THE FRANKS

As the Roman Legions withdrew from western Europe, various Germanic peoples moved into the territory, fought wars, and established settlements. One of these groups, the Franks, conquered much of the Roman province of Gaul (now France) in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Although they were farmers, they also loved making war. Most free men went about armed, often with a special kind of throwing axe called a *francisca*. Both men and women were fond of jewellery, and both genders wore their hair long. Their name for themselves— "Frank"—meant free. "Franchise," the English word for the right to vote, comes from this Frankish word.

THE MEROVINGIANS

The Merovingian royal family ruled the Franks for almost three hundred years. The most successful ruler in the family, Clovis I, reigned from 481 to 511 C.E. He founded the country of France and made Paris its capital.

After the death of Clovis, the kingdom was divided among his children, who were not very capable leaders. Before long, this royal family became famous for its treachery and murderous infighting. Kings and queens often committed murders with their own hands, and many were killed by members of their own family. For the next two centuries, the Merovingian royal family was weakened by this constant infighting, and the kingdom fell into chaos.

> **DID YOU KNOW?**
> In many parts of Asia, Europeans are still called Franks. For example, the Thai call Europeans "Farang."

VIEWPOINTS IN CONFLICT

Here we have two descriptions of the Franks. In one, Tacitus, a Roman historian of the first century, offers his opinion of the Germanic peoples, which included the Franks. Compare this with the other statement, in which the Franks describe themselves. In what ways do these statements agree? How do they differ? How does each reflect the speaker's point of view?

The materials ... come through war and foray. You will not so readily persuade them [the Germanic peoples] to plow the land or await the year's crop as to challenge the foe and earn wounds. Besides it seems [to them] limp and slack to gain with the sweating of your brow what you can win with blood.

—*Tacitus*

[We are a] glorious people, wise in council, noble in body, radiant in health, excelling in beauty, daring, quick, hardened.... This is the people that shook the cruel yoke of the Romans from its neck.

—*Preface to the Frank Legal Code*

THE LAWS OF THE FRANKS

As a Germanic people, the Franks had their own legal code, which differed greatly from Roman law. When these laws were written down and collected, they were called the Salic Code, after the Salian Franks, who had settled in France.

The Salic Code placed a monetary value on every piece of property and on every person. If property was stolen or a person injured or killed, a fine called **wergild** had to be paid to the owner of the property or the victim's family. In the case of murder, the family could refuse to accept the fine, and instead could demand the guilty person's death. If a relation of the victim took revenge by killing the murderer, the law did not hold him or her responsible.

wergild: man-money, that is, a person's value in money

arson: intentionally setting fire to property
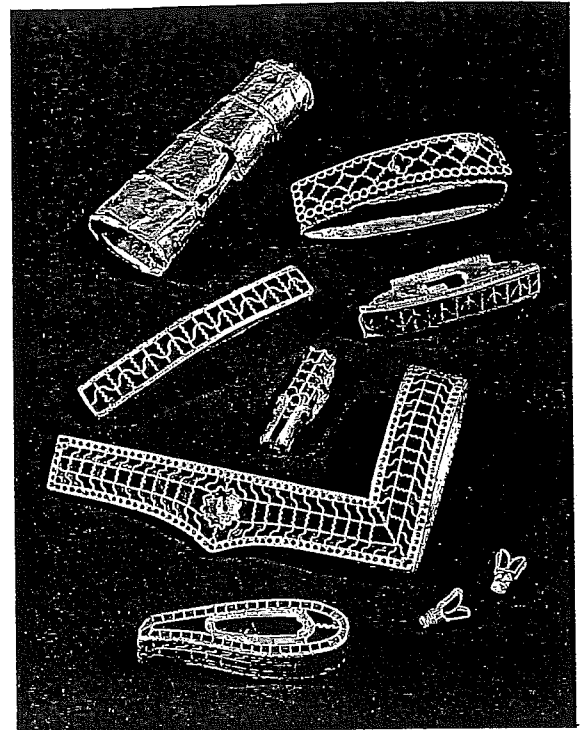
betrothal: a promise to marry

Figure 1–10 Finely decorated jewellery such as this was often placed in the coffins of Merovingian nobles. Consequently, grave robbing was a common offence. Why do you think the Merovingians placed jewellery in their graves?

