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France From Region to Nation

Final Paper

05/01/2025

Philip IV, Boniface VIII, and the Decline of Papal Supremacy

In the Middle Ages, the relationship between the Church and secular rulers was always complicated: their struggle for authority was nearly constant. While moments of cooperation occurred, more often than not, one side sought to dominate the other. Traditionally, the pope claimed supreme authority over secular rulers, a belief that was most forcefully formed during the papacy of Innocent III. Innocent III exercised papal authority to its fullest extent, like intervening in the domestic affairs of kingdoms such as France and England through tools including excommunication. At the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, he elevated the power of the papacy and the Church to its historical peak. However, this did not mean that spiritual authority would continue to be supreme over secular power. On the contrary, the conflict between the two only intensified. By the late 13th and early 14th centuries, tensions culminated in a dramatic clash between two people representing spiritual and secular authority respectively: Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip IV of France. Their conflict brought the already severe church-state relations to a breaking point. There are two fundamental explanations for this conflict. First, as Joseph Canning explains, the hierocratic vision held that "the pope, as the direct successor of St Peter, has the divinely appointed headship on earth of the body of the Christian community," which gave him the right "to judge, depose and concede power to secular rulers.[1]" This doctrinal claim was the foundation of the conflict. And this also leads us to the

[1] Joseph Canning, *Ideas of Power and Authority during the Disputes between Philip IV and Boniface VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13.

second point: these spiritual claims were deeply intertwined with realistic concerns (such as taxation and the appointment of local bishops) which directly affected the core interests of the kingdom. By the 13th century, under the rule of Philip IV, the French monarchy had developed into a more centralized state. As Canning notes, "the need for royal jurisdictional control over all the king's subjects, both clerical and lay, had come to be seen as paramount.[2]" The conflict between Boniface VIII and Philip IV was essentially a clash over core interests: Boniface VIII sought to preserve the traditional papal rights over taxation and legal matters to maintain the Church's economic and juridical authority. But in wartime France, where the monarchy was engaged in frequent wars to expand its territory, Philip IV saw the taxation of clergy as essential to fund these efforts.

This paper will examine in detail the conflict between Philip IV and Boniface VIII—what happened, and why. It will also explore a central question: how was Philip IV able to successfully challenge the authority of the papacy and the Church, instead of being forced to submit like kings a century earlier under Innocent III? What has changed? This paper argues that Philip IV was able to overcome the traditional tools of papal power (such as excommunication and interdict) because of the centralization of political authority in France, innovations in legal structures, and urgent economic needs. These factors enabled the French monarchy to assert the state's sovereignty both in practice and in ideology. The conflict between Boniface VIII and Philip IV was not a temporary episode, but a turning point in the balance of power. This shift led to the Avignon Papacy and signaled a lasting decline in papal supremacy.

The conflict between Boniface VIII and Philip IV, as well as the confidence Philip IV had in confronting Boniface VIII and the papacy he represented (which for several centuries had been regarded as the highest spiritual authority), was not a coincidental event, but rather the

[2] Canning, *Ideas of Power and Authority*, 13.

inevitable result of over a century of development in French royal power, which by the late thirteenth century had reached a high level of centralization. Although the papacy still stubbornly guarded its so-called supreme authority to judge and even depose monarchs, the French monarchy, through legal means, a well-developed bureaucracy, and ideological innovation, redefined the boundaries between secular and spiritual power. In this process of transformation, one of the most critical tools was the centralized bureaucratic state established by Philip IV. Historian Joseph Strayer emphasized that the reorganization and reform of the king's government were not because the royal government initially aimed to challenge the pope or the papacy, but rather due to more pragmatic and realistic considerations: the king hoped to assert jurisdictional control over all subjects, both lay and clerical in order to better govern the kingdom. Strayer explained: "The king wanted to draw on the financial and human resources of the French Church to aid in the government and defense of the realm.[3]" These measures included placing ecclesiastical courts under royal law and limiting clerical immunity in secular matters. Although these efforts often led to litigation and resistance, Strayer reminded us not to see them as purely ideological struggles: "There was fairly wide agreement… that the Church was trying to increase its jurisdiction and that it had to be watched carefully.[4]"

Philip IV's government/court was composed of a group of professional administrators, many of whom were clergies themselves. They were trained in Roman law and were loyal to the monarchy. His officials, such as Pierre Flote and Guillaume de Nogaret, were not only executors but also constructors of ideology. Nogaret was especially critical, as he proposed the idea of "royal theocracy"—namely, that the king not only had divine authority but was also God's

