SAINT LOUIS

JACQUES LE GOFF

Translated by Gareth Evan Gollrad

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Representation of Saint Louis. Early fourteenth-century statue from the church of
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Introduction

Sometimes called “the century of Saint Louis,” the thirteenth century has attracted historians less than the creative and turbulent twelfth century and less than the fourteenth century that sank into the great crisis at the close of the Middle Ages. Between his grandfather Philip Augustus and his grandson Philip the Fair, who have both garnered extensive interest from modern historians, we find to our great surprise that Louis IX has been “the least known of the great kings of medieval France.” One recent work by the American historian William Chester Jordan and another by the French historian Jean Richard present him as a man driven by a single idea, his fascination with the crusades and his obsession with the Holy Land. I believe that Saint Louis was a far more complex character. His long reign of forty-four years contained more changes and the period in which he lived was less stable than the term often used to describe it, “apogee” of the Middle Ages, implies.

The thirteenth century, however, is not the object of this study. We will have to deal with it, of course, since Louis lived during this period that constitutes the matter of his life and his actions. Still, this book is about the man himself and deals with the age only to the extent that it allows us to explain him. My topic is not “the reign of Saint Louis,” nor is it “Saint Louis and his kingdom,” nor “Saint Louis and Christendom,” nor “Saint
Louis and his age,” even if I will have to explore these themes. Speaking of the saintly king may sometimes lead me to cover extensive ground in great depth and detail, as, along with Emperor Frederick II, he was the most important political figure of the thirteenth century in Western Christendom. However, while Frederick II whose reign we see today as one of the precursors of the modern state remained a marginal figure fascinated by the Mediterranean cultural frontier, geographically, chronologically, and ideologically speaking, Louis IX was the central figure of Christendom in the thirteenth century. This led me to the idea of writing his biography, although this may not seem like a logical conclusion.

When more than ten years ago I slowly decided to begin research on one of the major figures of the medieval West and to give this investigation a biographical form, I imagined that it would be a difficult undertaking for any historian and would take me away from the way I had been practicing history until then. I was right about the first point and wrong about the second.

This feeling of difficulty that I mention here may seem paradoxical at first. With the proliferation of biographical publications that has taken place in recent years, the genre being very much in fashion, one might think of this as a leisurely exercise for which it would suffice to have access to the right documents, which is quite possible, and to possess an adequate talent for writing. My dissatisfaction with most of those anachronistically psychological, rhetorical, superficial, or excessively anecdotal works, as with those that too easily employ the notion of “mentality” in order to play upon the exoticism of the past without any real explanation or critical spirit, forced me to reflect on the implications and demands of historical biography. Thus I became convinced of this intimidating truth: historical biography is one of the most difficult ways to produce history.

On the other hand, while I thought I was drifting away from my prior interests and methods, I discovered almost all of the great problems of historical writing and research I had been facing before. Of course, my idea that biography is a particular way of producing history had been confirmed. Nevertheless, it required other methods in addition to the intrinsic methods of the historian’s practice. This task demanded first of all the positing of a problem, the search for and criticism of sources, the treatment of the subject within a time period long enough to capture the dialectic of continuity
and change, a style of writing capable of highlighting the attempt to explain, an awareness of the current stakes in dealing with the question to be treated. In other words, the task also required an awareness of the distance that separates us from the question to be dealt with. Biography confronts today’s historian with the essential though classic problems of the profession in an especially poignant and complex manner. However, it does this in a form that is often no longer familiar to us.

In spite of several brilliant exceptions, there was an eclipse of historical biography in the middle of the twentieth century. This is especially evident in the movement stemming from the *Annales*. Historians more or less abandoned the genre to novelists, their old rivals in this domain. Marc Bloch once stated as much, and without the customary scorn for this historiographical form. He expressed it with regret in fact, and probably with the feeling that biography, like political history, was not yet ready to assimilate new forms of historical thinking and practice. Commenting on the definition given by one of the father’s of the new history, Fustel de Coulanges, who wrote, “History is the science of human societies,” Bloch observed that “this may excessively reduce the individual’s part in history.”