Crime and Punishment in the Salic Code

Some of the laws in the Salic Code seem strange to us today, but they made sense to the Franks. For instance, cutting a child's hair was a serious offence because the Franks believed that a person's strength could be measured by the length of his or her hair. Grave robbing was a common problem among the Franks because of the jewellery they placed in the caskets of wealthy people. After analyzing the data carefully, make three conclusions about Frank society. Note that the Franks fined people more for killing a boy than for killing a girl. Why did they do this? Do Canadian laws make similar distinctions? Why or why not?

Note: *Solidi* were gold coins worth $50–$100 in today's money.
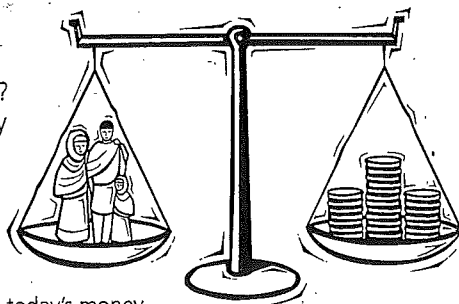
Crime	Punishment
Theft of a slave:	120–150 lashes
Arson:	slavery in the mines, banishment, or death
Theft:	fine, torture, or death

Crime	Fines
Breaking a betrothal:	65 gold solidi
Touching a woman's hand:	15 gold solidi
Cutting the hair of a free boy or girl:	45 gold solidi
Grave robbing:	200 gold solidi

A Person's Value by Law (Wergild)

Fines for killing a	
free woman of childbearing age:	600 gold solidi
pregnant woman:	700 gold solidi
boy under twelve:	600 gold solidi
girl under twelve:	200 gold solidi

CATALOGUE CARD

What is it? An excerpt from the ten-volume History of the Franks

Who wrote it? Gregory of Tours, a Frankish bishop and historian

When? Late sixth century

Why? To record the history of his people

Before the great **plague** ravaged Auvergne [a region in France], **prodigies** terrified the people of that region in the same way. On a number of occasions, three or four shining lights appeared round the sun. Once on the first day of October, the sun was in eclipse, so that less than a quarter of it continued to shine.... Then a star, which some call a comet, appeared over the region for a whole year, with a tail like a sword, and the whole sky seemed to burn and many other **portents** were seen.

M uch of what we know about the Franks and their rulers, the Merovingians, comes from a book called the *History of the Franks* by Gregory of Tours, a mild-mannered person who was shocked by the bloodthirsty deeds of the Merovingian rulers.

The *History of the Franks* is what historians call a "primary source." In other words, this document provides a first-hand account of historical events by a person who actually participated in them or was able to interview eyewitnesses. An account of Roberta Bondar's flight in space written by Bondar herself during the flight would be a good primary source to have. Documents such as charters, chronicles, historical paintings, and records of births and deaths are also considered primary sources. A "secondary source" is an account put together long after the events it describes. When historians research a particular period, they prefer to work with primary sources.

Even though Gregory's book is a primary source, modern historians have to interpret what Gregory wrote to decide how much of what he wrote actually occurred and how much was the result of superstition or wishful thinking.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. The above extract tells us several things. First, Gregory was superstitious. Second, a disease killed many people in Auvergne. What did Gregory see that would interest an astronomer studying historical astronomical events?

2. Gregory called these astronomical events "portents," or omens. Do you think he was right? Explain.

3. Think of three modern-day beliefs that people a thousand years from now might think were silly or superstitions.

EVERYDAY LIFE AMONG THE FRANKS

By reading Gregory's *History of the Franks*, we also learn about the everyday life of the Frankish people, and we find that some things never change. The Franks had **social classes**: some people were very rich and some were incredibly poor. The majority of people at this time (around 60 percent) were serfs, or peasants, people who worked the land on their lord's manor, or estate. Although they were considered free and not slaves, serfs were not allowed to move away from the manor. Because they were farmers, the serfs were at the mercy of the weather. Storms or drought could cause great hardship. The lords and rulers could steal serfs' crops at any time. Further, as Gregory of Tours complained, merchants often tried to profit from the misfortunes of ordinary people by raising prices when food was scarce.

**plague:** a contagious disease that is out of control and kills many people

prodigies, portents: omens, occurences that predict future events

social class: the group that one belongs to in a society. Class can be determined by money, role in society, or one's parentage.

