

## SECTION IV

If we sum up Charlemagne's designs and achievements, we find a sound idea and a vain dream, a great success and a great failure.  
GUIZOT.

THE EMPIRE OF CHARLEMAGNE AND THE  
CAROLINGIAN LINE<sup>1</sup> (768-987)

24. **Charlemagne's Accession and Designs.** — At Pepin's death, in 768, his dominions were equally divided between his sons, Charles and Carloman.<sup>2</sup> The latter soon died, and his brother, destined to be known in history as Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, became sole ruler over the Franks and over all the peoples who acknowledged their power. Charlemagne, despite the French name by which he is best known to us, was thoroughly German in blood, temperament, and character.<sup>3</sup>

He was bold, pushing, sagacious, eager for dominion. He had a desire for unity, system, and order equal to that of Cæsar himself. In him we find harmonized the opposite qualities of the northern barbarian and of the civilized Roman. He had the vigor and the impetuosity of the one, with the organizing, legislative, and centralizing ability of the other.

Pepin, and those who preceded him, had been contented to be the commanders in chief of a people, but Charlemagne

<sup>1</sup> For a list of the Carolingian kings, see Genealogical Table in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Charles: his German name was Karl, later Karl the Great. Charlemagne (shar'le-mān) is the French form from the Latin Carolus Magnus.

<sup>3</sup> Charles the Great was born, according to some accounts, at Aix-la-Chapelle (āks-lā-shā-pēl'); according to others, at Salzburg or Ingelheim, Germany.

was ambitious to rule over a great realm; he thus sought to become not merely the head of a race or of a union of tribes which might be stationary or wandering, according to circumstances, but to be a true territorial sovereign, master of a certain well-defined territory and of all it contained. Here, then, was a step forward; the idea of the barbaric chief was departing; that of the king or ruler, with fixed geographical authority, fixed revenue, fixed military power and prerogative, was beginning.

25. **His Wars with the Aquitanians, Lombards, and Saxons.** — Charlemagne had inherited the government of a people scattered over a country much larger than that of modern France. But in the southwest the Aquitanians revolted, and his first efforts were spent in reducing them to obedience. This accomplished, he was obliged to turn his attention to the Lombards, who had again invaded the territory which his father had granted to the pope. With the Church, Charlemagne was in thorough sympathy. He felt that if they joined forces, all Europe might be conquered in the interest of intellectual and moral progress. When, therefore, the pope implored his help, he marched to his aid, crushed the Lombards, annexed their country to his own, thus gaining a large part of Italy, and then confirmed the papacy in the possession which Pepin had secured to it.<sup>1</sup>

Charlemagne next turned his attention to the north. There he hoped to gain fresh territory. Beyond the Rhine the Saxons still held the lands which Cæsar had vainly tried to conquer. Although a kindred people, yet between them and the Franks deep hatred existed. The Saxons considered the Franks as men who had deserted the honor and faith of their fathers. They taunted them with having abandoned the free, wild life of the forest for the effeminate customs of walled cities, and with having forsaken the savage war gods, Woden and

<sup>1</sup> See Paragraph 22.



Thor,<sup>1</sup> for the meek god of the Christians, who had been ignominiously crucified between two thieves.

The Franks, on the other hand, despised the Saxons as pagans, pirates, and savages. For more than thirty years war was going on between them. Terrible as Charlemagne was with his bodies of disciplined veteran troops, he found in the sturdy Saxons foemen worthy of his steel. The slaughter on both sides was immense, but at last the great Frankish leader compelled the northern tribes to sue for peace.

He succeeded in reaching the forest where the fortress of Ehresburg was situated. The Saxons regarded this spot as sacred, for here they had erected a column commemorating the defeat of the Roman legions by their great ancestral warrior Hermann. Before this column stood an altar of stone on which captives were sacrificed to the god of battles, while all around it were heaped up the spoils of war. Charlemagne stormed the fort, chopped the column to pieces, broke the altar, and burned the sacred oak trees. Then this fierce people, seeing their holiest place in the hands of their enemy, submitted to what seemed the decree of fate, and agreed to pay tribute.

