

Charlemagne and His Family

During the collapse of the western half of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, the Franks took control of northern Gaul (what is now France) through military campaigns and political alliances. They continued their expansion and added marriage as a tool of diplomacy and dominance. The most powerful Frankish ruler, Charlemagne (747- 814), had a succession of wives, along with concubines, who produced a total of eighteen children and often engaged in political activities or significant cultural and religious patronage. Many of Europe's royal dynasties and noble families are descended from Charlemagne, though only through his sons, as he refused to allow his daughters to marry. The children of his daughters' extramarital relationships, along with Charlemagne's own children and grandchildren born out of wedlock, were often granted royal or church positions such as abbots and abbesses of major monasteries. They were thus part of networks of influence, though they could not inherit the throne.

Einhard Describes Charlemagne's Private Life

REINHARD, From *The Life of Charlemagne* (ca. 817-836)

Einhard was a Frankish scholar who became an adviser and friend to Charlemagne and his son Louis the Pious. His most important written work was a biography of Charlemagne, which began soon after the ruler's death and describes his wars, building projects, personal appearance, character, and actions. The work paints Charlemagne in a very favorable light, as Einhard's point was to praise the man he described as "my foster father" and "a very great and distinguished man." Despite this bias, Einhard is nevertheless frank about Charlemagne's personal life and relations with his wives, concubines, and children.

Private Life

After his father's death, while sharing the kingdom with his brother, he bore his unfriendliness and jealousy most patiently and, to the wonder of all, could not be provoked to be angry with him. Later, he married a daughter of Desiderius, King of the Lombards, at the instance of his mother, but he repudiated her at the end of a year for some reason unknown and married Hildegard, a woman of high birth of Suabian origin. He had three sons by her - Charles, Pepin, and Louis - and as many daughters - Hruodrud, Bertha, and Gisela. He had three other daughters besides these - Theodorada, Hiltrud, and Ruodhaid-two by his third wife, Fastrada, a woman of East Frankish (that is to say, of German) origin, and the third by a concubine, whose name for the moment escapes me. At the death of Fastrada [794],

he married Liutgard, an Alemannic woman, who bore him no children. After her death [June 4,800], he had three concubines -Gersuinda, a Saxon by whom he had Adaltrud; Regina, who was the mother of Drogo and Hugh; and Ethelind, by whom he had Theodoric. Charles' mother, Bertrada, passed her old age with him in great honor; he entertained the greatest veneration for her, and there was never any disagreement between them except when he divorced the daughter of King Desiderius, whom he had married to please her. She died soon after Hildegard, after living to see three grandsons and as many granddaughters in her son's house, and he buried her with great pomp in the Basilica of St. Denis, where his father lay. He had an only sister, Gisela, who had consecrated herself to a religious life from girlhood, and he cherished as much affection for her as for his mother. She also died a few years before him in the nunnery where she passed her life.

Charles and the Education of His Children

The plan that he adopted for his children's education was, first of all, to have both boys and girls instructed in the liberal arts, to which he also turned his own attention. As soon as their years admitted, in accordance with the custom of the Franks, the boys had to learn horsemanship and to practice war and the chase, and the girls to familiarize themselves with cloth-making and to handle distaff and spindle, that they might not grow indolent through idleness, and he fostered in them every virtuous sentiment. He only lost three of all his children before his death: two sons and one daughter, Charles, who was the eldest; Pepin, whom he had made King of Italy, and Hruodrud, his oldest daughter, whom he had betrothed to Constantine [VI, 780-802], Emperor of the Greeks. Pepin left one son, named Bernard, and five daughters, Adelaide, Atula, Guntrada, Berthaid and Theoderada. The King gave striking proof of his fatherly affection at the time of Pepin's death [810]: he appointed the grandson to succeed Pepin and had the granddaughters brought up with his own daughters. When his sons and his daughter died, he was not so calm as might have been expected from his remarkably strong mind, for his affections were no less strong and moved him to tears. Again, when he was told of the death of Hadrian [796], the Roman Pontiff, whom he had loved most of all his friends, he wept as much as if he had lost a brother or a very dear son. He was by nature most ready to contract friendships and not only made friends easily but clung to them persistently and cherished most fondly those with whom he had formed such ties. He was so careful of the training of his sons and daughters that he never took his meals without them when he was at home and never made a journey without them; his sons would ride at his side, and his daughters follow him, while a number of his body-guard, detailed for their protection, brought up the rear. Strange to say, although they were very handsome women, and he loved them very dearly, he was never willing to marry any of his daughters to a man of their own nation or to a foreigner but kept them all at home until his death, saying that he could not dispense with their society.

Hence, though otherwise happy, he experienced the malignity of fortune as far as they were concerned, yet he concealed his knowledge of the rumors current in regard to them and of the suspicions entertained of their honor.

Document Questions:

1. What does this account tell you about the value of Frankish society?
2. Other than fondness for his daughters, can you think of another reason why Charlemagne would have wanted to prevent them from making official marriages?