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## CHARLEMAGNE 742 - 814

The medieval emperor Charlemagne (Charles the Great) was king of the Franks, conqueror of Saxony, founder of the Holy Roman Empire, and one of the foremost rulers in European history.

Charles was born in 742, probably near the city of Aachen, which later became his capital. His father was Pepin the Short, and his grandfather was Charles Martel, the great Frankish leader whose victory in 732 at the Battle of Tours had thwarted an attempted Moslem conquest of France. In 751, Pepin had been declared king of the Franks, thus ending the weak Merovingian dynasty, and founding a new dynasty which is today called Carolingian, after Charlemagne. In 768, Pepin died, and the Frankish kingdom was divided between Charles and his brother, Carloman. Fortunately for Charles and for Frankish unity, Carloman died unexpectedly in 771. That left Charles, at age twenty-nine, the sole ruler of the Frankish kingdom, which was already the strongest state in western Europe.

At the accession of Charles, the Frankish state consisted primarily of present-day France, Belgium, and Switzerland, plus considerable holdings in present-day Holland and Germany. Charles wasted little time before starting to expand his domains. Carloman's widow and children had sought refuge in the Lombard kingdom in northern Italy. Charlemagne divorced his own Lombard wife Desiderata and led his army into northern Italy. By 774, the Lombards were decisively defeated. Northern Italy was assimilated into his holdings, although four additional invasions were needed to consolidate his rule. Carloman's widow and children fell into Charlemagne's hands, and were never seen again.

Perhaps more important, and certainly more difficult, was Charlemagne's conquest of Saxony, a large region in northern Germany. This required no fewer than eighteen campaigns, the first in 772, and the last in 804. Religious factors were certainly part of the reason why the wars against the Saxons were so protracted and bloody. The Saxons were pagans, and Charlemagne insisted that all his Saxon subjects convert to Christianity. Those who refused baptism or who later reverted to paganism were put to death. There have been estimates that as much as one-fourth of the population of Saxony was killed in the process of these forced conversions.

Charles also fought campaigns in southern Germany and in southwest France to consolidate his control over those regions. To secure the eastern frontiers of his empire, Charlemagne engaged in a series of wars against the Avars. The Avars were an Asiatic people related to the Huns, and they controlled a large territory in what is today Hungary and Yugoslavia. Eventually, Charlemagne thoroughly defeated the Avar armies. Though the lands east of Saxony and Bavaria were not occupied by the Franks, other states which recognized Frankish suzerainty were set up in a broad strip from eastern Germany to Croatia.

Charlemagne also tried to secure his southern frontier. In 778, he led an invasion of Spain. It was unsuccessful; however, Charles did manage to establish in northern Spain a border state,

known as the Spanish March, which recognized his sovereignty.

As a result of his numerous successful wars (the Franks fought fifty-four campaigns during the forty-five years of his reign), Charlemagne succeeded in uniting most of western Europe under his rule. At its height, his empire included most of present-day France, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, and the Low Countries, plus a large part of Italy, and various bordering areas. Not since the fall of the Roman Empire had so much of Europe been controlled by a single state.

Throughout his reign, Charlemagne maintained a close political alliance with the Papacy. During his lifetime, however, it was always clear that Charlemagne, rather than the Pope, was the dominant partner.

