

A SEMANTIC AND POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF ROYAL TITLE IN FRANCE (680–1790)

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Abstract

This article investigates the semantic and political evolution of royal titles in France from the Merovingian period to the French Revolution. By analyzing original royal seals and avoiding interpretative distortions from later copies and translations, the study identifies the first monarch to adopt the title “roi de France” in vernacular French. It argues that title changes reflect shifts in political regimes rather than linguistic trends. The article proposes 24 April 1617, the day of Louis XIII’s Coup de Majesté, as the symbolic birth of the modern French State.

Keywords

Royal titlature; Rex Francorum; Roi de France; Louis XIII; Political symbolism; French monarchy.

Introduction

This study addresses the historical ambiguity surrounding the transition from Latin royal titles to vernacular French in the titlature of French monarchs. It aims to identify the first sovereign to adopt the title *roi de France* in French, challenging the traditional “*national narrative*”¹ that conflates dynastic categories with linguistic evolution.

To achieve this primary objective, the core of the method consists principally of examining seal inventories by Natalis de Wailly, Louis Claude Douët d’Arcq, and the SIGILLA (2025) database, and constructing a typological table to compare the legends on the seals, thereby gaining a better understanding of the historical context of their emergence.

The article fills a historiographical gap by revisiting an observation that has largely disappeared from scientific literature since 1874: Alfred Maury’s (1874, p. 925) statement that “*the legend, which continued to be written in Latin during the reign of Henry IV, is composed in French from the reign of Louis XIII onward.*” Alfred Maury’s formulation is reiterated here with greater precision, building on and refining earlier accounts by Natalis de Wailly (1843) and Douët d’Arcq (1863). The article argues that changes in titlature correspond to shifts in political regimes and concludes by proposing 24 April 1617 as the symbolic date marking the emergence of the modern French State.

¹ “Our national narrative may be fictionalized, exaggerated, or fantasized, but it is our national narrative” (Sarkozy, 2021).

1 Literature Review

The article “Roi des Français” (2025) illustrates the imprecision of the national narrative attempting to differentiate between sovereign titles: the title *King of the French* recalls that of *King of the Franks* (in Latin *rex Francorum*), which was the official Latin titulature of the Kings of France before the adoption of *rex Franciae* (Latin for *King of France*). The passive construction *was adopted* allows the author to omit the agent of the action. No date is given, nor is a monarch named. The article relies on vague analogies, suggesting one title *recalls* another. As a result, sovereign titles are stripped of precise meaning.

The article “Royaumes Francs” (2025) correlates styles of sovereignty with dynastic succession: the Merovingians and Carolingians are listed as *Kings of the Franks*, with Hugh Capet (987–996) closing the list. In this categorization, also used by the SIGILLA (2025) database, Hugh Capet’s descendants form the lineage of *Kings of France*, and Robert II becomes de facto the first of that line. However, to the best of knowledge of the author of this article, no historian explicitly attributes the primacy of the title to him.

Another widely accepted thesis presents Philip II, the seventh king of the Capetian dynasty, as the first *King of France*, although he still used Latin. As the article “Liste des monarques de France” (2025) puts it, the title *rex Franciae* is said to appear from 1190 onward, competing with *rex Francorum* until the Revolution. To substantiate this title change, scholars cite a document referred to as the *Ordonnance-testament* of 1190. Considered by Baldwin (2010, p. 96) as “*the first written constitution of the Capetian monarchy*”, Marc Smith (2015, p. 26) explains that “*this ordinance was issued by the king before departing on crusade, organizing governance in his absence*”. The article “Style of the French Sovereign” (2025) explicitly describes this title change, as shown in Table 1.

Tab. 1 Titles of Philip II Augustus according to the national narrative

Period	Title	Monarch
1180–1190	By the Grace of God, King of the Franks, Count of Artois	Philip II
1190–1223	By the Grace of God, King of France	Philip II

Source: (“Style of the French Sovereign”, 2025)

However, original documents never confirm this persistent legend of *rex Franciae* appearing under Philip II. The work of Berger & Delaborde (1916) or Charles Petit-Dutaillis (1938) easily verified it. While all documents consistently mention the title *Francorum rex*, commentators continue to refer only to *King of France*.

Although many authors agree in recognizing Philip II as the first *rex Franciae*, Colette Beaune attributes the first use of the title *King of France* to Saint-Louis (Louis IX): “*It was in 1254 that Rex Francorum gave way to Rex Franciae*” (Beaune, 1985, p. 419). Beyond the Latin title, it may even be possible to identify Louis IX as the first original *roy de France*. A remark by Louis Carolus-Barré explains the increasing appearance of this term from the 13th century onward. At the time of Louis IX, a few administrative acts and diplomatic treaties addressed to the Plantagenets were written in the vernacular. The term *roy de France* appears only as a translation of *Francorum rex*:

“Étienne Pasquier had already observed this in his *Recherches de la France*, writing: ‘The ordinance of King Saint Louis, from the year 1254 was made in Latin (as was the common usage in France at the time and before) and later translated by various pens, each adapting its version to the common language of its time’” (Carolus-Barré, 1976, p. 149).

