

# CHARLES MARTEL

"The Hammer"

686-741 C.E.



BIOGRAPHY WORKBOOK  
SERIES FOR HIGH SCHOOL

## CHARLES MARTEL

(694-741 C.E.)

Toward the close of the seventh century of our era, the kingdom which we now name France was peopled by a half-barbarous, professedly Christian race, of mixed tribes, the ruling portion of which originally sprang from Germany. The Frankish kingdom, as it was called, had risen upon the ruins of the Roman Empire, and for about a century was remarkable for the ability of its sovereigns.

But after the death of King Dagobert I, in 638 C.E., the royal family seemed devoid of any mental or moral strength whatsoever. The kings of this line have been always known as *fainéants*—weak idlers. The real power of the government was held by a succession of chief officers of the household, styled "Mayors of the Palace."

1. Those holding what title were the effective rulers of France after 638 CE?
  - a. *Fainéant*
  - b. Keeper of the Flame
  - c. Mayor of the Palace
  - d. Princes

The most distinguished of these noblemen was Pepin d'Héristal, who, from the year 688 to his death in 715, was virtually king of France—the nominal sovereigns being but puppets in his hands. The country was then divided into two great districts—the eastern, known as Austrasia; and the western, as Neustria. At his death Pepin left the reins of government to his grandson, Theodebald, an infant under the guardianship of his mother, Plectrude. The lawful king, Dagobert III, was also a child.

2. Who ruled as the virtual king of France from 688 until 715?

It was clear that a fierce race of warriors required a strong arm to keep them in check, and could not long brook an infant's sway. The Neustrians commenced the revolt by expelling Theodebald and his mother, and choosing for their ruler a Mayor of the Palace named Raginfred. They then attacked Austrasia, which had not joined in the revolt. It was without

fitting defenses, and had no able man to direct its resistance against this assault. What course should the Austrasians take?

3. Whom did the Neustrians choose as their leader?

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Pepin, as we have said, left the government of France to a grandson; but he had a natural son, Charles, then in the flower of his youth. Whether on account of his not having been born in wedlock, or his having offended Pepin by some misconduct, Charles had been slighted, and even hated, by his father, who banished him to a monastery at Cologne, far from the intrigues of statecraft and the tumult of war. "Here," said the Austrasians, "is the likeliest man for our leader; a son of the wisest and firmest ruler the kingdom has yet acknowledged."

It was agreed, therefore, by the people, that Charles should be invited to come. A summons was sent from Metz, the then capital of the district, to the cloister at Cologne. Young and brave, pining in uncongenial society, and debarred from the employment of his talents, Charles seized this opportunity of release. Eagerly accepting the invitation, Charles hastened to return with the

messengers, and soon, amidst the shouts of the delighted Austrasians, put himself at their head, under the title of Duke.

4. What was the then capital of Austrasia?

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The family of Pepin was not royal, and Charles doubtless saw the wisdom of yielding to the popular reverence for the ancient race of kings. The Neustrians had the same prejudice. Accordingly, while Charles in the one district, and Raginfred in the other, virtually governed, their respective tools were Clothaire IV, King of Austrasia, and Chilperic II, King of Neustria, two descendents of the old dynasty. These events took place in 716 C.E.

The two countries now prepared for war. The Franks of Neustria were not so thoroughly and habitually warlike as their brethren of Austrasia, whose military system was better developed, in consequence of their position near the Rhine continually exposing them to conflicts with bands of Germans, which crossed the river in hopes of conquest. Nevertheless, the Austrasian Franks were now at a disadvantage, by reason of the unprepared state in which the Neustrian attack found them. Charles

and Raginfred collected each an army, and marched at its head.

The encounter was for some time doubtful, but the Neustrians gained a considerable advantage in the first campaign, and Charles was obliged to seek an asylum in the forests of the Ardennes region. Here, however, Charles did not long remain in concealment. Issuing forth at the head of a fresh body of men, he came upon the Neustrian army by surprise. A fearful slaughter took place, which he followed up by a vigorous pursuit.

The Neustrians made a stand at Vincy, near Cambray. Charles met them here, and after a gallant struggle completely routed the force of Raginfred. This victory decided the fate of Neustria, and the crown of both countries was, in the year 719, placed on the head of Chilperic II. Either from motives of policy or of generosity, Charles did not abuse his success by the punishment of his rival, Raginfred, on whom he conferred the earldom and province of Anjou. He himself was content to remain sole Mayor of the Palace, under a show of obedience to a powerless king.

