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INTRODUCTION: FRANKS AND SAXONS

The passionate nationalisms of the 19th and 20th centuries cast their shadow over many aspects of history, none more so than the relationship between the peoples of France and Germany. Largely meaningless issues of ethnic origin, and rather more interesting questions of precisely who lived where and when, still preoccupy many scholars. What can be stated with reasonable certainty is that, following the so-called Age of Migrations – which itself both caused and resulted from the collapse of the western half of the ancient Roman Empire – a significant new dividing line emerged across Europe. The major cultural frontier within Europe was no longer between the ‘civilized’ Mediterranean world and the ‘barbarian’ north, but between a largely Latin-Germanic west and a largely Slavic east.

Yet this supposed cultural border always remained blurred, with large areas of mixed Germanic and Slav speakers as well as other peoples who spoke languages related to neither of these, or indeed to Latin. Then, as Christianity spread, either through peaceful persuasion or the power of the sword, some Slavic peoples found themselves Catholic while others found themselves Orthodox. Until the Reformation in the latter decades of the Middle Ages, the Germanic peoples were fully within the Catholic camp. However, this only followed a substantial period during the early Middle Ages when the spread of Christianity seemed to stop, leaving many Frisians, the German Saxons and all the Scandinavian peoples clinging to a form of paganism which they shared to a remarkable degree. By then most of the Germanic-speaking peoples who had overrun so much once-Roman territory had gone on to adopt the Latin-based tongues of their overwhelmingly Christian subjects. The main exception was, of course, Anglo-Saxon England. Here both Latin and Celtic languages were almost obliterated while the existing late Roman Christianity was so
enfeebled that Christianity had to be reintroduced after a considerable period of
Germanic pagan domination. Thereafter the linguistic boundaries within Europe
remained remarkably stable, surviving, in fact, to the present day.

Of those ill-named ‘Barbarian Kingdoms’ which succeeded the Western
Roman Empire, that of the Franks emerged as the largest and most powerful,
giving its name, of course, to the nation of France. Nevertheless, most of
what had been the heartlands of the initially Merovingian and latterly
Carolingian Frankish state – and subsequently empire – remained German,
Flemish, Dutch or Luxembourgish though also incorporating significant
French-speaking regions of Belgium and north-eastern France.

While the Franks and several other Germanic peoples had been establishing
extensive, though sometimes ephemeral states far beyond what is now
Germany, the majority of those Saxons who did not cross the sea to share in
the creation of Anglo-Saxon England pushed southwards. In so doing they
gradually expanded their territory from a small area on the frontier of present-
day Germany and Denmark. How much of this process was done by conquest,
or by absorbing existing Germanic tribes, or by occupying lands largely
vacated by others who had migrated elsewhere, remains unknown. Suffice to
say that by the 8th century AD these Old Saxons inhabited most of the territory
between the Lower Rhine and Lower Elbe rivers, and the ranges of hills or
small mountains in central Germany. Although by now largely landlocked,
these Old Saxons still inhabited the western part of Germany’s Baltic coast
and, perhaps, part of its North Sea coast though this latter was mainly home
to the related and maritime-oriented Frisians.

East of these Saxon tribes were various Slavic people, Abodrites, Wiltzi
and Sorbs. Their southern neighbours included Thuringians, whom legend
suggests had been the primary losers to earlier Saxon expansion though they
were now a partially assimilated people within the Frankish state. To their
west were Hessians and Franconians who were fully assimilated peoples of
the Austrasian Frankish sub-kingdom of the now vast Kingdom of the
Franks. The Franks themselves had, in fact, previously lost much of their

A simple drawing of
unarmoured cavalry and
infantry bearing shields in an
8th-century, early Carolingian
copy of the Apocalypse. (Ms. 31,
Stadtbibliothek, Trier)
original homeland to the Saxons at the very start of the Age of Migrations. Many of the Saxons’ north-western neighbours, the Frisians, were by now similarly within the Frankish state and were at least in the process of converting to Christianity. Meanwhile many other Frisians retained both their independence and their paganism.

Here it is important to understand that the identities of these medieval *gens* or peoples were not ‘ethnic’ in the modern sense. They were merely a form of self and group identification, which rarely expressed any real sense of superiority over other *gens*. Nor was there as yet any conclusive association between states under one ruling dynasty and the *gens*, of which there were often more than one, within that state. The concept of the nation-state had, of course, yet to impose itself upon the world.

Each of the main Germanic peoples also had its own origin myths, partially reflecting its own traditions and partly invented by southern churchmen or scholars who sought to incorporate these mysterious newcomers into the world of Mediterranean history and legend. Thus the Franks first appear in written Roman historical records in the 3rd century AD as a confederation of Germanic tribes, living along the lower and middle Rhine River. Some of them raided Roman territory while others sought service with the Roman army as *laeti* or allies. By the mid-4th century AD one group, known to the Romans as the Salian Franks, had established a virtually autonomous ‘kingdom’ within the Roman frontier. As the Western Roman Empire collapsed in the 5th century AD, these Salians united under the Merovingian dynasty and conquered most of Gaul (France) as well as the ex-Roman provinces of Raetia, Germania Superior and part of Germania Magna.
By the later 8th century AD the Franks were ruled by the Carolingian dynasty, which had succeeded the Merovingians in AD 751. They had also virtually expelled the rival Visigoths from southern France, after which the last Visigothic enclave of Septimania had recently fallen to the Muslim Umayyad Caliphate along with the rest of the Visigothic Kingdom on the Iberian Peninsula. The Carolingian Franks had also contained the Bretons, themselves a mixture of established Celtic Gauls and more recent Celtic British refugees, and dominated autonomous Aquitaine in south-western France. To the east the Franks now ruled, or at least dominated, what remained of the other Germanic ‘barbarian’ states, their only significant Christian-Germanic rivals being the Lombard Kingdom of Italy.

The other, pagan, Germanic peoples of Germany were regarded as more of a nuisance than a serious threat and beyond them lay various Slavic peoples who were largely ignored. Only in the Umayyad Emirate of Cordova on the Iberian Peninsula, and in the essentially Turkic Avar Khaganate of Hungary and the northern Balkans did the new Carolingian Frankish dynasty face significant rivals. Meanwhile the East Roman or Byzantine Empire was preoccupied with its own eastern and southern neighbours, the newly established ’Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad. Thus they had no wish to quarrel with the rising Christian power of the Carolingian Franks.
Alongside these historical origins, the Franks had been given a rather peculiar origin myth which claimed that they were descended from Trojans, somehow still led by King Priam of Homeric legend, who had accompanied the Roman army during campaigns against the Germanic Alemanni. Supposedly their name of Franks had been given them by the Emperor Valentinian because ‘in the Attic [Greek] tongue the word feri meant savage’.

The Saxons’ pseudo-classical origin seems almost reasonable by comparison. The 2nd-century Roman-Egyptian geographer Ptolemy correctly located the earliest-known Saxons where the Cimbrian Peninsula (Denmark) joined the main European continental mass. However, a legend also spread which maintained that they were descended from Macedonian soldiers, a remnant of Alexander the Great’s ‘world conquering army’ which had somehow reached northern Germany by sea. In fact a migration by sea also featured in what seems to have been the Saxons’ own origin myth. This stated that they were northerners (Scandinavians) who had crossed the sea under the leadership of a certain Hadugoto and had landed at Hadeln on the North Sea coast where they defeated the local Thuringians. More recent historians have suggested that the name Saxon came from the Germanic god of war, Saxnoth, and was also found in the name of a large single-edged dagger or shortsword called a *sax* or *seax*.

Relatively little is known about the political structure of the pagan Old Saxons, though they were clearly divided into three or four major groups or tribal confederations. These were the Westphalians of the Ems River basin, the Eastphalians living between the Harz Mountains and the river Elbe, the Angrians of the Weser basin whose culture seemingly revolved around horses, and the Nordalbian Saxons north of the Elbe who initially held aloof from their cousins’ struggles against the Franks. These large groups may even have been on the verge of evolving into early medieval ‘states’ and they would survive both Charlemagne’s conquest and the imposition of Christianity to re-emerge as what are known as the stem-duchies of medieval Germany. Within these confederations were many other smaller groups for whom the word tribe is perhaps more appropriate, though most are now known only as a name.

During Merovingian times the Saxons did not feature prominently in Frankish affairs. Relations with the Frisians, Thuringians, Alemanni and Bavarians were usually more important for the Franks. Even so, the Merovingians sometimes claimed suzerainty over their...
closest Saxon neighbours. For example Clovis, the first ruler of the united Frankish tribes (AD 466–511), tried to demand an annual tribute of 500 cows but the Saxons often avoided paying this. During the reign of Childebert II, the Merovingian King of Austrasia (AD 570–95), at least some Saxons had been allies of Lombards against the Franks. Another clash between Franks and Saxons during the reign of the Merovingian King Clothar II (AD 613–29) was significant enough to have songs written about it. Even so, the archaeological records show clear cultural interaction between Franks and Saxons, despite their different religions.

Eventually the frontier between Frankish-ruled and Saxon territory stabilized and while in some areas this was defined by rivers, hills or dense forests, in others it remained exposed to raiding by both sides. Meanwhile there was a similarly ill-defined frontier zone between the Saxons and those Slav tribes which had been pushing into once-Germanic territory for several centuries. The Thuringians, having long been in retreat, eventually threw in their lot with the Franks, despite having lost substantially to both Franks and Saxons following the collapse of an ephemeral Thuringian ‘empire’ during the early 6th century AD.

The Frankish state weakened under the last ‘Lazy Kings’ of the Merovingian dynasty, enabling the Saxons to throw off nominal Frankish suzerainty and even to regain a swathe of territory south of the Lippe and Ruhr rivers in the 690s. Thereafter the first Carolingian kings of the Franks encouraged differences between Westphalian and Eastphalian Saxons while also attempting to regain lost lands and re-establish Frankish supremacy. In the words of the Carolingian chronicler Einhard (c. AD 775–840), ‘on both sides [of the frontier], murder, rapine, and arson kept breaking out’. In fact the first Carolingian ruler (though never crowned king) Charles Martel and his sons fought ten campaigns against the Saxons before an annual tribute of 300 horses was reinstated in AD 753, only to be discontinued after the death of Pippin the Short in AD 768.
To the north a Frisian attempt to retain their independence was less successful and, following a prolonged struggle, the western half of Frisian territory had to accept Carolingian rule and the imposition of Christianity. Even so, the Frisians’ notably inaccessible and marshy homeland along the North Sea coast enabled them to preserve an identity and a language which survive to this day.

Long before Charlemagne came to the Frankish throne, the Church had been working to convert the Germanic peoples to Christianity. In many areas it achieved remarkably rapid success but amongst the Saxons, and to a lesser extent the Frisians, Christian missionaries faced a much harder task. While the Carolingians supported Church reorganization in those parts of western and southern Germany which had long been Christian, the pagan Saxons and Frisians increasingly came to be seen as an anomaly if not an affront to Christianity. Anglo-Saxon missionaries played a notable role in these efforts, a number of them being martyred for their pains and a few becoming saints. Meanwhile many Saxons, seeing the fate of their neighbours, came to believe that adherence to traditional pagan beliefs was a necessary aspect of maintaining their own political independence.

Hatred for Christianity even appears to have increased, and Saxon raids into Frankish-ruled territory often targeted churches and monasteries, killing priests and monks and raping nuns. Perhaps the raiders believed such acts were pleasing to their gods, or perhaps it was simply the savagery of people who felt under threat. Documentary and archaeological evidence nevertheless shows that some Saxons did convert to Christianity, though their fate and their role in the forthcoming struggle with Charlemagne remains unclear.

The relationship between the Carolingian dynasty and the papacy in Rome had strengthened under Charlemagne’s father, Pippin. It endured during the co-rule of Charlemagne and his brother Carloman and, a few
months after the latter’s death in December AD 771, Charlemagne informed the Pope of his intention of converting the Saxons to the Holy Faith. The implication was that this would be done by force of arms if necessary. The traditional view that Charlemagne had finally lost patience with the pagan Saxons is simplistic. Similarly, the idea that Charlemagne merely wanted to extend his realm and loot a poor but notably warlike neighbour seems unlikely. Perhaps the historian Benjamin Arnold was correct in suggesting that the conquest of Saxony had been one of the new Frankish king’s earliest ambitions as a ruthless warlord and pious Christian.1 Given the values of his time, Charlemagne may also have wanted to avenge the death of so many missionaries. Thus, in the words of another historian: ‘The campaign opened in July 772, the great Frankish host accompanied by bishops, priests and monks riding and marching in the rearguard, and their presence lent its own colour to the enterprise and set the religious purpose above any other.’2

The first Frankish raid would set the tone for three decades of struggle when Charlemagne led his army to the site of the Irminsal, which is now believed to have been a large, ancient tree or wooden column, probably on the summit of Eresburg (now Obermarsberg). This tree, like others in different parts of Germany, was sacred to the local pagans as a form of ‘World Pillar’. It, like others, would now be cut down and burned while a nearby temple was looted and destroyed as Christian priests chanted psalms of thanksgiving for their victory over paganism. As had also happened before, the pagans made little effort to defend the Irminsal, perhaps expecting their gods to do that. The tree was duly destroyed, and Charlemagne and his army were not struck down by thunderbolts.

1 B. Arnold, Medieval Germany, 500–1300: A Political Interpretation (London 1997) 40–44.
2 E.M. Almedingen, Charlemagne, a study (London 1968) 102.
However, the idea that the Saxon pagans were therefore demoralized and unable to fight is clearly wrong. Twelve Saxon hostages were handed over as assurances of future good behaviour, but not long afterwards a large Saxon force crossed the frontier to destroy several Christian churches in revenge. This was a marker for the future. Because the Saxons lacked a single leadership, even at the level of the main tribal confederations, the Carolingians would constantly find that while some agreed to peace, others continued to fight.

The centre of Saxon resistance was henceforth located east of the river Weser, while to the west and south Charlemagne installed a number of garrisons, notably at Eresburg itself. This naturally defensible site is said to have had an Iron Age Germanic fort, which had served as a centre of
resistance against the Romans. Now it would play a significant role during the long struggle between Carolingians and pagan Saxons. Charlemagne may, however, have thought that the Saxon problem was already solved and so turned to the question of how to deal with the Lombard Kingdom of Italy.

The Lombards had long been seen as a major threat by the popes in Rome, while Charlemagne already saw himself as the papacy’s greatest champion. Within a few years the Frankish king would destroy the northern part of the Lombard realm, making it into a Carolingian sub-kingdom, but this would require campaigning on a massive scale, efforts which would frequently be hampered by what became the running sore of Saxony. Victory achieved in Italy, Charlemagne would next attempt to interfere in Islamic Spain but received a bloody nose at Roncevalles – a setback which encouraged Saxon resistance. Charlemagne’s next great offensive would be against the pagan or, more accurately, Tengrian³ Avars who ruled the Great Hungarian Plain and much surrounding territory. They proved a tough foe and although Charlemagne’s armies were eventually victorious, they were frequently diverted and weakened by persistent uprisings by the supposedly conquered Saxons.

One man soon emerged as the leader of pagan Saxon resistance, Widukind of Westphalia, a skilled military commander with the political ability to cultivate Saxon relations with the partially pagan Frisians and the emphatically pagan Danes. In AD 773 a Saxon force seized upon Charlemagne’s preoccupation with Italy to retake Eresburg and Syburg. They also attacked the episcopal centre of Büraburg which had been established by St Boniface of Wessex in AD 723.

The following year, while Charlemagne was still busy in northern Italy, Saxon raiders ravaged much of northern Hesse and burned the abbey at Fritzlar, putting the abbot and monks to the sword. During the autumn Charlemagne hurried north having finally conquered the Lombard capital of Pavia and, assembling what local troops he could, retook Eresburg before the approach of winter halted further operations. Most historians agree that it was at this point that the character of the Saxon war changed.

This became brutally clear in January AD 775 during an assembly of the senior Carolingian leaders at Quierzy in northern France. Here Charlemagne decided that the Saxon pagans must be either defeated and subjugated to

³ Tengrism was the traditional religion shared by many Turkic and Mongol peoples of the steppes, including Ghengiz Khan himself. Today it is enjoying a revival in several parts of post-Soviet Central Asia and among some Turkic peoples in Russia.
Christianity, or be annihilated. To achieve this goal he would have fortified bases built across the conquered territories. In spring: ‘The pious and illustrious lord King Charles [Charlemagne] held the assembly at the villa called Düren, from where he undertook a campaign into Saxony. He captured the castrum of Syburg, rebuilt Eresburg and reached the river Weser at the place called Braunsberg where the Saxons, who intended to defend the bank of the river, were arraying themselves for battle.’4 Having defeated the Saxons in this confrontation, Charlemagne divided his army and led one part across southern Saxony, accepting submission from leaders of the Eastphalians and Angrians. Meanwhile the Westphalians, probably under Widukind, had fought that part of the Carolingian army which had remained to guard the crossings of the river Weser. Here at Hlidbek (now Lübbecke) the Carolingians claimed victory but in reality the clash seems to have been inconclusive if not a marginal Saxon success. Charlemagne’s reunited forces then inflicted a real defeat upon the Westphalians, seizing considerable booty and taking hostages, though Widukind escaped.

Before he was able to go to his villa at Scladdistat (now Sélestat) in Alsace for Christmas, Charlemagne had to return to Italy, this time to initiate a campaign against Rodgaud, the ‘rebel’ Lombard Duke of Friuli who was eventually killed in AD 776. His duchy was then reformed as the March (military frontier district) of Friuli. That same year, however, many Saxons again rose against Christianity and Carolingian rule. Eresburg fell to them again but a Saxon assault upon Syburg failed. Significantly, these supposedly poor and backward Saxons had so intimidated the garrison of Eresburg ‘by means of destructive mala ingenia [siege engines]’ that the Carolingian troops abandoned their citadel. Against Syburg ‘by God’s will, the catapults which they had set up did more harm to them than to those within the fortress… [so] they also prepared hurdles for an attack by storm upon the castellum’.5

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4 ‘Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks’, in P.D. King, Charlemagne: Translated Sources (Kendal 1987) entry for AD 775.
5 ‘Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks’, in P.D. King, Charlemagne: Translated Sources (Kendal 1987) entry for AD 776.

