

## The Blue and the Pink

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**By situating the birth of France’s national colors at the point where a prince meets a pig, Michel Pastoureau manages to reconcile cultural history and narrative history. As with any genealogical study, his hypothesis should be considered with a degree of caution.**

Reviewed: Michel Pastoureau, *Le roi tué par un cochon. Une mort infâme aux origines des emblèmes de la France?* (A King Killed by a Pig: A Notorious Death as the Origins of a French Symbol?) Seuil, la librairie du XXIe siècle, 2015. 240 p., 21 €.

On October 13, 1131—a date that in itself is rather diabolical—Philip, the eldest son of King Louis VI, “superb in body and pleasant in face,” fell with his horse on the outskirts of Paris and died several days later, at the age of fifteen. According to chroniclers, the accident was caused by a pig that threw itself between the legs of his mount. There is nothing particularly exceptional about this unfortunate incident. Fatal falls from horses were quite common in the Middle Ages, for kings as well as sons of kings. As for pigs, they ran the streets, playing the role of garbage collectors. Instead of Philip, it was his brother who, crowned at Reims on October 25 by the pope himself, succeeded Louis VI as Louis VII. On the morning of October 26, France had a new face.

This story, which exemplifies both dynastic chronicles and—thanks to the pig—what the French call *la petite histoire* (i.e., humorous, anecdotal history), long haunted almanacs and genealogies, before modern history relegated it to the oblivion of insignificance. The historian Michel Pastoureau has set himself the task of reintroducing the “regicide pig” into “grand” history by devoting an entire book to the topic. Far from being merely anecdotal, this incident was a full-fledged event, due to its consequences, which are still felt today, as well as its significance for contemporaries. It is because of this very significance that one can attribute a causal power that shaped the century’s great events. All of this boils down to determining the proper dosage of and articulation between two historical paradigms: narrative history and cultural history. Transformed into a *porcus diabolicus* by the clergy, notably Abbot Suger, the *gyrovague* pig (to use a term usually reserved for errant monks of ill repute), Pastoureau claims, jostled history, and may even have changed its course.

### **An Historical Event?**

If Pastoureau is to be believed, all the major events of Louis VII’s rein—the Second Crusade, the placing of the entire kingdom under the Virgin’s protection, the recasting of monarchical doctrine—can be traced back to this pig of the streets. In arriving at this bold conclusion, Pastoureau drew on his threefold qualifications as an historian of heraldry, animals, and color.

In the first place comes his training in heraldry, since Pastoureau’s goal is to study the origins of the French monarchy’s coat of arms, which emerged in the decades following

young Philip's death: the fleur de lys and the color blue, the famous Saint-Denis blue, which would later, mistakenly, be dubbed "*bleu de Chartres*" ("Chartres blue"). The author takes this occasion not only to remind us of his work on color, but especially to summarize his research on the representation and symbolism of pigs in medieval times.<sup>1</sup>

For contemporaries, Pastoureau explains, this event was in fact far more than a traffic accident. Pigs were neither futile nor ridiculous creatures, particularly when they were responsible for the death of a king. The pig, according to sacred texts, was an impure animal and, medieval exegetes add, a symbol of man's sullied and fallen nature. Men themselves might be pigs if God had not chosen a king to steer them from this fate, forcing them to lift their gaze upwards. A monarch could die in battle, or even, like Philip the Fair in 1314, be killed by a wild boar while hunting. But to be knocked over by a common household pig was incompatible with the royal purpose. In the chronicles, one adjective constantly recurs: the young man's death was not merely shameful and miserable, it was "infamous" (*infâme*), as it tarnished the entire Capetian line—its *fama* or, in other words, its aura.

What if death-by-pig meant that God had abandoned the dynasty, which was guilty of crimes against the Church? Contemporary prelates, particularly those who had run afoul of the monarchy, did not miss a chance to put forth this explanation. Any sign, however, is ambiguous. In this case, the horse's tumble could refer to two memorable falls: that of Adam, whose fall was also caused by an animal, and that of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus, who collapsed only to stand up again in glory. Who, then, lurked behind the pig of October 13? Was it the Devil or the good Lord?

The emotional outcry triggered by the prince's death, which is documented by contemporary sources, leads Pastoureau to a conclusion that no source can confirm: each of the great events that marked Louis's unfortunate reign would bear the mark, if not the stain, of this initial fall. Everything of significance that occurred during his reign was motivated by a single goal: to cleanse the realm of the blemish caused by this ignominious death. In other words, the main consequence of the heir's death was not simply that it gave France another king, and an unwilling one, for Louis VII had not been destined not for the throne, but for the Church, and his lack of preparation cost the kingdom dearly. Pastoureau does not deplore, in the style of Saint-Simon, the death of a prince who might have prevented history from taking an unfortunate turn. Philip's death had positive effects of the greatest importance: to restore the Capetian family's luster and "wash away the stain," nothing less than a crusade was needed. Yet as this crusade proved a failure, the French kingdom was placed under the protection of the Blessed Virgin, which entailed a new conception of power and the introduction of an unprecedented idea, that of a "crown" to be entrusted to the king alone (p. 145) and, ultimately, the adoption of the virgin's symbols, such as the fleur de lys and the azure hue that is seen on France's flag to this day. Consequently, Pastoureau concludes: "if athletes and players representing France on sports fields throughout the world wear blue jerseys, they owe it, perhaps, to a regicide pig!" (p. 14 and 207). Perhaps.

