Ryan Dillon

HIST 4700

4/23/2020

By the beginning of the 9th Century the order and stability that the old Roman political system provided to Western Europe was long gone. The former Roman provinces were now occupied by the Byzantines in the Balkans and Asia Minor, the Muslim caliphate in the Maghreb and the near East, and a variety of Christian kingdoms in Western Europe. One of the most notable rulers of one of these Christian Kingdoms in Western Europe was Charles I , or Charlemagne .The Frankish empire that Charlemagne inherited and expanded upon was truly an amalgamation of a variety of different groups of people who spoke different languages and took part in similar but different cultures. It was paramount for the new Frankish King to unify his realm politically and spiritually in order for it to be able to resist the multitude of external and internal threats that existed at the time. Charlemagne accomplished a lot during his reign. He conquered and converted the Saxons of northern Germany, protected Christian kingdoms in Spain from Muslim incursions, and solidified the position of the Franks as the protectors of the Papacy. Charlemagne also enacted widespread legal, religious and educational standardization reforms. Furthermore, Charlemagne was coronated as Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III, this act gave the Franks and their successors in the Holy Roman Empire a lot of religious authority which rivaled the religious authority of the Byzantines. Through force, subversion and reform Charlemagne was able to create a unified Catholic empire. Without the actions of Charlemagne and his successor, Catholicism would not have become the dominant sect of Christianity in Western and Central Europe during the Middle Ages.

Charlemagne conquered many of his neighbors in order to secure his Kingdoms survival. For most of his reign, Charlemagne fought against Germanic pagans, Iberian Muslims and other Catholic kingdoms. One of Charlemagne's most notable series of campaigns were those waged against the Saxons in Northern Germany. Charlemagne subjugated and executed large numbers of Saxons in order to intimidate others to convert to Christianity. In *The Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks* it is recorded that in 775 ad "[V]ictory had fallen to the Franks, who had killed a great number of those Saxons. When the lord king Charles heard of this he fell upon the Saxons a second time with the army. He inflicted no less slaughter on them and won much booty from the Westphalians, who gave hostages like the other Saxons. Then the lord king Charles returned home with God's help to Francia; he had taken hostages, acquired abundant booty and three times brought about carnage among the Saxons"[1]. This excerpt demonstrates the ferocity with which Charlemagne had used to deal with the Saxon groups to his north. It also shows the extent to which Charlemagne was willing to go to in order to conquer and later Christianize the Saxon people. In late 775, Charlemagne destroyed a Lombard revolt before having to turn around and face a Saxon rebellion. In the year 776, *The Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks* describes the Frankish reaction to the rebellion as a truly holy affair. It states, " God's glory appeared manifest above the building which housed the church there… they say that they saw the likeness of two shields, red in colour and flaming and moving to and fro over the church. And when the pagans outside saw this sign they were thrown into immediate disorder… How greatly God wrought His might upon them for the deliverance of the Christians defeats description; but the greater their terror grew, the more the Christians were strengthened and praised almighty God, Who vouchsafed to make manifest His power over His servants"[2]. From this perspective, one can see

---

[1] *The Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks,* 775-776.
[2] Ibid.

that the Franks viewed their actions as truly just and holy. For the Franks, the subjugation of the Saxons had more purpose than just pacifying a tribal threat to the north. The holy vision on the battlefield serves to confirm that Charlemagne and subjects were motivated to fight for God and by the prospect of being exalted of their sins for fighting in a holy war. As stated before the Franks had also been dealing with the Lombard's in Italy while the Saxon war had been taking place. The Lombard war had been brutal for the Franks, in large part due to the mountainous terrain in Northern Italy. In *The Life of Charlemagne*, Einhard sums up the Lombard war by stating, " [the] war ended with the subjection of Italy, the banishment of King Desiderius for life, the expulsion of his son Adalgis from Italy, and the restoration of the conquests of the Lombard kings to Hadrian, the head of the Roman Church"[3]. This outcome placed Charlemagne's kingdom just north of the Rome and the Papacy. Since the proper legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire by Constantine, the Romans had been the protectors of the Christian faith. With the Roman Empire having been gone for almost four centuries at this point that left either the Byzantines in the Near-East or the established Franks in the North to look after the Papacy and the Western Christian faith. The Pope's of the Eighth Century had already intertwined themselves with the Carolingian dynasty because they were the main reason the Carolingians ruled over the Franks to begin with. It came as no surprise when the Pope chose Charlemagne and the Franks as his protectors.

