

# 3 Foundations of Medieval Europe

(500-1050)



Charlemagne.

## Chapter Outline

- 1 The German Kingdoms
- 2 Feudal Society
- 3 Life on the Manor
- 4 The Medieval Church

Late in the year 800, Charlemagne (SHAR luh MAYN), ruler of the German kingdom of the Franks, traveled south to Rome. He went there to help Pope Leo III, who had been attacked by rebellious Romans. Charlemagne restored order in Rome, and on Christmas Day he attended Mass at St. Peter's Basilica. Years later, a Frankish writer described the events of that day:

"As the king rose from praying . . . before the tomb of the blessed apostle Peter, Pope Leo placed a crown on his head and all the Roman people cried out, 'To Charles Augustus, crowned by God, great and peace-

giving emperor of the Romans, life and victory.' And after [that] he was called emperor and Augustus."

The coronation of Charlemagne was symbolic of changes in Europe after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. In the heart of the old Roman Empire, the head of the Christian Church crowned a German king emperor. By this action, the pope revived the ideal of a unified empire like that of ancient Rome. Roman traditions were just one of the forces that would shape a new civilization during the Middle Ages. This new civilization, known as medieval civilization, blended Roman, Christian, and German traditions.

Western Europe in 500 seemed an unlikely place to build a new civilization. As you read in Chapter 1, Roman political power in Western Europe had collapsed in the fifth century. Trade slowed to a trickle, Roman cities dwindled in size, and some fell into ruins. During the German invasions of the fifth and sixth centuries, trade, travel, and learning declined further. The knowl-

edge of the ancient world as well as practical skills such as road building were largely forgotten. Crude wooden buildings replaced massive Roman structures. Roman roads and aqueducts fell into disrepair.

Despite the disorder and decay, Western Europe was a place of great potential. It had fertile land and other resources, such as timber, furs, and tin. In the early Middle Ages, from about 500 to 1050, a new political system emerged and restored a measure of order.

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## 1 The German Kingdoms

During the early Middle Ages, different German tribes set up small kingdoms in Italy, Gaul, Spain, Britain, and North Africa. The different kingdoms were constantly at war with each other. Gradually, however, the Kingdom of the Franks established control over much of the Western Roman Empire.

### Roman Influence on Government

The governments of the German tribes were simple compared to the complex system Rome had developed to rule its vast empire. Whereas Roman emperors depended on citizens' loyalty to an organized government, German rulers depended on the personal loyalty of their warriors. Moreover, in the German tribes there were few government officials and few taxes. Because free men gave unpaid military service to their rulers, taxation was largely unnecessary.

The Romans had developed extensive written law codes to settle disputes among their many peoples. German laws were based on custom. Most laws were designed to prevent feuds between families. The few written laws that existed were usually lists of fines for specific crimes.

As German kings extended their rule over parts of the Western Roman Empire, some adapted ideas of Roman government. For example, when Theodoric (thee AHID uhr ihk) established the Kingdom of Ostrogoths in Italy, he issued a simplified version of Roman law.

In other areas, however, Roman influence was weaker. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes moved into Britain after Roman legions had withdrawn. These peoples kept their German customs and languages, which eventually evolved into modern English.

The Christian Church helped preserve Roman traditions in the German kingdoms. For example, when the Roman monk Augustine converted the Anglo-Saxons in England, he set up new Christian communities along Roman lines. Furthermore, German kings relied heavily on the clergy, who were almost the only educated people in Western Europe.

### The Kingdom of the Franks

The strongest kingdom to emerge in the early Middle Ages was that of the Franks, a small German tribe who lived in the areas of present-day Germany and Belgium. The Franks rose to prominence in the late 400s under the brilliant but ruthless leadership of King Clovis. Through cunning and treachery, Clovis conquered lands from the Pyrenees Mountains to central Europe.