In his article Julien Havet (1885, p. 149) expressed deep skepticism toward erroneous copies:

“I believe these words (rex Francorum vir inluster, instead of viris inlustribus), when found in a Merovingian text, were introduced by a copying error and should be corrected.”

If sovereign titles are subject to stylistic variations introduced by commentators and copyists, and if original documents are transcribed according to the fashions of the time, then it must be admitted that a copy is only evidence of itself. In 1884 Élie Berger (1884, p. 305) summarized this fundamental principle, noting (regarding the Acts of Louis VII):

“these letters, which we no longer possess in their original form, prove nothing against the authentic acts.”

2 Methodology

To avoid the pitfalls of this *principle of uncertainty*, which assumes systematic error in copies and translations, deciphering the legend inscribed on royal seals—under the protective scrutiny of the Keeper of the Seals—provides reliable information capable of revealing the exact form of the sovereign’s title. The document, authenticated by the seal, can thus specify the date of the first appearance of the *King of France* using vernacular French.

This study focuses exclusively on the legends inscribed on royal seals to develop the *Typological table of sovereign titles* in Table 2. Counter-seals may provide additional detail, but when multiple seals exist for a single sovereign, only the earliest is considered.

For a given sovereign, titles may vary depending on the type of document. Élie Berger (1884, p. 305), for instance, notes that

“Louis VII is referred to as Francorum rex on his Great Seal, while other documents and copies designate him as rex Francorum or dux Aquitanorum.”

To avoid this difficulty, from the Capetian period onward, the analysis is restricted to the so-called *Great Seals* or *Seals of Majesty*, which depict the monarch seated frontally, holding royal attributes such as the sceptre, orb, or staff of justice.

The description of seal legends does not account for orthographic variations. Abbreviations are systematically reconstructed in uppercase within the commentary, where the distinction between [U] and [V] is preserved, although modern spelling conventions are used in Table 2. No attention is paid to font style. In accordance with the methodological principle formulated by Natalis de Wailly (1843, p. 447), “*only the semantic level is retained*”.

Crosses or the *chrismon* (Chi-Rho symbol) in Table 2 are indicated by [+] or XPE.

Titles in Table 2 are classified chronologically. When no date is associated with the appearance of a seal, the beginning of the sovereign’s reign is used instead. If the dates differ between inventories, this issue is addressed later in the commentary.

Kings only reputed of *Lorraine* (*Zventeboltus*), as well as those for whom no seal is extant, whose original seal has been lost, or whose existence is not confirmed by all three primary sources simultaneously, are excluded from Table 2.

3 Results

Compiling the inscriptions on royal seals into a chronological table in Table 2 provides a rapid overview of variations and changes in titles, facilitating the association of each title with a specific date and the name of the reigning sovereign. This will facilitate the swift identification

of the first sovereign to bear the title of *King of France*, which is highlighted in bold in Table 2.

Tab. 2 *Typological table of sovereign titles*

Reconstructed seals legend	Name of the reigning sovereign	Date of appearance or start of the reign
Theudericus Rex Francorum	Theuderic (Thierry III)	680
Anepigraphic	Pepin the Short, Carloman, Charlemagne	752, 769, 779
+ XPE Christe Protege Carolum Regem Francorum	Charlemagne	774
+ XPE Christe Protege Hlvdovicvm Imperatorem	Louis the Pious	816
+ XPE Christe Adjuva Hlothariv.MP. Avg. / + XPE Christe Adjuva Hlotharivm Imperatorem	Lothair I	840 / 843
+ Karolus Gratia Dei Rex	Charles the Bald	843
Hludovicus Misericordia Dei Rex	Louis II the Stammerer	878
+ Karolus Gratia Dei Rex	Charles the Simple	911
Rodulfus Gratia Dei Rex	Rodolphe/Raoul	932
+ Robertus Gratia Dei Francorum Rex	Robert II the Pious	997
(+) / Heinricus Dei Gratia Francorum Rex	Henry I / (+) reappears for Philip III	1031 / 1271
Ludovicus Dei Gratia Francorum Et Navarre Rex	Philip IV the Fair (on counter-seal: et Navarre) / Louis X the Quarrelsome	1288 / 1315
Philippus Dei Gratia Francorum Rex	Philip VI	1328
Karolus Dei Gratia Francorum Rex Octavus	Charles VIII	1495
Franciscus et Maria Dei Gratia Reges Reges Francorum, Scotorum, Angliae et Hyberniae	Françis II and Mary Stuart	1559
Ludovicus XIII Dei Gratia Francorum Rex / Louis XIII Roy de France et de Navarre – Par la Grâce de Dieu	Louis XIII the Just	1610 / 1617
P.L.G.D. Dieu et la Loy constitutionnelle de l'État Roy des Français	Louis XVI	1790

