

History Essay

The royal courts in the 16th and 17th century expanded rapidly. Explain why this happened and what its impact was on European political systems.

The 16th and 17th century saw a rejection of the peripatetic ruling style that had been so commonplace in medieval Europe, in favour of a more stationary system that had more resources to govern. This essay will discuss how political systems of states were radically altered in these centuries, largely due to the expansion of the courts that accompanied the change from peripatetic to settled ruling style but also due to cultural shifts associated with the Renaissance. Changes included increased bureaucracy, greater piety, faster cultural developments and more recreational time for sovereigns. The expansion of the courts will be discussed literally; looking at why the courts contained larger numbers of people and occupied more space. Three major monarchs of change from three of Europe's biggest powers at the time will be focused on in detail; Henry VIII of England, Francis I of France and Philip II of Spain, although some of their successors will be mentioned also.

The change from peripatetic rule to a more settled system did not occur overnight. For example, Francis I was still a peripatetic monarch who enjoyed his travels, but his movements were generally restricted to summer and autumn¹. Thus, his rule was one in which a secure, stationary court was developed and maintained, accompanied by a growth in Parisian luxury industries². Similarly, Henry VIII enjoyed some movement, but seldom strayed outside London³. The settlement of a court in one area allowed monarchs to hire larger household staff, live in larger palaces and take counsel from more advisors. **Consequently**, growth occurred in culture, religion and bureaucracy Europe-wide. **Whilst** the reasoning behind the shift in systems of court rule is unclear, the monarchs soon reaped the benefits of the change.

¹ R. Knecht, 'The Court of Francis I', R. Knecht, *Francis I and Sixteenth-Century France*, (Surrey, 2015), (Chapter IV), p.13

² *ibid*, (Chapter IV), p.15

³ P. Happé, 'Dramatic Genre and the Court of Henry VIII', T. Betteridge & S. Lipscomb (ed.), *Henry VIII and the court: Art, Politics and Performance*, (Surrey, 1988), p.271

Structural features

Communication features

Standard Introduction
(see Ch. 1 'Getting started on your essay')

Introductory sentence sets the scene.

Statement of purpose
to guide the reader, laying out the scope of the essay

Verbs to show intent: discuss, focus, mention

Paragraph describing the background and related directly to the title.

citations used to demonstrate a good range of sources.

Linking words used to build coherence and cohesion

Footnotes are common as a system of referencing in History. (see Ch. 8 'Referencing with accuracy')

Change from peripatetic to stationary rule was not immediate; travel around the sovereigns' territories had begun to wind down by the 16th and early 17th centuries, being replaced by fixed courts that grew to become the centre of their empire's politics and administration. In Spain, this system ended because it was no longer the most efficient form of rule. Philip II (ruled 1556–1598), who inherited the Spanish Empire from his frequently-travelling father Charles V, **said that 'travelling about one's kingdom is neither useful nor decent'**⁴. He was suggesting that the efforts of travel wasted time, and by '[indecent]', that it prevented a sovereign from fulfilling their role of providing a good example to their subjects through model behaviour and immersion in government business⁵. Indeed, Philip spent most of his ruling life at his desk, surrounded by mounds of paper⁶. The impact of the fixed court arguably facilitated this by centralising all aspects of government; Philip could receive information in one central hub. Likewise, Francis I (ruled 1515-1547) spent each morning dutifully attending to his work, albeit less busily⁷; his main court allowed him to have closer access to the latest information. Even more extreme was Henry VIII's court (ruled 1509-1547) which was the centre of virtually all political decisions in England⁸. Here, even religious policy was dictated (in a rejection of the Papacy's power), and this makes clear how the sheer volume of administrative work to do would be made easier by remaining in one location where information could be focused. The court also promoted religion, with a ceremonial Royal Chapel built where the king could pray in his subject's view⁹. **Whilst it could be argued** that a travelling court would permit more subjects to view their King, the centralised court allowed official viewing points to be designed. This created the perfect climate for expansion, with lobbyists, elites and subjects coming to visit either to try to influence the monarch's decisions, to try to get a patronage, or to get to see God's representative on Earth.

Semi colon to add explanatory information to a sentence.

