Francis I and Sixteenth-Century France

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This book, a collection of essays and articles ranging from 1963 to 2008, is published at an opportune moment, the year of the 500th anniversary of Francis I's accession on 1 January 1515, a year marked by conferences, exhibitions and, indeed, bizarre re-enactments such as that of the battle of Marignano at Amboise and Romorantin. Professor Knecht has, of course, written widely on other aspects of French history in the early modern period but this book concentrates specifically on the era of Francis I. For those who know his writings, some of the essays printed in this volume will be familiar, though others are not so easily accessed. The book is therefore a very welcome addition to the resources available to students and all those interested in Francis I and the French Renaissance. The essays form part of a many-layered vision of Francis I and his times by which Knecht puts into reverse a long period of hostility in French tradition, including the lecher of Hugo's *Le roi s'amuse* or Michelet's po-faced portrayal, in that extraordinary hindsighted chapter of *La Renaissance*, in which he portrayed Francis as a lightweight unable to understand the grand forces shaping the history of the world. In one of his essays (II (1)), Knecht dissects Michelet's caricature of the king as dominated by an ambitious and manipulative mother and establishes a more convincing picture of a close family – the 'Trinité' of king, mother and sister – but of a king who respected that family while generally knowing his own mind. Le grand Roy François, as he was known in his own century, was one of the few rulers of France before modern times to emerge in his own time and soon afterwards as a larger-than-life fictional character, whether it be in the bawdy plays of the basoche in his early years (considered in an essay on 'Popular theatre and the court' – V), his sister's tales (1540s) or in the scurrilous stories by Brantôme of the later 16th century. This inevitably shaped his long-term reputation, though there was much else to contribute to it, not least his patronage and architectural legacy.

Professor Knecht came to work on Francis and his reign almost by a series of accidents. Having started research in London on late medieval English history, by the mid-1950s he realised that the reign of Francis was a wide-open subject. French historians, who had after all neglected the reign of Francis since the early 20th century and certainly did not encourage work on political history, offered little guidance. Since the 1930s, of course, political, though not cultural, history had been downgraded. In his inaugural lecture at Birmingham, Knecht paid a generous tribute to the Annales school as a dimension of French cultural influence in modern Britain, while noting that it had been accused of 'arrogance, pretentiousness and of savaging the French language'. He might have added that it had led to a black hole in the political history of

the Renaissance period only latterly filled by the work of his old (Annales) friend Jean Jacquart in the study he published on Francis in 1981.

His ground-breaking study of the 1516 Concordat of Bologna (I), published in 1963, opened the way to a serious re-assessment of role of that Franco-Papal agreement in shaping the king's religious stance and political strategy. Having pondered the orthodoxy that Francis did not need to follow Henry VIII's example in breaking with Rome because the Concordat gave him all the power over the Church that he needed, he discovered that the reality of royal power under the Concordat was much more complex. He pursued this theme in his 1972 comparison of the Reformation in England and France (VIII), which pointed up the absence of a strong later medieval heresy in France; the machinery for the control of the spread of Lutheranism was not really in working order and so the inchoate early Reformation spread much more quickly in France than in an England used to heresy trials. In his 1978 study, he developed his ideas on Francis's religious stance before and after the Placards of 1534, as a nuanced account of the changes in the king's attitude towards heresy. Francis had long been accused of personal petulance and pique in his reaction to the Placards. In fact, he could do no other than react to the violent sacramentarian language of the Placards (IX).

When publishing his *Francis I* in 1982, he explicitly ruled out defining his book as a biography – though in many important ways it was of course a study of the man – and opted primarily for setting the king in a wider political and cultural context. The court, again a subject relatively neglected until that time, naturally came to figure prominently in his analysis of the reign. In a paper given in 1976 and published in 1978 (IV), Knecht began to deal with this. He accompanied it by a chapter in A. G. Dickens' illustrated book on the *Courts of Europe* in 1977 (2), in which he broadened the cultural themes. Impelled towards the subject by the research for the first version of *Francis I* (1982) he was, perhaps responding to a general revival of interest in the history of the royal courts of early modern Europe, that had already been signalled in Norbert Elias's 'Civilizing Process'. In England, Tudor historians were quick to take this up (one thinks of his great Birmingham friend and colleague Eric Ives). Thus, the court as a political, governmental and, perhaps above all for him, a cultural focus has been a major facet of his work (fully developed in his 2008 book on the subject). In his 1976–8 paper, Knecht identified a number of related themes which he was later to explore in depth: the institutionalisation of the court and the prodigious growth in terms of numbers of royal servants at court (the fact that the numbers of royal servants double from Louis XI's reign to 1522 and continued to grow thereafter). In his evocation of the court of Francis, the reader cannot but be aware of the startling change in the cultural and political sway of the institution during the reign.

