

The Frankish Empire

The Germanic tribe known as the Franks established and ruled the Frankish Empire, in the ancient territory of Gaul (largely encompassing modern-day France and parts of modern-day Germany), from the fifth through the tenth century. Over the course of the empire's history two familial dynasties, the Merovingian dynasty and the Carolingian dynasty, reigned over these territories. The Merovingian dynasty, under its founder King Clovis I, was responsible for uniting all of the Frankish kingdoms under one Crown. Clovis and the Merovingian dynasty expanded the presence and influence of the Franks throughout parts of Western and Central Europe.

The power of the Merovingian dynasty waned by the end of the seventh century, and Pepin the Short, a member of the Carolingian family, became king in the middle of the eighth century. His ascendancy to the throne launched the beginning of the Carolingian Empire. The Carolingian Empire ruled the Frankish realm until the end of the tenth century. It was one of the most powerful empires in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. The modern state of France would evolve from the Frankish Empire and medieval Francia.

The Franks and the Origins of the Frankish Empire

The Franks were originally a Germanic tribe that invaded portions of Roman territory from the third to the fifth century. The Salian Franks emerged as a subgroup of the early Franks and were known for being particularly militaristic. They would also go on to spread Christianity throughout Western Europe. King Clovis (ca. 466–511) was the first Frankish king and was responsible for uniting the disparate Frankish tribes into one kingdom, called Francia. At the urging of his wife, Clotilde, King Clovis converted to Catholicism in around 496, and was thus the first Catholic King to rule over Francia. He also established a precedent for future Frankish kings to rule as Catholics. Clovis's conversion to Christianity guaranteed support and aid from Catholic Rome. It also eased tensions between the Franks and the Catholic population in Gaul, which was more willing to accept a Catholic monarch. Clovis's religion impacted the future course of Western and Central Europe, as he spread his religious beliefs throughout nearly the entire region. Clovis is regarded as the founder of the Merovingian dynasty. The Merovingian dynasty established a monarchy that replaced the Western Roman Empire and reigned over the Frankish Empire from the late fifth through the eighth century.

Merovingian Dynasty

The Merovingian dynasty was a hereditary dynasty that began with Childeric I (ca. 457–481), the leader of the Salian Franks and the father of Clovis I. However Clovis is traditionally considered the first major leader of the Merovingian dynasty, as he successfully united all of the Franks under Merovingian rule. The dynasty ruled the Frankish Empire for the following three hundred years. Over time, the government grew weaker as a result of the prevailing custom that obligated the king to divide the kingdom's territories equally among his sons. This was particularly threatening to the

future stability of the monarchy. Following the death of Clovis, the kingdom became fragmented among his four sons. Wars between royal descendents were common; however, they rarely presented any substantial threat to Francia. The partitioning off of smaller political units continued after Clovis's death with each succeeding generation.

During this time the Frankish Empire was also threatened from outside of its realm. Francia was threatened externally by the Slavs and Avars to the north, the Lombards to the southeast, and the Muslims to the southwest. Finally, in 613, Clotaire III successfully united the smaller political units under one centralized power and created its new capital in Paris. However, royal power continued to weaken over the course of the next century. Clotaire's son Dagobert I (603–639) is considered to be the last powerful monarch of the Merovingian dynasty. The final Merovingian ruler was Childeric III, who was deposed in 752 by Pope Zachary. Pope Stephen II, Zachary's successor, appointed Pepin the Short as king in 754. Pepin was the first ruler of the Carolingian dynasty, which would rule the Frankish Empire until its collapse in the late ninth century.

Merovingian Religion and Culture

Clovis's decision to convert to Catholicism not only shaped the political but also the social and cultural structure of the Frankish empire. The monarchy and the elite were closely linked to the church during the Merovingian period and would oftentimes use the church for their own advantage. Monasteries were often given to members of the elite who were willing to offer their support to the Merovingian dynasty. The nobility would also donate large tracts of land to monasteries in order to circumvent certain taxation laws, which made it easier to keep land in the same family for generations. This resulted in a very close relationship between the elite and monastic communities. Elite families were known to appoint family members to high positions in the monastery. Additionally, families would send their adult offspring who could not be married off to live in the monastery.