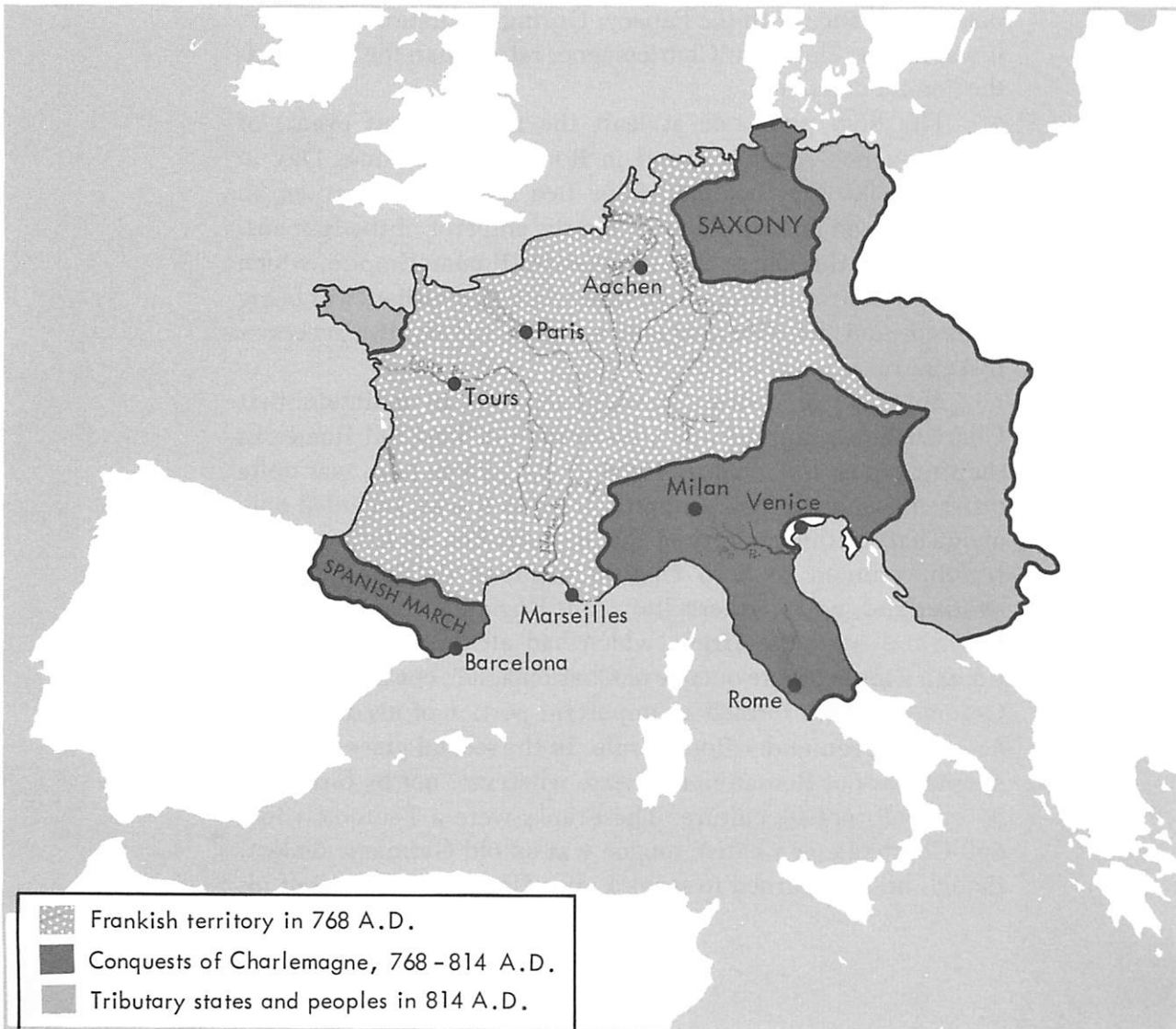
The high point, or at least the most famous event, of Charlemagne's reign occurred in Rome, on Christmas Day in the year 800. On that day, Pope Leo III placed a crown on Charles's head and proclaimed him the emperor of the Romans. In principal, this meant that the Western Roman Empire, which had been destroyed more than three centuries earlier, was being restored, and that Charlemagne was now the rightful successor to Augustus Caesar.

Actually, of course, it was ridiculous to maintain that Charlemagne's empire was a restoration of imperial Rome. In the first place, the territory ruled by the two empires was quite different. Charlemagne's empire, large as it was, included only about half of the territory of the Western Roman Empire. The region common to both empires included Belgium, France, Switzerland, and northern Italy. But England, Spain, southern Italy, and northern Africa, which had all formed part of the Roman Empire, were outside of Charlemagne's control; whereas Germany, which formed an important portion of his dominion, had never been under Roman rule. In the second place, Charlemagne was not Roman in any sense whatever: not by birth, not by outlook, not by culture. The Franks were a Teutonic tribe, and Charlemagne's native tongue was an old Germanic dialect, though he also learned to speak Latin. Charles lived most of his

life in northern Europe, particularly in Germany, and made only four visits to Italy. The capital of his empire was not Rome but Aachen, in present-day Germany, not far from the Dutch and Belgian borders.

