

The Frankish Kingdom

The decline of the Roman Empire took some 300 years and resulted in its disintegration and the eventual collapse of its western part. The last emperor of the West resigned in AD 476. The cause of this development was the “Barbarian Migration”* which started in AD 166 when Germanic tribes (Lombards*, Marcomanni* and Quadi*) began overcoming the limes* and penetrating deeply into the Empire. They reached the Adriatic Sea* near Aquileia in 170. The last, and ultimate, blow was marked by the westward migration of the Ostrogoths who had been driven out of their area of settlement on the Black Sea by the Huns* in 375. The Huns exerted pressure on all of the Germanic tribes and peoples living in Central and Eastern Europe causing them to move west to fight for new territories. Many tribes were not able to establish their own strong governments – they either became allies of more powerful peoples and eventually merged with them, or they were integrated by force. Other tribes, however, succeeded in establishing their own kingdoms inside the boundaries of what used to be the West Roman Empire: Ostrogoths*, Vandals*, Visigoths*, Burgundians*, Franks* and Lombards* (q.v. “The Transformation of the Roman World”).

The Franks* were one of these tribal associations*. From their original area of settlement north and east of the River Rhine (from its mouth down to the River Main) they had shifted their territory to what is today Belgium and the Netherlands. One of their rulers, King Clovis* (481 – 511) from the royal family of the Merovingians* first expanded Frankish rule into the country between the Somme and the Loire rivers in 486; then, by defeating the Alamanni* in 496, he obtained the land east and west of the River Rhine down to the Alps and, in a third step, he conquered all of Aquitaine (which corresponds to South-western France) in a victory over the Visigoths* in 507. Clovis’ sons managed to add the kingdom of Burgundy*, Provence and the Thuringian* kingdom to Frankish rule. Moreover, Bavaria was made dependent.

King Clovis was one of the outstanding Germanic rulers, not only because he was a successful conqueror, but, more so, because he strove to found his rule upon a principle which was to make the Franks the most successful people of the early Middle Ages and a model for all medieval kingdoms after him – the principle of unity at all levels of government.

One of Clovis’ first moves was to bring about stability of government within the Frankish Kingdom by ruthlessly disempowering the great number of tribal sub-kings within his kingdom who, by tradition, had authority as tribal leaders in the smaller tribal units of the Franks. After that, he and subsequently all of his people converted to Christianity in 498. Clovis had deliberately chosen the “Trinitarian*” form of Christianity (i.e. the Catholic faith), thus making his country unique among Germanic kingdoms (whose kings had opted for Arianism*). In this way he gained the support of the Romano-Gallic* high clergy* and, moreover, of the pope in Rome. Clovis made it quite clear that he regarded the people of Germanic origin and of Romano-Gallic origin within his kingdom as equal – united by one common faith. At the same time he recognized the different legal and cultural traditions of these two segments of the population.

Yet, there was one obstacle on the way to lasting unity. According to an ancient and cherished Frankish tradition, after the death of a free man his estate had to be divided equally among his rightful heirs. Consequently, after Clovis’ death, the kingdom was partitioned, each of his sons receiving one of its parts. Only after about 50 years after Clovis’ death could the kingdom be united again.

In the meantime, however, local nobles had become powerful and they demanded a share in the administration of the realm. As a result, the heartland of the kingdom was organized in three parts: Austrasia* (Champagne, the area of the Maas and Moselle), Neustria* (the country between the Scheldt and the Loire) and Burgundy* (the area of the Loire and the Rhone rivers). These sub-kingdoms were given limited autonomy and they were headed by powerful local noblemen who bore the title of “Mayor of the Palace*”. As the Merovingian kings became more and more indolent “do-nothing kings,” it was the mayors of the palace who exerted real

power within the Frankish kingdom: no longer were they restricted to domestic responsibilities, but also political and military affairs were laid into their hands.

