

Frederic J. Baumgartner. *Louis XII.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. xiii + 319 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-12072-6.



Reviewed by Mark Konnert

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Frederic J. Baumgartner's new biography of Louis XII, King of France from 1498 to 1515, is a political biography in the classic style. One is tempted to say "old style," but that would have a pejorative connotation that is not intended. As Baumgartner himself states, he intended to write a history of sixteenth-century France, beginning with the reign of Louis XII, but "found that there was no English-language biography for him from any era nor a scholarly study of his reign in French since the nineteenth-century..." (p. vii). It is a curious lacuna given Louis' contemporary prestige: he was given the title "Father of the People" by the Estates-General in 1506, and his reign remained for over a century the paradigm of the "good old days."

This lack of attention by historians may be attributed to several factors. First, his reign falls in a historiographical no man's land in French (and European) history: histories of medieval France tend to stop with Louis XI (1461-1483), while the major events and movements of the sixteenth century, such as the Renaissance and Reformation, have their greatest impact in France after

Louis XII's death. Second, Louis XII's reign is overshadowed by that of his flamboyant successor, Francis I (1515-1547). Even for his lifetime, historians have devoted more attention to the women in his life--Jeanne of France, Anne of Brittany, and Mary Tudor--than to the king himself. The author's goal, therefore, is to fill a gap in the literature on early modern France, rather than to develop new interpretations.

Baumgartner's overall assessment of Louis XII as king is sympathetic but modest: "Certainly, I will not argue that Louis XII stands in the first rank of French kings" (p. vii). Indeed, Louis was a better king than those who knew him as a young man would have had reason to imagine. Born in 1462, he was the son of Charles, Duke of Orleans, a grandson of King Charles V (1364-80). Young Louis became Duke of Orleans at the age of two, when his father died in 1465. As the first Prince of Blood, Louis of Orleans was an important person, but the possibility of his becoming king was still remote, since Louis XI (d. 1483) was succeeded by his young son Charles VIII (1483-1498), who

would have to die without male issue in order for young Orleans to accede to the throne.

Louis' early life was not especially distinguished. He gained a reputation as a jousting and womanizer, and spent most of his time hunting (a life-long passion) and in ineffective political maneuvering against the real powers in the early reign of Charles VIII--his older sister Anne and her husband Pierre de Beaujeu. This plotting, and an ineffective rebellion, landed him in prison for a time, but he seems to have eventually accepted his position as first Prince of the Blood, and in fact was godfather for Charles VIII's son, born in 1492, who immediately displaced him in the line of succession. The event of his early life that has attracted the most attention was his forced marriage in 1476 to Jeanne of France, the saintly but deformed daughter of Louis XI. Baumgartner has some hard things to say about Louis' conduct toward his wife, but not as hard as some have said. Certainly he ignored her, and rebuffed all attempts at intimacy, repelled as he was by her appearance. But he does seem to have recognized her strength of character and saintliness, and for a while, at least corresponded with her in friendly terms. Nevertheless, an annulment remained his ultimate goal, one achieved only in 1498 after his accession to the throne. Having made his peace with Charles VIII, Louis became one of his most trusted intimates, and was given important military commands in the French invasions of Italy beginning in 1494.

Louis of Orleans became King of France upon the death of Charles VIII in 1498, his son having predeceased him in 1495. Although there was no real alternative to Louis, many were apprehensive about the new king, fearing the settlement of old scores. The new king acted at once to mollify their concerns, stating that "It is not honorable for the king of France to avenge the quarrels of a duke of Orleans" (p. 57). Louis became king at the age of 35, with a wealth of experience unusual in

a new monarch, having learned a great deal from his earlier plotting and rebellions.

According to Baumgartner, preoccupation with Italian affairs was the central feature of Louis' reign (p. 229). This was especially because of his dynastic claim to the Duchy of Milan, inherited from his grandmother, Valentina Visconti. Even before becoming king, Louis ruled the town of Asti, on the Duchy's western boundary. Upon becoming king, Louis pressed not only his claim to Milan, but also the claim to Naples, which had prompted Charles VIII's invasion in 1494. Baumgartner sees this preoccupation as unfortunate, but understandable, given the dynastic nature of political power. The treatment of the complex and torturous Italian politics is one of the strengths of the book. Baumgartner consistently makes sense of the twists and turns of diplomacy and the reversals of alliances.

If Italian affairs predominated in Louis' mind, they nevertheless did not prevent substantial domestic achievements. Principal among these were the Ordinance of Blois (1499) regulating the Gallican church, judicial and financial affairs, and the redaction and codification of various customary laws throughout the kingdom. As is evident, and as Baumgartner makes clear, these were not bold innovations in government, but rather careful reforms building on and preserving past practices. These developments were entirely consistent, both with the man and the times. Among other achievements, and the one that earned him the title "Father of the People," was the lowering of taxes (particularly the *taille*, the major direct tax) despite virtually continuous war in Italy. Reductions were achieved largely through economies such as cutting back on noble pensions and careful overseeing of the fiscal system.

