Introduction

Paderborn, Summer of 799

In July 799 Charles, king of the Franks, had set up camp at Paderborn, in the heart of vanquished Saxony, and it was bustling with bricklayers and carpenters. Convoys of carts loaded with bricks and mortar were arriving every day along dirt tracks. Other materials were brought by waterways on barges and scows. The king was building a city in the forest and marshland, which was to be Christendom’s bridgehead among the newly converted pagans. Its palace and a basilica were to rival those of Aachen. But at this particular moment, the king had little time to think about his building plans or even his military ambitions. He was anxiously waiting for the return of his son Charles, who had pressed on as far as the Elbe to negotiate with the Slavic tribes that had settled on the banks of that great river, and then to add to his troubles, Pope Leo III suddenly arrived in Paderborn. Leo’s arrival had been preceded by news of the insurrection in Rome, during which his enemies had captured him, gouged out his eyes, and cut off his tongue. Then Providence had miraculously intervened to assist his escape.\footnote{1}

When he did arrive, the pope turned out to be something of a disappointment, because it was immediately obvious that he was still in possession of his eyes and his tongue. Leo III explained that they had mirac-
ulously grown back again, and out of politeness his listeners showed no sign of disbelief. King Charles found it difficult to give much credence to this man who had too often been the subject of scandal. Charles had sent him an odd letter at the time of his election to the papal throne, exhorting him to behave well and not to give grounds for suspicion. Nevertheless, Leo III was the pope, and the king of the Franks, whom everyone considered the true protector of the Church in the West, had to do everything he could to ensure that the papacy received the respect it deserved. Although he had little desire to do so, he was obliged to go to Rome, quell the revolt, and reestablish the pope’s authority in the eyes of the world, as long as there was not too much evidence to prove the rumors about the pope.

During talks between the pope and the king in that hot and dusty Paderborn summer, an exciting idea was first suggested or at least fully fleshed out: when Charles reached Rome, the inhabitants, who in spite of everything were still the people of the Eternal City, were to acclaim him as emperor, just as in previous times they had acclaimed Augustus and Constantine. Thus the Frankish king would become the successor to the Roman emperors on a par with the basileus who ruled in Constantinople, and no one could object to his meddling in the affairs of the Eternal City or indeed of Christendom as a whole. It is possible that the prospect of such a scenario had been circulating for some time both at the royal court in Aachen and at the papal court, which at the time resided at the palace and church of St. John Lateran. But it wasn’t discussed seriously until the Paderborn meeting in the summer of 799, although the matter was still so delicate that no written record of the discussions survives.

In the same brief period a poet who remains anonymous, in spite of repeated efforts by historians to identify him as one or other of the men of learning at the court, undertook the composition of a short poem in Latin hexameters, which copyists were to call Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa. The poetry is perfectly adequate, but we are not so interested here in its literary merits as in the anonymous writer’s political intent. In
this contemporary account, the pope clearly asserts that he must be 
defended from his enemies and that Charles is the only sovereign in the 
world capable of reestablishing the majesty of the Church. Precisely for 
this reason, it is right that Christians all over Western Europe should 
acknowledge him as their leader to an extent that is not justified by his 
kingly title alone. The poet, who was evidently privy to the negotiations 
that were taking place, perceived the Frankish king as the successor to 
the Roman emperors, ruling in Aachen as though it were a second 
Rome. He hailed Charles as rex pater Europae, “the king and father of 
Europe.”

Now that the peoples of our continent have found a way out from the 
dead end into which they had been driven by nationalist ideologies and 
seem to be moving toward an integrated and supranational Europe, the 
image conjured up by the Paderborn poet appears surprisingly topical. 
After all, it was Charlemagne who first created a single political structure 
in Europe that stretched from Hamburg to Benevento, and from Vienna 
to Barcelona, with its trade centered on the Rhine and the seaports of 
the North Sea. It was profoundly different from the Roman Empire, 
which had been centered on the Mediterranean, and whose richest and 
most civilized regions had been in the Middle East. To quote perhaps 
the greatest historians of the century that has just come to a close, while 
“Europe appeared when the Roman Empire fell” (Marc Bloch), it was 
“the empire of Charlemagne that first gave it the form that we call 
Europe” (Lucien Febvre).4