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This seems to suggest that the Saxons were short of the expertise needed to make proper use of machines either captured or copied from their Carolingian foes. According to the *Frankish Annals*, the Saxons were then driven off with considerable loss, largely owing to a divine manifestation in ‘the likeness of two shields, red in colour and flaming and moving to and fro over the church’.

Hurriedly returning from Italy to the city of Worms, Charlemagne summoned an assembly before launching a rapid counter-offensive which clearly caught the Saxon rebels off guard. Most of their leaders were summoned to meet Charlemagne at the headwaters of the river Lippe, perhaps partially because the hot mineral waters of what is now the German spa town of Bad Lippspringe had magical qualities to these pagans. There they formally submitted to Frankish rule and agreed to become Christian, though Widukind seems to have been notably absent. Charlemagne then had the fortifications of Eresburg restored and a strong new position established at Karlsburg, close to if not the same as the later city of Paderborn. These were then garrisoned by elite *scara* troops.

The following winter remained largely peaceful, though Widukind seems to have used this time to win allies amongst those who resented Carolingian domination. Perhaps aware of Widukind’s activities, in spring Charlemagne gathered a particularly large army, which he then led to Paderborn where another general assembly of Carolingian leaders had been summoned. This focused upon the administration of supposedly conquered Saxon lands, which were now divided into missionary parishes, ready for the large-scale conversion of their inhabitants. This may have seemed innocuous enough and, in the words of the *Revised Frankish Annals*, the Saxon leaders: ‘surrendered themselves so fully to the power of the king as to merit receiving forgiveness at this time, the condition being that they would be deprived both of their country and of their freedom should they be in further breach of his decrees’.

Again Widukind was not present. Accepting the fact that continued resistance would deprive him of his huge estates in Westphalia, Widukind had fled to the Danish King Sigfred, taking many of his supporters with him. Charlemagne was still at Paderborn, hunting wild boar and auroch (the now extinct wild cattle of Europe and Asia), when he heard of the alliance between Widukind and Sigfred. By then Charlemagne had also received a request for support from the governor of Saragossa in the eastern *thughur* or military frontier zone of the Umayyad Emirate of Cordova, who was in rebellion against the Amir ’Abd al-Rahman I. Confident that Saxony was now under control, Charlemagne agreed to send an army to Spain the following year.

Having spent Christmas at Douzy in the Ardennes, Charlemagne
went to Aquitaine where he spent Easter at Chasseneuil to prepare his forthcoming Spanish campaign. By then, however, the Saragossa rebellion had fizzled out and Charlemagne’s ambitious two-pronged offensive across the Pyrenees suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of Basque tribesmen as it retreated across the pass of Roncevalles. This was the reality behind the epic medieval *Song of Roland*.

The fact that accurate information of political and strategic importance travelled rapidly across early medieval Europe to supposedly backward tribal peoples, tends to be neglected by non-military historians. Yet Widukind clearly knew that Charlemagne was preoccupied elsewhere, and probably that he was in significant difficulties. The leader of the Saxon dissidents clearly seized this opportunity and, again quoting from the *Frankish Annals*: ‘they [the Saxons] followed their evil custom and again rebelled, at the instigation of … Widukind and his companions’. The costly new fortress of Karlsburg was destroyed and Widukind’s army pressed on as far as Deutz on the river Rhine, torching churches on their way. This lay deep within territory which had been Frankish for centuries. Meanwhile the monks of Fulda Abbey hurriedly carried the relics of St Boniface over the Rhön Mountains to safety.

Unable to cross the Rhine, Widukind led his men towards Coblenz, capturing many of the rural population and sending them back to Saxony as slaves. A relatively small Carolingian force then checked the rebel onslaught opposite Coblenz, so Widukind fell back towards Deutz, giving his enemies the impression that the Saxons had been routed. Either in a counter-attack or an ambush, the rebels then routed their pursuers. News of this victory reportedly encouraged many other Saxons to throw off their grudging acceptance of Christianity and consequently the flames of revolt spread still further.

Charlemagne learned of the problem when he reached Auxerre on his return from Spain and promptly sent troops to the Rhineland where they caught and defeated the Saxons near Leisa in the Eder Valley. The Carolingian state was not on the verge of collapse, as some respected historians have claimed. Nevertheless AD 778 was a year of crisis for the Carolingian king who may well have found himself short of troops to deal with an increasing number of problems. Furthermore, the confrontation in Saxony had almost become a personal duel between Charlemagne and Widukind, while the Saxon rebels’ defection from Christianity made much harsher measures permissible in Christian eyes. In purely military terms, the centre of Saxon resistance had again moved north, to the area of Wigmodia between the lower Weser and Elbe rivers where Widukind found staunch allies.

Charlemagne finally seems to have accepted that the defeat of Saxon rebels could no longer be regarded as a sideshow. So, in AD 779, he again assembled his army at Düren before crossing the Rhine at Lippeham, which seems to have been where the river Lippe met the Rhine, perhaps at the modern town of Wesel which had a Franconian manor in the 8th century. Charlemagne then defeated a significant Saxon force at Bocholt. According to the *Frankish Annals*, all the Westphalian leaders were captured, though again with the notable exception of Widukind. Charlemagne now marched east, across the Weser and into Eastphalian territory where local leaders again swore oaths of loyalty and handed over hostages. For almost two years there was relatively little fighting while Widukind seems to have concentrated
on building up support. Then, when the Saxon rebellion erupted once more, it was the Carolingians who now went on the offensive deeper and deeper into Saxony. In response Widukind’s warriors mainly relied upon guerrilla warfare.

While Widukind gathered his strength, Charlemagne sent men in a somewhat premature attempt to divide a supposedly conquered Saxony into ecclesiastical units where bishops, priests and abbots could preach to the baptized converts more effectively. In return for handing over hostages from the ranks of free men and *litt* (half-free), the existing Saxon tribal aristocracies mostly seem to have retained their lands and status. In fact the next phase of the struggle against Carolingian domination seems largely to have been fought by the middle and lower ranks of society, while much if not most of the aristocracy supported the Frankish conquerors. In fact Charlemagne himself felt no need to go to Saxony in AD 781. Instead he concentrated on other matters such as the troublesome Duke Tassilo III of Bavaria. Charlemagne also sent his three-year-old son Louis (the future Emperor Louis the Pious) to Aquitaine to stop local people ‘growing insolent because of the king’s long absence’ and to start learning the art of rulership.

The east end of the Stiftskirche of St Petrus and Paulus in Obermarsberg, which is believed to stand on the site of the *Irminsal* sacred tree or wooden pillar of the pagan Saxons. (Author’s photograph)
CHRONOLOGY

695 Territory south of the Teutoburger Wald lost by Franks to Saxons.

772 Charlemagne leads his army into lost territory, seizes Eresburg, destroys the Irminsul sacred tree and installs a garrison.

772-74 Charlemagne campaigns against the Lombard Kingdom of Italy.

773 Saxons retake Eresburg, occupy Syburg and attack Büraburg.

774 Saxons destroy the abbey at Fritzlar and ravage much of Hesse; Charlemagne returns from Italy and retakes Eresburg but bad weather halts further campaigning.

774-75 Charlemagne conquers the northern provinces of the Lombard Kingdom of Italy.

775 Charlemagne invades Saxony where most of the Saxon leaders submit, though Widukind escapes; Charlemagne then campaigns against the rebel Duke of Friuli in Italy; another uprising by many Saxons under Widukind is again defeated and again Widukind escapes.

776 Conclusion of the campaign against the Lombard Duke of Friuli.

777 Charlemagne holds a general assembly at Paderborn attended by all Saxon leaders except Widukind, who finds refuge with King Sigfred of the Danes.

778 Charlemagne unsuccessfully attacks Muslim Saragossa in the thughur frontier zone of the Emirate of Cordova and is defeated by the Basques at Roncevalles on his return journey; Bavaria accepts Carolingian overlordship; a further rising by Saxons is led by Widukind who probably makes alliances with the Danes and the north-western Slav tribes.

779 Charlemagne crosses the Rhine and defeats the Saxons at Bocholt.

779-81 Widukind builds up rebel strength in northern Saxony.
781 Charlemagne finalizes preparations for an invasion of the Avar Khaganate.

782 Charlemagne holds an assembly at Lippspringe in southern Saxony; he also sends an army against Slav Sorb raiders but this returns to deal with an uprising in southern Saxony; two Carolingian forces are defeated by Widukind’s Saxons in the Süntel Hills; Charlemagne returns from Italy to defeat these rebels then has many captives executed at Verden, though Widukind again escapes to the Danes.

783 Autumn, Charlemagne defeats the rebels in a three-day battle next to the river Hase and perhaps overruns fortifications on the Wittekinsberg before ravaging southern Saxony.

783–74 Winter and spring, a Frisian uprising against Carolingian rule is supported by Widukind; renewed uprisings amongst Westphalian and Eastphalian Saxons.

784 Bad weather hinders Charlemagne’s campaign towards northern Saxony; he ravages Eastphalian territory as far as the Elbe River while his son, Charles the Younger, defeats a Saxon force in the Lippe Valley; Charlemagne decides to conduct a winter campaign in southern Saxony.

785 Charlemagne’s spring campaign is baulked by flooding of the river Weser; in June Charlemagne summons a major assembly of Saxon and Frankish lords at Paderborn, then leads his army across Saxony as far as the lower Elbe without significant resistance; Widukind and Abbo retreat beyond the Elbe but then negotiate and exchange hostages; Charlemagne returns to his palace at Attigny, followed by Widukind and Abbo; here the Saxon leaders are baptized as Christians on Christmas Day.

785–86 Charlemagne suppresses a rebellion by Count Hardrad of Thuringia.

791 Carolingian forces attack the Avar Khaganate from three directions but lose most of their horses to an equine epidemic; many Saxons take advantage of Charlemagne’s Avar setback to rebel once more.

793 Charlemagne attempts to have a canal constructed to link the Rhine and Danube river basins; he sends Count Theoderic to muster Saxon troops for another offensive against the Avars but Theoderic is defeated by Saxon rebels; Charlemagne has large numbers of Saxon families deported from north of the Elbe; Charlemagne’s son, King Pippin of Italy, unsuccessfully campaigns against Lombard southern Italy.

794 Charlemagne abandons his canal project and attacks the Saxon rebels, supported by a second army under his son Charles the Younger; threatened from two directions the Saxons surrender.
795–78 Slav Abodrites attack the northern Saxons while Charlemagne marches to the Elbe where eastern Saxon rebels again surrender.

796 Charlemagne and Pippin launch a successful two-pronged invasion of the Avar Khaganate; 10,000 Saxons are deported to different parts of France and southern Germany while their homeland is given to the Abodrites.

797 Charlemagne issues the Capitulare Saxonicum making Westphalian, Angrian and Eastphalian Saxons equal to other peoples in his empire, but the Nordalbian Saxons again revolt; a Carolingian fleet attacks northern Saxon rebels while Charlemagne attacks from the south.

798 Charlemagne forms an alliance with the Abodrites and the Nordalbian Saxons are crushed at the (first) battle of Bornhöved.

800 Charlemagne is crowned as Western Emperor in Rome.

801 Charlemagne formally cedes Nordalbian territory (Schleswig and Holstein) to the pagan Abodrites.

802 Pagan Danes invade Abodrite-ruled Schleswig.

804 Last recorded uprising by northern Saxons.

808 King Godfred of the Danes (since c. AD 804) allies with Slav Wiltzi, Lutasian Sorbs and Smeldingi to attack the pro-Carolingian Abodrites.

809 Danes kill the new Abodrite leader Drożko, resulting in years of confusion in Abodrite territory.

814 Death of Charlemagne.
During this conflict the opposing forces were each dominated by a single figure. On the Christian, Carolingian side this was of course Charlemagne. Born on 2 April 742 Charles, son of Pippin II and Bertha, daughter of the powerful Count of Laon, had a remarkably long life for this period in history, dying at the age of almost 72 on 28 January 814. He was King of the Franks from AD 768 and King of Italy from AD 774. From AD 800 he was also the first Western Emperor since the fall of Rome three centuries earlier, and later generations came to regard ‘Charles the Great’ or Charlemagne as the first Holy Roman Emperor. Overthrowing the Lombard Kingdom in northern Italy, conquering the Saxons and destroying the Avar Khaganate, he also extended Frankish territory and overlordship along several other frontiers.

Charlemagne’s grandfather had been the redoubtable Charles Martel while his father was Pippin, Mayor of the Palace to the final enfeebled Merovingian Frankish rulers until he deposed the last of them, Childeric III, in AD 751. He thus became the first Carolingian king of the Franks. Like his predecessors, Charlemagne retained many Germanic tastes while still being a pious Christian and greatly admiring the Roman heritage of his southern, Latin territories. In fact his delight in listening to old heroic Germanic poems resulted in many of them being written down and thus preserved. On a more practical level Charlemagne was interested in Germanic tribal law, a fascination which shocked many intellectuals in the Carolingian court. It would nevertheless influence the way this greatest of all Carolingian rulers dealt with the Saxon problem.
Charlemagne’s patronage of what has come to be known as the Carolingian Renaissance is thought to have been the first serious attempt by a non-Byzantine or non-Islamic early medieval ruler to preserve the cultural heritage of ancient, Graeco-Roman civilization. As a military leader, Charlemagne had few equals in early medieval Europe. Of course, to be a successful king during this period, a ruler also had to be a successful warlord. Thus ‘Charles the Great’, like Charles Martel and Pippin III before him, succeeded as a ruler because he succeeded as a warrior. His abilities were recognized during his lifetime, not least in Einhard’s biography of Charlemagne where he wrote that ‘we may wonder which is more to be admired, the King’s physical endurance or his good fortune… [He] never refused any undertaking because of the difficulties and toil involved, nor would he ever withdraw for fear of its perils… [He] was never broken by adversity nor uplifted by triumph.’

Einhard recorded various aspects of Charlemagne’s personal life, noting that, ‘He constantly took exercise both by riding and hunting. This was a natural habit for there is hardly any people in the earth that can be placed on equality with the Franks in this respect.’ When not campaigning, which was rare during the early decades of his life, Charlemagne liked to spend time in favourite palaces at Frankfurt, Herstal, Ingelheim, Mainz, Worms and Thionville, all of which lay in the Frankish heartlands of his realm. Here he clearly indulged a love of women (five wives and four concubines according to Einhard), which shocked people of a later generation, if not of his own. In AD 824 a monk named Wetti claimed that in a dream he had seen Charlemagne with a wild beast gnawing at his genitals as punishment for his sexual excesses.
On his death, Charlemagne was buried in his great new palace church at Aachen. His long reign not only created an empire which proved fragile, but cemented a partnership between a warrior aristocracy, kings and the Church which would be the central pillar of a new and distinctly European medieval civilization. He is even credited with establishing an emerging European identity, which subsequent generations would develop further. By the 12th century a German chronicler like Helmold could claim that Charlemagne was already 'a man to be extolled by every writer and to be placed in the front rank of those who laboured for God in the northern parts. For by the sword he overcame the most fierce and rebellious Saxon folk and subjected it to the laws of Christendom.'

Romantic legends were soon grafted onto the real facts of Charlemagne’s life, even claiming that he went on crusade to the Holy Land – presumably because such a Christian hero must surely have done so! The earliest surviving examples of these Charlemagne legends are in 12th-century French but they became so popular that they soon appeared in many languages, sometimes with distinctive local variations. Not surprisingly the Saxon wars feature in these epics, one example coming from the late 13th-century Scandinavian Karlamagnus Saga. The first part is rooted in reality, though hugely simplified, stating that Charlemagne learned of the Saxon revolt when he returned from Spain. He then hastened to meet the rebels but was unable to cross the Rhine. Charlemagne’s men tried to build a bridge but their progress was slow until the heroes Roland and Oliver arrived to quickly complete the job. The Saxons were then defeated and their king slain. These events were then followed by the first appearance of the mystical ‘Swan Knight’, Lohengrin, whose own legend formed the basis of one of Wagner’s greatest operas.

The Chanson de Saisnes or ‘Song of the Saxons’ by Jehan Bodel was written around AD 1200. It featured Widukind, here called Guiteclin, who supposedly captured Cologne while Charlemagne was besieging mythical Nobilis in Spain. Leaving Roland to continue that siege Charlemagne hurried to Cologne but, through his own recklessness, was encircled by Guiteclin’s men within Saxon territory. Summoned to save his king, Roland first captured Nobilis then rescued Charlemagne. But the struggle continued and in order to defeat the Saxons the Carolingian army had to build a bridge across the Rhine. After many setbacks this was completed, and the Franks went on to win the war while Guiteclin was brought to trial but died soon afterwards.

In subsequent centuries Charlemagne was held up as an almost ideal Christian ruler in both France and Germany. In fact rival French and German nationalisms competed to claim this long-dead ruler. In the second half of the 20th century his memory served to advance the ideals of a united Europe and since 1949 the citizens of Aachen have awarded the annual Karlpreis or International Charlemagne Prize to those who have furthered the creation of a United States of Europe.

Count Theoderic
Theoderic was described as a *propinquus*, close relative or even cousin, of Charlemagne. This, and the little that is known of his life, suggests that he was of a similar age. Known in French as Count Thierry, he was a grandson of a sister of Plectrud, the wife of Pippin of Herstal who, though never crowned king, had in effect ruled the Frankish realm as Mayor of the Palace from AD 680 until his death in AD 714. Theoderic’s other grandmother was Bertrada who was similarly one of Charlemagne’s grandmothers and a daughter of Count Hugobert of Laon. However, it has also been suggested that Count Theoderic was the same man as Theuderic of Mâcon and Autun who was himself descended from Chrodelind, a sister of Pippin II’s wife.

