

The Rise of the Franks

Among the Germanic tribes that invaded Western Europe causing the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West, the Franks played a very important role. The Franks were a nomadic Germanic tribe who lived in the Rhine River valley, which flows through modern-day Germany. In the 400s, the Franks were restless and began to invade Roman Gaul (the France of today).

The Franks were ruled by a family called the Merovingians. Clovis I ruled the Franks from 481 to 511. Under his leadership, this tribal kingdom became the most powerful group in Western Europe. Born a pagan, Clovis was converted to Christianity in 496 by his wife, a princess named Clotilda. (According to the 6th-century historian Gregory of Tours, Clovis was baptized after he won the battle of Strasbourg against a rival German tribe to fulfill a promise he made to God before the battle.)

Not only did Clovis convert to Christianity, but so did his people. The Christianizing of the Franks is important historically. It made certain that Christians, especially Catholics, in his kingdom, would be loyal to Clovis.

After his death in 511, Clovis's kingdom was extended by his sons and grandsons to include all of modern-day France, Belgium, and the larger part of Germany. However, the Merovingian kingdom faced many challenges. The royal household was corrupt; royal plots of murder and assassination were common. The Merovingians were destined to lose their power in time.

By the 600s, the Merovingian kings were too weak to rule in reality, and the Frankish kingdom was divided into three independent kingdoms. Although the dynasty continued to support a king, the chief official of the royal house, known as the Mayor of the Palace, held power. The Merovingian kings were reduced to nothing.

Among the foreign challenges the Merovingians faced in these years was the invasion of Western Europe by the Moslems, the followers of the prophet Muhammad, who had created a new religion in Arabia known as Islam during the early 600s. A great horde of Moslem Arabs was rampaging on horseback in the late 7th century, threatening Spain and ultimately the Frankish kingdom.

In 714, a skilled and capable Mayor of the Palace, Charles Martel, came to power. One of the Carolingian family who had challenged the power of the Merovingians and other Mayors of the Palace, Charles brought unity to the Kingdom of the Franks while managing to keep the Merovingians weak figureheads.



It would be Charles Martel who would face the advancing Moslems. In 732, he faced them in battle at Tours (southwest of Paris). The battle featured Frankish infantry troops against horse-bound Moslem cavalry. The Moslems faced heavy losses, and when their commander was killed, they retreated to Spain.

The battle of Tours is considered one of the key military engagements of history. It guaranteed that Moslems would not rule in a future France, and that Christianity would remain the religion of the Franks.

Another important result of the battle of Tours was that Charles realized the effectiveness of mounted cavalry. Following this victory, he began to create military units of Frankish cavalry. This led to the development of mounted knights, an important fighting force in the medieval world.

Review and Write

Compare the success of the Merovingians and the Carolingians in leading the Kingdom of the Franks.