**26. War with the Moors; Roncesvalles.** — Next, the victorious ruler prepared to advance on Spain. The Moors in the northern part of that country had revolted against the authority of the Mohammedan caliph of Cordova. They begged Charlemagne's assistance, promising to become his subjects. Charlemagne crossed the Pyrenees and took possession of a number of cities; but the Moors, becoming alarmed lest they had got for themselves a harder taskmaster than the caliph, now desired to drop the war and resume their former allegiance. Charlemagne then found himself without allies in a rough and hostile country, where food was scarce, and with a mountain chain between him and his supplies.

<sup>1</sup> Woden and Thor (Tor): these names of heathen gods are preserved in our English names Wednesday (Woden's day) and Thursday (Thor's day).

Under these circumstances he deemed it prudent to retire. He began his retreat by the old Roman road which leads from Spain to France,<sup>1</sup> through the narrow and gloomy pass of Roncesvalles;<sup>2</sup> he passed through the gorge in safety; but not so his rear guard under the command of Roland. There the wild tribes of the mountains, joined by the treacherous Moors, attacked them with such fury and in such overwhelming numbers that, encumbered as they were by baggage, they could make but slight resistance: not a man, it is said, escaped to tell the tale.

But the poets of that and following generations found in this tragedy a fit theme for their genius. The death struggle, which no one saw save those engaged in it, they beheld with the eye of the imagination, and the "Song of Roland" became one of the great romances of the Middle Ages. It was recited in the peasant's hut and the baron's castle. The warriors of the west of Europe knew it by heart; and when the Normans, two centuries later, fought that battle of Hastings by which they won the crown of England,<sup>3</sup> they advanced to the conflict singing of

the blast of that wild horn,  
On Fontarabian<sup>4</sup> echoes borne,  
The dying hero's call,  
That told imperial Charlemagne  
How Paynim<sup>5</sup> sons of swarthy Spain  
Had wrought his champion's fall.<sup>6</sup>

But the reverse did not check the arms of the great king, and he claimed the Spanish territory as far as the Ebro as part of his dominions.

<sup>1</sup> Astorga to Bordeaux (bôr-dô').

<sup>2</sup> Roncesvalles (rôn-thes-vâl'yés): in the western Pyrenees. See Map No. IV, page 27.

<sup>3</sup> See The Leading Facts of English History in this series.

<sup>4</sup> Fontarabian: from Fontarabia, a fortified town of Spain, on the boundary between France and that country.

<sup>5</sup> Paynim: pagan.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Walter Scott's Poems.



**27. Conquest and Conversion of the Saxons.** — His campaigns, however, were not yet over. The Saxons, who had been after all but half conquered, broke out in revolt. They burned the churches which the missionaries had erected, killed the preachers of the Gospel, and compelled the Christians to flee the country. Charlemagne raised an enormous force and soon appeared on the scene of the rebellion. Such was the terror of his name that many of the rebels had already fled, and he found the country quiet. The king, however, was determined to make an example of those who had dared defy his authority. He called a meeting of the leading men and demanded the delivery of the insurgents. Four thousand five hundred prisoners were shortly after brought bound into the camp at Verden.<sup>1</sup> Charlemagne gave orders that the whole number should be executed. The work of death began; it lasted through the entire day, and when the sun set, their headless bodies lay on the banks of the Weser, whose stream ran red with blood.

This massacre, far from intimidating the survivors, stirred them to frenzy. Another revolt broke out. Charlemagne, raising a new army, ravaged the country with fire and sword. The barbarians saw that they must choose once for all between submission and extermination. Wittekind, the chief of the Saxons, came forward and gave himself up as a captive. So completely was he overcome that he consented to enter a monastery for the rest of his life.

Charlemagne next began a series of conversions, not by persuasion, but by force. He gave the Saxons their choice between baptism and death. Under this edict the Church increased rapidly in numbers. But even these measures were not wholly effectual, and eventually the king adopted a different policy. He carried off the inhabitants, men, women, and children, by thousands, and settled them in colonies in

<sup>1</sup> Verden: on the Weser, a little southeast of Bremen.

central and southern Europe, leaving in their stead strong military garrisons to hold the country.

