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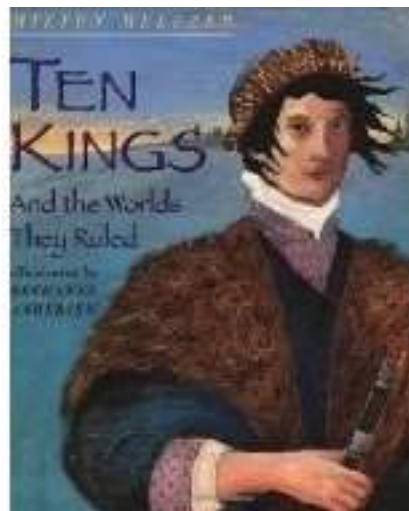
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Meltzer, M. (2002). *Ten kings and the world they ruled*. New York: Orchard Books.



Charlemagne

Reigned A.D. 768-814

History knows him as Charlemagne, or “Charles the Great,” one of the legendary figures of the Middle Ages. He was a rare combination of warrior and scholar. As warrior he battled to extend the boundaries of his Christian kingdom on all sides. He started as king of the Franks and made himself emperor of the West. He founded the Holy Roman Empire and stimulated the economic and political life of Europe.

As scholar he mastered Latin and could speak it as well as his native tongue. He studied the liberal arts and fostered education and a cultural renaissance.

There is little known about Charlemagne’s childhood and youth. The sources are thin. His only biography by someone who knew him was written by the abbot Einhard a decade after the king’s death. But he gives us few of the details of his subject’s life and times, perhaps because he had no contemporary biographies on which to model his work. No one had written such personal histories for some five hundred years, not since the time of the Roman Empire.

Einhard’s biography was colored by his desire to make Charlemagne and his dynasty look good. Luckily there are other documentary records that modern historians have used, annals kept by monks in monasteries. These writings provide detailed accounts of events during the reign of Charlemagne. Then too

there are collections of saints' lives. They offer insights into the religion and politics of the period.

Charlemagne was the grandson of Charles Martel, who gained control of Aquitaine, a large region of today's France. Charlemagne's father, Pépin III, made himself the first king of a new Frankish dynasty. Pépin and his wife, Bertrada, had two sons, Charles and Carloman. Upon Pépin's death in 768, the two brothers ruled jointly, each responsible for a different part of the realm. Inevitably rivalry arose that threatened to bring on civil war, but then Carloman suddenly died. Charlemagne was left as sole ruler of the entire kingdom of the Franks.

The Franks were a Germanic people who originally lived along the Rhine River. Together with other Germanic groups, around A.D. 200 they began moving into the territory of the declining Roman Empire. Roman ways attracted their chieftains, as well as the prospect of loot and of paid service with the Roman army. Sometimes the Romans enrolled whole tribes as mercenaries to serve against other tribes.

The Franks, a warrior society, settled within areas now part of Belgium and France. Their territory became known as Francia. One of their earliest kings, Clovis, embraced Christianity, giving the Franks the support of the Church.

The Frankish nation developed into something more than a collection of barbarian war bands. The war bands became a people belonging to a recognizable state, although different groups of the empire still spoke different languages and could communicate only in Latin. These of course were the literate ones. The pagan beliefs that many Franks clung to were gradually reconciled with Christianity.

Most people living in Francia were scarcely aware of inhabiting a nation or a state. They were intensely local in view, more interested in their neighbors and the goings-on in the next village than in differences between their state and others in Europe. "Europe" itself was still only a dim concept, which few thought about or grasped. Even upper-class people had a limited knowledge of the world, depending upon maps drawn on parchment. These pictured the



world map

world as a flat disc divided into three continents—Asia, Africa, and what came to be called Europe. Christendom? Most were only vaguely conscious of being part of a far-spreading religious community. The word *Europe* would not be applied to western Christendom until the tenth century, long after Charlemagne's time.

When Charlemagne became sole ruler, he moved against those who threatened his power. To expand his territory he defeated one rival, the king of the Lombard people of northern Italy, and had himself crowned king in his place. Then he forged an alliance with the papacy, glad to have the pope's protection. Thus he took control of a large part of Italy, which brought new wealth and peoples into his growing empire.

Before he was through with the Lombards, Charlemagne declared war against the pagan Saxons, another Germanic people. (They had begun moving into the old Roman province of Britain from the fourth century onward.) For thirty years Charlemagne hammered away at the Saxons. He would kill thousands of them in a single day without a quiver of conscience. Charlemagne's policy was an early example of the enforced Christianization of people considered to be "barbaric" or "primitive."

