CHARLEMAGNE FATHER OF THE CONTINENT.THE IDEOLOGY OF THE EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN EMPIRE.

Fabian Istvan, University of Targu Mures

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to deal with the aspects concerning the so called "European ideology" of Charles the Great, and to reveal the social, economic, and religious aspects of the "Christian Empire". Did ever Charles the Great had such a modern European ideology or it is just about a forced modernization of his ideas. The truth is that although the Frank leader was an exquisite ruler he was nothing more than a medieval king who reigned through force and diplomacy.

The first state, which managed to accomplish a permanent administrative system on European territory, was the Roman Empire. Having its center in Italy the Romans tried, and succeeded, in creating a continental wide union. The line of the Danube, Greece, Egypt, the British Islands and Germany represented the borders of Roman "Europe". Much later, the integration of the western part of Europe was realized by the Frank state. The nucleus of the European Union contemporary to us was set up on this administrative and territorial unit of the early Middle Ages.

From the very beginning, we must specify the fact that the historiographies of both founder nations of the E.U.; respectively the French and the Germans, for about 150 years searched their roots in the Carolingian Empire. In a period in which the national ideals found their resources in the historic past, the evolution of the Frank Empire was considered as "personal" by both nations. The French searched in the history of the Carolingian Empire the roots of their national unity and in the evolution of the Frank-Gallic- Roman population the spring of the French nation. On the other hand, the German national ideology remembered with nostalgia the Empire of the VIII-IX centuries, Charlemagne being considered the first German emperor, who by the unification of the Germanic peoples created the basis of the Holy Roman-German Empire.[1]

Only the arrival of the XX century made possible the "reconciliation" between the Carolingian Empires of the French and German sides, respectively between Carl der Grosse of the Germans and the French Charlemagne. In the contemporary historiography, which passes over the national influences, the Frank Empire is no longer the parent of only the French/ German nation, but of a new European order. Today in Western Europe is widely accepted the fact that the "beginnings

[1] Papp Imre,**A modern Europa Szűletése. A Karoling Birodalom és Europa**, Historia, III, 1997,p.8

BDD-A23864 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:54 UTC)

of Europe" are in the Carolingian Empire. The question is we dealing with an ephemeral bearer of the continental unity or with a creator of strong phenomena with great echoes in European history. Another, more acute, question is: had the Carolingian emperors and especially Charlemagne the "conscience" of the European unity, and if their actions had the aim of creating such unity, or is just about creating an western Christian Empire able to compete with the Byzantine Empire or with the Arabs.

The opinions are divided according to the analysis of the evolution of political, social, cultural resorts of the Carolingian Empire.[2]

These resorts - although in many ways imitate the Roman and the Byzantine ones – prove to be "marketable" on the long term. This is more important considering the fact, that the Franks, unlike the other Germanic populations understood from the very beginning the basis of a strong state, lies in the unity and continuity between old and new structures. More precisely: it is known that on the ruins on the Western Roman Empire, a few barbarian kingdoms were born:419 A.D. the Visigoth kingdom, 929 A.D.- the Vandal kingdom, 443 A.D – Burgundian kingdom, 481 - the Frank state, 493 A.D. - the Ostrogoth kingdom, and in 568 A.D. the Longobard state. From all these states, three proved to be viable: the Visigoth kingdom, the Ostrogoth kingdom, and the Merovingian Frank state. Each of them tried the assimilation of the other two and the foundation of a unitary western state. If the Visigoth kingdom will eventually crash under the Frank pressure (507), the Ostrogoth kingdom under the rule of the charismatic leader from Ravenna, Theoderich the Great (474 - 526), proved to be an aggressive and viable alternative. Theoderich's policy of military and matrimonial alliances has as aim the creation of a Europe wide empire with Arian rite. If this plan would became a fact it would mean radical changes in European politics and, between other the disappearance of papacy, as we know it. The Ostrogoth kingdom was a rough competition for the Franks until the catholic baptism of the Frank king Clovis (in spite of the major political support promised by Theoderich).

The baptism of Clovis has much significance: firstly, it meant the end of the supremacy of the Arian rites between the Germanic populations; secondarily through the creation of a unitary Frank state in which the religious differences between the Gallic - Roman majority and the Germanic minority were erased the foundations of the future feudal European system were laid. That is why many historians consider that not the Arian baptism of the Germanic tribes was decisive for the history of Europe but the catholic baptism of Clovis.