Knecht's body of work reveals an historian whose work is characterised by clarity of exposition, respect for the sources and a sensitive awareness of the visual. His capacity for convincing narrative is matched by his grasp of problems, with, dare one say, a suspicion of the merely modish. The 1993 study of the *Lit de justice* of 1527 (XIII) displays his capacity to debunk the latter by a careful attention to the texts relating to that crucial turning-point in the relations between the Crown and Parlement. He argued that the notion of the king as accepting the idea of the assembly as a great constitutional forum is largely illusory, though there were most certainly great issues of public policy concerning both church and state at stake. From the beginning, Knecht developed a distinctive understanding of the nature of the French monarchy under Francis. He emphasised the authoritarian instincts of the king and underlined the assumptions about absolute power which were characteristic of some thinkers of the time while accepting that there were limits to what later became called 'absolutism'. So, in his study of Francis and the various 'mirrors for princes' presented to him (VII), he points out that the king was intensely pragmatic in his attitude to political concepts. In his study of the Constable of Bourbon (XI), set firmly in the international context and tracing the Constable's entanglement in English and Habsburg strategies, we see another side to the politics of the reign: a country ill-governed and on the verge of revolt in the early 1520s, but one in which rebellion is fatally undermined by treachery, intrigue and the inability of even the greatest of princes to mobilise wider support. In the event, Francis was lucky.

Knecht has stressed that Francis was a peripatetic monarch. A ruler in his position at the time had to be, but

Francis had more of a taste for it than most. He took the trouble, though, to identify patterns in his wanderings. In his 1981 study of Francis I and Paris (X) he pointed out that the king was far more given to reside at Paris than had been commonly assumed and in fact, despite his slowness to return to his capital after 1526, shifted the focus of his favourite residences away from the Loire to the Ile-de-France. The king hoped to embellish the capital but it was his demands for money that characterised his relations with the city, to the point that in the last half of his reign relations were often very strained. His 'wanderings' had some strategic purposes and Knecht was probably the first, for instance, to clarify what Francis was actually doing after his return in 1526. In his study of the *Lit de justice* he comprehensively dismissed the idea that Francis returned from captivity in Spain determined immediately to rush to Paris in order to discipline the Parlement. France, though, had two capitals (the other being the court) and the king was often on the move. Knecht has evoked many times the picture of a King given to stopping over in some run down manor house in the middle of a forest. It is also sometimes easy to forget that movements of the equivalent of a medium-sized town of 10,000 people had to be planned meticulously in advance. In his discussion of the movements of the later Valois court, Knecht vividly evokes the logistical problems which seem on the surface improvised, but in reality involved extensive preparations for furnishing and supplying the royal entourage, not only in cities but in smaller towns and châteaux. The pattern was long established but particularly evident in the 16th century at certain periods and remained the norm even in the first half of Louis XIV's reign.

Knecht broadened his study of the politics and culture of the court in a number of ways. In a perhaps not too widely known lecture to the 1987 conference on the town and the court, he acknowledged his debt to the perception of Norbert Elias that in the early modern period the court occupied the role of the town in modern society as the most dominant cultural and political institution, the city aping the court rather than the other way round. In some of his later work, indeed, he has dealt with the tensions between the city and the court at greater length in the theme of 'one kingdom, two capitals' apparent in tense relations both under Francis I and Henri III.

Knecht has always been fascinated by the interaction of England and France in the age of Francis and Henry VIII. Culture and diplomacy were, of course, essential features here and is an ideal position to understand the nature of those relations. One of his earlier works had, after all, been an edition of the (now highly sought after) travel journal of Sir Nicholas Carew across France in 1530. In 1972, as has been noted, Knecht published a thought-provoking article on the comparison of the Reformations in England and France (VIII) while, of course, his inaugural lecture as Professor at Birmingham dealt with French influences on Tudor England.⁽³⁾ A more recent study (XII) considers Francis's presence in southwest France from the point of view of English observers in 1520s, a question doubly sensitive both in terms of time (alternating peace and war) and place (the reputation of the region for English sympathies left over from the Hundred Years war). Anglo-French cultural and political relations have never, then, been far from his mind, as was shown in the study he published in 1995 of the Field of Cloth of Gold (III). Here again he departed from the accepted clichés to point out the lack of evidence for a negative impact on Anglo-French relations by the competition and rivalry of the meetings; in fact a good time was had by all. The coming of war was rather dictated by the geopolitical imperatives. In another study, Knecht focuses on another series of summit meetings, this time between Francis and the Emperor Charles V in 1539–40 (XV). Again, the display was sumptuous (especially the Emperor's visit to France in late 1539) and the stakes high, no less than the settlement of the poisonous issue of the duchy of Milan. The display and propagandistic pageantry were in overdrive and there seems every reason to believe that, on the French side, there was a real expectation of long-term settlement. Indeed, it is incorrect to say, as some have done, that the reception of the Emperor at Paris was an underplayed affair. In fact it was mounted on the grandest scale. Again, summit diplomacy failed and the grandiose gestures were followed by an inexorable slide to war.

As for the nobility, Knecht observed that in the 16th century a 'court nobility' was only present in embryo. Given the expense, a life at court was open to relatively few noblemen and not even exemption from the feudal levy was enough to overcome this. Knecht suspected that there was a substantial overlap between great aristocratic households and that of the King under the later Valois. As he observed in 1987, the

relationship between the inner royal entourage and the clienteles of grantees would be crucial until at least the middle of the 17th century. His comparative study of the English and French nobilities in the 16th century neatly sums up the contrasts between them in a way that throws considerable light on French elite society (XVI).