Use of direct quotation by a historical figure brings the narrative to life

Criticality evident through the writer's demonstration of different ways of looking at the facts

⁴ G. Parker, *Philip II*, (London, 1979), p.24

⁵Ibid

⁶ Ibid, p.31

⁷R. Knecht, *French Renaissance Monarchy: Francis I & Henry II*, (New York, 1984), p.26

⁸J. Adamson, 'The Kingdom of England and Great Britain: The Tudor and Stuart Courts 1509-1714' J. Adamson (ed.), *The Princely Courts of Europe 1500-1750*, (London, 2000), p.95

⁹Ibid, pp.95-117

The end to a nomadic lifestyle brought a significant increase in the size of a sovereign's staff. **In France, for example, the royal court went from containing 540 officials under Francis I¹⁰ to up to 10,000 in the late 17th century under Louis XIV¹¹**. A peripatetic court simply could not maintain the number of staff that the stationary courts could due to its reliance on having to transport everything from place to place. However, the staff boom created a funding gap, and thus taxation systems were examined to ensure the extra costs could be sustained¹². In France, for instance, Francis I reorganised and centralised the fiscal system in 1523, closing tax loopholes¹³. Likewise, Henry VIII increased the administrative powers of the exchequer to keep up with the financial demands of the court and society in the following decade¹⁴. **This is a clear example of where the expansion of the courts had a direct impact on the political system.**

Use of an example to clarify the point and demonstrate understanding

Overt linking of information to the essay question

A fixed capital attracted visitors. Whitehall, Henry's residence from the 1530s, became desirable because Henry's personal style of monarchy meant those who could get close to him could have a considerable influence over his decision making¹⁵. For example, Henry's court had two major areas of influence: the Chamber and the Privy Chamber. His personal staff could provide counsel in the Privy Chamber without interference from the elite nobles that would advise him in the Chamber. Positions in the Privy Chamber were thus especially sought after, although other courtier positions were often similarly competitive for senior positions of influence over the king¹⁶. This climate of competition and rivalry was a drawback of the court, and sparked factionalism and some inefficiency. Similarly, the use of a fixed court inevitably led to the increase in power of regional elites, who sovereigns needed to consolidate their authority. In a more centralised system, regional elites would have greater control of their own region's taxes and resources, and so could more easily restrict their contribution to the capital¹⁷. Some monarchs successfully countered this problem,

¹⁰R. Knecht, *The French Renaissance Court*, (King's Lynne, 2008), p. 34

¹¹J. Adamson, 'Introduction', J. Adamson (ed.), *The Princely Courts of Europe 1500-1750*, (London, 2000), p.11

¹²E. Kiser & J. Kane, 'Revolution and State Structure: The Bureaucratization of Tax Administration in Early Modern England and France', *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 107 No. 1, (Chicago, 2001)

¹³ Knecht, *French Renaissance Monarchy*, pp.22-23

¹⁴ Kiser & Kane, 'Revolution and State Structure', *American Journal*

¹⁵Adamson, 'Kingdom of England, Adamson (ed.), *The Princely Courts of Europe*, p.96

¹⁶Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid, p.108

with Elizabeth I using her summer break to travel around England and meet them. Here, simply visiting would cost them a fortune, and although her primary motive was to see her nation, her stay could diminish the local power of the elites¹⁸.

While fixed courts gave rulers the means to work harder, it gave them the opportunity to play harder too. Henry VIII revelled in watching jousting and other forms of entertainment that were readily available in London¹⁹, while Elizabeth I was a keen fan of music, and Spain's Philip III took full advantage of hunting sites that were easily accessible from court²⁰.

However, difficulties could still arise. The Duke of Lerma, a court favourite of Philip III, was able to use Philip's distraction over hunting to take further control of courtly life. In fact, the Duke and Philip would annually visit Old Castile for hunting trips, which some were concerned created a divide between monarch and court²¹. A far cry from Philip II who had been so reluctant to delegate power that he wouldn't even provide his closest advisors with all the information he knew, Philip III allowed the Duke of Lerma to persuade him to move the court to Valladolid, the Duke's family city, thus personally benefitting him²². Clearly, court favourites were able to manipulate the sovereign into putting personal gain above the nation, **and this abuse of the system had the potential for a seriously negative impact on the court's efficiency.**

However, although favourites were common across early modern courts, they did not always equate to an abuse of power. French King Louis XIII (ruled 1610 to 1643), who became king aged eight, relied heavily on the Chief Minister Cardinal Richelieu during his reign. Richelieu was a powerful, imposing figure who instigated an initiative to curb the powers of the high nobility and to encourage favourable writings about the monarchy²³. **Here is a clear example of** the king's status being upheld and solidified in a vast court despite the power of a court favourite.