While still struggling to subdue the Saxons, who often revolted, Charlemagne waged other campaigns to broaden his empire. Best remembered is his expedition into Spain, for in 778 something happened there that is commemorated in literature. Part of his army, led by Count Roland, was ambushed by Basques near Roncesvalles, and Roland was killed. The epic poem *The Song of Roland* tells the story. The outcome of the campaign was the establishment of a militarized buffer zone between Frankish land and Muslim Spain.

Marching to his eastern frontier, Charlemagne defeated the duke of Bavaria, adding that duchy to his empire. Farther east was the huge Slavic territory held by an Asiatic people, the Ayars. Charlemagne smashed their power in four years of assault and made their kingdom a tributary state.

By 800 Charlemagne could map a vastly extended empire. It ran from the Elbe River in Germany to south of the Pyrenees in Spain and from the North Sea to southern Italy. His authority rivaled that of the old Roman emperors at the peak of their power.

In Rome the papacy moved to proclaim how much it valued Charlemagne's protection and political leadership. He had brought all the invaders of the Roman lands within a single faith. True, he had often imposed conversion at the point of a sword. But that was how power was practiced at that time. On Christmas Day of the year 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne the Holy Roman Emperor.

Under Charlemagne Christianity was preached everywhere, and the Church and its institutions were encouraged. But the ancient faiths rooted in the past could not be wiped out overnight. The history of the Church shows constant combat with older beliefs even into modern times. Paganism survived



in many places, along with magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, dream interpreters, astrologers, and fortune-tellers. Though Charlemagne condemned it, belief in witchcraft persisted, at great cost especially to women. Many were persecuted, even burned alive, on the charge of witchery.

What was Frankish society like at that time? Francia was a world of forest and wasteland with villages and lords' manors scattered here and there. Towns were just beginning to grow and commerce to revive.

Travel in those times, whether local or distant, was always dangerous. The roads were not safe. Thieves were everywhere. Outlaws hid in the forests, leaping out to rob passersby. They even dogged the army, hoping to pillage the baggage carts. Charlemagne's penalties were harsh for all forms of thievery: for a first offense, loss of an eye; for a second, slitting of the nostrils; for a third, execution.

Everyday life was brutal too. When people quarreled, ears were cut off, eyes torn out, noses slit, tongues ripped out, teeth broken, joints crushed, hands and feet amputated, testicles smashed. Punishment for such "misbehavior" was just as harsh: mutilation, castration, burning, drowning.

Charlemagne tried to prevent feuds that could kill entire families. When civil wars broke out, the devastation was terrible—slaughter, or mass deportation of men, women, and children.

Fear and insecurity drove people, both the lofty and the humble, to seek protection and sustenance from one another. Everyone looked to their neighbors and above all to God and his angels and saints for aid and comfort. It was a struggle to live yet another day against the threat of famine, disease, and violence.

People commonly died at what we today would think a very early age. Infant mortality was high. Famine came often, at one time taking a third of the population. A survivor of a famine in 793 wrote that “some welcomed the hungry into their houses, killed them, and put the bodies into the salt tub. . . . Men ate men, brothers ate brothers, and mothers their children.” Epidemics took further deaths, while the malnutrition that followed piled the dead even higher. There were no medicines of the modern kind to ease or cure illness. But every monastery had its herb garden and infirmary for the care not only of its ailing members but also the local sick. If the medicinal herbs did not work, one could only pray and wait for the end.

The unfree had no rights. Their master had complete power over them. Slavery was still common, for the many wars of conquest kept the institution alive. Slaves were sold within the empire or abroad. Slaves worked on the land or as artisans in the towns.

The rural folk made up four fifths of the population. They might own a small farm or work for others as tenants or farm laborers. Free men could acquire ownership of land by developing it out of uncultivated wasteland. They lived in houses built of wood or stone—whatever was at hand.

The upper class dominated society. A small group who succeeded in gaining power by force or through diplomacy, these aristocrats controlled the sources of wealth and held the key civil and religious positions. The father in such an aristocratic family was all-powerful.

The aristocrats married into one another’s families, thereby adding to their power. They held immense wealth in land, acquired by conquest, gift, or pur-

chase, as well as by marriage. Some families had many large estates in several parts of the empire. In their relations with the king, the aristocrats played the double role of counselors and faithful followers.