5. Who became king of both Austrasia and Neustria in 719 CE?
- Charles Martel
  - Chilperic II
  - Pepin d'Héristal
  - Raginfred

A brave, iron-willed man, this Charles Martel appears to us—dimly as the light of historic tradition permits us to behold him. Charles made his army the sole engine of his power, and cultivated it to the fullest extent then possible to him. Even the Church was not able to resist him. At his pleasure, Charles seized on benefices which he deemed too important to be placed in priestly hands, and bestowed them on his warriors. A rebellion among the nobles of Aquitaine demanded his attention; and thither he marched with ruthless determination, stemming revolt and establishing order. But Charles had a work to do in his generation far more important to Europe than any he had yet performed.

The Arab tribes, which in the last century had been converted, by the genius of Mohammed, from idolatry to the worship of God, and from lawless bandits into disciplined soldiers, were at this period pursuing their career of religious conquest into the heart of Christendom. The Gothic monarchy of Spain, under its last king, Roderick, had fallen beneath the invading force, which now threatened France. The Duchy of Aquitaine, which considered itself independent of France, but which Charles had reduced to comparative submission, opposed the only barrier to Arabian aggression.

6. Who was the last Gothic king of France before the Arab conquest?

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Eudes (or Eudin, better known as Odo the Great), then Duke, was a gallant prince, and did all that in him lay to resist the claim which the new lords of Spain asserted to his province of Septimania (Languedoc). Eudes/Odo defeated one invading army before Toulouse in the year 721. But the tide of invasion still flowed in. Odo then tried intrigue, and bestowed his daughter on Musa, a revolted general of the great Arabian leader, Abd-er-rahman. But all was in vain. In 732, the Arabic Muslims once more appeared, in tremendous force, all over the south of France, ravaging as they came, finally besieging Arles and defeating its relieving army.

7. Who defeated an invading Arab army before Toulouse in 721 CE?

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The wives and children of the invaders followed in their train, as though they intended to settle in the country. Abd-er-rahman was advancing yet farther on his victorious way, when Odo, as a last resource,

applied for aid to his enemy, Charles. What were personal enmities now? This common, national danger must be averted at all hazards. So thought Eudes when he sent to Charles. So thought Charles when he quickly summoned an army, and marched toward the plains between Poitiers and Tours, where the Arabs were quartered.

8. Why was Odo willing to request aid from Charles, his enemy?

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The importance of the struggle that ensued cannot well be overestimated. Christianity and Islam were at issue for the possession of Europe. The difficulties that lay in the way of the success of Charles were very great. The Arabs were animated with the fanatical zeal of a new faith, and a greedy desire of domination. The Franks, on the other hand, were probably not at all conscious of, nor concerned for, the religious interests which were at stake, and aimed at no more than a vigorous rebuff of an unprovoked assault. The Franks had the advantage of familiarity with the country and climate; but were

outmatched, beyond comparison, in numbers.

The old monkish chronicles tell us that the battle lasted seven days. The Arab army was mainly composed of cavalry and bowmen, and the Franks suffered greatly from the charges of the former and the unerring shots of the latter. But on the seventh day the combatants closed with each other. Heavily fell the iron hands of the sturdy Franks upon the sinewy, but slender frames of their opponents. Nevertheless, Charles had no cavalry; and the swift steeds of Arabia, with their daring riders, trampled down his battalions.

9. The cavalry of Charles Martel helped him to win the battle against Abd-er-rahman's forces.
- a. True
  - b. False

Suddenly there was a cry in the rear of the Arab army that the infidels were spoiling the camp. More eager to save their treasure than to slay their foes, the Arabs turned in this direction. Skillfully interpreting the movement as a flight, Charles cheered on his men to pursue. The crisis was fatal to Abd-er-rahman. He tried to rally his cavalry. It was too late; and he fell, pierced through with many a Frankish spear.

Night separated the contestants. When in the morning the Franks would have renewed the battle, they found that their foes had stolen away in the night, fled, leaving their treasure and their dead upon the field. The incredible number of 300,000 Arabs is said to have fallen in this memorable defeat. The remainder fled through Aquitaine before the avenging sword of Charles. Well was he named "Martel," from the hammer-like might of his good arm! Who can say whether France and Germany, ay, England and all Europe, might not at this hour be speaking Arabic, had Charles Martel and his bold Franks fought less valiantly and enduringly at Tours?

