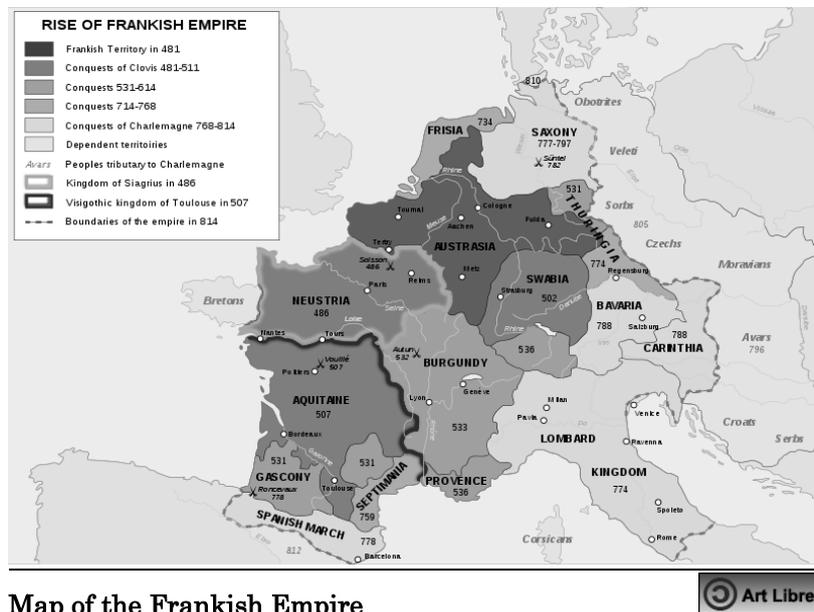


Chapter 6 – WEST FRANCLIA



Map of the Frankish Empire

There is no intention here of trying to provide an authoritative history of the Franks or of all their rulers. However, to explain where West Francia, the forerunner to France, comes from it is necessary to give some general background to the Frankish tribes and the dynasties of Kings who ruled them.

In Roman times, there were two tribes of Franks. The Ripuarian Franks, as their name would suggest, lived along the banks of the river Rhine. The Salian Franks lived north of the boundary of the Roman Empire roughly where Northern Belgium and Southern Holland are now; their proximity to the sea and salt lakes and marshes gave them their name.

There was no ethnic difference between the two tribes and they frequently intermarried. Eventually, the Salian Franks came to rule all the Franks.

The first dynasty of Kings to rule the Franks were the Merovingians who descended from a Salian leader called Merovech (411-457). As with so many founder figures from that time, Merovech's origins and life are surrounded by myth and legend. Even recently, the Merovingians have played a central role in some very successful fiction.

Merovech's father Chlodion (392-448) led the Salian Franks out of their original territory into the valley of the Somme. They established their capital in Tournai, which is now in Belgium.

In 451, Merovech, himself, responded to a request from Flavius Aëtius, the leader of the Western Roman Empire, to help him fight the Huns. Alongside the Romans and Visigoths, the Salian Franks helped defeat Attila and his Huns at the Battle of Catalaunian Fields, at today's Châlons-sur-Marne. This stopped the Huns in their tracks and they were finally destroyed by another coalition of Germanic peoples at the Battle of Nedao, in the Balkans in 454.

Little else is known about Merovech other than that his wife was called Verica.

Their son Childeric (436-481) became King of the Salian Franks on the death of his father.

The Franks again came to the assistance of the Romans in 463 at Orléans, when they helped to defeat the Visigoths who were trying to expand their territory along the Loire Valley. They also took Angers later in a series of battles with some Saxons led by one Odoacer. Odoacer became an ally when the Alamanni tried to invade Italy and jointly they turned them back.

Childeric was a serial womaniser and eventually he was expelled to Thuringia where he stayed for 8 years with King Basin and his wife Basina. When he returned, he brought Basina with him and married her.

He died in 481 in Tournai and his son Clovis (466-511) succeeded him at the age of only 15. The name Clovis was the forerunner of Louis which was the name of so many Frankish and French Kings.

Between 486 and 491, Clovis extended his territory down to the Loire by defeating the last Roman ruler in northern Gaul. He also arranged the marriage of his sister to the King of the Ostrogoths and helped secure the east of his kingdom by defeating a group of Thuringians.

In 496, he defeated the Alemanni at the Battle of Tolbiac, near today's Zülpich in North Rhine-Westphalia about 60 kilometres east of the German-Belgian border. He had married Clothilde of Burgundy who was a Catholic Christian and it is said that his victory persuaded him to convert to her faith; he was baptized at Reims in the Christmas of that year by Remigius, who was later made Saint Remi.

