



34. CRISIS OF THE CAROLINGIAN EMPIRE AND NEW BARBARIAN INVASIONS

We must now dedicate a few words to the historical chronicle necessary to explain the great changes that preceded the collapse of Tradition in the West.

Following the custom of the earlier Frankish rulers, Charlemagne divided his dominions into three parts. His son Pepin (or Carloman) received the Kingdom of Italy, which included all the domains that had previously belonged to the Lombards and to the Byzantines, as well as, the Patrimony of St. Peter¹ and the Kingdom of Burgundy that were both direct vassals.



1. The kingdoms of the three sons of Charlemagne

Louis the Pious inherited the Kingdom of the Western Franks, which included much of current France, the Spanish Marches (Aragon) and the vassal Kingdom of Asturias. The third son, Charles the Younger, was bequeathed the Kingdom of the Eastern Franks (current Belgium, Germany, Austria, Bohemia and Hungary). Pepin (or Carloman) and Charles the Younger, however, died before his father, so the entire territorial legacy ended up in the hands of Louis the Pious. The latter, therefore, became King of Italy, King of France, King of Germany and was eventually acclaimed Emperor².



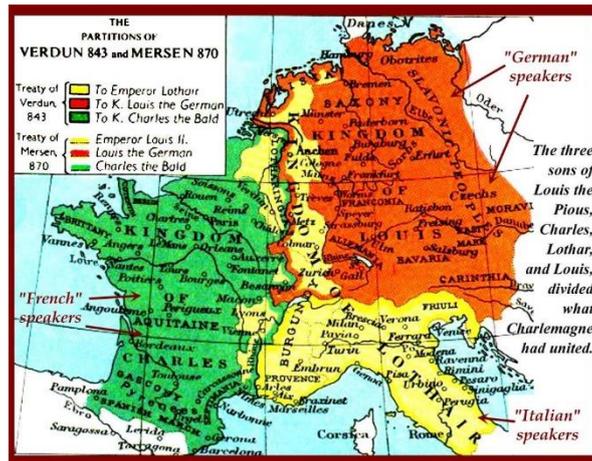
2. Charlemagne assumes Louis the Pious as co-Emperor

¹ Comprised of an ensemble of small fiefdoms granted to the Pope by various Lombard and Merovingian Kings and by the Carolingian Empire, of whom, in the secular domain, he was a vassal. Only after seizing the opportunity to proclaim its independence from the Empire would that territory have been known as the State of the Church,

² In line with the doctrine of the temporal power of his grandfather Charlemagne, in the year 824 Louis promulgated the *Constitutio Romana*, with which the pope of Rome was bound to swear loyalty to the Emperor before the coronation rite. See Andrea Zorzi, *Manuale di storia medievale*, Torino, UTET, 2016, p. 121. This act of vassalage remained unaltered for at least two centuries.



Charlemagne was an Emperor who proved to be a skilled warrior, a fair judge and a farsighted administrator. He was also able to conduct relations with the Church with firm hand and organized his Empire on the model of the initiatory organizations of which he was at the helm. Louis, on the other hand, was mainly concerned with the relations between the Empire and the Church, confirming his sacral authority and intensifying the spiritual relationship between the state and the *kṣatriya* initiatic organizations. Due to his predominantly spiritual commitment, he went down in history with the byname 'the *Pious*'¹. Louis had three sons of the first bed, and Charles the Bald of the second bed. Lothair, the eldest of the three inherited the title of King of Italy.



3. Second tripartition of the Empire: the three kingdoms

His kingdom divided the empire vertically and included Italy, Provence and the Lotharingia (Lorraine) up to the mouth of the river Rhine. He was later acclaimed Emperor by the imperial barons and by the people and the Senate of Rome², where he was crowned in 823. Pepin, the second son of Louis the Pious, was bequeathed the kingdom of Aquitaine, that is of western Francia, which included a large part of the present France. Finally, the third son, Louis II the German, received the kingdom of eastern Francia, approximately corresponding to present Germany.