But what can an historian mean by "perhaps"? Pastoureau does not hide the hypothetical character of his argument, which is punctuated by "perhapses" that, at times, turn into an "undoubtedly", and eventually into a "probably." Yet, he acknowledges, this hypothesis "must be confirmed by the discovery of new sources" (p. 197) and these questions must be "debated, nuanced, and completed" (p. 147).

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<sup>1</sup> *Bleu, histoire d'une couleur*, Seuil 2002; *Le Cochon. Histoire d'un cousin mal aimé*, Gallimard (Découvertes n° 544), 2009. The story of the regicide pig was already discussed in *Les Animaux célèbres*, Bonneton, 2001.

## The Import of Pork

Curiously, Pastoureau provides us with all the information required to lead us to conclusion that, as has generally been assumed until now, we can do without the pig. Was the Second Crusade really launched to cleanse France of infamy? Nothing explicitly supports this claim. The choice of symbols and coats of arms is distinct to a period. The author emphasizes the fact that Abbot Suger and Saint Bernard, two of the most influential men of the period, had their own reasons to promote the cult of the Virgin and an affinity for blue, the celestial color. So what exactly does the regicide pig bring to the story? This is an important question because, if it cannot be answered, Pastoureau's study, as appealing as it may be, runs a serious risk of sinking into the kind of anecdotal history it claims not to be.

Yet as one reads this book, the question invariably recurs. At times, Pastoureau claims that the motivation for the "placing the French kingdom under the Virgin's protection" was "to erase the dynastic stain of 1131" (p. 141), as its "symbols, azure and the lily, both of which represent purity, seem to cleanse the dynasty and monarchy symbolically of their former stains and even to efface the memory of the sinister *porcus diabolicus*" (p. 163). At others, he concedes that "no contemporary text explains when, how, and why the French kingdom, towards the middle of the twelfth century, was placed under the Virgin's protection" (p. 142) and he recognizes that "in the mid-twelfth century, the cult of the Virgin was blossoming" (p. 131). Mariology, needless to say, does not begin with a pig. At best, the latter was merely an occasion for its emergence.

As for the choice of these symbols, Pastoureau proposes another motive: to choose a flower for one's heraldry when others preferred animals (such as a leopard, an eagle, or a bull), and to select a color that was unprecedented, if not new (red had previously prevailed, while "blue blood" had only just been invented) was to pursue a strategy of distinction. "To distinguish oneself, to not be an ordinary sovereign, not to draw on the commonplace repertory of royal insignia: since the twelfth century, such has been the guiding line of the French kings' symbolic representation." Yet Pastoureau adds: "There are multiple reasons for this desire and this behavior. The infamous death of King Philip, caused by a common farm pig in October 1131, is probably one of them" (p. 171). "Probably"? Yet the connection between stain and the desire for distinction is hardly self-evident.

## The Pig Rehabilitated

To support his study, Pastoureau lays out the entire tradition that is rooted in the opposition Plato posits between the ideal city and the "city of swine" and in Biblical prohibitions<sup>2</sup> in order to level accusations against pigs, which are reputed for being dirty, libidinous, the embodiment every vice, the symbol of the sinner writhing in the slime of pleasure, and so on. In subsequent centuries, actual charges will be leveled against criminal pigs, complete with sentences and public executions, but this had not yet happened at this period.<sup>3</sup> In the twelfth century, pigs were, as it were, nothing more than the devil's instrument.

Yet Pastoureau does point out some exceptions, most notably Saint Anthony's pig. Why, around the year 1000, was a pig added to the *Life of Anthony*—one that, unlike other animals the devil sent to torment the saint in his solitude, was benevolent and compassionate? It remains a mystery, Pastoureau admits, though he does mention one persuasive reason:

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<sup>2</sup> For reasons that are unclear, Pastoureau adds a page on Islamic prohibitions.

<sup>3</sup> It is a shame that Pastoureau does not explain why.

Antonine monks were a hospitaller order, who tended to patients afflicted with ergotism, or “Saint Anthony’s fire,” by feeding them lard.

