Inheritors and Builders:
From the Fall of Rome to Charlemagne (An Overview)

Topics:
- Invasions and Migrations
- Fifth and Sixth Century Trends
- Merovingian Gaul
- The 'International' Scene
- Charles the Great: A New Emperor of the West?
- Bibliography and Further Reading

1. Invasions and Migrations

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire was preceded by a hundreds years of military, economic and social problems, exacerbated after 407 A.D., but virtually irreversible by A.D. 476. (see Ferrill 1986; Grant 1976; Ward-Perkins 2005). The return of the imperial regalia of Empire by the Roman Senate to Constantinople, and acceptance of a 'king' of Italy only recognized the realities of the late 5th century. Arthur Ferrill (1986) has demonstrated that there was a real military collapse of military power in the West, though this was exacerbated by economic and social factors (see Grant 1976; Ward-Perkins 2005; Ferguson 2006).

However, we should not think of this collapse as a direct product of massed invasions right across the northern frontiers of the empire. It is true that the introduction of intact allied Gothic units across the Danube after 376 C.E., Anglo-Saxon pressure on Britain in the 5th century, and the mass crossing of the Rhine in 406-7 were large-scale invasions. However, from the third century onwards large numbers of 'barbarians' had been settled in Dacia, Noricum and Gaul. Likewise, we find later agreements for orderly settlement made with these peoples; with the acceptance of the Goths in the Balkans, then a more lasting settlement of them in Aquitania in south-west France (418 C.E.). Likewise, arrangements were made with the Burgundians to move into central Gaul after their Rhine kingdom was destroyed between 435-436 (suffering defeats from the Romans and the Huns, see Goffart 1980, pp8-9). Settlements of Ostrogoths and Alans occurred in Italy during the 5th century, and there was the acceptance of the Franks as an enduring part of Gallic society. These agreements were born of harsh necessity, and some groups expanded their areas of control beyond treaty areas, e.g. the Visigoths in 1419 for Aquitaine (Wade-Perkins 2005, p15, p57).

Thus we see not just invasions, but also the mass migrations of peoples into new homelands, where they settle and eventually continue relatively stable forms of agricultural and city life (Goffart 1980, pp4-5, 17). Furthermore, we must remember that though the total number of people involved over two centuries was quite high, these individual tribal movements might at first comprise only a few thousand people, and on most occasions less than twenty-thousand warriors. The two largest movements attested, that of the Goths across the Danube in 376, and of the Vandals from Spain to Africa, may have comprised as much as 30,000 warriors, though
Goffart argued that this is much too high a figure (1980, pp231-4). However, they moved against a largely civilian, unarmed population (Goffart 1980, p33): the age of great Roman and Greek citizen armies was long gone. Likewise, these different Germanic peoples were not unified either culturally or politically (Goffart 1980, p25, 28).

The settlement of these peoples did not always entail violent displacement of Romans or earlier inhabitants (as occurred in early phases of the Gothic and Vandal invasions). We find the lawful accommodation of various tribes in Gaul, Italy and Spain under the Roman concept of *hospitalitas*. This had traditionally been viewed as an extension of Roman procedures for billeting and supporting Roman army units (a hypothesis developed by Ernst Gaupp in 1844, followed by Ferdinand Lot in 1928, assessed and criticized by Goffart 1980), and may have involved the assignment of 1/3 - 2/3rd of the land to the 'invaders' (Ward-Perkins 2005, p64). However, Goffart has provided reasons why this interpretation may be erroneous, since we do not hear of widespread revolts against this mass appropriation of lands. There seems to have been a relatively peaceful accommodation of the tribesmen alongside the existing Gallo-Roman society (Goffart 1980, pp38-9, 54-55). The cases where sources (a Chronicle of 452) speak of the seizure of land by the Alans (resulting in civil disturbances, a large number of deaths) were clearly regarded as exceptional (Goffart 1980, p111). In Goffart’s view the procedure of accommodation resulted in proportion of tax revenue, previously collected for the Roman administration, being set aside for the maintenance of the tribal armies, though Ward-Perkins suggests that in Italy real land was transferred (Wards-Perkins 2005, p64). Remaining funds would have been used by local kings to maintain their court and administration, thereby taking over the role of Roman government. Only over time would these tax and rental obligations be commuted into direct forfeitures of proportions of lands, and here the Burgundian kingdom may have been among the first to formalize this procedure (Goffart 1980, pp160-1, p228).

The significance of this trend was that it allowed the invading peoples to settle alongside the existing communities, with the barbarians providing a strong armed force that was able to protect the region at a local level, something that Rome, Milan, Trier or Constantinople were no longer able to do. Furthermore, the local Roman or Gallo-Roman nobility, with their greater administrative skills, their towns, access to education, and with an entrenched Catholic tradition, were a resource that local kings often valued. Indeed, it was this resource which gave the Frankish, Burgundian and Lombard kingdoms distinct advantages over the Vandals and Visigoths, who treated the Romans in a more destructive or prejudicial way. It was this combination of traditional tribal units amid a Romanized Gallo-Roman population which would allow a new phase of state-building under the Franks.

