

Capetian kings of france



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What factors promoted the authority of the Capetian Kings of France in the Twelfth century? France in the eleventh century had been a fragmented land, divided into federal principalities, or mini-states ruled by princes or dukes. Though they recognized the King of France's authority they did not expect him to exercise it in their individual territories. Feudalism increased the power of these mini-states in the twelfth century, and was the tool used by the Capetian Kings of France to advance their influence and wealth.

Why and how the Capetian dynasty sought to establish and then successfully utilize this particular system will be the main focus of my essay. Feudal law was the customs and relations between lord and vassal in regards to the most valuable medieval commodity; land. Under the 'oath of fealty' the lord protected the vassal and gave him land to hold in return for produce, labour services, or military services. The feudal lord could acquire a substantial sum of money if his vassal's son wished to retain his deceased father's fiefdom.

The potential heir would pay a 'relief' to the lord to secure his succession. Other advantages in the feudal arrangement were in cases of the land reverting entirely back to the lord if its vassal died without any successors. The benefits of a feudal society were significant in terms of power and profit for a feudal lord. Therefore, a King who was also feudal lord of his kingdom would hold a strong position of authority. King Louis VI (the fat) sought to establish himself as a feudal monarch, perhaps to regain some of the distinction that had been enjoyed by his predecessor, Charlemagne.

Louis VI's reign was from 1108 - 1137 AD, during which time he sought to consolidate his power as a feudal lord in his demesne. The Capetian King would then have established a base from which to further expand his royal

authority in the Kingdom of France. Louis VI felt that he should protect the lands of his vassals well and not appear to be seizing them for himself. It appears that he hoped this would establish a mutual confidence between lord and vassal and would be a great incentive for other subjects in the kingdom to become his vassals voluntarily. “Ceaseless vigilance” was required by the king to assert his royal power and prevent its loss if it was not exercised. Louis VI therefore spent a great deal of his reign travelling from one end of his demesne to the other, quashing petty disputes with vassals and granting permission for festivals and markets. All this was in pursuit of respect for his feudal authority, which he painstakingly achieved. Consequently, the respect of other nobles in the kingdom for Louis increased and with his authority.

Evidence of the King’s increased power can be seen in the invasion of France by Emperor Henry V in 1124. Nobles from all over the territory obeyed Louis VI’s summons to stand against the Emperor e. g. those from Soissons, St Denise, the Count of Flanders, the Count of Anjou, and the Duke of Aquitaine. Louis’s grandson, Philip II ‘ Augustus’ would continue this practice of exercising royal control over his demesne. Philip invested a great deal in drawing up thorough and precise agreements with vassals old and new.

By the time Philip II ‘ Augustus’ was in power, the territory under Capetian control had grown significantly. This was due in part to the labours first carried out by Louis VI in first consolidating the royal demesne before enlarging it. Both kings knew the value in treating their subjects justly, as dishonesty or greed was sure to provoke a feudal rebellion and destroy any possibility of a feudal monarch. The relationship between the crown and the

church also played a part in promoting Capetian authority. The church lent support to the king in return for protection.

The idea of a feudal monarch in Latin Christendom appealed to the clergy who favoured order and obedience which would allow 'Christian life' to flourish. The church even supported the claim that the king possessed a healing touch which he passes on to his son. This claim gave rise to the notion that the position of king was ordained by God and should be accepted as his will. This made way for another advance in solidifying royal power by helping to make the crown hereditary. The king's son was permitted to be crowned during his father's lifetime in order to preserve the healing touch.

The church gave the monarch a higher degree of moral credibility and in return the church gained more prestige. One therefore increased the standing of the other in medieval France. Louis VI's chief minister and ecclesiastical advisor was Abbot Suger of St Denise. He held his prestigious office from 1122 to his death in 1155, during which time he recorded a history of his king, *The Life of Louis the Fat*. As a result of this great power he held in France, he was very much involved in French politics and "virtually ran the Kingdom while King Louis VI was away on crusade. This aspect of Suger's career would explain his proximity and involvement in the monarch's progress in gaining a more prominent role in European affairs, and as a result of this proximity, why he was in a position to chronicle Louis's life. He seems to play a significant role in promoting Capetian authority in how he portrays Louis as a most pious and worthy king to serve under. He states in the introduction of his biography that "with my pen I describe his devotion to the church's worship of God" and implores his contemporaries and readers

not to forget Louis VI's "marvellous zeal for the good of the kingdom. Perhaps Suger may be slightly guilty of exaggerating Louis's piety in an effort to promote his image as a moral leader and help consolidate his power. The enlargement of the royal demesne was the essential aim of the king and his advisor and Suger's account seems to support this view. Suger may have also wanted to record the events in the life of Louis VI that involved the French Church in order to emphasise the strong bond between the crown and the clergy. The King was forced to move against Thomas de Marle who was claiming land unlawfully.

