

GASTON FÉBUS

(aka Count Gaston III)

STRONGMAN OF THE PYRENEES

(1331 - 1391)

Comte de Foix et Souverain Vicomte de Béarn,

**Vicomte de Marsan, de Gabardan, de Nébouzan, de Lautrec,
et des Terres-Basses d'Albigeois, co-seigneur d'Andorre &
Brother-in-law of Charles the Bad**



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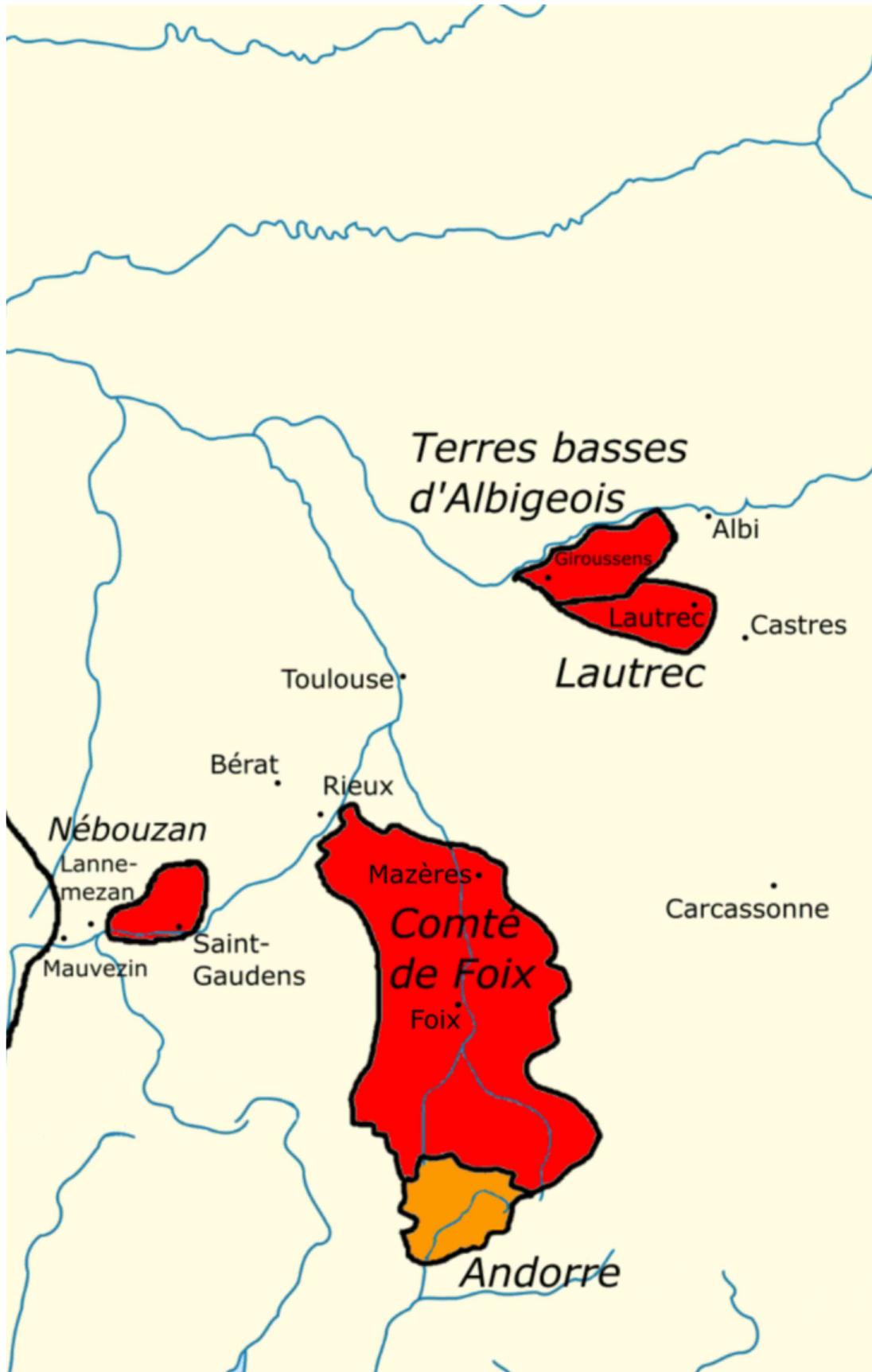
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Source: Gaston Fébus, Prince des Pyrénées. Pierre Tucco-Chala.



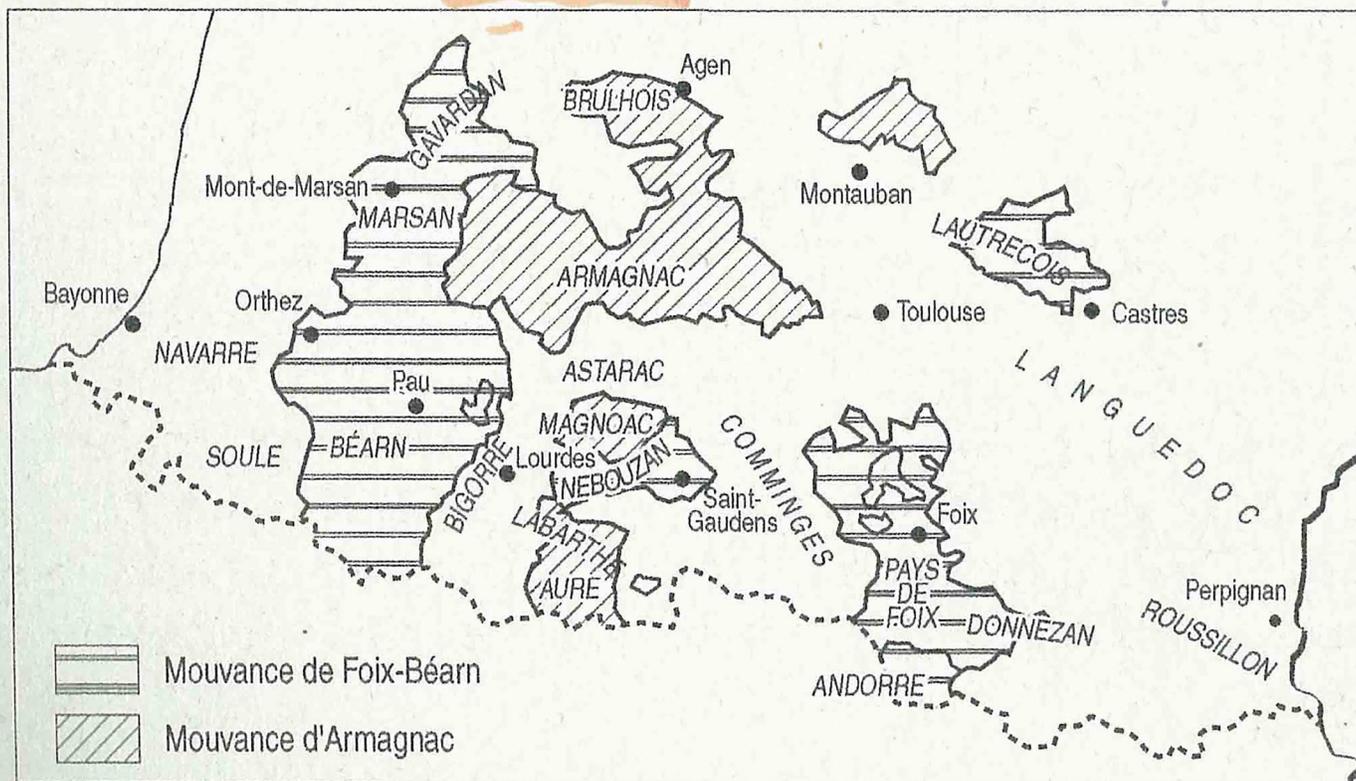
Source: Gaston Fébus, Prince des Pyrénées. Pierre Tucco-Chala.



FRANCE ET PÉNINSULE IBÉRIQUE VERS 1360



CARTE POLITIQUE DES PYRÉNÉES AU XIV^e SIÈCLE





Cy commence le prologue du
livre de la chace que fist le conte
Plebuis de foyz et seigneur



de beart
u nora et en
lonneur de
dieu createur
et seigneur
de toutes cho
ses et de son
benoist filz ihesu crist et du saint
esperit. de toute la sainte trinite

et de la vierge marie. Et de tous
les saintz et saintes qui sont
en la grace de dieu. Je gaston par
la grace de dieu surnomme pleb.
Conte te foyz. Seigneur de beart.
qui tout mon temps me suis deli
te par especial en. iij. choses. L'une
est en armes. L'autre est en amos.
Et l'autre si est en chace. Et car
des deux offices il y a eu de meil
leurs maistres trop que ie ne suy.
Car trop de meilleurs cheualiers

deffoubz. ilz fierent des espois deffix.
mais ilz ne font une si grant coup ce
vn cerf. mais ilz font plus grant paour
aux alanz & aux leuiers qnt ilz
voient leur diuerse & inuelleuse
teste. Ilz ne sont pas plus haultz q
vn daun. mais ilz sont plus espes &
pl⁹ gros. Si vn rangier lieue la tet
te e arriere. la teste est plus loque q
nest lo corps. et tout lo corps einte
dedanz la teste. Jen ay veu e nouue
gue et ruedeue. et en a oultre mer.
mais en romain pays en ay ie

cerf ou comme vn daun. et getent
leurs fumees en tourches ou en
plateaux. ilz vuent bie loquent.
ou les prent aux arcs. aux teps.
aux laz. aux fouilles & auts eging.
vn rangier a plus grant venoylo
q na vn cerf. et la saylo est auqs
comme dun cerf. ilz vont au nuit
apres les cerfs comme font les
dauns. et portent come vne busche.
Et pour ce que on les chace pou.
ie me tauay de plus parler de la
nature car assez en ay dit.



Cy apres deulse du daun et de toute la nature.



dant. aucunefoys tous seulz.
Et demeurent volentiers en

tes montaignes. on les corche z
le desfait on coume vn cerf.



En deuil du bouc et de toute sa
nature.

Bouc n'est pas
cōme beste
que chascū cog
noisse. z pour
ce vucil ic deu
ser de la nature.
facon. et vie. Des boucs ya de. ij.
manieres. les vns sapellent bouc

saunaiges et les autres boucs
ysaues. et aucuns les apellent
saues. les boucs saunaiges sōt
bien aussi grans de corps cōme
vn cerf. mais ilz ne sont mie si
longs ne si hault en ambre. mais
ilz ont bien autant de char. ilz
portent leurs testes en tēu manie
re comme ya est figure. z le corps
aussi est de la fourme qui est ya



Cy deulse des alanz et de toute leur nature.

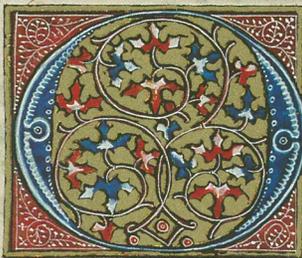
Alanz est vne nature et maniere de chiens et les vns sont que on appelle

alanz gentils. les autres sont que on appelle alanz vautres. les autres sont alanz de bou chue. les alanz gentils li douet estre fais et tailliez droiterent cœ

vn leurrier de toutes choses fors que de la teste. qui doit estre grosse et courte. et combien q'il en yait de chascun poil. le droit poil de bon alanz. et qui est pl' commun. li doit estre blanc auec aucune tache noire en un ou l'oreille. les yeux bien petis et blancs. et les narines blanches. les oreilles droites et agulices. et aussi les ya faite len. alanz faut mieulx acoustumer que nulle autre beste. car il est mieulx taillie et plusfort pour faire mal



Cy deuse comment on doit aler laisser courre pour le cerf.



ne faut il
puis que
le valet
nomiel soit
aler en qste
et destour
ner cerf et
sangler quil le saiche bien et
a point laisser courre. donc
quant il partira de lassemblee
il faut quil se mette devant
tous les autres la main derriere
son des. et son limier derriere

loy en le tenant bien court au
bout du collier. et le auantefoiz
les le prestre de lassemblee li
met son limier devant luy. po
lapyendre de le ramener et se
tourner a les buliees. ne ne le
tiens une a mal fait. car quat
un limier soit ramener s'il maist
tie es buliees. ce est moult bone
chose. espreciaument en vne fo
rest estrange ou on ne se cognoist
point. ou quant on a encontre
de cerf ou de sangler en les forz

Et lors doit retrairre son lumier.
et prendre le vent comme ray

dit. et ainsi faire iusques a tant
quil soit pris.

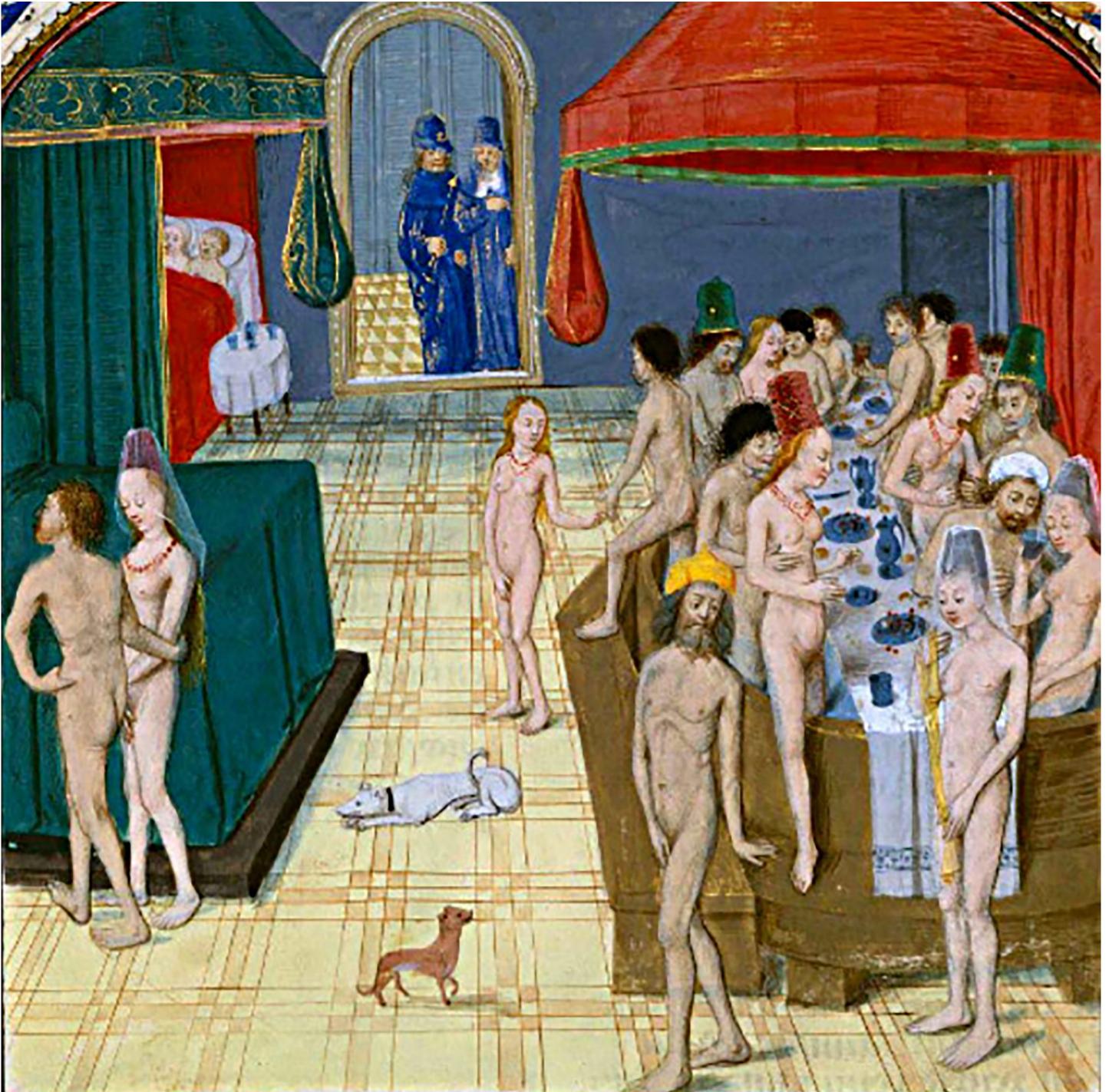


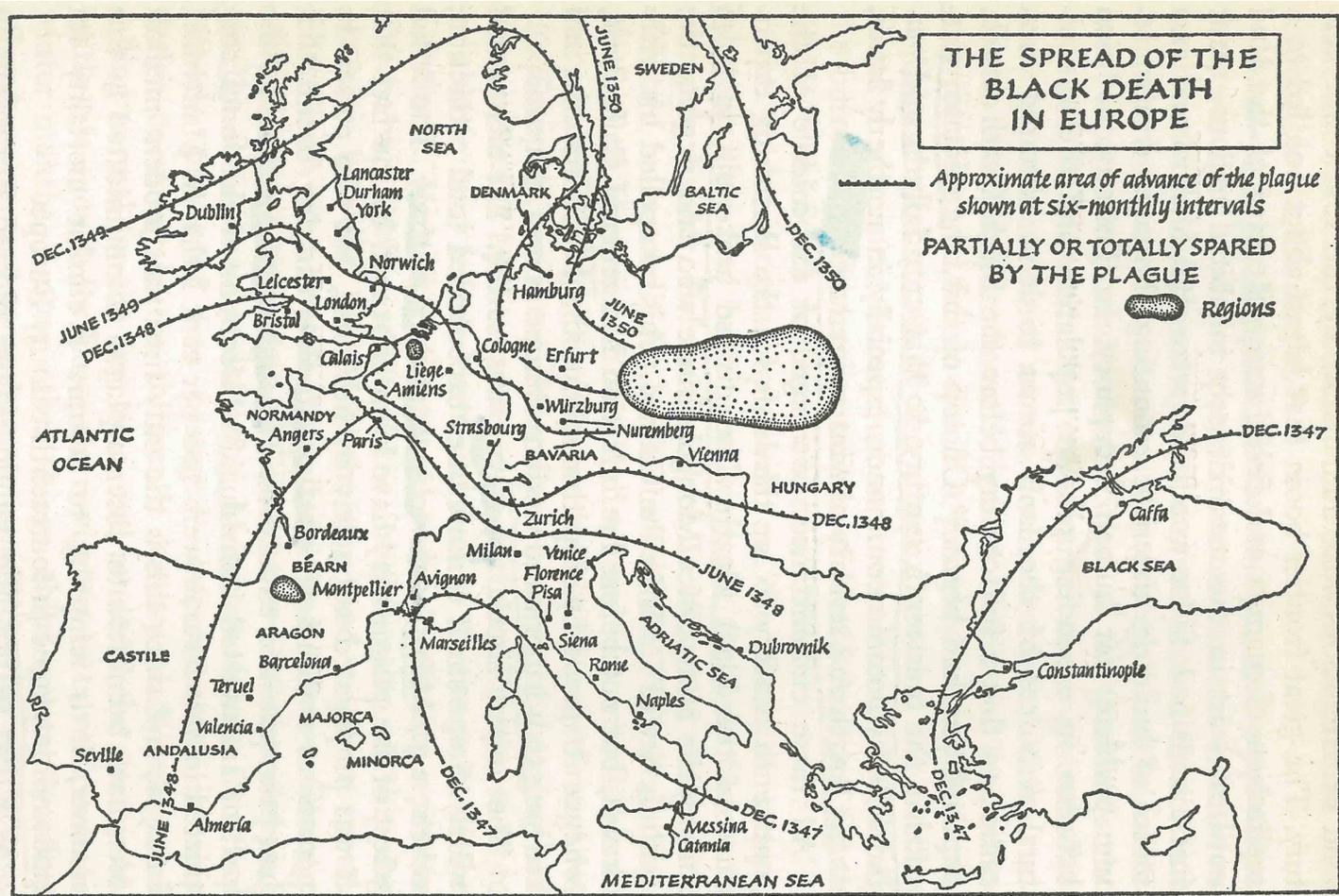
Cy devise comment on doit escorchier le cerf et le deffaite.

Quand il
sera pris
il et tire tous
les autres
qui seront
de la venue
doivent
corner prise comme ray dit
deuant. et le doit escorchier et
deffaite en tele maniere. Pre-
mierement quant le cerf est

pris et on le veult escorchier on
doit mettre la teste du cerf cote
terre. et puis tourner tout le
corps du cerf sus la teste. les que
pies et le ventre en amont. Et la
premiere chose quil doit faire il
doit couper les deux couillons
en seuble a toute la pel. que on
appelle dauntiers. et faire un pe-
tit ptuis en la pel du coutel. et
bouter par vne verge que len

Une partouze courtoise
Source : Hérodote.net





ROMANTIC INTRODUCTION

Five hunters crouch beneath the protective shelter of a massive outcrop of limestone in the Pyrenees mountains. The hunters have chosen this site to wait in ambush because of its sweeping view of the valley below. As they wait, they communicate quietly with one another, sometimes by hand signals, sometimes with cautious, quiet sounds. The hunters are optimistic of their chances for a successful hunt, but they are also worried about the consequences of success.

If they succeed in “making meat,” the hunters will have to do the messy work of removing the viscera of their prey, then cut the meat into manageable pieces for transportation to their families. During those moments, the hunters will be transformed from predators into prey because massive, brown bears live in the same mountains where these hunters live. The fearsome bears would be attracted by the smell of the hot meat the hunters hope to capture and carry off. This was the way of life for the caribou hunters who lived in the Pyrenees mountains 30,000 years ago.

Readers of this monograph, please hold on tight and keep your mind and imagination in the mountains of the Pyrenees as we fast-forward one

third of an eyeblink of geologic time from these ancient hunters to what we call “The High Middle Ages” and the 14th century.

Come with me, now, and leave the time of Cro-Magnon hunters to zoom forward, past the time of the Egyptian Pharaohs, past the birth and death of Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed, past the warrior monks of the Knights Templar, and past the Crusaders who conquered Jerusalem but lost it in less than a century. Now, slow down your time travel and come to a stop—without ever leaving the mountains of the Pyrenees—as you arrive in the year 1331.

1331 is the year of the birth of another hunter from the Pyrenees. His name is Count Gaston III. He is the ruling Count of Foix-Béarn, *aka* Count Gaston Fébus—a surname he gave himself in 1358 to claim a share of the glory and beauty of the Greek God of the Sun: Fébus-Apollo.¹

It is the goal of this monograph to partially describe a slice of the European world of the 14th century by telling the story of Count Gaston III²

¹ There was nothing extraordinary (or modest) about a ruler taking the name of the ancient Greek God of the Sun. Since the days of France’s King Louis IX in the 1200’s (Saint Louis), French kings liked to style themselves as “Sun Kings”. The spelling “Fébus” was used in medieval times and is used throughout in this paper, instead of “Phoebus.”

² Like all modern historians, we use the dynastic name Gaston III interchangeably with the name Gaston Fébus. Also, we refer to the entire collection of lands ruled by the Gaston dynasty as Foix-Béarn.

of Foix-Béarn (1331-1391). He was a protean character who exemplifies many of the most interesting facets of human culture of the 14th century.

Let's be clear: Count Gaston III was no saint---his life and adventures include contradictions, cruelties, violence, demonstrations of terrible anger, and more than two hypocrisies, but his life also includes great adventures of chivalry, diplomacy, and genuine scholarship. Beyond question, he was a mover and a shaker.

Count Gaston III's life was exotic and extraordinary. His adventures were dangerously exciting; he was fabulously successful as a warrior and as a diplomat; he was a poet and an author in three languages; he was famous in his lifetime within the literary, social, and political contexts of medieval chivalry; and he played a key role in a mysterious homicide worthy of a Mexican *tele-novella*.

The *tele-novella* episode is shocking. A few days after his only legitimate son tried to poison him, Gaston Fébus killed the teenaged boy. In so doing, Fébus ended his family's dynasty, whose continuation the boy represented.³ But more about that later.

³ SEE: Jean Froissart, "Voyage en Béarn," in Les Quarante grands textes de l'histoire, choisis par Georges Duby. Société de l'Histoire de France : 1987.

Although political success is the salient feature of Gaston Fébus' modern-day renown, there is far more to this man than mere politics. Count Gaston III was an award-winning poet⁴, a musician, a *troubadour*, a respected, multi-lingual author, scholar, and a translator of contemporary scientific works long before Gutenberg's invention of movable type. He was a patron of the arts who employed many artists, poets, and musicians in addition to the "copyists" of his comital scriptorium who painstakingly hand-copied books for his personal library and study. He was a medieval "Renaissance man" before historians invented the term "renaissance."

Gaston III was also an architect. Fébus was such a consummate knight and warrior that he involved himself deeply in castle design and architecture. He developed his own style of fortress, based on a standard plan. Supplementing the castles of Foix-Béarn was a defensive system of scouts posted on the mountain passes, plus high-elevation refuges for livestock and shepherds in the event of an attacking *chevauchée*. Not only did he have rare prescience for a medieval military strategist, but he also had a quality that remains rare today in the military—a sense of economy.

⁴ Poetry in the XIV century was intended to be sung aloud. This was the art of the *troubadours*. Musicians who were strictly instrumentalists were known as *jongleurs* or *ménéstrels*.

Fébus was a “rock star” of 14th century chivalry by virtue of his status as a Christian Crusader in eastern Europe and his heroic salvation of noble damsels in distress at Meaux, in 1358.

Count Gaston III is perhaps best known in modern history for his success as a feudal potentate. Although he was never a King, an Emperor or a Pope, Count Gaston III proudly and defiantly declared himself a sovereign political ruler in his mountain homeland of Béarn, with no Overlord “other than God.” Despite the proximity and pressure of two, powerful Kings--France and England--Gaston Fébus successfully held off both of them for his entire lifetime and made his declaration of sovereignty for Béarn a reality that endured well beyond his reign. This was a political and diplomatic *tour de force* unequalled by any contemporary.

Count Gaston III was a veritable Prince of the Pyrenees. He hosted and was hosted by the greatest political powers of his world. He dealt personally with Popes and Kings. Gaston III was a country-boy noble from the Pyrenees who swam with the Big Fish and played with the Big Dogs.

Gaston III was a complex character. There are many aspects of his personality and life that will forever be a mystery due to a lack of reliable documents. The complexity of what we know with certainty of Fébus’ life

and adventures is matched by tantalizing lacunae in reliable, documentary evidence for other parts of his life.

This study will try to focus on what is known about Gaston Fébus and the years in which he lived, rather than what is imagined. Many details have been left out of this monograph in an effort to make the story easier to read. I apologize for those omissions and my inadvertent errors.

So, please grab a cup of coffee, throw another log on the fire, and travel slowly with me to the mountains of the Pyrenees and the fourteenth century. Come, let's meet Gaston Fébus and his era.

WHERE IS FOIX? WHERE IS THE BÉARN?

The two, landlocked, and non-contiguous fiefdoms of Foix and Béarn are located in the Pyrenees mountains, the chain that divides modern France from Spain⁵. Foix and Béarn are inland, on the “French side” of the Pyrenees (i.e., the range’s northeast slope). Since the time of Charlemagne (800 A.D.), the inhabitants of Béarn and Foix have been virtually all Christians who spoke Béarnais, Occitan, or French.

The political map of Europe in the 14th century era of Count Gaston III was far different than it is today. To the west of Béarn was the small Kingdom of Navarre; to the north of Foix and Béarn was their arch-rival and enemy, Armagnac. To the northwest of Foix and Béarn, and still on the “French side” of the Pyrenees, was the huge Duchy of Aquitaine, owned by the King of England⁶. Compared to the lands owned by the King of France

⁵ The Treaty of the Pyrenees (1659) established a border along the Pyrenees that has lasted until the present.

⁶ 2,000 years ago, Aquitaine was the name of the Roman province in SW France. The name stuck. Southwest Aquitaine, the area adjacent to Foix-Béarn, is also known as Gascony. Aquitaine and Gascony are often used interchangeably, but this is misleading. Aquitaine includes the Rouergue (known today as the Aveyron) in eastern Aquitaine just east of Toulouse, and the Limousin in northern Aquitaine.

in the north part of the country, Aquitaine was sunnier, warmer, wealthier, lustier, and had a much more robust artistic culture.⁷

Foix and Béarn were not contiguous, yet they were politically affiliated since 1280, by order of Count Gaston VII.⁸ Nonetheless, they were separate entities. Their separation was highly significant for their respective, feudal status: Béarn was a feudal dependency of Aquitaine, whereas Foix was a feudal dependency of Languedoc. This meant that Foix-Béarn was caught between two, different, feudal suzerains who were enemies: the King of England (who was Duke of Aquitaine) and the King of France (who took control of Languedoc after the Albigensian Crusades in 1229 for eastern Languedoc and 1271 for the west side). It was the diplomatic genius and precocious bravado of Gaston Fébus that found a way out of this seemingly-impossible dilemma of serving two different masters at once.

The Pyrenees was a busy place during the years preceding the XIV century. Late in the 7th century, Moslem warriors surged out of the Saudi Arabian Peninsula and conquered all of North Africa. In 711, the Islamic

⁷ SEE: pp. 117-187, Thomas Cahill, Mysteries of the Middle Ages. Anchor Books: 2006.

⁸ The name Gaston was, by tradition, reserved exclusively for the Comte de Foix and his eldest son.

warriors crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and conquered the Visigothic Kingdom of the Iberian Peninsula (modern Spain). Next, the Moslem cavalry surged north across the Pyrenees and invaded France. Béarn was partially invaded and partially protected from the Moslem invaders by the tiny, Christian Kingdom of Aragon, to the south.

In the early 700's, the warriors of Islam were poised to conquer all of Western Europe, but it was spared from Moslem rule. Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel, defeated the invading Moslem cavalry in 732, near Tours, in central France. The Arabs then retreated hundreds of miles back across the Pyrenees. For centuries thereafter, Moslem Arabs continued to rule most of the Spanish Iberian Peninsula where they had long since attacked and defeated the Visigoths and their empire.⁹

For centuries after Charlemagne, the Emirate of Córdoba covered most of modern-day Spain. The Emirate of Córdoba was a province of the immense Umayyad Caliphate, whose capital was in Damascus. The Arabs

⁹ Under Islamic law, Christians and Jews living in Moslem "Spain" had the subordinate status of "*dhimmi*," allowing them to practice their respective religions, but requiring payment of a special tax. Under Islamic rule, Jews and Christians were restricted to enjoying legal and social rights inferior to those of Muslims.

were not expelled from the Iberian Peninsula until 1492, when the Kingdom of Grenada was conquered and the *Reconquista* ended.¹⁰

Foix and Béarn were created as separate political entities as a result of the strategic significance of the Pyrenees vis-à-vis the bellicose Moslems occupying the Iberian Peninsula. This was a period when a handful of small fiefdoms were created in the Pyrenees as a mountainous buffer zone between Christian France and the Moslem-ruled lands of the Iberian Peninsula.

Béarn was created in the 9th century by France's King Louis I. It was a subdivision of the Duchy of Aquitaine. Béarn had been inhabited by humans for over 800,000 years, but because of its isolation, it was sparsely populated and largely beyond the reach of governmental control. When Béarn was invaded by Vikings in the 800's, Béarn was without allies.¹¹

¹⁰ Spain did not exist as a unified entity until 1516, after the Kingdom of Aragon merged with the Kingdom of Castile.

¹¹ Viking invasions of France occurred often in the 800's. Paris was besieged a number of times. Peace was established in 911 via a Treaty that ceded Normandy to the Vikings and made their Count Rollo the Duke of Normandy. Rollo held the newly-created Duchy for settlement by the Vikings; in exchange, Rollo provided protection from other raiders for Paris and the rest of 10th century France. It was a deal that worked well.

Foix came into existence as a new, geopolitical entity around 1000 A.D.¹² It was created from lands previously ruled by the powerful Count of Toulouse and the Kingdom of Aragon.

According to legend, Count Gaston IV¹³ of Béarn was the first Christian Crusader to enter Jerusalem in 1099 AD, and he was the first Pyrenean ruler to formally establish safe routes across the Pyrenees for the popular Christian pilgrimage to Compostella.

A series of different families ruled Béarn after the First Crusade (1096). One of those families, the ancestors of the Gaston Dynasty, cooperated closely with the Cathars¹⁴ during the 1200's, before the Cathars were wiped out in the Albigensian Crusades (1209-1229).¹⁵ Somehow,

¹² The Gaston dynasty's origins were in the noble family ("House") of Béarn, then in the noble House of Foix. For some reason, the Gaston dynasty preferred to consider Foix to be their home base and maintained religious connections only with the abbeys of Foix. For the sake of simplicity, and in accord with what has become common usage, we use the hyphenated designation of Foix-Béarn--but Foix is distinct from Béarn.

¹³ The ruling dynasty of Foix-Béarn is known as the Gaston Dynasty. Unfortunately, the numbering system for all the rulers known as Count Gaston does not track chronologically. This is why Count Gaston IV was a Crusader in Jerusalem in 1099, yet Count Gaston III was born in 1331. Sigh...

¹⁴ The Cathars were Christians who did not give allegiance—or tax money—to the Pope in Rome. Pope Innocent III declared the Cathars to be heretics and launched two Crusades to force their conversion or exterminate them (1209-1229). The Cathars and Catharism were, in fact, extirpated. SEE: Jean-Luc Déjean, Les Comtes de Toulouse (1050-1250). Fayard: 1988.

¹⁵ Catharism grew out of the rampant corruption of the medieval Roman Catholic Church. The Countess Esclarmonde de Foix was a convert to the Cathar faith. Esclarmonde de Foix was proud and public in her religious profession of Catharism. Catharism grew rapidly in popularity, especially in southwest France, but it was branded a heresy by Pope Innocent III. All Cathars who refused to abjure their religion were killed by the Catholic Inquisition. SEE: Zoë Oldenbourg, Massacre at Montségur. Phoenix Press: 1959; Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, Montaillou, The Promised Land of Error. Vintage Books: 1979; René Weiss, Les derniers cathares (1290-1329).

the Gaston Dynasty survived the Albigensian Crusades intact, and continued to rule their historic lands—and indefatigably continued to fight with their nearest neighbors, the Armagnac clan, usually over a patch of land called the Bigorre, located smack in between Foix and Béarn.¹⁶

During the 11-14th centuries, the fiefdoms of Foix and Béarn were ruled by a dynasty known by the simple name of “Gaston.”¹⁷ During most of the 14th century, at the peak of their economic prosperity and political importance, Foix-Béarn and a handful of other, nearby fiefdoms were ruled by the protagonist for this study: **Count Gaston III, aka Gaston Fébus**.

The Pyrenees in the XIV century were Balkanized. They were divided into more than a dozen, separate fiefdoms (e.g., Foix, Béarn, Andorra, Navarre, Armagnac, Castile, Aragon, Roussillon, Cerdagne, Catalonia). Foix and Béarn were separate and non-contiguous juridical entities, but they were ruled by a single suzerain referred to for the sake of simplicity as ruling “Foix-Bearn,” although other fiefdoms were also under their simultaneous rule.

Fayard: 2002. Countess Esclarmonde de Foix was held in the highest regard by people in and beyond Foix who adhered to the reform movement now called Catharism. Since 1978, the University of Winnipeg, Manitoba has awarded “The Esclarmonde de Foix Travel Scholarship.”

¹⁶ A labyrinth of marriages, promises, and arbitrations makes the fight for Bigorre tremendously complicated and hard to follow. SEE: pp. 32-39, Tucoo-Chala. [Gaston Fébus](#).

¹⁷ In 1280, Count Gaston VII imposed the rule that Foix and Béarn would thenceforth be inseparable as a single, political entity. Foix and Béarn were subsumed within France by King Louis XIII in 1620.

Foix-Béarn was in near-constant conflict with its closest neighbor, the County of Armagnac. The “private war” between the clan of Armagnac and Foix-Béarn pre-dated Fébus’ rule and continued for most of his reign.

In the 14th century time of Gaston Fébus, Foix-Béarn was a crossroads of four kingdoms: Navarre, Aragon, France, and... England. England? Yes. Since 1152, a few months after Henri Plantagenet married Aliénor of Aquitaine, the Duke of Aquitaine was simultaneously the King of England, and in near-constant conflict with his feudal suzerain for Aquitaine: the King of France.

Geography and feudal law made Foix-Béarn a critically important player in the geopolitics of the 100 Years War between England and France. Foix-Béarn was one fulcrum of the regional balance of power—able to decisively tip the scales, yet always in danger of being crushed.

From the perspective of population, Béarn was barely a pimple on France’s foot. Béarn had a population of 50-60,000, whereas France was Europe’s most populous country with around 20 million inhabitants. But as real estate agents remind us, “location is everything,” and Foix-Béarn were strategically located.

The King of France was not land-rich in the XIV century. The zone known then as “France” was far different compared to the 21st century nation-state of France. In medieval times, Brittany was semi-independent, and the east bank of the Rhône was entirely outside France. The Duchy of Savoy was independent of France and a feudal state within the *mouvance* of the Holy Roman Empire. The Dauphiné was independent of France, too, until it was sold to the King of France in 1349. The Papacy ruled in full autonomy over a small enclave that included Avignon and its environs.

Perhaps the most important exception to royal control over what we know today as “France” involved southwest France and the Duchy of Aquitaine, centered on Toulouse and Bordeaux. Aquitaine was adjacent to the bundle of lands ruled by Count Gaston III. Fights between France and England for control over Aquitaine were a central feature of the political reality with which Gaston Fébus had to deal. Accordingly, an abbreviated telling of the story of Aquitaine will help illuminate what Gaston III had to face and the context in which he acted.

It was a great diplomatic triumph for France in 1137 when the young, heiress-ruler of the Duchy of Aquitaine, Aliénor¹⁸, married the King of France, Louis VII. The marriage had been arranged by his father, Louis VI (*le Gros*, the Fat), and his virtual plenipotentiary, the Abbé Suger (the father of Gothic architecture). Aliénor brought Aquitaine with her to the marriage, thereby substantially enlarging the Kingdom of France. The young couple quickly had two daughters—but no sons.

