

Ages. This was to combine the two most important elements of early Western European civilisation, the Roman Catholic Church and the legacy of the Roman Empire.

The inspiration behind this new empire was Emperor Charlemagne, Charles the Great, who, on Christmas Day 800, accepted the title of Holy Roman Emperor from the pope in Rome. This seminal bond between Church and state was nurtured and maintained for the rest of Charlemagne's long reign and beyond. The importance of this watershed in early medieval European history was huge for it was this link, this symbiosis between state and Church, that was to shape the nature of Western European political society for the next thousand years and more.

Charlemagne ruled over much of what was to become France and Germany and, during his long reign, worked hard to ensure the spread of Christianity throughout continental Europe. Later, he was to lead the attack on Moorish Spain, which had been taken over by the Umayyad dynasty at the beginning of the eighth century, and this paved the way for his son's capture of much of Spain for Christianity in the years after his death.

Charlemagne's control of his empire was all encompassing and his treatment of those on its periphery who rebelled against him was both vicious and brutal. In one single day, according to contemporary chroniclers, Charlemagne ordered the execution of some 4,500 Saxon prisoners who had disobeyed his rule. Each region of his empire was ruled from a protected walled city in which his representatives and those of the Church resided. Charlemagne himself spent much of his time moving between these fortified towns, ensuring that his grip on power never weakened. William the Conqueror, among others, was to use a similar strategy in his years of domination in both Normandy and, later, England. But as well as being something of a tyrant, Charlemagne was also a cultured and religious man who brought into

As trading and commercial links began to bind the nation together, old tribal loyalties were replaced by early expressions of English nationalism. These early notions of nationhood were far more developed and important than any expressed on continental Europe where the break-up of the old Frankish empire of Charlemagne had led to a myriad of warring dukedoms. Edgar the Peaceful, however, died suddenly, at the age of 31, only 2 years after his grandiose success at Chester, and was sainted within a hundred years for his work in unifying the English church and building monasteries.

Edward the Martyr, Edgar teenage son, replaced his father but was to rule for only 3 years, years of political chaos following the stability of Edgar's reign, before his assassination in Dorset at Corfe Castle in the spring of 978. Supporters of a new king, Edward's half-brother, Ethelred the Unready, then a boy of only 10 or 11, carried out this coup d'état. It is said that Edward was stabbed, but escaped on horseback before dying later. He was interred at Winchester but his tomb was lost during the dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s. It was eventually rediscovered in the early 1930s with his bones kept in a bank vault until his reinternment in 1984.

The murder of Edward the Martyr was masterminded by Queen Ealfreda, the mother of the new king as well as the queen who had been crowned alongside Edgar at Bath Abbey 5 years before. Ethelred the Unready, a corruption of the Old English meaning unwise or badly advised and a pun on his first name that meant ready or prepared, was crowned king in March 978 and proved to be one of England's most unsuccessful kings. Losing much of the unity that had been brought about by the guile and hard work of Edgar and his forebears lost during his long 28-year reign, these were terrible years for the English nation with much of the north and east of the country returning to Viking rule. This was particularly the case after a catastrophic loss for the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Malden on the Essex coast in