

Part 5: The Rise and Fall of the Carolingian Dynasty

Though the Merovingians remained in power for some 250 years in Francia, the warrior aristocrats took advantage of the Merovingian kings' tendency to divide their kingdom between their sons, beginning with Clovis himself. The sons and grandsons of the late king would then fight each other until there was only one male remaining. Though this meant eventually only one man would be king, such familial conflicts allowed aristocratic families to dominate until by the end of the seventh century, the Merovingian dynasty had very little power. In midst of these wars and conflicts, the office of the mayor of the palace helped to maintain the cohesion of the Frankish state in the various Frankish kingdoms. The office usually belonged to one of leading local aristocratic families of the kingdoms, such as in Arnulfing-Pippinids family who came to control that position in most of the Frankish kingdoms, and they thus became the puppet masters of the Merovingian kings as well. One such mayor of the palace was Charles Martel (d. 741), an illegitimate son of a Arnulfing-Pippinid mayor of the place, who gave his name to the dynasty as the Carolingians.

Charles Martel's rise to the height of power was not easy. Since he was illegitimate, he had to fight his stepmother and his infant half-brother for dominance in the family and then he had to fight other aristocratic families for ascendancy in Francia. Despite these struggles, by the end of his life, Charles Martel did not even bother to find a new Merovingian king after his Merovingian king died in 737. He managed to consolidate his power by patronizing the church and supporting missionaries, such as Boniface of Wessex, among the surrounding Germanic peoples, as well as by exploiting the church through seizing its property and giving it to his followers.

After Charles Martel's son, Pepin (d. 768), consolidated his power as the sole mayor of the palace of the last Merovingian king, he decided to write a letter to the pope, the bishop of Rome, asking him whether it was right that he who had the power of the king did not have the title of king. The pope said that it did not sound right and that it was better that he who had the power to be called king, so Pepin used papal support to throw the last Merovingian king into a monastery and seize the throne. Being the puppet master of the Merovingian kings was perilous, since it required maintaining the cooperation of the other aristocratic families. But a coup was also dangerous, and that is why he needed to have ecclesiastical sanction for his palace revolution. This established what is often called the Papal-Frankish Alliance, since not only did the Carolingians need papal support for the coup, the popes needed Frankish support to protect them from attacks on Rome at the hands of another Germanic group called the Lombards who had been pestering the popes since the late sixth century. Though Rome was still technically under the authority of the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire, the pope could not rely on Byzantine support, since not only were the Byzantines distracted by the Muslim threat to the east, the Roman Church and the Byzantine Church had numerous disagreements. Thus, the last vestiges of the classical Mediterranean-centric world of the Roman Empire in Western Europe dissipated, and the new world of medieval Western Europe was truly born.

When Pepin I died in 768, the Frankish kingdom once again faced instability. Since he left two sons, Charlemagne (d. 814) and Carloman I the two brothers competed for domination of the kingdom, until Carloman supposedly died from a severe nosebleed in 771. As sole ruler, Charlemagne extended Frankish territory by conquering the kingdom of the Lombard in Italy in 773, which happened to belong to his ex-father-in-law. To the east, he sought to subjugate the pagan Saxons between 772 and 802, forcing many to convert to Christianity and massacring

about 4,500 rebel Saxons after they surrendered to him. He also created a buffer against Slav peoples further east in the eastern march, now known as Austria. In Spain, despite some initial disastrous and unsuccessful campaigns in 778, he captured Barcelona in 781, and created the Spanish March, eventually known as Catalonia, as a buffer against the Muslims. As a result, Charlemagne created one of the largest and most extensive empire in Western Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire, covering modern France, much of modern Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and more, and it also extended southward to include northern Italy, Catalonia, and Austria.

Such a large empire required a well-organized though flexible administration. Dividing the empire in districts, the king appointed a count from another region to oversee justice and the army, and he usually worked with local judicial assemblies of local elites. Charlemagne also commissioned royal representatives, or *missi*, usually a count and a bishop working together, who were itinerant judges hearing complaints against local counts, and usually each pair moved within defined territories. The point of all this was to correct abuses, to prevent counts from creating local power-bases, and to diffuse the creation of competing factions. Though much of the Carolingian administration was based on oral instructions, it was reliant on written law as well, such as the capitularies, which included agendas for annual assemblies, instructions to the *missi*, revisions of traditional laws, and theological statements about morality and the liturgy. It is not clear how much these regulations were obeyed, but Charlemagne expected that people would follow them. Though Charlemagne's court was often itinerant, in 794, he established a semi-official capital at Aachen where he spent much of his time, since having *missi* made his personal presence no longer a necessity.