It was a political disaster for France when, in 1152, Aliénor d'Aquitaine, the Duchess of Aquitaine, divorced her husband, France's King Louis VII. Almost immediately thereafter, Aliénor married a powerful, northern French lord named Henri Plantagenet. She brought to the marriage her ancestral land of Aquitaine in southwest France, and Henri Plantagenet became Duke of Aquitaine *de jure uxoris*¹⁹. Three months after the marriage, Henri Plantagenet became King Henry II of England.

Under feudal law, the Duke of Aquitaine was a vassal of the King of France.²⁰ Although Henri II was a King in England, in Aquitaine he was

¹⁸ Aliénor d'Aquitaine (aka Eleanor) was the daughter of Duke William X of Aquitaine, aka The First Troubadour.

¹⁹ Aliénor bore three sons for England's King Henri II. All 3 of their sons became Kings: "Young Henri" (crowned, but who never ruled since he predeceased his father); John Lackland, and Richard the Lionhearted.

²⁰ SEE GENERALLY: Martin Aurell, *L'Empire des Plantagenet*. Perrin: 2003, 2004.

merely a Duke. In other words, the English King was sovereign only on his island kingdom. On the European continent, he was a mere vassal of the King of France. By the time of Count Gaston III, that conundrum of feudal hierarchy had already been a source of conflict for two centuries. But more about that, later...

THE CHILDHOOD OF GASTON FÉBUS

Count Gaston III (aka Fébus) came from an illustrious line of forebears that ruled Foix-Béarn from 1052 to 1391. The Gaston dynasty ruled without interruption, passing leadership directly from father to son, for 13 consecutive generations over an uninterrupted stretch of 339 years—a striking and singular contemporaneous analogue to France’s Capet dynasty (897-1328, aka “the Capetian miracle”).

Gaston Fébus’ most illustrious predecessor was arguably the Countess Esclarmonde de Foix²¹ (1151(?) – 1215). She is well-known to modern historians as a religious activist who dared to oppose the authoritarian orthodoxy of the monolithic Roman Catholic Church.

Esclarmonde de Foix was deeply involved in the iconoclastic movement of Christian religious reform that swept the Midi of France and many other parts of Europe in the 12th century. Historians call this break with Catholic orthodoxy “Catharism” or “the Albigensian Heresy.”

²¹ SEE: pp. 60-62, 275, Oldenbourg, Massacre at Montségur, Phoenix Press: 1961.

Esclarmonde de Foix attained the highest rank in the Cathar hierarchy: *parfaite*. Her sister, Philippa, was also a *parfaite*. Philippa was married to Raimond Roger Trencavel, Viscount of Albi and Carcassonne.²²

The Cathar religion was eventually branded by the Roman Catholic Pope Innocent III as a heresy. The 12th century religious reformers we call “Cathars” thereupon became the target of the first Catholic (Dominican) Inquisition. Although they were Christians, their adherents were all systematically exterminated.²³ But that’s another story...²⁴

Gaston Fébus had another, well-known ancestor: his grandmother Jeanne d’Artois. Jeanne’s brother was Robert III d’Artois, famous for his legal wars versus his Aunt Mahaut, his deep involvement in sorcery, and his liberal use of poison against his enemies. Jeanne d’Artois married Gaston I, Comte de Foix-Béarn. She was the mother of Count Gaston II, but the mother and her son did not get along. For reasons described as “scandalous” but which I have never seen specified, in 1331, Gaston II

²² For additional Gaston dynasty ties to Catharism, SEE: Pailhès, *Gaston Fébus*.p. 433, Note 4.

²³ In 1317, the Bishop of Pamiers, Jacques Fournier, from the Comté de Foix, led the tail end of the Inquisition that followed the Albigensian Crusades. He succeeded in his work and extirpated the last, surviving Cathars. Bishop Fournier was rewarded by the Church for his successes by being elected Pope Benoît XII in 1334, when Gaston III was still a baby.

²⁴ See: Zoë Oldenbourg. *Massacre at Montségur*. Phoenix Press: 1961.

locked up his mother in the castles of Foix²⁵, Orthez, and then Lourdes, until she was released in 1347. That's a lengthy "confinement." There is no evidence that Gaston Fébus ever met his infamous grandmother Jeanne, but he must have overheard a few, whispered stories.

Virtually nothing is known with certainty about the childhood of Gaston III except that he was born in Béarn at the castle of Orthez on April 30, 1331. He was the first son of Gaston II, Vicomte de Béarn and Comte de Foix, and his wife, the Countess Aliénor de Comminges. (At the time of their marriage, Gaston II was 14 years old and Aliénor was 28. Despite the age differential, "it was a marriage that worked.")

Under the rule of primogeniture, the son of Gaston II and Aliénor de Comminges was destined to become the next Count of Foix-Béarn—if he could survive the dangerous, neo-natal years of life.²⁶

²⁵ Foix is still a beautiful and imposing fortress well worth visiting.

²⁶ Customary feudal law included the rule of primogeniture, whereby the eldest surviving son of a nobleman inherits his father's fief and title. Other sons were lucky to get anything. A second-oldest son was lucky to have his father (if the man was rich enough) buy him a sinecure in The Church. It might even be as a bishop, or perhaps the head abbot ruling a wealthy monastery and the holder of fiefs with vassals, and maybe some vineyards, too? Always nice to have some subordinates out in your fields, picking your grapes, then making your wine, eh? Not a bad life for a second-oldest, rich boy... A third oldest son—and this presumes a good rate of post-natal survival, a disease-free youth, and plenty of good luck—might receive from his father an upbringing with an uncle who trains the boy to become a knight or a squire, and maybe helps buy the lad the horribly expensive gear a knight needs: horses, armor, weapons, etc., not to mention funding a squire as an assistant and maybe a few archers and foot soldiers, with their own, lesser requirements for weaponry, but nonetheless with needs that must be met and paid for. SEE: Georges Minois, Du Guesclin. Fayard: 1993.

Gaston III's education was typical of a wealthy and powerful medieval noble in the early XIV century. Experts trained him in the martial arts, physical exercises, and hunting. A private tutor gave Gaston III instruction in classical languages and literature in Latin, French, and Occitan. Music, dance, and poetry were also part of the curriculum.

Count Gaston II died at war in 1343, fighting the Moors in Spain. On his father's death, following the hereditary principle²⁷ prevalent in western Europe, Gaston III became the new Count of Foix and Vicomte de Béarn at the age of 12. Count Gaston III initially ruled in name only; he was under the tutelage and Regency of his mother, Aliénor de Comminges, since he was legally a minor until he reached the age of 14.

The nobility and longevity of the Gaston dynasty meant that the legitimacy of Gaston III's rule of Foix-Béarn was never questioned. Medieval society obediently followed tradition. The Gaston dynasty had already ruled Foix-Béarn for a dozen generations without interruption, from father to son, when Gaston III took charge. They were well-established.

²⁷ A few rulers were regularly elected, but most became rulers by inheritance.

When Gaston III reached the age of majority (14) in 1345, the Regency of his mother ended and he assumed the duties and responsibilities of an adult, including full authority for ruling his lands. (Aliénor “stayed on the job” assisting her son until her death in 1369; she handled the accounting.) Count Gaston III ruled Foix-Béarn without interruption, keeping a tight and exclusive rein on all the powers of government, until his death in 1391.

From the outset of his reign, Count Gaston III knew how to spend big for the sake of making a big impression. The feasts he hosted for visitors to his castles are legendary for their opulence and chivalric *largesse*. His salient genius, however, was in financial management. It seems reasonable to presume that he was trained in money matters by his mother, Aliénor de Comminges. Gaston III never threw money out the window, nor did he miss many opportunities to add to his wealth.

Count Gaston III was an astute ruler who quickly learned the value of capturing valuable enemies to hold for profitable ransom. He was careful to always collect taxes from his subjects (*fouages* and *tailles*). He demanded cash payments to sweeten most of the treaties he signed. His

serfs were encouraged to buy their status as freemen, and since interest on loans was legally permitted by statute in Béarn, he was also a wily banker.

Habits like those helped Gaston III learn the value of a florin. He eventually built up a huge treasury, a veritable war chest. Consequently, he was always able to build a castle when needed and he could pay his soldiers on time. This was one of the key reasons Gaston III was able to maintain the neutrality of Béarn and stave off untimely or unfavorable military confrontations.

Unswerving fiscal solidity was the basis for Gaston III's strength as a ruler.²⁸ He never had to rely on mercenaries for his armies. With a single exception, he avoided contracting debt and he generally avoided acquiring impolitic alliances. When the famine of 1374 struck, Gaston III had saved enough gold and silver to buy wheat in far-off Brittany to keep his vassals and other subjects from the starvation suffered in many other regions.

Gaston III's policy of neutrality during the 100 Years' War was a boon for his subjects. Foix-Béarn, which controlled many of the key passes through the Pyrenees, became a war-free center of trade, especially for

²⁸ The fiscal wisdom of Gaston III can be usefully contrasted with the fiscal follies of Humbert, the Dauphin du Viennois, who was constrained by lack of funds to sell the entire Dauphiné to the King of France in 1349.

grains, which were locally scarce, and for iron mined nearby in the Pyrenees. In the lowlands of Foix-Béarn, there were vineyards and the valuable, blue dye, “*pastel*.” Regional trade did not fundamentally alter the dominant, rural economy of raising livestock (mainly cattle, sheep, goats, and horses), supplemented by hunting, gathering, and fishing. Forestry was also important.²⁹

Economic prosperity was a hallmark of Foix-Béarn during the rule of Gaston III, although no “tax breaks” were ever given. High taxes payable to the Gaston dynasty were Foix-Béarn’s price of peace in an era of near-universal war elsewhere. Gaston III was a fiscal conservative who habitually kept large reserves of gold—especially after collecting the ransoms he won at Launac in 1362. He understood that an impecunious sovereign could never be an effective ruler or successfully defend his lands.³⁰

²⁹ In 1354, Gaston III promulgated a comprehensive legal code for forest management and reasserted personal control over entry to and use of forest lands, employing forest rangers to enforce the rules.

³⁰ Some historians cast Gaston III as “avaricious,” but none of them deny the success of his fiscal policies.

THE EARLY REIGN OF GASTON FÉBUS

In 1343, Gaston III succeeded his father, Gaston II, as the Count of Foix-Béarn. Like his father, Gaston III held the titles of Count of Foix, Viscount of Béarn, Viscount of Marsan, Gabardan, Nébouzan, Lautrec, the Lower Albigeois, and co-ruler of Andorra. For convenience, we simply say “Foix-Béarn.” All these landlocked fiefs were located in the mountains, foothills, or the piedmont plains of the Pyrenees. (SEE: Maps, pp. 4-7.)

Through astute statesmanship and entrepreneurial vigor, Foix-Béarn established itself as a commercial hub—sort of a 14th century Switzerland--for overland trade between its four, much richer and more powerful, neighboring kingdoms. Gaston III even organized and developed an artisanal arms industry, using local iron, to enhance his autonomy.

Under the rule of Count Gaston III, Foix-Béarn was an island of security, peace,³¹ and prosperity in the surrounding world of war and devastation. Considering the various crises and disasters that afflicted France in those years, maintaining peace and prosperity at home, and the

³¹ One brief and minor revolt occurred in Béarn in 1353, during Gaston Fébus' absence.

support of his subjects would have been more than enough to ensure the place in History of Count Gaston III. But wait—there's lots more.

The small, mountainous fiefdoms of Béarn and Foix were caught between the pincers of their two, richer, and far more powerful neighbors: Aquitaine (i.e., England) and France. A critical and unforgettable complication in feudal law devolved from this geopolitical situation: Béarn had historically been a vassal state of Aquitaine, whereas Foix was historically a vassal state of France. Yet Foix and Béarn were indissolubly joined--since 1280, they were ruled by a single suzerain.

Who, then, was the ruler of Foix-Béarn required to obey? The Duke of Aquitaine (i.e., King of England), or the King of France? This was “The \$64,000 Question” for Gaston III.

As Count of Foix and Viscount of Béarn, Gaston III was simultaneously under conflicting and totally incompatible feudal obligations insofar as England (i.e., Plantagenet Aquitaine) and France were concerned. How Gaston III succeeded in balancing the demands of England (for Béarn) and France (for Foix) is part of his diplomatic genius and his enduring fame.

Under feudal law, the Viscount of Béarn³² had been a vassal of the Duke of Aquitaine since 1053 when Gascony was added to Aquitaine. As his vassal, the Gascon Viscount of Béarn had to pay homage to the Duke of Aquitaine and, *inter alia*, provide him on demand a contingent of armored knights, at his own expense, for up to 40 days a year.

In contrast, land to the east of Béarn—including Foix, Nébouzan, Lautrec, and the Albigeois--was under the feudal sway (“*mouvance*”) of the King of France. Feudal law required the Count of Foix to pay homage to the King of France and also to provide him, on demand, armored knights for up to 40 days a year.³³

This was a Gordian knot. Divided feudal responsibilities could easily have resulted in splitting Foix from Béarn. Yet, Count Gaston III skirted that risk successfully, and with brio.

How did he do it?

³² The Duke of Aquitaine (i.e., King of England) was also entitled to homage for two, additional and rarely-mentioned fiefdoms included in Foix-Béarn: Marsan and Gabardan.

³³ The nearby province of Languedoc did not become part of France until 1229 and 1271. Its people (Languedocians) spoke a language that was not French; they spoke Occitan.

COUNT GASTON III'S DECLARATION OF SOVEREIGNTY FOR BÉARN

We are in the year 1345. At age 14, Gaston III has just taken over as the actual ruler of Foix-Béarn. War has resumed between France and England after 5 years of uneasy truce. When invading English troops land on the southwest coast of France at Bayonne, which sits at the foot of the western terminus of the Pyrenees, Gaston III promptly declares his wish to loyally serve the King of France in the years to come.

Soon came some of the darkest days ever for France's first Valois King, Philippe VI. On August 26, 1346, a greatly-outnumbered English army utterly crushed the French royal army at Crécy³⁴. The massive defeat of the French King's army by the English King's army translated into a teeter-totter reversal of the pre-existing European balance of power.

The regional implications of France's defeat at Crécy (preceded in 1340 by annihilation of the French navy in Flanders at Sluys by the English navy) were not lost on Gaston III. Those actions had taken place in northern France, but they were redolent with repercussions for the war in Aquitaine and for the relative importance of its neighbors in the Pyrenees.

³⁴ Count Gaston III was summoned by the King of France, but declined to go and fight at Crécy.

The conflict between the King of England versus the King of France over control of Aquitaine placed nobody in a more uncomfortable posture than the Count of Foix-Béarn. Feudal law made France's King Philippe VI the overlord for Foix (plus Gaston III's fiefs in Nébouzan, Lautrec, and the Albigeois); but at the same time, feudal law made England's King Edward III the overlord for Béarn (plus Gaston III's fiefs in Marsan and Gabardan).

The incompatibility of the obligations under feudal law for Foix compared to those of Béarn was matched by an incompatibility of economic interests of Foix compared to those of Béarn. Economically, Foix had to trade with French-controlled Toulouse, whereas Béarn needed access to the English-controlled ports of Bayonne and Bordeaux.

Thus, the Count of Foix-Béarn was in a doubly untenable position. He was torn between mandatory feudal allegiances to two, different, warring kings, and he was also torn between competing economic necessities. The simultaneous and incompatible obligations of twin vassalhood made the conundrum of the Gaston dynasty practically impossible to resolve.

How could such incompatible obligations for Foix and Béarn possibly be reconciled? How could Gaston III continue to simultaneously rule both of his Counties?

After his defeat at Crécy, King Philippe VI sent an envoy to Foix in 1347 to request future military aid from Gaston III. The French envoy was stunned at the demurrer he received:

“... Monseigneur le comte se trouve en sa terre de Béarn, terre qu’il tient de Dieu et de nul homme au monde, d’où ne découle aucune obligation si ce n’est de faire ce que bon lui semble,... »

“... my Lord the Count is, at this time, in his land of Béarn, a land that he holds directly from God and from no man on Earth, and for which he has no other obligation than to do as he pleases...and the French King’s request for military aid, upon which Count Gaston looked favorably, could not now be received.”

Gaston III’s *ipse dixit* of 1347 still grabs a good student’s attention.

When he was a rookie ruler and barely 16 years old, Count Gaston III astonished the European diplomatic world by declaring the autonomy of his Viscounty of Béarn, free of all feudal duties to any King and under no obligations to anyone other than God and himself. At the age of 16, Gaston III had the *chutzpah* to make a very risky, unilateral declaration of sovereignty for Béarn. Hats off to Gaston III, eh?

In the context of feudal law, this unilateral emancipation of Béarn from its traditional, feudal duties was totally unprecedented. It ran counter to over two centuries of prior practice by the Counts of Foix-Béarn. In an era when tradition was the foundation of most law, this was a tradition-shattering declaration of autonomy.

Gaston III's declaration of sovereignty for Béarn came out of the clear, blue sky. Yet, by adding to his declaration of autonomy for Béarn an avowal that he was favorably disposed to King Philippe VI's request for help in his "other" capacity, i.e., as Count of Foix, Gaston III shrewdly avoided forcing a diplomatic confrontation with France. Yes, Gaston III was still the French King's vassal for Foix. It was only for Béarn that Gaston III declared that he was a sovereign and under no obligation to anyone but himself and God.

In terms of feudal law, Gaston III claimed that Béarn was a *franc-allevé* (freehold). No similar claim of independence was made for Foix. The Count of Foix never disclaimed his duty of homage to the King of France for Foix.

Reeling from military defeats at Sluys, Crécy, and then at Calais, France's King Philippe VI had no real choice but to get along with his

brazen young vassal in the Pyrenees, Gaston III. Accordingly, the declaration of autonomy for Béarn stood unchallenged by the French King.

In 1348, when Gaston III performed the requisite feudal ceremonies of homage to King Philippe VI for Foix, not a word was mentioned of the newly-proclaimed, autonomous status of Béarn.

Gaston III found a brilliant solution to the quandary posed by his dual, feudal obligations to England and France.³⁵ By the *fait accompli* of his unilateral declaration of independence for Béarn, Gaston III solved an apparently insoluble dilemma.

The declaration of sovereignty for Béarn was a master stroke of diplomacy by Gaston III. It was unique in Europe. It allowed Béarn peace and prosperity during years when France faced nearly constant warfare with England, years when France also faced social chaos, economic disaster, military débâcles, a series of rebellions among the peasantry and bourgeoisie, and a refractory nobility intent on resisting domination by the Valois monarchy. It's no wonder that the populace of Béarn loved their

³⁵ Gaston III's feudal obligations were actually more complex than "mere" duality. For the lands of Donnezan and Andorra, the Counts of Foix were vassals of the King of Aragon. Andorra eventually drifted away from the reach of Aragon. Many Andorrans became specialists in smuggling. Andorra remains to this day a tiny, undisturbed, scenic, quirky, and sovereign nation in the heart of one of the sunniest stretches of the Pyrenees.

Count Gaston III and their peaceful, prosperous life in the remote mountains of the Pyrenees.

On one hand, Gaston III escaped commitments to England in 1347 by declaring the sovereignty of Béarn, completely free from any homage to the Duke of Aquitaine (i.e., the King of England). On the other hand, Fébus escaped commitments to France by placating the King of France in 1348 with a declaration of allegiance for the Comté de Foix, yet he deftly eluded military involvement by Foix on behalf of France. How Gaston Fébus finessed this Catch-22 of feudalism is an important part of his justifiable fame.

Since Fébus' declaration of independence for Béarn in 1347 was announced to an envoy of King Philippe VI of France, the announcement avoided a direct confrontation with his English overlord for Béarn.

Regarding the Comté de Foix, Fébus repeatedly affirmed his feudal duty to the King of France for Foix. He evaded the French King's every request for military assistance against the English, except for a few, minor campaigns in 1351-1352. Gaston III dodged his feudal obligation of providing knights for the French King's "ost," and shrewdly avoided

entanglement in the military morass of the 100 Years' War on behalf of either the King of England or the King of France.³⁶

Declaring that one will not swear homage to one's historic overlord was extraordinarily cheeky. Under feudal law, a vassal who refuses to swear the oath of homage is a felon; he runs the risk of having his land confiscated (*commise*) by his overlord. For example, twice (before the birth of Count Gaston III) a King of England had refused to pay homage to the King of France for the Duchy of Aquitaine and twice, as the legal consequence, a French King declared Aquitaine forfeited to the crown of France.³⁷

Gaston III's declaration of independence for Béarn ran counter to the fundamental tenet of feudalism that unless specifically absolved by their suzerain, all nobles (other than kings or emperors) owed some form of homage to an overlord for their lands.

³⁶ The fable of « Le singe et le chat » and its concluding moral would seem to have been written in *post hoc* praise of Fébus' wise restraint. SEE: Jean de la Fontaine, *Fables*, Livre IX.

³⁷ In 1202, the fascinating French King Philippe Auguste confiscated the fiefs of Aquitaine and Normandy from England's King John Lackland for failure to kneel and swear liege homage to the King of France.

The English King John's son and heir, King Henry III, traveled in 1259 to swear homage for Aquitaine to Saint Louis IX King of France, after which Saint Louis restored a large part of Aquitaine to the English King.

The issue of homage arose again in 1337 when England's Plantagenet King Edward III, counseled by the traitor Robert III d'Artois, refused to swear liege homage to France's Valois King Philippe VI for the Duchy of Aquitaine. Once again, the Duchy of Aquitaine was declared forfeited to the King of France (setting off the 100 Years War). Aquitaine was forfeited to France by the English King Edward III when he harbored the traitor, Robert d'Artois, then forfeited again in 1369.

From 1347 onward, Gaston III repeatedly avoided or refused to swear homage for Béarn to England's King or to his son, the Black Prince.

Bravado—and Gaston's good luck—combined for the rest of Gaston III's reign to perpetuate and legitimate his refusal to pay homage for Béarn to the Black Prince or to his father, the King of England. Instead, Gaston III swore liege homage to the Black Prince only for his other possessions in Aquitaine, explicitly and boldly omitting his "independent" land of Béarn.

A serendipitous combination of factors helped cement Gaston III's assertion of sovereignty for Béarn. The weakness of the Valois King of France after the crushing defeat at Crécy in 1346 combined with the continent-wide confusion created by the ravages of the Black Plague in 1348.³⁸ This gave Gaston III the audacity to create a "middle path" for Foix-Béarn and enabled him to be effectively neutral in the Franco-English wars that continued until 1453.

³⁸ The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 is small potatoes compared to the Black Plague of the XIV century. In 1348, "...the toll was appalling in densely populated areas, monasteries, armies and most towns. After its first brutal appearance of 1348, the plague never completely disappeared, but severe outbreaks recurred periodically, notably in 1353-5, 1357, 1377-9, and 1385-6. The scourge then retreated for a while, only to reappear in 1403 and 1419....in 1390 the population in Normandy was only 43% of what it had been at the beginning of the century. A fall in population of 50% is a reasonable estimate for the country as a whole. It is almost impossible for us to imagine the impact of the Black Death: in the Paris region alone, four or five million individuals took ill in a single summer; within a few hours, they had died from a totally incurable disease. Total confusion reigned." P. 269. Georges Duby, France In the Middle Ages: 987-1460. Blackwell: 1991.

The peripeties of war were fortuitous for Gaston III and his assertion of Béarnaise sovereignty. The nerve center of the war with England was in the north of France, in Flanders and Normandy, far from the Pyrenees. Brittany was at war with itself over succession to their ducal crown. And in 1347, the English conquered the critical beachhead of Calais, which would be their safe harbor on the English Channel for the next 200 years.

These crises were more than the Kings of France could handle. Disciplining their recalcitrant vassal in Foix took a back seat to what the Valois Kings reasonably found to be more pressing matters.

Gaston III was playing diplomatic poker for very high stakes when in 1347, and again in 1360, he refused to swear homage to the Duke of Aquitaine (King of England) for the Viscounty of Béarn. Homage had been given without interruption by the Viscounts of Béarn to the Dukes of Aquitaine (i.e., the Kings of England) since 1228. An assertion of Béarnaise sovereignty in 1347, free of the oath of homage to the Duke of Aquitaine, was a very bold break with tradition—and tradition was 9/10ths of feudal law.

To really appreciate the magnitude of what Gaston III got away with by declaring feudal sovereignty for Béarn, we compare the case of Béarn

with the case of Aquitaine and its Duke's analogous refusal to swear homage. The Duchy of Aquitaine was forfeited to the King of France numerous times for the failure of its Duke to swear homage to his overlord. Béarn was never forfeited. England and France warred for over 100 years over control of Aquitaine. Béarn escaped that war. The political and military leverage of the Dukes of Aquitaine were immense since they were also Kings of England. Gaston III was merely the Count of a tiny, mountainous fiefdom. He was small fry compared to the Kings of England.

Gaston III successfully pulled off what was perhaps the greatest magic trick in feudal law: in full view of his "audience," he made the legal obligation of swearing homage for Béarn simply vanish into thin air.

It seems unlikely that Gaston Fébus had access to fifth century B.C. China's classic work on military strategy—Sun-tzu's The Art of War. It is probably mere coincidence that Fébus' strategy vis-à-vis the Great Powers of England and France mirrors exactly Sun-tzu's tactical ideal of "victory without combat." This is precisely the tactic used by Fébus for his declaration and successful defense of sovereignty for his Viscounty of Béarn. Sun-tzu's teaching is crystal-clear:

...attaining a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the pinnacle of excellence. Subjugating the enemy's army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.³⁹

Gaston III walked a tightrope—and never fell. If you're like me, you just can't help admiring a good funambulist like Gaston Fébus.

³⁹ Sun-tzu, quoted in R. Sawyer, "Traditional Chinese Conceptions and Approaches to Secrecy, Denial, and Obfuscation," Studies in Intelligence, Vol. 64, No. 1, p. 1. March, 2020. ALSO at p. 161, The Art of War. Translated by Ralph D. Sawyer, The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China. Basic Books: 1993, 2007.

THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

What was the XIV century world of Gaston Fébus (1331-1391) like?

Foix-Béarn was overwhelmingly rural. Mountain life in the Pyrenees depended on grazing livestock -- mainly cattle, sheep, goats, and horses. Seasonal migrations (*transhumances*) were standard operating procedure, moving stock to alpine pastures early in the summer, then downhill to winter in the lowlands. Grazing lands were collective property, not private.

Foix-Béarn's small towns needed to import grains and other foods. This led to the development of small markets and fairs, as well as networks of trade to supply them. Foix-Béarn profited from trans-Pyrenees trade and developed ties with the nearby kingdoms of Aragon and Castile. Controlling key passes across the Pyrenees was one of the riches of the rulers of Foix-Béarn—analogueous to the Counts of Savoy in the Alps.

Beyond any doubt, Foix and Béarn were overshadowed by their more powerful neighbors: France, Aquitaine, Castile, and Aragon.

For a fuller idea of life in Foix-Béarn during the time of Gaston Fébus, we look to studies of France, where centuries of scholarship provide a rich mine of XIV century documents.

It sounds contradictory to people of the XXI century, but in 14th century France, the principal vassals of the King of France—about 15 nobles--were richer and more powerful than the King of France. Effectively, these vassals were autonomous agents with only nominal inferiority to the King. The Counts of Foix-Béarn were not especially rich, but they were far enough from the center of power to enjoy independence.

The King of France was far from being an “absolute” ruler. In order to rule, he needed the cooperation of hundreds of less powerful nobles and castellans. The idea of a nationality or a country to which one must be loyal barely existed at the time. Families and clans were the touchstone of personal loyalty and duty. Residents of Foix-Béarn were loyal directly to the Gaston dynasty.

14th century European governmental structures were primitive. The feudal system of Justice was fractured. Ecclesiastical courts had exclusive jurisdiction over clerics. Simultaneously, many nobles exercised plenary, draconian justice on the lands they owned as well as over the serfs and free men present on the land. It was not uncommon for abbeys and monasteries to own land apart from the parcel on which their institution was located, and they exploited those lands and serfs as ordinary landlords.

Jurisdictions frequently overlapped, causing no end of confusion. The king's court (called the *Parlement de Paris*) was the appeal of last resort for the secular systems. It was, at least in theory, a protection against seigneurial abuse of power.

France in the XIV century had no national system of taxation. The King of France was expected to satisfy his needs from his personal holdings in the Île de France (his "*demesne*"), with some support on the side by taxing the Church. When these methods became inadequate, currency debasement became commonplace, but that provoked economic dislocations that engendered resentment of the monarchy. As military budgets grew, so did the need for additional revenue. Foix-Béarn were fiscally-independent and depended entirely on local taxation.

A fortified town was called a *bourg*; its inhabitants were called *bourgeois*. Many of the inhabitants of small towns were farmers of the adjacent fields. Inside the town's walls, pigs ran in the muddy streets, splashing sewage as they ran. Exclusive guilds united merchants and artisans. Each small town was a world unto itself from which few of its inhabitants ventured. *Bastides* were newly-established towns.

Towns were of prime, strategic importance during the Hundred Years War (1337-1453). Walled and heavily defended, they were refuges for civilians from depredatory armies and mercenaries. Depopulated by the Plague in 1348, then repopulated by a new influx of peasant refugees and nobles, towns became important as sources of tax revenue—and new taxes became essential to maintain the new, standing armies. Popular reliance on the power of government increased, since organized authority was essential to maintain peace and safety inside the new, city walls.

When Gaston III was born in 1331, Paris was the largest, richest, and most densely populated city of northern Europe. Paris was completely encircled by huge, fortress walls, pierced by fortified gates that were locked tight every night. Life in Paris was unclean for everyone except its wealthiest inhabitants: the nobility, the power brokers of the Catholic Church, and about 20 bourgeois families in the banking and textile sectors.

For most Parisians, survival was not easy and comfort was rare:

Within its walls and in the new suburbs to the north, more than 100,000 people lived, at a time when London probably had less than 40,000 inhabitants. Its citizens were packed into a dense mass of tall, narrow, wood-frame houses, separated by a warren of irregular alleyways which Jean de Jandu from the calm of the university quarter on the south bank likened to the 'hairs of a multitude of heads, ears of corn piled up after a plentiful harvest, or leaves in a

dense forest.' They lived every day with the indescribable din of raucous cries, rumbling carts, driven cattle, clanging bells, and shouts of '*gare à l'eau*' ("Look Out ! Here comes a bucketful!") as slops fell into the street from upper windows. Only the proximity of the open country outside can have saved from perpetual epidemic a city which had no sewer until 1374 and only three public fountains (water sources), all of them north of the Seine, a place where the more fastidious emptied the contents of their latrines weekly into carts to be dumped outside the walls, where pigs, dogs, and rats rooted among the piles of garbage, butchers slaughtered their animals in the streets, and lepers wandered at large.

pp. 1-2, The Hundred Years War. Vol. 1. Jonathan Sumption. University of Pennsylvania Press: 1999.

The population of France grew steadily from roughly the First Crusade in 1096 through the early 1300's, mirroring the increase in agricultural resources of those years. By the 14th century, France's population had reached the limit of its food resources. Famine struck in 1315-1317 and a period of long agricultural depression set in. Localized rebellions erupted. In northeast France, Flanders saw a savage civil war fought between landowners and peasants.

14th century France was heavily influenced by climate change. Things got colder. The Baltic Sea froze twice. Polar and alpine glaciers grew. This meant crop failures and famine in a world whose population had increased to finally outstrip its ability to feed itself. Contemporaries

could not know it was the onset of a Little Ice Age, which would last until about 1850. Climate change was felt acutely in the Pyrenees.

Paris and France in 1331—when Gaston III was born--were the envy of the western world. French culture and French military prowess and prestige were at their apex.

The University of Paris was truly, as an Irish visitor described it in 1323, 'the home and nurse of theological and philosophical science, the mother of the liberal arts, the mistress of justice and the standard of morals, the mirror and lamp of all theological virtues.' The architecture of the Île de France had conquered the native traditions of every western European country and for a while had taken complete possession. Italian noblemen studied French sartorial fashions and learned to speak French, which they described as the most beautiful language in existence.

p. 14, Jonathan Sumption, The Hundred Years War, Vol. 1. University of Pennsylvania Press: 1999.

Two very serious revolts occurred in France that are important to the story of Gaston III. First, in 1358, Étienne Marcel led a bourgeois uprising in Paris that came within a hair of toppling the brand-new, Valois dynasty. Second, also in 1358, there was the Jacquerie, a peasant rebellion in northern France against the noble warrior caste that oppressed them.

These two rebellions overlapped somewhat. They are demonstrative of the shakiness of the newly-installed Valois dynasty's rule, and its

susceptibility to being undermined by the machinations of Count Gaston III's devious and murderous brother-in-law, Charles the Bad, King of Navarre and Comte d'Évreux.⁴⁰

During the revolt of Étienne Marcel (1358), it took very little time for Charles the Bad to double-cross his brother-in-law, the French Dauphin, and throw his support to the Anti-Valois rebels in Paris. The fickle Parisians abandoned their King and his son (the Dauphin); they acclaimed Charles the Bad as Captain of Paris, bringing him within a short hair's length of becoming King of France by a *coup d'état*.

All the ferment in France worked to the advantage of Gaston Fébus in his distant strongholds in the Pyrenees. The French King's priority was saving his kingdom; it was not a royal priority to try to discipline a refractory vassal like Gaston III, on the periphery of France.

⁴⁰ Gaston Fébus (1331-1391) was a contemporary, a neighbor, and a brother-in-law of Charles the Bad (1332-1387), King of Navarre. The tiny Kingdom of Navarre was located on both sides of the Pyrenees, west of Gaston Fébus' disjointed collection of lands in Foix-Béarn.

Charles the Bad was a very powerful noble. In addition to enjoying the prestige of being King of Navarre, Charles the Bad was a direct descendant of the Capet family's dynasty of Kings of France. He was also a powerful Count in the Duchy of Normandy, and by marriage, he was the son-in-law of the Valois King of France, Jean II.

During the chaotic decades of conflict between France and England -- lumped together under the name "The Hundred Years' Wars" (1337 -1453) -- Charles the Bad and Gaston Fébus periodically shared common political interests, due mainly to the location of their respective lands in the Pyrenees. Each one of them ruled lands near the southern frontier of Aquitaine, where the Duke of Aquitaine was simultaneously King of England and his delegate in-country was the famous warrior known as the Black Prince (his eldest son).

In the 14th century (anticipating von Clausewitz), rebellion was merely “the continuation of politics by other means” for the leading nobles of Brittany, Normandy, Flanders, Languedoc, Béarn, Foix, Armagnac, Gascony, and elsewhere. The concept of loyalty to a nation had not yet developed; loyalties were extremely personal, visual, aural, and local.

As a rebellious Norman noble (and King of Navarre) seeking to topple and replace France's new Valois dynasty, Charles the Bad was practicing *Realpolitik* long before the term was invented by Baron Ludwig von Rochau in 1853. Count Gaston III, who was married to Charles the Bad’s sister, sought to take advantage of his brother-in-law’s maneuvers by riding on his coattails when it looked advantageous for Foix-Béarn.

King Charles the Bad was not as skillful a player as Count Gaston III. The 1358 rebellion in Paris, led by Étienne Marcel, failed and Charles the Bad never became King of France. But while Charles the Bad’s star dimmed to near-invisibility, Gaston Fébus continued to rule, stronger than ever, in Foix-Béarn.

How did Gaston III do it?

France’s new, Valois dynasty had serious troubles with which it was preoccupied. For example, invading English troops roamed France from

northeast Flanders to southwest Aquitaine. England exploited the rebellion in Paris, with which it collaborated. England also cultivated an anti-Valois alliance with a Pretender to the throne of France: Charles the Bad.

The serious preoccupations of Valois France gave Count Gaston III a certain measure of freedom. Gaston Fébus was able to walk a line of independence because he was far away in the mountains of the Pyrenees. He sagely avoided explicit commitments to anyone and prudently avoided antagonizing his more powerful neighbors.

When the English captured France's King Jean II at Poitiers in 1356, then moved him from Bordeaux to a prison in England, it was disastrous for France. Considering the domestic difficulties France faced from the rebellion of Étienne Marcel, then the Jacquerie, France's Dauphin-Regent would have been daffy to focus on Foix-Béarn at a time when survival of the Valois dynasty was on the line and France's King was imprisoned in London. He had bigger fish to fry.

The Dauphin struggled to rule France without an explicit delegation of authority from his imprisoned father, the King. Down in the Pyrenees, Gaston Fébus thrived while France's King Jean II languished in an English prison and foolishly tried to rule France *in absentia*.

After several years of imprisonment, France's King Jean II was desperate to be freed from prison in England. Under the constraints of prison, he accepted the Treaty of Brétigny (1360) imposed by England.⁴¹ Brétigny ceded to England vast portions of the Kingdom of France, including Aquitaine, Gascony, and Bigorre.⁴² In exchange, the English King promised to renounce his claim to the crown of France—a crown he had never worn. The English King did not, however, change his demands for an enormous ransom to be paid before releasing Jean II from prison.

Back in France, the Dauphin and Estates General refused to sign the treaty their King had negotiated from his prison cell in London. They refused to ratify the Treaty of Brétigny, declaring it a nullity and invalid as a matter of law on the grounds that, in France, not even a King is empowered to alienate portions of the kingdom.⁴³ So, despite the Treaty of Brétigny, nothing much changed on the ground.

⁴¹ Under international law, "Duress does not invalidate consent (to a treaty), as it does in the private law of contract. A dictated treaty is as valid legally as one freely entered into on both sides." P. 318, J. L. Brierly, The Law of Nations, Oxford University Press: 1963.

⁴² Gaston III was most concerned with the Treaty's provisions transferring the Bigorre to England, with the Count of Armagnac ruling Bigorre. The Treaty of Brétigny made the Count of Armagnac a vassal of the King of England for Bigorre. Since the Count of Armagnac was Gaston III's arch-enemy, that sufficed to make Count Gaston III an enemy of the English. Fébus promptly signed a treaty allying Foix-Béarn with the French Dauphin—a signature for which Fébus received a substantial payment of gold as a bonus.