The Franks under Charlemagne fought against the Moors in Spain in another attempt to subvert the legitimacy of neighboring religions. The initial advance of the Spanish Muslims into Europe had been halted by one of Charlemagne's ancestors, Charles Martel. In *The Life of Charlemagne*, Einhard states that in order to prevent future Muslim incursions Charlemagne

---

[3] *The Life of Charlemagne,* translated 1880.

"covered the frontier by garrisons at the proper points," Charlemagne also "marched over the Pyrenees into Spain at the head of all the forces that he could muster." Einhard continues, "All the towns and castles that he attacked surrendered"[4]. Charlemagne did this as a show of force in order to intimidate the Muslims into not pursuing any northward expansion. Over the course of his forty-seven year reign Charlemagne secured an Empire that consists of what is most of modern day France, Germany, Switzerland, the Benelux, and Northern Italy. Here Einhard describes the dimensions of Charlemagne's conquests, "He so largely increased the Frank kingdom, which was already great and strong when he received it at his father's hands, that more than double its former territory was added to it. The authority of the Franks was formerly confined to that part of Gaul included between the Rhine and the Loire … By the wars above mentioned he first made tributary Aquitania, Gascony, and the whole of the region of the Pyrenees as far as the River Ebro, … He next reduced and made tributary all Italy from Aosta to Lower Calabria, where the boundary line runs between the Beneventans and the Greeks, a territory more than a thousand miles long; then Saxony, which constitutes no small part of Germany, and is reckoned to be twice as wide as the country inhabited by the Franks, while about equal to it in length; in addition, both Pannonias, Dacia beyond the Danube, and Istria, Liburnia, and Dalmatia, except the cities on the coast, … he vanquished and made tributary all the wild and barbarous tribes dwelling in Germany between the Rhine and the Vistula, … but the rest, by far the larger number, submitted to him of their own accord"[5]. All of this was done in order to ensure the protection of the Christian population and attempt to reestablish the political and religious stability as well as obtain the prestige the old Roman system had provided.

---

[4] *The Life of Charlemagne*, translated 1880.
[5] Ibid.

Although the territorial gains Charlemagne made were impressive, the most important acts of his reign were the immense standardization reforms he undertook. Charlemagne's reforms modified crucial sectors of the Frankish Kingdom including: educational, judicial, and monastic. Charlemagne was very interested in learning, later in his life he learned how to read Latin and Greek. Charlemagne's desire to learn can most clearly seen in the extensive library he created for himself. Bernhard Bischoff describes Charlemagne's library in *Manuscripts and Libraries in the Age of Charlemagne*, "the well-stocked library which his great appreciation of the heritage of the past led him to create at the beginning of the cultural revival in the West"[6]. Charlemagne's main focus with his educational reforms was on the interpretation of Church scripture. This educational objective ties into monastic reform as well, because at the time monks were the individuals who did most of the scriptural interpretation. The letter *De Litteris Colendis* demonstrates Charlemagne's desire to have proper educational procedures in his empire. In the letter Charlemagne states, "we all know well that, although errors of speech are dangerous, far more dangerous are errors of the understanding. Therefore, we exhort you not only not to neglect the study of letters, but also with most humble mind, pleasing to God, to study earnestly in order that you may be able more easily and more correctly to penetrate the mysteries of the divine Scriptures. Since, moreover, images, tropes and similar figures are found in the sacred pages, -no one doubts that each one in reading these will understand the spiritual sense more quickly if previously he shall have been fully instructed in the mastery of letters. Such men truly are to be chosen for this work as have both the will and the ability to learn and a desire to instruct others. And may this be done with a zeal as great as the earnestness with which we command it. For we desire you to be, as it is fitting that soldiers of the church should be, devout in mind, learned in

---

[6] *Manuscripts and Libraries in the Age of Charlemagne*, 2007.

