Section 3: The Carolingian Dynasty

The Coronation of 800 CE

Charlemagne reached the height of his power in 800 when he was crowned Emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day at Old St. Peter’s Basilica.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe the reasons for Charlemagne receiving the title of Emperor

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- In 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne the Emperor of the Romans, thereby extending Charlemagne’s power and authority.

- Some historians believe that Charlemagne was surprised by the coronation and would not have gone into the church that day had he known the pope’s plan.

- Nonetheless, Charlemagne used these circumstances to claim that he was the renewer of the Roman Empire, which would remain in continuous existence for nearly a millennium, as the Holy Roman Empire.

- Although one of the aims was ostensibly to reunite the entire Roman Empire, given that many at the time (including the pope) did not recognize Empress Irene of the Byzantine Empire as a legitimate ruler, the two empires remained independent and continued to fight for sovereignty throughout the Middle Ages.

- The Pope’s motivation for crowning Charlemagne was to give the papacy and the church implicit authority over the empire, since with this act Leo set a precedent for crowning emperors, which subsequent popes would do throughout the reign of the Holy Roman Empire.
Key Terms

- **Empress Irene**: A Byzantine empress who ruled from 797–802, during the time of Charlemagne’s coronation.
- **Byzantine Empire**: Sometimes referred to as the Eastern Roman Empire, was the continuation of the Roman Empire in the East during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, when its capital city was Constantinople.
- **Holy Roman Empire**: A multi-ethnic complex of territories in central Europe that developed during the Early Middle Ages and continued until its dissolution in 1806; founded by the coronation of Charlemagne by Pope Leo III.

Coronation

In 799, after Pope Leo III was abused by Romans who tried to put out his eyes and tear out his tongue, he escaped and fled to Charlemagne at Paderborn. Charlemagne, advised by scholar Alcuin of York, travelled to Rome in November 800 and held a council on December 1. On December 23, Leo swore an oath of innocence. At Mass, on Christmas Day (December 25), when Charlemagne knelt at the altar to pray, the pope crowned him *Imperator Romanorum* (“Emperor of the Romans”) in Saint Peter’s Basilica. In so doing, the pope effectively nullified the legitimacy of Empress Irene of Constantinople. As historian James Bryce writes:

> When Odoacer compelled the abdication of Romulus Augustulus, he did not abolish the Western Empire as a separate power, but caused it to be reunited with or sink into the Eastern, so that from that time there was a single undivided Roman Empire… [Pope Leo III and Charlemagne], like their predecessors, held the Roman Empire to be one and indivisible, and proposed by the coronation of [Charlemagne] not to proclaim a severance of the East and West.

Charlemagne’s coronation as emperor, though intended to represent the continuation of the unbroken line of emperors from Augustus to Constantine VI, had the effect of setting up two separate (and often opposing) empires and two separate claims to imperial authority. For centuries to come, the emperors of both West and East would make competing claims of sovereignty over the whole.

In support of Charlemagne’s coronation, some argued that the imperial position had actually been vacant, deeming a woman (Irene) unfit to be emperor. However, Charlemagne made no claim to the Byzantine Empire. Whether he actually desired a coronation at all remains controversial—his biographer Einhard related that Charlemagne had been surprised by the pope. Regardless, Byzantium felt its role as the sole heir of the Roman Empire threatened and began to emphasize its superiority and its Roman identity. Relations between the two empires remained difficult. Irene is said to have sought a marriage alliance between herself and Charlemagne, but according to Theophanes the Confessor, who alone mentions it, the scheme was frustrated by Aetios, one of her favorite advisors.
Motivation

For both the pope and Charlemagne, the Roman Empire remained a significant power in European politics at this time, and continued to hold a substantial portion of Italy, with borders not far south of the city of Rome itself. This is the empire that historiography has been labelled the Byzantine Empire, for its capital was Constantinople (ancient Byzantium) and its people and rulers were Greek; it was a thoroughly Hellenic state. Indeed, Charlemagne was usurping the prerogatives of the Roman emperor in Constantinople simply by sitting in judgement over the pope in the first place. Historian John Julius Norwich writes of their motivation:

By whom, however, could he [the Pope] be tried? In normal circumstances the only conceivable answer to that question would have been the Emperor at Constantinople; but the imperial throne was at this moment occupied by Irene. That the Empress was notorious for having blinded and murdered her own son was, in the minds of both Leo and Charles, almost immaterial: it was enough that she was a woman. The female sex was known to be incapable of governing, and by the old Salic tradition was debarred from doing so. As far as Western Europe was concerned, the Throne of the Emperors was vacant: Irene’s claim to it was merely an additional proof, if any were needed, of the degradation into which the so-called Roman Empire had fallen.