Today when history along with the social sciences is going through a period of intense critical revision of its fundamental assumptions, and while this is taking place in the midst of the crisis of a general transformation of Western societies, I have the impression that biography has been partly freed from the traps in which false problems had confined it. It may even become a privileged position for making useful observations on the conventions and ambitions of the historian’s profession, on the limits of his given knowledge, and on the redefinitions that he needs.

As I present this book and define what I have set out to do, I will have to explain what historical biography should not be today. In fact, these objections have helped me rediscover my own ways of producing history in a state of transformation on what have been especially difficult grounds. All this is perhaps more obvious here than anywhere else.
what object crystallizes the whole of its environment and the areas dissected by the historian in the field of historical knowledge more and better than an actual character? Saint Louis participated simultaneously in the economic, the social, the political, the religious, and the cultural; he acted in all of these domains, while thinking of them in a way that the historian must analyze and explain—even if the search for complete knowledge of the individual in question remains a “utopian quest.” In effect, it is necessary here—more than for any other object of historical study—to know how to respect the absences and lacunae left by the documentation and to resist wanting to reconstitute what the silences of and about Saint Louis hide, the disjunctions and discontinuities that break the flow and apparent unity of a life. A biography, however, is not only the collection of everything we can and should know about a historical character.

If a character then “globalizes” a sum of diverse phenomena, it is not because it is more “concrete” in relation to the historian’s other objects. For example, some have quite correctly denounced the false opposition between “a concrete falsehood of biography” and “an abstract falsehood” of political history. But more than other historical methods, the biographical method strives to produce “reality effects” [effets de réel]. What makes it even more similar to the methods of the novelist is that these “reality effects” do not result from the style and writing of the historian alone. Due to his familiarity with the sources and with the period in which his character lived, thanks to an “appropriate dismantling” [démontage approprié], the historian must be capable of placing these “reality effects,” whose truth can be inferred, in the documents themselves. Or, more simply, he must be capable of taking these documents apart in order to conjure whatever produces a reasonable conviction of historical reality. As we shall see, Saint Louis benefits from having an exceptional witness, Joinville, who often makes the historian say, “Ah yes, now, that is the ‘real’ Saint Louis!” However, the historian must not let his guard down.

He effectively chooses to submit to one major constraint: the limitation of the documentation that dictates the ambition and the scope of his investigation. He is different from the novelist in this regard, even when the novelist becomes preoccupied with information about the truth he pretends to describe. It just so happens that Saint Louis is (along with Saint Francis of Assisi) the one character of the thirteenth century about whom we know the most through primary sources. There can be no doubt that
this is because he was king and because he was a saint. History has spoken
of great men most of all, and for a long time was interested in them only as
individuals. This was especially true in the Middle Ages. However, the
apparent advantage the case of Saint Louis presents for the historian is by and
large offset by the doubts that can arise about the reliability of the sources.
These, more than other sources, run the risk, if not of lying, then at least
of presenting us with an imagined or imaginary figure.

One main reason for this risk is the quality and objectives of the old bi-
ographers of Louis who are almost all hagiographers (the most important
ones in any case). They do not only want to make him into a sainted king.
They want to make him into a king and a saint according to the particular
ideals of the ideological groups to which they belong. So, there is a Saint
Louis of the new Mendicant orders—the Dominicans and Franciscans—and
a Saint Louis of the Benedictines of the royal abbey of Saint-Denis.
He was more of a mendicant for the first groups, and more of a “national”
model of the king for the second. Another cause of manipulation is that
the sources that present the king to us are essentially literary sources. These
are the Vitae in particular, the Lives of saints written in Latin. Medieval lit-
erature was divided between genres that obeyed certain rules. Even if the
conception of saintliness in the thirteenth century admitted a bit more free-
dom, the hagiographical genre was still full of stereotypes. Is the Saint Louis
of our sources only an assemblage of commonplace ideas? I had to com-
mit the entire central section of my study to evaluating the reliability of
these sources. I did this by studying the conditions for the production of
the memory of Saint Louis in the thirteenth through the beginning of the
fourteenth century. I did this not only in employing classical methods for
the criticism of sources, but, more radically, as a systematic production of
memory. I had to ask myself if it were possible to get closer to a Saint Louis
who could be called “true,” truly historical, through the sources.