⁴³ Since the Dauphin and Council of Nobles refused to ratify the Treaty of Brétigny, thereby showing an unequivocal rejection of the Treaty, it never became a legal obligation for France. "There is no legal nor even a moral duty on a state to ratify a treaty signed by its own plenipotentiaries...Signature, followed by ratification...is

Also at this time, France's Dauphin and Council of Nobles sought to avoid what looked like an imminent civil war by coming to terms with the nefarious Charles the Bad, although he was still trying to topple the Valois dynasty and take the throne of France for himself. France and its leadership needed to focus on resisting the latest invasion by the English King, Edward III.

There were a great many, serious problems facing France in the XIV century. Instability of the Valois dynasty arbitrarily heads our Short List. But don't forget war, pillage, and the scorched-earth depredations of the mercenaries, or the protection racket of their extortionate "*pâtis*." Or the Black Death of 1348, or the return of the Plague in 1360-61, and then, again, in 1368. Or the war in Brittany (1364-1368). Or King Charles V's 1369 re-confiscation of Aquitaine from the King of England (simultaneously Duke of Aquitaine) that torched a new round of warfare between France and England. These were tumultuous times and rough water to navigate.

When the Great Schism of the Roman Catholic Church began in 1378, it was yet another calamity that demanded France's immediate and

the procedure by which a state has traditionally indicated its willingness to be bound by a treaty, but the only essential requirement is that this willingness (to be bound by the terms of a treaty) should be unequivocally shown..." pp. 320-321, J. L. Brierly, The Law of Nations, Oxford University Press: 1963.

focused attention. On the other hand, the Great Schism opened another window of “benign neglect” for independence-minded Gaston III.

An immediate focus on problems of desperate importance meant that from roughly 1354-1376, Valois France to a certain extent ignored its neutral neighbor far away in the Pyrenees: Count Gaston III.

France’s justifiable preoccupation with the foregoing problems did not fully free Gaston Fébus. Ever since declaring sovereignty in 1347, there remained the problem of his obligation of feudal loyalty to England’s Black Prince for the Vicomté de Béarn.⁴⁴ After all, Béarn had historically been a fief whose lord was a vassal obliged to swear homage to the Duke of Aquitaine as his overlord.

In 1369, back in the safety of the Pyrenees, Gaston Fébus consulted with his brother-in-law, Charles the Bad. Fébus told the Bad he did not want to be the Black Prince’s vassal for Béarn. When Fébus finally answered his overlord’s summons, he swore homage to the Black Prince only for two of his tiniest possessions: Marsan and Gabardan. Béarn was expressly omitted from his oath of homage.

⁴⁴ The Black Prince and Gaston Fébus were born in the same year. The Black Prince was the oldest son of King Edward III, and thus first in line for the crown of England. He was also Duke of Aquitaine from 1362-1372.

Fortunately for Fébus, 1369 was also the year the Black Prince let himself be lured south of the Pyrenees, into the Kingdom of Aragon, to fight the unemployed mercenaries.⁴⁵ In Aragon, the Black Prince spent himself into a huge deficit and fell so sick that he never fully recovered—and never again demanded that Fébus swear homage for Béarn. Fébus stayed aloof from the chimera of war booty in Aragon, kept his wealth intact, and stayed healthy—all wise decisions in the decade of the 1370's.⁴⁶

Broad analyses of XIV France are often generally applicable to the County of Foix as well as to the Vicomté de Béarn. Here is a taste of how some of the most brilliant commentators have described, in general terms, the XIV century in France:

⁴⁵ A host of Gaston Fébus' noble vassals from Béarn (chronically impecunious and therefore eager for a chance at booty) sought an audience with him. The knights tried to convince Fébus to join cause with Castile and cross the Pyrenees to fight the mercenaries in Aragon. Fébus demurred. He said it was a fool's mission and they would only lose their shirts or their Life. Many of the knights ignored Fébus' wise—and accurate—advice. Many Béarnais knights died at Aljubarrota when the Castillians and their allies were crushed on August 14, 1385.

⁴⁶ When war between England and France resumed in 1368-9, it kept both of Fébus' more powerful neighbors—England and France--fully occupied. Their war resumed for legal reasons. Asserting a juridical posture in Aquitaine superior to its Duke (England's King Edward III), France's King Charles V agreed to hear appeals from the Gascon Armagnac family about the validity of an English tax applicable in Aquitaine. Charles V maintained—correctly—that the Treaty of Brétigny (1361), purportedly transferring full sovereignty over Aquitaine from France to England, had never been fully executed because the English King never formally renounced his claim to the French crown, which was required by the Treaty. Thus, the Treaty of Brétigny was void and France retained sovereignty in Aquitaine. Fébus was not disappointed that this new phase of the 100 Years War outlasted the Black Prince (died in 1376), King Edward III (died in 1377), and continued past 1380 when King Charles V and his *connétable*, Bertrand du Guesclin, died. 1378 marked the beginning of the Great Schism, as well as being the year of Charles the Bad's subornation of Jacquet de Rue to poison France's King Charles V. Jacquet de Rue did not succeed; King Charles V survived until 1380.

So violent and motley was life, that it bore the mixed smell of blood and roses. The men of that time always oscillate between the fear of hell and the most naïve joy, between cruelty and tenderness, between harsh asceticism and insane attachment to the delights of this world, between hatred and goodness, always running in extremes.

p. 27, Johann Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages.

...we must not leave out...the effects of an astonishing sensibility to what were believed to be supernatural manifestations. It made people's minds constantly and almost morbidly attentive to all manner of signs, dreams, or hallucinations...the irrational is an important element in all history and only a sort of false shame could allow its effects on the course of political events in feudal Europe to be passed over in silence.

p. 73, Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, Vol. I.

It was an age which could make a public spectacle of the most extreme ferocity and wickedness, and yet which lived according to a code of piety, firm in its belief in God and sincere in its pursuit of a moral ideal which it contravened with great facility and candor.

p. 118, Umberto Eco, Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages.

Deeply attached to tradition, but of violent manners and unstable temperament, the men of the feudal ages were in every way much more disposed to show formal respect for rules than to obey them consistently in practice.

pp. 235-236, Marc Bloch. Feudal Society, Vol. I.

Pagan, barbarian, feudal, Christian...here was medieval society, and the many-layered elements of Western man.

p. 23, Tuchman, Barbara. A Distant Mirror; the Calamitous 14th Century.

In poetic terms, the fourteenth century “night was as dark as nature intended;” France and the rest of 14th century Western Europe was “a world lit only by fire.”⁴⁷ No human traveled faster than the speed of a horse on land, or faster than the speed of a sailboat on the water. Travel and communication were slow and uncertain. Cutpurses, brigands, and highwaymen were never in short supply. Moveable type would not be developed for a century and a half. Roman numerals were still in use; Arabic numerals were not introduced until 1430. Numbers (e.g., 3, 4, 5, and 10) had an arcane, mystical significance, often reflected in art and architecture. There was almost no statutory law. Astrology was a respected science. It was a time of the three curses: famine, war, and Plague. There was no Internet.

...bears and above all, wolves, prowled in every wilderness, and even amongst the cultivated fields.

p. 72, Marc Bloch. Feudal Society, Vol. I. (translated by A. L. Manyon) University of Chicago Press: 1961.

People of the Middle Ages existed under mental, moral, and physical circumstances so different from our own as to constitute almost a foreign civilization. As a result, qualities of conduct that we recognize

⁴⁷ SEE GENERALLY: William Manchester, A World Lit Only by Fire; the medieval mind and the Renaissance. Little, Brown, and Co.: 1992.

as familiar amid these alien surroundings are revealed as permanent in human nature.

p. xiv, Tuchman, A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century. Ballantine: 1978.

The 14th century was before the age of nationalism. Family ties were pre-eminent. Hereditary dynasties treated their domains as family property. Loyalty to family, caste, and fiefdom trumped loyalty to one's "country." Less than 1% of the total population—the nobility—controlled virtually the entire political process, the wealth, and the judicial power.

At least until the twelfth century the lives of medieval peasants differed little from that of beasts of the field. They toiled, they bred and they died.... Whether the peasant was baptized [or not], he continued to worship the forces of nature, as he had always done. And even when he thought himself a Christian, his religious outlook was dominated by superstitions and fertility cults. The Christianity of the early medieval peasant was a hodgepodge of saints, relics, and demons.

p. 118, Cantor, Civilization of the Middle Ages, HarperCollins: 1993.

In France, the XIV century began with a sensational sex scandal in the royal family of Capet,⁴⁸ which ruled France until 1328, when the Valois branch took the throne.⁴⁹ The Capet sex scandal was intimately linked to

⁴⁸ SEE: The magnificent series of seven books by Maurice Druon, Les rois maudits. Livre de Poche: 1977, and the stellar series of DVD's by the same name.

⁴⁹ Professor Contamine states that the French royalty of the XIV century suffered a "crisis of authority." p. 482, Philippe Contamine, Le Moyen Âge (481-1514), Éditions du Seuil: 2002.

and followed closely by two, exceptional crises of succession to the French throne (1316 and 1322). The cumulating crises of the Capet monarchy ultimately brought the Valois family to the throne of France in 1328.

From the outset, the new, Valois dynasty lacked the legitimacy of the 300+ year old Capet dynasty that preceded them. The Valois were known derisively as “*rois trouvés*” (kings by accident).

If the XIV century sounds “calamitous” (as Barbara Tuchman terms it), calamity may simply have followed naturally after the XIII century, which Georges Duby paints in these bleak terms:

The combination of a decrease in the land available for food production and an increase in population inevitably spelt famine. In rural Picardy, only one peasant in ten had enough to live from—and he was better off than the neighboring landowner. One in ten had nothing at all, and was forced to beg for food. As for the rest, households cultivating areas of less than three hectares (in other words, below the subsistence level) could only survive by selling their labor, the men lodging in the big farms and the women spinning wool for urban capitalists. In 1270, the population had ceased to grow, and this was a direct result of rural poverty: malnutrition was responsible for higher mortality rates among children and a reduction of adult life expectancy; above all, the birth rate fell, because women were less fertile, and possibly also because economic conditions meant that people did not marry at such an early age.

pp. 260-261, Georges Duby. France in the Middle Ages: 987-1460.

Blackwell: 1991.

This is the backdrop against which we need to view Count Gaston III of Foix-Béarn. He was a cagey ruler whose realms were fortuitously far from the major power centers of his time (France and England). His dynasty enjoyed legitimacy and stability. The lynchpin of his political strategy was to stay out of the wars that were devastating France and impoverishing England and France. The tactics that were the key to this strategy were 1) declaring sovereignty for Béarn, and 2) maintaining solid finances sufficient to support a strong and independent armed force.

Gaston III sought, above all, to preserve his personal independence and increase his wealth. He succeeded at both. In these respects, he fits comfortably and squarely inside the 14th century's broad, feudal mold.

What sets Gaston III apart from all other rulers of his day are the degree of his success as a feudal ruler, the romantic attractions of his chivalric triumphs, his unparalleled scholarship and erudition, and the mysterious and still unexplained details of the two, personal tragedies that continue to mar his legend.

MEDIEVAL WARFARE

War in the 14th century was a very different proposition compared to warfare in the 21st century. War in the lifetime of Count Gaston III did not involve guns, aircraft, uniforms, artillery, or a large, standing army. Nonetheless, human genius ensured that war in the Middle Ages could sometimes be just as cruel, terrifying, murderous, unjust, and even as senseless as it often is today.

In general, every 14th century mounted knight in shining armor was accompanied by a support team (called a lance) of 4-30 men, including foot-soldiers and cavalry, wranglers, repairmen, and bottle-washers, all joined in an almost mystical, personal allegiance to their well-armored, noble *seigneur*. A King could call on his dukes and counts to show up for battle along with their vassals, and those vassals could then call down to their own vassals to do likewise, and so on down the line of hierarchic subinfeudation. This disparate crew comprised the King's "*ost*" (army).

A king or a duke could call on his liegemen once a year for up to 40 days of unpaid military service. ("More service can be yours—for a fee.") The knights bound to their lord by an oath of homage would assemble to

form their lord's Host ("ost"). Linguistic and dialectic diversity among the vassals were common, making battleground communication problems endemic and sometimes disastrous. Training and routine were radically disparate. So was the quality of equipment and horses. Discipline and chain of command were not uniform—and uniforms themselves were non-existent. Military operations were often pretty confused.

The medieval *mêlée* was a chaos of hand-to-hand and man-on-man combat. The goal was not to kill the other side's knights; it was to capture them, confiscate their armor and horses, and hold captive knights for ransom. Killing non-noble foot-soldiers, though, was fine sport. The archers and foot-soldiers, sappers and engineers made up a large proportion of the medieval army—but our focus here is on the nobility, the flower of chivalry.

Because all knights were nobles, and the nobility was barely 1% of the total population, it was common to end up fighting one's relatives. Taking hostages for ransom was often a family affair—more civilized and of course, more lucrative than killing one's cousin or in-laws. Dead men do not pay ransoms.

Mercenary soldiers (“*routiers*” or “*écorcheurs*”) were commonly used to supplement the élite warriors of the knighthood. For economic reasons, a disproportionate number of mercenaries came from the Pyrenees and Gascony. *Routiers* were overwhelmingly non-noble men with nothing to lose. Often, they had left home because of famine or poverty and joined a mercenary band out of desperation. They felt lucky to find a piratic fraternity of similar, lost souls—plus food, adventure, and a tiny chance for fortune.

Around 1360, when truce or any other cessation of hostilities meant sudden unemployment for mercenary soldiers and an immediately aleatory meal schedule, the mercenaries began to form independent, free-lancing armies known as the “Great Companies.” Whether you refer to them as the Great Companies, mercenaries, *écorcheurs*, or *routiers*, they were an anomic, outlaw scourge of unparalleled destructiveness.

Routiers were parasitic, amoral brigands famous for their utter contempt of death and the terror they inspired in non-combatant civilians.

The *routier*-mercenary was:

...that godless, lawless, fearless being, who had no rights and showed no mercy. He inspired the same sort of terror as a mad dog, and was treated as such not only by his opponents, but often by

those who made use of him. His mere name was a sufficient and natural explanation for any sort of brutal or sacrilegious behavior, however outrageous. He seems to have been viewed as a living emblem of Hell on earth.

p. 105, Zoë Oldenbourg, Massacre at Montségur, Phoenix Press: 1961.

By 1361, when peace broke out after the Treaty of Brétigny, the suddenly-unemployed *routiers* became exceptionally numerous in the sunny and wealthy south of France, including Gaston III's neighboring province of Languedoc.⁵⁰ The famously-ugly Breton warlord, Bertrand du Guesclin, eventually led the *routiers* away from Languedoc and into Spain, where the mercenaries fought on both sides of the Byzantine battles between Pedro the Cruel and Henri Trastamare. In Spain at the same time, fighting to support his allies, the Black Prince (son of England's King Edward III) fell sick, never to recover, and never to mention again the issue of homage by Count Gaston III for the Béarn.

Medieval warfare was a horrific scourge. The passage of an army of any size meant disaster for civilians. Usually without warning, knights and soldiers would suddenly appear, then swarm across the landscape like a plague of human locusts, devouring everything edible, stealing everything

⁵⁰ SEE : Françoise Autrand, Jean de Berry, l'art et le pouvoir. Fayard : 2000.

valuable, and drinking everything alcoholic.⁵¹ An army (plus its camp-followers of tramps, beggars, mountebanks, and prostitutes) blocked commerce, spread panic, and constantly ransacked the countryside for plunder, food, forage, wine, and women. Soldiers of England and of France lived off the land and its inhabitants, paying themselves with food, booty, and ransom money.

To escape an army's depredations, civilians took refuge within the walls of their lord's castle or a walled *bourg*, bringing with them what little livestock they owned.

Pitched battles were rare in the Middle Ages; sieges were common. A siege was a protracted effort by a surrounding army to starve those inside a castle or town. Gigantic catapults, *trébuchets*, movable towers, and other masterworks of medieval carpentry and engineering were used in sieges. Tunnels dug by sappers complemented the above-ground efforts.

The result of a good siege was famine and epidemic within the besieged castle or fortified town.⁵² At any time during a siege, the lord within could expel "useless mouths", i.e., peasants, forcing them outside

⁵¹ SEE: Alphonse Daudet, "Les Sauterelles, » in Lettres de mon moulin. (written in 1866).

⁵² In reality, it was often the besiegers who endured privation from lack of food, since the peasants living near a castle fled to their lord's protection and took all the livestock and provisions they could carry or herd.

the castle walls into No-Man's Land to be killed by the besiegers or to starve or freeze within sight of the castle's armed garrison.

One hallmark of medieval strategy was the *chevauchée*. The *chevauchée* was a stroke of genius. It is the form of warfare that characterized the English invasions of France during the 100 Years' War and the reign of Count Gaston III.

Instead of fighting battles with defending knights, the goals of the invading English during a *chevauchée* were to avoid any defending army in order to travel unimpeded through the rich and lush countryside of France, which they would destroy wantonly, to the greatest extent possible. They sought to inflict a maximum of unnecessary violence and suffering on innocent civilians, to steal as much booty as could be carried off, and to squeeze in as much non-consensual sex as possible.

The only enemies for the attacking knights and their supporting mercenaries in a *chevauchée* were therefore unarmed civilians. The peasants, monks, abbots, abbesses, and petty bourgeois in the rural countryside and small towns that were invaded were easy pickin's for the fully-armed and merciless soldiery of England. The very real prospect of "living off the land" and acquiring fantastic booty in France converted many

an Englishman to learn to use a longbow, then travel to France to risk death in the hope of finding Fortune.

There is an interesting parallel between the parasitic raiders of a medieval *chevauchée* and parasitic, infectious disease.

Very early in civilized history, successful raiders became conquerors, i.e., learned how to rob agriculturalists in such ways as to take from them some but not all of the harvest. By trial and error a balance could and did arise, whereby cultivators could survive such predation by producing more grain and other crops than were needed for their own maintenance. Such surpluses may be viewed as the antibodies appropriate to human macroparasitism. A successful government immunizes those who pay rent and taxes against catastrophic raids and foreign invasion in the same way that a low-grade infection can immunize its host against lethally disastrous disease invasion. Disease immunity arises by stimulating the formation of antibodies and raising other physiological defenses to a heightened level of activity; governments improve immunity to foreign macroparasitism by stimulating surplus production of food and raw materials sufficient to support specialists in violence in suitably large numbers and with appropriate weaponry. Both defense reactions constitute burdens on the host populations, but a burden less onerous than periodic exposure to sudden lethal disaster.

p. 48, William H. McNeill, Plagues and Peoples. Anchor Books: 1976.

Strange as it seems to modern minds, medieval armies rarely confronted one another for armed battles. Occasionally this happened, and when it occurred it was sometimes with an outcome of great significance.

In general, though, battles between large armies were exceptional. Speedy raids (*chevauchées*) and long, patient sieges were the general rule.

When a battle did occur, the important nobles were rarely killed. By universal agreement among the warrior class—whose members were often related by blood or marriage—whenever possible, knights were captured and held for ransom, then released on their word of honor, pending payment. While “out on parole” and trying to pay his ransom fee, the released noble was honor-bound to refrain from war against the noble by whom he had been captured, but he was free to fight anybody else in his immediate quest to earn enough money to pay his own ransom. These were tenets of the honorable ethos of chivalry.

Medieval war was a curious “gentleman's game” of hunting ransom money, akin to high-stakes poker, that is, unless you were a non-noble foot-soldier or a peasant with a pike, and then your life was insignificant. The goal was not necessarily to win the battle, but to win honor and wealth.

The soldiery involved in a *chevauchée* were often nobles loyal to one or another king, but they were just as frequently non-noble mercenaries who sold their services to the highest bidder, sometimes changing sides in mid-hostilities if their paychecks were late. Mercenaries were like free-

agent athletes, but with a sociopathic love of violence. A *chevauchée* was a series of traveling, guerilla raids, like destructive Arab *razzias*. This style of warfare was never intended to win the hearts or minds of the inhabitants, just ruin their land and life.

When England's Black Prince conducted his highly-destructive *chevauchée* of 1355, Gaston Fébus⁵³ sold him food and permitted his vassals to serve in the Black Prince's army. In exchange for this collaboration, the Anglo-Gascon forces led no *razzias* of pillage and plunder in Foix or Béarn. Small wonder that the people of Foix, like their neighbors in Béarn, appreciated their Count Gaston III of Foix-Béarn and the relative peace they enjoyed under his rule.

During the periodic "outbreaks of peace" or truce, mercenary soldiers were immediately taken off the payroll *en masse* and cut loose to fend for themselves. It was too expensive for the chronically cash-strapped kings to pay them during these lulls. Mercenaries were like the Great White Shark that could show up hungry at the beach, without warning, at any moment...

⁵³ Professor Sumption admirably describes Fébus at his 1355 meeting with the Black Prince as "...a flamboyant young man, charming, humorous, and learned..." p. 184, Sumption, [The Hundred Years War](#).

Free-booting mercenaries quickly organized into a number of large, private armies called the Great Companies. These were organized bands of brigands with an elected leader. They roamed and devastated France in their endless search for booty, food, and wine.

Warfare in the 14th century was more than a violent resolution of politics, **war was a business venture** whose purpose was capturing prisoners for rich ransom, capturing expensive war *matériel* (armor, weaponry, and horses), raping the helpless, making off with as much stolen booty as could be carried, and often simply finding enough to eat.

Because France's monarchy had such an ineffective system of taxation and truly pathetic success at tax collection, the frequently unpaid troops of the French monarch often behaved in a way indistinguishable from the plundering mercenaries or English troops. In each event, it was the poor peasant who paid with his life, his property, or both.

“War was made to pay for itself through pillage.”

p. 81, Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*. Ballantine: 1978.

Scorched earth tactics were employed for the duration of the Hundred Years War, especially in western and northern France. Aquitaine, Guyenne, Flanders, and Normandy were repeatedly devastated. The

economic productivity of rural France was decimated during the Hundred Years War. The English almost destroyed the country they were attempting to conquer and the French almost destroyed the country they needed to protect. This is one root of a phrase too-often repeated in the 20th and 21st centuries: “We had to destroy the village in order to save it.”

Entire generations of peasants and villagers knew nothing but suffering, destruction, violence, and uncertainty from the *chevauchées*, especially those in Normandy led by the Duke of Lancaster (John of Gaunt, 4th son of King Edward III) and in Aquitaine and Auvergne, where they were led by the Black Prince (Edward of Woodstock, the eldest son of England's King Edward III.)

This was the scourge of war that Count Gaston III sought to dodge. He was brilliantly successful.

RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

The inextricable and all-pervasive link of the Roman Catholic Church with political power at every level—from local to royal—is hard to fathom for XXI century people living in something like a non-sectarian democracy.

The immense secular power of the Church (i.e., Rome) and its unrivalled spiritual authority were fundamental and accepted facts of medieval Life. It was not unusual for a bishop to be the sovereign, secular ruler of a rich city in addition to ruling his ecclesiastic bishopric.⁵⁴

It is well-nigh impossible to overstate the importance and omnipresence of religious thought in the Middle Ages. 14th century Europe was a period of intense, fervent, emotional religiosity, superstition, myth, and blind Faith⁵⁵. It was simultaneously a period of profound hypocrisy, perfidy, intolerance, tyranny, and cruelty.

Christianity was the matrix of medieval life...It governed birth, death, sex, and eating, made the rules for law and medicine, gave philosophy and scholarship their subject matter. Membership in the Church was not a matter of choice, it was compulsory and without alternative, which gave it a hold not easy to dislodge.

⁵⁴ For example, Lyon was ruled by an archbishop until 1312, when the city became part of France.

⁵⁵ SEE: Léon Pressouyre, Le rêve cistercien. Gallimard : 1990, and Norman F. Cantor, Civilization of the Middle Ages. HarperPerennial : 1963, 1994.

According to St. Augustine, the fount of authority, all men were under the Devil's power by virtue of original sin; hence the necessity of the Church and salvation.

pp. 32, 59, Barbara Tuchman, A Distant Mirror. Ballantine Books: 1978.

...a realization of the power and import of the Christian Faith is needed for an understanding of the thoughts and feelings moving the men and women of the Middle Ages, and for a just appreciation of their aspirations and ideals...but I do not see how that can be achieved without a careful study of brutality, ignorance, and delusions in the Middle Ages, not just among the laity, but also at the highest Christian altars. Christianity survived despite medieval Christians, not because of that. Fail to grasp that, and you will never understand their millennium.

p. xvii, William Manchester, A World Lit Only By Fire—the medieval mind and the Renaissance. Little, Brown and Company: 1993.

Throughout the XIV century, reform of the Church was high on most folks' agenda. Why? The abuses of the Church had grown too numerous, too flagrant, and too long-lasting. Simony--the selling of Church offices for money instead of awarding them based on merit—grew common and outrageous. Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) bemoaned the practice of simony, writing: “Christ [was] bought and sold the whole day long.”

Clerics of all ranks sold absolution from every sin. They:

...would sell absolution for any sin from gluttony to homicide, cancel any vow of chastity or fasting, remit any penance for money, most of which they pocketed.

p. 30, Barbara Tuchman, A Distant Mirror. Ballantine Books: 1978.

The practice of selling indulgences was authorized in 1343 by Pope Clément VI.

The sacrifice of Christ's blood, he stated, together with the merit added by the Virgin and saints, had established an inexhaustible treasury for the use of pardons. By contributing sums (of money) to the Church, anyone could buy a share in the Treasury of Merit. What the Church gained in revenue by this arrangement was matched in the end by loss of respect.

p. 121, Barbara Tuchman, A Distant Mirror. Ballantine Books: 1978.

The appointment of unfit clergy was a natural offshoot of simony. Many prelates did not read or write Latin (the language of all Church services and the Bible itself). Many prelates did not even speak the same language as their flock. Many clerics lived a dissolute High Life of wealth and ribaldry. Monks and itinerant friars were notorious seducers of women. Clerical celibacy was a joke; Nicolaiism was common. (SEE GENERALLY: Bocaccio's wonderful Decameron.)

Nicolas...was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles. They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. The character of these men is very plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John, [when they are represented] as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practice adultery, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.

— *Irenaeus, Adversus haereses, i. 26, §3[16]*

[Nicolas] had an attractive wife, and had refrained from intercourse as though in imitation of those whom he saw to be devoted to God. He endured this for a while but in the end could not bear to control his incontinence.... But because he was ashamed of his defeat and suspected that he had been found out, he ventured to say, "Unless one copulates every day, he cannot have eternal life."[\[18\]](#)

— Epiphanius, *Panarion*, xxv. 1

And that was not all. Dispensations allowed noble children of 5 or 10 years of age to be appointed as abbots, bishops, even cardinals. The sale of indulgences took the sting out of sin for rich folks. Many prelates were absentee, never visiting the flock they were supposed to shepherd. Many priests could not even read. Nepotism, cronyism, Nicolaism, and corruption were rampant and visible to all. Saint Catherine of Siena summed up the Church's problems neatly: "pride, debauchery, and greed."

The clergy on the whole were probably no more lecherous or greedy or untrustworthy than other men, but because they were supposed to be better or nearer to God than other men, their failings attracted more attention.

p. 35, Barbara Tuchman, [A Distant Mirror](#). Ballantine Books: 1978.

Reforming these abuses coexisted with abstruse doctrinal debates by theologians over questions we might find absurd today, e.g., the Beatific Vision: Do the righteous see the face of God as soon as they die, or must they await Armageddon and the day of the Last Judgment? Reform movements proliferated to challenge the moral and doctrinal authority of

the Roman Catholic Church: the flagellants, the *fraticelli*, the Brethren of the Free Spirit and *Béguines*, John Wycliffe, William of Ockam, Thomas à Kempis, Savonarola, and Jan Hus. (For sheer weirdness, Google what is now called the psychogenic illness of “Dancing Mania” or “St. Vitus’ Dance.”)

Shaken by the visible effects of the Black Death, and by the undeniable failings of the Church, Pope Clement VI declared in 1351:

What can you preach to the people? If on humility, you yourselves are the proudest in the world, puffed up, pompous and sumptuous in luxuries. If on poverty, you are so covetous that all the benefices in the world are not enough for you. If on chastity—but we will be silent on this, for God knoweth what each man does and how many of you satisfy your lusts.

p. 123, Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*. Ballantine Books: 1978.

The myriad moral failures of the Roman Catholic Church were matched by misdeeds of the putatively pious nobility who often gave little better than lip service to their moralizing words. Many nobles unduly oppressed their vassals, failed to protect them from harm, and ignored the 10 Commandments.

How does the religious conduct of Count Gaston III stand up to non-anachronistic judgment, i.e., when his temporal context is properly taken into account?

Gaston III observed religious formalities. He was respectably orthodox in his daily obedience to the dominant dogma and rituals of the Roman Catholic Church. Gaston III observed the sacraments. He heard Mass regularly and prayed daily, he included religious ceremony in many of the peace treaties he signed, and he expressed belief in the possibility of benevolent intercession by the Virgin Mary. He also established a few, new abbeys and monasteries. He even had a legendary vision where he encountered the 5th century martyr, Saint Volusien. Insofar as outward manifestations of piety are concerned, Gaston III was certainly not a saint, but he was more than reasonably compliant with the chivalric ideal of Christian piety.

A man who slits the throat of his only son will never be a candidate for sainthood—and that is how Gaston III killed his only legitimate child in 1380. Yet, after Gaston Fébus killed his son and sole heir, he sought to expiate his sin by publishing a religious work of self-confession, the *Livre des Oraisons*.

Recent scholarship⁵⁶ has determined that only a small portion of the Oraisons was written by Gaston III. It would be unjustified to accuse him of plagiarism, though, since he never claimed to have been the sole author of the work. The book is simply a compilation of poems and prayers taken from the Bible and other authors, including a section indisputably written by Gaston III. The fact of authorship of others appearing in the Oraisons with Count Gaston III's personal writing does not diminish the uniqueness of his act of contributing to and publishing this religious work.

Gaston III's written religious remorse as expressed in the Oraisons elides the killing of his son and focuses instead on his general moral failings, especially sins of the flesh. The Oraisons contains only broad, general statements of Gaston Fébus' contrition for diverse sins. It does not include a *mea culpa* for the killing of his son. It does not even contain a specific avowal of intent to commit homicide relative to Fébus' "accidental" killing of his son.

⁵⁶ SEE : pp. 270-274, Claudine Pailhès, Gaston Fébus. Perrin : 2007.

Here is one example from the Oraisons of Fébus addressing the Lord and admitting guilt and contrition for non-homicidal sins, especially the banal and delightfully commonplace sin of Lust:

"Seigneur, j'ai en moi trop d'autres choses comme colère et impatience, odieuse discorde, rancoeur de courage, mauvaises pensées, voracité de gueule, mauvaises paroles, avarice, rapine et beaucoup d'autres choses semblables. Plus encore, j'ai un mal, Seigneur, qui sur tous les maux l'emporte depuis que je suis sorti du berceau et tous les jours il s'est accru en moi, en enfance, en adolescence, pendant ma jeunesse et s'est multiplié en moi tous les jours et encore ne veut pas m'abandonner, ce mal, Seigneur, c'est la débauche de la chair, tempête de luxure qui a blessé mon âme chétive de trop grand façon et l'a ôtée de ta grâce. J'ai plus durement péché que Sodome et j'ai failli plus que Gomorrhe."

Lord, I have in me too many other things like anger and impatience, odious discord, rancor, evil thoughts, gluttonous appetite, evil words, avarice, rapine, and lots of other similar failings. More than that, I have a failing, Lord, worse than all the others, ever since I left the cradle and every day it has grown stronger inside me, in childhood, in adolescence, during my youth, and has multiplied within me every day and will not leave me. This failing, Lord, is debauchery, a storm of lust that has greatly wounded my poor soul and removed me from your grace. I have sinned worse than Sodom and failed more than Gomorrha.

Our assessment of the religious side of Gaston Fébus is mixed. He observed the outward, superficial duties of chivalric piety. He certainly deserves extra credit for his exceptional service as a Crusader. But two, glaring exceptions to the piety of Gaston III are too significant to gloss over.

Those failings are 1) an apparently callous repudiation of his wife that included separating her from her infant son and 2) the uncontested homicide of his only legitimate son. We conclude our evaluation of Gaston III's piety with a wishy-washy assessment: "better than many, but far from perfect."

FEUDALISM

14th century feudal society was organized in a way that bears little relationship to the social pluralism, mobility, and fluidity we know in the 21st century. There was a profoundly traditional society with rigid class distinctions that are genuinely hard to fathom today. Hopefully, this résumé of feudalism will clear some of that fog.

The feudal system in France can be traced back to the early 8th century and Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel. He won one of the most significant battles in the history of Western Civilization: his cavalry defeated the invading Moslem cavalry at Tours in 732.

Charles Martel instituted a system of patronage that developed into feudalism. The monarch made grants of land to vassals, who were thereby bound to the monarch by a bond of personal loyalty, in order that the vassals might have enough wealth to furnish the monarch with mounted cavalry. It was a *quid pro quo*. The land granted, plus the obligation of military service, was known as a **fief**.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ *Precairium* = noble gives protection to landowner in return for title to the land protected and occasional military service to the noble; *Patrocinium* = noble gives protection to non-landowner in return for occasional personal services to the noble.

Over the centuries after Charles Martel, the social and legal system evolved that we now call “feudalism.”

Feudal society was organized in a tri-partite system: nobility, clergy, and commoners.⁵⁸ According to the universally-accepted wisdom of the day, the three estates were divinely ordained; they were established by the Will of God. Everybody owed obedience to God, whose wish it was that everyone must be subservient to a King, an Emperor, or the Pope.

14th century Foix-Béarn was no exception to these organizing principles of society. In Foix, everyone was subservient to the Comte de Foix; in Béarn, everyone was subservient to the Vicomte de Béarn. Gaston III held both titles.

In this three-layered world view, one group (the clergy) was to sing and pray for the spiritual salvation of society; a second group (the agricultural peasantry and villagers) was to work to feed society; and a third group (the nobles, about 1%) was to fight to protect everyone. This was the theory of feudalism in its ideal (and very simplified) form. On the ground, things often worked out quite differently from the theoretical model.

⁵⁸ In the eyes of the nobility, peasants were mere beasts of labor.

Here is a short summary of the fundamental features of European feudalism:

A subject peasantry; widespread use of the service tenement (i.e., the fief) instead of a salary, which was out of the question; the supremacy of a class of specialized warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man and, within the warrior class, assume the distinctive form called vassalage; fragmentation of authority—leading inevitably to disorder...

p. 446, Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, Vol. II.

Feudalism was predicated on the theory of an exchange of services and loyalty between an overlord and a vassal—a *quid pro quo*. The lord promised his vassal protection from marauders and invaders. Land and its usufruct (land + income = a fief) were provided by the lord in exchange for diverse goods and services from a noble's vassals.⁵⁹ Count Gaston III had scores of vassals who swore homage to him.

If the vassal could bear arms, (e.g., a mounted knight) then the vassal provided his lord with military service, including his own armor, horses, food, and weapons. Unpaid military service was generally limited to a period of 40 days per year. In addition, a noble vassal was obligated

⁵⁹ A vassal was obliged to furnish his lord "aids," e. g., to provide for their lord's ransom if captured, provide a dowry for his daughter, and provide money when the lord's eldest son becomes a knight.

to provide counsel to his overlord on demand at any time. A knight had to be willing to die for his lord. A knight also had to show up at his lord's castle whenever he was summoned.

The relationship between a vassal and his overlord was solemnized by swearing an oath of homage. "Simple homage" (*planus*) was sometimes sworn, but it came with a big exception: it did not affect the superiority of previously-sworn oaths of homage. In contrast to simple homage, "liege homage" came with no restrictions of any kind and trumped all prior or subsequent oaths; it obliged the vassal to serve his lord against all others.

The oath of homage bound a vassal directly to his overlord (suzerain) and was a personal bond, sanctified by a religious ceremony, explicitly acknowledging the hierarchical and sacred relationship between vassal and overlord. The solemnity of this ceremony could be spectacular if it was witnessed by a great assembly. The oath was sometimes sworn in a religious edifice to enhance both parties' incentive for obedience.

By the time of Gaston III's reign, the oath of homage had become deeply imbued with religiosity. Church officials were often present to add piety and solemnity to the occasion. A high-ranking cleric frequently

administered communion to the vassal and his overlord as part of the homage ceremony.

The protocol required a vassal to present himself before his suzerain to solemnly pledge his loyalty and overtly recognize that the vassal owned certain lands and possessions solely by the grace of his suzerain. The vassal stood before his suzerain in a posture of total submissiveness, bareheaded, without his belt and therefore without his otherwise omnipresent sword or any of the other weapons emblematic of his nobility. The vassal was required to kneel on a pillow at the feet of his suzerain, who remained seated royally in front of the vassal. The vassal then declaimed aloud his oath of homage and loyalty. The vassal then placed both of his hands between the hands of his overlord, who brought the vassal to a standing position, where they exchanged “the kiss of peace,” mouth-on-mouth.

The feudal system could get extremely complicated. Most lords were simultaneously vassals. Most lords had sworn homage to a higher lord and owed obligations of service to him. The Count of Foix was historically a vassal of the King of France; the Viscount of Béarn was historically a vassal of the Duke of Aquitaine—but more about that conundrum, later...

Multiple allegiances by a single vassal to different overlords frequently presented conflicts, especially when one vassal was obligated to two different lords who were at war with each other. This explains why overlords wanted their vassals to swear “liege homage.”

Nobles were landowners. They were exempt from taxation⁶⁰, but responsible for responding to their overlord’s call at any moment for the honorable obligations of military service and counsel to the lord.

If the vassal was a serf (a free peasant attached to a specific parcel of land), he provided crops and labor to his lord, such as road-building, castle repair, and agricultural services. Roughly two-thirds of the inhabitants of Foix-Béarn were freemen, although a fascinating sub-category, the *cagots*, were in an intermediate social class, less than free but not quite servile. They suffered from many forms of discrimination⁶¹.

Feudal abbeys and monasteries were generally run by a noble (often a second-born or third-born son from a noble family). They had serfs who worked their land and swept their floors while the noble monks sang and prayed and drank. Some of these abbeys and monasteries were extremely

⁶⁰ Military service and the risk of being injured, maimed, or killed was sometimes referred to as the “blood tax” of the nobility.

