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William Beik

Excerpt

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## *Introduction: France and its population*

Until the unification of Germany in the nineteenth century, France was the richest and most densely populated kingdom in Europe. It was also an attractive country, notable for the diversity of its regions and the creativity of its people. But despite its identity as the kingdom ruled over by the Merovingian, Carolingian, and Capetian kings, France never had a single geographical, cultural, or institutional center of gravity, and by the end of the middle ages it was already the product of a great many historical cross-currents. As we explore its rich history, we will constantly be reminded that there was no typical village, province, or customary practice, and that even its kings had to accommodate diverse power structures and varying levels of privileges as they attempted to unify all these parts into one centralized entity.

### **The creation of France**

“France” only emerged as a political and cultural entity through centuries of interaction between a succession of rulers and a variety of peoples. Geographically, it can be defined as the territory over which the kings of France had long held suzerainty (feudal overlordship), and over which they gradually established sovereignty (ultimate political authority). Its jurisdictional limits had been set in the Treaty of Verdun in 843 when Charlemagne’s grandsons divided up the Carolingian empire. They established a frontier following the Scheldt, Meuse, Saône, and Rhône rivers, which separated what became the Holy Roman Empire, to its east, from what became the kingdom of France, to its west. The Iberian peninsula, set off by the line of the Pyrenees mountains, was not included. This ancient boundary delimited “France” as an area of some 425,000 square kilometers where the king was recognized as overlord, but the various provinces contained within it were only gradually assimilated into the king’s direct rule. This smaller medieval France was about three-fourths the

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size of modern France, and most of the last fourth was added during the years under consideration.

The years from 1400 to 1789 constitute a period that can loosely be labeled “early modern.” By the mid thirteenth century, what we may call French “medieval” civilization had reached its full flowering. Paris was a center of European university life, the French Gothic style was being copied everywhere, and the reigns of Louis IX, Philip III, and Philip IV (1226 to 1314) were laying the groundwork for permanent governing institutions. In the next generations a succession of crises undermined these medieval certitudes. The Hundred Years War with England, waves of bubonic plague, demographic collapse, and the schism in the Catholic church created what historians often call a “general crisis.” The year 1400 represented a nadir from which France began to recover. The “early modern” period can be considered to extend from this period of revival through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the monarchy reached its height of power and influence. The eighteenth century saw the final flowering of these achievements, but also experienced the changes leading to the Revolution. The year 1789 is a good place to end because the Revolution destroyed the institutions and social structures that had prevailed since the middle ages. Historians today emphasize that many early modern characteristics continued well into the nineteenth century. But the Revolution was nevertheless as major a turning-point as any in history.

During the period we are examining, royal authority gradually reached out across the ancient eastern frontier into Dauphiné (1349), Burgundy (1477), Provence (1481), Franche-Comté (1678), and later Alsace (1648 in part, all by 1681) and Lorraine (1766), with small additions on the northeastern border and the southern Pyrenees frontier as well.<sup>1</sup> In the west, Brittany was subjected to direct royal control between 1491 and 1532. By the late seventeenth century, France had grown to 460,000 square kilometers (178,000 square miles), or a territory about 66 percent the size of Texas and more than three and a half times the size of England. This area was inhabited by some sixteen to seventeen million persons in 1328, a number that collapsed down to as low as ten million in the 1440s after a century of plague and warfare, then gradually recovered, with intermittent fluctuations, to 19 million in 1600, 22 million in 1700 and 30 million by 1815.<sup>2</sup>

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This territory, consisting of many provinces and multiple identities, was gradually coordinated into a rudimentary state by a long succession of monarchs. This consolidation process was not linear. Provinces were incorporated, lost, and regained in various ways. Starting with Hugh Capet, who came to the throne in 987, the French kings began extending their influence outwards from a tiny power base in the region around Paris (the Île de France). They concentrated first on managing the area which they controlled directly, and from which they drew revenues as direct lords; then on extending it by developing relations with the lords of the territories outside this sphere.

Sometimes they used their positions as feudal overlords to establish relationships with powerful figures such as the dukes of Burgundy or Brittany or the counts of Champagne. As overlords they could demand loyalty and service, and if it was not forthcoming, undertake military reprisals. Or they might arrange marriage alliances with these powerful families in the hope of ultimately drawing their patrimonies into the royal orbit. Recalling the sacred anointing they received at their coronation ceremonies, they could invoke a special relationship with God to intervene in the affairs of the church and build strong alliances with bishops, cathedral chapters, and religious houses, many of which were wealthy and influential in their own right. They might use their prestige as king and overlord to establish a system of judicial appeals, first in their own domain and later in the surrounding provinces. They might issue charters to towns in return for loyalty and tax revenues.

