

## The Fall of the Carolingian Empire

The Germanic tribe known as the Franks established and ruled the Frankish Empire from the fifth through the tenth century in the ancient territory of Gaul (encompassing portions of modern-day France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands). The Carolingian Empire refers to the rule of the Carolingian dynasty, which ruled the Frankish Empire during the Early Middle Ages from 800 to 888 CE. During its period of domination the Frankish Empire, spanning parts of present-day France and Germany, had two monastic dynasties, the Carolingian being the second and most influential one. The Carolingian Empire ruled the Frankish state in one form or another through the early tenth century. The Frankish Empire under the rule of the Carolingian dynasty was one of the most powerful empires in Western Europe during the Early Middle Ages. Today the Carolingian Empire is considered to be the precursor to the modern states of France and Germany, as well as the historical forerunner to the Holy Roman Empire.

Pepin the Short's ascendancy to the Crown and appointment as king of the Franks in the middle of the eighth century launched the beginning of the Carolingian dynasty. The Carolingian family came to power following the Battle of Tours in 732. The battle was fought between the Frankish and neighboring Burgundian forces against the Muslims. The Franks were victorious, successfully fending off the Muslims and preventing them from advancing further into Europe. The victory at the Battle of Tours was one of the integral factors leading to the rise of the Carolingian dynasty and the creation of Carolingian Empire. The Carolingians dominated the Frankish empire and expanded their power throughout Europe for the following century. The Carolingian Empire spanned from 750 to 987, under the rule of Charlemagne and his family. Today, scholars mark the beginning of the Carolingian Empire with the crowning of Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, and his coronation by Pope Leo III (800). The collapse of the Carolingian and the Frankish Empire is usually associated with the death of Charles the Fat (839–888).

### *The Reign of Charlemagne*

Charlemagne was born in 742 and ruled the Frankish realms from 800 to 814. Charlemagne was the son of King Pepin the Short, who is considered the founding member of the Carolingian dynasty. Charlemagne's reign in Western Europe is remembered today for its expansionary and unifying accomplishments throughout the region. Following the collapse of the western portion of the Holy Roman Empire, the Frankish Empire under Charlemagne was one of the first to follow in its footsteps as a major and influential powerhouse in Western Europe. Charlemagne extended his influence, and the power of the Frankish Empire, into a large portion of Western and Central Europe. He was responsible for successfully conquering portions of Italy as well.

Charlemagne is referred to as Charles I in the history of France, Germany, and the Holy Roman Empire. This reflects his widespread influence throughout Western Europe. His reign shaped the course of history in Western Europe and, to a certain

degree, the entire history of the Middle Ages in the West. Charlemagne was also responsible for spreading Christianity throughout large portions of Western and Central Europe. The spread of Christianity was accomplished peacefully during the flourishing of art and culture known as the Carolingian Renaissance, but it was also forcefully imposed on peoples that Charlemagne conquered and ruled. For example, Charlemagne waged war on the Saxons to the east of the Frankish realms. After successfully conquering the Saxons he introduced Christianity and imposed a strict penalty against the practice of German paganism, which was the most popular form of religion among the Saxon peoples.

Throughout Charlemagne's reign he successfully extended the influence and presence of the Frankish Empire to cover nearly as much territory as the Western Roman Empire had ruled over centuries earlier. During his lifetime Charlemagne divided the Carolingian Empire among his three sons: Pepin, Charles the Younger, and Louis the Pious. Although this potentially set the stage for significant divisions within the kingdom, Charles died without leaving any heirs to his holdings and Pepin died leaving only an illegitimate son, who would rule Italy. Following Charlemagne's death in 814, Louis the Pious succeeded his father as emperor and king of the Franks.

### *Carolingian Renaissance*

Although there were developments in writing and architecture during the Merovingian period, the reign of Charlemagne and the Carolingian dynasty saw a flourishing of culture and innovation throughout the Frankish Empire. Today it is considered by scholars to be the first of three medieval renaissances. The entire period referred to as the Carolingian Renaissance spanned the eighth and ninth centuries; however, the main period of cultural activity occurred during the reigns of Charlemagne (r. 800–814) and his son Louis the Pious (r. 814–840). Elite scholars of Charlemagne's court were largely responsible for spearheading the Carolingian Renaissance and, in a similar way to the later Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, these scholars turned to ancient and classical texts for wisdom. During the Carolingian Renaissance, scholars looked to the Roman Empire of the fourth century for inspiration. Overall, the Carolingian Renaissance was largely confined to elite intellectual members of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious's court.