⁶¹ A small museum devoted to the “*cagots*” can be visited in the town of Arreau, in the Pyrenees.

wealthy; they were organized almost on a modern, corporate basis with subordinate branches in distant locations, like franchises.

It was not uncommon (outside Foix-Béarn) for one or more vassals of a sovereign to be in rebellion against him. In such a case, the vassal risked being declared a *félon*, or a “contumacious vassal.” The overlord could declare the lands of a contumacious vassal forfeited (to him, of course) and additionally, he could release from their oath anyone who had sworn homage to the contumacious vassal.

Here is one example of a feudal conflict arising out of the complex obligations of vassalage: Edward III, Plantagenet King of England, was a sovereign in England. But in France, where he owned vast tracts of land, Edward III was a vassal of the King of France; he was merely the Duke of Aquitaine. Whenever one of the Duke of Aquitaine's vassals felt aggrieved by the justice rendered by the Duke's court, the vassal could appeal to the Duke's overlord, the King of France—who often found ways to contradict the Duke's courts and frustrate his purposes. This feudal conflict in large part produced the Hundred Years War (1337-1453).

In Béarn, the Top Dog of the local feudal system was Gaston III, the Vicomte. He was the sovereign. Beneath him were his many vassals. The

lower level of the feudal Pyramid of Power was a collection of lesser nobles, all of whom owed homage to the Vicomte. These lesser nobles were generally known as Barons. The Barons owned less land than the Vicomte, they had smaller castles, and they had fewer vassals of their own for whom they were the direct suzerain. The Barons of Béarn were generally in a precarious economic position, which explains the frequency with which they signed up for mercenary military service to fight for the English, the Aragonese, the Castillians, or the Portuguese.

The rest of society in Foix-Béarn, i.e., the non-nobles, were either clerics (usually attached to an abbey or monastery), freemen, serfs, or *cagots*. (Google **cagot** to learn about this fascinating, persecuted minority.)

Certain nobles, towns, or regions were granted a charter by their overlord that formally recognized their rights and privileges. Béarn was granted a charter, sort of a “Bill of Rights.” The charter recognized and codified the Béarnaise region’s written rules of law. Written law was part of Béarn’s Roman legal heritage. The laws were called the “*Fors de Béarn*.”

The Kings of France who came after the Emperor Charlemagne took pains to formally acknowledge, honor, and respect the *Fors de Béarn*.⁶²

Abbeys and monasteries were miniature feudal hierarchies. All owed ultimate obedience to the Roman Pope, of course. A few Béarnaise abbeys and monasteries owned their own land, along with peasants to work it. In Béarn, most abbeys and monasteries were borderline economic operations and were economically dependent on outside subsidies.

Frequently, the abbot in charge or monk in charge was a noble who was only a second-born son or a third-born son and thus not entitled to inherit his father's title, land, or wealth. Instead, if he was lucky, a younger son got a plump religious sinecure, or a cushy benefice. There were also oblates, i.e., boys "donated" to an abbey or monastery for a life of service. Convents were roughly analogous hierarchical systems to abbeys, but virtually all convents were headed by a male⁶³.

The system of *appanages* was well-suited to meet the years of the scourge of the mercenaries and Great Companies. An *appanage* was different from independent fiefdoms like Foix, Béarn, Brittany, or Flanders.

⁶² The Midi, or South (including Foix-Béarn) followed their Roman heritage of written laws; northern France followed its Germanic heritage of traditional, unwritten law.

⁶³ The Abbey of Fontevault, which was run by an Abbess, was highly exceptional.

It was a fief carved out of the king's royal domain and given by the king— conditionally--to a son or brother, e.g., Burgundy, Poitou, or Languedoc. The close links of blood and family were presumed (but not guaranteed) to ensure loyalty to the throne from the prince governing the *appanage*.

The major condition to the gift of an *appanage* was that it could never be transferred out of the family and it could only be inherited by a male. This prevented foreigners (like the English) from marrying an heiress to gain control of an *appanage*. The first generation without a son meant that the fief would automatically revert to the crown and rejoin the royal domain. Having an *appanage* on the frontiers of the kingdom meant the King had a trusted man running the local government.

MARRIAGE AMONG THE MEDIEVAL FEUDAL NOBILITY WAS A MATTER OF DIPLOMACY.

Virtually all medieval marriages between nobles were diplomatic arrangements in which “Love” played little role or no role at all. Noble marriages were designed to procure important advantages of state, such as giving birth to a son to inherit the land and noble title, bringing an end to hostilities, acquiring new territory, or pocketing a hefty dowry. Divorce was unknown.

Marriage was a religious sacrament as well as a *sine qua non* for the perpetuation of a noble family’s name or dynasty. Only a child legitimately born within wedlock could inherit a title of nobility. The Roman Catholic Church monopolized the strict rules within which marriage could occur as well as monopolizing the highly-lucrative sale of exceptions to those rules (“dispensations”) that could be granted by the Pope—for a fee.

Kings, princes, dukes, counts, and others were at the mercy of a Pope from whom they had to seek permission to marry if the proposed betrothed was from a family within the capacious prohibitions on consanguinity. Transgression of various rules of morality could, and

sometimes did, result in excommunication or interdict, with the attendant and terrifying risk of Eternal damnation. Control over the right to marry was one of the Church's strongest powers for managing the nobility.⁶⁴

Once permission to marry was secured, the diplomatic purposes of marriage could come into play. As usual, Barbara Tuchman's analysis is spot on:

Marriages were the fabric of international as well as inter-noble relations, the primary source of territory, sovereignty, and alliance, and the major business of medieval diplomacy. The relations of countries and rulers depended not at all on common borders or natural interest but on dynastic connections and fantastic cousinships which could make a prince of Hungary heir to the throne of Naples and an English prince claimant to Castile. At every point of the loom sovereigns were thrusting in their shuttles, carrying the strand of a son or a daughter, and these, whizzing back and forth, wove the artificial fabric that created as many conflicting claims and hostilities as it did bonds. Valois of France, Plantagenets of England, Luxembourgs of Bohemia, Wittelsbachs of Bavaria, Hapsburgs of Austria, Visconti of Milan, the houses of Navarre, Castile, and Aragon, Dukes of Brittany, Counts of Flanders, Hainault, and Savoy were all intertwined in a crisscrossing network, in the making of which two things were never considered; the sentiments of the parties to the marriage and the interest of the populations involved.

pp. 46-47, Barbara Tuchman, A Distant Mirror, Ballantine Books: 1978.

⁶⁴ When the Avignon Pope Urban V (1362-1370) put the kibosh on a proposed marriage between Edward of England and Marguerite of Flanders, he prevented a union that would have been a geopolitical disaster for France. Urban V steered Marguerite's marriage to Philippe, Duke of Burgundy, a brother of France's Charles V. This was a huge benefit to France.

Marriages were arranged by parents desirous of enhancing wealth, territory, status, or security. These “advantageous marriages” rarely took heed of the amorous inclinations or desires of the participants. It was not uncommon for noble parents to arrange marriages for pre-pubescent children who were total strangers and/or close, blood relatives.

Examples abound to demonstrate how the medieval cultural practice of diplomatic marriage among nobles was totally different from marriage as we know it in the XXI century. Here are a few examples linked to Foix-Béarn:

Procreation of a son was the foremost concern of every dynasty. Another prime use of marriage was for mutual enhancement of the safety and wealth of the two families that would be united by the marriage. The political purpose of unifying two, powerful families is exemplified by the marriage of Gaston III’s parents, Aliénor de Comminges and Gaston II (*le Preux*), Comte de Foix and Vicomte de Béarn.

Comminges, the land of Gaston III’s mother Aliénor, was a small but important County located between the non-contiguous lands of Foix and Béarn. Creating a sound alliance with Comminges and its ruling family was clearly advantageous for Foix-Béarn, and vice-versa. The marriage of Gaston II and Aliénor de Comminges was a classic feudal bond, based on

the territorial advantages gained through the alliance of two, neighboring families. The fact that at the time of their marriage, Aliénor de Comminges was 28 years old and Gaston II was only 14, was not a problem.

Count Gaston II died waging war against the Moors in the service of the King of Castile in 1343. His only son thereupon became Count Gaston III. Gaston III inherited all his father's titles of nobility, all his father's lands, and a future, springing interest to inherit his mother's fief, the Comminges.

A different and unusual sort of marriage is exemplified by the second marriage of Jean, Duke of Berry (1340-1416), a contemporary of Gaston III. Duke Jean was one of 3 younger brothers of King Charles V and he was the uncle of King Charles VI. This made Duke Jean one of the richest and most powerful men in all of France.⁶⁵ He liked to remind people that he was the son of a king, a king's brother, and a king's uncle.

Jeanne d'Auvergne and de Boulogne was the bride in Duke Jean's second marriage. She was born in 1378. Her father was a spendthrift, gluttonous drunkard, so her mother (a different Aliénor de Comminges) left the marriage in 1381 and dropped off Baby Jeanne in Foix to be raised and

⁶⁵ Duke Jean of Berry is most famous for commissioning what many connoisseurs believe is the most beautiful and elaborate of all illuminated manuscripts: *Les très riches heures*, which is displayed for public viewing (under glass) at the chateau of Chantilly. Every day, a new page is lovingly turned over. Duke Jean's first wife, Jeanne d'Armagnac, died in 1388. Duke Jean was the uncle of Gaston Fébus' Enemy #1, Count Jean II d'Armagnac.

protected by her famous and wealthy cousin, Count Gaston III of Foix-Béarn. When little Jeanne arrived at court in Foix, she was 3 years old.⁶⁶ As the legal guardian of Jeanne d’Auvergne and de Boulogne, Gaston Fébus had total power over her future, including her marital destiny. No one imagined she would one day be conjugally linked with Duke Jean of Berry—a man 38 years older than she was.

Nine years after young Jeanne arrived at Foix, when Duke Jean was just shy of the age of 50 but not shy at all about what he wanted, he told Gaston III that he craved being married to the pre-pubescent Jeanne de Boulogne (aka Jeanne d’Auvergne). The Duke—already a grandfather--was thoroughly smitten by the sprightly, 12-year-old Jeanne. Duke Jean unabashedly began the business of negotiating with Count Gaston III for young Jeanne’s hand in marriage. Bemused, and always alert to an opportunity for windfall income, Gaston III listened to the powerful Duke.

⁶⁶ Jeanne’s father, the Count de Boulogne, died heavily in debt. One of his creditors was Gaston Fébus. A plausible scenario seems that when Jeanne de Boulogne was 3 and her mother Aliénor de Comminges dropped her off at Gaston’s castle in Foix, Aliénor and Gaston agreed that Jeanne would be raised by Gaston at no expense to Aliénor; in consideration, Jeanne’s future marriage-price was a “pledge” for the unpaid debt of her father to Fébus and compensation for Gaston’s expenses of raising her at his court to be refined, cultured, and a suitable, potential bride. The payment Gaston III later received from Duke Jean de Berry was third-party reimbursement of Jeanne’s father’s debt to Gaston, plus reimbursement for the decade of expenses for her upbringing. There was nothing dishonorable in Gaston III’s conduct if the foregoing is reasonably accurate. The opprobrium some historians express at Fébus’ negotiating for a high marriage-price appears unjustified in light of these facts.

Gaston listened even more intently when King Charles VI of France (Duke Jean's nephew) made the proposed marriage a priority for his Kingdom and said so to Gaston. This put a very deep pocket in the game.

At first, Gaston III coyly withheld his consent to the marriage of his ward Jeanne, letting the Duke de Berry up the ante to match his passion. Backed by the King, the ardent Duke eventually agreed to pay Fébus a huge sum of cash (30,000 gold florins, with King Charles VI footing a third of the bill), plus his two, finest, deer trophies and six of his finest hunting hounds. And so, in 1389, after a long negotiation to gain the consent of Gaston Fébus, the 12-year-old heiress, Jeanne, was married to the 50-year-old Duke Jean. The Duke had very expensive tastes, so it is likely that he was also smitten by the prospect of presently enjoying the income from Jeanne's sumptuous dowry: the rich County of Auvergne and the strategic County of Boulogne.⁶⁷

This was an unusual marriage of carnal lust, lust for lucre, and territorial security. To the surprise of all, despite the age disparity of the two newlyweds, the marriage of Jeanne and Jean was long and happy.

⁶⁷ Duke Jean already held land in Auvergne, so Jeanne's dowry neatly rounded out his holdings there. As for Boulogne (on the English Channel), King Charles VI was anxious that this strategic locale and potential invasion beachhead should stay out of English hands and remain French. Duke Jean was a trustworthy ruler for Boulogne.

Marriage was more than an opportunity for lucre.⁶⁸ Occasionally, marriage played a prime role in making peace between warring neighbors by uniting enemy families. Gaston Fébus used this peace-making facet of marriage to unite his own family of Foix-Béarn with their historic, arch-enemies and close neighbors, the Armagnac clan.

The marriage of Béatrix d'Armagnac with Gaston III's son, "Little Gaston" in 1379 is an excellent example of a marriage for peace. (The Armagnac clan led the opposition to the pro-English Burgundian clan during the time of Jeanne d'Arc, in the early 1400's. Before that, the Armagnacs were rivals of Gaston III in nearby Languedoc.⁶⁹)

There was a long-standing, implacable, feudal rivalry between the Gaston dynasty of Foix-Béarn and the neighboring noble clan of Armagnac. Raids and pitched battles for land, power, and wealth between these families (and Armagnac's allies, the d'Albret clan) and their client vassals were common. Truces and peace treaties were often agreed upon, then routinely broken. Each clan vied against the other for local power and

⁶⁸ Perhaps the nadir of venality as a marriage motive is King Jean II's "sale" of his 12 year old daughter, Isabelle in 1360. 600,000 pounds of gold was the price for her morganatic marriage to the Milanese Jean-Galéas Visconti. The sale occurred in the context of King Jean's imprisonment in England and his zeal to pay his ransom.

⁶⁹ SEE: Bertrand Schnerb, Armagnacs et Bourguignons. Perrin : 2001, 2009, and Françoise Autrand, Jean de Berry, l'art et le pouvoir. Fayard : 2000. The first marriage of Jean, Duke de Berry was to Jeanne d'Armagnac.

wealth, as well as competing for the favor and support of the King of France and occasionally for alliance with King Edward III of England, who was their neighbor and the Duke of Aquitaine.

Armed conflict was frequent between Foix-Béarn and Armagnac, but it was more expensive than productive for each side. The marriage of Little Gaston with Béatrix d'Armagnac in 1379 was intended to be a marriage for peace, prosperity and procreation of a son to carry on the Gaston dynasty.

Well before the marriage of Little Gaston and Béatrix in 1379, the power dynamic between the Armagnacs and the Gastons had changed in favor of Foix-Béarn. The change took place because of Gaston Fébus' huge military victory over the Armagnacs at Launac in 1362.

At Launac, Fébus was outnumbered by the troops of Armagnac. But Gaston III defeated the knights of Armagnac-d'Albret because he learned an invaluable lesson to which the Valois Kings of France seemed impervious: he relied on the tactical value of concealed archers.

Gaston III's overwhelming victory over the Armagnacs at Launac further enhanced his reputation as an invincible warrior and added to his chivalric credentials. What's more, he gained great wealth and additional territory by ransoming the nobles of Armagnac-d'Albret captured at Launac.

Gaston Fébus was never inattentive to the financial side of things. For Gaston III, Launac was his “big score.” Gaston III wanted to hold on to his winnings.

Even after Launac, true peace in the region proved to be evanescent. In the wealthy province of Languedoc, just to the east, chaos reigned and war raged due to the influx of pillaging mercenaries.

Almost 20 years after his great victory at Launac in 1362, Gaston III decided that a diplomatic marriage of his son with the Armagnac clan was the best way to ensure “peace in the valley” and save money by avoiding war. Accordingly, in hopes of gaining a more permanent regional peace, the marriage of “Little Gaston” with Béatrix d’Armagnac took place in 1379.

The diplomatic marriage that united the Gaston Dynasty with the Armagnac clan was intended to safeguard and consolidate the rich bounty of ransom money won at Launac in 1362 by ending the chronic, “private war” between Foix-Béarn and Armagnac.

For the remainder of his long reign, Gaston Fébus was to be one of the richest and most flamboyant princes of the west, the man who could maintain a permanent war treasury and an army of 4,000 or 5,000 men and who “gave, no man more” to foreigners, knights, and squires, heralds and minstrels who passed through his small and ill-endowed territory.

p. 484, Sumption, The Hundred Years War.

Outright financial gain was an important and common facet of the business of marriage among nobles in the Middle Ages. This was certainly the case on May 5, 1349, when Gaston III became engaged to marry his neighbor, Princess Agnès de Navarre. Agnès was regional royalty; she was the sister of King Charles II of Navarre, aka Charles the Bad. Agnès was also of French royal blood. She was a grand-daughter of a deceased King of France, Louis X *le Hutin* (the Squabbler). In contrast, the Gaston Dynasty was merely a local power, but the Gastons were big fish in a small pond. First and foremost, this was a union of regional powers. It was a diplomatic marriage at the highest level between the two most powerful princes of the Pyrenees. But it was also a marriage for money. Agnès de Navarre was under contract to bring a royal dowry.

Agnès' mother, Queen Jeanne of Navarre, sweetened the deal memorialized in the written contract of marriage by promising, *inter alia*, to pay Gaston III a dowry of 20,000 livres when the marriage took place. As it turned out, the dowry clause of the contract was a "*promesse de Gascon*" (*i.e.*, nothing but hot air). When Queen Jeanne died of the Plague in 1348 and her son, Charles II, succeeded her on the throne of Navarre, he

dutifully acknowledged the marriage contract's dowry obligation for his sister Agnès...but he still held on to his money.⁷⁰

Gaston and Agnès were married on August 4, 1349. But only the dowry's down payment of 1,000 livres was paid. The wedding turned out not to be the Payday as promised. Agnès' dowry remained 95% unpaid.

The consequence of the King of Navarre's failure to promptly pay up on his sister's promised dowry eventually proved to be critically significant.

As was often the case with noble inter-marriage in the Middle Ages, this marriage was arranged by the parents of Gaston and Princess Agnès while they were still kids. The parents sought to gain mutual and reciprocal diplomatic advantages by uniting two, regional powers. The large dowry was a glittering inducement to the marriage.

The primary purpose for this marriage (after procreating a son to perpetuate the Gaston dynasty) was to create an immediate and mutually-beneficial diplomatic alliance of immediate value. The gold to be paid to

⁷⁰ Queen Jeanne de Navarre apparently had better legal advice than Gaston III's mother at the time of the marriage contract. Or, perhaps Queen Jeanne was just a smooth talker? Professor Autrand tells us that it was customary to delay making the first payment on a dowry until the first day of a marriage—but an unsecured creditor is a foolish creditor. When Charles the Bad defaulted on the contracted debt, i.e., he failed to pay the 95% of dowry that remained unpaid, Gaston III had no recourse, no collateral, and no security for the dowry payment he was contractually entitled to receive. Compare the sagacity of Amadeus VI, the famous Green Count of Savoy (1343-1383) when he arranged the marriage of his son Amadeus VII (the future Red Count of Savoy) with Bonne de Berry in 1377. The Green Count required the first payment on Bonne's dowry be made the night before the marriage... but he still ended up with only 80% of the full dowry getting paid. Autrand, Jean de Berry, pp. 299-300.

Gaston III as Agnès' dowry was a royal sum befitting the marriage of a royal Princess. It was not a marriage based on romance or love.

The historical record tells little about the interpersonal relations between Agnès de Navarre and Gaston III. As always, the marriage would not be deemed successful unless and until the birth of a male heir to perpetuate the Gaston dynasty. So, once married, Gaston III and Agnès performed their conjugal duties and waited patiently for a son to be born. Gaston also waited (perhaps with less patience?) for full payment of the unpaid balance of Agnès' promised dowry. Otherwise, Gaston III went about his business of ruling Foix-Béarn, fighting the Armagnacs, and going hunting as often as possible.

In 1359, Agnès de Navarre, who was now the Comtesse de Foix-Béarn, gave birth to a child, but it was still-born. So, Gaston III continued to try to sire a surviving son to carry on the Gaston dynasty in Foix-Béarn. He kept waiting for the rest of the unpaid dowry, too.

After 13 years of marriage, a viable son was finally born to Gaston III and Agnès in late September, 1362. The boy survived the critical, neonatal period, and seemed destined to inherit the power and wealth of the

Gaston dynasty.⁷¹ Following family tradition, the newborn son was named Gaston as a presage of his destiny to perpetuate the family dynasty and become the next Count of Foix-Béarn.

Shortly after the birth of little Gaston in 1362 came another great moment for Foix-Béarn: victory over the Armagnac clan at Launac on 5 December, 1362. Gaston III captured the Count of Armagnac and many of his supporting knights, held them for immense ransom, and got paid in cash. Launac was a brilliant success for Gaston Fébus.⁷²

After the financial boon of crushing the Armagnacs at Launac, Gaston III justifiably felt financially flush, militarily successful, and dynastically secure. He was truly in his prime. Count Gaston III was on a roll.

After his overwhelming military and financial victory over the Armagnac clan at Launac, with Fébus at the height of his glory, and with a healthy, newborn son lined up to continue the Gaston dynasty, Fébus did not sit idly, smacking his lips in smug satisfaction.

⁷¹ A bastard son, Bernard, was already living in the castle at Foix when Gaston's first legitimate son to survive neo-natality was born. Two more illegitimate sons, Yvain and Gratien, later joined the family.

⁷² Gaston III felt strong enough after his victory over the Armagnacs at Launac in 1362 to turn his full attention to holding off the Black Prince and the Prince's renewed attempts to reduce Béarn to vassalage. (The Black Prince was the son of the King of England and the on-site ruler of Gaston III's rich neighbor, the Duchy of Aquitaine.) In 1364, when Count Gaston III was summoned by the Black Prince to swear homage, Gaston presented himself—but he swore homage only for the tiny fiefdoms of Marsan and Gabardan. He explicitly excluded and reserved Béarn from the oath of homage. It was an audacious distinction that Gaston made by withholding homage for Béarn—but it succeeded.

On the day after Christmas, 1362, after 13 years of seemingly uneventful marriage, and with no further payments of Agnès' dowry, Gaston III suddenly and categorically repudiated his wife, Agnès de Navarre. He ordered her to immediately leave and return to Navarre--“And don't come back without your dowry”—leaving behind in Foix their newborn son, Little Gaston, sole heir to the crown of Foix-Béarn.

Despite direct intervention by Pope Urban V, who wrote to Gaston III urging him to take back his wife, Agnès de Navarre never returned to Foix-Béarn.

The only reason ever given for the sudden repudiation of his wife is the non-payment of Agnès' dowry. Certainly, the dowry was never paid in full; the dowry remained 95% unpaid. Since incomplete payment of a dowry was commonplace back in the day, it is often suspected that the unpaid dowry was a mere pretext⁷³ and perhaps some other, less mercenary motive, was also involved? Historians who have specialized in studying Gaston Fébus do not generally buy the unpaid dowry explanation, but a plausible alternative hypothesis has not been found, either.

⁷³ SEE: Jean de La Fontaine, Fables, « Le Mal Marié, » Livre VII.

Since divorce was impossible, Gaston III knew that repudiating Agnès meant he could never remarry as long as Agnès lived. If their infant son pre-deceased him, Gaston III's own death would be the end of the Gaston dynasty and the next Count of Foix-Béarn would be a very distant cousin. Since Agnès was a princess of the Kingdom of Navarre, repudiating her also risked making an enemy of Agnès' brother, the dangerous King Charles II of Navarre.

Count Gaston could have avoided the gratuitous risk of creating problems with Charles the Bad if he had simply moved Agnès aside, let her stay in Foix, and more or less ignored her in favor of spending more time with courtesans. But he did not. In an exception to his standard operating procedure, he took an extreme step: public repudiation.

Lacking documentary evidence, we must leave speculation about the reason for the repudiation of Agnès to the novelists, poets, and playwrights. Historians require documents. There are no documents that explain why Gaston Fébus repudiated his wife or why he did so in such a churlish way.

All that is known with certainty is that Agnès de Navarre left Foix in ignominy within 24 hours of receiving her pink slip from Gaston III. She

rode off to Navarre in the chill of late December, 1362, with barely more than the clothes on her back, never to return again.

The official explanation (in its classic version told by Froissart), which has never been disproven but is widely doubted, is that Gaston III acted for financial reasons. At the time of the birth of Little Gaston, 95% of the dowry promised for Agnès had not been paid. No more than 1,000 florins had been paid out of the 20,000 florins that were promised.

Speculation about Fébus' psychological or other motives for repudiating his wife have been common, but the speculation has not been productive. No moral aspersions, e.g., adultery, have ever been cast on Agnès de Navarre. The unpaid dowry hypothesis does not explain the cold and brutally summary manner of her repudiation. This is a mystery that calls out for the creative hand of a playwright or a novelist.⁷⁴

Divorce in the 14th century was impossible. The Pope could not annul the marriage, since there was no impermissible link of consanguinity between the House of Navarre and the Gaston dynasty. In the space of a single day, Agnès de Navarre was suddenly repudiated and estranged,

⁷⁴ If you've ever lost a lover, or lost a spouse, or lost both, you'll know that Gaston III's sudden repudiation of Agnès de Navarre is just one of 50 ways to lose your lover.

with nothing more to explain it beyond “a plausible cover story.” As a legal matter, the marriage never ended.⁷⁵

Gaston III’s repudiation of Agnès de Navarre was utterly unchivalrous. It was also diplomatically risky, because it could have made Agnès’ brother, Charles the Bad, a dangerous enemy of Gaston Fébus. Surprisingly, though, even after the repudiation of Agnès, Gaston Fébus and Charles the Bad remained friends and exchanged numerous gifts as late as 1374. By 1380, however, the worm had turned...

Without better knowledge of the underlying reasons for this repudiation, it is more difficult to ethically exonerate Gaston than it is to condemn his action. Repudiating his wife was a non-chivalrous, risky move that defies rational explanation for lack of documentary evidence.

⁷⁵ In addition to his one, legitimate son (young Gaston), Gaston Fébus fathered at least three, illegitimate sons. None of his mistresses are known to History. No record exists of a woman coming to live with Gaston III after his repudiation of Agnès. One cannot help ruminating the words of Jean, Duc de Berri: « *Hôtel de seigneur ne vaut rien sans dame ni homme sans femme.* » (A lord’s castle is worth nothing without a lady, and a man is worth nothing without a woman.)

CHIVALRY

Gaston Fébus was an archetype of the fourteenth century nobility's culture of chivalry. It is impossible to understand Gaston III without understanding medieval chivalry, so we discuss that topic in detail.

Chivalry⁷⁶ was a normative mind-set whose values and ideals became the dominant ethos of the medieval nobility. Chivalry was distinctly and exclusively aristocratic. Not all nobles were knights, but all knights were noble. Every member of the knighthood was expected to be chivalrous. In contrast, the nobility considered the peasantry to be barely-sentient beasts of the field.

Chivalry permeated the international fraternity of knighthood and influenced the institutions and deeds of feudalism. Chivalry's intent was to infuse the martial impulses of the warrior caste with moral ideals. Chivalry's basis was ethical and idealistic, whereas the basis of feudalism was a legal relationship, a *quid pro quo* among social classes.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ The word "chivalry" is sometimes used to mean the medieval aristocracy itself, or knighthood, but in most cases, it denotes the social and ethical system of the medieval nobility.

⁷⁷ The first manual of the chivalric ethos was Raymond Lulle's Le Livre de l'Ordre de chevalerie, circa 1275.

The nobility—roughly 1% of the population--was a largely hereditary, aristocratic, warrior caste. It controlled every level of government and it overwhelmingly dominated the power positions of the Roman Catholic Church.

Through the work of the poet-troubadours of Provence and elsewhere, concepts like “courtesy” and “courtly love” were articulated. These gradually became part of the nobility’s ethos of chivalry.

...the thought of all those who lived in the circles of court or castle was impregnated with the idea of chivalry. Their whole system of ideas was permeated by the fiction that chivalry ruled the world...This illusion of society based on chivalry curiously clashed with the reality of things.

p. 67, Johann Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages. Doubleday: 1947.

In the XIV century, didactic poetry helped diffuse the cultural norms of chivalry and courtesy. One example is the lengthy poem, Roman de la Rose, by Guillaume de Lorris (this part was written in approximately 1235), which includes behavioral advice from the God of Love:

Be discreet and good company, be polite and forgiving to the small and the great; in the street, be first to give greetings, and if someone else speaks first, quickly pay them your compliments.
Take care not to speak grossly; do not allow your mouth to speak unkind things; that is not how a man of courtesy behaves.
Honor all women and place yourself at their service. If you hear someone who is in a bad mood speak ill of them, correct him and

have him be quiet. Take every opportunity to do things that please women and maidens so that they will hear you spoken of in good terms: you will gain in their esteem by doing so.⁷⁸

The strict, hierarchical world of feudal-chivalric society valued military prowess, and a sort of “Boy Scout Code” that included family loyalty, personal loyalty to one’s overlord, generosity towards women and children, courtly manners, and personal piety.⁷⁹ We can summarize the key virtues of the chivalric Code of Honor:

- absolute loyalty to one's lord and one's family in battle and in peace,
- the trustworthiness of the guarantee of one's sworn word,
- Honor in all its senses and ramifications,
- “*prouesse*” (physical strength, valiance, and skill as a warrior, especially on horseback, but also on foot--and as a hunter, too),
- gallantry towards noblewomen,
- boundless generosity (“*largesse*”)⁸⁰,

⁷⁸ »*Sois discret et de fréquentation agréable, poli et complaisant à l'égard des petits comme des grands ; dans la rue, sois le premier à saluer, et si quelqu'un te devance, rends-lui aussitôt ses compliments.*

Aies soin de ne pas dire des mots sales et grossiers, que ta bouche ne nomme pas de vilaines choses ; cela n'est pas d'un homme courtois.

*Honore toutes les femmes et mets-toi à leur service. Si tu entends quelqu'un de mal disposé les bafouer, blâme-le et fais-le taire. Saisis toute occasion de faire des choses qui plaisent aux femmes, et aux demoiselles, de façon qu'elles entendent dire du bien de toi : ainsi tu grandiras dans leur estime. » (translated into modern French by Robert Leggewie, pp. 40-41, *Anthologie de la littérature française*. Oxford University Press: 1990.)*

⁷⁹ SEE GENERALLY: Georges Duby, *la Chevalerie*. France Loisirs: 1994, and Georges Duby, *William Marshall, the Flower of Chivalry*. Pantheon: 1985.

⁸⁰ Social values are, for the most part, in constant evolution. The above-listed hallmarks of chivalry are not exempt from that rule. *Largesse*, for example, began as a strategy for rich lords to subsidize poorer knights, thereby ensuring they would be well-equipped with the expensive tools of battle, as well as buying their loyalty and creating durable bonds of allegiance. Eventually, *largesse* was more broadly dispensed as a general display of wealth proving social status, e.g., maintaining a sumptuous court life with *troubadours*, *ménéstrels*, and *jongleurs*. *Largesse* evolved over time to mean conspicuous consumption and conspicuous generosity. SEE: Jean Flori, *Chevaliers et Chevalerie an Moyen Âge*. Hachette Littératures : 1998.

--courtesy melded with gallantry i.e., respect and deference to noble ladies, refined manners, singing, music, and dancing⁸¹,
--contempt for fatigue, pain, and death,
--Christian piety and complete, unquestioning loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church and Pope.

Although the foregoing ideals were universally respected, they were often honored in the breach. Many knights talked loudly of chivalric values but lived abominably with only a hypocrite's Potemkin façade giving a nod to the noble ideals of chivalry. Although it was generally laudatory, and often didactic, medieval literature did not ignore the hypocrisies of chivalry, and used plenty of humor and irony in doing so.⁸²

Gallantry was essential to chivalry. Provençal troubadours sang the praises of gallantry and courtesy. These traits eventually merged with the pre-existing hallmarks of the warrior's ideal form of medieval chivalry. The troubadours sang a poetic ideal. The knight was to act nobly for the love of nobleness, to be honorable, generous, courteous, munificently hospitable, redress wrongs, engage in no quarrel but a just one, be true to his word, and above all else, to protect the helpless and serve (noble) women.

⁸¹ In mythology, the God Fébus-Apollo was the father of Orpheus, whose singing and musicianship were unsurpassed. In earthly life, Gaston Fébus was a highly-reputed musician, poet, and singer.

⁸² e.g., pp. 64-65, Gilbert Rouger (traduction), « les Putains et les jongleurs» and pp. 71-77 « Saint Pierre et le jongleur,» Fabliaux. Gallimard : 1978.

The religious event known as the Council of Clermont (1095) is most famous for having proclaimed the First Crusade, but it was also a benchmark event for expressing the ideals of chivalry. The Council issued a formal injunction that every noble male, upon reaching the age of twelve, should take a solemn oath to protect the weak and humble by defending to his utmost widows, orphans, and the oppressed, and that women of noble birth should enjoy his special care.

The most famous literary exponent of chivalry was Jean Froissart (1337-1405?). Froissart is still widely read and studied as a medieval “chronicler,” i.e., sort of a proto-historian.⁸³

Froissart made a long trip from northern France to the Pyrenees in 1388-9 to meet Gaston Fébus. He was drawn to Foix-Béarn by Gaston III’s fame as a paragon of courtly largesse, by his reputation as an accomplished author, a pious and chivalrous knight of war (“*preux*”), and a practitioner and generous patron of the arts. After visiting Gaston Fébus for close to a year as his guest at the castle of Orthez, Froissart wrote

⁸³ *Chroniques de France, Angleterre et des pays voisins* is the best known of Froissart’s works. Book III contains a lengthy segment « Voyage en Béarn » which is widely viewed as a masterpiece of medieval literature.

effulgently and from extensive, personal knowledge about Fébus as an exemplar of noble chivalry:

At the time I was his guest, Count Gaston de Foix was about fifty-nine years old. I have known many knights, kings, princes, and other lords in my time; but I have never seen anyone so handsome and well-built as he was. He had a flushed, jovial face. His bright, gray eyes fell affectionately on whatever he pleased to look at. He was so perfect in every way that excessive praise of him is impossible. He liked and disliked what he felt he should like and dislike. He was intelligent, authoritative, wise in giving counsel....

Every day he recited prayers in his private chamber...and had alms distributed at this door...Sometimes (but not every day), he would take money from some of his coffers in his chamber to help a knight or squire who happened to be staying at his court...

The Count, then, lived in the manner I have just described. And when he came out of his chamber at midnight to have supper in his hall, he was always preceded by twelve valets, each carrying a lighted torch. The great hall, brightly lighted by twelve torches held at the head of the Count's table, was always filled with knights and squires. There were always tables set for those who wished to have supper. No one was allowed to address the Count at table unless he was called upon. He usually ate large quantities of fowl, especially the wings and legs. He drank sparingly. He enjoyed listening to minstrels' songs and lays (a medieval poetic form, now largely abandoned). He usually sat about two hours, looking pleased at the sight of the exotic dishes that were set before him, and had them distributed to the knights and squires at the other tables.

pp. 64-65, Paul Archambault, Seven French Chroniclers. Syracuse University Press: 1974.

Jousting (one-on-one competitions between knights with lances and on horseback) and tournaments (closed-course competitions between opposing pairs or larger groups of knights using multiple types of weaponry) provided training opportunities for public display of some of the skills of war as well as some of the generous virtues of chivalry. These events were a chance for noble knights to practice war as a team sport or an individual sport. They were also, and sometimes primarily, social events for all of medieval society to watch. The nobles would be seated in special grandstands; non-nobles were relegated to “standing room only.”

Tournaments could be spectacular opportunities for the display of wealth, power, social standing, largesse, and courtesy. Most nobles loved the pageantry, danger, and display of tournaments.

...If no real conflict was at hand, he sought tournaments, the most exciting, expensive, ruinous, and delightful activity of the noble class, and paradoxically the most harmful to his true military function. Fighting in tournaments concentrated his military skills and absorbed his interest in an increasingly formalized clash, leaving little thought for the tactics and strategy of real battle.

p. 65, Barbara Tuchman, [A Distant Mirror](#).

To get an idea of medieval jousting, close your eyes, place yourself among the participants, and imagine the dramatic impact of this episode from

the life of the Green Count of Savoy--a famous contemporary of Count Gaston III. When he was knighted, at the age of nineteen, the Green Count of Savoy (in the Alps) made his official début in 1352 at a jousting tournament in a style that might even impress cellphone kids of the twenty-first century.

When the trumpets announced the entry of the combatants into the lists, the count appeared at their head resplendent in green silk and velvet vestments under his armor, an emerald plume on the crest of his silver helmet, and astride a magnificent charger richly caparisoned in silver and green. Behind him rode eleven of his noblest knights, also in green, and all were led into the arena by lovely ladies, each holding her champion captive by means of a long green cord attached to the bridle of his charger. Then the damsels, also in green robes, released their knights, and the tournament began. When the jousting had ended for the day, the ladies descended once more into the arena to "recapture" their champions and lead them back into the castle. Then the banqueting began in the great hall, in the course of which gold rings or batons were awarded to those adjudged the most valorous in the day's contests of skill and strength.

According to the chroniclers, the winner of the first day was Antoine de Gramont; the winner on the second day, Pierre of Aarberg; and the winner on the third day, Thibaut of Neuchâtel. Naturally, everyone was convinced that the young count had outshone all the others, and that he was permitting his friends to be acclaimed the winners out of noble modesty. On the last day of the tournaments, therefore, the four ladies who bestowed the prizes hailed Amadeus as the winner and offered him the customary rewards, the gold rings and the privilege of a kiss from each of them. Amadeus is supposed to have accepted the kisses with pleasure, but gallantly requested that the gold rings be given to the lords of Villars, Entremont, and Corgenon. At this, the three knights complained that they would far rather have had the kisses than the

rings, which caused "moult grant risée," the signal for gargantuan revelries lasting all night.

pp. 97-98, Eugene Cox, The Green Count of Savoy. Princeton University Press: 1967.