One family became most successful: the Austrasian mayor of the palace Pépin of Herstal* (679 – 714) defeated his Neustrian rival in 687, became mayor of all three sub-kingdoms and thus was sole de facto* ruler of the Frankish kingdom. Moreover, he succeeded in making the office of “Mayor of the Palace” hereditary. Pépin’s son Charles*, nicknamed Martel (i.e. “the Hammer”), succeeded Pépin in 714. It was he who conquered the Alamanni* and the Thuringians* and integrated them into the Frankish kingdom again. Bavaria was made dependent and the Saxons were fought successfully. His most memorable action, however, was the battle of Tours (A.D. 732) which stopped the invasion of Spanish Muslims into Western Europe once and for all.

After Charles’s death in 741 his son, Pépin the younger* (also nicknamed “the Short”), took another decisive step to stabilize the Frankish kingdom – in 751 an assembly of Frankish nobles deposed the legitimate but weak Merovingian king and elected Pépin king of the Franks. This was an unprecedented and scandalous act: kings were regarded as sacrosanct* by their own people. Pépin, who later was said to have argued that it was the sign of a king to hold a position of power instead of just a title (like the Merovingian kings did), succeeded in gaining the support of the pope who had him anointed by his legate Boniface*. This procedure was unprecedented because up to then no king had been given a special formal blessing by the Church. Three years after this event the pope himself came to France and repeated this act of coronation. Pépin, in return for this service, promised the pope his support against the Lombards who wanted to expand their power over all of Italy, thus threatening the pope’s position in Central Italy. Pépin went to war against the Lombards* in 754 and 756 and forced them to acknowledge the papal authority in Central Italy. He also took away their lands and gave them to the pope. “Pépin’s Donation*,” as this was called, was later regarded as the formal beginning of the Papal States* in which the pope was the sovereign ruler. The Papal States existed until 1870. The support of the Frankish kingdom by the popes and the fact that the pope himself had anointed the king was unique and important for future developments: from then on kings could be regarded as being agents of god. This fostered the idea that God himself had given the king the authority to rule over his subjects. Centuries later, popes argued in return that Pépin’s case clearly showed that the pope had the power and authority to depose kings if they disregarded their obligations to the Church.

Pépin the Younger was also successful as a warrior king: in addition to his triumph over the Lombards, he reincorporated the South (Languedoc) and the Southwest of France (Aquitaine) into the Frankish kingdom and when he died in 768 A.D. he left his sons, Carloman* and Charles, a stable and powerful country.

Charlemagne

Carloman*, the elder brother, died in 771. The death of his brother made Charles monarch of the entire kingdom. He ruled for 46 years until his death in 814.

Charlemagne* was an energetic and very successful leader in war – throughout his long reign he waged aggressive and successful wars on all frontiers of his kingdom and expanded its borders considerably. When Charles died he left behind a stable empire with permanent borders about the size of the former Western Roman Empire. Charlemagne’s extraordinary military prowess, his skill as an administrator, his desire for learning, his untiring efforts to spread knowledge across his vast country, and the considerable expansion of the Frankish kingdom made him appear to his contemporaries as a leader bearing all the signs of greatness. This is why he was called “Charlemagne” (Charles the Great). He was considered to be a model king for many of the monarchs of Western Europe who came after him.

At the beginning of his reign, Charlemagne conquered Friesland* and then, in 773 – 774, conquered the Lombard kingdom (i.e. Northern and Central Italy). By adopting the title “King of the Lombards,” he incorporated this region into the Frankish kingdom. In 778 the Duchy of Bavaria was annexed and integrated

into the kingdom of the Franks once and for all. Several campaigns against the Slavs* (789 – 812) led to a Frankish protectorate over the Slav peoples living east of the Frankish borders. From 791 to 796, in three campaigns, the Avars*, who settled in the south of Central Europe (approximately modern Hungary), were destroyed by the joint forces of the Franks and Bulgars. The most murderous series of wars, the campaigns to
5 overcome and subdue the Saxons* (in the northwest of modern Germany), were waged between 772 and 804 A.
D. and ended with the final defeat of the Saxons and their complete integration into the Frankish Empire. Charlemagne’s successes against the Arabs in Spain were minimal, but he succeeded in conquering a small strip
of land south of the Pyrenees. This later enabled Christian rulers to win back much of Spain from the Muslim
Moors. Most of the border regions were organized as “Marches”*. These were administrative districts in which
10 the king’s representatives, the Margraves, could raise armies to repel enemy attacks at very short notice. Thus,
the “Spanish March” was meant to protect the empire against the Muslim Moors, the “Breton March” against the
hostile Bretons and the “Danish March” against Scandinavian invaders.

