In 600 BC, Ionian Greeks from Phocaea founded the colony of Massalia (present-day Marseille).[22] Celtic tribes penetrated parts of eastern and northern France, spreading through the rest of the country between the 5th and 3rd century BC.[23] Around 390 BC, the Gallic chieftain Brennus and his troops made their way to Roman Italy, defeated the Romans in the Battle of the Allia, and besieged and ransomed Rome.[24] This left Rome weakened, and the Gauls continued to harass the region until 345 BC when they entered into a peace treaty.[25] But the Romans and the Gauls remained adversaries for centuries.[26]

Around 125 BC, the south of Gaul was conquered by the Romans, who called this region Provincia Nostra ("Our Province"), which evolved into Provence in French.[27] Julius Caesar conquered the remainder of Gaul and overcame a revolt by Gallic chieftain Vercingetorix in 52 BC.[28] Gaul was divided by Augustus into provinces[29] and many cities were founded during the Gallo-Roman period, including Lugdunum (present-day Lyon), the capital of the Gauls.[29] In 250–290 AD, Roman Gaul suffered a crisis with its fortified borders attacked by barbarians.[30] The situation improved in the first half of the 4th century, a period of revival and prosperity.[31] In 312, Emperor Constantine I converted to Christianity. Christians, who had been persecuted, increased.[32] But from the 5th century, the Barbarian Invasions resumed.[33] Teutonic tribes invaded the region, the Visigoths settling in the southwest, the Burgundians along the Rhine River Valley, and the Franks in the north.[34]

In Late antiquity, ancient Gaul was divided into Germanic kingdoms and a remaining Gallo-Roman territory. Celtic Britons, fleeing the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain, settled in west Armorica; the Armorican peninsula was renamed Brittany and Celtic culture was revived.

The first leader to unite all Franks was Clovis I, who began his reign as king of the Salian Franks in 481, routing the last forces of the Roman governors in 486. Clovis said he would be baptised a Christian in the event of victory against the Visigothic Kingdom, which was said to have guaranteed the battle. Clovis regained the southwest from the Visigoths and was baptised in 508. Clovis I was the first Germanic conqueror after the Fall of the Western Roman Empire to convert to Catholic Christianity; thus France was given the title "Eldest daughter of the Church" by the papacy,[35] and French kings called "the Most Christian Kings of France".

The Franks embraced the Christian Gallo-Roman culture, and ancient Gaul was renamed Francia ("Land of the Franks"). The Germanic Franks adopted Romanic languages. Clovis made Paris his capital and established the Merovingian dynasty, but his kingdom would not survive his death. The Franks treated land as a private possession and divided it among their heirs, so four kingdoms emerged from that of Clovis: Paris, Orléans, Soissons, and Rheims. The last Merovingian kings lost power to their mayors of the palace (head of household). One mayor of the palace, Charles Martel, defeated an Umayyad invasion of Gaul at the Battle of Tours (732). His son, Pepin the Short, seized the crown of Francia from the weakened Merovingians and founded the Carolingian dynasty. Pepin's son, Charlemagne, reunited the Frankish kingdoms and built an empire across Western and Central Europe.

Proclaimed Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III and thus establishing the French government's longtime historical association with the Catholic Church,[36] Charlemagne tried to revive the Western Roman Empire and its cultural grandeur. Charlemagne's son, Louis I kept the empire united, however in 843, it was divided between Louis' three sons, into East Francia, Middle Francia and West Francia. West Francia approximated the area occupied by modern France and was its precursor.[37]

During the 9th and 10th centuries, threatened by Viking invasions, France became a decentralised state: the nobility's titles and lands became hereditary, and authority of the king became more religious than secular, and so was less effective and challenged by noblemen. Thus was established feudalism in France. Some king's vassals grew so powerful they posed a threat to the king. After the Battle of Hastings in 1066, William the Conqueror added "King of England" to his titles, becoming vassal and the equal of the king of France, creating recurring tensions.  
  
  
  
The Carolingian dynasty ruled France until 987, when Hugh Capet was crowned king of the Franks.[38] His descendants unified the country through wars and inheritance. From 1190, the Capetian rulers began to be referred as "kings of France" rather than "kings of the Franks".[39] Later kings expanded their directly possessed domaine royal to cover over half of modern France by the 15th century. Royal authority became more assertive, centred on a hierarchically conceived society distinguishing nobility, clergy, and commoners.

The nobility played a prominent role in Crusades to restore Christian access to the Holy Land. French knights made up most reinforcements in the 200 years of the Crusades, in such a fashion that the Arabs referred to crusaders as Franj.[40] French Crusaders imported French into the Levant, making Old French the base of the lingua franca ("Frankish language") of the Crusader states.[40] The Albigensian Crusade was launched in 1209 to eliminate the heretical Cathars in the southwest of modern-day France.[41]