Source: Own with the use of Natalis de Wailly (1843); Douët d'Arcq (1863); SIGILLA (2025)

The results presented in Table 2 are likely to surprise readers accustomed to the “national narrative”; therefore, it is essential to contextualize these findings within their historical background to enhance their comprehensibility.

3.1 **The Absentees: Clovis and the Early Merovingians, and the Elusive *rex Franciae***

Carlrichard Brühl (1996, p. 219) notes that no authentic acts survive from the reign of Clovis that could shed light on his rule:

“This unfortunate reality extends to the entire sixth-century Merovingian period, during which neither the Frankish kings nor their Lombard counterparts left behind a single document that is not a forgery.”

According to Nielen and Prévost (2013), the oldest document preserved in the French National Archives dates back to 625 and mentions Clotaire II, but no seal is attached. Consequently, the earliest Merovingians are absent from all the inventories due to a lack of reliable documentation.

Although the title *rex Franciae* would suggest a natural transition from *Francorum rex* to *King of France*, no trace of it appears in the seal collections of French monarchs. According to modern nationalist criteria, Edward III Plantagenet—grandson of Philip IV the Fair, son of Isabella of France and Edward II—still spoke French, yet is now considered “English.” In the feudal context, which excluded the concept of nationhood, rival cousins did not forget their familial ties. Jean-Marie Moeglin (2012, p. 889) explains that in a parliamentary address from January 1338, Edward referred to the Pope’s request for peace with “*our consanguineous relative in France*”.²

Edward III responded to the aggressive policies of his cousin Philip VI, who had confiscated Guyenne in August 1337. On October 7 of that year, Edward officially claimed the French crown. He leveraged a commercial alliance with the County of Flanders to support his dynastic claim to the French throne. According to Kervyn de Lettenhove (1886, p. 480) “*on January 23, 1340, in Ghent, he adopted the title Rex Angliae et Franciae et Dominus Hiberniae et Dux Aquitaniae*”. Artevelle (1786, p. 428) notes that “*this move was advised to remove any scruples the Flemish might have about fighting their suzerain, the King of France—regardless of who held the title*”.

More than a strategic alliance, Edward III’s claim sought to circumvent the obstacle posed by the Salic Law. In her critical apparatus to the translation of Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, Michèle Le Doeuff summarizes the controversy surrounding this law: since the 14th century, the English argued that the law—*in terram salicam mulieres non succedant* (women shall not inherit the Salic land)—applied only to specific regions in Germany, not to France. If the law was geographically limited, “*then the English claim to the French crown was legitimate*” (Le Doeuff, 1997, p. 139). By renouncing the title *King of the Franks*, Edward III freed himself from the traditions binding the Salian Franks. If the Salic Law applied to the *Francorum rex*, it did not extend to the *rex Franciae*.

According to Alison Weir (1996, p. 286), “*Edward’s successors retained the title King of France until 1801*”. Juliet Barker (2010, p. 24) notes that Edward “*adopted the motto Dieu et mon droit, for God and my right, the right being his claim to the French crown*”.

3.2 The First Dynasty of *Rex Francorum*

According to the corpus examined, the first monarch to bear the title *King of the Franks* was Thierry III, son of Clovis II, who reigned over all the Franks from 679 to 691:

THEVDERICVS REX FRANCORVM

Beyond the disagreements over the ordinal number in his name, it is worth noting the difficulty in distinguishing the Frankish *Thierry* from the Gothic *Theodoric*. Although the Latin versions differ slightly (*Theudericus* vs. *Theodericus*), the article “Reconstruction:Proto-Germanic/Þeudōrīks” (2025) explains that both names are believed to derive from a single

² “*Tractatum de Pace cum Consanguineo nostro Franciae habere*” (Rymer, 1739, p. 200).

Proto-Germanic form *Peudōrīks*, meaning *ruler of the people*. The ethnic identity—Frankish or Gothic—is thus determined by later ideological transcriptions.³

Regardless of his ethnicity, King Thierry stands as the first sovereign in the series of *rex Francorum*, a title remarkable for its consistency. As Douët d’Arcq (1863, p. XCIV) observed:

“The legend on the seals of our kings from the first dynasty is constant and uniform. It always consists of the king’s name in the nominative, accompanied by the title King of the Franks.”