Of course, every generation of historians constructs its own image of 
the past, and there was not always so much agreement on the parallel 
between Charlemagne’s empire and the birth of a European entity. A 
quarter of a century ago an important conference in Spoleto, attended 
by leading specialists on the early Middle Ages, posed the question in its 
title: “The Birth of Europe and Carolingian Europe: A Link Yet to Be 
Demonstrated.” Opinions differed a great deal, and some were diamet-
rically opposed, but on the whole the case for Charlemagne as the father 
of Europe emerged somewhat the worse for wear or, at the very least,
less indisputable than it had seemed a generation earlier to Bloch and
Febvre.5

Today the pendulum has swung back in the other direction, and there
is again wide support for this interpretation, thanks in part to a veritable
revolution in research fields, particularly the economic one. Until a few
years ago the military victories achieved on all horizons and the program
of cultural renewal promoted by Charlemagne seemed like the glittering
surface of a profoundly backward society and a stagnant economy. Today
a wide variety of indicators lead us to perceive the Carolingian age as the
basis for the demographic and economic recovery that became clear
around 1000 A.D. and from which modern Europe was born with all its
overwhelming vitality. The current state of academic research, irrespec-
tive of the superficial enthusiasm for everything European in the year
2000, allows us to revive the term used twelve centuries ago by the
anonymous poet and speak of Charlemagne as a father of Europe.
Charlemagne is firmly identified in the European imagination with the title of emperor that was conferred on him at St. Peter’s on Christmas morning of 800. In reality, he only carried this title for the last fourteen years of his long life. Thirty-two years earlier he had become the king of the Franks, a title he kept even after gaining the imperial one, which, as we shall see, was intrinsically different and did not cancel out the kingship he inherited from his father, Pepin the Short, in September 768. The poet who many years after his death was to write the *Chanson de Roland* would refer to him as “Carles li reis, nostre emperere magnes” and was clearly still well aware of this twin identity.¹

What did it mean to be king of the Franks toward the end of the eighth century? From the very beginning the Franks occupied an important position among the Germanic people who three or four centuries before Charles crossed the Rhine in small groups and settled there, first as allies and then as overlords in the territory of the Roman Empire of the West. Strictly speaking, they were not even a people but a confederation of tribes from the Rhine basin—Bructerii, Cattuarii, and Camavi—who spoke the same Germanic dialect, practiced the same
religious cults, and followed the same warrior leaders. Thus they ended up adopting a collective name but one that initially constituted an extremely weak form of identity. Originally Frank simply meant “courageous person” and later “free man.”

Sidonius Apollinaris, a Roman, a Christian bishop, and a classical poet, describes the Franks he came to know in Gaul during the fifth century. His words evoke a physical type that must have appeared decidedly exotic to a Mediterranean reader, but he did not hide his admiration for the courage of these barbarians:

Their red hair falls from the top of their heads, while their necks are shaved at the back. Their eyes are clear, transparent, and of a grayish blue color. Instead of a beard, they have narrow mustaches which they curl with a comb. Their preferred amusements are throwing axes at targets, spinning their shields, and running and catching their spears after having thrown them. From childhood they have an intense passion for warfare. If they are overcome by superior enemy numbers or adverse terrain, they yield only to death and never to fear. Sidonius concludes, “They could even have tamed monsters.” While waiting for the monsters, these barbarians took control of Gaul, which in the impoverished Western Europe of the late imperial period was perhaps the most prosperous and populous province—probably more than Spain and certainly more than Italy. They immediately demonstrated that they had no intention of sharing it with anyone else: the Visigoths, who had previously settled in the south of the country—in the current Provence and Languedoc—were defeated and driven over the Pyrenees, and the Burgundians, who had settled in the Rhône Valley, had to acknowledge the superiority of the Franks and submit to their king. Moreover, it was only with great difficulty that first Byzantine generals and then Lombard kings managed to prevent the new lords of Gaul from spreading over the Alps into Italy.

