

## COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

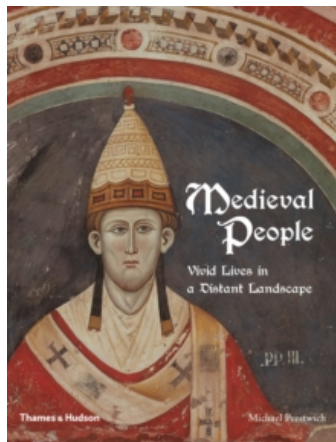
Copyright Regulations 1969

### WARNING

This material has been reproduced and communicated to you by or on behalf of Methodist Ladies' College under 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.**



Prestwich, M. (2014). *Medieval people*. London: Thames & Hudson.

# Charlemagne

## FIRST MEDIEVAL EMPEROR IN WESTERN EUROPE

742–814

**C**harles the Great, or Charlemagne as he has become known, suffered from insomnia. He kept a wax writing tablet under his pillow, so that when he woke he could try to write, though forming the letters was beyond him. This was an exceptional failing in an extraordinary man, who became king of the Franks jointly with his brother, Carloman, in 768, sole ruler in 771 and emperor in 800.

Charlemagne's contemporary biographer, Einhard, described him in detail. He was tall and well built. His head was large, his hair fair, his eyes piercing. His neck was rather short, and his nose on the long side. His voice was shrill. Normally, he wore Frankish dress, much as his people did. He particularly liked roasts, and in his final years was angry with his doctors when they urged him to eat his meat boiled. Another writer, Notker, considered that 'the emperor struck terror into everyone'. In old age, Charlemagne could be impatient. He wrote to one official regarding bridge tolls: 'We have given you orders before, out of our own mouth, and you have not understood us.' He had a questioning mind. In an interrogation of his bishops and abbots he asked: 'Who is that Satan or enemy whose works and pomp we renounced at baptism? This is to be seen into, lest any of our people should follow him in his wrongdoings.'

Charlemagne was a great Christian warlord. His most formidable opponents were the Saxons, a Germanic people similar in many ways to the Franks, but unlike them in being pagan and having no kings. A series of campaigns developed from raids into full-scale conquest, which was not finally achieved until 803. The war was brutal; in 782, a reported 4,500 prisoners were massacred by the Franks. Saxons were pushed into rivers in mass forced baptisms. Charlemagne's armies also fought in Aquitaine, Italy, Brittany, northern Spain and Hungary. Failure was rare. In 778, his forces suffered a famous defeat at the hands of the Basques at the pass of Roncesvalles, later commemorated in the *Song of Roland*, but this did not halt Frankish expansion.

The key to Charlemagne's military success was not so much brilliant generalship as superb organization. His armies were recruited by means of sophisticated systems of military obligation. Attention was given to horse-breeding. Care was taken over logistics and provisioning, with legislation requiring 'flour, wine, sides of bacon and other food in abundance, hand querns, adzes, axes, augurs, slings and men who can use them properly'.

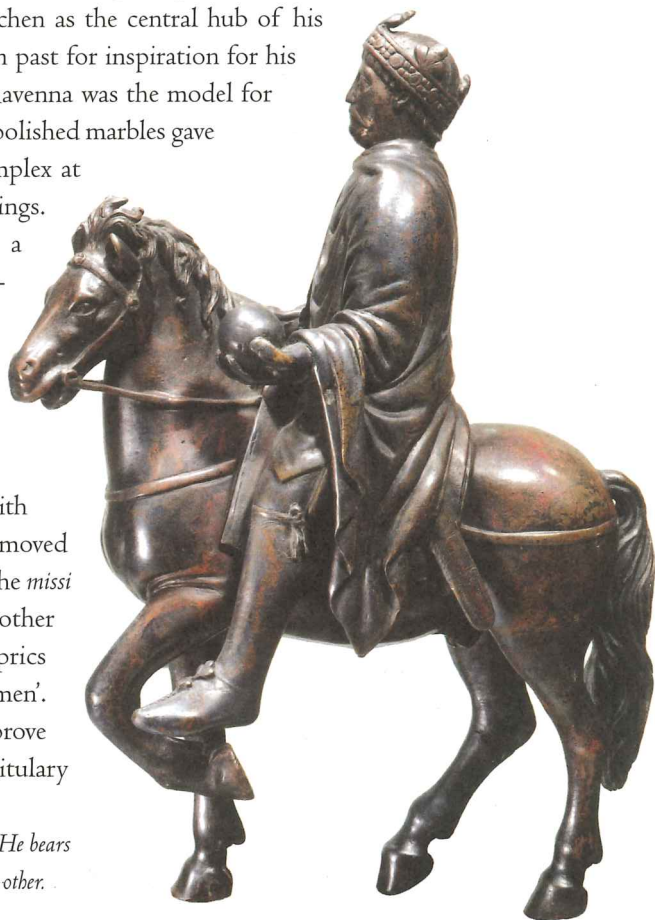
Instructions were even given for the construction of waterproof carts, which could be floated across rivers.

