

Carolingian War and Violence and the Course of Medieval History

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The Frankish noble dynasty of the eighth and ninth centuries, the Carolingians—named for Charles “The Hammer” Martel, the “founding father” of the Carolingians—supplanted the Merovingian “long-haired kings” as the ruling Frankish power.¹ The full extent of the impressive Carolingian power during the reign of Charlemagne was made possible by an overall grand strategy whose genesis lay in a fundamental propensity toward prompt violence in settling matters and meting out justice to ensure order. A martial political structure, put in place by Pepin of Herstal (who might be considered a “proto-Carolingian”), Martel, and his son Pepin the Short, was also a factor.² Although most historians consider Charlemagne’s reign successful, the state of affairs after his death was precarious. With a focus on what Dutton calls the “Carolingian civilization,” this paper explores the nature and the impact of war and violence as determinative factors in Carolingian formation and duration, primarily using the assemblage of primary sources collated by Dutton and supplemented by notable secondary sources.³ Moreover, this paper will examine the extent to which the violent and warring “Carolingian world”—the appellation preferred by Costambey, Innes, and MacLean—influenced the direction of the Middle Ages and the development of

¹ Paul Dutton, ed. *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 4.

² Bernard S. Bachrach, *Early Carolingian Warfare: Prelude to Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2001), 1.

³ Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, xiii-iv.

Europe.⁴ The Carolingian civilization was relatively short-lived. War and violence were central core components during its entire period, despite contemporaries considering it a Christian empire (a theocratic monarchy under Charlemagne and Louis the Pious).

From the inception of the so-called Carolingian civilization, violence was conventional, just, and proper—even institutionalized and necessary.⁵ Bachrach makes a persuasive argument that the Carolingians implemented a long-term grand strategy that developed Carolingian military and political assets to define and ensconce the Carolingian polity among its neighbors and in the Western world based on the use of just war and violence.⁶ This grand strategy began with Pepin of Herstal. It was strengthened by Martel and Pepin the Short before Charlemagne skillfully brought it to bear in its complete application in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. The early Carolingians did not necessarily possess any forethought about how such a grand strategy would affect the course of future events. However, it appears they did conscientiously work toward constructing and enhancing the Kingdom of the Franks through a mission they believed to be endowed by God. The Franks were confident they were God's chosen people; therefore, war and violence at the hands of the Carolingians to carry out God's divine justice in the name of expanding the *Regnum Francorum* was perfectly reasonable.⁷ The early

⁴ Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean, *The Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9-15.

⁵ Janet L. Nelson, "Carolingian Violence and the Ritualization of Ninth-century Warfare," in *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West*, ed. Guy Halsall (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), 92-3.

⁶ Bachrach, *Early Carolingian Warfare*, 1.

⁷ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks, Book I*, accessed July 20, 2020,

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/gregory-hist.asp#bo>.

Carolingians used war, violence, and diplomatic and economic resources over three generations to execute this long-term mission.⁸ Charlemagne reaped the benefits of this grand Carolingian strategy and the course of medieval European history was substantially shaped by it. In contemporary hagiographies, biographies, and poetry, violence and war were often front and center in Carolingian civilization. An early example during the genesis period of the Carolingians exists in correspondence from Pope Gregory II to Charles Martel, December 722, shortly after Martel had been victorious in a Frankish Civil War and became the official Mayor of the Palace. In the correspondence, Pope Gregory II recommended the Bishop Boniface to Martel and entreated Martel to defend Boniface “against every enemy.”⁹ The very fact that the Pope requested that Martel—already renowned for his martial prowess and battlefield leadership acumen—provide physical protection of Boniface, tacitly by way of violence if necessary, was telling. Violence was acceptable, even preferable under certain circumstances. To be sure, this predilection for violence did not begin with the Carolingians; the Merovingians—whom the Carolingians had initially served and eventually succeeded—had already demonstrated that violence and war were not only acceptable but often preferable. Merovingian ruler Clovis, for example, regularly opted for violence to instill and keep order, as recorded by Gregory of Tours.¹⁰ The Merovingians also used violence to ensure that insolence to God received just retribution. This tradition for the Franks had existed as early as the fifth and sixth centuries. Thus, Martel and subsequent Carolingians merely adopted and

⁸ Bachrach, *Early Carolingian Warfare*, 1-5.

