CHARLEMAGNE REVIVED THE IDEA OF EMPIRE

After the breakup of the Roman empire, petty kingdoms sprang up all over Europe. For example, England was divided into seven tiny kingdoms, some no larger than the state of Connecticut.

By far the largest and strongest of Europe's kingdoms was that of the Franks in what had been the Roman province of Gaul. The foundation for this kingdom were laid by the Franks' first Christian king, Clovis. The name France is derived from the term "Frank."

Clovis's Descendants Lost Power

When Clovis became king in 481, the Franks controlled only a small area. By the time he died, 30 years later, he ruled most of what is today France. But there was a problem: in succeeding generations, when a Frankish king died, his sons treated the kingdom as private property to be divided among themselves. Such divisions weakened the kingdom and often led to civil war as each son tried to seize the whole kingdom. Still, Clovis's dynasty ruled for almost 300 years.

By the year 700, the power of the kings descended from the line founded by Clovis had dwindled to almost nothing. The most powerful person in the kingdom was not the king but an official known as the major domo or mayor of the palace. Officially, a mayor of the palace was in charge of the royal household and estates. Unofficially, he was the power behind the throne. He commanded armies and made policy. In effect, he governed the kingdom in the king's name.

In 714, the position of mayor of the palace was held by Charles, known as Martel (the Hammer). Charles Martel was king in all but name. He extended the power of the Franks to the north, south, and east. He even defeated a Muslim raiding party from Spain at the Battle of Tours in 732. (This battle marked the height of Muslim conquests in Europe.) Finally, at his death, Charles Martel passed his power on to his son, Pepin the Short.

The Pope Named Pepin King

Pepin was not content to be the power behind the throne. He wanted to be king in his own right. Pepin wrote to the pope and managed to get the pope's blessing for his rule. The truth is, the new Frankish king and the pope needed each other: only the Church could give legitimacy to the rule of Pepin and his heirs. At the same time, only a strong king like Pepin could protect the pope from the Lombards, a fierce Germanic tribe, who again threatened Rome. Pepin agreed to fight the Lombards on the pope's behalf. In return, the pope anointed (put holy oil on the forehead) Pepin, the first king to ever be so honored. After this, it became common for kings in Western Europe to be crowned "by the grace of God" in a church ceremony. No longer were kings simply political rulers; they now had some spiritual authority as well.

Pepin soon led an army into Italy and defeated the Lombards in one city after another. In 756, the turned the lands he conquered over to the pope, and these territories became known as the Papal States. The Frankish kings and the Roman popes had entered into an informal alliance. It was an unstable alliance, however. Much of the later history of the Middle Ages. kings and popes would battle each other for power.

Pepin the Short died in 768 and left a greatly strengthened Frankish kingdom to his son, Charles. He would rule for 46 years and would achieve glory for the Frankish kingdom. In Latin, Charles was called Carolus Magnus (Charles the Great). In French, his name became Charlemagne (shar-lah-mane). His descendants would be known as the Carolingian dynasty ("Carol" is Latin for "Charles").
In war, the king himself commanded the armies and fought in the front line. Every spring Charlemagne called together all the great landowners of the kingdom, both nobles and bishops. They met at Charlemagne's capital, Aachen (ah-khun), or at another royal residence. Each noble brought his own followers, equipped for battle.

Summer after summer, Charlemagne led these armies against the enemies that surrounded his kingdom. He conquered new lands to both the south and the east. He waged campaigns in Italy and marched into Muslim Spain, hoping to win control of northern Spain, but the expedition failed.

It was the Franks' eastern frontier, however, where Charlemagne fought his greatest wars. In what is now south-central Europe, an Asian people called the Avars ruled the Slavs. After years of brutal warfare, Charlemagne destroyed the Avar kingdom. The Saxons of Germany were even more troublesome, and Charlemagne fought them for 30 years before they submitted to his rule and Christianity.

Charlemagne did more than encourage missionaries to spread the word; he sometimes resorted to "baptism by the sword." Defeated enemies were given the choice of becoming Christian or dying on the spot. This is why Charlemagne was sometimes called "Iron Charles" or "The Strong Right Arm of God."

By the year 800, the Frankish kingdom included 2/3 of Italy, all of present-day France, a small part of Spain, and all of the Saxon territory in Germany. It had grown larger than the Byzantine Empire, and only a ruler of Charlemagne's energy and ability could hope to govern such a vast place.
Charlemagne Strengthened His Rule

Charlemagne needed the help of powerful nobles in order to govern his kingdom. However, he also needed a way to limit the power of those nobles.

Royal Officials. All of Francia, as the Frankish kingdom was called, was divided into counties. Each county was ruled in the king's name by a powerful landholder called a count. The counts administered justice and raised armies. In theory, the king could dismiss a count at any time. In practice, however, the same count might rule an area for as long as he lived. Unless the counts were constantly reminded of the loyalty they owed the king, they might quickly become independent rulers.

Wisely, Charlemagne did not trust his counts. He sent out royal agents called missi dominici ("messengers of the lord king") to make sure counts governed justly and did not abuse their powers. Charlemagne also visited every part of his kingdom. He heard legal quarrels, settled disputes, and rewarded faithful followers. With his constant watchfulness, he was able to keep powerful counts under his control. (His sons and grandsons, however, were less successful at controlling their nobles.)

The Royal Estates. Much of Charlemagne's power rested on his position as a great landowner. The Carolingian family owned huge estates throughout the kingdom. Charlemagne and his sons kept a close eye on the management of their lands. Most of a king's wealth came not from taxes but from goods produced on royal estates. These estates supported the royal court and also paid for the daily working of government. A king who allowed his estates to decline would quickly lose his political power as well.

Charlemagne Revived Learning

Charlemagne's court became the center for a revival in learning. Charlemagne understood some Latin and maybe even a little Greek. For his court at Aachen, the king recruited the leading European scholars of his day. There was a music teacher from Italy, a Muslim poet from Spain, and many others. Charlemagne also invited Jews to settle in his kingdom because they were literate and could help with administrative work.

For his own numerous sons and daughters and for other children at the court, Charlemagne began a palace school. There students learned to read write, and do a little arithmetic.

By Charlemagne's order, monasteries and cathedrals were expected to open schools to train future monks and priests. (Since only boys could enter the priesthood only boys attended these schools.)

Monasteries increased their libraries. Monks labored to make handwritten copies of rare Latin books. New styles of writing and calligraphy allowed books to be more readable and accessible.

Answer questions on a separate sheet of paper with your name, period, and homework number on it.

1) How did Pepin the Short gain power?
2) What was the significance of Pepin's coronation (crowning) for him and for future monarchs?
3) How did Charlemagne PERSONALLY promote conversion to Christianity?
4) To what extent was Charlemagne's suspicions of the intentions of the counts in his kingdom justified?
5) How did Charlemagne deal with this problem?
6) What are two ways Charlemagne promoted learning?