The Romans, or rather the Romano-Gauls of Celtic or Italic blood who populated the Gallic provinces and were by then all Latin speakers,
were allowed to stay as long as they acknowledged the supremacy of the Frankish king. This was true not only of peasants and slaves but also of rich land-owning and senatorial families and the Catholic clergy. In any case, the Franks could never have populated the whole of Gaul and replaced the many millions of Romans who lived there, given that there were no more than two hundred thousand of them, including women and children, and possibly even fewer. These warriors, whose superhuman stature contemporaries found so striking, only settled in great numbers with their families in the northern part of the country along the course of the Rhine, the Meuse, and the Moselle. That was the only region in which they outnumbered the Romans, and indeed, the linguistic border between Latin and Germanic Europe passes through that region to this day.

To the south, in the land where wine, corn, and oil replaced beer, meat, and butter, the Frankish presence gradually grew less marked, and the Romano-Gallic population more easily absorbed the conquerors. The former imposed their customs and dialect on the latter, leading to the birth of modern French. Around Paris, already one of the favorite residences of Frankish kings, no Germanic dialect ever replaced the Romance tongue. The Franks were almost never seen south of the Loire, and there the Romano-Gallic population continued to live as in the past, although they obeyed the barbarian kings in the north and paid their taxes to them.

THE FRANKISH MONARCHY

The Merovingian Kingdoms

The Frankish kingdom in Gaul was in reality a collection of kingdoms. Although the various tribes that made up the Frankish people did briefly submit to one king, the cruel and energetic Clovis, with whom they converted to Christianity, that unity did not last very long. The custom of subdividing the king’s inheritance among all the male sons led to the formation of many kingdoms that rejoined and divided again according
to circumstance. The most easterly kingdom between the Moselle and the Rhine, the only one in which the Franks were the majority and the language in general use was of Germanic origin, was called the “kingdom of the East,” Austrasia or Austria. Because of its geographic position, it was able to impose its authority on the peoples of southern Germany, and it incorporated the duchies of the Thuringians, *Alamanni*, and Bavarians into the Frankish area of influence.

Further west, beyond the immense forest of Ardennes that covered part of modern Belgium, the kingdoms of Paris, Orléans, and Soissons came together over time to form a single kingdom, whose main language was Romance and whose southern border was marked by the Loire. The Franks called this Neustria, which probably meant the “kingdom of the West.” Beyond the Vosges to the southeast and between the Rhône and the Alps, the kingdom of Burgundy formed a separate political entity, although the Burgundians were soon to be forced to renounce their own king and acknowledge the overlordship of the Frankish king of Neustria. Further south where few ethnic Franks were to be found, Provence continued to be ruled by a Roman official with the title of patrician, even though he was now accountable to one or other of the Frankish kings and no longer to Constantinople. Finally, in the southwest where the Romano-Gaulish population lived alongside a restive Basque minority, Aquitaine tended to slip out of Frankish control, in spite of being governed by a duke rather than an independent king.

The most energetic monarchs in the Frankish ruling family, which was called the Merovingian dynasty after their ancestor Merovech (or Meroveus), occasionally managed to reunite the different kingdoms, only to have them divided up again on their death. The majority of these kings, who initially governed Gaul as supposed appointees of the distant Byzantine emperor, had more of a priestly than a warrior role. The symbol of their kingship was their long hair, hence the term *reges criniti* (long-haired kings). According to ancient beliefs, these flowing, almost unmanly, locks represented the king’s magical powers and his
ability to guarantee prosperity for his people and fertility for women and the land. Following their conversion to Christianity, this pagan belief in the sacredness of kingly office gradually began to dissolve, and the priest-kings of the Merovingian dynasty found that their authority was disintegrating.