⁹ “Pope Gregory II Recommends Boniface to Charles Martel, December 722,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 5-6.

¹⁰ Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks, Book II*, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/gregory-hist.asp#book2>.

perfected what the Merovingians had already practiced for centuries. Contemporaries held the following to be great virtues: martial skills, military prowess, the ability to win battles, the skills and propensity to execute violent acts when necessary, and the ability to command armies.

Charles Martel—b. 688, d. 741—was the exemplar. Chroniclers even compared him to Joshua of the Hebrew Old Testament. Martel, like Joshua, could ostensibly count on the infinite, supernatural power of God to assist him in crushing the enemies of God and carrying out the grand Carolingian strategy. To be sure, violence and war came naturally to Martel. His nickname “Martellus”—or “the Hammer”—was derived from a disposition composed of fierceness, bellicosity, and courage, even from an early age.¹¹ Descended from noble ancestors—the Arnulfing and Pippinid clans of the 7th century—Martel came to power because the Merovingian kings had given great power to the Pippinid Mayors of the Palace. The latter had essentially become the *de facto* rulers of Frankish Austrasia. In a violent Frankish Civil War lasting from 715 to 718, Martel led a number of battles, the Battle of Amblève prominent among them, and gained significantly in reputation as a warrior and battlefield commander. He became Mayor of the Palace of both Austrasia and neighboring Neustria, the western realm of the Kingdom of the Franks. He then launched a long period of military expansion, engaging in war and violence with great alacrity, aplomb, and aptitude until he died in 741. Such a protracted period of war and violence arguably led to an increasingly embedded martial ethos in Carolingian society and political structure and set the stage for Charlemagne’s successful future reign.¹²

Martel is best known for his victory in 732 against

¹¹ Paul Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 1.

¹² Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel*, 146.

the invading forces of the Umayyad Caliphate, led by Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi, at the Battle of Poitiers in west-central Francia. In control of Spain since 711, the Umayyad Caliphate had executed military campaigns that pushed up into southern Francia across the Pyrenees Mountains and now threatened central Francia. The measure of the true impact of this battle is sometimes a contested issue among historians. Some historians—such as Edward Gibbon—argue that the battle was highly influential in the course of events for Europe and indeed the Carolingian Dynasty itself. For Gibbon, if the battle had turned out differently, the outcome was clear. In classic Gibbon style, he wrote: “Perhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet.”¹³ For Einhard, Charlemagne’s chronicler, and not exactly known for impartiality, Martel’s victory at Poitiers was anything but inconsequential. Einhard wrote that Martel “so completely defeated the Saracens, who were attempting to occupy Gaul, in two great battles – the first in Aquitaine near the city of Poitiers and the second near Narbonne on the River Berne – that he forced them to fall back into Spain.”¹⁴

For other historians, the Battle of Poitiers had little effect and is often downplayed. The general assertion is that the Umayyad incursion was nothing more than a minor raid for booty and would not have necessarily resulted in a permanent foothold; moreover, the Muslims

¹³ Edward Gibbon, “Chapter 52,” in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, (1776), end of para. 7 “Expedition and Victories of Abderame, A.D. 731,” accessed July 23, 2020, <https://www.ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume2/chap52.htm>.

¹⁴ Einhard, “The Life of Charlemagne,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader; Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 28.

were overextended and spent.¹⁵ These points are contestable. If one is to properly assess the true and full implications of the battle's outcome for the course of the Middle Ages, one must consider any reasonable alternative effects. With the hindsight of Martel's victory at the Battle of Poitiers, it is easy to say that the battle was not particularly of consequence; however, there are indeed different potential outcomes to consider had the fortunes of Martel been reversed at the Battle of Poitiers.¹⁶

Gibbon's interpretation is hyperbolic, to be sure, and it is important not to overstate the implications of the battle's outcome. Indeed, it is an arduous and problematic argument that the Muslims could, or would, have conquered substantially more European territory than they did historically, or that Shari'a law would have been imposed on Britons and Anglo-Saxons by conquering Muslims in Britain. Nonetheless, the significance of the battle should not be understated either. There is a compelling argument to be made that had the Umayyad Caliphate's army been victorious, other raids might well have followed in Francia, sapping Francia of wealth, order, and morale. What is more, it is reasonable to posit that Martel and his forces would have been weakened. Weakened or damaged Frankish forces under Martel would have left him—if he even managed to personally *survive* a defeat—exposed to future Umayyad raids and challenges from others seeking power within the Frankish realm. At the very least, his reputation may well have suffered.

