Parrots, Princes, and Popes:  
_Translatio Imperii_ in Jean Clouet’s _Portrait of Francis I as St. John the Baptist_  

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**Abstract:** At first glance, a green parrot featured in Jean Clouet’s _Portrait of Francis I as St. John the Baptist_ appears out of place. The parrot was a prized import that first graced Europe upon Alexander the Great’s victorious return from his conquest of the Persian Empire and India. Why is this foreign bird exhibited in a sixteenth-century French royal portrait? Repeated in a portrait of Francis I’s sister, Marguerite d’Angoulême, the green parrot was evidently no casual inclusion. Francis I’s green parrot contains a complex visual message. Considering the implications of the parrot and the ambitions of Francis I, this paper will argue that the appearance of this particular bird served to glorify and endorse a new branch of the Valois dynasty.

**Key words:** Parrot, portraiture, Francis I, Clouet, Marguerite d’Angoulême

Francis I (1494–1547) became the king of France in 1515 and he quickly made clear his desire to expand the borders of his kingdom. Jean Clouet’s _Portrait of Francis I as St. John the Baptist_ (now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris) subtly displays these ambitions of the first king from the Angoulême branch of the Valois dynasty [Figure 1]. This inference can be supported by examining the green parrot featured in the portrait, which appears again in Jean Clouet’s portrait of Francis I’s sister, Marguerite d’Angoulême (now in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool), executed eight years later [Figure 2]. How can we make sense of the unusual features of this cryptic portrait? What sort of parrot is this? Why include a parrot? Interrogating the inclusion of such a unique bird reveals the parrot’s role—a sign of Francis I’s preordained right to rule Christendom.

Before specifically addressing the parrots in the Clouet portraits, we must consider the presence and significance of the parrot in sixteenth-century France. The parrot was known in Europe as early as 327 BCE when Alexander the Great returned from his conquest of the Persian Empire and India. The emperor is credited with introducing the Alexandrine parrot (_Psittacula eupatria_), named in his honor, and the rose-ringed parakeet, or “Green Indian parakeet” (_Psittacula krameri_), to Greece. The parrots quickly became a prized import and were associated with Alexander’s imperial success in the East. Aristotle’s _History of Animals_, written in 350 BCE, explicitly names the Indian parrot, noting its ability to mimic human speech and its brashness after drinking wine. By 77 CE, Pliny the Elder had also written on the Indian parrot in his _Natural History_. The vast trading networks of the Roman Empire had made the parrot an available and recognizable foreign product. Pliny remarks that “India sends us this bird,” and “It will duly salute an

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1 Alexander’s encounter with parrots in India and the legacy of the connection between Alexander the Great and parrots is explained by Bruce Boehr, _Parrot Culture: Our 2500-Year-Long Fascination with the World’s Most Talkative Bird_ (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), Chapter 1.


emperor and pronounce the words it has heard spoken." Pliny’s comment about saluting an emperor refers to an incident following the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE when Octavian (soon to become Emperor Augustus) defeated Mark Antony and claimed the Roman imperial title. A parrot called from a crowd of Octavian’s supporters, “Hail Caesar, conqueror and leader”—an act that spoke to the parrot’s remarkable capabilities and its owner’s loyalty. This wording and delivery revealed the existence of some human faculties in the bird. The parrot could identify an emperor; this act was more than just repeating a phrase on command. The storyline of Caesar Augustus and the parrot was integrated into the narrative of several medieval rulers, lending them legitimacy. For example, Thomas de Cantimpré’s *On the Nature of Things*, written in 1240 and read widely in the sixteenth century, was an encyclopedia of the natural sciences intended for the clergy. The text includes an entry about King Charles I of France and a parrot. While Charles was traveling through Greece, he encountered some parrots who called out to him in Greek saying: “Farewell, Emperor.” Thomas explains that this was a prophecy because at the time Charles was only the king of France, and not yet Emperor Charlemagne. References to parrots by Aristotle, Pliny, and Thomas de Cantimpré ensured that by the sixteenth century parrots were linked to emperors in the courtly imagination.

