



Legendary Figures

Clovis I, King of the Franks 450-550

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe was transformed by the rise of new groups such as the Vikings, Anglo-Saxons, Normans and Franks. Their advent led to a series of upheavals and the creation of new states.

In the 5th century, Clovis I brought about the political and religious unity of almost the entire Frankish Empire, a territory that would later become France. Conversion to Christianity helped legitimize his royal authority, contributing to his image as the first King of France. Clovis' reign also helped shape a shared identity among peoples of diverse origins.

Charlemagne, King of the Franks and Emperor of the West 750-850

Charlemagne was crowned Emperor in the year 800. During his reign, he loosely united Western Christendom, a territory stretching from Spain to Germany to Italy. His reign, which lasted more than 40 years, was notable for major reforms undertaken in consultation with scholarly advisors.

Religious reform brought about the foundation of abbeys, which became important cultural centres. His reign also brought about reform of Royal administration, through ordinances known as capitularies, which were shared throughout the kingdom by envoys known as *missi dominici*. Significant educational reform was another hallmark of this period of the Carolingian dynasty. Written knowledge became more important through the rediscovery of ancient texts and the production of numerous manuscripts.

Charlemagne's reign also brought about cultural renewal, as monasteries, cathedrals and palaces became intellectual and artistic centres.

Rollo, Viking Chief 850-950

In 793, Vikings attacked the Monastery at Lindisfarne, their first incursion on English shores. This began a series of raids that terrorized local populations for many decades.

In France, the Vikings sailed up the Loire and the Seine, reaching Paris. To keep the peace, Charles III, King of the Franks, decided to negotiate with the Scandinavian invaders. He ultimately ceded a territory near Rouen, which was given to the Viking chief, Rollo, a brilliant strategist.

Normandy, which means “Men of the North,” had been born. The Normans settled this territory, giving the Duchy its name.

William I, King of England 1000 – 1100

In 1066, Edward the Confessor, King of England, died without an heir. His nephew William of Normandy should, in principle, have inherited the throne. However, Edward’s half-brother Harold took the throne instead.

Seeking a way to claim his right to the throne, William decided to invade England. William and his army defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings, thus earning him the nickname William the Conqueror. The story of that battle is illustrated in the famous Bayeux Tapestry.

Eleanor of Aquitaine, Duchess of Aquitaine and Countess of Poitiers 1100-1200

During the Middle Ages, some women exercised their authority, challenging the stereotype of subordinate medieval women. Eleanor of Aquitaine was one such woman. During the 12th century, she was Queen of France, then Queen of England. She bore several children, three of whom became kings.

As Duchess of Aquitaine and Countess of Poitiers, she managed her own lands, defying the tradition of masculine power. She later rebelled against her second husband, Henry II of England, taking sides with her sons Richard, Henry and John. After Henry II’s death, she ensured the passing of the crown to her son Richard I, known as Richard the Lionheart, who left on a Crusade soon after.

Until her death, Eleanor of Aquitaine remained interested in her duchy’s politics and the succession to the throne. She remains an exceptional figure of the Middle Ages.

Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury 1100-1200

During the Middle Ages, the Church was a powerful organization. As a political and military authority, it exerted considerable influence over people's lives.

In 1162, Thomas Becket was named Archbishop of Canterbury. He quickly came into conflict with King Henry II of England regarding the rights and privileges of the Church. The king wanted to control the clergy's privileges, and sought sole control over all of the kingdom's affairs.

In 1170, Thomas Becket was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral by four knights who supported the king. He was canonized three years later at Canterbury Cathedral, which became a place of pilgrimage. Thomas Becket was soon declared a martyr, as demonstrated by his many relics.

Richard I, King of England, known as Richard the Lionheart 1000-1200

During the Middle Ages, the veneration of relics and pilgrimages to Jerusalem were common practices among pious Western Christians. Eight successive Crusades were undertaken by Christians.

The First Crusade, blessed by the Pope, began in 1096. Christian kings and knights took the Cross to free Jerusalem. A century later, Richard I, King of England, would command the Third Crusade. He seized Acre, giving pilgrims access to certain holy sites.

Through his military exploits, Richard I became a key figure in the history of the Middle Ages. Known as Richard the Lionheart, he has become a legendary hero.

Louis IX, King of France, known as St. Louis 1200-1300

France enjoyed a period of prosperity during the reign of Louis IX. Numerous judicial and administrative royal reforms were brought about.

Louis IX, an avid builder, supported the founding of the Sorbonne in Paris. He also ordered construction of the Sainte-Chapelle to house Christ's Crown of Thorns, reportedly purchased from Venetian merchants in 1229. A pious man, Louis IX vowed to go on a Crusade after being healed of a serious illness. He took part in the Seventh Crusade. He took the Cross again a few years later during the Eighth Crusade, but was felled by dysentery and died in 1270 at the gates of Tunis.

Worshipped both in life and death, Louis IX was canonized in 1297 as St. Louis of France.

Pope Gregory IX **1150-1250**

The Inquisition was a dark period in Church history, and has left its mark on the collective imagination. Its judicial proceedings were aimed at combatting heresy and those who didn't believe in Catholic dogma.