In religious affairs, Louis was a conventional medieval Catholic, not terribly interested in issues of church reform. However, Georges Cardinal d'Amboise, the chief minister for much of the reign, did make some limited efforts at cleaning

up the church in France. The major impact of the reign in church affairs was on the level of administration and Franco-Papal relations. Louis' bitter feud with Pope Julius II and his sponsorship of the schismatic Council of Pisa, and the subsequent reconciliation with Leo X paved the way for the Concordat of Bologna of 1516 and the replacement of ecclesiastical Gallicanism with the royalist variety, that is, assertion of royal predominance over a church that previously had been largely self-governed by its clergy.

As regards the other major intellectual and cultural movement of the day, the Renaissance, Louis was more of an interested bystander than an active patron and participant, as his successor would be. Another major achievement was the continuation of the process of incorporating the Duchy of Brittany into the kingdom. This was accomplished through Louis' marriage (after the annulment of his marriage to Jeanne of France) to Anne of Brittany, widow of Charles VIII. By all accounts, Louis and Anne genuinely cared for each other; however, to their great disappointment, the marriage produced only two girls, leaving the young Francis of Angouleme as heir presumptive.

Because Louis' reign has been largely ignored by historians, there is little historiography for Baumgartner to call into question, and few interpretations to revise or question. Nevertheless, the last chapter, "Legacy," does put Louis XII and his reign into context regarding several themes in early modern historiography. The most important is the debate surrounding the concept of "New Monarchy" and the nature of "Renaissance Monarchy," whether absolutist or consultative. According to Baumgartner, Louis XII typified the consultative monarchy as outlined by J. Russell Major (in his *Representative Institutions in Renaissance France* [1960] and *Representative Government in Early Modern France* [1980]). Even if (as some historians have claimed) the assembly of 1506 cannot be considered a "true" Estates-General, "[t]here can be little argument that Louis prac-

ticed a highly consultative form of government" (p. 248). Louis was also concerned with moulding public opinion in ways unlike any other king until Louis XIV. Yet, according to Baumgartner, this is largely a function of personality and preference, rather than the inherent nature of Renaissance monarchy.

In a time of flux and rapid change such as the sixteenth century, kings were largely able to put their own stamp on their reigns: "The 'Renaissance monarchy' thus is a distinctive period in French history, so difficult to define, because each reign was essentially *sui generis*. To look at the problem in that way helps to explain why France was able to go from the consultative, limited monarchy of Louis XII to the more absolutist government of Francis I without pause or rebellion. Both forms had a basis in French law and tradition" (p. 251). Indeed, Louis' successor was to break fundamentally with his domestic policy. Francis reversed the downward trend of taxation, and encouraged and capitalized on the sale of offices, severely condemned by the Ordinance of Blois. Louis indeed seems to have recognized that Francis would break with the policies of his reign: "The big boy is going to spoil everything," Louis is reported to have uttered on many occasions (p. 238). In foreign affairs, however, there was continuity, as Francis pressed his claims to both Naples and Milan.

Baumgartner's clear and comprehensible treatment of Italian affairs is one of the strengths of the book. Others are the several snapshots of French government and administration, particularly in chapters 7 and 14 on judicial and financial affairs, and in chapter 12 on the church. These chapters make the book a suitable candidate as a textbook in a course on early modern France. Although one hesitates to use the words "weaknesses" or "shortcomings," there are several areas that the author could have treated more thoroughly. Although it is no doubt precluded by the nature of the sources, a more thorough treatment would

have been desirable of Louis the man, rather than Louis the king. Baumgartner's portrait is largely sympathetic, but the personal glimpses are few, and based largely on rumour or conjecture. The other is that there is little sense of the kingdom that Louis ruled, or of the times in which he ruled it. Apart from a few brief references (pp. 66-69, 207-8), little attention is given to the demographic and economic circumstances of Louis's reign. Surely, the fact that the early sixteenth century was a prosperous and vibrant era, when recovery from the disasters of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries was in full swing, but before rising population would once again depress standards of living, is an important consideration and could have been given more prominence. Louis' ability to carry out an expensive foreign policy and reduce taxes was largely due to this happy coincidence of circumstances.

Baumgartner's book is based upon the relevant primary and secondary sources. In particular, he has ably exploited the various collections of letters and diplomatic relations, and the various memoirs relating both to diplomatic affairs and the Italian campaigns, and to domestic affairs. The book is meticulously researched and well documented, and is confirmation of the continued viability and importance of a classic genre of historical writing. *Louis XII* is a worthy companion to several other biographies of sixteenth-century French monarchs, including Baumgartner's own *Henry II, King of France* (1988) and Robert J. Knecht's *Francis I* (1982), just reissued in a second edition as *Renaissance Warrior and Patron: The Reign of Francis I* (1994). Once again, historians of early modern France are indebted to Professor Baumgartner for an eminently readable and thoroughly researched book on a neglected aspect of French history.

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