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Charlemagne

A

Lecture

Dedicated
to
Hanna Holborn Gray,
who attempted to teach me how to teach

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PREFATORY NOTE

While a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the early 1960's, I began my teaching career as a member of the staff of the Western Civilization course that formed the centerpiece of the undergraduate education in the humanities at the time. Each week, in addition to the class discussions, there was a general lecture given by a member of the staff on a key topic in the area of his or her expertise. Since at the time I was regarded, albeit somewhat prematurely, as a mediaevalist, it fell to me to give the lecture on Charlemagne that opened the door, so to speak, to the mediaeval section of the course.

I found the topic stimulating since I had been able, when studying at Cambridge University with Walter Ullmann, to develop some ideas on the subject that seemed to me to go beyond the usual commonplaces regarding his reign, and I saw this as an opportunity to present them to an undergraduate audience. Using some passages from Einhard's charming biography to "humanize" the topic, I set to work and in a short time came up with an hour's talk.

The lecture was enthusiastically received by the students who attended, and later I learned that it also received favorable comment from members of the faculty who heard it.

Now, many years later, upon re-reading it, I find, much to my surprise, although it makes no claim to original research it does seem to have held up quite well over the interim, appearing as worthy of publication as other lectures given in similar circumstances with which I am familiar. Consequently I have decided to issue it without additions or modifications, exactly in the form in which it was originally given, although I have added some footnote references to the original texts that are quoted in the lecture.

Charlemagne

Few, if any, of you would have much difficulty in identifying Charlemagne. Alongside Caesar and Napoleon he is one of the few historical figures to enjoy almost universal fame. Just as the name Caesar was universalized into the German title Kaiser and the Russian Tsar, so the name Charles, in the form of Kral, became the highest title of rule among the Slavs of Eastern Europe. He stands as a hero of Western history, one of the Nine Worthies of the world.

Some of you possibly have formed an image of him from reading the French epic poem, the *Chanson de Roland*, a piece of crusading propaganda written about the beginning of the twelfth century which portrays Charlemagne sitting

*...beneath a pine beside an eglantier on a faldstool all of red gold clear;
white are his locks, silver his beard, his body noble, his countenance
severe.*¹

His demeanor in the poem reflects his role as the perfect feudal lord who dutifully weighs his vassals' counsel before coming to a decision:

*He was a man not hasty in reply but wont to speak only when well
advised.*²

Over a century later, after Charlemagne had been canonized, St. Francis (who had been brought up as a youth on legends of chivalry) pictured him with a certain amount of confusion as a pious Knight of the Round Table who

*...fought the heathen unto death and was victorious over them and in the
end became himself a holy martyr who died in battle for the faith of Christ.*

Others of you may be acquainted with a later, extraordinarily penetrating conception of him in one of Dürer's wood-block prints where he appears enthroned in God-like majesty, as a sort of lay pope.

But, putting aside whatever literary or visual image you may have of our subject, how many of you could give a satisfactory reply to such questions as: who were the Carolingians, and what was their origin? Or, what was the Carolingian Empire and its significance in the development of European civilization? Should it be viewed as an anachronistic attempt to revive a past long dead, or was it rather the nursery of certain institutions of great significance for the future history of Europe?

Fortunately for our purposes a number of scholars have devoted most of their careers to answering some of these questions; and today, after more than a century of intensive historical work, we can begin to place him and his reign in reasonably satisfactory perspective. I have said more than a century of intensive work; in reality the historiography (or some might say hagiography), as distinct from myth and legend,

¹ *The Song of Roland*, trans. by Dorothy L. Sayers (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1957). 55.

² *Song of Roland*, 56.

began within a generation after Charlemagne's death, when his close friend and godson, Einhard, though apologizing for

...the fact that I who am a barbarian, and very little versed in the Roman language, seem to suppose myself capable of writing gracefully and respectably in Latin³

took up his pen to

...commit my story to writing and hand it down to posterity in partnership with others, so to speak, rather than to suffer the most glorious life of this most excellent king, the greatest of all the princes of his day, and his illustrious deeds, hard for men of later times to imitate, to be wrapped in the darkness of oblivion⁴

as for his reliability Einhard tells us,

...no man can write with more accuracy than I of events that took place about me, and of facts concerning which I had personal knowledge.⁵

The result of Einhard's devotion was the Vita Caroli or Life of Charlemagne, our principal source for the history of his reign and the first medieval biography we have of a lay figure.

