

# Clovis I

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**Clovis** (French pronunciation: [klɔ̃.viː]; c. 466 – 511), or ***Chlodowech*** (German *Chlodwig*, Latin *Chlodovechus*), was the first king of the Franks to unite all of the Frankish tribes under one ruler, changing the form of leadership from a group of royal chieftains to rule by a single king and ensuring that the kingship was passed down to his heirs.<sup>[1]</sup> He was also the first Christian king to rule Gaul, known today as France.

Clovis was the son of Childeric I, a Merovingian king of the Salian Franks, and Basina, Queen of Thuringia. He succeeded his father in 481, at the age of fifteen.<sup>[2]</sup> He is considered the founder of the Merovingian dynasty, which ruled the Franks for the next two centuries.

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## History

### Frankish consolidation

Numerous small Frankish kingdoms existed during the 5th century. The Salian Franks were one of two Frankish tribes that occupied the area west of the lower Rhine known as Toxandria, between the Meuse and Scheldt (in what is now the Netherlands and Belgium). Their power base began to the southwest around Tournai, capital of the kingdom, along the modern frontier between France and Belgium.

Childeric I, Clovis' father, became king of the Salian Franks in 457 upon the death of his father, Merovech, ruling over lands he had received as a *foederatus* of the Romans. In 463

### Clovis I



*Clovis roi des Francs* by François-Louis Dejuinne (1786–1844)

#### King of the Franks

<b>Reign</b>	509–511
<b>Predecessor</b>	<i>Francia conquered</i>
<b>Successor</b>	Clotaire I (Soissions) Childebert I (Paris) Chlodomer (Orléans) Theuderic I (Rheims)

#### King of the Salian Franks

<b>Reign</b>	481–509
<b>Predecessor</b>	Childeric I
<b>Successor</b>	<i>Francia conquered</i>
<b>Spouse</b>	Clotilde

#### Issue

Ingomer  
Chlodomer  
Childebert I

he fought in conjunction with Aegidius, the magister militum of northern Gaul, to defeat the Visigoths in Orléans. Childeric died in 481 and was buried in Tournai; Clovis succeeded him as king.

Under Clovis, the Salian Franks came to dominate their neighbours, initially aided by the association with Aegidius. Historians believe that Childeric and Clovis were both commanders of the Roman military in the Province of Belgica Secunda and were subordinate to the magister militum.<sup>[3]</sup>

Clovis turned against the Roman commanders, however, defeating the Gallo-Roman ruler, and son of Aegidius, Syagrius in the Battle of Soissons (486), considered the end of Western Roman rule outside of Italy.<sup>[4]</sup> Clovis then had the Frankish king Chararic imprisoned and executed. A few years later, he killed Ragnachar, the Frankish king of Cambrai, along with his brothers. Another victory followed in 491 over a small group of Thuringians to the east. By this time Clovis had conquered all the Frankish kingdoms to the west of the River Maas, except for the Ripuarian Franks. He secured an alliance with the Ostrogoths through the marriage of his sister Audofleda to their king, Theodoric the Great. With the help of the other Frankish sub-kings, he narrowly defeated the Alamanni in the Battle of Tolbiac in 496. He made Paris his capital<sup>[5]</sup> and established an abbey dedicated to Saints Peter and Paul on the south bank of the Seine.<sup>[6]</sup>

In 500 Clovis fought a battle with the Burgundian kingdom at Dijon but was unable to subdue them. He gained the support of the Armoricans (Alans, Gallo Romans, Britons) in the following years, for they assisted him in defeating the Visigothic kingdom of Toulouse in the Battle of Vouillé in 507, eliminating Visigothic power in Gaul. The battle added most of Aquitaine to Clovis' kingdom<sup>[5]</sup> and resulted in the death of the Visigothic King Alaric II.

According to Gregory of Tours, following the Battle of Vouillé, the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius I granted Clovis the title of consul. Since Clovis' name does not appear in the consular lists, it is likely he was granted a suffect consulship. Gregory of Tours recorded the systematic campaigns following Vouillé to eliminate the other Frankish "*reguli*", or sub-kings, including Sigobert the Lame and his son Chlodoric the Parricide; Chararic, another king of the Salian Franks; Ragnachar of Cambrai, his brother Ricchar, and their brother Rignomer of Le Mans. Clovis became the first king of all Franks in 509, after he had conquered Cologne.

