A. Charlemagne’s Military

Charlemagne looked the part of a powerful Frankish king. Standing at 6 feet 3 inches tall, Charlemagne was a large and heavy man with bright blue eyes and a dramatic mustache. This gave him the appearance of someone who demanded respect and loyalty. When Charlemagne finally became king over all of the Frankish lands he had two main goals: he wanted to unite all of western Europe under his power; and he wanted to convert all of Europe to Christianity. Charlemagne, who saw himself as a warrior of Christ, accomplished both goals primarily through war.

Charlemagne’s army was large and well-trained, with cavalry and foot soldiers drilled to move in formation and respond quickly to commands sounded by trumpet. Many historians identify the Franks’ adoption of the stirrup (invented in Asia in the 100s BCE) as a key event that improved the effectiveness of mounted soldiers. Every year within Charlemagne’s empire, there was a roundup of troops at the Spring Assembly. Based on the size of the realm, the potential existed for an army of 100,000 men, but only a few thousand were used at a time. Each soldier was expected to bring their own weapons and armor, and enough food to last up to three months. A huge caravan of wagons loaded with supplies followed the army.

The methods that he and his powerful army used to convert people to Christianity were often brutal and cruel. To defeated opponents, he made them convert to Christianity and swear loyalty to him as their new ruler. He fought against the pagan (non-Christian) Saxon people in what is today northern Germany for over 30 years in an attempt to impose his rule and religion over them. The Saxons resisted becoming subjects of the Franks and followers of Christianity, and resisted mightily. In 782 after a Saxon revolt Charlemagne rounded up 4,500 Saxon leaders and had them all beheaded in one day, this event has come to be known as the “Bloody Verdict of Verden.”

During his 46-year reign, he would conduct over 50 campaigns throughout Europe. Fighting against non-Christians in Germany and Italy allowed Charlemagne to gain vast new territories. To gain favor with the Pope he would share plundered wealth and land. Fighting against the Muslims in Spain Charlemagne was less successful and was only able to keep a small area of land under his control there. By the end of his reign Charlemagne was able to nearly double the territory of his kingdom and was more powerful than any ruler western Europe had seen since the time of the Roman Empire.

D. Charlemagne’s Government

Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, ruled the Frankish kingdom from 768-814. Under his command, the Franks grew to greater power than ever before. At its height, Charlemagne’s empire controlled most of what is today western Europe. This was a region of different tribes, and ethnic groups; for this empire to survive there needed to be a strong form of government.

Charlemagne turned to the Roman Catholic Church for a model of orderly government. Due to the lack of stable government the Roman Catholic Church was the only Europe-wide social structure remaining after the fall of the Roman Empire. Churches had become central to life in Europe as sources of justice, security, and wealth in each community. Thus the Church filled an important role in the daily lives of ordinary people. Charlemagne used the Church to help him govern his vast empire due to its experience. The emperor also created strong ties with the Pope and the Church which helped to give the empire unity under a common religion. People were taught in church to obey Charlemagne, which only added to his power.

Charlemagne combined the image of a warrior leader of the Frankish people with the idea of divine kingship; the idea that he was God’s chosen leader on Earth. Charlemagne’s government resembled the government of the Roman Empire because he created a centralized system of authority with all power centered on him. This enabled him to manage the far-flung areas of his empire through government officials that answered directly to him. He divided his empire into 350 counties or manors managed by a count who was directly responsible to the king. Ideally these counties were supposed to be self-sufficient. The counts had three main jobs: to maintain a small army loyal to the emperor; to collect taxes; and to settle disputes between commoners. These counts could not pass down their job to their son/s, but were named, promoted, and removed by Charlemagne at will.

To ensure that the people were loyal and unlikely to rebel, Charlemagne employed minstrels and spies. Minstrels (musicians) wandered from manor to manor performing songs that glorified Charlemagne and his empire. These performances served to encourage subjects to be loyal and to make people who lived far away from the palace fell that they were still a part of Charlemagne’s empire. Charlemagne was actively informed of what was happening in his vast territory through an army of spies and informants. These informants would act as the king’s eyes and ears so that he was informed of what his counts were doing. He was particularly concerned if anyone was stealing tax money (corruption), and if his orders were being carried out. By being aware of any problems Charlemagne could act quickly to prevent any revolts or disloyalty from his subjects.

C. Charlemagne and the Church

Charlemagne saw himself as God’s chosen ruler over his kingdom. As such he took his role in his religion very seriously. He saw that the Roman Catholic Church was an important tool in managing his empire and worked through-out his rule to ensure that the church was working properly. He felt an obligation to defend his faith from heresy, which are beliefs different from official Church beliefs. He also worked to rid the Church of corruption and extend the domains of Christendom. He sought to make church practices the same by issuing royal decrees ordering that priests were able to properly lead services and perform rituals, and that they lived moral or holy lives. His ultimate goal was to have educated priests who could properly lead church services, understand the prayers, and teach to the people about Christianity. The Roman Catholic Church would also serve as a model of how Charlemagne governed his empire.

In the year 800 Charlemagne marched his army into Italy to defeat an army of Lombards, who were not Christian, that were threatening the pope. After defeating yet another army, Charlemagne donated a large area of land for the pope to manage. Later, on Christmas Day the pope, being very grateful and wanting further protection, would crown Charlemagne Holy Roman Emperor whose power was blessed by the Church. Charlemagne was somewhat annoyed by this crowning—the Pope’s actions implied that the Pope gave Charlemagne his power. Charlemagne believed that his power came from God alone.

