

The Capetians: Kings of France, 987–1328

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Bradbury's text is a delightful read. His text discusses the Capetian dynasty of kings, from the events that brought the family to power in the tenth century up to the death of Charles IV in 1328. Charles died without male heirs, and so the kingship passed to a collateral line, the Valois. Bradbury has a wonderful sense of humour, especially when he uses primary source material to describe the colourful details of the deaths of the various kings and noblemen. The book gives an in-depth look into the reign of each king.

The text is complete. It fleshes out the importance, or lack thereof, of each Capetian, reign by reign, king by king, covering such topics of inquiry as 'the king and his realm', 'royal administration' and 'the king and the church'. Bradbury explains the complicated kinships of the royal and noble families. He relates the significance and power structures of the principalities, describing how they affect royal power. At the beginning of every chapter, he states the themes to be reviewed and at the end he gives useful summary conclusions. He uses a good balance of contemporary and modern sources to interpret important issues and occurrences. Bradbury's methodology is sound and his work can serve as a text for medieval France.

After a quick glance at the Merovingians the book begins with an overview of Carolingian Francia. It breaks down into its components the coming apart of Charlemagne's empire. Bradbury makes a good case for the last Carolingian kings not being as weak as commonly believed. He points out that the geographical boundaries of the three kingdoms in the Treaty of Verdun of 843 were not 'written in concrete' and that the units of land given to Charles the Bald had the best chance of survival intact (pp. 14–15). Additionally, Bradbury believes that the Viking invasions during the Carolingian period as described by modern writers do not adequately reflect the threat from them felt by chroniclers of the era (p. 23).

The author next presents the rise of the Robertian family (ancestors of the Capetians) to power in the ninth and tenth centuries, showing that Hugh Capet inherited a throne in 987 stronger than is generally believed. Bradbury also finds that the importance of Paris grew as the control of the family over north-western Francia increased. He concludes that Odo (888–98), the first Robertian king and son of Robert the Strong who died fighting the Vikings, deserves credit for his successes against the invaders (p. 32). However, Odo could not check the development of the new principalities that eventually challenged the kings for control.

Then, after the throne reverted to the Carolingians, Charles the Simple (898–923) wisely granted the area around Rouen in 911 to Rollo the Viking (p. 53). Charles set up a buffer region and gave Rollo the task of protecting the coast from further incursions of the Northmen. Rollo also accepted Christianity. Bradbury correctly sees the foot-kissing episode performed by Rollo in giving homage to Charles as an exaggeration of Dudo of St-Quentin, who recorded the event and who was overwhelmingly pro-Norman in sentiment (pp. 53–4).

Although Charles the Simple was neither a simpleton nor a weakling, Hugh the Great, a Robertian who refused the kingship at the death of the Carolingian Ralph I (923–36), proved to be the most potent prince in West Francia in the tenth century (p. 37). Hugh held a firm grasp on Neustria, with his lands stretching from Beauvais in the north to Poitiers in the south, and he became the lay abbot of major monasteries. According to Bradbury, Carolingian kingship came to an end in West Francia for three major reasons (p. 45): first, the last Carolingian kings made an enemy out of their most powerful vassal, the Robertian Hugh Capet; second, they lost the support of the Ottonian rulers of East Francia, their greatest external ally; and third, they opposed the most important prelate in their realm, Archbishop Adalbero of Reims.

When Hugh Capet acceded to the throne in 987, West Francia could be called a 'realm' (pp. 64–6). Bradbury sees a firmer division between the East and West Frankish kingdoms, and finds that those dwelling in each were beginning to see themselves as either German or French. He asserts that the principalities were slowly growing stronger and the magnates who controlled them could now be called 'princes', even 'sub-kings'. The author states that 'the emergence of principalities was not necessarily a weakening of Western Europe, or even a diminishing of royal power' (p. 65). The first part of this statement is certainly true, but an argument could be made that the principalities indeed checked royal power and even lessened it until the conquest of the northern ones by Philip II in the late twelfth century. Nevertheless, however powerful the princes became, they continued to see themselves as part of a kingdom, recognising themselves as princes of the realm (p. 65).

Bradbury believes that the first two Capetian kings, Hugh (987–96) and Robert II (996–1031), were not as weak as many historians have depicted them (p. 95). Their kingdom continued to grow in wealth and power, and they controlled many major dioceses as well as abbeys. Bradbury shows that Hugh's authority extended beyond his principality, from the environs of Paris to those of Orleans (pp. 82). He successfully checked the ambitions of both Charles of Lower Lorraine and Odo of Blois, and he convened church assemblies to defy the pope. Bradbury also notes that Hugh began the Capetian practice of associating their heirs on the throne, and he chose to be buried in the church of St-Denis, a precedent that made the abbey the Capetian dynasty's cemetery. The problem with making any decision about whether Hugh's rule was either strong or weak, however, lies in the lack of sources about him, as Bradbury recognises (p. 69). The one major chronicler of the period, Richer, favoured the Carolingians and thus was biased on their behalf.

