

Document-Based Question

The question is based on the accompanying documents 1-5. The documents have been edited for the purpose of this exercise.

Question: Evaluate whether or not the term “absolute monarchy” accurately describes Louis XIV’s rule.

Document 1

Source: Charles-François Poerson, portrait of Louis XIV (1654) sitting on the throne of the supreme Roman god Jupiter. The painting commemorated the king’s defeat of the Fronde, a rebellion of nobles (1648–1653), and was displayed at the palace complex of Versailles.



Translation of the Latin inscription on the plaque below the painting: “Jupiter, applauding Louis, ceases his thundering and now the world sees that a new Jupiter has arrived.”

Document 2

Source: Louis XIV, Memoirs for the Instruction of the Dauphin [eldest son and heir of the king], describing the year 1662

It was then that I adopted the emblem that I have retained ever since and that you see everywhere. I believed that rather than dwelling on something private and minor, it should in some way portray the duties of a prince and always inspire me to fulfill them. Chosen as a symbol was the sun, which . . . is the noblest of all, by virtue of its uniqueness, by the brilliance that surrounds it, by the light that it imparts to the other heavenly bodies that seem to pay it court, by its equal and just distribution of this same light to all the various parts of the world, by the good that it does everywhere, constantly producing life, joy, and activity everywhere, by its perpetual yet always imperceptible movement, by never departing or deviating from its steady and invariable course.

Document 3

Source: Claude Bouchu, intendant,* report to Jean-Baptiste Colbert, finance minister, 1669

You will find enclosed my report and recommendation concerning the establishment of a general hospital in Dijon [a city in the Burgundy region of eastern France], which, although it is urgently necessary, will never be possible unless you give it your special protection because of the opposition of the Parlement** of Burgundy, which opposes on every possible occasion all the good one would like to accomplish. They are so totally carried away with their sovereignty that they believe they alone can initiate action and that the orders coming from the royal council are usurpations, although I've done what I could to disabuse them of this idea; and thanks to your aid and protection I've established many good procedures and fully reestablished the authority of the king against all those who do not acknowledge it. But I can assure you that I have not yet been able to suppress their desire for their former grandeur, and they do not fail to say frequently that they are waiting for better times.

* royal official appointed to enforce the king's policies in a particular region

** the highest law court for the province of Burgundy; its magistrates owned their offices and were neither appointed by nor removable by the king

Document 4

Source: Declaration of the Assembly of the Clergy of France,* 1682

Saint Peter and his successors, the vicars of Jesus Christ [the popes], and the entire church have received their power from God only in spiritual matters that concern salvation, but not in temporal and civil matters. . . We declare as a result that kings and sovereigns are not subjected by the order of God to any ecclesiastical authority in temporal matters; that kings cannot be deposed either directly or indirectly by authority of the head of the church; that kings' subjects cannot be released from their duty of submission and obedience or absolved from their oath of fidelity; and that this doctrine, necessary for the public peace and equally advantageous for the church and for the state, must be inviolably followed because it is in conformity with the Word of God, with the tradition of the Holy Fathers, and with the examples of the saints.

* An assembly called by Louis XIV in response to a dispute between the king and the pope concerning the king's appointment of bishops

Document 5

Source: François Fénelon, French nobleman, archbishop, and tutor to Louis XIV's grandson, letter to Louis XIV, circulated at the royal court circa 1694

You, Sire, who could gain such lasting and peaceful glory by being a father of your subjects and an arbiter to your neighbors, have become the common enemy of your neighbors and a hard taskmaster within your kingdom. . . Your peoples, however, whom you ought to love as your children . . . are starving to death. Agriculture is all but abandoned; the towns and the countryside are being depopulated, all trades languish and no longer feed the workers. . . The whole of France is no more than one great hospital, desolate and unprovided for.

If a king had a father's heart for his people, would he not glory in providing bread for them, rather than in keeping a few frontier towns which lead to more war? . . . Furthermore, while the people lack bread, you yourself lack money, and you refuse to see the extremity to which you are reduced.

[But] God will one day lift the veil that covers your eyes. He has long since held his arm raised above you, but he is slow to strike because he feels pity for a prince who all his life has been surrounded by flatterers. . . But he will bring you low in order to convert you, for you will become a Christian only through humiliation.