All these tactics established multilateral relationships with feudal rulers, churches, towns, and regions, rather than a single, uniform relationship between king and subjects. As time passed, the monarch strengthened his relationships with provinces and cities to the point where he was able to intervene more effectively in their affairs. Ultimately he began to legislate for the whole realm and build an administrative structure that would correspond to this theoretical aspiration.

The extension of royal power was not a one-way street. While the French kings were pulling together elements of a kingdom, other forces were pulling it apart. Regional lords rebelled; populations revolted; foreign kings invaded. During the Hundred Years War (1338–1453) the dukes of Burgundy, who stemmed from a younger branch of the French royal family, tried to establish their own

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independent kingdom in eastern France and the Low Countries by joining forces with the kings of England, who already ruled the whole of southwestern France (Aquitaine) and wanted to regain their hold on Normandy. By the 1420s France had been dismembered, leaving a Burgundian zone, an English zone, and a greatly reduced “France” controlled by Charles VII, who was derisively called the king of Bourges, because he did not even control the city of Paris. After this debacle, the monarchy had to reconquer and reinstate each province and town in turn, and win the loyalty of their inhabitants with new concessions of privileges and favors.

Thus the French kings had always enjoyed theoretical claims to preeminence, but in practice they had to make good their claims over and over again. Most French provinces and towns had been assimilated into the realm at least twice, first in the medieval period and then again in the Renaissance, and each time compromises were struck to conciliate their regional elites. Special tax exemptions were ratified, legal privileges were renewed, regional courts and local governments were allowed to continue to function under the auspices of the king. Many centuries of this sort of piecemeal construction had made France a very complex organism institutionally. Because the king’s authority had been established through a variety of channels – military, administrative, legal, and ecclesiastical – his relationship with each region and town was slightly different.

### Diversity of geography and culture

The difficulties faced by the crown were in part the result of France’s geographical disunity. The mountainous “core” of the country, called the Massif Central, offered a formidable barrier to anyone trying to travel from north to south or east to west. This region, lying south of the Loire and extending like a backbone along the Rhône almost as far south as the Mediterranean coast, was a hilly obstacle consisting of rounded peaks and high plateaux cut by deep river gorges. Travelers from Paris had to go around this vast obstacle in order to reach the cities of the Midi, either by boating down the Saône and Rhône rivers toward Aix and Marseille, which was the preferred route, or by traveling overland through the hilly western country toward Bordeaux, via Tours, Orléans, and Poitiers. Once in the south, the traveler still had a long journey if he wanted to complete the circuit between Bordeaux

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and Marseille, or vice versa. A reasonably swift traveler could make it from Paris to Aix or Bordeaux in about ten days. The fastest messenger could make the trip in about half that time, but troops and merchandise moved much more slowly. Any deviation from these few well-traveled thoroughfares to penetrate France's many other outlying regions was likely to encounter bad roads and major delays.

The Massif Central itself was a variegated landscape of distinct valleys linked by narrow paths used by shepherds. Its rivers flowed outwards in three directions, connecting particular highlands with particular lowland valleys and creating a variety of distinct subregions rather than one unified area. To complicate matters, France's main river systems flowed outwards in different directions. The Seine linked Paris and Rouen to the English Channel; the Meuse led to Germany and the Rhineland; the Loire pointed toward the Bay of Biscay and the Atlantic world, as did the Garonne and the Dordogne; while the Rhône took you toward the Mediterranean coast, Italy, and the Levant. These were advantageous connections for trade, but they resulted in regional centers with distinct interests that were not always complementary.

To this geographical diversity must be added significant cultural diversity. Even today the landscape of France reminds us of the fundamental difference between the Mediterranean civilization of the Midi and the Germanic civilization of the north. South of a line extending roughly from La Rochelle to Lake Geneva, the change is visible to the traveler. The sun comes out, and olive trees, terraced vineyards, and distinctly tropical plants appear. The tiled roofs take on a flatter, Mediterranean look. The houses display heavy wooden shutters, protecting deeply set windows designed to keep out the dry heat of the southern sun. Life moves into the open air and becomes visibly more animated in streets and squares that might almost be Italian. North of the La Rochelle–Geneva line the roofs are steeply sloped, people are more taciturn, and sociability takes place in the interior of cafés and brasseries. In Rouen, or Rennes, the older streets look English; in Dijon and Châlons-sur-Marne, they look central European. In Toulouse they look Spanish.