3.3 Carolingian Instability: *Rex, Imperator, Augustus*

During the initial phase of the Carolingian dynasty (752, 769, 779), no legends were engraved on royal seals. The title *rex* reappears in a transformed form on Charlemagne’s second seal (774). Charles remains *King of the Franks*, but now under divine protection, with the title functioning grammatically as an accusative:

XPE PROTEGE CAROLUM REGEM FRANCORUM

This grammatical shift reflects the emergence of a divine instance—symbolized by the *chrismon*—that confers sovereignty upon the king.

Although Jean Lafaurie (1978, p. 160) reports the inscription reading “*KAROLUS IMP AVG*”, numismatic evidence confirms Charlemagne’s imperial title, yet the corpus examined does not show him bearing it on seals. The title *Imperator* appears under his successor, Louis the Pious (816–839), whose seal legend differs from Charles’s only in the imperial designation, which remains in the accusative and still bears the reference to divine protection. Unlike Charlemagne, however, Louis no longer reigns over the Franks:

+ XPE PROTEGE HLVDVICVM IMPERATOREM

Lothair I’s seal (840) retains the general structure of the *chrismon* legend. The new emperor no longer receives *divine protection* (*protege*), but *divine assistance* (*adjuva*), which allows him, according to Natalis de Wailly (1843), to augment his title with *Augustus*:

+ XPE ADJUVA HLOTHARIVM IMPERATOREM (AUGUSTUM)

In 843, Charles the Bald introduced the formula *gratia Dei* for the first time, though he retained only the title of king:

KAROLUS, GRATIA DEI, REX

By 877, he replaces *gratia Dei* with *misericordia Dei* and assumes the imperial title:

KAROLUS, MISERICORDIA DEI IMPERATOR AUGUSTUS

Even though the cross preceding the name is not always consistent, or if *mercy* alternates with *divine grace*, Louis II the Stammerer, Charles the Simple, and Rodolphe/Raoul (878, 911, 932) continue the usage inaugurated by Charles the Bald in 843:

(+) KAROLUS GRATIA DEI REX

³ At the head of the chapter, he devotes to the first Thierry, Mézeray (1643, p. 104) translates the title “*THEVDERICUS Francorum rex* [sic]” as “*THEODORIC I Roy de France*”. The name of the second Thierry, whose Latin spelling varies: “*THEODORICUS Francorum rex* [sic]” is rendered only as “*THIERRY II Roy de France*” (Mézeray, 1643, p. 124) and is no longer confused with “*THEODORIC Roy des Goths*” (Mézeray, 1643, p. 142).

3.4 The Capetian Dynasty

3.4.1 Founders: Robert II and Henry I

Robert II and Henry I occupy a pivotal position as founders of the Capetian dynasty. As Douët d'Arcq (1863, p. XXXIX) notes “*the first Capetian seal preserved in the Archives is that of King Robert*”:

+ ROBERTUS GRATIA DEI FRANCORUM REX

Robert II reintroduces the mention of *Francorum*, which had been absent since Charlemagne. Some sources even refer to a *renovatio regni Francorum* under Charles the Bald. Robert is the first to associate *Gratia Dei* with the modernized form *Francorum rex*, in which the word *rex* is postposed, unlike the Merovingian style *rex Francorum*.

Robert is also credited with being the first monarch to use a Seal of Majesty. As Lecoy de la Marche (1889, p. 170) explains

“the great seal of our kings, known as the seal of majesty, was invented at the accession of Robert in 996. This new observation is supported by comparing wax impressions with the formulas of the attached documents”.

Douët d'Arcq (1863, p. 270) describes the seal as depicting

“a king seen frontally, half-length, with a crown of three fleurons and a long beard. The mantle, fastened on the right shoulder, falls to a point on the chest. He holds a sceptre in his right hand and an orb in his left”.

However, Robert II's seal lacks one element required to meet Douët d'Arcq's definition of a *Seal of Majesty*. Although the king is shown frontally and holds royal attributes, the half-length framing does not allow us to determine whether he is seated or standing. According to Douët d'Arcq (1863, p. XXXIX), it is only with the next generation that the *Seal of Majesty* fully emerges:

“it is his son, Henry I, who provides the first example of a true seal of majesty. It is a round seal approximately 76 millimeters in diameter. The king is seen frontally, seated on a two-tiered architectural throne with a footstool. His crown, with three fleurons, resembles that of his father. He wears a long beard and is dressed in a tunic and mantle, fastened on the right shoulder and falling to a point on the chest. His arms are raised to head level. He holds, in his right hand, a three-lobed fleuron, and in his left, a staff or sceptre.”

