Chapter 2  The Development of Feudalism in Western Europe

Target 2: I can explain how well feudalism established order in Europe in the Middle Ages.

Introduction

The collapse of the Roman Empire in 476 C.E. marks the beginning of the period in Europe known as the Middle Ages. During this time period, a complex political and economic system developed that largely shaped people’s lives.

Historians divide the Middle Ages into three periods. The Early Middle Ages lasted from about 476 to 1000 C.E. The High Middle Ages lasted from about 1000 to 1300. The Late Middle Ages lasted from about 1300 to 1450.

The Middle Ages began with the fall of the Roman Empire, which had unified much of Europe for about 500 years. After its collapse, life became dangerous and difficult in Western Europe. People worked hard simply to survive and to have enough to eat. They also needed to protect themselves from conquest by invading barbarians and neighboring kingdoms.

These challenges gave rise to the economic and political system historians call feudalism (FEWD-ahl-ism) in which people had clearly defined roles and relationships with each other. In the feudal system, people pledged loyalty to a lord—a ruler or powerful landholder. In return, they received protection from that lord. Warriors fought on behalf of their lords, and peasants worked the land. At the bottom of the system were serfs, or peasants who were not free to leave the lord's land without permission.

In this lesson, you will discover more about the difficulties people faced during the Early Middle Ages. Then you will learn about the rise of feudalism and how it helped to establish order and security after the fall of Rome. Finally, you will explore what daily life was like for people living under feudalism.

1. Western Europe During the Early Middle Ages

For 500 years, much of Europe was part of the Roman Empire. The rest of the continent was controlled by groups of people the Romans called “barbarians” because they did not follow Roman ways. When Rome fell to invading barbarians in 476 C.E., Europe was left with no central government or system of defense. Throughout Western Europe, many invading groups set up
kingdoms that were often at war with one another. The most powerful rulers were those who controlled the most land and had the greatest warriors.

**Charlemagne's Empire** One powerful group during this time was the Franks (from whom modern-day France takes its name). The Franks were successful because they had developed a new style of warfare that depended on troops of knights, heavily armed warriors who fought on horseback. To achieve and hold power, a ruler needed the services and loyalty of many knights. In return for their loyalty and service, the ruler rewarded knights with land and privileges.

One of the early leaders of the Franks was an ambitious young warrior named Clovis. In 481 C.E., at the age of 15, Clovis became leader of the Franks. Five years later, he defeated the last great Roman army in Gaul at Soissons. During his 30-year reign, he led the Franks in wars that largely extended the boundaries of the Frankish kingdom.

Clovis also helped convert the Franks to Christianity. Clovis married a Christian woman, Clotilda, and eventually was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. Many of his followers became Christians, as well.

The most important leader of the Franks was Charlemagne (SHAR-luh-main), which means “Charles the Great.” This impressive king ruled for over 40 years, from 768 to 814. Writings from that period say that he was six feet four inches tall—extremely tall for his time—and “always stately and dignified.” Legend has it that he read very little and couldn't write, yet he loved to have scholarly works read to him. He encouraged education and scholarship, making his court a center of culture. Most important, he unified nearly all the Christian lands of Europe into a single empire. One of the poets at his court called him the “King Father of Europe.”

Charlemagne built his empire with the help of a pope—Leo III, the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. The Church was a central part of society during this time, and for Charlemagne, the blessings of the Church sent the message, “God is on my side.” The Church also valued support from the empire, and Leo needed the backing of someone with an army. In return for Charlemagne’s help, the pope crowned him Holy Roman emperor in 800 C.E.

Charlemagne’s empire survived many attacks. After his death in 814, however, it quickly fell apart. The weak rulers who followed him could not defend the empire against new waves of invasions. Still, these kings helped prepare the way for the system of feudalism by following Charlemagne’s example of rewarding knights with land and privileges in return for military service.

**A Need for Order and Protection** In the 9th and 10th centuries, Western Europe was threatened by three main groups. Muslims, or the followers of the religion of Islam, advanced from the Middle East
and northern Africa into what is now Spain. The Magyars, a central Asian people, pressed in from the east. Vikings swept down from present-day Norway and Denmark.