Theoderic rose to high rank and was first mentioned in written sources for the year AD 775. To the end of his life he was regarded as a tough warrior with a reputation for recklessness and in AD 782 Count Theoderic was seemingly in command of the elite Ripuarian Frankish army based on the Rhine frontier. Credited with saving the remnants of his fellow commanders’ shattered force following their defeat by Saxon rebels in the Süntel Hills, he subsequently had a major command role against the Avars in AD 788 and AD 791. Two years later Charlemagne entrusted Theoderic with raising a Saxon army for yet another invasion of the Avar Khaganate. This time, however, Theoderic may have miscalculated for his small recruiting force was destroyed by those Saxons whom he wanted to enlist. In the words of the *Revised Frankish Annals*, Charlemagne was informed that ‘The troops whom count Theoderic was bringing through Frisia had been intercepted and destroyed by the Saxons in the district of Rüstringen, on the river Weser’. Count Theoderic then disappears from the sources, having probably been slain.

Witzan of the Abodrites
Whether Witzan should correctly be called the chieftain or the king of the pagan Abodrites is a matter of debate, though Frankish sources use the Latin terms *princeps* and *rex*. The date when Witzan gained this position is unknown but his alliance with Charlemagne against their common Saxon foe dated from around AD 780. In practice his position at the head of a loose union of Slavic tribes was useful to the
Carolingian king because the fearsome Abodrites could always threaten the Saxons from the north if they became a menace to the Franks in the south. Carolingian sources also describe Witzan as a *vassus* of Charlemagne but, at the time, this term had a more varied meaning than it would have in the later medieval period.

The Abodrites could also find themselves fighting their fellow pagan Slavs, the neighbouring Wiltzi, when the latter formed an alliance with the Danes and northern Saxons, as happened in AD 789. Witzan himself fell in battle against the northern Saxons in AD 795 while leading his men towards Bardowick, and a subsequent campaign launched by Charlemagne was at least partially in retaliation for the death of his ally. Witzan was succeeded by his son Droźko who maintained the alliance between pagan Abodrites and Christian Carolingians until he himself was killed by Danes in AD 809. Thereafter the Abodrite tribal confederation fell into several years of confusion though Witzan’s brother Slawomir was nominally their ruler, initially alone and, after AD 817, as co-ruler with Droźko’s son Ceadrag.

**SAXON COMMANDERS**

**Widukind**

The leader of pagan Saxon resistance remains something of a mystery. Widukind was first mentioned in Frankish sources in AD 777, as the only significant Westphalian leader to refuse to attend Charlemagne’s great assembly at Paderborn and then fleeing to the Danes. A rather later source, the 13th-century *Sachsische Weltchronik*, mentions Widukind in relation to events in AD 769 and it is possible that its author was drawing upon another lost text. Widukind’s name meant ‘child of the forest’ and, being unknown in earlier times, may actually have been a nickname or *nom de guerre*. However, it was also a poetic term for a wolf or wolf-like man, so it may thus have been an honorific title.

Widukind is generally described as a nobleman of the Saxon Westphalians who emerged as leader of the pagan Saxon resistance between AD 777 and 785. But the historian John Hines suggests that he might have been more than that: ‘In this context, it is difficult not to believe that Widukind, the leader of pagan resistance, was more than simply a secular nationalist or regional if not personal freedom fighter, but a religious leader of some sort – perhaps taking on some of the familiar characteristics of the traditionalist “prophet” emerging to lead resistance to imminent Christianity.’

Such a view might be strengthened by Widukind’s ability to convince recently converted Frisians to revert to their traditional beliefs in AD 784 and to rise against Carolingian rule. Similarly, Widukind’s ability to form a

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genuine alliance with the ruler of the pagan Danes suggests some degree of recognized status, be it political or religious, despite Widukind’s being little more than a refugee at the time.

Whatever his precise status amongst the Saxons, Widukind can fairly be described as waging a political and cultural war, comparable with, though in direct opposition to, that waged by Charlemagne. Another interesting feature of at least the later years of this struggle was that Widukind found most support amongst the middle and lower strata of Old Saxon society. A large part of the Old Saxon aristocracy, at least in southern Saxony, seems to have resigned itself to the Franks’ overwhelming military superiority and to have accepted Carolingian domination. In so doing they succeeded, to a large extent, in preserving their own status. Widukind may therefore have provided a focus for resistance amongst people who felt abandoned by their traditional military leaderships. Furthermore, a looser social hierarchy amongst the pagan Saxons – compared with that of the increasingly formal and even proto-feudal structure of Carolingian society – probably made it easier for at least those of free status to turn to a new and presumably charismatic leader like Widukind.
Carolingian and some early Christian German sources naturally condemn Widukind as a sort of polar opposite to the almost saintly Charlemagne, portraying him as a faithless, troublemaking rebel who in the end submitted only because he was ‘conscious of his crimes’. Widukind’s baptism as a Christian, with Charlemagne as his godfather, seems to have been a more significant event than the mere conversion of one leader and a few of his followers. In so doing, Widukind appears to have strengthened the position of the Saxon elite within the Frankish Kingdom and subsequent Empire.

Almost nothing is known for certain about him afterwards, though there are passing references, hints and legends. Some have suggested that Widukind was for a while held in a monastery like other deposed rulers. Alternatively, or perhaps after a few years, he may have played a role in the administration of a now-conquered Saxony. Widukind is certainly credited with founding a church at Enger while less reliable stories also credit him with building several others. Enger itself was not mentioned before AD 984, but it came to be known as Widukind’s Town and its church is said to contain Widukind’s tomb.

According to some sources Widukind died about AD 808 during a campaign in the service of Charlemagne, though the *Vita Liudgeri* (Life of St Ludger) suggests that he had died some ten years earlier. Pious legends soon grew up around Widukind’s memory and the Christian Church, against which he had struggled for so long, proclaimed him to be ‘blessed’ and allowed his name to be honoured annually on 6 January. Widukind’s wife was called Gheva, Ghena or Gena and she was also said to been buried at Enger. The *Sachsische Weltchronik* named one of his sons as Wigbert, ‘a good man’ who sent his own youngest son Wulbert to be educated in Rome. What is clear is that Widukind’s descendants not only became pillars of the Church in their homeland of Saxony but were claimed as ancestors of the Ottonian dynasty which ruled the Western Empire – then consisting of little more than Germany and northern Italy – from AD 919 to 1024. Queen Matilda, the wife of King Henry I of England, was similarly stated to be a great-great-great-granddaughter of Widukind.
By then Widukind himself was emerging as a Saxon epic hero, though this was seen more in France, the Low Countries and Scandinavia than in Germany itself. Known as Guiteclin or Guitechin in medieval French literature, he features most prominently in the *Chanson des Saisnes*, a *chanson de geste* written around 1200 by Jehan Bodel of Arras, who based his text upon an earlier, supposedly cruder, and now lost version of the story. Four differing versions of Bodel’s epic survive but the story always centres upon the struggle between Charlemagne and Widukind (see above) which, it maintains, was a personal feud resulting from the death of the Saxon leader’s father Justamont, at the hands of Charlemagne’s father Pippin the Short. Courtly love affairs are also added to complicate the tale further. One such sub-plot has Guiteclin-Widukind’s wife, here called Sebile, falling in love with Baudouin who is Roland’s brother and Charlemagne’s nephew. She tells Charlemagne of Guiteclin’s plans to cross the Rhine and after Charlemagne slays Guiteclin, Sebile becomes a Christian and marries Baudouin who thus becomes King of the Saxons. However, a second war ensues between Guiteclin’s descendants and Charlemagne, who is again victorious. As a result, one of the defeated Saxons becomes Christian and is thus known as Guiteclin the Convert to distinguish him from Guiteclin the Pagan.

Much later, Widukind re-emerged as a hero of a new German nationalism. In mid-17th-century plays and early forms of opera he is no longer just a pagan foe but has become a glorious ancestor whose conversion to Christianity is a central theme. Widukind’s popularity grew still further in the 18th and 19th centuries in patriotic and nationalistic poems, ballads, novels, plays, operas and oratorios, sometimes incorporating elements of German folklore.

Widukind then had the huge misfortune to be co-opted by the Nazis whose writers and scholars presented him as the saviour of the Saxon ‘race’ against aggression by Charlemagne – a
Frenchman and stooge of the Pope. One extraordinary publication suggested that Widukind converted to Christianity only because, if he did not, Charlemagne threatened to have his army of Italians, Moors and other ‘lesser races’ pollute the German ‘race’ by raping all the captured Saxon maidens!

Other named Saxon leaders
Remarkably little is known about other Saxon leaders at this time, and only a few names have survived. Hessi, for example, is merely mentioned in the *Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks* for the year AD 775 where he is described as the senior leader of the Eastphalians ‘who gave hostages as he [Charlemagne] was pleased to demand and swore oaths of fidelity to the above-said lord king Charles’. Similarly, when Charlemagne returned from Eastphalian territory, ‘the Engrarians came with Brun and their other optimates [senior men] to the district called Bucki [Bückegau] and there gave hostages’.

Widukind’s ‘constant companion’ or perhaps son-in-law Abbo is similarly mysterious, though he is mentioned in connection with Widukind several times. All that is known in detail is that in AD 785 both men fled north of the Elbe as Charlemagne’s army approached, and thereafter both then went to Attigny to be baptized as Christians.

Sigfred of the Danes
Only a little more is known about Sigfred or Sigurd, the ruler or perhaps even king of the pagan Danes. Usually known as Sigifridus in the Latin sources, he ruled what later became Denmark before the better-known King Godfred. Mentioned in the *Frankish Annals* in AD 777 as giving refuge to Widukind, he clearly offered the Saxons a certain amount of help in subsequent years though probably not very much.

King Sigfred of the Danes was mentioned again in AD 782, sending an embassy led by Halptani (Halfdan) to Charlemagne’s great assembly at Lippspringe. According to the Carolingian chronicler Einhard, this, like the embassy which came from the Avars, was looking for peace and rest and to be absolved, presumably of their peoples’ previous crimes against
Charlemagne. The last time that Sigfred was mentioned in these sources was in the year AD 798, when Charlemagne sent an envoy named Godeskalcm (Gotskalk) to the Danish leader, perhaps to initiate peace talks.

By AD 804 Sigfred had disappeared and the new Danish ruler was Godfred, who may have been Sigfred’s son or nephew, and who continued to support Saxon rebels against Charlemagne. Some years later a certain Anulo claimed the throne on the grounds that he was a nephew of a King Harald who may, on chronological grounds, have been co-ruler with Sigfred at some time between AD 798 and AD 804. It has also been suggested that Sigurd Hring, a legendary Danish and Swedish ruler who is thought to have lived in the middle of the 8th century, may be partially based upon the historic King Sigfred. This larger than life Sigurd Hring appeared in a number of Scandinavian sagas and even had a saga of his own, though it is now lost.
CAROLINGIAN FORCES

Charlemagne’s ambition that his army would be as disciplined, well organized and equipped as that of the Roman Empire at its height was clearly unrealistic. On the other hand, his vision of a Frankish kingdom and empire which united ‘church and state’ did produce a remarkably effective army. Of course a great deal of the credit should go to his predecessors but the result was, to some degree, a Christian Frankish fighting force. Direct comparison with the Romans is largely meaningless, as the Europe of the later 8th and early 9th centuries AD was fundamentally different from the Mediterranean world of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD.

Nevertheless the Carolingian rulers, and perhaps above all Charlemagne, achieved greater political cohesiveness than any of their foes, except the Byzantine Empire and the Umayyad Emirate of Spain. This enabled the Carolingians to use political as well as military means to great effect. Though disloyalty was not unknown in the upper echelons of Charlemagne’s civil and military leadership, he was able to remain at the centre of affairs while delegating authority to trusted deputies. Charlemagne’s immediate family, including sons and closest in-laws, served either as sub-kings in places like Aquitaine and Italy, or as deputies in partially autonomous duchies such as Bavaria. Equally vital in military terms were several newly established frontier Marches. These were special zones along the most vulnerable borders which were controlled by men with the rank of count.
Central to Charlemagne’s system of civil and military government were royal capitularies, or documents which both confirmed the ruler’s instructions in writing and also ensured that his instructions were clear to those who received them. These documents were then carried around the expanding Carolingian realm by *missi*, or messengers. This had been done for centuries, but Charlemagne improved and extended the system, perhaps inspired by the even more effective *barid* government postal system of the Islamic Caliphate. Such relatively reliable communications meant that the Carolingians could muster armies more effectively, launch larger campaigns, and send out more than one army at a time, often converging on a single enemy from different directions.

The military power base of Charlemagne’s kingdom remained the heartland of the Frankish people, which lay between the Rhine and Maas/Meuse rivers. From here Frankish armies had been sent out to face, defeat and, equally importantly, to learn from a remarkable variety of enemies. Such adaptability remained a hallmark of Charlemagne’s military system, as was its ability to sustain frequent and very intensive campaigns. Years without a significant campaign were, in fact, rare. So how could an early medieval state with a primitive, even rudimentary,
economic base afford such warfare? This has been studied by several historians over several generations, but is perhaps best summed up by John France who wrote that, in one way or another some of the costs would have fallen on the magnates and their client-groups, perhaps most obviously in the form of the *donum publicum*. Their dependants were liable to pay other taxes. The better-off might be liable to the *haribannus*, while poorer free tenants paid the *hostilitium*. All these pressures profoundly affected the wealth and position of the magnates, so that it is hardly surprising to find the king short of men at various times.8

While relentless in pursuit of taxes to finance his campaigns, Charlemagne was also bitterly opposed to superfluous luxuries on campaign, even in the baggage train. One story tells how, after he became emperor, Charlemagne rounded upon a senior commander who arrived at a military muster wearing jewellery. This, the man was told, would further endanger his life because he would become an obvious target. It would also risk his family’s wealth and, by implication, risk its value as a source of taxes for the government. The situation was different for churchmen who marched with the army in gorgeous robes and beneath sumptuous canopies to raise men’s morale.

One of the most effective tools in Charlemagne’s hands when dealing with a proud and often turbulent aristocracy was his control over *honores*. These were normally temporary military or civil offices, which could bring their holders wealth and power. Here it is important to realize that Charlemagne’s huge kingdom, like most other early medieval states, could not really be ruled or dominated by one person. Instead Charlemagne’s government should be seen as a sort of aristocratic oligarchy where the king sat as a sort of respected chairman. When the system worked properly, monarch and aristocracy cooperated to their mutual benefit. Even so, many in the old Frankish aristocracy still tended to regard the Carolingian dynasty as upstarts. There was no ‘machinery of command’ and a king’s success depended almost entirely upon his character, his abilities – including the ability to divide and rule – and of course his luck. As John France has also pointed out, the great families of the Frankish state could gain a great deal from supporting a successful ruler in war, but warfare also presented great risks, not only of death in battle but of catastrophic financial losses.

In the heartlands of the Frankish realm these magnates were essential for the mustering of a useful force. The death of a senior man, especially in battle or without an adult male heir, could seriously disrupt recruitment, organization, morale and the chain of command. Such losses were particularly

important if the man in question was a close companion or friend of the ruler who might therefore be expected to take prompt and savage revenge. This too-often neglected aspect of the court and military ethos of Charlemagne’s kingdom may have contributed to the otherwise notorious Massacre of Verden (see below). In some provinces where loyalty was considered less than reliable, for example Aquitaine, Charlemagne was reluctant to allow powerful lords to have large military followings. Even so, the expansion of the Frankish kingdom into so many non-Frankish regions led to increasing variety within Charlemagne’s armies. For this reason generalization about these armies can be very misleading.

The little that is known about military training in the Carolingian state concerns the aristocracy, though it was probably also true of free men liable for military service. Most men involved in conflict learned the art of war through experience, though boys of the elite were given toy weapons and maybe even pieces of toy armour with which to play and train in the courtyards of their houses. A few years later these boys would be involved in hard riding and hard living while the hunting of wild and dangerous animals honed skills that would also be useful in war.

Carolingian chroniclers naturally maintained that Christian fervour was the primary motivation for Charlemagne’s troops. However, these forces still had a great deal in common with their Migration Era ancestors. In other words, even their elites could still be seen as war-bands of relatively young warriors drawn from Frankish and other aristocracies. They were attached to a leader or lord and competed both individually and as units for booty and renown. During the long struggle against the pagan Saxons there might have been opportunity for fame but precious little for loot. In fact, there is only one mention of significant amounts of gold and silver being seized from the Saxons, so perhaps the traditional concept of glory, both heroic and heavenly, remained an overriding factor.

Charlemagne was particularly successful in harnessing the authority of the Church to his frequent military campaigns. Yet this was a relationship between equals and certainly not a simple case of one side making use of the other. Indeed Charlemagne and the Church seem to have had an agreed programme of prayers, fasts, alms giving, special masses and public religious rites that were not only intended to promote widespread support for military campaigns but were intended to win divine aid for Carolingian armies. The first Carolingian rulers had allied themselves to papal attempts at religious reform and a mid-8th-century revision of the old Law of the Salian Franks unashamedly declared the Franks to be God’s ‘new Chosen People’. Presumably this had an impact upon Carolingian efforts to make soldiers feel responsible for their own relationship with God, in their individual actions and through the religious rites of confession and penance.

9 D.S. Bachrach, Religion and the Conduct of War c.300–1215 (Woodbridge 2003) 32–33.
Increasingly, warfare had to be justified in a Christian way while military leaders particularly needed reassurance that their inevitable responsibility for bloodshed would not bar them from paradise. The role of religion was most obvious during Charlemagne's campaigns against external peoples or states who were either non-Christian or who could be accused of faithlessness. So the king ensured that his armies were supported by churchmen, who either accompanied the troops on campaign or remained in their abbeys to pray for Carolingian success. For example, a capitulary issued in AD 780 instructed all bishops and priests to conduct three Masses, one for the king, one for his army and one to alleviate current difficulties, while every monk, nun and canon was to say three psalms. All these members of the ‘religious’ also had to fast and give alms. Such rituals on behalf of the king and his army had to be completed by the Feast of St John (24 June), around the time that the campaigning season actually started. This close association between Church and army was made easier by a continuing ‘Frankization’ of the senior ranks of the Carolingian Church, bishops, archbishops and senior abbots mostly being drawn from the same elite Frankish families as the military leadership.