Mayors of the Palace

The real power in the two principal kingdoms of Austrasia and Neustria passed into the hands of men who could not boast sacred charisma but knew how to lead the Franks to victory in war. These mayors of the palace were effectively ministers or even viceroys, who governed officially on behalf of the kings, while tending to supplant them and drive them into a purely ceremonial role. Originally there was a mayor in each kingdom, but in 688 Pepin, who had grown extremely powerful and held the office in Austrasia, managed to impose his authority on Neustria as well, after he defeated the Neustrian magnates in battle. From that time on, even when there were still two kings, the Frankish people were effectively ruled by a single mayor of the palace. This Pepin of Herstal, as historians refer to him, was the great-grandfather of Charlemagne.

At this stage, the family later known as Carolingian was referred to as Pepinids or Arnulfings, descended from the alliance between two prominent landowners in Austrasia, Pepin the Old and Arnulf, who both died in 640. To be more precise, Pepin’s daughter married Arnulf’s son before Arnulf, who was eventually to be venerated as a saint, became the bishop of Metz. This union produced Pepin of Herstal, the sole mayor for the Frankish kingdoms. On his death in 714, the office was passed on to his son Charles, known as Martel after Mars because of his fame as a warrior. The position initially inherited by Charles Martel, Charlemagne’s grandfather, was far from stable. He was forced to defend it by force of arms against several rebellions. He was able to strengthen it by leading the Franks to victory over the most terrible threat they had ever confronted in their history, that of the Muslims who had just destroyed the
Visigothic kingdom of Spain and were attempting to establish themselves north of the Pyrenees in southern Gaul.

In 732 at Poitiers, Charles Martel defeated an Arab force that had pushed forward as far as the Loire, spreading terror as it went. In the years that followed, the Franks reconquered southern France by the sword and took their revenge on any local leaders in Aquitaine and Burgundy who were suspected of having welcomed the Muslims in order to free themselves from the hated Frankish yoke. Today, historians tend to play down the significance of the battle of Poitiers, pointing out that the purpose of the Arab force defeated by Charles Martel was not to conquer the Frankish kingdom but simply to pillage the wealthy monastery of St-Martin of Tours. However, the Franks and Christendom in general believed that the expulsion of the Moors from Gaul had earned lasting glory for the mayor of the palace. He was proclaimed a new Joshua, after the king of Israel who reconquered the Promised Land for his people.

On his death in 741, Charles Martel left his sons, Pepin the Short and Carloman, complete and uncontested authority over a kingdom that was now well established. Childeric III was still formally king, but this puppet, who was appointed by the mayor of the palace, no longer had any role at all, not even a ceremonial one. Contemporary chroniclers regularly referred to Charles as a prince (princeps) who reigned over the Frankish people. His sons were even more assertive, and Carloman spoke of “his kingdom” (regno meo) in the first of his edicts. It is not surprising then that when he abdicated his powers in order to withdraw to a monastery, his brother, Pepin, who now found himself alone in the government of the kingdom, decided that the time had come formally to claim the title of king of the Franks that in practice was already his.

Before giving an account of the anointment of Pepin in 751, which sanctioned the dynastic change in the leadership of the Frankish people, we need to consider an event that occurred in the preceding year and passed almost unnoticed by people at the time. Indeed no chronicler
took the trouble to record it, but it represents the real starting point for our story.

THE BIRTH OF CHARLEMAGNE

Shortly after Charles Martel's death, Pepin's wife, Bertrada, who came from one of the powerful land-owning families of Austrasia that were traditionally allied to the Pepinids, gave birth to their first child, a boy who took the name of the grandfather who had just died. The name Charles signified masculinity and virility in the Frankish tongue, and the boy was also destined to take his grandfather's place. We do not know where he was born, and it would in any case be an entirely meaningless piece of information. For the delivery, Bertrada could have been installed in any of the many residences that Pepin owned in the countryside between the Loire and the Rhine, and only nationalist obtuseness can explain the tremendous efforts made by French and German scholars to demonstrate that Charles was born within the current borders of either France or Germany. It would be more important for our purposes to know exactly when the future emperor was born, but strangely we cannot even establish this question with any certainty.