## Catholicism

Clovis converted to Catholicism<sup>[7]</sup> at the instigation of his wife, Clotilde, a Burgundian princess who was a Catholic in spite of the Arianism that surrounded her at court.<sup>[8]</sup> He was baptized on Christmas Day, 496, in a small church in the vicinity of the subsequent Abbey of Saint-Remi in Reims; a statue of him being baptized by Saint Remigius can still be seen there. Clovis and his wife were buried in the Abbey of St Genevieve (St. Pierre) in Paris; the original name of the church was the Church of the Holy Apostles.<sup>[9]</sup>

Chlothar I	
Clotilde	
<b>Dynasty</b>	Merovingian
<b>Father</b>	Childeric I
<b>Mother</b>	Basina of Thuringia
<b>Born</b>	c. 466
<b>Died</b>	511
<b>Burial</b>	<i>Originally</i> St. Genevieve Church <i>Now</i> Saint-Denis Basilica
<b>Religion</b>	Catholic



Conquests of Clovis between 481 and 511

The followers of Catholicism believe that God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are three persons of one being (consubstantiality), as opposed to Arian Christianity, whose followers believed that Jesus, as a distinct and separate being, was both subordinate to and created by God. While the theology of the Arians was declared a heresy at the First Council of Nicea in 325 AD, the missionary work of the bishop Ulfilas converted the pagan Goths to Arian Christianity in the 4th century. By the time of the ascension of Clovis, Gothic Arians dominated Christian Gaul, and Catholics were the minority. The king's Catholic baptism was of immense importance in the subsequent history of Western and Central Europe in general, for Clovis expanded his dominion over almost all of Gaul.

Previously, Clovis had adamantly refused to convert from his pagan religion to Christianity. Clotilde had wanted her son to be baptized, but Clovis refused to allow it, so Clotilde had the child baptized without Clovis's knowledge. Shortly after his baptism, their son died, and his death further strengthened Clovis's resistance to conversion. Clotilde also had their second son baptized without her husband's permission, and this son got very ill and nearly died after his baptism.<sup>[10]</sup>

Yet Christianity did offer certain advantages to Clovis as he fought to distinguish his rule among many competing power centers in Western Europe. His conversion to the Roman Catholic form of Christianity served to set him apart from the other Germanic kings of his time, such as those of the Visigoths and the Vandals, who had converted from pagan beliefs to Arian Christianity. His embrace of the Roman Catholic faith may have also gained him the support of the Catholic Gallo-Roman aristocracy in his later campaign against the Visigoths, which drove them from southern Gaul in 507 and resulted in a great many of his people converting to Catholicism as well.<sup>[11]</sup>

Nevertheless, Bernard Bachrach has argued that his conversion from Frankish paganism alienated many of the other Frankish sub-kings and weakened his military position over the next few years. In the "*interpretatio romana*", Saint Gregory of Tours gave the Germanic gods that Clovis abandoned the names of roughly equivalent Roman gods, such as Jupiter and Mercury.<sup>[12]</sup> Taken literally, such usage would suggest a strong affinity of early Frankish rulers for the prestige of Roman culture, which they may have embraced as allies and federates of the Empire during the previous century.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> William Daly, more directly assessing Clovis' allegedly barbaric and pagan origins,<sup>[13]</sup> was obliged to ignore the Gregory of Tours and base his account on the scant earlier sources, a sixth-century "*vita*" of Saint Genevieve and letters to or concerning Clovis from bishops and Theodoric.



Clovis I leading the Franks to victory in the Battle of Tolbiac, in Ary Scheffer's 19th-century painting

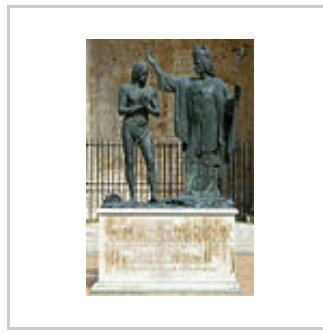
## Images of the King



Battle of Tolbiac.  
Fresco at the Panthéon  
(Paris) by Paul-Joseph  
Blanc circa 1881.



Saint Remigius baptizes  
Clovis, in a painting of  
ca 1500



Statue depicting the  
baptism of Clovis by  
Saint Remigius.



Clovis statue at the  
Abbey Church of Saint-  
Denis

## Roman Law

Under Clovis, the first codification of the Salian Frank law took place. The *Roman Law* was written with the assistance of Gallo-Romans to reflect the Salic legal tradition and Christianity, while containing much from Roman tradition. The *Roman Law* lists various crimes as well as the fines associated with them.<sup>[14]</sup>

## Later years and death

Shortly before his death, Clovis called a synod of Gallic bishops to meet in Orléans to reform the Church and create a strong link between the Crown and the Catholic episcopate. This was the First Council of Orléans. Thirty-three bishops assisted and passed 31 decrees on the duties and obligations of individuals, the right of sanctuary, and ecclesiastical discipline. These decrees, equally applicable to Franks and Romans, first established equality between conquerors and conquered.

