

Framing Kingship: Directed Conceptions of Kingship in Twelfth-Century England and France

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In February 1119, a dispute over the Norman castle of Ivry escalated into a major rebellion of the son-in-law of Henry I of England and ended in a personal tragedy which has long cast a dark cloud over Henry's reign. The fortress of Ivry was held by the king, but belonged, by hereditary right, to Eustace of Breteuil, who had married Henry's daughter Juliana. While Henry was not yet ready to return Ivry, he pledged that it would be handed over in the future and gave the son of Ivry's castellan, Ralph Harenc, to Eustace as a hostage and show of good faith. This gesture was reciprocated by Eustace, who provided the king with Henry's two young grand-daughters as counter-hostages.

With the terms of the agreement settled the matter might have been resolved, but on bad council Eustace blinded his hostage, the son of the castellan, and sent him home to his devastated parents. The boy's enraged father demanded vengeance on the counter-hostages, and Henry willingly gave his granddaughters to the castellan. The two girls were brutally mutilated with their eyes being put out and their noses cut off. Castellan Ralph Harenc was then compensated by the king with the castle of Ivry and gifts. Upon the return of his wounded daughters Eustace angrily prosecuted a rebellion against his lord and father-in-law, which Henry soon defeated at the siege of Breteuil. As a concluding punishment, Eustace lost his estate and his lands were given to others.¹

For a great many, this account of Eustace of Breteuil's conflict with Henry I portrays the king as a callous and calculating man whose selfish concern for power drove him to destroy the lives and property of those closest to him. Is this interpretation fair? What drove Henry to act in this fashion and disregard the welfare of his family? While these questions are deeply personal, their answers are derived from a broader societal perception of kingship which often informed royal

actions and policies.

As the chronicler Orderic Vitalis asserts, the king needed to be mindful of the sentiments and opinions of the great lords of his realm. One of his fundamental challenges was to keep them pacified. In the wake of the landing of Henry I's elder brother and rival, Duke Robert of Normandy, at Portsmouth and with the threat of a possible *coup*, Orderic provides some retrospective advice through his chronicle's speech from Count Robert of Meulan: "placate every one with promises, grant whatever they ask, and in this way draw all men assiduously to your cause. If they ask for London or York, do not hesitate to promise great rewards appropriate to royal munificence."² While Count Robert advised that gifts and favors were indeed effective ways of preventing discontent among the magnates, this tactic could not be maintained indefinitely. Providing a consistent and reliable source of mediation, judgment, and law would prove to be a much more secure and cost-effective way of achieving one of the most vital goals of kingship: political stability. In the simplest of terms, Henry's decision concerning his granddaughters indicated a consistency of action toward his vassals in respect to the sphere of law. As a figure of public attention, consistent and traditionally framed legal policy was a cornerstone of his reign's security. To deviate from this image was to invite rebellion and disaster. While this legal consistency was not universally observed by all twelfth-century kings, Henry's dedication to it allowed him to rule effectively for over three decades and explains why a generation later, there was a wide-spread desire to return to the policies of his reign.

As the cause of Duke Robert's abortive coup in 1101 collapsed, those barons who had conspired against the king in England now faced Henry's judgment. As Henry's attitude toward his granddaughters might suggest, these men had cause for alarm, but the king's subsequent action against them lacked the physical hostility his kin

had suffered. The judicial actions against these treasonous lords demonstrate a level of order, restraint, and control; thus “[he] charged them, not all together but individually at different times, with the offence of violating their pledged faith in many ways. He imposed large fines on some of them who were unable to clear themselves of the crime laid to their charge, and disinherited and drove into perpetual exile others.”³

Henry’s justice toward these men provides us with three important points about his approach toward law. First, cases were judged based on individual merit, rather than collectively. Second, the charges against the accused were placed within the context of lordship. Lastly, none of the magnates suffered beyond losing their lands, and exile. The punishment of the rebels in 1101 shows a Henry I who does not advocate a heavy handed or violent form of justice. This seems to be an almost different Henry than the one who gave up the reigns of law into the hands of man willing to brutalize the king’s own kin. If we have two opposing Henrys then it should be recognized that the Henry of the trials of 1101 appears far more in our sources than the Henry of 1119.