The author also mentions the pig’s essential contribution to the development of medicine. The pig’s organs are very close to those of human beings. Consequently, throughout the medieval period, knowledge of the human body was acquired by dissecting pigs. The *corpus* was read in the *porcus* (p. 83). In the eyes of the Church, which was always suspicious of animals that imitate human beings, as well as of those who saw nature as consisting of natural causes rather than as a forest of symbols, pigs were thus somehow immoral. Yet even so, the pig remained a model, and there were other representations of it besides that of the *porcus diabolocus*, which was spread by documents the vast majority of which were produced by the Church. I propose to add another pro-porcine lineage to this story that Pastoureau does not mention, yet which may well shed light on this stubborn “perhaps.”

Thus Pyrrho, the high priest of the equality of opinions, seemed to have had a certain fondness for pigs. His biographer, Diogenes Laertius, informs us that the master of skepticism lived off of the trade in poultry “or even pigs”; that he cleaned his home, and would “dust the things in the house, quite indifferent as to what he did,” going so far as to show “his indifference by washing a porker.” A final anecdote places him on a sinking ship, trying to raise the panicked crew’s spirits by pointing to a little pig that was eating peacefully. “[S]uch was the unperturbed state [*ataraxia*],” he explained, “in which the wise man should keep himself.”<sup>4</sup> The three little pigs that punctuate the *Life of Pyrrho* embody and symbolize the contingency of events, the indifference of judgment, and the equality of all conditions: to live or die, to be a king or an obscure monk, to be covered in honors or infamy.

Epicureanism (which also made the swine, which eats everything, its animal of choice) taught, for its part, the doctrine of multiple hypotheses, in opposition to the mad quest for a single explanation, a form of fanaticism that was worse than the belief in religious myths.

### Putting Fiction into History

Pastoureau might have made greater use of this plurality of hypotheses, rather than limiting himself to one, which seems more repeated rather than proven and the causal scope of which remains to be determined. Is the pig the spark that triggers an entire process or a way of coloring the blue line of official history—in this instance, with that pale pink that elicits such repugnance among those whom it reminds of their own hue? Consider this example. If we are to believe him, Philip’s shameful death tormented the conscience of King Louis VII, at least until the late, miraculous birth of a crown prince in 1165 who would be given the name Philip—the future Philip Augustus. In support of this hypothesis, and in order to transform this “perhaps” into a likelihood, if not a certitude, Pastoureau does not hesitate to place himself in the mind of his character:

Upon his return to France, Louis VII was crushed: the crusade had been catastrophic; numerous princes and knights had died in the East; and the royal treasury had been significantly depleted by the expedition. Saint Bernard, humiliated by the failure of a crusade that he had desired and preached for, held him [the king] responsible for it. As for his wife, the capricious Eleanor, she had yet to give him a male heir after twelve years of marriage and grown

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<sup>4</sup> Diogenes Laertius, “Pyrrho,” in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, ed. R.D. Hicks, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1972 (First published 1925). Available online: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0258%3Abook%3D9%3Achapter%3D11>

increasingly distant from him. The Devil still seemed hard at work. What had he done to deserve such a fate, this man who had not wanted to be king? And was he, for that matter, a legitimate sovereign? Did he not owe his crown to a miserable pig that came straight from the pits of hell? A swine had scrambled the usual rules for acceding to the throne. How could one be a king worthy of the name after such a blemish, after such a debasement of the dynasty?

These are the questions that Louis VII asked himself upon returning to his country in November 1149 (p. 129-130).

These are the kinds of questions the clergy might have whispered to the king's conscience. But by what right can we reduce the latter to the former? We find ourselves here on the outer limits of fiction—midway, as it were, between Jacques le Goff, to whom the book is dedicated, and Alexandre Dumas, of whom Maxime du Camp wrote that he “would raise a whole imaginary fabric, logically conceived and calculated to interest and excite the reader, and to move him deeply, on the very slightest foundation.”<sup>5</sup> This insight is applicable to Pastoureau's book.

Let's not quibble over what we enjoy. Despite—or even because of—the fact that the book feels like a novel—though this practice of the “maybe” must still be theorized or formalized—this approach has a great deal to teach us about the way people thought at this time. Halfway between a fact and a representation, it is the result of an historian's attempt to paint not a static picture of an historical moment, but a culture's transformation in a period of crisis. This is its masterstroke: to shed light on a sequence of historical facts by considering a background story in which every fact is refracted and finds its anchor, its binding, and its true significance. The pig hypothesis is better than true: it is plausible. It becomes, in Pastoureau's hands, not a novel, but the symbol of an epoch, as if the historian of symbols must himself think symbolically, thanks to his ability to focus, like an illuminator or master glassworker, his intimate and poetic knowledge of the Middle Ages on a tiny, if not minuscule point.

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<sup>5</sup> Maxime Du Camp, *Recollections of a Literary Life*, London and Sydney, Remington and Co., 1893, vol. 2, p. 188.