¹⁵ Roger Collins, *The Arab Conquest of Spain: 710–797* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1989), 87-91; see Alessandro Barbero, *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), 10; see also Tomaz Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2002), 99-100.

¹⁶ Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Anchor Books, A Division of Random House, 2001), 167.

Furthermore, it is possible he would not have been able to assume power in the aftermath of Merovingian King Theuderic IV's death in 737.

Regardless of whether the purpose of the Umayyad incursion into central Francia was to extend the Islamic realm and acquire Frankish territory or to gain spoils (although there are references in Muslim literature to those who died at the battle as martyrs for Islam), a victory by Islamic forces in 732 at the Battle of Poitiers could have led to a dramatically different course for the developing Carolingian civilization.¹⁷ It is most often injudicious to point to singular events throughout history as "turning points;" the course of history is reliant on a myriad of interconnected factors and circumstances. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that an alternate outcome at the Battle of Poitiers would have led to a future with no Charlemagne (or a different one than history remembers), no Einhard (or one that history does not remember), no Alcuin rising to prominence, no Carolingian scriptoria, no Saxon conversion to Christianity, no Carolingian Renaissance, no Louis the Pious, no Lothar, no Charles the Bald, no Louis the German, and no Treaty of Verdun. With any of these players or events removed or even diminished, it is difficult to see how the course of medieval Europe would not have been entirely different. The *Reconquista* of Al-Andalus should also, at the very least, be questioned as one considers the implications of an Umayyad victory at Poitiers. It is difficult to see how Martel's defeat of Islamic forces at Poitiers after a century of constant, aggressive, and unchecked Islamic expansion could be anything but critical in the scheme of medieval history.

As we know, history unfolded with Martel winning

¹⁷ William E. Watson, "The Battle of Tours-Poitiers Revisited," *Providence: Studies in Western Civilization* (Providence College Press), 1, no. 2 (1993): 51–68; see also Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 2001, 167.

at Poitiers, personally surviving, and ruling Francia. In 737, when King Theuderic IV died, Martel decided against propping up another Merovingian king; he assumed power and ruled until his death.¹⁸ When Martel died in 741, his son Pepin the Short replaced him as Mayor of the Palace. Pepin and his brother Carloman cooperatively ruled the Frankish realm. In 751, after having requested the Pope's blessing in deposing the titular Merovingian King Childeric, Pepin the Short was "chosen king and was anointed by the hand of Archbishop Boniface."¹⁹ Pepin sent Childeric to a monastery and ordered him tonsured. The cutting of his hair was likely seen as symbolic of stripping him of his Merovingian kingship since the Merovingians prided themselves on their long hair and uncut beards. In 754, Pope Stephen authenticated Pepin the Short as king "in the name of the holy Trinity together with his sons Charles and Carloman."²⁰

Pepin's rule should not be minimized. He skillfully used war and violence, and through well-executed and aggressive plans, he executed the Carolingian grand strategy and expanded the Carolingian domain beyond that under Martel. Pepin expanded west into Maine, east into Saxony, and southwest into Aquitaine and Septimania. He put down challenges in Bavaria, Auxerre, and Burgundy.²¹ For having received papal assistance in the deposition of Childeric and coronation of Pepin as king, Pepin waged war on the Lombards in 755-756. Pepin's war on the

¹⁸ Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 12.

¹⁹ "The Elevation of Pepin the Short," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 12; see also Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," 28.

²⁰ "The Reanointing of Pepin in 754," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 13.

²¹ Judith Herrin, *The Formation of Christendom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 390.

Lombards was the first time there was Frankish military intervention south of the Alps.²² Einhard tells us that Pepin waged war against Aquitaine for “nine straight years.”²³ In 768, Pepin contracted edema and died.

