

Charles the great analysis



Charles the Great, or Charlemagne as he is more commonly known, was born a Frank, a member of the Carolingian bloodline. He was born in 742, the illegitimate son of Pepin III and an Austrasian noblewoman. He served as the king of the Franks from 771-814, and during that time, during a campaign that lasted nearly 30 years, extended his rule through Western Europe. In the year 800, on Christmas Day, he was crowned Emperor of the West by Pope Leo, and he served as such until his death fourteen years later. Upon his father's death in 768, Charlemagne and his brother Carloman inherited joint ruler hip of Francia.

However, his brother died three years later, and Charlemagne exiled hisfamilyand claimed sole rulership. While he was one of a line of what became known as warrior chiefs, he strived to stretch past that with his broader mind that craved contact with " men of religion, learning andculture, not just as officials who could help him run his empire, but for themselves. " It was his belief in God that helped to make him such a formidable leader, and kept him focused on his objectives with the determination and faith that would help him to become a legend.

The year after Carloman's death found Charlemagne engaged in the Saxon Wars. The relationship between the Franks and the Saxons had long been tense, with the Saxons periodically attempting to expand to accommodate an ever growing population in finding more hospitable lands to inhabit. Border clashes were common, with peace in between being tenuous and short-lived. What also added to the tension was the fact that the Saxons believed in pagan gods, which inevitably added more tension with the

Christian Franks. Biography Page 2 of 5 Charlemagne's first action against the Saxons was to take on both military and

religious connotations. He marched his army into Saxony and captured the castle of Eresberg and then traveled further to destroy a Saxon idol known as the Irminsul, which was a giant tree trunk that was considered a shrine, believed to be one of the pillars of heaven. It was considered to ensure the protection of the gods, and it was considered a demonstration of defiance to the Franks. Thus, by striking in such a way, Charlemagne made a strong statement about his determination to strike both at the Saxon people and at their religion, which is something that he considered to be his duty as a Christian.

Following this blow to the Saxons, Charlemagne was called in by Pope Hadrian I to help defuse a situation with Lombardy. There had long been conflict between them, and so Charlemagne decided to put an end to it once and for all, marching his army in autumn of 773, making haste to cross the Alps before it started to snow. He divided his army in two, sending each in different directions. Desiderius, the Lombardy leader, could not split his smaller forces to meet both sections of the Frankish forces, and so he was forced to withdraw back to his capital.

Charles and his army followed and laid siege, and, much to Desiderius' surprise, he settled his troops in for the winter instead of falling back. This time demonstrated the true leadership abilities of Charlemagne. His men were far from home, and forced to fight in inhospitable conditions. But they remained loyal and followed their king, remaining there through spring of 774. However, those in Parvia suffered more than those involved in the

siege, hunger and disease rampaging them. Desiderius stubbornly held strong against them until midsummer of that year, when

Biography Page 3 of 5 he finally had to sue for peace. Charlemagne, instead of demanding tribute from Desiderius, instead took the Iron Crown of Lombardy, and sent the Lombardy ruler and his family back to Francia as prisoners. With that, Charlemagne increased the size of his empire, becoming King of Lombardy as well as King of Francia. A large part of Charlemagne's rule was that of protector of the Church. He did this not only out of loyalty to the Church and the pope, but also because he needed the support of the Christians.

The support of the Church took him farther than he might otherwise have gone, helping to instill a loyalty of him into the people, particularly the nobles. However, he made it rather clear that he would not allow the pope any political power, nor would he allow him to dictate his will upon Charlemagne. The king had his own plans, and he was not to be foiled by anyone who might want to interfere, including the pope himself. Charlemagne would once again become involved in a campaign against the Saxons, and he decided that he must find a long-term solution to the problem.

He had to confront the problem of a " war on several fronts and the concomitant drain it imposed on the nation's resources. " However, he set goals for himself, and he committed himself to achieving those goals, which kept him in conflict with the Saxons until 785. It was slow going, as he would advance into Saxon territory and take land and hostages, but the agreements that came from this were broken by the Saxons as winter came

along, and they would regain some of the ground that they lost. However, they were not to regain it all, and so slowly Charlemagne gained more and more of their territory, advancing his

Biography Page 4 of 5 own borders. He garrisoned territory that was taken, and he left clergy with these garrisons to help advance the Christian religion as well. It became clear during these wars that the only acceptable outcome to staunch the flow of hostility and war from the Saxons was complete and total victory. In 782, Charlemagne added new laws and restrictions to what were already imposed upon the Saxon people, focusing again on conversion and attempting to force the new converts however he could to not renege on their conversions and instead seeking penance for their misdeeds.

The laws against crimes against Christians incurred penalties of death, and the people were expected to supply both land and slave labor to the churches. At first, the results were not as Charlemagne wished. As he was elsewhere, a revolt broke out after Saxon forces killed twenty of Francia's leading noblemen. When Charlemagne heard this, he marched east with his troops with such ferocity that the Saxons exiled Widukind, who was the leader of the revolt, and handed 4,500 men over to Charlemagne.

Each of these was beheaded in a demonstration of Charlemagne's anger. The knowledge that, so long as Widukind was a heroic figure for the Saxon people, he could not have complete victory, led Charlemagne to offer peace to him as well as gifts and a promise of pardon. There was also the possibility of an official position in Francia as well, and so Widukind accepted baptism and peace with his long-time enemy, and this ended the first phase of the

Saxon wars. The next years saw the conquering of Bavaria and a renewal of the Saxon wars.

The peace with the Saxons lasted ten years, and then the Saxons once again started to show defiance to Charlemagne's rule. His empire continued to grow, however, and "was Biography Page 6 of 5 bounded almost entirely by sea and neutralized marches." Despite this success, he was never able to completely bring all of his empire under one system of legislation, which was a large failure for the emperor. It was in 800 that Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as emperor.

After gaining this role, he worked to educate himself, learning to read Latin and Greek, although writing eluded him. He attempted to better educate himself, and also worked to better the lives of his subjects, including working on an improvement in commerce. Russell describes him as "the pioneer of the Middle Ages and the world is indebted to him for invaluable improvements in the manner and ways of exchange." He made a point of reforming the monetary system and also worked to introduce universal coinage.

While Charlemagne will always be known as an impressive military leader, his influence goes far beyond that. His dedication to his religion was a key part of his life, as was his insistence on bettering the education of both himself and the clergy. He promoted "the spread of a competence in written Latin among the clergy," believing that social reform would not work if the clergy were illiterate. All of these things together contributed to Charlemagne becoming one of the most renowned and respected leaders in history.

Leaders from generations after, all over the world, would work to learn from his example and attempt to mirror his many successes in their own times, using his failures as well to help guide them. Very few leaders had the prowess in so many ways that Charlemagne did, and it was perhaps the fact that he was so well-rounded in his achievements that make his legacy so great. Works Cited Heer, Friedrich. Charlemagne and His World. New York: Macmillan Publishing Col, Inc. , 1975. Russell, Charles Edward. Charlemagne: First of the Moderns. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930. Wilson, Derek. Charlemagne. New York: Doubleday, 2006.