**2. Fifth and Sixth Century Trends**

The trends in western Europe which followed the collapse of centralised Roman political power include: -

1) The building of regional political units focused on kings, controlling separate peoples and areas, including traditional Romanized cities. Once the main periods of migrations began to settle down during the 6th century, we find regions controlled by Saxons, Franks, Burgundians, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals and Lombards. Except for a few small areas, these regions are all controlled politically by kings supported by armies, and comprise the new settlers and the older Romanized population. A few centres are still controlled by the older Romano-Gallic aristocracy; thus we find leaders such as
Syagrius of Soissons termed a 'king of the Romans' (Gregory of Tours *The History of the Franks*, p270), which can be no more than a descriptive term.

2) We therefore often find, for a time, a dual pattern of society and law, the older population continuing according to its own customs, but now accommodating a distinct warrior caste directly associated with a king. In many cases, e.g. in the Visigothic region of Aquitania and the Vandals in North Africa, it is forbidden for the two populations to intermarry. It is in the Frankish kingdom that these divisions are first set aside. On the other hand, this pattern does foster a certain continuity of Roman legal and literary traditions down into the 6th century (Dill 1966 pp262-3).

3) Christianization had already deeply penetrated Gaul and the Germanic tribes by the fifth century, though some of them followed Arianism, based on the thought of the Egyptian priest Arius (c.250-c.336), who ‘denied the full deity of the preexistent Son of God’ (see http://www.mb-soft.com/believe/txo/arianism.htm). In Gaul, new patterns of loyalty focused upon the authority of individual holy men such as Martin of Tours, Hiliary of Poitiers and Paulinus of Nola, and with the relics and holy places associated with Saints and miracles. As such certain churches and monasteries came to be authoritative centres that even kings could not readily ignore. In Gallic society we find bishops emerging as power-brokers in a society desperately needing protection and leadership. Thus Gregory, as nineteenth bishop of Tours, would happily build up the already high prestige derived from St. Martin 'in the cell of the holy Martin close to the cathedral church' (Gregory of Tours *The History of the Franks*, Book X, p278).

4) The Roman empire, in spite of its apparent strength, was undergoing a crisis in management of its resources (financial and military) that led to a severe undermining the imperial ability to govern. This began to erode its capacities terminally by the late fourth century and more certainly by the mid-fifth century (see Grant 1976; Wade-Perkins 2005). Expressed in rather exaggerated terms by Edward Gibbon:

   . . . the Roman government appeared every day less formidable to its enemies, more odious and oppressive to its subjects. The taxes were multiplied with the public distress; economy was neglected in proportion as it became necessary; and the injustice of the rich shifted the unequal burden from themselves to the people, whom they defrauded . . . . They abjured and abhorred the name of Roman citizens, which had formerly excited the ambition of mankind. (Gibbon 1904, III, pp571-572)

5) Although many Roman traditions were retained by the emerging kingdoms of Western Europe, there is strong archaeological evidence to show a partial collapse in the economic and productive base of western Europe. Thus pollution samples from ice-cores in Greenland show that level of lead, copper and silver smelting dropped from the Roman period, indicating less metal working across the continent (see Wade-Perkins 2005, pp94-95). There was also a serious reduction in the complexity and material sophistication of the mass of ordinary functional items, including pottery, weapons, and roofing, with the exception of elite goods, as well as the reduction in the production of new coins (Wade-Perkins 2005, pp104-117). It is also possible that in parts of Western Europe there was a decline in the number of rural sites with an associated drop in food production during the 5-7th centuries (see Wade-Perkins 2005, pp138-146). This was due in part to the disruption of the complex, state-supported trade and production networks (including factories, roads, and harbours), the end of the huge supply system maintained
for the Roman armies, and the end of the spending power of Roman forces encamped across frontier areas, creating webs of regional trade (Wade-Perkins 2005 p132; see Cuncliffe 1988). Thus, Eugippius’ Life of St Severinus shows that though a garrison at Batavis (in Noricum on the Danube) was still receiving pay for guard duties, this stopped after robbers attacked the soldiers bringing the money over the Alps, some time after 450 C.E. (Life of St Severinus 20). This shows ‘the very end of the re-distributive process that for centuries had pumped gold from the prosperous and peaceful provinces of the interior of the empire to the frontier regions that bore the brunt of the barbarian attack, but thereby also enjoyed the principle fruits of the army’s spending’ (Wade-Perkins 2005, p135).

These trends ran alongside a wider transformation of society. It is important to notice in Gaul two complementary trends: the Christianization of the aristocracy and the aristocratization of Christianity (Van Dam 1985, p116). It was in the interests of powerful families to have friends in the church, and to have one of their sons a local bishop might give them the advantage over enemies and give them pre-eminence in local cities. Christianity, in effect, began directly and deeply integrated into the social structure of Gaul. Patterns of patronage and clientele once common in Roman political power now became associated with the religious power and social prestige of bishops, abbots, living holy-men, and dead saints (see Brown 1978). By the sixth century the educated men now found in Western Europe were 'church-trained' men. Thus Gregory of Tours (529-594) would write in his preface to the History of the Franks:

In these times when the practice of letters declines, nay, rather perishes in the cities of Gaul, there has been found no scholar trained in the art of ordered composition to present in prose or verse a picture of the things that have befallen. Yet there have been done good things many, and evil many; the peoples savagely raged; the fury of kings grew sharp; churches were assailed by heretics and protected by catholics; the faith of Christ that glowed in many hearts was lukewarm in not a few; the faithful enriched the churches while the unbelievers stripped them bare. Wherefore the voice of lament was oft-times raised, and men said: "Alas! for these our days! The study of letters is perished from us, nor is any found among our peoples able to set forth in a book events of this present time." (Gregory of Tours The History of the Franks, Preface)

We should not take Gregory too literally here. This is a standard classical rhetorical device whereby the writer excuses his own poor talents and explains why he dared write such a text. On the other hand, Gregory's history and the biographies of the saints (hagiography) do show us that history is now conceived of primarily as the history of Christianity and God’s providence in world affairs. Thus Gregory begins with a brief account of Christian times from ‘the foundation of the world'. He is not writing a specifically Roman history, nor even a history of a region. Rather, his account focuses on the progress of Christianity in Gaul, with the conversion of the Merovingian house, and the proofs thereby provided of the truth of Catholic Christianity. The lives of kings, races and countries are viewed through this model. It is the church-trained men who now dominate the historical and cultural discourse of the age. The importance of this central educational and cultural role seems to have been well understood by a bishop and writer such as Gregory of Tours. It was perhaps for these reasons, imitating the injunctions at the Apocalypse at the end of the New Testament, that he enjoined that his books should be preserved unaltered:

These works may be written in an unpolished style, but I adjure all of you bishops of the Lord, who after me in this my lowliness shall govern the church of Tours, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the day of judgement terrible to all sinners, if ye would not deport confounded from the Judgement, to be condemned with the Evil One, never to let these books be destroyed or rewritten, by choosing out some parts and omitting others, but to leave them all
complete and intact in you time just as I have myself left them. (Gregory of Tours The History of
the Franks, X, pp278-9)

Such an extreme threat, indeed, almost a curse, seems to have been effective. Gregory's book
has survived intact down into the modern period. But then, it was an orthodox text which was
preserved and copied in the dominantly Latin Christian culture of the following Middle Ages.

The pattern of religious transformation is even more extreme in the conversion of one of the last
groups in mid-western Europe to be Christianized; the Anglo-Saxons. Here the power of the
'king' was directly tied to him as a representative of the people before the gods. His actions and
the ceremonies of offering he performed ensured good crops and the welfare of the community
in general (Chaney 1984, p96). Shared communal eating of sacrificial meat was also used as a
form of social bonding in villages, and could also be used as a test of loyalty. The account of
the passion of Saint Sabas (martyred in 372 C.E.), for example, shows how a test against
Christians was ordered by the ruling council, but the local community wished to protect its few
Christians (Thompson 1984, p86-7). Sabas refused, was at first expelled from the village, and
later on tortured and killed by the soldiers of leading man (called an optimates or megistanes)
from another region (Thompson 1984, p86, p89-91). Generally, if the king could be converted,
this would lead at least to a superficial conversion of most of his people (Chaney 1984, p97).
Thus we find that in the Frankish kingdom, in Kent, Essex, and the British kingdoms generally
the conversion of the royal family, or its apostasy, were crucial in determining the 'official'
religion of the people (Chaney 1984, pp97-101).

In most cases the migrating tribes had already been exposed to Christianity; many of them to
the ‘heretical’ form of Arianism which denied the equality of the Son to the Father, and
therefore questioned the full divinity of Jesus. The Christianization of Western Europe in fact
proceeded along three paths:

a) The normal pattern of converting ‘pagans’ to Christianity, especially kings and
aristocrats.
b) The ongoing dialogue between Arianism and ‘Catholicism’, i.e. the body of official
interpretation focused on Roman popes and endorsed by Roman emperors, and for this
period embracing many of the western and eastern bishops. This dispute was both
theoretical and political, and Catholicism gained advantages through prominent men
such as Saint Martin, and through its conversion of the Frankish kings and then
Burgundian kings to their interpretation of Christianity. The intensity of this dispute
between the two churches can be seen in the fact that although the Arian Burgundian
King Gundobad was willing to be converted to Catholic beliefs, he refused to make this
act public from fear of his staunchly Arian subjects (Gregory of Tours The History of
the Franks, p276).
c) A powerful group of ‘Catholic’ bishops soon emerge in Gaul, and play a major civic
as well as religious role in their communities. It is only in the 6th-8th centuries that they
begin to be tied into a hierarchical pattern of obedience under Roman Popes, a pattern
which develops alongside the recognition of the special status of Frankish kings, first as
supporters of the faith, then as ‘Holy Roman Emperors’ (see below).

In general there was a continued use of Roman learning, writing, literature and patterns of legal
expression in the major western courts. This was in part due to the need for kings to have
competent administrators to deal with the taxation and administration of their kingdoms, for
people who could work with the traditionally educated city-populations, and with a desire to
create a prestigious court environment which would impress both Romans and the emperors of Constantinople. Furthermore, with the decline of city-supported Roman educational systems, it was the church school which became the main educator of Europe; a tradition which remained until the 18th century. It is from these church-trained young men, often priests or monks, that the bureaucracies of early Europe would be created. The monasteries, along with a few royal courts such as that of Charlemagne (see below), also maintained the libraries and copyists that kept traditional learning and Christian scholarship alive.

