

## Rome Falls, France Rises

In the year 200 CE, the Roman Empire reached the height of its power. At that time, Rome controlled the lands as far east as Palestine, as far west as Spain, and as far north as border with Scotland. The lands that currently go by the name France were called Gaul by the Romans. Rome had controlled much of Gaul going back as far as the conquests of Julius Caesar in the first century BCE. Over centuries of Roman control, Gaul became heavily Romanized in its laws, customs, and even language. But by the fifth century CE, what was then the Western Roman Empire was beginning to collapse. When Rome finally fell to the Germanic tribes of central Europe, Gaul's time as a Roman province came to an end.

The warrior king that rose up to replace Roman rule was called Clovis, the first of a dynasty called the Merovingians. Under Clovis much of what is now France was united under a single king for the first time. Previously, the lands had been ruled by royal chieftains. The Merovingians were strongly influenced by the Romans, and thus kept much of Roman political and social structure. Around 500, Clovis even converted to Christianity, a move that gave the king more legitimacy in a Europe that was gradually becoming Christianized. This move also gave him the support of the Catholic Church.

After the death of Clovis in 511, France was divided between his four sons. The kingdom was reunited and divided again several times, and by the early 700s, the Merovingians had lost a lot of their power to powerful local chieftains called mayors. One of these mayors, a man named Charles Martel, grew in power to become the most powerful man in France, despite the fact that there was still officially a king ruling the country. Martel is most famous for his role in the Battle of Tours in which he and his army turned back the Muslim armies that had invaded from Africa and Marched across Spain into France. In 752, the last Merovingian king, Childeric III, was overthrown. A new king, Pippin the Younger, a son of Charles Martel, rose to replace him and to begin the Carolingian dynasty.



Pippin ruled only for a short time. But his son, Charles, also known as Charlemagne or Charles the Great, ruled for decades and used his power to attempt to unite all the Germanic kingdoms into one kingdom. This kingdom became known as the Holy Roman Empire, and Charlemagne was crowned emperor by Pope Leo III in 800. Under Charlemagne, France and much of Western Europe experienced a rebirth of learning, art, and culture.

## Instructions

In this activity, you will analyze the rise of France during and after the fall of Rome. First, you will examine several primary source excerpts and images. As you do, think about how the territory we now know as France both changed and stayed the same over time. First, you will write a brief description of France under the Roman Empire, the Merovingian Empire, and the Carolingian Empire. Then, you will write a paragraph explaining which aspect of France changed the most after the fall of Rome. Finally, you will write an essay describing what France would have been like if Rome had not fallen.

## Document A: Excerpt from *The Gallic Wars*, by Julius Caesar

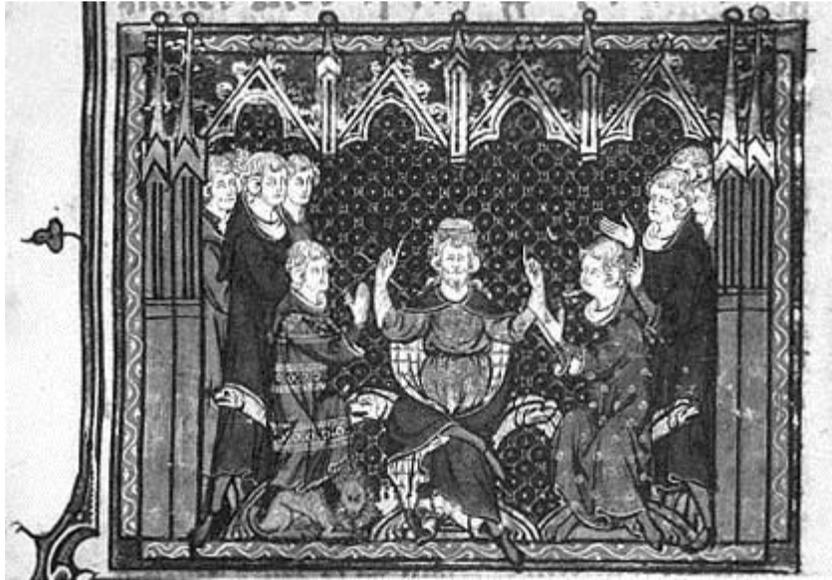
All Gaul is divided into three parts, one of which the Belgae inhabit, the Aquitani another, those who in their own language are called Celts, in our Gauls, the third. All these differ from each other in language, customs and laws. The river Garonne separates the Gauls from the Aquitani; the Marne and the Seine separate them from the Belgae. Of all these, the Belgae are the bravest, because they are furthest from the civilization and refinement of [our] Province, and merchants least frequently resort to them, and import those things which tend to effeminate the mind; and they are the nearest to the Germans, who dwell beyond the Rhine, with whom they are continually waging war; for which reason the Helvetii also surpass the rest of the Gauls in valor, as they contend with the Germans in almost daily battles, when they either repel them from their own territories, or themselves wage war on their frontiers.



**Citation:** *The Gallic Wars*, translated by W.A McDevitte and W.S. Bohn. Boston: MIT archives

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### Document B: Charles Martel, a Frank Noble and Mayor of the Palace



**Description:** This is a detail from a fourteenth-century French illuminated manuscript called *The Great Chronicles of France*. This panel shows Charles Martel. This illustration demonstrates the power held by mayors in the Merovingian era.

### Document C: Pope Gregory to His Most Excellent Son, Karl, Sub-King

In our great affliction we have thought it necessary to write to you a second time, believing that you are a loving son of St. Peter, the prince of apostles, and of ourselves, and that out of reverence for him you would obey our commands to defend the church of God and his chosen people. We can now no longer endure the persecution of the Lombards, for they have taken from St. Peter all his possessions, even those which were given him by you and your fathers. These Lombards hate and oppress us because we sought protection from you; for the same reason also the church of St. Peter is despoiled and desolated by them. But we have intrusted a more complete account of all our woes to your

faithful subject, our present messenger, and he will relate them to you. You, oh son, will receive favor from the same prince of apostles here and in the future life in the presence of God, according as you render speedy aid to his church and to us, that all peoples may recognize the faith and love and singleness of purpose which you display in defending St. Peter and us and his chosen people. For by doing this you will attain lasting fame on earth and eternal life in heaven.

**Citation:** from Oliver J. Thatcher, and Edgar Holmes McNeal, eds., *A Source Book for Medieval History*, (New York: Scribners, 1905), p. 102

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### Document D: The Coronation of Emperor Charlemagne



**Description:** This is a fourteenth-century French illustration of Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, being crowned the Holy Roman Emperor. The Pope's support of Charlemagne helped him to unify a Europe that was fragmented after the fall of the Roman Empire.

## Primary Source Document Analysis

After reviewing the primary sources above, use the chart to note the characteristics of France under the Roman Empire, the Merovingian Dynasty, and the Carolingian Dynasty.

Roman Gaul
Merovingian France
Carolingian France



## Apply and Elaborate

Imagine if the Roman Empire had never fallen. How do you think France's development in the Middle Ages would have changed? What do you think would have stayed the same? On a separate piece of paper, write a three-paragraph essay describing a France that developed in a world where Rome never fell.