Make a Bar Graph

Sometimes we need help in grasping the significance of statistics. Graphs help us by providing a "picture" of the information. For example, a bar graph comparing the life expectancies of Frankish and Canadian women helps us see the extraordinary difference:

Life Expectancy for Frankish and Canadian Women
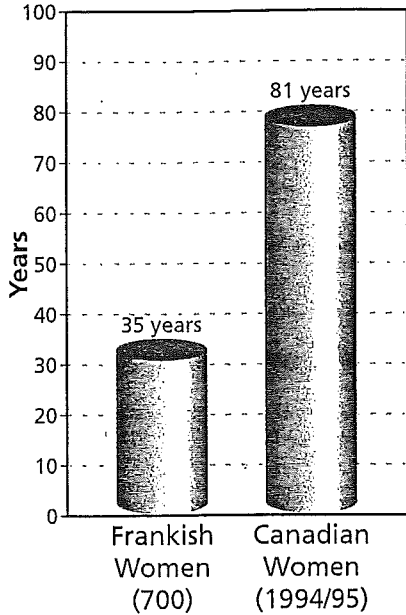
Statistics: The Franks in 700 and Canadians in 1994/95

	The Franks	Canadians
Infant mortality rate	45%	0.6%
Population under twelve years	22%	16%
Population under twenty-five years	60%	34%
Average life expectancy for men	45 years	75 years
Average life expectancy for women	35 years	81 years
Age of marriage (for women)	12 years	30 years
Size of average family	2.9 persons	3.0 persons
Average height for men	165 cm*	180 cm*
Average height for women	150 cm*	165 cm*

* Estimated

Every bar graph has two axes. The horizontal axis shows the categories (for example, year, city, gender), while the vertical axis shows the values (for example, degrees of temperature or distance in kilometres). The bars, always of equal width, show the value for each category by their height.

NOW YOU DO IT

1. a) Following these instructions, make a bar graph comparing the life expectancies of Frankish and Canadian men.
   - Draw and label two axes.
   - Add categories on the horizontal axis and a scale on the verticle axis. To help choose your scale, look at the largest value you will show.
   - Draw and shade one bar for each category, using the statistics in the table above.
   - Give your bar graph a title.

   b) Why do you think life expectancy for men and women in Frankish times was so much lower than life expectancies today? Why do you think Frankish women died so much earlier than men?

2. Now make a similar pair of graphs comparing the heights of Frankish and Canadian women and Frankish and Canadian men. Speculate on why Franks were shorter than Canadians are today.

CHARLEMAGNE

Charlemagne came to power in western Europe in 768 C.E. His father, Pepin the Short, had made himself king by throwing out the last of the Merovingian rulers, who had come to be known as the "do-nothing" kings. The pope agreed to recognize Pepin as king because Pepin's father, Charles Martel, had defeated a Muslim army that had threatened to conquer Europe in 732.

Unlike many of the Germanic rulers who had come before him, Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, was very interested in rebuilding civilization, and he had the intelligence and power to do so. Through his military successes he expanded the old Merovingian Empire in every direction. At the height of his power, on Christmas day in 800, he was crowned Emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III. The **Carolingian Empire** gave much of western Europe a brief rest from the wars that had torn it apart since the fall of Rome.

Charlemagne governed his empire from his palace at Aachen in what is now Germany. Although he allowed local governments much freedom, he also sent out agents, called *missi dominici* (the lord's messengers), to make sure that people were treated properly. He created a single code of laws for the whole empire. Unlike those who came before him, Charlemagne tried to make things better for the serfs and tradespeople.

We learn from Charlemagne's biographer, Einhard, that Charlemagne could also be hardhearted and merciless. After a long war with the Saxons in northwest Germany, Charlemagne defeated them and insisted that they convert to Christianity. When the Saxon leaders refused, Charlemagne ordered his soldiers to kill about 4000 Saxons in a single day.