Beginning in 1225, Pope Gregory IX, principal leader of the Inquisition, named its first judges, with powers to investigate and condemn all acts perceived as sinful. Although repression already existed, the Inquisition empowered tribunals to intervene in all affairs relating to defence of the faith. Tribunals brutally repressed witchcraft and persecuted non-Christians.

During the 15th century, with the development of judicial institutions, Inquisition tribunals were slowly phased out. The Spanish Inquisition nonetheless endured until the end of the 19th century.

John Lackland, King of England **1150-1250**

During the 13th century, England suffered many losses at the hands of the French.

During his 17-year reign, King John, known as John Lackland, lost all his fiefdoms in France. His military losses damaged his royal authority. Heavy taxation further alienated him from all sectors of society. In 1215, the barons made him sign the *Magna Carta*, or Great Charter, which revised the rights and obligations of the king and his subjects. For the first time ever, a document limited royal power.

Down through the centuries, the key articles of the *Magna Carta* — which address justice, civil liberties and the rule of law — retained important symbolic power. The document's fundamental principles have inspired countries the world over, including the United States, Canada and France, and are enshrined in constitutional documents.

Edward I, King of England, known as Edward Longshanks **1200-1300**

Henry III left his son Edward a kingdom divided by baronial rebellion. During his reign, King Edward I strengthened royal authority over the old feudal nobility. He established a system of government which brought together county officials and nobles.

The King's Council slowly developed into a parliament, which in turn became a permanent institution. In addition to strengthening the authority of the monarchy through judicial powers, Parliament helped enact statutes that promoted the healthy administration of the kingdom.

After conquering Wales, Edward I halted a Scottish rebellion led by William Wallace. He tried in vain, throughout his reign, to conquer Scotland.

Philip VI of Valois, King of France **1250-1350**

Philip VI of Valois inherited the throne of France in 1337, upon the death of his cousin Charles IV — youngest son of Philippe le Bel and last of the Capetians. However, Edward III of England, grandson of Philippe le Bel, also claimed the throne. A war of succession was fought over possession of the Kingdom of France, known today as the Hundred Years' War. France was weakened and divided following a devastating defeat at Crécy in 1346, the loss of Calais the following year, and an outbreak of plague from 1348 to 1349.

The reign of Philip VI, first king of the Valois dynasty, thus took place during a devastating period, despite the fact that he managed to expand the Kingdom of France by adding Dauphiné and Montpellier.

Pope Clement VII **1300-1400**

In the middle of the Hundred Years' War, two popes were elected, leaving the Church with divided loyalties. Clement VII ruled from Avignon, supported by France and Spain, while Urban VI ruled in Rome, supported by England, the German Empire and Northern Italy.

This became known as the Western Schism. This religious quarrel, which was largely ideological and political in nature, lasted 39 years. Although it primarily concerned the ruling classes, most Catholics remained indifferent, as their religious ties were solely between themselves and their priest.

The quarrel threw discredit upon the Church, contributing to the emergence of dissenting forces and the birth of Protestant reforms in the 16th century by Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Joan of Arc, known as the Maid of Orléans **1400-1450**

The myth of Joan of Arc began while she was still alive. A simple shepherd from Lorraine, she became a popular heroine during her lifetime. She played a crucial role during the Hundred Years' War between France and England.

Legend has it that the deeply religious young Joan heard divine voices ordering her to fight the English. Under her command, the Siege of Orleans was lifted by the French army, greatly contributing to a reversal of fortune during the war. Despite her many brave exploits, she met a tragic end. Joan of Arc was captured by the Burgundian faction at Compiègne in 1430. She was sold to the English and, following trial as a heretic, was sentenced to be burned at the stake.

In 1456, her reputation was fully restored after the Pope ordered a new trial, which declared her innocent. Thanks to the preserved records of these trials, Joan is one of the best-known figures of the Middle Ages.

Richard Neville, known as Kingmaker 1400-1500

In England in 1450, a civil war called the War of the Roses erupted between two rival branches of the Plantagenet family. Both claimed the Throne of England. The House of York was represented by a white rose, and the House of Lancaster by a red rose.

Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, one of the principle barons of the era, originally supported King Henry VI, of the House of Lancaster. Later, however, he joined the opposition, led by Richard, Duke of York. Open war broke out in 1461. Warwick would play a key role in overthrowing Henry VI in favour of Edward IV, son of the Duke of York. He was thus nicknamed Kingmaker.

Although the relationship between the new king and his most powerful subject was excellent at first, it turned sour within a number of years. Warwick ended up joining the Lancaster side, and helped restore Henry VI to the throne in 1470.

Richard III, King of England 1400-1500

Richard III rose to power in 1483 after usurping the throne of England from his nephew Edward V. His reputation was grim, as he was accused of imprisoning young Edward and his brother in the Tower of London in order to reign. This dark side of his reign has been forever immortalized by Shakespeare in his play *Richard III*.

In 1485, during the turmoil of the War of the Roses, Henry Tudor, Lancaster pretender to the throne, faced the King's army at the Battle of Bosworth Field. Richard III was defeated and killed. Following his victory, Henry Tudor married Elizabeth of York, reconciling the two Roses.

In 2012, a body was found beneath a Leicester parking lot. Researchers identified the remains as those of Richard III, found not far from where he perished during the famous battle.