These landed gentry were the heart of the military. The king depended upon them for his cavalry and to pay for costly arms and equipment. The price of a horse and sword, for instance, might be as high as the value of both a farm and a slave. A knight had not only to equip himself, but to provide horse and arms for his squire, provisions for three months of campaigning, and more.

Boys born into the aristocracy were destined for war. Drummed into them was the sure knowledge that they would have to be able to withstand hardship, hunger, cold, heat, and the risks of combat. At about fourteen a boy was handed a sword by his father, a token of his entry into the adult world. The sword—and his horse—became his lifetime companions.

If aristocrats yearned for combat, not so the bulk of the army. These were the infantrymen, who saw no glamour or romance in warfare. They hated to leave their families and the farmwork, and couldn't wait to return home to bring in the harvest and the vintage. Among the infantry desertion was common, with death the penalty.

Estimates vary on the size of Charlemagne's army; the lower guess is about three thousand cavalry and ten thousand infantry. In enemy territory the troops relished the prospect of looting. They ferreted out anyone alive to sell as slaves and stole sheep and cattle and produce. Everything they couldn't carry off they put to the torch.

How did Charlemagne govern his empire?

The emperor's responsibility was to keep the peace. Within the kingdom, not beyond it, where he fought many wars of both defense and offense. He was responsible too for administering justice. This function he delegated to the nobles in charge of the many districts of the empire. He instructed them to "do justice fairly, correctly, and equitably to churches, widows, orphans, and all others, without fraud, corruption, obstruction or abusive delay, and be vigilant that all your subordinates do likewise."

What did Charlemagne look like? And what was his character? Our only personal report comes from his friend Einhard's Life of Charlemagne:

Charles was large and strong and of lofty stature, though not disproportionately tall (his height is well known to have been seven times the length of his foot); the upper part of his head was round, his eyes very large and animated, nose a little long, hair fair, and face laughing and merry. Thus his appearance was always stately and dignified, whether he was standing or sitting, although his neck was thick and somewhat short and his belly rather prominent; but the symmetry of the rest of his body concealed these defects. His gait was firm, his whole carriage manly, and his voice clear, but not so strong as his size led one to expect. . . .

He used to wear the national, that is to say the Frank, dress: next to his skin a linen shirt and linen breeches and above these a tunic fringed with silk, while hose fastened by bands covered his lower limbs, and shoes his feet; and he protected his shoulders and chest in winter by a close-fitting coat of otter or marten skins. Overall he flung a blue cloak, and he always had a sword girt about him, usually one with a gold or silver hilt and belt; he sometimes carried a jeweled sword, but only on great feast days or at the reception of ambassadors from foreign nations. He despised foreign costumes, however handsome, and never allowed himself to be robed in them, except twice in Rome. . . .

Charles had the gift of ready and fluent speech, and could express whatever he had to say with the utmost clearness. He was not satisfied with command of his native language merely, but gave attention to the study of foreign ones, and in particular was such a master of Latin that he could speak it as well as his native tongue; but he could understand Greek better than he could speak it. . . . He most zealously cultivated the liberal arts, held those who taught them in great esteem, and conferred great honors upon them. . . . The King spent much time and labor . . . studying rhetoric, dialectics, and especially astronomy; he learned to reckon, and used to investigate the motions of the heavenly bodies most curiously, with an intelligent scrutiny. He also tried to write, and used to keep tablets and blanks in bed under his pillow, that at leisure hours he might accustom his hand to form letters; however, as he did not begin his efforts in due season, but late in life, they met with ill success.

He cherished with the greatest fervor and devotion the principles of the Christian religion, which had been instilled into him from infancy.

The leading landowners were his chief counselors, judges, and administrators. They met in annual assemblies, numbering hundreds of men, in the spring. Here new laws were proposed and military objectives considered. The nobles had to produce the armies needed to achieve the agreed-upon goals. We have no evidence to indicate how democratic these assemblies were. It would seem that some degree of consensus had to be achieved. If not, revolt might threaten.

Of course there was time for fun and games. What aristocrat could do without them? Sports were a major outlet, with hunting the favorite. The rich kept reserves of wild animals and even menageries.

Eating—that was a major concern: food, and lots of it, especially roasted meats. The kitchens smoked day and night, and the head cook was a palace favorite. Charlemagne himself was a notoriously big eater. The more food laid out, the greater a royal's prestige. Musicians entertained the guests on their lyres and zithers while mimes made the dining hall rock with laughter. Wine was drunk every day. Every class of society drank too much, with abbots and bishops setting the example. If wine was not at hand, then beer would do, but that was considered a penance. Water supplies were often unsafe to drink. However, wine and beer kept without refrigeration for long periods, and they were often drunk at less than full strength. Few other beverages were available.