Clovis's reign reached a turning point when he became a Christian. His wife, who was a Christian, urged her husband to convert, but political interests may also have encouraged him. Clovis thought that the support of the Church in Rome would make him more powerful than neighboring German kings. These kings were also Christian, but

they belonged to the Arian sect, which had developed in the early years of Christianity. The Church in Rome, now calling itself the Roman Catholic Church, regarded the Arians as *heretics*, or untrue Christians. Thus, as the only Roman Catholic king in Gaul, Clovis won the Church's support.

When Clovis died in 511, his lands were divided among his four sons, according to German custom. Although Clovis's family ruled until 751, its power had declined by the mid 600s, and the real ruler of the Frankish kingdom was the chief court official, the Mayor of the Palace.

### Invasion by the Muslims

In the 700s, the German kingdoms of Western Europe faced invasion by Muslim armies. Muslims believed in the teachings of Islam, a religion founded in the Middle East during the seventh century. (You will read more about Islam in Chapter 6.) Muslims won many converts around the southern rim of the Mediterranean. Then they pushed into Europe through Spain.

The German kingdoms of Spain fell before the advancing Muslim armies, and by 732, Muslim forces were spilling into France. Charles Martel, the Frankish Mayor of the Palace, rallied Christians against the invaders. At a battle near Tours, Christian armies defeated the Muslims and stopped the spread of Islam into Western Europe.

Yet during the Middle Ages, Islamic civilization continued to affect Europe. For centuries, Muslims ruled Spain, Sicily, and parts of southern Italy. From these areas, the advanced learning of Islam reached the people of Europe.

### The Age of Charlemagne

After the defeat of the Muslims, Charles Martel founded the Carolingian (KAR uh LIHN jee uhn) dynasty in the Frankish kingdom and began to organize a strong central government. His son Pepin was elected king by the Frankish nobles. Pepin then had his election approved by the pope. This action symbolized the strong ties between the king and the Church. Later popes would use this

incident to justify their claims of authority over political rulers.

After Pepin's death, his son Charles continued to build a strong central government. During his long reign, from 768 to 814, he so impressed his contemporaries that he was called Charlemagne, or Charles the Great.

An able general, Charlemagne conquered an empire that reunited large areas of the Western Roman Empire. (See the map on page 43.) He defeated the Lombards who had occupied Italy. In a hard fought campaign, he won land in northern Spain back from the Muslims. In an effort to spread Christianity, he battled the non-Christian Saxons in the north. In the west, he defeated the Avars and occupied their land.

