300 YEARS AGO

On 1st September 1715, King Louis XIV died. Also known as the Sun King, he was 76 years old and had reigned over France since before his 5th birthday – that meant he was king for a record 72 years! His death ended an important chapter in French history.

INTERNET

For all the info about the “The King is Dead” exhibition, go to Le Petit Journal du grand roi:
www.leroiestmort.com/en

A special edition in collaboration with the Château de Versailles

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CHRONOLOGY

Discover the key dates in the history of Louis XIV’s reign.

2,500

The number of people who followed the Sun King’s funeral procession

The King is dead

The last days of Louis XIV
**Louis XIV, the Sun King (1638-1715)**

Louis XIV is probably the most famous king in France’s history. Because he was so confident of his own power, he compared himself to the mightiest, brightest star – the sun.

**1643: The child king**
Louis XIV was nearly 5 years old when his father, Louis XIII (13th), died. Some noblemen tried to seize power, but his mother, Queen Regent Anne of Austria, protected the little boy.

**1658: the Battle of the Dunes**
Louis XIV was passionate about war. As a child, he went to various battles. He was 20 years old when he won the Battle of the Dunes at Dunkirk. He sent France to war against other European kings for 33 of the 54 years of his reign in the hope of enlarging the kingdom of France. But war is very expensive and he had to increase taxes to pay for it.

**1661: Taking power**
When his chief minister Mazarin died, Louis XIV took personal control of the government. Under his reign, royal power became absolute – the king made all the decisions after listening to the advice of his loyal ministers.

**1682: Moving into Versailles**
The Château de Versailles was quite small at the time, so Louis XIV extended it. He hired the greatest artists of the time to make it a truly exceptional palace. He held vast parties and entertainments there.

**1685: The Edict of Fontainebleau**
Louis XIV wanted to unite all the people of his kingdom by making them all Catholic. He persecuted Protestants and cancelled the Edict of Nantes, a law made by a previous king, Henri IV (4th), which gave Protestants a certain amount of freedom.

**Protestant**
A Christian who follows a faith known as Protestantism. Unlike Catholics, Protestants do not recognise the Pope as the head of the Church.

**Edict**
A law made by a king.
The last days of Louis XIV

It was 10th August and he had just come back from the Château de Marly (another of his pleasure palaces, located near Versailles, now destroyed) when Louis XIV felt an intense pain in his leg and summoned his doctors. His condition got worse very quickly. Within a few days, he was no longer able to get up, stroll in the Trianon gardens, attend his huge public meals or go to mass at the royal Chapel.

By 17th August, he was spending all day in bed. The pain was getting worse and the remedies he was given were not working. Medicine was still not very advanced in those days, even for kings!

On Saturday 24th August, his doctor, Fagon, realised that the king had gangrene. Louis XIV knew that he was seriously ill and that he was going to die. He confessed to a priest, Le Tellier – he admitted the mistakes he had made and the wrong he had done so God would forgive him.

On Sunday 25th August, there was a grand party at Versailles to celebrate Saint Louis’ day. As the day was ending, the king collapsed. Cardinal de Rohan performed the rite of extreme unction. Three days later, he was given a remedy to drink by a man from Marseille who claimed he could cure the king. An hour passed and the king felt better. But it did not last long.

By Saturday 31st August, the king was dying. Most of the time he was unconscious. He died at 8.15 the following morning, on Sunday 1st September.

The king is dead, long live King Louis XV!

Where did the grand chamberlain announce the king’s death?

From a balcony at the Palace of Versailles.
Careful preparations to preserve the king’s body

The day after Louis XIV died, his body was moved into another room of the Château de Versailles, the Bull’s Eye Salon. In keeping with tradition, physicians opened up the king’s body so they could do an autopsy. By studying his corpse, they could tell what caused his death. They wanted to be sure that the king had not been poisoned.

Once the autopsy was finished, his heart and viscera were removed so they could be buried in a different place from the rest of his body. This was known as tripartition (see below). His heart was locked in a box and his viscera were put in a separate coffin. Then the doctors and surgeons embalmed the body.

Embalming stops the body from rotting and helps to preserve it. This was necessary because Louis XIV’s body would not be buried for another seven weeks. When a body is embalmed, it is filled with odoriferous powdered herbs (such as bay leaves, basil, lavender and lemon peel) which also dry it out. It is then sewn up and wrapped in bandages before being placed in its coffin.

We still know exactly what happened, because lots of people who were there wrote their own eyewitness accounts. Doctors wrote reports and the grand officers of the court copied them down in the kingdom’s records.

What is the name of the plant painted on the white and blue pitcher in room 8 of the exhibition?
42 kings

32 queens, 63 princes and princesses and 10 other important people are buried in the Saint-Denis Basilica, which is a bit like a cemetery for French kings.