Next, he offered every half-naked barbarian who would come forward and receive baptism a fine, new, white garment. The bribe worked wonders. Instead of flying from immersion as they formerly had, the Saxons begged for it. Once, it is said, the stock of new garments did not hold out, and some of coarser quality were hastily prepared. A gigantic chief, who received one of these, looked at it with scorn. "I have been baptized here twenty times before," said he, "and never once got such linen as that; and if I didn't need the clothes, I would have nothing more to do with such a mean-spirited religion."

**28. Extent of Charlemagne's Dominions; the Northmen.** — Thus, by the point of the sword in most cases, by exile and gifts in others, Charlemagne extended the boundaries of his kingdom until it comprised the greater part of western Europe, from the Atlantic to the main stream of the Danube, and from the Mediterranean to the Baltic — embracing the countries now included in modern France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, part of Hungary, part of northern Spain, and more than two thirds of Italy. For the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire this immense territory acknowledged one ruler.

Charlemagne's dream of geographical unity, at least so far as the Germanic races were concerned, was in great measure accomplished. His example, too, inspired the British prince Egbert, who was heir to the throne of the West Saxons, but was then a refugee at Charlemagne's court, so that after he came into possession of the crown, he compelled all rival kings to submit to him, thus establishing the realm of England.<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of the year 800 Charlemagne set out for Rome. On his journey, which occupied the entire summer

<sup>1</sup> See The Leading Facts of English History in this series.



and autumn, he stopped for a time at a seaport on the Mediterranean. One day, as he stood by the window, his attendants noticed that his eyes were filled with tears. None of his great men dared to question him, but he addressed one of them: "Do you see those vessels in the distance?" asked the king. "I do, sire," was the reply. "Well, those are the Northmen; they have come to insult these shores. For myself, I do not fear them; but woe to those who come after me."

Charlemagne had reason for his foreboding. He had succeeded in putting a stop to the land invasions of the barbarians: his realm was practically at peace; but he was powerless to check those Scandinavian pirates who, with their swift-sailing barks, were ravaging England and threatening every coast in Europe. A century later we shall see all that Charlemagne dreaded come to pass.

**29. Charlemagne crowned Emperor at Rome; his Plans.** — Toward the end of November the king reached Rome. On Christmas day, followed by a numerous retinue, he entered the church of St. Peter<sup>1</sup> to partake of the solemn communion which celebrated the birth of the Saviour. He advanced toward the high altar and knelt in prayer; as he rose, the pope stepped forward and placed on his head a jeweled crown surmounted by a cross. Immediately a shout filled the building: "Long life and victory to Charles Augustus,<sup>2</sup> crowned by God, great and peace-giving emperor!"

Thus did Charlemagne receive the sanction of the Church to his scheme of resuscitating the imperial government of Christian Rome. Thus, after more than three centuries had elapsed,

<sup>1</sup> Not the present church, which was not wholly completed until the seventeenth century.

<sup>2</sup> Augustus: a title originally given to Octavianus Cæsar as supreme ruler. Later, it became the surname of all the Roman emperors. Its use here implied that Charlemagne had become the legitimate successor of the Cæsars, and head of the revived Roman (Christian) Empire.

the title of Emperor of the Romans was revived. With the pope's aid the newly crowned potentate was resolved to establish the Holy Roman Empire<sup>1</sup> on an enduring foundation. Henceforth throughout Europe he would have but one state, one people, one universal or Catholic faith.

To accomplish this gigantic undertaking Charlemagne employed the following means: (1) war; (2) national assemblies; (3) courts and royal commissioners; (4) the clergy; (5) education; (6) commerce. What he had achieved through war we have already seen in great measure. By it he had not only gained his territory and his title, but he had organized the semi-barbarous tribes and taught them to obey one will. His wars, in fact, were so constant that he may be said never really to have been at peace.

**30. "Fields of May"; Laws; Imperial Commissioners; Education; Public Improvements; Influence Abroad.** — The chief national assembly, or the Field of May,<sup>2</sup> was held in the spring. It consisted of the leading men of the Empire, though in case of war all freemen would probably attend. With them Charlemagne took counsel respecting the enactment of statutes, the general welfare of the country, and on questions relating to war and peace; but practically the emperor held absolute power. He stamped treaties with the pommel of his sword, and compelled their observance with the point.

