

couldn't afford. Trying to bolster her flagging popularity, she took to riding around on a golden chariot pulled by the finest white horses and sprinkling gold coins to the crowd. The assembled populace took the money, but their love couldn't be so easily bought. They were well aware that thanks to her promises of tribute to the Saracens, the treasury was quite empty, and flinging what was left into the crowds brought her only increased scorn. The only surprise was that the revolt, when it came, was sparked not by a disaffected Byzantine but by a barbarian in the far west.

The trouble started in Rome, where Pope Leo III was growing more unpopular with each passing day. He had risen from peasant stock and as such was hated by the powerful Roman senatorial families who believed that the papacy should be reserved for members of the nobility. Their hatred was so intense that in 799 they sent a gang to ambush the pope as he was walking in the streets, ordering their henchmen to gouge out his eyes and rip out his tongue. Thankfully for the pontiff, in the excitement of the attack, the mob merely left him unconscious with his vision and speech intact. Smuggled out of the city before his assailants could correct their mistake, Leo fled to the court of the Frankish king and waited for tempers to cool. The moment he was gone, his enemies tried to depose him, charging him with everything from public drunkenness to adultery. Leo angrily denied the charges from the safety of his shelter, but it was clear that the two sides had reached an impasse. Some sort of trial would have to be held, but that involved damaging complications. Who was qualified to sit in judgment of the Vicar of Christ?

The answer, of course, was the emperor of Constantinople, the temporal head of Christendom, but not only had she disgraced herself by killing her own son, she was also a woman and therefore in western eyes disbarred from ruling. Leo needed a champion, and he turned not to the East but to the far more immediate power of the Franks.

Though it was not yet a century old, the Frankish kingdom already had an illustrious history. Its founder, Charles "the Hammer"

Martel, had stopped the Muslims at the battle of Tours, permanently turning the tide of the formerly irresistible Islamic advance into western Europe. His son Pépin the Short had come to the rescue of the pope while the Byzantines had been busy fighting over iconoclasm and was personally crowned and rewarded with the rank of patrician by the grateful pontiff. It was with Pépin's illustrious son, however, that the kingdom of the Franks really came into its own.

For someone who was known to history by the nickname "the Short," Pépin had a remarkably tall son. Named Charles like his grandfather, he stood nearly six-foot-four, and he had a personality as large and dominating as his frame. By the year 800, he had transformed the relatively minor kingdom he inherited into the most powerful state of western Europe, an empire unparalleled in the West since the days of ancient Rome. After crossing the Alps at the pope's request, Charles the Great—or Charlemagne, as he was soon to be known—descended on Italy in December of the year 800 and testified on Leo's behalf. The pope swore on the Gospels that he was innocent, and with the looming figure of the Frankish king behind him, the assembled clergy accepted his word. Two days later, while Charlemagne was kneeling at the Christmas Mass, Leo lifted a jeweled crown from the altar and placed it on his head, declaring to the startled assembly that Charlemagne was now a "Holy Roman Emperor"—adding for good measure that he was descended from the biblical kings of Israel. Shock waves rippled through the electrified crowd. After four hundred years in abeyance, an emperor had returned to the West.

Life in Dark Ages Europe was all too often brutish and short, but the inheritors of the wreckage of the Western Roman Empire were fully conscious that it hadn't always been so. The white marble ruins of ancient Rome were sprinkled from Britain to Sicily, constant reminders of a time before the light of learning had given way to darkness. They longed for the day that the empire would rise again, phoenixlike, from its own ashes and restore the proper order to the

world. Now, on Christmas day at the dawn of the ninth century, Pope Leo had declared that that day had come.

The coronation was breathtaking in its presumption. By placing the crown on Charlemagne's head, Leo was implying that the true crown of the Roman Empire was his alone to give—and what he could make, he could unmake as well.* The church, Pope Leo was firmly declaring, was a higher authority than the state. Such statements struck at the very heart of Byzantine authority, for if Charlemagne was the true Roman emperor, then obviously Irene—or anyone else on the Byzantine throne—was not. At a stroke, Leo had created a rival empire that not only dared to claim equality with the ancient line of the Caesars, but also declared Constantinople's throne to be full of impostors, mere pretenders to the throne of Augustus.

Leo, of course, didn't have the slightest authority to create a new emperor, but to bolster his position he trotted out what was surely the most shameful forgery of the Middle Ages—the "Donation of Constantine."[†] According to this document, Pope Sylvester had miraculously cured the emperor Constantine of leprosy, and the grateful emperor had "retired" to Byzantium and given the pope authority over the Western Empire and the ability to bestow the crown on whomever he chose. The Latin it was composed in was anachronistic and referred to events that had taken place after it was supposedly written, but education in the West had sunk so low that it was used to bolster papal claims for the next six hundred years.

The news of the coronation was greeted with horror in Constantinople. Just as there was one God in heaven, there was only one Roman Empire and only one emperor here on earth. Irene may not

*This lesson wasn't lost on the shrewd Charlemagne, but the deed was done and there was nothing for the irate monarch to do. A thousand years later, when it came time for his own coronation, Napoléon made sure he crowned himself.

[†]It was probably written a few decades before Leo used it, and it remained a standard weapon in the papal arsenal until the humanist Lorenzo Valla conclusively proved it a fake in 1440.

have been a satisfactory ruler, but that didn't mean an illiterate barbarian could claim equality with her throne. The blasphemous coronation was an affront to the correct world order, and that the pope had performed the ceremony made the betrayal that much worse.

Tempers were not improved when early the next year the ambassadors of this boorish Frank arrived in Constantinople with a startling marriage proposal, offering their monarch's hand to Irene. The empire would again be united under a single hand, they said, and Irene could rule like a new Theodora over both the East and the West. To the shocked Byzantine courtiers, the only thing more insulting than the arrogance of the barbarian envoys was the fact that Irene actually appeared to be seriously considering their proposal. Now almost universally hated in her own domains, she felt the walls closing in, and this seemed like the perfect escape.

Her subjects, however, had no intention of letting Irene turn over their empire to this barbarian pretender, and they moved quickly to get rid of their discredited monarch. Irene hardly bothered to resist. After a lifetime spent tenaciously gripping power, she was a spent force and was overthrown by a group of patricians with barely an effort. Imprisoned tamely in the palace that she had so recently commanded, she waited quietly while the assembled populace in the Hippodrome acclaimed one of her ministers of finance as emperor, and then obligingly headed into exile on the Aegean island of Lesbos.

Irene's fall brought an end to more than just a tired regime. Her reign marked the last time Christendom had a single, undisputed temporal head and saw the final collapse of the old Roman world. Her empire bore little resemblance to the proud state of Augustus, and the differences were more profound than the empty treasury and ruined economy that her shortsighted attempts to buy popularity had brought. The old order had lingered in the East long after its light had gone out in the West, but raids and plagues had taken a heavy toll even as the unrelenting attacks of Islamic armies had robbed the empire of Spain, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and North Africa.

What had begun with the shattering advance of Islam had been

completed with the coronation of Charlemagne. Byzantium had been subjected to tremendous pressures, both spiritual and physical, and every level of society had been transformed. No longer was it the confident master of the Mediterranean, straddling the warm shores that had given it birth. The last traces of that classical empire of Constantine and Justinian had disappeared in the wreckage of Irene's rule, and the enemies pressing in on every side threatened its very existence. It was too late to try to undo the damage. Byzantium would either adapt or be extinguished.