

# THE RISE OF THE FRANKS THROUGH CHARLEMAGNE (c.500-841)

W. Roman Empire overrun by Germanic tribes

Most Ger. tribes convert to Arian Christianity & persecute Roman Catholics → Unpopular with their Roman subjects

Franks under Clovis convert to Catholic Christianity like their Roman Catholic subjects  
→ More popular than Arian Germans

Franks build large kgd. in Gaul at expense of other tribes

Frankish kings, like other Ger. kings, split lands between sons

Civil wars that tear Frankish kingdom into 3 parts

Carolingian family reunites & revives Fr. kgd. thanks to:

Adoption of stirrup → Better defense

Alliance with Church and control of its lands & offices

Influx of Muslim silver via Vikings

Height of Fr. power under Charlemagne (768-814)

Tried to revive Roman culture

Ruled most of W. Europe

Revived Roman imperial title

Growing milit. reliance on nobles

Charlemagne's emp. is split b/w 3 grandsons → Civil wars

Silver trade w/Muslims declines

Increasing defiance of king

Raids & invasions by Vikings from North, Magyars from East, & Arabs from South

Reversion to land based economy

Frankish Empire disintegrates into anarchy

## **The Rise of the Franks through Charlemagne (c.500-840)**

Much of Europe's destiny would be tied in with a new Germanic power, the Franks. This tribe had played a minor role in the breakup of the Roman Empire. In fact they had occasionally served as loyal allies, defending Rome's Rhine frontier against the invasions of the Vandals in 406 and the Huns in 451. However, after 451 when the Western Empire was coming totally unraveled, the Franks made their move and started taking northern Gaul. It was at this time that the first of their great kings, Clovis, emerged.

Clovis was only fifteen when he came to the throne in 481. Despite his youth, he was an ambitious and capable ruler, who made a shrewd and far-reaching move of converting to Catholic Christianity. The story goes that in a desperate move to influence the course of a battle against another tribe, the Alemanni, he prayed to the god of the Christians to give him victory in return for his conversion. For whatever reason, the Franks prevailed, and Clovis kept his promise and became a *Catholic* Christian like his Roman subjects. While the other Germanic tribes were Arian Christians often persecuting and alienating their Roman Catholic subjects, the Franks could count on more loyal support from their Catholic subjects. As a result, the Franks under Clovis and his immediate successors expanded rapidly at the expense of the Arian Christian kingdoms around them. By 600 C.E., this factor of Frankish rulers and Roman subjects united by the Catholic faith made the Frankish kingdom the largest and most powerful of the Germanic states to succeed the Roman Empire in the West.

Unfortunately, the Frankish kings shared the other Germanic tribes' concept of the state as the king's property and, as a result, split the kingdom between their sons. Because of this, civil wars and turmoil plagued the Frankish kingdom from the death of Clovis to the early 700's. As a result, the Franks were split into three kingdoms: Austrasia, Neustria, and Burgundy. All were ruled by weak "do nothing kings" that let their kingdoms degenerate into further turmoil. Luckily, new officials, called mayors of the palace, emerged to rebuild the Frankish state. One of these mayors of the palace, Pepin of Herstal, reunited the Frankish kingdom and laid the foundations for one of the greatest dynasties of the Middle Ages, the Carolingians. Several factors helped in the resurgence of the Franks under the Carolingians. One factor was the decline of the neighboring Germanic kingdoms because of the anarchy and decay generated by their poor understanding of the Roman state they had inherited.

Another factor was the Frankish adoption of the stirrup for warfare. While the Frankish kingdom had been wrecking itself in civil wars and palace intrigues, a dynamic new power had been rising in the East: the Muslim Arabs. United and inspired by their new religion, Islam, the Arabs had swept both to the east and west with incredible speed. A century after the death of the prophet, Mohammed, Muslim armies had conquered North Africa and Spain and were raiding into southern Gaul. In 733, the Frankish mayor of the

palace, Charles Martel, turned back an invading Muslim force at the Battle of Tours.

Historians have argued whether this was the defeat of a major invasion or just a large raid. Either way, it apparently saw the dramatic introduction of the use of the stirrup in battle and the rise of mounted knights as shock cavalry that would rule the battlefields of Western Europe for centuries. Since the Franks were the first to adapt the stirrup for this purpose, they gained a decisive military edge over their enemies and a reputation as the fiercest fighters in Western Europe. Writers of the period would typically refer to any warriors from that region as Franks because of that reputation.