Following the political conflicts of 1101, the next year saw the uprising of Earl Robert Bellême. Henry I’s action against Earl Robert, again demonstrates a respect for law and judgment. After being called to answer charges against him, the earl fled from court and prepared for war. The king’s response was not rash, but rather speaks to his respect for legal process, “He therefore publicly condemned Robert as a man who had been openly accused and had failed to clear himself by process of law, and pronounced him a public enemy unless he returned to do right and submit to justice.”⁴ Orderic’s description speaks to the restraint Henry exercised in regards to his power and how his action reflected upon its perception. It was only after Earl Robert did not present himself that the king resorted to military force to bring the rebellious earl to heel. At the conclusion of the campaign against the rebel, Earl Robert was not executed, nor physically harmed. Robert Bellême received the same punishment as did many of the rebels the previous year. For his treason and rebellion, Henry stripped the earl of his lands and “allowed him to leave unharmed with his horses and arms, and granted him a safe-conduct through England to the sea-coast.”⁵ It is indeed telling that Bellême’s revolt was the last in England during Henry’s reign.⁶ Four

years later, after Henry’s victory at the Battle of Tinchebray, the king again displayed his policy of disinheriting those charged with treason, rather than harsher punishment. While the more dangerous ring-leaders of his brother’s faction (including his brother) were imprisoned, the aftermath of Tinchebray again speaks to what was becoming a pattern for Henry I: a policy of a mild and standardized form of justice.⁷ What made this pattern so important and why was consistency of justice so strongly emphasized by chroniclers, like Orderic Vitalis?

What we see with Henry’s use of law is the construction or fulfillment of an idealized image that carried a powerful connotation: the king as the font of justice.⁸ The broader medieval conception of kingship emphasized several core values. In addition to justice, defense of the weak (and the Church), power sanctioned through God’s favor, lordship (including all the associations that came with it), and military leadership were all aspects of kingship which came to define the role and value of kings in medieval society. Successful kings were ones which were able to identify the role they were expected to play, and frame their rule within this context. Unsuccessful rulers were ones who could not exhibit these qualities, and therefore fostered concern among the aristocracy and the Church over their ability to perform their expected role in society. With his displays of consistent law and judgment, King Henry I was attempting to visibly frame his kingship in these terms, and thereby strengthen confidence in his rule and insure stability. Henry I and other early twelfth-century rulers relied on rhetorical and symbolic tools to publicize their fulfillment of these qualities.

Chronicles, such as Orderic Vitalis’ *Ecclesiastical History*, proved useful in conveying the attributes Henry I, and other contemporary kings wished to convey, but they were not the only tools in a ruler’s arsenal. Royal charters (grants of land or privileges) were another means by which a king might communicate the ideals and merits of his rule. One king, a contemporary of Henry I, whose surviving charters demonstrate that he sought to frame the image of his rule, was Louis VI of France.

For deciphering principles of kingship in charters, identification of vocabulary and rationalizations for word choice are essential. As the charters discussed will show, these documents were often formulaic and frequently used similar language in particular places to emphasize specific points. We can safely assume that such structure

was intended to communicate specific hierarchical points about both the issuer of the charter and the recipient, serving to frame the status of the issuer of the charter (in this case: the king).

In 1129, King Louis VI issued a charter to Geoffrey, bishop of Chartres, where he first scolded him over ambiguous control of several serfs in the bishop's household (which Louis claimed were actually under his jurisdiction).⁹ The charter goes on to grant the bishop the control of these serfs, and provides witnesses and signatures to verify the transfer of rights. Such a document may at first seem to be a mundane exchange. It is rich, however, in royal symbolism which Louis used to increase his future authority with this Episcopal see.

The charter opens with, "In the name of the holy and indivisible Trinity, I Louis, by the grace of God, king of the French."¹⁰ An illustrative example, such as this, confirms that the king (Louis in this case) is king of the French "by the grace of God" and owes his authority to God's providence.¹¹ This is reaffirmed in the first part of the phrase where he is appealing to God for authority in the matter of the charter's concern. In this quote, God's authority was invoked to provide strength to the king's case. Audience is an important aspect of the analysis of these documents. Louis' charter shows that he was using central tenants of the Church's perceptions toward kingship to buttress both his argument and his authority over Bishop Geoffrey. By incorporating the ecclesiastical ideology into royal symbolism, the king enjoyed a better relationship with the Church.¹² This is an example of a successfully framed reign. Orderic Vitalis provides an example from the height of the conflict between Henry I and Count Eustace of Breteuil, which complements the theologically derived sentiment of Louis' charter.