True to form, Louis acts quickly to prevent loss of royal authority by handling the matter personally. Suger reports that the clergy move with him [the King] to excommunicate de Marle and strip him of all honours for his crimes. This is described by The Abbot as "yielding to the prayers of the great council", to whom Louis VI "was always very strongly attached." The Cathedral Basilica of Saint Denis was also known as the Royal Abbey of France as many Kings had been educated and buried there. The old abbey church of St.

Denis was partially dilapidated by the early twelfth century, having been built in the late eighth century by Charlemagne, and required renovation as an important symbol of French Capetian royal power. Suger was overseer of the rebuilding of the abbey. Though Suger's involvement in its reconstruction was of more religious significance, the project was nevertheless just as much a political and architectural an event. The new building marked the beginning of Gothic architecture which would spread

with the expansion of the House of Capet's royal demesne as they came closer to becoming a feudal monarch.

The family's connection to Charlemagne also increased the perception of their glory and power. Their glorified ascendancy was highlighted by the restoration of the Cathedral the great emperor had first commissioned. The church aided the promoting of royal authority throughout the twelfth century as more vassals and land came under Capetian control. After establishing him-self as a respected feudal lord within the kingdom, Louis VI's court became the place other lords turned to settle their disputes.

This was an automatic assertion of Louis's power in the kingdom. The nobles' " submission to [Louis's court's] judgement necessitated the recognition of the King as one's feudal lord. " Advantageous marriage was also a method employed to acquire territory for the crown and increase its power. Though it was not always a successful method, it is evidence that alliances with the Capetian house were not undesirable by rulers of the other mini-states. It also suggests that the consolidation of power into a feudal monarchy was not widely resisted.

In 1137 Louis VI married his son, Louis VII to the daughter of the Duke of Aquitaine and thus acquired the extensive territory in western France through marital bonds. However, Aquitaine was lost to Henry II of England when Louis VII's marriage fell apart. Philip II was slightly more successful than his father in regards to political marriage. He wished to marry the daughter of Canute VI of Denmark, Isabella of Hainault, in 1193, in the hopes that the alliance would give him the man power he needed to remove the English from the Kingdom of France. He was unsuccessful in this endeavour.

He soon wished to have the marriage annulled but it was not permitted by Pope Innocent III. Philip obtained the district of Artois through this marriage. This acquisition marked the beginning of the northern expansion of the royal territory. Philip II soon found himself in a position to continue expanding north by claiming various districts of inheritance. These included Amiens in 1185 and St Quentin in the beginning of the thirteenth century. The continual expansion of the royal demesne to the north was not just to acquire land but to acquire particular land in the district of Flanders.

Flanders would be a significant gain to a potential feudal monarch as it was one of the wealthiest parts of northern Europe. Its cities would dispense a considerable amount of money into the pockets of its feudal lord. The growing willingness of French nobles to submit to the Capetian kings throughout the twelfth century indicates that the idea of a feudal monarchy was neither unpopular nor unwanted. Louis VI's demesne was seen as a prime example of order and a strong body, capable of wielding power over the rest of France and other European empires.

Louis VI proved his worthiness to govern France as both king and feudal overlord. Philip II 'Augustus' built on his grandfather's reputation and had accumulated a considerable amount of land and prestige for the crown by the beginning of the thirteenth century. The church also aided Capetian propaganda by emphasising the dynasty's most prestigious member, Charlemagne. The restoration of the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Denis was symbolic of the Capetian celebrity that would have been well known in France. Suger and Louis VI the fat sought to utilize the connection for the advancement of Capetian power.

This suggests that the monarch and the clergy were quite intertwined in the political events of France in the twelfth century, each shaping the power and the role of the other in the Kingdom's progression of authority in Europe.

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