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# Castles, Commons, and Kings: The Hundred Years War and the Making of French Identity

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## Introduction

This book begins with a paradox. The Hundred Years War was a century of intermittent conflict, devastation, and political fracture, yet from its crucible emerged a more cohesive French polity and a durable sense of “France” as a collective identity. *Castles, Commons, and Kings* explores that transformation by setting battlefield narratives alongside the daily experience of villagers, townsfolk, and royal officials. Rather than tell a story only of kings and captains, we follow carts of grain to besieged towns, listen to tax collectors and parish priests, and read the chronicles that turned violence into memory. War, in these pages, is not merely a sequence of campaigns; it is a social process that reordered power, wealth, and imagination.

At the heart of this transformation stood the monarchy. While feudal bonds frayed and regional loyalties contended, the French crown learned, often painfully, to tax more regularly, to staff more professional armies, and to project authority through law and ritual. The rise of a centralized monarchy did not occur in spite of war but because of it. The demands of defense pressed the crown to negotiate with estates, harness new technologies, and extend its administrative reach. Castles ceased to be only aristocratic symbols; they became nodes in a growing network of royal governance that tied frontier to center and lordship to law.

Yet the politics of the realm cannot be understood without the commons who paid, suffered, and adapted. Peasants navigated scorched fields and marauding bands, fled to walled towns, rebuilt hedgerows, and bargained for relief. Their revolts, most famously the Jacquerie, were not aberrant outbursts but cries from a countryside forced to absorb the costs of campaigns and coinage crises. Markets shifted, labor became dearer after plague, and households recalibrated marriage, migration, and work. In the very places most exposed to pillage and fire, the practices of resilience—cooperation in villages, mutual defense, and new terms of tenancy—quietly remade rural society.

Culture, too, bore the marks of sustained conflict. The ideals of chivalry animated banners and ceremonies even as artillery shattered walls and longbows felled nobles from afar. Chroniclers and poets struggled to reconcile honor with hunger, victory with sacrilege. From this tension arose new myths and saints, none more compelling than Joan of Arc. Her voices, victories, and death offered contemporaries a language of divine favor that transcended faction, while later generations would mythologize her as the personification of a nation in the making. Chivalry did not disappear; it was transformed—pressing its ethics into service of a monarchy that claimed to embody the realm.

This book is also an economic history of war. From ransoms and booty to salt taxes and forced loans, conflict created incentives and institutions that knitted disparate provinces to a fiscal center. The revenue systems that sustained garrisons and sieges outlived the truces that justified them. Mint policy, tolls, and the provisioning of armies bound merchants, guilds, and officials to royal projects. In examining ledgers alongside letters, we see how livelihoods were reorganized around the rhythms of campaigning, and how the crown learned to make war pay for its own expansion.

Above all, *Castles, Commons, and Kings* argues that French identity was not declared once and for all in a single victory but assembled piecemeal—through parish processions and royal entries, through the circulation of stories and symbols, through the ordinary labors of rebuilding. National sentiment took root where political necessity met shared suffering and aspiration. The memory of battles mattered, but so did the quiet acts of governance and community that made peace legible and durable.

The chapters that follow move between strategy and hearth, from the Channel to the Loire, from the court to the commons. They trace shifting front lines and shifting meanings, showing how a century of war reordered authority, reimagined community, and left France with both scars and capacities that would shape its future. By reading across muster rolls, village records, and chronicles, we recover a history in which soldiers, peasants, and kings all had a hand in making France.

## CHAPTER ONE: A Contested Inheritance: From Capetians to Plantagenets

The story of the Hundred Years' War begins not with the first clash of arms in the fourteenth century, but with an older accumulation of claims, lands, and loyalties. In the early twelfth century, a French noblewoman named Eleanor of Aquitaine moved through the courts of Europe with a talent for scandal and an empire's worth of territory. Her divorce from King Louis VII of France and subsequent marriage to Henry Plantagenet, later King Henry II of England, bound the vast duchy of Aquitaine to the English crown. From this moment, the geography of feudal obligation grew tangled. An English king now owed fealty to a French king for lands that stretched from the Pyrenees to the Loire, a situation that no sovereign in Paris could accept as permanent.