In these contexts, with the need for law codes fitting the new mixed populations, with kings needing to control, tax and administer large regions containing cities as well as landed aristocracies, we find the emergence of the institutions necessary for the modern state. At first legal systems needed to cope with both the dominant German groups and their relations with ‘Romans’. In some cases Roman law was allowed to continue for cases exclusively concerning Romans, e.g. the Visigothic publication of a ‘compendium of Roman law’, the Breviarium of Alaric (Wade-Perkins 2005, p76). However, this did not solve all legal issues. Thus Counts of the Goths had the ‘final say’ in disputes between Romans and Goths during the sixth century (Ward-Perkins 2005, p65). Likewise, gold coins continued to be minted by the Germanic kings of Italy, though at first under the name of the Eastern Roman Emperor, as if a united empire still existed, and adhering to eastern mint standards (Ward-Perkins 2005, pp68-69). By the time of King Theoderic (ruler of the Ostrogoths 471-526 C.E.), however, a gold medallion (Senigallia medallion) could be produced that showed the ruler with long hair and a moustache, a serious break from Roman patterns of representation (Ward-Perkins 2005, pp72-73).

Later on, even Charlemagne did not create a nation-state in the modern sense, that is, a region administered by a government which also correlates with a geographical region peopled by citizens with loyalty to that region as part of their identity. However, these new kingdoms did begin to set up state systems of administration, and geographically, they helped form the basis for the cultural, ethnic and political map of modern Europe. To demonstrate these points we can look briefly at two Frankish dynasties of considerable importance, Merovingian and Carolingian Gaul.

3. Merovingian Gaul

The emergence of a new civilization began when the Franks moved into the region of Rhineland from the third century onwards (Chamberlin 1986 p5) and then began to take control of a region of northern France and south-west Germany. This civilization was built in part on their military strength, in part on their use of Romanized elements in Gallic society. This culture derives its named from an early Frankish chief, Merovech (Chamberlin 1985, p7). As noted by Patrick Geary:

Merovingian civilization lived and died within the framework of late antiquity. Its characteristic political structure remained the kingdom of the imperial German military commander who, by absorbing the mechanism of provincial Roman administration, was able to establish his royal family as the legitimate rulers of the western provinces north of the Pyrenees and the Alps. His rule consisted primarily of rendering justice, that is, of enforcing Roman law and Romanized barbarian law where possible or appropriate to the tradition of his people, and of commanding the Frankish army. The economic basis for his power was on the one hand the vast Roman fisc and on the other the continuing mechanism of Roman taxation. The broader organization of society continued to be based on small communities, the late classical cities, with their local power structures virtually intact. Wherever possible, in the north of Gaul around Soissons, in the Rhineland of Trier and Cologne, or in distant Regensburg and Salzburg, the Merovingians and
their agents integrated themselves into these existing Roman structures and derived their power and legitimacy from them (Geary 1988, p226).

The growth in power of the Franks is discussed by Gregory of Tours with especial interest paid to king Clovis (481-511 C.E.) since he converted to Christianity. His Queen, Clotild was already a Christian, and had their son baptized, against the wishes of Clovis who at first believed in the pagan gods. Clovis successfully defeated many enemies, e.g. Syagrius of Soissons and the Thuringians. However, Clovis found himself in dire difficulties in a battle with the Alamanni, and promised to convert if God would help him on the battlefield. Thereupon the Alamanni immediately 'turned their backs and began to flee' (Gregory of Tours The History of the Franks, p273). Clovis, who was then baptized and educated by Remigius, bishop of Reims, but was at first afraid of the reaction of the 'people'. We can gain some idea of the highly polemic and politicized aspect of religion through Gregory of Tours' account:

But when he [Clovis] came before the assembled people, or ever he opened his mouth, the divine power had gone forth from him, and all the people cried with one voice: "O gracious king, we drive forth our gods that perish, and are ready to follow that immortal God whom Remigius preacheth." News of this was brought to the bishop, who was filled with joy, and commanded the font to be prepared. The streets were overshadowed with coloured hangings, the churches adorned with white hangings, the baptistry was set in order, smoke of incense spread in clouds, perfumed tapers gleamed, the whole church about the place of baptism was filled with divine fragrance. (Gregory of Tours The History of the Franks, p273).

The converted queen and the presence of Remigius and his church indicates that there was already a sizeable community of Frankish Christians. However, this public statement of Christianity by the king would have an enormous impact in further entrenching Christianity in Gaul. Some three thousand of his army were immediately baptized, along with one of his sisters, while another sister, Iahthechild was converted from Arianism (Gregory of Tours The History of the Franks, p274). Gregory goes on without irony to describe Clovis as 'like a new Constantine'. Clovis extended the Frankish hegemony in Gaul. Taking the opportunity of a dispute between two brothers, Gundobad and Godigisel, for control of their kingdom, Clovis ended up being able to subject Burgundy to him as a tribute-paying vassal (Gregory of Tours The History of the Franks, pp275-6). We can see in Gregory's writings several factors that may have helped account for the Franks growing power. Speaking of the allied king Gundobad he noted that 'He restored his dominion over the whole region known as Burgundy, and instituted milder laws among the Burgundians that there should be no undue oppression of the Romans.' (Ibid.)

