

The reign of charlemagne



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Why Was The Reign Of Charlemagne So Important In The Development Of The Early Medieval Monarchy?

Charlemagne or Charles the Great was born on the 2 April 748 AD, the son of Pippin; the King of the Franks. At the time of his accession, the Frankish kingdom was already the most important power in Europe. However, that power and prestige was increased greatly by Charlemagne during his reign, in which he came to rule the vast majority of Western Europe.

Charlemagne's power and prestige culminated on Christmas Day 800, when he was crowned Imperial Emperor by Pope Leo III. This act was incredibly significant as it founded the empire that would be known as the Holy Roman Empire, an empire that lasted for over a thousand years. As a result of the immense power Charlemagne had, he has been often been referred to as the 'father of Europe'. Ultimately, Charlemagne was the founding father of the French and German monarchies, a key player in the spread of Christianity throughout Western Europe, and ruled over an empire, the likes of which had not been seen since the Roman era.

Charlemagne instigated various administrative reforms throughout his empire that were key in the development of the early medieval monarchy.

One of Charlemagne's foremost concerns was maintaining unity within his empire. In 802, two years after his imperial coronation, Charlemagne required the entire population of the realm to swear an oath of loyalty;

'all people were expected to keep God's commandments, to respect all the emperor's possessions, to acknowledge his protection over the churches and the weak, especially widows and orphans, and finally to obey imperial

commands. ' He Charlemagne's demands of loyalty were a way of exerting a manner of control and authority over a vast empire.

Furthermore, the same year as Charlemagne introduced the oath of loyalty, he also set about bringing in new legislative reforms, which are seen as being key in the development of the early medieval monarchy. For the first time in history a king wrote down the laws of his kingdom. Charlemagne recorded the laws of the Frankish, Frisian, Saxon and Thuringian people. He also corrected the ' defective laws' of his people, rewriting and removing laws he deemed to be vicious and useless, and adding to them where it was needed. Certainly this was a key reform, as it enabled law to have a more central authority, and aided the spread of the knowledge of law within the empire, fundamentally, what was right and wrong. To a certain extent, he allowed for differences on law, within the provinces of his empire. However, Frankish law certainly had its influence throughout the region. Furthermore Charlemagne required that all leading members of society within each province hear their laws read aloud in their own language. Thus, aiding the implementation of law enforcement throughout the Frankish empire.

Charlemagne sought a more civilised empire, founded on Christian values, and one of his key concerns was not only lowering rates of crime but also a move away from the more personalised ' taking the law into their own hands' way of dealing with criminals that had existed for hundreds of years, to a more structured system of law enforcement and criminal punishment. Charlemagne introduced legal cases and a judicial system within each district that consisted of a count passing judgement and delivering sentences. This movement was a key component of the development of

early medieval monarchy, as both the French and German monarchies, after the collapse of the Frankish empire, followed this more structured judicial system, and it could be argued that Charlemagne founded the beginnings of a judicial system, the likes of which are in existence in western civilisation today. Furthermore;

‘ Charlemagne established the office of the so called reprimandary witnesses who were required to bring crimes to the attention of the court if the victims did not do so themselves’

Thus, Charlemagne took it upon himself to enforce justice within his empire, and by establishing these offices his aim was to see the criminal members of society reap the rewards of their actions, even if victims themselves did not desire to carry the criminals actions forwards. However, such matters are not as black and white as Charlemagne imagined them to be, and it is debatable as to what extent Charlemagne was able to fulfil his goal. Nonetheless Charlemagne’s judiciary reforms were key in the development of early medieval monarchy as many monarchs sought inspiration from Charlemagne’s founding judicial system basis, and they also encouraged a more civilised society in the early medieval ages.

