

III. Popes and Franks: A New Order

A. The Rise of the Popes

1. After the fall of Rome, the fate of Europe was of course uncertain. Various tribes (such as the Visigoths and Ostrogoths) and various religious authorities competed for power and a leadership role in the new order. Among them was the Christian bishop of Rome, who eventually became known as the “pope” (from the Latin word “papa”).
2. As recorded in the Bible (the central text of Christianity), Jesus had said to one of his disciples, Peter, “...*thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.*”
3. Thus, after Peter became the bishop of Rome, his successors claimed a special role in the growing religion.
4. The bishops of Rome did not have primacy within Christianity at the time of the council of Nicaea, but as the authority of the Roman emperors fell they became more and more important, especially in the city of Rome itself.
5. After the Huns invaded Europe but were defeated at the **Battle of Chalons of 451 AD** (see map on page 12, again!) they descended on Rome itself. Then a mysterious meeting occurred between their leader, Attila, and the bishop of Rome, named Leo.
6. The fact that Attila did not sack Rome gave Leo an aura of religious power and his prestige grew, but then the Ostrogoths, followed by the Lombards, became in turn the dominant power in Italy. This meant the emerging leader of *Nicene* Christianity was surrounded by *Arian* barbarians (the people to whom Arius and his followers had been able to teach after being expelled from Rome).
7. To whom could a Nicene Christian church leader turn for help?

B. The Rise of the Franks

1. The **Battle of Chalons of 451 AD** was a decisive moment for Europe. The long string of tribal migrations that caused Rome’s fall had been triggered by the arrival in Europe of the Asiatic *Huns*.
2. Recognizing the broader significance of this threat to Europe the Visigoths, Romans, and Franks allied together to fight the Huns at Chalons, and were successful. This event can without exaggeration be viewed as the moment Europe itself began. Had the battle gone differently, there would have been no Europe. Europe simply would have been part of Asia.
3. The partnership between the Franks and Romans was short-lived, as all such partnerships are. They were following the rule, normally quoted as “the enemy of my enemy is my *friend*.” History, however, clearly falsifies this statement. The more correct position is: “The enemy of my enemy is my *temporary ally*.”
4. With the Huns defeated, the Franks proceeded to dismember Roman authority in France, defeating the Romans at the Battle of Soissons in 486 AD. What followed was a pivotal transformation for the Frankish tribe.

5. At the subsequent **Battle of Tolbiac** in **496 AD**, as the Franks (after whom, of course, *France* is named) were battling the Alemanni (in French “*Allemagne*” means *Germany*), their leader, Clovis, found himself facing almost certain defeat.
6. Clovis invoked the power of the Christian god in this moment, to whom his own wife, Clotilda, has already personally pledged herself. Clovis then won the battle. Viewing the victory as a supernatural omen, Clovis converted to Christianity—*Nicene Christianity, to be precise.*
7. In the Dark Ages, the conversion of a king to a different religion was not a merely private matter. The entire tribe followed suit. All the Franks became Nicene Christians.



The Battle of Tolbiac by Ary Scheffer depicts Clovis’s desperate summons of the Christian god in the midst of his battle. *The Baptism of Clovis* by François-Louis Dejuinne shows the subsequent conversion of the Frankish king.

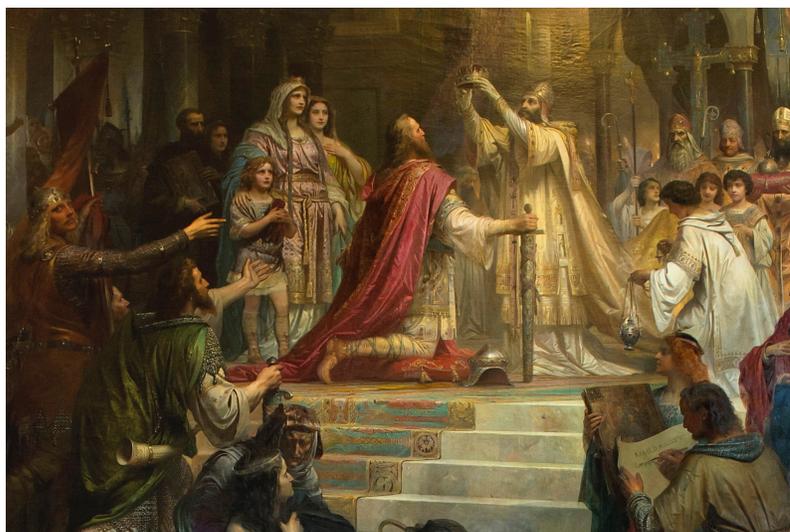
C. The Alliance of the Popes and Franks

1. In light of the conversion of Clovis, the Franks became a natural for the besieged bishops of Rome, so that they could truly become *popes* for Europe. It took time, however, for a proper alignment of their mutual needs to occur. (The popes *needed* the Franks, but the Franks did not yet *need* the popes.)
2. A Frankish need arose as the descendants of Clovis sputtered in their leadership role.
3. Clovis was himself descended from a warrior named “Merovig,” who had been the Frankish champion at Chalons in **451 AD**. The “Merovingian” dynasty of tribal chieftains had thus emerged as the first true Frankish *kings*.
4. They had failed to adjust their tribal ways, however, to the exigencies of managing a kingdom. They were seduced into delegating all their most important functions to others who held the title “Mayor of the Palace.” The Merovingians themselves then became what historians refer to as the “do-nothing” kings.

5. When the Muslims entered Europe in **711 AD** (initiating the great conquest of the *Reconquista*) they even pushed up into France, and the Franks were summoned to deal with this threat.
6. It was the Mayor of the Palace, Charles Martel (Charles “the Hammer”) who answered the call— *not* the king. At the **Battle of Tours of 732 AD**, Charles defeated the Muslims, thus deflecting their advance into central Europe. Once again, the Franks had secured European civilization.
7. The fact that the Mayors of the Palace were performing the functions of king but did not actually hold the title created a situation that drove them to seek an alliance with the popes.
8. Charles’s son, Pepin, asked the pope for permission to depose the Merovingian king and take power for his family, the Carolingians (named after Charles “Martel,” because Charles in German is “*Carol*.”) The sanction of the pope was the ingredient he would need for a legitimate takeover (not just one justified by force).
9. Charles Martel’s grandson — Pepin’s son — was *Charlemagne*.
10. It was Charlemagne who finally crossed into Italy, defeated the Arian Lombards, and cemented the alliance of the Franks and Popes, making each respectively the most important in Europe.
11. Thus in **800 AD**, Charlemagne was crowned “Emperor of the Romans” by the Pope.



The Battle of Tours (732 AD) as depicted by Charles Steuben. Charles Martel wields his axe in defense of the Christian world.



The crowning of Charlemagne in 800 AD by the pope represented the culmination of the rise of both the popes and the Franks and a new hope. However, the union would not last.