

Student Handout #1 - The Carolingian Empire and Charlemagne

As you read, Stop and Jot as directed. Be ready to share your thinking with a partner when you are done.

When Rome finally fell in 476 CE, different Germanic tribes such as the Goths, Vandals, and Franks took control of Western Europe, often fighting with each other for power over certain areas. Two centuries later, their descendants came into conflict with Muslim armies connected to the Umayyads who had moved into what is now Northern Africa and Spain.

Western and central Europe, the area around what is now France and Germany, ended up being ruled by a Frankish family dynasty called the Merovingians (the Franks were a group who lived in the area around the Rhine River in Western Europe). The Merovingian kings grew weak over time, and other political leaders in their courts actually gained more power than the king, even though they allowed the kings to rule in name only. Pepin the Middle was one such man. He held lots of power even though he wasn't king, and he passed this power on to his sons. His son, Charles Martel, took on this role and became even more powerful when he defeated a Muslim army trying to enter the kingdom through Spain at the Battle of Tours in 732 CE. Charles Martel is often credited with stopping the expansion of Islam in this part of Europe and uniting different parts of Europe under one rule.

Stop and Jot: When Rome fell, how did that affect the politics (power and decision making) in western and central Europe?

Charles Martel had a son, Pepin the Short, and this Pepin officially took the throne and removed the Merovingian king from power with the support of the Pope, the leader of the Christian religion in Rome. Pepin the Short then passed on the throne to his sons, Carloman and Charles, also known as Charlemagne, in 771 CE. The kingdom was divided in two, but Carloman died mysteriously after a few years, and Charlemagne became king. Over time, he became the most famous Frankish king of all, and the empire he helped build became known as the Carolingian Empire. Charlemagne ruled until 814 CE. At the height of his rule, there were between 10 and 20 million people living under his reign.



Figure 1: Coin showing the image of Charlemagne

He tried to expand the area under his control and also spread Christianity by forcing people in conquered areas to convert. He was a great military leader and was often at war as he tried to maintain this empire. The military success of Charlemagne and other Carolingians was in part due to their use of advanced cavalry techniques (fighting on horseback). Under Charlemagne, Germanic tribes who had been a problem for the Romans were defeated and the Carolingian kingdom extended its area of control to the east.

Stop and Jot: What do you notice about the names of the kings? Why do you think they did this?

Charlemagne also helped bring about many cultural advances and development in Europe during his rule, so much so that this time is called the Carolingian Renaissance. Charlemagne helped to establish regional governments, he standardized weights and measures to help with trade across this region, and he also improved the legal system. He invited scholars to his court and had a library created as well. Charlemagne strengthened Christianity as well and is considered by some to be a founder of modern Europe.

In 800 CE, Charlemagne was actually crowned Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III of Rome. Pope Leo had been facing a rebellion, and when Charlemagne came to his aid and put down the rebellion, he was rewarded with this honor. With this added title, Charlemagne added in the top half of Italy to his empire, which also included present-day Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and part of Germany.

Stop and Jot: What do you think was Charlemagne's most SIGNIFICANT achievement? Why do you think this?

At the end of Charlemagne's rule, different members of his family were given power over different parts of the empire. The Carolingians, as you may have noted, believed that power and control of land should be inherited from father to son (along with certain names like Pepin and Charles!). This caused problems when more than one son wanted to rule. As a result the kingdom got divided and weakened. This is what happened when Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious, died, and the empire was split between his sons. They fought each other in a civil war until they signed a treaty in 843, the Treaty of Verdun, and divided the empire up. The treaty divided the empire into the Central Frankish Realm, the Eastern Frankish Realm, and the Western Frankish Realm (sometimes called East Francia, Middle Francia, and West Francia). The names of all these areas changed over time, but Germany and France were basically formed in this process.

Conflict over power and land didn't end though, and regional rulers continued to fight for more territory and try to extend their new borders. Vikings attacked from the west and north, causing further problems in the region and weakening the kingdoms even more. In 881, Charles the Fat (a great-grandson of Charlemagne) managed to get control over a large part of the kingdom and again unite these different regions under one rule. However, in 886 he was forced to pay off Viking raiders to prevent them from destroying Paris, and this made him look weak in the eyes of his political opponents. He fled the capital when a rebellion broke out, and conflict developed again with more divisions of the empire taking place.

Over time, the kingdoms were divided up even further. Descendants of Charlemagne ruled parts of the old kingdom for a time, but all were out of power by 987 CE. The modern nations of France and Germany have their origins in this time, with some of today's borders even being established during this time as the larger kingdom was divided up. In addition, the medieval system of kings and lords controlling land, with knights as an important group, all ruling over poor farmers working the land, really began in this time period.

Stop and Jot: What do you think was the biggest problem faced by the Carolingian rulers?

Turn and Talk: How do you think the Carolingians affected the future of Europe, for better and for worse?