Government of Charlemagne's vast dominions, which extended across much of western Europe, was no simple matter. Regular assemblies enabled him to keep a finger on the pulse of his empire. Much was done by word of mouth at these gatherings; even at its largest, there were no more than a dozen clerks in Charlemagne's writing office, issuing administrative and legislative instructions known as capitularies in growing profusion as the reign proceeded. Special commissioners, called *missi*, were sent round regularly to check up on the conduct of the counts, who were responsible for government at a local level.

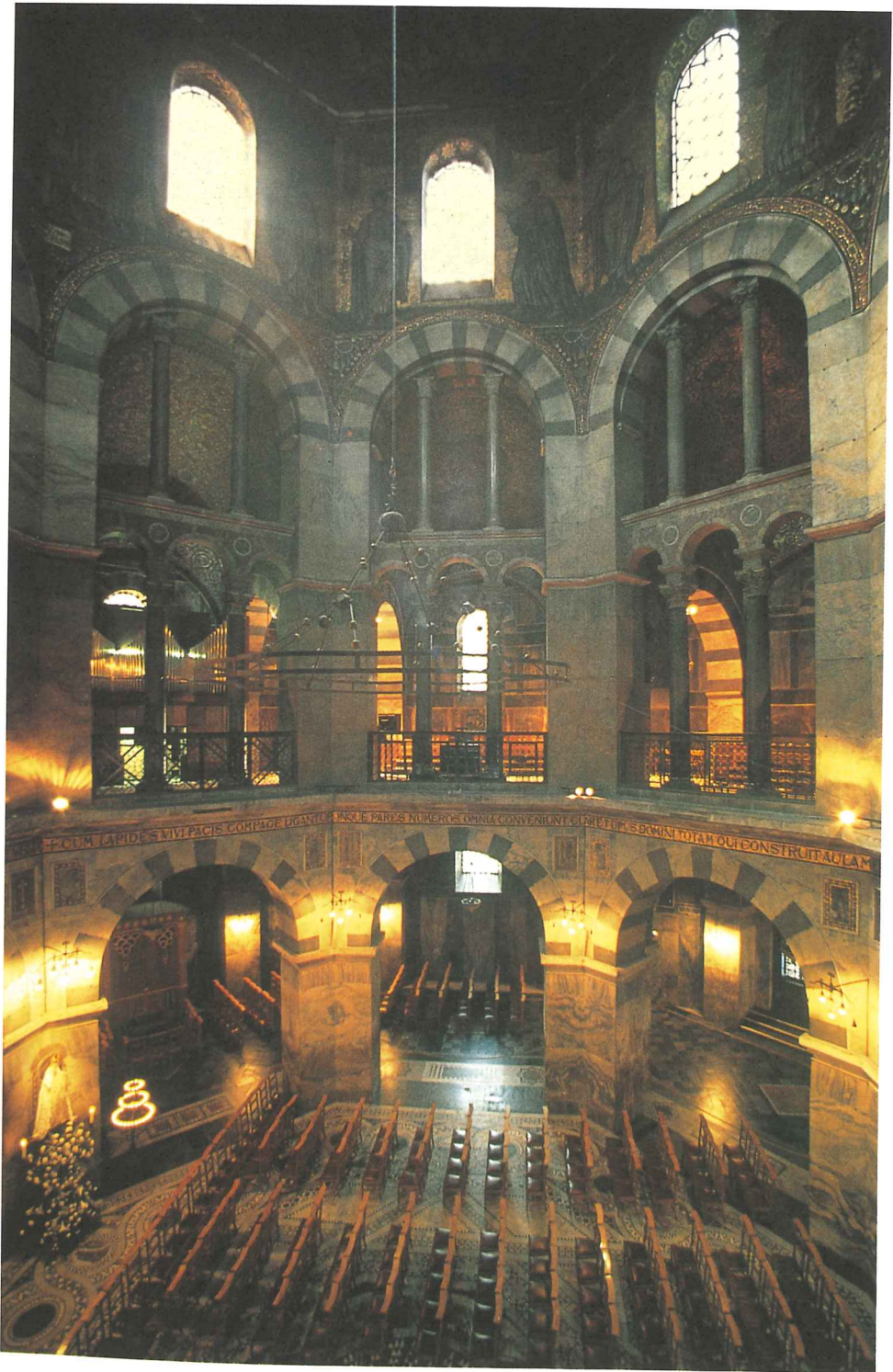
The royal estates were the backbone of Carolingian rule as Charlemagne journeyed around his lands, moving from one palace complex to another. Detailed instructions commanded, for example, that no one should press grapes for wine with their feet, and required that in each royal estate 'they shall always keep fattened geese and chickens sufficient for our use if needed, or for sending to us'. Sample estate surveys were made and issued as models of the documents that royal officials should produce.