Cohesion established between paragraphs with final sentence setting up the content of the next paragraph (repetition of the word 'abuse').

Direct explanation of the relevance of the example

¹⁸ N. Williams, 'The Tudors: Three Contrasts in Personality', A. Dickens (ed.), *The Courts of Europe: Politics, Patronage and Royalty 1400-1800*, (London, 1977), pp.164-165

¹⁹ Happé, 'Dramatic Genre', *Henry VIII*, pp.271-286

²⁰ J. Elliott, *Spain and its World 1500-1700*, (Bath, 1992), p. 155

²¹ P. Williams, 'Philip III and the Restoration of Spanish Government, 1598-1603', *The English Historical Review* Vol. 88 No. 349, (Oxford, 1973), p. 763

²² J. Adamson, 'The Kingdoms of Spain: The Courts of the Spanish Habsburgs 1500-1700' J. Adamson (ed.), *The Princely Courts of Europe 1500-1750*, (London, 2000), pp.64-65s

²³ M. Weisner-Hanks, *Early Modern Europe 1450-1789*, (Cambridge, 2013), pp.328-329

The stationary nature of the now expanded royal courts, however, had some clear disadvantages. For example, a large court did little to protect the wishes of distant parts of a vast empire. Philip II discovered this upon attempting to impose Spanish Catholic practices onto the Netherlands, which had traditionally been more relaxed about religion. Upon the outbreak of revolt, his regent, Margaret of Parma, had to wait 24 days for instruction from Philip, time in which the situation changed dramatically²⁴. Similarly, in England, much of the North received little attention from a succession of rulers, barely ever even seeing them. Although a Council of York had been established, there were reports of violence and rejection of London rulings surrounding tax and punishment²⁵. Such drawbacks of a stationary court are clear; with no clear leadership to address disasters, they could spiral out of hand.

Another noteworthy influence of the expansion of the royal courts related to cultural transformations; the large courts were a **major** contributor to Renaissance changes. Henry VIII **quickly** worked to shed England's reputation as a country with **little** cultural significance, inviting artists from European states where art was more in vogue²⁶. Music played a **significant** role in his court, with Henry joining in in music-making and spending more on music than any other English monarch²⁷, and the Elizabethan court, which favoured music and drama²⁸. Meanwhile, Francis I was **particularly** taken by paintings. He invited many Italian artists such as Da Vinci to Paris²⁹, which gave the French Renaissance a boost. Such **large** celebrations of art not only encouraged creation, but also enjoyment. This enthusiasm was **quietly** shared by Philip II, who amassed a collection of paintings. However, the period was one of **heightened** religious censorship, and the *Index of Forbidden Texts*, a list of **censored** heretical texts, stalled some of the cultural advances that other countries enjoyed³⁰.

The changes to the court also heavily influenced the role of religion in states. Of the nations discussed, only Spain remained solidly Catholic throughout this period, and this was partially

New topic introduced
to build the argument.

Adverbs and adjectives
used as boosters.
(see Ch. 10, 'Developing
your stance & voice')

²⁴ G. Parker, *The Dutch Revolt*, (London, 1977), pp. 68-117

²⁵ J. Mackie, 'Henry VIII and Scotland', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society Vol.29*, (Cambridge, 1947), pp.93-94