After Pepin’s death, Charlemagne and his brother Carloman assumed joint control of Francia. The two brothers had an uneasy relationship exacerbated by Carloman’s aides, some of whom advocated for armed conflict to resolve differences.²⁴ In 769, Charlemagne believed it was essential to finish the war with Aquitaine that Pepin the Short had started. Charlemagne requested assistance from Carloman, but Carloman failed to provide any help. Despite Carloman withholding aid, Charlemagne still executed the operation vigorously to a victorious conclusion.²⁵ Thus, from very early on, after Charlemagne had taken on his role, he wasted no time in displaying an aggressive posture, using war and violence—or the threat of it—to expand Carolingian power and realm.

The brothers’ strained relationship was short-lived. Carloman suffered an untimely death in 771. At least some part of the success of Charlemagne’s long and fruitful rule can be attributed, in part, to Carloman’s death. While it was undoubtedly inopportune for Carloman, it may well have been a stroke of splendid fortune for Charlemagne; according to Einhard, the Franks were of one accord: Charlemagne became King of the Franks.²⁶ With no divided realm and no siblings to contest holdings, Charlemagne’s reign was not interrupted by the internecine conflicts and disruption that plagued future Carolingians.

²² Phillip Daileader, “Rise of the Carolingians: Lecture 13,” in *The Early Middle Ages*, The Great Courses audio lecture (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2004).

²³ Einhard, “The Life of Charlemagne,” 29.

²⁴ Einhard, 29.

²⁵ Einhard, 30.

²⁶ Einhard, 29.

On the contrary, reaping the benefits of the Carolingian grand strategy sown by the early Carolingians, Charlemagne was unhindered internally and proceeded to expand the Carolingian realm through war and violence, or the threat thereof, over the next four decades in ways not seen since the Roman Empire proper some three centuries before. During his first three decades in power, Charlemagne focused on waging violent campaigns. Skillfully using war and violence, Charlemagne kept order, defended his kingdom, expanded the empire, plundered neighbors, suppressed uprisings, and converted pagans in neighboring realms to Christianity. Einhard records that Charlemagne waged violent campaigns against the Lombards, the Bretons in Armorica, Islamic warriors in the Spanish March, the Beneventans, the Bavarians, the Slavs or Welatabi, the Avars or Huns, the Alemannians, the Bohemians, and the “Northmen” or Vikings.²⁷

Charlemagne’s longest-lasting war, from 772 to 804, was against the Saxons, who, according to Einhard, were the most “dreadful” of Charlemagne’s foes, were “naturally fierce, worshiped demons, and were opposed to [Christianity].”²⁸ The war was “waged with great vehemence by both sides” and was at once a brutal war of expansion and designed to force the Saxons to convert to Christianity.²⁹ The Frankish precedent of waging war for religious purposes would have profound repercussions for centuries to come.

In 782 at Verden, Charlemagne summarily executed 4,500 Saxon rebels in response to the decisive defeat of a troop of Franks by Saxons in the Süntel mountains.³⁰ After this event, Charlemagne issued the

²⁷ Einhard, “The Life of Charlemagne,” 30-7.

²⁸ Einhard, 31.

²⁹ Einhard, 31.

³⁰ Costambeys, et al., *Carolingian World*, 74.

first Saxon capitulary, forcefully compelling the Saxons to convert to Christianity or face death.³¹ Other capitularies upon the Saxons followed, with most containing Christian-based commandments or prohibitions, such as the proscription of ingesting meat during Lent, to be punished by death, or the decree that Saxons must tithe.³² There can be little doubt that such severe impositions on the Saxons played a significant role in Saxon resistance.³³

Charlemagne's imposition of Christian ways on the Saxons did not go unnoticed. One of his greatest aids-de-camp was the renowned scholar, deacon, and poet, Alcuin of York, who cautioned Charlemagne in 796 against forcing the Saxons to adhere to decrees of Christianity.³⁴ In his 796 letter, after first praising Charlemagne for converting many different peoples to Christianity, Alcuin advised caution for Charlemagne in imposing tithing upon the newly converted Saxons. Alcuin referred to the Saxons as "simple people who are beginners in the faith."³⁵ Using the early Christian apostles as models, he reminded Charlemagne that they never required their newly converted to remit tithes.