The Christian religion also had an important part to play on campaign. Bishops and abbots accompanied and sometimes even commanded military units, as they had long done, though they were not to bear arms personally nor shed blood. Some clearly did, while others fell in battle merely because they were present. After a battle churchmen chanted Gradual Psalms for the fallen, gave last rites to the dying and helped the wounded. On the rarer occasions when Carolingian armies were accompanied by trained physicians, most of these men would also have been clerics, that is, members of the Church.

Swords dating from the 7th and early 8th centuries AD, from Westphalia, south-western Germany and northern France; the shield boss is from Friuli in north-eastern Italy. (Neues Museum, Berlin; author’s photograph)

Charlemagne and one of his wives, probably Luitgard his last spouse, from a manuscript made between AD 817 and 823. (Monastery of St Paul in Carinthia, Austria)
Other motivations still existed, of course, including close identification with a monarchy and state in which military service was an obligation, the mark of a free man and a source of honour. The numbers of troops available to Charlemagne, and the resulting size of his armies on various campaigns, have exercised historians for well over a century. What is easier to assess is the size of the aristocracy, which provided leadership at various levels. There were probably between 250 and 300 counts, each with a military following. Maintaining the loyalty and support of these counts was vital for Charlemagne who therefore shared the spoils of war and political authority with them.

Many if not most of the men within these military followings were unbeneﬁced, meaning that they did not have landed estates of their own. So a just distribution of booty and other rewards was vital at all levels. This was all well and good when the Carolingians were campaigning successfully against wealthy foes, but the prolonged Saxon war rarely fell into that category. Something more was needed in a situation where, in the words of John France, ‘hard knocks and harsh conditions were more readily available than plunder’. The main booty to be gained in Saxony was probably human – low-status captives being enslaved, while ransom could be gained for high-status hostages. Nevertheless the difﬁcult and dangerous war in Saxony did not actually threaten the interests of the Frankish aristocracy – it even favoured those of the magnates whose estates lay within range of Saxon raiding. So these men were willing to ﬁght some of the time, though many seemed unwilling to ﬁght repeated campaigns.

SAXON FORCES

The basic element of early Germanic society has been described as the clan. Its primary functions were to maintain traditional or customary law and to conduct warfare. In other respects the bonds of clan membership were weak while the clan itself often had a divided leadership. Nevertheless it remained central to Old Saxon society even at a time when that society was already changing. One of the most striking differences between the Saxons who faced Charlemagne in the 8th century and those Germanic tribes who had resisted Roman aggression so ferociously and effectively centuries earlier, was that some elements in Old Saxon society, perhaps mostly aristocratic, were willing to come to terms with the Frankish king. Meanwhile others were most definitely not.
Much less is known about Old Saxon military structures than about their Carolingian rivals, and most of what can be deduced comes from archaeological evidence, or from their enemies, or from later Saxon chroniclers who drew upon earlier traditions or lost written sources. For example, the 10th-century Saxon chronicler Widukind of Corvey, who is thought to be a descendant of the Widukind who fought Charlemagne, stated that, when the early Saxons learned of a Frankish and Thuringian plot to attack them during a period of negotiations, a veteran Saxon warrior stepped forward. He took hold of ‘a standard that was held sacred among them, marked with the likeness of a lion and a dragon, and an eagle swooping from above’.10 These animals may also have been associated with a victory altar and were perhaps totemic tribal or clan symbols.

According to another myth, Widukind the pagan leader rode a black horse before his conversion to Christianity and a white horse afterwards. White or black horses appear on many flags and heraldry in several parts of Germany and England, as well as on the coats of arms of the defunct Kingdom of Hanover and several modern German Länder or provinces. Archaeological evidence supports the importance of the horse above all other animals among some Old Saxon groups. For example, one late Saxon grave at Sarstedt near Hildesheim is accompanied by a ritual horse burial. The man – clearly a warrior – was interred with a comb for his hair, tweezers, fire-steel, small knife, heavier seax fighting knife or shortsword, the iron boss from a wooden shield which had long rotted away, and a spear. To his left a horse, perhaps the warrior’s own, lay in a separate grave with its saddle and bridle, along with the bones of either a young squire or a female servant. This was certainly a pagan grave and is believed to date from around the time of the struggle against Charlemagne.11

Paganism was a central element of the Old Saxon independence struggle, becoming even more important after Charlemagne’s destruction of the Irminsul sacred tree and under the leadership of Widukind. This was at least the case amongst middle and lower strata of Saxon society. Meanwhile the warrior class seems to have retained its Germanic ancestors’ concern for appearance in the face of enemies and of allies. Widukind of Corvey, the chronicler, was probably correct if somewhat one-sided in his description of

the impact his pagan ancestors had upon their opposite numbers during negotiations with a Frankish king: ‘While they were saying these things, the Franks were admiring these men, for they were physically and mentally outstanding. They marvelled at their unusual clothing, their weapons, their hair which fell to their shoulders, [among the Franks only those of royal blood wore their hair so long] and above all their great constancy of mind. For they were clothed in military sagis [a long flowing woollen garment], and were armed with long lances, and when standing they rested upon their small shields, while at their loins they carried magnus cultellos [big knives, or in other words a sax or seax].’

Though almost nothing is known about lower-status Saxon warriors, they are generally assumed to have been similar to the early Franks. Archaeology shows both peoples to have used the same weapons, including javelins. This seems to have remained true of Old Saxon foot soldiers throughout the wars with Charlemagne, though in general terms they were significantly less well armoured than the elite scarae of the Carolingian army who were, of course, also mounted. Very few Saxons had mail armour or even a helmet, though these were known amongst the highest-status warriors. Basic weapons are found in a large number of male graves from this period, especially in Westphalia, which bore the initial brunt of Carolingian aggression.

Archaeological finds also suggest some degree of steppe influence upon Old Saxon horse-harness. Perhaps this was a heritage of earlier centuries when migrating Germanic peoples were in contact with the Sarmatians and Huns, or was a more recent influence from the Avars of what is now Hungary. Avar influence upon the Saxons was probably tenuous, but it is worth noting that the armour and helmets of the Saxons’ Swedish neighbours, north of the Baltic Sea, were under quite distinct technological influence from the steppes from the 4th to 8th centuries. The clearest technological connections were with the Khazars of southern Russia and the Ukraine.

One weapon featured more prominently in the written record than in the archaeological. This was the bow, probably because archery was practised by poorer, lower-status warriors rather than those men found in pre-Christian ‘warrior graves’. Less than a generation after finally submitting to Charlemagne, those Saxons who were mustered to fight against the Bretons at the time of Emperor Louis the Pious were described by Ermoldus Nigellus as a Saxona cohors patulis praecincta pharetris, meaning they were equipped with big quivers.12 Bows dating from the 5th or 6th century AD, made of yew and comparable with the better-known later medieval English so-called longbow, have been found at Kragehul on the island of Fyn in Denmark in an area which may then have been inhabited by Saxons. An 8th-century example over 2m long was similarly found in Alemannic graves in Württemberg, south of Saxony.

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The unsuccessful Saxon use of siege machines against Frankish fortification during the struggle against Charlemagne might suggest unfamiliarity with their use, or an attempt to get more qualified captives to operate them. The machines in question are likely to have been early forms of man-powered beam-sling mangonels which were simple to construct, but required training and considerable teamwork to use effectively.

The Saxons’ own fortifications varied considerably in size but were usually in one of two basic styles. Hilltop fortresses or citadels used any naturally defensive features and thus followed the lie of the land, sometimes incorporating rough stone walls plus timber palisades, gates and towers. Saxon forts or fortified settlements on level or low-lying land were more or less circular, with sometimes massive turf or earth ramparts, again topped by timber palisades and pierced by timber gates, sometimes strengthened with wooden towers. This circular style had a great deal in common with the earth and timber fortifications of the Saxons’ Western Slav neighbours. However, it has been suggested that a particularly urgent period of Saxon fortress building occurred in the 8th century AD before and during the struggle against the Franks, and was concentrated in the threatened south and west of Saxony.

Once again, information about Saxon tactics comes entirely from their foes. Accounts of their campaigns stress raiding and plunder, followed by retreat if defending forces approached. Both in enemy territory and when
defending their own, Old Saxon forces made considerable and effective use of ambushes. Fortified places would be defended when necessary and in the infrequent examples of open battle against the Carolingians, the Saxons would form up as a solid mass of infantry with few references to manoeuvring. Nevertheless, as far as can be told, there was a notable reliance upon infantry archery.

Strategically these Old Saxons seem to have made use of the many and varied forms of *invia*, ‘trackless terrain’ within their homeland. These were particularly extensive amongst the forests and marshes of northern Saxony. Perhaps not surprisingly, Frankish armies were reluctant to penetrate such dangerous country whereas the Saxons, like the Vikings of later centuries, used them to disperse and escape with ease.

The question of cavalry amongst the Saxons, most notably the Angarians who inhabited what subsequently became the horse-raising heartland of the Kingdom of Hanover, remains unanswered, though the cultural importance of horses cannot be denied. There is evidence that some Saxon groups bred horses of small to middle size and sturdy build, while these animals were used for both riding and to carry baggage. Furthermore, soon after Charlemagne’s conquest, the Carolingians either recruited or stationed a significant cavalry squadron in this region.

The ritual graves of sacrificed young and fit horses rarely include the elements needed for riding, while the lack of evidence for saddles suggests that the riders used saddle blankets. Saddles then appear, albeit very rarely, from the very late 7th or 8th century AD into the 9th century AD when such pagan graves disappeared. Some of these saddles clearly had wooden frames, though the wood itself had rotted away, the basic shape of such a wooden foundation being shown by the remains of its metallic fittings. One grave dating from the late 7th or 8th century AD not only included the remains of a saddle, but also stirrups, before stirrups are thought to have been adopted by the Franks. This must surely reflect Saxon cultural contact with the Avars, if not other peoples of the western steppes. Unfortunately there seems to be no archaeological link between stirrups and weapons such as spears or lance-heads, so one cannot say that the Saxon horsemen used stirrups in warfare. Similarly, snaffle bits with side bars are found in horse-graves associated with both male and female human graves.
CAROLINGIAN PLANS

Charlemagne rarely took a personal role in combat and although for him the conquest of Saxony became a virtual crusade, the Frankish ruler met this enemy in ranged battle only twice. According to his biographer Einhard, ‘the first time [was] near the Osning Mountains in the region of Detmold [AD 783], and then on the banks of the river Hase [later the same year], but the plan of every manoeuvre was made by him’. A closer look at the record suggests that there were other lesser clashes where Charlemagne was in command against the Saxons.

Like his predecessors, he usually planned his campaigns in late winter or early spring. As soon as these plans were ready, messengers were sent to those counts or other senior military leaders who were expected to contribute forces, specifying the date and place of muster. Fighting took place in summer with a truce, either formal or informal, normally coming into effect with the approach of winter. Charlemagne was nevertheless willing and able to continue military operations at a relatively low level throughout winter if this was considered necessary.

The conversion of the Saxons to Christianity was not only a central war aim for Charlemagne, it was also seen as essential for the incorporation of the Saxon tribes into the Carolingian realm. Hence military campaigning and the establishment of an ecclesiastical structure of dioceses and parishes went almost hand in hand. The new religious administrative structure and the building of fortified positions with resident garrisons similarly followed essentially the same pattern. When the conquest
proved much more difficult than had been expected, the Carolingian ruler resorted to enforced baptisms and at least one significant massacre. Towards
the end of the war, mass deportations of the northernmost Saxon populations and the handing of their ancestral homeland over to an allied, though still pagan, Slav tribe finally broke Saxon resistance. Thereafter the newly
established church bishoprics and, to a lesser extent, the administrative counties rapidly extended Carolingian cultural as well as political domination
over Saxony.

Nevertheless, the overall character of the war and the direction of its many campaigns were not the result of some grand strategic plan. In most
cases these campaigns were launched in response to yet another Saxon ‘falling away’ from a previous submission to both Charlemagne and the Christian
Church. For the Carolingians, therefore, much of this warfare was seen as vengeance for Saxon faithlessness or betrayal – hence the escalating savagery
of the conflict. Even during the early campaigns, Charlemagne and his advisers seem to have made little effort to differentiate between those who
had submitted and then rebelled, and those who had not submitted in the first place. Instead they apparently regarded all of southern Saxony as a
target, and after this was finally secured they turned their attention to the other Saxon lands.

From a purely military point of view, one of the Carolingians’ biggest problems lay in the fact that Saxony had never formed part of the Roman
Empire. It therefore lacked even the crumbling remains of roads, bridges and towns. Very little was, in fact, known about the country. Most campaigns
against Saxons were hampered by dense forests, with the attendant danger of ambush. Narrow passes through hills, which may not have been very high,
nevertheless confined Carolingian movements to a known route and thus the same danger of ambush. Saxony was also crossed by several substantial
rivers, which could be crossed only at known fords.

Meanwhile in the flat lands of the north there were broad open areas, which lacked cover or obvious locations for fortified encampments. Even so,
the establishment of fortified bases and garrison centres became central to Charlemagne’s strategy. These were manned by military settlers, who would eventually be integrated into the wider population. In the meantime those built in the south and west of Saxony during the first years of the conflict served as jumping-off points for campaigns farther afield.

Then there was the role of hostages. Hostage taking was regarded as an entirely legitimate means of warfare, being a normal feature of peace and truce agreements. Usually little is known of the hostages themselves, except occasionally their names.
But one otherwise not particularly important passage from a legal document from Reichenau sheds a rare light on what happened to some hostages while they were held in Carlingian territory. Written between AD 802 and 805, it lists the names and fathers’ names of 37 Saxon hostages as well as those Alemannians who held them. The latter ‘guards’ included three bishops and several counts while the Saxon hostages themselves were in three groups, reflecting their origins as Westphalians, Eastphalians and Angarians. They had initially been brought to Mainz where they were handed over to Bishop Haito of Basel and a local count named Hitto. Whether these 37 hostages were eventually released is unknown.

SAXON PLANS

Saxon plans and even Widukind’s contribution to these plans, insofar as they existed, can be deduced only from their enemies’ comments and from events as they unfolded. Saxon tribes living closest to the Frankish frontier undoubtedly felt threatened by rising Carolingian power, especially after Charlemagne attacked Eresburg and destroyed the sacred Irminsal. Clans which had previously acted separately, though nominally being part of the broader Westphalian tribe, now seem to have come together, albeit temporarily, to resist and where possible retaliate. By AD 775 Charlemagne’s ambitions were clear enough for the three tribal groupings of Westphalians, Eastphalians and Angarians to resist Carolingian aggression, though they almost always did so separately.

It was almost certainly the emergence of a senior Westphalian tribal leader or perhaps ‘priest-chieftain’, Widukind, that altered the character and effectiveness of Saxon resistance. He, perhaps for the first time in Saxon history, managed to get the three tribal groups to act together strategically and even occasionally on the ground. Whether one can see any element of political joint action remains much more doubtful. Later on, of course, Widukind also got those Saxons living north of the Elbe to join the struggle, largely because Charlemagne’s campaigns were by then ranging so widely that these distant northerners themselves felt threatened.

There is some truth in the popular idea that Saxon resistance was strengthened by the very fact that these people were politically and militarily so fragmented. This theory maintains that Charlemagne could find no overall Saxon leadership whom he could defeat or with whom to arrange a Saxon surrender. However, this idea is probably a romantic oversimplification. Much of the Saxon aristocracy seems to have accepted the fact of Carolingian domination at an early stage, but enough resistance remained at a tribal level for the war to continue. Widukind became the focus of Saxon resistance for several years and it was his eventual surrender, and even more so his conversion to Christianity, which broke the back of the pagan struggle even though guerrilla warfare continued

13 On two leaves of parchment preserved in the Benedictine Abbey of St Paul in the Lavanttal, in Austria (Benediktinerstift St Paul Lavant, Cod. 6/1, ff. 191r–192v).
for over a decade. The class-based character of Saxon resistance was clearly overstated by Marxist historians, but it nevertheless remains the case that the Saxon aristocracy, which submitted under generous terms, continued to have problems with its own free and ‘half-free’ litt subordinates. Significantly later, this would break out in another rather different revolt, the Stellinga uprising of AD 841 to 842.

The clear material and numerical superiority of Carolingian armies, and their superior organization, meant that the Saxons won only a single clear-cut battlefield victory, though there were other occasions when the victories claimed by Carolingian chroniclers do not bear close examination. On all these occasions the Saxons found themselves with a local numerical and tactical advantage, and in the better-recorded battle in the Süntel Hills in AD 782, their enemies also made a major blunder. Above all, despite the importance of horses in their culture, the Saxons still lacked a substantial cavalry force, whereas the Carolingians were by now renowned in this field.

The Saxons and their leaders rapidly recognized that their own few advantages could be used effectively only in guerrilla warfare and in raiding enemy territory when an opportunity arose. This they often did because of Charlemagne’s commitments or ambitions elsewhere. There were also many occasions when Saxon ‘rebel’ forces attacked Carolingian fortified outposts and the more exposed of Christian abbeys. Here they achieved several notable successes, though usually when Charlemagne’s garrisons abandoned their positions in the face of seemingly overwhelming force. The Saxons were markedly less successful in defending their own fortifications and seem to have done so only when they and their families were unable or unwilling to flee into the forests.
At the beginning of the summer, when fodder was at last plentiful enough to enable an army to march, he [Charlemagne] decided to enter Saxony and to hold the general assembly there, just as he was accustomed to hold it every year in Francia [the lands of the Franks]. He crossed the Rhine at Cologne and came with the whole army of the Franks to the source of the Lippe, where he set up camp. He stayed there some time and dealt with various matters. Among other things, he gave audience and leave to depart to legates from Sigfred, king of the Danes, and to those sent to him, supposedly in the cause of peace, by the khagan and the jugur, princes of the Huns [Avars].

Thus the year AD 782 started favourably for the Carolingian king, as recorded in the Revised Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks. The only disappointment was that Widukind, a senior nobleman and perhaps by now the recognized leader of the Westphalian Saxons, did not appear at this great assembly. Nevertheless, the other senior Saxons are said to have submitted, to have accepted Charlemagne as their overlord, and to have agreed to become Christians.

