Charlemagne and the Carolingian Renaissance

For several hundred years after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, various states arose from an assortment of tribal governments. One of the most important states of post-Roman Europe was the kingdom of the Franks. In about 742 CE, Charles—the future Charlemagne (meaning "Charles the Great")—was born to Pippin the Short, ruler of the Franks. On Pippin's death in 768, his kingdom was divided between his sons, as was the custom among the Franks. After his brother's death in 771, Charlemagne became the sole ruler of the kingdom.

Charlemagne continued his father's program of conquest over neighboring kingdoms. He subjugated the Lombards in present-day Italy, subdued the rebellious Saxons in present-day Germany, and destroyed the Avars' power in Eastern Europe. By the time of his death in 814, Charlemagne ruled nearly all of Christian Western Europe except for the British Isles.

Charlemagne's rule lasted from 768 to 814. Within two generations after his death, the effects of most of his reforms had dissipated because his successors, weakened by Viking invasions, could not sustain them.

Although the empire dissolved in little more than a generation after his death, Charlemagne left an indelible mark on his age and the later Middle Ages. His model of Christian kingship remained the ideal for much of the rest of the Middle Ages, and the imperial dignity he created was regarded as the ultimate expression of political power into the modern era. The close ties he forged with the popes in Rome influenced political events long after his death, and his reform of the church in his kingdom revived a sagging institution. The efforts at cultural and religious renewal that created the Carolingian Renaissance established an important foundation for later cultural growth in the Middle Ages. Indeed, Charlemagne's achievement was unsurpassed in the early Middle Ages, and he is widely considered the greatest king of the entire Middle Ages.
Medieval Trade Fairs and Guilds (Overview)

The 12th century was a time of expansion in medieval Europe. Kings and lesser lords pushed into new territories, the Crusades brought Europeans into contact with new peoples and markets, and the economically inward-looking world of the earlier Middle Ages gave way to a larger, outward-looking world of interregional and international trade. One consequence of that expansion was the rise of towns, a development that meant a number of significant changes and innovations. The period gave rise to a new money economy, large-scale commerce, and great local trade fairs, all of which began to redefine medieval society.

The Champagne Fair

Perhaps the best known fairs of the medieval period are the Champagne fairs. Count Theobald II of Champagne (also known as Theobald IV of Blois) recognized that by organizing trade and providing a central location, goods could be traded more easily. He also recognized the potential for profit in hosting fairs. At its height, there were six fairs in Champagne, and it is largely thanks to them that the wool market thrived. Theobald’s son, Henry, also patronized the fairs, and soon the counts of Champagne were fabulously wealthy. Fairs like those helped stimulate the economy, not only locally, but also throughout Europe and into the Levant. English wool, French wine, Russian wax, and Prussian wheat could all be found at such fairs.

The Money Economy

Booming trade demanded easier ways to handle transactions, thus the demand for money increased. New mines flooded Europe with silver coin and helped the new economy. In the early Middle Ages, the need for coins had not been as great, as most business could be handled through barter or was local enough as not to require a large amount of cash. In the flourishing economy of the High Middle Ages, money came to new prominence. It was much easier to rely on money than to actually carry that amount of wool, metal, or spices. Concomitant with the growing importance of money was the necessity for banking. Banks held money for individuals, used it to invest in trade, and provided loans. Medieval society was wary of profit for its own sake. Ecclesiastic law forbade usury, or claiming too much interest on a loan. Most banks found ways to profit without breaking the law, but some openly flouted it. Merchants, who were often concerned with usury, periodically made donations to the Catholic Church or public works to offset potential sin.
medieval cloth

Wool was medieval England's chief export, and large flocks of sheep were also grazed across France. Monasteries kept the largest flocks of sheep; they used the sale of wool to fund their communities. Cistercian monasteries were especially methodical in their sheep breeding and shearing. They graded it by quality and sold it in bales. The best wool came from Merino sheep imported from Spain, the worst from more primitive double-coated sheep.

Cotton was native to India. It spread into the Arab lands during the eighth century, and it was introduced to Muslim Spain around the ninth century. Its first use in Europe was simply as padding in quilted linen or wool. Quilts were not made as bed covers; they were used as winter clothing and as padding under armor for both men and horses. Italian manufacturers first imported raw cotton from India and Egypt and then began to grow cotton as well.