Let us accept Einhard's invitation to become partners in the recollection of this "very great and distinguished man" as he calls him. The Charlemagne who emerges from Einhard's pages is almost as impressive in appearance as legend later represented him. In height, seven times the length of his foot (and when his tomb was opened in 1861 Einhard was proved correct; he was unusually tall for a medieval man -- over 6'3"), with fair hair, a somewhat rounded head, animated eyes, and a merry face. His dignified appearance was marred only by his short, thick neck, and a prominent belly, due undoubtedly to his fondness for roasts which neither ill-health nor his doctors could persuade him to abandon for boiled meat.

He distinguished himself among his contemporaries by his extraordinary moderation in drink, taking, says Einhard, no more than three cups of wine per meal; while eating he particularly enjoyed having St. Augustine's City of God read aloud to him. Yet his intellectual culture could not have been very great; besides his native Frankish tongue he spoke a passable Latin, but his Greek was very poor (and all this is probably a very flattering appraisal). Alcuin, the noted court scholar and diplomat, taught him the barest rudiments of mathematics, and he began to fancy himself something of an amateur astronomer; but he never learned to write, although we are given an amusing picture of him attempting to wile away his frequent attacks of insomnia by laboriously tracing letters on a slate which he kept underneath his pillow. Whether his insomnia at night had something to do with his summer habit of taking a two or three hour siesta every day after lunch Einhard does not tell us. For exercise he favored the traditional Frankish sport of hunting on horseback after which he liked to swim in the

³ Einhard, The Life of Charlemagne, trans. by Samuel Epes Turner (Ann Arbor?, 1960), 17.

⁴ Einhard, 16.

⁵ Einhard, 16.

natural warm springs at Aachen to which he was so devoted that he later built his administrative center around them.

Though abstemious with wine he was considerably less so in regard to women. His first wife, a daughter of the king of the Lombards, he divorced with a year. His second bore him three sons and three daughters; his third produced two daughters; and although his fourth wife bore him no children, he had one more daughter and four more sons by a succession of four concubines. It would be difficult to call his court a center of Christian virtue but Einhard keeps a scrupulous and loyal silence except for the following remark about his daughters:

*...Strange to say, although they were very handsome women and he loved them dearly, he was never willing to marry any of them to a man of their own nation or a foreigner, but kept them all at home until after his death, saying that he could not dispense with their society. Hence, though otherwise happy, he experienced the malignity of fortune as far as they were concerned; yet he concealed his knowledge of the rumors current in regard to them and of the suspicions entertained of their honor.*⁶

To complete the traditional trio, it may be stated that Charlemagne was devoted, in Einhard's words,

*To those rude songs that celebrate the deeds and wars of the ancient kings and had them written down for transmission to posterity.*⁷

Unfortunately these have not survived, a fact much lamented by that sub-species of historian known as the philologist.

Such then was the man in so far as the words of Einhard can convey him across the more than twelve centuries that separate us from him; of more significance for us than his personality, perhaps, is the world in which, drawing on sources outside Einhard, we must attempt to place him. Let us now shift our focus onto the setting of the historical drama of which he is the protagonist; and if we wish to view him through properly medieval eyes the first context in which we must put him is not that of geography or of politics but of blood -- in other words, his family, whom history has chosen to call the Carolingians after Charlemagne, its most illustrious representative.

The first thing to note is that the throne which Charles inherited in 768 had been in the possession of his family for less than fifteen years. His father, Pepin the Short, was not of blood royal. Like his father and grandfather before him, Pepin was merely Mayor of the Palace -- the prime minister, if we may use the term, of the Frankish state. After thirteen years of service in this position Pepin secured papal support for a peaceful coup d'état which brought him and his family to the Frankish throne. The ruler whom he deposed was not blinded or mutilated as was customary then in Byzantium, but rather was shorn of his flowing hair and long beard, the traditional Germanic symbols of royalty, and forced to retire to a monastery. This unwilling monk was Childeric, the last of the Merovingians, a nonentity pathetically described by Einhard as living on the revenues of a single estate, a creature entirely under the thumb of his prime minister who brought him out of retirement once a year to be paraded ceremonially before the general assembly of the people before being driven back to his estate in an ox-cart. In beginning

⁶ Einhard, 48.

⁷ Einhard, 47.

his biography of Charlemagne with his contemptuous description of the last of the Merovingian “do-nothing” kings, Einhard clearly wished to contrast Childeric’s degradation with the power and glory of his master. But we must remember that the Merovingians had not always cut so insignificant a figure as in the middle of the eighth century. Childeric was only a feeble ghost of a family which had created the Frankish state so recently seized by Charlemagne’s father. And it is to this state that we must direct a moment’s attention.