In the absence of her husband and surrounded by the king's hostile forces, Henry's desperate daughter, Juliana, planned to murder her father. A crucial line from Orderic emphasizes the theme of God's delegation of power to kings: "in the end, plotting to raise her hand against the Lord's anointed, she asked with treacherous intent to speak to her father."¹³ From the example of Louis' charter and Orderic's comment about Henry's anointing, it is clear that the relationship between God and king held strong emphasis in both chronicle and charter sources, but more importantly, also in both Anglo-Norman England, and Capetian France. As the context of Louis' document suggests, invoking the sanction of God added weight to the king's message,

especially when the king sought to frame himself to the Church. Like law, the use of religion to frame kingship buttressed royal authority.

In addition to the derivative authority of God, justice and royal responsibility were also points expressed in charters. Again, the specific language of the charters is vital to understanding subtle clues to this particular king's idealized rule. A charter expressing the rights of the clergy attributes, "like the holiest of legal motions, kingly power, from the burden imposed on him [the king] by the office, he is given the defense of the church."¹⁴ In this charter, though talking about vacant positions in the Church, Louis VI, once again states strong feelings about the derivative power of his station. The beginning of the charter, similar to the one discussed above, frames God as the source of the authority of the king. It is here, however, that he states that royal power carries legal and judicial power as well. We additionally see that there are certain responsibilities which Louis acknowledges are the providence of kingship, such as defending the church. Louis frames his own role similarly to Abbot Suger's depiction of him in *The Deeds of Louis the Fat*. The defense of churches and the helpless is a strong theme in Suger's work, as is indicated in the abbot's description of the king's defense of Saint Denis from the unlawful attack of Burchard of Montmorency.¹⁵

Often chroniclers provide us with their feelings about kingship, but charters uniquely show that sentiments from the king himself demonstrate that rulers did not necessarily feel entitled to do whatever they pleased. Rather, they perhaps saw a sense of duty inherent in their office. Additionally, by acknowledging a function for his position, Louis provides himself with clear and defensible rationales for him and his successors to intervene in the affairs of the Church and the aristocracy. In such interventions, kings would be interceding as judges and protectors, with divinely sanctioned authority. It is clear, therefore, that these seemingly mundane documents served as a powerful stage for royal expression and political philosophy.

Returning to the question of Henry's supposed callous disregard for his own family, we see that due to the importance of framing the role of the king, Henry did not have the luxury to deviate from the path of how he displayed his rule. The situation that led to the mutilation of his granddaughters was one with little flexibility. Any action which might have communicated a prioritization of the king's personal life at the expense of his political role would have

welcomed whole-sale revolt from Henry's vassals. If the king could not provide justice for Ralph Harenc after his son had been harmed in the castellan's faithful service to the king, then why would the magnates owing to the king have cause to trust that they would not be neglected so under similar circumstances.

To show mercy to his granddaughters would have been to break the consistency of his framed rule. This consistency was especially vital in 1119, a time when he could not afford to appear unreliable. As Norman strength increased, hostile factions had begun to grow against Henry I, who after 1106 was at once de facto duke in Normandy, while King in England.¹⁶ With such an imbalance of power in Northwestern France, Henry had spawned many enemies. The list of the Norman King's opponents and the context of their cause was a grave matter for a king with a precarious claim to the duchy he had forcefully seized from his brother. Duke Robert Curthose had decisively lost his inheritance of the duchy to his brother at the Battle of Tinchebray in 1106, but left his son William Clito with a powerful and tradition-backed claim to Normandy. The threat of Henry's nephew is one which would plague him in the closing years of his reign, and was one that his enemies exploited to its fullest extent in 1118.¹⁷

Henry's lord, King Louis VI of France, with his

allies, Count Baldwin of Flanders and Count Fulk V of Anjou, invaded Henry's lands and spawned a revolt that combined with the invasion of his most dangerous neighbors, threatened Henry's possession of Normandy. Matters worsened for King Henry with the deaths of three of his most trusted advisors.¹⁸ It was in this context of invasion and internal rebellion that Henry's granddaughters were blinded. It was one of the principle rebels, Amaury III de Montfort, who convinced Henry's son-in-law Eustace to mutilate the hostage in his care, and thereby forcing a response from Henry.¹⁹ With rebellion spawned from massed external invasion Henry's hands were tied. To survive as king and ruler of Normandy, he had to demonstrate a consistency which would buttress the legitimacy of his rule and provide stable kingship. To be inconsistent and show mercy would have been to license further rebellion as well as risking political isolation.

