

**THE HISTORY OF
FRANCE, VOL.
I, PP. 1-293**

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The History of France, Vol. I, pp. 1-293 by Eyre Evans Crowe

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BY
EYRE EVANS CROWE.

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THE
HISTORY OF FRANCE.

CHAPTER I.

THE MEROVINGIANS AND CARLOVINGIANS.

GAUL was reduced by Cæsar under subjection to the Romans about fifty years previous to the birth of Christ. The country remained for the space of five centuries under their sway, troubled, nevertheless, during the latter half of the period, by the incursions, conflicts, and finally by the settlement, of barbarian invaders. Under its first conquerors Gaul made rapid progress in improvement. It received the advantages of political union, of an enlightened system of justice, of a long interval of peace; and wealth, industry, agriculture, and commerce soon followed as necessary consequences. The very climate was wonderfully ameliorated, and the soil rendered capable of producing and maturing those choice fruits which the Romans introduced. The vine, the olive, even the useful plant of flax, were brought thither from the south. The Christian religion, too, was amongst the boons which Rome gave to her subject lands in return for their political independence: nor can the conquests of that ambitious city be said to have been, on the whole, destructive of liberty; since by her were sown those precious seeds of municipal union and rights which were never altogether stifled, and which sprang up after the long winter of the dark ages, to offer the earliest buddings of civilization, and to bear the first fruits of modern freedom.

Of the natural and well-known boundaries of the Roman province of Gaul, the Rhine was the most important. It was the great barrier which defended the empire from the errant tribes and nations that swarmed beyond. Wealth and civilization were on one side of the stream; want and barbarism upon the other. Betwixt such neighbors the natural state is war. The disciplined legions of Rome, however, quelled the turbulence of the German tribes, penetrated far and at different intervals into their country, fully avenged one or two defeats, and long held their rude enemies in salutary awe.

The Germans, though little versed in policy, began after some time to perceive that their frequent defeats were in a great measure owing to their disunion, to their dispersion in different tribes, and to the want of any solid or lasting bond of connexion, whilst they were opposed by the united mind and forces of a large empire. The mutual leagues hitherto formed amongst the barbarians were not sufficiently knit and woven together. The consciousness of this defect produced in the third century those confederacies, in which many tribes united, not occasionally but lastingly, under one common name, and often under one monarch or chief. Some assumed the appellation of *Allemanni*, or *All-Men*; others, the simpler distinction of *Franks*, that is, *Brave* or *Free Men*.

The chief seat of the confederacy of the Franks was that marshy territory, overflowed and divided into islets by the Rhine, from the spot where the river commences to turn westward, to its junction with the sea. The first mention of them by the historians of the empire takes place A. D. 241. In nearly forty years after, Probus quelled one of their incursions, and drove them back into their morasses. The civil war betwixt Magnentius and Constantius, which occupied and wasted the Roman forces in mutual slaughter, allowed both Franks and *Allemanni* to establish their desolate rule on the left bank of the Rhine. The emperor Julian defeated and subdued them, drove the *Allemanni* within their ancient bounds, but allowed the Franks to settle permanently on the Roman side of the Rhine, in the province of *Toxandria*, supposed to be the modern *Brabant*.

The commencement of the fifth century is marked by the great and victorious irruption of all the barbarian hosts into Gaul. They poured, like a long pent up and gathering tide, in a thousand destructive torrents throughout the land, sweeping away and overwhelming in a mass, life, property, and institutions. Were it not for the Christian church, which held itself aloft and alive above the general inundation, the very memory and precious traditions of the past would have perished amidst the universal ruin. Years elapsed, ere the agitation subsided and the inebriety of conquest was over. When calm was restored, the *Visigoths* were in possession of *Aquitaine* and the lands southward of the *Loire*, with *Toulouse* for their capital. The *Burgundians* held the provinces bordering on the *Rhone*, from the lake of *Geneva* to the *Mediterranean*. *Britany* had established a kind of independence. The Franks, who had looked on themselves as the allies more than as the enemies of Roman power, and who had at first bravely stood forth in its defence, had advanced their establishments over the present *Netherlands* to the limits of mod-

ern France; whilst the central provinces, preserved to the empire by the victories of Ætius, were, like Britain, gradually abandoned to themselves, and came to obey, under Roman forms and titles, the wealthiest and most powerful of the native provincials. It was thus that count Ægidius, and after him his son Syagrius, governed, and were even said to have *reigned* at Soissons.