One of his principal objects was to obtain uniformity of law throughout the realm. Previous to his reign each people had its own laws, which were sometimes written, and at other times were simply certain customs handed down from the earliest

<sup>1</sup> See Bryce's Holy Roman Empire, pages 3 and 80.

<sup>2</sup> The Field of May: so called because the assembly met in May, generally in a field or public square. The Field of May did not originate with Charlemagne, but grew out of an ancient German assembly of the Franks held in March, and hence called the Field of March. Once every freeman had a right to take part in these meetings; but under Charlemagne this was practically restricted to the chief men (nobles and higher clergy), except in emergencies. From 770 to 813 Charlemagne held thirty-five of these national assemblies.



period. On this account there was no proper unity. The Burgundians might have one law, the Visigoths another, the northern Franks a third. At the south an attempt was made by the clergy to enforce a modified form of the old written Roman law, while in the district of which Paris was the center, and beyond it, men were tried and judged according to the primitive German customs.

These old Frankish customs recognized only two capital offenses: one was desertion from the army, the other was cowardice in battle. The deserter was hanged; the coward was suffocated in a mud hole. Murder and all other crimes were punished by fine. If a man killed a noble or a bishop, it cost him heavily, perhaps ruined him; but if he killed a common man, he got off easily.<sup>1</sup> In case a criminal refused to appear for trial, or failed to pay the sum prescribed, he was declared an outlaw and hunted down like a wild beast. If he had not means to pay, and his friends would not pay for him, the injured person or his relatives took his body, and he became a slave.

As in those days there were few ways of discovering the facts in difficult cases, it was the custom to presume the prisoner guilty until he proved the contrary. He might do this, first, by swearing that he was innocent, and getting a number of reputable men to swear that they believed him. Secondly, if he could not bring such witnesses, he was obliged to undergo the ordeal, or "judgment of God." He appealed to Heaven to vindicate him, and then, in the presence of priests and other witnesses, carried a piece of red-hot iron a certain distance, or plunged his bare arm up to the elbow in boiling water.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The murderer of a swineherd incurred a fine of 30 sols (a sol being about \$1.85; or, reckoned at the present value of money, about ten times as much, or \$18.50); the murderer of an able-bodied slave incurred a fine of 150 sols; the murderer of a nobleman or priest incurred a fine of 600 sols. These rates varied at different periods and in different parts of the country.

<sup>2</sup> There were also various other ordeals, but all rested on the same general principle.







If, after several days had elapsed, he appeared to have escaped serious harm, he was acquitted; if not, he had to suffer the penalty of his crime.

Finally, in certain cases, the accused had the right to challenge his accusers to fight in mortal combat. If he came off victor, it was believed that God had interposed in his behalf. Such customs show how hard it was in that age to collect evidence in regard to crime. Underneath these rude attempts at justice was the idea that there is a power above ourselves that is on the side of righteousness.

Charlemagne's constant effort was to improve on these primitive methods. His edicts or laws<sup>1</sup> embrace every subject, political, civil, military, and ecclesiastical. Not infrequently they begin with a quotation from the Ten Commandments or from the laws of Moses.

These edicts extend to every relation of man to man or of man to property. They also relate to the government of the Empire and the supervision of the imperial estates. Some lay down rules for the guidance of generals of the army, others for the conduct and behavior of bishops; others give minute instructions respecting the emperor's farms, and even order what shall be done with a surplus of hens' eggs.

To insure the energetic, faithful, and uniform administration of these laws, Charlemagne appointed special officers, called "counts," who had the government of districts or cities. Next, he appointed special commissioners to travel through the Empire and oversee these counts.

The commissioners went out in pairs,—a count and a bishop,—and were called the "Emperor's Eyes," since it was their duty to spy out abuses and take measures for rectifying them. In accomplishing these and other reforms, Charlemagne made it a rule to secure the coöperation of

<sup>1</sup> Sixty-five of Charlemagne's edicts, or "capitularies," containing over a thousand articles, have come down to us.



the clergy. At the same time he took care to purge the Church of inefficient or unworthy men, fully realizing that there was often more likelihood that the Church would become barbarized than that the barbarians would become Christianized.

