

Roman emperor Charlemagne

Name

Institution

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Charlemagne also referred to as “Charles the Great” is one of the most remembered and discussed political leader of the eighth and the ninth centuries. From 768 to 814, Charlemagne was the king of the Franks and from 800 to 814 he ruled as the Emperor of the Romans. His kingdom was vast as it covered most of western and central Europe. Charlemagne was born in 742 and passed on in 814. On his physical appearance, he was a tall man with blue eyes, thick neck, and red hair.¹ Charlemagne was the son of “Pepin the Short” having been born on April 2, 742. As part of survival in 1951 his father conquered the last Merovingian king taking the throne for him. In 754, Pepin the Short become the King of the Franks and was crowned by Pope Stephen II after he promised Pope Protection for his land. After his death in 768, his kingdom was equally divided among his two sons, Carloman and Charlemagne. Based on a set of agreements; he ruled his own kingdom peacefully although incidences of instability were evident. After only ruling for three years, Charlemagne young brother Carloman died and his wife fled to Italy for protection. As it was the tradition, Charlemagne acquired the part that was ruled by his brother. He combined the two parts and he later became the leader and king of the Frankish Empire.

Charlemagne was a military man having been introduced by his father during the Aquitanian war. After the death of his brother, Charlemagne began the journey of expanding his kingdom and empire. It is imperative to note that war was used when necessary to expand his

¹ James Bruce Ross. *Two Neglected Paladins of Charlemagne: Erich of Friuli and Gerold of Bavaria Speculum*, 1945, 20 (2), pp. 215.

kingdom. By 771, Charlemagne had expanded the kingdom to Septimania in the south from Austrasia in the north. He was aggressive, ambitious and a ruthless emperor, but equally notable was his persistence and perseverance. People feared him and others admired his leadership and charisma. His kingdom traversed to border Nordau in the East and Aquitaine in the West. During his era, the longest battle that Charlemagne was involved in was the Saxon War. He later conquered and made Saxon one of his many provinces. He established churches and made the Saxons become Christians. This was revolted until he captured their leader. The essay is an attempt to discuss how and why Charlemagne was able to rule such a vast empire. It also explores his strengths and weaknesses during his rule as an Emperor. Charlemagne ruled a vast empire through the cross and the sword.

Mathias Becher notes that Charlemagne is remembered as one of the most powerful Christian leaders to have ruled the world. The coronation of Charlemagne by the Pope Leo III on Christmas Day in AD 800 marked the highpoint of his rule.²The association between Charlemagne and the church is one of the major reasons in how and why he ruled such a vast empire. To some extent he used the church for his political gain although he was a devoted Christian. On the other hand, the church benefited in a great deal because through his power, Charlemagne conquered new regions and converted the locals to Christianity. The mutual relationships between the church and Charlemagne played an integral role in ensuring a stable empire and rule. In 800, Charlemagne adopted the title, 'Charles, most serene Augustus, crowned by God, great and pacific emperor, governing the Roman Empire.'³In Becher's view, Charlemagne after taking charge of events of papal affairs and events in Rome, he become in

²Matthias Becher. *Charlemagne*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 1

³Becher. *Charlemagne*. 3

control of the situation⁴. Subsequently, he effectively orchestrated his elevation of leadership and kingdom to rule over Rome. Therefore, he remained as the seminal figure behind the "founding of the medieval empire that would later continue as the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation until 1806."⁵In this perspective, Charlemagne through the association with church elevated his rule to cover Germany and Holy Roman.