Although native to India, parrots made their way to Europe in different ways throughout the centuries. In antiquity, after Alexander’s initial introduction, parrots were bred in Greece and traded in Egypt. While they continued to be bred locally throughout the Middle Ages, they were also imported through Venice and Constantinople. By the sixteenth century, Spain had begun to import them from the Atlantic world; however, the Alexandrine parrot and the Green Indian parakeet are not indigenous to the Americas, and they would not have been among the parrot species introduced to the European market by Spain. The bird that appears in Francis I’s portrait—the Indian parrot, which was the species most entangled in the narratives of emperors—carries particular economic and imperialist connotations that warrant scholarly exploration.

Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the foreign origins and exotized features of parrots rendered them commodities of status. Along with elephants, monkeys, and giraffes, parrots were often included in Renaissance menageries of kings, emperors, and popes. A king’s possession of a

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4 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, X.LVIII.
6 Thomas de Cantimpré, *On the Nature of Things* V.CIX.
magnificent creature like a parrot made the king, by ownership and proximity, a magnificent king.¹⁰ Synonymous with economic success and social rank, simply owning a parrot indicated that its owners could afford the cost of import, and they would accordingly boast their financial abundance by parading the vibrant, charming birds.

Lauded as clever speakers by ancient authors, the birds would also signify an owner’s intellectual sophistication. Their ability to precisely mimic human speech earned parrots a reputation for eloquence, and they were accordingly likened to poets. Often featured as protagonists in late medieval literature, their presence within the social landscape of the early modern court was underwritten by the intellectual achievements of the past.¹¹ Despite such romantic affiliations, a parrot can only faithfully repeat words that it has heard spoken. The implication of this skill is that the parrot can only speak honestly—no unspoken words or deceit will come from their mouths. Truthful often to a fault, the parrot and his dependable voice provided opportunity for social commentary and moral instruction.

The wonder of the parrot derives from its uncanny ability to proffer words, astounding its audience in the same way as excellent orators do through their uncanny use of words.¹² Its eloquence and honesty may explain the notion that God favored the parrot. The parrot, who comes to Earth from Heaven, speaks and speaks well by the grace of God.¹³ These desirable traits allowed it to be a compelling and dynamic messenger of God’s decrees. Because it was able to relay God’s message without altering it, the parrot was associated with the angelic salutation of Gabriel upon announcing God’s divine will to Mary. The “Ave” of the angelic salutation in Latin was supposed to be the natural greeting of the parrot, and on this account, the bird became a symbol of trustworthy prophecy and an allusion to the mystery of the Incarnation, in particular Mary’s virgin birth of the Messiah.¹⁴ The spoken word was a key element in the concept of the Incarnation. The Gospel of John explained, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” and “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.”¹⁵ The


¹² In his Iconologia (first published in 1593), Cesare Ripa assimilates the parrot with eloquence: “Il papagallo è simbolo dell’eloquente, perché si rende meraviglioso con la lingua et con le parole imitando l’huomo, nella cui lingua solamente consiste l’esserci80 dell’eloquenza. Et si dipinge il papagallo fuora della gabbia, perché l’eloquenza non è ristretta a termine alcuno.” Cesare Ripa, Iconologia (1610; Milan: Neri Pozza, 2000), 116.

¹³ This notion is reflected in Conrad Gesner’s Historia animalium, published in five volumes between 1551 and 1558. The Swiss naturalist explains that the parrot came to India from heaven: “Psitacus inter aves ingenio sagacitateq[ue] praestat, quod grandi sit capite atq[ue] in India caelo syncero nascat.” Conrad Gesner, Historiae animalium libri III. Qui est de avium natura (Frankfurt am Main, 1604), 723.


¹⁵ John 1:1, 1:14 (Douay-Rheims Bible).
Virgin did conceive by the Word of God as acknowledged by the Gospel of Luke and understood in Mary’s response to the Archangel Gabriel: “Be it done to me according to thy Word.” Jan van Eyck’s *Madonna with the Canon van der Paele* (Groeningemuseum, Bruges, 1434–36) refers to the complex symbolism associated with the parrot. The green parrot, more than likely the Green Indian parakeet, rests in the Virgin’s lap, where it is petted by the Christ Child. With its head facing the enthroned Virgin, the parrot, as the central point of the painting, represents the “Word made flesh,” reminding viewers and believers of the faithfulness and truth of God’s decrees.