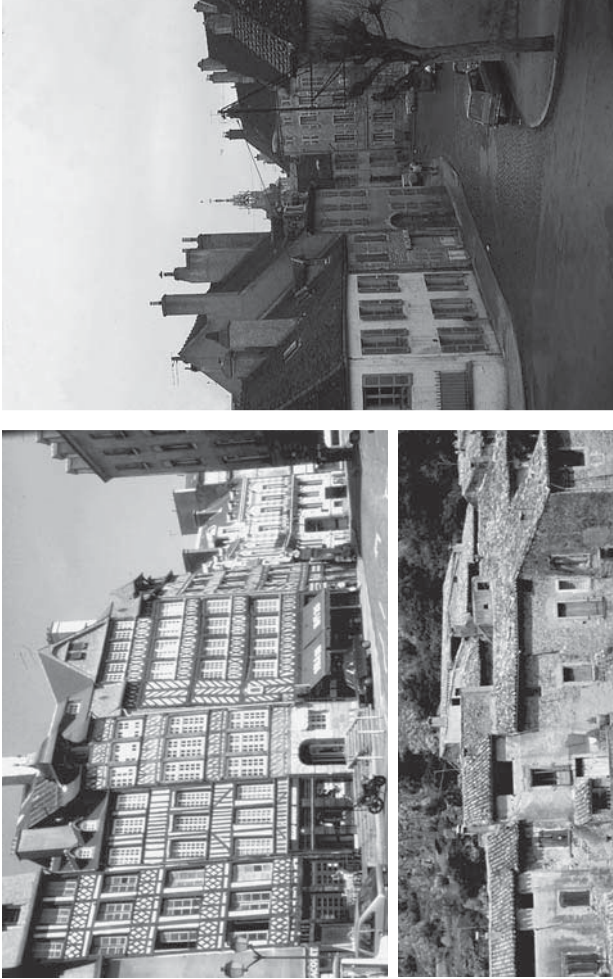
These superficial impressions remind us of a fundamental distinction that was more pronounced in the centuries before rapid transit and the triumph of international styles of architecture. The southern half of France (the “Midi”) had been deeply romanized, and its

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**Figure 1.** Regional contrasts. Top left: a street in Rennes (Brittany) looks like Tudor England. Lower left: the Midi looks Mediterranean (Saint-Guilhem du Désert in Languedoc). Right: in Beaulieu (Burgundy), the sloped roofs and pastel colors (not visible here) are reminiscent of Prague or Vienna.

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culture was closely allied to that of the Mediterranean world, whereas the northern half was more influenced by the Germanic settlements of the early middle ages. The south remained more urban, more influenced by Roman law, more skeptical of northern influences. Its striking religious monuments were mostly romanesque in style because they dated from the economic and cultural revival of the twelfth century. The north was more rural, more feudalized, more closely tied to the Carolingian and Capetian dynasties. Its style was the northern Gothic of the thirteenth-century cathedrals. The people of the north and south spoke different versions of French – the *langue d’oil* in the north, the *langue d’oc* in the south.

But cultural distinctions were far more complex than a simple north–south divide. France is a country where, even today, people speak in terms of particular *pays*, intangible smaller territorial units about the size of a county that express the distinctiveness of local cultural practices and geographical features.<sup>3</sup> There were hundreds of these unofficial *pays* with names like the Vexin, the Sologne, the Charollais, the Lauragais, the Beauce, the Vermandois. Usually the terms had no administrative meaning, but they conveyed a sense of continuity and place. This diversity of micro-regions was reinforced by regional differences in the layouts of villages. As Braudel notes, “there was the Provençal hill village, with its narrow streets to shield one from the sun and wind; the Lorraine village, with its adjoining houses lining the broad street that also serves as a farmyard; and the very different Breton village, scattered and dispersed, its houses isolated on their own farmland.”<sup>4</sup> There were many other combinations of field patterns, village layouts, and building styles that gave a particular “look” to a particular district. It is even possible to draw a map showing the regional distribution of ten different types of roofing.<sup>5</sup> Such diversity was matched by the different styles of dress, the many customary law codes, and the many different weights and measures used in local marketplaces. Early modern people had a strong sense of place that rivaled their identification with larger entities like the province or the kingdom.

There was also a diversity of dialects and languages. In addition to the Basque, Breton, Flemish, and German spoken in parts of the periphery, there were at least thirty varieties of *patois* (dialects of French). Gascon was not the same as Languedocien or Provençal, though all belonged to the *langue d’oc* family, and there were



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hundreds of local variations, vocabularies, and accents. Classical French was the language of Paris, of the aristocracy and, since the sixteenth century, of official documents. Only a small percentage of the rural population understood it, even at the time of the French Revolution. The upper classes were usually bilingual, speaking French when at court and switching to the local dialect at home when addressing servants and subordinates.

Historically speaking, then, there was no one preordained territory, culture, or language on which to hang a concept of Frenchness. This was something that would have to be constructed over time through a combination of collective historical experience and conscious state-building. But there were common elements already in place. In 1400 most of the inhabitants of the territory in question already thought of themselves as subjects of the king of France, whose reputation in legend and historical memory was powerful. Most had at least indirect experience of the monarchy from periodic military conquests and liberations, knowledge of privileges granted or revoked, or exposure to royal justice or royal taxes. Most adhered to the Catholic faith and shared its values, however differently understood by different parties, and they knew that the king had a special relationship with God and the church. The people in the various regions also knew one another through long-standing patterns of trade and exchange, and through the seasonal migrations of laborers.