The distant ancestry from whom Childeric’s family took its name was Meroveus (meaning “fighter of the sea”) a shadowy chieftain of a small group of Salian (or salty) Franks who first entered the Empire in the middle of the fourth century as foederati, a term which should be familiar to you from the essay by Rostovtzeff. Under Clovis, the grandson of Meroveus, the Franks swiftly took advantage of the decline of Roman power and the weakness of the other Germanic kingdoms in Gaul in order to conquer roughly the whole of modern France by the middle of the 6th century. In spite of its successes however, the Merovingian kingdom suffered from serious structural flaws. First, since the typical Frankish king regarded the area over which he ruled as his private property and felt no obligation to perform any public service, whatever taxes he attempted to levy appeared to the population as an exaction of tribute incompatible with free status and were bitterly opposed. If we recall in addition the extent of public hostility to Roman taxation during the late Empire, it should not surprise us to learn that the Merovingians found direct taxes almost impossible to collect. Confronted by such reluctance on the part of both their Roman and Frankish subjects and plagued by the administrative incompetence of their barbaric officials, the Merovingians rulers soon abandon any plan of general taxation. Unable then to support their army and administration with taxes, the rulers were forced to adopt the expedient of rewarding their followers from the vast amounts of land which they had acquired during their wars of conquest. Once granted, however, these lands were almost impossible to recover. Only further conquests could replenish the treasury or fisc. But since nearly all of the military resources were now devoted to civil war, the conquest of new lands or capture of booty to replenish the royal treasury was virtually impossible. Second, the civil wars which we have just mentioned were the unfortunate consequence of Germanic custom which made it inevitable that upon the death of the ruler his kingdom would be divided amongst all his male heirs. Such a division inevitably led to each brother’s attempting to seize the territory of the others in order to regain for himself the entirety of his father’s inheritance. These civil wars, aside from the economic and social disorder which they caused, drastically weakened the royal power since each kinglet, in order to secure as large a following of nobles as possible, was forced to make continual grants of land to them from the royal fisc. Confronted with the constant necessity to bestow gifts to secure supporters to fight civil wars, plus the inability to replenish the fisc by further conquests, the Merovingian monarchy was fated, we might say, to give itself away.

Thus, while the position of the monarchy steadily declined, the power of the nobility, gorged upon the spoils of civil war, correspondingly increased. Among these war-profiteers, if we may call them such, one of especial importance was Pepin of Landen, a member of his nobility who became Mayor of the Palace in the eastern part of the kingdom, and the first member of the Carolingian family of whom we have any certain knowledge. Charlemagne was his great-great-grandson.

Pepin of Landen and his descendants spent over a century in the noble vocation of collecting property and in converting their position as the prime ministers to the declining Merovingian monarchs into a quasi-hereditary family post. The stronger their position became the more aggravating they found it to be to have de facto possession of power without the corresponding legal basis; only the royal title could make their family

completely secure; furthermore it was a situation that ran contrary to the strong medieval sense of legality. A convenient solution to their problem finally appeared in the middle of the eighth century when special circumstances involving the papacy presented the Carolingians with the opportunity to convert their power de facto into rule de jure. The circumstances were the following: the Lombards, who flooded Italy in the wake of Justinian's ill-fated attempt at reconquest, were threatening to occupy Rome and to reduce the pope to the status of a Lombard bishop. The Byzantine (or, more exactly, the East Roman) Empire, which was still legally responsible for the protection of the papacy, had long since abandoned most of its pretensions to the Italian peninsula after the Lombard invasion and therefore was in no position to assist the pope. Lacking an army of its own, the papacy sorely needed a protector in the form of a strong secular power willing to defend it against its enemies.

On the other hand the Carolingian Mayor of the Palace, uncomfortable in the position of ruling without title, realized that the best legitimization for his contemplated coup d'état would be the authorization and support of the highest moral authority in the West, the papacy. The result was a bargain, so to speak, by which the papacy approved and sanctified the coup d'état in return for which Pepin, now the new king of the Franks, assumed the title of patricius Romanorum (or patrician of the Romans) which had previously been held by the Byzantine representative in Italy, a title which obligated the holder to defend and protect the Roman church and its bishop.

The alliance was sealed when the pope, for the first time in history journeyed across the Alps into France to meet Pepin at the small village of Ponthion on the Marne. Here the pope personally consecrated Pepin and his sons kings by the grace of God and thus bestowed divine approval upon the Carolingian house whose reigning representative became the new David, a rex et sacerdos or king and priest. In contrast to the Merovingian monarch who though absolute was yet secular in origin, every Carolingian after Pepin (and indeed every French king down to Charles X in 1824) was anointed and consecrated upon assuming the throne.