For his part, Charlemagne placed new counts in charge of his new Saxon territories, though many of these men were simply the senior Saxon aristocracy reinstated, some of whom now formed marriage alliances with noble Frankish families. Meanwhile Charlemagne returned to Frankish territory fully confident, it seemed, that the matter was concluded.

Unfortunately there was another side to the agreements – the now infamous Capitulatio in partibus Saxoniae – drawn up at what is now Lippspringe. This consisted of a series of draconian laws intended to crush Saxon paganism and to ensure that the Carolingian occupation was permanent. In fact in many areas it had the opposite effect. Capitulatio in partibus Saxoniae went further than merely establishing an administrative structure for the Saxon Church. No fewer than 14 different
offences against Church or state would be punishable by death. These ranged from any form of resistance, to breaking the Sabbath or eating horsemeat. Perhaps even more provocative for new and widely unwilling Saxon converts, from the wealthiest to the poorest, was the introduction of a church tithe, taxes in modern terms, consisting of one-tenth of a man’s substance. These were to support the preaching of Christianity but were paid by those same people who were having the new religion forced upon them. Furthermore such tithes must, to a large degree, have been collected by the new aristocracy of Frankish and Saxon noblemen – the latter perhaps already seen as traitors by those they ruled on behalf of a foreign king. In addition the Saxons had to provide a specified amount of unpaid labour to the Church.

Modern historians tend to see the Capitulatio in partibus Saxoniae as a blunder and only 12 years after its imposition Charlemagne’s most renowned scholar, Alcuin of York, ventured to suggest that the tithe of one-tenth might undermine the still fragile faith of the Saxons.

While Charlemagne was organizing the supposedly conquered territories in Saxony, Widukind of Westphalia made his way northwards to the land of the Danes (the name Denmark was not used until later). There he is said to have been well received by King Sigfred, a fellow pagan who may already have been watching with concern the belligerent advance of Carolingian Christianity in Saxony and amongst the nearby Frisans. Such concerns probably lay behind the Danish embassy, led by Halfdan, which had attended Charlemagne’s assembly at Lippspringe. Perhaps Halfdan returned home around the same time as Widukind arrived at Sigfred’s court and maybe both brought alarming accounts of the Frankish ruler’s ambitions.
But Widukind cannot surely have instigated the Saxon revolt, which broke out so soon after the issuing of the *Capitulatio in partibus Saxoniae*. As resentment spread across Saxony, Widukind returned and probably did little more than get some of the discontented local Saxon leaders to coordinate their activities. Perhaps they had asked him to come home. It is clear that Widukind’s success in these efforts caught the Carolingians by surprise. Certainly the *Revised Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks* blamed him for the result, maintaining that Widukind had ‘stirred up the passions of the Saxons with vain hopes so that they rebelled’.

Charlemagne had meanwhile returned to France and there learned that the Slav Sorbs, some of whom lived in disputed lands between the Elbe and Saale rivers, were raiding both their Saxon neighbours and Thuringia which had been Carolingian territory for much longer. Perhaps these Sorbs hoped to take advantage of the political changes and any resulting confusion, at least in Saxony. They clearly caused widespread damage and loss.

After reportedly returning to France, Charlemagne went to Bavaria to oversee final preparations for a proposed major assault upon the Avar Khaganate. Obviously the ‘Hun’ peace embassy to his great assembly at Lippspringe had failed. While in Bavaria, Charlemagne learned of the Sorb raids but rather than change his Avar plans he sent a small force to deal with this seemingly minor problem. It consisted of elite *scarae* cavalry or mounted troops from amongst Eastern Franks of the Ardennes and Rhineland. *Scarae* were the real professionals of the Carolingian army and were attached to the military households of palace officials, counts and other senior men.

On this occasion, they were supported by Saxons from the newly conquered territories, seemingly the first time these Saxons fought for their new ruler. This small army was nevertheless led by three senior *ministri* (government officials) from the Frankish court, Adalgis the *camarius* (Chamberlain), Gallo the *comes stabuli* (Count of the Royal Stables), and Worad the *comes palatii* (Count of the Palace), with orders to ‘repress the temerity of the contumacious Slavs’.
Adalgis, Gallo and Worad had reached or were nearing the river Elbe when they learned that a Saxon uprising had started behind them, apparently targeting Christian priests in particular. From that moment on there seems to be no further mention of Saxons in this small punitive expedition. Perhaps they deserted or, largely being infantry, they were left behind as the three Carolingian commanders hurried to deal with this new and more serious crisis. According to the Revised Annals, ‘they abandoned the route by which they had been intending to advance against the Slavs and marched at speed, with the east Frankish troops, towards the place where they had heard the Saxons had gathered’.

This was probably done on the orders of Charlemagne who meanwhile instructed his close relative Count Theoderic to assemble another army of Eastern, Ripuarian or Rhineland Franks and to link up with the first army. Because Theoderic hurriedly gathered men from the same areas as the three initial commanders had done, his force probably included fewer elite scarae and more infantry. It is also most likely to have assembled at Cologne before crossing the Rhine. Some historians have suggested that the two armies joined forces at Paderborn, but the established Carolingian base at Eresburg (Obermarsberg) seems more likely. It would also seem that even when the Carolingian armies joined forces, they were still outnumbered by Widukind’s rebel Saxons – an unaccustomed state of affairs for the Franks.

Charlemagne’s commanders had no difficulty in learning that their enemies were assembling in the Süntel Hills, overlooking the east bank of the river Weser. Furthermore, the Saxons had constructed a castra or fortified position, almost certainly on the Hohenstein which, being a narrow spur of what might better be described as the Süntel plateau, was largely surrounded by steep valleys and steeper cliffs. The Revised Annals state that the Saxon position was in the northern Süntel whereas the Hohenstein is towards their western end – though still ‘northwards’ in the sense that the Weser is a generally northwards-flowing river.

Whether the now four Carolingian commanders drew up their plans at Eresburg or did so after they had marched down the western bank of the Weser and were within sight of the Süntel, is unknown. They certainly held council somewhere and adopted Theoderic’s plan to launch a pincer attack ‘if the terrain was appropriate’. As Theoderic’s part of the army probably lacked many horsemen, it would initially remain static, leaving manoeuvre to Adalgis, Gallo and Worad with their now apparently entirely mounted force. Then, presumably, Theoderic’s infantry would toil up the slopes of the Süntel to attack the Saxon castra while the three commanders’ cavalry threatened them from a different direction or would attack the Saxon infantry if a suitable opportunity arose. It was a tactic frequently used – though usually with greater success – by Carolingian armies well into the 9th century AD.
Perhaps the plan even envisaged the three first commanders trying to lure the enemy out of their position and so giving Theoderic’s troops a better chance of overcoming the field fortifications. This is not specified in the sources, but the latter were written with the advantage of hindsight, based upon the testimony of survivors and of those perhaps eager to exonerate themselves from failure. It is, after all, easier to blame those who are already dead. It should be noted that in this part of the Sünentel, the hilltops are not rugged hills, as has sometimes been suggested, but form a relatively level if narrow plateau. Furthermore the forests, as they existed in the 8th century AD, would largely have consisted of deciduous woodland with open areas of shrub and grass – not the dense, dark pine forests of popular imagination.

The three first commanders now led their men across the Weser, probably via a ford close to where the medieval Münsterbrücke (Münster Bridge) and town of Hamelin were later built. They then headed up into the Süntel Hills where they took up position east of the enemy. Meanwhile Theoderic built a fortified encampment next to the Weser to block any Saxon thrust towards Carolingian territory. From here his men could also launch the proposed joint assault upon the Saxon castra. This position seems most likely to have been close to another ford farther downriver, probably at what is now Hessisch Oldendorf. It would nevertheless seem unlikely that Theoderic took his men along the east bank, exposing them to attack from Saxons in the hills. So he probably went along the west bank, crossing the Weser only at that lower ford. This is also believed to have been the route used by a Roman army in AD 16 to defeat the German leader Arminius.

Now, however, the Carolingian plan fell apart. The *Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks* specifically blame Adalgis, Gallo and Worad, stating that, ‘It
was their fear ... when they discussed matters among themselves, that if they had Theoderic with them in the battle the renown of the victory would be transferred to his name, and they therefore resolved to engage the Saxons without him.' Yet such arrogant selfishness seems unlikely in these respected and senior commanders.

Preliminaries to the battle of the Süntel Hills, AD 782

1 Early summer: After finalizing preparations in Bavaria for an invasion of the Avar Khaganate, Charlemagne returns to Francia then crosses the Rhine at Cologne to hold a large-scale general assembly at Lippspringe.

2 The assembly is attended by senior Carolingian noblemen, subordinate rulers, and by all Saxon leaders except Widukind. King Sigfred of the Danes sent ‘messengers’ led by Halptani (Halfdan), as did the khagan and the jugur (rulers) of the Avar Khaganate. The draconian *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* is drawn up and subsequently implemented throughout Carolingian-held Saxony.

3 Charlemagne returns to Gaul (France).

4 Early summer: Widukind returns from the Danish court where he had been seeking support from King Sigfred and takes over leadership of a spreading Saxon uprising against Carolingian rule.

5 Summer: Sorbs from between the Saale and Elbe rivers raid Saxon and Thuringian territory.

6 Late summer: Charlemagne sends an elite force of Eastern Frankish troops under Adalgis the Chamberlain, Gallo the Count of the Royal Stables, and Worad the Count of the Palace, supported by loyal Saxon forces, to deal with Sorb raiders.

7 Having reached the middle Elbe, Adalgis, Gallo and Worad hurriedly return to face the Saxon uprising. It is unclear whether they are accompanied by the loyal Saxons.

8 Charlemagne sends an army hurriedly recruited from the Rhineland Franks, commanded by his propinquus (close relative) Count Theoderic, to deal with Saxon ‘rebels’.

9 Widukind establishes a fortified position in the Süntel Hills, almost certainly on the Hohenstein at the north-western end of the plateau.

10 Saxon ‘rebels’ join Widukind from the west, north and east.

11 The two Carolingian armies join forces, probably at Eresburg, where their commanders agree upon a plan to attack the Saxon rebel position from two sides simultaneously.

12 The Carolingian armies march down the Diemal River Valley then along the west bank of the Weser before probably pausing opposite what is now Hamelin.
CAROLINGIAN DEFEAT IN THE SÜNTEL HILLS, 
AD 782

One feature which is made abundantly clear in the written sources is Carolingian overconfidence, but given their recent history this was understandable. The Revised Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks simply stated that, ‘Each individual seized his weapons and charged with as much speed as he could muster, just as fast as his horse would carry him, upon the place where the Saxons were drawn up in battle-array in front of their camp. They acted as if their task was to pursue a fleeing foe and seize booty rather than to take on an enemy standing marshalled to face them.’\(^{14}\)

Perhaps the presence of high-ranking Carolingian commanders made victory seem inevitable. Unfortunately the written evidence is both sparse and, suffering from the wisdom of hindsight, should be treated with caution. The presence of high-ranking and experienced military leaders would seem just as likely to suggest that their tactics were fully within the expectations of the time, as it was to suggest that Adalgis, Gallo and Worad fell victim to jealousy. In fact it seems most likely that Widukind lured this part of the Carolingian army into launching a sudden charge, which appeared to the three commanders to be the right tactic at the time. Under this scenario the three were drawn into a trap or ambush in which the advantages enjoyed by well-equipped, well-trained and disciplined cavalry were simply swamped by the Saxon infantry’s greater numbers.

Bernard Bachrach, the highly respected historian of early medieval warfare, came to the following conclusions:

The Saxon commander, who in this case was Widukind himself, obtained intelligence that led him to appreciate the difficulties inherent in his strategic position. He understood that the Saxons had to engage and defeat the East Frankish *scara*, which was already not too far distant from their camp, before Theoderic’s Ribuarian force arrived and the two armies converged on their position and encircled it. Once the two Carolingian armies had linked up in the environs of the Saxon camp, the Franks could wait for increasing numbers of reinforcements until overwhelming force was at hand ... the Saxon position would become increasingly untenable until executing a successful breakout became impossible ... Widukind was aware that Adalgisus [Adalgis] and his co-commanders would not lead a mounted charge against a fortified position and that Charlemagne’s *ministri* would not order their horsemen, inferior in number to the Saxons, to dismount and storm the *castra* on foot... Thus, Widukind ordered his troops to march out of the protection of the *castra* in order to challenge the Carolingians, whom the Saxons probably outnumbered, to attack them.\(^{15}\)

The most logical explanation is that the Carolingian commanders saw what they thought to be a relatively small Saxon covering force arrayed on the vulnerable eastern end of the Hohenstein Hill, ahead of the Saxon field fortification. This Saxon array may even have started to pull back in apparent retreat when the Carolingian cavalry drew up facing it. Nothing is known of the Carolingian battle array, but it would normally have consisted of a centre.

\(^{14}\) P.D. King (ed.), *Charlemagne: Translated Sources* (Kendal 1987) 116.
and two wings. Adalgis, who is usually regarded as the senior of the three commanders, would presumably have been in charge of the centre, with the flanks under Gallo and Worad. Here it is worth noting that Worad was the only one of these three to survive the battle, which might suggest that his wing was the one best able to escape the coming disaster. The *Frankish Annals* do not say as much, but Worad also seems a likely source for part of the annalist’s account of the battle.

Then there was the role of Saxon archery. Perhaps Widukind had placed additional troops on the flanks, hidden within the wooded areas, which still cover most of the Süntel. If these included his archers, low-status tribesmen, then the ‘baiting’ force in the centre might have consisted of his better-equipped, higher-status and thus more reliable men. Perhaps the battle evolved as an earlier, though comparable, version of the better-recorded English victories over French chivalry during the Hundred Years War.

The few tactical details which the annalist provides are not inconsistent with Carolingian military practice. Even the final, somewhat disorganized phase of the cavalry charge may have been carried out in an attempt to reach the enemy before the Carolingian horsemen and their mounts suffered too much from archers and javelin men. Normally Carolingian cavalry of this period paused to throw their own javelins at the enemy before closing with spears and swords. On this occasion the Carolingian commanders may also have hoped to break through the ambush and looming encirclement.

Perhaps Worad’s unit on the flank was the only unit able to do so. If the gruesome names given to a valley, stream and pool on the northern side of the Hohenstein – the Carolingians’ presumed right flank – do recall a final stand, then Worad may well have been on the left flank. From here his man may have broken through the Saxons to escape down the valley on the southern side of the Hohenstein. They headed for Theoderic’s camp, not back to their own starting point, as the annals make clear: ‘Those who were able to make their escape even so fled not to their own camp, from which they had set out, but to Theoderic’s, across the mountain.’ Their comrades were not so fortunate: ‘Since the approach had gone badly, badly also went the battle; for when this was joined they were surrounded by the Saxons and killed almost to a man.’
EVENTS

1 ‘Rebel’ Saxon tribal forces assemble on the Süntel plateau, approaching from many directions though mostly from the north and east.

2 Widukind of Westphalia, leader of the Saxon uprising, establishes what Carolingian sources described as a \textit{castra} on the Hohenstein Hill, presumably strengthening this naturally defensible position with field fortifications.

3 The two Carolingian armies arrive down the west bank of the river Weser from their starting point at Eresburg (now Obermarsburg).

4 The ‘first’ Carolingian army consists entirely of elite \textit{scara} troops from the Eastern (Ripuarian) Frankish territories of the Rhineland. It is commanded by three high status Carolingian commanders, Adalgis the \textit{camararius} (Chamberlain), Gallo the \textit{comes Stabuli} (Count of the Royal Stables), and Worad the \textit{comes Palatii} (Count of the Palace).

5 The ‘second’ Carolingian army, consists of hastily mustered levies from the same Eastern (Ripuarian) Frankish territories of the central Rhineland and perhaps as many other troops as could be assembled at short notice. It is commanded by Count Theoderic, a \textit{propinquus} (cousin or close relative) of Charlemagne and thus a man of consequence at the Carolingian court.

6 The Carolingian armies make camp on the left bank of the Weser where their leaders discuss how to deal with the rebel Saxon position on the Hohenstein. The commanders of the ‘first’ army agree to Count Theoderic’s plan to attack from two directions in a pincer movement.

7 The ‘first’ Carolingian army crosses the Weser, probably via fords and an island next to the site of the subsequent medieval Münsterbrücke (Münster Bridge) of the present-day city of Hamelin.

8 The ‘first’ Carolingian army ascends the south-eastern slopes of the Süntel plateau and makes camp, probably on or near the Hohe Egge which is the highest part of the plateau at 437.5m.

9 The ‘second’ Carolingian army under Count Theoderic continues to march down the Weser Valley, probably along the left bank to avoid potential harassment by Saxon ‘rebels’ coming down from the Süntel plateau.

10 The ‘second’ Carolingian army crosses the Weser further downriver and establishes a fortified camp. They must have used a ford which means that they would have crossed and made camp close to present-day Hessisch Oldendorf, thus using the same route as a Roman army which defeated the German leader Arminius back in AD 16.
THE BATTLE ON THE SÜNTEL HILLS

Having learned that Widukind and his ‘rebel’ supporters were gathering in the Süntel Hills and had constructed a fortified position, Charlemagne’s commanders – Theoderic, Adalgis, Gallo and Worad – decide to attack their enemies from two directions. The Saxon stronghold was almost certainly on the Hohenstein, a narrow spur of the Süntel high ground which was itself more like a plateau than a range of hills. The Hohenstein itself was mostly surrounded by steep valleys and steeper cliffs, with a relatively narrow access over level ground to the south-east. As Theoderic’s part of the army lacked many horsemen, it would leave most of the initial manoeuvring to Adalgis, Gallo and Worad with their mounted force. Theoderic’s infantry would then climb the Süntel to attack the Saxon castra while the three commanders’ cavalry threatened from a different direction – a tactic often used by Carolingian armies, though usually with greater success than here in the battle of the Süntel Hills.
EVENTS

1. The ‘rebel’ Saxons deploy in front of their fortified castra, perhaps because Widukind hopes to lure the Carolingian ‘first’ army into a premature attack.

