



Frankish Settlements
ca. 400 AD

Charlemagne's Empire, ca. 800 AD



EMERGENCE OF MEDIEVAL FRANCE

Clovis I (d. 511 AD), the first of the **Merovingian** monarchs (he was the grandson of a Frankish chieftain named Merovech) was the first king to unite all of France. He converted to Christianity and supported the Roman church. However, as was French law and custom, at his death he divided his kingdom among his sons.

The Merovingian dynasty declined because (a) many of their kings were young when they came to the throne, others were mentally deficient; (b) the kings relied upon Mayors of the Palace, who soon attained the real power in the realm; (c) constant civil wars forced the kings to cede lands to their supporters.

One powerful Mayor of the Palace, Pepin III the Short, in 751, got papal support for usurping the crown, and deposed the last Merovingian, starting the **Carolingian** dynasty. Carolingian France took a decidedly religious turn: a large percentage of church officials used in government roles (not common in Merovingian era); calling of synods of bishops to discuss church issues; very strong protection of Papacy in Italy. France remained steadfast in support of the Roman church up through the Protestant Reformation.

The Carolingian dynasty has (at least) two noteworthy members:

Charles Martel (who gave his name to the dynasty), who fought battles against the Muslims (the Battle at Tours in 732 marked the increase of Frankish power, and decline in Islamic power, in France).

One development that started in France was an increased reliance on cavalry, made possible by the introduction of the stirrup in the 700s. By making fighting on horseback more effective, it radically changed medieval society by encouraging kings to provide lands for supporters, in exchange for their fielding squadrons of knights, replete with body armor and lances. Freemen who were not knights saw a decline in status and power, however.

Charlemagne, king of the Franks from 768-814. He cemented an alliance with the church, being crowned Emperor of the Romans on Christmas Day, 800, by the Pope. He fought battles in Germany, Spain, and Italy, in support of the Roman church as well as his own nation. At the death of Louis, Charlemagne's son, in 840, the empire was divided among the three sons of Louis, never again to be re-united.

As a strong nation with a potentially stronger neighbor (Germany) on its border, France adopted a policy that changed only after WWII: keeping Germany weak and divided, and they undertook wars to support this policy. As a consequence, Germany was not united until 1871, and German leaders saw France as their mortal enemy.