As the offspring of this alliance between what we might term the Merovingian tradition of secular Germanic monarchy on the one hand, and the Roman-Christian tradition of sacred rule on the other, the Carolingian monarch thereby acquired a complex and special character unknown to his Merovingian predecessor. Let us examine three or four aspects of this power in action under Charlemagne.

First: as heir of the Merovingians, the Carolingian monarch was fundamentally the military chieftain of his people who was expected to support himself and his followers not through taxation but by wars for land and booty to swell the royal fisc or treasury. A particularly good illustration of this is given in Einhard's account of Charles' campaign against the Avars, the successors of those fearsome Huns who swept across Europe soon after the death of St. Augustine. The campaign of extermination which he waged against them brought him a profitable and decisive victory. Einhard describes its results:

...The entire body of the Avar nobility perished in this contest and all its glory with it. All the money and treasure that had been years amassing was seized, and no war in which the Franks have ever engaged within the memory of man brought them such riches and such booty. Up to that time the Avars had passed for a poor people, but so much gold and silver was found in the Khan's palace, and so much valuable spoil taken in battle that one may well think that the Franks took justly from the Avars what the Avars had formerly taken unjustly from other nations.⁸

⁸ Einhard, 38.

This war against the Avars was provided in part by their harassment of Charles' new eastern frontier which had been acquired by the absorption of the Bavarii, a semi-independent Germanic people living in present-day Bavaria under the rule of their leader or duke Tassilo. Angered by what Einhard terms their duke's "arrogance and folly" (by which he means he was taking too independent a line in foreign affairs) Charlemagne quickly overawed him by a display of force and incorporated the duchy into the Frankish kingdom. The absorption of Bavaria illustrates a second characteristic or tradition of the Merovingians: that vague aspiration to bring all the independent Germanic peoples on the continent under Frankish rule -- a policy which can be traced as far back as Clovis' conquest of the neighboring Alemanni late in the 5th century.

After the absorption of the Bavarians the only Germanic people still independent were the Saxons, a hardy nation which had sent out the fifth century conquerors of Britain. Unlike their neighbors who had been converted to Christianity some years before by St. Boniface, the Saxons remained attached to their pagan deities whose relatives stride so pompously through the interminable operas of Wagner. It was this sense of religious identity which gave the Saxon war its peculiar intensity and bitterness which Einhard reveals in the following passages:

...No war ever undertaken by the Frank nation was carried on with such persistence and bitterness, or cost so much labor, because the Saxons, like almost all the tribes of Germany, were a fierce people, given to the worship of devils, and hostile to our religion, and did not consider it dishonorable to transgress and violate all law, human and divine.⁹

Unfortunately success in battle did not mean an end to the war for:

...the Saxons promised to renounce the worship of devils, and to adopt Christianity, but they were no less ready to violate these terms than prompt to accept them.¹⁰

The extent to which these tactics tried Charles' patience is betrayed by the extremity of his final solution:

...At last, after conquering and subduing all who had offered resistance, he took ten thousand of those that lived on the banks of the Elbe and settled them with their wives and children in many different bodies here and there in Gaul and Germany. The war that had lasted so many years was at length ended by their acceding to the terms offered by the King; which were renunciation of their national religious customs and the worship of devils, acceptance of the sacraments of the Christian faith and religion, and union with the Franks to form one people.¹¹

This "first religious war of European history," as it has been called, reveals to us a third aspect of one's power, deriving from the novel Roman-Christian character of the Carolingian monarchy. Unlike the Merovingians who virtually ignored the conversion of the Germans east of the Rhine, Charlemagne felt impelled to inflict Christianity by the

⁹ Einhard, 30.

¹⁰ Einhard, 31.

¹¹ Einhard, 31-32.

sword on the Saxons who were “hostile to our religion” as Einhard says. This close alliance with the Church brought the monarchy a number of advantages. For example, it could begin to remedy its lack of trained personnel by making use of the most literate group in the realm, the Christian clergy, as a sort of primitive bureaucracy and it is this incorporation of the church hierarchy into the governmental system which initiates the problem which, more than any other factor, led to the outbreak of the later Investiture Controversy.

