Charlemagne: The Father of Europe

*History.com Staff (adapted)*

Charlemagne (c.742-814), also known as Karl and Charles the Great, was a medieval emperor who ruled much of Western Europe from 768 to 814. In 771, Charlemagne became king of the Franks, a Germanic tribe in Western Europe. His mission was to unite all Germanic peoples into one kingdom, and convert his subjects (people he ruled) to Christianity. A skilled military strategist, he spent much of his reign engaged in warfare in order to accomplish his goals. In 800, Pope Leo III (750-816) crowned Charlemagne emperor of the Romans. In this role, he encouraged the Carolingian Renaissance, a cultural and intellectual revival in Europe. When he died in 814, Charlemagne’s empire encompassed much of Western Europe, and he had also ensured the survival of Christianity in the West. Today, Charlemagne is referred to by some as the father of Europe.

**CHARLEMAGNE’S EARLY YEARS**

When his father died in 768, the Frankish kingdom was divided between Charlemagne and his younger brother Carloman. The brothers had a bad relationship, as Professor Michael Kulikowski of the University of Tennessee explains, “Frankish [land] was always divided among the male [sons], and... as a result, Charlemagne and his brother had to share power. They weren’t too [happy with] this arrangement...” However, Carloman died in 771, and Charlemagne became the one ruler of the Franks. “We want to believe that Charlemagne had something to do with [his brother’s death],” suggests Professor Kelly DeVries of Loyola College. “Maybe he did. We will never know for sure.”

**CHARLEMAGNE EXPANDS HIS KINGDOM**

Once in power, Charlemagne sought to unite all the Germanic peoples into one kingdom, and convert his subjects to Christianity. In order to carry out this mission, he spent the majority of his reign engaged in military campaigns. Charlemagne waged a bloody war against the Saxons, a Germanic tribe of pagan worshippers (polytheists), and earned a reputation for ruthlessness (toughness). In 782 at the Massacre of Verden, Charlemagne slaughtered some 4,500 Saxons. He forced the Saxons to convert to Christianity, and declared that anyone who didn’t get baptized as a Christian be put to death, saying, “If there is anyone of the Saxon people [hiding] among them unbaptized, and if he [refuses] to come to baptism and wishes to... stay a pagan, let him die.”

Professor Brett Whalen of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill explains, “This brutal execution, it really was part of a bigger picture. Charlemagne meant business. Anyone who is caught worshiping pagan gods were performing pagan rites, it’s a death sentence... Anyone who disobeys the king is executed. Anyone who... refuses to be baptized as a Christian, that is again the death penalty. So the execution on that day is just one [example of Charlemagne’s policy].”

**CHARLEMAGNE AS EMPEROR**

In his role as a defender of Christianity, Charlemagne gave money and land to the Christian church and protected the popes from their powerful political enemies. As a way to acknowledge Charlemagne’s power and strengthen his relationship with the church, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne “Emperor of the Romans” on December 25, 800, at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

This was the first time there had been an Emperor in the West in over three centuries. However, in the East, there were still Roman Emperors ruling from Constantinople, and they would not appreciate this title being granted to a Germanic king by the Pope, especially since the Eastern Christians did not accept the Pope as their religious leader. This led to increased conflict between East and West.

Yet as an emperor, Charlemagne proved to be a talented ruler of the large area he controlled. As Professor Thomas Martin of the College of the Holy Cross explains, “He traveled constantly... He didn’t shut himself up in the palace,
isolated from what was going on... He believed that he had to increase the social, the political, and the intellectual organization of his society....”

He promoted education and encouraged the Carolingian Renaissance, a period of increased emphasis on scholarship and culture. He started economic and religious reforms, and helped create the Carolingian miniscule, a standardized form of writing that later became a basis for modern European lower-case alphabets. His palace at Aachen included a school, for which he hired the best teachers in the land. He even took it upon himself to learn to read and write, which was very unusual for a king at this time. As his biographer Einhard mentions, “He tried also to learn to write, and for this purpose used to carry with him and keep under the pillow of his couch tablets and writing sheets that he might in spare moments accustom himself to the formation of letters. But he made little advance in this strange task, which was begun too late in life.”

Though some of his actions may seem far from greatness, Professor Kelly DeVries of Loyola College argues that he deserved to be called Charles the Great, saying, “Everything you want to say about him is probably accurate. He never ever lost a military conquest. He gives birth again to education, he reestablishes the economic importance of the empire. Any title that’s given to him is too few.” While his enemies and rivals may have hated him, for Western Christendom, Charlemagne was a light in a dark age.
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