Charlemagne's usual political astuteness failed him badly when it came to the question of the succession to his throne. Although he had spent most of his life fighting wars to unify a

*Charlemagne's Empire.*



large portion of western Europe, he could think of no cleverer plan than that of dividing the Empire between his three sons when he died. Such a procedure is usually an infallible prescription for engendering warfare. As it turned out, however, his two eldest sons died shortly before Charlemagne himself. As a result, his third son, Louis the Pious, was able to inherit Charlemagne's empire intact when Charlemagne died in Aachen, in 814. However, Louis showed no better judgment than his father had when it came to the succession: he, too, wished to divide the empire among his sons. After some fighting, Louis's sons finally signed the Treaty of Verdun (in 843), by which the Frankish empire was divided into three portions. The first portion comprised most of present-day France; the second included a large portion of Germany; and the third included both northern Italy and a wide strip straddling the French-German border.

Now, there are some persons who estimate Charlemagne's influence more highly than I do. It has been said that he restored the Roman Empire; that he reunited western Europe; that he brought Saxony into western Europe; that he set the pattern for most of the succeeding history of western Europe; that he safeguarded western Europe from external threats; that he established the rough boundaries of France, Germany, and Italy; that he spread Christianity; and that his coronation by the Pope set the stage for the centuries-long struggle between the State and the Church in Europe. To my mind, such claims are greatly exaggerated. In the first place, the so-called Holy Roman Empire was not really a restoration of the Roman Empire at all, but rather a continuation of the Frankish kingdom that Charlemagne had inherited.

The unification of western Europe would have been highly significant if Charlemagne had indeed succeeded in accomplishing it. However, Charlemagne's empire fell apart within thirty years after his death, and was never subsequently reunited.

The present borders of France, Germany, and Italy have virtually nothing to do with either Charlemagne or Louis the Pious. The northern boundary of Italy largely follows the

geographical boundary of the Alps. The Franco-German border roughly follows a linguistic boundary, which in turn roughly follows the northern boundary of the old Roman Empire.

To give Charlemagne any substantial credit for the spread of Christianity seems quite unjustified to me. Christianity had been spreading northwards through Europe for centuries before Charlemagne's reign, and continued to do so for centuries thereafter. Quite apart from the point that Charlemagne's forced conversion of the Saxons was morally dreadful, it was also totally unnecessary. The Anglo-Saxons in England were converted to Christianity without being massacred, and in succeeding centuries, the various Scandinavian peoples were also converted by persuasion rather than by force.

What about the notion that Charlemagne's military victories succeeded in safeguarding western Europe from external attack? Not so. During the entire ninth century, the northern and western coasts of Europe were subjected to a devastating series of attacks by the Vikings, or Norsemen. At the same time, Magyar horsemen invaded Europe from the East, and Moslem raiders harassed the continent in the south. It was one of the least secure periods in Europe's history.

The struggle for dominance between civil authorities and the Church was a persisting feature of European history, even in regions that were not part of the Carolingian Empire. Such a struggle, indeed, was inherent in the aspirations of the medieval Church, and would have occurred (though perhaps in slightly different form) without Charlemagne. His coronation in Rome was an interesting incident, but hardly a crucial causative factor in the overall struggle.

I think that it would be difficult to convince an educated Chinese or Indian that Charlemagne should be considered nearly as important as such men as Shih Huang Ti, Genghis Khan, or Asoka. Indeed, if Charlemagne is compared with Sui Wen Ti, it seems fairly clear that the Chinese emperor was the more important of the two. The unification of China engineered by Sui Wen Ti has had a lasting effect, whereas Charlemagne's unification of western Europe hardly endured for a generation.

Although Charlemagne's importance has been somewhat overrated by Europeans, his short-term influence was certainly large. He destroyed the Lombard and Avar states and conquered Saxony. Large numbers of people died in his wars. On the positive side, there was a brief cultural renaissance during his reign (which, however, ended quickly after his death).

There were also various long-term consequences of his career. For centuries after Charlemagne, German emperors engaged in an ultimately futile struggle to control Italy. Without Charlemagne's example, it is quite possible that they would have paid less attention to Italy and devoted more effort to expanding to the north or east. It is also true that the Holy Roman Empire, which Charlemagne started, managed to endure until the early nineteenth century. (For much of that time, however, the actual power of the Holy Roman Emperor was slight, and effective power in Germany was divided among innumerable small states.)

But Charlemagne's most important achievement was probably his subjugation of Saxony, which brought that important region into the mainstream of European civilization. That was an accomplishment similar to Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul, though not quite as important, since Saxony is a substantially smaller region.



*The Treaty of Verdun set the borders of present-day France and Germany.*