The nature of these Lives comprised both a justification and a new dan-
ger for my project. The hagiographical Life was a history, even if the narra-
tive was organized around manifestations of virtues and piety, including a
catalog of miracles usually appearing in a separate section. Moving from the
hagiographical biography of the thirteenth century to the historical biogra-
phy of the late twentieth century, I was able to test the false opposition that
has recently been raised between historical narrative and a “structuralist”
narrative that would have previously been called sociological and, in an even
earlier time, institutional. But all history is narrative because, placing itself in time by definition, in succession, it is necessarily associated with narration. But that is not all. First, contrary to what many—even many historians—believe, there is nothing immediate about the narrative. It is the result of an entire series of intellectual and scientific operations that one has every reason to expose, in other words, to justify. It also induces an interpretation and represents a serious danger. Jean-Claude Passeron has pointed out the risk of “the excess of meaning and coherence inherent in any biographical approach.” What he calls the “biographical utopia” not only consists in the risk of believing that “nothing is meaningless” in biographical narrative without selection and criticism, but perhaps even more in the illusion that it authentically reconstitutes someone’s destiny. So, a life and, perhaps even more, the life of a character endowed with a power as rich in symbolic and political reality as a king doubling as a saint can be conceived through some form of illusion predetermined by its function and its final perfection. In following this plan, are we not adding a model suggested by the historian’s rhetoric and that Giovanni Levi has defined as associating “an organized chronology, a coherent and stable personality, actions without inertia, decisions without uncertainty” to the models that inspired the hagiographers?

I have tried several times to escape the constraining logic of this “biographical illusion” denounced by Pierre Bourdieu. Saint Louis did not ineluctably proceed toward his destiny as a saintly king in the conditions of the thirteenth century and in following the dominant models of his time. He formed himself and formed his era as much as he was formed by it. This construction was made up of chance and hesitation over different choices. It is vain to try to imagine a biography, or any other historical phenomenon, in any other way than we know that it occurred. We do not write history with too many “ifs.” However, we should understand that on numerous occasions Saint Louis, even in believing that he was history itself led by Providence, could have acted differently than he did. For a Christian, there can be different ways of reacting to the provocations of Providence without disobeying it. I have tried to show that Louis defined himself little by little through a series of unpredictable choices. And I have constantly interrupted the thread of his biographical trajectory while seeking to account for the problems that he encountered at different points in his life. I have also tried to define the difficulties the recuperation of these moments of life present for the historian. The pair of governing figures, unique in
French history, that he formed for a long time with his mother, Blanche of Castile, makes it impossible for the historian to date a “rise to power” of Louis IX as can be done for Louis XIV. When he learned of the Mongol raid into central Europe, when illness cast him down at death’s door, when he was freed from captivity by the Muslims in Egypt, when he returned to his kingdom from the Holy Land after a six-year absence, Louis had to choose. He had to make decisions that unpredictably formed the character that finally was Saint Louis. I mention here only a few of the important events that required him to make decisions weighted with consequences. It was in the daily nature of exercising his royal function and in the secret, unconscious and uncertain construction of his sainthood that the existence of Saint Louis became a life the biographer can attempt to explain.