For the pope, then, there was “no living Emperor at the that time.” Furthermore, the papacy had since 727 been in conflict with Irene’s predecessors in Constantinople over a number of issues, chiefly the continued Byzantine adherence to the doctrine of iconoclasm, the destruction of Christian images. From 750, the secular power of the Byzantine Empire in central Italy had been nullified.

Norwich explains that by bestowing the imperial crown upon Charlemagne, the pope arrogated to himself “the right to appoint the Emperor of the Romans, establishing the imperial crown as his own personal gift but simultaneously granting himself implicit superiority over the Emperor whom he had created.” And “because the Byzantines had proved so
unsatisfactory from every point of view—political, military and doctrinal—he would select a westerner: the one man who by his wisdom and statesmanship and the vastness of his dominions stood out head and shoulders above his contemporaries."

How realistic either Charlemagne or the pope felt it to be that the people of Constantinople would ever accept the king of the Franks as their emperor, we cannot know: Alcuin speaks hopefully in his letters of an Imperium Christianum ("Christian Empire"), wherein, "just as the inhabitants of the [Roman Empire] had been united by a common Roman citizenship," presumably this new empire would be united by a common Christian faith.

**Roman Emperor**

In any event, Charlemagne used these circumstances to claim that he was the renewer of the Roman Empire, which was perceived to have fallen into degradation under the Byzantines. The title of Emperor remained in the Carolingian family for years to come, but divisions of territory and in-fighting over supremacy of the Frankish state weakened its power and ability to lead. The papacy itself never forgot the title nor abandoned the right to bestow it. When the family of Charlemagne ceased to produce worthy heirs, the pope gladly crowned whichever Italian magnate could best protect him from his local enemies. This devolution led to the dormancy of the title from 924 to 962. The title was revived when Otto I was crowned emperor in 962, fashioning himself as the successor of Charlemagne. The empire would remain in continuous existence for nearly a millennium, as the Holy Roman Empire, a true imperial successor to Charlemagne.

**The Rise of Charlemagne**

Charlemagne is considered the greatest ruler of the Carolingian Dynasty because of the actions he took to bring Europe out of turmoil.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Discuss the political and territorial achievements of Charlemagne

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

**Key Points**

- Charlemagne was determined to improve education and religion and bring Europe out of turmoil; to do this he launched a thirty-year military campaign of conquests that united Europe and spread Christianity.
- First he conquered the Lombards in Italy, supporting Pope Adrian I.
- In the Saxon Wars, spanning thirty years and eighteen battles, he conquered Saxony and proceeded to convert the conquered to Christianity.
- By 800 he was the ruler of Western Europe and had control of present-day France, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and parts of Austria and Spain.

**Key Terms**

- **Carolingian Dynasty**: An empire during the late medieval realm of the Franks, ruled by the Carolingian family, a Frankish noble family to which Charlemagne belonged.
• **Frankish state**: Territory inhabited and ruled by the Franks, a confederation of Germanic tribes, from the 400s to 800s CE.

• **Saxons**: A group of Germanic tribes first mentioned as living near the North Sea coast of what is now Germany (Old Saxony) in late Roman times.

• **Lombards**: A Germanic people who ruled large parts of the Italian Peninsula from 568 to 774.

**Charlemagne’s Rise to Power**

Charlemagne, also known as Charles the Great or Charles I, was the king of the Franks from 768 and the king of Italy from 774, and from 800 was the first emperor in western Europe since the collapse of the Western Roman Empire three centuries earlier. The expanded Frankish state he founded is called the Carolingian Empire. Charlemagne is considered to be the greatest ruler of the Carolingian Dynasty because of the achievements he made during what seemed like the very middle of the Dark Ages.

Charlemagne was the oldest son of Pepin the Short and Bertrada of Laon. He became king in 768 following the death of his father, and initially was a co-ruler with his brother, Carloman I. Charles received Pepin’s original share as Mayor—the outer parts of the kingdom bordering on the sea, namely Neustria, western Aquitaine, and the northern parts of Austrasia—while Carloman was awarded his uncle’s former share, the inner parts—southern Austrasia, Septimania, eastern Aquitaine, Burgundy, Provence, and Swabia, lands bordering Italy. Carloman’s sudden death in 771 under unexplained circumstances left Charlemagne as the undisputed ruler of the Frankish Kingdom.

**Territorial Expansion**

Charlemagne was determined to improve education and religion and bring Europe out of turmoil. To do this he launched a thirty-year military campaign from 772–804 of conquests that united Europe and spread Christianity. Charlemagne was engaged in almost constant battle throughout his reign, often at the head of his elite scara bodyguard squadrons, with his legendary sword Joyeuse in hand. The first step that Charlemagne took in building his empire was to conquer new territories.