While Charlemagne was using war and violence with great proficiency to expand the Carolingian civilization, there were "dreadful fore-warnings"

³¹ Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 104-5.

³² "The Capitulary on the Saxon Territories," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 66-68.

³³ Costambeys et al., *Carolingian World*, 73-4; see McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 251-2.

³⁴ Alcuin of York, "Advice to the King on Converting the Saxons," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 125-7.

³⁵ Alcuin, "Advice to the King on Converting the Saxons," 125-7.

preceding great violence from “heathen men” who were wont to commit “rapine and slaughter” to the north of, and along the coast, of Francia.³⁶ Thus, it would not be long before the Carolingian civilization would also know the violent ways of these “heathen men.”³⁷ In 793, the so-called “Viking Age” was inaugurated with a slaughter of Christian monks at the remote and highly regarded Christian monastery of Lindisfarne off the coast of northeastern England. Sea-faring Scandinavian pirates, or Vikings, assaulted the wealthy monastery and its unarmed monastic denizens, killing most or enslaving them, and looting the great Christian site of its wealth. The Vikings did not destroy the Lindisfarne monastery; they were more interested in absconding with booty and slaves, but they did not hesitate to shed blood in the process. Christendom was shocked and appalled at the desecration of this holy Christian place.

Perhaps speaking for all of Western Christendom, Alcuin expressed his distress and devastation at the attack in a letter to the Bishop of Lindisfarne, Higbald, with whom Alcuin communicated regularly and who had somehow survived the sack of Lindisfarne. Alcuin responded to a letter from Bishop Higbald that had informed Alcuin of the violent attack. Alcuin wrote: “...your tragic sufferings daily bring me sorrow; since the pagans have desecrated God’s sanctuary, shed the blood of saints around the altar, laid waste the house of our hope and trampled the bodies of the saints like dung in the streets.”³⁸ Alcuin went on to console Higbald, writing that he would appeal to Charlemagne for assistance in tracking down and liberating those monks who had been

³⁶ Carruthers, Bob, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Illustrated and Annotated* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2011), 103.

³⁷ Carruthers, *Anglo-Saxon*, 103.

³⁸ Alcuin of York, “On the Sack of Lindisfarne by the Northmen in 793,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed., Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 124.

taken by the “pagans” as slaves.³⁹ Alcuin further expressed his great apprehension:

We and our fathers have now lived in this fair land for nearly three hundred and fifty years, and never before has such an atrocity been seen in Britain as we have now suffered at the hands of a pagan people. Such an attack was not thought possible. The church of St Cuthbert is spattered with the blood of the priests of God, stripped of all its furnishings, exposed to the plundering of pagans—a place more sacred than any in Britain... Who is not afraid at this?⁴⁰

Some historians have dismissed Alcuin’s words and descriptions by his contemporaries of Vikings and their violent ways as “mere monkish exaggeration;” however, attempts to balance understanding the Vikings have sometimes led to understating just how violent they were.⁴¹ Before establishing settlements, they invariably carried out extreme acts of brutality, slaughter, and subjugation; and, they engaged prolifically in slaving activities. The first documented Viking attack on Frankish territory occurred during the reign of Charlemagne in 799.⁴² As was generally his way, Charlemagne reacted swiftly and firmly; he responded to Viking violence with more violence. In 800, he began erecting formidable defensive fortifications at the mouths of his empire’s major rivers.⁴³ Charlemagne, his sons, and his grandsons all came to know too well of the

³⁹ Alcuin, “On the Sack of Lindisfarne,” 125.

⁴⁰ Stephen Allott, ed., *Alcuin of York, c. AD 732 to 804: His Life and Letters*, (York: William Sessions Ltd., 1974), 18.

⁴¹ John Haywood, *Northmen: The Viking Saga, AD 793-1241* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015), 11.

⁴² Haywood, *Northmen*, 98.

⁴³ Haywood, 99-100.

violent proclivities of the “Northmen.”

