

## The Decline of Church Power

The popes of the Roman Catholic Church reached the height of their power in the thirteenth century. Then, in the fourteenth century, a series of problems led to a decline in the Church's political position.

**The Popes at Avignon** The European kings had grown unwilling to accept papal claims of supremacy by the end of the thirteenth century. This is evident in a struggle between **Pope Boniface VIII** and **King Philip IV** of France. Their struggle would have serious consequences for the papacy.

To gain new revenues, Philip said that he had the right to tax the clergy of France. Boniface VIII claimed that the clergy could not pay taxes to their ruler without the pope's consent. He argued that popes were supreme over both the Church and the state.

Philip IV refused to accept the pope's position and sent French forces to Italy to bring Boniface back to France for trial. The pope escaped but died soon after from the shock of his experience. To ensure his position, Philip IV engineered the election of a Frenchman, Clement V, as pope in 1305. The new pope took up residence in **Avignon** (a•veen•YOHN), in southern France.



From 1305 to 1377, the popes lived in Avignon. Sentiments against the papacy grew during this time. The pope was the bishop of Rome, and it seemed improper that he should reside in Avignon instead of Rome. The splendor in which the pope and cardinals were living in Avignon also led to strong criticism of the papacy. The Italian poet Petrarch expressed this feeling when he wrote:

“Here reign the successors of the poor fisherman of Galilee; they have strangely forgotten their origin. I am astounded . . . to see these men loaded with gold and clad in purple, boasting of the spoils of princes and nations.”

At last, Pope Gregory XI, perceiving the disastrous decline in papal prestige, returned to Rome in 1377.

**The Great Schism and Its Aftermath** Gregory XI died soon after his return to Rome. When the college of cardinals met to elect a new pope, the citizens of Rome warned that the cardinals would not leave Rome alive unless an Italian was elected pope. The

terrified cardinals wisely elected an Italian, who became Pope Urban VI.

Five months later, a group of French cardinals declared the election invalid and chose a Frenchman as pope. This pope promptly returned to Avignon. Because Urban remained in Rome, there were now two popes, beginning what has been called the **Great Schism** of the Church.

The Great Schism, which lasted from 1378 to 1417, divided Europe. France and its allies supported the pope in Avignon. France's enemy England and England's allies supported the pope in Rome.

In addition to creating political conflict, the Great Schism damaged the Church. The pope was widely believed to be the true leader of Christendom. When each line of popes denounced the other as the Antichrist (one who opposes Christ), people's faith in both the papacy and the Church were undermined.

A church council finally met at Constance, Switzerland, and ended the schism in 1417. The competing popes either resigned or were deposed. A new pope who was acceptable to all parties was then elected.



Meanwhile, the crises in the Catholic Church had led to cries for reform. A group of Czech reformers led by **John Hus** called for an end to the corruption of the clergy and the excessive power of the papacy within the Catholic Church. Hus was accused of heresy by the Council of Constance and burned at the stake in 1415. This angered the Czechs and led to a revolutionary upheaval in Bohemia that was not crushed until 1436.

By the early 1400s, then, the Church had lost much of its political power. The pope no longer had any hope of asserting supremacy over the state. Although Christianity remained a central feature of medieval life, the papacy and the Church had lost much of their spiritual authority.

**Reading Check Summarizing** List the problems that led to the decline of the Church's authority in medieval Europe.

## The Hundred Years' War

Plague, economic crisis, and the decline of the Catholic Church were not the only problems of the late Middle Ages. War and political instability must also be added to the list. The Hundred Years' War was the most violent struggle during this period.

**The War Begins** In the thirteenth century, England still held one small possession in France, known as the duchy of Gascony. The English king, who was also the duke of Gascony, pledged his loyalty as a vassal to the French king. However, when King Philip VI of France seized Gascony in 1337 in an attempt to make the duchy part of the French kingdom, the duke of Gascony—King Edward III of England—declared war on Philip. Thus began the Hundred Years' War between England and France. It would go on until 1453.

The war began in a burst of knightly enthusiasm. Trained to be warriors, knights viewed battle as a chance to show their fighting abilities. The Hundred Years' War proved to be an important turning point in the nature of warfare, however. It was peasant foot soldiers, not knights, who won the chief battles of the Hundred Years' War.

