The Hundred Years’ War began in 1337 and dragged on fitfully for 116 years, with short periods of savage warfare alternating with long periods of truce. Arising from numerous causes, it devastated both realms, although France, where almost all the fighting took place, suffered more (see Map 13.1).

No cause for the war was sufficient in itself, but many small causes accumulated to send English armies across the Channel in 1337 to attack French forces. First, the conflict grew from continuing English claims to French lands, although these had shrunk from the days of the vast Angevin empire to only Gascony in the southwest. There, the lordship of the English king was cemented by a brisk trade in English cloth and Bordeaux wine (for which the English had developed a special thirst). Philip IV of France (r. 1285–1314) and Edward I of England (r. 1272–1307) fought an expensive but inconclusive war over Gascony from 1294 to 1303; this was a warm-up for the larger conflict that began in 1337. Second, the English and French were also competing for de facto control of Flanders. French kings claimed political lordship over the Flemish, yet English kings enjoyed a sort of economic lordship over the region, due to Flemish reliance on a profitable trade in English wool. Both wanted more authority over the rich and quasi-independent towns of Flanders.

Third, in 1328, the French royal succession was thrown into dispute, when Charles IV (r. 1322–1328) died without heirs. Edward III of England (r. 1327–1377) had the best claim to the French throne through his mother; but Philip of Valois had a plausible claim through his father. Faced with the horrific prospect of an English king on the French throne, the French nobility suddenly “invented tradition,” creating a new law but enshrining it in the purported ancient customs of the Salian Franks. This law stated

Map 13.1  The English in France during the Hundred Years’ War, 1337–1453  When the Hundred Years’ War began, the English controlled only two territories: a small outpost near the shortest crossing of the Channel and the wine-producing region around Bordeaux. By 1360, they had extended their reach in both areas, especially by capturing Calais in 1347. By 1429, the English had lost ground in the south but vastly extended their reach in the north. Then the tide turned, and within a few decades they controlled only the port of Calais.