In the legend of his title, Henry I retains the *Francorum rex* structure established by his father, but places the genitive of divine grace before it, establishing the canonical order of the legend:

HENRICUS DEI GRATIA FRANCORUM REX

This order would persist, sometimes expanded but never fundamentally altered, until the reign of Charles VIII: “*this final form is used consistently by all his successors until Charles VIII, who is the first to add the ordinal number to the royal legend*” (Douët d'Arcq, 1863, p. XCXV):

KAROLUS DEI GRATIA FRANCORUM REX OCTAVUS

Charles VIII completes the legend at the end of his reign (1495); his earlier seals omit the ordinal. This change was overlooked by Natalis de Wailly (1843), who presents a seal from 1494 and attributes the appearance of the ordinal to Charles's successor, Louis XII (1499):

LUDOVICUS DEI GRATIA FRANCORUM REX DUODECIMUS

3.4.2 Kings of the Franks and of Navarre

Douët d'Arcq's observation must be amended. Before the change introduced by Charles VIII, Philip IV *the Fair* had already modified the canonical legend. In 1286, on his counter-seal, he added the words *et Navarre*, reflecting his possession of the Kingdom of Navarre through his marriage to Joan of Navarre, Countess of Champagne, in 1284 (Douët d'Arcq, 1863, p. XCIV). All sons of Philip IV and Joan of Navarre inherited their mother's title. Thus, the three brothers and last direct Capetians—Louis X, Philip V, and Charles IV—each enriched the royal title with the crown of Navarre:

DEI GRATIA FRANCORUM ET NAVARRE REX

However, the two kingdoms remained distinct and governed by different laws. Since the Salic Law did not apply in Navarre, upon Charles IV's death, his niece Joan II, daughter of Louis X and granddaughter of Joan of Navarre, reclaimed the crown after considerable political turmoil. Following her father's death, Joan II was successively excluded from the throne by her uncles, the regents Philip V and Charles IV. As the Valois line, beginning with Philip VI, had no legitimate claim to the Navarrese throne, they reverted to the canonical title established by Henry I.

3.4.3 Francis II and Mary Stuart

Upon the death of her father, James V, in 1542, Mary Stuart became Queen of Scots. Daughter of Mary of Guise, the young queen was sent at age six to the court of Henry II of France, where she was raised alongside the Dauphin Francis. Their marriage was celebrated in 1558, and Francis assumed the title *King of Scots*. After the tragic death of Henry II in 1559, the young couple jointly held the titles *King and Queen (rex et regina) of the Franks and the Scots*. They also claimed sovereignty over England and Ireland:

REX ET REGINA FRANCORUM, SCOTORUM, ANGLIAE ET HIBERNIAE

Since the divorce between Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon had not been sanctioned by the Pope, Catholic factions refused to recognize Elizabeth I as a legitimate monarch. Mary Stuart, granddaughter of Margaret Tudor and great-niece of Henry VIII, claimed the English throne, encouraged by the Guise family, who rejected Elizabeth's authority.

Given that English monarchs had claimed the title *rex Franciae* since Edward III, Durot (2007, p. 10) interprets Francis II's assertion as diplomatic reciprocity: "*The Queen of Scots may well bear the arms of England, since Queen Elizabeth has not renounced her ancestors' claim to those of France.*"

3.4.4 The First Bourbons and the Last *Francorum rex*

Brother of Francis II and the last reigning Valois, Henry III of France was assassinated by the monk Jacques Clément in 1589. He had designated Henry III of Navarre as his successor. Henry of Navarre ascended the French throne as Henry IV:

HENRICUS QUARTUS DEI GRATIA FRANCORUM REX

Although the emblem of Navarre appeared alongside the fleur-de-lis on the royal arms of France, the canonical title *King of the Franks* remained unchanged. Henry IV thus stood as the legitimate heir of Henry I, despite orthographic variations in the Latin rendering of his name (*HEINRICUS* vs. *HENRICUS*).

Journal Le Mercure françois (1611, p. 417) reports that upon Henry IV's assassination by Ravailiac on May 14, 1610, the Keeper of the Seals, Sillery, consoled the grieving Queen Marie de' Medici with the words: "*Your Majesty must forgive me—kings do not die in France*". From

that moment, although Henry had passed away, the title was immediately passed on to his heir. Douët d'Arcq (1863, p. 281) confirms the existence of a seal dated 1610:

“First Great Seal (1610): Seal of majesty beneath a canopy held open by two angels

LUDOVICUS XIII DEI GRATIA FRANCORUM REX

Attached to a parchment charter uniting the abbey of Le Val with the monastery of the Feuillants in Paris, 1616. The Imperial Archives possess another example of this seal, bearing the date 1610.”