The ascendancy to power by Charlemagne came to be in AD 772 when Pope Adrian I sought his help to fight against King Desiderius. Although he was his father in-law before falling out, he defeated him and restored this part of the empire. In addition he took the position of his father in protecting the papal interest.⁶Power vacuum resulted to the attack on Pope Leo III in AD 799 in the streets of Rome. The Romans had mistreated the Pope and tried to cut his tongue and put out his eyes. After the attack, it is when the Pope sought the protection of Charlemagne. In AD 800, Charlemagne knelt at the altar and Pope Leo crowned him as the Emperor of the Romans. In so doing, the legitimacy of Empress Irene of Constantinople was nullified. The implication made is that Charlemagne became the legitimate successor and leader of the empire. Based on these events, Charlemagne used his power to elevate his empire and rule, and at the same time the interests of Pope Leo III were served.⁷ Other than protection the papal interests, Charlemagne emperor gave lands to the church. He also converted new kingdoms to Christianity which was a win to the Roman Catholic Church. As the protector of the papal interests and the emperor, Charlemagne was able to govern the church as an important part of his kingdom.

Charlemagne aggressively travelled and removed those who threatened his power in Italy. During his travels, he attacked and went ahead to defeat King Desiderius of the

⁴ Ibid 8

⁵ Ibid 8

⁶ Ibid 59-62

⁷ Ibid 3

Lombards. He was later crowned the Lombards at Pavia. It is imperative to note that the Frankish conquest of Italy was very important because it brought new people and wealth into his kingdom. This was necessary for a ruler during such time as it not only showed a sign of power, but land was perceived as a sign of wealth. During the Italian operations, he went ahead to declare war against the Saxons. These were Germanic tribe that threatened the power and rule of Charlemagne. The war which started in AD 772 ended in AD 804. Charlemagne expanded the Francia territory to Saxon and converted the Saxon tribes into Christians. This was a win to both the Church and Charlemagne. Notably, it took Charlemagne more than thirty years to conquer the Saxons.⁸Notably the expansion of the Frankish Kingdom in the east was achieved through military campaigns. Bercher notes that Charlemagne's long struggle against the Saxons was necessary as it annexed a large block of territory found between the Elbe and the Rhine Rivers.

Charlemagne operated a centralized government which according to Becher was successful. He goes further to state that diplomatic relationships ensured that he made treaties that governed and ensured understanding among different rulers.⁹Like any other centralized government, Charlemagne's leadership was faced with some shortcomings. For example, not all the rules and laws were followed. In addition, his rule was characterized with corruption. For instance, to ensure border control, loyalty and defense, Charlemagne gave lower lords and other leaders' tracks of land which has been grabbed from innocent people. Thus, it could be argued that despite the strengths associated with Charlemagne's reign, land grabbing, corruption, and displacement from ancestral land was common.

In conclusion, Charlemagne also referred to as the Charles the Great was undisputed ruler of the Western Europe. He is depicted as a great leader who used diplomatic relationships to

⁸ Ibid 60

⁹ Ibid 100

strengthen ties and expand his kingdom. He united the Frankish society and brought people from different kingdoms together. In addition, Charlemagne related very well with the people. He was seen as a Christian leader although he was feared and admired at all odds. To expand his empire, Charlemagne used military power and the church associations to rule such a vast empire. For example, in AD 800, Charlemagne was crowned the Emperor of Rome by the Pope after providing security and protection. Protecting the church, the papacy, providing land for construction of more churches and converting barbarians to Christianity and some of the ways in which the empire expanded. Strong military organization ensured that Charlemagne was not defeated in any war. He relentlessly fought the Saxons for more than thirty years and later captured their territory. Based on the essay, it was necessary for Charlemagne to rule a vast empire because it provided land, people and other resources necessary for a strong empire. His strong military organization invaded and defeated a lot of other leaders. He had lords in lower levels to provide intelligence, to ensure border control and provided defense from enemies.

Some of the strong attributes associated with Charlemagne regime are such as bring unity and order, bring education and art, constructing of churches and place of worship, building bridges and canals and roadways. Although he was an aggressive leader, he promoted Christianity in the Roman Empire. He also changed the way of life for many people who had lived under anarchy. Other than the strengths associated with the rule of Charlemagne, some weaknesses were evident. For example, starvation, famine, war, death, and corruption as well as land grabbing. People shed blood whilst others lost their property, land and lives. He had anger for power and he never knew when to give up. Force was used to convert barbarians to Christianity and some were even killed.

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