



HISTORYMAKERS

Charlemagne

Legendary King

"Charles was large and strong, and of lofty stature . . . his appearance was always stately and dignified . . . His gait was firm, his whole carriage manly . . ."
—Einhart, *Life of Charlemagne* (829–836)

In a time of chaos, one ruler arose to unite most of the western regions of the fallen Roman

Empire. That ruler was Charles, king of the Franks. While the unity he forged soon gave way to chaos after his death, he lived on as a legendary figure. He captivated the medieval mind as the strong Christian emperor Charles the Great, or Charlemagne.

As a young man, Charlemagne was taught at the palace school by the local abbot. He also learned the arts of war from his father, Pepin the Short, during an invasion of northern Italy. Charles grew to be tall and strong, reaching six feet four inches. His great size contributed to his legend. Surely, it was believed, this man who towered over all others was special.

In 768, Pepin died, and Charlemagne and his brother Carloman inherited the kingdom. Though older, Charlemagne received the smaller share. The reason may have been one of birth. Carloman was born after their parents had been married whereas Charlemagne had been born before. This division sparked a conflict that intensified when Carloman refused to give Charlemagne help in a military campaign. Then in 771, Carloman unexpectedly died, and Charlemagne became sole ruler.

Charlemagne's conquests were extensive. When northern Italy caused trouble for the pope, Charles invaded and conquered the area. He was now king of the Lombards as well as the Franks. He fought for many years in Germany until he finally defeated the Saxons. He also drove the Avars out of the upper Danube River valley. This would eventually open the settlement of Eastern Europe by Germans. His advances were checked only in Spain. Yet defeat there became the source of one of the great medieval epic poems, *The Song of Roland*, which helped perpetuate his legend.

Charlemagne traveled widely throughout his realm, seeking to impress his subjects with his awesome presence. He also wanted to watch over the nobles so they could not increase their own power. When he was angry, he was ruthless. After many rebellions by the Saxons, he ordered 4,500 of them put to death in a single day.

In addition to expanding his area of political control, Charlemagne enlarged the Christian areas. He conquered the Saxons to bring them to Christianity. He built many churches and sponsored learning. His conquests also helped fund these pursuits. Defeat of the Avars yielded 15 wagons filled with gold, for instance.

Charlemagne also built a huge and impressive palace at his capital of Aix-la-Chapelle, which is located in present-day Aachen, Germany. The chapel there was modeled after a church built by a Byzantine emperor in Italy. With this, Charlemagne probably revealed his true wish: to be seen as the heir to the Roman Empire. He made a giant stride toward that goal on Christmas Day, 800, when Pope Leo III crowned him Holy Roman Emperor.

The historian Einhard later wrote that Charlemagne was at first ". . . so much opposed to this that . . . he would not have entered the Church if he had known beforehand of the Pope's intention." Some historians think that Charlemagne objected to his coronation because he thought it placed the pope in a higher position than the king. Nevertheless, Charlemagne accepted the title and began communicating with the Byzantine emperor as an equal.

Charlemagne earned his reputation as a military and political leader, a proponent of the Church, and a patron of learning. Charlemagne's coronation proved a symbol of great importance in European history. It clearly linked the emerging Europe to the glory of ancient Rome. Later, when German rulers hoped to establish their own right to rule, they called themselves Holy Roman Emperor to bask in the glory of the legendary king of the Franks.

Questions

1. *Drawing Conclusions* Why did Charlemagne's size enhance his image?
2. *Finding Main Ideas* How did Charlemagne improve the position of Christianity?
3. *Forming and Supporting Opinions* Why do you think Charlemagne opposed his coronation? Explain.