The granddaughters of Henry I were not victims to an inherent medieval barbarism, nor were they prey to the emotionally detached, callous whims of a power hungry madman. The suffering of these girls, while abhorrent to modern observers, represented a framed kingship which medieval Anglo-Norman and French kings used to provide stability to a political system still primarily based on custom and tradition.

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Endnotes

¹ The above paragraphs are paraphrased from--- Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. VI, trans. Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 2004). 211-213. --- C. Warren Hollister, *Henry I*, ed. Amanda Clark Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 253.

² Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. V, trans. by Marjorie Chibnall, (New York: The Oxford University Press, 2004). 317.

³ Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. VI, trans. by Marjorie Chibnall. 13.

⁴ Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. VI, trans. by Marjorie Chibnall. 21.

⁵ Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. VI, trans. by Marjorie Chibnall. 31.

⁶ Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. VI, trans. by Marjorie Chibnall. 31.

⁷ Referring to the imprisonment of Duke Robert--- Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. VI, trans. by Marjorie Chibnall. 95.

⁸ The term “font of justice” is taken out of the *Gesta Stephani* to describe the calamities that follow in the absence of royal presence, “For, they (the Londoners) said, every kingdom was exposed to calamities from ill-fortune when a representative of the whole government and a font of justice was lacking.” See--- *Gesta Stephani*, trans. K.R. Potter (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1955). 3. --- Similar statements are made in other chronicles. These quotations are often dominated by statements of absolute and highly rhetorical language. Orderic Vitalis explains that in the absence of King Stephen from Normandy, “deeds and others like them were performed by the Normans, and they devoured each other with their own teeth, as we read figuratively of the beast in the Apocalypse.” --- see Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. VI, trans. by Marjorie Chibnall. 459.

⁹ Charter issued in 1129 by Louis VI to Geoffrey, bishop of Chartres, where he first scolds the bishop over the ambiguous control of several serfs in the bishop’s household which Louis claimed were actually under his jurisdiction, see *Cartulaire de Notre-Dame de Chartres d’après les Cartulaires et les Titres Originaux*. eds. E. du Lepinois and Lucien Merlet, vol 1, (1129) no. XLV, pp. 137.

¹⁰ This English quotation has been translated from the Latin, “In nomine sancte et individue Trinitatis, ego Ludovicus, Dei Gracia, Francorum rex...” See--- *Cartulaire de Notre-Dame de Chartres*, XLV. 137.

¹¹ *Cartulaire de Notre-Dame de Chartres*, XLV. 137.

¹² Ralph Turner, *Eleanor of Aquitaine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 41-42.

¹³ Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. 6, trans., Marjorie Chibnall, 213.

¹⁴ This English quotation has been translated from the Latin, “Cum, juxta sacratissimarum legum institute, regia potestas, ex injuncto sibi office, ecclesiarum defensionem.” See--- *Cartulaire de Notre-Dame de Chartres d’après les Cartulaires et les Titres Originaux*. eds. E. du Lepinois and Lucien Merlet, vol 1, (1129, avant le 14 avril), no. XLIV, pp. 135.

¹⁵ Suger, *The Deeds of Louis the Fat*, trans. by Richard C. Cusimano and John Moorhead, (Washington D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992). 29.

¹⁶ Marjorie Chibnall points out that Henry was careful not to use the title of Duke and to rule his paternal lands as a single entity under the crown. She explain how Hyde chronicler referred to him as “Res Normanglorum”. She explains that his refraining from the ducal title was the insecurity of his hold on the duchy while Duke Robert and his son remained alive.--- Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. 6, trans., Marjorie Chibnall, 99 (note 3).

¹⁷ Hollister backs Chibnall’s assertion that these events could have taken place between 1116 and 1118.--- C. Warren Hollister, *Henry I*, ed. Amanda Clark Frost, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). 246.

¹⁸ 1118: Queen Matilda, Count William of Evreux, and Count Robert of Meulan.--- C. Warren Hollister, *Henry I*, ed. Amanda Clark Frost, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). 247.

¹⁹ Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, Vol. 6, trans., Marjorie Chibnall, (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 1978). 211.