Bradbury finds that Robert II the Pious (996–1031), Hugh's son and successor, needs more credit for his achievements (pp. 95–6). He increased the royal revenues and kept the royal principality intact, adding Dreux and Melun firmly to it. He opposed Ottonian expansion from East Francia and approached Henry II as an equal when they met on the Meuse in 1006. Robert indeed seems to have been more pious than his predecessors in protecting churches, giving of alms to the poor, and fasting. Again, the main problem of getting to know the real Robert comes from the best source about him, the *Vita* of Helgaud of Fleury, which is hagiographical in nature, as Bradbury states (p. 83).

Bradbury proceeds next to the reigns of Henry I (1031–60) and Philip I (1060–1108) in a chapter he entitles ‘Successful failures’ (p. 97). He argues that, although modern writers have labelled them as feeble and weak, they had successes and deserve more recognition for their accomplishments. Under Henry and Philip, greater royal power in the kingdom began shifting to the Capetians. Bradbury asserts that the problem with judging these kings fairly lies in their comparison to William of Normandy, the conqueror of England. Henry won the contests for expansion against the counts of Blois and Anjou, turning the latter, who had been enemies, into allies (pp. 110–11). After earlier setbacks Henry consolidated his power in the Ile de France by recovering almost all of the territory he had lost. Additionally, and surprisingly, Henry turned his eyes to the East in selecting Anna of Kiev as his second wife. He was looking to the other side of East Francia to find alliances.

Philip I, who succeeded his father Henry at a young age, carried a name that was Greek and Byzantine in origin (p. 111). Contemporary and modern writers have condemned Philip with the same sort of language used against the first three Capetians, but Bradbury follows the lead of some more recent historians who find Philip more appealing as king than previously seen (pp. 111–14). Philip’s contemporaries, who were all clerics, found him to be lazy, fat and sensual. However, their opinions of him derived from the scandal when he set aside his wife Bertha of Holland and began his liaison with Bertrada of Montfort, a union that most clergymen and the papacy never recognised as valid (pp. 118–21). In addition, Philip staunchly opposed the Gregorian reform movement that began in his era, but he eventually reached a compromise with the clergy over Investiture (p. 122). Neither indolent nor fat until the end of his reign, Philip conducted numerous campaigns against his own direct vassals as well as those in neighbouring principalities.

In judging the first four Capetian kings as more powerful and successful than previously believed, Bradbury makes a strong case for Robert I and Philip I, but his arguments are weaker on behalf of Hugh Capet and Henry. However, no matter how anyone judges these kings, Bradbury’s extensive research shows them to have been more accomplished and stronger than many historians have previously presented them.

Moving to the reigns of Louis VI (1108–37) and Louis VII (1137–80), Bradbury believes that, because the first four Capetians were more powerful than most historians have seen them, he must present the next two kings as less significant than previously thought, or at least their significance must be redefined (p. 129). He puts the blame for the over-emphasis of their importance mainly on the shoulders of Abbot Suger of St-Denis, who wrote accounts of both reigns: ‘Suger distorted history to suit his own agenda—seeking to benefit his abbey’ (p. 130). This condemnation of the abbot does not seem warranted. Most medieval abbots indeed laboured for the benefit of their abbeys, their monks, their families or themselves. Some toiled on behalf of their kings, their noble patrons and their realm. Suger did all of the above, even serving as regent while Louis VII went on the Second Crusade.

Suger did glorify the achievements of the two kings, especially Louis VI. However, to accuse Suger of distorting history for the benefit of his abbey is too harsh a judgement. A return to a more balanced view of the abbot’s motives is justified. His service for years at the royal court, his travels abroad and around the kingdom as a royal ambassador, and his labours to put down royal rivals and keep the kingdom financially stable during his regency demand it. Suger always acted for a complexity of reasons, and whatever he did, even his account of *The Deeds of Louis the Fat*, reflected that complexity. Furthermore, if inflated importance is a distortion of history, then every medieval writer stands condemned.

Bradbury is correct in stating that Suger was not the ‘creator of the theory of the monarchy’ (p. 130) and that Louis VI was not a greatly successful warrior, even in his principality. He lost battles against Hugh of Le Puiset and Thomas of Marle before he subdued them (pp. 136–7). In fact, a good case could be made that he never really put down Hugh, who died on crusade. Regarding administration, the major change at Louis VI’s court was that the great lords’ presence slowly declined and the lower nobility of the king’s domain had greater influence (pp. 134–5). Louis also defended towns against tyrannical rule, and his Customs of Lorris struck a blow for liberty on behalf of communes and serfs (p. 147).

Louis VII (1137–80), son and heir of Louis VI, inherited lands under control with no real challenge to his right to rule. Bradbury correctly states that Louis VII is the most difficult of all the Capetians to figure out (p. 149). He seems to have been priest-ridden and uncommonly pious, but he protected his rights over churches and quarrelled with the papacy over appointments to bishoprics. He bungled the Second Crusade but managed to make his way to Jerusalem. His marriage to Eleanor proved to be a disaster for him but a boon to Henry II of England. When all things about him are considered, however, ‘the balance falls on the positive side’ (p. 165).