Nobles and knights were rarely killed in tourneys (or at war). Instead, they were captured and held for ransom and profit. Horses and armor were confiscated. Prestige was acquired or lost. In the grandstands erected for the nobility to watch tournaments, noble ladies sashayed and swooned. Men strutted and preened. Values were confirmed.

Virtually all nobles in the fourteenth century participated in the elaborate pageantry and display of jousting tournaments. Yet, Gaston Fébus was an iconoclast; he did not like jousting nor did he organize any tournaments. He believed that war was too serious an endeavor for mimicry or dilettantism. For Fébus, jousting and tournaments were superfluties; they were mere frivolities to be avoided and disdained.

Fébus believed that the best practice and training for war was hunting.⁸⁴ In his opinion, hunting was the quintessential noble pastime, a virile sport whose practice was not limited to men. Hunting was an

⁸⁴ The God Phoebus-Apollo is a great hunter and his sister, Diana-Artemis is goddess of the hunt. SEE: Ovid, The Metamorphoses. Taking the surname "Fébus" showed Gaston III's devotion to hunting.

enterprise that demanded the utmost skill of a horseman and often presented the very real danger of death to the hunter. Secondly, the bounty of a successful hunt was an essential component of the Rabelaisian feasts that nobles regularly hosted as displays of *largesse*.

There was even a religious component to hunting. Since the 7th century, Pope Gregory the Great had counseled against the sin of sloth. Fébus reasoned that because a successful hunter must be up before daybreak, be active and hard-working, hunting shields the hunter from the sin of sloth, which is the mother of all other sins. For Fébus, skilled hunters not only live longer, they live more joyously, and their chances of going to Heaven are greater.

Gaston Fébus was a passionate hunter his entire life. He believed that hunting was not only the best way to learn and maintain the skills needed for war, hunting was also a profound source of pleasure that conduced to good health and spiritual communion with Nature.

The ethos of chivalry was reflected in literature. Medieval poetry was primarily shared orally and in music by *troubadours*. *Troubadours* were itinerant poet-musicians who often extolled the virtues of chivalry when they

performed in the courts of the nobility on whom they depended to earn their living.

Professor Kilgour writes lucidly that the troubadours:

...elaborated a poetic ideal of chivalry, which rejected self-interest, pillage, and the indulgence of bloody and sensual passions as ignoble, setting up in their stead the cult of honor, fidelity to family and comrade, to suzerain and king, to one's nation and one's God. The true knight gave up all thought of himself. He swore to renounce the pursuit of wealth, to act nobly for the love of nobleness, to be generous, to be courteous, to redress wrongs, to engage in no quarrel but a just one, to be true to his word, and above all else, to protect the helpless and to serve women...Illusions and golden dreams have always played a tremendous role in human events, and it is absurd to represent the past as a rational whole, constantly ruled by clearly defined interests.

p. xxi, Raymond Kilgour, The Decline of Chivalry. Harvard University Press: 1937. (Disclosure statement: Professor Kilgour was a great-uncle of mine.)

What Professor Kilgour calls the “illusions and golden dreams” of chivalry still capture the romantic imagination of people in the 21st century. In American culture, the literature, films, and music of the “Western” genre are redolent of the ethos of medieval chivalry.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ These ideals of chivalry are precisely the conduct we see unfailingly modeled by Duncan Renaldo and Leo Carillo in television's first serial filmed in color: “The Cisco Kid.” (1950-1956).

Writers and readers of popular fiction and historical fiction rarely focus on chivalry's manifest shortcomings or its glaring and egregious hypocrisies. The inconsistencies of chivalry counter-balanced the golden ideals of the chivalric ethic.

Chivalry...left as great a gap between ideal and practice as religion...the warrior class was...supposed, in theory, to serve as defenders of the Faith, upholders of justice, champions of the oppressed. In practice, they were themselves the oppressors, and by the 14th century, the violence and lawlessness of men of the sword had become a major agency of disorder.

p. xix, Barbara Tuchman. A Distant Mirror. Ballantine: 1978.

Most knights and other nobles fell short of adhering to all the chivalric ideals at all times.⁸⁶ Some fell far shorter than others. Chivalry's ***coup de Jarnac*** did not occur until July 10, 1547, when the chivalric ethos was already in serious decline.

Chivalry had many economic ramifications. The keystone of chivalry was leading the life of a warrior on horseback. Consequently, the chivalric

⁸⁶ Professor Thompson wrote that the XIV century was "...an age notable for the ruthlessness of its warfare, the butchery of prisoners, the breaking of promises, for conspiracy, assassination, treachery, torture and general license, and at the same time the age that saw the foundation of the most celebrated orders of Knighthood, the age in which the tournament and the joust reached the height of their popularity and magnificence, the age in which more was written in praise of chivalry than ever before or since. The less men acted as chivalrous knights, the more deliberately they preserved the external forms of the code of knighthood and talked and wrote about its ethical program...no one seemed to realize fully that the conduct of the nobility was a mockery and that chivalrous ethics were gradually being supplanted by capitalist ethics or no ethics at all." pp. 866-867, Thompson and Johnson, An Introduction to Medieval Europe (300-1500). W. W. Norton: 1937.

lifestyle took a lot of money. Someone had to foot the bills to host a jousting competition or a tournament. Those medieval rodeos were elaborate and spendy affairs. Going off to a real war, fully-equipped and well-trained, wasn't cheap, either.

It was extremely expensive to maintain the trappings of a medieval warrior. A stable of horses had to be cared for and fed. The horses had to be of different breeds adapted for the different purposes needed at differing times. A pack horse was needed to carry the armor and weapons. At least two palfreys were needed to ride when not on the battlefield—one for the knight and one for his squire. The huge warhorse, the *destrier*, was painstakingly trained to make many specialized moves to enhance the knight's effectiveness in battle, and it was taught to bite, kick, and trample. Fine steel used to make swords, lance-tips, coats of mail, armor, helmets, etc., was rare and costly. The knight had to foot all those bills on his own.

The workmanship required to create a full suit of armor and knightly weapons was not only exceptional, the technology of war constantly

evolved in the Middle Ages. Defensive and offensive weaponry of all kinds, including armor, needed regular upgrades.⁸⁷

Castles required a huge outlay of money to build and they immediately required constant maintenance. Stone walls and towers had to be repaired, flammable wooden hoarding required upkeep, and moats needed to be kept free of silt.

To Gaston III's credit, he adopted a relatively standard architectural format for the castles he built, thereby saving substantial funds without compromising their efficacy. (My personal favorites in Foix-Béarn—so far--are the castles of Foix and Mauvezin; Pau boasts a magnificent statue of Fébus standing next to one of his beloved dogs.)

It took a lot of working serfs to finance the lifestyle of a lord. It took supplemental war booty and ransom money to build his castle, support his family and his live-in retinue of knights and squires (aka clientele), his stables, his cows, his chickens, his servants, his guests, his mistresses, his gifts, his banquets, his modern armor, his gaudy clothes, his arsenal of

⁸⁷ Because medieval armor is so beautiful, numerous museums have collections that show the evolution of helmet design, decoration, coverage, plate articulation, etc. SEE, for example, the superb collection of medieval weapons and armor at the Art Institute of Chicago.

hand-made weapons, his jousting, his *troubadours*, his *jongleurs*, his *ménestrels*, his grandiose entertaining, and his ostentatious *largesse*.

The need for money encouraged predatory behavior by the nobility. According to the divinely-ordained, three-part world view of feudalism, the nobility was supposed to protect the rest of society, but in reality, the nobility often preyed on the social classes it was supposed to protect. Those classes were the rural peasantry and emerging bourgeoisie of the tiny towns and cities, plus the clerics of the wealthy monasteries and abbeys.

The search for money to pay for war and support their extravagant lifestyle drove many nobles to conveniently ignore the generous values of chivalry and focus, instead, on selfish and ignoble pecuniary needs.

As usual, Barbara Tuchman succinctly states the case:

Raising money to pay the cost of war was to cause more damage to 14th century society than the physical destruction of war itself....war was made to pay for itself through pillage. Booty and ransom were not just a bonus, but a necessity....ransom became a commercial enterprise.

p. 81, Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*. Ballantine Books: 1978.

There is much about chivalry that was superficial and blind to the needs or rights of anyone outside the privileged 1% of society that were noble. Does any of this sound familiar?

Chivalry during the Middle Ages was, on the one hand, the great source of tragic political errors, exactly as are nationalism and racial pride at the present day.

p. 94, Johann Huizinga. The Waning of the Middle Ages. Doubleday: 1947.

It has been persuasively argued that Gaston III was always conscious of public relations and that he purposely enhanced his renown as a paragon of chivalry. True enough, he is not remembered as a modest man. Certainly, changing his name to “Gaston Fébus” is consistent with the assertion that he was image-conscious.

Adopting the name of a Greek God (Phoebus-Apollo) is hardly a sign of modesty or bashfulness. It is, however, consistent with chivalric pedagogy’s penchant for the study of classical mythology. Chivalry valued all classical learning and literature. Taking the name of a Greek God was bold, perhaps presumptuous, but it was consistent with the behavior of a chivalric hero.

Largesse was another essential trait of chivalry. *Largesse* can be defined as a mode of demonstrative living in the public spotlight marked by the spontaneous and liberal sharing of one's private wealth with others. *Largesse* connotes resplendent giving of lavish gifts and hosting splendiferous banquets. *Largesse* means a lifestyle replete with habitual displays of striking and disproportionate generosity.

A thumbnail sketch of the Visconti-Plantagenet marriage of 1368 will give you a gut feeling for chivalric "largesse."

When the ceremony was over, a magnificent banquet was held in the center of the public square next to the cathedral. Food and drink were said to have been provided in such abundance as to have easily satiated 10,000 people. There were thirty courses, and after each one splendid gifts were presented to the guests of honor: silver vessels, seventy horses caparisoned in silk and silver, costly suits of mail, massive steel helmets and breastplates, jewels of every kind, and rich garments of precious cloth....

...The repast consisted of a series of double courses of meat and fish, beginning with suckling pigs, gilded, with fire in their mouths, accompanied by crabs, also gilded. Following the presentation of the platters came the gifts, this time two greyhounds with velvet collars and silken leashes, and twelve brace of hounds held by chains of gilded brass, collars of leather, and silk leashes. Next came roasted hares and pike followed by gifts of greyhounds, goshawks, and silver buttons; the third course was gilded calf and trout accompanied by gifts of more hounds.

And so went the gargantuan spectacle: quails and partridges with roasted trout; ducks and herons, gilded, with gilded carp; beef and fat

capons in garlic and vinegar sauce, sturgeons in water; capons and meat in lemon sauce, beef and eel pies; meat and fish-galantine, roast kids, venison, peacock, pickled ox tongue, and finally, cheeses and fruits of every description...When the feasting had ended at last and the participants had washed, expensive robes were distributed to everyone present. Bernabo gave money to the crowds of minstrels, jugglers, and acrobats, and the wines and confections were served.

pp. 251-252, Eugene Cox, The Green Count of Savoy. Princeton University Press: 1967.

Whether at home in one of his many castles, or traveling with a large retinue (which always included hundreds of hunting dogs), Gaston Fébus consistently exemplified the chivalric trait of “largesse.”

The nightly banquets over which Gaston III presided in his castles of Foix-Béarn were models of largesse. So were the precious gifts he habitually showered on his many guests, knights, squires, and heralds, as well as the poets, *troubadours*, *jongleurs*, and *ménestrels* who provided the sophisticated entertainment for his guests, especially in music.

The court of Gaston Fébus in Foix-Béarn was a cultural leader in the development of 14th century polyphonic music called *Ars nova*. (So was the court of the Avignon papacy.) Gaston Fébus was a generous patron of all the medieval performing arts. In these respects, Gaston III was a paragon of cultured, medieval chivalry.

The most famous medieval chronicler, Jean Froissart, devoted nearly all of Book III of his masterwork Les Chroniques (“*Voyage en Béarn*”) to a poetic recounting of the sumptuousness of his multi-month stay in the Pyrenees as a guest of Gaston Fébus. For Froissart, Gaston Fébus was chivalry incarnate and the ideal of a perfect prince. Other, less-famous chroniclers of the time concurred with Froissart’s dithyrambic judgments. Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales includes “The Manciple’s Tale,” which is a story that includes a character named Fébus. That tale may even hold the clue, thus far unsubstantiated, as to why Gaston III mysteriously banished his wife from Foix-Béarn.

Erudition was another trait valued by the ethos of chivalry, although it was not the one most frequently practiced by the nobility as a whole. To his great credit, Gaston Fébus was extraordinary in his scholarship and authorship. As a bibliophile, Gaston III was exceptional. He was an unrivalled archetype of erudite chivalry.

Gaston Fébus was more than highly literate and more than a mere collector of manuscripts with a vast, personal library. He was the only medieval prince of his time who was also an author. He wrote poetry that was successful in literary competitions (*cansos*), he wrote a scientific

treatise that stayed a respected reference work until the late 18th century (*Le Livre de la chasse*), and he wrote religious literature (*Le livre des Oraisons*). To top this off, he wrote fluidly in three different languages: Occitan, Latin, and French. It is hard not to admire Gaston III's literary output and erudition.

Le Livre de la chasse, (The Book of Hunting) is especially noteworthy.⁸⁸ This is his most famous work, where his authorship is undisputed and his scholarship was unsurpassed for centuries.⁸⁹ The book was an immediate literary success and was quickly translated into English. It is a sumptuous "illuminated" manuscript (i.e., with hand-drawn, polychrome illustrations with glittering gold) that is simultaneously a work of high scholarship as well as a very expensive and still-famous work of art. The artists who created the illuminations were all paid by Fébus as their patron and employer.

Gaston Fébus wrote *Le Livre de la chasse* based on his personal experiences and observations as a hunter. The weapons of his day were

⁸⁸ In the first sentence of *Le Livre de la chasse*, Gaston Fébus summarizes his lifelong predilections : *"Tout mon temps me suis délecté spécialement de trois choses : les armes, l'amour et la chasse."* (For my entire life, I have reveled in three things: war, love, and hunting.)

⁸⁹ Written in 1388, the book is dedicated to Philippe le Hardi, Duke of Burgundy, an uncle of France's King Charles VI.

the longbow and crossbow; he does not discuss falconry. With the expertise of an autodidact naturalist, Fébus discusses habitat requirements, animal behavior, and appearances for various game animals, including wolf, several species of deer, reindeer, ibex, Pyrenean isard (*Capra pyrenaica*), rabbit, brown bear, wild boar⁹⁰, fox, badger, wildcats, and otter. Additionally, the book has 6 chapters devoted to discussing the merits of different breeds of hunting dogs, their illnesses, and their care. The last half of the book is a manual for huntsmen and game keepers, with special attention to the highly-ritualized practices of medieval hunting.

In the field of venery, Gaston III's descriptions of wildlife in this book were relied upon for at least two centuries. All of his data were empirical. I am aware of no other medieval noble who researched, wrote, or published a scientific treatise that is even remotely comparable to this gorgeous and interesting work by Gaston Fébus.

In my opinion, the text of *Le Livre de la Chasse* still reads well in the 21st century--especially for experienced hunters. The artistry of its

⁹⁰ For one example of the very real dangers of hunting wild boar in medieval times, SEE: Michel Pastoureau, *Le roi tué par un cochon*. Éditions du Seuil : 2015.

illuminations is brilliant and lush, yet surprisingly realistic. And the book is elegiac in its praise of dogs.

Le Livre de la Chasse is not the only evidence of this highly-educated nobleman's love of learning. Count Gaston III maintained a court in Foix-Béarn that included poets, *troubadours*, *ménestrels*, and *jongleurs* who performed and composed music, sang, and recited poetry.⁹¹

Poetry contests at the court of Count Gaston III were an annual event, with the poems written and recited in *Langue d'Oc*. Gaston Fébus also composed and performed music and poetry. He was a Grand Prize (*joya*) winner awarded by the prestigious *Consistoire* of Toulouse for his composition of a *canço*, a poem set to music. His court included a *scriptorium* where books were meticulously hand-copied for his personal library (since movable type and the printing press had not yet been invented).

Count Gaston III was far more than a mere patron of the arts; he was a highly-accomplished artist in his own right. In this respect, he was an extraordinary man, a stand-out in his own time and an acclaimed luminary

⁹¹ SEE the CD "Fébus avant: musique à la cour de Gaston Fébus. » SONY Vivarte, SK 48195 (1991).

of medieval scholarship. This was icing on the cake of chivalry, since Gaston III was also a serious master of the martial and cynegetic arts that defined the noble class, a brilliant and successful diplomat, and a wise ruler during very troubled times.

Gaston Fébus scorned jousting as a farcical simulacrum, but he was a passionate hunter, partly because the hunt provided a “true” field test of a knight’s most important skills. Hunting was the quintessential avocation of the nobility and every chivalrous noble was expected to be a hunter. Success in the field required a hunter to demonstrate courage, endurance, intelligence, horsemanship, and skill with weapons—all traits that were essential for combat. Great skill in combat was an essential attribute of chivalry’s ideal *preux*.

The medieval knight loved warring, and Gaston Fébus was no exception. While Fébus was winning “victory without combat” on behalf of Béarn against France and England, he was still a product of XIV century chivalry. Among his contemporaries, his glory and renown depended, to some extent, on personal, heroic acts of warfare.

A famous panegyric of chivalry’s love for The Joys of War comes from an Occitan troubadour, *chatelain*, and warrior named Bertrand de

Born (1140-1215).⁹² Linger over the loving touches he gives to the mayhem of battle and imagine you are in the front row of listeners in the Great Hall of a castle, with walls that are lined with fine tapestries, and immense fires burning in multiple fireplaces while he sings this song to you:

(trans. Frederick Goldin, *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvères* (1973))

*I love the joyful time of Easter,
That makes the leaves and flowers come forth
and it pleases me to hear the mirth
of the birds, who make their song
resound through the woods,
and it pleases me to see upon the meadows
tents and pavilions planted,
and I feel a great joy
when I see ranged along the field
knights and horses armed for war.*

*And it pleases me when the skirmishers
make the people and their baggage run away,
and it pleases me when I see behind them coming
a great mass of armed men together,
and I have pleasure in my heart
when I see strong castles besieged,
the broken ramparts caving in
and I see the host on the water's edge
closed in all around by ditches,
with palisades, strong stakes close together.*

⁹² SEE ALSO: A Collection of Unmitigated Pedantry, a blog at wordpress.com---www.acoup.blog

*And I am as well pleased by a lord
when he is first in the attack,
armed, upon his horse, unafraid,
so he makes his men take heart
by his own brave lordliness.
And when the armies mix in battle,
each man should be poised
to follow him, smiling,
for no man is worth a thing
till he has given and gotten blow on blow.*

*Maces and swords and painted helms,
the useless shields cut through,
we shall see as the fighting starts,
and many vassals together striking,
and wandering wildly,
the unreined horses of the wounded and dead.
And once entered into battle
let every man proud of his birth
think only of breaking arms and heads,
for a man is worth more dead than alive and beaten.*

*I tell you there is not so much savor
in eating or drinking or sleeping,
as when I hear them scream, "There they are! Let's get them!"
on both sides, and I hear riderless
horses in the shadows, neighing,
and I hear them scream, "Help! Help!"
and I see them fall among the ditches,
little men and great men on the grass,
and I see fixed in the flanks of the corpses
stumps of lances with silken streamers.*

*Barons, pawn your castles,
and your villages, and your cities
before you stop making war on one another.*

A prime feature of chivalry was the conviction that the nobility was divinely-ordained to fight--while bestial peasants worked the land, like oxen, and clerics prayed. Being a skilled hunter, in Gaston Fébus' opinion, meant that one had talents and skills valuable for war together with a sort of pious dedication to God's Will that since all nobles must be warriors, they must also be hunters.

The fundamental characteristic of the medieval nobility (by the XIV century, all knights were noble) is that they were highly-trained soldiers groomed to wage war from early childhood. Their mission in society—ordained by God--was to fight and to protect the rest of society, i.e., noblewomen, clerics, and the helpless. Yet much of chivalry's putative idealism was selfish and egocentric.

Despite their individual skills as warriors, the knighthood generally lacked even the most elementary discipline in battle. They were out for **personal** glory, booty, ransoms, and showy deeds that might make their way into the lyrics of a *jongleur's* or a *ménéstrel's* song, or a troubadour's or a *trouvère's* poem.

14TH century Europe is notable for the general failure of the warrior caste—the nobility—to live up to the moral ideals of chivalry. Not only did the flower of French chivalry lose a series of major battles to the English, but at Poitiers in 1356, many of them turned tail and ran. Many noble knights abandoned King Jean II and his 10-year-old son on the battlefield at Poitiers, where the King and his son were captured by the English.

Medieval chivalry was probably no more or less hypocritical than any other popular system of ethics seen in the course of History. Chivalry was romantic and idealistic, but many of its practitioners were as hypocritical, as avaricious, and as self-centered as humans sometimes are in the twenty-first century. This is abundant and ambivalent food for thought about what are permanent features of “human nature.” What behaviors, what attitudes, what emotions, are hard-wired in The Human Animal?

14th century chivalry was a complex and simultaneous blend of noble ideals (e.g., protecting defenseless women and children, the practice of pious Christianity, generosity, and largesse) with utterly incompatible, base, and hypocritical behavior (e.g., avaricious exaction of taxes, wanton destruction, gratuitous killing of non-nobles during warfare and hunting,

diplomatic mendacity, and deception). Gaston Fébus lived the noble ideals of chivalry as well as its base contradictions.

Chivalry was practiced exclusively by the tiny fraction of society (1% or less) that comprised the ruling, warrior class: the nobility. Fébus came from this ruling élite. His was a family of long-standing, Pyrenean nobility. Fébus married a grand-daughter of the King of France who was a sister of the King of Navarre, but Fébus' only blood relation to high royalty (very distant) was with the King of Aragon. Fébus was local—but he was still eminently noble. He was destined by his noble birth to adhere to the ethos of chivalry and to be judged by his peers on that basis.

As the unchallenged ruler of Foix-Béarn, Gaston III's main concern was to walk the tightrope between the two, warring kingdoms of France and England in order to preserve and enhance his dynastic domains. Simultaneously, he sought to enrich himself, improve the prosperity of his fiefdom, and earn chivalric glory. His unrivalled scholarship and his patronage of the arts are appurtenant traits that complement the exemplary chivalry of Gaston III.

Nonetheless, there are two, indelible stains on Gaston Fébus' Pedigree of Chivalry: 1) repudiating his wife Agnès, and 2) killing his son,

Gaston. Considering these transgressions, along with the rest of his life and accomplishments, we conclude that Gaston Fébus personifies the ideals, the contradictions, and the complexities of 14th century European nobility and its ethos of chivalry.

A SYNERGY OF CALAMITIES

It's hard to overstate the magnitude of the difficulties that confronted people of the fourteenth century. The era was "a perfect storm" of turmoil. Acting in synergy, the four calamities discussed next made the job of ruling his many fiefdoms far more difficult than Gaston III could possibly have imagined when he became Count of Foix-Béarn in 1343.

Here are four, incredibly dark, funnel clouds that touched down in the XIV century:

- the 100 Years' War,
- the Black Plague,
- the instability of the Valois dynasty in France, and
- the Great Schism of the Roman Catholic church.

Viewed in the light of these towering maledictions of the times, the successes of Gaston Fébus are all the more noteworthy.

CALAMITY # 1: WAR

My synopsis (below) of the 100 Years' War (1337-1453) is an effort to compress a myriad of complexities and avoid turning this monograph into an encyclopedia. Please forgive the oversimplifications and elisions.

Throughout the lifetime of Count Gaston III, war raged in Europe. There were countless "private wars," as well as international wars. Private wars were local affairs, pitting lesser nobles and their allied *clientèle* against one another.

The conflict between the Gaston dynasty and the Armagnac dynasty is a textbook example of a feudal, "private war." In the mid-1300's, three clans were the dominant, local powers on the north slope of the Pyrenees: Navarre, Armagnac and the Gaston dynasty of Foix-Béarn. Their geopolitical importance was primarily based on their respective borders with land owned by the King of England (who was simultaneously the Duke of Aquitaine) and lands owned by the King of France.

Armagnac and Foix-Béarn were long-standing enemies. As close neighbors and rivals for control of a mountainous sector that is represented today by France's Département des Hautes Pyrénées (65), they fought

primarily over ownership of a strategic zone in Gascony called the County of Bigorre. It is still known as the Bigorre, and sits east of Béarn and south of Armagnac. The main town of Bigorre is Lourdes.

In 1379, Gaston Fébus accomplished one of the major goals of his reign: he finally occupied the Bigorre and established contiguity of his realm between Foix and the Béarn. This made him the most powerful feudal lord of the Pyrenees, controlling the most commercially important mountain passes and commanding the respect of the four kings who were his neighbors.

The most important war of the XIV century, though, was not the private war between the Gaston clan and the Armagnac clan. Undeniably, it was the seemingly-endless conflict between France and England⁹³ over the great Duchy of Aquitaine. Throughout the reign of Count Gaston III, this was an international war that threatened to involve and ruin Foix-Béarn.

People of the 14th century did not suspect that future historians would call the conflict between England and France during the years 1337-1453

⁹³ “No country has ever profited from protracted warfare.” Sun-tzu, The Art of War. Translated at. 159, Ralph D. Sawyer, The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China. Basic Books: 1993, 2007.

“The Hundred Years War.” This prolonged period of conflict overlapped the entire reign of Gaston III in Foix-Béarn. It was one of the most important and constant features of European political and social life. It deserves our close attention.

The series of wars, treaties, and truces that is known today as the 100 Years War began because of an untenable feudal relationship between the King of England and the King of France. The King of England was simultaneously the Duke of Aquitaine, a large and rich duchy in SW France, centered on Toulouse and Bordeaux. In his capacity as Duke of Aquitaine, the English King was a vassal and subordinate of the King of France. Any judicial or administrative decision made by the Duke of Aquitaine could be appealed to and reversed by the King of France. Therein lay the rub. Vassalage was an intolerable arrangement for the Duke of Aquitaine / King of England.

The Hundred Years War (1337-1453) was originally a feudal war for sovereignty over Aquitaine--plus prestige and ego. A decade later, it also became a dynastic war between two families--Plantagenet England and Valois France--for the grand prize of the throne of France.

The dynastic facet of the 100 Years' War is genealogical. England's King Edward III was crowned in 1327. Because of his mother, Isabelle, he had a strong claim to inherit the throne of France when Isabelle's brother, France's King Charles IV, died a year later in 1328. Isabelle was the last, surviving child of King Philippe IV; her three brothers had each reigned briefly as King of France, but they all pre-deceased Isabelle. She was the last, living descendant of France's King Charles IV.

King Edward III of England's claim to be the rightful King of France—based on his mother, Isabelle--was not articulated until seven years after Edward III had knelt and solemnly sworn liege homage to France's King Jean II for Aquitaine in 1331.⁹⁴ Edward III's claim in 1338 to be the rightful King of France was an afterthought. His claim was patently inconsistent with his prior conduct--his oath of homage as a vassal.

Nonetheless, England's King Edward III became a "Pretender" to the throne of France that was occupied by France's Valois King Jean II. At the age of 15, citing sound, genealogical evidence of his *bona fides* as a

⁹⁴ With good reason, André Maurois calls the Hundred Years War a feudal war and a dynastic war—but also an *imperialist war*, because England was fighting for money on two fronts: control of the rich, weaving cities of Flanders on which the English economy and export of raw wool was dependent, and control of Aquitaine and the rich wine trade of Bordeaux, which shipped to England. English armies profited, too, by plundering the riches of France's cities, abbeys, and monasteries. pp. 107-114, André Maurois, [Histoire de France](#).

descendant of the last Capetian King of France, King Edward III of England laid claim to the throne of France for the first time in 1338.

Ten years had already passed since the death of the last Capetian King, Charles IV in 1328.⁹⁵ Two kings of the new, Valois dynasty (Philippe VI and Jean II) had occupied the throne of France for a full decade before Edward III challenged them in 1338. By then, the horse was out of the barn and the Valois wore the crown of France.

An additional “Pretender” to the throne of France was Charles the Bad (aka Charles II, King of Navarre). He, too, had direct bloodlines to the Capet dynasty. He often played a pivotal role in the conflicts between England and France, seeking to tip the balance of power and scoop up the spoils. Charles the Bad was motivated by a visceral hatred of the Valois family and an insatiable lust for lucre and personal power. The game being played was high-stakes poker with France in the pot.

In Charles the Bad’s perfidious machinations for power, jockeying back and forth between England and France, he was periodically abetted by his brother-in-law, Count Gaston III. Gaston III occasionally combined

⁹⁵ Lawyers would say that Edward III’s claim to the throne of France was “barred by laches.”

forces with the Kingdom of Navarre in order to safeguard the autonomy of Béarn and protect Foix. Charles the Bad's motives were not shared by Gaston III.

To understand the reign of Count Gaston III, it is necessary to understand the practice of war in the XIV century and, in particular, the broad impacts of the Hundred Years War. This requires us to back up a bit and look at some events that took place **before** the birth of Count Gaston III in 1331. We need to see how the southwestern half of what we now call France (i.e., the Duchy of Aquitaine) came to be owned by the Plantagenet Kings of England. Here is a “short” version recapping our prior discussion:

When King Louis VII divorced Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1153, she promptly re-married. Eleanor's new husband was Henri Plantagenet, a young noble in northeastern France.

Henri Plantagenet was 10 years younger than Eleanor of Aquitaine, but he was already very rich and very powerful. Before their marriage, Henri Plantagenet had already inherited the Plantagenet family's immense holdings in northwest France: Anjou, Maine, Touraine, and Normandy. Henri was one of the dozen “lesser” nobles in France who were richer and more powerful than the King of France. Aquitaine was only one part of the

Plantagenet family's famous "Angevin Empire," which was much larger than the Capet family's holdings in France.⁹⁶

Eleanor of Aquitaine's marriage to Henri Plantagenet was a political setback for France. When Eleanor divorced Louis VII, she took with her all her rights to the Duchy of Aquitaine. Eleanor brought Aquitaine with her in dowry, to be ruled by her new husband, Henri. *De jure uxoris*, Henri Plantagenet became Duke of Aquitaine. This was a disaster for the Kingdom of France. It soon got worse.

A few months after marrying Eleanor of Aquitaine, Henri Plantagenet became King Henri II of England. He simultaneously remained Duke of Aquitaine. In effect, England owned SW France. As a result, King Henri II of England owned far more land in France than the King of France. English control of French land resulted in what André Maurois has called "the strange symbiosis of the kingdoms of France and England."

One fact is crucial to understanding the conflict between England and France: Henri Plantagenet was the legal inferior of the King of France

⁹⁶ SEE: Martin Aurell, [L'Empire des Plantagenet](#). Perrin: 2003, 2004.

regarding all the Plantagenet lands on the European continent, i.e., the King of England was supreme only in his island kingdom, not in France.

As a vassal of the French King, it was Henri's feudal obligation to kneel and swear a solemn oath of homage to his overlord, the King of France. The King of France, as Henri's suzerain, could overrule any judicial decision made by Henri in his capacity as the Duke of Aquitaine.

After Henri II died (1133-1189), centuries of rivalry continued between the English Plantagenet family and the French Capet family, followed by their Valois successors. Contentions often focused on the (English) vassal's requirement of swearing an oath of homage to his (French) overlord. This was more than English pride could bear. The Plantagenets felt humiliated by the French and periodically refused to kneel before the King of France to recite the requisite oath of fealty for their gigantic and rich fiefdom of Aquitaine.

Vineyard-rich Aquitaine was a focal point of contention between England and France. So were Normandy and Flanders, in the north of France, but we focus on Aquitaine because of its relevance to Gaston III and Foix-Béarn.

More than any other factor, it was the oath of homage that feudal law required to be sworn by the Duke of Aquitaine (i.e., the King of England) and his resulting status as a vassal of the King of France, that were the root cause of the Hundred Years War.

The Kings of England had been vassals of the King of France for lands they retained in France ever since William the Bastard, Duke of Normandy, conquered England in 1066.⁹⁷ Yet, for Aquitaine, the Plantagenet Kings of England repeatedly sought to escape the legal obligations of their status as a vassal of the King of France, including the requirement of a sworn oath of homage to obey him and submit to his judgments.

In 1259, the Plantagenet King Henry III of England reluctantly agreed that due to his status as Duke of Aquitaine, he was a vassal of the King of France. An uneasy calm then prevailed. It did not last.

In 1294, France's King Philippe IV (*le Bel*) summoned his vassal, the new Duke of Aquitaine, who at that time was England's King Edward I. One of the cardinal duties of a vassal under feudal law was to come when

⁹⁷ SEE: Wm. Carruthers Sellar, 1066, And All That. E.P. Dutton & Co.: 1931, for a completely useless but amusing recap of all the important and memorable stuff that happened.

his lord called. Yet, King Edward I refused to answer three summonses from his lord, the King of France. For this dereliction of feudal duty, King Edward I was declared to be in default under feudal law. But what was the penalty? Under feudal law, the penalty was “*commise*,” i.e., confiscation by the suzerain of the delinquent vassal’s fief.

England's King Edward I forfeited the Duchy of Aquitaine in 1294 for failure to perform his feudal duties, and Aquitaine reverted to the King of France for 9 years. Then, France's King Philippe IV restored the Duchy of Aquitaine to its Duke—but only after England's King Edward I answered a new summons and swore an oath of homage to King Philippe IV for the Duchy of Aquitaine (but not for the Kingdom of England).

Whenever a vassal or an overlord died, the oath of homage and vassalage had to be renewed by the successor. Under traditional, feudal law, all duties were quintessentially personal. Accordingly, when Edward II became King of England in 1307, he was required to swear a personal oath of homage to the King of France for his obligations of vassalage as Duke of Aquitaine.⁹⁸ Since the oath of homage was personal, each new King of

⁹⁸ Professor Cantor briskly describes Edward II as “personally unattractive and incompetent.” p. 515, Norman Cantor, Civilization of the Middle Ages. HarperPerennial: 1914.

France was entitled to have all of his vassals renew their oath of homage to him. An oath had to be sworn whenever a new vassal came on the scene, and whenever a new overlord (suzerain) came on the scene.

King Edward II was in the same situation as his father regarding his vassalage for the Duchy of Aquitaine. The vassal's oath of homage was repeated three, separate times by King Edward II after France's King Philippe IV *le Bel* died in 1314 because Philippe IV was succeeded as King by each of his three, short-lived sons (one at a time).

King Edward II swore homage for his Duchy of Aquitaine to King Philippe IV of France in 1308, then again in 1320 to France's King Philippe V. So far, so good, eh? Well, look out.

In 1322, King Charles IV took the throne of France. As was his right under feudal law, he called on his vassal, the English King and Duke of Aquitaine, to come to Paris and swear homage to him personally. But this time, King Edward II was "just too busy" to come to the court of France and swear the requisite oath of homage. And so, one more time, the Duchy of Aquitaine was confiscated by the King of France until 1327 when it was restored to Edward II, albeit in a shrunken status, due to military conquests made in Aquitaine by France during the interim.

(King Edward II of England and his famous homosexual lovers, the Despencers, were deposed in 1327 in favor of his Queen Isabella, the daughter of the French King Philippe IV. After arranging the gruesome murder of her deposed husband, Queen Isabella ruled England as Regent with her adulterine lover, Roger Mortimer—but that is a different story.)

King Edward III took the throne of England in 1327 at the tender age of fourteen. (In 1330, as an emancipated adult, he banished his randy and murderous mother, Queen Isabella.) But the English Kings' problem of being a vassal of the King of France, and thereby required to swear homage to the King of France for the Duchy of Aquitaine, did not go away.

Edward III swore a partial oath of simple homage to France's King Philippe VI in 1329, then swore an equivocal oath of liege homage in 1331.⁹⁹

The protagonist of this article, Gaston Fébus, was born in 1331 in Béarn. The disputes between Valois France and Plantagenet England did not end when Gaston Fébus was born. Not by a long shot.

⁹⁹ Edward III's sworn oaths of homage demonstrate recognition by him of his status as a vassal of the King of France, and show that he recognized the Valois dynasty as the legitimate rulers of France. Edward III's subsequent claims as a Pretender to the throne of France, labeling the Valois as "usurpers," were a *post hoc* rationalization to try to legitimize his decision to use armed warfare against his suzerain—an act of felony—and seek *rapprochement* with Flanders as an ally against France and remain England's partner in the wool trade.

In 1337, England's King Edward III was declared a felonious vassal of the King of France for failure to return to France and answer the summons of King Philippe VI to swear firmer obligations of liege homage for the Duchy of Aquitaine. Twice, judicial rulings in France declared King Edward III's forfeiture of the Duchy of Aquitaine: first in 1337, then again in 1369.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to tell all the details of the story of the struggle for Aquitaine. For now, let us simply say that France and England fought for control of Aquitaine for several hundred years.

For our purposes, what is most important is this: **Count Gaston III of Foix-Béarn artfully played the conflict between England and France (and Navarre) to his greatest advantage, using it to win and retain sovereign status for his Vicomté of Béarn.**

For me, the term "Hundred Years War" is a misnomer. There was no single war that lasted 100 years without interruption. There were multiple wars, multiple parties to the wars, and during the many truces and unsuccessful peace treaties, there were so many unemployed warriors (the "Great Companies" of unemployed mercenary soldiers and others, including a few priests, nobles, etc.) roaming the land for pillage and

plunder that “peace” was often more dangerous for the common folk than when war was overtly declared.

The Great Companies (aka *routiers* or *écorcheurs*) were primarily bands of unemployed, mercenary soldiers who waged war for their private benefit when they were not being paid to fight for a King. You could call it “non-governmental unemployment compensation.” For many decades, the Great Companies were a scourge in France, burning, killing, plundering, extorting money, raping, and wreaking havoc whenever a truce was declared or peace threatened to break out.

Because of the random plundering of the Great Companies, much of the French countryside was progressively emptied of its productive peasantry. They fled to the nearest castle or fortified town and sought protection from their lord. Whenever a truce or treaty might temporarily suspend the overt military operations of France or England, the vacuum of belligerence was filled by the depredations and crimes of the suddenly-unemployed mercenaries who continued to live off the land and the hapless peasantry.