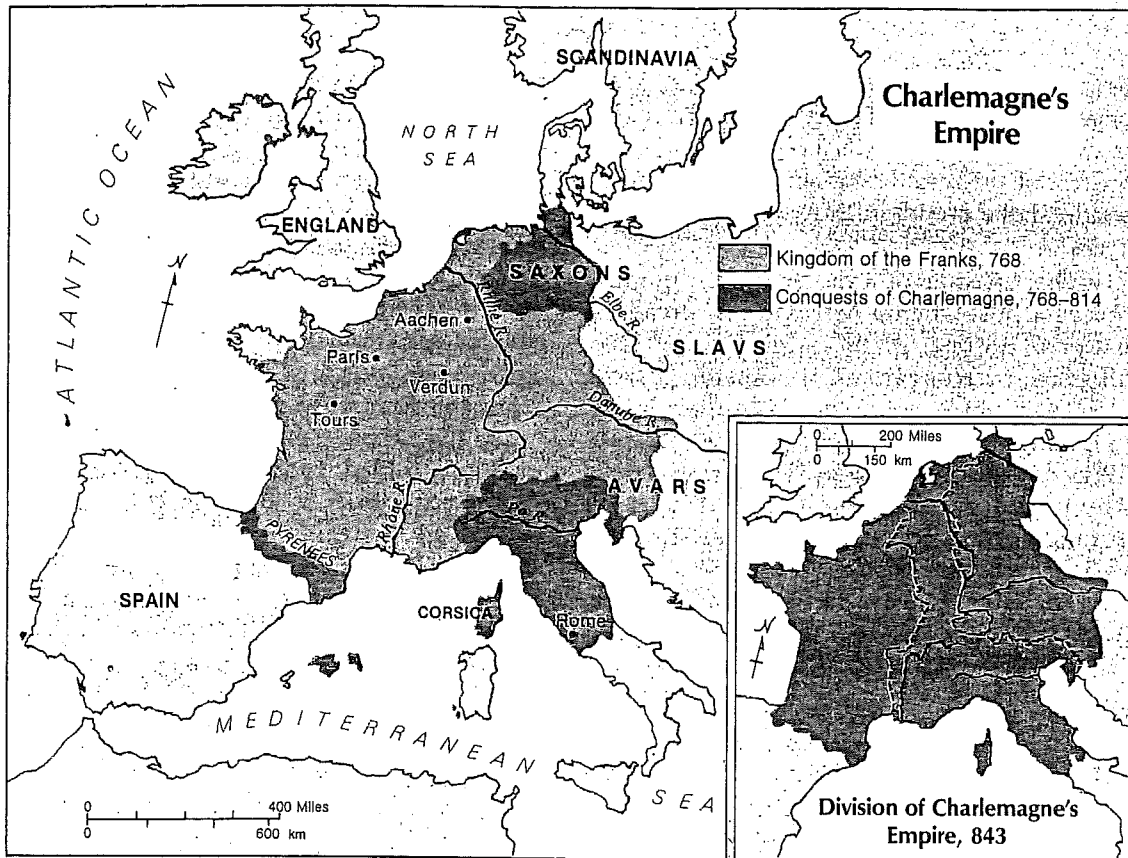
In 800, Charlemagne journeyed to Rome. As you read at the beginning of the chapter, Pope Leo III crowned him "Emperor of the Romans." The pope's action reaffirmed the Roman goal of a universal empire.

Charlemagne was an efficient, energetic ruler. From his court at Aachen (AH kuhn), he kept firm control over the empire. He recruited talented officials to carry out his policies, designed to improve government and unify the empire. Royal officials, called *missi dominici* (MIH see DOHM ih NEE kee), or lord's messengers, checked on local nobles who were responsible for justice and defense in their own lands. Charlemagne issued regulations, which helped establish uniform laws, and appointed local judges to uphold the laws.

Charlemagne promoted Christianity throughout the empire. He strongly supported the work of Christian missionaries to convert the Saxons. He also encouraged the efforts of the Church to organize *parishes*, or rural districts, each with its own priest. To support the parishes, Charlemagne required all Christians to pay a *tithe*, 10 percent of their income, to the Church.

### A Revival of Learning

To encourage education, Charlemagne invited scholars from all over Europe to his court. Alcuin (AL kwihn), a learned Anglo-



■ Charlemagne had a reputation as “the most able and noble-spirited” ruler of his time in part because he was successful in warfare. Notice the areas he added to Frankish lands. After Charlemagne’s death, his empire was divided by the Treaty of Verdun into a western part that included most of France, an eastern part that included most of Germany, and a middle strip that ran from the North Sea to Italy.

Saxon monk, set up a palace school to teach Charlemagne’s sons and daughters as well as the children of Frankish nobles. Charlemagne himself could read, but he did not know how to write. Yet he is reported to have slept with pen, ink, and paper under his pillow.

Charlemagne issued rules for the education of the clergy. He also ordered monasteries to establish schools and libraries. In monastery schools, students learned Latin, which became the language of the Church.

Monks made copies of the Bible and of the few surviving ancient Greek and Roman texts. They also developed the art of illumination. *Illumination* involved decorating the first letter of a paragraph and the margins of a page with brilliant designs. In addition, monks invented a clear written script known

as the Carolingian miniscule. Romans had written only in capital letters. Carolingian miniscule used both capital and lower case letters, the form of writing still used today.

By encouraging scholarship throughout the empire, Charlemagne strengthened the foundations of medieval civilization. During his reign, the distinctions between Roman and German traditions blurred, and a new European culture began to emerge.