Louis VII married three times before he produced a male heir, Philip II (1180–1223). Bradbury calls him ‘the greatest of the Capetian kings’ (p. 167) and it would be difficult to disagree with him. A main criticism of Philip has been his role on the Third Crusade, but Bradbury feels that the chroniclers of the event were hostile to Philip and therefore downplayed his part in it (p. 172). Philip made significant contributions to the fall of Acre, the signal victory of the whole debacle (pp. 173–4). His friendship with the Plantagenets waxed and waned but in the end he took control of a large portion of their French territories, doubling the size of his domain. Philip created the French royal navy, increasing it until it reached 1,500 ships in 1213 (pp. 180–1). The quarrel with Pope Innocent III over Philip’s marriages ultimately ended in the king’s favour (p. 184). Following excellent coverage of Philip’s reign, Bradbury devotes only a few pages to that of his heir, Louis VIII (1223–6), whose kingship was brief.

The reign of Louis IX (1226–70) lasted almost half a century because of the premature death of his father. Bradbury correctly refuses to judge Louis’s saintliness (p. 201), but he does just that in summing up his comments on ‘Louis the King’ (p. 227). Bradbury believes that no other Capetian took his coronation oath more faithfully than Louis: he kept the faith, protected the Church, dispensed good justice and maintained peace at home (p. 202). His mother Blanche of Castile and his wife Margaret of Provence influenced him strongly but never dominated him (p. 203).

Some modern historians have cautioned that Louis IX’s reign should not be viewed as some sort of ‘Golden Age’ for France; royal power had declined by the end of his reign and the signs foreshadowing the disasters of the fourteenth century were evident (p. 205). As a crusader, Louis failed miserably. After the debacle in Egypt during the Sixth Crusade, Louis salvaged something when he went to the Holy Land and strengthened its defences (pp. 212–13). His religious views were traditional for the era (p. 229). He persecuted Jews and he died on the Seventh Major Crusade against Muslims. The church soon canonised him as a saint because of his personal piety, which at times bordered on the extraordinary (p. 232).

Philip III (1270–85), son and heir of Louis IX, eventually initiated policies different from his father’s and daringly pursued them, for which reason he earned the sobriquet ‘the Bold’ (p. 237). He continued the French practice of granting royal brothers apanages, large tracts of land that were usually counties and duchies, to keep them loyal to the crown and ensure that the lands would revert to the monarchy if that person died without heirs. He became more active than his predecessors in the south of France and in Spanish affairs (pp. 237–8). His son and heir Philip IV (1285–1314) succeeded him at age 17.

On the character of Philip IV, Bradbury concludes that he ‘represents all that was best and all that was worst’ among the Capetian kings (p. 240). Philip seems to have been an enigma – silent, taciturn, cold, remote and conventionally pious, a man whose personality eludes deciphering. No one, however, can argue that his reign was insignificant (p. 241). During his kingship Paris truly became the capital of France (p. 243). He supported its university; several departments of state took up residence there, and professional men flocked to the city to improve their station in life. Some of these ‘lesser’ men became royal councillors who publicly carried out the king’s policies.

During Philip IV’s kingship the Estates-General of France met for the first time ever at the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris in 1302 to assist the king in his quarrel with Pope Boniface VIII over taxation (p. 247). Philip hit churches heavily for revenues. He also demanded a general tax for the first time in France (p. 251). Bradbury asserts that ‘as France became the most powerful monarchy in the West, so relations with the

church deteriorated' (p. 264). He believes that the reason why Philip suppressed the Knights of the Temple lies somewhere amid three possible motives (p. 274): money, although the amount gained came nowhere near solving his financial problems; his desire to create a French crusading order from their possessions; and his belief that the accusations against them, especially heresy, were true. His crushing of the Templars in France, however, cannot be justified and has left an indelible stain on Philip's reputation (p. 274). His three sons, Louis X (1314–16), Philip V (1316–22) and Charles IV (1322–8), all reigned briefly without male heirs to succeed them and so the direct rule of the Capetian kings came to an end.

Bradbury ends his text with a summary chapter on the Capetian legacy. By the end of this long line of able kings France was the greatest power in Europe. It had reached its modern boundaries, and the royal domain was huge, almost double that of the magnates combined. Apanages given to royal brothers had returned to the monarchy for the most part. Paris had become the capital of the kingdom, with government centralised there, and its university had reached new heights. The French language had developed to the point where it produced great literature, especially the *chansons*. Gothic architectural changes gave rise to the magnificent cathedrals that still stand in France. Finally, the Capetian kings brought forth a Catholic Christian monarchy that endured.

The flaws in Bradbury's book are minor. At times sentence construction and word usage seemed unusual, but these are piddling issues that hardly deserve mentioning. Readers can always argue over interpretation of events and people, but there are no errors of fact noted in his text. This book is a pleasure to read and should be studied by all who are interested in the history of medieval France.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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