Charlemagne saw to it that all the conquered peoples were converted to Christianity. This missionary spirit
was due largely to his deep-felt obligation to the Christian Church, partly, however, also to the notion that
15 Christian subjects would obey a Christian king more readily than pagans. In the case of the heathen Saxons,
Charlemagne converted them by brute force: those who refused to be baptized were killed on the spot. He also
reorganized the Church within the Frankish kingdom and even gave the leading clergy* important functions in
the administration of his country. However, the Church was made dependent on the king: Charlemagne himself
assumed the chief role in religious affairs and made it clear that it was he alone who bore the responsibility for
20 religious life throughout his realm.

Charlemagne’s closeness to the Church, his military success and the fact that he had borne the honorary title
of “*Patricius Romanorum*” (Protector of the Romans) since 754 inspired Pope Leo III to make him a spectacular
offer: to confer the title “Emperor of the Romans” on Charlemagne. In the winter of 800 Charlemagne
accompanied Pope Leo III to Rome. On Christmas Day that year, after Mass at St. Peter’s Basilica, the pope
25 surprised him by placing a crown on his head and having him hailed as “Emperor of the Romans” by a
congregation of Roman nobles. Charlemagne took this title seriously, but he was not pleased with the procedure
of his coronation. To the public it appeared as if the emperor had been given the crown because the pope had the
authority to “make” emperors. Charlemagne resented this view because he was convinced that it was his right as
king to tell the pope what was right or wrong and there was no doubt either that it was Charlemagne alone who
30 had authority over the Frankish clergy. That is why Charlemagne made every effort to correct the flaw of his
own coronation: in 813 he himself made his only son Louis co-emperor. Louis placed the crown on his head
himself. This took place in Aachen. The pope was not present, nor was any Roman.

As a warrior and conqueror alone Charlemagne was certainly “great”. There was, however, a side to him
which made him stand out from all the Germanic leaders before and after him: Charlemagne was a genius of
35 organization and a great motivator of his people. During his reign, great strides were made in a variety of fields
which he thought were of prime importance for his government, the development of Frankish society and
humankind in general.

Like all kings of Europe north of the Alps, Charlemagne and his predecessors found it difficult to exercise
their full authority in all parts of their realm. The greatest obstacle to their power lay in the character of the
40 landscape in the early Middle Ages, as large parts of the country were still covered with forests, wetlands, bogs,
sandy heaths and other natural obstacles which made travelling difficult, if not impossible, at most times of the
year. Many of the rivers in their natural condition were impossible to ford and roads were few and in very bad
repair, many impassable for lack of maintenance. That is one reason why local noblemen were frequently held in
greater awe than the king by the population of the territories they lived in. Furthermore, these noblemen used to
45 be the tribal chiefs and leaders in war of all the warriors in their tribes and they owned large estates which they

used as the basis of their power within their homelands. In addition to this, the ancient tribes often had their own traditional laws and the chiefs were the acknowledged judges in all difficult law cases. In order to assert his authority over these local noblemen, the king had to be present in all parts of his country as often as possible with his whole court, his officials and a small army of horsemen. This was to prevent rebellions, enforce royal law, establish friendly relations with the regional nobility and demonstrate his leadership. Kings in the early Middle Ages therefore had no one particular place of residence as their centre of government, but they and their court were itinerant: In order to assert the king's authority, they journeyed from one royal domain* to the other all year round living off the products the royal lands yielded.