As far as Renaissance culture is concerned, understatement in any form was not a serious option for Francis. The very existence of a royal court in which the King was known to welcome writers and artists and even engaged directly with them was what provided the essential motor of patronage. Knecht has argued that the fact that the court of France became a magnet for artists and craftsmen from all over Europe was a source of pride. The Renaissance in France was, of course, wider than the court itself and embraced some highly cosmopolitan urban life. Politesse at court was prized and the role of women, appropriately in the reign of a King who commissioned the translation of Castiglione, highly important (as is argued in essay II). It need hardly be stressed that, as a poet descended from Charles d'Orléans, he also consciously modelled himself as the 'restorer of letters'. But we have to be careful here. Francis has long been credited with the title of 'père des lettres' and as founder both of the Collège de France and a newly-invigorated royal library. Knecht has always been careful to debunk tradition when necessary. Having looked at recent work on this, he cautioned against accepting too much of this at its face value and pointed out how flimsy was the evidence for the new College or indeed whether the famous 'lecteurs royaux' were paid for very long (VI). As for the royal library, it was moved to Fontainebleau in 1544 but its status is unclear. We now know that the famous edict of Montpellier (1537) supposedly founding an early form of copyright library of printed books was not put into effect and was probably designed with the idea of controlling religious publications.

Francis was, of course, one of the great collectors and builders in the history of the French monarchy and, as Monique Châtenet has shown, took a careful and almost professional interest in the design of his own palaces. During the Italian wars, the constant contact with Italian society drew Italian artists and architects into the service of the King of France. Knecht's study of Francis and Fontainebleau (XIV) gives us a careful summing up of some of the most revealing modern research into royal building in the period, research which had completely transformed our understanding of how and why such buildings were constructed. Most residences – the Loire in the early period but the Ile-de-France later on – must have resembled building sites for lengthy periods. Frustratingly little is known about the architects themselves and their designs, though more is known about the crucial interior decoration at Fontainebleau by Rosso and Primaticcio. The piecemeal and ad hoc process of building at Fontainebleau is revealed, alongside the extraordinary complexity and ambiguous messages of the decor, for instance of the long gallery.

Francis was widely known to be both a patron and connoisseur. As Knecht shows in both in essay II and his revised study of 1994, *Renaissance Warrior and Patron*, as early as 1504 the Mantuan ambassador reported the ten-year-old Francis as asking him to find some examples of the Italian paintings that had given him such delight. In 1540, in a much quoted account, Sir John Wallop reports how Francis proudly displayed his connoisseurship in décor and his taste for finely wrought wood in the royal chamber at Fontainebleau and then took him into the gallery (for which he kept the key on his own person) to admire the programme of decoration and the bath suite below. The King's taste in painting, revealed in the décor of Fontainebleau, was mannerist and, as with Lescot's design for the Louvre, meant to amplify the grandeur of the monarchy and designed to be read on different levels – of the cognoscenti and the casual observer. This is all the more important as many of Rosso's paintings for Fontainebleau were engraved and, for the time, widely disseminated. Francis, of course, vastly expanded the royal art collection, part of it displayed in the bath suite at Fontainebleau, but it is difficult know much about his taste except for his acquisitions and the stray remark of an ambassador or a series of anecdotes by Cellini. Two major figures stand out but tell different stories. The invitation of Leonardo to France may have been something of a trophy, certainly the artist did little work in France before his death in 1519 (not in the arms of Francis who, as Knecht was careful to point out, was elsewhere at the time). Cellini's visits to France between 1537 and 1545 tell a different story – of a monarch who this time was determined to get value for his money (he certainly did this time). Nevertheless, Francis by the end of his reign had created a great collection, employing his diplomats and other agents to scour Italy.

In many ways, the arguments and perceptions put forward in these essays have created a generally accepted view of the age but in others have stimulated arguments which will continue in France and elsewhere over the significance of the reign. The fact that research and publication on the period is now so active and vibrant is a tribute to his work. In the preface to his 2008 book on *The French Renaissance Court*, Knecht almost evokes the world of Alain Fournier's lost domain as he gazes as a child from the widows of the château of Ecoen or as a young man cycles along the valley of the Loire looking for the châteaux of the Renaissance. This profound bond with France, its landscape and monuments suffuses his work and enables him to get to the heart of the matter. The world of Francis I and the Renaissance has been the ideal rediscovered domain for this lover of art and culture, collector of foibles, and superb teller of stories (à la Brantôme) to deploy his skills.

Notes

1. Essays will be referred to by the Roman numerals used in the pagination as there is no consecutive pagination.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Francis I: Prince and patron of the northern Renaissance', in *The Courts of Europe: Politics, Patronage and Royalty 1400-1800*, ed. A.G. Dickens (London, 1977, repr. 1984), pp. 99–119.[Back to \(12\)](#)
3. Robert Knecht, *The Lily and the Rose*, pamphlet (Birmingham, 1987).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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