

A Model of a Humanist, Cultivated Prince: King Francis I of France

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ABSTRACT

The reign of Francis I (1515-1547) was a time of a remarkable blossoming of the humanities in France, one that was admired across Europe. A subtle blend of humanist ambitions and the will of a well-read king who believed in literature and the humanities, this renewal constituted both a period that enabled the kingdom to occupy a cultural role that was unprecedented in Europe and a moment of cultural transformation of France's elite. Backed by the king, the development of printing provided technological support that contributed greatly to those evolutions.



Antoine Macault lisant sa traduction devant François I^{er} et sa cour (Antoine

Macault Reading His Translation to Francis I and His Court). Miniature of the translation of Diodorus of Sicily's *Universal History* by A. Macault, 1534. Condé Museum Library, ms. 721. The translation was published the following year with an engraving imitating this miniature. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The day after Francis I died, in March, 1547, twenty-four town criers proclaimed across Paris, "Pray to God for the soul of [...] the very Christian Francis, King of France by the Grace of God, the first of his name, a merciful prince and father to the arts and sciences." That pronouncement could be seen as a thumbnail portrait of his reign. Francis I fulfilled the hopes the humanists placed in him: that he would be the patron of a modern flourishing of the humanities. More than Henry VIII in England, or Charles V, other great sovereigns of his generation who also contributed to Europe's humanist revival in the early 16th century, he left behind an image dominated by the role that has been ascribed to him in the rebirth of the humanities.

The Ambitions of a Humanist

When Francis I acceded to the throne of France, on January 1, 1515, the humanist Guillaume Budé said delightedly that his reign would initiate an era in which the *bonæ litteræ* (literally, "good letters," i.e. well-written books) would flourish once again. His statements came from the intersection of his ambition for writing, his conception of royal power and excellent intuition. He was convinced that the young king was capable of fulfilling his humanist dream and protecting writers in a way that would redefine their role in the kingdom, and the role of the well-read as well. That would represent a clear break with the reign of Louis XII (1498-1515), which had just come to an end.

Budé's hopes were founded on the personality of a prince whose curiosity and thirst for knowledge were already being celebrated. But Budé was also convinced that the humanities were political: studying *bonæ litteræ* was the best way to resist the ever-present risk of mankind's regressing toward animality. Budé emphasized the civilizing virtue of books, which "men of Antiquity called humanities, because without the erudition contained therein, the world doth live brutally and not humanely." Thus the humanities were the foundation of a healthy political body. And a prince who was both a lover of *and* a protector of good books was, therefore, the most worthy kind to fill his royal role. Budé made his vision known to Francis I. He emphasized the merits of cultivated people and placed the existence of that aristocracy of knowledge in the hands of a king who would be capable, through his generosity, of creating, "poets and orators." He envisaged a monarch who would be both celebrated and nourished by the culture he was protecting. A means of existence for writers, patronage of writers also created a medium for praise of the prince who recognized its worth.

Budé had to wait until the very late 1520s to see higher education revived from a humanist perspective - military and diplomatic concerns having dominated the first decade of Francis I's reign. At that point, the king founded, with his own funds, a college with several lecturers in classical languages and mathematics (the future "Collège de France," which still exists). European humanists applauded that initiative, and Erasmus, who had refused in 1516-1517 to join the king's court, then said that the humanities were flourishing "nowhere more so than in France, under royal auspices."

The Humanities at Court

Slightly less swept off his feet, Budé kept asking the king to grant even greater support and investment to the humanities. He made his convictions clear once again when he published his *De Philologia* (1532), a dialogue set at the king's table, the nerve center for humanities. Because although we don't know the extent to which the king concurred with Budé's demanding vision, what we do know is that both his court and he himself were at the very heart of a brilliant life of the mind. Francis I was renowned for both his natural eloquence and his memory. His erudition, fed by conversations and books that were read to him, bear witness to his curiosity for all the subjects covered by the humanities. A poet himself in his spare time, the king enjoyed both French and Italian poetry; history also appealed to him. His first major editorial commission involved translations of ancient history books written during Louis XII's reign that had remained unpublished, existing only in manuscript form. The happy humanism at court was fueled by the competition that the king encouraged with his commandments and stimulated with his largesse. Francis I ordered the completion of books he was read the first pages of and the translation of Greek and Latin authors into "the king's tongue," which needed to be enriched so that the kingdom should have a cultivated language. But his interest wasn't limited to satisfying his own tastes. He also ordered that Greek and Latin manuscripts be collected or copied from across France and Italy; they enriched his library, and scholarly editions of them were made.

The Royal Will in Deeds and Printed Books

While the king's court was the center of intellectual life, the dissemination of printed texts offered a far wider scope, which created the perception of their revival. From the late 1520s on, printed matter became an ever-more explicit instrument for the dissemination of knowledge, and "privileges" (royal deeds protecting texts) defined the outlines of the king's wishes. Francis I could state therein, for example, that he has "always particularly desired the indoctrination and edification of all of [his] good subjects." Referring sometimes to royal enjoyment of a text, the privileges paint a portrait of a prince "desiring to give preferential treatment to the authors and scholars in [his] Kingdom, so that each of [his] subjects may follow their example and strive to learn the science through which all honor and virtue is reached" and "desiring that all good books should be revealed," a prince who, therefore, shared the humanists' wish to have their books printed in order to "please all educated and book-loving people." Much of the praise describes the king as the driving force behind book-based, humanist life, declaring that the goal of a profound transformation of the kingdom has been achieved.

That dynamic did not preclude the awareness that the print medium also allowed for the dissemination of ideas that the powers-that-be condemned. The anti-Catholic "Affair of the Placards" (1534) led to a royal edict banning all printing throughout the kingdom. That meant that printers' activity was directly incriminated in the ideas spread by religious reformers. The ban was soon moderated, on condition that works to appear be monitored. Printing, caught in the crossfire of mixed feelings about what was being published, was no longer condemned *per se*, but was instead overseen, so that only "approved books that are necessary to the public good," would be produced.

In the end, royal deeds combined the surveillance of printed texts and the desire for the spread of knowledge. In December, 1537, in Montpellier, the king signed a ruling that aimed to define non-contradictory interests in both distributing and retaining books. The king insisted that, before any book printed in or outside of France could be

sold within the kingdom, it must be presented to his librarians, so that a report could be made to his council. The idea was to block the spread of “faithless interpretations straying from our holy Christian faith.” Yet at the same time, the text boasts of the cultural preeminence the kingdom has acquired during his reign. Buoyed by that assertion, it modifies Europe’s cultural centrality by celebrating the successful *translatio studii* (transfer of knowledge). The king establishes a policy for his library of purchasing “all books of our times that are worthy of being seen, compiled, amplified, corrected and amended” whatever language they are in, assembling in this way the cultivated memory that is preserved by printed text: France was and needed to be both the living heart of western, educated culture and its conservatory.

Through harmoniously articulated strokes, both the humanists’ and the king’s wishes influenced an intellectual, ideological and political project. Thus European humanism became remarkably dynamic in France, thanks to a book- and knowledge-loving king.

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