Giovanni Levi accurately stated that “biography constitutes . . . the ideal place for verifying the interstitial and nevertheless important character of the freedom that agents have at their disposal, and for observing how normative systems function in concrete situations that are never exempt from contradiction.” I have tried to appreciate the extent of the power that nature and the plasticity of monarchical institutions provided Saint Louis in the middle of the thirteenth century. I have attempted to explain the growing prestige of a sacred royalty that was nonetheless still far from absolute and whose thaumaturgical power was strictly limited. And I have striven to depict his struggle with time and space and an economy that he did not even know how to name. I have made no attempt to conceal the contradictions that weighed on Saint Louis’ character: between his penchants for the flesh and fine living and his ideals of mastery over sexuality and gluttony, between the “hilarious” piety of the mendicants and the rigorous ascetic practice of monastic tradition, between the pomp of royal duty and the humility of a sovereign who wanted to behave, if not as the most humble of laymen, then at least as a Christian as humble as he should be, between a king who declared that “no one holds more fast to life than I,” and who often exposed himself to death, thinking constantly of his death and the dead, between a king who became more and more the king of France and who wanted to be a king for all Christendom.

This problem of the uncertainties and contradictions of a life that any attempt at biographical history encounters is actually modified by the particular characteristics of Saint Louis’ case. Almost all his former biographers affirmed the existence of a turning point or even a rupture in his life at some
point during the crusade. Before 1254 we would be dealing with a normally pious king, like any Christian king. After this date, we would be facing a penitential and eschatological sovereign who prepared himself—and wanted to prepare his subjects—for eternal salvation by establishing a moral and religious order in his kingdom while readying himself to be a Christlike king. This version of the life and the reign of Louis IX follows the hagiographical model that sought a moment of conversion in the lives of saints at the same time as a model of biblical kingship that would make Louis IX into a new Josiah whose rule the Old Testament divided around the rediscovery and the reapplication [réactualisation] of the Pentateuch. My own work adds a hypothesis that may fortify this thesis about the turning point of 1254: in effect, I attribute great importance to the meeting that took place that year between Louis, who was debarking in Provence while returning from the Holy Land, and a Franciscan, Friar Hugh of Digne who professed millenarian ideas calling for the realization on earth of a long state of peace and justice prefiguring Heaven. However, was the change that great between the king who bowed devoutly before the relics of the Passion acquired in 1239, the ruler who commissioned investigators for redressing offenses in 1247, and the legislator of the “great ordinance” of the end of 1254 which was supposed to instill a moral order in his kingdom? Moreover, what enables the historian to partly escape any abusive explanations in the unfolding life of Saint Louis is that in keeping with the scholastic and intellectual practices of the thirteenth century his biographers had recourse to three kinds of arguments whose intersections allowed one to avoid any single type of explanation. There were the authorities: Holy Scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers that allowed the biographers to apply biblical models. Then, there were the reasons derived from the methods of the new Scholasticism. While the third type, that of the exempla, edifying anecdotes, circulated a large number of commonplaces, it also introduced a narrative element of fantasy that broke down the rigidity of the first two types of demonstration.

The main problem here arises from a particular reaction. Without the sources stating it explicitly, we have the impression that, without ever being so proud as to want to be a saint, very early on Louis IX had been in some way “programmed” by his mother and the advisors of his youth, and that from this early age he modeled himself to become an incarnation of the ideal Christian king. His life then ended up being only the impassioned and
voluntary realization of this project. Against William C. Jordan who, not without talent and subtlety, sees in Saint Louis a king torn between his royal duties and a sense of devotion patterned after the Mendicant orders, I believe that Saint Louis had mentally and practically reconciled politics and religion as well as realism and morality without any tormenting internal conflict. I believe that he accomplished this with an aptitude that is all the more extraordinary since he had assimilated it to the point of making it unconscious. We will have many occasions to verify this in the course of the book.

This tendency to form a project does not free his linear biography from his hesitations, his sticking points, his moments of repentance and the contradictions involved in conforming to royal rectitude as defined in that day and age by Isidore of Séville according to whom the word “king” [roi] came from “to rule rightly” [rex a recte regendo]. If Louis escaped certain dramas, his constant aspiration to be an embodiment of the ideal king casts a shadow of uncertainty upon his biography, which remains impassioning from beginning to end. Furthermore, certain testimonials seem to hold up a mirror for us in which the image of the saintly king has been incredibly deformed.