The Vikings were fierce warriors who instilled fear in the people of Europe. At times, the Vikings’ intent was to set up colonies, but they were best known for their terrifying raids on towns and religious centers.

Picture a Viking attack. The people of the town are at early morning church services when an alarm bell starts to clang. Vikings! Long, shallow wooden boats have brought the Vikings close to shore. Now they leave their boats and run toward the town with swords and axes raised over their heads. People are running in all directions, while several villagers who attempt to resist are killed. Others are seized by the Viking raiders and taken back to the ships.

Clearly, the people of Western Europe needed to figure out new methods of defense. To protect themselves and their property, they gradually developed the system we call feudalism.

2. Feudalism: Establishing Order

By the High Middle Ages (about 1000 C.E.), Europeans had developed the system of feudalism. Feudalism provided people with protection and safety by establishing a stable social order.

Under this system, people were bound to one another by promises of loyalty. In theory, all the land in the kingdom belonged to the monarch (usually a king, but sometimes a queen). A large amount of land was also owned by the Church. The king kept some land for himself and gave fiefs (FEEFS), or land grants, to his most important lords, who became his vassals. In return, each lord promised to supply the king with knights in times of war. A lord then enlisted lesser lords and knights as his vassals. At times, these arrangements were written down, and some of these contracts even survive to this day in museums.

At the bottom of the social system were peasants. Lords rented some of their land to the peasants who worked for them. However, some peasants, called serfs, were “tied” to the land they worked, which meant that they could not leave the lord’s land without permission and had to farm his fields in exchange for a small plot of their own.

Most lords and wealthier knights lived on manors, or large estates. A manor included a castle or manor house, one or more villages, and the surrounding farmland. Manors were in the country, far from towns, which required peasants to produce everything the people on the manor needed. Only a few goods came from outside the manor, such as salt for preserving meat and iron for making tools.

During the Middle Ages, people were born into a social class for life. They had the same social position, and often the same job, as their parents. Let’s take a closer look at the social classes in feudal society.
3. Monarchs During Feudal Times

At the very top of feudal society were the monarchs, or kings and queens. As you have learned, medieval monarchs were also feudal lords. They were expected to keep order and to provide protection for their vassals.

Most medieval monarchs believed in the divine right of kings, the idea that God had given them the right to rule. In reality, the power of monarchs varied greatly. Some had to work hard to maintain control of their kingdoms, and few had enough wealth to keep their own armies. They had to rely on their vassals, especially nobles, to provide enough knights and soldiers. In some places, especially during the Early Middle Ages, great lords grew very powerful and governed their fiefs as independent states. In these cases, the monarch was little more than a figurehead, a symbolic ruler who had little real power.

In England, monarchs became quite strong during the Middle Ages. Since the Roman period, a number of groups from the continent, including Vikings, had invaded and settled England. By the mid-11th century, it was ruled by a Germanic tribe called the Saxons. The king at that time was descended from both Saxon and Norman (French) families. When he died without an adult heir, there was confusion over who should become king.

William, the powerful Duke of Normandy (a part of present-day France), believed he had the right to the English throne. However, the English crowned his cousin, Harold. In 1066, William and his army invaded England. William defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings and established a line of Norman kings in England. His triumph earned him the nickname “William the Conqueror.”

When William of Normandy conquered England, he brought feudal institutions from Europe with him. Supported by feudalism, strong rulers brought order to England. In fact, by the start of the High Middle Ages, around 1000 C.E., the feudal system had brought stability to much of Europe.

4. Lords and Ladies During Feudal Times

Like monarchs, lords and ladies were members of the nobility, the highest-ranking class in medieval society. Most of them lived on manors. Some lords had one manor, while others had several. Those who had more than one manor usually lived in one for a few months and then traveled with their families to another.

Manor Houses and Castles Many of the people on a manor lived with the lord’s family in the manor house. Built
of wood or stone, manor houses were surrounded by gardens and outbuildings, such as kitchens and stables. They were protected by high walls.