The methods of the mercenaries were quite hideous:

They imposed ransoms on prosperous villages and burned the poor ones, robbed abbeys and monasteries of their stores and valuables, pillaged peasants' barns, killed and tortured those who hid their goods or resisted ransom, not sparing the clergy or the aged, violated virgins, nuns, and mothers, abducted women as enforced camp followers and men as servants...they wantonly burned harvests and farm equipment and cut down trees and vines, destroying what they lived by, in actions which seem inexplicable...

p. 164, Barbara Tuchman, A Distant Mirror. Ballantine: 1978.

The image I like for the Hundred Years War is to imagine the two, principal combatants--France and England--as a couple of burly, bare-knuckle boxers who have unwittingly started a fight that is fated to last 116 years. The boxers stand toe-to-toe, knocking The Livin' Bejeesus out of one another, each of them "punch drunk" and unable to deliver a knockout punch.

At ringside, we see the diminutive Charles the Bad (King of Navarre) sneaking from England's corner to France's corner and back again. Between rounds of the fight, he offers secret aid to England (for a fee) and then offers vivifying smelling salts to France (but the salts are actually arsenic). The fight goes on, and on, and on, while the spectators are systematically robbed and beaten by armed thugs roaming the audience—

mercenary thugs who used to work for each of the boxers, or for Charles the Bad, or for all three, but who now work for nobody but themselves.

Moving among the spectators, unnoticed by England or France or the mercenary thugs, is a handsome and wily cutpurse: Count Gaston III. He is the only one to leave the fight before it ends and the only one to really profit from it.

Because of the Great Companies and the near-constant war with England, 97.28% of which took place on French soil, France after 1337 was a land of great danger, violence, unrest, and uncertainty. France suffered from a systematic plundering of the countryside by mercenaries who extorted ransoms called "*pâtis*" (protection pay-off money extorted from nobles or towns), wantonly burned villages, towns, churches, monasteries and abbeys, denuded the country of grain, vineyards and cattle, and caused immeasurable economic devastation along with a sickening violence.

England imposed on France the harsh Treaty of Brétigny-Calais (1360) after soundly defeating the French at the battle of Poitiers in 1356. At Poitiers, the English captured the French King Jean II and held him for ransom. This disastrous treaty (from the French perspective) carved up

France and transferred huge chunks of territory in absolute sovereignty to England. Among other things, it gave Aquitaine to England as a sovereign entity, free of all obligations of vassalage and homage to France.

In exchange for French renunciation of its feudal rights in Aquitaine, the Treaty of Brétigny required the King of England (Edward III) to renounce his claim to the throne of France.¹⁰⁰ For 9 years, the King of England failed to make the required renunciation. France did not make the called-for renunciation of its rights to Aquitaine, either.

In 1369, the new King of France (Charles V took the throne in 1364) summoned his vassal, the Duke of Aquitaine (King Edward III), but the Duke/King refused to come. So, in 1369, the Parlement of Paris (sort of a Supreme Court) ruled the fiefdom of the Duchy of Aquitaine forfeited again, and France's King Charles V confiscated Aquitaine from its Duke, i.e., the King of England.

The back-and-forth fortunes of France and England during the 100 Years War, the machinations of feudal law, and the successive forfeitures of the Duchy of Aquitaine, all worked to the great advantage of Gaston

¹⁰⁰ Renouncing a claim to a crown he had never worn was not much of a concession for the King of England.

Fébus in Foix-Béarn. The “big dogs” of England and France were preoccupied fighting each other; they were relatively unconcerned with Béarn and Fébus’ claim to hold it free and clear of any obligation of vassalage. Complex diplomatic maneuvering was required of Fébus, but he succeeded brilliantly in keeping Béarn sovereign, neutral, and at peace.

Count Gaston III succeeded in sparing his subjects in Foix-Béarn from the war that raged around him. How did he do it?

The savvy Gaston Fébus adroitly played the various misfortunes and distractions of the two, belligerent superpowers to the advantage of Foix-Béarn. Those distractions were numerous and serious. Fébus kept his eye on the ball. He focused on the interests of Foix-Béarn whether England was trouncing France (1327-1360), or France was regaining territory it had lost to England (after 1369), or France was torn by civil war (two factions, the Bourguignons and Armagnacs fought from 1382-1415).¹⁰¹

In addition, Fébus cleverly stayed out of the complex maneuvering that ensued as a result of the Great Schism of the Roman Catholic

¹⁰¹ SEE: Bertrand Schnerb, Armagnacs et Bourguignons, la maudite guerre. Perrin : 2001, 2009.

Church.¹⁰² He stayed mum and did not endorse any of the competing Popes. Fébus was clever as a fox. Not taking sides in the Great Schism justified his wily decision to withhold all clerical tax monies that would otherwise have been paid to the Church.

It should not be forgotten that the Black Plague of 1348 detoured around Foix-Béarn. Even though that was just blind luck, it freed Fébus from many of the Plague-related disasters that befell France and England from 1348 on.

During the reign of Gaston III, Foix-Bearn enjoyed relative peace and prosperity. His non-alignment policy meant that Foix-Béarn spent his reign without war against either England or France. Lady Luck (Dame Fortune) spared his lands from the Plague, and the combination of all the foregoing meant that Foix-Béarn during the reign of Gaston III was a land relatively without significant social stress. This undoubtedly contributed to Fébus'

¹⁰² The Catholic Pope left Rome in 1309 and moved the apparatus of the papacy to Avignon, a small in-holding owned by the Roman Catholic Church, surrounded by French Provence. Moving the papal bureaucracy to the (perceived) "Sin City" of Avignon is known, thanks to Petrarch, as the Babylonian Captivity. In 1378 the "Great Schism" began when two, and sometimes three, rival Popes competed for control of the Church and its coffers, each fulminating excommunications and interdicts against the other, each demanding tax money, each appointing rival bishops and abbots to benefices, each using diplomacy to gain adherents among the many rulers of Europe. The brouhaha lasted until the Council of Constance in 1417, or, if you prefer, until the death of the last anti-Pope in 1423.

popularity among the citizens of Foix-Béarn. His bold and successful assertion of sovereignty for Béarn certainly added to his prestige.

The neutrality of Béarn vis-à-vis England and France freed Fébus to fight his neighbor and historic enemy—the Comte d’Armagnac—for control of the adjacent County of Bigorre. It had long been a goal of Gaston Fébus to control Bigorre, and thereby physically connect Béarn with Foix. This is precisely what Fébus did next.

At the same time, Fébus was wise enough to continue to placate the King of France by repeatedly declaring his allegiance to him as suzerain for the Comté de Foix—but not for Béarn.

War for Bigorre and against the Armagnacs began almost as soon as Fébus returned home from Meaux in 1358. In 1362, Fébus crushed the Armagnacs at the battle of Launac, wringing ransoms of gold from the hundreds of prisoners he captured. This was the treasure that Fébus used to cement his power in the Pyrenees, fund the defensive network of castles that protected Foix-Béarn, and protect the independence of Béarn.

In 1376, Gaston Fébus once again took on his Armagnac rivals in the War of Comminges, a neighboring Pyrenean fiefdom where Gaston III had

a strong right of inheritance. Fébus won a clear victory in the winter of 1376 at Cazères, capturing Jean II d'Armagnac and 200 of his knights.

The wars between Armagnac and Foix-Béarn were brought to an end by the time-honored method of a diplomatic marriage. In 1378, the only son of Gaston III (Gaston de Béarn) became engaged to a daughter of the Count of Armagnac (Béatrice d'Armagnac). They were married in 1379, when Little Gaston was 16 years old.

CALAMITY # 2: THE BLACK DEATH¹⁰³

Count Gaston III was 17 years old in 1348 and firmly established as the legitimate ruler of Foix-Béarn when the Black Plague swept across western Europe.¹⁰⁴ The Black Death killed roughly one-third of all living humans in Europe—except for a very few, small, refugia that were spared from the tremendous mortality. (SEE: Map of Plague, herein at p. 11.)

Béarn was one of the lucky refugia.¹⁰⁵ For reasons nobody really knows, the Black Plague made a detour around Foix and Béarn¹⁰⁶. Being spared from the Plague was truly a cause of rejoicing for Gaston III's lucky subjects. In an age of superstition, myth, and miracles, it seriously

¹⁰³ *Pasteurella pestis*, aka *Yersinia pestis*, is the bacillus that causes bubonic plague and the closely-related pulmonary plague. It was discovered (twice) in 1894. Bubonic plague is transmitted by the bite of a flea carried by rats; pulmonary plague is transmitted by drops of saliva from infected persons who cough, sneeze, or spit. Medieval man was ignorant of these scientific facts.

¹⁰⁴ 1348 was not the only year of Black Plague in Europe. The Plague returned in 1360-1362 with almost equal devastation. The Plague returned frequently, in fits and starts, until 1670 and continued to recur in Europe until the Marseille Plague of 1720-1722. SEE : pp. 156-159, Fernand Braudel, *L'identité de la France*. Flammarion : 1990; Giovanni Bocaccio, *The Decameron*, Signet Classics: 2002 (written in 1353); William McNeill, *Plagues & Peoples*. Anchor Doubleday: 1976; and Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Signet Classics: 1960 (written in 1723). *La Peste*, the brilliant novel written by Albert Camus in 1947, is a gem and still relevant in 2020.

¹⁰⁵ A slice of Flanders was also largely spared.

¹⁰⁶ My dilettantish hypothesis is that the Plague skipped Foix and Béarn because they were not close to a Mediterranean port where Plague-infested rats debarked, they were thinly-populated, and they were not on a trade route from any such port. No city of dense concentration existed in 14th century Foix or Béarn. 50-60,000 was the total population for all of Béarn; with a population density of only 10-12 people per square km. Moreover, the cold, mountain climate of the early Little Ice Age (1300-1800) was inhospitable to the Plague bacillus.

enhanced the aura of semi-divinity that graced Count Gaston III. Clearly, God favored Count Gaston III.

By way of comparison to Foix-Béarn's good fortune, as a result of the Great Plague of 1348 the population of the nearby Pyrenees Kingdom of Navarre dropped by 40-50%. Avoiding the grave, demographic, economic, and epidemiological disasters of the Great Plague presumably simplified the task of ruling Foix-Béarn. Surely, it augmented the mystique, prestige, and popularity of its *seigneur*, Count Gaston III.

The bubonic plague known as The Great Plague returned to scourge Europe at least 5 times from 1346-1425¹⁰⁷. The Great Plague of 1346-1349 was the greatest demographic disaster in European history.¹⁰⁸ The loss of workers was so great that the resulting scarcity of labor actually improved wages. Another effect of the Plague was to decimate the financial resources of the French crown. Foix-Béarn largely escaped those impacts.

¹⁰⁷ Google the brilliant painting "The Triumph of Death" by Pieter Breughel the elder.

¹⁰⁸ The Great Plague of 1346-1349 was not the first pandemic of bubonic plague to hit Europe. It was preceded by the Justinian Plague of 541-542, which recurred periodically until 750 and caused an estimated 25-100 million deaths. The Emperor Justinian contracted that eponymous plague—but he survived.

The Plague gave rise to the medieval artistic theme known as the “*danse macabre*” with its omnipresent skeletons and the hooded Grim Reaper which we still see portrayed in places conserving 14th century art, like Rocamadour. The morbid art speaks volumes about the times.

With the terrors and dangers of war and pestilence omnipresent, just staying alive became more tenuous and less likely. Erratic behavior became the new norm in the 14th century.

Medieval man skated on the thinnest possible ice of verified knowledge with beneath him unplumbed and altogether terrifying depths of ignorance and superstition.

p. 29, Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death*. Allan Sutton: 1969.

There were two types of Plague. One type was spread by physical contact. Bubonic plague infected the bloodstream. It caused buboes and internal bleeding. The other type of plague was even more virulent; it was pneumonic plague that infected the lungs and was spread by respiratory infection.

A victim could have both types of plague at once, which accelerated death. Cases were known of persons going to bed well and dying before they awoke, of doctors catching the illness at a patient’s bedside and dying before their patient.

The diseased sailors showed strange black swellings about the size of an egg or an apple in the armpits and groin. The swellings oozed blood and pus and were followed by spreading boils and black splotches on the skin from internal bleeding. The sick suffered severe pain and died quickly within five days of the first symptoms. As the disease spread, other symptoms of continuous fever and spitting of blood appeared instead of the swellings or buboes. These victims coughed and sweated heavily and died even more quickly, within three days or less, sometimes in 24 hours. In both types everything that issued from the body—breath, sweat, blood from the buboes and lungs, bloody urine, and blood-blackened excrement—smelled foul. Depression and despair accompanied the physical symptoms, and before the end “death is seen seated on the face.”

...

The sense of a vanishing future created a kind of dementia of despair.

pp. 92, 99, Barbara Tuchman, A Distant Mirror. Ballantine Books: 1978.

SEE ALSO: Boccaccio’s incomparable and detailed Introduction to the Decameron (only 20 pages long, and riveting) for an astonishing, eye-witness, clinical account of the 1348 Great Plague in Tuscany.

The headlong flight from the cities, abandoning possessions and leaving houses open to all the world; the ruthless desertion of the sick, to meet their end as best they might, with no company but their own; the hurried, sordid burials in great communal pits; crops wasting in the fields and cattle wandering untended over the countryside—such details are the common currency of the chroniclers. On some points, even, it seems that Boccaccio does not do full justice to the horror.

p. 36, Philip Ziegler, The Black Death. Allan Sutton: 1969.

Medical care in the 1300's depended on superstitions, prayers, miraculous relics, and the patient's credulity. Germ theory was centuries away. So was the Scientific Method.

Medieval medical thought was based on ideas hatched in ancient Greece. It was organized around the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire; the four qualities of cold, hot, moist, and dry; and the four humors of blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. These physical qualities determined the behavior of all created things, including the human body.

14th century Europe was pre-industrial. Trade was generally limited to food, cloth, wine, and spices. Money was scarce. Life on land was precarious and travel by sea was dangerous. The risk of a grisly death was always imminent, and the arrival of the Plague made morbid thoughts real. In the words of Thomas Hobbes (Leviathan, 1651), life in 14th century Europe for many people was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Conversely, one medieval alchemist's suggested style of healthy living in the XIV century sounds pretty sane and downright alluring to me.

He advised:

...listening to and reading delectable books and hearing sweet and amiable speech; looking at lovely faces, hearing the sweet resonance of musical instruments and sweet songs...looking at beautiful faces and other things delightful to the heart, also looking at the starry sky and clear water.¹⁰⁹

Acting in synergy with the multiple disasters of constant warfare and the “peacetime” depredations of the mercenaries (*écorcheurs*), alongside the mortality and chaos of the Plague, there was the chaos of civil society engendered by the instability of the nascent Valois dynasty, which we discuss next.

¹⁰⁹ In medieval French, the alchemist’s advice was: « oïr et lire livres délectables et entendre parole douce et aimable ; regarder belles face, ouïr instruments musicaux doucement résonant et douces chansons (...) regarder belles faces et autres choses délectables au coeur, si comme regarder le ciel étoilé et l’eau clere. » p. 184, Joel Blanchard. La Fin du Moyen Âge. Perrin : 2020.

CALAMITY # 3: INSTABILITY OF THE VALOIS DYNASTY

France's "Capetian miracle" ended in 1328 when the last representative of the "direct" Capetian dynasty, King Charles IV, died without a son (or a brother) to inherit the throne. After his death, France's Council of Nobles elected a cousin of Charles IV as their new King: Philippe de Valois. He took the name King Philippe VI. He was the first representative of the Valois family to rule France.

No King of France had been elected since Hugues Capet, the first Capet king, was elected in 987. The hereditary principle of succession had produced a King of France for over 300 years. But in 1328, the end of the Capetian dynasty produced a brief crisis of succession that put the Valois, who followed the Capets, in a precarious position.

The break with centuries of tradition represented by having a non-Capet as King caused a widespread, unfavorable reaction in France. The first Valois King was widely derided—and with justification--as a "king by accident" (*le roi trouvé*).

The legitimacy of the first Valois king, Philippe VI, was widely questioned from Day One. Philippe VI was not the son of a king or even

the brother of a king; he was merely a cousin of a king. This was an unprecedented break with tradition. His legitimacy was especially questionable because of the existence of two, serious rivals—“Pretenders” to the throne who argued that they were entitled to be King. They each claimed to have a better right to the throne than Philippe VI.

Each of the two Pretenders to the throne of France had strong Capetian blood lines. The Pretenders were England’s King Edward III and Charles the Bad (simultaneously Count of Évreux in Normandy and King of Navarre). These two rivals were an immediate, major threat to France’s new, Valois monarch.

King Edward III of England was the principal Pretender to the throne of France.¹¹⁰ In spite of Edward’s impeccable Capet genealogy, the Council of Nobles never seriously considered electing him as King of France for a very simple, obvious, and insurmountable reason: “He was not French—he was English.” Need anyone say more?

¹¹⁰ King Edward III’s mother was Isabelle de France. She was a daughter of France’s Capetian King Philippe IV (le Bel). Each of her three brothers had been a Capetian King of France, preceding the first Valois King (Philippe VI). King Edward III’s Capetian mother gave him a colorable claim to the throne of France. Only the new-found Salic Law (1328) precluded Isabelle from taking the throne herself OR transmitting any right to it. Modern legal scholars would call the Salic Law “a legal fiction.”

To justify denying Edward III the crown of France required some legal gymnastics and creativity. That's where lawyers excel. The decision to elect Philippe de Valois (and not choose Edward III) was cloaked by the royal lawyers with the respectable title of "The Salic Law."

Once sham and shibboleth are stripped from the Salic Law, conveniently "discovered" by French jurists in 1328, its true purpose can be seen: to prevent an English king from wearing the crown of France.

Charles the Bad, King of Navarre, was another, serious Pretender to the throne of France with a legitimate genealogical claim to be King. His Capet bloodlines were uncontested. Charles the Bad was the son of Jeanne de France, and she was the sole child of the Capetian King Louis X, so the Bad was the grandson of Louis X.¹¹¹ Charles the Bad's Capet blood was pure on his father's side, too. His father, King Philippe III of Navarre and Comte d'Évreux, was the grandson of the Capetian King Philippe III (*le Hardi*) and the half-brother of King Philippe IV (*le Bel*). When Charles the Bad bragged publicly, and often, that he had the "*fleur de lys* on all sides" of his family, it was true.

¹¹¹ Through his mother, Jeanne, Charles the Bad was a lineal descendant of France's King Louis X (1314-1316), his maternal grandfather. Charles the Bad was also a son-in-law of France's King Jean II by virtue of Charles the Bad's marriage (at age 20) to King Jean's daughter Jeanne (age 8) in 1352. Charles the Bad's multiple betrayals of King Jean II were not merely against feudal custom, they were an outright, family betrayal, too.

But Charles the Bad was a dollar short and a day late—by the time Charles the Bad was born in 1330, France’s Salic Law was a *fait accompli* and there was no right to inherit the crown of France from, or through, any female. By the time Charles the Bad grew up and began to declaim that he had the blood to be King of France, the Salic Law had already become the “new tradition” in France for determining royal succession. The Salic Law barred him from inheriting the throne of France through his Capet mother.

Charles the Bad simply ignored the new, “Salic Law.” The first three Valois kings—Philippe VI, Jean II, and Charles V--were repeatedly threatened by the perfidious plotting of Charles the Bad, grandson of France’s Capetian King Louis X¹¹² (“*le Hutin*”, the Squabblers).

Charles the Bad was a two-pronged threat to the Valois dynasty. In addition to being King of Navarre and a Pretender to the throne, Charles the Bad was also the Count of Évreux, a wealthy fiefdom in the strategic and rebellious northern Duchy of Normandy. Charles the Bad’s grandfather, Louis d’Évreux, got Évreux as an *appanage* from his half-brother, King Philippe IV (*le Bel*); the Bad’s dad, Philippe, inherited it.

¹¹² King Philippe IV had three sons, each of whom became King of France: Louis X (1314-1316), Philippe V (1316-1322) and Charles IV (1322-1328). Since none of the three brothers left a surviving son to take the throne, when Charles IV died, the Council of Nobles elected a cousin of the King as France’s first Valois King, Philippe VI.

With royal princes in his bloodlines, Charles the Bad was automatically one of the most influential nobles of Normandy. The loyalty of Normandy was strategically critical to the Valois and to England because of Normandy's wealth, its proximity to England, and its potential usefulness as an invasion beachhead for the English. The nobles of Normandy quickly found it in their personal, parochial interest to support Charles the Bad. They reasoned that a weak King of France equated to more local power, prestige, and tax money in their own hands. True enough.

Charles the Bad actively sought to topple France's Valois dynasty and usurp the throne for himself, or cut a deal with England to topple the Valois. In either event, Charles the Bad hoped to carve up France to his own benefit.

Treason, conspiracy, assassination, and poison were Charles the Bad's stock in trade.¹¹³ In my opinion, he certainly earned and deserved his moniker (despite contrary asseverations of some revisionist historians). An implacable hatred of the Valois Kings of France and an insatiable,

¹¹³ Barbara Tuchman describes Charles the Bad deliciously as "A small, slight youth with glistening eyes and a voluble flow of words, he was volatile, intelligent, charming, violent, cunning as a fox, ambitious as Lucifer, and more truly than Byron, "Mad, bad, and dangerous to know." p. 132, [A Distant Mirror](#), Ballantine Books: 1978.

jealous, pursuit of power were the motive forces in the life of Charles the Bad.¹¹⁴

More than once, Charles the Bad said “If my mother had been a man, I would be King of France.” And it was true. But his mother was not a man. Charles the Bad’s mother (Jeanne) was a 6-year-old, and an only child, in 1316 when her father (King Louis X) died and she arguably should have acceded to the throne of France. But not only was Jeanne a mere child of 6, she was quite possibly a bastard with nary a drop of Capet blood, born as fruit of her mother’s notorious adultery.

Charles the Bad’s mother, Jeanne, was therefore shunted aside from the line of succession to the French throne in 1316¹¹⁵ in favor of her uncle, Philippe V, who was merely a younger brother of the deceased King Louis X. The French Council of Nobles understandably preferred the leadership of a mature man over the conflicts inherent in rule by a Regency ruling in the name of a girl-child of dubious blood.

Young Jeanne was ignored again in 1322, when her uncle, King Philippe V, died without a son to inherit the crown. With the new precedent

¹¹⁴ Gaston Fébus was married to Charles the Bad’s sister, Agnès de Navarre, so they were brothers-in-law. Charles the Bad was married to King Jean II’s daughter, which made him a son-in-law of the King of France.

¹¹⁵ As sort of a “consolation prize,” Jeanne inherited the throne of the Kingdom of Navarre (Navarre had no “Salic Law”) and the Comté of Champagne.

of 1316 and Jeanne's likely illegitimacy still in mind, the Council of Nobles chose another younger brother of the deceased Louis X to be King.¹¹⁶

Charles IV was the third and final son of King Philippe IV (*le Bel*).

Charles the Bad's mother, Jeanne, was 18 years old when King Charles IV died in 1328 without a son to inherit the crown, and France needed a new King again. She was an adult, but still a woman of dubious blood. With no brothers of Louis X left alive, who would the Council of Nobles pick to be France's next King? The recent precedents of 1316 and 1322 were no longer helpful.

Following the laws of the Kingdom of Navarre, Jeanne was Queen of Navarre. But France was not Navarre. France had never been ruled by a woman (except as a temporary Regent), and the French Council of Nobles still preferred the leadership of a proven, male warrior over a young girl of dubious bloodlines.

When they met in 1328 to choose France's next king, the French Council of Nobles had an attractive, alternative candidate for King in the

¹¹⁶ Jeanne was a victim of her mother's indiscretions. Her mother was Marguerite de Bourgogne, one of the two, randy, "Burgundy sisters" who were the principal women involved in the 1314 Scandal of the Tour de Nesle. Jeanne's mother had been an adulteress before, during, and after her pregnancy and the birth of little Jeanne. She was not chosen to rule France after the death of her father, Louis X (1316), or after the death of her father's two brothers, King Philippe V (1322) and King Charles IV (1328). How could one realistically expect the turbulent and often rebellious nobles of France to sit quietly and be ruled under the putative hereditary authority of a young girl who might be a bastard? This is what led to the invention of the Salic Law in 1328.

person of Philippe de Valois. By way of contrast to Jeanne de Navarre, Philippe de Valois was a mature warrior who could step immediately into the shoes of leading France and its knights in person. He did not suffer from the perceived detriments of Jeanne (a teenage girl of highly questionable legitimacy who might not have a drop of Capet blood), and he was a candidate who did not suffer from the manifest detriments of King Edward III--an Englishman with loyalties to England, not France.

The Council of Nobles elected Philippe de Valois as King Philippe VI of France. The Capet dynasty ended in 1328 and the Valois dynasty began with King Philippe VI, 4 years before the birth of Charles the Bad.¹¹⁷ The Valois were men with “a lean and hungry look”¹¹⁸ who simply outmaneuvered Jeanne to snooker her out of the crown of France.¹¹⁹

This was the factual background against which the “Salic Law” was conveniently invented out of thin air in 1328. The Salic Law made it

¹¹⁷ The Salic Law was a “legal fiction,” a rationalization invented to avoid passing the crown of France to an English King, but which, in so doing, cut females out of the line of royal succession.

¹¹⁸ Wm. Shakespeare, “Julius Caesar,” Act I, scene ii.

¹¹⁹ SEE: Maurice Druon, Les Rois maudits, vol. 6, Le Lis et le Lion. Livre de poche : 1970. André Maurois calls the Valois “*parvenus*” to the monarchy who snuck in to the throne room through the back door when the “Capetian miracle” ended and no direct male heir in the Capet family was left alive. Maurois describes the first Valois king, Philippe VI (reigned 1328-1350), as being preoccupied with prestige, impulsive, poorly-counseled, a king who treated warfare as if it was a jousting tourney where the most important objective was not victory, but just to look good, look courageous, and follow the rules of chivalry. The second Valois King, Jean II, he calls “just as mediocre.” The third Valois King, Charles V (reigned 1364-1380), gains Maurois’ approval.

against the rules for a woman to inherit the crown and rule France in her own name, or for the crown to even pass through a woman to a subsequent male descendant. And so, once more, Jeanne did not accede to the throne of France. Instead, Jeanne remained Queen of Navarre and thereafter she has been known as Jeanne de Navarre.¹²⁰

By the time Charles the Bad had been born and became a Pretender to the crown of France, the horse was out of the barn. The Salic Law had been “discovered” and Charles the Bad was disqualified from contention, although not disqualified from being contentious.

Charles the Bad would never tire of complaining “I was robbed !” But he simply got to the party too late—the Valois were already on the throne by the time he was born and possession was 9/10ths of the law.

Soon after taking power, the first Valois Kings began to lose battles in a series of major military disasters that could easily have toppled the Valois family from the throne. King Philippe VI¹²¹ at Crécy (1346) suffered a huge and unexpected French loss to a greatly-outnumbered English army. Ten years later, when France was led by King Jean II, Poitiers (1356) was a

¹²⁰ When Jeanne de Navarre died, her son Charles (the Bad) became King Charles II of Navarre. Navarrese traditional law was just the opposite of France’s new Salic Law. In Navarre, a woman could rule the kingdom in her own name and the crown passed as an inheritance from her to her heir.

similar military disaster for French knighthood and another victory for outnumbered English forces.¹²²

To the medieval French mind, the defeats at Crécy and Poitiers were the divine Judgment of God who was manifestly punishing France for its sins. The sins in question were the many, diverse failures of the nobility.

Abject military failures contributed to the instability and relative lack of legitimacy of France's new, Valois dynasty. The ineptitude in war of King Philippe VI and King Jean II was matched by their respective ineptitude managing the apparatus of government.

The defeat of the French at Poitiers (1356) was a failure in a special class of its own, because at Poitiers the English captured the French King Jean II and held him for an immense ransom. France's government was in limbo while Jean II was a prisoner of the English. Initially, no Regent was appointed to rule France in place of King Jean II, who attempted to continue to rule in spite of his captivity¹²³. Meanwhile, back in Paris, the 18-year-old Dauphin¹²⁴ struggled to keep the French ship of state afloat.

¹²² A third military disaster for France was the overwhelming English victory over the French at Agincourt, but that did not occur until 1415, well after the death of Gaston Fébus.

¹²³ King Jean II was described by the chronicler, Jean Froissart as "a slow learner, and hard to change his opinion." ("lent à informer et dur à ôter d'une opinion.") Professor Claudine Pailhès adds that he was "brutal and irascible." p. 52, Gaston Fébus. Perrin: 2007. King Jean II had personality deficits to match his many performance

With the crushing defeats of Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356), the French twice managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. The new Valois dynasty, which began in 1328 with Philippe VI, certainly did not get off to an auspicious start. However, one ruler's detriment can be another ruler's benefit. The instability of the Valois dynasty in France was an important factor that gave Gaston III room to maneuver in Foix-Béarn.

For Count Gaston III of Foix-Béarn, the predicament of the Valois was not a disaster; it was serendipity. For Charles the Bad, it was another incitement to try to topple the Valois and try to take the throne of France for himself. For Edward III, it meant his Valois enemy was weak, vulnerable.

The Valois dynasty's crisis of legitimacy was due in part to the series of plots Charles the Bad led to overthrow the Valois and take the crown for himself. This, too, worked to the advantage of Gaston Fébus. The more

failures. This made him less of a threat to Gaston Fébus' project of sovereignty for Béarn. For a gentler verdict, emphasizing the benefits of King Jean II's acquisition for France of Dauphiné and Burgundy, SEE: Georges Bordonove, Jean II. Pygmalion: 1980, 2010. France's King Jean II died in captivity at London in 1364. He was succeeded by his son, King Charles V.

It's hard to argue with Mark Twain's dictum: "All kings is mostly rascalions." Ch. 23, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. (1884).

¹²⁴In 1349, the French King Jean II purchased the land and title of a spendthrift noble named Humbert II, owner of the gigantic fiefdom called the Dauphiné de Viennois, a disparate and non-contiguous patchwork of lands located along a beautiful stretch of the Alps and the Rhône river. Since 1349, when King Jean II gave the fiefdom of the Dauphiné to his eldest son, the title "Dauphin" has referred to every succeeding French king's eldest son, who by tradition is the heir-apparent to the throne. Before becoming King, (the future) Charles V was France's first Dauphin. Succeeding generations of French kings followed the practice of giving their eldest son the Dauphiné as an apanage, a fief where they could "practice" ruling before taking charge of the Kingdom of France.

preoccupied the King of France was with saving his own bacon, i.e., his life and his throne, the less time the King had available to try to bring Fébus and Béarn to heel.

A full recital of Charles the Bad's badness is beyond the scope of this work. (c.f., the more indulgent perspective of Bruno Ramirez de Palacios, Charles dit le Mauvais. Editions la Hallebarde: 2015.) A few, spicy, tidbits should suffice to show how Charles the Bad exacerbated the instability of the Valois dynasty.

In 1354, Charles the Bad hired assassins to murder the best friend of France's King Jean II. The assassins succeeded; they killed Charles de la Cerda in cold blood. Charles the Bad proudly claimed responsibility for the murder, but he promptly wrangled a royal pardon. As it turned out, this was not the last time Charles the Bad would get away with murder and treason.

Shortly after the murder, Charles the Bad opened secret negotiations with England's King Edward III to carve up Valois France and kill France's King Jean II. The military portion of Charles the Bad's plan was to join forces with England and open a two-front, joint war against France in

Gascony and Normandy. Charles the Bad¹²⁵ would stop at nothing to dislodge the Valois family from the throne of France he believed was rightfully his.

He had no programme but the advancement of his power and the enlargement of his domains.

p. 199, Jonathan Sumption, The Hundred Years War.

The machinations of Charles the Bad in France provided coincidental opportunities for political benefit to Count Gaston III in the Pyrenees¹²⁶.

To his discredit on principles of chivalry (but not *Realpolitik*), Gaston Fébus was in on the plot to dismember France and redistribute certain provinces to Charles the Bad and other provinces to the King of England. Gaston III briefly allied himself on the side of Charles the Bad with England against France's King Jean. (pp. 64-67, Tucoo-Chala.) The French King Jean II's eldest son, the Dauphin, was also a party to this plot, even though it was directed against his own father.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Charles the Bad's stock lost value when he was defeated at Cocherel in 1364, by the troops of France's King Charles V, led by Bertrand du Guesclin. 1364 was the year Charles V became King of France.

¹²⁶ Charles the Bad's sister, Agnès de Navarre, married Gaston III in 1348. Being the brother-in-law of Gaston Fébus did not deter Charles the Bad from trying to poison Fébus in 1378.

¹²⁷ The French King Jean II got wind of the plot but knuckled under to Charles the Bad, leading to the Treaty of Valognes in 1355. All the plotters were amnestied by this treaty, including Gaston Fébus, who nonetheless continued to give King Jean II the cold shoulder. Charles the Bad continued to plot against his father-in-law, King Jean II, and Gaston Fébus continued to go along, right up to the infamous Banquet of Rouen in 1356.

The treachery¹²⁸ of Charles the Bad against his father-in-law, France's King Jean II, was foiled at an early stage. It is impossible to know how deeply Gaston III was involved in or would have stayed a party to the plot to kill King Jean II and dismember the Kingdom of France, carving it up like a roast turkey to be devoured by Edward III with the scraps and the carcass going to Charles the Bad.

What we do know is that King Jean discovered the plot before hostile military action against him began. In need of allies instead of enemies, King Jean amnestied his oldest son Charles (the Dauphin), as well as Charles the Bad, and their co-conspirator, Gaston Fébus. The French King was desperate for allies; he could not afford to fight alone against the English in Aquitaine and Normandy at the same time. The amnesty only served to further encourage Charles the Bad, who immediately resumed his felonious efforts to overthrow the King of France.

The Bad focused his next efforts on King Jean's son, the Dauphin Charles, who had just been named Duke of Normandy by his father.

¹²⁸ In addition to being King of Navarre, Charles the Bad was also a wealthy and powerful noble with a fiefdom in Normandy (the Comté d'Évreux). This made him a vassal of the King of France. Charles the Bad's plot was a crime of *lèse-majesté* against King Jean of France, who was his suzerain for the fiefdom of Évreux. Because Charles the Bad was married to the King of France's daughter, his plot was equally treasonous on the basis of their close family ties as in-laws. Charles the Bad was Bad.

Silver-tongued Charles the Bad convinced the young Dauphin/Duke that he would never get power, fame, or true wealth from his father, King Jean. Instead, the quick path to fame and fortune was to be found by following Charles the Bad and overthrowing King Jean.

The young Dauphin/Duke of Normandy eagerly arranged a sumptuous banquet to meet with Charles the Bad and other refractory and *glitterati* nobles. The banquet was held at the Dauphin/Duke's castle in Rouen on April 5, 1356. "Listen to me," said King Charles the Bad to the young Dauphin/Duke, "I have a plan..."

Like the first plot, the newest scheme of Charles the Bad was quickly uncovered. This time, though, Charles the Bad's plan to overthrow (and kill) his father-in-law, King Jean II of France, led to the famous, surprise arrest of the conspirators at the Banquet of Rouen, on April 5, 1356.

At Rouen, King Jean and a heavily-armed escort of over 100 beefy loyalists burst unexpectedly into the Great Hall of the Dauphin/Duke's castle during the sumptuous banquet he hosted for the plotters. With swords drawn, and backed up by a squadron of loyal knights in full armor, King Jean dramatically arrested Charles the Bad, King of Navarre (and son-in-law of King Jean).

Also arrested at the banquet in Rouen in 1356 was Count Gaston III. He was one of many noble invitees attending the banquet. It is unclear what sort of role in the revolt was planned for Fébus, but his presence among the conspirators that night is incriminating. Immediately after being arrested, Gaston III landed in the French King's prison. This could easily have been "lights out" for Gaston...

A month or two later, however, when the Black Prince landed at Bordeaux and the war in Aquitaine got hot again, France's King Jean II let Count Gaston III out of prison. The now-familiar dynamic was the same: King Jean simply could not run the risk of forcing Fébus and Foix-Béarn into the English camp, in light of the precarious balance of power in Aquitaine.

In contrast to the brief incarceration of Gaston III, Charles the Bad spent close to a year and a half in various prisons of King Jean, doing "hard time" and a wee bit of torture before he escaped in late 1357. Once on the loose, he high-tailed it back to the safety of his Comté d'Évreux in Normandy, where he promptly resumed his role as the implacable nemesis of the Valois.

By the time of Charles the Bad's escape from prison in 1357, the tide of History had changed again. King Jean and most of his knights had once again been defeated in battle—just as they were defeated 10 years earlier at Crécy—this time by the numerically-inferior forces of the Black Prince at the battle of Poitiers (Maupertuis) on September 19, 1356. At Poitiers, King Jean and a passel of high-ranking French knights were taken prisoner by the English and held in captivity (some for decades) pending payment of exorbitant ransoms.

From the geopolitical perspective of Gaston Fébus, having the King of France captured by the English at Poitiers and imprisoned in Jolly England meant that England's Black Prince (the new Duke of Aquitaine) was now the main threat to the continuing sovereignty of Béarn. Luckily for Fébus, the English promised not to disturb Béarn until after a peace treaty with France was signed.

The game that Gaston III still had to play after the Banquet of Rouen and his bit in prison was not a simple, binary, affair. Fébus also had to deal with the King of Aragon, for whom he was a vassal owing homage for lands he owned in Catalonia, Cerdagne, and the Conflent. By clever, dilatory

maneuvers, Fébus was able to prudently elude entering the conflict south of the Pyrenees between Aragon and Castile.

The army Fébus put together for the King of Aragon—but never had to use-- shows why he was courted as an ally: 1,000 knights in shining armor, fully-equipped for battle and with spare battle horses, plus a personal support team for each knight that ranged from 4-30 persons, plus all the necessary pack animals, food, wine, and an additional 600 foot-soldiers. This was a formidable force.

