

**COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA**

*Copyright Regulations 1969*

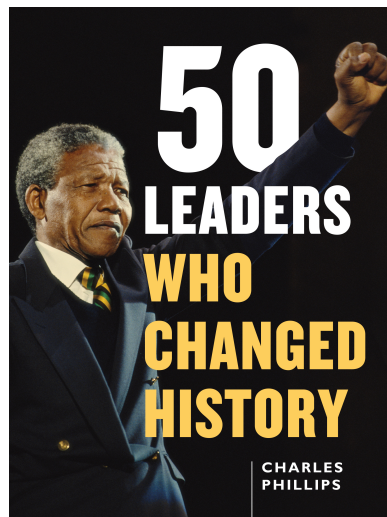
**WARNING**

*This material has been reproduced and communicated to you by or on behalf of Methodist Ladies' College pursuant to Part VB of the Copyright Act 1968 (the Act).*

*The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further reproduction or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.*

*Do not remove this notice.*

Phillips, C. (2015). *50 leaders who changed history*. Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Pier 9.



## 11

## CHARLEMAGNE

**DEVOUT EMPEROR WHO PROMOTED REFORM AND UNITED EUROPE**

**NATIONALITY:** *Frankish*  
**ACHIEVEMENT:** *Created Carolingian Empire*  
**WHEN:** 771-814

**King of the Franks and founder of a great Christian empire, Charlemagne promoted learning and artistic activity in the Carolingian Renaissance. He had a major impact on life in medieval Europe and for centuries was revered as an ideal ruler.**

On Christmas Day 800 Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne Emperor of the Romans in St Peter's, Rome. The ambitious leader, who had already proved himself a powerful Christian warrior and effective protector for the pope, gained authority for his rule over the great empire he had built up since his accession as sole ruler of the Franks in 771.

This unprecedented imperial coronation at the hands of the pope revived the Roman Empire in the West, which had been in abeyance since the fifth century. It gave Charlemagne, hitherto King of the Franks and Lombards, equal standing with the rulers of the Roman Empire in the East, the Byzantine emperors based in Constantinople. The action also consolidated the authority of the papacy – the church was bestowing Charlemagne's authority.

The alliance between the Frankish kings and the papacy had been created by Charlemagne's father Pippin III the Short. Pippin, originally mayor of the palace (an important court position, who was effectively regent), had seized the Frankish throne from Childeric III in 751, then gained the pope's backing for his position. In 754 Pippin and the then pope, Stephen II, reached a mutually beneficial agreement: military protection in exchange for the papacy's recognition of Pippin's dynasty as rightful Frankish rulers. In 756 Pippin, who had enjoyed considerable military success in Italy, made the famous Donation of Pippin in which he gave the pope a great swathe of territory in central Italy – the basis of the Papal States governed by the papacy.

**AMBITIOUS, DIPLOMATIC**

Charlemagne had all the ambition, military drive and diplomatic skill of his father. On Pippin's death he inherited the kingdom alongside his brother Carloman, but Carloman's death in 711 opened the way for Charlemagne to build an empire in his own name. As was expected of a Frankish monarch, he embarked at once on energetic military campaigns to expand territory, over the course of many years defeating the Lombards, Saxons and Avars and incorporating their territories into his



▲ Raphael envisages the full splendour of Charlemagne's coronation as Emperor of the Romans on Christmas Day, 800.

own. He was brave, strong-willed and physically imposing – standing at 1.9 m (6 feet 3 inches) at a time when the average height was only 1.69 m (5 feet 7 inches).

Charlemagne was quick-witted and able to see the big picture. He improved administration of the territories in his empire and used diplomacy – backed by the force of his armies – to settle its borders: he maintained largely settled relationships with neighbours including Danes to the north, Slavic tribes to the east, Bretons and Gascons in what is now France, and the papacy in Italy. He also had good relations with the Anglo-Saxon rulers of Northumbria and Mercia in England and with the Muslim rulers of the Abbasid caliphate based in Baghdad – in the course of several diplomatic missions, Charlemagne received from Caliph Harun ar-Rashid an elephant, a chessboard and a water-powered clock that greatly impressed Charlemagne's courtiers.