The manor house was the center of the community, and in times of trouble, villagers entered its walls for protection. Its great hall served as the lord's court, but it also offered a place for special celebrations and feasts, such as those given at Christmas or after a harvest.

Kings and queens, high-ranking nobles, and wealthy lords lived in even grander structures: castles. Castles were built for many purposes, but one of their main functions was to serve as a home. Castles were also one of the most important forms of military technology. With their moats, strong walls, and gates, they were built for defense. Finally, their large size and central locations made castles visual reminders of the social hierarchy and the power of the ruling classes.

The earliest medieval castles were built of wood and surrounded by high wooden fences. The strongest part, the motte, was built on a hilltop. A walled path linked the motte to a lower enclosed court, the bailey, where most people lived. After about 1100 C.E., most castles were built of stone to resist attacks by more powerful siege weapons.

Castles gradually became more elaborate. Many had tall towers for looking out across the land. The main castle building had a variety of rooms, including storerooms, kitchens, a dining hall, sleeping quarters for distinguished guests, and the lord and lady's quarters.

The Responsibilities and Daily Life of Lords and Ladies

It was the lord's responsibility to manage and defend his land and its laborers. The lord appointed officials to make sure villagers fulfilled their duties, which included farming the lord's land and paying rent in the form of crops, meat, and other foods. Lords also acted as judges in manor courts and had the power to fine and punish those who broke the law. Some lords held posts in the king's government. In times of war, lords fought for their own higher-ranking lords, or at least supplied them with a well-trained fighting force.

In theory, only men were part of the feudal relationship between lord and vassal. However, it was quite common in the Middle Ages for noblewomen to hold fiefs and inherit land. Except for fighting, these women had all the duties that lords had. They ran their estates, sat as judges in manor courts, and sent their knights to serve in times of war.

Noblewomen who were not landowners were still extremely busy. They were responsible for raising and training their own children and, often, the children of other noble families. Ladies were also responsible for overseeing their household or households. Some households had hundreds of people, including priests, master hunters, and knights-in-training called pages and squires, who assisted the knights. There were also cooks, servants, artists, craftspeople, and grooms. Entertainment was provided by musicians and jesters who performed amusing jokes and stunts.

When they weren't hard at work, lords and ladies enjoyed hunting and hawking (hunting with birds), feasting and dancing, board games such as chess, and reading. Ladies also did fine stitching and embroidery, or decorative sewing.

Although nobles and monarchs had the most privileged lives in medieval times, they were not always easy or comfortable by modern standards. Lit only by candles and warmed only by open fires, manor homes and castles could be gloomy and cold. There was little or no privacy. Fleas and lice infected all medieval buildings, and people generally bathed only once a week, if that. Clothes were
not washed daily either. Diseases affected the rich as well as the poor. And, of course, warfare was a great and ever-present danger.

5. Knights During Feudal Times

Knights were the mounted soldiers of the medieval world. In general, knights needed to have a good deal of wealth, since a full suit of armor and a horse cost a small fortune. Knights were usually vassals of more powerful lords.

Becoming a Knight

The path to becoming a knight involved many years of training. A boy started as a page, or servant. At the age of seven, he left home and went to live at the castle of a lord, who was often a relative. Nearly all wealthy lords had several pages living in their castles and manors. A page learned how to ride a horse and received religious instruction from the local priest or friar.

During this first stage of training, a page spent much of his time with the ladies of the castle and was expected to help them in every way possible. During this period, the ladies taught pages how to sing, dance, compose music, and play the harp—skills that were valued in knights.

After about seven years as a page, a young boy became a squire. During this part of his training, he spent most of his time with the knight who was his lord. The squire helped care for his horse and polished the knight's armor, sword, shield, and lance. He even waited on his lord at mealtime, carrying water for hand washing, carving meat, and filling his cup when it was empty.