The first of these conquering campaigns was against the Lombards; Charlemagne came out victorious and won the Lombard lands to the north of Italy. At his succession in 772, Pope Adrian I demanded the return of certain cities in the former exarchate of Ravenna in accordance with a promise at the succession of Desiderius. Instead, Desiderius took over certain papal cities and invaded the Pentapolis, heading for Rome. Adrian sent ambassadors to Charlemagne in the autumn, requesting he enforce the policies of his father, Pepin. Desiderius sent his own ambassadors denying the pope’s charges. The ambassadors met at Thionville, and Charlemagne upheld the pope’s side. Charlemagne demanded that Desiderius comply with the pope, but Desiderius promptly swore he never would.

Charlemagne and his uncle Bernard crossed the Alps in 773 and chased the Lombards back to Pavia, which they then besieged. The siege lasted until the spring of 774, when Charlemagne visited the pope in Rome. There he confirmed his father’s grants of land. Some later chronicles falsely claimed that he also expanded them, granting Tuscany, Emilia, Venice, and Corsica. After the pope granted Charlemagne the title of patrician, he returned to Pavia, where the Lombards were on the verge of surrendering. In return for their lives, the Lombards conceded and opened the gates in early summer.
Charlemagne and Pope Adrian I: The Frankish king Charlemagne was a devout Catholic who maintained a close relationship with the papacy throughout his life. In 772, when Pope Adrian I was threatened by invaders, the king rushed to Rome to provide assistance. Shown here, the pope asks Charlemagne for help at a meeting near Rome.

The Saxon Wars and Beyond

In the Saxon Wars, spanning thirty years and eighteen battles, Charlemagne overthrew Saxony and proceeded to convert the conquered to Christianity.

The Germanic Saxons were divided into four subgroups in four regions. Nearest to Austrasia was Westphalia, and furthest away was Eastphalia. Engría was between these two kingdoms, and to the north, at the base of the Jutland peninsula, was Nordalbingia. In his first campaign against the Saxons, in 773, Charlemagne cut down an Irminsul pillar near Paderborn and forced the Engrians to submit. The campaign was cut short by his first expedition to Italy. He returned to Saxony in 775, marching through Westphalia and conquering the Saxon fort at Sigiburg. He then crossed Engría, where he defeated the Saxons again. Finally, in Eastphalia, he defeated a Saxon force and converted its leader, Hessi, to Christianity. Charlemagne returned through Westphalia, leaving encampments at Sigiburg and Eresburg, which had been important Saxon bastions. With the exception of Nordalbingia, Saxony was under his control, but Saxon resistance had not ended.

Following his campaign in Italy to subjugate the dukes of Friuli and Spoleto, Charlemagne returned rapidly to Saxony in 776, where a rebellion had destroyed his fortress at Eresburg. The Saxons were once again brought to heel, but their main leader, Widukind, managed to escape to Denmark, home of his wife. Charlemagne built a new camp at Karlstadt. In 777, he called a national assembly at Paderborn to integrate Saxony fully into the Frankish kingdom. Many Saxons were baptized as Christians.

Outside Charlemagne’s Saxon campaigns, he expanded his empire towards southern Germany, southern France, and the island of Corsica. He fought the Avars, adding modern-day Hungary to his empire, and also fought against the Moors of Spain, gaining the northern part of Spain. Through these conquests Charlemagne united Europe and spread Christianity.
By 800 he was the ruler of Western Europe and had control of present-day France, Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and parts of Austria and Spain. Charlemagne’s successful military campaigns were due to his abilities as a military commander and planner, and to the training of his warriors. He controlled his vast empire by sending agents to supervise its different areas. Charlemagne’s accomplishments restored much of the unity of the old Roman Empire and paved the way for the development of modern Europe.

Charlemagne’s Reforms

As emperor, Charlemagne stood out for his many reforms—monetary, governmental, military, cultural, and ecclesiastical—and ushered in an era known as the Carolingian Renaissance.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Describe the significance of Charlemagne’s reforms

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

• Charlemagne is known for his many reforms, including the economy, education, and government administration.
• Charlemagne’s rule spurred the Carolingian Renaissance, a period of energetic cultural and intellectual activity within the Western church.
• Charlemagne took a serious interest in scholarship, promoting the liberal arts at the court, ordering that his children and grandchildren be well educated, and even studying himself.
• Charlemagne established a new monetary standard, the *livre carolinienne*, which was based upon a pound of silver, as well as a universal accounting system.
• Charlemagne expanded the reform program of the church, including strengthening the church’s power structure, advancing the skill and moral quality of the clergy, standardizing liturgical practices, improving on the basic tenets of the faith and moral, and rooting out paganism.
• Charlemagne’s improvements on governance have been lauded by historians for instigating increased central control, efficient bureaucracy, accountability, and cultural renaissance.