### REFORMER

A devoutly religious man, Charlemagne was inspired by his Christianity to spread the faith: his conquests of the Avars and Saxons opened up vast territories for missionary work. He instituted a programme of religious reform, calling several synods at his court and enforcing laws to make the church hierarchy stronger and more efficient, raise intellectual and moral standards among the clergy, and standardise forms of worship. He also took control of many matters that were previously governed by the church.

In addition to these religious reforms, Charlemagne was also interested in promoting education throughout his empire. To this end he invited some of the best minds of Europe to his court, chief among them the Anglo-Saxon poet, cleric and teacher Alcuin of York. Alcuin was head of the Palatine School that Charlemagne

## TIMELINE

**April 747**

*Born, Aachen.*

**751**

*His father Pippin III the Short seizes Merovingian throne.*

**753**

*Pippin makes alliance with Pope Stephen II.*

**756**

*'Donation of Pippin'.*

**768**

*Pippin dies – Charlemagne and Carloman co-rulers.*

**771**

*Carloman dies – Charlemagne takes sole power.*

**772**

*Begins 32-year campaign against Saxons.*

**774**

*Defeats Lombards in northern Italy.*

**778**

*Failed invasion of Spain.*

**781**

*Creates kingdom of Aquitaine to protect border with Spain.*

**781**

*Invites Alcuin to Aachen.*

**789**

*Takes control of Bavaria.*

**796**

*Third of three successful campaigns against Avars.*

**25 December 800**

*Crowned 'Emperor of the Romans' by Pope Leo III.*

**805**

*Palatine Chapel, Aachen, consecrated.*

**January 814**

*Dies, Aachen.*

founded and a leading light among the scholars who set out to improve education and standards in reading and writing Latin across the empire. They issued manuals for the teaching of Latin and the basics of the Christian faith and outlines for the correct performance of church liturgy. Monastic schools were established throughout the empire. At court the scholars founded a library and a scriptorium for writing illustrated manuscripts, developing a new system for writing later known as Carolingian miniscule.

The court scholars wrote history, theology, explications of the Bible and poetry. Alcuin declared that a 'new Athens' was being established at Charlemagne's favourite residence Aachen (now in Germany), where the emperor set magnificent building works in motion. The court-driven programme of education produced a great flowering of culture in the Carolingian empire and inspired King Alfred the Great to attempt his own Anglo-Saxon cultural revolution in the ninth century (see page 54).

### BORN LEADER

*Charlemagne did not have much formal education, but he possessed a keen mind and great intellectual curiosity. In the modern world great emphasis is placed on education and qualifications, but Charlemagne is only one of many leaders – alongside people such as Charles de Gaulle or Giuseppe Garibaldi – who achieved great things while relying chiefly on their natural intelligence and leadership qualities.*



### ROLE MODEL FOR CHRISTIAN RULERS

Although Charlemagne's territorial empire did not long survive his death, he had a profound and lasting influence that was felt throughout the medieval period – and even beyond. He revived the Roman Empire in the West, establishing the possibility of a unified Europe that has lived on for centuries as an idea; the great cultural and educational renaissance of his reign had a major effect, and laid the foundations for later similar revivals. He himself became the model for subsequent rulers. Celebrated in his own lifetime as 'Father of Europe', he became the subject of a great and widely popular body of legends that cast him as champion of Christendom, peerless warrior and saintly leader.



### LEADERSHIP ANALYSIS

**LEADER TYPE:** *Ambitious*

**KEY QUALITIES:** *Energetic, courageous*

**LIKE-MINDED LEADERS:** *Alfred the Great, Süleyman the Magnificent*

**FACT:** *For all his commitment to education at court, Charlemagne never learned to read or write.*