The three brothers did not get along with each other or with their father, the Emperor. To this climate also contributed the plots of their half-brother Charles the Bald, who succeeded in replacing Pepin as King of Aquitaine. On Lothair's death, Louis the German was designated Emperor, and from that moment on the imperial title almost always fell on the kings of Germany and Italy. The frictions among the Carolingian heirs prevented the imperial succession from becoming dynastic. If from one hand such elective characteristic of the imperial office³ made its actual power lesser than that of established regal dynasties, on the other hand conferred on the Emperor of the Christians a greater prestige as a result of the publicly recognized merit and an unparalleled sacral charisma.

¹ In Latin, *pius* indicates a person completely devoted to the divine will (*bonæ voluntatis*), both in the exoteric and esoteric domains.

² In place of the acclamation by the legions, as it happened in ancient Rome, in the Holy Roman Empire the first step for the recognition of the imperial dignity consisted in the acclamation by the nobility. It was, therefore, a normal adaptation of elective practice to different historical conditions. The recognition by the Senate of Rome, which conferred on the sovereign the title of Patrician, and that by the Roman population that recognized him as King of Italy (and, for a certain period, of Lotharingia), remained unaltered. At this point the candidate was recognized as a *de facto* Emperor and worthy of being crowned by the pope.

³ The imperial electivity survived, at least formally, until the advent of the last Roman Emperor, Francis II of Habsburg (1792).





The second barbaric threat appeared on the eastern border of the Empire. After the repeated attempts by the Slavic peoples to break into the Empire throughout the 8th century¹, a new warrior population of Siberian origin appeared at the borders. After seriously threatening the existence of the Eastern Empire, they became federated with the Byzantine army and employed by the *Basileis* to contain the expansion of the Holy Roman Empire towards the Balkans. However, their conversion to Catholicism promoted at the beginning of the 11th century by their King, St. Stephen, eventually attracted them into the orbit of the Holy Roman Empire.



6. Landing of Saracen pirates

The third barbaric threat was represented by the Saracen² pirates. A contemporary complaisant historiography is accustomed to describing the Islamic society of that period as highly civilized. This is certainly true, especially with regard to the Near East, Morocco and Spain. But it is too often forgotten to mention that North Africa was dotted with small independent emirates and city-states that thrived only by raiding, piracy, brigandage, and the slave market. In the year 843 the Saracens had the audacity to sack Rome and, later, to establish piratical ports and dens almost everywhere in southern Italy and on the islands of the Mediterranean Sea. Also, in this case, the Empire's inability to plan an adequate maritime strategy and control over the seas turned out to be the cause of many disasters.



1. The Church of Rome tries to subdue the Sovereigns (Apocalypse XVII)

In these circumstances the popes distinguished themselves for their two-faced policy. At every difficulty that occurred in the Empire they always hastened to squeeze greater autonomy from the crown, drawing up false *Decretali* and falsifying any documents proceeding from the Imperial Chancellery. However, the popes were ready to withdraw all their claims and to swear loyalty and

storia medievale, cit., p. 144); and particularly the conquest of southern Italy, whose grave consequences on the medieval 'ecumene' will be illustrated later.

¹ The only Slavic state of a certain consistency, Moravia, collapsed in 907, after seventy years of existence. The Slavs were pushed into Central Europe by other populations from Central Asia, such as the Huns and the Avars. They constituted the lowest castes of these semi-nomadic populations and for this reason they were called Slavs or Serbs (Gr. Σχλαυηνοί, slaves, Lat. *Servi*, servants or slaves).

² For this reason, they were later called "barbaresque" pirates. The Latin term *sarraceni* is derived from the Aramaic *sarqiyyin* which means "inhabitants of the desert (*sarq*)".



submission to the Emperor whenever they were threatened by the Arabs and the Byzantines or by Lombard uprisings¹.

Petrus Simonet de Maisonneuve

¹ The treacherous behavior of the popes was evident in the cases of Leo III (795-816), Paschal I (817-824), Eugene II (824-827), Gregory IV (827-844), Sergius II (844-847, Leo IV (847-855), the greatest falsifier of documents, Nicholas I (858-867), John VIII (872-882), Adrian III (884-885), another notable forger, and finally in that of the abominable Stephen IV (896 -897) who ordered a macabre trial against the corpse of his predecessor Formosus (891-896) who was indicted for having been too loyal to the Emperor. The indignation of the Roman people broke out in a revolt that ended with the strangulation of Pope Stephen IV (Carlo Rendina, *I Papi. Storia e segreti*, Roma, Newton Compton, 1984, pp. 244-304).