The improvement of this system was realized by the Frank but not through their weak Merovingian kings but, with the help of those *major domus* of the Arnulfide dynasty, which beginning with the year 687 A.D. succeeded in the reunification of the Frank tribes around the three

[2] **Ibid** p.9

BDD-A23864 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:54 UTC)

kingdoms of *Austrasia ,Neustria* and *Burgundy*. This work of stately improvement made by Charles Martel, Pippin the Short was crowned by Charles the Great/ Charlemagne (768 - 814). This charismatic figure of the early middle Ages managed through a series of military and diplomatic actions to build an Empire, which stretched from Catalonia to the Elba, from the Nordic Sea to southern Italy, from Bretagne to Pannonia, covering o surface of 1.200.000 km² and having a population of 15.000.000 inhabitants. To notice the fact that the Carolingian Empire stretched mainly inside the *limes* ("border") of former The Roman Empire.

The clerical and lay, the ethnic and social strata, will create a unique and unitary mixture, which will bear the mane of *Europa occidens*, which in the ideology of the age meant the completely civilized Europe. The Empire of Charlemagne made its apparition based on a clear mental evolution in the ranks of the Frank leadership, as the phase of localism became obsolete in the flavor of imperial ideology. The coronation of Charlemagne at 24 December 800 was the "birthday" of a new Empire a Christian one. Secondarily, it was created a different and viable alternative to the Byzantine imperial system. Finally yet importantly, it was created *de jure* an important pole of the European political and ecclesiastical history: the Papal state (whose great contribution is nowadays denied by the European Constitution).

Charlemagne's access to the Christian emperorship is a normal fact having in view that most of Europe's Christian population was under his command, not to talk about the ideological power stretched out by the title of:" propagator and defender of Christian faith and through the power of Christ good and enterprising king". From this title came the idea that the Empire is an earthy foreshadowing of *Civitates Deii* (The kingdom of God). On the other hand, we must underline the fact that the acceptance of the imperial crown by Charlemagne did not meant the continuation of Roman imperial tradition. The Carolingian Empire was the community of western Christians, and only superficially was bounded with the Roman tradition. Charlemagne's imperial status is a Germanic and Christian origin. That is why he bears the following titles: "*serenissimus Augustus a Deo coronatus, magnus, pacificus imperator*", but he never accepted the title of "*Romanorum imperator*" or "*semper Augustus"* used by the Roman emperors[3]. To notice the fact that pope Leon III, mixing the Roman imperial and Germanic/Christian titles in a letter to Charlemagne used the following formula: "*imperatore, domino nostro Carolo, piisimo perpetuo Augusto, a Deo coronato, mango et pacifico imperatore*". [4] In the pope's view, Charlemagne was the military representative of St.Peter on earth as his person was the spiritual representative. However, in practice things were not so clear and ideal. Charlemagne influenced by his Biblical readings, considered himself "*rex et*

[3] Arthur Kleinclaus **Charlemagne**, Hachette, Paris.1994,p.287. This aspect is evealed by the letter of the abbot of Monte Cassino. Charlemagne was reserved in using the imperial title. Only in the diploma from 25 May 801 he uses the term *imperator*. Till then he used the trem *rex francorum et romanorum adque longobardum*

[4] F.Louis Ganhoff, **The imperial coronation of Charlemagne. Theories and facts.** Glasgow University Press, 1989, p.8. Many historians consider that Charlemagne accepted the imperial title only to humiliate the Byzantines

BDD-A23864 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:54 UTC)

sacerdos"[5] and had set some priorities both in political and in ecclesiastical fields. In this way, he acted towards the maintenance of stately unity – in all domains – using the two main bases of his power: the landownership and the web of religious settlements. The final aim was the education of the populations within his Empire, as an important aspect in the creation of the western Christian imperial unity.

The first "engine" of his power has the landownership. Known in historiography as "*patrimonial monarchy*" the system originated from the fact that the Germanic king was considered the most important landowner of his kingdom. The thesaurus / estates of the kingdom merged with the estates of the leading families. A direct result was the rebirth of the Merovingian *comitatus.* The *Comes* or *grafio* was an imperial clerk, and his estates and position could not be inherited. The Carolingian Empire was covered by a web of 300 marks, which beyond their defensive role had an important contribution in the spreading of the Carolingian administrative system in regions, which originally did not belong to the Empire. Specific examples are the organization of the Czech, Polish and Hungarian feudal states in the X - XI centuries. It also must emphasize the fact that this *comitatus* / marks were used by the Holy Roman/ German Empire as bases for its expansion to East.