A fourth characteristic of the Carolingian monarchy was the specific duty implied in the title of patricius Romanorum, that is: the obligation to defend and protect the Roman church, or more specifically, the pope. You will recall that this duty was an essential part of the agreement which Charles’ father had originally made with the papacy, and when Charlemagne became king he in turn assumed this obligation. It was a promissory note, so to speak, which the pope was not long in cashing. Menaced by the Lombards, just as was his predecessor twenty years before, the pope called on Charlemagne for assistance. The Frankish ruler dutifully crossed the Alps into Italy where he defeated, then deposed the king of the Lombards, and settled the problem permanently by assuming the traditional iron crown of the Lombards himself. (774 A.D.)

Freedom from the Lombards, however, did not assure the papacy freedom from the unruly Roman mob and some twenty-five years later, in 798, Charles was confronted by pope Leo III, come from Rome to the royal camp at Paderborn with a shocking tale of indignities inflicted upon him by some of his opponents in Rome. A second time, Charlemagne set off for Italy, in Einhard’s words, “to set in order the affairs of the church which were in great confusion.” The journey was to have greater significance for the subsequent history of Europe than anyone at the time could have suspected; and for that reason let us pause for a moment, now, at the very end of the eighth century to survey the situation that prevailed in Europa, as western Christendom was beginning to be called, from the viewpoint, say, of an advisor to the king.

The first thing to strike the observer would be Charlemagne’s undisputed mastery over this entity which stretched from the North Sea to the Mediterranean, and from the Atlantic to the Elbe and the plains of Hungary. (In fact, the area described is not very different from that part of Europe which is today oriented towards the West.) Within this area the Saxons were all but defeated, while farther east there were only tribes of Slavs already overawed by the colossus of the West. The Avar threat had been eliminated and the eastern frontier secured by the erection of the Ostmark or Eastern March, the beginnings of present-day Austria. The southern border along the Pyrennes was defended by another, the Spanish, march; and Italy, once the Lombards had been overcome, was at peace under the control of Charles’ eldest son. Reflecting this vast area under the aegis of a single ruler, a consciousness of unity was emerging which found expression in the terms Europa and Imperium Christianum which begin to appear in the documents of these years. Since the inhabitants of this Christian Empire were distinctively Roman Christians because of their allegiance to the Roman church, the term Roman Empire was occasionally used interchangeably with Christian Empire.

This use of the term Roman Empire to describe Latin Christianity, however, had rather far-reaching implications, for the only legitimate Roman Emperor in existence after 476 A.D. resided in the East, in Byzantium. What did Charles’ advisors, who created these expressions, have in mind? Clearly they did not wish to imply acknowledgement of the overlordship of the Byzantine basileus. What, then, was the motive behind this ambiguous expression given to the territory that Charlemagne ruled? If we turn to Einhard we shall find that he evidently did not consider the so-called Roman Emperor at Byzantium truly Roman, for he refers to him constantly as the “Greek Emperor” or as the “Emperor of Constantinople.” Furthermore for more than two years the eastern throne

had been occupied by an usurper -- and a woman at that -- the Empress Irene, who after deposing and blinding her son, had illegally taken his place.

Considering these circumstances from the viewpoint of an advisor to Charlemagne, what could have seemed more fitting or necessary to him than a renewal of the Roman Empire, a renovatio Romani Imperii, to be built on the foundation of the Frankish monarchy. We have noticed that such an idea was already appearing in the correspondence of the scholars and officials of the palace at Aachen; and further confirmation of this tendency will appear if we examine the palace itself, begun in 794. Einhard attributes the erection of the palace to Charles' fondness for the warm springs located there. But the palace seems to have possessed a deeper symbolic significance; for just as the Byzantine Emperor traditionally lived in a sacrum palatium so was the new palace at Aachen modeled almost exactly after the Emperor Justinian's well-known palace chapel of San Vitale in Ravenna with all of its complicated Caesaropapist symbolism.

It is with an outlook such as this that Charlemagne and his advisors followed the pope back to Rome late in the year 800. Upon his arrival Charles first punished those responsible for the recent indignities inflicted upon the pope; next he instituted a complicated legal proceeding to allow the pope to answer the charges which his enemies had brought against him. Though the trial was carefully conducted so as to preserve the dignity of the papacy, in fact the head of Christendom was being judged by the king of the Franks. Two days after the completion of the trial (which of course exonerated the pope), on Christmas day of the year 800 A.D., as Charles was rising from mass at St. Peter's, the pope placed a crown on his head; after which the congregation acclaimed him "Charles, crowned by God, most pious Augustus, great and pacific emperor of the Romans." Placed against the background which we have sketched this seems but the logical climax to the trends of his reign. As sole ruler of the West, now termed the Christian or even the Roman Empire, what could be more natural than that Charlemagne should receive a title commensurate with his position. Such, at least, is the interpretation of scholars such as Halphen and Ganshof.