Clovis and his army fought a battle against the Burgundians at Dijon in 500 but were not successful in overcoming them.

In 507, he defeated the Visigoths at the Battle of Vouille, near today's Poitiers in eastern France; this removed the Visigoths from Gaul and forced them down into Spain. Clovis secured most of Aquitaine.

He adopted Paris as his capital and established the building which became the Abbey of St Genevieve on the south bank of the Seine.

Clovis then embarked on a campaign to eliminate all the other Frankish Kings, some of whom were close relatives, effectively taking control of all the Frankish territories. He died in 511 and was buried in the new abbey.

Salian Law provided for the division of a father's realm between his sons. Clovis had four sons: Theuderic took Reims; Chlodomer Orléans; Childebert Paris; and Chlothar Soissons. The name Chlothar was the forerunner of Lothair which was also the name of a number of Frankish Kings.

In 523, the four brothers attacked Burgundy and captured the ruler Sigismund who had assassinated a nephew of their mother. They returned home and Chlodomer took Sigismund and his two sons back to Orléans; they left a garrison in Burgundy. Sigismund's brother, Gondomar, returned to Burgundy with Ostrogoth mercenaries and killed the garrison.

Chlodomer had Sigismund and his sons killed on 1 May 524 and attacked Burgundy again; he was killed at the Battle of Vézeronce in Isère. Chlothar married his widow Guntheuc and killed two of his three sons. One, Clodoald, escaped death by entering a monastery; he eventually became Abbot of Nogent and, after his death, became St Cloud. Chlothar took control of the cities of Tours and Poitiers.

Further attacks on Burgundy followed and, by 534, he had secured the kingdom taking territory down to Grenoble. Campaigns against the Ostrogoths enabled him to take control of Provence and an attack on the Visigoths of Spain in 542 took the Franks down to the Spanish Marches.

As his brothers, nephews and great-nephews died, Chlothar took control of their territories. And, when his brother Childebert died in 558, he became King of all the Franks. His kingdom included most of present day France and a good part of today's Germany.

At the end of his reign, his son Chram rebelled against him a number of times. Finally, Chlothar tracked him down in Brittany in 561, locked him in a cottage with his family and set fire to it. He hated himself for this and died soon after at Compiègne.

Right after the death of his father, Chilperic tried to seize the whole kingdom but his brothers made him accept the Salic law and share the kingdom. Chilperic took Soissons which eventually was called Neustria; Charibert took Paris; Guntram took Orléans which became Burgundy; and Sigebert took Reims and Metz which became Austrasia.

Chilperic and Sigebert were at each others throats straight after this and Sigebert came out on top in the initial conflict.

Charibert died in 567 and his territories were split between the surviving three brothers; but, they agreed to share the city of Paris. Chilperic attacked Sigebert's new territories immediately afterwards but again Sigebert was victorious.

Chilperic was married to Audovera and she gave him three sons and a daughter.

Sigebert married Brunhilda daughter of the Visigoth King of Spain and so, not to be outdone, Chilperic married her sister Galswintha having put aside his concubine, Fredegonde. Relations cannot have been good because Galswintha was found strangled in bed one morning.

In 575, war was renewed between the brothers and again Sigebert had the advantage; eventually he had Chilperic at his mercy besieged in Tournai. Fredegonde whom Chilperic had, by then, married, had Sigebert assassinated by two men armed with poisoned daggers at Vitry-en-Artois, 20 kilometres north east of Arras.

Brunhilda was captured and imprisoned at Rouen. Chilperic took a large slice of Sigebert's territory. Sigebert's son Childebert II (570-595) was taken to Metz where he was recognized as King

Chilperic's son Merovech went to Rouen, ostensibly to visit his mother Audovera. However, he decided that if he married Brunhilda he might be able to seize the throne. Although this was against the law of the church, they were married by Praetextatus, Bishop of Rouen.

Chilperic took immediate action, besieged them and, after making peace with Brunhilda, took Merovech back to Soissons, had him tonsured and put in a monastery. He escaped but eventually, in 578, asked his servant to kill him when he realized he was a failure.

Brunhilda moved to take the regency of all of Austrasia on behalf of her son Childebert II (570-595). Her nobles would not accept this and so she took refuge with Guntram in Burgundy. She persuaded Guntram to adopt Childebert as his son and heir in 577. This enabled Brunhilda to take the regency in Austrasia

until Childebert took the throne, at the age of 13, in 583.