Both the royal villas and the great monasteries had their corps of artisans: blacksmiths, goldsmiths, saddlers, carpenters, parchment makers. . . . The aristocrats valued artisans who could make the luxury products they loved, and sculptors, painters, and goldsmiths enjoyed a special place. Many objects were made of wood, for iron was scarce. The blacksmiths were much in demand; they were depended upon for weaponry.

Although much of the economy was local, trade did exist, carried on by merchants. They might be simply peddlers, selling in local markets, or they could be international traders. These last, on their own or working for aristocrats, abbots, or princes, transported goods by cart or boat from one corner of the empire to another. Products moved back and forth between the West and Asia and Africa. A merchant might carry bearskins, marten fur, swords, and

eunuchs from Francia to sell in Egypt, or cinnamon, musk, aloes, wood, and camphor from the Orient to sell in the West.

When Charlemagne's armies raided Slavic lands, they opened up a new supply of slaves. At one time a monk recorded observing six ships in an Italian port filled with nine thousand slaves heading for a market in Egypt. The emir of Córdoba in Spain bought five thousand slaves to staff his army, his administration, and his harem.

Charlemagne had many royal residences. Clustered around each were peasants, artisans, clerks, and other functionaries. He traveled much with his court, moving from one estate to another, staying now for a day or two, or perhaps a few months. The rural residences were nothing elegant, and almost all have disappeared.

But in 794 Charlemagne decided to enlarge his modest palace at Aix-la-Chapelle, now Aachen in Germany, into a truly imperial palace and make it the political center of his empire. It became a vast collection of buildings surrounded by a four-gated wall. Nearby were the homes of bishop and abbot and other dignitaries such as his friend Einhard. Charlemagne dearly loved to swim and bathe in the thermal springs at Aix-la-Chapelle. He spent the last years of his life in this city and is buried in his chapel there, in its day the largest stone building north of the Alps.

To Charlemagne, one of his most important missions was to lead his people to salvation. He believed that the rural folk, the artisans, the merchants must be instructed in the Christian religion. And the newly conquered pagan peoples had to be converted. It would take well-educated teachers to do all this.

The king ordered that schools be established where children would learn reading, the psalms, chanting, computation, and grammar. Parchment books had to be carefully copied and placed in classrooms. Schools became major responsibilities of bishops and abbots.

It was believed that a child in the sixth year was ready for schooling. Parents could offer their sons or daughters to the Church for education, binding the child to the monastic life permanently. The education was free. Most monks and almost all nuns were recruited from the upper class. In the monasteries

their time was given to both intellectual and manual labor, with only an hour per month, or maybe per week, for free time in which to relax.

Charlemagne himself knew how to read and was quite learned. But he never mastered writing. Writing was a difficult skill practiced only by specialists in those days.

A child completing the first studies would take up the liberal arts as part of secondary education. These included arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The subjects were not ends in themselves, but steps to the highest level: philosophy or Christian theology.

It wasn't only clerks and monks who were schooled. Lay aristocrats too wanted to be educated as a measure of their breeding. Mothers were more concerned than fathers that this be done. Men preferred to see their sons as expert riders, warriors, and hunters rather than as scholars.

The end results of Charlemagne's educational program went beyond its initial aim. It led to a kind of literary renaissance. Contributing to it were many scholars that he brought in from abroad—Spanish, English, Irish, Italian. One of them, Alcuin, a Saxon from York, became a longtime close friend and adviser of the king and took charge of several abbeys.

These strangers influenced the cultural life of both church and lay leaders, as well as of Charlemagne's own children, both boys and girls. The scholars explored serious problems in continued discussions. They were responsible for thousands of manuscripts that have been preserved and for the adoption of a more readable and regular minuscule hand, which the printers of the future would adapt in their lowercase typography.

The image of Charlemagne was transfigured by legend. One story held that when his tomb was opened in the year 1000 Charlemagne was found "seated on a throne as if he still lived." He was often portrayed with a flowing white beard, which it seems he never actually wore.

That he was dynamic and brilliant is certain, and that he had a firm belief in his mission to uphold and propagate Christianity by sword or book. His reign helped bring to birth a new European society.