In 800, Charlemagne traveled to Rome because a violent Roman mob had attacked Pope Leo III. The attackers attempted to gouge out his eyes and cut off his tongue. Some of the Roman nobility had failed to get one of their own elected to the papal throne. In the aftermath, the violent mob accused Pope Leo of moral indiscretions. Although injured in the attack, Pope Leo escaped and somehow managed to retain his eyesight and keep his tongue. He fled north seeking protection from Charlemagne, who was engaged in fighting the Saxons. Charlemagne sent the pope back to Rome with an armed entourage who kept him under constant guard. Once he was free from other obligations, Charlemagne proceeded to Rome in support of the Pope.⁴⁴

On December 25, 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as Emperor. Many historians consider the event to be one of the most critical and notable events in medieval history.⁴⁵ Charlemagne was the first emperor in over three centuries. He had significantly expanded the Frankish realm through his Frankish forces’ highly effective war-and-violence capabilities, his often decisive and quick tendency to wield them, and his effective and charismatic leadership. The Carolingian grand strategy was on full display. The result was that the Carolingian Empire was recognized worldwide as a powerful political and military polity. Even in the latter years of Charlemagne’s reign, the Carolingian Empire had already made a lasting impact on the course of the Middle Ages.

⁴⁴ Einhard, “The Life of Charlemagne,” 44; Einhard, “Charlemagne and Pope Leo,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 62-65; see also Norman Cantor, *Civilization of the Middle Ages, A Completely Revised and Expanded Edition of Medieval History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 180-1.

⁴⁵ Herrin, *Formation of Christendom*, 446.

In 806, carrying on the earlier Merovingian and Carolingian traditions of splitting territories among male progeny, Charlemagne issued a public proclamation that he planned to divide his lands among his three sons: Charles, Pepin, and Louis. Charlemagne granted Charles, the eldest of the three, the central and vibrant section of Francia while giving the other two sons the outlying lands.⁴⁶ As it turned out, the proclamation was premature. Charlemagne's sons, Charles and Pepin, both died before Charlemagne. Only Louis outlived Charlemagne, who died in 814. Just before his death, Charlemagne summoned Louis to his palace and crowned him Emperor.⁴⁷

Although many were saddened and deeply lamented the death of Charlemagne—the ruler of Francia for two generations—some considered his death to be an opening for positive change.⁴⁸ They considered it a chance for a more just ruler and an opportunity to stamp out the corruption that had crept into Charlemagne's kingdom during his final years. Louis the Pious's supporters and other disenchanting Franks hoped Louis would be the one to bring about these positive reforms; however, during Louis's reign, there would be an extended period of fragmentation, decline, and civil war.⁴⁹ Moreover, the Northmen would make their brand of hit and-run war and violence even more well-known to Francia.

Considered by the biased Thegan to be “the best”

⁴⁶ “Charlemagne's Division of His Kingdoms,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed., Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 146-151.

⁴⁷ Thegan, “Thegan's Life of Louis,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 160-1.

⁴⁸ “Lament on Charlemagne's Death,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 157-8.

⁴⁹ Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 157.

of Charlemagne's sons, Louis early on developed a reputation of piety and fear of God.⁵⁰ Louis continued the Carolingian war-and violence tradition: in 816, he dispatched his army to the east to wage war on the Slavs. Louis proved far more cautious than any of his forefathers. According to Thegan, Louis "did everything prudently and cautiously."⁵¹ However, his penchant for prudence and caution may have contributed to his inefficient bureaucracy and an inability to check his power-hungry sons. In 817, Louis released what scholars call the *Ordinatio imperii*, a proclamation that formalized his succession to his three sons, Lothar, Pepin, and Louis (the German). The reasons for the issuance of the *Ordinatio imperii* at that time remain unclear; however, there is speculation that attributes the act to Louis's recognition of his mortality when part of the palace at Aachen collapsed on Louis and some of his colleagues.⁵² With the *Ordinatio imperii*, the most significant part of the realm was assigned to the oldest of the three, Lothar, who also was made co-emperor. Pepin was to take possession of Aquitaine. Louis the German would preside over Bavaria. These imperial rights were to be fully exercised upon the death of Louis the Pious. Pepin and Louis the German were to exercise veneration for Lothar, lavish him with annual gifts, and seek his counsel on all matters of import.⁵³

Arguably, the year 822 is when Louis began to squander away the prestige and power that his father and

⁵⁰ Thegan, "Life of Louis," 160.

