

Rise of the Capetian Kings in France

When the last Carolingian king of France died without an heir in 987, an assembly of nobles chose Hugh Capet (kuh • PAY), a French noble, as king. Capet and his descendants, called the Capetians (kuh • PEE • shuhnz), ruled for more than 300 years.

As king, Hugh Capet ruled only a small region around Paris called the Ile-de-France (EEL-DUH-FRAHNS). *Ile* is the French word for "island," and this region was indeed an island of royal authority in the midst of feudal lands. Even in the Ile-de-France, the king's vassals resisted his authority.

The rest of what is today France was divided into provinces ruled by feudal lords (see map, this page). The Capetians set out to unite these provinces and to develop a strong central government.

The Capetian kings' method of succession allowed them to outlast many other noble families, including the Carolingian kings. Instead of dividing their kingdom among their sons, the Capetians allowed only the eldest son of a king to inherit. This method worked for more than 300 years.

The history of the Capetian kings demonstrates the feudal struggle for power. Strong kings increased royal lands and authority. Weak kings allowed nobles to regain power. Fortunately for the Capetians, enough strong kings ruled to outweigh the losses of the weaker kings.

The strong Capetian kings increased their power in three ways: by adding to the royal lands, by developing a strong central government, and by increasing the revenue from taxes.

The growth of royal territory. Kings sometimes married the daughters of great feudal lords to add to the royal lands. By doing so, they gained fiefs that were often included in the daughters' dowries. Kings also increased their royal territory by claiming the lands of those noble families that died out.

After 1066, when William of Normandy conquered England, the territorial problems of the Capetians became even more complicated. For centuries the English kings owned vast territories in France. Strong Capetians watched for a chance to regain these lands. The shrewd Philip Augustus, king of France from 1180 to 1223, seized much English-owned land in France. By 1328, when the last Capetian king died, the only major English landholdings in France included parts of the provinces of Aquitaine and Gascony (see map, page 242).

Central government. To maintain a strong government, the Capetians needed loyal, well-trained officials. They could not rely on feudal lords. Philip Augustus sent out loyal inspectors to investigate, hear complaints, report to the King's Council, and conduct government affairs.

The Capetians set up two new government departments. A Chamber of Accounts collected the taxes, and a supreme court, called the Parlement of Paris, heard appeals from all parts of the kingdom. Trained officials, like those in the King's Council, staffed and ran these departments.

Revenues. A strong central government needed money to pay the army, government officials, and other expenses. The expanding royal territory produced more wealth, as did fees and fines from royal courts. Because a wealthier country would produce more revenue from taxes, the Capetians encouraged the growth of towns, trade, and manufacturing. This policy caused townspeople to support the Capetians against the feudal lords. By the early 1300s, France was a strong, well-organized country, and the power of the king was greater than that of the nobles. However, the three sons of Philip IV died without a male heir, and in 1328 the long line of the Capetians ended.

Learning from Maps The growth of France took place from the center, the Ile-de-France.

What were the English possessions in France in 1328?