Carolingian Empire: Charlemagne's empire, from about 770 to 814
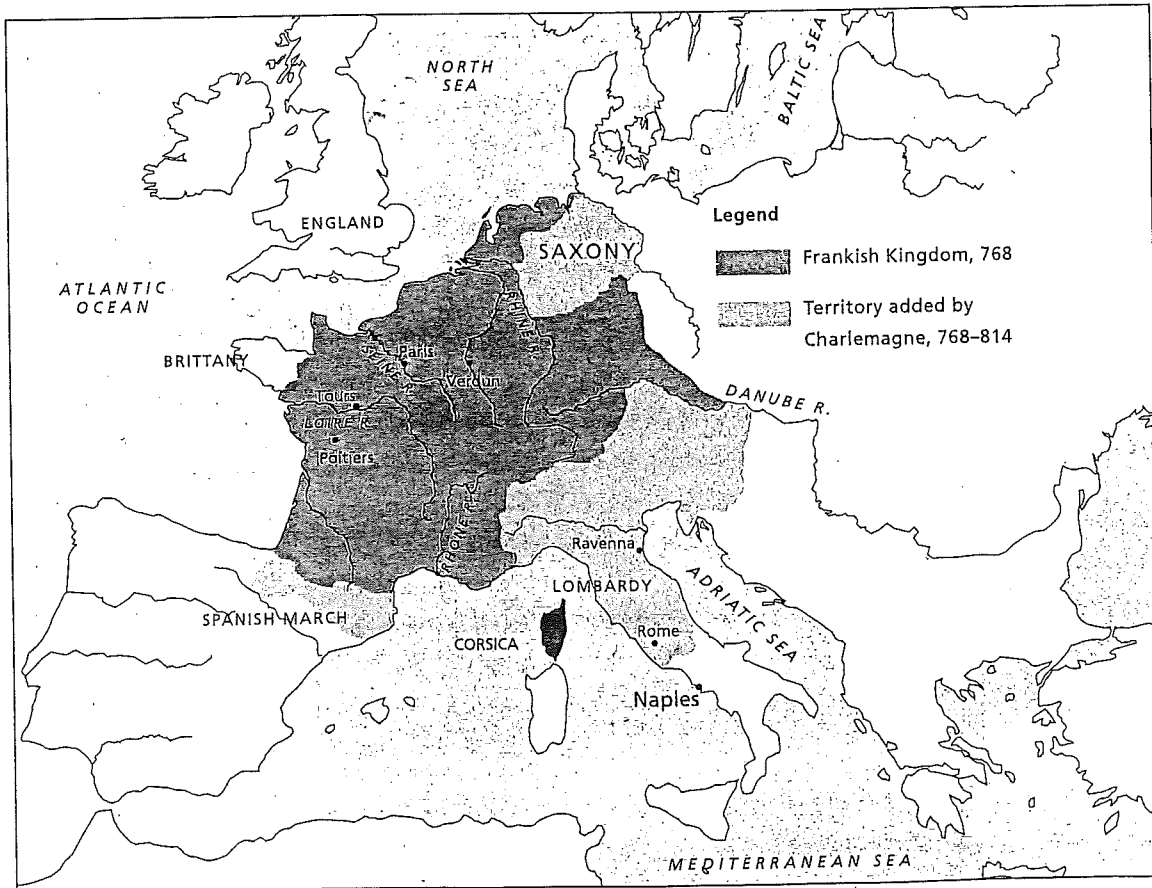
Figure 1–11
This map shows the extent of Charlemagne's kingdom. Check in an atlas to discover what modern countries lie in this region. Which mountain ranges formed natural borders?

Legend

Frankish Kingdom, 768

Territory added by Charlemagne, 768–814

Einhard, Charlemagne's secretary, wrote a biography of Charlemagne, the first biography of a medieval person who was not a saint or otherwise connected with the Roman Catholic Church. Are there any indications of exaggeration in the account at right?

> Charles [Charlemagne] was large and strong, and of lofty stature, though not disproportionately tall.... In accordance with the national custom, he took frequent exercise on horseback and in **the chase**, accomplishments in which scarcely any people in the world can equal the Franks. He enjoyed the **exhalations** from natural warm springs, and often practised swimming, in which he was such an adept that none could surpass him; and hence it was that he built his palace at Aachen, and lived there constantly during his later years until his death.

PRIMARY SOURCE

Figure 1–12 A carving from the outside of Charlemagne's coffin, showing Charlemagne dressed in bishop's clothing and seated between two saints. What impression do you think Charlemagne wanted to leave?

the chase: the hunt

exhalations: vapours

renaissance: a rebirth or revival, especially of the arts

Charlemagne's Renaissance

Improving education throughout the empire was a special concern of Charlemagne. He established new schools in monasteries and encouraged the learning of the Latin classics. Charles insisted that his sons and daughters be educated.