Most importantly, squires trained to become warriors. They learned how to fight with a sword and a lance, a kind of spear that measured up to 15 feet long. They also learned how to use a battle-axe and a mace (a club with a heavy metal head). Squires practiced by fighting in make-believe battles, but they also went into real battles. A squire was expected to help dress his lord in armor, care for his weapons and horses, follow him into battle, and look after him if he was wounded.

In his early 20s, if deserving of the honor, a squire became a knight, a process that at times was a complex religious event. A squire often spent the night before his knighting ceremony in prayer. The next morning, he bathed and put on a white tunic, or long shirt, to show his purity. During the ceremony, he knelt before his lord and said his vows. The lord drew his sword, touched the knight-to-be lightly on each shoulder with the flat side of the blade, and knighted him. Sometimes, if a squire did particularly well in battle, he was knighted on the spot.

The Responsibilities and Daily Life of Knights

Being a knight was more than a profession. It was a way of life. Knights lived by a strong code of behavior called chivalry. (Chivalry comes from the French word cheval, meaning “horse.”) Knights were expected to be loyal to the Church and to their lord, to be just and fair, and to protect the helpless. They performed acts of gallantry, or respect paid to women. From these acts, we get the modern idea of chivalry as traditional forms of courtesy and kindness toward women.

Jousts and tournaments were a major part of a knight’s life. In a joust, two armed knights on horseback galloped at each other with their lances extended, aiming to unseat the opponent from his horse. Jousts were held as sporting events, for exercise, or as serious battles between rival knights. A tournament involved a team of knights in one-on-one battle.
Knights fought wearing heavy suits of armor. In the 11th century, armor was made of linked metal rings, called chain mail. By the 14th century, plate armor was more common and offered better protection.

The medieval style of knighthood lasted until about the 17th century, when warfare changed with the growing use of gunpowder and cannons. Knights, who fought one-to-one on horseback, were no longer effective against such weapons.

But knights were only a small group in medieval society. Next, let's turn to daily life for the vast majority of the population: the peasants.

6. Peasants During Feudal Times

Most people during the Middle Ages were peasants. They were not included in the feudal relationship of vassal and lord, but they supported the entire feudal structure by working the land. Their labor freed lords and knights to spend their time preparing for war or fighting.

During medieval times, peasants were legally classified as free or unfree. These categories had to do with the amount of service owed to the lord. Free peasants rented land to farm and owed only their rent to the lord. Unfree peasants, or serfs, farmed the lord's fields and could not leave the lord's manor. In return for their labor, they received their own small plot of land to farm.

The daily life of peasants revolved around work. Most peasants raised crops and tended livestock (farm animals), but every manor also had carpenters, shoemakers, smiths (metalworkers), and other skilled workers. Peasant women worked in the fields when needed, while also caring for their children, their homes, and livestock.

Along with the work they performed, peasants and serfs might owe the lord numerous taxes. There was a yearly payment called "head money," at a fixed amount
per person. In addition, the lord could demand a tax, known as *tallage*, whenever he needed money. When a woman married, she, her father, or her husband had to pay a fee called a *merchet*.

Peasants were also required to grind their grain at the lord's mill (the only mill on the manor). As payment, the miller kept portions of the grain for the lord and for himself, with lords keeping any amount they wanted. Peasants found this practice so hateful that some of them hid small handmills in their houses.

Most peasants lived in small, simple houses composed of one or two rooms. A typical house was made of woven strips of wood covered with straw or mud, usually with little furniture or other possessions inside. There was a hearth fire in the middle of the main room, but often there was no chimney, making the room dark and smoky. An entire family might eat and sleep in one room that sometimes also housed their farm animals.

Peasants ate vegetables, meat such as pork, and dark, coarse bread made of wheat mixed with rye or oatmeal. Almost no one ate beef or chicken. During the winter, they ate pork, mutton, or fish that had been preserved in salt. Herbs were used widely, to improve flavor and reduce saltiness, or to disguise the taste of meat that was no longer fresh.

**Lesson Summary**

In this lesson, you learned about life during feudal times. The fall of the Roman Empire led to a period of uncertainty and danger. Europeans developed the system of feudalism to help provide economic and social stability and safety.