‘Menus-Plaisirs’

The king loved to be at the centre of magnificent spectacles. He believed that celebrations boosted his kingdom’s prestige and should show him off as a great king. Louis XIV had a department of staff to organize his ceremonies, parties and court entertainment, called the Menus-Plaisirs (or ‘little pleasures’). It organised his funeral, which was presented like a show. A grand, theatrical set in black, gold and silver was created in the Saint-Denis Basilica.

Changing funeral traditions

Hélène Delalex, historian at the Château de Versailles, tells us how important funerary rituals were to royal families in France and Europe: “Deaths, like births, marriages and coronations, were all important moments for royalty. This is still true today. They are very popular events and the chance for a country to unite and come together.”

Louis XIV’s death was no different. “Because he reigned for 72 years, everyone had forgotten what royal funerals were like. They needed to look through the archives to find descriptions of the funeral held for his father, Louis XIII. So their funerals were quite similar. They were more sombre and religious than funerals for previous kings. But they still had to be impressive, so the decor was very luxurious and the funeral procession and ceremony were theatrical and spectacular!”

The funerals of French kings were quite like those of their European cousins. “The main stages of royal funerals were similar everywhere – the body lay in state, then it was placed in the coffin, taken in the funeral procession to the religious ceremony called the ‘Grand Service’, then placed in its tomb.”

On 9th September 1715, Louis XIV’s body was taken away on a carriage draped in black and pulled by eight horses. He left Versailles at 7pm and arrived at Saint-Denis Basilica at 7am the next day. Thousands of people followed the coffin, including civilians, soldiers, priests, monks and nuns, courtiers and members of the royal family. At the back of the procession was a group of poor people carrying torches. Louis XIV’s night-time journey symbolized resurrection (coming back to life) after death. The coffin stayed in the basilica for 43 days while the funeral was being organised. Masses were constantly offered up and the bells were rung 3 times a day to commemorate the king’s death. The funeral took place on 23rd October in the basilica, which had been richly decorated (see left). Because Louis XIV loved music, the king’s musicians played many pieces, including the funeral march by Philidor.

When the lavish ceremony was over, Louis XIV’s coffin was buried in the Bourbon family vault. The royal family returned to Versailles. The treasurer of the Saint-Denis Basilica then removed the precious objects that had been thrown in the vault and added them to the Basilica’s own treasury. Today, some of these objects are owned by the Louvre.

In which year did Louis XIII die?

On 9th September 1643, Louis XIII died.

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Funerals throughout history

After the monarchy was abolished in France, funerals for important people such as writers, artists, scientists, soldiers and politicians kept the lavish style of royal funerals. Only the religious side of the ceremony became less important.

Symbolic locations
The Panthéon, Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral, the Arc de Triomphe and the Hôtel des Invalides are some of the symbolic, historic places where public lying-in-state ceremonies take place and where the deceased are buried. This is a way of making important people a part of French history. In 1929, the coffin of Marshal Foch (who helped win the First World War) lay in state for 3 days beneath the Arc de Triomphe.

Extravagant ceremonies
State funerals are organized when a very important person dies. People feel that the more lavish a ceremony is, the more the deceased person was respected. Statues, fountains and streetlights along the procession route are covered in black cloths, flags and flowers. This is what happened in 1899 when French President Félix Faure’s coffin was taken to Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral in a magnificent carriage pulled by several horses.

Impressive processions
The procession which follows a coffin gives funerals a ceremonial feel. Soldiers line the route. At first newspapers reported processions, then radio and now the television do too. Mourning has become a national event. In 1885, 1 million people followed the writer Victor Hugo’s coffin along the streets of Paris from the Arc de Triomphe to the Panthéon.

Music everywhere
Music has always been an important part of ceremonies since the days of French kings to more recent times. This includes singing, orchestras and military bands. Louis XIV loved music and about 150 musicians and singers performed at his funeral at the Saint-Denis Basilica.

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1. MYSTERY WORD
Write the answers to the clues in the boxes. When you put together all the letters in the colored boxes, you will see the name of the illness Louis XIV had before he died.

1. What doctors do to a king’s body to preserve it.
2. Something doctors do to work out why a king has died.
3. The name of the infection that started in Louis XIV’s leg.
4. The first name of the king who came after Louis XIV.
5. The French word for a castle or palace.
6. The name of a law made by a king.

Mystery word:

2. RIDDLE
Can you put all the sounds together to work out this lady’s name?

My first is not sane.
My second is what beavers build in rivers.
My third is the French for “two”.
My fourth is not a woman.
My fifth is the square root of 100.
My sixth is the opposite of ‘off’.

My all is the name of Louis XIV’s secret wife.

3. PUZZLE
Follow the arrows starting with the letter T on the bottom row. You will see Louis XIV’s nickname.

4. LET’S SPEAK FRENCH!
The priest • A
The procession • B
The crown • C
The war • D
The mourning • E
The courtier • F

Answer: Madam de Maintenon – Madame de Maintenon.