Gaston Fébus had the largest and best-equipped military force of any noble in southern France. He could muster 4,000 well-armed knights and foot-soldiers. Moreover, much of their equipment was manufactured locally because the economic policies of Gaston III favored development of the necessary artisans and industries.

The instability of the Valois dynasty helped insulate Foix-Béarn from domination by France. The travails of the early Valois kings of France are an important part of the context in which Count Gaston III thrived.

A quick review of a few of the weaknesses of the Valois provides illuminating contrast with the correlative strengths of Gaston III.

Valois France was not economically sound. The Valois Kings' system of taxation and collection was dismally ineffective. This was a grave handicap, especially in time of war--and war was omnipresent in France during the lifetime of Gaston III. The judicial system in Valois France was slow, corrupt, inefficient, despised by the public, and chronically underfunded. The plague of unemployed mercenary soldiers (*écorcheurs*) pillaged and ransacked freely in France. As if those economic factors were not enough, in 1356, France was rocked by the need to ransom their captured King from prison in England. Payments were made, but payment in full by France proved impossible and ruinous.

In contrast, Gaston III consistently maintained a rich treasury in Foix-Béarn that enabled him to meet the extraordinary fiscal demands of self-defense and warfare, yet still have money left over to lend to less-disciplined, impecunious nobles.

The centuries when France was ruled by the Capet dynasty (897-1328) were, in general, years of increasingly-centralized monarchical power in France. The Valois Kings tried to stay on the same, centralizing tack. Naturally, this provoked a reaction: powerful nobles fought back against the monarchy to try to preserve their relative independence and

their historic privileges. The aristocratic nobility of France (warriors and high-ranking clergy) was strongly opposed to the authoritarian, centralizing policies of the early Valois monarchy.

In contrast to France's collection of rebellious nobles, the barons of Foix-Béarn who were Gaston III's vassals were relatively compliant with his rule. The centralization of power in the hands of Gaston III may have been resented, but it was not often resisted. Count Gaston III was just one of the powerful nobles in and around the periphery of France who resisted the centripetal forces of the expansionist and increasingly authoritarian French monarchy of the XIV century. He was certainly one of the most successful.

Under the rule of the Capetian dynasty in France (987-1328) and its immediate successor, the Valois dynasty, the title "King" was deceptively grandiose. The King of France controlled only two, small regions of France: the Île de France around Paris, and the Orléanais along the River Loire. The Valois were far from possessing the kind of "absolute power" that people of the 21st century tend to presume a king wields.

France was a tessellation with many common threads, but the points of commonality were arguably outnumbered by France's many internal differences. The so-called "great fiefs" of Normandy, Brittany, and Flanders

which were part of France exercised virtual independence at the time Count Gaston III was born (1331). So did the less-wealthy and smaller bundle of fiefs that made up Foix-Béarn.

“France” was little more than a geographic expression in the time of Gaston III. The Kingdom of France in the 14th century was a complex patchwork of fiefdoms, a mosaic of intertwined jurisdictions with shifting loyalties and interests. France was a land without a common coinage, without a unified legal system, and without a common language. Every corner of France had its own dialect and every dozen or so square miles had its own *patois*.

In contrast to France, Foix-Béarn was tiny. The relative homogeneity of the population and culture in Foix-Béarn helped Gaston III exercise power efficiently and personally dispense Justice with a minimum of dissent.

The King of France possessed ultimate political power only in his very restricted landholdings of the Île de France and Orléanais. Elsewhere,

...he was merely king, compelled to rule through vassals who exercised the royal power for him but did so in their own names and with an independence which reduced the monarchy to a portentous honorary dignity. The princes could and quite frequently did make war upon him and upon each other...

pp. 15-16, Jonathan Sumption, The Hundred Years War, Vol. 1. University of Pennsylvania Press: 1999.

...one of the common features of all the (feudal) governments was, not exactly their weakness, but the fact that they were never more than intermittently effective.

p. 409, Marc Bloch. Feudal Society, Vol II.

In the 14th century, although the King of France was far from being an “absolute” ruler, he nonetheless possessed a unique level of dignity among the French nobility. A King of France was still the lineal successor to the legendary King Clovis (466-511). This prestigious heritage was enough to make him distinct from all the other powerful nobles of France.

Even if the new Valois King’s bloodlines were derided, he enjoyed a special form of respect throughout the land that made him qualitatively different from all the kingdom’s other nobles. Only the King was the highest priest of the Gallican Catholic Church. The King alone was believed to possess miraculous, thaumaturgic powers. The King alone was placed by the Grace of God above all other men. Other great nobles of the kingdom enjoyed great power and wealth, but they did not share the mystic or religious aura that surrounded the King.

The King of France had a unique feudal dignity that distinguished him from all his subordinates. Unlike all the other nobles in France, only the King of France received the miraculous ointment of Clovis and its public, ritual application to his body during the sacred, traditional ceremony of coronation at the cathedral of Reims, and the powerful blessing of the Roman Catholic Church. The “Most Christian” King of France had the support of the Church all the way up the ladder to the Pope. Only the King could carry the sacred banner of the *oriflamme* into war.

In France, the King represented Order and Justice. According to the customs of feudal law, the King's word was final in all matters of Justice. This meant that any subject of any vassal of the King of France could appeal any decision to the King. It was an awesome power for the Overlord. For the inhabitants of a fief, the traditional right of appeal to the King was, at least in theory, a protection against tyranny by their more immediate, local suzerain.

Gaston III artfully exploited the many weaknesses of Valois France to the advantage of his own lands in the far-off Pyrenees. War and Plague impeded travel and communications, and it was difficult to manage a refractory noble like Gaston III from a distance. Paris was a long way from

Foix. What was bad for France was often good for Béarn. Instability of the Valois dynasty in France diverted the Kings' attention from Foix-Béarn and kept Gaston III a key player in determining the balance of power in Aquitaine and the Pyrenees.

Battlefield incompetency of the French knighthood (at Crécy and Poitiers) contributed to widespread public disdain for France's nobles all the way up the feudal ladder to the King. People impugned the lesser nobles' lack of courage, their cowardly flight from the battlefield of Poitiers where King Jean II continued to fight (bravely, but unwisely) until his capture, and the general failure of the warrior caste to fulfill their divinely-ordained role as protectors of the realm.

Count Gaston III was not present at the disasters of Crécy or Poitiers, so he and the knights of Foix-Béarn were exempt from criticism on those events. In fact, throughout his career, Gaston III's bravery and chivalric panache were never questioned; both were exemplary. Gaston III's leadership of Foix-Béarn and its knighthood was notable for its radical contrast with the military failures and ineptitude of Valois France.

If there had existed a university with a course called "Fief Management 101", Gaston III would have gotten an A+ and the Valois

Kings would have pulled down a C-. Gaston Fébus' administration of Foix-Béarn shows it was a virtual island of non-deficit and efficient government. While France's King Jean II was manifestly incompetent in many ways, Gaston III was a hands-on ruler who made wise decisions, after receiving counsel, on all matters affecting Foix-Béarn.

In addition to consistently maintaining fiscal soundness, the legitimacy and practical wisdom of the Gaston dynasty were never in question. Compared to France and its "kings by accident," Gaston III was pure platinum.

Count Gaston III was particularly noteworthy for his even-handed dispensation of justice. Like Saint Louis, often described as the apotheosis of a wise ruler, Gaston III liked to hold court outdoors, beneath an ancient oak tree, personally listening to the stories of the supplicants who came before him. Rich or poor, they had personal, direct access to their ruler and they could count on a fair hearing. By all accounts, citizens respected and trusted the system of justice in Foix-Béarn.

The tax burden in Foix-Béarn was heavy, but it sufficed for Gaston III to maintain at all times a numerically strong and well-equipped military

force. No invasions by other rulers or by the Great Companies of mercenaries occurred in Foix-Béarn while Gaston Fébus ruled.

The closest thing to a standing army in 14th century France was the nobility, which could be convoked by the king for 40 days of annual, obligatory service. In addition to the classic, noble, warrior-knights on horseback and wearing full armor, there were foot troops, archers, Genoese crossbowmen, knife-wielders, sappers, and other non-mounted warriors who were hired as mercenaries to supplement the mounted, noble knights and squires.

The bulk of France's royal army under the early Valois kings was composed of thousands of individual nobles who brought along their personal retinue of squires, etc. This meant that the King's army was far from being a cohesive unit. It had no shared training. Foreign mercenaries meant the army also lacked a shared language. Discipline was exceedingly difficult. They frequently had "a failure to communicate."

In contrast, the knights and squires of Foix-Béarn all spoke the same language. Thanks to Count Gaston III, they had to meet strict, detailed, formally-articulated standards of equipment. They were a tightly-

disciplined, cohesive, and respected force. In matters of war, as in peace, Gaston III was a serious and methodical Commander-in-Chief.

Technological developments in waging war caused extreme financial strains for the Valois Kings of France as well as for the rest of the French nobility, i.e., the knighted, warrior caste of heavy cavalry that constituted “French chivalry.” The King of France was usually too short of money to wage war effectively against the Great Companies and protect his kingdom. It took tax reform under King Charles V and the famous Breton warrior, Bertrand Du Guesclin, to deal with the curse of the Great Companies—but that is a different story.

Nobles were generally exempt from taxes--they paid with their blood in war. Clerics generally escaped taxation, too, so it was the common folk who bore the burden of paying for the warfare that bedeviled their life, ravaged their homes, and killed off their families. Commoners often ended up footing the bill to pay the ransom for their lord when he was captured (called feudal “aids”).

Finding money to pay for war and ransoms was the constant and preeminent concern of kings, counts, and dukes. Multiple warhorses were needed, armor was expensive, fine steel for broadswords was rare and

costly, and saving money was frowned on as inconsistent with chivalric *largesse*—the list went on and on.

In contrast to the fiscal chaos of France, Gaston III's administration of Foix-Béarn was marked by rigorous and demanding taxation—but it was also marked by fairness and peace, with steadfast respect for the traditional Béarnais freedoms and customary laws (called the *Fors* of Béarn). The Valois kings of France struggled because they were chronically broke, whereas Gaston III was flush.

Gaston III's reign can fairly be characterized as “fiscally responsible, enlightened despotism.” Gaston III understood that deficit spending meant the downfall of a dynasty. If a ruler could not pay his knights and mercenaries in cash, or buy necessary supplies, he was doomed to fail in war. Gaston III never quit accumulating wealth, and he was never constrained by lack of funds in his military efforts—nor was he ever captured at war to be held for a ruinous ransom.

Gaston III was a paragon of chivalry, but he also knew when to invoke Machiavellian pragmatism, especially in the field of finance. Gaston III always kept his personal financial interests, which were the same as those of Foix-Béarn, in the forefront.

Acting in synergy with the three calamities of war, plague, and instability of the Valois monarchy, was the progressive disintegration of the moral authority of the Roman Catholic Church and The Great Schism of the Roman Catholic Church. The XIV century was as unhealthy spiritually as it was in its secular aspects, and we discuss that subject next.

CALAMITY # 4: THE GREAT SCHISM OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH (1378-1417)

Constant war, dynastic instability, and the Black Death were not the only calamities concurrent with the reign of Gaston III. Another major, disruptive event stunned the people of the XIV century. It was the confusion, rivalry, and conflict that derived from the Great Schism of the Roman Catholic Church (1378-1417).¹²⁹

During the Great Schism, multiple popes--one in Rome and another at Avignon--simultaneously fought for allegiance from the Christian faithful. They also fought for control of the administration, personnel, and finances of the Church and its many subordinate institutions. For a few years, there were even THREE different men who simultaneously called themselves “the one and only, true Pope”: Pope Benedict XIII, Pope Gregory XII, and Pope John XXIII.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Scholarly opinion nearly always cites 1417 as the end of the Great Schism, but Pope Benedict XIII never quit being Pope (or Anti-Pope, depending on your perspective), even during his lonesome exile at Peñascola, where he died in 1423, so the Great Schism did not really end until 1423.

¹³⁰ Imagine the havoc surrounding collection of the many taxes levied by the Roman Catholic Church when two, then three, different Popes simultaneously claimed the exclusive right to all the tax money. And imagine what having two or three competing Popes did to the Doctrine of Papal Infallibility, which had been around since Pope Boniface VIII proclaimed the Bull of Unam Sanctum in 1302. And imagine the confusion among the faithful when different men were simultaneously appointed to be curé, bishop, archbishop, or Cardinal. But we digress...

Even before the Great Schism, there had been widespread conflict within the Roman Catholic Church. For example, in 1308, the Roman Catholic Pope fled the chaos of Rome to escape the Mafia-like battles between powerful, competing Roman clans who sought to control the papacy and its multi-faceted, money-making machinery of government.

The Pope fled Rome for the relative peace and voluptuous life of Avignon in 1309, and was comfortably settled in Avignon by the time Gaston III was born in 1331. Because of the perceived licentiousness of Avignon, Petrarch colorfully labelled it a “Babylon” and depicted the voluntary move from Rome to Avignon as a form of “captivity.” Petrarch did not buy the maxim *Ubi est papa, ibi est Roma*.¹³¹

Extraordinary, multiple problems had beset the Catholic church for many years before Pope Clément V moved the seat of the Church from Rome to Avignon in 1309 (the “Babylonian Captivity”).¹³² By comparison with Rome, life at Avignon was sweet,¹³³ perhaps too sweet...and public opinion demanded the papacy return to Rome despite the continuing

¹³¹ “Wherever the Pope is, that’s where Rome is.” In other words, the Pope is holy and sacred wherever he may be; the Vicar of Christ does not lose his authority when he travels or resides outside Rome.

¹³² “Under six ‘French’ Popes in succession, Avignon became a virtual temporal state of sumptuous pomp, of great cultural attraction, and of unlimited simony—that is, the selling of offices.” p. 26, Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, Ballantine Books: 1978.

¹³³ SEE the delightful story of “La mule du pape,” by Alphonse Daudet, *Lettres de mon Moulin*. (1869).

threats of clan control over the Church. However, a series of popes stayed at Avignon from 1309 until 1370, long enough to build and enhance the imposing, fortress-palace called *le Palais des Papes*.

When Pope Gregory XI was elected in 1370, he immediately set out to move the papacy away from Avignon and back to Rome. This was done. Pope Gregory XI died in Rome in 1378.

After Pope Gregory XI died, a new Pope was elected by the College of Cardinals, meeting in Rome. But the election was strongly influenced by a howling, Roman mob that surrounded the Vatican and threatened the Cardinals with death unless they elected a Roman Pope.

Under manifest duress, the election's outcome was Urban VI (formerly Archbishop of Bari in Italy). His election as Pope was clearly a result of the imminent threat of violence to the Cardinals. The mob had demanded a Roman Pope; otherwise, they threatened to kill the Cardinals. Unfortunately, the new Pope Urban VI quickly showed himself to be a violent and brutal man.

The following day, in a safer location (Anagni) without the threat of mob violence, a second election was held by the College of Cardinals. This second election was conducted without the participation of the

minoritarian, Italian Cardinals. This time, without the influence of a raging mob in the wings, a different Pope was elected: Clement VII (Robert of Geneva).

There were now TWO Popes, each one elected by the College of Cardinals. Which one was the “true” Pope? Urban VI or Clement VII? Which one was worthy of allegiance? Which one was a fraud, i.e., the Anti-Pope? Whose word was law? Who was the “Vicar of Christ?” To which Pope were you supposed to pay your tax money?

One Pope lived at Avignon (Clément VII) and the other Pope lived at Rome (Urban VI). Each one had his own *Curia* (governmental apparatus). Each Pope excommunicated the other one; each Pope had his own College of Cardinals; each Pope appointed different clergy up and down the ladder of clerical hierarchy. For a world centered on Catholic piety and organized on the principle of strict obedience to “the one, true Pope,” this was utter chaos.

Almost all of the greatest and most powerful nobles—Kings, Emperor, Dukes, Counts, etc.—quickly declared themselves to be in favor of one or the other of the two, competing Popes. England and its allies favored the Roman Pope; France and its allies favored the Avignon Pope.

Gaston Fébus, who was caught between allegiance to England and allegiance to France, refused to declare allegiance to either of the two Popes. This strategy kept him from supporting a position that was contrary to France's or England's allegiance. It was also a strategy that enabled Gaston III to pocket the tax money that otherwise would have gone to a Pope. It gave Gaston III full control over the management of local abbeys and monasteries, including control of all appointments to local benefices. Count Gaston III was a sly fox—the fox of Foix.¹³⁴

Because of the Great Schism and Gaston III's refusal to declare allegiance to either Pope, when the holder of a religious benefice died in Foix-Béarn (e.g., a head monk, abbot, or a bishop), it was Gaston Fébus who chose the successor, not the Church. Applicants for prime, religious sinecures usually engaged in greasing of the palm (*pot-de-vin*) to promote their candidacy. During the Great Schism, those under-the-table disbursements went to Gaston III instead of to either of the competing Popes.

¹³⁴ For the record, the inhabitants of Foix are called "Fuxéens" and "Fuxéennes."

This was the Great Schism of the Roman Catholic Church, where Pope and Anti-Pope¹³⁵ competed for doctrinal obedience, temporal power, and tax money; where rival popes fulminated excommunications against each other and the religious allegiances of the Christian world were cleft along political lines. France and half the Christian world supported the Avignon Pope; the other half supported England's choice in Rome. Yet, once again, Count Gaston III neatly finessed this conundrum of allegiance.

¹³⁵ Catholic Popes and Anti-Popes had existed simultaneously on a number of occasions since 235 A.D., especially during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Yet the Great Schism seems qualitatively different. The Great Schism was somewhat resolved by the Council of Constance in 1414-1417, which elected Pope Martin V in 1415. By that time, there were THREE competing, Catholic Popes/Anti-Popes (who was an Anti-Pope depended on your choice of allegiance): Gregory XII, Benedict XIII, and John XXIII. Pope Benedict XIII was elected in 1394 and never resigned; he died in 1423, still a Pope. Don't worry if this sounds awfully confusing—it was. SEE: the brilliant novel by Jean Raspail, [L'Anneau du pêcheur](#). Éditions Albin Michel: 1995, and the magisterial history by Jean Favier, [Les Papes d'Avignon](#). Fayard: 2006.

THE SYNERGY OF CALAMITIES IN THE XIV CENTURY ACTUALLY HELPED COUNT GASTON III AND FOIX-BÉARN

A synergy of four calamities during the XIV century (war, plague, instability of France's Valois dynasty, and religious schism) worked to the advantage of Count Gaston III and Foix-Béarn. Why?

During the reign of Count Gaston III, France and England each had to face much bigger problems than a recalcitrant vassal in far-away Foix and Béarn. Gaston III was well aware that France and England were largely preoccupied with matters outside Pyrenean politics.

With consummate savvy, Count Gaston III used France's preoccupation with England, and England's preoccupation with France, to assert and maintain *de facto* independence for Béarn. This allowed Foix and Béarn to avoid entanglement on behalf of either belligerent in the 100 Years' War.

Foix and Béarn were spared the catastrophic losses suffered by both of the era's Great Powers because of Gaston III's wise strategy of "victory without combat."

THE BANQUET OF ROUEN

In the spring of 1356, Charles the Bad was busy with another of his seditious plots to overthrow the Valois King of France and take the throne for himself. Although he was King of Navarre, Charles the Bad's main base of operations was actually in Normandy at Évreux, one of his hereditary fiefdoms. Charles the Bad was in Normandy, courting the French King's son, the Dauphin Charles, and trying to turn him against his father, King Jean II¹³⁶. The Dauphin Charles was an impressionable 18-year-old who had recently been granted (by his father, King Jean) the responsibility of being Duke of Normandy.

In the port city of Rouen, along the banks of the River Seine, a very significant meeting took place between Count Gaston III and King Charles the Bad of Navarre. They met at the castle of the Duke / Dauphin Charles, in Normandy, far to the north of the Pyrenees.

In furtherance of Charles the Bad's incipient plot, on April 5, 1356, the Duke / Dauphin Charles hosted an elaborate banquet in his ducal castle at

¹³⁶ King Jean II is known as *le Bon* (the Good) although he does not merit the compliment. In medieval French, "le Bon" could also mean brave, and Jean II certainly displayed bravery at the battle of Poitiers in September, 1356. Just as certainly, though, Jean II did not display prudence or good judgment. He lost the battle of Poitiers, he was captured by the English, and he was held for ransom along with his second-oldest son, Philippe.

Rouen. At the banquet, Charles the Bad brought together the key players for his plan to overthrow King Jean II. Count Gaston III was one of the *glitterati* invitees at the banquet. Gaston III was therefore, at least by implication, a party to Charles the Bad's planned *coup d'état* against France's King Jean.

Before any serious action occurred, however, Charles the Bad's plot was foiled by a leak. The King of France was tipped off to the plot, and he very unexpectedly showed up at the Dauphin's castle in Rouen. In the middle of the banquet, King Jean dramatically burst into the Great Hall, backed up by a beefy and well-armored escort of knights.

Charles the Bad was arrested on the spot and imprisoned as the main criminal. Gaston Fébus was arrested, too, and imprisoned as an accomplice, though very few details of his arrest or incarceration have survived.

Luckily for Gaston III, his stay in the King of France's prison was short. The geopolitical significance of Foix-Béarn relative to Aquitaine was simply too great for the King of France to keep Gaston in prison and thereby risk Gaston changing his allegiance to join the side of England's King Edward III in his wars against France. Gaston Fébus was released

from prison after only a few months, but it seems fair to presume that he was chastened by the experience of his arrest and incarceration.

Once out of prison, Count Gaston III quickly returned to the sunshine, warmth, music, troubadours, luxuries, and freedom of Foix. It seems reasonable to imagine that back in the safety of the Pyrenees, once in a while his thoughts must have turned to his outlaw in-law, Charles the Bad, who was still being held under close watch in a series of cold, dark, hard, prisons in the chill and dank of northern France. Gaston III must have thanked his lucky star to be at home, in the sunshine, and free.

GASTON III ON CRUSADE IN LITHUANIA: 1357-58

Gaston III surely felt lucky when he got home safely to Foix-Béarn in mid-1356, after his release from King Jean's prison. The debacle of being arrested at the Banquet in Rouen must have been a serious wake-up call for Gaston III. It must have reminded him that he was not the biggest fish in the pond of France or even in the Pyrenees.¹³⁷ Clearly, Foix-Béarn would never have overwhelming force relative to its neighboring kingdoms. Dexterity and savvy would have to be Gaston's skills to succeed in his environment. Luckily for Gaston III, he had both qualities in spades.

In the summer of 1356, Fébus was being tugged simultaneously by England, France, Navarre, Aragon, and Castile, all of whom wanted military assistance from Foix-Béarn. At this delicate moment, Lady Luck intervened to help pull Fébus' chestnuts out of the fire. On a silver platter,

¹³⁷ Gaston III was probably released from King Jean's prison because the English Prince of Wales (aka the "Black Prince") had just debarked at Bordeaux with an army of invaders, and the King of France needed all the military allies he could get ASAP. For the King of France, Gaston Fébus was a critical ally, since his lands in the Pyrenees flanked the English in Aquitaine. For France, even the neutrality of Foix-Béarn was preferable to having them as an enemy, cooperating with the English against France.

Gaston III was handed an unimpeachable excuse to “take a walk” and evade the imprecations of his neighbors to join them in war.

It was sheer serendipity when the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights--Winrich von Kniprode--issued a general call to all nobles to join him on a Crusade to spread Roman Christianity among the heathens and heretics of Eastern Europe. The Teutonic Knights were a religious order of warrior-monks, comparable to the recently-dissolved Knights Templar, the order of warrior monks who had fought in the twelfth century Crusades for Jerusalem. The less-venerable Teutonic Knights were founded around 1192, in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. They often went on Crusades to the nearby Baltic states.

Fébus answered the call to go on Crusade and left Foix-Béarn, thereby escaping the political pressure from 5 different kings. He headed for Lithuania and Prussia in the spring of 1357.

By going on Crusade, Fébus did not “leave the store untended.” The Church promised all Crusaders that not only would all their sins be remitted (i.e., pardoned forever), but also during a Crusader’s absence, their goods and lands were (theoretically) off-limits to predation by everyone—even by kings. Added to the reassurance of safety for his lands and treasure

(stored at the castles of Foix and Orthez) during his absence were the lures of perhaps winning chivalric glory, the thrills of violent combat, opportunities for non-consensual sex, and the prospect of winning more golden booty.

To top this off, there was the feudal custom that permitted a lord leaving on Crusade to levy an exceptional tax on his vassals and subjects to help defray the expenses of crusading. Fébus' choice to go a-Crusading in 1357 was thus fairly easy. It promised adventure, possible booty, windfall tax revenue, and a respectable escape from dangerously incompatible political pressures.

Fébus made an additional, creative decision to supplement the protection for Foix-Béarn that the Church promised during his absence. He convinced a certain, famous knight from Aquitaine to accompany him to Prussia. His Crusading companion was, like Gaston, an exemplar of chivalry: Jean III de Grailly, aka the Captal de Buch¹³⁸.

The Captal de Buch was the foremost representative of the pro-English nobility of Gascony (although the Captal was of Savoyard origin). In fact, it was the Captal de Buch who masterminded the maneuver that

¹³⁸ Jean de Luxembourg, King of Bohemia and Poland, is often cited as the premier XIV century model of chivalry.

resulted in England's capture of France's King Jean II at Poitiers (Maupertuis) in 1356. The Captal was one of the Black Prince's most loyal and trusted lieutenants in Aquitaine. The Captal was also a cousin, by marriage, of Gaston Fébus.

Gaston III correctly reasoned that while he and the Captal were on Crusade and traveling together, hunting in Norway, Sweden, Prussia, and Lithuania, the Black Prince was unlikely to plunder or otherwise harm Foix or Béarn.

Virtually nothing is specifically known of what Fébus did during his Crusade with the Teutonic Knights in 1357-1358. We know little beyond the fact that before going to Prussia, Fébus made a long detour to Scandinavia, where he made numerous hunting trips with his cousin, the Captal. The hunts must have been fun; they certainly increased his expertise in wildlife matters. The treatise on wildlife and hunting that Gaston Fébus later wrote, *Le livre de la chasse*, includes a number of segments that derive from his side-trip to Scandinavia.

Going on Crusade in Lithuania and Prussia cemented Fébus' reputation as a pious Christian. It showed he was willing to risk his life for the propagation of The One True Faith.

Christian piety was a key facet of the knightly ethos of chivalry. Among his noble peers, Gaston Fébus substantially enhanced his prestige (and his “CQ,” or Chivalric Quotient) by going on Crusade.¹³⁹

By the time Gaston Fébus was born in 1331, for over two centuries the great dream of the noble warrior class that comprised the flower of French chivalry had been to participate in a Crusade to free the “holy land” from Moslem rule. The dream of conquering and holding Jerusalem proved unrealistic and an abject failure less than a century after the First Crusade was preached by Pope Urban II in 1095. Nonetheless, for centuries after the Holy Land was lost to Moslem rule, a series of Popes encouraged new Crusades. Countless nobles and peasants left Europe to make war on the Moslems of the Middle East.¹⁴⁰

Going on Crusade was a key element in the ethos of chivalry for many years, long after it became patently unrealistic to target Jerusalem.

¹³⁹ On the other side of the coin, Professor Kilgour writes; “A crusade seemed to be in fashion only when there was nothing else to do...One has only to run over the list of outrages against churches and convents during the Hundred Years’ War to see how little piety remained in the chivalric order, in spite of its pretensions.” p. 77, Raymond Lincoln Kilgour, The Decline of Chivalry. Harvard University Press: 1937.

¹⁴⁰ SEE GENERALLY: Zoë Oldenbourg, The Crusades. Phoenix Press: 1960, 2001. By the same author, SEE the tasty, trilogy of novels: The Cornerstone. Carroll & Graf: 1955, 1998; The World is Not Enough. Carroll & Graf: 1998; and Destiny of Fire. Gallimard: 1960.

What, then, was a powerful knight and willing warrior like Gaston Fébus to do for foreign adventure and pious renown in the mid-1300's if he couldn't go to Jerusalem and the Middle East to kill for Christ?

The answer was simple: go to Prussia/Lithuania and kill or convert heathen Slavs. The Order of Teutonic Knights promoted this 14th century approach to Christian Crusading. Their focus of carnage was along the shores of the Baltic Sea, especially Poland and Lithuania.

From the perspective of logistics, warring in Eastern Europe made a lot more sense than Crusading in the Middle East. For one thing, transportation was far simpler and cheaper. Also, fighting in Eastern Europe meant the Crusaders did not have to face the redoubtable warriors of Islam, or fight on Islam's home turf.

The attractions of becoming a Crusader in Eastern Europe combined serendipitously with Gaston Fébus' release from his brief incarceration after the Banquet at Rouen, and with his passionate love of hunting. In the spring of 1357, Gaston packed his bags, his weapons, his hunting dogs, plus plenty of gold, and got himself out of reach of the King of France. By leaving on Crusade, Fébus simultaneously evaded England's Black Prince

in Aquitaine—who was still trying to coax a feudal oath of homage out of Fébus for Béarn.

Gaston Fébus knew when to lay low. By going on Crusade, he kept beyond the grasp of the Kings of England and France, and for a bonus, he enjoyed an exotic hunting trip with his favorite dogs and friends. Gaston III spent the summer and fall hunting game in Scandinavia before heading to Lithuania for the winter of 1357-1358 to hunt more wild game and heathen humans, to boot. A powerful, supporting army of well-seasoned knights accompanied him on this trip. Virtually no documentary evidence exists (of which I am aware) to reconstruct the events of these adventures.

A Teutonic Crusade in Lithuania was no walk in the park. Conditions were rough and the battles were fierce. Gaston's gains in reputation for chivalry and Christian piety, resulting from participation in this Crusade, were hard-earned. Coincidentally, the big game hunting in Scandinavia was exceptional. It's hard to know which experience Gaston valued most.

From the perspective of chivalric fame, what happened after the Crusade, on Fébus' way home to the Pyrenees, was more significant than the events of the Lithuanian Crusade. This was The Rescue at Meaux.¹⁴¹

Before one can understand The Rescue at Meaux, it's necessary to set the stage by describing a concurrent rebellion of the bourgeoisie in Paris, led by Étienne Marcel. As if the rebellion in Paris was not enough, in 1357 there was a simultaneous, but distinct, peasant uprising in northern France called "the Jacquerie."

Taken together, these very distinct episodes created a Harmonic Convergence that culminated in Gaston Fébus' crowning, chivalric success of The Rescue at Meaux. We look next at the events of The Harmonic Convergence.

¹⁴¹ Since being captured at Poitiers in 1356, King Jean II was preoccupied with being released from prison in England. Release required assembling an impossibly-huge sum of gold that the English demanded for his ransom. The wealthy businessmen of Paris were not eager to pay extraordinary taxes to fund King Jean II's ransom. This bourgeois opposition produced the Anti-Valois, tax revolt led by Étienne Marcel in Paris.

In France, the Dauphin struggled--without much success--to run France while his father was imprisoned in England. The violent, tax revolt in Paris led by Étienne Marcel kept the French king's son, the Dauphin, distracted from events in the Pyrenees. The Dauphin had his hands full dealing with an empty treasury that was incapable of paying the King's ransom. But there was more.

The Dauphin also confronted confused authority to rule France during his father's captivity and absence. Add to this the revolt in Paris led by Etienne Marcel, the dynasty-threatening machinations of Charles the Bad, the return of the Black Plague, and the disastrous impacts on the French economy of the depredations of thousands of suddenly-unemployed mercenary soldiers who were ravaging the French countryside to worse effect than the relatively-quiet armies of England. Small wonder the Valois were not up to the task, eh?

A HARMONIC CONVERGENCE IN 1358: AFTER THE CRUSADE, THE PARIS REBELLION OF ÉTIENNE MARCEL, AND THE JACQUERIE

Being a hero is often a matter of the fortuitous circumstance of being “in the right place at the right time.” The three, intertwined stories of 1) the Teutonic Crusade in Prussia/Lithuania, 2) a tax revolt in Paris led by Étienne Marcel, and 3) the peasant rebellion of the Jacquerie, produced a harmonic convergence that resulted in a hero’s halo for Gaston III. In June of 1358, the stars lined up to produce a situation from which Gaston III emerged limned with chivalric glory.

Part One of the 1358 Harmonic Convergence is Count Gaston III’s return home to the Pyrenees after his Crusade in Lithuania. Gaston III was leaving Prussia after finishing his Crusade in Lithuania with the Teutonic Knights. He and his knightly entourage crossed the Rhine river into northern France. He was about to pass through the town of Meaux, a town known today for its production of Brie cheese. Nobody suspected that Fébus was “in the right place” or that “the right time” was just about to come...

Part Two of the 1358 Harmonic Convergence is a tax revolt in Paris that occurred simultaneously with Gaston III's return from crusading.

The rebellion in Paris was led by a wealthy bourgeois named Étienne Marcel. The Marcel family was the most powerful of the 20 bourgeois families that controlled the Parisian economy. Étienne Marcel was not oppressed, working stiff, nor was he a peasant rube. The revolt was supported by Paris' privileged, powerful, moneyed interests: the nascent banking elite and textile merchants. The anti-tax revolt was also actively supported by the emerging, working class of Paris.

The main goal of the rebellion in Paris led by Marcel was to limit the French monarchy's power to tax. Tax increases were desperately needed by the Valois monarchy due to a combination of factors: 1) repeated currency devaluations, 2) the immense costs of endless wars with England, and 3) the need to rustle up the extraordinary sum of ransom money required to pay off the English to spring the Valois King Jean II from prison in London. But the Power Elite of Paris didn't want to pony up to ransom King Jean. You can almost read their lips: "No new taxes !"

The Paris tax revolt took advantage of the fact that King Jean II was in prison in England. ("While the cat is away...") Since 1356, when the

French King was captured by the English at Poitiers, actual power in France was ineffectually exercised by the King's teenage son, the Dauphin Charles because King Jean continued to rule from his prison cell.

The nemesis of the Valois—Charles the Bad—plays a role in the bourgeois revolt in Paris led by Étienne Marcel. When Charles the Bad escaped from prison late in 1357, he headed for Paris, where he was given a hero's welcome and proclaimed "Captain of Paris." Charles The Bad was sympathetic to the anti-Valois insurgents of Paris; they reciprocated by supporting his claim to the French throne. The English armies—still in France--were in cahoots with the rebels of Paris and with Charles the Bad. All of them were anti-Valois, albeit for different reasons.

In early 1358, the situation in Paris degenerated into a civil war between supporters of the Valois monarchy versus the coalition of insurgent bourgeois and Charles the Bad. Things quickly got out of hand. One night, a mob of armed rebels stormed into the Dauphin's personal residence. In front of the terrified, teenage Dauphin, the rebels murdered two of his unarmed, senior counselors, spattering the Dauphin with their hot blood.

Skipping nimbly over the many, juicy details of this rebellion, we need only note that the day after the murder of his two counselors, the Dauphin elected to send his teenage wife, the Dauphine Joanna, and several other high-ranking noblewomen away from Paris to the safety of the countryside. He lodged them at the fortress of Meaux, to the northeast of Paris. Fearing almost as much for his own safety, the Dauphin soon left Paris, too, with a group of pro-Valois loyalists for protection.

Meanwhile, sensing the moment has come for his *coup d'état*, Charles the Bad takes up arms. It is the first stage of a civil war, but with the collaboration of invading English soldiers thrown in, to boot.

Part Three of the 1358 Harmonic Convergence comes next. At the same time as the rebellion in Paris, a violent rebellion of peasants broke out in northern France. This peasant rebellion—completely unrelated to the bourgeois tax revolt in Paris--was called “the Jacquerie” because the nameless peasants were all referred to derisively as “Jacques.”

The Jacquerie was an un-premeditated, spontaneous revolt of small landholders. These were not the poorest peasants. They had no real leader, no command structure, and no program of reform. They were lamentably armed and thoroughly disorganized.

The Jacques were small fry caught in the net of economic and social dislocations that followed the Great Plague of 1348. They focused their sudden, destructive rage against the nobility. The Jacques saw the nobility as the cause of France's crushing military defeats at Crécy and Poitiers. They blamed the nobles for being the cause of high taxes, inflation, monetary devaluation, low prices for farm goods, the high cost of farm labor, hangnails, hangovers, and halitosis. The consensus solution of the Jacques for all these problems was simple: "Kill the nobles !"

The Jacquerie broke out completely unexpectedly on May 28, 1358, when a small group of outraged peasants murdered nine unsuspecting nobles at a small, country estate. News of this event struck a highly-responsive chord. Suddenly, a leaderless revolt of uncoordinated groups of peasants, united only in their hatred of "the shameful nobility," grew and spread logarithmically. Isolated groups of peasants, estimated at a total of 6,000-10,000 Jacques, began murdering nobles, then plundering and burning castles across much of northeast France. This was class warfare—peasants against nobles.¹⁴²

¹⁴² The revolt of the Jacquerie in northern France found an echo in Languedoc, with the revolt of the Tuchins in 1381.

To fight the revolt of the Jacques and protect the nobility, a group of nobles from Normandy and Picardy sought out Charles the Bad. At the time, Charles the Bad was laying low after his recent escape from King Jean's prison; he was staying nearby at the home of his younger brother, Philippe de Navarre, in Normandy.

The nobles who visited Charles the Bad sounded the tocsin on behalf of the nobility. They wanted immediate action to resist the threat of the upstart peasantry. "My Lord, (they said to Charles the Bad) you come from the noblest stock in the world; surely you will not stand by and see the whole noble order obliterated?"

Charles the Bad could not resist this opportunity to play a leadership role and rescue the nobility on whose support and allegiance he relied in his quest to overthrow the Valois King Jean II. After all, Charles the Bad wanted the throne of France, and being King was tantamount to being the preeminent noble of France. To be #1 in the nobility, Charles the Bad would first have to defend the nobility from annihilation by the Jacques.

To recap briefly: In early 1358, there were two, different, yet simultaneous revolts occurring in northern France when Gaston III headed for home in Foix-Béarn after his Crusade in Lithuania. After crossing the Rhine and re-entering France, Gaston and his contingent of armed knights were camped just outside of Meaux. Unbeknownst to Gaston's little army of Crusaders, this was the region where the Jacquerie uprising was the hottest.

