the doors towards Lorraine. Philip

left Mediterranean ambitions, especially in southern Italy, to his Angevin relatives, preferring to focus his attention on reducing English power in the large duchy of Guyenne. He also incorporated Lyon and its *pays* in 1312, and where the acquisition of borderland principalities from Hainaut to Savoy seemed beyond reach, he actively sought to expand his feudal lordship over the princes who ruled there.

At the same time, Philip IV's reign witnessed major efforts to increase royal control of the lands he governed. The *baillis* introduced by Philip Augustus were by now the lynchpin of royal administration, especially in the more distant areas; their southern equivalents, the *sénéchaux*, presided over an administration that was often considered oppressive because of its military character. The celebrated crusading king, Saint Louis IX (1226–70), had already tried to regulate the behaviour of both types of official and, more broadly, to remedy perceived weaknesses in government during the mid-1250s; the legend of Saint Louis giving justice in person to his subjects was often invoked by disgruntled later generations to criticise bad government. The Paris parlement, which would remain the highest law court in France until the Revolution, became a permanent, sedentary institution of considerable authority under Louis IX's grandson, Philip IV. A new Chamber of Accounts was also created to supervise the expanding royal fiscal machinery, whose enviable ability to invent new taxes was badly needed at a time when soaring royal expenditure (particularly on war) made traditional domain revenues a shrinking proportion of its receipts. Already, the monarchy had asserted its right to control the currency; it regulated markets and trade and, above all, began developing a long-lasting relationship with the principal towns (the *bonnes villes*) of the kingdom.

Despite its importance, the role of the stern and diligent Philip IV (1284–1314) in internal affairs has often been underestimated. It suited him to allow the increasingly ubiquitous legists and his other councillors, imbued with a precociously advanced creed of royal authority, to appear on-stage. He regularly insisted that as monarch his ultimate power was that of final and supreme judge in all but specifically ecclesiastical affairs. Although a claim rather than a statement of fact, the ensuing authoritarianism began to raise hackles in the last years of the reign, especially in the expulsion of the Jews (1306) and the brutal destruction of the order of the Templars (1307), in both of which financial appetites were foremost. Not for the last time, manipulation of the coinage to the treasury's advantage drew stinging criticism, while damaging commercial activity. The shrillest confrontation of Philip IV's reign, with Pope Boniface VIII, proved to be a defining moment in church-state relations in France for centuries; it was only possible because of Philip's conviction, which he did not invent, that

his lineage and established rights entitled him to defend the church against an unworthy pope. It says much about the continuing bonds between monarchy and church that Philip had little difficulty in securing the support of the kingdom's clergy against the pope.

Yet within just over a generation after Philip the Fair's death (1314), there began a major and long-lasting conflict with England – the Hundred Years' War – that nearly tore France apart. No more than their contemporaries, the Capetians were not politically infallible – or secure. In his final year, Philip IV himself was forced to back down in the face of resistance from the nobility against the levy of a feudal 'aid' for war-making purposes. Judging the charge excessive – the campaign was cancelled, but not the levy! – several noble leagues, seeking a return to the days of 'the good king Saint Louis', had to be pacified by Philip's short-lived successor; it was the king's chief extorter of funds who paid the ultimate price of execution promptly after his master's death. Such behaviour, often involving open revolt over taxation, would become a familiar feature of later French history. Above all, Philip IV's succession caused trouble. His son, Louis X, only lasted eighteen months, after which the throne was effectively 'usurped' by Philip IV's own brother, the childless Philip V 'the Tall' (r. 1316–22), who was then followed, equally briefly, by the last of the Capetians, Charles the Fair (r. 1322–8). The Capetians' prolonged good luck was running out, and its major consequence was the Hundred Years' War.

In a context of such unusual dynastic fragility, and unresolved differences about succession rights, another recent departure from the normal Capetian practice of preserving the royal domain intact is noteworthy. A century earlier, in 1225, Louis VIII (r. 1223–6) willed his father's patrimony to his eldest son, the future Louis IX, and simultaneously endowed his three younger sons with individual apanages consisting mainly of recently acquired provinces as large as Artois, Anjou-Maine, Auvergne and Poitou. His intention, he asserted, was to prevent discord among his sons. The aristocracy had long practised such division of their estates, but it was new for the Capetians to follow their example. The long 'age of the apanage', which would endure until the seventeenth century, would cause much trouble for reigning monarchs, but this may not have been evident in the 1220s. Its endurance over the following centuries shows how formidable, even irresistible, the pressures to share one's patrimony could be at the highest level; by 1225 and later, the Capetians' successes in acquiring new lands seem to have persuaded them to reverse their previous parsimony towards younger sons. In any event, Louis IX, Philip III and Philip IV all imitated the example of Louis VIII, but tried to 'circulate' roughly the same territories and ensure that they would revert to the crown in due



course. Such caution indicates their awareness of the need to obviate the problems that might otherwise arise, but it did not persuade them to drop the practice altogether. Substituting members of the royal dynasty for the previous princes of recently acquired principalities made good sense, and was designed to facilitate the process of absorbing such territories, especially distant ones, into the royal domain. But the meaning of such gestures could be read in ways other than those intended, as was to become evident in due course. Despite the proper emphasis laid by historians on the precocious development of a concept of the state – or the ‘crown’ – as a distinct, abstract entity during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, political practice was only partially governed by such lofty, self-denying principles.

### III

This cursory exploration of the French monarchy – its unstable territory and its fluctuating but gradually developing capacity to rule it – only scratches the surface of a world characterised by a bewildering complexity of interests and motivations, where ‘modern’ distinctions between ‘public’ and ‘private’, ‘monarchy’ (or the ‘state’) and ‘aristocracy’ were not yet familiar, let alone lived by. Personal bonds that were based on blood, on oaths taken and accepted, and on lord-vassal relations, were the strongest of all, but were far from sacrosanct when hard political decisions had to be made. In a world where the question ‘who made you a count?’ could be answered by another – ‘who made you king?’ – power essentially belonged, for a long time still, to the landed aristocracy who, from the early Germans to the Vikings, eagerly stepped into the shoes of their Gallo-Roman predecessors. Gradually the Roman practices – and language – of patronage and clientage within the political elites were adapted to the *mores* of Frankish society. Rule increasingly revolved around land and attached forms of local power and jurisdiction held ‘in fief’ by dependent vassals, both clerical and lay, who in return owed fidelity and service (primarily military) to their lords. Varying substantially from region to region, such practices and their consequences were central to a highly complex and endlessly discussed feature of medieval society – feudalism, a modern construct whose various meanings still divide historians.

The eleventh and twelfth centuries can be labelled as ‘seigneurial’ (literally, ‘lord-ly’) as much as ‘feudal’. With the decline of the Carolingian empire, the oaths of fidelity to emperors and kings lost their substance, and in any case they now ranked below fidelity to one’s immediate lord; as clienteles of vassals became more regional, even local in character, the