**Feudalism** The feudal system arose as a way of protecting property and creating stability. It was based on loyalty and personal relationships. Monarchs gave fiefs to lords, their most important vassals. In exchange, vassals promised to supply monarchs with soldiers in war.

**Monarchs and Lords** At the top of the feudal social structure was the monarch. Below the monarch were his vassals, the lords, or nobles. Monarchs and nobles oversaw their lands and the people who worked them. They lived in manor houses or castles.

**Knights and Peasants** Below the lords were the knights, heavily armored warriors on horseback who provided service in war in return for land and protection. At the bottom of the social hierarchy were free peasants, followed by serfs. Peasants farmed the land and made most of the necessary articles of life. Serfs were peasants bound to the land.
Decentralization After the Fall of Rome

The ancient world had been characterized by several very large empires. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 C.E., most of Europe was split into small to medium-sized kingdoms. There were frequent changes of both borders and the peoples who ruled them. The time period after the fall of the Western Roman Empire is known as the Early Middle Ages. Some historians say this period lasted until the 900s C.E., while other sources say the Early Middle Ages lasted until 1000 C.E.

Europe Struggles Through the Early Middle Ages

One way to describe Europe during the Early Middle Ages is by identifying the three waves of migrant invasion that occurred on the continent. These were the:

- Germanic invasions of the 5th and 6th centuries
- Invasions of Arabs and the Frankish tribes from the area that is now north-central France in the 8th century
- Viking, Magyar, and Muslim invasions of the 9th and 10th centuries

The invasions had personal and economic effects and also caused political and cultural change throughout Europe. It was impossible to trade or export goods to other locations because the invasions made it unsafe to even travel short distances. Pottery, manufacturing, and other industries that depended on trade completely disappeared from some areas. Populations and economies began to exist on a very local level. For example, people in the areas of Italy, Spain, and France continued to speak Latin, but many people in what is now England did not during the Early Middle Ages. The structure that societies often receive from their educational systems and centralized military forces did not exist during this period of European history, so illiteracy increased dramatically.

Between 400 AD and 600 AD, the European population had declined by twenty percent. The continent’s agricultural system had also broken down, and a period of rapidly cooling climate change occurred. These conditions contributed to low crop yields throughout Europe.

In circa 581 C.E., the spread of sickness presented another threat to the population. Smallpox began to affect Western Europe, and other unnamed illnesses later followed. Large numbers of people died.

All of these many factors that influenced European life in the Early Middle Ages caused the remaining population to make many changes to what were once long-established practices in society. These included changes in things like property ownership, law, religion, and culture.

These four maps will give you an idea of how European geography changed in the Early Middle Ages and how political power became localized.

1. By 150 C.E., the Roman Empire had unified large amounts of Europe and beyond under one administration. Notice how the empire completely surrounds the Mediterranean Sea and extends into Asia. As the Germanic groups moved into the area, the empire shrank.
2. By 486 C.E., the Western Roman Empire was gone. Its territory had been fragmented into many kingdoms. These kingdoms were formed and ruled by Franks, Goths, Saxons, Ostrogoths, Vandals, and other migrant groups. The style and development of the government varied by kingdom.
3. (above) Kingdoms and their rulers continued to change frequently for centuries. Here you can see the state of Europe in 526. Note that there are fewer divisions than in 486. Another change is that the Kingdom of the East Goths has grown in size.

4. (below) By 533–600, as shown in the lower map, much has changed. The Kingdom of the East Goths is gone. The Lombards have taken over Italy. The Franks have expanded their territory. The Eastern Roman Empire now covers much more territory in the west, including the region formerly ruled by the Vandals.
The Beginnings of Feudalism and Decentralization

In this chaotic situation, the Franks began to consolidate power and territory under the leadership of the family known as the Carolingians. The name comes from their most famous member, Charlemagne. But the family began their rule of the Franks with Pepin, who was the mayor of Austrasia. Austrasia is located in what is now north-central France. Pepin conquered Neustria, to the west of Austrasia, in 687.