### **Population and long-term economic environment**

One very broad way of organizing the whole period 1400 to 1789 is to clock the ups and downs of the size of the population and use it as a way of organizing the chronology. The changing ratio of people to resources made a significant difference in the social landscape. To establish population trends, demographers have laboriously reconstructed the structure of families recorded in parish registers, as to the duration of their marriages and the number of their surviving offspring.<sup>6</sup> Population change was essentially a function of the number of births minus the number of deaths. The limiting factor was the high death rate. Each local community was vulnerable to three kinds of periodic catastrophes: bouts of plague or epidemic disease; years when small grain harvests led to shortages of food; and passages of soldiers who not only pillaged villages and fields, but transmitted contagious



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diseases. The most consistent problems were grain shortages resulting from bad weather. These shortages punctuated people's lives. For example, in Lyon there were grain crises in 1481–3, 1504–5, 1529–31, 1543–6, 1565–8, 1571–4, 1585–7, 1590–3, 1595–7, 1602, 1611–12, 1625, 1652–3, 1659, 1674, 1676, 1681, 1687, 1693–4, 1709, 1714, 1718, 1730, 1740, 1757, 1766, 1783, and 1787.<sup>7</sup> That adds up to 45 bad years out of 318, or once every seven years, although the crises were not that evenly distributed in time, and their frequency diminished in the eighteenth century. Most communities also faced periodic bouts of plague until 1720, when the disease disappeared, probably because of better sanitation and quarantine procedures.

Given the precarious state of many peasant households, periodic crises like those in Lyon typically set off a series of interrelated collapses. Bad harvests led to high prices and low yields. People became undernourished. Their resistance to plague or other contagious diseases was lowered. Then there would be a wave of deaths, including many men and women of child-bearing age. Population would decline. Finally, there would be a period of recovery during which the survivors would remarry en masse and produce many new births. The population would rebound within a generation, but it would simply recover its former level by the time the next crisis hit. When many villages throughout a region, or across the whole country, experienced these crises at the same time, the result would be an economic slump and a decline of population. This kind of crisis was especially common between 1580 and 1660, when periodic plagues and cold weather, along with the pressures of the Thirty Years War, caused French population growth to slow down and possibly even to decline. Using the indicators of population and economic change as a way of defining historical periods has the advantage of focusing on the way the population experienced good and bad times. But this is not the only way to think about demographic fluctuations. There were differences in the way the cycles affected different regions. Over the long term, the French population grew at a fairly steady annual rate of 1.75 to 1.9 percent, rising to 3 percent in the later eighteenth century. In developmental terms this steady, then increasing, rate of growth is significant. But averaging annual long-term growth conceals the shorter-term fluctuations which so drastically affected peasant life.

This recurring sequence of subsistence crises meant that death rates would be high, and high death rates meant that families would have to

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produce numerous children to replace the dead. One study of infant mortality shows that for every hundred babies born in the seventeenth century, twenty-eight would die in the first year, eighteen more would die between age one and nine, and four more would die between years ten and nineteen. By age twenty, 50 percent of the children would be gone. Other studies show similar results.<sup>8</sup> Research shows that for the population to grow, each family on the average would have to produce enough children to replace the adults and the children who did not survive. Barring illegitimate births (which were apparently few) and birth control (which was generally unknown), the maximum number of babies produced by a couple was determined by the number of years of fertility the wife had between her marriage and the age of menopause. The population would stagnate or decline if each couple produced, on the average, four children. Five children would lead to some growth, and any more than five would cause a healthy expansion. The key to the number of possible children per couple was the age at marriage of the wife. Marriage at twenty-five or later reduced the possible number of children, which was reduced further by the high mortality rate of women twenty-five to forty years old who died giving birth.

Close analysis of reproduction on this micro-level leads us back to the big picture of demographic change. Population growth, or failure to grow, impacted on the way of life of the common people. Most of them were peasants farming small, inefficient plots with relatively low yield, given the primitive technology and traditional methods then employed. If the population expanded rapidly, that meant more mouths to feed from the same inefficient plots. Then plots would be subdivided, and less productive marginal fields would be plowed under and seeded. Prices of grains would rise, the lords or landowners who enjoyed surpluses from their estates which they could sell would be better off, and the poorer peasants would be worse off. If the population fell dramatically, there would be more good land to go around, rents and prices would be bid down, and the poorer elements of the population would be better fed, while nobles and landlords would be worse off.

A major turning-point in the history of the French population was the crisis of the fourteenth century, a generalized catastrophe between 1350 and 1450 that laid the groundwork for the social relationships of the next four hundred years. The long medieval rise in population