The parrot as a religious motif and a prophet brings our discussion back to Clouet’s cryptic portrait and Francis I. At his birth, Francis I seemed unlikely to become king because he was only the cousin of Charles VIII, the reigning monarch, and Louis, Duc d’Orléans (later Louis XII) was next in line to the throne. However, in 1515, Francis succeeded his cousin and father-in-law, Louis XII, who died without a son. The early uncertainty of Francis I’s status as heir and the successive events that cleared his path to the French throne were attributed to destiny and God’s will and were most certainly wrapped up in the construction of his royal image. Clouet’s *Francis I as St. John the Baptist*, dated 1518–20, is an early portrait of the new king. Seated and dressed in fur, Francis points to the lamb in his lap. Iconographically, this portrait fits traditional depictions of St. John the Baptist. However, several modifications alert the viewer to the fact that this is not St. John, but Francis I. The king does not wear the typical camel skin of St. John the Baptist who lived in the wilderness; instead, he is clad in a wild cat or dark ermine fur—more befitting of his status. Furthermore, Francis makes direct eye contact with his viewer—the prerogative of a king.

St. John’s primary attribute, the lamb, sits in Francis I’s lap and carries a meaning similar to that of the parrot. St. John was the first to recognize Christ as the Son of God, exclaiming when Christ passed, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” This heralding of Christ is usually visualized by a pointing gesture. In the Clouet portrait, Francis I, like St. John the Baptist, points to the lamb. With his gesture towards the lamb while gazing at the viewer, Francis reminds us of St. John’s prophetic knowledge of Christ as the Savior. It is in light of this knowledge combined with the prophetic powers of the parrot that the viewer can now

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18 Francis I had married Louise’s daughter Claude, a match that had been orchestrated by Louis before his death to ensure that his hereditary line remained in power. R.J. Knecht, *French Renaissance Monarchy: Francis I and Henry II* (London: Longman, 1984), 24–6.
20 While the meaning of the details are debated, the literature agrees that Clouet’s *Francis I as St. John the Baptist* is a portrait of Francis I in the guise of St. John and not an arbitrary depiction of St. John. See Mansfield, *Representations of Renaissance Monarchy*, 86–8; Lecoq, “Le François ler en saint Jean-Baptiste,” 31–6; Scailliérèze, *François ler par Clouet*, 93–4; Walbe, “Studien zur Entwicklung des allegorischen Porträts,” 37.
21 Scailliérèze suggests that the parrot was present because St. John was known to live among the animals. However, this conclusion downplays the specificity of the bird. Scailliérèze, *François ler par Clouet*, 94.
22 *John* 1:36 (Douay-Rheims Bible).
23 Lisa Mansfield thinks that the lamb refers to Francis I’s namesake Francis of Paola, whose attributes included a staff, a lamb, and the word *Charitas* or *Humilitas*. Mansfield, *Representations of Renaissance Monarchy*, 88.
24 This pose emulates Leonardo’s *St. John the Baptist* which the artist completed during his time in France.
make sense of the inclusion of this bird. Just as Francis I points to the lamb, so too does the parrot “point to” Francis I. Through its allusion to the Incarnation, the parrot, like St. John, confirms the veracity of the divine prophecy: the lamb is the Word. On the other hand, the parrot’s attention to and implicit recognition of Francis I is meant as a heralding action akin to its saluting, “Hail Caesar,” in recognition of Caesar Augustus. The parrot therefore seems to indicate Francis I’s expectation of receiving the title of emperor. This symbolism, paired with the dating of the portrait, creates a clear allusion to the imperial election of 1519. With the death of Maximilian I in January 1519, an imperial election was required to determine his successor, and the primary contenders were Francis I and Charles of Spain (the future Emperor Charles V). France’s wars in Italy had instigated an intense rivalry between Francis I and Charles, who ruled Spain, Austria, and a number of territories surrounding France, making him a constant threat to Francis I’s kingdom. The title of Holy Roman Emperor carried immense power and prestige; Francis particularly coveted this title since it had first been held by Charlemagne. Despite his initial potential, Francis could not garner German support, and he withdrew two days before the election, ensuring that Charles was elected Holy Roman Emperor.