During the reign of the Merovingian dynasty there were new developments in art and architecture, most of which corresponded with the growth of the monasteries and the Catholic Church. The construction of churches during this period combined the old tradition of the Roman basilica with new styles and influences from places such as Syria and Armenia. Most churches were built out of stone and some were very ornate with intricate mosaics and marble columns. Under Merovingian rule the Franks introduced the use of a sarcophagus positioned axially behind the altar. This was a new, distinctive feature in church architecture with no Roman precedent. The Merovingian period was also known for its skilled craftsmen, who were recognized throughout Europe for their glassmaking and stonemasonry. Merovingian craftsmen were used in England to revive glassmaking, and the stonemasons were also employed in England to build churches throughout the country.

Carolingian Empire

In 732, the Battle of Tours was fought between the Franks (and their Burgundian allies) and the Muslims. The Franks were victorious, successfully fending off the Muslims and preventing them from advancing further into Europe. The victory at the Battle of Tours was one of the integral factors leading to the rise of the Carolingian dynasty and the creation of Carolingian Empire. The Carolingians dominated the Frankish Empire and expanded their power throughout Europe for the following century. The Carolingian Empire spanned from around 750 to 888, under the rule of Charlemagne and his descendants. Today, scholars mark the beginning of the Carolingian Empire with the crowning of Charlemagne (also known as Charles I, or Charles the Great) and his coronation by Pope Leo III in 800. The collapse of the Carolingian and Frankish Empire is usually associated with the death of Charles the Fat (839–888).

The Age of Charlemagne spanned from 768 to 814. Charlemagne is referred to as Charles I in the history of France, Germany, and the Holy Roman Empire. This reflects his widespread influence throughout Western Europe, as well as parts of Central Europe. Charlemagne's reign shaped the course of history in Western Europe and to a certain degree the entire history of the Middle Ages in the West. Charlemagne was also responsible for spreading Christianity throughout large portions of Western and Central Europe. The spread of Christianity was accomplished peacefully during the flourishing of art and culture known as the Carolingian Renaissance, but it was also forcefully imposed on peoples that Charlemagne conquered and ruled. After successfully conquering the Saxons to the east, Charlemagne strictly enforced the observance of Christianity and enforced the death penalty for the practice of German paganism, which was the most popular form of religion among the Saxons.

During Charlemagne's reign he successfully extended the influence and presence of the Frankish Empire to cover nearly the entire territory ruled by the Western Roman Empire centuries before. Throughout his lifetime Charlemagne divided the Carolingian Empire among his three sons: Pepin, Charles the Younger, and Louis the Pious. Although this potentially set the stage for substantial divisions among the kingdom, Charles died without leaving any heirs to his holdings and Pepin died leaving only an illegitimate son (who would rule Italy until his own death). Following Charlemagne's death in 814, Louis the Pious succeeded his father as king of the Franks.

The Carolingian Renaissance

Although there were developments in writing and architecture during the Merovingian period, the Carolingian period saw a flourishing of culture and innovation. Referred to as the Carolingian Renaissance, this period spanned the eighth and ninth centuries; however, the main period of cultural activity occurred during the reigns of Charlemagne (r. 800–814) and his son Louis the Pious (r. 814–840). Elite scholars of Charlemagne's court spearheaded the Carolingian Renaissance and, in a similar way to the later Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, these scholars

turned to the texts of classical scholars to try and recreate the glory of the old Roman Empire in West. During the Carolingian Renaissance, scholars looked to the Roman Empire of the fourth century for inspiration. The movement was largely limited to elite intellectual members of the court.

