



25 December 800

The Coronation of Charlemagne

The Beginning of the European Idea

‘Let peace, concord and unanimity reign among all Christian people...for without peace we cannot please God...’

Charlemagne, *The Admonitio* (789)

On Christmas day, 800, Charles I, king of the Franks (r.768-814) and of the Lombards, attended the Mass celebrated in St Peter's, Rome by Pope Leo III. The king, who would be called Charlemagne (from his title of *Carolus Magnus*, Charles the Great), knew Leo well and took a dim view of him. The previous year the Pope had fled to Charlemagne's court at Paderborn seeking protection from the Roman nobility who had rebelled against Leo's rule. The purpose of the king's visit to Rome, where he had been since November, was to restore the Church's government in the city and the associated papal territories. Leo was then able, on 23 December, to purge himself publicly of the charges of misgovernment laid against him. The monarch who now knelt in prayer inside the basilica was a man with an imposing physique and, although he himself could barely write, would inspire the first mediaeval biography of a layman. The historian Einhard in his *Life of Charles the Great* describes a man of unusual height with a broad and strong body. The hair was now grey but full and 'the eyes were lively and rather large.' 'Seated or standing he thus made a dignified and stately impression even though he had a thick, short neck and a belly that protruded somewhat; but this was hidden by the good proportions of the rest of his figure.' He also 'spoke with a higher voice than one would have expected of someone of his build.'

The Mass of the day, attended by the Roman nobility, was always going to be a special event, but as Charlemagne rose from prayer Leo placed a gold circlet in token of an imperial crown on his head and then abased himself before the new emperor in the Roman and Byzantine manner which showed recognition of a protector. The assembled Romans acclaimed the coronation: 'To Charles Augustus, crowned by God, the great and peace-giving Emperor of the Romans, life and victory!' They had special cause to praise the ruler who had subdued the Lombards, their traditional enemies, in the north of Italy. However, the coronation was controversial and it was doubtful whether Leo had the legal right to do it. Einhard's *Life* claims that Charlemagne was taken by surprise. This is unlikely since he had prepared himself by choosing to wear the ancient Roman tunic and *chlamys* or short mantle. These garments symbolized his acceptance of the revived imperial title. Nor was the idea a novelty, for the scholars who had flocked to Charlemagne's court at Aachen had long since campaigned for just such a recognition of their patron.

Ancient Rome lived on in the very fabric of Aachen since the palace Charlemagne had built there was constructed with stones transported from the remains of Roman buildings at Trier and Cologne. Nevertheless a certain bashful humility was appropriate on 25 December. Charlemagne knew the day's events would anger the Greek emperors of Byzantium who considered themselves the sole true heirs to the ancient Roman title, although their claim was weakened by the fact that in 800 they happened to be ruled by a woman, Empress Irene. Leo's action would later be used by the papacy to prove that it had the authority to transfer the Roman *imperium* from the Byzantines to a western ruler. But on that Christmas Day his action was simply the result of his subservience to Frankish interests. Pragmatically, he also needed a powerful protector at a time when the Greek empire was renewing its claim to rule in Sicily and southern Italy. Charlemagne's probable view of his coronation was that it was a personal compliment by a pliant Pope. It's significant that thirteen years later he decided that he himself, not the Pope, should crown his son Louis as co-

emperor and eventual successor and that the coronation would take place in Aachen and not in Rome. The Frankish view that they were a chosen race and the heirs to past empires, Persian, Greek and Roman, was deeply held. Popes might be politically convenient but it was God, speaking through the acclamation of the congregated Frankish nobility, who made emperors. Charlemagne knew that his new imperial status would require diplomatic handling. Only the deposition of Irene stopped him from having to take seriously his advisers' suggestion that he should marry her as an act of East-West reconciliation – a risky measure, even for Charlemagne, since she had blinded her own son to secure her throne.

The origins of the Frankish kingdom lay in the region of the Meuse-Moselle on the borders of modern France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. Peppin III, Charlemagne's father, had deposed the Merovingian dynasty and assumed kingship in 751. Charlemagne's own victories created Europe's first Christian superstate: only the British Isles, Southern Italy and the kingdom of Asturias in Spain lay beyond its borders. At its core was Charlemagne's central achievement: the union of the west German tribes of the Saxons, the Alemanni, the Bavarians and the Thuringians. Bavaria, conquered in 778, was already Christian but the Saxons, occupying what is now lower Saxony and Westphalia, were pagans. A succession of rebellions by the Saxons from 778 onwards tested the Frankish government and church structure imposed on them at the Diet of Paderborn. Charlemagne had to take his army into battle eighteen times before the Saxons were finally subjugated by 804 and his programme of mass executions and enforced conversions in the territory was an early mediaeval novelty which, even at the time, aroused criticism. He also conquered the Avar kingdom (covering the area of modern Hungary and upper Austria) in three major campaigns and established the Elbe as a frontier against the northern Slavs. His only military defeat came in 778 when he invaded Spain and had to retreat after failing to take Saragossa.

