

Dividing Charlemagne's Empire

The great Carolingian rulers were a grandfather, son, and grandson: Charles Martel, Pepin the Short, and Charlemagne. Between them, they provided a century of solid rule over the Franks and their neighbors—from approximately 714 to 814.

Destroying much of their combined legacy, however, only took one generation. By the mid-800s, Charlemagne's Empire was divided three ways, creating in the process the modern nations of France and Germany.

Before his own death, Charlemagne witnessed the crowning of his son Louis the Pious who almost immediately partitioned, or divided, the Empire between his three sons: Lothair the Elder, Louis the German, and Charles the Bald. The three sons soon quarreled between themselves, even to the point of fighting one another through civil war.

Louis and Charles sided against their brother Lothair, signing the famous Strasbourg Oaths in 842. Interestingly, the oath document was written in two languages: French, to be understood by Charles's followers, and German, for those loyal to Louis, many of whom lived on the eastern side of the Rhine river. The use of these two languages, indicates that the Frankish Empire was already facing division between two groups: those living in East Frankland and those of Germany.

The next year, in 843, the three brothers ended their fighting and signed the Treaty of Verdun. The result was a three-way split of the Empire. Charles the Bald gained title over the western empire and Louis the German over the eastern portion. Lothair (he was to keep the title of Carolingian emperor) was granted land which lay between the other two. It included the northern half of Italy, and a strip of territory about 150 miles wide, running from Italy to the modern-day Netherlands and the North Sea.

Never again would the Carolingians rule over a united empire. In fact, Frankish nobles overthrew the last Carolingian in the West in 887 and the final Carolingian rulers in East Frankland died in 911.

Besides bringing about an end to Charlemagne's Empire, the Treaty of Verdun had other primary results. The states established for Louis the German and Charles the Bald helped to create the modern nations of France and Germany. The kingdom of Lothair, called Lotharingia or Lorraine, became destined to be a battleground between France and Germany in later centuries, including the Twentieth.

Such weak rulers on the thrones of Europe helped give rise to more localized rule by regionally powerful noblemen. These lords controlled estates through a system known as feudalism, which we will be studying later.



Map Exercise

This map shows the Empire of Charlemagne at the time of his death. In short order, it would be divided between his three grandsons. Using colored pencils, shade the three kingdoms established by the Treaty of Verdun. Identify the kingdoms ruled by Lothair the Elder, Louis the German, and Charles the Bald.