With respect to education, he set the standard by establishing the School of the Palace, under the leadership of Alcuin, a learned Anglo-Saxon monk. Alcuin collected and restored many valuable Latin manuscripts, and thus helped to lay the foundation for sound classical scholarship. He also wrote Scripture commentaries and a variety of other works, and encouraged discussion. These discussions were full of ingenious subtleties, rather than of profound investigation; but such as they were, they helped to keep thought alive<sup>1</sup> in an age which lived almost wholly through the senses. Although the emperor never made great progress, yet, by his example and efforts, he rekindled the pure and living flame of learning at a time when it seemed about to go out forever.

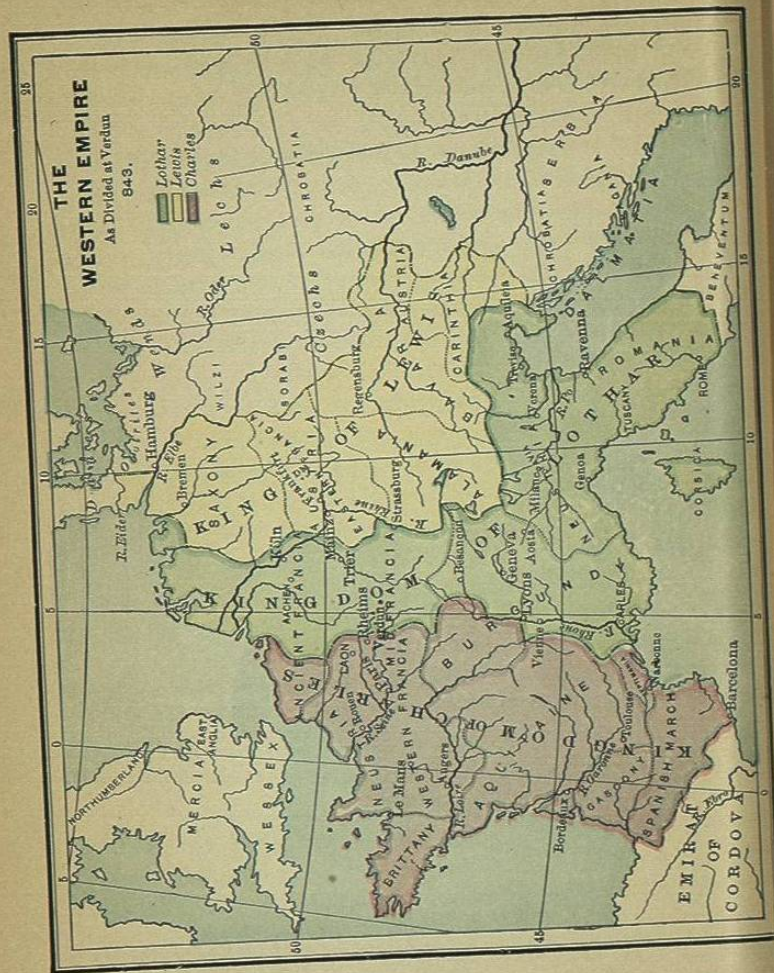
Finally, he encouraged and protected commerce, opened new roads, and placed guards along the rivers, coasts, and highways to prevent robbery. He also established great annual fairs, where merchants and people gathered from all parts of Europe to buy and sell. This intercourse did much to overcome the prejudices and hostilities of different sections and races, and thus helped to give unity to the Empire.

The fame of Charlemagne's achievements extended not only throughout Europe, but even to the court of the caliph of Bagdad. We have already seen its influence on England.<sup>2</sup> Centuries later that influence still lived; and when the great emperor had long been dust, Henry II found in his legislative

<sup>1</sup> The following may serve as examples: "What is it which renders bitter things sweet? Hunger." "What is that of which men never grow weary? Gain." "What is hope? The refreshment of labor." "What is faith? The assurance of unknown things."