In his later years, the aging emperor was no longer capable of constant travel around his lands. He settled on Aachen as the central hub of his empire, and turned to Italy and the Roman past for inspiration for his new palace. The church of San Vitale in Ravenna was the model for the magnificent palatine chapel, where fine polished marbles gave an extraordinary opulence. The palace complex at Aachen incorporated baths fed by hot springs. Charlemagne greatly enjoyed swimming, a highly unusual accomplishment for a medieval ruler. According to Einhard, it was because of the baths that he chose Aachen.

The powerful Christian element to Charlemagne's rule strongly reflected his own personal piety. Counts and their officials were to deal with crimes 'so that with God's indulgence all these evils may be removed from among our Christian people'. In 802, the *missi* were to enquire 'concerning adultery and other unlawful acts, whether committed in bishoprics and monasteries and convents or among laymen'. Charlemagne was much concerned to improve the standard of the lower clergy; one capitulary



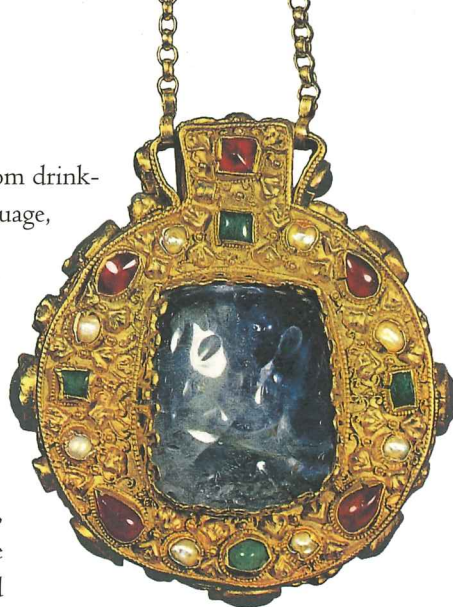
*A bronze statuette probably representing Charlemagne. He bears an orb in one hand, and would have had a sword in the other.*



even included a clause forbidding priests, monks and clerks from drinking in taverns. He was keen that priests should use proper language, and not express themselves in uncouth ways.

Charlemagne possessed considerable intellectual curiosity if not necessarily much aptitude; his inability to write increased his appreciation of the written word. He developed his court as a centre of learning, and encouraged the establishment of schools in cathedrals and monasteries. Though he complained on one occasion that he did not have men around him of the quality of the early Christian fathers Jerome and Augustine, the scholars he recruited from the 780s were exceptional. There was Alcuin from Northumberland, Theodulf from Spain and Paul the Deacon from Italy. Scholars worked on many topics, from biblical commentaries to histories. The task of copying Classical texts was of crucial importance in preserving the heritage of the past. To help with this, a style of writing, now known as Carolingian minuscule (the basis of modern lowercase typefaces), was improved under Alcuin's influence. In illustrating books, artists combined late-Roman and Byzantine elements with Germanic and Celtic traditions. It was, however, words not pictures that Charlemagne regarded as being of fundamental importance. As he put it in one decree: 'Often some desire to pray to God properly, but they pray badly because of incorrect books.'

On Christmas day, 800, Charlemagne, king of the Franks, was crowned emperor by Pope Leo III in Rome. This elevation was surely deserved, in terms of his achievements and the scale of his conquests. In fact, that was not why the coronation took place. The pope faced serious unrest in Rome, and turned to Charlemagne for support. He crowned an apparently reluctant Charlemagne because he needed a protector. No pope had crowned an emperor before, and Charlemagne is unlikely to have welcomed such a precedent. With hindsight, the coronation was a moment of immense significance. There were now two empires, the Byzantine in the east, based on Constantinople and directly descended from the Roman Empire, and a new, upstart empire in the west.



*An amulet made for Charlemagne, containing a relic of the Cross.*

*Charlemagne's lavish palatine chapel at Aachen, built to a central plan, was modelled on the church of San Vitale in Ravenna.*