Throughout the Carolingian Renaissance there was rapid growth in literature, the arts, architecture, and scriptural studies. This reflected the devoted interest in education, high culture, and moral revitalization among the Carolingian monarchy and court. The Carolingian Renaissance saw the preservation and duplication of ancient and classic texts and the creation of a new and more legible style of script—the Carolingian minuscule. The early modern Italic script has its roots in the Carolingian minuscule. The Carolingian minuscule provided a common writing style and a more universal Medieval Latin that improved communications throughout Europe for centuries to follow.

Charlemagne's *Admonitio generalis* (789) and *Epistola de litteris colendis* are two of the most important works written by Charlemagne to have survived to the present day. The *Admonitio generalis* was a piece of legislation containing over eighty clauses,

many of which related to religious reform and regulation. The *Epistola de litteris colendis* was a letter written by Charlemagne pertaining to the issue of language.

Charlemagne brought scholars from all over Europe to his court and ordered the creation of schools to address the growing problem of the fragmentation of Latin into the different romance languages (Spanish, Italian, French, etc.). One of the primary objectives of these groups of scholars was to create a universal curriculum to be used at these new schools. These scholars were responsible for creating textbooks and word lists, and for establishing the basic foundations for medieval education, such as the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) followed by the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy).

A major theme throughout Charlemagne's reign and the Carolingian Renaissance was an attempt to unite the diverse ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups within the kingdom. Scholars' work in language and scripts attempted to do this in the field of education. Charlemagne also tried to create a universal style of church music by eliminating any regional differences in style. He also managed to standardize the system of currency throughout the kingdom by creating a new system based on a pound of silver. The Carolingian Renaissance ultimately worked toward fostering the creation of a common European identity.

### *The Treaty of Verdun (843)*

One of the most substantial threats to the Carolingian dynasty and the Frankish Empire was the practice of *gavelkind*, which entailed the division of the empire among the king's heirs. This would eventually be replaced throughout Western Europe by the practice of *primogeniture*, which involved passing down the majority of a family's property to the eldest son. Following his ascendancy to the throne, King Louis the Pious had a difficult time maintaining control over the Carolingian Empire. By 817, only three years after his father's death, Louis the Pious had parceled out new kingships throughout the empire for his three sons from his first marriage. His eldest son Lothar became co-emperor with his father in addition to becoming the king of Italy. Louis the Pious's other sons, Pepin and Louis the German, received similar titles and territories. In 823, civil war broke out between Louis the Pious and his elder three sons following his attempt to incorporate Charles the Bald, his fourth son from his second marriage, into his will.

The Carolingian Civil War lasted from roughly 823 to 835 and involved a series of hostile infighting between Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald and his older sons Lothar, Pepin, and Louis the German. In 829 Louis the Pious stripped Lothar of his title as co-Emperor and banished him to Italy. The next year, in 830, his sons retaliated and invaded Louis the Pious's empire and replaced him with Lothar. In 831, Louis the Pious once again attacked his sons and bestowed the kingdom of Italy to Charles the Bald. Over the course of the next two years Pepin, Louis the German, and Lothar revolted once again, resulting in the imprisonment of Louis the Pious and Charles the Bald. Finally, in 835, peace was made within the family and Louis the Pious was ultimately restored to his position as emperor.

After the death of Louis the Pious in 840, Lothar declared himself to be the sole successor to the entire Frankish Empire. This led to a second war between Lothar and his brothers Charles the Bald and Louis the German. Lothar's troops were ultimately unable to defeat Charles and Louis's army, and finally, in 842, Louis the German and Charles the Bald agreed to an alliance referred to as the Oaths of Strasbourg. In addition to asserting Lothar's inability to rule the kingdom, the Oaths of Strasbourg divided the empire between Charles the Bald and Louis the German. Today, the oaths signify the beginnings of the kingdoms of France and Germany.