3.4.5 King of France and Navarre

Douët d'Arcq (1863, p. XCXV) observes that “*Louis XIII was the first to inscribe his legend in French, in 1617*”:

LOUIS XIII PAR LA GRÂCE DE DIEU ROI DE FRANCE ET DE NAVARRE

Natalis de Wailly (1843, p. 485)⁴ does not contradict this, but suggests the date 1618, noting that

“only a few letters of the legend survive, proving it was in French and that Louis XIII used the title King of France and Navarre. On the counter-seal, the arms of France are crowned and supported by two standing angels.”

4 Discussion

4.1 Title Changes in Historical Context

To explain the emergence of the title *roi de France*, historical examples suggest that shifts in titulature are primarily driven by power dynamics between political actors and reflect changes in the regime. For instance, the Merovingian dynasty ended when Childeric III, the last *rex Francorum*, was confined to the Abbey of Saint-Bertin in 751 and symbolically shorn of his hair to signify his removal from power.

Jean Dhondt, distinguishing between symbolic *power* and effective *force*, argues that legal and legislative principles are fragile bulwarks against the reality of political strength. He explains that royal elections by the kingdom's magnates allowed powerful princes like Pepin and Hugh Capet to convert their *force* into *power*:

“Whether by heredity or election, these were mere formulas at the time. What mattered was the force that enabled one to impose power. The elimination of the Merovingians in favor of Pepin is proof of this. The succession of Carloman, Charlemagne's brother, is another.” (Dhondt, 1939, p. 918)

Although the Carolingian dynasty is often said to have ended naturally with the death of the childless Louis V in 987, Dhondt (1939, p. 930) emphasizes that Robert II's accession was not a simple election but a dynastic overthrow: “*This was no mere election, but a revolt against the reigning king, aimed at dethroning him.*”. Thus, even if Louis V's death was accidental, the rise of the Capetian *Francorum rex* marked a regime change.

This same logic explains why the title *King of France* was replaced by *King of the French* on November 9, 1789, by decree of the Constituent Assembly, as explained by Duvergier (1834, p. 57): “*The expression King of France shall be changed to King of the French, and nothing shall be added to this title.*”. The principle was reaffirmed during the founding of the Republic,

⁴ (Darricau, 2022a) website gives the date 1613, but (Darricau, 2022b) website shows that it bases its estimate on the study of an “*anepigraphic*” seal.

which symbolically destroyed the title *King of France*. Guillaume (2006) explains that after the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of the Republic on September 26, 1792, the end of the *Ancien Régime* was symbolized by the breaking of the State Seals and their return to the Mint by decree of October 6 and 8, 1792. The fall of Napoleon and the Restoration restored the title *King of France and of Navarre*, although it was stripped of its divine connotations. The July Revolution of 1830 reinstated the title *King of the French* in the person of Louis-Philippe, Duke of Orléans.

The date April 24, 1617, thus marks a sudden rupture, inaugurating a new political era in which the young king could fully assert his sovereign identity.

4.2 April 24, 1617, as a Moment of National Liberation

To assert his authority, Louis XIII orchestrated the *Coup de Majesté* on April 24, 1617. He ordered the assassination of his first minister, Concini (Conchine). The king also banished his mother, the regent, from court and exiled her to Blois. In his biography, Jean-Christian Petitfils describes the widespread jubilation that followed Concini's execution and Louis XIII's rise to power:

"Cries of 'Long live the king!' erupted from all sides." (Petitfils, 2008, p. 231)

"Joyful, confused, but growing clamors came from the Henri II staircase, up which a noisy horde of guards and courtiers rushed. Surrounded, jostled, and cheered, Louis opened the window. In the courtyard, packed with people, a wave of acclamations rose to him, illuminating his face and freeing his heart... He was finally liberated from Concini's tyranny! 'Thank you, thank you all. At this moment, I am king!'" (Petitfils, 2008, p. 232)

"Then, standing on a billiard table, he received the crowd's congratulations. 'Now I am king... Serve me well, and I shall be a good king to you!'" (Petitfils, 2008, p. 234)

After receiving widespread approval, Louis XIII went to the Parliament of Paris. As André Tosel (1988, p. 21) put it, even when led by the king himself, *"revolution is always illegal"*; therefore, Louis XIII had to legitimize his coup through the kingdom's legal institutions retroactively. He addressed the Attorney Generals Servin and Lebret, awaiting the arrival of other members of Parliament:

"I am king now, I am your king; I have been, but I am and shall be⁵, God willing, more than ever. Tell my Parliament that this villain sought to harm my person and usurp my State." (Petitfils, 2008, p. 234)

The rebels—Nevers, Mayenne, Vendôme, and others who had risen in January—rallied to the king. Petitfils (2008, p. 237) writes:

*"All of France welcomed the news of the king's seizure of power with joyful and unanimous celebration. Louis XIII was praised as 'the greatest king on earth,' the glorious 'liberator of the French republic'."*⁶

Since the appearance of the *chrismon* in royal legends, Frankish and French sovereigns had consistently placed themselves under divine protection. This divine justification was the first basis for royal legitimacy. Thanks to the work of Chartier and Nagle (1973, p. 1489) it is known

⁵ The king *has* maintained a relationship of opposition (*but*) the king *he is and shall be*.