Silk came from China, where the secrets of raising silkworms on mulberry trees and weaving their delicate threads were closely guarded. Silk-weaving technology did not reach Northern Europe until the late Middle Ages, but then towns like Arras and Beaumont became centers of silk weaving using raw silk imported from the Mediterranean region.

Velvet was invented in Lucca, Italy; it was woven by creating fine loops sticking up from the fabric.

4 Hundred Years' War

The Hundred Years' War was the most important Anglo-French conflict of the Middle Ages. Conventionally considered to have lasted from 1337 to 1453, the war in actuality had complex roots. It was the last and more violent stage of an old conflict that arose from the fact that the English king was, at the same time that he was king of England, a vassal of the French king for Guyenne (part of the region of Aquitaine in southwestern France).
Agriculture

The vast majority of the population in the age of Charlemagne lived and worked on farms. It was a constant struggle to produce enough food. Most of the farmers were freemen who owned the land they worked, although monasteries made up the largest landowning complexes in Charlemagne's time.

Two major innovations led to increased agricultural production at about this time: the large wheeled plow and three-field crop rotation. It had long been known that the soil would become worn out by repeated crop planting, so usually half of a farm's land would be left empty, or fallow, each year to allow it to recover. During the Carolingian period, farmers began to divide their land into three sections—planting two and allowing one to lie fallow. That practice increased the productive area significantly and made more food available each year.

Church and State

When the kingdom expanded into an empire under Charlemagne, the Franks' tribal system of government was no longer sufficient. He had to control a vast territory and several different ethnic groups with different traditions of government. Charlemagne turned to the Roman Catholic Church for a model of orderly government. The Roman Catholic Church was the only Europe-wide social structure remaining after the fall of the Roman Empire, and churches had become the central sources of justice, security, and wealth in each community. The continued health of the Church was therefore an important consideration in maintaining the health of the empire.

Because the administration of the Catholic Church was based on the administration of the Roman Empire, Charlemagne's government also resembled Roman imperial government. In Charlemagne's new civil government, governors or barons were responsible for large regions, with counts ruling over subdivisions of those regions, called counties. Legal assessors were assigned to counties and villages to make sure that abuses did not occur. To further ensure the enforcement of the realm's laws, royal envoys were sent out in pairs, directly from the emperor, to check up on the government of each county.
Flying buttresses on Reims Cathedral

Detailed view of flying buttresses on the south side of Reims Cathedral in France. Flying buttresses, featured in Gothic architecture, are the exposed arches that support the roofs of medieval cathedrals. Flying buttresses allowed medieval architects to build taller churches, thus opening up space for larger, decorated windows. Construction on Reims Cathedral began around 1211 and took about 80 years.
Feudalism

For safety and for defense, people in the Middle Ages formed small communities around a central lord or master. Most people lived on a manor, which consisted of the castle, the church, the village, and the surrounding farm land. These manors were isolated, with occasional visits from peddlers, pilgrims on their way to the Crusades, or soldiers from other fiefdoms.

In this "feudal" system, the king awarded land grants or "fiefs" to his most important nobles, his barons, and his bishops, in return for their contribution of soldiers for the king's armies. At the lowest echelon of society were the peasants, also called "serfs" or "villeins." In exchange for living and working on his land, known as the "demesne," the lord offered his peasants protection.

13th-century joust from the Codex Manesse

[Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg; Codex Manesse, fol. 52r: Herr Walther von Klingen, ca. 1305–1340 CE]

Knights were warriors who served the complex hierarchy of vassals, lords, and kings ruling medieval society. They often honed their skills, as well as provided entertainment, in tournaments pitting them against each other in combat.
Feudalism and the Three Orders (Visual)

The Three Orders
Relationships and Responsibilities

Those who prayed
Included members of the clergy, from cardinals and bishops to monks and village priests. They were responsible for the spiritual well-being of all Christians in Europe.

Those who fought
Were the kings, dukes, the lesser nobility, and knights. Each member of this order except for the king had a military obligation to his overlord and was also supposed to protect those who worked and lived on his land.

Those who worked
Were peasant farmers, laborers, and craftsmen. They were by far the most numerous and were obligated to work for the Lord who owned the land they lived on.