Under the first Capetian kings, the royal domain was modest, a patchwork of lands centered on Paris and Orléans. The true power of the French monarchy in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries lay more in ceremony and sacrament than in military might. Yet the Capetians were patient architects. They secured the loyalty of the church, nurtured the idea of sacral kingship, and exploited the periodic weakness of their great vassals. When Henry Plantagenet ascended the English throne in 1154, he inherited not only the crown of England but also Normandy, Anjou, Maine, and Aquitaine. The Plantagenet empire encircled the royal French domain like a collar. To the kings in Paris, this was a persistent and intolerable stranglehold.

Philip II Augustus, who ruled from 1180 to 1224, seized upon the fractious politics of the Plantagenet family to chip away at their continental holdings. His campaign against John "Lackland" culminated in the decisive victory at Bouvines in 1214, a battle that secured the French crown's authority and expanded its territory. Normandy, Anjou, and much of Aquitaine fell under direct royal control. For a time, the balance tilted toward Paris. Yet even as Philip Augustus consolidated gains, the Plantagenet rump in Guyenne remained. The English crown retained a foothold on the continent, and the French crown still claimed suzerainty over it, setting the stage for centuries of mutual grievance.

The legal architecture of feudalism made these tensions both intimate and inescapable. As Duke of Aquitaine, the King of England owed homage to the King of France. Ceremonies of liege homage involved kneeling, clasped hands, and oaths of fealty, all of which were fraught with political meaning. When the French king summoned a vassal to his court to answer complaints or to render judgment, refusal could be construed as defiance. Over time, the French monarchy weaponized these

rituals, using feudal courts to assert jurisdictional authority over English-held lands. The Plantagenets, in turn, sought to narrow their obligations, pleading that as kings they could not be compelled like ordinary dukes.

Geography complicated everything. Aquitaine sat at the crossroads of Iberian, French, and Atlantic spheres. Its towns—Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Bayonne—thrived on wine and wool, shipping casks and bolts to markets across the Channel. Trade bound the region to England in ways that made outright severance painful for both sides. For Bordeaux, English customers bought wine in bulk; for London, French markets provided luxury goods and taxes. This commercial intimacy created constituencies on both shores with an interest in uneasy peace, yet the logic of sovereignty tugged toward confrontation. The feudal map and the merchant ledger rarely aligned, and men in power had to choose which to consult on any given day.

As the thirteenth century unfolded, both crowns experimented with new tools of governance. The French monarchy expanded its network of royal agents—bailiffs and seneschals—who enforced law, collected revenue, and coordinated defense in the provinces. Royal justice grew more systematic, and taxes, once ad hoc, became more regular in moments of crisis. Across the Channel, English kings refined common law, Parliament, and systems of taxation that funded campaigns and administration. Neither kingdom was a centralized modern state, but both were moving in that direction. War would accelerate this evolution, but its seeds were planted long before the first arrows flew at Crécy.

The question of succession repeatedly exposed the vulnerabilities of feudal ties and royal claims. When the last Capetian male heir died in 1316, followed by the brief reigns of his brother and son, the French crown faced an unprecedented crisis. The nearest male relative was Philip of Valois, but the nearest in strict genealogical terms by modern standards was Edward III of England, whose mother Isabella was the sister of the last Capetian king. The French nobility, wary of an English king inheriting the throne, invoked Salic law—a legal tradition rooted in Frankish custom that forbade inheritance through the female line—to justify passing the crown to Philip. Edward III paid homage for Guyenne under Philip VI, but the grievance simmered.

Meanwhile, the duchy of Brittany became a recurring flashpoint. The war of the Breton succession in the 1340s drew in both crowns, with England backing John of Montfort and France supporting Charles of Blois. These were not simply dynastic quarrels; they were contests over local autonomy, feudal rights, and strategic corridors linking the Atlantic to the Loire. Castles rose and fell, alliances shifted, and mercenary captains learned that loyalty could be as fluid as the winds off the coast. The Breton question demonstrated how regional disputes could become national conflicts when overlaid with the ambitions of kings in Paris and London.