Key Terms

• **Carolingian Renaissance**: The first of three medieval renaissances; was a period of cultural activity in the Carolingian Empire occurring from the late-8th century to the 9th century.
• **livre carolinienne**: Charlemagne’s monetary standard, based upon a pound of silver, equivalent to the modern pound.
• **literati**: Well-educated, scholarly people; intellectuals who are interested in written works.

The Carolingian Renaissance

As emperor, Charlemagne stood out for his many reforms—monetary, governmental, military, cultural, and ecclesiastical. He was the main initiator and proponent of the “Carolingian Renaissance,” the first of three medieval renaissances. It was a period of cultural activity in the Carolingian Empire occurring from the late-8th century to the 9th
century, taking inspiration from the Christian Roman Empire of the 4th century. During this period there was an expansion of literature, writing, the arts, architecture, jurisprudence, liturgical reforms, and scriptural studies.

The effects of this cultural revival were largely limited to a small group of court literati; according to John Contreni, “it had a spectacular effect on education and culture in Francia, a debatable effect on artistic endeavors, and an unmeasurable effect on what mattered most to the Carolingians, the moral regeneration of society.” Beyond their efforts to write better Latin, to copy and preserve patristic and classical texts, and to develop a more legible, classicizing script, the secular and ecclesiastical leaders of the Carolingian Renaissance applied rational ideas to social issues for the first time in centuries, providing a common language and writing style that allowed for communication across most of Europe.

Education Reform

Part of Charlemagne’s success as a warrior, an administrator, and a ruler can be traced to his admiration for learning and education. The era ushered in by his reign, the Carolingian Renaissance, was so called because of the flowering of scholarship, literature, art, and architecture that characterized it. Charlemagne’s vast conquests brought him into contact with the cultures and learnings of other countries, especially Moorish Spain, Anglo-Saxon England, and Lombard Italy, and greatly increased the provision of monastic schools and scriptoria (centers for book copying) in Francia.

Most of the presently surviving works of classical Latin were copied and preserved by Carolingian scholars. Indeed, the earliest manuscripts available for many ancient texts are Carolingian. It is almost certain that a text that survived to the Carolingian age endures still.
Carolingian Minuscule: Carolingian minuscule, one of the products of the Carolingian Renaissance.

The pan-European nature of Charlemagne’s influence is indicated by the origins of many of the men who worked for him: Alcuin, an Anglo-Saxon from York; Theodulf, a Visigoth, probably from Septimania; Paul the Deacon, a Lombard; Peter of Pisa and Paulinus of Aquileia, both Italians; and Angilbert, Angilram, Einhard, and Waldo of Reichenau, Franks. Charlemagne took a serious interest in scholarship, promoting the liberal arts at the court, ordering that his children and grandchildren be well-educated, and even studying himself (in a time when many leaders who promoted education did not take time to learn themselves). He studied grammar with Peter of Pisa; rhetoric, dialectic (logic), and astronomy (he was particularly interested in the movement of the stars) with Alcuin; and arithmetic with Einhard.

Charlemagne’s great scholarly failure, as Einhard related, was his inability to write. When in his old age he attempted to learn—practicing the formation of letters in his bed during his free time on books and wax tablets he hid under his pillow—"his effort came too late in life and achieved little success." His ability to read—which Einhard is silent about, and which no contemporary source supports—has also been called into question.

Economic Reform

Charlemagne had an important role in determining the immediate economic future of Europe. Pursuing his father’s reforms, Charlemagne abolished the monetary system based on the gold sou, and he and the Anglo-Saxon King Offa of Mercia took up the system set in place by Pepin. There were strong pragmatic reasons for this abandonment of a gold standard, notably a shortage of gold itself.

The gold shortage was a direct consequence of the conclusion of peace with Byzantium, which resulted in ceding Venice and Sicily to the East and losing their trade routes to Africa. The resulting standardization economically harmonized and unified the complex array of currencies that had been in use at the commencement of Charlemagne’s reign, thus simplifying trade and commerce.

Charlemagne established a new standard, the *livre carolinienne* (from the Latin *libra*, the modern pound), which was based upon a pound of silver—a unit of both money and weight—and was worth 20 *sous* (from the Latin *solidus*, the modern shilling) or 240 *deniers* (from the Latin *denarius*, the modern penny). During this period, the *livre* and the *sou* were counting units; only the *denier* was a coin of the realm.
Charlemagne instituted principles for accounting practice by means of the *Capitulare de villis* of 802, which laid down strict rules for the way in which incomes and expenses were to be recorded.