Another thing that kept me from getting lost in composing a biography of Saint Louis is that I was quickly able to eliminate another false problem. This was the presumed opposition between individual and society, the vacuity of which has already been exposed by Pierre Bourdieu. The individual exists only within a network of diversified social relations, and this diversity also allows him to develop his role. An understanding of society is needed in order to see how an individual figure lives and forms himself within it. In my previous works, I studied the appearance of two new social groups in the thirteenth century: the merchants, which led me to scrutinize the relations between economy and morality, a problem that Saint Louis also encountered; and university members, whom I then called “intellectuals” and who provided ecclesiastical institutions and, in a less pronounced manner, governments with their leading members. Furthermore, they promoted the rise of a third power, institutionalized knowledge (studium) that stood alongside ecclesiastical power (sacerdotium) and princely power (regnum). Louis had limited relations with the intellectuals and this
new power. Finally, I studied the members of a much larger society: one found in the recently discovered “beyond” of the thirteenth century. I am referring to the dead in Purgatory and their relations with the living. Saint Louis had constant contact with death, the dead, and the beyond. The social setting in which the saintly king lived was therefore to a large extent familiar to me. It was likewise my task to recover what was both normal and exceptional in his path of development, for with him I attained the summit of political power and heavenly Paradise.

I gained access to an individual or, rather, I had to ask myself if I was able to gain access to him, as the personal problem opened up into a general process of questioning. Saint Louis lived at a time in which certain historians have thought they could detect the emergence or the invention of the individual. I discuss this at great length in the course of this book. Without waiting any longer, it is, however, very important to remember that Louis lived in a century whose beginnings saw the introduction of the examination of conscience (a canon of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 imposed obligatory auricular confession for all Christians), but also, toward its end, the birth of the individual portrait in art. In what sense was Louis an individual? Recalling a judicious distinction made by Marcel Mauss between the “sense of the self” [le sens du moi] and the concept of the individual, I believe that Saint Louis was in possession of the first but that he was not aware of the second. In any case, he was without a doubt the first king of France to make a royal virtue of conscience, an individual disposition.

Finally, in biographical inquiry I discovered one of the essential preoccupations of the historian: time. In what is first of all a plural form, I believe that today we have discovered the diversity of times, after a phase in which the West was dominated by the unified time of the mechanical clock and the watch, a time broken down into pieces by the crises of our societies and the social sciences. Saint Louis himself lived in a period that was prior to this time in the process of being unified and on the basis of which princes would attempt to establish their power. In the thirteenth century, there was no one time but only times of the king. Compared to other men, the sovereign existed in relation to a greater number of times, and the relationships that he had with them, although subjected to the conditions of the age, sometimes surpassed the limits of the ordinary. The time of power had its own rhythms particular to its schedule, travel, and the exercise of power. Within certain limits, it could determine the measures of
time, and the king also measured time through the burning of candles, the
observation of sundials, the ringing of bells, and the changes of the litur-
gical calendar. Above all though, the biographical work has taught me to
recognize a kind of time I was not accustomed to—the time of a life that,
for a king and his historian, cannot be confused with the time of his reign.
Even if Louis IX had been a king at twelve and remained on the throne for
his entire life, to restore an individual, let alone a king, to this measure of
social, biological time that runs “from the cradle to the grave” as the eth-
nologists like to say, opens new perspectives on chronology and periodiza-
tion. This is a unit of measure for a time that is above all political and even
more acute [plus chaude] if this time is dynastic, as was the case with Louis.
It is a form of time unpredictable in its beginning and end, but a time which
the king and only the king carries within himself as an individual in all places
and at all times. The sociologist Jean-Claude Chamboredon has pertinently
explained the relation of the time of biography to the times of history. I
have paid close attention to how the periods and the general manner of
evolution in the time of the life of Saint Louis developed in relation to the
diverse temporal junctures of the thirteenth century such as the economic,
the social, the political, the intellectual, and the religious. Saint Louis was a
contemporary of the end of the great economic expansion, the end of peas-
ant servitude and the rise of the urban bourgeoisie, the construction of the
modern feudal state, the triumph of Scholasticism, and the establishment
of Mendicant piety. The rhythm of these great events marked the youth, the
maturity, and the old age of the king in different ways, including the major
phases coming before and after his illness in 1244 and before and after his
return from the crusade in 1254. Sometimes these events marked his life at
specific points, often in coinciding harmonies, and sometimes in shifts that
did not entirely correspond. Sometimes he seems to accelerate history and
sometimes he seems to slow its advance.