2. Some Saxons almost certainly remain on the Hohenstein, inside their fortifications, in case of a sudden move by the ‘second’ Carolingian army. Widukind would also have wanted to secure this position as a refuge in case the main Saxon force is defeated.

3. Further ‘rebel’ Saxon forces may have been hidden in ambush in the forest, to hit the flanks of the advancing Carolingian ‘first’ army. If so, then they are likely to have included most of the Saxons’ renowned infantry archers.

4. It is safe to assume that small Saxon force would be watching Theoderic and the Carolingian ‘second’ army.

5. The commanders of the Carolingian ‘first’ army learn, or see with their own eyes, that an apparently small force of Saxon warriors on foot is protecting the south-eastern approaches and main entrance to the Saxons’ field fortifications.

6. Perhaps believing that a sudden attack upon the seemingly small Saxon covering force will succeed and may even lead to an enemy collapse, the commanders of the Carolingian ‘first’ army abandon the planned pincer attack and, without waiting for the ‘second’ army to advance, lead their troops against the Saxon ‘rebels’.

7. Theoderic’s Carolingian ‘second’ army in or around its field-fortified encampment is probably preparing for the planned infantry assault against the Hohenstein. They may even have had some of the simple siege equipment which Carolingian armies certainly used elsewhere around this time.

8. When the advancing Carolingian ‘first’ army nears the visible array of the Saxon acies (battle line), it charges the enemy as fast as its horses can gallop in order to minimize the time its horses are exposed to Saxon archery and javelins.
THE CAROLINGIAN ATTACK

Having advanced towards the Saxon castra, the commanders of the Carolingian ‘first’ army – Adalgis, Gallo and Worad – abandon the plan that had been agreed with Theoderic. Instead of waiting until their enemies could be attacked from two sides at once, they launch an immediate attack. Subsequent accounts of the battle maintain that they were jealous of sharing what looked like certain victory with Theoderic, commander of the ‘second’ Carolingian army. In reality these experienced commanders almost certainly seize what looked an opportunity to overrun an unprepared enemy. Instead they fall into a well-prepared trap.
More is known about this battle than any other clash during Charlemagne’s long campaign to conquer the Saxons. Although Charlemagne himself was not present, the defeat of some of his most senior commanders, and the death of two, had a profound impact upon the course of the campaign and on Charlemagne’s own subsequent behaviour. Quite where the Carolingians made their final stand is unknown, though it may have been close to what later came to be known as the Blutbach (blood stream) and Totental (death valley) on the north-eastern side of the Hohenstein Hill. In this reconstruction the Carolingian commanders, Adalgis the Chamberlain (1), and Gallo the Count of the Stables (2), have retreated within the cover of a dwarf beech tree with their surviving followers. This tree remains the iconic though somewhat weird and twisted species of the Süntel Hills. The Saxons who are closing in for the kill include Widukind, the leader of their uprising (3). The well-equipped, armoured and prosperous Carolingian military elite who took part in this disastrous battle were all cavalry, or were at least all originally mounted, though by now they have lost almost all their horses. In contrast the pagan rebels seem mostly to have been drawn from the lower ranks of Old Saxon society, and almost certainly included significant numbers of infantry archers.
Defeat was bad enough, but Charlemagne’s army had also suffered the humiliation of losing two of its commanders, along with other senior men and members of the military elite, a fact which the Frankish Annals again highlight: ‘The loss to the Franks was greater than numbers alone, however, for two of the legates, Adalgis and Gallo, four counts and as many as twenty other men of distinction and nobility were killed, as well as others who were in their followings and chose to die at their sides rather than survive them.’ The historian Matthias Becher may have exaggerated when he wrote that all the successes achieved in Saxony up to this point were reduced to nothing, but the event was significant enough for the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which normally took almost no interest in such matters, to recall that in the year AD 782, ‘The Old Saxons and the Franks fought.’

When news of this defeat reached Charlemagne’s court, the king ‘judged that there must be not a moment’s delay; swiftly collecting together an army, he entered Saxony’. In fact the rising and subsequent defeat caught Charlemagne by surprise and it took time to assemble an adequate army from available troops. Only then could Charlemagne march north from Bavaria to the river Weser. Such an emphatic defeat and the loss of such senior men was a serious humiliation for the Carolingian state and it had to be avenged as quickly and decisively as possible.

In fact, even many Saxons may have been shocked by their own success and realized that the consequences would be dire. So, as Charlemagne marched north, many Saxon leaders assembled near the already significant fortified settlement of Verden, close to the confluence of the Weser and Aller rivers. However, they had not gathered to fight but to surrender. When Charlemagne arrived, these Saxon leaders handed over as many of the rebels as could be found and identified. Widukind of Westphalia was not there. He and his immediate followers had already fled north to find refuge amongst the Danes.

The resulting ‘Blood Court of Verden’ is usually described as a major stain on Charlemagne’s reputation, though it was not seen that way at the time. Frankish written sources are also likely to exaggerate the numbers of those rebels executed since the given figure of 4,500 seems improbable under existing circumstances. Once again the evidence needs to be looked at cautiously and should be interpreted within its own cultural context. According to the Revised Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks, Charlemagne ‘entered Saxony and questioned the primores [leading men] of the Saxons, all of whom he had summoned to attend him, as to who was responsible for the rebellion which had taken place. And since they all declared that Widukind was the author of this wickedness but were unable to deliver him up ... no fewer than 4,500 of the others, those who had fallen in with his promptings and committed such a gross outrage, were handed over and ... at the king’s command, all beheaded in a single day.’

EVENTS

1. The ‘rebels’ Saxon battle line of infantry lures the cavalry of the Carolingian ‘first’ army into an attack.

2. Saxon infantry archers and perhaps javelin-armed warriors bombard the flanks of the advancing enemy.

3. The cavalry charge by the Carolingian ‘first’ army becomes disorganized because every man rides as fast as possible. These horsemen apparently do not pause to throw their own javelins at the enemy, as would have been the normal tactic, but instead close immediately.

4. Saxon troops on the flanks probably emerge from cover in the trees to envelop the now greatly outnumbered Carolingian cavalry.

5. A few Carolingian cavalymen escape and make their way across the mountains towards the ‘second’ army’s fortified encampment. Most of these are likely to have fled westward down small gullies such as that of the Langeföhrbach (Long Pine stream) to the valley of the river Weser, but others may have fled north and then west. The Carolingians’ surviving commander, Worad, was probably in command of one of the wings, perhaps the left, which would account for his unit’s escape from the ambush.

6. Saxon warriors on the Hohenstein may have emerged to block the escape of the Carolingian units led by Adalgis and Gallo, trying to fight their way around the north of the Saxon field fortification.

7. Most of the Carolingian ‘first’ army is killed, including Adalgis and Gallo who may therefore have been in command of the ‘first’ army’s centre and right wing, plus four counts, 20 clari (aristocrats) and nobles (nobles). The worst of the slaughter and perhaps a final stand by the Carolingians probably took place next to the Blutbach (blood stream) on the north-eastern side of the Hohenstein.

8. Count Theoderic is sometimes credited with hurrying to save the survivors, so it is possible that troops from the Carolingian ‘second’ army moved forwards to support the fugitives and escort them to safety.

9. If any horse handlers and other servants of the ‘first’ army had remained in camp at the Hohe Egge, they would have fled on hearing of the Carolingian defeat, probably the same way the ‘first’ army had originally come down the Weser to seek security with the Carolingian ‘second’ army. It would have been safer, though slower, for them to have crossed and recrossed the Weser fords.

10. The Carolingian ‘second’ army and survivors of the ‘first’ army retreat to their starting point at Eresburg.
During the reign of Charlemagne, Carolingian cavalry were trained to pause and throw their javelins at the enemy before attacking with spear and sword. This time Adalgis, Gallo and Worad lead their men in a direct and reportedly somewhat disorganized charge. Perhaps they hoped to overwhelm the Saxon infantry – who may already have been pulling back – or the three Carolingian commanders wanted to break though what they realized was looming encirclement. Only Worad’s unit was able to do so, and thus they are likely to have been on the left flank, escaping down the Langeföhrbach valley to Theoderic’s camp. Adalgis and Gallo are unable to escape. They and their followers probably try to fight their way around the northern side of the Hohenstein where the gruesome names of some locations might recall their final stand.
Clearly a massacre took place but to ascribe this to Charlemagne’s fury at the escape of Widukind, as some historians have done, seems simplistic. Of course he wanted to make an example and to show that such a rebellion brought serious consequences. Yet Charlemagne was probably also sending a message to his own followers, especially his senior men and their families, that death in his service would not go unavenged – the more so as the noblemen who fell on the Süntel were seen to have been killed by men of low degree. Furthermore, Carolingian criminal punishment, even for simple brigandage, was extremely violent. This was probably because so few perpetrators were normally apprehended. Hence a terrible example was made of those who were caught. Other historians like Alessandro Barbero have seen the inspiration for Charlemagne’s ruthlessness in the fiercer books of the Bible’s Old Testament. He notes the examples of the Jews’ extermination of the Amalekites and the slaughter of ‘two out of every three’ of the conquered Moabites by King David, whom Charlemagne is known to have regarded as his kingly ideal.

The deed done, Charlemagne ‘retired to winter-quarters at Thionville, where he celebrated both the Lord’s birthday and Easter in the customary fashion’. But, rather than crushing Saxon resistance, the slaughter outside Verden caused even greater resentment which would erupt into rebellion in AD 783.

THE SAXON DEFEAT

While Charlemagne celebrated the main festivals of the Christian calendar in the Carolingian palace at Thionville, he learned that his new Saxon subjects had risen yet again. Preparations were therefore made for another military expedition. Meanwhile, the Frankish ruler’s second wife, Hildegard of Vinzgouw, died on 30 April. In October that year Charlemagne would marry again, this time to a Frankish noblewoman named Fastrada. By then he would have fought another hard campaign, defeating Widukind in a three-day battle next to the river Hase, perhaps overrunning the major Saxon fortified citadel on the Wittekinsberg, and ravaging southern Saxony.

At least at the start of this AD 783 campaign Charlemagne is thought to have been short of troops, though he assembled a more substantial force later in the year. The Frankish Annals may also be less reliable than normal where the first clash was concerned, claiming it as a great victory: ‘After paying her [Hildegard’s] body the honours which were its due … he led an army into Saxony … and when he learned that the Saxons were preparing themselves for combat at the place called Detmold, he made towards them with all the
Aftermath of the battle of the Süntel Hills, AD 782–83

1 Autumn 782: Hurriedly returning from Italy, Charlemagne musters an army of available troops in Bavaria then marches to Saxony, probably initially to Eresburg.
2 Charlemagne marches down the Weser to the Aller River, making camp near Verden.
3 Widukind flees to the Danes.
4 Saxon leaders, summoned by Charlemagne, hand over those responsible for the recent uprising, except for Widukind. Learning of Widukind’s escape, Charlemagne has all the ‘rebels’ executed, supposedly 4,500 men.
5 Charlemagne returns to Thionville where he remains for Christmas AD 782 and Easter AD 783.
6 Widukind returns to Saxony, probably early in AD 783, to lead a rapidly spreading Saxon revolt.
7 30 April 783: While Charlemagne prepares for another campaign in Saxony, his wife Queen Hildegard dies.
8 Spring 783: Saxon ‘rebels’ gather near Detmold.
9 Spring 783: Charlemagne leads a small army against the Saxon ‘rebels’ and claims victory at Mount Osning (Teutoburger Wald).
10 Charlemagne falls back and establishes a camp at Paderborn, suggesting that his recent victory may have been marginal.
11 Reinforcements from Franconia (probably mustered at Worms) join Charlemagne’s army at Paderborn.
12 Saxon ‘rebels’ reform on the river Hase.
13 More Saxons join Widukind near the source of the river Hase.
14 Summer 783: Having intended to march against ‘rebels’ in eastern Saxony, Charlemagne leads his enlarged army against Widukind’s forces to avoid having an enemy force in his rear, and wins a major victory in a three-day battle on the Hase River.
15 Later stories maintain that Widukind retreated to Wittekinsberg, and is besieged there by Charlemagne.
16 Autumn 783: Charlemagne ravages southern Saxony, between the Hase, Weser and Elbe rivers.
17 Charlemagne returns to Worms, presumably to dismiss his Franconian troops.
18 Charlemagne goes to Herstal where he marries Fastrada, daughter of Count Radolf, and remains there for Christmas and the following Easter.
speed he could muster, engaged them in battle and defeated them with such slaughter that out of their immense host very few are said to have escaped.’ Einhard specified that this battle took place ‘near the mountain that is called Osning’, an old name for the steep Teutoburger Wald ridge which is better known as the site of the early Germans’ virtual extermination of a Roman army in AD 9. Its Grotenburg Hill is topped by an early German citadel, which is likely to have continued in use until the 8th century AD.

Einhard further specifies that Charlemagne was faced by Widukind himself on Mount Osning but Charlemagne then hurriedly withdrew to the new Carolingian outpost of Paderborn. Here his army made camp, probably erecting field fortifications. This suggests that his force was not large enough to pursue any advantage it may have gained in the first clash of AD 783. Indeed Charlemagne may well have seriously underestimated what he was up against and thus suffered a moral if not a military defeat.

Paderborn now became a base from which to prevent the rebellion spreading southwards and from which to launch a proper counter-offensive into Westphalia, the heartland of Widukind’s strength. For his part, the Saxon leader now gathered rebels from all the Saxon tribes into one great army, the first and perhaps only time that this happened. The Frankish Annals make it clear that Charlemagne did not wait for all his own reinforcements to arrive, but struck back on hearing of this new challenge. According to Einhard, this was in the same month as the battle near Detmold, though it would seem that some additional troops had arrived.

The king now led his reinforced army northwards until he faced the Saxon rebels across the river Hase near present-day Osnabrück late in summer. The battle which followed is said to have lasted three days, though in reality there was probably a two-day stand-off before Charlemagne was able to get his men over the river and then decisively defeat Widukind. Again according to Einhard’s Vita Karoli, many thousands of Saxons were killed, many others taken prisoner, and the rebels never again dared to face Charlemagne himself in open battle.

This victory restored the gains which had been lost on the Süntel Hills and later sources maintain that Charlemagne then attacked the great Saxon hilltop citadel subsequently named after Widukind who, it was claimed, again escaped. Whether or not Widukind attempted to defend this fortress, it is obvious that Charlemagne would have wanted to ensure control over such a
strategic position before ravaging a wide area between the rivers Weser and Elbe. In reality, only the southern parts of this region could have been attacked because Charlemagne now led his army eastwards. As the Revised Annals stated: ‘From the Hase the victor directed his campaign eastwards, laying waste everything in his path as he ranged first to the Weser, then to the Elbe.’

Having seemingly again crushed the Saxon rebellion, Charlemagne returned to Frankish territory, to Herstal which was the Carolingian family’s place of origin and where Charlemagne’s mother, Bertrada, had died earlier in the year on 12 July. Here the king now married Fastrada, his third wife, and stayed to celebrate Christmas and Easter.

The following year, AD 784, saw the Saxon uprising change. During the winter Widukind had forged new alliances, as a result of which rebellions soon broke out in Frisia and in Eastphalia. The former was a more immediate problem for the Carolingian authorities as the western part of Frisia had been under their control for some time. Furthermore, many of its inhabitants were thought to have genuinely embraced Christianity. In fact the Frisian rebellion started during winter, which was unusual.
In the summer of AD 783 Charlemagne won a notable victory over Widukind’s Saxon ‘rebels’ at the river Hase. However, some scholars maintain that Charlemagne’s subsequent siege of Widukind’s stronghold on what is now called the Wittekindsberg was a later legend. On the other hand, such an attack would seem almost inevitable, unless the Saxons simply abandoned this major citadel to Charlemagne’s advancing forces. Whether the Saxon leader Widukind was there is again unknown, though he clearly escaped from the battle of the river Hase. By this stage of the war the Carolingians were taking their enemies more seriously, had planned more carefully and committed more men to each year’s campaign. So it is likely that any attack upon the Wittekindsberg would have included the siege machines which Charlemagne’s army is known to have possessed. Against such powerful weaponry traditional Saxon fortifications of earth, rubble and timber would have had little chance. This reconstruction placed the centre of the action at the main, northern gate of the citadel (1), which had been excavated by German archaeologists and tentatively reconstructed in publications. The passion and determination of the pagan defenders, perhaps helped by their own families within the citadel, would similarly have had little hope against the famed discipline of forces which Charlemagne hoped – somewhat optimistically – would be as well trained and disciplined as the ancient Roman army which he so admired.
Rather than being diverted by these peripheral uprisings, Charlemagne assembled an army then crossed the Rhine farther north than usual, close to Lippeham. By starting his campaign in this area Charlemagne might have hoped to separate the Westphalian from the Frisian rebels. He then marched to the river Weser, through the area which he correctly regarded as the centre of trouble. After devastating some rebel territory he reached Huculbi (now Petershagen), about 10km north-east of Minden, but found his further progress down the Weser blocked, ‘because of the very severe flooding which unexpectedly occurred at this time in consequence of continual rain’.

Unable to invade northern Saxony as he had originally intended, Charlemagne divided his army, leaving one part under his son Charles the Younger to watch the Westphalians. At the head of the other, ‘he directed his march to Thuringia’, and from there entered the territory of the Eastphalian Saxons. This suggests that Charlemagne marched up the Weser Valley and crossed it elsewhere. He then ‘came to the plains of Saxony adjoining the rivers Elbe and Saale. He laid waste the fields of the eastern Saxons, burned their villa and then returned from Schöningen, such was the name of the place, to Francia’ – in fact to Franconia, to the city of Worms.
By then Charlemagne had reached agreements with several Eastphalian leaders, which he again assumed would ensure peace. Equally significantly, this march had been accompanied by the construction of rectangular fortresses west of the Weser. East of that river the Carolingians either strengthened existing Saxon round forts or built new forts of earth, turf and timber, which looked like smaller versions of earlier Saxon fortifications. They served as administrative centres or rallying points for Carolingian troops and had a small number of buildings irregularly distributed within their ramparts.