Pepin's son, Charles Martel (ruled 714–741), took the land in Neustria and gave it to Austrasian nobles. But he also did something new. With the gift of land came a requirement. In return for the land, the Austrasian fighters had to promise military service to Charles Martel. He also required them to provide their own horses. These two elements—gifts of land that supplied the means for a soldier to purchase his battle equipment and a promise of military service—were the foundation of the feudal system that Charlemagne (ruled 768/771–814) and those after him developed more fully.

The third wave of invasions in the 9th and 10th centuries also contributed to breaking up and re-forming kingdoms under new leaders. And the system of inheritance of kingdoms also promoted division of kingdoms. For example, the kingdom Charlemagne had worked so hard to build was broken into three by his three sons shortly after his death with the Treaty of Verdun in 843.
The next map shows the extent of Charlemagne’s empire at his death. The three colors show how it was divided in 843 among Charlemagne’s three sons. The territory was to split more over time.

**Knights Become Nobles**

Charlemagne temporarily provided unity for a large portion of Europe in the late 8th century. But feudalism was a system that promoted local loyalties and control rather than state unity. At first, a knight’s social status in the Middle Ages was not connected to nobility. Knights were a class of professional mounted soldiers who had access to horses and armor and could support the costs of maintaining those resources. Knights who received land swore an oath of fealty to their local lord. But that lord was rarely the king. The code of behavior known as chivalry and a knight’s status as a member of nobility developed in the 12th century. As was the case with royal lines of succession, the idea of heredity became part of knighthood a century later. Sons of knights were automatically made squires, so a man’s ancestry now determined his
eligibility for knighthood. Other legal restrictions were also passed that would close the knight class further and make it a more elite group of men.

Royal Women and Children: The Keys to Power and Control

Inheritance affected the unity of kingdoms in another way. Women who inherited kingdoms had a certain amount of power, at least to bestow their land. The following map shows the Frankish lands Henry II of England gained by inheritance and marriage. He inherited land from both his father Geoffrey V and his mother Empress Matilda. He also received land by dowry, or marriage gift, from his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Eleanor had become Queen of England in 1152 upon her marriage to Henry II. In childhood, princesses or daughters of high-ranking nobles were often promised as the future wives of kings. The actual marriages would then usually take place before the young women became teenagers. In this way, a young woman’s influence was in what she could facilitate, or make happen, but women were usually not given the choice to decide what they wanted to happen. Any wealth or resources that a woman brought with her into a marriage, such as land, allowed
monarchs and kingdoms to gain power and forge political alliances with one another. The ownership of land through marriage and birth also contributed to the breaking up and remaking of kingdoms.

Once a young woman had entered into a royal marriage, her primary and most critical influence on a royal court was to have children. Children who were the offspring of royal marriages during the Middle Ages became heirs to two kingdoms. Daughters were seen as assets who could be used to create more political alliances through future marriages, but sons were especially coveted and prized in royal courts. Sons had the power to ascend to a royal throne after the death of a monarch (who, in most cases, was usually the son’s father).

After a royal wife had produced children, the sphere of her influence evolved from producing children for a royal household to preparing those children for their future lives as members of royal families. A royal mother would support a son’s political position in the line of succession and prepare him for the responsibilities of ruling a kingdom. Royal women would also prepare daughters for their own eventual royal marriages. Eleanor of Aquitaine actually shifted her loyalty from her husband to her sons, who would later become King Richard I and King John. She encouraged them to rebel against Henry II. As a result, Henry had Eleanor charged with treason and imprisoned for 16 years.

---

### Charlemagne's Successful Rule

Charlemagne was unique among the medieval rulers in successfully establishing centralized rule. One of his courtiers, Einhard, wrote a biography of Charlemagne. Read these translated selections from Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* to discover what made Charlemagne's rule so effective. Use a dictionary to look up any words you don't know.

