

I Charlemagne and Christian Culture

Christopher Dawson treated the imperial coronation as an important stage in the emergence of "Western Christendom."

FROM *The Making of Europe* BY CHRISTOPHER DAWSON

THE HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE of the Carolingian age far transcends its material achievement. The unwieldy Empire of Charles the Great did not long survive the death of its founder, and it never really attained the economic and social organisation of a civilised state. But, for all that, it marks the first emergence of the European culture from the twilight of pre-natal existence into the consciousness of active life. Hitherto the barbarians had lived passively on the capital which they had inherited from the civilisation which they had plundered; now they began to co-operate with it in a creative social activity. The centre of mediaeval civilisation was not to be on the shores of the Mediterranean, but in the northern lands between the Loire and the Weser which were the heart of the Frankish dominions. This was the formative centre of the new culture, and it was there that the new conditions which were to govern the history of mediaeval culture find their origin. The ideal of the mediaeval Empire, the political position of the Papacy, the German hegemony in Italy and the expansion of Germany towards the East, the fundamental institutions of mediaeval society both in Church and State, and the incorporation of the classical tradition in mediaeval culture—all have their basis in the history of the Carolingian period.

The essential feature of the new culture was its religious character. While the Merovingian state had been predominantly secular, the Carolingian Empire was a theocratic power—the political expression of a religious unity. This change in the character of the monarchy is shown by the actual circumstances of the installation of the new dynasty; for Pepin obtained

Papal authority for the setting aside of the old royal house and was anointed king in the year 752 by St. Boniface according to the religious coronation rite which had grown up under ecclesiastical influence in Anglo-Saxon England and Visigothic Spain, but which had hitherto been unknown among the Franks. Thus the legitimation of the rule of the Carolingian house sealed the alliance between the Frankish monarchy and the Papacy which St. Boniface had done so much to bring about, and henceforward the Frankish monarchy was the recognised champion and protector of the Holy See. The Papacy had already been alienated from the Byzantine Empire by the Iconoclastic policy of the Isaurian emperors, and the extinction of the last survival of the Byzantine power at Ravenna by the Lombards in 751 forced the Pope to look for support elsewhere. In 754 Stephen II visited Pepin in his own dominions, and obtained from him a treaty which secured to the Papacy the Exarchate of Ravenna and the former Byzantine possessions in Italy, together with the duchies of Spoleto and Benevento. In return the Pope reconsecrated Pepin as King of the Franks, and also conferred on him the dignity of Patrician of the Romans. This was an epoch-making event, for it marked not only the foundation of the Papal State which was to endure until 1870, but also the protectorate of the Carolingians in Italy, and the beginning of their imperial mission as the leaders and organisers of Western Christendom.

The Carolingians were naturally fitted to undertake this mission since they were themselves the representatives of both sides of the European tradition. They traced their descent from Gallo-Roman bishops and saints as well as from Frankish warriors, and they combined the warlike prowess of a Charles Martel with a vein of religious idealism, which shows itself in Carloman's renunciation of his kingdom in order to enter the cloister, and Pepin's sincere devotion to the cause of the Church. But it is in Pepin's successor, Charles the Great, that both these elements find simultaneous expression. He was above all a soldier with a talent for war and military enterprise which made him the greatest conqueror of his time. But in spite of his ruthlessness and unscrupulous ambition he was no mere barbaric warrior; his policy was inspired by ideals and universal aims. His conquests were not only the fulfillment of the traditional Frankish policy of military expansion; they were also crusades for the protection and unity of Christendom. By his destruction of the Lombard Kingdom he freed the Papacy from the menace which had threatened its independence for two hundred years and brought Italy into the Frankish Empire. The long drawn out struggle with the Saxons was due to his determination to put an end to the last remains of Germanic heathenism as well as of Saxon independence. His conquest of the Avars in 793-794 destroyed the Asiatic robber state which had terrorised the whole of Eastern Europe, and at the same time restored Christianity in the Danube provinces, while his war with the Saracens and his establishment of the Spanish March were the beginning of the Christian reaction to the victorious expansion of Islam. In the course of thirty years of incessant warfare he had extended the frontiers of the Frankish monarchy as far as the

Elbe, the Mediterranean and the Lower Danube, and had united Western Christendom in a great imperial state.

The coronation of Charles as Roman Emperor and the restoration of the Western Empire in the year 800 marked the final stage in the reorganisation of Western Christendom and completed the union between the Frankish monarchy and the Roman Church which had been begun by the work of Boniface and Pepin.