While the Clouet painting features Francis I as St. John the Baptist, a later painting by an unidentified master (now in the Musée d’Art et Histoire, Cognac) depicts Francis I along with St. John himself. Dated to the late 1520s, St. John the Baptist Preaching in the Presence of Francis I speaks to the persistent imagery of the king as a divinely chosen monarch [Figure 3]. However, there is no parrot present to signal his imperial prerogatives; in this painting, the task of “announcing” the king is given to St. John. Rather than pointing to the symbolic Lamb of God at his feet, the saint gestures across the crowd to a figure portraying Francis I. The king looks knowingly at the viewer, fully aware of his heavenly duty as God’s chosen. Placed behind St. John’s legs, Marguerite d’Angoulême is also portrayed here and gazes at the viewer like her brother. She was crowned Queen of Navarre in 1527, due to her brother’s matchmaking work, around the same time that this work was completed. Here, she acknowledges Francis I’s power and divine anointment. The artist and the patron of this painting is unknown, but the message is unambiguous and reflects Francis I’s title as the “Most Christian King.” The title Rex Christianissimus or Roi Très-Chrétien was bestowed upon French kings in the thirteenth century by the papacy for their devotion to the Christian faith. It became recognized as a hereditary and exclusive title of the Kings of France. This allowed French kings to establish themselves as the inheritors of the Christian kingdom, as well as the divinely sanctioned rulers of France. Reminding the viewer of Francis I’s status as Roi Très-Chrétien, St. John the Baptist Preaching in the Presence of Francis I may be a timely allusion to the disarray of the papacy in the

25 The most frequently agreed upon interpretation of the parrot in Francis I’s portrait is the parrot as a symbol of eloquence. Lecoq proposes the parrot as a symbol of eloquence, fitting for the patron saint of preachers and a Renaissance king. She uses Cesare Ripa’s discussion of “Eloquence” in his Iconologia to establish this connection. Lecoq, “François Ier en saint Jean-Baptiste,” 32–3; Scalailléz also points to the eloquent parrot as an appropriate symbol for both Francis I and Marguerite d’Angoulême. Scalailléz, François Ier par Clouet, 91–4; Brigitte Walbe leans into the religious interpretation of the parrot as a symbol of redemption from original sin, citing Albrecht Dürer and Hans Burgkmair. Francis I points to the redeemer of mankind (Christ, the lamb of God) which is an indicator of the religious devotion of the young king as well as his worthiness. Walbe, “Studien zur Entwicklung des allegorischen Porträts,” 37–9.


27 This was an appropriate time to promote this type of imagery since Francis I had only been released from Spain in 1526. For Francis I’s defeat and capture at the Battle of Pavia as well as his subsequent imprisonment, see R.J. Knecht, Renaissance Warrior and Patron: The Reign of Francis I (Cambridge: New York, 1994), 216–48.

28 Mansfield, Representations of Renaissance Monarchy, 2.

aftermath of the 1527 Sack of Rome which was carried out by the mutinous troops of Charles V. This portrayal of Francis as divinely chosen presents him in stark contrast to the elected Holy Roman Emperor whose army had devastated the Eternal City.

The pope’s role and influence in the matters of Christian Europe are also evoked in the Clouet portrait, in particular through the presence of the parrot. Leo X (r. 1513–1521) was the pope at the time of the painting’s execution. Born Giovanni de’ Medici, Leo X was the second son of Lorenzo de’ Medici; he combined the wealth and might of the Medici family with the political and religious power of the papacy, which made him a necessary ally for the ambitious Francis I. Examining Clouet’s portrait, we can discern associations between the prince and the pope. The sixteenth-century French word for parrot was papegay or perroquet.30 Pape is the French word for pope, creating a word association with papegay.31 In this interpretation, the parrot becomes a metaphor for the pope—a stand in for Pope Leo X.32 Taking this observation one step further, it can be said that the parrot evokes a strategic relationship between Francis I and Pape Leo X based on mutual favor and support, which was indeed the case.