Despite all the sophistication of his government, Charlemagne lacked a standing army. Instead, he relied on retinues of soldiers provided by large landowners, including bishops and abbots. Though these retinues swore an oath to their lords, Charlemagne made every free man also take an oath of loyalty to the king. Even with this oath of loyalty, Charlemagne's power was far from absolute, since annual assemblies agreed on when and where they should fight, though a powerful and charismatic personality, such as that of Charlemagne, could go a long way in dominating such an assembly. In addition, Charlemagne and his successors' power was based largely on plunder, treasure, and land that they could bestow on their followers, since they lacked the Roman fiscal and tax system present in the Byzantine and Abbasid Empires. As long as the Carolingians could give out treasure and land, they could maintain their power.

Despite their limitations, the Carolingians were by far the most powerful dynasty in Western Europe, and the popes who still needed protection and assistance realized this. For this reason, in the year 800, Pope Leo III (r. 795-816) fled to Charlemagne in Aachen after the family of his predecessor drove him out of Rome, supposedly blinding him and slitting his tongue and accusing him of heresy, sodomy, and adultery. Having previously assisted the other popes, Charlemagne agreed to restore the now supposedly miraculously healed pope. Upon returning him to Rome, Charlemagne had declared in a council that no one, except God, could judge the pope. The pope's restoration took place during the penitential season of Advent, leading up to Christmas. Since Charlemagne was still in Rome on Christmas Day, he attended Mass in the Lateran Basilica when the pope came up behind him and crowned him Augustus and Emperor of the Romans. According to Charlemagne's biographer, the emperor "declared that he would not have set foot in the church the day that they were conferred, although it was a great feast-day, if he could have foreseen the design of the pope."

Though Charlemagne did use the modified title of the emperor governing the Empire of the Romans and then later on Emperor of the Franks, he very well may have been displeased, not with receiving the title, but with how the coronation happened. He probably did not appreciate that the pope conferred the crown and titles on him, implying that Charlemagne owed the crown to the pope. Indeed, the very act of coronation was not a Frankish or Roman practice; rather, it was a papal invention. Charlemagne might also have been anxious about how the Byzantines would have reacted to such a move. Part of the pope's justification for the coronation was that the Byzantine throne in the east was vacant, since a woman, the Empress Irene, sat uncomfortably on the throne after killing her own son. After much diplomatic wrangling, including a marriage proposal to Empress Irene, Emperor Michael I in 812 accepted Charlemagne as emperor of the Franks.

But none of this diplomatic wrangling hid that the Carolingians did aspire to something more than being a mere local power. Long before Christmas Day 800, Charlemagne's court scholars saw the Carolingian Empire as imitating the Christian Roman Empire. Indeed, one of the leading scholars of the Carolingian court, Alcuin of York (d. 804), called the Frankish Empire, the Empire of the Christians. To create this empire of the Christians and to encourage moral reform, Charlemagne and his son promoted a revival of intellectual life. As a result, scholars often speak of the Carolingian Renaissance. In *The Admonitio Generalis* from 789, Charlemagne set forth his reforming vision to model his empire after ancient Israel, and thus, he wanted to ensure that the church in the Frankish Empire had an educated and literate clergy. By being more educated, they could perform the new more uniform Frankish liturgy of the Mass, preach more effectively, and serve as literate men in the king's court. To ensure moral reform in the royal government, he sent out the *missi* to root out abuses, and throughout the early ninth

century, there were constant calls for penance, since military defeats were often seen as a result of sin. For example, after defeats in Spain in 827, Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious, stopped hunting and many attributed the failures to perjury, pride, hatred, and the neglect of Sunday rest.

Charlemagne also patronized learning at his court school and in monasteries across the empire. His court attracted not only scholars from the Frankish Empire, but also scholars from across Western Europe, including Alcuin from Northumbria in England. Major thinkers of the Carolingian court, such as Alcuin of York, did not seek so much to produce innovative new works of theology and philosophy but to preserve and copy classical pagan and Christian texts, such as the works of Caesar, Horace, and Cicero. In order to do so, the intellectuals at the Carolingian court developed Carolingian miniscule, which was a uniform script designed to make it easier to recite liturgical texts, to read classical texts, and to copy such texts. With modifications and as unwittingly revived by Renaissance humanists who thought it was ancient Roman script, it is the basis for the typeface that we use to this day. The Carolingians valued uniformity in other areas as well, including the Mass, church law, and the universal use of Jerome's Latin Vulgate. Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious, sought to impose the *Rule of St. Benedict* on all the monasteries of the empire.

