



*Louis:
The French Prince
Who Invaded England*

Catherine Hanley

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Louis: The French Prince Who Invaded England. By Catherine Hanley. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-300-21745-2. xvi + 279 pp. \$40.00.

The brief reign of Louis VIII of France (1223–1226) has always been obscured by that of his august father, Philip II (r. 1180–1223), and his saintly son, Louis IX (r. 1226–1270). A detailed French monograph by Charles Petit-Dutaillis (1894) remains standard, in spite of more recent biographies by Gérard Sivéry (1995) and Ivan Gobry (2009). Catherine Hanley now gives us the first book-length treatment of Louis in English. As her subtitle indicates, the heart of the book is a narration of Louis’s ultimately unsuccessful, but nevertheless important, invasion of England in 1216–1217. This is a volume aimed at a wide audience, with an appealing, fast-paced prose style. Hanley is the author of a previous scholarly monograph on *Warfare and Combat, 1150–1270* (Boydell and Brewer, 2003), but is probably better known for her recent series of historical novels set in thirteenth-century England. *Louis* is not a work of fiction, however, and thus it is surprising to find that Yale University Press would chose to publish the book without notes of any kind. The author does provide a judicious discussion of her sources in the introduction and again in a concluding “note on sources”. Still, it is a shame that a bare minimum of documentation was not provided, since the lack of such documentation will inevitably lessen the work’s impact in academic circles.

The first two chapters lead up to the invasion of 1216. Born in 1187 to Philip II and his first wife, Isabelle of Hainaut, Louis’s childhood was marked by his mother’s early death (1190), his father’s absence on the Third Crusade and infamous marital controversies, and most directly by the rapidly shifting political relationship between England and France. When King John succeeded his brother Richard on the English throne in 1199, a marriage was arranged between John’s niece Blanche of Castile and Louis, the heir to the French throne. In spite of this peace-making move, by 1204 the hapless King John had lost to Philip all of his “French” lands north of Aquitaine. For a decade, John schemed to reverse these losses, and in 1214 planned a two-pronged attack on the Capetians in tandem with Otto of Brunswick (one of two claimants to the Imperial throne). The clash of 1214 initiated perhaps the most decisive power shift of the high Middle Ages. The famous battle in July 1214 at Bouvines, where Philip II’s forces defeated Otto’s, has gone down in French history as one of the moments that made France. But, it was Prince Louis who had gone to meet John’s invading army in the west at La Rochelle. At Louis’s approach, John fled. Not until a few weeks later, after Louis had already turned the momentum against the invaders, did Philip win his victory

at Bouvines. Perhaps for this fact alone Louis deserves to be better remembered in French history. One element of Hanley's treatment here is puzzling—John's loss of Normandy is mentioned in passing (50) but not explained until later (60-61), well after the events of 1214 have been narrated. A reader without additional knowledge would be hard pressed to understand the political context without this key piece of information.

Chapters 3 to 7 focus on Louis's invasion of England and form the core of the book. In fact, even before Bouvines Louis had planned to lead an invasion on Philip II's behalf, but was pre-empted by King John's move of ceding England as a papal fief. Now, after John's disastrous loss of 1214, his barons revolted and forced him to sign Magna Carta in June 1215. By August, Innocent III had freed John of his obligations to this document, which the latter rescinded in September. Open warfare with the barons broke out again, and thus a delegation sailed to France to offer the crown of England to Louis. Louis's advisors made the (dubious) case that John had effectively vacated the throne, that Louis had the best claim through his wife Blanche, and that anyway Louis had the right of election by the barons. Whatever its merits, on 20 May 1216 Louis sailed for England to try to make good this claim. After a series of victories, on 2 June he entered London in triumph, welcomed by its citizens. Although he decided not to proceed to a coronation, Louis appeared well on his way to total victory, continuing to expand the number of castles and towns under his sway through the early autumn. It was King John's death on 19 October 1216 that changed everything. The English barons, though, did not immediately rally to the boy king Henry III. Aside from a quick return to France to attempt to gather reinforcements, Louis would remain in England, pressing his claim with help from troops raised by his capable wife, until September 1217. Through much of this time, his military position remained strong, and only slowly did his support among the English barons slip away. In the end, he departed not in defeat, but as the result of a treaty paying him the hefty sum of 10,000 marks. Hanley is most in her element here, giving a compelling, blow-by-blow military and strategic account of Louis's sixteen months in England.

The brief chapters 8 and 9 that cover the years 1217 to 1223 and Louis's actual three-year reign feel a bit like afterthoughts. The author evidently wanted to treat the full span of Louis's life, but the thirty-page survey of his reign is not as satisfying as the nearly 120 pages on his invasion of England. And given recent controversies over everything concerning the so-called "Cathars", the rapid-fire treatment of the Albigensian crusade's conclusion necessarily feels incomplete. Yet, the book ends on a strong note, with a broad assessment of Louis's legacy. Hanley convincingly questions the common assumptions that Louis was in weak health throughout his life and

that he was often at loggerheads with his father. In fact, Louis was a warlike and vigorous (if small) man, and he maintained the Capetian tradition of family solidarity. More importantly, Hanley points out that Louis's invasion had massive consequences for English constitutional history. It was only the fact that Louis was on English soil pressing his attack that caused Henry III's advisors to re-issue Magna Carta, which had been a dead letter at the time of John's death. Louis's presence forced the boy king and the papal legate to guarantee Magna Carta's validity, ensuring that it would be the touchstone for the long battles between king and barons that resulted in the rise of Parliament. It is not too much to say that Magna Carta owes its enduring importance to the invasion of a French prince: in this sense, Louis VIII may well be more important to English history than to French.

Louis VIII is one of the few medieval kings who can be said to have been overshadowed in the medieval and modern imaginations by his wife (his grandfather Louis VII is another). There is some risk that he may suffer this fate once again, since Yale University Press released Lindy Grant's major new biography of Blanche of Castile in November 2016. Let us hope that Hanley's and Grant's publications will be widely read and considered together, and that they will open up new perspectives and debates on the era of Louis and Blanche.

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