Following the French victory at the Battle of Marignano in September 1515, which enabled France to capture Milan, Francis I needed the pope in order to maintain his position in Italy.33 The Concordat of Bologna, signed August 18, 1516, created a personal relationship between Francis I and Leo X and delineated their sphere of influence in a manner that benefited both parties. The pope was permitted to collect the income of the Catholic Church in France, while the king could tax French clergy. French bishops, abbeys, and priors were appointed by Francis I, but the appointments could be vetoed by Leo X. Most notably for the papacy, the Concordat abolished the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges (1438), a document that asserted that the General Council of the Church in France was superior in authority to the pope. The Pragmatic Sanction was a largely symbolic document that offended the papacy. Nevertheless, the provisions of the Concordat allowed Francis I to maintain most of the privileges that he enjoyed under the Pragmatic Sanction.34 To seal their alliance, Leo X gave the French king a reliquary cross containing a piece of the True Cross, the cross on which Christ was crucified. This gift validated Francis I as the Roi Très-Chrétien and was meant to encourage him to lead a crusade. In addition, the pope had a seal made for each party. The seals were an image of the cross with the three nails that included the motto “In hoc signo vinces,” or “In this sign you will conquer.” Through this evident reference to Emperor Constantine, Leo X

30 Sixteenth-century French naturalist Pierre Belon traveled widely in the 1540s, documenting animals and plants and then comparing his observations to descriptions by classical authors. The parrot appears in two of his publications, L’histoire de la nature des oyseaux, avec leurs descriptions, & naïfs portraits retirez du naturel (Paris: 1555) and Portraits d’oyseaux, animaux, serpens, herbes, arbres, hommes et femmes d’Arabie et d’Égypte: le tout enrichy de quatrains, pour plus facile connaissance des oyseaux et autres portraits (Paris: 1557). His commentary on parrots simply restates the tropes established by Aristotle and Pliny, perpetuating the association of the parrot with India, wine, and the ability to learn human speech. Belon refers to the bird as “Le Papegay est aussi nommé un Perroquet” (1555) and “Les Papegays, que Perroquets on nomme” (1557).

31 Gustave Loisel’s history of menageries details the papal preference for parrots. He explains that popes joined the “le mouvement général de grande lux” and acquired “animaux d'appartement, des oiseaux, surtout des perroquets.” Loisel, 1:202.

32 The parrot’s sacred associations directly related it to the Catholic belief and the papacy which was taken advantage of by Protestants. Martin Luther supposedly thought that parrots, like popes, were deceptive, remarking in Table Talk (Tischreden) “I believe the devil resides in parakeets and parrots...because they can imitate people.” Noble, “The Kind of Virgin That Keeps a Parrot,” 706. In his article, Boehrer explains how the parrot evolved “into an emblem of mindless repetition at the hands of first-generation Protestant reformers, who use it to exemplify the alleged ignorance of Catholic priests and the alleged emptiness of Catholic rituals.” Boehrer, “The Cardinal’s Parrot,” 1–37.

33 This victory was not lasting. By 1521 Francis I was forced to abandon Milan to Charles V’s forces, losing the ground he had gained in 1515. Knecht, Francis I, 33–50.

34 French subjects resented having to relinquish their symbolic sovereignty; however, Francis I saw an alliance with the pope as more advantageous. Knecht, Francis I, 52–6.
assimilated Francis I with the figure of the Holy Roman Emperor, exhorting him to undertake the crusade, but also suggesting his own support in any future imperial election. Furthermore, the Concordat of Bologna was commemorated in a fresco (1516–17) at the Vatican Palace by Raphael and his assistants. Instead of depicting the meeting in Bologna, the scene portrayed the coronation of Charlemagne; however, Leo III is a portrait of Leo X, and Charlemagne is a portrait of Francis I [Figure 4]. Layered with these allusions to the great Christian rulers of the past, Francis I’s portrait as Charlemagne compelled the viewers to recognize the French king as a divinely pre-ordained emperor. Francis I could therefore count on the pope’s approval. It is this harmony with the papacy that is alluded to in the Clouet portrait.

