



***House of Lilies: The Dynasty
That Made Medieval France***

By Justine Firnhaber-Baker

Allen Lane, 2024

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House of Lilies: The Dynasty That Made Medieval France. By Justine Firnhaber-Baker. Allen Lane, 2024. ISBN 978-0-241-55277-3. xxix + 409 pp. £30,00.

House of Lilies is a breathtaking dive into the history of the Capetians, the powerful French royal dynasty whose rivalry with the Plantagenets, who ruled over England from 1154–1485, dominated Anglo-French politics throughout their existence. Those with an interest in medieval royal history should delve into this book, which brings together power, politics, and piety across a stirring sweep of five centuries. Much has been written on the history of medieval France, though not often in English and for a wider audience. Firnhaber-Baker's work brings together a compelling narrative of the dynasty rather than the kingdom, exploring the Capetians themselves as well as their impact on the world around them.

The political composition of Western Europe in the medieval period was complex: Firnhaber-Baker deftly explains the transition from the Carolingian foundations in tenth-century West Francia to France in the 1300s, the kingdom then becoming one more recognisable from a modern point of view. The book is divided into six parts, with each comprising three to four biographical chapters drawn together on a common theme. Such a structure makes sense for a narrative appealing to a non-specialist audience, and it also allows the reader to make clearer connections of the geographical, political, and cultural changes that the Capetians engineered and transformed across the high medieval period. From beginning to end it is apparent that much of the exercise of kingship was dependent on strong political judgement, as well as beneficial circumstances: the downturn of Capetian fortunes from Philip III onwards was marked by poor kingship that was often amplified by catastrophe.

Throughout the book several key themes emerge. The lives of the poor and the impact of Capetian decision-making on the population below them features across the book. This brings the lives of the citizens of medieval France to the fore, alongside descriptions of medieval France's stunning and impressive architecture, the latter of which is detailed in chapter 6. The roles and activities of women, usually queens, for whom we have the most evidence, is also incorporated seamlessly, though sometimes briefly, throughout the book. This provides a welcome distinction from the political histories which continue to view the queen as a wife and mother and an occasional agent.

Obviously, no medieval history book can ignore the presence of religion, intrinsic as it was to everyday life in premodern Europe, and sufficient attention to the topic is evident

throughout the book. Medieval ecclesiastics were often some of the most powerful figures and influential advisers at court, with Abbot Suger during the reign of Louis VII being one of the most famous. Firnhaber-Baker notes the importance of Suger's architectural and political contributions, although Suger's true influence may have been exaggerated by earlier historians, as demonstrated by Lindy Grant's *Abbot Suger of St-Denis: Church and State in Early Twelfth-Century France*. The Council of Clermont, for which Pope Urban II visited France, and from there proposed the eastern pilgrimage which later became the First Crusade, was but one example of how the leaders and activities of the Church could be visible across all levels of society. The French kings were enmeshed in crusades, both against Muslims and other perceived enemies of the Roman Catholic faith, such as the Cathars (159–164), for much of the medieval period. The occasional unwillingness of the kings of the Franks, and the kings of France, to remain married to one woman until death, saw sporadic annulments arise which undoubtedly brought the kings into conflict with their own churchmen, as well as the Pope. These marital separations were sometimes driven by dynastic reasons; however, in the case of Philip I, personal preference emerged as the decisive factor. Such personal stories of the monarchs are delightfully brought to life by the author, whilst underpinning the seriousness and precariousness in which the monarchs found themselves. Aside from discussion of Christian morals and customs, Firnhaber-Baker's book continues its religious focus by describing the lives of the various Jewish populations in France, noting the persecution they faced under Philip Augustus (II) (110–113) in particular, highlighting that France was not a Christian monolith.

No work on monarchy can truly escape discussions of power and *House of Lilies* offers insightful and convincing discussions on the development of Capetian power and government, as their territories grew, and networks were built. Yet for all the discussion of the monarchs, there is not often a detailed consideration of what roles queens, counsellors, or favourites had to play in co-ruling partnerships, outside of the well-known figures of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Marguerite of Provence, and Blanche of Castile.

Though the author does correct some of the medieval myths and modern misinterpretations of the Capetian monarchy, primary sources are sometimes employed without enough depth across the entire book. For example, Firnhaber-Baker notes that Constance of France has been “vilified” as “‘avaricious and domineering’, ‘humourless’, ‘hateful and perfidious’, and even ‘bestial and insane’” (24) by medieval and modern writers, but then offers some critical examination as to why medieval chroniclers may have depicted her in such a way. Even a brief critical insert of these lively excerpts would not

detract, but instead deepen the reader's understanding of how some medieval legacies and reputations have been shaped and (possibly) misinterpreted – surely an important note for a dynastic narrative. The author notes that these characterisations may be “overdrawn caricatures, intended by the queen's enemies to undermine her authority” (24), which is true, yet more explanation would have been desirable. More attention is paid to the reputations of Eleanor of Aquitaine (99–104) and Blanche of Castile (174–175), and the matter of Philip Augustus' marriage to Ingeborg of Denmark (128), so some further consistency in the level of explanation—or notes contextualising the discussion—could be incorporated. The book becomes unbalanced in the middle, with three chapters dedicated to Philip Augustus and Louis IX each. Whilst Philip's reign was remarkable and was the transitional moment from the monarch being king of the Franks to king of France, some of the other Capetians also warrant deeper attention, but this is a minor concern.

What this book does is bring together the major themes one would expect of a medieval history, with the centrality and importance of the institution of monarchy and how it created and shaped people's worlds; this is combined with a broader picture of that world and the people who lived in it. It is intended for the non-specialist public as an entry text to the Capetians and medieval France more broadly but can and indeed should be read by anyone with an interest in European monarchy. The book dynamically and captivantly explores the history of one of Europe's most potent dynasties. In comparison, other works, such as *Capetian France* by Elizabeth M. Hallam and Charles West, or *L'âge d'or capétien (1180–1328)* by Jean-Christophe Cassas provide detailed explorations of several aspects of life in Capetian France, *House of Lilies* provides a broader introductory text. Richly described and illustrated, *House of Lilies* brings the Capetians to life for the modern reader.

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