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As King, Charles had stood outside the Roman tradition; as Emperor, he entered into a definite juridical relationship with the head of the Church. His power was still as formidable as ever, but it was no longer indefinite and incalculable. Moreover, the idea of the Roman Empire was still indispensable to the Church. It was synonymous with Christian civilisation, while the rule of the barbarians was so identified with heathenism and war that the Liturgy couples together, "the enemies of the Roman name and the foes of the Catholic Faith." Consequently, it is by no means improbable that the Papacy as the representation of Roman universalism should have taken the initiative in the restoration of the Empire in 800, as it did once more seventy-five years later in the case of Charles the Bald.

However this may be, it is certain that the restoration of the Roman Empire, or rather the foundation of the new mediaeval Empire, had a religious and symbolic value which far outweighed its immediate importance from a political point of view. Charles used it, no doubt, as a diplomatic counter in his negotiations with the Eastern Empire, but his coronation made no difference in his life or government. He never attempted to ape the ways of a Roman or Byzantine Caesar, as did Otto III and other mediaeval emperors, but remained a thorough Frank, in dress and manners as well as in his political ideals. He even imperilled his whole work of imperial unification by dividing his dominions among his heirs in 806 according to the old Frankish custom, instead of following the Roman principle of indivisible political sovereignty; and the same tradition reasserted itself among his successors and proved fatal to the unity and continuity of the Carolingian Empire.

It was the churchmen and the men of letters, rather than the princes and statesmen, who cherished the ideal of the Holy Roman Empire. To them it meant the end of the centuries of barbarism and a return to civilised order. To Einhard, Charles is a new Augustus, and he views his achievement in the light of the Augustan ideal; while Modoin, the Bishop of Auxerre, writes of his age as the Renaissance of classical antiquity:

rursus in antiquos mutataque saecula mores;
aurea Roma iterum renovata renascitur orbe.

[*The changing ages turn to ancient ways;
golden Rome is born again, the world renewed—B. T.*]

In fact, though the learning of the Carolingian age may seem a poor thing to set by the side of that of the great Italian humanists, it was none the less a genuine Renaissance which had no less importance for the development of European culture than the more brilliant movement of the fifteenth century. The gathering together of the scattered elements of the classical and patristic traditions and their reorganisation as the basis of a new culture was the greatest of all the achievements of the Carolingian age.

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Thus the culture that we regard as characteristically Western and European was confined in the main within the limits of the former Carolingian Empire, and found its centre in the old Frankish territories of Northern France and Western Germany. In the tenth century it was, as we have seen, hard pressed on every side and even tended to contract its frontiers. But the eleventh century saw the turn of the tide and the rapid expansion of this central continental culture in all directions. In the West the Norman Conquest took England out of the sphere of the Nordic culture that had threatened for two centuries to absorb it, and incorporated it into the continental society; in the North and East it gradually dominated the Western Slavs and penetrated Scandinavia by its cultural influence; while in the South it embarked with crusading energy on the great task of the reconquest of the Mediterranean from the power of Islam.

In this way the peoples of the Frankish Empire imposed their social hegemony and their ideals of culture on all the surrounding peoples, so that the Carolingian unity may be regarded without exaggeration as the foundation and starting-point of the whole development of mediaeval Western civilisation. It is true that the Carolingian Empire had long lost its unity, and France and Germany were becoming more and more conscious of their national differences. Nevertheless they both looked back to the same Carolingian tradition, and their culture was compounded of the same elements, though the proportions were different. They were still in essence the Western and East Frankish realms, though, like brothers who take after different sides of their family, they were often more conscious of their difference than of their resemblance. In both cases, however, the cultural leadership lay with the intermediate regions—the territories of the Empire that were most Latinised, and those in France where the Germanic element was strongest: Northern France, Lorraine and Burgundy, Flanders and the Rhineland. Above all, it was Normandy, where the Nordic and Latin elements stood in sharpest contrast and most immediate contact, that was the leader of the movement of expansion.

It was this middle territory, reaching from the Loire to the Rhine, that was the true homeland of mediaeval culture and the source of its creative and characteristic achievements. It was the cradle of Gothic architecture, of the great mediaeval schools, of the movement of monastic and ecclesiastical

reform and of the crusading ideal. It was the centre of the typical development of the feudal state, of the North European communal movement and of the institution of knighthood. It was here that a complete synthesis was finally achieved between the Germanic North and the spiritual order of the Church and the traditions of the Latin culture.