Although Francis I did not win the imperial election, Leo X was a stark supporter of Francis I and actively campaigned for him. This significant endorsement also relates to the presence of the parrot in the Clouet portrait. In Leo X’s calculations, Charles of Spain’s bid for the title of Holy Roman Emperor was a greater threat than Francis I’s. Charles already ruled Naples, and upon his appointment, he would gain territory in Northern Italy, causing the Empire to effectively surround the papal states. While the pope could not cast a vote, Leo X went to considerable lengths in order to secure votes for his candidate. He sent envoys to Germany to cast doubt on Charles’s ability and eligibility. In addition, Leo X authorized Francis I to promise archbishop seats and cardinal positions in return for votes. Clouet’s portrait conveys Leo X’s investment in and support of Francis I. The parrot, looking to Francis I, included a double meaning—the parrot as the herald of Roman emperors and the parrot not only as a symbol of God’s will, but as the representative of God’s authority on earth, the pope, thus sanctioning the French king’s bid for the title of Holy Roman Emperor. In addition, the parrot not only indicated Leo X’s privileging of Francis I, but it also exhibited Francis I’s faithfulness to Leo X. The Italian word for parrot—pappagallo—could be interpreted as “papa gallo,” or the French pope. The assimilation of Francis I with St. John the Baptist can be explained as the king’s support of Leo X’s papacy as the legitimate heir of the Holy Lamb, as well as his support of future Medici popes. This understanding was important to Leo X, who wanted his cousin, Giulio, who later became Pope Clement VII, as his successor. The Clouet painting displays the beneficial alliance between the king and the pope by identifying Leo X as a “French pope”—a pap(p)agallo.

Like his predecessors, Francis I had territorial ambitions in the Italian city-states, and citing dynastic claims through his great-grandmother Valentina Visconti, he invaded Italy in the first year of his reign. Francis I was proclaimed the new Julius Caesar after his early victory at Marignano, and he was poised to play a dominant role in European politics. Again, the parrot in Clouet’s portrait and his greeting of “Hail Caesar!” enters the conversation as a designation of Francis I’s status and ambition. Francis had extended

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35 Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor, had allegedly been told the words “In hoc signo vinces” at his conversion. Eusebius, Vita Constantini 1.28.
36 Lecoq discusses Francis I as the new Constantine at great length and includes The Coronation of Charlemagne in her analysis. Anne-Marie Lecoq, François ler imaginaire: Symbolique et Politique à l’Aube de la Renaissance française (Paris: Macula, 1987), 259–323; For the details surrounding Francis I’s gifts, see Knecht, Renaissance Warrior and Patron, 103–04.
37 Buying votes was not uncommon in this process. Among other reasons, Charles V secured his win by buying the seven votes. Knecht, Francis I, 74–7.
38 “Papa” is the Italian term for “pope” and, “Gallo” refers to the ancient territory of Gaul, which comprised most of modern France. I would like to thank Dr. Lorenzo Pericolo for drawing my attention to this Italian pun.
39 In addition to the imperial election, the two allied themselves several times early in Francis I’s reign: Francis I appointed the pope’s brother, Giuliano de’ Medici, Duke of Nemours in 1515, and in 1518, Lorenzo II de’ Medici, the pope’s nephew, married Madeleine de La Tour d’Auvergne, a relative of Francis I.
40 Lecoq points to the declaration of Francis I as the new Julius Caesar after his victory at Marignano as the reason for the parrot in the Clouet portrait. The parrot was intended to mark this declaration since the parrot was linked to the greeting of emperors. However, she dates the Clouet portrait to 1520 which was five years after his victory and after he had lost the most important emperor title, Holy Roman Emperor. In addition, by late 1519, Charles V was closing in on Francis I’s territorial possession making his position much more precarious. Lecoq, “François ler en saint Jean-Baptiste,” 34–5.
the borders of his kingdom, but there was still more that he desired—an implication of the portrait’s agenda conveyed by the verdant bird. The parrot, as symbolic compensation for a distant, but commodifiable physical space, embodies the intentions and might of the possessor. Its position in the upper left corner of the composition—just above the king but clearly still within his own spatial jurisdiction—signifies a capacity to expand into, and establish ownership of, a place beyond his kingdom’s current boundaries.\(^{41}\) Just as the green parrot symbolized the conquests made by Alexander the Great in enlarging his empire, so too does the parrot in the Clouet portrait convey Francis I’s desire to add unconquered lands to his kingdom in emulation of his Roman imperial predecessors.