Throughout the Carolingian Renaissance there was a growth in literature, the arts, architecture, and scriptural studies, reflecting the interest in education, high culture, and moral revitalization among the Carolingian monarchy and court. The Carolingian Renaissance saw the preservation and duplication of ancient and classic texts and the creation of a new and more legible style of script—the Carolingian minuscule. The Carolingian minuscule provided a common writing style and a more universal Medieval Latin that improved communications throughout Europe for centuries to follow.

During his reign, Charlemagne brought scholars from all over Europe to his court and ordered the creation of schools to address the growing problem of the fragmentation of Latin into the different romance languages (Spanish, Italian, French, etc.). One of the primary objectives of these groups of scholars was to create a universal curriculum to be used at these new schools. These scholars were responsible for creating textbooks and establishing the basic foundations for medieval education. A major theme throughout the Carolingian Renaissance was an attempt to unite the diverse cultural and ethnic groups within the kingdom. Charlemagne's court scholars attempted to do this in the field of education.

The Decline of the Frankish Empire

In the generations following Charlemagne's death there were persistent problems regarding the succession of his great empire. According to the prevailing tradition, kings divided their territory among all of their heirs. This led to infighting and fragmentation throughout the Frankish Empire. Charlemagne died in 814 and, following his death, his son Louis the Pious peacefully took control of his father's empire. Hostility, chaos, and civil war ensued with the following generation, between Louis the Pious and his four sons. The fighting finally ended with the Treaty of Verdun (843), which represented the final step in the partition of Charlemagne's empire. The Treaty of Verdun in many ways marked the beginning of the end of the Frankish Empire. Although the treaty successfully ended the civil war, it created an official division of the Frankish empire into three separate kingdoms, which were to be ruled by Louis the Pious's sons Lothar I, Charles the Bald, and Louis the German, which would become the modern-day nations of Italy, France, and Germany, respectively.

The legacy of the Treaty of Verdun would prove to have lasting consequences for more than a millennium. The partition of Charlemagne's empire by his three grandsons was carried out without any consideration of the complex cultural and linguistic differences that existed within the three territories. This led to hostility and conflict in Western Europe up through the second World War. Lothar's kingdom, referred to as the Middle Frankish Kingdom, was very difficult to keep unified because of its natural geographical division by the Alps. This region would become fragmented, and its smaller territorial entities led to disunity on the Italian Peninsula, which continued to pose problems until the unification of Italy in the mid-nineteenth century. The other two

kingdoms—West Francia and East Francia (roughly modern-day France and Germany, respectively)—continued to be more powerful than the Middle Frankish Kingdom, although East Francia remained divided into a series of Germanic states until its unification at the end of the nineteenth century.

Internal fighting and the partitioning of the empire between the descendants of Charlemagne is one substantial reason for the decline of the Frankish Empire. However, external threats from all directions also contributed to its collapse. Scandinavian Normans (also known as Vikings) represented one of the more severe threats to the Frankish realm, particularly as a result of the Vikings' raids along the region's coastlines and rivers. The Frankish Empire also faced attacks from the Hungarians from the east and threats from Muslim forces to the south. By the final decades of the ninth century the Frankish Empire had essentially collapsed into smaller, fragmented kingdoms.

Summary:

- The Franks were a Germanic tribe who invaded the ancient territory of Gaul and established the kingdom of Francia following the fall of the Roman Empire.
- Over the course of its history two dynastic families, the Merovingians and the Carolingians, ruled over the Frankish empire.
- King Clovis, of the Merovingian dynasty, and the first Frankish king, who was responsible for uniting the kingdom of Francia, converted to Catholicism in around 496. His conversion, and the subsequent conversion of his people, transformed and shaped the future history of Western and Central Europe.
- The Carolingian family, primarily under the reign of Charlemagne, dominated Western and Central Europe through territorial expansion and a cultural revival during the Carolingian Renaissance.
- The fall of the Frankish Empire resulted from infighting between the descendants of Charlemagne and the external threats from other civilizations, such as the Normans, Muslims, and Hungarians.