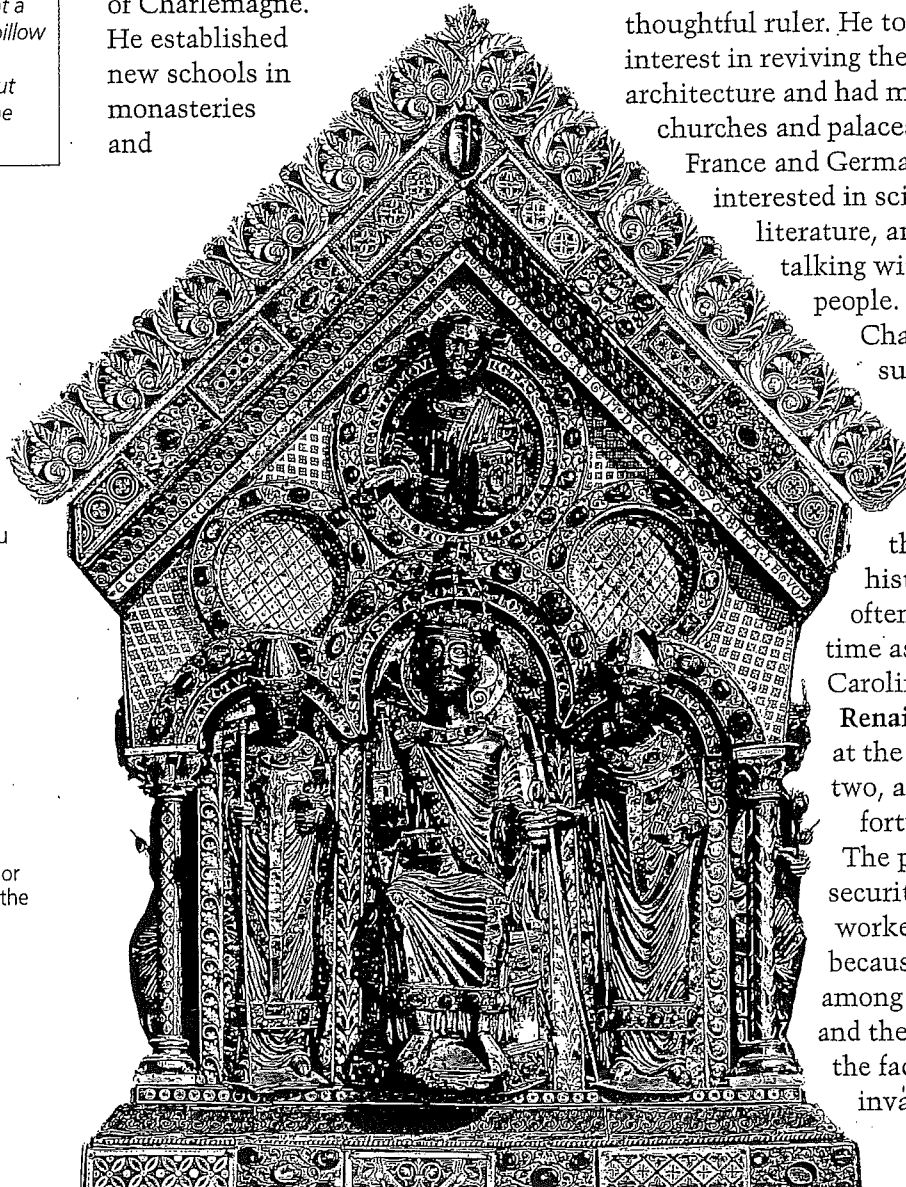Charles was an energetic and thoughtful ruler. He took a keen interest in reviving the practice of architecture and had many stone churches and palaces built in France and Germany. He was interested in science and literature, and he loved talking with interesting people. Because Charlemagne succeeded in bringing about a rebirth of learning and the arts, historians today often refer to his time as the Carolingian **Renaissance**. He died at the age of seventy-two, after ruling for forty-seven years. The peace and security Charles had worked for fell apart because of feuds among his decendants, and their weakness in the face of Viking invasions.