Meanwhile Charles the Younger had won his own smaller victory: ‘While on the march in the district of Draigni [the Dreingau between Lippstadt and Lünen], near the river Lippe, [he] was met by an army of Saxons and engaged them in a cavalry battle. Happy and successful was the outcome of his struggle, for a great number of them were killed and the rest scattered in flight.’ Charlemagne’s son then headed south to rejoin his father at Worms. There an assembly was held, which decided on what at the time may have been regarded as the risky and courageous strategy of continuing operations through the winter.

As a result Charlemagne, after celebrating Christmas ‘in camp on the river Emmer [a tributary of the Weser] in the Weissgau near the Saxon castrum called Skidroburg [now Schieder], then advanced, ravaging, to the place named Rehme where the Weser and the Werre flow together’. However, Charlemagne’s progress was again blocked by flooding, this time of the Weser flatlands before the river flows through the Porta Westfalica gorge. So he brought his army back to Eresburg where he spent the rest of the winter. Clearly Charlemagne had decided on complete domination of the middle Weser region before venturing farther north onto the broad plains of northern Germany. So elite units of Carolingian scarae based at Eresburg continued to attack ‘rebel’ Saxon settlements and take control of the roads ‘against the arrival of suitable weather’, Charlemagne himself taking part in some of these raids.
Charlemagne’s new wife Fastrada and some of his children came to Eresburg late in AD 784 and remained there with the king until Easter the following year. During this period Carolingian craftsmen strengthened Eresburg, ‘building the fortifications anew but also constructing a church there’, according to the Moselle Annals.

According to a later legend Widukind came to spy on his enemies disguised as a beggar, and was thus present during the celebration of Easter. This legend maintained that he watched a priest performing the Holy Sacrament of Mass but rather than giving a piece of bread to each participant, the priest gave them a beautiful child. To Widukind’s astonishment, the priest miraculously gave the same child to each person. A short while later Widukind
was supposedly recognized because he had a deformed finger and was therefore captured. When Charlemagne heard what Widukind had seen, he concluded that the Saxon rebel leader had been granted a miraculous vision of the Christ Child, whereupon Widukind renounced paganism and agreed to become a Christian.

Whether any of Widukind's agents did bring him reports of the Christian mystery of the Easter Mass from Eresburg is unknown. Nevertheless, this legend conveniently justified Widukind's willingness to be baptized, later in the year, and supported the Church's later elevation of him to the ranks of the blessed. A few weeks after Easter, Charlemagne took his court to Paderborn for another assembly of both Carolingian and newly submitted Saxon lords. The king's young son Louis, then aged about seven, also came with military levies from Aquitaine. The main purpose of the Paderborn assembly was to draw up another capitulary or law to protect the new church institutions and personnel in Saxony, though it also enabled Charlemagne to prepare for a new Saxon campaign.

Thereafter Charlemagne took his entire force northwards, meeting little resistance because, as the Annals laconically state, 'the roads were free'. Eventually they reached the banks of the lower Elbe in the Bardengau region. Saxon resistance had been broken, at least for the time being, and it is even possible that the legend of Widukind seeing a miracle at Eresburg reflected some otherwise unrecorded preliminary negotiations. In practice Widukind was not yet certain how a surrender would be received and so he and his immediate entourage, including his supposed son-in-law Abbo, retreated north of the Elbe, perhaps considering looking for sanctuary with his pagan ally, King Sigfred of the Danes.

Using Saxons as intermediaries, Charlemagne tried offering to meet Widukind and Abbo personally. Eventually both sides agreed to an exchange of hostages as guarantees of good faith. The Revised Annals naturally put a pro-Carolingian gloss on these talks, stating that, 'Conscious of their crimes, they were doubtful about committing themselves to the king's faith. But at length, after receiving from him the promise of impunit... they came with Amalwin, a dignitary from the palace whom the king [Charlemagne] had sent to escort the [Carolingian] hostages to them, to appear in his presence at the villa of Attigny.'

In reality these negotiations took time, during which Charlemagne returned to his palace at Attigny in north-eastern France. It was from here...
that Amalwin went back to Widukind with the selected hostages. Only then did Widukind, Abbo and their retinue, plus Amalwin and the hostages, cross the Rhine in Charlemagne’s footsteps. In the words of the Moselle Annals for AD 785, ‘After the king had returned home, with peace concluded and no one in rebellion, Widukind, author of so many evils and inciter of perfidy, came with his companions to the palace of Attigny.’

The baptism of Widukind and Abbo in the royal chapel at Attigny on Christmas Day, AD 785, proved to be a highly significant event. As a public acknowledgement of Widukind’s status, Charlemagne himself participated as his sponsor or godfather. Furthermore the Moselle Annals noted that, ‘the lord king received him from the font and honoured him with magnificent gifts’. These may well have included two portable gold reliquaries, which still exist.

For Widukind these events amounted to an honourable submission and his acceptance into the ranks of the Carolingian elite. For Charlemagne the conversion of Widukind, who had been more than merely a leader of Saxon rebels, was a political as well as a military success. Whether Widukind was, as some have suggested, allowed to return at once to his own estates in Westphalia, is unclear, though he almost certainly did so eventually. Indeed he seems to have become a loyal supporter of the Carolingian kingdom, or empire as it would soon become, as well as an active promoter of Christianity in Saxony. Indeed Pope Adrian I rejoiced at the Saxon leader’s ‘true religion and perfect faith’.

Events were not quite so straightforward for Charlemagne. He remained in Attigny, at least until the following Easter, but had to deal with a new conspiracy if not a rebellion. This was by Count Hardrad of Thuringia and had broken out earlier in AD 785. Its causes remain obscure, though Charlemagne’s biographer Einhard attributed it to the ‘cruelties’ of Charlemagne’s new queen, Fastrada. According to another source the trouble actually broke out among Franks living east of the Rhine, amongst precisely those military groups which had borne the brunt of the struggle against Saxon rebels. Though the Hardrad conspiracy was quickly crushed in AD 786, some of its leaders being blinded and others exiled, this was the first recorded example of the Carolingian dynasty’s traditionally most loyal subjects turning against Charlemagne.
Nothing now remains above ground of the Carolingian church and palace at Attigny in north-eastern France. So this reconstruction is based upon religious buildings which do survive from this period or a few years later, and their decoration. It has been suggested that Widukind (1) was the religious as well as the political and military leader of the pagan Old Saxons’ resistance to Charlemagne’s conquest and his insistence that the Saxons be forcibly converted to Christianity. So, after his defeat, Widukind’s willingness to be baptized might have reflected a genuine rejection of pagan gods who had failed, in favour of Charlemagne’s victorious Christian deity. Widukind’s faithful lieutenant and perhaps son-in-law Abbo (2) perhaps felt the same, though the numerous outbreaks of pagan rebellion during following years show that not all the Old Saxons were yet willing to accept the new religion, nor to submit tamely to conquest. For Charlemagne (3) the baptism of Widukind was a hugely important event, both politically and religiously, which was why the Frankish ruler acted as the Saxon leader’s sponsor and godfather. Widukind and Abbo are known to have come to Attigny with a retinue of servants and perhaps guards. On the other side, an event such as this would of course have been witnessed by additional Christian clerics and perhaps members of Charlemagne’s court (4).
A CONTINUING STRUGGLE

There would be further risings amongst the Saxons until the struggle came to a definitive end in AD 804, but at least there were a few years of relative quiet in Saxony. This enabled Charlemagne to deal with the Hardrad conspiracy in AD 786; then, two years later, he felt no need to be as generous with troublesome Duke Tassilo III of Bavaria as he had been with Widukind. Instead Tassilo was abruptly deposed and forced to enter a monastery. In AD 789 bishoprics were established across Saxony, while across the North Sea the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle recorded the first raid by Northmen (Vikings) in England. Though coming from Hörthaland (modern Hordaland in Norway) and targeting one of Charlemagne’s Christian neighbours, it was nevertheless a sign of things to come.

In AD 791 Charlemagne and his sons could at last turn their full attention to the Avars, attacking the Khaganate from three directions. Like the pagan Saxons these ‘new Huns’, as Carolingian chroniclers liked to call them, identified themselves as enemies of the Carolingians and to some degree of Christianity as well. The resulting campaigns were, in the opinion of Einhard, second only to those against the Saxons in their intensity and importance. This one came to an ignominious halt when an equine epidemic killed most of the riding and baggage horses in the central army led by Charlemagne. A southern army, which was supposed to invade Avar territory from Italy, extracted itself safely but after the northern army led by Counts Theoderic and Meginfried had retraced its steps through Bohemia, most of its horses seem to have been captured or killed by Saxons. This disaster left Charlemagne with very few animals for campaigning in the near future.
Furthermore, many Saxons took advantage of Carolingian difficulties to rise in rebellion yet again, at the same time that Charlemagne’s reputation as an invincible military leader had been seriously dented – along with that of his God. This new uprising focused upon northern Saxony in the Wigmodia region between the lower Weser and the lower Elbe rivers, in the Bardengau region around present-day Bardowick closer to the Elbe, and in the area north of the Elbe then called Nordalbingia. Here former Carolingian successes seemed to go up in smoke.

Because of the shortage of horses and the renewed problems in Saxony, Charlemagne’s next campaign against the Avars had to wait almost three years. However, in AD 792 his son Pippin the sub-King of northern Italy continued the fight and won considerable booty from the Avars. Unfortunately he was then suspected of being involved in a plot against his own father, though this was dealt with quickly. The following year Charlemagne supervised a hugely ambitious project to link the headwaters of two rivers which flowed into the Rhine and Danube. Had it succeeded this canal between Rednitz and Altmühl would have permitted boats to carry military supplies from the Frankish heartland to armies campaigning against the powerful Avar Khaganate on the Carolingian kingdom’s eastern frontier. In the event, it proved to be beyond the engineering capabilities of the time, constant rain apparently making the banks collapse time and again.

In preparation for his new campaign against the Avars, Charlemagne also sent Count Theoderic to Frisia, not to campaign against rebels but to raise a contingent to fight the Avars. It was a costly error for Theoderic and his followers entered a hornets’ nest and were attacked near the mouth of the river Weser, Theoderic himself probably being killed. This may have been the final straw for Charlemagne who had large numbers of Saxon families deported from north of the Elbe in AD 793, many being sent to Bavaria.

A The early medieval fortifications of Verden have now disappeared beneath the modern town, but 18th- and 19th-century maps show that an early medieval citadel was made by cutting a ditch across the steep spur of a hill overlooking the river Aller.

B The southern side of the Wittekindsberg citadel near Minden largely relied upon natural cliffs and a precipitous slope down to the river Weser for protection, while the northern side and both ends of the elongated site are protected by a simple rampart of rubble which would have had a timber palisade on top.
What remained of Theoderic’s army and its horses were certainly needed on the Avar front where the effects of the great equine epidemic were still being felt. Meanwhile, Pippin of Italy’s army was busy elsewhere, campaigning against the Lombards of Benevento in the south. Here the Carolingians suffered another setback, this time as a result of famine. Charlemagne finally abandoned his overambitious canal project in AD 794 and turned his attention to the Saxon rebellion. An army led by him headed directly northwards, while a second led by his son Charles the Younger crossed the Rhine at Cologne to attack the rebels from the west. Having assembled at Sintfeld south of Paderborn, the Saxon rebels as usual surrendered when threatened with such overwhelming force, but even that was not the end of the matter.

The following year AD 795 saw some northern Saxons, though not necessarily the same people as in the previous year, again rise up, perhaps resisting forcible expulsion from their territory north of the Elbe. Witzan, ruler of the Slav Abodrites, whom Charlemagne had invited to take over this territory, was apparently killed in battle by Saxons in AD 795. He was succeeded by his son Drožko (Thrascô), who continued his father’s role as a somewhat nominal Carolingian dux. The northern Saxons may also have been infuriated by the Carolingians’ continuing attempt to forcibly recruit their fighting men for a war against the Avars. So Charlemagne, now aged 53, led an army north from Mainz and reached the Elbe where, yet again, the rebels surrendered.

In AD 796 Charlemagne and Pippin of Italy turned their attention against the Avars, invading the Khaganate, seizing the Avar ‘rings’ or strongholds, and effectively destroying Avar power before returning with so much booty that 15 wagons, each drawn by four oxen, were needed to bring it back to Frankish territory. The following year saw a new variation in Carolingian operations against the troublesome Saxons, when Charlemagne sent a fleet against the North Sea coast of Germany. It landed in Hadeln, a marshy coastal region between the Weser and Elbe estuaries about 15km east of Cuxhaven. It had been here that, according to tradition, the Saxons had themselves first landed centuries before. Charlemagne marched into northern Saxony and, returning in mid-November, established a camp south of Höxter in a place then known as Heristelle. Here he yet again accepted the submission of the entire Saxon people and brought an end to what, perhaps to the surprise of many, proved to be the last serious Saxon uprising against Carolingian rule.
This accomplished, Charlemagne returned to Aachen, which was by now the real and recognized Carolingian capital. Here he held an assembly, which issued a second set of laws concerning the government of Saxony. This *Capitulare Saxonicum* granted the Westphalians, Angarians and Eastphalians the right to participate in law making, thereby making them equal to the other peoples within Charlemagne’s realm. In so doing he also rewarded the southern Saxons who had by and large remained loyal since Widukind’s submission back in AD 785. In contrast some of the still-turbulent northern Saxon groups were excluded. Nevertheless, this *Capitulare Saxonicum* was a significant step in reconciling the Saxons to Frankish concepts of legal administration and recognizing a three-tier social structure of nobles, free men and half-free.

On the other hand, an official version of the traditional *Lex Saxonum*, ‘Laws of the Saxons’, drawn up in AD 802 incorporated some significant changes to Saxon customary law resulting from Carolingian conquest, a new system of administering justice and, of course, the imposition of Christian religious practice. These, it has been suggested, reflected Charlemagne’s earlier updating of Eastern Frankish law as seen in a new version of the long-established Merovingian *Lex Ribuaria*. Overall, these developments could be interpreted as a shift from military occupation to the incorporation of a new province into Charlemagne’s expanding empire.

Peace may not have yet firmly established in Saxony but future disturbances were localized and quickly contained. In AD 798, for example, there was a short-lived revolt by some of the Nordalbingian or northernmost Saxons, almost certainly resisting deportation. In response Charlemagne took advantage of his alliance with Prince Drożko of the Abodrites. Together their forces crushed the rebels at the first battle of Bornhöved, obliging these northerners to submit and give hostages against their future good behaviour. These men were apparently handed over to Charlemagne’s son Charles the Younger in AD 799, the same year that the Bretons of Brittany who had long resisted Frankish domination finally surrendered to Charlemagne’s armies.

More significant for Carolingian and wider European history, Pope Leo III, who had fled from enemies in his own city of Rome, came to the Saxon city of Paderborn to discuss matters with Charlemagne in person. The following year, of course, Charlemagne had himself crowned as Emperor in Rome on Christmas Day AD 800. Clearly Christ’s birthday was regarded as suitable for such symbolic events, Widukind having been baptized a Christian exactly 15 years earlier. Before travelling to Rome, however, Charlemagne had, in the words of a
chronicler known simply as The Astronomer, 'found the moment opportune, insofar as he was at rest from foreign wars, to begin making a circuit around those places of his realm that bordered upon the sea'. Concern about the threat posed by the Vikings was already felt in the Carolingian court.

The *Lex Saxonum* promulgated in AD 802 and described above was just one of a series of such legal reforms. It was followed shortly afterwards by the *Lex Thuringorum* which both updated and formally recognized the ‘folk law’ of the Thuringians. Now that Saxony had thus become an equal member of the family of provinces which made up the Carolingian Empire, the new system of government required all members of the Saxon aristocracy, whether Old Saxons or newly arrived Franks, to swear oaths of loyalty as Charlemagne’s vassals, not only to obey the Emperor and protect his life but also to live Christian lives. It was a new world, with new rules not only governing political and military matters, but also governing people's everyday lives. Away to the north, however, the year AD 802 saw a major clash between Danes and Abodrites in what is now the province of Schleswig (divided between Denmark and Germany since 1920). Both sides, it would seem, were trying to take over territory almost emptied by Charlemagne’s forcible deportation of Saxons living north of the Elbe.

Many of the Saxon dioceses established following Widukind’s submission were abandoned by AD 804 because of the continuing unrest, especially in the north. Only when a Carolingian administration was properly restored was the diocese of Bremen re-established. Even those farther south in Münster, Osnabrück, Paderborn and Minden could only now start to carry out their religious duties in genuine security. The last sparks of Saxon resistance had finally been extinguished and there was an element of relief in the anonymous Astronomer’s chronicle as he described Charlemagne’s final and, in the event, un-needed campaign:

The church at Germigny-des-Prés in central France is an almost unique survival from Charlemagne’s reign, having been built in AD 806. (Author’s photograph)

This bronze spur found at Koljana, dating from the 9th century AD, is a typical piece of Carolingian cavalry equipment. (Museum of Croatian Archaeology, Split; author’s photograph)
With summer’s return, the glorious Emperor Charles went to Saxony and commanded his son [Louis] to follow him into that same land and to plan on spending the winter there [winter AD 804–05]. He set out in haste, came to Neuss, crossed the Rhine there, and hurried to meet his father. But before he got to him, he encountered a messenger from his father in a place that is called Ostfaloa [the territory of the Eastphalian Saxons], with orders that he not wear himself out any longer in marching but rather pitch camp in a suitable place and wait there for his [Charlemagne’s] return. For the entire Saxon people had been conquered, and Emperor Charles, already victorious, was on his way back. When his son met him, he embraced him and kissed him many times, extolled him with praise and many thanks for his effort, repeated again and again how valuable his support was, and pronounced himself fortunate to have such a son.17

Unfortunately for Charlemagne, his Saxon problem was now replaced by a Danish problem. In AD 808 the new ruler of the pagan Danes, Godfred, formed an alliance with the similarly pagan Wiltzi and other Slav tribes against the pagan but pro-Carolingian Abodrites. According to Einhard, ‘Godofrid was so puffed up with vain hopes that he planned to rule all Germany. He considered both Frisia and Saxony as little more than provinces of his own… He boasted that he would soon arrive with a great body of troops at Aachen where the royal [Carolingian] court was located.’ In the ensuing struggle Charlemagne’s son Charles The Younger ‘threw a bridge across the Elbe and with all the speed he could muster moved the army he commanded across it against the Linones and Smeldingi, who had also defected to king Godfred. He laid waste their fields far and wide and then recrossed the river, returning to Saxony with his army unscathed.’ Later in AD 808 the Carolingians constructed two new forts on the river Elbe, garrisoning them against future Slav incursions. The following year the pro-Carolingian Abodrite leader Drožko was assassinated. This threw the Abodrite tribes into confusion and several years passed before a new leader clearly emerged and re-established the Carolingian alliance, this time under Charlemagne’s son Louis the Pious.