It is singular to observe that of all the nations which overran Gaul, that which eventually subdued the rest, and gave its name both to the land and to the general race, was the least united, and the least advanced in the arts of life and policy. Both the Goths and the Burgundians were more civilized than the Franks. Each of the former was a nation, forming one race, and obeying one monarch and family of monarchs. The Franks, on the contrary, were but a looser kind of confederacy, which held together still less as they advanced from the Rhine. Each town or territory had its petty and independent sovereign; and previous to Clovis, we meet with no sign of supreme chief or capital town amongst them. This, no doubt, was advantageous to them. They were thus more free to emigrate and to invade. It left the throne of chieftaincy open to the first leader of pre-eminent talents; whilst the vagueness and comprehensiveness of their name was calculated to congregate and admit beneath their banner any roving bands, or even whole nations, of barbarians that might be in search of plunder or establishments.

Such is the secret of the rise of Clovis, the founder of the French monarchy. He was the young chief or king of a small colony of the Franks established at Tournay. In conjunction with the Frank chief of Cambrai, he attacked Syagrius, the provincial governor of the Soissonnois, defeated him, and took possession of his territory and capital. (A. D. 485.) It was on this occasion the circumstance took place, so often narrated and alluded to as a proof of the piety of the king, and the independent habits of the barbarians. A silver vase, reserved for sacred uses, had been taken, amidst other plunder, from the church of Rheims. It was at Soissons that the distribution of booty was to take place. Thither came Saint Remy, bishop of Rheims, supplicating for the restoration of the silver vase. Clovis was favorable to the bishop's request, and sought to gratify it. He addressed his assembled soldiers, and begged of them, in addition to his share, to grant him the vase in question. Ere the assembly could answer, a zealous soldier, jealous of his rights, struck the vase with his ax, exclaiming that the king had no right to more than fell to his allotment. Despite the rudeness of the act, it was still consonant to the habits and laws of the free barbarians.

Clovis was obliged to dissemble his resentment, and defer his vengeance. It was not until several months after, that, at a review, he took an opportunity to find fault with the breaker of the vase for the bad condition of his arms. Clovis flung the soldier's ax to the ground, and whilst the latter stooped to pick up the weapon, the monarch slew him with a blow of his own, exclaiming, "Thus didst thou serve the vase of Soissons!"

Clovis, like all the heroes and eminent men of those ages, paid great respect to the church, and received considerable advantage from its aid. The Franks had been hitherto heathens; but Clovis, having married Clotilda, a Burgundian princess, became instructed in the rites and religion of the Christians. In the heat of a battle against the Germans in the neighborhood of Cologne, Clovis recalled the example of Constantine, who in a doubtful moment of action invoked the God of the Christians, and was heard. The king of the Franks imitated the example of the Roman, prayed for victory to the God of Clotilda and of Constantine, won it soon after, and was baptized, with the greater number of his followers, in grateful acknowledgment of the divine aid. Clovis had the good fortune to imbibe Christianity at its pure source. The Visigoth and Burgundian monarchs, though Christian, were Arians at this time. Clovis received the orthodox faith, which brought to him the zealous support of the Gaulish clergy, and gave to him the title of *Most Christian King*, worn by his successors to the present day.

The comparison between Clovis and Constantine might be followed farther. Their embracing of Christianity had a similar effect upon both. Instead of tempering their passions, and inspiring them with the virtues of mildness and mercy, it seems to have rather given rein to their ferocity and blood-thirstiness. The domestic murders committed by Constantine, that of his wife, and of his son, are known. To assassination Clovis united perfidy. All the rival monarchs or chieftains whom he could conquer or entrap were sacrificed to his jealousy and ambition. The whole race of a rival family was extirpated, in some instances, by the hand of Clovis himself. How could Christianity be made conducive to such crimes! By being coupled with the corrupt doctrine of personal confession and absolution, which, by superseding the voice of conscience, took away all natural obstacles to crime, and held forth, in a barbarous age, the certain prospect of impunity.

Although Clovis won a great battle over the Visigoths in Aquitaine, and obtained a nominal dominion over a portion of that province, nevertheless, his kingdom cannot be said to