<sup>2</sup> See Paragraph 28.





acts a model for those reforms of justice which have made his name so conspicuous in English history.<sup>1</sup>

### 31. Failure of Charlemagne's Plans; his Death; Results.

— But however temporarily successful his work might be, Charlemagne had, nevertheless, undertaken an impossible task. There was in fact no real and permanent unity in the Empire. First, the people were not of the same race: part were Italians, part French,<sup>2</sup> part Germans. Next, there was no common language, but each race had its own. Lastly, each had, or wished to have, its own customs and laws. During Charlemagne's life his genius and power held these antagonistic societies and peoples together. Deceived by the peace he had compelled, he believed that all that he had accomplished would last.

When he died, in 814, he ordered that his corpse should be propped up in a royal chair of state and placed in the vault of the cathedral of his capital at Aix-la-Chapelle.<sup>3</sup> In his lap lay an open Bible, in his hand a scepter. Thus he sought to make his lifeless body a material image of his enduring power. But it was all in vain; the forces of disintegration, held in check for a time, speedily broke the realm to pieces.

Still, all was not lost. The effects of Charlemagne's policy of government continued to make themselves felt: (1) the establishment of his capital as far north as Aix-la-Chapelle not only put a stop to the land invasions of the Germans into Gaul, but made that city an important center of civilization; (2) his schools also survived in considerable measure, and continued to be a source of intellectual activity; (3) finally, though the colossal empire broke into three fragments, each of these became a nation.

<sup>1</sup> See Stubbs's Constitutional History of England, I, 494.

<sup>2</sup> French, *i.e.*, Romanized Celts of Gaul.

<sup>3</sup> Aix-la-Chapelle (aks-lä-shä-pél'): German, Aachen.



The Treaty of Verdun,<sup>1</sup> made between the three grandsons of Charlemagne in 843, was a turning point in history. It was the first important treaty between European states; it is connected with the oldest written monument of the French language;<sup>2</sup> it marks the beginning of the three great sovereignties of Italy, Germany, and France, into which the Empire was divided.

The map<sup>3</sup> shows France shorn of much of its former territory. It no longer extends to the Rhine on the north, or to the Rhone on the southeast; for all that long strip of country, reaching from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, the Treaty of Verdun annexed to Italy. That allotment has proved a source of constant war between Germany and France. Each has by turns tried to get possession of that border land; and though more than ten centuries have elapsed since the division was made, the contest between the two countries is not yet settled.<sup>4</sup>

After Charlemagne we meet no really great name in France for a number of centuries. His descendants, like the Sluggard Kings who preceded him, have no character. Their history is told in their names, or rather nicknames, — the "Meek," the "Bald," the "Fat," the "Stammerer," the "Simple," and

<sup>1</sup> Verdun: a town of France, on the Meuse, northeast of Paris. See Map No. IV, page 27.

<sup>2</sup> After Charlemagne's death civil war broke out between his three grandsons, Charles, Louis, and Lothaire. The first two eventually formed an alliance and took a solemn oath in the spring of 842, which prepared the way for the Treaty of Verdun, which gave France to Charles (or Karl), Germany to Louis (or Ludwig), and Italy, with the strip of territory lying between Germany and France, to Lothaire (or Lothar). Louis' oath, addressed to the Romanized Franks, or Frenchmen, shows the Latin language in the act of transformation into French. French, in fact, had already made such progress that Charlemagne had been obliged to learn it, and the clergy of his reign had taken to preaching in it. See Brachet's Historical French Grammar, pages 12-15, where the oath is given entire.

<sup>3</sup> See Map No. VI, page 45.

<sup>4</sup> Out of the strip granted to Lothaire, which embraced Lorraine and Alsace, France obtained a considerable portion, and the rest eventually went to form Holland and parts of Germany, of Belgium, and of Switzerland.

the "Fool." Had France depended on them, she would never have risen. Other hands and other brains were to build up the kingdom that now had a name and a language of its own.

**32. Summary.** — Charlemagne aimed at unity, in an age when unity was practically impossible. But he succeeded in some of his great measures: he checked the most formidable of northern invasions and he strengthened and reformed the Church. Europe to-day rests in considerable degree on the three great divisions of his empire, — Germany, France, Italy. The greatness of his character and his wonderful executive ability are unquestioned. Napoleon at the height of his power used to style himself a "second Charlemagne."