²⁶ Williams, 'Tudors', Dickens, *Courts of Europe*, p.155

²⁷ Ibid, p.155

²⁸ Williams, 'Tudors', Dickens, *Courts of Europe*, p.166-167

²⁹ Knecht, *French Renaissance Court*, p. 169

³⁰ Parker, *Philip*, p.101

due to the strict and non-localised policies of its kings. Philip II built a new Palace, the Escorial, which was 'part monastery, part royal residence', meaning it was largely a ceremonial home for religious celebration rather than a place of courtly matters, made to demonstrate his piety³¹. Philip II's successors Philip III and Philip IV celebrated Easter Week in the streets of Madrid to be enjoyed by the public³². These events gave the public sight of the monarchy and view of the glory of Catholicism. It encouraged them to live piously through the image of splendour presented. Despite this, the true influence is hard to measure. However, the expanded court gave rise to more sinister ways to ensure that piety was upheld; the Spanish Inquisition, established in the late 15th century, was used as an instrument of fear and coercion to maintain religious discipline. It effectively prised power from the hands of the Pope to the Spanish monarchy, and was at its most powerful when Philip II had established his permanent court in Madrid. Here, meaningful dialogue could be had between King and Inquisitor General. By the 17th century, the Suprema (a council that met in Madrid to report to the king) would regularly meet with representatives of the king, reporting directly back to him³³. As a result, Catholic practice was enforced by the court, through ceremonies showing the divine glory of the faith, and the Inquisition providing a more aggressive enforcement. In fact, groups of heretics were found in Valladolid and Toledo under Philip II, and many were burnt during *auto da fé* trials (Inquisition persecution of heretics)³⁴, suggesting that its influence was strong throughout the country. Therefore, the expanding court tightened their grip over Spanish religion.

In contrast, France fell into religious turmoil during the period, with a relaxation of heresy laws under Charles IX (ruled 1560-1574) erupting into a conflict in 1562 that would become the Wars of Religion. The court was unable to broker peace, and became a key strategic target of the Huguenots. For example, in 1563, Charles IX was blockaded in Paris, only escaping due to the Huguenots departing to link up with German forces³⁵. The episode demonstrated that taking down the court would be not only symbolic, but also strategic, removing the top Catholic figures in one go.

³¹ Adamson, 'Kingdoms of Spain', Adamson (ed.), *The Princely Courts of Europe*, pp.55-56

³² Ibid, p.61

³³ H. Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*, (USA, 2014), pp.184-185

³⁴ Parker, *Philip*, p.99

³⁵Knecht, *French Renaissance Court*, p. 250-251

Henry VIII used his court as a political tool to deal with the Papal opposition he faced in his divorce of Catherine of Aragon. By sending her away with her personal court reduced to a fraction of the size of his, he was able to sever ties with European Catholicism and initiate the Church of England in 1533³⁶. Thus separated from the Papal rule, the religious duties that were part and parcel with running a religion fell upon the English court. In fact, using Whitehall as a royal court was a clear stamp to mark the difference between Henry VIII's jurisdiction and his predecessors'. Similarly, Mary I was forced to use the court to cement her position upon ascension. Coming to power despite Lady Jane Grey being the official heir, Mary needed the full weight of the court to stand behind parliament and denounce the late King's chosen heir if she wanted to claim the throne. As an ambassador advised at the time, this should be done to 'discover if there be opposition...and declare the late King Edward's testament null and void.'³⁷ The sheer political power of the courts at times of change could not be underestimated, and had helped to maintain both Henry and Mary's rule.

By examining the impact of the phasing out of the peripatetic style of rule, this essay has shown how the royal courts were able to balloon in size through the 16th and 17th century. Through a more settled form of rule, the sovereigns could attend to much more business and administration, while also enjoying regular recreational activity. The courts also attracted and encouraged artistic and political powers. The expanded and settled courts shaped society into a greater and better organised piety. However, it did give rise to abuses of the system, such as advisors using their royal favour to manipulate power. Despite such drawbacks, the impact of the expansion of the courts on the political systems of Europe's three major powers was largely positive, leading to a more visible relationship between monarch and their people and more stable and productive governance.

Bibliography

Adamson, J., 'Introduction', in J. Adamson (ed.), *The Princely Courts of Europe 1500-1750*, (London, 2000)

³⁶ Williams, 'Tudors', Dickens, *Courts of Europe*, pp.156-157

³⁷ A. Hunt, 'The Monarchical Republic of Mary I', *The Historical Journal Vol. 52, No.3*, (Cambridge, 2009), p.561

Concluding paragraph, summarising key points and linking back to statement of purpose

Bibliography listing all references already given in the footnotes. There are a variety of possible conventions when using footnotes, so check instructions carefully

Adamson, J., 'The Kingdom of England and Great Britain: The Tudor and Stuart Courts 1509-1714' in J. Adamson (ed.), *The Princely Courts of Europe 1500-1750*, (London, 2000)

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Diana and Tom's comments

This is a well-written essay that organises the evidence effectively to provide a logically structured, in-depth argument. Quotations are used to add relevance and 'life' to the prose, as well as to support findings. Language is evocative and engaging. The essay links to the question throughout, and coherence and cohesion are good. Improvements relate to greater balance in the topics being discussed.