Here the Franks and Burgundians were doing a better job in accommodating and assimilating different peoples into one society than the Roman empire itself had done, with its inability to really accommodate or assimilate the German peoples (see Grant 1976). In this process, assimilation through a shared Christian belief may have been a crucial factor. From now on the term 'barbarian' is not used to describe migrating peoples; it is applied only to non-Christians.

The power of the Franks was recognized by the Goths, with whom friendship was pledged. Over the next 100 years they managed to consolidate their power. However, this family of Merovingians from which the Franks chose their kings seems to have declined by the period prior to King Hilderich (Einhard The Life of Charlemagne, 1, p282), with their Majordomos of the Palace ruling effectively for them. The office of 'Majordomo' was raised to great prominence by Charles Martel, who had managed to defeat Saracens forces at the battle of Poitiers in Aquitaine (732 C.E.) and at the Berre River near Narbonne. The position was then held as a hereditary office by his son Pepin (Einhard The Life of Charlemagne, 2, p282). Pepin
(sometimes written as Pippin) eventually tired of the nominal kingship of Hilderich and, apparently with the support of the Pope, had him set aside and assumed the title of king. Pepin was anointed by the Pope in Paris, and the new use of sacred oil, previously reserved for priests and bishops, established his rule as a specifically Christian monarch (McKay 1987, p235). Pepin was engaged in battles with Waifar, Duke of Aquitaine, and handed on the kingship at his death to his two sons, Charles and Carloman. They ruled jointly until the death of Carloman two years later. An overview of developments in Western Europe is provided in the following timeline.

Table I: Selected Developments in the Western Europe 476-1000 C.E. (from McKay 1987; Wade-Perkins 2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>476</td>
<td>Retirement of Last Roman Emperor in the West (Romulus Augustus)</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 480</td>
<td>Clovis (Frankish King) extends power in northern &amp; central Gaul</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 490</td>
<td>Clovis issues Salic Law code of the Franks</td>
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<tr>
<td>496-507</td>
<td>Clovis adopts Christianity</td>
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<tr>
<td>507</td>
<td>Franks defeat Visigoths, control most of Gaul</td>
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<tr>
<td>529</td>
<td>Publication of the monastic Rule of St. Benedict</td>
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<tr>
<td>533-535</td>
<td>Eastern Roman armies intervene in Africa and Italy</td>
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<tr>
<td>597</td>
<td>Pope Gregory sends missionaries to convert Britons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>698</td>
<td>Carthage and Africa fall to Arab armies</td>
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<tr>
<td>664</td>
<td>Roman Christianity upheld over Celtic traditions as the Synod of Whitby in Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 700</td>
<td>Publication of <em>Lindisfarne Gospel</em>, of Bede's <em>Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation</em>, &amp; the epic <em>Beowulf</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>732</td>
<td>A Muslim army is defeated near Poitiers by Charles Martel</td>
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<tr>
<td>752</td>
<td>Pippin III elected king by Frankish aristocrats</td>
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<tr>
<td>754</td>
<td>Pope Stephen anoints Pippin III as king in Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>756</td>
<td>Pippin III 'donates' the Papal States to papacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>768</td>
<td>Charlemagne become Frankish king</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>768-805</td>
<td>Charlemagne's conquest of much of western Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>781</td>
<td>The scholar Alcuin becomes adviser at Frankish court, helps 'Carolingian Renaissance'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>800</td>
<td>Imperial Coronation of Charlemagne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>814</td>
<td>Louis the Pious’s rules the empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>843</td>
<td>Treaty of Verdun: empire divided between Charlemagne's grandsons Lothair, Louis the German and Charles the Bald.</td>
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<tr>
<td>845-900</td>
<td>Viking, Magyar and Muslim invasions further erode the Carolingian empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Phase or western political 'unity' ended.</td>
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4. The 'International' Scene

Developments in Gaul, however, should not be considered in isolation. Two other trends were visible. There was a growing political and cultural division between the Rome and the Eastern Empire during the 4th and 5th centuries. During the sixth century the court under Constantinople was able to re-assert itself over parts of Italy and Africa through the victories of their brilliant general, Belisarius (c. 505-565 C.E.), though by this may have been viewed as another invasion by many in Italy (see Wade-Perkins 2005). However, these revivals would be temporary, and would pale before one of the most sudden cultural and military waves of change in world history. Mohammed, born circa 570 C.E. in the Arabian trading city of Mecca, would
create the creed of a new religion in the Koran, inspired by Allah and the angel Gabriel (see Armstrong 1995 for the social context). In 622 he led the Hejirah to the nearby city of Medina, returning eight years later as ‘the acknowledged leader of a new religion’ (Brown 1972, p26). Rapidly, by force of arms and religious conversion, this new wave of ideas and culture conquered large stretches of the Middle East and Africa. With the partial exception of conquests in Portugal, Spain, Persia and the later occupation of Greece and the Balkans by the Turks, this wave of conquest brought with it a profound Islamization and Arabization that has endured into the present century across much of the Middle East and North Africa. Nor should we regard this in any sense as a ‘barbarian conquest’; Islamic social policies, for example, were generally more lenient towards Jews than eastern Christian control was during this period. Likewise, the vast philosophical, religious, scientific and medical knowledge of the Arabs (see Fakhry 1983; Qadir 1988), partly based on Greek and Persian learning, was deeply attractive to western scholars. Thus we find in Spanish cities, such as Cordoba during the 9th century, young scholars turning to Arabic learning, poetry and books, virtually ignoring Latin (Brown 1972, pp30-31). This was a revolution in middle-eastern and Mediterranean affairs that had a decisive impact on Byzantium, North Africa and Western Europe (see Table 2).

