**Who Was Charlemagne?**

Charlemagne was one of Europe’s most successful monarchs. He was king of the Franks in 768 CE. Charlemagne was not the first king of the Franks. His father had ruled before him, and his grandfather had ruled before that. They were good rulers, but Charlemagne was an impressive king. For one thing, Charlemagne was very tall. He had blonde hair. He was always laughing. His dogs were his constant companions, forever tangling about his feet wherever he went. His sword girl ran alongside him, so he would always have his weapon handy. He always strode, taking big steps. If you wanted to talk to him, you had to keep up. He knew everybody in his castle by name, from his top advisors to the lowliest serf. As friendly as he was, he was every inch a king. The people in his kingdom called him Charles the Great.

**Expansion:** The Franks were great fighters. Their battle skills were legendary. Using the strength of his army, combined with his own leadership abilities, Charlemagne defeated other barbarian tribes. He expanded the Frankish Empire to include Germany, all of France, most of Italy, and even sections of northern Spain. Under Charlemagne, the Frankish Empire grew to be about one-fifth the size of the United States! When the Frankish Empire went to war, Charlemagne was in the thick of things. He was easy to spot. Besides being very tall, he often wore a blue cloak over his fur coat, which made him appear even larger. Yet, somehow, he managed to survive battle after battle. He got scarred up a bit, but did not die in battle. He died of old age in his seventies, which for the time was a really old age.

**Education:** After the fall of Rome in 476 CE, the ability to read and write began to disappear. The only people left with these skills were the clergy, and not even all of them had the ability. To effectively rule his kingdom and to successfully convert people to Christianity, Charlemagne wanted his officials to be able to read and write. If he sent them a note, giving them some instruction, he wanted to make sure they could read it. To accomplish this, he turned his own castle into a center for learning. Scholars came from all over Europe to teach in the palace school. Charlemagne tried to learn to write, but his hands were too big and too scarred from battle to write legibly. Charlemagne tried to talk other nobles into joining him in his educational pursuits, but they were quite resistant. It was not the Frankish way. The Frankish nobles (warriors) thought reading and writing was a waste of time.

**Preservation:** Charlemagne gave many of his scholars the job of copying all the old manuscripts into Latin by hand. All books in the Middle Ages were written by hand. The scholars would have been delighted to use a typewriter, printing press, or computer, but since none of these things had been invented yet, everything had to be done by hand.

**Government:** Charlemagne ruled his vast empire by using local officials called counts to help him. Their job was to solve local problems and to raise armies for the kingdom. At least once a year, messengers inspected various regions managed by counts, then reported back to Charlemagne. Charlemagne himself made regular tours of his kingdom. The local officials were not allowed to rule in place of the king; they ruled under his direction.

**Trial by Jury:** When accused of a crime, peasants had a tough time proving their innocence. Trial was by ordeal. A man suspected of a crime would have to prove he was innocent by holding a red-hot piece of metal. If his burnt hand healed in three days, which it was unlikely to do, he was found innocent. If you were accused of something and you were higher in the social rank, you might be judged by the outcome of trial by fighting. You could hire someone to fight for you. You were innocent or guilty based on the quality of fighter you were or could afford.

Charlemagne did not believe this method could determine the innocence or guilt of a man accused of a specific crime. Charlemagne started a system by which all disputes would be heard by a panel of honorable men who had taken an oath to listen and judge fairly based on the evidence. There was still corruption, but this system had a much better chance of being fair. Our modern jury system slowly developed from this early start.

**Standardized Money:** The process of collecting taxes fell to local administrators. They could tax any way they wanted. This gave the local administrators a great deal of power. Charlemagne recognized that such a system could lead to an abuse of power. He needed a system of taxation and a way to enforce that system. He also needed a system to control prices on goods. Charlemagne could not get his hands on enough gold to make coins. Instead, he used silver. Barter was still used, but payment using silver coins began to take hold.

**Holding the Kingdom Together:** Charlemagne held his kingdom together by the sheer force of his personality. He was not a king in a palace somewhere; he was out and about. He personally fought in battles. He personally visited local administrators. The common people saw him. He strode through town after town. He had a horrible singing voice but he was always singing at the top of his lungs. The people loved him. He was their king. He was able to pull the people together. They were Franks, and proud of it. Charlemagne was able to create a Christian Empire under a powerful secular leader—himself.

**Questions:**

1. Charlemagne wanted to bring order to his empire. What did he believe was the key to order?

2. How did Charlemagne improve education?

3. What characteristics did Charlemagne have that made him an effective leader?

4. How did Charlemagne maintain control over his huge empire?

5. What was the major religion in Western Europe during this time period?

**Medieval Church Answers**

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