

# Charlemagne

Charlemagne, «*SHAHR luh MAYN*» (742-814), or Charles the Great, was the most famous ruler of the Middle Ages and a key figure in European history. He conquered much of western Europe and united it under a great empire. Charlemagne revived the political and cultural life of Europe, which had declined after the fall of the West Roman Empire in the A.D. 400's. His activities laid the foundation for the European civilization that arose during the later Middle Ages.



More is known about Charlemagne than most medieval rulers because of a biography written by Einhard, one of Charlemagne's court attendants. This biography describes Charlemagne as more than 6 feet (2 meters) tall, with piercing eyes, fair hair, a thick neck, and a potbelly. He was strong, fond of exercise, and had an alert mind and a forceful personality. Charlemagne could read and speak Latin, the language of educated people of the time. However, he never learned to write it.

**Military conquests.** Charlemagne was a son of Pepin the Short, who became king of the Franks in 751. After Pepin died in 768, his two sons, Charlemagne and Carloman, shared the Frankish kingdom. The kingdom covered what is now Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and part of western Germany. Charlemagne became the sole ruler of the Frankish kingdom following Carloman's death in 771.

Charlemagne began to expand his kingdom almost immediately. He conquered the Lombard kingdom and Bavaria and added them to his realm. He took land and treasure from the Avars in eastern Europe.

Charlemagne waged his longest and bitterest campaign against the Saxons, a pagan people in northwestern Germany. He subdued the Saxons after about 30 years of war and forced them to accept Christianity.

Charlemagne also waged war in Spain. He was returning from an expedition there in 778 when a mountain people called the Basques ambushed and wiped out his rear guard. This incident became the subject of the famous epic poem *The Song of Roland*. In the poem, however, the ambushers were the Moors, a Muslim people who ruled Spain.

By 800, Charlemagne's realm extended from central Italy north to Denmark and from eastern Germany west to the Atlantic Ocean. Throughout his reign, Charlemagne followed a policy of friendship and cooperation with the Christian church. He protected the church and continually extended its power. In recognition of Charlemagne's vast power, and to strengthen the king's alliance with the church, Pope Leo III crowned him emperor of the Romans on Christmas Day, 800.

**Administration and influence.** In Charlemagne's time, Europe had hardly any towns, trade, or industry. Almost all the people made their living by farming, and they raised barely enough to feed themselves. Few people had much money, and the government and laws of the old Roman Empire had disappeared.

Charlemagne introduced a system to the rest of Europe that his father and grandfather had employed in the Frankish kingdom. He granted large estates to loyal nobles, who, in return, provided military and political services to the king. The nobles also maintained the roads, bridges, and fortifications on their land. This system became the basis for *feudalism*, the political and military system of

Europe for the next 400 years. To stimulate trade, Charlemagne coined silver money, encouraged the establishment of markets, and discouraged excessive tolls.

Charlemagne was devoted to justice and good government. He decreed that all courts be held regularly and that judges base their decisions only on accepted law. He divided his realm into districts and appointed efficient officers to administer them. Periodically, Charlemagne sent royal inspectors to carry his orders to the districts and to report on local conditions. In this way, he kept control of the distant parts of his empire.

Charlemagne also improved education and culture by establishing a school at his palace in Aachen. This *palace school* attracted the best teachers and students in Europe. It educated clergymen, thus strengthening the church, and trained teachers for schools throughout the empire. Scholars at the schools collected and copied ancient Roman manuscripts, which otherwise might have been lost forever. They also developed a new style of handwriting, called *Carolingian minuscule*. This style of handwriting later became the model for printing. The revival of learning under Charlemagne is sometimes called the *Carolingian Renaissance*.

After Charlemagne died on Jan. 2, 814, his empire gradually fell apart. Attacks by Vikings and other invaders weakened the empire, and in 843, Charlemagne's grandsons divided it into three parts. By the late 800's, the empire had ceased to exist. However, the cultural revival begun by Charlemagne had a lasting effect on European civilization. Charlemagne's empire also inspired later attempts to unite many European nations, including the Holy Roman Empire. Later in the Middle Ages, Charlemagne became a hero of legends and stories that credited him with superhuman wisdom and strength.

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**Contributor:**

• Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Department of Art History, Indiana University, Bloomington.

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