Table 2: The Wave of Islamic Conquests 622-1453 C.E. (based on Brown, 1972, pp26-30)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>622</td>
<td>Mohammed’s Hejirah to Medina</td>
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<tr>
<td>630</td>
<td>Mohammed returns in triumph to Mecca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>634</td>
<td>Most of Arabia conquered or converted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>640</td>
<td>Byzantine provinces of Syria &amp; Palestine captured</td>
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<tr>
<td>640</td>
<td>Cairo and then Egypt taken from Byzantine control</td>
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<tr>
<td>642</td>
<td>Cyrenaica (in North Africa) falls under Arabian control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>650</td>
<td>Persian empire conquered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>670</td>
<td>Most of North African coast under Islamic control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>673</td>
<td>Unsuccessful siege of Constantinople</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>693</td>
<td>Carthage falls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>711-720</td>
<td>Southern Spain brought under control of Muslim rulers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>712</td>
<td>Islam reaches Bokhara and Samarkand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>717</td>
<td>Unsuccessful siege of Constantinople</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>732</td>
<td>Probes into Gaul halted at Battle of Poitiers, where incursions are turned back by the Franks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>823-961</td>
<td>Crete gradually brought under Islamic control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>902</td>
<td>Sicily under Islamic control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1453</td>
<td>Fall of Constantinople to Turks</td>
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There are several crucial factors to note in these developments. First, it cut away most of the southern parts of the old Roman Empire. The Mediterranean was no longer an imperial lake; instead Saracen, Moorish and later on Turkish fleets would be a major threat to the coasts of the Balkans, Sicily and southern Italy. Second, major cities of the east, including Ctesiphon, Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria, along with their wealthy and vigorous populations, were now integrated into a new and vigorous cultural and political system (Brown 1972, p28). As such their resources were now largely lost to the western kingdoms, which had to rely much more on their own continental resources. Indeed, a writer such as Henri Pirenne (2001) in his *Mohammed and Charlemagne* would argue that the classical unity of the ancient world, based on the Mediterranean, was destroyed and trade with east disrupted. Most of the western
Mediterranean was closed to normal trade and naval activities with the east unless they had the approval of Muslim rulers. The ‘Pirenne hypothesis’ states, in summary:

The Islamic conquests in the Mediterranean basin were identified by Pirenne as the true cause of the dissolution of the western Roman Empire. He said that Muslims halted trade between the western and eastern parts of the Roman Empire and that areas governed by Germanic rulers who did not submit to Islamic rule were cut off from the eastern Mediterranean, as was Gaul. Westerners who resisted were blockaded by the Muslims and forced to live on their own resources. Such developments sealed the disappearance in Gaul of the Romanic, Mediterranean-oriented Merovingians and enabled the rise of the Carolingians with their more northern capital at Aachen, their more Germanic orientation, and their feudal vassalage. The western Mediterranean became a "Muslim lake." The Pope in Rome eventually found relations with the Emperor in Constantinople too arduous to sustain in view of Islamic strength. He therefore turned to the Carolingians for protection and alliance. Christian administrators and their institutions were welcomed in the new and unfolding structures of the Carolingians. Pirenne believed that this developmental phase, when antiquity disappeared and European feudalism surfaced, took place roughly during 650 to 750 CE at the time of the Islamic conquests. (Frank 1993, p373)

It was thus natural that a new centre for western culture would be established and accepted in Charlemagne's Gaul (Brown 1972, pp31-33). These hypotheses have been challenged by later writers as overly schematic, e.g. they fail to see an earlier decline in the standard of production of most normal items with the exception of elite goods in the fifth and sixth centuries (see Ward-Perkins 2005). Likewise, an assessment from Islamic sources suggests that most of the areas coming under Muslim control were not wealthy at this stage, and that Muslim power was far from a monolithic bloc. Thus:

Between 650 and 800 CE, significant East-West trade in the Mediterranean did not exist. The accumulating evidence supports the view that after 400 CE, the western Mediterranean entered a long period of gradual disintegration of central Roman institutions. Pirenne himself admits that unified political control had crumbled and that culture, the arts, literature, and science were all in regression; there was pessimism and discouragement. The Arabs took advantage and penetrated these poor, provincial, fragmented areas, but there seemed hardly anything in North Africa or Spain of a profitable nature to be exploited. They deemed the area a backwater. Instead of claiming that Arab invaders had shattered an enduring Roman mercantile unity, as Pirenne does, it is more accurate to conclude that the commercial infrastructure and trading facilities of the Roman Empire had disintegrated on the one hand and had yet to be reconstituted by any stable, unified power on the other. (Frank 1993, p378)

It is clear that conditions had radically changed from the second century C.E., and even from the milieu of the fifth century when there had been a serious fragmentation and decline of the integrated political and economic system that had been the Roman Empire.