Additionally, both Charlemagne and the Pope knew that only the emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire at Constantinople could claim to be the Holy Roman Emperor. This ceremony would further split the eastern and western factions of Christianity. As Holy Roman Emperor, he would dedicate himself to further strengthen the church and bringing learning to his empire. Later kings would seek the Pope’s approval or at least try to avoid the Pope’s disproval, and would also claim that God chose them to rule.

B. Charlemagne and Culture

Charlemagne was the dominant political and military figure of his day. However, he also had an appreciation for culture and the arts. Although he learned to read and write, Charlemagne still needed educated men around him to help manage the empire. By Charlemagne’s time most of Europe’s libraries had been destroyed during periods of war and chaos. Though the Byzantines and Muslims had vast libraries they were far away. Thus few people in Europe could read and write. This led to a loss of knowledge from ancient Greece and Rome, as well as a lack of higher level thought and creativity that led to new inventions.

Charlemagne decided to make his palace at Aachen into a new center for learning. The emperor began a school to train the children of royal officials to work in the church or palace. Subjects taught included grammar, logic, and mathematics. Using the money he had obtained from conquering and looting foreign lands, Charlemagne was able to pay scholars from all over Europe to come teach and study at his school. His greatest scholar was a man named Alcuin from England.

Some ways that Charlemagne tried to improve culture and learning in his empire was to have his scholars create a new form of writing. Older handwritings were too varied and some writing techniques made texts unreadable. This new form of handwriting or calligraphy made it easier for people to read what was written. Charlemagne was also concerned with increasing the number of books available to scholars. So he encouraged scholars and monks to copy existing books. This process focused on important Christian texts, but Charlemagne was happy to have even pagan Greek and Roman texts copied. Though this process was done by hand and was very time-consuming it allowed European scholars to preserve knowledge for future generations.

E. Charlemagne and Non-Christians

Throughout his reign, Charlemagne attempted to spread Christianity to pagan lands. He accomplished this through war and violence. When he conquered a non-Christian settlement he would demand that the people immediately convert to Christianity or face destruction. If groups switched back to their old religion, Charlemagne would return with his army and punish the people. Through his efforts Christianity became a much more widespread and followed religion in Europe. Christianity remains the dominant religion in Europe to this day.

Another group of people that lived in Charlemagne’s lands were the Jews. Jews had lived in Europe since Roman times when many of them were forced to move after failed revolts. They were generally tolerated by the Romans after that, but when the Roman Empire fell they lost many rights. Charlemagne granted Jews certain rights such as the ability to own land in France. Jews also had their own courts and the freedom to travel freely, trade, and worship their religion. Many rulers at this time would grant Jews rights as long as they paid extra taxes.

Jewish culture and economy thrived, and many Jews specialized in handicrafts, finance, and navigation. Thus, some Jews created extensive trade networks organized around families and relatives in far-away places. Jewish trade networks also thrived because they were free to move around Muslim lands, while Christians were not. Christian rulers sometimes relied on these Jewish merchants as advisers on international politics and trade.

Jewish culture thrived in Europe along the Rhine and Rhone Rivers, and around the Mediterranean Sea. Great Jewish communities in the Byzantine Empire and Rome continued to develop. New Jewish communities arose in Spires, Worms, Paris, and Narbonne. In those places a new type of Jewish culture arose which combined the languages of Hebrew and Old German, into a language called Yiddish. They also changed some daily customs and ways of life such as worshipping in synagogues (Jewish places or worship). Jewish scholars created religious writings, law histories, and poetry. Many of these texts are influential in Jewish and Christian learning to this day. These communities were never secure though, as rulers could demand heavy taxes or force them to leave, in some cases they could be attacked.

F. After Charlemagne

As Charlemagne grew old, his empire began to unravel. Enemies were hammering away at his borders. From the east came a people called the Magyars. From North Africa and Spain, Muslims attacked. And from Scandinavia came a group of fearless warriors known as Vikings. But all of these were to be someone else’s problem. In 814, after 48 years ruling his empire, Charlemagne died at the age of 72.

Charlemagne’s son, Charles the Pious, lacked his father’s cunning and strength. Long before he dies in 840, his sons, Lothair, Charles, and Louis, were fighting for control of the empire. For a while the empire was divided among them. But their kingdoms came apart as landowners became more independent. As Europe broke up into smaller kingdoms, people looked to local lords or nobles to defend them. With the Magyars, Muslims, and Vikings at their borders, people needed protection.

After Charlemagne’s death, the Vikings found Europe falling apart once more, and ready for the taking. The Vikings sailed out from Scandinavia into coastal villages throughout Europe, plundering, killing, burning, and taking prisoners. By the time a local army would arrive, the Vikings were gone, back out to sea. In time, they grew bolder and would establish camps from which they could launch raids into the countryside.

The combined pressure from outside invaders with that of Frankish rulers fighting each other and their lords led to the collapse of the Charlemagne’s empire. The model of how a king should act, how they should interact with the Pope, and his military, government, and cultural reforms set the standard by which later kings would evaluate themselves.