What – if any – role local Saxon troops played in these events is unclear, though Charlemagne’s final campaign was later described by Helmold. Writing after the looming Viking menace had itself been contained, Helmold stated that, ‘This most victorious prince, who had conquered all the kingdoms of Europe, is said to have undertaken last of all a war with the Danes… After their king, Göttrik [Godfred], had brought the Frisians and also the Nordalbingians [northernmost Saxons], the Abodrites and other Slavic peoples under tribute, he threatened even Charlemagne with war… When at length, by the dispensation of God, Göttrik died, there succeeded him Hemming, his cousin, who soon made peace with the Emperor and recognized the Eider River as the boundary of the kingdom.’ It would remain the frontier between Denmark and the Holy Roman (German) Empire, with few alterations, for over 1,000 years.

The Carolingian Empire at Charlemagne’s death, AD 814

A. Frisia (AD 784–785).
B. Austrasia (Frankish heartland).
C. Saxony (AD 772–804).
D. Neustria (AD 486).
E. Brittany (AD 799).
F. Breton march (AD 778–786).
G. Aquitaine (AD 507 and 768–769).
H. Gascony (AD 531 and 769).
I. Spanish march (AD 778 and 801–812).
J. Septimania (AD 759).
K. Provence (AD 736).
L. Burgundy (AD 533).
M. Swabia (AD 502 and 744).
N. Alemannia (AD 536 and 744).
O. Thuringia (AD 717–718).
P. Thuringian march (AD 806).
Q. Bavaria (AD 788).
R. Ostmark (AD 803).
S. Carnithia (AD 788).
T. Friulian march (AD 776).
U. Kingdom of Italy (AD 774).
V. Duchy of Spoleto (AD 774).
W. Dalmatia (AD 803).
X. Croatia (AD 795).
Y. Pannonia (AD 795–796).
Z. Corsica (AD 754).

The Carolingian Empire
Carolingian frontier “marches”
Papal territories recognizing Carolingian overlordship
Territories under Carolingian overlordship or strong influence
Territory given to the Obodrites in AD 789 when Saxon population expelled

Byzantine Empire
Nominally Byzantine territory
Other Christian states or peoples

Peoples in the process of conversion to Christianity
Emirate of Cordova (Muslim)
Thughur ‘frontier marches’ of the Cordova Emirate
Eastern thughur accepting Carolingian overlordship
Pagan or shamanist peoples, and probably Tengrian Bulgars

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IMPACT ON THE SAXONS

The years AD 782–85, though they did not end with total military victory for Charlemagne, had broken the back of Saxon resistance. Nevertheless, when the king summoned the Saxons to contribute to new military campaigns shortly after Widukind’s submission, many remained very unwilling. In fact almost a decade would pass before Saxon levies became a normal and reliable element within Carolingian armies. Meanwhile Charlemagne had a series of new defences constructed to protect his northern frontier from the still pagan Danes. Centred around Itzehoe on the river Stör, and Schiffbek near Hamburg, this new Danish March eventually gave its name to Denmark. There would be further localized risings amongst the Saxons until the struggle came to a real end in AD 804. Its length and ferocity would long be remembered in Germany and, writing in the 12th century, the Saxon chronicler Helmold of Bosau recalled:

The conflict with the Saxons was long drawn out. Waged with great animosity by both sides, with greater losses, however, to the Saxons than to the Franks, it went on continuously for thirty-three years. It might, indeed, have been ended sooner but for the obstinacy of the Saxons, who, preferring to preserve their liberty by force of arms, devastated the territories of the Franks even to the Rhine. Thus, with scarcely a year free from warfare, the Saxons are recorded to have become at length so exhausted that ten thousand of those who lived along both sides of the Elbe with their women and children were transported into Francia.18

Einhard had already claimed that no other war undertaken by the Franks was so protracted, savage and laborious. Nor does he hide the sufferings of the Saxons. Not only were very large numbers of people killed, but also the devastation was widespread and frequently repeated. Then there were the mass deportations, which must have shaken the very fabric of Saxon society. As so often, it was the middle and lower ranks which suffered most. Much of the Old Saxon aristocracy, at least amongst those who had recognized the weakness of the Saxon position, submitted to Charlemagne early enough for themselves and their families to be accepted into the Carolingian elite. As a result much of the post-conquest Saxon aristocracy could claim descent from these families, or from the widely recorded intermarriages between Saxon and Frankish nobilities.

One example is Hessi, the leader of the Eastphalians in AD 775, who entered Frankish service and became a count. Subsequently Hessi’s daughter was recorded as constantly travelling with her father to administer the properties Hessi had already passed on to her. The position of the Saxon aristocracy was also strengthened by Charlemagne’s new codification of Saxon tribal law in the Lex Saxonum, which widened the social gap between nobility and the rest.

After Saxony was officially incorporated as a province of the Carolingian Empire, as it had by now become, it was treated essentially the same as Aquitaine, Lombardy, Alemannia and Bavaria. Perhaps in the long run the most important development was the implanting of an effective church structure, which went hand in hand with the new, or perhaps more correctly the renamed, counties and duchies. Both these church and secular administrative systems would mould the history of medieval Germany. In

many ways, they still form the structural basis of the modern state. Certainly the 12th-century chronicler Helmold recognized the significance of these developments: ‘Saxony was, therefore, divided into eight dioceses and put under most worthy pastors who would by word and example imbue the rude minds of her people with the Faith. The Caesar [the Emperor Charlemagne] ... provided most honourably for the support of these clerics with generous munificence. In this wise was the task of making a new plantation in Saxony accomplished and confirmed with full strength.’

Meanwhile many Old Saxon cultural institutions were inevitably crushed, along with Old Saxon paganism, despite the continuance of some pagan burial practices well into the 9th century AD. Saxony soon became deeply Christian and, in fact, would be one of the most active participants in the Northern Crusades, which started 300 years later. Part of the process of turning the Saxons into genuinely convinced Christians seems to have involved a degree of flexibility on the part of the local Church, at least for a while.

This almost certainly lay behind one of the strangest of early medieval Christian German texts, the *Heliand*. Written in Old Saxon, perhaps at Fulda in the first half of the 9th century AD, the *Heliand* presents the life of Christ as a heroic epic in a style suited to listeners brought up in a world of pagan gods and heroes such as that of Scandinavian myth and saga. Christ’s Apostles become a retinue of loyal followers while gift giving and self-sacrifice are central themes. The text also seems intended to be narrated aloud, just as the ancient sagas were related in a pagan chieftain’s hall.

Archaeologists found the remains of a small cross-shaped church within the Saxon citadel on the Wittekindsberg, probably dating from very soon after the conversion of the Saxons to Christianity. (Author’s photograph)
The chronicler Ermoldus Nigellus recorded the success of a decision made by Charlemagne’s son and successor, Louis the Pious, which allowed many deported Saxon and Frisian families to return home around AD 826. ‘Some attributed this to generosity and some to a lack of foresight... The emperor, however, thought that he could bind them more effectively to himself if he bestowed desirable benefits upon them, and his hope was not deceived, for after this he always kept those very same peoples in the greatest devotion to himself.’

By then Saxon troops had taken part in several campaigns against neighbouring Slavs who had attacked the Slav Abodrite allies of the Carolingians. Whereas the Saxons, Thuringians and Bavarians were previously largely separated from the main western Slav tribes by forests, swamps or marshes, Charlemagne’s campaigns beyond the river Elbe had altered this traditional state of affairs. By transferring the entire area between the Elbe and Eider rivers to his Abodrite allies in AD 804, he had removed the Saxon buffer between Slavs and Danes. The leadership of both Danes and Abodrites then went through a period of confusion and change, and in AD 817 the new Carolingian frontier zone in northern German was under attack by both peoples.

**IMPACT ON THE CAROLINGIANS**

Charlemagne’s conquest of the Saxons had created a new situation in northern Europe, which some historians have suggested would contribute to, or even trigger, the eruption of pagan Viking assaults upon Western Christendom only a few decades later.

Perhaps a clash between Charlemagne and his pagan Saxon neighbours had been inevitable. Certainly the Saxons were regarded as very troublesome neighbours, as Einhard made clear:

The Saxons, like almost all the peoples who live in Germany, were ferocious by nature, devoted to the cult of demons, hostile to our religion, and did not consider it shameful to defile or transgress divine or human laws. There were always issues that could disturb the peace on any day, particularly because our borders and theirs touched almost everywhere in open land, except for the few places where substantial forests or mountain ridges traced precise limits between both our lands. Murder, robbery, and arson never ceased on either side. The Franks were so irritated by these incidents that they decided the time had come to stop responding to individual incidents and to open a full-scale war against the Saxons.

Blame for the length of this conflict was also laid at the Saxons’ door:

The war could have been ended sooner had not the perfidy of the Saxons prevented this. It is very hard to say how many times they were beaten and handed themselves over as suppliants to the king, made promises relating to the conduct that was required of them, turned over without delay the hostages that were demanded of them, and received the envoys that were sent to them. Several times they were so beaten and weakened that they promised they would abandon the cult of demons and willingly submit to the Christian religion. But just as they were sometimes inclined to do these things, so too were they quick to go right back to their old ways.
Of course Charlemagne was presented as a hero, as he clearly was to Einhard and most of those who came later, ‘For he was never willing to tolerate with impunity people who perpetrated such things, and he avenged their treachery and exacted a suitable punishment either by leading an army against them or by sending one under his counts, right up to the point when ... all of those who were used to resisting him [were] either struck down or else returned to his power’. Similarly, Einhard regarded Charlemagne’s methods as entirely justified, even when ‘he transported ten thousand of the men who lived along the Elbe, along with their wives and little children, and dispersed them in little groups in various places in Gaul and Germany’. Finally Christianity triumphed and the Saxons ‘had to abandon the cult of demons and let go of their ancestral rites, receive the sacraments of the Christian faith and religion, and unite themselves to the Franks so that they might become one people with them’ – a matter of great satisfaction to Einhard and his Carolingian contemporaries.

Yet there was no getting away from the fact that the conquest of the Saxons had cost the Carolingian kingdom dear. The victory of AD 785 and the baptism of Widukind, the religious and military leader of the pagan resistance, proved to be less conclusive than it had seemed. Years of struggle continued, though at a much lower level and without a united leadership on the Saxon side, before it finally ended. The Carolingian state had endured much, paid even more, and had been tested to its limits. In Einhard’s words: ‘Never was there a war known to last so long, nor one which demanded such efforts on the part of the Franks’, and as he also noted: ‘Many nobles and holders of high office, both Franks and Saxons, perished in that war.’ Here Einhard was almost certainly referring to Saxons in Charlemagne’s service, not pagan Saxon ‘rebels’.

There had, of course, been a few quiet years when the Saxons either remained cowed or were preparing for another rising. But even when Charlemagne used these to concentrate on his ambitions elsewhere, the problem of the Saxon pagans kept popping up, making it virtually impossible for the Carolingian ruler to focus fully on other fronts. A watch had to be kept, some troops had to garrison the new fortified outposts within or around Saxony, and then another rebellion would erupt, demanding either a major expedition by Charlemagne himself or punitive actions by his subordinates. Not surprisingly, a shortage of properly trained and equipped troops remained a constant headache.
The Carolingian conquest of Saxony, when it eventually came, has been described as Charlemagne’s greatest achievement. As the German historian Thomas Heller pointed out in 1998, Charlemagne succeeded in uniting the German peoples, ‘where the Emperor Augustus had failed eight hundred years earlier’. Heller, it is worth noting, was writing just a few years after the reunification of his country following the Cold War. Charlemagne had also crushed, though not entirely destroyed, the Avar Khaganate and in AD 805, a year after the end of Saxon resistance, the Avar khagan or ruler who, like Widukind, had by now been baptized, made his way to the Imperial capital of Aachen. There he requested permission for the remnants of his people to settle peacefully, under Carolingian overlordship, south-east of Vienna.

During the remaining years of Charlemagne’s life, he and his government largely focused upon internal affairs. The territory under this new Western Emperor’s control covered the bulk of western Europe with the exception of most of the Iberian Peninsula, the British Isles and Scandinavia. The revived Western Empire had political, economic and cultural contact with all its neighbours, including the pagans of Scandinavia and the Slav lands, the Christians of the British Isles and the Byzantine Empire, as well as the vast and still vigorously expanding Islamic world. The Christian Patriarch of Jerusalem, the Christian Byzantine or Eastern Roman Emperor in Constantinople, and Harun al-Rashid the ‘Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad, all exchanged embassies and corresponded with Charlemagne’s court.

The Frankish Merovingian and Carolingian states had been built upon expansion but, unlike the ultimately more enduring Islamic Caliphal ‘empire’, the western Christians had no tradition of ruling ‘others’ – namely non-Christians. The Carolingian ruling ideology demanded uniformity, especially in religious matters. Those who were conquered not only had to become Christian, but also had to be the same sort of Christians as the Carolingians. With only a few minor exceptions, if they could not be converted, they must be either destroyed or expelled.

It has even been suggested that the resulting difficulty of incorporating newly conquered peoples may itself have contributed to the ending of significant Carolingian expansion under Louis the Pious. In practice there were also other important economic and military factors at play. Nevertheless, the end of expansion brought its own problems for the Carolingian Empire. No new conquests meant – almost – no more loot. But the warrior followings of Carolingian rulers and Carolingian noblemen still needed to be maintained or rewarded. A solution would eventually be found in a sort of internal expansion, economic development, the colonization of suitable but as yet unused lands and the emergence of what is still loosely called the feudal system to maintain a military elite.

Before that process was complete, the now-wealthy Carolingian state, having largely ceased aggression against its neighbours, itself became the target of external aggression. The next phase in Western European military history would be dominated by a new wave of supposedly ‘barbarian’ invasions by Magyar Hungarians, by far-from-barbarian western Mediterranean Saracens (Muslims) and, above all, by the Vikings. Viking raids, though not those of the Magyars and Saracens, have even been interpreted as a pagan counter-offensive, almost as vengeance for Charlemagne’s crushing of the pagan Old Saxons.
Although Charlemagne’s campaigns against the Old Saxons ranged over a considerable area, their focus was in western and central Germany. Much of this area was very popular with foreign, especially British and American, visitors in the 19th century. Indeed it inspired many books, including comedy classics such as Thomas Hood’s *Up the Rhine* of 1840, Mark Twain’s *A Tramp Abroad* of 1880, and Jerome K. Jerome’s *Three Men on the Bummel* of 1900. Since then two world wars, occupation, division and the Cold War have done little for German tourism outside a limited number of major cultural and scenic centres. This is a shame because those who like to walk the ground of earlier military history find it is very easy to do so in the Germany of today.

At the centre of the campaigns described in this book is a region of forested hills, scenic valleys, and rivers. The most important of these is the Weser, ‘deep and wide’ as it is described in Robert Browning’s famous poem, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* of 1842. Having more or less secured this hilly region early in his campaigns, Charlemagne then turned his attention northwards, beyond the Porta Westfalica gap where the Weser cuts between the Wiehengebirge hills to the west, and the Weserbergland hills to the east. North of this gap the countryside changes quite suddenly and the Weser, like the Ems, Elbe and other substantial rivers, flows across the North German Plain towards the North Sea. Like so many flatlands, this part of Germany has traditionally attracted few foreign visitors, though it has a quiet charm of its own, remarkable history, fascinating medieval and early modern towns, and excellent food.

All these areas are served by one of the best public transport systems in Europe. The famous Autobahns enable drivers to speed – often too fast – from town to town. Meanwhile the ordinary main roads of Germany, and indeed the minor country roads, are first class. Hotels range from the best and most modern though rather expensive, to the simple, local and charming. Germany’s array of campsites is also good, though perhaps not quite equal to that of France.

As far as the main battlefields of this campaign are concerned, the Süntel Hills are now part of an extensive national park called the Naturpark Weserbergland. Though primarily intended for walkers and cyclists, this Naturpark has stabilized roads, which are suitable for cars, at least in good weather. The fascinating Old Saxon hilltop citadel on top of the Wittekindtsberg lies at the easternmost end of the Nordlichen Teutoburger Wald-Wiehengebirge national park. In fact one end of the fortifications lies beneath
a dramatically situated ‘German Imperial’ style hotel built in 1896. This not only serves good food but also has a launch pad for paragliding next to its outside terrace.

Many other militarily and historically significant locations lie outside these dramatic Naturparks and range from large cities like Paderborn which, having been 85 per cent flattened by Allied bombing during World War II, has been almost miraculously rebuilt. Hamelin, which served as a major crossing point over the Weser for Charlemagne’s armies, is better known for its *Rattenfänger* – the Pied Piper of legend and verse. Further south the little town of Marsberg is overlooked by what is now the prosperous and dramatically situated hilltop suburb of Obermarsburg, which is the Eresburg of the early medieval period. There seems to be only one small hotel in Obermarsburg, but several at a good price in Marsberg itself. Lippspringe, where Charlemagne summoned assemblies of his loyal nobility and those Saxon leaders willing to submit to him, now attracts large numbers of visitors. However, the overwhelming majority come for the hot mineral baths of Bad Lippspringe, not for a small, almost overlooked monument in the town’s central square, which commemorates Charlemagne’s great assembly of AD 780.
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