In response to the Jacques, a second group of local nobles quickly formed an *ad hoc* delegation and set out to find the camp of the famous Count Gaston III of Foix-Béarn to try to recruit him to fight against the Jacques. The nobles told Gaston about the women of France's royal family who were holed up nearby in the castle of Meaux. The women, they explained, had been sent to Meaux to escape the violence of Étienne Marcel's revolt in Paris. Suddenly, the noblewomen now faced a completely different threat: the Jacques. And they were in desperate need of rescue. Could Gaston III help? Did the Lone Ranger ride a horse named Silver?

Count Gaston III had just spent a warrior's holiday in Prussia and Lithuania massacring non-Christians, so another chance to use his lance—

especially to protect noble ladies—sounded great. He broke camp. At the head of his troops, and flanked by the Captal de Buch, Gaston III made a bee-line for Meaux.

Meanwhile, for the first time since 1350 in Languedoc, Charles the Bad took the field of battle. He reportedly commanded one of three armies of noblemen who met the Jacques on June 10, 1358.

History does not appear to have recorded the precise, military role played by Gaston Fébus in fighting the Jacques. In light of his extensive battleground experience relative to Charles the Bad's paucity of war experience, it seems very likely that Fébus was among the leadership of the vanguard while Charles the Bad may have commanded the rear guard, but that is speculation.

The events that preceded the head-to-head and hand-to-hand battle against the Jacques evoke no thoughts of Gaston Fébus; they are pure Charles the Bad.

Charles the Bad asked for a pre-battle meeting with the impromptu leader of the Jacques rabble, a man named Guillaume Cale. They met under a flag of truce and safe-conduct at the spacious, multi-colored, sumptuous, silk tent of King Charles the Bad. Pursuant to the traditions of

chivalry and war, the two sides were supposed to mutually agree on a time and place for the combat to begin.

Instead of parleying, and in betrayal of the safe-conduct pass, Charles the Bad threw the leader of the Jacques in irons. (Chivalry and one's word of honor applied only within the knights' own class—at least for Charles the Bad.)

The peasant revolt of the Jacques and the bourgeois revolt led by Étienne Marcel are evidence that France in 1358 was a chaotic mess. King John II was a prisoner in England, which encouraged the old guard nobility of France in their reactionary opposition to the centralizing and taxing policies of the Valois. Popular sentiment and the *Parlement* of Paris had demanded liberation of Charles the Bad from prison, which was a sure sign of favoritism for this Pretender to the Valois' throne.¹⁴³ King Jean II's son, the Dauphin Charles, was struggling to lead a government despite King Jean's deliberate and ongoing failure to formally relinquish power during his

¹⁴³ Charles the Bad escaped from prison November 9, 1357, before the Jacquerie and during the early stages of the revolt in Paris led by Étienne Marcel. Charles the Bad immediately headed home to Normandy (where he held a rich fiefdom, the Comté d'Évreux) and resumed making trouble for the Valois King and his son, the Dauphin. Charles the Bad's goal was to oust the Valois King and Valois Dauphin, then restore the Capetian dynasty to the throne of France—with Charles the Bad, of course, as King of France and Navarre.

imprisonment. The recent effects of the Black Plague (1347-1353) were still extremely unsettling.

The warrior nobility of France had repeatedly demonstrated incompetence and an inability to protect the common folk of France from the English or the free-lancing mercenaries. When peace broke out between England and France after the Battle of Poitiers (September 19, 1356), the suddenly unemployed mercenaries of both nations resumed their merciless depredations in France, terrorizing and plundering the hapless and unprotected peasantry, the rich monasteries, and the bourgeois of small towns.

It was in this climate of social havoc, economic distress, political instability, Black Plague pandemic, chaos in the Church, and well-justified anti-nobility attitudes that the leader-less uprising of peasants called the Jacquerie occurred. It surprised everyone when pitchfork-wielding peasants in northern France suddenly started to attack and murder rural nobles.

When the Dauphin, Charles, unilaterally took the political title of Regent at Paris in March of 1358, it did nothing to calm the bedlam in France.

The peasant Jacques swarmed out of the countryside and into the outskirts of the walled city of Meaux, wielding their primitive farm implements as weapons. The Jacques surrounded the castle of Meaux¹⁴⁴, where the Dauphin's wife and a few more ladies of France's highest nobility had been sent to escape the violence of Paris. Instead of finding safety, the noble ladies were besieged by threatening hordes of ragged, gap-toothed, violent, and filthy peasants. The ladies were damsels in distress.

Cue the trumpets !

Seemingly from out of nowhere, there on the horizon, astride their massive, Percheron war horses, we see the shining armor of the Captal de Buch and his cousin, Count Gaston III, followed by more than a hundred subordinate knights and squires, returning from their Lithuanian Crusade. The scene sounds like it's out of a novel by Sir Walter Scott...

Yes, the chivalrous knights have arrived, but Ahhh !!! the fealthy Jacques are nowhere in sight. Where are they? The Jacques are on a terrific drunk, having broken into nearby wine cellars to gorge themselves on food and drink.

¹⁴⁴ The castle, which no longer exists, bore the curious name "Marché de Meaux" (market of Meaux).

The insouciant stupor of the bibulous Jacques enables Gaston III, the Captal de Buch, and all their followers to enter the castle of Meaux unseen, during the evening, to succor the damsels within. But wait—there’s more.

The next day, when the hungover Jacques stagger across the bridge to attack the castle, carrying their rickety, scaling ladders, the peasants are met with a terrible and terrifying surprise. An unexpected swarm of armored knights on horseback suddenly surges out the castle’s gate and across the drawbridge, with lances deployed, swinging broadswords and maces. It’s Gaston III and his cousin, the Captal de Buch, followed by many more. The Jacques are easily massacred by the mounted knights and the noble ladies’ rescue is glamorously completed.¹⁴⁵

...the commoners unwisely chose to fight. Wielding weapons from horseback, the knights cut down their opponents, trampling them, toppling bodies into the river, forcing the rest back across the bridge, and opening the way to carnage. Despite some hard, hand-to-hand fighting, the “small dark villeins poorly armed” recoiled before the lances and axes of the mailed warriors and, succumbing to terrorized retreat, were butchered. The knights charged, hacking furiously, killing the commoners like beasts, until exhausted from the slaughter.

p. 180, Barbara Tuchman, A Distant Mirror. Ballantine: 1978.

¹⁴⁵ Professor La Monte (p. 665) tells us that Charles the Bad “descended on the hapless peasants with great vigor.” Those words make me wonder what specific facts inspired that pithy description?

All the damsels in distress at Meaux were saved. Gaston's reputation as a paragon of chivalry is tremendously enhanced by this romantic rescue at Meaux. Not only is he a victorious Crusader and a warrior knight, he also is The Man of the Hour who arrives in the nick of time to rescue royal damsels in distress. Without Gaston and the Captal, these princesses would surely have been captured by the scrofulous peasants, then abused, molested, shamed, violated, and perhaps killed.

When Gaston hits the trail again for the Pyrenees after the rescue at Meaux, he travels with an aura of lustrous chivalry and near-invincibility.

A quick survey of the landscape in 1358 (after the rescue at Meaux) shows a radical contrast between Valois France's travails and the fortunes of Foix-Béarn. The Kingdom of France in 1358 seems headed for civil war between the faction backing Charles the Bad versus the Valois loyalists. The war with England is endless. The King is in an English prison. Peasant revolts are mirrored by the bourgeois revolt of Paris, while the lesser nobility does all it can to undermine the monarchy and restore their former privileges and advantages. France is in near-total disarray. Valois France is in desperate straits, even after the end of the Jacquerie and the end of the bourgeois revolt of Étienne Marcel.

In contrast, in 1358, Foix-Béarn is thriving. Gaston Fébus is an unchallenged hero of chivalry in the prime of life, and his fame is only growing. When Gaston Fébus re-enters his homeland of Foix-Béarn after the Crusade in Lithuania and the Rescue at Meaux, he is on the cover of People magazine.

True to character and his own nickname, after the massacre of the Jacques at Meaux, Charles the Bad took their captured leader, Guillaume Cale, to the town of Clermont. There, the helpless prisoner was tortured, crowned with a red-hot tripod made of iron (ouch! ouch! Ouch!), then decapitated in a well-staged, public spectacle.

The Jacques fought on after the debacle at Meaux, but they continued dying in droves in each succeeding battle. The stick-wielding Jacques, who fought on foot, were simply no match for highly-trained knights in armor, riding on horseback with lances, broadswords, maces, and battle axes for whose use in combat they had years of training. An orgy of vengeance by the nobility ensued. Charles the Bad commanded that each rebellious village would have to provide four individuals for execution as scapegoats.

Gaston III must have had a good Press Secretary. After the rescue at Meaux in 1358, he adopts the surname of the Greek Sun God “Fébus” (aka Phoebus-Apollo). He also adopts the war cry “*Fébus en avant!*” (“Onward, Fébus!”) and the motto “*Toquey si gauses,*” (Hit me if you dare). Forever after, Gaston III has been commonly known as “Gaston Fébus.”

The moniker “Fébus” fits well within the rubric of chivalry. The name Fébus¹⁴⁶ is straight out of Classical mythology, which was part of the education of every cultured noble, including Count Gaston III.

According to the Greeks, Febus-Apollo (on Earth he was Apollo, in the heavens he was Febus) was the son of the gods Zeus and Leto. Febus was a living representative of the Sun. He was famously beautiful—a handsome god of eternal Youth. Fébus was the brother of Artemis (aka Diana), the goddess of the hunt. Like his sister, Febus was a great hunter and archer. He was also a prophet. Fébus was able to predict the future and heal illnesses, he was a poet, and a sublime musician who was the father of Orpheus. He was the god of Truth who never deceived, nor could he be deceived. And he was a prolific lover: Daphne the virgin nymphette-

¹⁴⁶ Medieval orthography preferred “Fébus,” whereas modern orthography leans toward “Phoebus.” In this paper, we spell Fébus the way Gaston Fébus spelled it himself. Why not?

huntress, the nymph Clymène, the gorgeous Coronis, and Marpessa, just to name a few. All of this mythology was well known to Gaston III through the epic works of Ovid, translated into Occitan.

For the rest of his life, Count Gaston III was universally known as Gaston Fébus—the hero, the near-mythical exemplar of chivalry.

BACK HOME IN FOIX-BÉARN (1358-1391)

In the summer of 1358, Gaston Fébus had every reason to feel satisfied. He was back in his ancestral lands of Foix-Béarn, his coffers were full of gold, he was free to hunt in the Pyrenees as often as he liked, and he was a famous hero of chivalry. However, these were tumultuous and complex times, and a feudal lord could not sit still.

Gaston III immediately got busy protecting what he saw as Gaston dynasty turf in Bigorre. His opponent was his old enemy, Count Jean I d'Armagnac. This time, Armagnac was aided by his 18-year-old god-son, Jean (the Count of Poitiers and soon-to-be Duke de Berry) who had been sent to Languedoc by his older brother, the Dauphin Charles (soon to be King Charles V). This meant that in order to win the battle for control of Bigorre, Count Gaston III was warring against Armagnac and France—although Gaston took pains to notify the Dauphin that his grudge was entirely and solely against the Armagnacs.

Mediation paused this conflict over Bigorre after the Dauphin's brother, Jean Duke de Berry, was sent from Languedoc to England in 1360

(until 1366) as one of scores of hostages for his father's brief release from prison. Gaston Fébus pocketed 200,000 florins as part of the mediation.

The truce between Foix and Armagnac did not settle the future of Bigorre. It failed within months. Each side put together a coalition of neighbors during the summer of 1362 and prepared to resume their war.

Taking care of family business at the same time he was preparing for war, Fébus finally fathered a healthy son to carry on the Gaston dynasty. After 13 years of marriage with Agnès de Navarre, "Little Gaston" was born in September, 1362.

On December 5, 1362, Gaston Fébus and his knights of Foix-Béarn won a stunning, underdog victory over the knights of Armagnac near the town of Launac. Fébus took many valuable prisoners, including Count Jean I d'Armagnac himself and many of his retreating knights.

Fébus wrung magnificent ransom payments from the captured knights, with a specially high price for Jean I d'Armagnac. Fébus' winning strategy at Launac, relying on concealed archers, was modeled on the English victories at Crécy and Poitiers. Count Jean I d'Armagnac copied the French approach that had led to the defeats of Crécy and Poitiers,

putting his faith in a pell-mell, furious charge by his heavy cavalry into the face of the archers.

Flush with the ransom gold he squeezed from the Armagnac knights captured at Launac, Gaston III's next move surprised everyone. As discussed above in the section on Marriage, Little Gaston's mother, Agnès de Navarre, was brusquely repudiated three months after their child's birth. She was banished from Foix the day after Christmas, 1362, while "Little Gaston" stayed at Foix in his father's custody.

In 1364, Gaston III met with his (still) brother-in-law, Charles the Bad. Gaston III asked the Bad to talk to the King of France to see if an alliance could be arranged whereby all of them could make a common front against the English in Aquitaine, still led by the Black Prince. Lesser Gascon nobles began turning against the Black Prince, too. Protecting the sovereignty of Béarn became easier for Fébus as the Black Prince's power diminished.

Charles the Bad was not so lucky—or skilled—as Gaston Fébus. While the Bad was in his Kingdom of Navarre, most of his army was in Normandy. The Navarrese were crushed in a great battle at Cocherel (in

Normandy) by the military maven of the Valois, the famously ugly Bertrand du Guesclin, on 16 May, 1364.¹⁴⁷

Meanwhile, on the “other side” of the Pyrenees, there was a complex, intra-familial fight for the throne of Castile in the 1360’s. After Cocherel, Bertrand du Guesclin led a swarm of mercenaries out of France and into Castile to join the battle, as did the Black Prince, much to their subsequent and mutual regret.

In Castile, the Black Prince spent himself into bankruptcy and acquired a debilitating illness he never could shake.¹⁴⁸ Gaston Fébus, on the other hand, stayed in Foix-Béarn and wisely kept out of the Castilian fray. Maintaining the sovereignty of Béarn was the goal of which Fébus never lost sight.

The tide was slowly turning against the English in southwest France. During these years, Gaston Fébus prudently elected to keep his head down and continued to stay out of the wars between the French and English as the best strategy to maintain the sovereignty of Béarn. This approach

¹⁴⁷ SEE: Georges Minois, Du Guesclin. Fayard : 1993; and M. S. Coryn, Bertrand du Guesclin. Payot: 1980.

¹⁴⁸ Increasingly sick and disabled, the Black Prince left Aquitaine forever and returned to England in 1371. He was replaced in Aquitaine as the resident ruler by his younger brother, John, Duke of Lancaster.

allowed Fébus to continue fighting his dynasty's historic enemy, the Armagnac clan.

Soon after Launac, Gaston III had to confront a new threat in addition to the Armagnac clan, this time from another powerful brother of France's King Charles V. In 1365, the King named his brother Louis, Duc d'Anjou, as the new Lieutenant-Governor of the huge and wealthy province to the northeast of Foix: Languedoc. The Duke of Anjou¹⁴⁹ proved to be a rapacious administrator of Languedoc. He imposed heavy taxes that he collected without pity and personally pocketed.

Louis d'Anjou was roundly despised by the people of Languedoc. Even Pope Urban V intervened and tried to convince France's King Charles V to suppress Louis d'Anjou's rapacity. The Pope failed.

Gaston III's treasure of gold from the ransoms he wrung from the Armagnac clan in 1362 did not leave Foix-Béarn. Fébus did not just stockpile the gold in his castle of Orthez, he used his gold to finance construction and maintenance of his network of defensive castles and to provide arms and armor for his subjects. He funded castle-construction

¹⁴⁹ La Bastide d'Anjou is a tiny village in modern-day Languedoc. It is the home of the **Hostellerie d'Étienne**, which serves the world's most delicious cassoulet, and with a stellar cellar, to boot.

projects that provided local employment and materially contributed to the defense of Foix-Béarn. You might call it an “economic stimulus package” as much as a defense budget focused overwhelmingly on deterrence.

In 1367, when the Black Prince threatened a *chevauchée* through Foix-Béarn, Count Gaston III sounded the tocsin for a general mobilization of his subjects. Thanks to his treasury and perspicacious planning, he rapidly put Foix-Béarn on a solid defensive footing. Stockades were erected to protect villages, churches were transformed into fortresses, and the valleys and passes were protected by mounted knights, armored foot-soldiers, and archers.

The Black Prince got the message and stood down. The deterrent effect of Fébus’ defensive force worked. Once again, Gaston Fébus had won “victory without combat.”

In 1369, France’s new, Valois King Charles V confiscated the Duchy of Aquitaine from England’s King Edward III for his failure to swear homage. France announced its control of the Bigorre, too, and installed the Armagnac clan to run it.¹⁵⁰ This did not sit well with Fébus.

¹⁵⁰ In 1360, one of King Charles V’s younger brothers, Jean, married Jeanne, the daughter of the Count of Armagnac. The alliance of the Armagnac with the Valois helped the Armagnacs get the upper hand in Bigorre.

In 1373, Charles V recalled Louis d'Anjou from Languedoc to lead an army against the Black Prince's next *chevauchée* through Aquitaine. To replace him in Languedoc, the King appointed Count Jean II d'Armagnac. That was all it took to spur Gaston Fébus into renewed warfare against the Armagnacs. Gaston III floated two prospects of diplomacy inimical to France: 1) a marriage of the Duke of Lancaster's daughter and Fébus' son, and 2) a military alliance of Foix-Béarn with Lancaster. The King of France got the message—betting all his chips on the Armagnac clan instead of Gaston Fébus would not succeed; instead, it would drive Fébus into an alliance with the English. The King would have to deal with Fébus.

To bring an end to the recurrent conflicts with the Armagnac clan, and gain additional territorial concessions from them, Fébus arranged the marriage of his son, "Little Gaston," with Béatrix d'Armagnac (age 13, "*la gaie armanageoise*") in 1379. The marriage did not suffice. For reasons described in the following section herein, Little Gaston died young in 1380, ending the marriage alliance, and durable peace between Foix and Armagnac remained elusive.

The people of Languedoc clamored for the Duke of Anjou to be replaced by Gaston Fébus. Languedocians still resented the "foreigners" of

northern France who had ravaged their land during the Albigensian Crusades (1209-1229). Toulouse even sent a formal delegation from its City Council (*les capitouls*) to Paris—a 2 week ride by horse—to plead directly with the King and his Council for Gaston Fébus to be appointed as the King's Lieutenant to run Languedoc. It was to no avail.

Instead, the 12-year-old King Charles VI, who had just succeeded his father on the throne of France, named another of his uncles, Jean, Duke of Berry, to serve as his Lieutenant in Languedoc from 1380-1389. Duke Jean was closely allied with Fébus' sworn enemies, the Armagnac clan. The Duke's godfather was an Armagnac and he was married to an Armagnac. The Duke's family links with the Armagnac clan were enough to make the Duke of Berry the Enemy of Fébus.

The King's choice of Duke Jean de Berry in 1380 to administer Languedoc enraged the Languedocians. Armed uprisings took place in numerous cities. Gaston Fébus did not sit still, either. Because the Duke de Berry was closely tied to the Armagnac clan, his leadership in Languedoc was plainly inimical to Gaston III's interests.

Before the arrival of the Duke de Berry in Languedoc, Fébus gathered his knights and rode to Toulouse, where the residents proclaimed

him Captain of Toulouse, i.e., their military leader. Toulouse knew that to gain effective protection from the marauding mercenaries, they needed Count Gaston III. In the process, Fébus pocketed a service fee of 100,000 francs. Toulouse also paid the full expenses for a contingent of 400 of his knights. Despite the King's appointment of the Duke of Berry as Lieutenant for Languedoc, Gaston Fébus was the man they wanted to protect them from the mercenaries. Languedoc anted up and paid cash for Fébus.

Fébus took the gold from the Toulousains and started chasing out the mercenaries. Foix-Béarn defeated them at Rabastens in 1381. This made Gaston Fébus the military master of the northeast slope of the Pyrenees—more powerful than the King of France's uncle, Lieutenant Jean Duke de Berry. But the hostilities did not end.

With intervention by the Pope, in 1384 a peace was brokered between the Languedocians, Duke Jean de Berry, the Armagnac clan, and Count Gaston III.

Although Bigorre was officially French, its inhabitants nonetheless rallied to their neighbor, Gaston Fébus. King Charles V eventually accepted the reality of Gaston III's military presence and control of Bigorre. Fébus became the master-in-fact of most of the central Pyrenees and its

high crossings. His power was recognized by the Kings of France, England, Navarre, Castile, and Aragon.

Gaston III successfully protected the sovereignty of Béarn and avoided the Black Prince's repeated imprecations to swear homage for Béarn. His success was no accident. It would have been impossible to field an effective deterrent to invasion by his enemies, including the Black Prince, without Gaston III's prescient attention to keeping enough gold on hand to immediately finance sufficient defensive capabilities in Foix-Béarn.

Throughout the decades of the 1360's-1380's, Gaston Fébus remained at the pivot of the Pyrenean balance of power between France and England, courted by all sides yet committing to none. Protecting the sovereignty of Béarn was his *cynosure*. He succeeded.

Gaining control of Bigorre was a secondary goal of long standing. He accomplished that, too.

Gaston Fébus' administration of Foix-Béarn was consistently marked by efficiency, concision, certainty, fairness, military preparedness, military success, and fiscal soundness. His court was famous for its glorious sumptuousness. Fébus was renowned for his munificent largesse and his patronage of all the arts, as well as his personal proficiency in music, multi-

lingual poetry, and cynegetic science. With the enlargement of Fébus' domains and the filling of his coffers with gold, Foix-Béarn remained a neutral haven of relative peace and prosperity, surrounded by seas of war and devastation.

The reasonableness of Gaston III's rule is attested to by the willingness of his subjects to pay the taxes he levied in Foix-Béarn. It is also attested to by the measure of allegiance he earned from his neighbors in Bigorre and Languedoc who sought to be led by Gaston Fébus and who (unsuccessfully) sought his appointment as the King's Lieutenant for Languedoc.

Although some historians characterize Fébus as avaricious, his record of support and success at home, as well as the admiration and support he received in neighboring provinces like Languedoc and Bigorre, does not appear to me to support the negative characterization of Fébus one encounters in certain histories.

THE SUDDEN DEATH OF GASTON FÉBUS' SOLE HEIR, "LITTLE GASTON"

By the time Agnès de Navarre was banished from Foix in 1362, allegedly for failure of Charles the Bad to pay her full dowry as promised in the marriage contract, three bastard sons had been born to the great Count Gaston Fébus of Foix-Béarn: Bernard, Yvain, and Gratien.

Gaston Fébus was widely and accurately known as a man of "impetuous passions" and passionate desires, but there was nothing unusual about a powerful noble having illegitimate children. The Count's illegitimate, male progeny were raised in the castles where Fébus and his sole, legitimate son, "Little Gaston," lived (without Agnès).

Perhaps Little Gaston felt slighted or threatened by the illegitimate progeny who lived on equal terms with him at court? There are no documents that recite his thoughts. We do know that it was a frequent practice among the nobility during the Middle Ages to raise illegitimate sons in the household of their noble father.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ As a child, Fébus was raised with two, illegitimate half-brothers sired by his father, Count Gaston II. As adults, the bastard half-brothers, Pierre de Béarn and Arnaud-Guilhem, never wavered as loyal lieutenants and allies of Gaston Fébus.

As a matter of feudal law, half-brothers were no threat to Little Gaston's dynastic destiny of inheriting all the titles and rulership of Foix-Béarn. Since the half-brothers were illegitimate, they were barred by feudal law from inheriting any of Count Gaston III's titles of nobility.

In 1380, when he was 17 years old, Little Gaston made his first visit to his mother, Agnès, since his infancy. There is no evidence of how long Little Gaston stayed in Navarre to visit his mother—it could have been just a day, or a week, or more.

Here is the stage in the life of Count Gaston III where analysis by a scholar of classical mythology would be fascinating because of the similarities with the Myth of Oedipus. The ancient Greek story of Oedipus is the fulfillment of a prophecy: a son returns home incognito, unwittingly kills his father, and unwittingly marries his own mother. When Oedipus discovers that he has (symbolically) “blindly fulfilled” his Fate according to the prophecy, Oedipus takes it one step further and gouges out his own eyes before embarking on a voluntary Exile of Misery (a sort of Living Hell).

The Oedipus myth as told by Sophocles is a story with which Gaston Fébus was undoubtedly very familiar. An immersion in classical history

and mythology was the standard educational fare for young nobles in the proto-humanist era to which Gaston Fébus belonged.

Readers, please keep the Oedipus Myth in mind as you now learn how the son of Count Gaston Fébus died.

In 1380, Little Gaston rode west to Navarre to visit his mother Agnès, and her brother, Little Gaston's infamous uncle, King Charles the Bad. (SEE: Tucoo-Chala, pp. 211-215; Pailhès, pp. 309-317; and p. 344, Tuchman.) During this family visit, Little Gaston received a very special gift from his uncle: a bag of magic, white powder.¹⁵²

Simultaneously, Little Gaston also received a story from his uncle, Charles the Bad: Little Gaston must go home to the family castle in Foix and lace his father's meat and soup with the magic powder. Then, Little Gaston must ensure that his father (Gaston Fébus) eats the meat secretly doctored with the magic, white powder.

According to Charles the Bad, after ingesting the magic powder, his father would be unable to think of anything but the joy of having Little Gaston's mother, Agnès, back at his side in Foix. Little Gaston's parents

¹⁵² Professor Pailhès casts a ray of doubt on when and where Little Gaston procured the powder.

would then be reconciled at last. For the first time in his life, Little Gaston would forevermore live in familial happiness with both of his parents--Agnès de Navarre and Count Gaston III. What a beautiful story...

Little Gaston took the bag and—perhaps--swallowed the story that his uncle, Charles the Bad, allegedly told him about the magic white powder that would reunite his parents.

A glitch in the plan came up. When Little Gaston returned home from Navarre to Foix, his bastard brother Yvain¹⁵³ discovered the bag of white powder and quickly ran to tell their father, Count Gaston Fébus.

Fébus was not amused. The great Count of Foix-Béarn was nobody's fool. He knew that his brother-in-law Charles the Bad had a well-earned reputation for using poison¹⁵⁴, as well as paying for murder-by-contract. To remove all doubt, Gaston Fébus took some of the white powder Little Gaston was hiding, sprinkled it on a handy haunch of venison, and fed the doctored meat to one of his hunting dogs. The dog immediately went into

¹⁵³ In January, 1393, Fébus' bastard son Yvain was one of the four, disguised, "wild men" at the infamous "Bal des Ardents" given in Paris for France's King Charles VI. At this royal party, Yvain was accidentally burned to death in his highly-flammable costume, along with the other wild men—except for the pathetically insane King Charles VI, who narrowly escaped unharmed. But that is another story...

¹⁵⁴ Along with several unquestioned incidents of using poison, it was rumored that in 1380, Charles the Bad had tried to poison France's Valois King Charles V, plus the royal Dukes of Berri and Burgundy. Charles the Bad certainly poisoned non-royalty; e.g., Seguin de Badefol. (SEE: Autrand, pp. 504-506.) Charles the Bad also hired paid assassins, e.g., for the murder of Charles de la Cerda (unarmed and in his skivvies at the time he was killed).

painful paroxysms and died at the Count's feet. Bad sign, eh? The magic white powder was arsenic.

Restrained from immediately killing his dynasty's sole heir and his only legitimate son, Count Gaston Fébus locked him up in the castle dungeon of Orthez. All of Little Gaston's household who had gone with him to Navarre were immediately interrogated. According to Froissart, fifteen of them were quickly executed. (Professor Pailhès criticizes that part of Froissart's tale as dubious hearsay that Froissart never witnessed.)

Meanwhile, Little Gaston, perhaps realizing that his uncle Charles the Bad had schemed to have him commit parricide, or perhaps fearing that the arsenic from his uncle might be retributively hidden in Little Gaston's prison food at Orthez, gave way to despair and refused to eat. For whatever reason, Little Gaston went on a hunger strike.

The "official version" of what happened next is as implausible as the story of Richard Nixon's secretary, Rose Mary Wood, and her "accidental" erasure of 17 minutes of the Watergate tapes. But it's the only version we have...

When Gaston Fébus was informed of Little Gaston's hunger strike, he was paring his nails with a very sharp knife. Angry and still a man of

“impetuous passions,” the Count of Foix rushed to his son's cell and seized him by the throat, saying “Traitor, why dost thou not eat?”

The “official version” (according to the chronicler Froissart) of what happened next is that Gaston Fébus “slipped” and “accidentally” cut Little Gaston’s throat across the jugular vein with the sharp knife that was, by infelicitous coincidence, still in his hand. “Whoops ! Sorry !!!” Little Gaston bled to death.

Regarding Little Gaston’s motive for using the arsenic he was given by Charles the Bad, there is no way to prefer one hypothesis over another. Perhaps he naïvely believed in a magical reconciliation of his estranged parents? Or perhaps he was jealous of his father’s evident preference for his bastard brothers and saw murdering his father as a way to immediately take control of Foix-Béarn and its wealth? The key facts will never be known, but a novelist or a playwright like Sophocles could create something memorable here.

When Gaston Fébus realized that his son was trying to kill him, it seems inescapable to me that a man like Fébus, who had received an intensive, tutorial education extensively based on Classical Greece and Rome, would not immediately “flash” on the Oedipus Myth. Fébus’ long-

standing familiarity with the Oedipus myth had to cumulate with whatever spontaneous and “impetuous” emotions Gaston Fébus felt on the spot.

Because of a lack of documentary evidence, we do not know what Gaston III felt or thought when he realized his son was trying to poison him. Nor do we know the thoughts or intent of Little Gaston. We are left with speculation—and the hope that a modern cinematographer or writer will someday give us a plausible version of the story on which we can ruminare.

Unlike Oedipus, who marries and seduces his mother Jocasta, Little Gaston did not marry or seduce his mother, Agnès. However, Little Gaston was arguably “seduced” by his uncle, Charles the Bad--not for sex, but suborned to attempt to murder his father--while Little Gaston was at least figuratively in the hands of his mother, Agnès de Navarre.

Readers should bear in mind that a hallmark of medieval-feudal culture in Europe was the preeminent importance of family loyalty. The attempt to poison Gaston Fébus was a serious transgression of the norm of family loyalty by Little Gaston and by Charles the Bad. It was taboo; kapu.

The essential and preeminent purpose of marriage was for perpetuating and enhancing a family dynasty. “Family was everything” in the era of Gaston Fébus. It was therefore no casual matter for a powerful,

feudal lord to kill his sole heir and continue to live without conjugal access to his wife—a situation that virtually guaranteed the proximate end of the Gaston dynasty in Foix-Béarn.¹⁵⁵

There are no historical documents of which I am aware that explore the mythological parallels or the psychology of Gaston Fébus vis-à-vis the attempted murder by his son, Little Gaston.

In 1839, the acknowledged Grand Master of the genre of the historical novel—Alexandre Dumas (*père*)—published Monseigneur GASTON PHOÉBUS, a historical novel. This book was a disappointment to me when I read it for the first time in 2014, and it was still a disappointment re-reading it in 2020. Your opinion may be different. In any event, I do not recommend it to you. My personal opinion is that only Chapter One of Dumas' Gaston Phoebus is even marginally good; the rest should be tossed into “the round file.”

The book Gaston Phoebus was a commercial failure when it was published in 1839, five years before Dumas' first, wildly-successful

¹⁵⁵The Gaston dynasty began in 1062. In 1380, it was poised to outlast in longevity France's Capetian dynasty (987-1328). Fébus had to be aware that unless his repudiated and estranged wife Agnès predeceased him, thereby allowing him to re-marry, the Gaston dynasty would end forever when he died.

historical novel, The Three Musketeers. It was written early in Dumas' career, at a time when he had written two, highly successful, historic plays, but had not yet written a novel.

So, attention all novelists and playwrights: the field is ripe and it is still wide open. Classical scholars, romantic novelists, brilliant playwrights, and ambitious movie-makers, please come forth and expatiate on the amazing, known events of Gaston Fébus' life and the unknowable, hidden, emotions of the actors, their secret thoughts, and their true motives.

All the above thoughts are for the cinematographer, novelist, or playwright to explore, but not the historian, because there are no documents exploring the psyche of Gaston III or Little Gaston. But the interplay between the Oedipus Myth and the True Life Story of Gaston Fébus is too obvious to ignore or skim past.

Whatever may be The Real Reason for Little Gaston's attempted poisoning of his father, and whatever may be The True Story of how Gaston Fébus slit his son's throat, there is no doubt that after the fact, Fébus became immensely regretful of killing his son and sole heir.

Gaston Fébus' remorse after killing his only son is the unmentioned subject of the collection of pious and poetic prayers, some of which he

composed himself, and published shortly after the death of Gaston III in a lavishly-illuminated manuscript: *Le Livre des oraisons.*

Publishing a work of literary repentance is a far cry from the mythical Oedipus gouging out his own eyes and going into exile. Yet Oedipus and Gaston Fébus each performed a heavy, expiatory act.

It took 3-4 years after Little Gaston's death before Gaston Fébus resumed his glittering life at court. After that "decent interval" of relative asceticism and mourning, Fébus resumed his luxurious lifestyle, hosting sumptuous banquets in the castles that comprised his exquisite, defensive network. These opulent feasts continued to impress his many visitors with spectacles of music, drama, song, dancing, poetry, wrestling matches, readings of novels, and tales of travel and war.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Google Images Gaston Phoebus for some great illustrations, including many from his hunting treatise.

GASTON FÉBUS GOES TO “THE HAPPY HUNTING GROUNDS”

On August 1, 1391, Gaston Fébus was 60 years old, hale, hearty, rich, and famous. He had spent a vigorous morning in the Pyrenees mountains, hunting brown bear¹⁵⁷ with his illegitimate son, Yvain, and his favorite hunting buddies from Court. The hunters and the dogs had successfully taken a Pyrenean brown bear. It had been a great day and a great hunt.

Just before dinner, while washing his hands in icy water, Fébus suffered a heart attack or a stroke. Half an hour later, he died peacefully, surrounded by his best friends. Hollywood couldn't have staged it better.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Brown bear were abundant in the Pyrenees during the XIV century and were not extirpated until the early XX century. A bear hunt was the quintessential adventure of the Pyrenees, and it demanded a hunter at the apex of hunting skills. Reintroduction of brown bear to the Pyrenees in 2006 (the bears were from Slovenia) met with equivocal results and fierce opposition from local residents in the agricultural and livestock sectors. The outcome of this highly-controversial transplant is still uncertain.

¹⁵⁸ The death in 1387 of Fébus' brother-in-law, Charles the Bad of Navarre, was also pure Hollywood, but it was not nearly so charming. It was terrifying and gruesome. (SEE: p. 456, Tuchman.)

The Greek myth of the mighty hunter Orion's death might be more picturesque than the death of the mighty hunter Gaston Febus, but it would require the genius of Steven Spielberg to film it. Orion the hunter had the misfortune of angering Artemis, goddess of the hunt (and sister of the sun god Phoebus-Apollo). Perhaps Orion offended Artemis by trying to seduce her? Whatever may have been her reason, Artemis decided to get rid of Orion and his dog, Sirius, by changing them into stars and exiling them forever to the night sky—which was far kinder than what the goddess Artemis did to the mighty hunter, Acteon...

WHO INHERITED FOIX-BÉARN ?

After the death of Little Gaston at the hands of his father in 1380, Gaston Fébus had no legitimate son to inherit his lands or titles.¹⁵⁹ The Treaty of Toulouse,¹⁶⁰ signed between Gaston Fébus and King Charles VI of France on January 5, 1390, sought to resolve this question¹⁶¹.

The Treaty of Toulouse made France's young King Charles VI the sole heir of Gaston Fébus. In exchange, Fébus received 100,000 gold francs cash in hand paid, ("*des espèces sonnantes et trébuchantes*") plus sovereignty during his lifetime over the coveted County of Bigorre. Always attentive to finances, this was a hefty hunk of gold, even for Fébus.

The Treaty's provisions on Bigorre enabled Fébus to resolve (in his favor) the major bone of contention with his neighbors of Armagnac, and to

¹⁵⁹ Two of Gaston III's bastard sons, Gratien and Yvain, became poor knights errant. Gaston III's eldest bastard son, Bernard, became Count of Medinacelli and one of the preeminent lords at the court of the King of Castile. He was legitimized by papal decree in 1381.

¹⁶⁰ For complex reasons involving the three kingdoms of Aragon, England, and France, the Treaty of Toulouse was annulled by negotiations in 1391. Mathieu de Castelbon, age 14, became the next Count of Foix-Béarn. Béarn retained its sovereignty until 1620 when it became a province of France.

¹⁶¹ France's King Charles VI suffered his first bout of insanity in 1392 and was totally incapacitated, off and on, for the next 40 years until his death. Before the onset of his mental illness in 1392, young King Charles VI was a big fan of Fébus and owned an illuminated manuscript of his hunting treatise. SEE: Françoise Autrand, Charles VI. Fayard: 1986, and Bernard Guénéé, La folie de Charles VI, Roi Bien-Aimé. Perrin : 2004.

“bridge” the land gap that separated Foix from Béarn—a geopolitical dream that Fébus had nurtured for years. The hegemony of Gaston Fébus in the Pyrenees thereby became even more pronounced—and Fébus provisionally solved the conundrum of who would inherit Foix-Béarn.

When Count Gaston III died unexpectedly on August 1, 1391, it should have triggered the retrocession of Bigorre and Foix-Béarn to the Crown of France. But despite the fact that Fébus had already pocketed his gold, the Treaty of Toulouse was never fully-executed. Before Christmas, 1391, the Treaty was annulled by joint agreement of the signatories.

The new agreement provided that a cousin of Gaston III--a 14-year-old named Mathieu de Castelbon—inherited all of Fébus’ lands and his titles. The new Count Mathieu then swore homage to the King of France for Foix, but the great legacy of Gaston Fébus—sovereignty for Béarn, free of all homage—remained intact for centuries.

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