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The King of France

The first task of Hugh Capet's descendants was to establish their dynasty firmly, to ensure its continuance on the throne, and to win for it a religious prestige and thereby the veneration of the people it had solemnly taken upon itself to govern. Meanwhile they had to organise the practical means of carrying on good government, making use of the prerogatives which the social organisation of mediaeval France put at their disposal.

Feudal society may strike the historian as having been too often anarchical in practice. But in theory it was a rigorously ordered society in which every individual had his fixed place in a strict hierarchy of lords and vassals. The keystone of the system was the king, the suzerain lord of all. In the ninth and tenth centuries the state was unquestionably in eclipse, but this fact did not alter the principles of social and political organisation. Tenth-century France was a patchwork of innumerable nearly independent lordships; but no lord, however powerful, refused to recognise the king's theoretical supremacy. The name 'France' came to mean only a narrow belt of territory around Paris; but the kingdom of France, the ancient regnum Francorum, survived not only in theory but even to some extent in practice. The king might be feeble. He might be weaker than some of his great vassals. Nevertheless, the great vassals owed him homage, and it is significant that they performed it. The six great feudatories who at the beginning of the thirteenth century became the six lay peers of the realm, had been in the juridical sense strictly bound to the king for the previous two hundred years and more, and had been his vassals, his 'men', however remarkable in other respects had
been their independence of the monarchy.\textsuperscript{1} With almost unfailing consistency and success the Capetians insisted on these juridical ties and the rights they conferred on the crown.

In 1002, early in the dynasty’s history, when Duke Henry of Burgundy, Hugh Capet’s brother, died without leaving an heir, King Robert would not allow the Burgundian bishops and barons to choose a new duke for themselves. He refused to recognise Otto William, the late duke’s son-in-law, and waged unremitting warfare in Burgundy for thirteen years, until he was able to put his son Henry in control of the duchy, with the title of duke.

In 1035 Robert the Magnificent, Duke of Normandy, died in the Holy Land, leaving as his only heir his bastard William, the future conqueror of England. When the Norman barons chose William to be their duke, King Henry I ratified their choice and gave his support to William against the nobles of the Bessin and the Cotentin, who were promoting the rival candidature of William’s cousin Guy of Burgundy. Juridically, Henry I was William’s guardian and trustee, and he used armed force to secure Normandy for the boy.

In 1078 the papal legate, Hugh of Die, summoned to Poitiers in the name of Pope Gregory VII a council which proved to be hostile to the king. Philip I wrote a letter to Duke William VIII of Aquitaine and to the bishops present, declaring that they would be guilty of breaking the fealty they had sworn to the king if they tolerated this ‘pseudo-synod’. The upshot was that some of those attending the council were roughly handled by the duke and the townsfolk of Poitiers. In 1101, in similar circumstances, Duke William IX tried to break up another council by sending it word that ‘My lord the king has informed me that you — to his dishonour and mine — are threatening to excommunicate him in this city of Poitiers which I hold of him. In the name of the fealty I owe him, he has ordered me to prevent you. Wherefore proceed no further. Otherwise, by the oaths I have sworn to the king, you shall not leave this city unscathed.’\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1} Convincing demonstration of this was given by F. Lot in his thesis, \textit{Fides ou vassaux? Essai sur la nature juridique du lien qui unissait les grands vassaux à la royauté depuis le milieu du IX\textsuperscript{e} jusqu'à la fin du XII\textsuperscript{e} siècle} (Paris, 1904).

\textsuperscript{2} \textit{R.H.F.}, xi, 108.