5. Charles the Great: A New Emperor of the West?

Charlemagne (Charles the Great, 768-814 C.E.) is a figure that has intrigued later Europeans as one of the great 'builders and rebuilders' of their history. He is claimed by various nationalities as intimately associated with their history; but whether we call him Charlemagne (French), Karl de Grosse (German) or Carlo magno (Italian), we must remember that he lived long before nation-states of 'France' and 'Germany' existed (Geary 1988, p221). His dynasty is called the 'Carolingian' after the Latin form of Charles, Carolus (McKay 1987, p233). Likewise, the Franks are generally viewed as a western Germanic tribal grouping, though this does not make them the same as Teutons or Saxons and does not carry the sense of modern nationality. It has also been suggested that ‘Germanic tribal identities’ in the post-Roman western Europe were
somewhat flexible, though this only applied within the wider grouping of the Germanic ‘family of peoples’ (see Wade-Perkins 2005, p78). In the long term, it seems that “the indigenous Roman population eventually adopted the identity of their masters, and became ‘Visigoths’ or ‘Franks’” (Wade-Perkins 2005, p80). In turn, the Franks have sometimes been viewed in the modern period as common ancestors to the French and Germans, leading to strong revisionist accounts written since World War II and in part influenced by the emergence of the European Union (see Wade-Perkins 2005, pp175-176).

The main source for this period is one of the intimates of Charlemagne, the monk Einhard (770-844 C.E.), who was educated in the monastery of Fulda (in Germany). Later on Einhard would become an adviser at Charlemagne's court, taking part in the so-called 'Carolingian Renaissance' which flourished under Frankish patronage. Einhard, too, apologizes for daring to undertake this task:

> Here, then, is the book containing the life story of a truly great man. You will marvel at his deeds, and probably also at the presumption of a barbarous Frank for imagining that he could write tastefully and elegantly in Latin. For I am not much versed in the Roman tongue. . . . I thought this would be better than to allow the memory of so great a man to perish out of petty concern for my own reputation. (Einhard The Life of Charlemagne, Prologue, pp281-2)

Once again, we should not accept this writer's modesty on face value. Einhard's biography is in fact partly modeled on Suetonius' Life of the Emperor Augustus (McKay 1987, p235), a classical work that Einhard obviously admired. Charles is portrayed as a vigorous king engaged in constant campaigns in which he is usually victorious. He fought against the Duke of Aquitaine, managed through pressure and diplomacy to control the Basque Duke Lupus, and fought against the Lombards in northern Italy at the request of Bishop Hadrian of Rome. Northern Italy came under his rule, and he made his son Pepin king of those territories (Einhard The Life of Charlemagne, 6, pp284-5).

The longest and hardest war Charlemagne engaged in was with the Saxons, which was portrayed as a war of civilization and Christianity against those who were 'savage by nature, given to the cult of demons, and hostile to our religion' (Einhard The Life of Charlemagne, 7, p285). In total the war raged for 33 years, with Charlemagne trying to forcibly convert those he defeated. As noted by Einhard, at the victorious end of the war:

> Then he took ten thousand Saxons who lived on both banks of the Elbe river, with their wives and children, and resettled them in various contingents here and there throughout Gaul and Germania. And so the war which had dragged on for so many years was concluded under the conditions which the king imposed and the Saxons accepted. The conditions were that they give up the cult of demons, abandon the religious practices of their ancestors, adopt the sacraments of the Christian faith and religion, and become a single nation with the Franks. (Einhard The Life of Charlemagne, 7, p286).

Charlemagne was generally successful in the following wars, though a revolt by the Basques resulted in the death of some of his leading counts, including the royal steward, Ekkehard, the count of the Palace, Anshelm, and Roland, the Margrave of Brittany. This occurred at the Battle of Roncesvalles in 778 C.E., an event which has been made famous by the epic Song of Roland. Other campaigns were waged against the Bretons, against Duke Tassilo and the Beneventians in Italy, against the Slavs who threatened the eastern marches of his kingdom, against the Avars and Huns in Pannonia, and against the Danes, whose ships threatened the coasts of Gaul and Germania.
Charlemagne's policies seem to have both strengthened his own resources, and he soon established control over a greater part of Western Europe than any other king since the Western Empire. Originally, the Franks had only controlled the region between the Rhine and the Loire in northern Gaul (Einhard *The Life of Charlemagne*, 15, p289) but came to control all of Gaul, northern Spain, northern Italy, a good part of western Germany, and segments of Pannonia, Dacia, Istria and Dalmatia.

Relations with Constantinople were friendly until an unprecedented event took place. Charles, on a visit to Rome to set affairs in order after some Romans had tormented Pope Leo, founded himself granted a single honour. The new Pope Leo III crowned him as Emperor and 'Augustus' in late 800 C.E. Einhard claims that Charlemagne was not enthusiastic about this and 'he said he would never have entered the church even on this highest of holy days if he had beforehand realized the intention of the Pope' (Einhard *The Life of Charlemagne*, 28, pp296-7). Chamberlin argues that there is no reason to doubt Einhard on this point (1986, p201). Edward Gibbon claimed that the crowning was derived from specific Roman and papal interests:

>. . . it was only by reviving the Western empire that they could pay their obligations or secure their establishment. By this decisive measure they would finally eradicate the claims of the Greeks [the Eastern emperors]; from the debasement of a provincial town, the majesty of Rome would be restored; the Latin Christians would be united under a supreme head, in their ancient metropolis; and the conquerors of the West would receive their crown from the successors of St. Peter. The Roman church would acquire a zealous and respectable advocate; and, under the shadow of the Carlovingian power, the bishop might exercise, with honour and safety, the government of the city. (Gibbon, 1904, V, p329)