Ecclesiastical politics added another layer. The papacy, long entangled in French

affairs, relocated to Avignon in 1309 under pressure from the French crown. While the Avignon Papacy was not a French puppet, its proximity to Paris shaped perceptions and leverage. For English monarchs, the papal court's French leanings complicated diplomacy and sanctioned warfare. For French kings, the church's support lent moral authority to their claims. Crusading rhetoric, once aimed at the Holy Land, could be repurposed to frame continental quarrels as righteous campaigns against faithless vassals or opportunistic intruders.

The military culture of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries also set patterns for later conflict. Knighthood, tournament culture, and the ideal of chivalry bound aristocratic society together. Yet warfare was not only the preserve of nobles. Crossbowmen, infantry from towns, and increasingly professional men-at-arms formed the backbone of effective armies. Fortification technology advanced in tandem: stone keeps, concentric castles, and improved curtain walls transformed the landscape into a lattice of strongpoints. War was as much an engineering problem as a chivalric romance, and both crowns invested in the craft of sieges and defense.

Economic shifts in the thirteenth century further sharpened the stakes. The expansion of trade—wool from England, wine from Aquitaine, cloth from Flanders—made certain regions crucial to royal finance. The Flemish towns, rich and fiercely independent, resisted both French and English influence, sparking intermittent conflicts. Royal treasuries grew more dependent on customs duties and tolls tied to these flows. When trade was interrupted by war, revenue fell, and kings had to find new ways to tax their subjects. The interdependence of commerce and war meant that battles could ripple through markets, and market fluctuations could shape strategy.

Demographic and environmental stress added volatility. The Great Famine of 1315–1317 exposed the fragility of food systems, and by the early fourteenth century, population pressure in some regions had begun to ease. Villages expanded into forests, marshes were drained, and agricultural techniques improved, yet margins remained thin. Weather could undo years of incremental growth. Droughts and floods turned harvests precarious, and bad harvests made taxation unpopular. Kings seeking to wage war had to balance extraction against subsistence, a calculation that could tip entire regions into revolt if misjudged.

Before open war erupted in the 1330s, diplomacy and brinkmanship defined the relationship between Paris and London. Edward III sent envoys, delayed payments of feudal dues, and tested Philip VI's resolve. The French crown, for its part, summoned Edward to court and entertained complaints from Gascon subjects about English administration. These gestures were not empty; they were legal and political maneuvers designed to strengthen claims and weaken opponents. Each citation of feudal law, each delayed homage, each naval skirmish in the Channel narrowed the space for compromise.

Theatrical displays of legitimacy were as important as legal arguments. Royal entries into cities, coronations, and public rituals affirmed the rightful order. In Paris, kings processed to Notre-Dame; in London, coronations at Westminster Abbey underscored continuity and divine favor. Heraldic display, banners, and coats of arms communicated lineage and lordship in a world where literacy was uneven but symbols were universal. When Edward III later began to quarter the arms of France with those of England, it was not merely a heraldic flourish but a public claim to a contested inheritance. Such gestures played to audiences across Europe, shaping perceptions of right and legitimacy.

In Aquitaine and Guyenne, local elites navigated the pressures of overlords with dexterity. Gascon lords, clergy, and town councils weighed the benefits of English administration—relative autonomy, trade advantages—against the pull of the French crown and its promise of integration into a larger realm. They sent petitions, hosted garrisons, and arranged marriages that wove kinship ties across political divides. Their choices were pragmatic, rooted in the everyday calculus of taxes, justice, and security. For many, the question was less about national identity than about who would provide the best deal for their community.

The maritime frontier mattered as much as the land. Control of the Channel and the Atlantic approaches was essential for moving troops, protecting merchants, and blockading enemies. Shipbuilding traditions in England and France evolved, with cogs and galleys increasingly armed for war. Naval engagements before 1337 were sporadic but instructive, revealing the importance of ports and the vulnerability of supply lines. A successful chevauchée could be undone if the fleet was delayed or scattered, and a siege could fail without adequate transport. War demanded coordination across land and sea, and both crowns learned to think in terms of theaters rather than single battlefields.