Early in Charlemagne’s rule he tacitly allowed the Jews to monopolize money lending. When lending money for interest was proscribed in 814, being against Church law at the time, Charlemagne introduced the *Capitulary for the Jews*, a prohibition on Jews engaging in money lending due to the religious convictions of the majority of his constituents, in essence banning it across the board, a reversal of his earlier recorded general policy. In addition to this macro-oriented reform of the economy, Charlemagne also performed a significant number of microeconomic reforms, such as direct control of prices and levies on certain goods and commodities.

His *Capitulary for the Jews*, however, was not representative of his overall economic relationship or attitude toward the Frankish Jews, and certainly not his earlier relationship with them, which had evolved over his lifespan. His paid personal physician, for example, was Jewish, and he employed at least one Jew for his diplomatic missions, a personal representative to the Muslim caliphate of Baghdad. Letters have been credited to him inviting Jews to settle in his kingdom for economic purposes, generally welcoming them through his overall progressive policies.

### Church Reform

Unlike his father, Pepin, and uncle Carloman, Charlemagne expanded the reform program of the church. The deepening of the spiritual life was later to be seen as central to public policy and royal governance. His reform focused on the strengthening of the church’s power structure, advancing the skill and moral quality of the clergy, standardizing liturgical practices, improving on the basic tenets of the faith and moral, and rooting out paganism. His authority was now extended over church and state; he could discipline clerics, control ecclesiastical property, and define orthodox doctrine.
Despite the harsh legislation and sudden change, he had grown a well-developed support from the clergy who approved his desire to deepen the piety and morals of his Christian subjects.

**Political and Administrative Reform**

In 800, Charlemagne was crowned emperor and adapted his existing royal administration to live up to the expectations of his new title. The political reforms wrought in his capital, Aachen, were to have an immense impact on the political definition of Western Europe for the rest of the Middle Ages. Charlemagne’s improvements on the old Merovingian mechanisms of governance have been lauded by historians for the increased central control, efficient bureaucracy, accountability, and cultural renaissance.

The Carolingian Empire was the largest western territory since the fall of Rome, and historians have come to suspect the depth of the emperor’s influence and control. Legally, Charlemagne exercised the *bannum*, the right to rule and command, over all of his territories. Also, he had supreme jurisdiction in judicial matters, made legislation, led the army, and protected both the church and the poor. His administration attempted to organize the kingdom, church, and nobility around him; however, its efficacy was directly dependent upon the efficiency, loyalty, and support of his subjects.

Around 780 Charlemagne reformed the local system of administering justice and created the *scabini*, professional experts on law. Every count had the help of seven of these *scabini*, who were supposed to know every national law so that all men could be judged according to it. Judges were also banned from taking bribes and were supposed to use sworn inquests to establish facts. In 802, all law was written down and amended.

The Frankish kingdom was subdivided by Charlemagne into three separate areas to make administration easier. These areas, Austrasia, Neustria, and Burgandy, were the inner “core” of the kingdom and were supervised directly by the *missatica* system and the itinerant household. Outside this was the *regna*, where Frankish administration rested upon the counts, and beyond *regna* were the marcher areas, ruled by powerful governors. These marcher lordships were present in Brittany, Spain, and Avaria. Charlemagne also created two sub-kingdoms in Aquitaine and Italy, ruled by his sons Louis and Pepin respectively. Bavaria was also under the command of an autonomous governor, Gerold, until his death in 796. While Charlemagne still had overall authority in these areas, they were fairly autonomous, with their own chancery and minting facilities.

The annual meeting, the *Placitum Generalis* or Marchfield, was held every year (between March and May) at a place appointed by the king. It was called for three reasons: to gather the Frankish host to go on campaign, to discuss political and ecclesiastical matters affecting the kingdom and legislate for them, and to make judgements. All important men had to go the meeting, and so it was an important way for Charlemagne to make his will known. Originally the meeting worked effectively, but later it became merely a forum for discussion and for nobles to express their dissatisfaction.
Kloster Lorsch: Lorsch Abbey gatehouse, c. 800, an example of the Carolingian architectural style, a first, albeit isolated classical movement in architecture.

Charles Martel and Pepin the Short

Charles Martel’s victory at the Battle of Tours is widely believed to have stopped the northward advance of Muslim forces and to have preserved Christianity in Europe during a period when Muslim rule was overrunning the remains of the old Roman and Persian empires.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Explain the significance of Charles Martel’s victory at the Battle of Tours

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

• Charles Martel was the de facto ruler of Francia (France) who defeated the Umayyad Caliphate in the Battle of Tours.