The event was awkward for the Frankish king in two ways; first, it aroused the indignation of the East Emperors, and second, although it recognized him as defender of the church, it was the Pope who had crowned him, indicating a subtle precedence of the pope over the 'emperor'. Indeed, Charlemagne did not accept the ambitious title of 'Emperor of the Romans'; instead he would only use the form *Romanum gubernans Imperium*, 'Governing the Roman Empire', as part of his titles (Chamberlin 1986, p204). In time, however, his royal seals bore the phrase *Renovatio Romani imperii*, suggesting a revival of Roman imperial values (Roberts 1985, p88). When it came time for Charlemagne to appoint his son Louis as co-emperor, it was Charles himself who physically crowned his descendant (Einhard *The Life of Charlemagne*, 30, p297; Chamberlin 1986, p201). In fact this first crowning was a clever political move by the Papacy; they had found a defender, and also attempted to established the precedence of their role in relation to the temporal powers. In so far as it suggested that Pope’s blessing was needed to legitimate emperors and kings, and had rights that couldn’t be removed by temporal powers, the issue would emerge centuries later as part of the wider conflict between Popes and 'Holy Roman Emperors' (known as 'The Investiture Contest', see Tellenbach 1970). On the other hand, it was clear that Rome and classical culture was still looking upon as something of a great stabilizing ideal; in some sense 'the transformed barbarian world . . . badly needed a Roman imperial tradition' (Geary 1988, p231). Charlemagne seems to have been influenced by both Roman and Christian notions of government:

He seems to have seen himself as a king like those depicted in the Bible, a judge and father of his subject with, especially, responsibility for their religious faith. Christian religion was the cement of his many-peopled empire. (Roberts 1985, p89)

The Carolingian court at Aachen was a brilliant centre of learning which soon rivaled Rome or Constantinople. It was adorned by a fine Basilica built by Charlemagne, and was now a centre of learning where scholars such as Deacon Peter of Pisa, Alcuin of York, 'the greatest scholar of
his age' and Einhard himself would find patronage (Einhard *The Life of Charlemagne*, 25, p295). Charlemagne without doubt viewed himself as a devoted Christian monarch; his favourite book was Augustine's *City of God* (Einhard *The Life of Charlemagne*, 24, p295) and as such encouraged Christian learning and scholarship. But much more than this was involved. A fine new minuscule script (Carolingian minuscule) was adopted and developed as a standard for copyists and chancellories throughout Europe (Roberts 1985, p90). Furthermore, this scholastic culture was rather international; scholars in Britain, Gaul, Germany, Spain and Italy could now communicate and travel through Charlemagne's empire, easily visiting cities, bishoprics or monasteries. Using Latin as a shared language, they continued historical, philosophical and religious debate alive. At the same time, local literatures such as the *Song of Roland* or the epic legend of *Beowulf* would find a wider distribution than before (McKay 1987, p242). They also extended the church school system throughout Europe. As noted by John McKay et al., speaking of Charlemagne's court:

The greatest contribution of the scholars at Aachen was not so much the originality of their ideas as their hard work of salvaging and preserving the thought and writings of the ancients. Thus the Carolingian Renaissance was a rebirth of interest in, study of, and preservation of ideas and achievement of classical Greece and Rome. (1987, p244)

Charlemagne died at the age of 72 after 47 years of rule. His was one of the most vigorous reigns of any Christian monarch, and he initiated a period of cultural renewal and stability which rivaled the late Roman empire. At the same time, this could only be done through continual warfare and conquest. Images and statues of Charlemagne often show him sitting on his horse, indicating how often he had to travel his realm and how often fight for it, or at least holding a sword and the ‘triumphant cross’ composed of an orb surmounted by a cross (Roberts 1985, pp90-91). Indeed, after his death, with the splitting of the kingdom between three of his grandsons, his political achievement was broken up. However, at the level of creating a mixed society for Gallo-Roman and Frank alike, in his creation of the tools and basic instruments for statecraft, he played a formative role in the creation of the Middle Ages. It is an exaggeration to regard Charlemagne as the 'Father of modern Europe', but it is not an exaggeration to recognize that his rule helped create a new culture out of the disturbed and broken remnants of the Western Empire (see Roberts 1985, p88). After Charlemagne, with a rather separate Byzantine culture flourishing in the east, and with Islam a major power now controlling the southern and eastern Mediterranean, western European cultures are forced into a different pattern of development where kingdoms, states and popes dominate. The new age and culture of Christendom would follow as part of the culture of contesting states in a process of national formation. These states were only partly under the shadow of German rulers that claimed supremacy over the ‘Holy Roman Empire’, a term not itself used until the twelve century, but implicit in the imperial crowning of Charlemagne in 800 and Otto the Saxon in 962 (Roberts 1985, p93). The societies and political practices of the ancient world were largely over, but the ideas and ideals of the classical and early Christian worlds were far from dead. They would be crucial in the creation of the 'modern world', beginning with a Renaissance that would give new meanings to Athens, Rome and Jerusalem.
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