#### 3. Charlemagne's Accession

Pepin, however, was raised by decree of the Roman pontiff, from the rank of Mayor of the Palace to that of King, and ruled alone over the Franks for fifteen years or more. He died of dropsy in Paris at the close of the Aquitanian War, which he had waged with William, Duke of Aquitania, for nine successive years, and left his two sons, Charles and Carloman, upon whom, by the grace of God, the succession devolved. The Franks, in a general assembly of the people, made them both kings on condition that they should divide the whole kingdom equally between them, Charles to take and rule the part that had belonged to their father, Pepin, and Carloman the part which their uncle, Carloman had governed. The conditions were accepted, and each entered into the possession of the share of the kingdom that fell to him by this arrangement; but peace was only maintained between them with the greatest difficulty, because many of Carloman’s party kept trying to disturb their good understanding, and there were some even who plotted to involve them in a war with each other. The event, however, showed the danger to have been rather imaginary than real, for at Carloman's death his widow fled to Italy with her sons and her principal adherents, and without reason, despite her husband's brother put herself and her children under the protection of Desiderius, King of the Lombards.
Carloman had succumbed to disease after ruling two years in common with his brother and at his death Charles was unanimously elected King of the Franks.

15. Extent of Charlemagne’s Conquests
[Charlemagne] so largely increased the Frank kingdom, which was already great and strong when he received it at his father's hands, that more than double its former territory was added to it.

16. Foreign Relations
He added to the glory of his reign by gaining the good will of several kings and nations; so close, indeed, was the alliance that he contracted with Alfonso King of Galicia and Asturias [in modern-day Spain], that the latter, when sending letters or ambassadors to Charles, invariably styled himself his man. His munificence won the kings of the Scots also to pay such deference to his wishes that they never gave him any other title than lord or themselves than subjects and slaves: there are letters from them extant in which these feelings in his regard are expressed. His relations with [Harun Al-Rashid], King of the Persians, who ruled over almost the whole of the East, India excepted, were so friendly that this prince preferred his favor to that of all the kings and potentates of the earth, and considered that to him alone marks of honor and munificence were due. Accordingly, when the ambassadors sent by Charles to visit the most holy sepulcher and place of resurrection of our Lord and Savior presented themselves before him with gifts, and made known their master's wishes, he not only granted what was asked, but gave possession of that holy and blessed spot. When they returned, he dispatched his ambassadors with them, and sent magnificent gifts, besides stuffs, perfumes, and other rich products of the Eastern lands. A few years before this, Charles had asked him for an elephant, and he sent the only one that he had. The Emperors of Constantinople … made advances to Charles, and sought friendship and alliance with him by several embassies; and even when the Greeks suspected him of designing to wrest the empire from them, because of his assumption of the title Emperor, they made a close alliance with him, that he might have no cause of offense. In fact, the power of the Franks was always viewed by the Greeks and Romans with a jealous eye, whence the Greek proverb "Have the Frank for your friend, but not for your neighbor."

17. Public Works
This King, who showed himself so great in extending his empire and subduing foreign nations, and was constantly occupied with plans to that end, undertook also very many works calculated to adorn and benefit his kingdom, and brought several of them to completion. Among these, the most deserving of mention are the basilica of the Holy Mother of God at Aix-la-Chapelle, built in the most admirable manner, and a bridge over the Rhine at Mayence, half a mile long, the breadth of the river at this point. This bridge was destroyed by fire the year before Charles died, but, owing to his death so soon after, could not be repaired, although he had intended to rebuild it in stone. He began two palaces of beautiful workmanship - one near his manor called Ingelheim, not far from Mayence; the other at Nimeguen, on the Waal, the stream that washes the south side of the island of the Batavians. But, above all, sacred edifices were the object of his care throughout his whole kingdom; and whenever he found them falling to ruin from age, he commanded the priests and fathers who had charge of them to repair them, and made sure by commissioners that his instructions were obeyed. He also fitted out a fleet for the war with the Northmen; the vessels required for this purpose were built on the rivers that flow from Gaul and Germany into the Northern Ocean. Moreover, since the Northmen continually overran and laid waste the Gallic and German coasts, he caused watch and ward to be kept in all the harbors, and at the mouths of rivers large enough to admit the entrance of vessels, to prevent the enemy from disembarking; and in the South,
Narbonensis and Septimania, and along the whole coast of Italy as far as Rome, he took the same precautions against the Moors, who had recently begun their piratical practices. Hence, Italy suffered no great harm in his time at the hands of the Moors, nor Gaul and Germany from the Northmen, save that the Moors got possession of the Etruscan town of Civita Vecchia by treachery, and sacked it, and the Northmen harried some of the islands in Frisia off the German coast.