Charles's biographer, Einhard, wrote that Charles died in January 814 "in the seventy-second year of his life and the forty-seventh of his reign." If we subtract these figures, we come up with the date of 742. The Royal Annals, the most official source we have, are somewhat less precise, although they attempt to provide further reference points. They date Charles's death as "in about the seventy-first year of his life, the forty-third from the conquest of Italy, the forty-seventh of his reign and fourteenth from when he was called emperor and Augustus." The chronicler must have suspected that his figures did not agree, particularly in relation to the conquest of Italy, and so he put in the "about" to advise us not to expect anything too accurate. The inscription on his tomb at Aachen is even vaguer and simply defines him as septuagenarius (i.e., a seventy-year-old). This doesn’t mean that he was exactly seventy, and it seems to have
been sufficient to know that he had reached that threshold, give or take a year or two. No one cared about the precise figure.

This is a fine example of what Marc Bloch has defined as the “supreme indifference to time” that is to be found in the medieval mindset. Perhaps it was not so much indifference to time as an extreme difficulty in measuring it and mastering it, even when there was a clear desire to do so. No less noteworthy is the fact that none of the three sources just mentioned bothered to provide the date of birth, an item of information that today we would consider essential. We are assisted here by another contemporary manuscript, containing a calendar that identifies the emperor’s birthday as 2 April. If we put this conflicting information together and decide to place more trust in Einhard than the middleheaded keeper of the Royal Annals, we come up with 2 April 742, which is generally considered in textbooks to be Charlemagne’s date of birth. I will also use this point of reference, even though some German historians have suggested a much later date, albeit without too much evidence.7

A precise date is not that important, just as it wasn’t important for the people of the time, who rarely kept a record of their own ages and, unlike us, were not in the habit of celebrating their birthdays. Time, then, was measured out by the circular rhythm of the agrarian and liturgical year. The habit of numbering years from the birth of Christ had only recently spread to the West, but it was a calculation exclusively used by chroniclers and notaries, and, as we have just seen, even they had difficulty in keeping track of the years with any precision. With so many children being born and so many dying, parents did not take the trouble to record the exact year of birth, and so adults had only an approximate idea of their own age. This is demonstrated by trial records in which witnesses always declare their age in round and approximate figures, such as fifty years old or sixty-five years old. In order to understand them, we will have to start to think like them; so let us forget any idea of establishing Charles’s exact date of birth and be content with knowing that he was born around 742 and died at just over seventy years of age.
So far we have concerned ourselves with events preceding the birth of Charlemagne in terms of what we have been able to establish from today’s viewpoint. The history taught to the son of the mayor of the palace was certainly very different. At the time, people interpreted the history of the Franks through a worldview that we would consider mythical, but one that to them undoubtedly appeared as perfectly authentic and credible. Charlemagne’s contemporaries, who knew less about the origins of their own people than modern historians do, were convinced that the Franks descended from none other than the Trojans. This legend was written down for the first time in a chronicle attributed to Fredegarius and written around 660, almost a century before the birth of Charlemagne. After that, we find it circulating in such varying forms that it seems likely to have been not a scholarly invention but a popular tradition that spread among the barbarian warriors as soon as they came into contact with the Roman world.

The Trojan origin had a precise comparative or even competitive significance in relation to Rome. While the Romans descended from Priam through Aeneas, who according to Virgil fled to Latium, the Franks were convinced that they descended from another Trojan prince, Francio, who gave them his name and led them through lengthy migrations to Europe, where they settled along the banks of the Rhine. They were therefore blood relations of the Romans, and this kinship gave them the authority to rule over Gaul and perhaps further afield, given that their relations, the sons of Aeneas, had grown soft and were no longer capable of commanding respect. This idea probably had more currency among the clergy than the ordinary people, but it was without doubt instilled in Charlemagne from a very early age, and we should remember that this child was later to wear the imperial crown.

Paradoxically, the idea of ancestral kinship between Franks and Romans was not so far from the truth. The high degree of integration
between the two peoples during the period of the Roman Empire had been forgotten by the time of Charlemagne and is only now being rediscovered by historians and archaeologists. The settlement of Franks in Gaul did not occur through the mass migration of a barbarian horde that fought its way through the *limes* or fortified frontier along the Rhine. Back in the third and fourth centuries, groups of Frankish warriors at the service of the empire were peacefully settled in Roman territory. Indeed, the national identity was formed during this phase under the profound influence of Roman culture. The funeral stele of a legionary who died in the eastern province of Pannonia in the third century bears this inscription, “Francus ego cives, romanus miles in armis,” which we could translate as “I belong to the Frankish people, but under arms I am a Roman soldier.” That man very probably didn’t know about his supposed Trojan origins, but he would not have been surprised at the idea.

