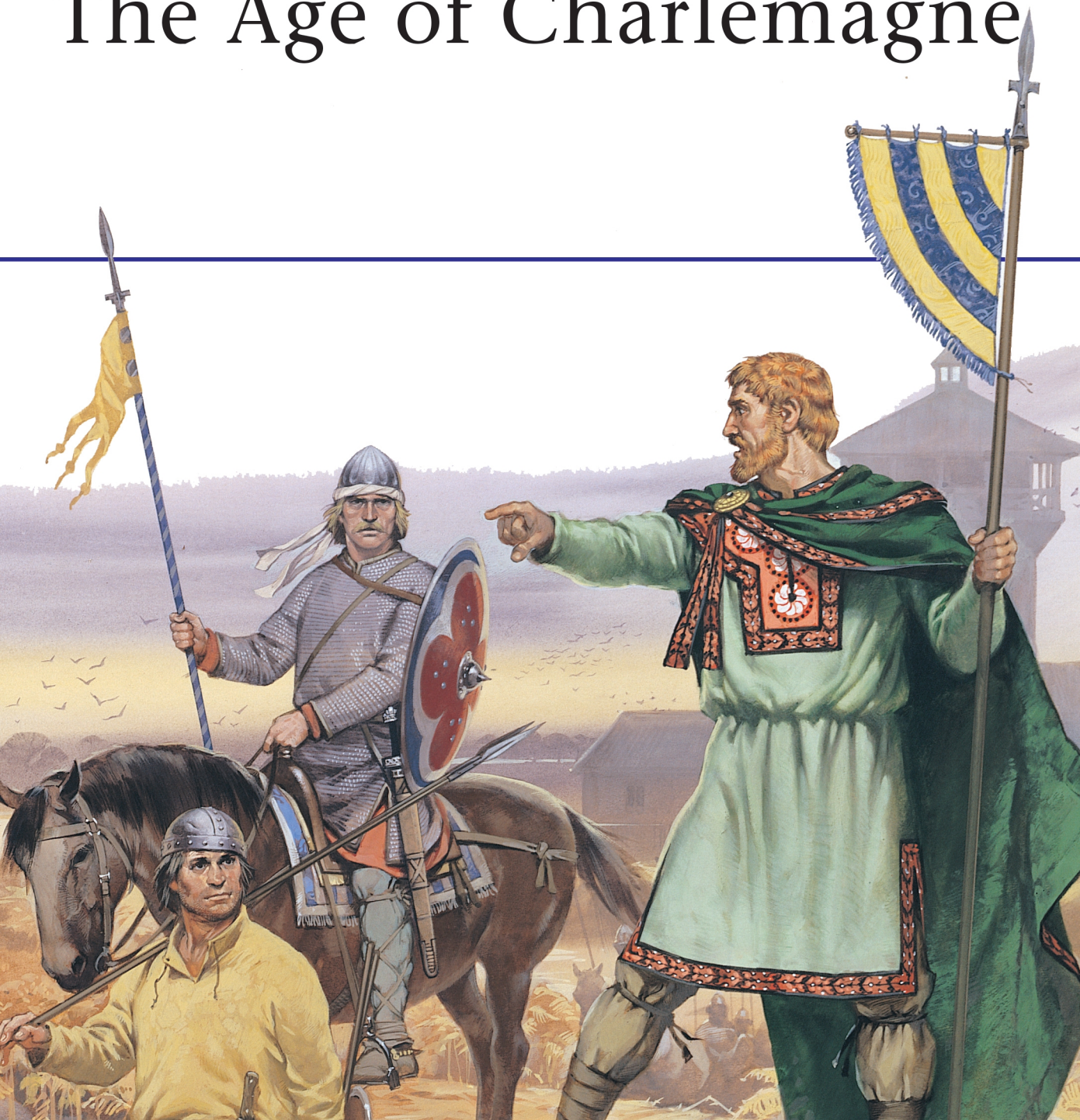


Men-at-Arms

OSPREY  
PUBLISHING

# The Age of Charlemagne

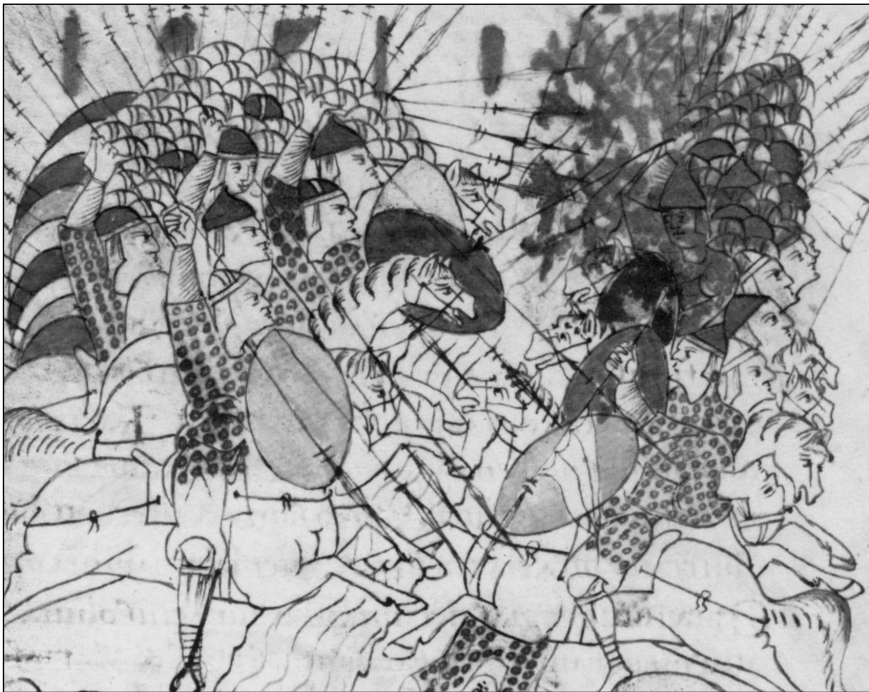


David Nicolle • Illustrated by Angus McBride

Men-at-Arms • 150

---

# The Age of Charlemagne



David Nicolle • Illustrated by Angus McBride

Series editor Martin Windrow

OSPREY PUBLISHING  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
Kemp House, Chawley Park, Cumnor Hill, Oxford OX2 9PH, UK  
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland  
1385 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10018, USA  
E-mail: [info@ospreypublishing.com](mailto:info@ospreypublishing.com)  
[www.ospreypublishing.com](http://www.ospreypublishing.com)

OSPREY is a trademark of Osprey Publishing Ltd

First published in Great Britain in 1984

This electronic edition published in 2024 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

© Osprey Publishing Ltd, 2024

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: PB 9780850450422; eBook 9781472869197; ePDF 9781472869203;  
XML 9781472869210

Typeset by PDQ Digital Media Solutions, Bungay, UK

All uncredited images: © David Nicolle 2024

For title page image caption, see [Page 29](#).

Osprey Publishing supports the Woodland Trust, the UK's leading woodland conservation charity.

To find out more about our authors and books visit [www.ospreypublishing.com](http://www.ospreypublishing.com). Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of forthcoming events and the option to sign up for our [newsletter](#).

## Introduction

The Carolingian dynasty traced its origins back to a political alliance between Pepin of Landen (called ‘the Old’) and Bishop Arnulf of Metz in the first half of the 7th century. By that time effective power was already slipping out of the hands of the Merovingian kings of the Frankish state into those of Mayors. These latter were men who came to dominate the various palaces or power-centres in the loosely-knit Merovingian kingdom. Pepin of Landen was Mayor in Austrasia, the north-eastern heartland of the Frankish state. His daughter married Bishop Arnulf’s son, and thus began the Arnulfing clan, which would later become known as the Carolingians.

