**Clovis**

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Top of Form



Bottom of Form

* **Born:** 465?
* **Died:** November 27, 511 in Paris, France
* **Nationality:** Frankish
* **Occupation:** King

Clovis

**Born c. 466**

**Died 511**

**Frankish king**



**A**mericans look to George Washington as the father of their country; but Clovis, who lived more than twelve hundred years before Washington, was the father of the French nation. He was the first significant king of the Franks, a tribe that gave its name to the entire country; and even more important, he was the first notable ruler in Western Europe following the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476. Clovis succeeded in gaining the blessing of the Christian church in Rome, which was eager to ally itself with a new leader after the fall of the empire. He also united the peoples of what is now France and surrounding areas, establishing the foundations of the medieval political order.

**Gaul and the Franks**

In ancient times, France was known as Gaul, an important province of the Roman Empire. But as Roman power began to fade, the western portion of the empire was overrun by various tribes that the Romans described as all related to one another—*Germanus* in Latin. These Germanic peoples were highly uncivilized compared to the Romans, who described them as barbarians; but this did not mean that the "barbarians" were incapable of wisdom, as Clovis's career illustrates.

Clovis came from the branch of the Franks known as the Salians, who lived along the northern coast of France. Along the Rhine River, which today forms part of the boundary between France and Germany, lived another group of Franks called Ripuarians (rip-yoo-WAYR-ee-unz). In about 450, Clovis's grandfather Merovech (MAYR-uh-vesh) declared himself king of the Salians, thus establishing what came to be known as the Merovingian (mayr-uh-VIN-jee-un) dynasty.

The Merovingians sought to adopt elements of Roman civilization, which they rightly recognized as being more advanced than theirs, while retaining their distinctly Germanic culture. This was the policy of Clovis's father, Childeric (KIL-dur-ik; died c. 481), and it would be Clovis's after he took the throne at age fifteen.

**The young king and warrior**

Young Clovis quickly proved his abilities as a leader, uniting the Salian and Ripuarian Franks and annexing territories to build a kingdom that included much of what is now France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and western Germany. He achieved this partly through warfare, but partly through skillful negotiation, which set him apart from many "barbarian" kings who preceded him. Whereas his predecessors had typically slaughtered all the inhabitants of an area, Clovis allowed them to live, which was actually in his best interests: not only did he win their good will, but his kingdom acquired new taxpayers who added to its wealth.

One of the greatest conquests of his early career was his victory over a lingering Roman stronghold in Gaul. A group of Roman citizens had gathered under the leadership of Syagrius (sy-AG-ree-us; c. 430–486), who was destined to be the last Roman governor of the region. Near the town of Soissons (swah-SAWn) in 486, twenty-year-old Clovis led his armies to victory over Syagrius, whose forces comprised mainly hired Germanic warriors rather than Romans. Later, Clovis had Syagrius executed.

**Marriage to Clotilde**

Five years later, in 491, Clovis defeated the Thuringians (thur-IN-jee-unz), a Germanic people who had formerly controlled a large region to the northeast of his own kingdom. Thus he added enormous lands to his growing empire. Around this time, he sent representatives to the court of the Burgundians, yet another Germanic tribe who controlled an area in southeastern France. These visitors were there not to make war, but to assess the situation among the Burgundians, and what they discovered was not good.

The Burgundian king Chilperic (KIL-pur-ik) and his wife, they learned, had been murdered by Chilperic's brother Gundobad. That meant that the princess Clotilde (kluh-TIL-duh; c. 470–545) and her sister were orphans—and that Gundobad might try to kill them as well. Furthermore, Clovis's representatives informed him, Clotilde herself was both beautiful and intelligent. Therefore Clovis negotiated with Gundobad to secure Clotilde's safe passage to his own kingdom, where he married her in 493.

**Conversion to Christianity**

Clotilde was a Christian, and like most Burgundians, she adhered to the mainstream form of Christianity that would later come to be known as Roman Catholicism. By contrast, many other peoples in the region had accepted Arianism, a branch of Christianity that taught that Christ was not God, but simply another one of God's creations. This viewpoint was unacceptable to the bishop of Rome (the pope), spiritual leader of the church.

Clovis refused to accept Christianity in any form, despite the urging of his wife, but continued to worship the old gods of his people. Meanwhile Clotilde gave birth to their son, and he allowed her to have the baby baptized, or sprinkled with water as a symbol of Jesus Christ's death and rebirth. But when the boy died, Clovis took this as a bad sign from the gods. They had another son, Chlodomir (KLOH-doh-mur), and again Clotilde arranged to have him baptized. This son, too, fell ill, and Clovis told her that he would die as well, but Chlodomir recovered.