[3] Joseph R. Strayer, *The Reign of Philip the Fair* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 238.
[4] Strayer, *The Reign of Philip the Fair*, 239.

appointed minister in temporal affairs[5]. As Julien Théry-Astruc wrote, "Nogaret's initiatives… infused the power [Philip] exercised with religious and absolutist elements that made the French monarchy a virtual theocracy.[6]" This portrayed Philip as "God's vicar in his kingdom for temporal matters[7]," successfully countering the pope's propaganda of spiritual supremacy on the ideological level, and placed the French king on an equal footing with the pope. This ideological shift was not limited to the king's advisory circle. Among the French clergy, there was also a strong Gallican sentiment. Gallicanism referred to their desire for and support of an autonomous French Church not controlled by Rome[8]. Strayer pointed out that "the French clergy, or at least the secular clergy, often seem to have had more confidence in the royal government than in the papal curia[9]." We can see that, in fact, during the reign of Philip IV, more than half of the royal court cases involved clergies: this shows that when the local French Church had legal matters to resolve, it increasingly turned to royal courts instead of Roman ones. This tendency of the French Church initially came from practical considerations, as papal intervention was often costly, slow, and politically complicated, making royal justice seem like a better choice. Over time, this developed into a habit and preference. Legal control, bureaucratic consolidation, and ideological construction—these three together laid the foundation for Philip to challenge papal authority. At this point, the French monarchy was no longer merely an "executor" under Church authority within the Christian world, but a self-justifying autonomous institution, supported by its national Church. Philip IV and his government were now prepared to enter into direct

[5] Julien Théry-Astruc, "The Pioneer of Royal Theocracy: Guillaume de Nogaret and the Conflicts between Philip the Fair and the Papacy," in *The Capetian Century, 1214–1314*, ed. William Chester Jordan and Jenna Rebecca Phillips (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).
[6] Théry-Astruc, "The Pioneer of Royal Theocracy," 222.
[7] Théry-Astruc, "The Pioneer of Royal Theocracy," 221.
[8] Strayer, *The Reign of Philip the Fair*, 299–302.
[9] Strayer, *The Reign of Philip the Fair*, 240.

confrontation with the papacy on both theological and political levels—and had the means to sustain it.

The reason that directly led to the confrontation between the two sides was both practical and fundamental: economic issues. By the late 1290s, Philip IV's wars (especially those fought with England and Flanders) had led the French monarchy into a serious fiscal crisis. The crown's traditional sources of revenue were no longer sufficient to cover the expenses of a kingdom at war, and therefore, Philip IV turned his attention to the wealthiest yet least-taxed estate in the realm: the Church. As historian Jeffrey Denton emphasizes, the French king was facing chronic financial difficulties, and the taxation of clergy became a practical necessity to maintain the kingdom's defense system and administrative operations[10]. In this context, royal officials began levying taxes on Church property within the French territory without papal approval, which provoked a strong condemnation from the Roman Curia. Boniface VIII responded with a tough stance. In 1296, he issued the papal bull *Clericis Laicos*, in which he clearly prohibited any secular authority from taxing the clergy without the pope's explicit consent. Boniface denounced those secular rulers who "exact from the clergy talliages and other contributions,[11]" and warned that anyone who agreed to such demands without approval from "the Holy See" would face the Church's severest punishment: excommunication. The bull further condemned those clerics who "fearing where they ought not to fear… do without permission of the Apostolic See acquiesce in such abuses.[12]" This declaration was a direct call-out to Philip IV and directly challenged his claims over sovereignty and fiscal authority—even during times of war or national emergency.

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[10] Jeffrey H. Denton, "Taxation and the Conflict between Philip the Fair and Boniface VIII," *French History* 11, no. 3 (1997): 251.
[11] Boniface VIII, *Clericis Laicos* (1296), trans. Paul Halsall, *Medieval Sourcebook*, Fordham University, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/b8-clericos.asp.
[12] Boniface VIII, *Clericis Laicos* (1296)

Philip IV responded quickly and strategically. Instead of confronting Boniface on theological grounds, he issued a royal order and banned the export of precious metals and coins from France, cutting off one of the most important incomes of the Church. As Joseph Canning points out, "Boniface was humiliatingly forced to back down under the pressure[13]" of this financial blockade. In 1297, just one year after *Clericis Laicos*, Boniface issued a new bull, *Etsi de statu*, allowing the king to tax the clergy in cases of "emergency" without prior papal consent. This was like a tacit recognition of royal authority in fiscal matters, and a clear retreat from the absolute position declared in *Clericis Laicos*. This also demonstrated the brilliance of Philip IV: no verbal argument could match the impact of concrete countermeasures. However, the significance of Boniface VIII's retreat went beyond money. At the heart of the dispute was the power structure of the entire Christian world. Boniface insisted that the liberty of the Church (libertas ecclesiae) must be free from secular control, while Philip believed that clerical immunity undermined his sovereignty. As Canning explains, "From Philip's perspective, the pope was going beyond spiritual matters and was interfering in the material interests of France.[14]" This crisis quietly revealed a very real truth: that spiritual authority, once supreme, could be limited by economic means and political necessity.

