Philippe de Comines Biography

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Biography

The French chronicler Philippe de Comines (ca. 1445-1511) wrote an extensive memoir of the reigns of Louis XI and Charles VIII.

Born in the château of Renescure in Flanders before 1447, probably in 1445, Philippe de Comines, or Commynes, was orphaned early. His formal education was limited, but his godfather, Philip V of Burgundy, reared him in his court. In 1464 Comines entered the service of Philip's son Charles the Bold, who became Duke of Burgundy in 1467. As Charles's chamberlain and councilor, he took an important part in the negotiations between the duke and King Louis XI when the latter was held prisoner at Péronne in 1468, and in fact did much to save the King's life.

In 1472 Comines abandoned Charles the Bold to enter the service of Louis XI; he was soon made chamberlain and councilor and was given a generous pension and a confiscated property. In 1473 Louis arranged his marriage with Helen of Chambes, who brought him the lands of Argenton. Comines and the King were in harmony in effecting many a political ruse, but Comines did not approve of Louis's domestic abuses.

After the death of Louis in 1483, Comines engaged in subversive plots against Charles VIII and in 1488 was exiled to one of his own estates. Recalled in 1492, he cooperated with Charles's Italian expedition, even representing the King at the Treaty of Vercelli. After the death of Charles VIII in 1498, Comines received no appointments of importance; he died at Argenton in 1511.

The *Memoirs* of Comines, his only permanent contribution, covers the period from 1464 to 1498. This work is not filled with charming anecdotes but abounds in explanations of the deep-seated and secret causes of political events, and thus Comines is the first French writer to deserve the title of historian in the modern sense. The earlier French chroniclers were content to report events, but Comines was a penetrating observer and a specialist in the secrets of the human mind. He presented some theories that were influential in the 18th century. Both he and his contemporary Niccolò Machiavelli shared the hardheaded view that success alone matters; but, unlike Comines, Machiavelli did not pervert Providence to consecrate reprehensible acts.