The French army of 1337 still relied largely on its heavily armed noble cavalymen. These knights looked with contempt on foot soldiers, people they viewed as social inferiors. The English, too, used heavily armed cavalry, but they relied more on large numbers of peasants, paid to be foot soldiers. English soldiers were armed not only with pikes, or heavy spears, but also with longbows. The longbow had greater striking power, longer range, and more rapid speed of fire than the crossbow (formerly the weapon of choice).

**Crécy and Agincourt** The first major battle of the Hundred Years' War occurred in 1346 at **Crécy**. The larger French army followed no battle plan but simply attacked the English lines in a disorderly fashion. The arrows of the English archers devastated the French cavalry.

As the chronicler Froissart described it, “[with their longbows] the English continued to shoot into the thickest part of the crowd, wasting none of their arrows. They impaled or wounded horses and riders, who fell to the ground in great distress, unable to get up again without the help of several men.” It was a stunning victory for the English.

The Battle of Crécy was not decisive, however. The English simply did not have enough resources to conquer all France. Nevertheless, they continued to try. The English king, **Henry V**, was especially eager to achieve victory.



### **Picturing History**

This illustration depicts the Battle of Crécy, in which a much smaller English force under Edward III defeated a French army of approximately 20,000 soldiers. **What weapon helped the English defeat the French at Crécy?**

At the Battle of **Agincourt** in 1415, the heavy, armor-plated French knights tried to attack Henry's forces across a field turned to mud by heavy rain. They were disastrously defeated, and 1,500 French nobles died on the battlefield. The English were masters of northern France.

**Joan of Arc** The French cause, now seemingly hopeless, fell into the hands of Charles, the heir to the French throne, who governed the southern two-thirds of the lands of France. Quite unexpectedly, a French peasant woman saved the timid monarch.

Joan of Arc was born in 1412, the daughter of prosperous peasants. She was a deeply religious person who experienced visions and came to believe that her favorite saints had commanded her to free France.

In February 1429, Joan made her way to Charles's court, where her sincerity and simplicity persuaded him to allow her to accompany a French army to **Orléans**. Apparently inspired by Joan's faith, the



Joan of Arc's achievements, however, were decisive. Although the war dragged on for another two decades, defeats of English armies in Normandy and Aquitaine led to a French victory by 1453. Also important to the French success was the use of the cannon, a new weapon made possible by the invention of gunpowder.

**Reading Check Analyzing** Why was the Hundred Years' War a turning point in the ways of warfare?

## Political Recovery

In the fourteenth century, European rulers faced serious problems. Many dynasties in Europe were unable to produce male heirs. The founders of new dynasties had to fight for their positions when groups of nobles supported opposing candidates for the kingship. Rulers found themselves with financial problems as well.

In the fifteenth century, however, recovery set in as a number of new rulers attempted to reestablish the centralized power of monarchies. Some historians have spoken of these reestablished states as the **new monarchies**. This term applies especially to the monarchies of France, England, and Spain at the end of the fifteenth century.

**Western Europe** The Hundred Years' War left France exhausted. However, the war had also developed a strong degree of French national feeling toward a common enemy. The kings used that spirit to reestablish royal power.

The development of a strong French state was greatly advanced by King Louis XI, who ruled from 1461 to 1483. Known as the Spider because of his devious ways, Louis strengthened the use of the *taille*—an annual direct tax, usually on land or property—as a permanent tax imposed by royal authority. This tax gave Louis a sound, regular source of income, which helped him to create the foundations of a strong French monarchy.

The Hundred Years' War had also strongly affected the English. The cost of the war and losses in manpower strained the economy. At the end of the war, England faced even greater turmoil when civil conflicts—known as the War of the Roses—erupted. Noble factions fought to control the monarchy until 1485, when Henry Tudor established a new dynasty.

As the first Tudor king, Henry VII worked to create a strong royal government. Henry ended the wars of the nobles by abolishing their private armies. He was also very thrifty. By not overburdening the



## Geography Skills

The Hundred Years' War was a series of conflicts between England and France.

- 1. Interpreting Maps** Research one of the battles on this map. Create a model illustrating at least two features of the battle (for example, topography and troop deployment).
- 2. Applying Geography Skills** Using information from the map, create a chart that shows which nation appears to have the advantage. Take into account the chronology of battles, supply lines, and the amount of land held by each side.

French armies found new confidence in themselves and captured Orléans.

Joan had brought the war to a decisive turning point but did not live to see its end. She was captured in 1430 and turned over by the English to the Inquisition on charges of witchcraft. At that time, spiritual visions were thought to be inspired by either God or the devil. Joan was condemned to death as a heretic.