Clovis I is traditionally said to have died on 27 November 511; however, the *Liber Pontificalis* suggests that he was still alive in 513.<sup>[15]</sup> After his death, Clovis was laid to rest in the Abbey of St Genevieve in Paris. His remains were relocated to Saint Denis Basilica in the mid- to late-18th century.



Gaul after Clovis' death

When Clovis died, his kingdom was partitioned among his four sons, Theuderic, Chlodomer, Childebert, and Clotaire. This partition created the new political units of the Kingdoms of Rheims, Orléans, Paris and Soissons, and inaugurated a tradition that would lead to disunity lasting, with brief interruptions, until the end of the Merovingian dynasty in 751.

## Legacy

Clovis is remembered for three main accomplishments:

1. The Unification of the Frankish nation
2. The Conquest of much of Gaul

### 3. His conversion to a form of Christianity.

By the first act, he assured the influence of his people beyond the borders of Gaul, something no regional king could accomplish. By the second act, he laid the foundations of a later nation-state, France. By the third act, he made himself the ally of the papacy and its protector as well as that of the people, who were mostly Catholics.

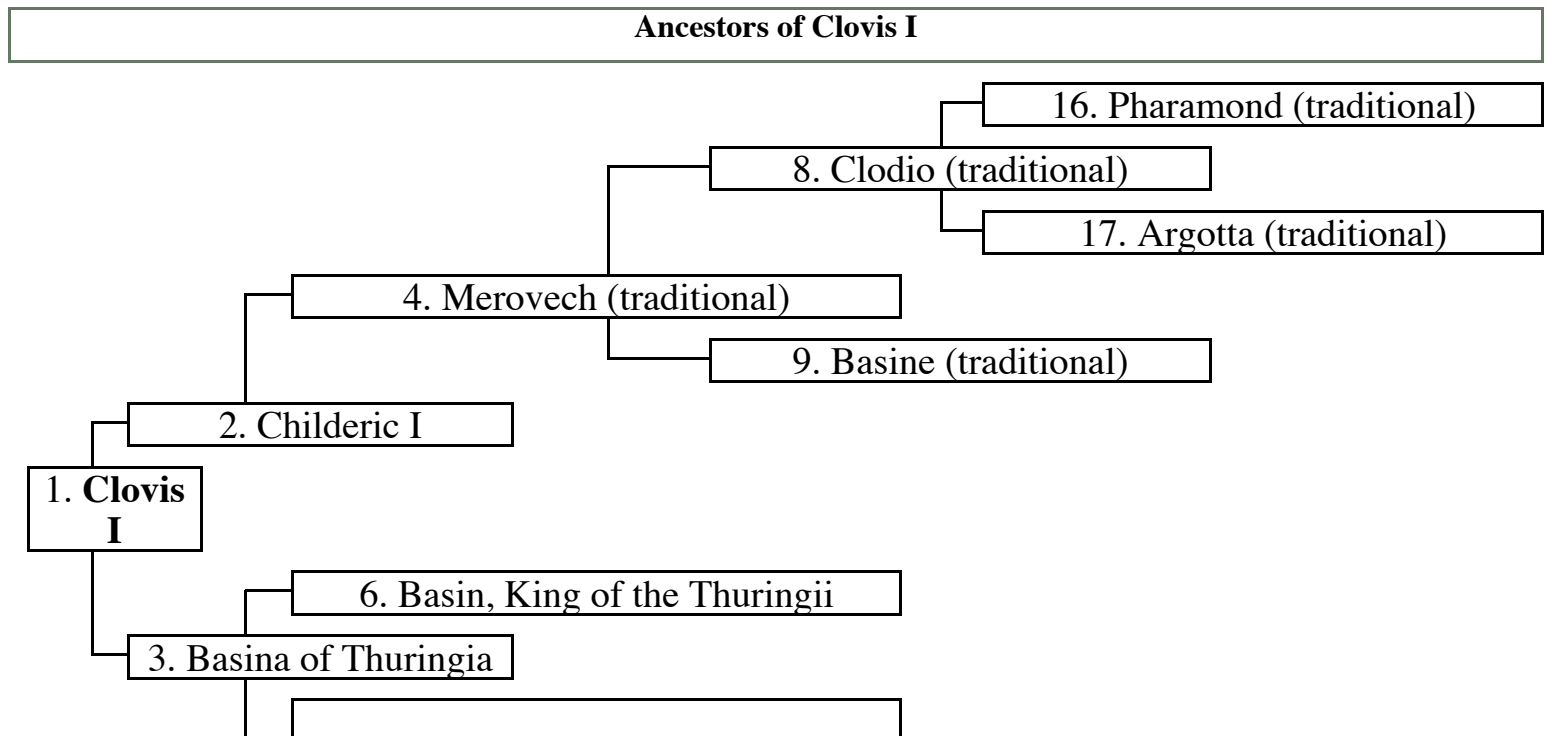
Detracting, perhaps, from this legacy, is his aforementioned division of the state. This was done not along national or even largely geographical lines, but primarily to assure equal income amongst his sons after his death. While it may or may not have been his intention, this division was the cause of much internal discord in Gaul. This precedent led in the long run to the fall of his dynasty, for it was a pattern repeated in future reigns.<sup>[16]</sup> Clovis did bequeath to his heirs the support of both people and Church such that, when the magnates were ready to do away with the royal house, the sanction of the Pope was sought first.