⁶ François Eudes Mézeray (1643, Dédicace) sees in Louis XIII the "very powerful liberator of the oppressed who took up arms to free Europe".

that the principle of the *Vox Dei*—*the voice of God* calling the king to reign—was universally accepted, as shown in the 1614 *cahiers de doléances*:

“As he is recognized as sovereign in his State, holding his crown from God alone, no earthly power, spiritual or temporal, has any right over his kingdom, nor may it relieve his subjects of the fidelity and obedience they owe him, for any reason or pretext whatsoever.”

From this point forward, in addition to traditional principles—divine right, dynastic succession, and primogeniture—and the support of the Parliament of Paris acting as a constitutional court, and the backing of the rebellious nobility, the new *King of France* drew his legitimacy above all from popular acclamation. The *Vox Populi* of an entire nation recognized in its king the hero of liberation.

Under the regency of Marie de’ Medici, diplomacy had fostered a sense of foreign domination—if not of the entire country, at least of its government. According to Michel Carmona (1985, p. 10) “*the regent had admitted the papal nuncio and the Spanish ambassador to the royal council*”. Entrusting governance to Concini, the Florentine, Pierre Matthieu (1618, p. 10) depicted France as a state “*abandoned to the tyranny of the foreigner*”. Thus, Concini’s murder was interpreted by contemporary authors as a symbolic act of national liberation. To oppose the Florentine was to resist foreign domination. Pierre Matthieu (1618, p. 3) expressed this sentiment clearly, presenting himself as a patriot “*ready to suffer all things courageously for the defense of truth and the liberty of France*”.

4.3 Absolutism as the Political Project of the New King of France

Although the journal *Le Mercure françois*, Pierre Matthieu, and François Mézeray naturally paint a laudatory portrait of the young king—likely exaggerating the spontaneity of widespread acclaim—Louis XIII nonetheless earned his title of *the Just*. Conceived as a response to the grievances expressed in the 1614 *cahiers de doléances*, the political project initiated by the 1617 coup, later known as absolutism, represented a radical transformation of the state. It was the first attempt to abolish the feudal system, which was widely perceived as archaic and unjust due to its functional disparities and local tyrannies.

To realize this project, the king first sought to deprive the feudal lords of their power by establishing a public monopoly on the use of force. Charles Tilly (2000, p. 103) precised that

“Louis XIII systematically destroyed the castles of rebellious great lords, both Protestant and Catholic, against whom his troops fought incessantly. He began condemning duels, the possession of weapons, and the maintenance of private armies.”

Secondly, the king weakened the authority of the nobility by becoming the direct suzerain of all subjects in the realm. All were rendered absolutely equal in their submission to royal power. This new relationship was termed the universal direct lordship of the king. Lauriane Kadlec (2012) explains in footnote 26 that

“article 383 became famous as the first legislative document in France to articulate the theory of universal royal direct lordship clearly. [...] In allodial regions, a distinction was introduced: against a subordinate lord, allodial status was presumed; but against the king, it now had to be proven by title, as any land without a lord was presumed to fall under royal authority. The effect of Article 383 of the Code Michau was thus to extend to all allodial regions the rule: ‘no freehold without title, when it concerns the king’.”

Although the *Code Michau* of 1629 met with widespread resistance, it constituted the first legislative expression of absolutism and the first attempt to dismantle feudalism. It established a direct link between the king and the entirety of his subjects, now conceived as a nation.

By executing his *Coup de Majesté* and liberating the country from what was perceived as foreign influence, Louis XIII set in motion a process that meets the criteria for the emergence of national consciousness described by Roger Martelli (2006, p. 13): “*the phase of proto-nations generally centers around a centralized state*”. Rather than a gradual emergence, as holistic historical models propose—supposing a *rex Franciae* as an intermediate step between *rex Francorum* and *roi de France*—the symbolic date of the *Coup de Majesté* can be understood, following Dubost (2017, p. 420), not merely as “*a palace revolution*” but as the birth of a nation, rallying a people around the political project of the first King of France.