The Clouet portrait is not the only work at this time to link Francis I’s to imperial predecessors. Thought to be a commemoration of Francis I’s triumph, the *Commentaires de la guerre gallique* is a manuscript in three volumes detailing a fictitious dialogue between the French king and Julius Caesar, in which the pair discuss military victories and the Gallic Wars.\(^{42}\) Volume one contains two portrait medallions of the French king and the Roman emperor, both attributed to Jean Clouet. Francis, depicted in the larger of the two illuminations, is situated above the profile portrait of Julius Caesar [Figure 5].\(^{43}\) An inscription at the beginning of the volume reads, “Francis by the grace of God King of France, second Caesar.” These links to Julius Caesar conceivably point to the land that he primarily occupied—Italy. Leading the viewer to believe that Francis was the legitimate successor of Julius Caesar and justified in his military campaigns in Italy.

As the successor of Julius Caesar and the rightful ruler of Italy, Francis I pursued the ideal of a French universal monarchy. The title of Holy Roman Emperor was rooted in the concept of *translatio imperii*, the “translation of empire,” or the linear transfer of power from one supreme ruler to another. Maximilian I utilized this notion during his tenure as Holy Roman Emperor, claiming that the title and status of the appointment belonged to him and those with German heritage because of Charlemagne’s association with Germanic territories.\(^{44}\) However, for France, Charlemagne, the King of the Franks, the King of the Lombards, and the Emperor of the Romans, was the true precedent, and his legacy was destined to be followed by French kings. In the late fourteenth century, the hermit Telesphorus of Cosenza foretold the “Second Charlemagne” and spoke of a “roi aux trois couronnes.” Since the king was to be the second Charlemagne, the crowns were the two temporal crowns of France and Italy and then the spiritual crown of Christianity. This king would vanquish the Muslims, resulting in a universal Christian monarchy and a renewal of the world, *renovatio mundi*.\(^{45}\) While the original prophecy was meant to indicate King Charles VI

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41. Boehrer applies this consideration to Alexander the Great, although it can also apply to Francis I and other Renaissance kings with imperial motives. Boehrer, *Parrot Culture*, 5. Using animals to convey possession and power is a tactic that Francis employed in other commissions. Most memorably at the Château Fontainebleau, the Galerie François Premier’s decorative program includes a royal entry with an elephant. The elephant depicted in one of the frescos is understood to be a symbol of the king himself, magnificent and powerful. See Dora and Erwin Panofsky, “The Iconography of the Galerie François Ier at Fontainebleau,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, vol. 52 (1958): 113–90.

42. The first two volumes of the *Commentaires de la guerre gallique* were completed in 1519 and the third in 1520. The third volume downplays Francis I’s imperial ambitions since he had lost the Holy Roman Emperor election. For detailed information about the *Commentaires de la guerre gallique*, see Anne-Marie Lecoq, *François Ier Imaginaire*, 229–44; Myra D. Orth, *Renaissance Manuscripts: The Sixteenth Century* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2015); and François Rouget, *François Ier et la vie littéraire de son temps* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017) 167–82.

