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XI.8 Why the Ancients did not have a very clear notion of monarchy

- The Spirit of Law - Book XI. On the laws that constitute political freedom in their relation to the constitution -

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XI.8 Why the Ancients did not have a very clear notion of monarchy

The Ancients did not know government based on a body of nobility, and even less government based on a legislative body made up of representatives of a nation. The republics of Greece and Italy were cities, each of which had its government, and assembled its citizens within its walls. Before the Romans had swallowed up all the republics, there was scarcely a king anywhere in Italy, Gaul, Spain, or Germany ; everything was small peoples or small republics. Even Africa was subjected to a large one ; Asia Minor was occupied by the Greek colonies. There was therefore no example of representatives of cities, nor assemblies of states ; only by going as far as Persia could one find the government of one man alone.

There were indeed some federative republics : several cities sent representatives to an assembly. But I am saying there was no monarchy on that model.

Here is the way the first tier of the monarchies we know was formed. The Germanic nations that conquered the Roman empire were, as we know, quite free. On this subject one has only to look at Tacitus, *On the ways of the Germans*. [1] The conquerors spread through the country ; they inhabited the countryside, and the cities to a lesser degree. When they were in Germania, the entire nation could assemble. When they were dispersed through the conquest, they no longer could. Yet the nation had to deliberate on its business, as it had before the conquest : it did so through representatives. Such is the origin of Gothic government among us. It was first mixed with aristocracy and monarchy. It had the disadvantage that the populace was enslaved. The custom developed of giving them letters of emancipation, and soon the civil liberty of the people, the prerogatives of the nobility and the clergy, and the might of the kings, were in such harmony that I do not think there has been on earth such a well-tempered government as that of each part of Europe for as long as it lasted ; and it is a wonder that the corruption of the government of a conquering people should have formed the best kind of government that men have been able to imagine. [2]

[1] [*De moribus Germanorum*.]

[2] It was a good government that had in itself the capacity of becoming better.