4.4 Limitation of the Study

The three primary sources agree that Louis XIII abandoned the title of *Francorum rex*. Richelieu (1823, p. 420) refers to April 24, 1617, as a “*great change*”, while authors like Pierre Matthieu (1618) and the journal *Le Mercure françois* (1617, pp. 1–16) provide extensive coverage of the “*Trial of Conchine*”. Contemporary historians, such as Fabrice Hoarau (2017, p. 439), emphasize the significance of April 24, 1617, considering it the “*birth certificate of Louis XIII*” and the beginning of an absolutist policy. However, this date remains hypothetical and symbolic, as no textual source studied for this article describes the appearance of the new Majesty seal bearing the inscription *King of France and Navarre* in vernacular French.

Conclusion

Aiming to determine the first king of France to use a vernacular French title, the study analyzes the legends inscribed on royal seals, excluding translations and copies. The titles are arranged chronologically in Table 2, which shows a consistent use of *rex Francorum* among the Merovingians but a more erratic pattern under the Carolingians. The Capetians introduced *Francorum rex* with Robert II, and Henry I established the title’s traditional fixed form *Dei Gratia Francorum rex*.

The change in royal titlature corresponds to shifts in political regimes rather than linear linguistic evolution; accordingly, the study rejects a teleological narrative and emphasizes diachronic variations in titlature as reflections of political transformation and changing royal self-identification. Searching for the first example in the “*roi de France*” category further reveals limits in the historiographical record: as the academic SIGILLA database manifestly demonstrates, a “*knowledge depreciation*” defined by Yan & Huang (2025, p. 166) as “*the knowledge that is rendered obsolete or lost due to aging*”. Knudsen & Lien (2023, p. 3) explain that “*the most fundamental form of the knowledge depreciation process is forgetting, which occurs at both the individual and organizational levels*”. Knudsen & Lien (2023, p. 3) assume that “*individuals and organizations forget due to an inability to retrieve existing knowledge*”. It helps explain why this question has been neglected in recent scholarship.

Until more detailed research more precisely reconstructs the event, it remains plausible to consider 24 April 1617 as the symbolic date marking the rise of the *roi de France* as a national figure embodied by Louis XIII, initiating a project of state centralization and national identity that continues to resonate in contemporary France.

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SÉMANTICKÝ A POLITICKÝ VÝVOJ KRÁLOVSKÉHO TITULU VE FRANCII (680–1790)

Tento článek zkoumá sémantický a politický vývoj královských titulů ve Francii od merovejské doby až po francouzskou revoluci. Na základě analýzy originálních královských pečetí a bez interpretativních zkreslení vyplývajících z pozdějších kopií a překladů studie identifikuje prvního panovníka, který přijal titul „roi de France” v lidové francouzštině. Tvrdí, že změny titulů odrážejí spíše posuny v politických režimech než jazykové trendy. Článek navrhuje datum 24. dubna 1617, den Coup de Majesté Ludvíka XIII., jako symbolické zrození moderního francouzského státu.

SEMANTISCHE UND POLITISCHE ENTWICKLUNG DES KÖNIGLICHEN TITELS IN FRANKREICH (680–1790)

Dieser Artikel untersucht die semantische und politische Entwicklung der Königstitel in Frankreich von der Merowingerzeit bis zur Französischen Revolution. Auf der Grundlage einer Analyse der originalen Königssiegel und ohne interpretative Verzerrungen durch spätere Kopien und Übersetzungen identifiziert die Studie den ersten Herrscher, der den Titel „roi de France” im französischen Volksmund annahm. Sie behauptet, dass die Änderungen der Titel eher Verschiebungen in den politischen Regimes als sprachliche Trends widerspiegeln. Der Artikel schlägt den 24. April 1617, den Tag des Coup de Majesté Ludwigs XIII., als symbolische Geburtsstunde des modernen französischen Staates vor.

SEMANTYCZNY I POLITYCZNY ROZWÓJ TYTUŁU KRÓLEWSKIEGO WE FRANCJI (680–1790)

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje semantyczny i polityczny rozwój tytułów królewskich we Francji od czasów merowińskich do rewolucji francuskiej. Na podstawie analizy oryginalnych pieczęci królewskich i bez interpretacyjnych zniekształceń wynikających z późniejszych kopií i tłumaczeń, badanie identyfikuje pierwszego władcę, który przyjął tytuł „roi de France” w potocznym języku francuskim. Wskazuje, że zmiany tytułów odzwierciedlają raczej zmiany w systemach politycznych niż trendy językowe. Artykuł proponuje datę 24 kwietnia 1617 roku, dzień Coup de Majesté Ludwika XIII, jako symboliczne narodziny nowoczesnego państwa francuskiego.