43. The medallion portrait, in addition to illuminating the established relationship between Francis and Julius Caesar, provides a likens comparison to the face of Francis in Clouet’s portrait [Figure 1]. Both versions show the same faint beard—a helpful detail that argues for the portrait’s completion before the Imperial Election of 1519. This comparison would suggest that both portraits were done at a similar time. Since the *Commentaires de la guerre gallique* portrait was completed by 1519, the same could be said for *Francis Ier as St. John the Baptist*. Janet Cox-Rearick, *The Collection of Francis I: Royal Treasures* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 5.


of France (1380–1422) as the second Charlemagne, the text of this prophecy was published in 1516, the second year of Francis I’s reign, and continued to be published throughout the sixteenth century.\(^{46}\) With his victory at Marignano granting him a foothold in Italy, Francis I began to align his own titles with those of Charlemagne. Francis I was, therefore, the heir of Charlemagne and the “Second Charlemagne” that was prophesied.\(^{47}\)

The meaning of the green parrot in Clouet’s *Portrait of Marguerite d’Angoulême* becomes clearer once the symbolism of Francis I’s green parrot has been established [Figure 2]. Following the death of her first husband, Charles IV, Duc d’Alençon, Marguerite married Henri II of Navarre in 1527, making the Valois princess Queen of Navarre. The portrait most likely marked the occasion of her wedding, which had been arranged as a result of Francis I’s captivity in Madrid. Seated against a red damask background, Marguerite, like her brother in the Clouet portrait, gazes at the viewer. The ruffle of her sumptuous sleeves fills the lower half of the image and provides a material contrast to the green parrot that perches on her right hand. Marguerite’s portrait, a rather standard royal portrait aside from the parrot, is not a cryptic portrait like her brother’s. The eight-year gap between these two portraits indicates that the meaning of the parrot relies on the specific symbolism of Clouet’s *Portrait of Francis I as St. John the Baptist*.\(^{48}\) Marguerite’s parrot appears more passive. The parrot does not face her; instead, it gazes beyond the portrait, perhaps even looks to the viewer. This pose is very different from that of Francis I’s parrot, who cranes its neck and positions its body to face the king. Marguerite’s parrot is not a bold symbol of empire, but a nod to Francis I. As a subtle emblem of her brother, the parrot communicates the Valois family’s status and Francis I’s achievements.\(^{49}\) Marguerite acknowledges and honors her brother by including such a prominent green parrot in her portrait.

The parrot, a secular and religious symbol, served to visually communicate the ambitions of a king who claimed earthly and spiritual crowns. Although an exotic bird, the parrot embodied European imperial intentions. Alluding to past and future achievements, Jean Clouet’s *Portrait of Francis I as St. John the Baptist* alerts the viewer to Francis I’s aspirations to rule over Christendom. As the rightful successor of St. John the Baptist, Julius Caesar, and Charlemagne, Francis I and his green parrot signal, early in his reign, the coming glory of the Angoulême branch of the Valois dynasty.

\(^{46}\) This prophecy gained the most popularity whenever a French king was planning a Crusade. Michael J. Heath, *Crusading Commonplaces: La Noue, Lucinge, and Rhetoric Against the Turks* (Genève: Droz, 1986), 51–3.


\(^{48}\) The association of the parrot with eloquence is the standard explanation of Marguerite’s parrot. Scaillière cites Marguerite’s distinction as a woman of letters. Scaillière, *François Ier par Clouet*, 93.; However, Marguerite’s writings were published anonymously in 1531 and then under her name in 1547—both publications are after the 1527 portrait of Marguerite and the parrot. Gary Ferguson and Mary B. McKinley, “Introduction” in *A Companion to Marguerite de Navarre*, eds. Gary Ferguson and Mary B. McKinley (Boston: Brill, 2013), 7–16.

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Figure 1. Jean Clouet, *Portrait of Francis I as St. John the Baptist*, 1518-1520, oil on panel, 96 x 79 cm, Louvre. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.
Figure 2. Jean Clouet, *Marguerite d’Angoulême, duchess d’Angoulême, Queen of Navarre*, c. 1527, oil on panel, 59.8 x 51.4 cm, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.
Figure 3. Unknown (French), *Saint John the Baptist Preaching in the Presence of Francis Ier*, 1525-1530, oil on panel, 83.5 x 66.5 cm, Musée d'Art et Histoire, Cognac. © Musées de Cognac.
Figure 5. Jean Clouet, *Portrait of Francis I*, 1519, black chalk and gouache on parchment 48 mm; Jean Clouet, *Portrait of Julius Caesar*, 1519, from *Commentaires de la guerre gallique* vol. 1, British Library, London, MS Harley 6205, fol. 3. Courtesy of the British Library Board.