

# The Disintegration of the Carolingian Empire

Charlemagne's empire began to disintegrate under the reign of his only surviving son, Louis I,\* who faced the difficult task of trying to keep his inherited empire intact. Four years after his father's death, he restructured the empire and established the imperial succession. One of his sons, Louis the German, inherited Bavaria. When Louis I died in 840, his three sons battled for the throne. This led to three years of civil war. The result was the division of the Carolingian Empire. In 843, the realm was split among the three leaders in the Treaty of Verdun which laid out the blueprint for France and Germany. In this settlement, one son, Louis "the German" received the eastern portion which included the lands east of the River Rhine (Bavaria\*, Franconia\*, Saxony\*, Swabia\*, and Thuringia\*), Charles "the Bald" received the western portion (roughly present-day France), and Lothar I ruled the Middle Frankish Kingdom (an area stretching from the North Sea to Northern Italy, including the territories of Lotharingia\* and Burgundy\*).

Charles the Bald ruled the Western Frankish Realm. When Lothar's eldest son, Emperor Louis II, died in 875, Charles went to Italy and was crowned emperor.

At that time the Middle Kingdom had been broken up between the eastern and western kingdoms. In 870 the Treaty of Mersen divided Lothar's Middle Kingdom, with Lotharingia going to East Francia and the rest to West Francia.

As rulers of the Frankish kingdoms, Charlemagne's grandsons faced the challenge of maintaining unity in their kingdoms as well as protecting them from invaders. For example, Louis the German spent much of his time leading campaigns against neighbouring Slavs. By 870, the borders of Louis' realm in the east were the River Elbe and the Bohemian mountains; in the west, beyond the River Rhine, they included the districts later known as Alsace and Lorraine\*. After his death in 876, the kingdom was divided among his three sons according to Frankish tradition, but the deaths of two of them restored its unity under Charles III (Charles the Fat) in 884. The endless attacks by Vikings, Saracens, and Magyars in the later 9th and 10th centuries, however, weakened the kingdom.

The remaining Carolingians ruled in West Francia, or France, until 987; the German branch of the family ruled in the east until 911. They were not as powerful as their ancestors: the ambitious nobles minded their own local interests and ruled independently without any regard for the weak central power. As fiefs had largely become hereditary, feudal lords managed to seize governmental and legal authority (the collection of taxes, the right of high justice, etc.) from the king, and some passed these rights on to their own vassals that was why Charlemagne's descendants could not save their heritage from disintegration.

## **1) Threats in the south: The Muslims**

The southern parts of Charlemagne's empire were threatened by Muslims from North Africa and the Middle East who menaced the Mediterranean and had conquered Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica. Contemporary Christians called them "Saracens," whereas Muslims in Spain and Northwestern Africa were known as "Moors."

When they threatened Rome, Pope Leo IV called on Emperor Louis II to halt the invaders. Charlemagne's great-grandson began an extensive campaign that included the conquest of the Muslim headquarters at Bari (871). After Louis' death in 875 the Muslims attacked Southern Italy and forced the pope to pay tribute to them. Northern Italy, on the other hand, was ruled by numerous local rulers. This period of unrest ended in 962 when Otto I\* conquered Northern Italy and was crowned emperor.

## **2) ... and in the north: The Vikings**

Another threat originated in Scandinavia. The Germanic merchants, explorers, and warriors from present-day Norway, Sweden and Denmark called themselves "Vikings," while their contemporaries knew them as "Danes," "Norsemen," or "Norse."

The Vikings left their homes and raided the European continent and the British Isles in summer when the weather allowed sailing across the seas. After their return they worked their farms, gathered, fished and hunted. The raids on European settlements began after an increase in population had caused a serious food shortage in their homelands. Many Vikings left Scandinavia in search of food and treasure.

5 The Vikings crossed the Atlantic Ocean. They even reached Iceland, Greenland, and North America. In 793 Vikings raided and plundered the wealthy monastery at Lindisfarne on the Yorkshire coast. As the 9th century progressed, the Vikings' sudden attacks continued in Anglo-Saxon England. Their ships appeared without warning, they devastated London and Canterbury. Not only did they raid the shores close to their homes, but they also sailed along the rivers of Germany, France and the shores of the eastern Baltic area, raiding towns such as Ant-  
10 werp (836), Koblenz (destroyed in 882) and Cologne, besieging\* Paris in 885/886. Their victims could often only get rid of them by paying large bribes in silver and gold.

The Vikings' invasions came to a halt after they had successfully settled away from their original homes. Among these settlements were places in Ireland, England, France, and Eastern Europe. Normandy in Northwest-  
15 ern France received its name from the French term "Normans" ("Northmen"). By the 860s, Danish Vikings had decided to stay in Northeast England. After a series of wars against the Anglo-Saxon kings, the country was divided and the "Danelaw"\* area of Viking control recognized.

### **3) ... and in the east: The Magyars**

Danger also came from the Magyars\*. These nomads came from Asia and were driven westward when the Pechenegs, a Turkic tribe, attacked them from the east. They had adopted fighting tactics that resembled those of the Huns\*, so the Europeans called them "Hungarians." They were feared for their brutality.

20 The Magyars crossed the Carpathian Mountains\* around 895. They soon destroyed Great Moravia and attacked Lombardy and Saxony. Their raids took them further and further each year, eventually reaching France. They were successful because they had a swift cavalry that had no match in Western Europe. In 907 the Magyars defeated a German army and in 924 the German king Henry I\* had to pay them a tribute.

25 After years of terror, raids, and pillaging, Magyar expansion was finally stopped in the Battle of Lechfeld in 955. After Otto I's victory over the Magyars, his hegemony in the West was not questioned. Following the battle, his men hailed him emperor in traditional fashion, raising him on their shields, and his coronation as emperor took place in Rome in 962. The Magyars, on the other hand, settled down and established a kingdom in present-day Hungary. At the same time the invasions of other peoples from outside Europe such as the Saracens stopped, ending an epoch of invasions that had begun with the Migration period\*.

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