• The Battle of Tours was historically significant because it stopped the advance of the Muslim empire, which had successfully conquered much of Europe; many historians believe that had Charles failed, no power in Europe would have been able to halt Islamic expansion.

• Charles divided his land between his sons Carloman and Pepin.

• After Carloman retired to religious life, Pepin became the sole ruler of the Franks and continued to consolidate and expand his power to become one of the most powerful and successful rulers of his time.

Key Terms

• Franks: Historically known first as a group of Germanic tribes that inhabited the land between the Lower and Middle Rhine in the 3rd century CE, and second as the people of Gaul who merged with the Gallo-Roman populations during succeeding centuries, passing on their name to modern-day France and becoming part of the heritage of the modern French people.
• **Umayyad Caliphate**: The second of the four major Arab caliphates established after the death of Muhammad; continued the Muslim conquests, incorporating the Caucasus, Transoxiana, Sindh, the Maghreb, and the Iberian Peninsula into the Muslim world, making it the fifth largest empire in history in both area and proportion of the world’s population.

• **Battle of Tours**: A battle that pitted Frankish and Burgundian forces under Charles Martel against an army of the Umayyad Caliphate led by ‘Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi, Governor-General of al-Andalus. The latter was defeated, thus ending the expansion of the Muslim empire into Europe.

• **Donation of Pepin**: Donations bestowed by Pepin the Short that provided a legal basis for the formal organizing of the “Papal States,” which inaugurated papal temporal rule over civil authorities.

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### Charles Martel

Charles Martel (688-741) was a Frankish statesman and military leader who, as Duke and Prince of the Franks and Mayor of the Palace, was de facto ruler of Francia from 718 until his death. The son of the Frankish statesman Pepin of Herstal and a noblewoman named Alpaida, Charles successfully asserted his claims to dominance as successor to his father, who was the power behind the throne in Frankish politics. Continuing and building on his father’s work, he restored centralized government in Francia and began the series of military campaigns that re-established the Franks as the undisputed masters of all Gaul.

Apart from his military endeavors, Charles is considered to be a founding figure of the European Middle Ages. Skilled as an administrator as well as a warrior, he is credited with a seminal role in the emerging responsibilities of the knights of courts, and so in the development of the Frankish system of feudalism. Moreover, Charles—a great patron of Saint Boniface—made the first attempt at reconciliation between the Franks and the papacy. Pope Gregory III, whose realm was being menaced by the Lombards, offered Charles the Roman consulship in exchange for becoming the defender of the Holy See, but Charles declined.

Although Charles never assumed the title of king, he divided Francia, as a king would have, between his sons Carloman and Pepin. The latter became the first of the Carolingians, the family of Charles Martel, to become king. Charles’s grandson, Charlemagne, extended the Frankish realms to include much of the West, and became the first emperor in the West since the fall of Rome. Therefore, on the basis of his achievements, Charles is seen as laying the groundwork for the Carolingian Empire. In summing up the man, Gibbon wrote that Charles was “the hero of the age,” whereas Guerard described him as being the “champion of the Cross against the Crescent.”

### Battles of Tours

After working to establish a unity in Gaul, Charles’s attention was called to foreign conflicts; dealing with the Islamic advance into Western Europe was a foremost concern. Arab and Berber Islamic forces had conquered Spain (711), crossed the Pyrenees (720), seized a major dependency of the Visigoths (721–725), and after intermittent challenges, under Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi, Governor-General of al-Andalus, advanced toward Gaul and on Tours, “the holy town of Gaul.” In October 732, the army of the Umayyad Caliphate, led by Al Ghafiqi, met Frankish and Burgundian forces under Charles in an area between the cities of Tours and Poitiers (modern north-central France), leading to a decisive, historically important Frankish victory known as the Battle of Tours.
Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi was killed, and Charles subsequently extended his authority in the south. Charles further took the offensive after Tours, destroying fortresses at Agde, Béziers, and Maguelonne, and engaging Islamic forces at Nîmes, though ultimately failing to recover Narbonne (737) or to fully reclaim the Visigoth's Narbonensis. He thereafter made significant external gains against fellow Christian realms, establishing Frankish control over Bavaria, Alemannia, and Frisia, and compelling some of the Saxon tribes to offer tribute (738). Details of the Battle of Tours, including its exact location and the number of combatants, cannot be determined from accounts that have survived. Notably, the Frankish troops won the battle without cavalry.

Charles's victory is widely believed to have stopped the northward advance of Umayyad forces from the Iberian Peninsula, and to have preserved Christianity in Europe during a period when Muslim rule was overrunning the remains of the old Roman and Persian empires.