In 578, Chilperic attacked the Breton leader Waroch who, when defeated, paid homage to Chilperic. He recanted later but Chilperic retained control of the territory during his reign.

Fredegonde, who had already shown her mettle, assassinated Clovis, Chilperic's only remaining son by Audovera, in 580; this left Chilperic, for the time being, without a male heir.

Chilperic was assassinated in 584 returning to his villa at Chelles, now located in the Paris suburbs. Although he was a violent man, it is said that he was both a musician and a poet.

His son Chlothar II (584-629) was born later that year and his mother Fredegonde was regent for him until her death in 597.

The conflict between Fredegonde and Brunhilda, for that was the underlying problem between the kingdoms, erupted again straight after the death of Chilperic. But, Brunhilda still had problems with her own nobles. Three of them plotted to assassinate Childebert.

One was killed but the other two still represented a threat so Guntram gave Brunhilda, Childebert and his two sons, Theuderic and Theudebert, shelter. Once the two plotters had been killed, in 587, Guntram signed the Pact of Andelot with Childebert and Brunhilda. This allied their two kingdoms and made Childebert heir to Burgundy.

In 592, Guntram died and Childebert took control of Burgundy and added it to his kingdom. Immediately, he started a war against Chlothar of Neustria. But, Childebert died in 595 and his sons split the kingdom and started fighting each other. Brunhilda backed Theuderic, who took Burgundy, and she accused Theudebert of being the son of a gardener.

Eventually, Theuderic captured Theudebert and Brunhilda had him murdered. Theuderic took control of both Austrasia and Burgundy but in 613 he died of dysentery in Metz, his capital.

It was at this point that a new force exerted itself in the Frankish kingdoms. The 'Mayors of the Palace' were the administrators of the three kingdoms and, at that time they were: Warnachar in Austrasia; Rado in Burgundy; and, Pepin of Landen in Neustria.

Initially Warnachar tried to stop Brunhilda becoming regent for Theuderic's illegitimate son, her great-grandson, Sigebert II (d.613).

He failed and enlisted the support of the other two mayors and Arnulf, Bishop of Metz. They then invited Chlothar to become regent and guardian for Sigebert and promised not to provide any military support for Brunhilda.

Her army, depleted by the desertion of many of her nobles, met Chlothar's army but was heavily outnumbered. Brunhilda, Sigebert and his brother Corbo fled but were caught near Lake Neuchâtel, in today's Switzerland. Sigebert and Corbo were murdered and Chlothar was able to unify the kingdom again.

Brunhilda was captured and accused of multiple murders of Kings and churchmen. She was put on the rack for 3 days and then executed by being dragged to death by an unbroken horse.

In 615, Chlothar published the Edict of Paris which gave a great deal of control to the nobles and placed education in the hands of the church which was already manned by the nobles' families. He also agreed, in 617, to make the position of

Mayor of the Palace a lifetime appointment.

Then, in 623 he gave Austrasia to his son Dagobert I (603-639). This pleased Pepin of Landen and Arnulf of Metz, the two Austrasians who had given Chlothar their support and it gave them a huge amount of autonomy and power.

Chlothar died in 629 having brought the Frankish kingdom together but also having fatally weakened the power of the Merovingian Kings who followed. The power of the Mayors had been enhanced and they started to take full advantage of that.

When his father died, Dagobert gained Neustria and Burgundy. Charibert his half-brother claimed Neustria; this was refused but, eventually, he was given Aquitaine. However, Charibert died in 632 and Dagobert had his son killed; he thus gained full control of the entire Frankish kingdom.

In the same year, the Mayor of the Palace in Austrasia led the nobles in a revolt. Dagobert put his 3 year old son Sigebert on the throne of Austrasia to appease the Mayor. Effectively this gave Pepin of Landen control of Austrasia.

Dagobert ruled from Paris and he was responsible for building the St Denis Basilica. He died in 639 in the Basilica and was buried there.

True power effectively passed to the Mayors and the young kings became ineffective rulers whose short lives seemed only to serve to produce male heirs.

Pepin of Landen died in 640 and the post of Mayor of the Palace of Austrasia passed for a short time to his son Grimoald. He was executed by the Neutrian King.

Pepin's daughter Begga had married Ansegisel, son of Arnulf of Metz. Their union was the foundation stone of the Carolingian dynasty of Kings.