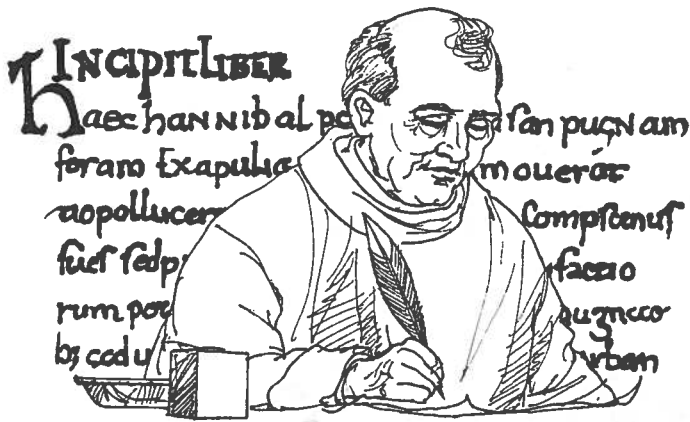


The Frankish Empire of Charlemagne



A sample of Carolingian miniscule

Charles Martel, an outstanding Mayor of the Palace, managed to defeat the Moslems at the battle of Tours in 732. This success helped pave the way for his family, the Carolingians, to come to royal power over the kingdom of the Franks.

His son, Pepin the Short, inherited his father's title and soon succeeded in gaining further power for himself. He ruled from 741 to 768, years of increasing power for the Frankish kingdom. He convinced Pope Boniface that he, Pepin, was the actual ruler of the kingdom. During the winter of 751–52, Boniface crowned Pepin as King of the Franks and the last Merovingian monarch was shipped quietly off to a monastery.

Pepin's close relationship with the papacy in Rome strengthened both his monarchy and the influence of the Church in northern Europe. The alliance between these two powers helped speed up the separation of Western Christianity from the Eastern or Greek version.

This first Carolingian king, Pepin, proved to be a successful monarch. However, his son would out-shine his father. His name was Charlemagne (SHAR luh mayn). Born in 742, his Latin name was Carolus Magnus (which translates as Charles the Great).

When his father died in 768, Charlemagne and his brother inherited his throne as joint heirs. After his brother's death three years later, Charlemagne became the sole ruler of the Franks. He soon embodied the ideal of a medieval king. The alliance between the Franks and the Pope was maintained.

Through his extensive military campaigns, Charlemagne was able to create an extraordinary empire for himself. In the year 800, on Christmas Day, he was crowned as emperor, with Pope Leo III placing a gold crown on his head.

This crowning of Charlemagne was an attempt to bring back the glory days of the long-dead Roman Empire. And his lands were impressive in scope. The Frankish Empire, or what came to be known as the Carolingian Empire, included all of the western half of the old Roman Empire minus Africa, Britain, southern Italy, and most of Spain. It stretched from the Baltic Sea south to the Adriatic Sea in the east to the coast of Denmark and to northern Spain in the west. Charlemagne maintained his Empire through military campaigns, which took place during nearly every year of his reign.

What kind of man was Charlemagne? He was one of the most powerful rulers of the Early Middle Ages, a military commander and a capable statesman. He stood tall (over 6' 3") in an age when few people were over 5' 5". He loved hunting and swimming (his palace in Aachen had a marble pool which could accommodate 100 bathers). He was fond of music, despised lavish court decorations, spoke German and Latin, and even knew a little Greek.

Although he was not well educated, Charlemagne was a great supporter, or patron, of the arts. He encouraged and paid for a revival of learning within his kingdom. Called the Carolingian Renaissance, his scribes, who included scholar-monks, copied many manuscripts during his reign. He had schools established throughout his Empire, usually attached to monasteries and churches where priests could learn to read, write, and do simple arithmetic.

More than 90 percent of the old Roman writings which survive today find their earliest form in a Carolingian text. The writing style used was called Carolingian minuscule, since copyists used lower-case letters, rather than all capital letters, as had been the Roman practice.

Although his reign was a model for later medieval kings and his lands were extensive, when he died, his sons divided his kingdom up, bringing to an end the glory days of the Carolingians.