



The Cambridge Medieval History - Book IX: Charles the Great and the Holy Roman Empire

G.L. Burr, Gerhard Seeliger, Paul Vinogradoff, F.G. Foakes-Jackson

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THE eighth century had hardly entered on its second half when the last of the long-haired Merovingians was thrust from the throne of the Franks, and Pepin the mayor of the palace hailed as king. The change seemed slight, for the new dynasty had served a long apprenticeship. For more than a century the descendants of Clovis had been mere puppets in a king's seat, while the descendants of St Arnulf, though called only Mayors of the Palace or Dukes and Princes of the Franks, had managed, and with vigour and success, the affairs of the realm. Their neighbours, the scoffing Greeks, marvelled at the strange ways of the Franks, whose lord the king needed no quality save birth alone, and all the year through had nothing to do or plan, but only to eat and drink and sleep and stay shut up at home except on one spring day, when he must sit at gaze before his people, while his head servant ruled the State to suit himself. But it was one thing to rule the State and quite another to lay hand upon those sacred titles and prerogatives which the reverence of centuries had reserved for the race of the Salian sea-god; and the house of Arnulf was little likely to forget their kinsman Grimoald who in the seventh century had outraged that reverence by setting his own son upon the throne, and had paid the forfeit with his life and with his child's. Charles Martel (the Hammer), in the last years of his long rule, had found it possible, indeed, to get on with no king at all, dating his documents from the death of the latest do-nothing; but, if he hoped that thus the two sons between whom at his own death he divided France like a private farm might enter peacefully upon the fact of kingship without its name, a year of turbulence was enough to teach the sons that to rule the Franks a kingly title must back the kingly power. The shadowy Merovingian whom they dragged forth from obscurity to lend a royal sanction to their acts was doubtless from the first a makeshift. Through their surviving charters, especially those of Pepin, the younger and more statesmanly, who not only appended to his name the proud phrase "to whom the Lord hath entrusted the care of government" but used always the "we" and "our" employed hitherto by royalty alone, there glimmers already another purpose. But not Pepin himself, even after his brother's abdication left him sole ruler, and when, all turbulence subdued, two years eventless in the annals had confirmed his sway, ventured the final step of revolution without a sanction from a higher power...

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