Ninth-century chroniclers, who interpreted the outcome of the battle as divine judgment in Charles's favor, gave him the nickname Martellus ("The Hammer"). Later Christian chroniclers and pre-20th-century historians praised Charles Martel as the champion of Christianity, characterizing the battle as the decisive turning point in the struggle against Islam, a struggle which preserved Christianity as the religion of Europe. According to modern military historian Victor Davis Hanson, “most of the 18th and 19th century historians, like Gibbon, saw Poitiers (Tours), as a landmark battle that marked the high tide of the Muslim advance into Europe." Leopold von Ranke felt that “Poitiers (Tours) was the turning point of one of the most important epochs in the history of the world.”

There is little dispute that the battle helped lay the foundations of the Carolingian Empire and Frankish domination of Europe for the next century. Most historians agree that “the establishment of Frankish power in western Europe shaped that continent’s destiny and the Battle of Tours confirmed that power.”

Steuben's Bataille de Poitiers: A painting of the Battle of Tours by Charles de Steuben, 1834–1837.
Pepin the Short

Charles Martel divided his realm between his sons Pepin, called Pepin the Short, and Carloman. Succeeding his father as the Mayor of the Palace in 741, Pepin reigned over Francia jointly with his elder brother Carloman. Pepin ruled in Neustria, Burgundy, and Provence, while Carloman established himself in Austrasia, Alemannia, and Thuringia. The brothers were active in subjugating revolts led by the Bavarians, Aquitanians, Saxons, and Alemanni in the early years of their reign. In 743, they ended the Frankish interregnum by choosing Childeric III, who was to be the last Merovingian monarch, as figurehead king of the Franks.

Being well disposed towards the church and papacy on account of their ecclesiastical upbringing, Pepin and Carloman continued their father’s work supporting Saint Boniface in reforming the Frankish church and evangelizing the Saxons. After Carloman, who was an intensely pious man, retired to religious life in 747, Pepin became the sole ruler of the Franks. He suppressed a revolt led by his half-brother Grifo, and succeeded in becoming the undisputed master of all Francia. Giving up pretense, Pepin then forced Childeric into a monastery and had himself proclaimed king of the Franks with the support of Pope Zachary in 751. The decision was not supported by all members of the Carolingian family, and Pepin had to put down another revolt led by Grifo and by Carloman’s son, Drogo.

As king, Pepin embarked on an ambitious program to expand his power. He reformed the legislation of the Franks and continued the ecclesiastical reforms of Boniface. Pepin also intervened in favor of the papacy of Stephen II against the Lombards in Italy. He was able to secure several cities, which he then gave to the pope as part of the Donation of Pepin. This formed the legal basis for the Papal States in the Middle Ages. The Byzantines, keen to make good relations with the growing power of the Frankish empire, gave Pepin the title of Patricius. In wars of expansion, Pepin conquered Septimania from the Islamic Umayyads, and subjugated the southern realms by repeatedly defeating Waifer of Aquitaine and his Basque troops, after which the Basque and Aquitanian lords saw no option but to pledge loyalty to the Franks. Pepin was, however, troubled by the relentless revolts of the Saxons and the Bavarians. He campaigned tirelessly in Germany, but the final subjugation of these tribes was left to his successors.

Pepin died in 768 and was succeeded by his sons Charlemagne and Carloman. Although unquestionably one of the most powerful and successful rulers of his time, Pepin’s reign is largely overshadowed by that of his more famous son.

The End of the Carolingians

After Charlemagne’s death in 814, the Carolingian Dynasty began an extended period of fragmentation and decline that would eventually lead to the evolution of the territories of France and Germany.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Identify the reasons for the fall of the Carolingian Dynasty

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Points

- The Carolingian dynasty was a Frankish noble family with origins in the Arnulfing and Pippinid clans of the 7th century, which saw its reached its peak with the crowning of Charlemagne as the Roman emperor in 800.
• Charlemagne’s death in 814 began an extended period of fragmentation and decline of the dynasty that would eventually lead to the evolution of the territories of France and Germany.

• Following the death of Louis the Pious (Charlemagne’s son), the surviving adult Carolingians fought a three-year civil war ending only in the Treaty of Verdun, which divided the territory into three separate regions and began the breakup of the empire.

• The Carolingians were displaced in most of the regna of the empire in 888, but ruled in East Francia until 911 and held the throne of West Francia intermittently until 987.

• One chronicler dates the end of Carolingian rule with the coronation of Robert II of France as junior co-ruler with his father, Hugh Capet, thus beginning the Capetian dynasty, descendants of which unified France.