⁵¹ Thegan, 165.

⁵² Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 199.

⁵³ "The *Ordinatio Imperii* of 817," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 199-203; see also Mayke de Jong, *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 814-840*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 25-26.

grandfathers had gained so skillfully. Louis felt it necessary to admit publicly and show remorse for his past sins upon counsel from his court. Chief among those sins was the order given by Louis for the blinding of his nephew Bernard after Bernard had attempted insurrection. Charlemagne had expressly forbidden such punishment in his succession arrangement of 806, but Louis had a short memory. Shortly after Louis's heavies blinded Bernard, he died. The death of Bernard haunted Louis; thus, his public penance, and with the penance, arguably, the loss of prestige.⁵⁴

Although history records Louis the Pious as generally feckless and impotent, he demonstrated early on that he was a skilled warrior and effective battlefield commander.⁵⁵ In 824, Louis inflicted violence upon the Bretons and “laid waste to the whole land with a great blow” in response to Breton perfidy.⁵⁶ Apparently, however, Louis's effectiveness on the battlefield was lost on his sons, and in the 830s, the relationship between Louis and his sons became greatly strained. The Astronomer, another biographer of Louis the Pious, recorded “the Rebellions” in detail.⁵⁷ After Louis's wife Ermengard died—the mother of Lothar, Pepin, and Louis—Louis the Pious remarried, taking Judith as his wife. By her, he had a son, Charles (the Bald). The other sons, Lothar, Pepin, and Louis the German, were resentful of Charles, especially after Louis the Pious announced plans to give Charles some lands (to be consummated upon the death of Louis the Pious). To make matters even worse,

⁵⁴ “Louis's Public Penance in 822,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed., Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2004), 256-265.

⁵⁵ De Jong, *Penitential State*, 14.

⁵⁶ Thegan, “Life of Louis,” 168.

⁵⁷ Astronomer, “Account of the Rebellions,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 256-265.

Pepin and Louis the German resented the elder brother Lothar because of his co-emperor status. Louis the Pious seemed unable to control his narcissistic sons, or at the very least, he tolerated their insolence beyond reason; his sons imprisoned him twice and attempted to seize power. Louis the Pious was freed each time by the younger sons when they reversed their allegiance to Lothar (hoping the act would enhance their standing with Louis the Pious and thus increase their holdings). Through it all, and in the aftermath, Louis the Pious never renounced or disowned any of his sons.

In 838, Pepin died, and Louis the Pious awarded Pepin's lands to Charles the Bald. Lothar was infuriated. Louis the Pious died in 840 after a campaign against the rebellious Louis the German.⁵⁸ After Louis's death, the three sons, Lothar, Louis the German, and Charles the Bald, fought a bloody civil war to control the Frankish realm. In what was arguably the beginning of the end of the Carolingian great but relatively short run of success, Lothar was pitted against Louis the German and Charles the Bald in an attempt to gain control of their lands. Just as they had always done, the Carolingians turned to war and violence to settle power, control, and expansion issues, no matter that this time the war was against other Carolingians. Nithard documented the Carolingian fall from grace.⁵⁹ Unlike the conflicts between Louis the Pious and his sons, which primarily consisted of posturing, meetings, discussions, and maneuverings, the civil war between the three brothers was bloody, exemplified in the Battle of Fontenoy, recorded by Nithard as having been a

⁵⁸ Astronomer, "The Final Days and Death of Louis the Pious," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed., Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 291-4.

⁵⁹ Nithard, "Nithard's History," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 297-331.

“violent battle on the brook of the Burgundians.”⁶⁰ The level of violence and slaughter at the Battle of Fontenoy was a “shock” to contemporaries, as chronicled by Engelbert.⁶¹

During this time of the Carolingian civilization, war and violence were not just limited to the civil war. As the brothers and their factions warred, Northmen attacks on Francia continued to increase in volume and intensity. The Scandinavians likely knew of the internecine violence of the Franks and took advantage of it. Even before Louis the Pious had died, in the 830s, Viking raids had intensified.

