

## Charlemagne By the sword and the cross

"By the sword and the cross," Charlemagne became master of Western Europe. It was falling into decay when Charlemagne became joint king of the Franks in 768. Except in the monasteries, people had all but forgotten education and the arts. Boldly Charlemagne conquered barbarians and kings alike. By restoring the roots of learning and order, he preserved many political rights and revived culture.

Charlemagne's grandfather was Charles Martel, the warrior who crushed the Saracens. Charlemagne was the elder son of Bertrade and Pepin the Short, first "mayor of the palace" to become king of the Franks. Although schools had almost disappeared in the 8th century, historians believe that Bertrade gave young Charles some education and that he learned to read. His devotion to the church became the great driving force of his remarkable life.

Charlemagne was tall, powerful, and tireless. His secretary, Eginhard, wrote that Charlemagne had fair hair and a "face laughing and merry . . . his appearance was always stately, regal and dignified." He had a ready wit, but could be stern. His tastes were simple and moderate. He delighted in hunting, riding, and swimming. He wore the Frankish dress: linen shirt and breeches, a silk-fringed tunic, hose wrapped with bands, and, in winter, a tight coat of otter or marten skins. Over all these garments "he flung a blue cloak, and he always had a majestic sword about him."

Charlemagne's character was contradictory. In an age when the usual penalty for defeat was death, Charlemagne several times spared the lives of his defeated foes; yet in 782 at Verden, after a Saxon uprising, he ordered 4,500 Saxons beheaded. He compelled the clergy and nobles to reform, but he divorced two of his four wives without any cause. He forced kings and princes to kneel at his feet, yet his mother and his two favorite wives often overruled him in his own household.

## Charlemagne Begins His Reign

In 768, when Charlemagne was 26, he and his brother Carloman inherited the kingdom of the Franks. In 771 Carloman died, and Charlemagne became sole ruler of the kingdom. At that time the northern half of Europe was still pagan and lawless. In the south, the Roman Catholic church was striving to assert its power against the Lombard kingdom in Italy. In Charlemagne's own realm, the Franks were falling back into barbarian ways, neglecting their education and religion.

Charlemagne was determined to strengthen his realm and to bring order to Europe. In 772 he launched a 30-year campaign that conquered and Christianized the powerful pagan Saxons in the north. He subdued the Avars, a huge Tatar tribe on the Danube. He compelled the rebellious Bavarian dukes to submit to him. When possible he preferred to settle matters peacefully, however. For example, Charlemagne offered to pay the Lombard king Desiderius for return of lands to the pope, but, when Desiderius refused, Charlemagne seized his kingdom in 773 to 774 and restored the Papal States.

The key to Charlemagne's amazing conquests was his ability to organize. During his reign he sent out more than 50 military expeditions. He rode as commander at the head of at least half of them. He moved his armies over wide reaches of country with unbelievable speed, but every move was planned in advance. Before a campaign he told the counts, princes, and bishops throughout his realm how many men they should bring, what arms they were to carry, and even what to load in the supply

wagons. These feats of organization and the swift marches later led Napoleon to study his tactics.

One of Charlemagne's minor campaigns has become the most famous. In 778 he led his army into Spain to battle the infidel Saracens. On its return, Basques ambushed the rear guard at Roncesvalles, in northern Spain, and killed "Count Roland." Roland became a great hero of medieval songs and romances.

By 800 Charlemagne was the undisputed ruler of Western Europe. His vast realm covered what are now France, Switzerland, Belgium, and The Netherlands. It included half of present-day Italy and Germany, part of Austria, and the Spanish March. The broad March reached to the Ebro River. By thus establishing a central government over Western Europe, Charlemagne restored much of the unity of the old Roman Empire and paved the way for the development of modern Europe.

#### Crowned Emperor

On Christmas Day in 800, while Charlemagne knelt in prayer in Saint Peter's in Rome, Pope Leo III seized a golden crown from the altar and placed it on the bowed head of the king. The throng in the church shouted, "To Charles the August, crowned by God, great and pacific emperor, long life and victory!"

Charlemagne is said to have been surprised by the coronation, declaring that he would not have come into the church had he known the pope's plan. However, some historians say the pope would not have dared to act without Charlemagne's knowledge.

The coronation was the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire. Though Charlemagne did not use the title, he is considered the first Holy Roman emperor.

#### Reform and Renaissance

Charlemagne had deep sympathy for the peasants and believed that government should be for the benefit of the governed. When he came to the throne, various local governors, called "counts," had become lax and oppressive. To reform them, he expanded the work of investigators, called missi dominici. He prescribed their duties in documents called capitularies and sent them out in teams of two—a churchman and a noble. They rode to all parts of the realm, inspecting government, administering justice, and reawakening all citizens to their civil and religious duties.

Twice a year Charlemagne summoned the chief men of the empire to discuss its affairs. In all problems he was the final arbiter, even in church issues, and he largely unified church and state.

Charlemagne was a tireless reformer who tried to improve his people's lot in many ways. He set up money standards to encourage commerce, tried to build a Rhine-Danube canal, and urged better farming methods. He especially worked to spread education and Christianity in every class of people.

He revived the Palace School at Aachen, his capital. He set up other schools, opening them to peasant boys as well as nobles.

Charlemagne never stopped studying. He brought an English monk, Alcuin, and other scholars to his court. He learned to read Latin and some Greek but apparently did

not master writing. At meals, instead of having jesters perform, he listened to men reading from learned works.

To revive church music, Charlemagne had monks sent from Rome to train his Frankish singers. To restore some appreciation of art, he brought valuable pieces from Italy. An impressive monument to his religious devotion is the cathedral at Aachen, which he built and where he was buried.

At Charlemagne's death in 814 only one of his three sons, Louis, was living. Louis's weak rule brought on the rise of civil wars and revolts. After his death his three quarreling sons split the empire between them by the Partition of Verdun in 843.

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