Charlemagne (SHAR-luh-mayn) was one of Europe’s most successful monarchs. He was king of the Franks in 768 CE. His father, Pepin the Short, ruled before him, and his grandfather - Charles (the Hammer) Martel - ruled before that. These two men were good rulers, but Charlemagne was a far more impressive king. He was very tall—perhaps as tall as 6’4”. He had blonde hair that seemed to glow in the sun. He was always laughing. His dogs were his constant companions and he never just walked, he strode. He knew everyone in his castle by name, from his top advisors to the lowliest peasant. As friendly as he was, he was every inch a king. The people called him Charles the Great and they loved him.

Expansion: The Franks were legendary fighters. Using the strength and loyalty of his army, combined with his own leadership abilities, Charlemagne soon defeated most of the other barbarian tribes in Western Europe. He expanded the Frankish Empire to include Germany, all of France, most of Italy, and even sections of northern Spain. SEE MAP IN TEXT pg 503. When the Frankish Empire went to war, Charlemagne was in the forefront, very tall and often wearing a blue cape over his fur coat, which made him appear even larger. He managed to survive battle after battle. He died of old age in his seventies, which for the times was a really old age.

Education: After the fall of Rome in 476 CE, the practice of reading and writing began dwindle. Soon, the only people left with these skills were the clergy (religious men), and not even all of them could do so. To effectively rule his kingdom, and to successfully convert people to Christianity, Charlemagne wanted his officials to be able to read and write. If he sent them a note, giving them some instruction, he wanted to make sure they could read it. To accomplish this, he turned his own palace into a center for learning. He invited scholars from all over Europe to teach in the palace school.

Charlemagne knew how to read, but he did not know how to write. He attempted to learn, but his hands were too scared from battle to write legibly. Charlemagne tried to talk other nobles into joining him in his educational pursuits, but they thought reading and writing was a waste of time. They thought of themselves as warriors, not academics.

Preservation: Charlemagne recognized the value of Roman literature and philosophy. He had the visiting scholars collect the handwritten roman books on monastery shelves that were now 100’s of years old. These books were carefully copied and preserved. He had scribes do the job of copying all the old manuscripts into Latin by hand. 90% of the Roman books we still have today were copied by Charlemagne’s scribes. All books in the middle ages were written by hand. Most were written to glorify religion. Each page was beautifully designed. Some pages were "illuminated" with a cover of gold. These books are known as illuminated manuscripts. The art of illuminating manuscripts continued for many hundreds of years.
**Government:** Charlemagne ruled his vast empire by using local officials called Counts to help him. Each Count was responsible for solving local problems. They also had the job of finding men and raising armies for the kingdom. At least once a year, Charlemagne paid surprise visits to his various Counts to make sure they were managing fairly and effectively.

**Trial by Ordeal/Trial by Jury:** One thing Charlemagne noticed that was *not fair* was the Frankish court system. In the Frankish Empire, *trial was by ORDEAL.* These trials went something like this: if you were a peasant and you were accused of a crime, to prove your innocence, you had to hold a red hot metal poker until your hand was deeply burned. If your burnt hand healed in three days, which it was unlikely to do, you were found innocent. If it did not, you were guilty. There were other versions of the Ordeal in other regions under other rulers.

If you were a *noble*, you could prove your innocence in ordeal by fight. And, you could hire someone to fight for you. If the person you hired lived, you were found innocent. If the person you hired died, you were found guilty, but you had paid your punishment - you had paid with "your" life, so to speak, or at least the life of the person you had hired - thus, you were free to go.

Charlemagne did not think much of this system of justice. He started a new system. He set up a *system of trial by panel.* Under Charlemagne's system, each accused person would be heard by a panel of honorable men, men who had taken an oath to listen and to judge fairly based on the evidence presented. There was still corruption, but this system had a much better chance of being fair than did the old one. *Our modern jury system, trial by jury, slowly developed from this early start.*

**Standardized Money:** Local administrators collected taxes from the people. The amount due was fixed. People knew how much they owed. Most taxes were paid in barter. The tax collector could decide the value of a pig or of a bale of hay. Charlemagne realized this system could easily lead to an abuse of power. He changed that system too. He introduced a payment system using silver coins. He standardized the value of each coin. It was no longer up to the tax collector to assign a pig a value. The farmer could sell his pig and then pay his taxes.

**A Christian Kingdom:** Some say Charlemagne held his kingdom together by the sheer force of his personality. He was not a king in a palace somewhere. He was out and about. He heroically fought in battles; he personally visited local administrators, creating new laws to protect his people. He had a horrible singing voice, but he often sang at the top of his lungs as he strode through village after village. He was loud and rambunctious and brave and fair and his people adored him. He was their king and they were Franks, and proud of it. Charlemagne was able to create a *Christian* kingdom under a powerful secular leader - himself.