discourse, chaste in conduct and eloquent in speech, so that whosoever shall seek to see you out

of reverence of God, or on account of your reputation for holy conduct, just as he is edified by

your appearance, may also be instructed by your wisdom, which he has learned from your

reading or singing, and may go away joyfully giving thanks to omnipotent God"[7]. This quote

shows that Charlemagne would like the various Bishoprics and Monasteries to be able to

correctly identify and interpret the meanings of Scripture. This can be seen as an act to

standardize Church thinking within his realm. Through the standardization of Church doctrines,

the risk of the creation of new heresies was significantly mitigated. The desire to create a

universal understanding of biblical scripture demonstrates Charlemagne's understanding that the

wellbeing of his Kingdom and the wellbeing of Christianity went together. Charlemagne also

enacted major judicial reforms in his realm. The most notable of which was an act to stem the

growth of corruption within his Kingdom. In *The Impact of Charlemagne on the Institutions of*

the Frankish Realm François Ganshof describes how "During his whole reign Charlemagne was

very much concerned not only about the zeal and the dignified behavior of the counts … in

discharging their judicial duties, but also about their honesty and independence. The *admonitio*

generalis of 789 and the *capitulare missorum* of the same year forbade them to accept presents

and to bend to the will of powerful men. This charge repeated emphatically in the programmatic

capitulare of 802 was frequently reiterated by the emperor in the following years"[8]. By targeting

corruption amongst his nobility, Charlemagne was able to promote and ensure the internal

stability of his realm. Charlemagne's ability to conquer territory and assimilate it under common

---

[7] *De Litteris Colendis*, 780-800.
[8] *The Impact of Charlemagne on the Institutions of the Frankish Realm*, 1965.

legal, educational and religious doctrines significantly aided in his creation of a unified Catholic Empire in Europe.

By gaining substantial amounts of prestige through his military, religious and political exploits Charlemagne was crowned Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire by Pope Leo III on Christmas day 800 AD. Charlemagne's coronation can be seen as a move to establish him and the Holy Roman Empire as the hegemons and protectors of the Christian Faith. Charlemagne's coronation mirrored many aspects of the coronation ceremony of the Romans and Byzantines. In *Charlemagne,* Johannes Fried states that "Charlemagne's coronation as emperor followed its Byzantine model to the letter, including observance of the 'proper' Roman ceremonial"[9]. The purpose of fully emulating the ceremony used by the Romans and their successors the Byzantines gave the coronation legitimacy as a Roman ritual. It can also be noted that this could also be interpreted as a move to undermine the religious authority of the Byzantines and move the center of Christendom from Constantinople to Rome. In his paper *Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800*, Henry Mayr-Harting states "The Roman idea of empire had various ingredients. It was the heir to Greek and Roman wisdom; it could only be acquired by coronation in Rome (and hence would surely exclude a coronation at Aachen such as that of Louis the Pious); and above all it was universalist, as P. A. Brunt shows that the ancient Romans conceived their empire to be, in the sense that all other rule in the world must in some way be a mere reflection of the one true, Roman, world imperium"[10]. With this statement in mind, by holding his coronation in Rome Charlemagne had the authority to claim that he was the legitimate holder of the title Roman Emperor.

---

[9] *Charlemagne*, 2016.
[10] *Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800*, 1996.

Charlemagne is still regarded as one of the most influential figures of European History. Over the course of his reign, Charlemagne subjugated large swathes of Western Europe and in turn created a unified Catholic state that could withstand the various external and internal threats the Catholic world faced at the time. Charlemagne's standardization reforms helped stabilize his large Empire and encourage a mini – cultural renaissance of religious, legal and educational thought. His coronation as Holy Roman Emperor solidified Catholicism's place as the dominant religion in Western and Central Europe for almost a thousand years. Charlemagne's extraordinary efforts established a longstanding balance in Europe and helped protect the Catholic faith when its future was not necessarily certain.

Bibliography

Primary

In Boretius, No. 29, p. 78, trans. by D. C. Munro, in - University of Pennsylvania. Dept. of History: *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European history,* published for the Dept. of History of the University of Pennsylvania., Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press [1900]. Vol. VI, No. 5, pp. 12-14

King, P. D., translator. "Life of Louis the Pious." *Charlemagne: Translated Sources*, Kendal, 1987. *De Re Militari*.

Einhard: The Life of Charlemagne, translated by Samuel Epes Turner, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880) [in 1960 the University of Michigan Press reprinted this translation, with a copyrighted forward by Sidney Painter]

Secondary

Beach, Alison I., and Isabelle Cochelin. *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Bischoff, Bernhard, and Michael M. Gorman. *Manuscripts and Libraries in the Age of Charlemagne*. Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Fried, Johannes, and Peter Lewis. *Charlemagne*. Harvard University Press, 2016.

Ganshof, François L. "The Impact of Charlemagne on the Institutions of the Frankish Realm." *Speculum*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1965, pp. 47–62. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2856463. Accessed 8 May 2020.

Mayr-Harting, Henry. *Religion and Society in the Medieval West, 600-1200: Selected Papers*.

Ashgate, 2010.