The third factor helping the Franks was the natural alliance of kings with the Church which often needed each other's help. This especially held true for the Franks and the pope. Charles Martel and his son, Pepin the Short, continued to rebuild the Frankish state to its previous status as a great power. However, they did this as mayors of the palace, while the "do nothing" Merovingian kings they served did nothing useful except ride around in a cart from estate to estate. Charles "the Hammer" Martel defeated Muslims at the Battle of Tours, stopping the spread of Islam into Western Europe and securing Christianity as the major religion of Europe. Pepin wanted the crown as well as the power and authority, and in 752 he got it. Meanwhile, the Lombards who had invaded Italy soon after Justinian's reconquest were hard pressing the popes. Pepin helped the pope against these enemies in return for his blessing to take the Frankish crown for himself. Soon afterwards, Pepin shaved the king's long hair (the symbol of royalty), packed him off to a monastery, and had himself declared the new king, thus officially establishing the Carolingian dynasty as the ruling family of the Franks.

Archaeological evidence points to a fourth factor helping the Franks: money. Although the Germanic kingdoms were not producing much silver coinage at the time, the Arab Muslim caliphs to the east were. Much of this money was making its way through Russia and the Baltic Sea to the Franks in return for such things as furs and slaves. This increased silver supply gave the Franks the means to expand and consolidate their power and helped pave the way for the greatest ruler of early medieval Europe: Charlemagne.

### **Charlemagne (768-814)**

Possibly the most legendary figure in the medieval period was Pepin the Short's son, Charles, known to us as Charles the Great or Charlemagne. As is true of any legend, there was some factual basis for certain stories surrounding this remarkable man, but there was also a good deal of fantasy. Physically he was a big man, which in the simple world of the eighth century helped him assert his authority among those around him. He was also a strong willed man, which was necessary for holding together an empire under such primitive conditions as existed then. There were three aspects of Charlemagne's reign that were especially important: his conquests, his attempts to revive Roman culture in what is known as the Carolingian Renaissance, and the revival of the Roman imperial title.

Charlemagne was an extremely energetic king who spent a large part of his reign campaigning on his empire's ever widening frontiers: in Italy against the Lombards, in Spain against the Muslims, in the east against the Avars, and in Germany against the Saxons whom he forcibly converted to Christianity at the point of the sword. By the end of his reign, Charlemagne's empire contained most of Western Europe: France, Germany, Austria, half of Italy, the Low Countries, and Denmark. The size of his empire was the primary basis for his later legend.

Charlemagne did his best to rule his empire efficiently, but there were too few trained officials with which to rule and too many lands for them to administer effectively. As a result, he also had to delegate a good deal of power to local nobles who ruled in his name. The king's officials would travel around and periodically check up on the nobles. And Charles himself was a strong enough king to inspire most men to keep in line. However, he failed to set up a lasting government that could function under less exceptional kings. As a result, when he was gone, his empire fell apart. People have argued over whether Charles was a barbarizing or civilizing influence on Europe. On the one hand, he did spend a lot of his reign fighting, and occasionally used some brutal methods, especially in converting the Saxons to Christianity. On the other hand, he patronized culture and the arts in what came to be called the Carolingian Renaissance. This was a self-conscious revival of Roman culture, which people then looked back upon as a golden age and the pinnacle of civilization. There was very little that was original in this revival, but it did manage to copy a large number of Roman books. As a result, 90% of to oldest versions of Roman texts we have come from the Carolingian Renaissance.

The most celebrated event of Charles' reign was his being crowned Roman emperor by the pope on Christmas day, 800 AD. There has been endless debate about the motives of Charles and the pope and just exactly what this revived title meant three centuries after the end of the Roman Empire in the West. The revival of such a title does show how much of a grip the memory of the golden age of Rome had on the medieval imagination. The real importance of this revived title would fade somewhat after Charlemagne's death and not regain its luster until 961 when the ruler of Germany, Otto I, was crowned emperor by the pope. For some 850 years, Germany will be known as the Empire, or the Holy Roman Empire. Despite the glory it invoked, this title would ultimately be a source of tremendous problems for Germany. In later years, it was said that it was neither holy, nor Roman, nor empire, but we can see that it represented a powerful idea.