However, Boniface did not abandon the ideological struggle. As a compromising but symbolically significant action, he canonized Louis IX of France in 1297. While historians often interpret this move by Boniface as a concession to Philip, M. Cecilia Gaposchkin has a different view; she believes that the canonization also contained an implied criticism of the king. In the papal bull *Gloria laus*, Boniface described Louis as a model ruler who "respected and honored… the limits of justice without relinquishing the path of equity" and "avoided scandal, and abhorred

[13] Canning, *Ideas of Power and Authority*, 14.
[14] Canning, *Ideas of Power and Authority*, 15.

dissensions.[15]" These descriptions not only glorified a French monarch but also subtly implied that Philip's aggressive fiscal and legal policies had deviated from the model of a "righteous" kingship, like his grandfather. Despite the weight of this symbolic criticism, the political outcome was already clear: Boniface's attempt to assert papal control over clerical taxation had failed. Philip had forced the papacy to concede. There was a consensus that the Church should bear some of the expense of defending the realm.

After the taxation crisis, a short period of peace happened between Philip IV and Boniface VIII. However, their conflict was back again in 1301: this time, the focus shifted to the legal status of the clergy and the competing claims of jurisdiction between the crown and the church. The direct catalyst for this new conflict was the dramatic arrest of Bernard Saisset, bishop of Pamiers, in the autumn of 1301[16]. Saisset was accused by the royal government of treason, heresy, and inciting rebellion in the politically unstable region of Languedoc. These charges stemmed from his anti-monarchical statements: that he denied Philip IV's authority in southern France and was suspected of conspiring with the count of Foix to transfer allegiance to the king of Aragon. One of the most radical accusations was that Saisset claimed Pamiers was not part of the kingdom of France, and insulted Philip as "a forger of money" and the descendant of "bastards.[17]"

Philip's administration put great importance to the case and pushed it forward with great force. According to a royal memorandum (Sane ad audientiam), the justification for the arrest was that Saisset "owed fealty to the king" for the temporalities of his see and had shown himself "disobedient and rebellious." However, this arrest represented a highly radical legal claim; in

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[15] M. Cecilia Gaposchkin, "Boniface VIII, Philip the Fair, and the Sanctity of Louis IX," *Journal of Medieval History* 29, no. 1 (2003): 2.
[16] Denton, Jeffrey H. "Bernard Saisset and the Franco-Papal Rift of December 1301." *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 102, no. 2 (2007): 399–427.
[17] Denton, "Bernard Saisset," 403.

canon law, bishops had long been considered exempt from secular judgment and could only be tried by the pope. By summoning Saisset before a secular court, the French crown not only violated long standing ecclesiastical procedure, but also advanced a bold vision of territorial sovereignty: that bishops, as subjects of the realm, should be accountable to royal authority and secular law for their temporal actions committed on French land. Denton highlights the unprecedented nature of this move, writing that the Saisset affair marked "a direct attack upon clerical immunity." Saisset remained in custody, becoming a direct symbol of the king's refusal to yield judicial authority to Rome. Pope Boniface VIII responded swiftly. In December 1301, he issued the papal bull Ausculta Fili. This letter, as Canning writes: "which in its tone would appear highly patronizing to the French court and in which he stated that Philip as the pope's dearest son had a superior, and that he was subject to the head of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.[18]" Although Ausculta Fili did not mention Saisset by name, its message was unmistakably clear: the king had crossed the line and overstepped divine order by placing a bishop underlay judgment. Boniface convened a council in Rome and even invited the French bishops to participate. This move was bold in itself, as Boniface VIII was not only defending clerical immunity but also asserting that the papacy had the right to reform the French crown itself.

