

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3165>



XXXI.10 Wealth of the clergy

- The Spirit of Law - Book XXXI. Theory of feudal laws among the Franks, in their relation to the transformations in their monarchy -

Date de mise en ligne : samedi 8 septembre 2018

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

The clergy took in so much that, in the three dynasties, it must have been given all the properties in the kingdom several times over. But if the kings, the nobility, and the people found the means of giving them all their property, they no less found the means of taking it away. Churches were founded out of piety in the first dynasty, but the military spirit caused them to be given to men of war who divided them among their children : how much land must have left the clergy's books ! The kings of the second dynasty opened their hands, and again made enormous liberalities ; the Normans come, pillage, and ravage, persecute above all the priests and monks, search the abbeys, look where they will find some religious spot ; in that state how many properties did the clergy lose ! There were scarcely any ecclesiastics to ask for them back. There still remained, therefore, for the piety of the third dynasty, enough foundations to create and lands to give ; the opinions that were spread and believed in those times would have deprived laymen of all their property if they had been honest men enough. But if the ecclesiastics had ambition, the laymen did too ; if the dying man gave, the successor wanted to take back. We see nothing but quarrels between lords and bishops, gentlemen and abbots ; and the ecclesiastics must have been sorely pressed, since they were obliged to put themselves under the protection of certain lords who would defend them for a moment, and oppress them afterwards.

Already a better order that took hold in the course of the third dynasty allowed the ecclesiastics to increase their holdings. The Calvinists appeared, and had coins struck from everything gold or silver that was in the churches. How could the clergy have been assured of its fortune ? Even its existence was not assured : it dealt with the matters of controversy, and its archives were being burned. What good was it to ask back from a still ruined nobility what it no longer had, or what it had mortgaged in a thousand ways ? The clergy has always acquired, it has always given back, and it acquires again.