*The Chosen People*

The history of the Franks contained another dimension that strengthened their claim to be successors to the Romans. This was their privileged relationship with the Church of Rome. The alliance dated back to the conversion of King Clovis, who was baptized in Gaul on Christmas Day. We are not entirely certain of the year, but it might have been 496. The other Germanic peoples had been converted to Christianity by missionaries trained under Greek influence and embraced the new religion in its Arian form, which at the time was widespread in the eastern Roman Empire but almost completely unknown in the western empire. Unlike Catholics, Arians believed in a Christ who was more human than divine and inferior in nature to the Father. By avoiding the complications of the dogma of the Trinity, this interpretation of Christianity was perhaps easier to assimilate for peoples who lacked any theological or philosophical tradition. The result was that, following conversion, Goths, Vandals, and Lombards had trouble in coming to an understanding with the Roman Catholics, from whom they were divided not
only by doctrine but also by rival ecclesiastical hierarchies. In the eyes of the Roman world, these barbarians were Christians, but heretical ones, and therefore little better than pagans, or possibly even worse.

When the Franks reached Gaul, they were polytheists and their conversion to Christianity took place under the supervision of the local bishopric. They therefore accepted the new religion in accordance with the Catholic confession from the very beginning. This accident of history was to produce beneficial results for the future of the Frankish kingdom: Romano-Gaulish bishops and senators found it easier to cooperate with the Frankish kings, as they considered them protectors and not tyrants. Hence these kings were able to establish relatively efficient administrative and fiscal regimes, at least in relation to the other Romano-barbarian kingdoms. In the eyes of the Roman population, theirs was a legitimate power. They had not usurped but governed by the grace of God, in the same manner as the Roman emperors before them, since the times of Constantine.

Above all, the Catholicism of the Franks allowed them to form good relations with the pope, the spiritual head of the Catholic Church. The successors to Saint Peter were in theory subjects of the Roman emperor who continued to rule from distant Byzantium, and they were supposed to rely on him for defense from their enemies, such as the Lombards, savage barbarians of the Arian faith, who in 568 moved into Italy and for some time posed a real threat to Rome. Yet the emperor was far away, and what is more, he prayed in Greek and followed a liturgy that with the passing generations had become increasingly alien to the Latin Church.

For all these reasons, the popes soon realized the usefulness of securing a protector who was less distant and more familiar. Given that the only real candidate was the king of the Franks, at the papal court they started to proclaim that his was the new chosen people. In a letter written by Pope Stephen II to Pepin in 756, Saint Peter himself addresses the Franks, assuring them that the Creator considers them a most special people destined for a mission that would be as great as that of the
A few years later, the newly elected pope Paul I did not notify the emperor of the East of this election in accordance with tradition from time immemorial but instead informed Pepin. To the Franks he said, “now has the name of your people been raised up above all the other nations, and the kingdom of the Franks shines brightly before the Lord.” He went on to quote the New Testament: “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people.”

The message did not fall on deaf ears: the most important legislative text of the Frankish people, the law of the Salian Franks (Salic law or lex Salica), was drawn up on the instructions of King Pepin in 763–64, when Charlemagne was twenty, and its prologue spoke of the “illustrious people of the Franks, founded by God, courageous in war and constant in peace, converted to the Catholic faith and untouched by any heresy even when still barbarian.” The Franks here considered themselves not only on a par with but manifestly superior to the Romans whom they defeated by feat of arms and who were after all the descendants of Nero and Diocletian, persecutors of the true faith: “This is the people who overthrew by force the heavy yoke imposed by the Romans, and, having undergone baptism, they covered with gold and jewels the bodies of the martyred saints that the Romans had burned, decapitated, and had torn apart by beasts.”