However, Philip IV did not yield. The royal court launched a powerful propaganda campaign. It leaked a forged version of *Ausculta Fili* with a radical title: Deum time ("Fear God"), which made Boniface appear to be publicly claiming that the pope and the Church held full political authority over France. Soon after, the king's advisers issued a rebuttal titled *Sciat tua fatuitas* ("Let Your Fatuity Know"), which portrayed the pope as deluded, heretical, and tyrannical.[19] These attacks were not only intended to refute Boniface's claims but also to stir

[18] Canning, *Ideas of Power and Authority*, 16.
[19] Canning, *Ideas of Power and Authority*, 15–16.

patriotic emotions from the French people. As M. Mildred Curley points out, Philip's team masterfully turned the controversy into a matter of national dignity, making effective use of public fears that the papacy sought to reduce France to a papal vassal.[20] In April 1302, Philip established and called the Estates-General as a tool for legitimizing the condemnation of the pope[21]. He gathered nobles, clergy, and commoners to publicly blame Boniface. This unprecedented assembly had two purposes: one, it demonstrated national unity; two, it gave political cover to the king's defiance of papal orders. At its core, the Saisset affair and its consequences raised a fundamental question: who governed the clergy—was it the pope or the king? Philip's position was that ecclesiastical immunity could not override national law. Boniface, on the other hand, believed that royal trials of bishops were a direct attack on libertas ecclesiae, the foundation of the Church. As Canning noted, Bernard Saisset's arrest in 1301 infringed the canon law provision that a bishop could only be tried by the pope, yet Philip "was convinced that his sovereignty was at stake. If he could not try a bishop for treason, how could he be truly sovereign?[22]"

With no success in diplomacy and no advantage through legal maneuvers, Boniface escalated the conflict to its highest point with the promulgation of Unam Sanctam. By this time, the issue was no longer about Bernard Saisset or taxation—it was about authority itself: spiritual, legal, and political.

In November 1302, Pope Boniface VIII issued the papal bull *Unam Sanctam*, the boldest declaration of papal authority in the medieval period. It marked the peak of his conflict with Philip IV, proclaiming that the pope's supreme authority was not only spiritual but also essential

[20] M. Mildred Curley, "An Episode in the Conflict between Boniface VIII and Philip the Fair," Catholic Historical Review 13, no. 2 (1927): 205.
[21] Canning, *Ideas of Power and Authority*, 54–55.
[22] Canning, *Ideas of Power and Authority*, 16.

for salvation. Boniface first affirmed that "the Church is one, holy, catholic, and also apostolic," and compared the Church to Noah's Ark: "outside of which we believe that no one is saved." He emphasized that there can be "one body and one head, not two heads like a monster," clearly indicating that no secular ruler (no matter how powerful)could claim to hold independent spiritual authority. He then pushed the theory of the "two swords" to an extreme: "Both, therefore, are in the power of the Church… but one is exercised for the Church, the other by the Church." He ended the bull with its most radical assertion: "We declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.[23]" As M. Mildred Curley writes, Boniface here "carried the power of the Holy See further than any of his predecessors since Gregory VII.[24]" Unlike Innocent III, who still preserved a degree of political flexibility when using spiritual weapons, Boniface VIII turned submission to the papacy into a doctrinal necessity.

The French response was quick and hostile. According to Curley, "the French people hated his person but they feared his authority," and many French people regarded Boniface as "nominis Gallici hostis[25]" (an enemy of the French name). The bull did not subdue Philip IV. On the contrary, it escalated the conflict to a level that could no longer be resolved through letters or doctrine. As Curley pointed out, "Philip answered it later by the violence at Anagni." The ideological struggle had become personal, violent, and irreversible.

Philip IV's royal court started a full-scale propaganda campaign. The most aggressive one of this attack was Guillaume de Nogaret. In March 1303, he submitted a formal statement to the king, declaring that Boniface was "a false pope and usurper of the apostolic see," "in every

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[23] Boniface VIII. *Unam Sanctam*. In Basic Documents in Medieval History, edited by Norton Downs, Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1959.
[24] Curley, "An Episode in the Conflict," 194.
[25] Curley, "An Episode in the Conflict," 207.

way ‘maleficus’” and “a thief and a robber.[26]” Nogaret accused the pope of deceiving Celestine V into abdicating, of “laying ‘violent hands upon him’,” and of “appropriating to himself the Church of Rome.” By June 1303, the accusations became even more serious. Nogaret’s colleague William de Plaisians accused Boniface of being “hereticus perfectus” and listed twenty-eight charges, including that the pope “denied the immortality of the soul, transubstantiation, the existence of an afterlife,” and supported “demonolatry and black magic.” The purpose of these accusations was to prove that Boniface’s crimes were “so great and so manifest that they could no longer be tolerated without subversion of the Church[27].”

