

## Who Were the Franks?

The period known as the Dark Ages (now often called Late Antiquity) is roughly considered to be from the time the last Roman emperor in the west was deposed in 476 A.D. to William the Conqueror's invasion of England in 1066. Of all the barbarian tribes that roamed the Europe during this time, the Franks most emulated the Roman Empire, (then fading in the west), serving as Rome's allies in its imperial service. The reign of the Merovingian dynasty, spanning the time between the retreat of Rome from Europe and the rise of Charlemagne, is a curious mixture of Christianity, lingering paganism and the codification of laws.

In 451 A.D. Merovech, a minor chieftain and ancestor of the Merovingians, led a band of warriors that fought with other German tribes allied against Attila the Hun in the Battle at the Catalaunian Plains. In this flat agricultural country east of Paris in Gaul, the battle was a draw. But Attila retreated and lost interest in Gaul, and the German warriors inherited the battle-scarred land.

Many of the tribal Franks settled in northern Gaul and became farmers. Gradually, the Frankish chiefs conquered more land to the south. Merovech's grandson Clovis (465-511 A.D.), was raised in times when a leader must conquer if his people were to survive. He managed to unify the squabbling Frankish tribes into a kingdom with one leader. His history is one of brutal conquest as he annexed town after town and killed all rivals to his rule.

Clovis married Clotild, the niece of Gundobad, the Christian king of Burgundy. She was an outspoken Christian, delivering lectures on the impotence of Clovis's gods. Many a marital squabble resulted. Clovis loved his wife and respected her education. When he came face to face in battle with a great threat from the Allemans, who inhabited today's Switzerland, and his army was being cut to pieces, Clovis remembered Clotild's God. He promised Jesus that if he were saved from his enemies, he would be baptized. Just at that moment, the Allemans' king fell, and they turned and fled. They begged for truce, which Clovis granted. Clovis kept his part of the bargain and was converted to Christianity in 503 A.D.

Throughout all this conflict, some of the old Gallo-Roman families managed to keep their estates, living in Roman villas. These cultured intellectuals were respected, and the barbarian conquerors emulated them. Clovis left Roman administrative systems in place, and the Gallo-Romans served in government or went into the Church. The Merovingians had a habit of dividing the land among all the sons upon the death of the father, causing the map of Gaul to change with each succeeding generation, and this policy gave rise to much dispute, further brutality and battle.

No less ambitious and as ruthless as Clovis were his grandsons — Charibert, Chilperic I, Sigibert I, and Guntram — and their queens. Chilperic's infamous third wife, Queen Fredegund, and his brother Sigibert's queen, Brunhild, both outlived and outfought their husbands; riding at the head of armies. The two queens feuded for thirty years and spread blood and chaos throughout Gaul long after their husbands were dead.

Fortunately, we have two eyewitnesses for much of this. Gregory of Tours (539–594 A.D.) recorded the history of his times in which he played no small part — and his writings have survived. Venantius Fortunatus (born circa 530 A.D.) began life as a court poet. He then settled down, took holy vows and lived out his life as a priest at the Abbey of the Holy Cross. His writings too, illuminate the times — with the births, deaths and marriages of kings and queens in early years and later with the flowers, fruits and presents given and received and with the taste of food prepared for him by the nuns of the Holy Cross.

Merovingian tendency toward licentiousness and debauchery finally weakened the line. Meanwhile the Mayor of the Palace (an office that was handed down from father to son in the house of Pepin during the Merovingian dynasty) became the power behind the throne. During the latter century of the Merovingian dynasty (late 600 and early 700 A.D.), the Mayors of the Palace actually ruled the kingdom. By that time, the longhaired Merovingian kings were trotted out only as figureheads, for the descendants of Clovis still held the loyalty of the people. They believed Merovingian divine power lay in their long, golden hair.

Finally in 735 A.D, Pepin usurped the throne, and the Carolingian dynasty came into power. The future Charlemagne was then eight years old.

Many of the incidents in *The Falcon and the Sword* (Zebra historical novel) were lifted from the pages of Gregory of Tours and Venantius Fortunatus, as well as from the scholars who have delved into the story of the Merovingians and from the archaeologists who have excavated their tombs.