Document-Based Activities on Medieval Europe

Using Primary Sources and the Internet

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Overview:

Charlemagne built a kingdom as ruler of the Franks (768–814) after the death of his father, Pepin the Short. He ruled over most of Europe, doubling the territory under the control of his family and assuming the title of Emperor in 800. He is considered the founder of the Holy Roman Empire.

Objectives:

Students will:
- comprehend the interdependence between the monarch and the Roman Catholic Church
- evaluate the circumstances surrounding the development of a feudal hierarchy
- interpret the broad implications of Charlemagne’s reign and legacy

Web Sites Used in this Lesson:

Einhard: The Life of Charlemagne
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/einhard.html

The Monk of Saint Gall:
The Life of Charlemagne, 883/4
http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/stgall-charlemagne.html

Illuminated manuscript “The Coronation of Charlemagne”
http://people.clemson.edu/~abmatth/123.jpg

Strategies:

Discuss with students the general background of Charles the Great and his rise to the throne. Next, pose the following questions:

- “What responsibilities are inherent in being a monarch?”
- “What means can monarchs use to bring about stability and justice for the subjects under their rule?”

Distribute the handout to students. Have students answer question 1-8 based on the primary source.

Review student answers, then have the class discuss the following question: “Are there limits to the power of a monarch?” After reaching a consensus on the issue of monarchical power, ask students to read the second primary source and answer questions 9 & 10.
Review the information, then have students examine the last primary source and answer the remaining question.

Wrap-Up:

After students have completed the worksheet, have the class come to a consensus regarding the long-term effects and ramifications of Charlemagne’s rule. Pose the following question: “Did the Catholic Church help or hinder Charlemagne’s greatness?”

Extension Activities:

1. Using Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne* (a version can be found at http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/einhard.html), divide the students into small groups and have them do an in-depth visual report. Students will pantomime, draw, produce a collage, or create another acceptable visual in order to present the attributes of Charlemagne as described by Einhard.

2. Using all three primary sources provided, students should write an essay based on the following prompt: “Did the Catholic Church help or hinder Charlemagne’s greatness?” Ask students to take a side in the matter and justify their response in their essay.

3. Ask students to view sections from *The Song of Roland* (a version can be found at http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/OMACL/Roland/). Ask students to identify the major themes (Good and Evil, Loyalty and Vassalage, The Benevolence of God, The Will of God, and Man’s Place and Duty) within the sections of the work. Ask them to chart the similarities and differences between the themes and their contemporary applications, if any exist. Next, ask them to imagine what it might have been like to live during the reign of Charlemagne.
Charlemagne
Student Worksheet

Introduction:

Charlemagne used the great wealth and strong military organization that he had inherited from his father and brother to build his empire. In 772 he opened an offensive against the Saxons, and for more than 30 years he pursued a ruthless policy that was aimed at subjugating the Saxons and converting them to Christianity. Almost every year, Charlemagne attacked one or another of the several regions of Saxon territory. He also was responsible for mass executions: for example, 4500 Saxons were killed on a single day in 782. The Saxons proved to be a far more difficult enemy than any of the other nations conquered by Charlemagne. By contrast, the Lombards had been conquered in a single campaign in 773–74. In 788 Charlemagne took Bavaria and launched an offensive against the Avar Empire.

On Christmas Day in 800, Charlemagne accepted the title of emperor and was crowned by Pope Leo III, and ruled until his death in 814. During his reign, it looked as if a new Roman Empire might emerge in Europe; however this did not happen. His empire was divided into three areas and led to the gradual emergence of regional monarchies.

Directions:

Einhard: The Life of Charlemagne
Go to http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/einhard.html and answer the following questions:

Scroll down and click on the link marked 16. Foreign Relations

1. According to this excerpt from Einhard’s The Life of Charlemagne, what did Charlemagne do to add to the “glory of his reign”?

Scroll down and click on the link marked 27. Generosity

2. According to Einhard, how did Charlemagne show his compassion to his fellow man?
3. Why did Charlemagne travel to Rome in November of 800?

4. What was the reaction of the Roman emperors when Charlemagne received the title of “Emperor & Augustus” from the Pope?

5. What action did Charlemagne take when he found the laws of his people to be “very defective,” and how may that have affected the diverse empire over which he ruled?

6. Why was it important for a monarch to leave a will?

7. Charlemagne, as his will states, divided his estate into “three lots, and subdivided and set off two of the said lots into twenty-one parts, keeping the third entire.” Discuss the division and how each of the lots was to be distributed.

8. In this preface to The Life of Charlemagne, Einhard states that he feels “no man can write with more accuracy than I of events that took place about me, and of facts concerning which I had personal knowledge.” Why do you think Einhard felt this way and do you agree with his statement?