**King Arthur**

As most people in the English-speaking world know, there are a great number of stories surrounding King Arthur, a legendary figure who ruled England in medieval times. It was said that as a boy, Arthur had gone by the name of Wart, and had pulled a sword from a stone that no one else could remove, thus fulfilling an ancient prophecy concerning England's future king. With his beautiful queen, Guinevere (GWIN-uh-veer), Arthur reigned from his palace at Camelot, supported by the brave Knights of the Round Table and his trusted magician Merlin. There are so many stories—all of them fictional, and many involving supernatural elements—surrounding Arthur and the others that it may come as a surprise to learn that there really was a King Arthur. At the very least, there was a military leader in the 500s in what is now Wales, in the western part of Britain, and he may have served as the basis for the Arthur legend.

In 546, the historian Gildas wrote about the Battle of Mount Badon (516), in which a general named Ambrosius Aurelianus led the Celts of Britain to victory over the invading Anglo-Saxons. A number of medieval writers associated Ambrosius with Arthur, though many modern scholars dispute the claim. The next mention of Arthur came in 796 from the historian Nennias, who remembered him as a commander of the Britons who in one day killed more than nine hundred of the enemy. Supposedly Arthur died in battle in 537.

Already by Nennias's time, Arthur had slipped from history into legend, and over the centuries that followed, writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth (MAHN-muth; c. 1100–1154); Chrétien de Troyes (kray-TYAn duh TWAH; flourished 1170); and Sir Thomas Malory (flourished 1470) added to the stories surrounding Arthur. In modern times, figures such as German composer Richard Wagner; English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson; American novelist Mark Twain; and many others each offered their own versions of Arthurian legends.



Stories about Arthur have formed the basis for countless poems, books, paintings, plays, operas, musicals, films, and Web sites; and yet, buried beneath all the legend, there is enough fact surrounding Arthur that he is listed in *Merriam-Webster's Biographical Dictionary* as a real human being. It is even possible that there was a Welsh princess named Guinevere, though she probably did not live in the same century as Arthur. Furthermore, the identification of Arthur with England and knighthood is historically inaccurate. Knighthood did not develop until many, many centuries after Arthur's time; and the name "England" (along with the language of English) has its roots not with Arthur's Celts or Britons but with their enemies, the invading Anglo-Saxons.

Soon afterward, Clovis went to war against the Alemanni (al-uh-MAHN-ee), a large group of tribes to the northeast. In 496, Clovis's forces engaged the Alemanni at Tolbiacum (tawl-BY-uh-kum), near the present-day city of Cologne, Germany. According to Gregory of Tours (TOOR; 538–594), the Franks' leading historian, Clovis was losing the battle until finally in desperation he prayed to Clotilde's God for victory, promising to convert to Christianity if he won the battle. Soon afterward, the Alemanni began to flee from the Franks. True to his promise, Clovis and some three thousand of his warriors were baptized as an outward symbol of their conversion to Christianity.

**The foundations of medieval Europe**

In his acceptance of mainstream Christianity rather than Arianism or some other offshoot, Clovis ensured the blessing of the pope. The latter encouraged the peoples of Clovis's kingdom, most of whom were conquered Romans and



not Franks, to support Clovis. This in turn helped bring Clovis success in campaigns against other tribes, including the Visigoths in 507, and provided the foundations for the relationship between church and government during the Middle Ages.

Clovis put in place another important foundation when he authorized the creation of a legal code, or set of laws, known as the Salic Law. Modeled on Rome's highly developed legal system, Clovis's code would govern the Franks for centuries to come. When Clovis died in 511 at the age of fifty-five, his death inaugurated another important tradition: by arranging before he died to be buried in Paris, then a small town dating back to Roman times, he established the importance of that city, which is today the undisputed center of the French world.

In generations to come, the most popular name among French kings was Louis (LOO-ee), a form of "Clovis" and thus a tribute to the fifth-century king who virtually established the nation of France. The Merovingian kingdom, however, barely outlasted Clovis. In accordance with Germanic tradition, he had divided his realms between Chlodomir and his other three sons, which greatly weakened the power of his government. Still, Clovis had set in place the idea of a unified kingdom, and some 250 years later, this concept would gain new meaning under the leadership of **Charlemagne** (see entry).