Succeeding generations would look upon Charlemagne's reign as a golden age. It did encompass most of Western Europe in a larger and relatively peaceful empire. It did try to revive the grandeur of Rome's empire and culture. And a powerful energetic king did rule over it. Although his empire collapsed soon after his death, Charles' reign did have lasting and profound effects. Frankish political institutions, in

particular feudalism, and military tactics (the mounted knight) would dominate Western Europe for centuries. In fact, the predominance of Frankish culture and customs was so overwhelming in Western Europe that the Byzantines and Muslims typically referred to anyone from Western Europe as a Frank.

Possibly the most significant sign that Charlemagne's reign was a turning point in history was the fact that for the first time scholars referred to a unified culture and realm known as Europe. After

Charlemagne, Western European culture would no longer be a cheap imitation of Roman culture. Rather, from now on, it would define its own institutions and culture in its own terms. Western Civilization was being born.

### **The disintegration of the Carolingian order (814-c.1000)**

Charlemagne's death seemed to be the signal for everything to go wrong at once. Indeed, a number of factors did combine to send Western Europe into some of its darkest centuries ever. First of all, the money coming from the Arab Muslims that helped make possible the palace and cathedral that Charles had built in his capital at Aachen dried up as the caliphs in Baghdad lavishly spent themselves into bankruptcy. This led to a decline of trade that caused a reversion to a land-based economy and a weaker government. This in turn hurt the Vikings in the north and Arabs in the south who had relied on Arab silver and trade. As a result, they turned to raiding and piracy, which further weakened the Frankish economy and state, causing more raids, and so on.

Along these same lines, the growing dependence on mounted knights for defense also meant a growing dependence on nobles to provide those knights. Since there was no money to pay these nobles, the king had to give them land. As we have seen, land regenerated wealth in the form of crops and made the nobles independent of the king's authority and therefore more rebellious. These rebellions also invited invasions, which encouraged more revolts, etc.

Finally, there were problems within the ruling family. Charlemagne's successor, Louis the Pious, was a weak king who let matters get out of control. He also followed the old Germanic custom of dividing the state among his three sons as if it were personal property rather than a responsibility. This division led to civil wars that ended with splitting the Frankish realm into three states: West Frankland (modern France), East Frankland (modern Germany), and Lotharingia, (modern Lorraine) in the middle. Because of its position between France and Germany, Lorraine remained a source of conflict between its neighbors into the twentieth century. Civil wars also forced the kings to give away more and more royal lands for military support. Soon those lands were parts of virtually independent states. And, as with the independent nobles and weakened economy, turmoil at court also invited invasions.

These invasions came from three directions. From the south came the Muslims who devastated parts of Italy and southern France with their raids. From the east came the Magyars, nomadic horsemen related to the

Huns. Eventually they would be defeated and would settle down to found the kingdom of Hungary. Worst of all, from the north came the Vikings whose raids and invasions tore a good part of the Frankish state to pieces and nearly overwhelmed England. In 911 C.E., the Viking chief Rollo gained recognition from the French king to rule what came to be called Normandy in return for military service to the crown. Of course,

the Vikings, or Normans, were their own men and lived under the king's rule in name only. By 1000 C.E., France was a hopeless patchwork of some 55 virtually independent principalities. The king was the nominal ruler of all this, but in reality just the head of one of these many states. As a result, a new political order would emerge: Feudalism.

- 1) What was the Franks' relationship with Rome?
- 2) What religion did Clovis convert to and what was the result for the Frankish kingdom?
- 3) What were the four factors that lead to a Frankish emergence under the Carolingian dynasty?
- 4) How was the Battle of Tours a turning point in Western European history?
- 5) What were the three most important aspects of Charlemagne's reign?
- 6) Describe Charlemagne's administration of his empire. Was it successful, why or why not?
- 7) What happened on Christmas Day 800 AD and why was this important? What effect did it have on Germany in later years?
- 8) How was Charlemagne's reign a turning point in European history?
- 9) What three factors lead to the disintegration of Charlemagne's empire after his death?
- 10) What three groups of invaders attacked the Frankish kingdoms, and what was the overall result of these attacks?