The Great Fiefs

The consolidation of the royal domain in the twelfth century was matched by a similar process in the great feudal principalities of Flanders, Anjou, Brittany, Champagne, Burgundy, and (to a lesser degree) Aquitaine and Toulouse in the south. The leaders, and possible models, were the Dukes of Normandy, who on their own account also applied the new methods in their conquests across the English Channel. The process made for stability. As a result of it, France ceased to be a conglomeration of petty lordships over which individual adventurers tried to establish a rule of force. Instead, hereditary succession to fiefs became the rule, dynasties were consolidated, and the greater families were able to build up considerable domains. More regular administrative methods followed, in Flanders, Anjou and Champagne. Philip Augustus was, in consequence, confronted in 1180 by a ring of feudal principalities as well organised as his own — if not more so.

In the long run, the crown was the gainer. When a great lordship fell into royal hands — as many did after 1180 — it brought to the king a complex of lands and legal rights, and new followers and dependents, without any need to repeat the laborious task of pacification. It was not surprising that as a result the standing and resources of the crown increased far more rapidly after Philip Augustus than they had done under his predecessors. There was no radical change of policy involved. If royal power had a new strength in the thirteenth century, it still continued to be exercised in support and vindication of legal rights. It was these legal rights which made the Capetians the masters of their kingdom, and enabled them to acquire lands and jurisdictions in a permanent and definitive manner, without creating the

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ambiguities and hatreds which would have accompanied the use of force alone.

The first step towards an understanding of this momentous process is a study of the relations of the royal house with the counties of Flanders, Toulouse and Champagne, and the duchies of Burgundy and Brittany, from 1180 onwards. This must be followed by an examination of the problems posed by the enormous principality created in the west of France by the Angevin rulers of England, in order to discover if the methods so successful elsewhere required any modification there. Finally, after examining the minor acquisitions made in the period, it should be possible to determine whether or not any clear-cut principles lay behind the individual acts of Capetian policy. The inconvenience of this method, with its disregard for strict chronology, is offset by its value in reducing a complicated series of events into some sort of order. It would be unwise, however, to infer from an analysis of this sort that the Capetians and their contemporaries looked at events in this particular way; any impression of a continuous and conscious policy would be historically misleading, however satisfying it might be intellectually.

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The reduction of the county of Flanders, the first of the great fiefs to be brought to heel, began at the very start of Philip Augustus' reign. It was touched off by his marriage at Bapaume, on 28 April 1180, to Isabella, daughter of Count Baldwin V of Hainault and niece of Philip of Alsace, Count of Flanders. The last-named held as part of his county of Flanders not only Flanders proper, but also 'the lands beyond the New Dyke', which were already occasionally called Artois, and which included Arras, Bapaume, Ruhout, Saint-Omer, Aire, the suzerainty of the county of Boulogne, Lens, Guines, Saint-Pol, Lilliers and Hesdin. Philip of Alsace had married, in 1159, Elizabeth of Vermandois, daughter of Raoul of Vermandois (brother of King Philip I) and of Petronilla, sister of Louis VII's first queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. In 1164, on the death of her brother, Raoul the Leprous, Count of Vermandois, the Countess of Flanders inherited