Charlemagne was not satisfied with this traditional way of ruling the country and strove to improve it to strengthen his authority. He did not abandon the system inherited from his predecessors, but expanded it. He was a tireless traveller who controlled the effectiveness of his officials across his realm and administered the law and justice. His court consisted of both clergymen and laymen who performed important political, judicial and diplomatic functions. Charlemagne introduced the system of *missi dominici**, teams of one clergyman and one lay nobleman each who were sent out to supervise the powerful governors (counts) in the 300 or so counties of the kingdom. Moreover, it was their duty to find out about what was going on in all parts of the realm, to instruct counts and other regional officials on what the wishes and political intentions of the monarch were, to mediate between quarrelling parties and to propagate the royal decrees (*capitularies**) issued in great number and dealing with a large variety of topics relating to public order.

Charlemagne was in constant touch with the nobles from all parts of his kingdom to stabilize his rule. From time to time he called the important and powerful subjects together at his palace in Aachen to make them swear oaths of fidelity and to involve them in the administration of his empire. These services were rewarded in turn by generous grants of land from the vast royal holdings or other material gifts. This practice – granting land to nobles in return for loyalty and services – has its origin in late-Roman times and is called *commendation** which means that free people could bond themselves as clients* to powerful men to be protected and taken care of by them in return for services and loyal support. This idea merged with the Germanic notion of “*Gefolgschaft*” (allegiance of free men to their noble leader) which means that free people promised obedience and loyalty to a powerful leader to enjoy, in turn, his loyal protection. In the Frankish kingdom of the eighth century, these two traditions fused together as the system of feudalism which later became the basis of medieval society.

Charlemagne made use of this practice in that he gave much of the royal land to regional and local noblemen for military assistance (as mounted warriors) or services (as royal officials). Both the king and the vassal* regarded themselves as bound by a personal bond which they strengthened by a mutual oath of loyalty, the promise of obedience on the side of the vassal and the promise of protection on the side of the lord. As compensation for the costs and troubles of the services expected by the vassal he would be given benefices (later called *fiefs**) which generally consisted of a piece of land. This contract was regarded as one which closely linked the lord to the vassal (and the other way round) and as such would end with the death of either the lord or the vassal. The fief*, therefore, was meant to be a loan which would revert to the lord once the personal contract between the two had come to an end. As this instrument of control proved to be very useful for the king and profitable for both sides, it was spread to all parts of the Frankish Empire under Charlemagne and in later years it was expanded throughout all of Western and Central Europe.

Charlemagne has justly been called one of the founders of modern Europe. To a certain extent this view is founded upon his enthusiasm for learning. Charlemagne was convinced that only correctness in everything produced correct results. As a consequence of this view, he saw to it that the Holy Scriptures and ancient books of learning should be copied and studied with utmost care. The immediate result of this effort was that a great number of texts by Greek and Latin authors were copied by specialists in the monasteries of the empire and therefore did not perish but could be passed down to posterity. In order to achieve these aims, Charlemagne

called together a number of learned men who organized and led schools instituted by the king himself. The most important school was founded for the education of his own children at his palace in Aachen. He called together the most eminent scholars of his time from all countries of Europe, like Alcuin from York, Peter of Pisa, Theodulf, a Goth, Agobard of Lyons, the Lombard priest Paulus Diaconus and the Frank Angilbert and many more. These and the generations of scholars educated by them laid the foundation of European culture for many centuries to come: both the effortless mastery of the Latin language as the key to all learned and sacred texts and to scholarly discourse and the combination of scholarly knowledge and intellectual skills were regarded as indispensable. For this purpose they revived the Roman system of the seven liberal arts (artes liberales*: grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) to be taught to all serious students as the basis of further studies. This curriculum remained the basis of scholarly education for roughly 700 years and formed the common core of all medieval and modern European civilizations. Charlemagne's effort to revive ancient Roman and Greek cultural traditions has come to be known as the "Carolingian Renaissance.*"

When, after an incomparably long and successful reign, Charlemagne passed the crown to his only remaining son Louis (813 coronation as co-emperor), he could be confident that the Frankish empire would continue flourishing.

Charlemagne died 28 January 814 and was buried in the palace chapel in Aachen.

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