There is, however, a rather embarrassing difficulty in the way of this interpretation which stems from a passage written by our friend Einhard. After describing the coronation at Rome he remarks that

...at first (Charlemagne) had such an aversion to the titles that he declared he would not have set foot in the church the day they were conferred, although it was a great feast day, if he could have foreseen the design of the Pope.¹²

Moreover, we know that when Charles' eldest son was made Emperor thirteen years later he received the imperial crown not from the pope but directly from the hand of his father. Charlemagne, the unlettered Frank, at best had only a vague conception of the meaning and history of the Roman Empire but we may be certain he was under no illusion that his rule over either his realm or over Christian society was a gift from the pope. Considering this additional evidence, some historians have drawn the conclusion that Charles was in effect outwitted by a crafty pope who seized the initiative to proclaim his superior auctoritas over the new Emperor. The papacy, so this interpretation maintains, wished to emancipate itself from legal subjection to the Empire at Constantinople and chose to accomplish this end by converting its patricius into an Emperor holding his title as a grant from the papacy and obligated to serve as its

¹² Einhard. 57.

defender and protector. This essentially is the thesis of three German scholars: Pfeil, Lintzel, and Ullmann. It fits neatly into the past pattern of papal-imperial relations and seems quite persuasive. But further reflection prompts some disturbing questions. If Charles himself had no intention of becoming Emperor, what are we to make of the elaborate quasi-Byzantine palace complex which he began constructing at Aachen five years before his coronation? How are we to understand the terms Imperium Romanum and Imperium Christianum which issued from the pens of those advisors close about him? And finally, can we really believe that a pope, who had just submitted to judgement at the hands of Charlemagne, would dare, two days later, to offend the all-powerful ruler of Europe with an unwanted title bestowed as if to an inferior? So the debate continues. The most satisfactory solution may be that of Fichtenau, a recent German scholar, who claims that instead of one interpretation the only possible conclusion is that the coronation must have meant different things to different people and that any attempt to say what it meant to everyone is unhistorical.

Whatever position we may take on the significance of the event, the unsubstantial nature of this Empire cannot be denied. For the revival of the Empire and the correspondingly vain hope for a revival of classical learning represented by the so-called Carolingian Renaissance were beyond the resources of the age. Just as Charlemagne, in attempting to create his sacred palace at Aachen "...had the columns and marble for this structure brought from Rome and Ravenna" as Einhard tells us, "for he could not find such as were suitable elsewhere," so his age was reduced to pilfering the political structures and literary works of the past in a vain attempt to bring to life again the moribund Empire of classical Rome.

For beneath this imposing but superficial ideological structure social developments were taking place which were eventually to reduce the Carolingian monarch-Emperors to a position as humble as that of their immediate Merovingian predecessors. These developments can be described as a mushrooming web of private relationships which steadily sapped the strength of the Carolingian state, superficially so brilliant. In origin these relationships were quite ancient. You will recall from the letter of Quintus Cicero on political canvassing in Rome that it was customary during the Republic for important men to become the patrons of a numerous following of dependents or clients who paid court to and voted for their patron in return for legal and various other forms of support. Originally this was an informal situation largely ignored by the Roman state. But in later years, particularly during the third century and after, as the Empire became both less capable of fulfilling its functions and simultaneously more oppressive, these relationships increased both in strength and in frequency. By the time of the Germanic invasions they involved in some manner or another a considerable number of Roman citizens in the West.

From Tacitus we learn of a similar relationship among the primitive Germans which he called the comitatus. By this Latin word Tacitus referred to that group of young warriors which formed about the typical German noble, obligated to follow him in battle, sharing in the booty, and supported by him with food and clothing in time of peace. After the settlement of the various Germanic nations on Roman territory in the West, the precedent of these two originally unrelated institutions, one Roman and one German, provided the framework for the growing web of dependent relationships which we have mentioned. Fortunately the bewhiskered argument as to which tradition, the German or the Roman, was the more important for the growth of feudalism seems to be dying of its own sterility; the important fact being that the growing weakness of the Germanic states in the early middle ages both permitted and demanded some substitute form of social and political organization and that the existence of these two traditions created the poles, as it were, about which various dependent relationships could develop.