25. Studies
Charles had the gift of ready and fluent speech, and could express whatever he had to say with the utmost clearness. He was not satisfied with command of his native language merely, but gave attention to the study of foreign ones, and in particular was such a master of Latin that he could speak it as well as his native tongue; but he could understand Greek better than he could speak it. He was so eloquent, indeed, that he might have passed for a teacher of eloquence. He most zealously cultivated the liberal arts, held those who taught them in great esteem, and conferred great honors upon them. He took lessons in grammar of the deacon Peter of Pisa, at that time an aged man. Another deacon, Albin of Britain, surnamed Alcuin, a man of Saxon extraction, who was the greatest scholar of the day, was his teacher in other branches of learning. The King spent much time and labour with him studying rhetoric, dialectics, and especially astronomy; he learned to reckon, and used to investigate the motions of the heavenly bodies most curiously, with an intelligent scrutiny. He also tried to write, and used to keep tablets and blanks in bed under his pillow, that at leisure hours he might accustom his hand to form the letters; however, as he did not begin his efforts in due season, but late in life, they met with ill success.

27. Generosity
He was very forward in succoring the poor, and in that gratuitous generosity which the Greeks call alms, so much so that he not only made a point of giving in his own country and his own kingdom, but when he discovered that there were Christians living in poverty in Syria, Egypt, and Africa, at Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Carthage, he had compassion on their wants, and used to send money over the seas to them. The reason that he zealously strove to make friends with the kings beyond seas was that he might get help and relief to the Christians living under their rule.

He cherished the Church of St. Peter the Apostle at Rome above all other holy and sacred places, and heaped its treasury with a vast wealth of gold, silver, and precious stones. He sent great and countless gifts to the popes; and throughout his whole reign the wish that he had nearest at heart was to re-establish the ancient authority of the city of Rome under his care and by his influence, and to defend and protect the Church of St. Peter, and to beautify and enrich it out of his own store above all other churches. Although he held it in such veneration, he only repaired to Rome to pay his vows and make his supplications four times during the whole forty-seven years that he reigned.

28. Charlemagne Crowned Emperor
When he made his last journey thither, he also had other ends in view. The Romans had inflicted many injuries upon the Pontiff Leo, tearing out his eyes and cutting out his tongue, so that he had been compelled to call upon the King for help. Charles accordingly went to Rome, to set in order the affairs of the Church, which were in great confusion, and passed the whole winter there. It was then that he received the titles of Emperor and Augustus, to which he at first had such an aversion that he declared that he would not have set foot in the Church the day that they were conferred, although it was a great feast-day, if he could have foreseen the design of the Pope. He bore very patiently with the jealousy which the Roman emperors showed upon his assuming these titles, for they took this step very ill; and by dint of
frequent embassies and letters, in which he addressed them as brothers, he made their haughtiness yield to his magnanimity, a quality in which he was unquestionably much their superior.

29. Reforms
It was after he had received the imperial name that, finding the laws of his people very defective (the Franks have two sets of laws, very different in many particulars), he determined to add what was wanting, to reconcile the discrepancies, and to correct what was vicious and wrongly cited in them. However, he went no further in this matter than to supplement the laws by a few capitularies, and those imperfect ones; but he caused the unwritten laws of all the tribes that came under his rule to be compiled and reduced to writing. He also had the old [rough] songs that celebrate the deeds and wars of the ancient kings written out for transmission to posterity. He began a grammar of his native language.