### A New Wave of Invasions

The heirs of Charlemagne lacked his wisdom and forceful character. They weakened the empire by fighting among themselves. In 843, Charlemagne’s grandsons drew up the Treaty of Verdun. This treaty divided the

empire into three kingdoms. (See the map on page 43.) Despite the Treaty of Verdun, rulers in the western and eastern regions fought for control of the middle region. These struggles would shape events in Europe for over 1,000 years.

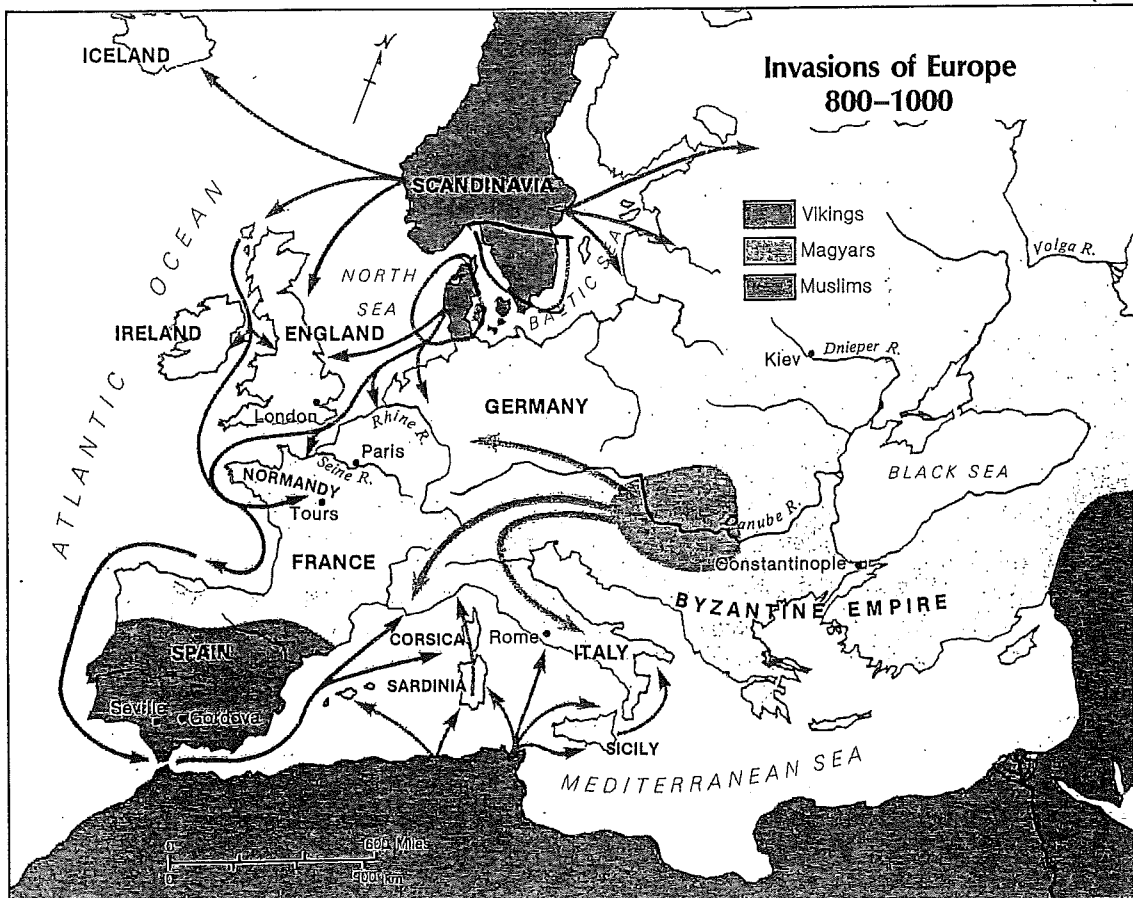
The division of Charlemagne's empire occurred just when a new wave of invaders battered Europe. In the ninth century, the Magyars, or Hungarians, a nomadic people from Asia, drove the Slavs from their lands in Eastern Europe. Soon, both Slavs and Magyars were attacking Western Europe. About the same time, Muslims gained ground in Italy. But the most longlasting invasions were those of the Vikings.

