

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 present-day Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and western Germany. He embarked on a mission to unite all Germanic peoples into one kingdom, and convert his subjects 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

Charlemagne was born around 742, the son of Bertrada of Laon (d.783) and Pepin the Short (d.768), who became king of the Franks in 751. Charlemagne's exact birthplace is unknown, although historians have suggested Liege in present-day Belgium and Aachen in modern-day Germany as possible locations. Similarly, little is known about the future ruler's childhood and education, although as an adult, he displayed a talent for languages and could speak Latin and understand Greek, among other languages.

After Pepin's death in 768, the Frankish kingdom was divided between Charlemagne and his younger brother Carloman (751-771). The brothers had a strained relationship, as Professor Michael Kulikowski of the University of Tennessee explains, "Frankish property was always divided among the male heirs (according to the Germanic custom), and in the case of royalty, it was the same thing. And as a result, Charlemagne and his brother had to share power. They weren't too keen on this arrangement, and they weren't too fond of each other."

However, with Carloman's death in 771, Charlemagne became the sole ruler of the Franks. "History says he dies. That's it. We want to believe that Charlemagne had something to do with it," 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. Soon after becoming king, he conquered the Lombards (in present-day northern Italy), the Avars (in modern-day Austria and Hungary) and Bavaria, among others.

Charlemagne waged a bloody, three-decade-long series of battles against the Saxons, a Germanic tribe of pagan worshippers, and earned a reputation for ruthlessness. In 782 at the Massacre of Verden, Charlemagne reportedly ordered the slaughter of some 4,500 Saxons. He eventually forced the Saxons to convert to Christianity, and declared that anyone who didn't get baptized or follow other Christian traditions be put to death. In 785 Charlemagne declared, *"If there is anyone of the Saxon people lurking among them unbaptized, and if he scorns to come to baptism and wishes to... stay a pagan, let him die."*

According to Professor Thomas Martin of the College of the Holy Cross, *"He thought he really was going to save them by making them Christian, even if he had to do it at the point of a sword."* Professor Brett Whalen of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill adds, *"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 cremates someone, a dead body, instead of burying them as a Christian, is executed. Anyone who disobeys the king is executed. Anyone who is not baptized, who refuses to be baptized as a Christian, that is again the death penalty. So the execution on that day is just one sign of this brutal and ultimately successful policy that Charlemagne pursued in the region."*

CHARLEMAGNE'S PERSONAL LIFE

In his personal life, Charlemagne had multiple wives and mistresses and perhaps more than 20 children. He was reportedly a devoted father, who encouraged his children's education. He allegedly loved his daughters so much that he prohibited them from marrying while he was alive.

Einhard (c. 775-840), a Frankish scholar and contemporary of Charlemagne, wrote a biography of the emperor after his death. In the work, titled "Vita Karoli Magni (Life of Charles the Great)," he described Charlemagne as

"broad and strong in the form of his body and exceptionally tall without, however, exceeding an appropriate measure...His appearance was impressive whether he was sitting or standing despite having a neck that was fat and too short, and a large belly."

CHARLEMAGNE AS EMPEROR

In his role as a zealous 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 reinforce 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, as Kelly DeVries of Loyola College points out, *"It isn't the same empire. There is nothing that is the same. The urban areas have fallen, trade is nonexistent, the economic structure, the transportation structure, engineering, has all faltered. Charlemagne does his best to build up education once more because that's destroyed, but it's going to be a very long time before Europe gets back to [level that the Roman Empire] once had."*

Also, in the East, there were still Roman Emperors ruling from Constantinople, and they would not appreciate his title being granted to a barbarian king by the Pope, whose authority the Eastern Christians did not accept. This led to increased conflict between East and West.

Yet as an emperor, Charlemagne proved to be a talented diplomat and able administrator of the vast area he controlled. As Professor Thomas Martin of the College of the Holy Cross explains, *"He traveled constantly. It was management by walking around, as they say today. He didn't shut himself up in the palace, isolated from what was going on. And he also had a vision of what it meant to be a king. Like the great kings of the period after Alexander the Great, he believed that he had to increase the social, the political, and the intellectual organization of his society. And inputting all of these complicated aspects of rule together, he distinguished himself from every other ruler, certainly for the three hundred years before him."*

He promoted education and encouraged the Carolingian Renaissance, a period of renewed emphasis on scholarship and culture. He instituted economic and religious reforms, and was a driving force behind the Carolingian miniscule, a standardized form of writing that later became a basis for modern European lower-case alphabets. Charlemagne ruled from a number of cities and palaces, but spent significant time in Aachen. His palace there included a school, for which he recruited 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.