The kings of France, like those of England, looked for ways to increase their power. After the breakup of Charlemagne’s empire, French counts and dukes ruled their lands independently under the feudal system. By the year 1000, France was divided into about 47 feudal territories. In 987, the last member of the Carolingian family died. Hugh Capet, an undistinguished duke from the middle of France, (was elected to the French throne by nobles who thought his power would not challenge theirs). The Capet family ruled only a small territory, but at its heart stood Paris. Hugh Capet began the Capetian dynasty of French kings that ruled France from 987 to 1328.

Hugh Capet, his son, and his grandson all were weak rulers, but time and geography favored the Capetians. Their territory, though small, sat astride important trade routes in northern France. For 300 years, Capetian kings tightened their grip on this strategic area. The power of the king gradually spread outward from Paris. Eventually, the growth of royal power would unite France.

One of the most powerful Capetians was Philip II, called Philip Augustus. ... Philip II not only wanted more land, he also wanted a stronger central government. He established royal officials called bailiffs. They were sent from Paris to every district in the kingdom to preside over the king’s courts and to collect the king’s taxes.

In 1302, Philip IV, who ruled France from 1285 to 1314, was involved in a quarrel with the pope. The pope refused to allow priests to pay taxes to the king. Philip disputed the right of the pope to control Church affairs in his kingdom. As in England, the French king usually called a meeting of his lords and bishops when he needed support for his policies. To win wider support against the pope, Philip IV decided to include commoners in the meeting.

In France, the Church leaders were known as the First Estate, and the great lords as the Second Estate. The commoners (wealthy landholders or merchants) that Philip invited to participate in the council became known as the Third Estate. The whole meeting was called the Estates-General.

Like the English Parliament in its early years, the Estates-General helped to increase royal power against the nobility. Unlike Parliament, however, the Estates-General never became an independent force that limited the king’s power. However, centuries later, the Third Estate would play a key role in overthrowing the French monarchy during the French Revolution.

England and France were just beginning to establish a democratic tradition. This tradition rested on setting up a centralized government that would be able to govern widespread lands. The creation of common law and court systems was a first step toward increased central government power. Including commoners in the decision-making process of government was also an important step in the direction of democratic rule.

Reflection: How does Traditions & Encounters explain how Capetian kings “tightened their grip on this strategic area” ... or, to put it another way, grew their resources?