The second unifying mechanism was the web of religious settlements. There had a constant and spectacular evolution from a secondary institution in the time of Merovingian kings up to a major power in state. The figures are eloquent: if in the mid VIII century we have 600 monasteries in 814 (the year of Charlemagne's death), the number is 800. The harshness of monastic life was associated with an active implication in social /political life. This aspect made possible the affirmation of the web of monasteries and churches as an important unifying and civilizing factor. "As once upon a time the politics of Gaul was given by the number of bishoprics, now the Carolingian Europe was covered by a web of religious settlements, which gave the tone of imperial politics. Especially the monasteries from Germany, like Fulda, Reichenau or St.Gall were real "camps" of the new borders, being similar to the Roman castrum during The Roman Empire".[6]

Charlemagne and later Ludwig the Pious (814-840) controlled a number of 180 bishoprics and 700 monasteries. From the members of clergy and monks they had continuous reinforcements in their work of maintaining the Christian unity.

The administrative and religious system of the Carolingian Empire was much flexible as of his Byzantine counterpart, where the provinces were under the pressure of the capital. In the case of the Franks, each region had similar resources. These reforms had no great implications, being rather a *politics of small steps* but the result was the mixture of the Roman and Germanic heritage, and the

[5] H. Pirenne, **Mahomed şi Carol cel Mare**. Meridiane, Bucureşti, 1996,p.121
[6] Papp **art cit,** p.10

BDD-A23864 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:54 UTC)

creation of a spiritual renaissance, which proved to be an important factor in the unification of Europe.

The Carolingian Empire had its basis in the theocratic ideology of Charlemagne, who considered (inspired by the Old Testament) that his "job" is the protection of Christianity. In this aspect, his letter from 796 addressed to Pope Leon III can be considered as political announcement. Charlemagne wrote: "our duty is the protection of the Church of Christ from the external pagan enemy (…) and on the internal side the fortification of faith through the universal reconnaissance of the Catholic faith. Your duty is to pray like Moses with the arms held high for the triumph of the Christian people upon its enemies".[7]

Of course, this vision had negative sides: in Charlemagne's ideology, the differences between the secular and clerical duties were erased especially after getting in contact with the Byzantine Empire. The use of clergy in secular jobs led to the mixing of attributions in the way that the clergy expected support from the secular side (*brachium seculare*).[8] Therefore, it was the concealed danger of laicization of the clergy. As long as strong leaders ruled the Empire: Charlemagne or Ludwig the Pious the phenomenon was under control, the crisis was latent, but it became acute under other Carolingian kings less capable as the first two.

Beyond these aspects, in the year 800, Charlemagne as the ruler of Europe managed the continental unification. His Empire was the third "superpower" beside the Byzantine Empire and the Arab Caliphate. Unfortunately, in the good old Germanic fashion once Charlemagne dead, the signs of decay appear Ludwig the Pious still succeeded in maintaining the internal cohesion, but after three years of his death the Empire was split through the Treaties from Verdun. Although it lasted a century, through the institutions created and the social cultural phenomena, the Carolingian Empire can be considered a state bearing the seeds of European unity.

We must be careful though to the aspects of Charlemagne's "Europeanism". In spite of today's trends of "modernizing" (imposed by the necessities of the moment), we must not forget that in the vision of the Frank leader, Europe and its unity was the mixing boll and his Empire was nothing more than an state created "*manu militari*" or by diplomatic ways. To assert that Charlemagne had the conscience of European unity and he acted in this sense it is an exaggeration. Charlemagne was a charismatic leader, who whit the aid of good counselors, knew how the use the opportunities of the moment. The fact that he created a state, which can be considered a model of government, is another aspect of the problem.

[7] Peter Brown**, Întemeierea creştinismului occidental**, Polirom,2002 p.262
[8] Augustus Franzen, **Kurse Kirchengeschichte**, Agape, Syeged, 1998,p.160

BDD-A23864 © 2005 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.143 (2026-11-19 08:46:54 UTC)