Despite the successes of Charlemagne's reign, the Carolingian Empire did not last long. Because Charlemagne's power was based on his ability to give his men plunder and land, under his successors such sources of wealth declined as new conquests declined. Moreover, his son, Louis the Pious, eventually divided his empire between his four sons who subsequently fought each other for territory until the empire was roughly divided into three parts in the Treaty of Verdun in 843. In the end, that division proved long lasting; West Francia becoming the basis of the medieval kingdom of France, and East Francia roughly became medieval Germany. Adding

to this chaos, the attacks of the Vikings on West Francia, the Magyars on East Francia, and Muslim pirates in southern Europe exacerbated the fragmentation of political authority, as defense against such enemies became more localized, and eventually led to the termination of the Carolingian dynasty.

In the aftermath of the breakup of the Carolingian Empire, there emerged in Western Europe a new society in which political power was no longer public but had become both personal and localized, rooted in a series of personal dependencies. This development had its roots in the Carolingian Empire whose kings had granted tracts of land to their powerful subjects in exchange for advice and military support in times of war. With the constant threat of the Vikings, these powerful lords also did the same when the Carolingian kings did not little prevent such attacks. In exchange for providing a retinue of warriors, advice when asked, and hospitality, a lord granted his vassal a fief, or tract of land. When receiving the fief, the vassal promised faithful service to his lord and called down on himself divine punishment if he ever violated his oath. Historians have often called this network of lords and vassals feudalism. In reality, this system was much more complicated. Many vassals received fiefs from multiple lords and thus had conflicting ties of loyalty. Moreover, a powerful lord often simply asserted his authority over less formidable lords, forcing them into a subordinate relationship, even if the vassal's land had never really belonged to the more powerful lord in the first place. In a sense, there was no such thing as feudalism, since each kingdom and indeed each region varied in how lords, vassals, and others established their personal dependencies.

Economically undergirding these personal dependencies was manorialism or the manorial system. Manorialism is the term historians use for the economic arrangements through which serfs and free peasants supported the landowning elite. A "manor" was an estate consisting of

land and people who worked that land. The peasants and serfs tilled the land, owed obligations, such as labor, and paid fees in the form of agricultural produce to the lord of the manor in exchange for protection, though such protection entailed they forfeit a certain amount of liberty. Serfs in particular were not free, that is, they were tied to the land and could not move or marry without the permission of their lord; however, unlike a slave, they could not be sold. All serfs were peasants, but not all peasants were serfs. In a simplistic way, the origins of this system are in the late Carolingian Empire, as peasants gave up a certain amount of liberty in exchange for protection. However, one is hard pressed to imagine the theoretical peasant who made a bargain with a local landlord that if the lord protected him, he would forfeit his land and freedom to the lord. Rather, what often happened was that the powerful landlord subjugated the peasants by force, and if there was any willingness on the part of the peasants, it was out of fear of other landlords and marauders, such as the Vikings. By the eleventh century, the vast majority of the peasantry and, therefore, the population were unfree, though this varied from region to region, since many peasants in Italy and parts of Germany were either free as tenants of major landowners or even were landowners in their own right.

The old Roman world looked a lot different in 1000 than it had in 300. In 300, the Roman Empire encircled the entire Mediterranean and included Britain, by 600 its capital was in the city of Constantinople, and it encompassed only present-day Greece, Turkey, Crete, Cyprus, Sicily, and southern Italy. In 300, the Roman Empire had for its religion a still vibrant paganism, but 700 years later the Byzantine Roman Empire was officially Christian, while the former Western Empire was ruled over by half-Romanized, half-Christianized Germanic kings, and much of what used to be the Roman Empire was now dominated by the new religion of Islam. Christianity itself had undergone a transformation. In 300, though many Christians of the empire

had the sense of belonging to a common catholic church, by 1000 there was a much clearer sense of what that Catholic Church believed and who lead the Church, but not without controversy and debate. By 1000, the Islamic world was at the height of cultural, intellectual, and political achievements, and the Byzantine Empire had made an impressive comeback. Western Europe in contrast looked like a provincial backwater, especially in the wake of the collapse of the Carolingian Empire, which had never matched the administrative or economic sophistication of the Islamic and Byzantine worlds. And though Western Europe would remain a backwater civilization and on the periphery of world civilization for another half millennium, the turn of the second millennium would see Western Europe beginning to recover economically and soon it would also begin to experience political and religious revivals as well. Such revivals would transform the medieval world in the High Middle Ages between 1000 and 1300 and produce some of Europe's greatest contributions to the modern world. But that is the story for next week. Until then have a great week!