TO WRAP UP THIS INTRODUCTION, I WILL LIMIT MYSELF TO THREE
remarks. First of all, we must not forget that whether as individuals or in
groups, men acquire a considerable amount of their knowledge and their
habits during their childhood and their youth when they were exposed
to the influence of older people such as parents, masters, and the elderly.
These individuals all had much more importance in a world where age was
a sign of authority and where memory itself was more powerful than in

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societies dominated by writing. Their chronological compass had therefore
opened well before their births. If Marc Bloch was right to say that “men
are more the sons of their time than of their fathers,” we might add: of their
time and of the time of their fathers. Born in 1214, the first king of France
who knew his grandfather (Philip Augustus), Louis was in many ways as
much a man of the twelfth as of the thirteenth century.

Saint Louis’ biography presents one other original problem. The king
was canonized after his death. We will examine the difficulties that delayed
this promotion. Because of these difficulties, twenty-seven years had passed
between the dates of his death (1270) and his canonization (1297). During
this time, the supporters of his canonization kept him alive in so many ways
so that he would not disappear from the memories of the witnesses and the
pontifical curia. This period comprised a sort of supplement to the life of
the king that I had to take into account. It was also the time of a forceful re-
working of his life story.

My goal is then to present a “total” history of Saint Louis, to present it
successively following the events of his life and according to the sources
and the fundamental themes of the personality of the king in himself and
in his time.

Finally, as Borges stated, a man is never really dead until the last man
who knew him is dead in turn, so if we do not know this man directly and
entirely, we are at least lucky enough to know the person who died last
among those who knew Saint Louis well: Joinville. Joinville dictated his out-
standing testimony more than thirty years after Louis’ death. He died at the
age of ninety-three, forty-seven years after his royal friend. The biography
I have written therefore continues up to Saint Louis’ definitive death, and
no further. Writing the life of Saint Louis after Saint Louis, a history of the
historical image of the sainted king, would be a fascinating subject, but one
that arises from a different set of historiographical problems.

SO, I CONCEIVED THIS BOOK KEEPING TWO PRIORITIZING
[prijudicelles] questions at the forefront of my mind. Each is actually a differ-
ent side of the same question: is it possible to write a biography of Saint
Louis? Did Saint Louis exist?

In the first part of my work, I have presented the results of my attempt
at biography. This section is more clearly narrative in style although suffused
with the problems presented in the first stages of this life as Louis formed it.
I have dedicated the second part of this work to the critical study of the production of the memory of the saintly king by his contemporaries. Here I engage in justifying the ultimately affirmative response I give to the question “Did Saint Louis exist?” In the third and final section, I have tried to fray a path toward the inner life of Saint Louis’ character by exploring the main perspectives that made him a unique and ideal king for the thirteenth century, a king who realized his identity as a Christly king but who could only receive the halo of sainthood—a magnificent compensation in itself.

This structure and conception of biography led me to cite many texts. I wanted the reader to see and hear my character as I have seen and heard him myself because Saint Louis was the first king of France who spoke in the sources. And of course he spoke with a voice from a time when orality could only be heard through writing. I was finally encouraged to adopt passages from certain texts and certain themes at different moments of my story according to the successive approaches I used to get closer to my character. Echoing these texts is one part of the method I employed in my attempt to end up with a form of Saint Louis that would be convincing and in order to give the reader access to this form. I hope that my readers find some interest in this work and that they experience several surprises as they join me in this investigation.