The child who learned about the history of his people in his father’s palace could not have perceived the Franks as a collection of tribes without any original cohesiveness, gradually transformed into a nation through the activities of some enterprising warrior leaders in the service of the Roman rulers, as is argued by historians today. For him they were the glorious progeny of the Trojans, as noble as the Romans and, like them, destined one day to govern the world because they were the people chosen by God to defend the Christian faith. In all their undertakings, the hand of Providence would be upon them and protect them because they were Christ’s people, just as the Jews had been God’s people in the times of the Old Testament: “Glory to Christ, who loves the Franks,” proclaims the prologue to the Salic law. The sovereign of this
new Israel was no longer just a new Joshua as Charles Martel had been, but a new Moses, a new David, and a new Solomon. This understanding was reflected in the official declarations of the pope in Rome and not only in the flattery of fawning Gaulish bishops. If we are to understand the course of Charles's life once he took over the leadership of the Franks from his father, we should remember that at Pepin’s court these were not opinions but incontrovertible facts.

*The Frankish Tradition*

For Pepin's son, the history of his own family was also something very different from the dry genealogy of potentates that I have just outlined in the preceding pages. Paul the Deacon (Paulus diaconus), the Lombard intellectual who lived at the court of Charlemagne, recalled Charles telling an extraordinary story of one of the founders of his dynasty, Saint Arnulf, the bishop of Metz. According to the emperor, Arnulf had thrown a ring into the Moselle as a sign of penitence, and when he asked for forgiveness of his sins, he declared that he would not consider himself to have been absolved until the ring was returned to his possession. Many years later, a cook found the ring in the stomach of a fish he was cooking for the bishop, thus demonstrating that God had forgiven Arnulf's sins and returned his pledge.

The story of the ring thrown into the water and found again in a fish's belly is clearly a folkloric motif that appears in many fairy tales. For anyone who believes in the extremely ancient origins of fables, it is fascinating to discover that Charlemagne would tell a story of this kind not as a fairy tale but as a true story relating to a member of his own family. Yet we should not overlook the ideological implications of the story, which in all probability was handed down orally in the home of the mayors of the palace, so that Charles must have heard it during his childhood. The saintliness of Arnulf, extolled by the miracle, was destined to reverberate down the generations to his great-grandchildren, convincing them that they belonged to a charismatic line. It is no surprise that
Paul the Deacon told this story in his *History of the Bishops of Metz*, and that he added that the benediction of Arnulf entitled his descendants to reign over the Franks. After all, the work had been commissioned by Charles himself for political reasons.

By the time of Charles’s childhood, official propaganda was already stressing that the Pepinid line was destined by the will of God to reign over the Franks. Pepin’s uncle Childebrand and later his son Nibelung, who continued the work of Fredegarius’s chronicle, implied in their writings that the victories of Charles Martel and his son conformed to the plans of Providence. In other words, the chosen people were led by a chosen dynasty, and it was appropriate that at the very time that Charles was listening at the age of seven or eight to the story of the ring, which he was to remember in his old age, his father, Pepin, had decided that it was no longer sufficient to rule the Franks as the mayor of the palace and the time had come to proclaim himself king.

**THE PEPINIDS IN POWER**

*Pepin’s Coup d’État*

Pepin’s plan was founded on the pope, who since the time of Clovis’s baptism was the natural ally of the Franks. Although at that time the bishop of Rome did not enjoy the absolute power that he now wields within the Catholic Church, his political and moral authority was widely recognized throughout Latin Christendom, and he was best placed to legitimize what, if we were to be uncharitable, was ultimately the usurpation of a Christian king. Before explicitly putting forward his claim to the throne, Pepin therefore wrote to Pope Zacharias asking whether it was right that in the case of the Franks the name of king should apply to someone who had no effective power. The pope, basing himself on the authority of Saint Augustine and Gregory the Great, replied that the title of king should be held by the person who actually exercised power.