• The Carolingian dynasty became extinct in the male line with the death of Eudes, Count of Vermandois. His sister Adelaide, the last Carolingian, died in 1122.

Key Terms

• regna: Territorial regions of independent rule.

• Carolingian: Refers to topics concerning or in the time of Charlemagne and his heirs.

• Francia: The territory inhabited and ruled by the Franks, a confederation of West Germanic tribes, during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

Charlemagne’s Death

The Carolingian dynasty began with Charlemagne’s grandfather Charles Martel, but began its official reign with Charlemagne’s father, Pepin the Short, displacing the Merovingian dynasty. The dynasty reached its peak with the crowning of Charlemagne as the first emperor in the west in over three centuries. Charlemagne’s death in 814 began an extended period of fragmentation and decline that would eventually lead to the evolution of the territories of France and Germany.

In 813, Charlemagne called Louis the Pious, king of Aquitaine and his only surviving legitimate son, to his court. There Charlemagne crowned his son with his own hands as co-emperor and sent him back to Aquitaine. He then spent the autumn hunting before returning to Aachen on November 1. In January, he fell ill with pleurisy. He took to his bed on January 21 and as Einhard tells it:

He died January twenty-eighth, the seventh day from the time that he took to his bed, at nine o’clock in the morning, after partaking of the Holy Communion, in the seventy-second year of his age and the forty-seventh of his reign.

He had a testament of 811, not updated prior to his death, that allocated his assets. He was succeeded by his son, Louis, but his empire lasted only another generation in its entirety; its division, according to custom, between Louis’s own sons after their father’s death laid the foundation for the modern states of Germany and France.

The Carolingian Dynasty and Its Decline

Charlemagne, who was crowned Emperor by Pope Leo III at Rome in 800, was the greatest Carolingian monarch. His empire, ostensibly a continuation of the Roman Empire, is referred to historiographically as the Carolingian Empire. The
traditional Frankish (and Merovingian) practice of dividing inheritances among heirs was not given up by the Carolingian
emperors, though the concept of the indivisibility of the Empire was also accepted. The Carolingians had the practice of
making their sons minor kings in the various regions (regna) of the Empire, which they would inherit on the death of their
father.

Following the death of Louis the Pious (Charlemagne’s son), the surviving adult Carolingians fought a three-year civil
war ending only in the Treaty of Verdun, which divided the empire into three regna while according imperial status and a
nominal lordship to Lothair I. By this treaty, Lothair received northern Italy and a long stretch of territory from the North
Sea to the Mediterranean, essentially along the valleys of the Rhine and the Rhône; this territory includes the regions of
Lorraine, Alsace, Burgundy, and Provence. He soon ceded Italy to his eldest son, Louis, and remained in his new
kingdom, engaging in alternate quarrels and reconciliations with his brothers and in futile efforts to defend his lands from
the attacks of the Northmen (as Vikings were known in Frankish writings) and the Saracens.

The Carolingians differed markedly from the Merovingians in that they disallowed inheritance to illegitimate offspring,
possibly in an effort to prevent infighting among heirs and assure a limit to the division of the realm. In the late 9th
century, however, the lack of suitable adults among the Carolingians necessitated the rise of Arnulf of Carinthia, an
illegitimate child of a legitimate Carolingian king.

The Carolingians were displaced in most of the regna of the Empire in 888. They ruled on in East Francia until 911 and
held the throne of West Francia intermittently until 987. Carolingian cadet branches continued to rule in Vermandois and
Lower Lorraine after the last king died in 987, but they never sought thrones of principalities, and they made peace with
the new ruling families. One chronicler dates the end of Carolingian rule with the coronation of Robert II of France as
junior co-ruler with his father, Hugh Capet, thus beginning the Capetian dynasty. Capet’s descendants—the Capetians,
the House of Valois, and the House of Bourbon—progressively unified the country through wars and dynastic
inheritance into the Kingdom of France, which was fully declared in 1190 by Philip II Augustus. Thus West Francia of the
Carolingian dynasty became France.

Following the breakup of the Frankish Realm, the history of Germany was for 900 years intertwined with the history of
the Holy Roman Empire, which subsequently emerged from the eastern portion of Charlemagne’s original empire. The
territory initially known as East Francia stretched from the Rhine in the west to the Elbe River in the east, and from the
North Sea to the Alps. Germany as we know it today did not come into existence until after WWI when the various
principalities of the region were united as a modern nation-state.

The Carolingian dynasty became extinct in the male line with the death of Eudes, Count of Vermandois. His sister
Adelaide, the last Carolingian, died in 1122.
Carolingian dynasty: Carolingian family tree, from the Chronicon Universale of Ekkehard of Aura, 12th century