After Charles the Bald and Louis the German allied themselves in the Oaths of Strasbourg, Lothar was finally willing to explore peaceful negotiations with his two brothers. This resulted in the Treaty of Verdun (843), which was the final step in the partition of Charlemagne's empire. The Treaty of Verdun (843) in many ways marked the beginning of the end of the Carolingian Empire. Although the treaty successfully ended the civil war, it established an official division of the empire into three separate kingdoms to be ruled by Lothar I, Charles the Bald, and Louis the German, the territories that would one day lead to the modern-day nations Italy, France, and Germany, respectively.

The legacy of the Treaty of Verdun would prove to have lasting consequences for over a millennium. The partition of Charlemagne's empire by his three grandsons was carried out without any consideration of the complex social and cultural differences that existed within the three territories. This led to hostility and conflict in Western Europe that lasted in some form or another up through World War II. Lothar's kingdom, referred to as the Middle Frankish Kingdom (comprising parts of modern-day Italy), proved very difficult to keep unified because of its natural geographical division by the Alps. This region would become fragmented, and its smaller territorial entities led to the disunity of the Italian Peninsula, which continued to pose problems until Italy's unification in the mid-nineteenth century. The other two kingdoms of West Francia (modern-day France) and East Francia (modern-day Germany) continued to be more powerful than the Middle Frankish Kingdom; however, East Francia would continue as a series of Germanic states until its unification at the end of the nineteenth century.

### *Decline and Collapse of the Carolingian Dynasty and Empire*

Infighting between Louis the Pious's sons and external threats from different civilizations, such as the Hungarians and the Muslims, both contributed to the collapse of the Carolingian Empire. However, another internal conflict increasingly threatened the future of the Carolingian dynasty over the course of the second half of the ninth century. The noble class throughout the Frankish realm had grown increasingly powerful during the rule of the Carolingian dynasty. It derived its power from nobles' ability to collect taxes and extract labor from the peasants who lived and worked on their land. Traditionally, the Frankish monarchs granted this land to the nobility in return for supporting the empire. The population of the nobility was steadily increasing at the same time that the Frankish kings stopped conquering new lands to be able to grant to the nobility. This led to a shortage of land to distribute to the nobility and a growing frustration among the nobility as a result. The nobles continued to demand land for

support, particularly during the period of civil wars. When members of the Carolingian monarchies could no longer provide land in exchange for noble support, members of the nobility started to seize religious properties, such as churches and monasteries. This weakened the power of the monarchies and increased the local power of the aristocracy throughout the Frankish Empire, and later throughout parts of Western and Central Europe.

The Carolingian Empire itself continued to be further fragmented and divided following the Treaty of Verdun. After the death of Charles the Bald in 877, the kingdom of West Francia was passed on to his son Louis the Stammerer, who died only two years later. The realm of West Francia was divided between his two older sons, Louis II and Carloman. Carloman died shortly after and his holdings were passed on to his brother Charles the Fat. In 881, Charles the Fat was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. The kingdoms previously held by his brother and other members of the royal family went to Charles after their death, increasing the size of his kingdom, and essentially reviving Charlemagne's empire. Charles faced threats from the Vikings and was unable to defend his kingdom against their invasion. Instead, Charles paid the Vikings to leave Paris in 886. The court viewed this action by Charles as weak and cowardly. As a result, his nephew raised an army and revolted against Charles, who fled, leaving an empire fragmented and fraught with confusion over the future course of succession. Following Charles's death in 888, the Carolingian Empire essentially collapsed, ending the powerful reign of the Carolingian dynasty and the entire Frankish Empire.

#### Summary:

- One of the defining landmarks of the Carolingian dynasty came in 754, when Pepin the Short was anointed king by the pope. It was the second and final familial dynasty to reign over the Frankish Empire.
- The Carolingian Empire thrived and expanded under the reign of Charlemagne (800–814).
- Some scholars designate Pope Leo III's appointment of Charlemagne as emperor, in 800, as the beginning of the Holy Roman Empire, which continued to exist until its dissolution in 1806.
- The rule of Charlemagne as Holy Roman emperor and king of the Frankish Empire laid the foundations of future monarchies in France and the German states. Furthermore, Charlemagne's descendants were responsible for establishing the kingdoms that would eventually become the nations of Italy, France, and Germany.