The name Louis, a later form of Clovis, was borne by 18 kings of France.

## Ancestry



Tomb of Clovis I at the Basilica of St Denis in Saint Denis



## References

### Footnotes

1. ^ Brown, Peter (2003). *The Rise of Western Christendom*. Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd. p. 137.
  2. ^ The date 481 is arrived at by counting back from the Battle of Tolbiac, which Gregory of Tours places in the fifteenth year of Clovis's reign.
  3. ^ Rosenwein, Barbara (2004). *A Short History of the Middle Ages*. Canada: University of Toronto Press. p. 43.
  4. ^ Frassetto, Michael, *Encyclopedia of barbarian Europe*, (ABC-CLIO, 2003), p. 126
  5. ^ *a b* "Iron Age Braumeisters of the Teutonic Forests" (<http://beeradvocate.com/articles/668>). *BeerAdvocate*.
  6. ^ The abbey was later renamed Sainte-Geneviève Abbey, in honor of the patron saint of Paris, and was demolished in 1802. All that remains is the "*Tour Clovis*," a Romanesque tower which now lies within the grounds of the Lycée Henri-IV, just east of The Panthéon, and the parish Saint-Étienne-du-Mont, which was built on the abbey territory.
  7. ^ *Gender and Conversion in the Merovingian Era*, Cordula Nolte, **Varieties of Religious Conversion in the Middle Ages**, ed. James Muldoon, (University of Florida Press, 1997), 88.
  8. ^ Ian Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms*, (Longman, 1994), 45.
  9. ^ Geary, Patrick (2003). *Readings in Medieval History: Gregory of Tours History of the Franks*. Canada: Broadview Press Ltd. p. 153.
  10. ^ Geary, Patrick (2003). *Readings in Medieval History: Gregory of Tours History of the Franks*. Canada: Broadview Press Ltd. pp. 145–146.
  11. ^ Robinson, J.H. (1905). *Readings in European History*. Boston. pp. 51–55.
  12. ^ James, Edward (1985) *Gregory of Tours' Life of the Fathers*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press; p. 155 n. 12
  13. ^ Daly, William M., "Clovis: How Barbaric, How Pagan?" *Speculum* **69**.3 (July 1994:619–664)
  14. ^ Geary, Patrick (2003). *Readings in Medieval History: Rome Law*. Canada: Broadview Press Ltd. pp. 129–136.
  15. ^ Collins, Roger, *Early Medieval Europe*
  16. ^ "The Rise of the Carolingians or the Decline of the Merovingians?" ([http://www.uq.edu.au/access\\_history/two-one/merovingians.pdf](http://www.uq.edu.au/access_history/two-one/merovingians.pdf)) (pdf)
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<p style="text-align:center">Clovis I  <b>Merovingian Dynasty</b>  <b>Born:</b> 466      <b>Died:</b> November 27 511</p>		
<b>Regnal titles</b>		
Preceded by <b>Childeric I</b>	<b>King of the Salian Franks</b> 481 – c. 509	<b>Conquered Francia</b>
<b>Conquest of Francia</b>	<b>King of the Franks</b> c. 509 – 511	Succeeded by <b>Clotaire I</b> <i>in Soissons</i>
		Succeeded by <b>Childebert I</b> <i>in Paris</i>
		Succeeded by <b>Chlodomer</b> <i>in Orléans</i>
		Succeeded by <b>Theuderic I</b> <i>in Reims</i>
<b>Political offices</b>		
Preceded by <b>Flavius Ennodius Messala, Areobindus Dagalaiphus Areobindus</b>	<b>Consul of the Roman Empire</b> 507 <i>with Anastasius I, Venantius Junior</i>	Succeeded by <b>Basilius Venantius, Celer</b>

## External links

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