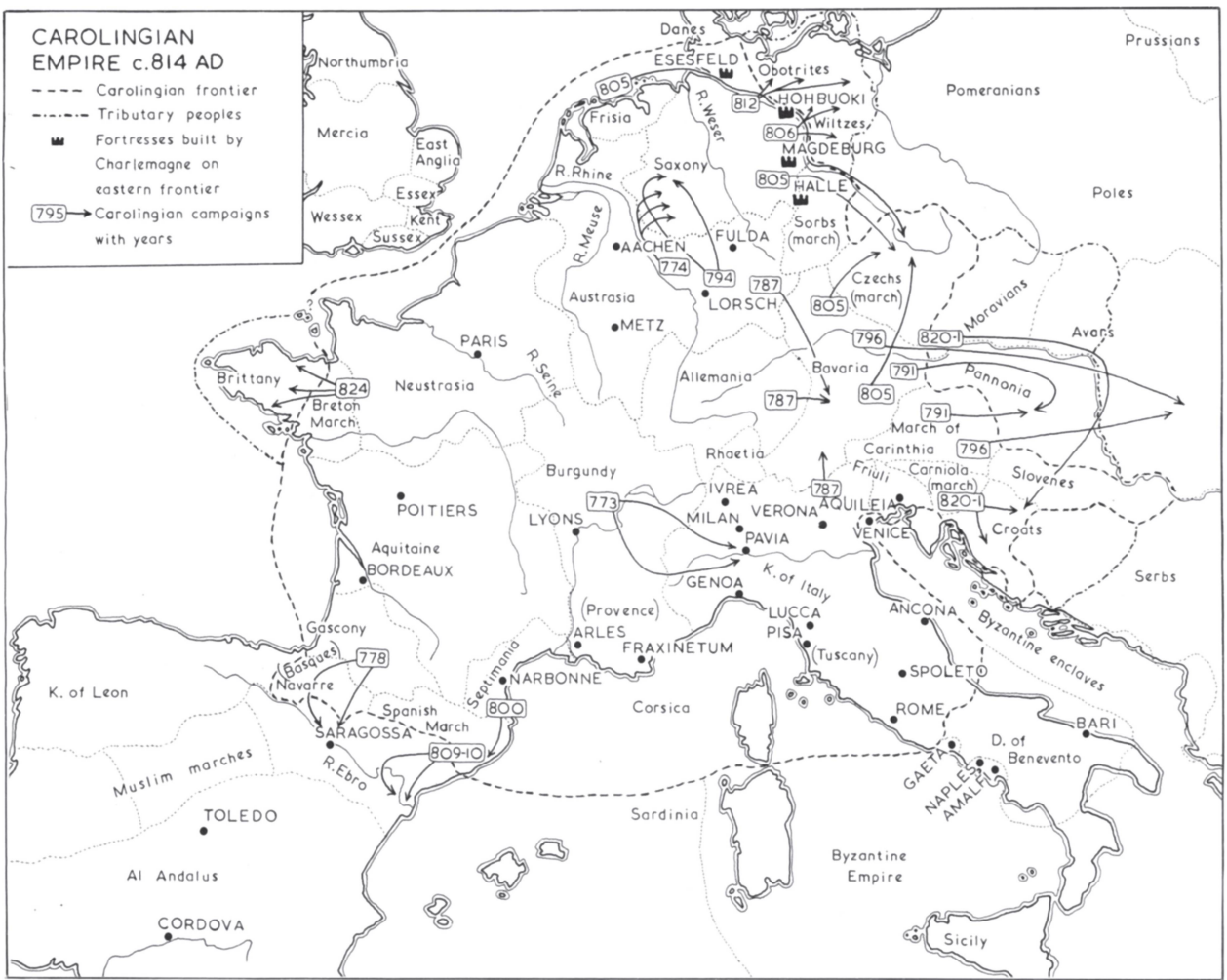
A century later these Arnulfings were, in all but name, the rulers of the kingdom. From their power-base in Austrasia they controlled the army—or at least the best parts of it—and it was now rare for the titular Merovingian king even to have his own armed retainers. Charles Martel, victor of the battle of Poitiers over the Muslims in 732 AD, died in 741 AD; in time-honoured fashion, he had arranged for his authority to be divided between his sons, Carloman and Pepin ‘the Short’. Apparently these brothers worked well together, and continued their father’s policies and campaigns in harmony.

Charles Martel’s wars had been largely defensive in purpose and conservative in character. Things were soon to change, however. In 747 AD Carloman decided to become a monk, and Pepin took over the whole kingdom. Thus, for the first time in many years, the Frankish state was unified. An Arnulfing now ruled the most powerful kingdom in western Europe. For three generations the Arnulfing clan had held barely disputed power. All that remained was for Pepin, as current head of the family, to depose the Merovingian king from his purely figurehead position.

This was still a momentous step to take. The Merovingian kings were mystical, almost semi-sacred figures whose family had its roots deep in the Franks’ pagan past. The only way that Pepin could win a greater degree of divine sanction was by an even closer alliance with the Christian church. In 750 AD he won approval from Pope Zacharias to depose the last ineffectual Merovingian, and in the following year he had himself crowned in the great Abbey of St. Denis as king of the Franks. But whereas a Merovingian king was proclaimed by being raised on a shield in an echo of the family’s distant origins as pagan Germanic war-leaders, Pepin was anointed with holy oil—a ceremony previously reserved for the most sacred Christian rituals of baptism and priestly ordination. In this way Pepin laid the foundations of an alliance

**This gravestone of around 700 AD from the Magdeburg region shows the simple weaponry, sword, spear and shield, common to both Germans and Slavs in this frontier region. (Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte, Halle)**





between the Arnulfing-Carolingians and the Church which was to prove extremely important in future years.

After 751 AD the nature of Pepin's campaigns also changed. Most were now aggressive, whether against pagans in the north, Muslims in the south or fellow Christians in Italy. While those against the Muslims in Septimania were the most striking aspect of Pepin's reign, his wars in Italy in support of the Pope would prove more important in the long run. It would also be wrong to see Pepin's campaigns against the Muslims as holy wars inspired by his new role as the Pope's champion. They were still primarily political campaigns, being directed against Arab rulers who had merely taken the place of previous Visigothic rulers against whom the Franks had warred for centuries. They were also closely linked to Pepin's internal campaigns in nearby Aquitaine, where the legitimacy of

Arnulfing rule was most persistently challenged.

In 754 AD a new Pope, Stephen III, actually came to France and, again at St. Denis, repeated Pepin's coronation. This time he also crowned Pepin's sons as fellow-kings, and declared them all to be Roman Patricians. This gave Pepin and his sons the duty to protect Rome and, in effect, to support the Pope against the Lombard kings who ruled most of Italy. Frankish expansionism was an almost inevitable result, and the unprovoked nature of Charlemagne's wars would follow an already well-established tradition.

Despite these far wider political and military horizons, and the broader ambitions which developed out of a close alliance with the Papacy, the Arnulfing-Carolingian clan still had to rely on its original power-base. This area, the foundation of both their material and their moral authority, lay between the rivers Rhine and Meuse. Today,