Driven by this propaganda campaign and Boniface’s threat to excommunicate the king himself, Philip sent Nogaret to Italy. In September 1303, Nogaret and his allies broke into the pope’s palace in Anagni and forcefully captured the pope. According to Curley, Boniface was taken prisoner, struck in the face by Sciarra Colonna, and imprisoned for three days without food or drink[28]. Although he was soon rescued by the townspeople, the humiliation was irreversible. This moment marks the collapse of Boniface’s authority, and this quickly led to its direct consequences: Boniface VIII death in October 1303. The violent capture of the pope shocked all of Christendom and marked the end of papal supremacy in the middle age.

The death of Boniface VIII created a vacuum in papal leadership, and this vacuum was soon filled under French influence. After an eleven-month interregnum, Bertrand de Got was elected pope on June 5, 1305, becoming Clement V. As Menache recounts, “Bertrand de Got was elected to the papacy... eleven months after the death of Benedict XI.” Due to his close ties with

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[26] Jeffrey Denton, “The Attempted Trial of Boniface VIII for Heresy,” in Judicial Tribunals in England and Europe, 1200–1700: The Trial in History, Vol. I, ed. Maureen Mulholland (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 118.
[27] Denton, *“The Attempted Trial of Boniface VIII,”* 119–120.
[28] Curley, *“An Episode in the Conflict,”* 218–220.

France and Bordeaux[29], people at the time generally viewed him with suspicion, and his papacy was heavily influenced by unprecedented royal power.

In 1309, the relocation of the papacy to Avignon further deepened the impression that the pope had become subordinate to the French monarchy. Both contemporary chroniclers and later historians judged Clement harshly. As Menache summarizes, "the pontificate of Clement V was... a continuous chain of concessions to the endless exigencies of the king.[30]" However, Menache also points out that Clement "succeeded in sabotaging the original plans of Philip the Fair" at several key moments, such as during the trial of Boniface VIII and the suppression of the Knights Templar[31].

Nonetheless, Clement did, to some extent, compromise with the goals of the Capetian dynasty—for example, he disbanded the Knights Templar. Menache notes that "doubts arose about the genuineness of Philip's Catholic faith," and that Clement's close cooperation with the king raised concerns that the pope was "undo[ing] Boniface's policy and undermine[ing] [the curia's] status.[32]" The relocation of the papacy to Avignon, along with its deep alignment with French interests, marked the end not only of the pope's so-called "supreme authority," but even of his basic independence. Other European countries also reflected this shift. According to Charles T. Wood, by the early fourteenth century, Philip's actions reflected a broader European trend in which monarchs, not popes, began to assert the final word. At that time, the French crown pursued a deliberate attempt to enlist all vital political forces in support of royal policy, a trend that could also be seen in other parts of Europe, including England[33]. Thus, the Avignon Papacy gradually became a symbol of weakened spiritual authority. Although Clement V did not

[29] Sophia Menache, *Clement V* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6–34.
[30] Menache, *Clement V,* 23.
[31] Menache, *Clement V,* 174–246.
[32] Menache, *Clement V,* 176.
[33] Charles T. Wood, "The English Crisis of 1297 in the Light of French Experience," Journal of British Studies 18, no. 2 (1979): 1–13.

reject Boniface's theological principles, his failure to uphold papal autonomy in practice "reinforced rumors regarding Clement's prior commitments to Philip the Fair." The transformation of the pope into an ally—and even a tool—of the French monarchy marked the brief conclusion of the decades-long struggle between royal and spiritual power.

The conflict between King Philip IV of France and Pope Boniface VIII is one of the most influential power shifts in medieval Europe. Through political centralization, the strategic use of law, and the manipulation of ideology, Philip achieved a whole victory over the papacy: not through military conquest, but by redefining the very nature of "power" itself. The failure of excommunication as a tool was not just the result of Boniface's misjudgment, but it came from a fundamental transformation of the political landscape[34]. Unlike earlier monarchs, Philip ruled over a centralized and stable monarchy. As this paper has demonstrated, the king's authority was supported not only by law and bureaucracy, but also by the support of the national clergy and the French public. In such a background, spiritual threats could no longer shake the foundations of political loyalty.

[34] Canning, *Ideas of Power and Authority*, 6–7.

Boniface VIII. *Clericis Laicos*. 1296. Translated by Paul Halsall. Medieval Sourcebook, Fordham University. https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/b8-clericos.asp.

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