Charlemagne certainly sought to improve the administration of the empire as a whole, reforming various aspects of administration. One of his reforms related to his persistent aim of exerting a greater level of control over his empire. He established middle authorities in each region, to ‘ oversee local officials’. Thus, in a sense Charlemagne inaugurated a form of local government. However, he amended this system over the years, he grew

distrustful of those he had sent to oversee, as he believed them to be open to bribery. Hence, he instead chose archbishops, dukes, and abbots; generally members of high nobility, whom he did not believe to be open to bribery. It can be said that a key theme of Charlemagne's reign was justice. Charlemagne wanted it not only for himself but also for every loyal subject of his empire, as exhibited through his judiciary reforms and distaste for subjects whom used their positions for their own selfish benefits.

In Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni* or *Life of Charlemagne*, Einhard states how Charlemagne also made reforms relating to the language of the Franks; 'He began a grammar of his native language' and the history of his people; 'he had the old rude songs that celebrate the deeds and wars of the ancient kings written out for transmission to posterity'. Thus Charlemagne was keen to preserve the history of the ancient kings.

Furthermore; 'Charlemagne had an important role in determining the immediate economic future of Europe'. He got rid of the gold currency and implemented a new silver currency. Additionally, Charlemagne standardised currency throughout most of Europe, abolishing many of the local currencies in existence. This monetary standard remained the basis for the currency for a long time. Hence, Charlemagne instigated economic reforms that were key to the development of the early medieval monarchy as he standardised currency throughout Europe, and implemented changes that remained in place in Europe for a very long time.

The Carolingian renaissance is also believed to be a requisite to the development of the early medieval monarchy. Similar to the renaissance that

occurred in the early modern period, it was characterised by the re discovery of ancient roman works, the flourishing of art and literature. Charlemagne was a very keen advocate of education, even returning to education himself, although he never learnt to write. He did however study grammar, logic and astronomy. Furthermore, some of the earliest manuscripts still in survival today are from the Carolingian era. Charlemagne also introduced the use of the classical Latin language as the language of scholarly study ‘ Thus, the West saw the development of a pure language, which was used almost exclusively by the learned, and from which the romance languages grew increasingly distinct’ Hence, he increased the availability of education within his realm, increasing monastic schools. Therefore, Charlemagne’s keenness for education was important to the development of the early medieval monarchy as it lead to a period of greater emphasis on education, a pattern that following monarchs were keen to emulate, and ultimately led to a greater number of educated persons within western civilisation.

Charlemagne’s reforms influenced nearly every corner of society, including the Church. Charlemagne was an extremely pious man and sought to be the ideal embodiment of both a Christian man and King. Charlemagne asked the Pope to send him texts on church law. ‘ This Dionysio-Hadriana was used enthusiastically in the Frankish kingdom’. By doing this Charlemagne encouraged future monarchs to take a more scholarly than blind approach to the Church. Charlemagne was also very interested in Church music and encouraged the spread of proper church liturgies throughout his empire, taking a personal interest in papal music, and banning melodies such as those found in Milan.

Charlemagne also introduced changes to the organisation of the military service. Obligation to military service of the empire was based upon personal wealth and Charlemagne instigated reforms that would make it fair for those obliged to join the military, based on the individual's wealth. ' Charlemagne ordered that every tenant with three to five so-called hides (homesteads), as well as the holders of fiefs, were required to serve against the enemy'. Many monarchs followed these reforms in the early medieval period.

In conclusion, Charlemagne was certainly a founding ' father of Europe'. He strove to implement justice in his empire and he instigated reforms in almost every important aspect of early medieval society. Charlemagne's reign was a period of change for Western Civilisation. However, it is foolish to assume that all these reforms were greatly successful, as not all were, for example Charlemagne's judicial reforms. However, early medieval monarchs followed Charlemagne's reforms, as they were eager to reach the level of power and prestige, which Charlemagne had possessed, Charlemagne's reign saw the emergence of Western civilisation, a civilisation that moved away in terms of religion, currency and thought from the East. Furthermore, Charlemagne made it easier for other early medieval monarchs to govern and handle their kingdoms, for example his judicial reforms made law enforcement an easier task for future monarchs, as he had recorded laws in a written form and implemented a sort of court system throughout his empire. Ultimately Charlemagne's reign was not only very important in the development of early medieval monarchy, but also important in the development and advancement of western civilisation. His reign has no doubt affected the world in which we live today.

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