The Vikings were farmers and traders from Scandinavia, the area of present-day

Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. A growing population may have forced these expert sailors to seek land in other parts of Europe. Sailing from northern harbors in long boats, the Vikings burned and looted towns, castles, churches, and monasteries in Western Europe.

In 911, the king of the Franks gave part of northern France to some Viking raiders. This region acquired its name, Normandy, from the French word "Norman," meaning "men from the north." Vikings from Sweden explored, raided, and traded along the rivers of Eastern Europe and Russia. Other Vikings settled in Iceland and Greenland. About 1000, the Viking Leif Ericson spent a winter in Newfoundland on the eastern coast of North America.

■ During the 800s and 900s, Western Europe was battered by Viking, Magyar, and Muslim invaders. The Viking raids lasted the longest. As you can see on this map, Vikings attacked coastal communities from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.



In the ninth century, the Vikings, whom the English called Danes, occupied part of England. The area they took became known as the Danelaw because the Danes lived there under their own laws. Anglo-Saxons fiercely resisted the Danish invasions, however, and eventually won back the lost territories.

The Viking invasions seriously disrupted life in Western Europe, but they did not completely destroy the work of Charlemagne. The Church sent missionaries to convert the Vikings. In addition, under strong local leaders, the people of Western Europe resisted the invaders.

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## SECTION REVIEW

1. Locate: Pyrenees Mountains, Tours, Aachen.
  2. Identify: Clovis, Charles Martel, Charlemagne, Alcuin, Treaty of Verdun, Danelaw.
  3. Define: heretic, *missi dominici*, parish, tithe, illumination.
  4. List two ways in which government in the German kingdoms differed from Roman government.
  5. List three steps taken by Charlemagne to improve education.
  6. What groups invaded Western Europe in the eighth and ninth centuries?
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## 2 Feudal Society

From the death of Charlemagne until about 1000, invasions and warfare disrupted life in Western Europe. Because kings were often too weak to resist the invaders, powerful nobles defended their own lands and maintained order. Although these nobles still owed loyalty to the king, they usually acted independently. The system of rule by local lords who were bound to a king by ties of loyalty is today called *feudalism*. Feudalism brought order out of chaos during the Middle Ages. It also helped produce a new way of life.

### The Emergence of Feudalism

Feudalism grew out of German customs. In German tribes, warriors swore an oath of loyalty to their chief. Warriors fought for their leader, and in turn he provided for their needs. Nobles in the German kingdoms carried on this tradition. Lesser nobles would serve as *knights*, or mounted warriors, for a *lord*, or greater noble.

In the eighth century, new technology furthered the development of feudalism. The stirrup, probably invented by the Chinese, changed the nature of warfare. The stirrup supported the knight while he was on horseback. Thus, he could wear heavy protective

armor and carry heavier weapons. But armor and horses were costly, and, to be effective, a knight had to be well trained. Most knights did not have the money to buy armor and horses or the time for training.

Charles Martel realized the value of heavily armed knights in his campaigns against the Muslims. Since he had no money to pay his knights, he granted them rights to land. With the land, a knight could support himself and his family while he served the king. In the next few centuries, the practice of granting land in exchange for military service spread across Western Europe.

During the Viking invasions, powerful lords took control of large tracts of land, which they divided among lesser lords called *vassals*. A lesser lord, in turn, might divide his land among his own vassals. The process could continue down to the lowest knight, who had no vassals. He had only enough land for himself and his family. (See the diagram on page 47.) The relationship between lord and vassal was central to feudalism.

### An Unwritten Arrangement

Feudalism was based on a mutual exchange of rights and obligations between nobles. As feudalism developed, a set of unwritten rules