10. How many of Abd-er-rahman's soldiers are estimated to have died at Tours?

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History tells us but little more of Charles. He carried his arms into the Netherlands, conquered the Frisians and other tribes which then dwelt there, made them Christians by force, and vassals of the Frankish crown. In Saxony, and other parts of Germany also, his power was feared and obeyed. Pope Gregory II offered to transfer to Charles the allegiance due from Rome



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to the Greek emperor, but the scheme was ended by the death of Charles.

After the decease of King Chilperic II, in 720, Thierry IV reigned in the same feeble manner as the other kings of his degenerate race. On Thierry's death, in 736, the people did not care to appoint a successor, being satisfied with the government which Charles continued to exercise under the title of "Duke of the Franks."

11. Charles Martel was crowned King of France after the death of Thierry IV.
  - a. True
  - b. False

Charles Martel died in 741, at the age of forty-seven, leaving the monarchy to his three sons, Pepin,

Carloman, and Griffo. Of the elder of these, we shall hear more anon.

Charles Martel is the first hero who succeeded in stamping his image upon the surface of European history, after the chaos of the broken Roman Empire had in some measure yielded to the spirit of order. He was chieftain of an unruly tribe, rather than king of a settled state. In this light we must regard him if we would judge his character fairly. Thus considered, he may be said to have governed France wisely and well. If his memory cannot be cleared from the reproach of certain deeds of violence, we can afford to pardon him when we remember the good leadership and protection that his strong hammer once wrought for Europe.



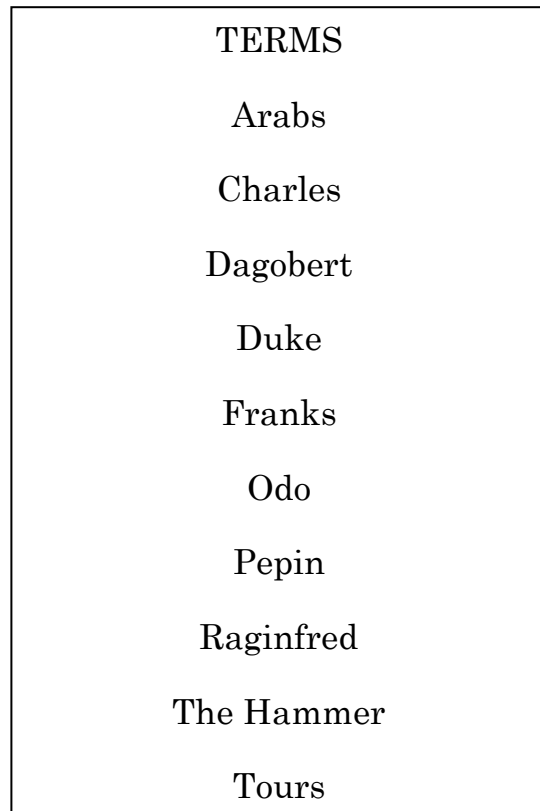
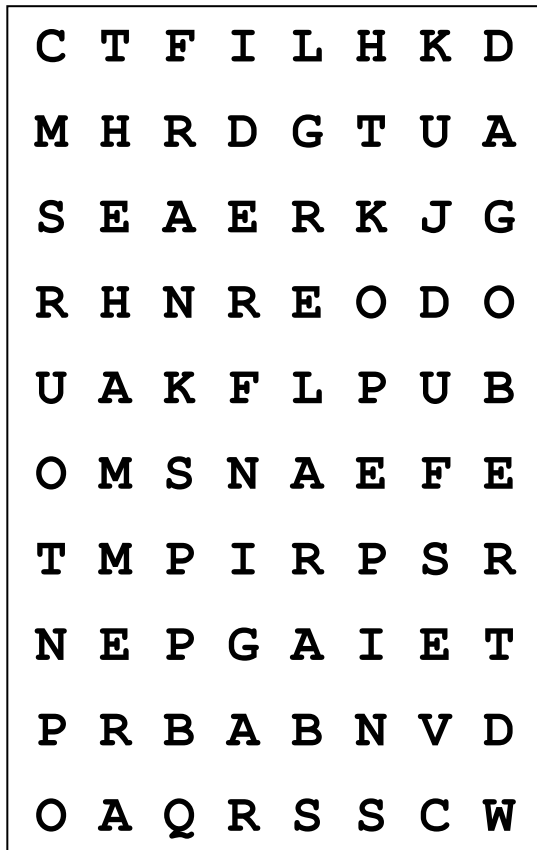
*Charles Martel at Tours.*





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## Word Search Puzzle



**Artistic Expression:** Illustrate a scene from the life of Charles Martel.