It should be emphasized that while the state was strong these relationships were purely private and in a sense extra-legal. The late Empire even attempted, in vain, to suppress them. But as the state first grew increasingly oppressive and later began to dissolve, its framework of order was gradually replaced by these private relationships which of necessity tended to assume a public function. That, in brief, is the origin of what is called feudalism. It is not the result of any political theory consciously hostile to the state and determined on its destruction. Rather the collapse of the state permitted the emergence of long-standing private legal arrangements to replace that public order which it is the first obligation of the state to guarantee.

In the Merovingian period (referred to on your sheets as the "Transitional Period"), aside from the private bodyguards of the King who were termed *antrustiones*, those persons who, like Cicero's clients, sought the patronage or *patrocinium* of a protector were generally referred to as vassals; particularly when they were of humble origin, since the word vassal came from the Celtic *gwas* which meant servant or boy. More important dependants who usually formed their lord's private army were called *gasindi*. In return for their service, whether military or otherwise, these vassals or *gasindi* were usually supported by their lord with grants of food and clothing and lived in his establishment. We have no evidence from Merovingian Gaul that they were ever supported by land grants or benefices, though we know of benefices (usually pieces of land) being given to persons NOT identified as vassals or *gasindi*.

On the other hand, if we consider the developed feudalism of the 10th and 11th centuries, we find that a lord (who could be any wealthy and important person up to and including the king) would normally grant his vassal a benefice or piece of property (now termed a fief) in return usually for military service, though there were some vassals who received a fief of money instead of land and some who performed services other than military. For example, a vassal of King John of England was granted his fief in return for "holding the King's head in the boat" whenever he crossed the channel. If any of you have ever crossed the English channel in winter you will understand the reference. So, as you can see, the service rendered by a vassal could be rather varied. The ability to grant fiefs for services of such type was something of a luxury however, and as a rule fiefs were granted in return for military service. Now, the question arises: when did it become customary to grant a vassal a fief in return for his service; when, in other words, were the two institutions of vassalage and the benefice which we find side by side but distinct in the Merovingian period joined together? If we can locate the date and find the man responsible we will have the origin and the creator of classic feudalism. It will hardly surprise you to learn that the industry of German scholarship proved equal to the challenge. In 1887 Heinrich Brünner brought forth an appealing solution which you will find reflected in your handbook. Essentially Brünner's thesis was this: Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel, who was running the Frankish kingdom as Mayor of the Palace found himself hard-pressed by Islamic cavalry from Spain whose continual raids into southern France were becoming difficult for him to repel with an army consisting only of the traditional Frankish foot-soldier. Realizing that the strength of the enemy depended upon their numerous heavily armed knights, Charles Martel determined, first, to increase the number of his vassals and, second, to convert them all into knights by granting them benefices of land whose revenues would allow them to purchase the essential horse and armor. To do so he confiscated the necessary land from the vast holdings of the church and by thus uniting a vassal with a landed benefice, he took the decisive step toward the development of classic feudalism. Can we accept Brünner's solution?

Unfortunately for Brünner's thesis we now know that in Visigothic Spain vassals were being granted land in return for military service at least a century before Charles

Martel's confiscations, and it seems likely that since the two kingdoms were institutionally so similar that the same situation held true in Merovingian Gaul but that the written evidence, which is skimpy anyway, has disappeared. Second, Spanish medievalists, who know a bit more about the composition of Saracen armies than did Brünner, have proved that the Moorish armies at this time had certainly no more and probably fewer horses than did the Franks who were by no means limited to fighting on foot. All those Saracens mounted on Arabic stallions at the battle of Tours in 732 is simply one of those myths on which historiography thrives. As a result, today Brünner's thesis can no longer be accepted; but there remains no doubt that Charles Martel did "borrow" a large amount of land from the Church and granted it to his vassals, and was thus enabled to build up an extraordinarily large private following. And it was this powerful support, essentially gained by bribing the more important Merovingian nobles to abandon their allegiance to the king which later allowed his son Pepin to depose the last Merovingian and seize the state.

The bond of vassalage so profitably employed by the early Carolingians in capturing the state, however, was not equally useful for retaining it. It was a sword with a double edge, as the Carolingians discovered too late -- if ever. Strangely unaware, it seems, of the consequences; in fact, in the belief that he was strengthening his position, Charlemagne made nearly all his public officials (his counts, dukes, even his bishops and abbots) into private vassals, called *vassi dominici*. To a certain extent this was probably inevitable since the vast expanse of the Empire which his wars for booty did so much to create, was beyond the control of the administrative resources of the monarchy. Vassalage seemed the only expedient at hand to guarantee the services of his officials. Nevertheless the feudalization of the Carolingian state, which the monarch actively encouraged, could only further weaken an already overstrained edifice. The logical culmination of this policy was the feudal monarchy of the 10th and 11th centuries in which the king presided in name only over a territory composed almost entirely of independent duchies and counties. Only within the smaller confines of these territories ruled by descendants of Carolingian officials could effective government be carried on; and the future kingdom of France was not the direct heir of the Frankish monarchy of Charlemagne but rather a new creation resulting from the slow collection by the monarch of authority and control over these various units which had enjoyed *de facto* independence during the age of classic feudalism.