Strengthened by this opinion and by the approval that his family had
enjoyed among Frankish nobles for more than a century, Pepin had himself proclaimed king in November 751 by an assembly of magnates of the kingdom, and he was anointed with holy oil by the bishops of Gaul, while the legitimate king was sent off to finish his days in the silence of a monastery. Pope Zacharias died shortly afterward, and his successor, Stephen, who was threatened by the Lombards bearing down on Rome, got the new king of the Franks to promise that he would intervene militarily in Italy to put an end to that threat once and for all. In exchange, Stephen went to Gaul in 754 to repeat the ceremony of anointing the king. This was the first time that a pope had traveled to that distant country, and it made an enormous impression. It provided the final seal of approval for the new dynasty, particularly as the pope wished personally to anoint not only Pepin, but also his sons, who by then were Charles and his younger brother, Carloman.

At this meeting, a solemn pact of friendship was sworn between the king and the pope, which their successors renewed to establish a lasting alliance between Rome and the kingdom of the Franks. On this occasion, the pope gave Pepin and his sons the title of patrician of the Romans, whose exact legal significance remains somewhat obscure but was supposed in some way to persuade the Frankish king that he had become the protector of the papal see. The title of patrician, without any geographic specification, had been traditionally conferred by the emperor of the East and belonged to the Byzantine exarch of Ravenna, but by that time Ravenna had fallen to the Lombards and there were no more exarchs in Italy. Even though the title of patrician of the Romans would probably have sounded barbaric to Byzantine ears, by conferring it on the king of the Franks, the pope undoubtedly intended to encourage him to take up the defense of the Eternal City in place of the emperor of the East.

In order to strengthen the alliance between Stephen and Pepin, a relationship of spiritual guardianship was established. It is not clear exactly why the pope referred to the king after 754 as the father of his godchildren and to Charles and Carloman as his spiritual children, given
that both were too old to be baptized then. It is more probable that the pope was their godfather at confirmation. This relationship between parent and godparent was considered so important that successive popes did everything they could to renew it. When Charlemagne's sister, Gisla, was born in 757, King Pepin sent the new pope, Paul I, the sheet in which the baby had been wrapped for her baptism. The pope received it in a solemn ritual and immediately wrote to the king that from then on he considered himself to be the girl's godfather, just as though he had held her personally at the baptismal font. Clearly the Pepinids, who after the triumphs of Charles Martel we can start to call Carolingians, enjoyed a privileged position in their relationship with the pope and therefore an unchallenged preeminence in the Frankish world and in the whole of western Christendom.

The Sacred Royal Line

The ritual anointment introduced by Pepin in 751 represented an extraordinary ideological innovation, given that until that time the Frankish kings had risen to the throne by acclamation, and if consensus was also accompanied by mystical charisma, this was generally due to the royal blood flowing in their veins. By having himself anointed with holy oil, Pepin brought into use the ritual recorded in the Old Testament, in which it is told that Saul took control of the kingdom by being anointed by the prophet Samuel. After him, David and Solomon took the throne by being anointed. In the Christian world, a ritual of this kind had already been introduced by the Visigothic kings of Spain, but by this time their kingdom had fallen to the Arabs. Pepin was not just the first Frankish king but also the only Christian king of his times to introduce this sacred symbolism into his coronation, although the kings of England lost little time in following his example.

Anointment was not simply a matter of attributing an air of holiness to the king, it also conferred upon him an almost priestly quality, as with the kings of Israel. Pepin could therefore rightfully claim to have been
“anointed by the Lord” and assert his own authority over the Church as well as his kingdom, in a manner that he could not have done as a temporal lord who had only been crowned. For his part, Pope Paul I did not hesitate to speak of him as a new David chosen by God to protect the Christian people, and he applied to him the words of the psalmist, “I have found David my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him.”

Thus the Franks were again ruled by a priest-king, as in the time of the reges criniti or long-haired kings, but this time the sacred charisma was wholly Christian and not pagan as in the case of the Merovingians. It did not preclude the use of the sword, which the king girded by divine will, and which he was required to draw in defense of the faith. Charlemagne was soon to demonstrate the immense advantage that the king of the Franks could gain from this kind of religious legitimacy.