Across this complex landscape, the idea of kingship matured. The French monarch was not merely the greatest feudal lord; he was the anointed sovereign whose authority flowed from sacred rites and territorial control. The English monarch, ruling an island kingdom with continental possessions, cultivated a distinct political culture that blended feudal service with common law and parliamentary consent. The collision of these models in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries set the stage for a prolonged contest. It would be fought not only in councils and courts but on the fields of Normandy, Brittany, and Aquitaine, where soldiers, taxpayers, and officials enacted the claims that nobles and kings asserted from afar.

By the 1320s, the stage was set. The Capetian male line had ended, replaced by the Valois. The Plantagenet presence in Aquitaine remained, a glittering shard of an earlier empire. Papal authority hovered between Avignon and neutrality. Towns and regions—Flanders, Brittany, Gascony—pursued their own interests, often pulling the

larger kingdoms into their disputes. The language of feudal obligation and the practice of royal administration jostled for primacy. The institutions of war—taxes, musters, fortifications—waited in the wings. Leaders in Paris and London possessed grievances and ambitions in ample supply. It only remained for a spark to ignite the long fuse.

One such spark came in 1328, with the death of Charles IV of France, the last Capetian king. Edward III of England, his nephew, asserted a claim through his mother Isabella. The French nobility, invoking the precedents of Salic law and the memory of earlier succession crises, elevated Philip of Valois to the throne as Philip VI. Edward paid homage for Guyenne, but the act was strained and the resentment mutual. Around the same time, the matter of Flanders simmered, with commercial interests and feudal obligations colliding. These pressures did not immediately produce war, but they created a climate in which each move by one court provoked a countermove by the other.

Maritime incidents added to the friction. English and French ships raided each other's coasts, and merchants complained of seizures and losses. The legal status of Gascon ports and the collection of dues became points of contention. Envoys crossed the Channel, but their instructions increasingly reflected the hardening positions of their masters. The language of compromise narrowed, replaced by the rhetoric of right and injury. For both crowns, the challenge was to mobilize support and resources without committing to a full-scale war prematurely. Yet the momentum was building, and the stage would soon be set for open conflict.

The stage was not only political; it was also cultural. Chivalric ideals, shaped in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, provided the vocabulary for justifying and celebrating war. Tournaments trained nobles for combat and reinforced social hierarchies. Chronicles from monasteries and towns recorded the deeds of kings and captains, shaping collective memory. In this world, a nobleman's identity was intertwined with the idea of service, honor, and loyalty to a lord. The question of which lord—Paris or London—was more legitimate became a question of personal honor and communal allegiance.

Religious sentiment, too, could be marshaled for political ends. The cult of saints, the rhythms of the liturgical calendar, and the moral authority of the clergy framed war as a struggle for order and justice. When kings sought to justify campaigns, they invoked divine favor and righteous cause. For the common people, prayers for deliverance from war's hardships mingled with anxieties about harvests and taxes. The church provided a language of meaning that could sanctify suffering or critique excess, and both crowns tried to ensure that the pulpits spoke in their favor.

Across the diverse regions that would one day be called France, local identities remained strong. A peasant in the Auvergne, a merchant in Marseille, and a knight in Normandy might understand "France" differently. Yet the pressures of governance

and conflict drew these communities toward common institutions—royal courts, tax systems, and military organization. Over time, the experience of shared danger and shared sacrifice would forge a broader sense of belonging. That process was just beginning as the fourteenth century opened, but it was already visible in the growing reach and complexity of royal administration.

In the royal courts of Paris and London, maps and genealogies were pored over by clerks and counselors. The past was not a static inheritance; it was a toolkit of precedents, artifacts, and stories that could be deployed to claim the future. The Plantagenet empire had redrawn the political map of western Europe; the Capetian and Valois kings had painstakingly redrawn it again. The result was a palimpsest of overlapping jurisdictions and contradictory obligations. The next half-century would test whether these contradictions could be resolved by negotiation—or whether they would have to be settled on the battlefield.

Thus, before the first army took the field in the 1330s, the ground was already saturated with claims and counterclaims, rights and privileges, loyalties and betrayals. The legal, economic, and cultural foundations of the conflict were in place. The institutions of governance and warfare had been honed over centuries. The stagecraft of legitimacy and the substance of power were intertwined. The Hundred Years' War would grow from this soil. Its roots lay in the tangled inheritance of Capetians and Plantagenets, and its branches would eventually cast a long shadow over the making of French identity.

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