A full description here of the complexity of mature feudal relationships would be impossible; they were as various as the relationships between lord and peasant on the manor to which they were essentially a counterpart in the higher or military classes of medieval society. What must be kept in mind is that the only possible restraining influence on the proliferation of these private ties was the strength of the state. Unfortunately in spite of its August facade, the Carolingian state was by no means a strong or stable structure. Neither the support of the papacy, the semi-sacred character of its king, nor his splendid titles of Augustus and Imperator could save it from its material limitations.

Like the Merovingian kingdom before it, the Carolingian was nourished principally upon conquest and booty. You may recall the passage in Einhard dealing with the defeat of the Avars and his remarks upon the vast wealth which Charlemagne acquired through the confiscation of their hoard of gold and silver. Similar acquisitions of booty were usually one of the major objects of his many campaigns. And besides booty the king needed land -- land to serve as payment for his functionaries and supporters. Let us borrow Weber's image of ancient civilization as a sort of blast furnace which could only preserve its existence by devouring slaves like coal and apply it to these Germanic monarchies with regard to land. The Frankish monarchy could live only upon the

treadmill of conquest, so to speak, and when its acquisition of new territory stopped its nourishment ceased. Two factors primarily were responsible for this cessation of expansion. First, like the Merovingians, the Carolingians were unable to free themselves from the old Germanic practice of dividing the realm among all male heirs, for the development of primogeniture (or succession by the eldest son alone) was to come only with the full development of feudalism. And the results were the same: civil war between brothers which necessitated lavish grants of land to supporters, and as a final result eventual impoverishment of the monarchy. The last of the Carolingian line in France, Charles the simple, was a near-replica of the last of the Merovingians. Reduced to the city of Laon, he ended his days in the dungeon of one of his most powerful nobles, the count of Vermandois whom he had had the poor judgement to offend. Second, the successors of Charlemagne were witnesses of the last cycle of barbarian invasions of Europe, more severe perhaps than any before. From the east came another group of steppe people, the Hungarians, relatives of the Huns and Avars who had hounded the borderlands of Europe for centuries past; from the south aggressive Muslims landed on the Mediterranean coasts; and worst of all, out of Scandanavia came those Vikings or Northmen from whose ferocity all Europe was soon praying for deliverance. Einhard mentions the beginning of these attacks but does not seem particularly concerned:

Charles fitted out a fleet from the war with the Northmen; the vessels required for this purpose were built on the rivers that flow from Gaul and Germany into the Northern Ocean. Moreover, since the Northmen continually overran and laid waste the Gallic and German coasts, he caused watch and ward to be kept in all the harbors, and at the mouths of rivers large enough to admit the entrance of vessels, to prevent the enemy from disembarking; and in the South, in Narbonensis and Septimania, and along the whole coast of Italy as far as Rome, he took the same precautions against the Moors, who had recently begun their piratical practices. Hence, Italy suffered no great harm in his time at the hands of the Moors, nor Gaul and Germany from the Northmen, save that the Moors got possession of the Etruscan town of Civita Vecchia by treachery, and sacked it, and the Northmen harried some of the islands in Frisia off the German coast.¹³

It was only after Einhard's death that civil war and external invasion reached their peak, and in the process the fabric of the Carolingian state nearly vanished. In its place the task of protecting the laborers on the land and the few merchants who traversed the interior of Europe was left to the feudal nobility whose counties and duchies became the true loci of government during this disordered period. But although the Carolingians proved unable to establish a stable and lasting structure of government for Europa, yet unlike the Merovingians who left little behind them but their names, the Carolingians left European civilization a deposit both of precedents in church-state relations which led to the Investiture Struggle of the eleventh century and the papal monarchy of the thirteenth, and perhaps more significantly, a deposit of feudal institutions -- which became the seedbed for those dynastic states which formed the political structure of European civilization well into the nineteenth century.

13 Einhard, 44-45.

Some Further Reading

Heinrich Fichtenau, The Carolingian Empire (Oxford, 1968)

Louis Halphen, Charlemagne et l'Empire Carolingien (Paris, 1968)

François-Louis Ganshof, The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy (London, 1971)

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