Charlemagne's empire was divided into counties governed by royal counts who were themselves controlled by itinerant royal commissioners. He divided the same territory into twenty-one archbishoprics and charged the Church with the task of educating his subjects. Annual assemblies of ecclesiastics and counts, meeting at court, discussed legal, military and ecclesiastical affairs which, given the missionary and expansionist nature of the empire, were scarcely distinguishable from each other. At these assemblies Charlemagne issued his legislative and administrative decrees. Some of these were recorded in written form as 'capitularies' but many of his judgements were oral and conformed to the Solomonic ideal of early mediaeval kingship with its emphasis on the king's personal declaration of what was right and wrong. Charlemagne's throne at Aachen stood, just like the throne of Solomon, on top of a flight of steps and his numerous concubines and mistresses, who supplemented his five successive wives, also harked back to Solomon's domestic arrangements. Charlemagne was an itinerant monarch until old age forced him to settle in Aachen. The summer months were spent on military campaigning and during the winter he moved between his various palaces demonstrating his personal kingly authority to as many of his subjects as possible.

Charlemagne lends his name to the Carolingian Renaissance which is particularly

associated with his palace and court at Aachen. His encouragement of scholars to establish themselves there led to the revival in Europe of the notion of the ruler as a patron of learning. The court library he established contained the texts of ancient classical writers as well as those written by the early fathers of the Church and his court academy was set up to educate young Frankish knights. One script (the Carolingian minuscule), one Church liturgy and one legal code were imposed across his empire: Carolingian civilization was based on the idea that correct thought required accurate expression. The concern with imperial unity and effective lordship flowed from Charlemagne's own view of God as supreme and Christ as a powerful lord. This, ostentatiously orthodox, Christianity was in conscious opposition to a world in which magic and paganism still captivated the minds of the simple and illiterate.

Carolingian unity was always an ideal rather than an enforceable reality. This was an empire without a permanent civil service, a standing army or a navy. Attempts at building up a money-based economy failed and the dominance of agrarian culture would prepare the way for feudal institutions. It's unsurprising that Charlemagne's empire disintegrated after his death. The reign of his unfortunate son Louis the Pious dissolved in the quarrels between the sons of Louis' first and second marriage. But the Treaty of Verdun in 843, agreed between Charlemagne's grandsons, is a momentous event in European history. This threefold division of the old imperial territories of Charlemagne created an East Francia, which comprised the German territories, and a West Francia based on the French ones. In the middle was a separate kingdom extending from what is now Belgium and Holland, through Burgundy, and down to northern Italy. This was the kingdom ruled by Lothar who had succeeded to the imperial title which no longer had a universal significance. The history of France and Germany therefore starts at Verdun as does the Franco-German contest over who should control the land of that middle kingdom. Over a millennium later (1916) Verdun would also be the site of the terrible and prolonged battle caused by that same contest.

Ninth-century Europe, plagued by Vikings from the north and by Saracens to the south, threatened a return to the crushing of states by migrating barbarians. Recovery came in the tenth century with the leadership of the Ottonian dynasty of Saxon princes. In 955 at the battle of Lech, near Augsburg, Otto I defeated a great Hungarian force and then started a vigorous brutal push to conquer the Slavic peoples beyond the Elbe. This inaugurated a German policy of eastern expansion which lasted, intermittently, until 1945. Otto had been chosen as their king by the five German tribes consisting of the Bavarians, eastern Franks, Swabians and Thuringians as well as his own Saxons. His selection, consecration and enthronement as king of the Germans took place, with an appropriate and Carolingian inevitability, at Aachen in 936. On 2 February 962, Otto was crowned emperor by the Pope in Rome. The date signifies the official start of the Holy Roman Empire and from then on the imperial title was especially associated with the German territories. The Saxon bishops, abbots, soldiers and nobles who re-established an imperial order that was sacred and Roman in the tenth and eleventh centuries did so in conscious homage to the Carolingian ideal. Charlemagne's campaign to convert their pagan ancestors at the point of a sword had born remarkable fruit.