In 843, the civil war ended. The three sons arrived at a formal settlement to divide the empire with the Treaty of Verdun. The Treaty of Verdun has sometimes been called the “Birth Certificate” of Europe; however, it might also be reasonably referred to as the “Death Certificate” of the Carolingian Empire.⁶² The brothers agreed to split the realm into three parts: Charles the Bald received the western third of Francia, Louis the German received the eastern third of Francia, and Lothar received the middle realm. With the Treaty of Verdun, a division was established that formed the basis for the future states of France and Germany; such was its influence on future events. There was more warring in the 850s, and eventually, the eastern and western realms expanded at the expense of the middle domain.

In the 880s, under Emperor Charles the Fat, the empire was once again briefly united under one ruler. Contemporaries longed to see the former eminence of the

⁶⁰ Nithard, “Nithard’s History,” 315.

⁶¹ Engelbert, “Engelbert at the Battle of Fontenoy,” in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 332-3.

⁶² Philip Daileader, “Collapse of the Carolingian Empire: Lecture 18,” in *The Early Middle Ages*, The Great Courses audio lecture (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2004).

Carolingians; however, the unity under Charles the Fat was short-lived. Charles the Fat also had to contend with savage Viking raids, which continued to intensify and arguably contributed to his demise. In 885, Vikings laid siege to Paris. Charles the Fat's paralysis during the crisis earned him no followers. With Abbo's chronicling of the event and the Viking wars with the empire recorded elsewhere, it is evident that although the Carolingians had once been so powerfully effective at dominating adversaries so overwhelmingly and expanding the empire, they were now unable primarily to protect the realm and keep it free from the violence of the savage Northmen interlopers.⁶³

Interestingly, Dutton suggests that instead of bringing the Carolingian Empire to its knees, the Viking invasions perhaps stimulated Western civilization and helped to reallocate wealth; however, it is difficult to imagine that Viking violence did not play a significant role in the collapse of the empire.⁶⁴ To be sure, at the very least, the image, both internally and beyond the Frankish realm, of the seemingly invincible Carolingian Empire had been shattered. The Carolingian grand strategy had run its course. There was perhaps no better example of this than when Charles the Fat paid the Vikings a sum of 700 pounds of silver to break off the siege of Paris and allowed them to attack Burgundy further up the Seine River.⁶⁵

This paper examined the nature and impact of war and violence—both by internal forces and external forces—in the development and maintenance of the Carolingian world, using a strong collection of primary

⁶³ Abbo, "Abbo's Account of the Siege of Paris by the Northmen," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition* ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 514-6; see also "The Annals of St-Vaast for the Years 882-886," in *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Paul E. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 507-512.

⁶⁴ Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 507.

⁶⁵ Haywood, *Northmen*, 109-111.

sources assembled by Paul E. Dutton and a compelling supplement of notable secondary sources.⁶⁶ Additionally, this paper has discussed the extent to which the aggressive Carolingians affected medieval history by developing a grand strategy supported by military and political assets that solidified the Carolingian polity through war and violence. Some final words: the Carolingian Empire was the most expansive and most potent state to date after the Western Roman Empire collapsed. Paradoxically, through war and violence and the threat of war and violence, Charlemagne brought peace, security, and education to the Frankish realm, leading to hardy trade and a resurgence of culture, later known as the Carolingian Renaissance. Indubitably, Charlemagne utilized and enhanced the military and political infrastructures created by his predecessors, Pepin and Martel; nonetheless, Charlemagne's accomplishments stand on their own. At the time of Charlemagne's death, the Carolingian Empire was renowned and respected the world over.

Just as the Carolingian civilization came to power through a grand strategy that relied on the sword, its demise came about by the sword. Repeated savage Viking raids, bloody civil wars, political distraction, paralysis, and incompetence plagued it. The relatively short-lived Carolingian Empire indeed left long-lived consequences in the form of Europeanization, specifically with the Treaty of Verdun serving as the genesis for the formation of France and Germany; and, what some historians call a Carolingian Renaissance (made possible by war, violence, conquest, and plunder); conversion to Christianity of neighboring peoples; and, implications for the future in regards to religious or holy war, that is, waging war to compel an external group to adopt a religion. The Carolingians also bequeathed to posterity the area

⁶⁶ Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 547-9.

formerly known as Lotharingia, which continued to be the focus of armed conflict and bloodshed even into the twentieth century.