

3 THE BAPTISM OF CLOVIS

The conquests of Clovis

The son of Childeric the First (Chlodovechus, 466-511), the young Salian Frank king Clovis the First ruled a territory located in what is now Belgium. He was not 20 yet when he extended his possessions to the East. He coalesced with other Frank peoples from Rhineland to confront the Ostrogoths and the Burgundians. Soon, Rheims territory was threatened by another German people, the Alamanni, stationed on the bank of the river Rhine. The Alamanni coveted Trier and Cologne which were in the fiefdom of his Rhenish allies. Clovis came to the aid of his friend Sigebert the Cripple. Then came the battle of Tolbiac (10 November 496). But the combat did not look good at all. Feeling that a defeat was pending, Clovis followed the advice of his secretary, Aurélien, and implored the sole and unique God of his new spouse, Clotilde. Indeed, Clotilde had constantly been preaching since their marriage in 493, as she wished her husband to convert to Catholicism. Clovis won the battle!



Picture 11 — Baptism of Clovis I, Daphne du Barry (1996). Square of the Basilica — photo TD

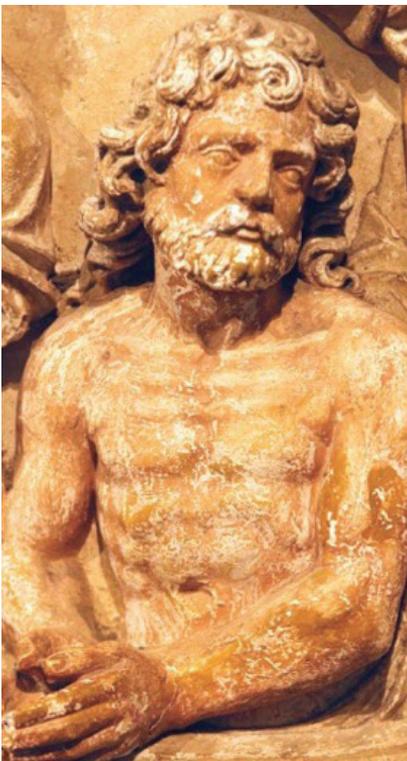
The conversion

Decided to fulfil his promise to convert himself in case he won the battle against the Alamanni, Clovis went to Rheims to be baptised. The ceremony was held in the new cathedral (on the same site where today's cathedral is) by the Bishop of Rheims, Remi. Clovis was baptised in a font with his two sisters, Alboflède and Lanthechilde... and 3,000 of his soldiers.

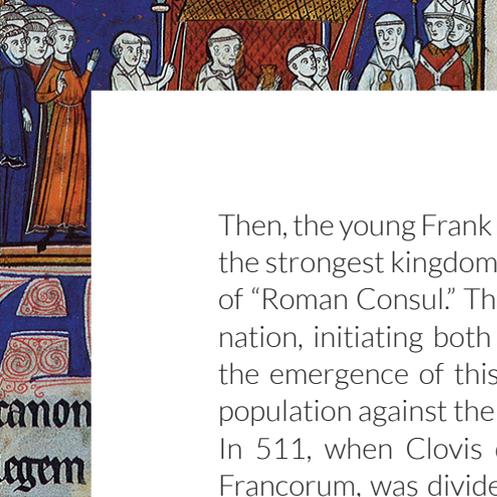
The symbolism of the baptism, the founding act of the kingdom, was re-enacted several centuries later in the coronation rites. After the dissolution of the Roman Empire, the Franks reconstituted a Nation that was to become very powerful. In memory of the baptism of Clovis, which legitimized the power of the Franks, the cathedral became "the Coronation Cathedral." With the new dynasty, Pepin the Brief initiated the coronation ceremony in 751 to legitimise his arrival on the throne. Indeed, Pepin, the strong man of the regime and mayor of the Palace managed to manoeuvre Childeric the Third out of the throne. Thanks to the coronation, Pepin would not be accused of stealing the power.

The legacy of the baptism

The traces of the baptism of Clovis can be seen today under the fifth bay of the Cathedral nave. Another consequence of this conversion: all the future conquests of Clovis had the blessing of the clergy and were considered raids against barbarian tribes who rejected Christ.



Picture 12 — Detail of The Three Baptisms set (17th century) — Clovis — photo TD



Then, the young Frank nation of Clovis and later of Charlemagne (Regnum Francorum) became the strongest kingdom of the Occident. This is why Clovis could take pride in the honorific title of “Roman Consul.” This founding myth can be considered as the starting point of the French nation, initiating both its golden legend and its royal lineage. Remi of Rheims accompanied the emergence of this new civilisation; in spite of the risks, he courageously protected the population against the ups and downs that threatened the people of Rheims.

In 511, when Clovis died, a delicate transition period started. The kingdom, the regnum Francorum, was divided between the four sons of the deceased. Thierry, the son of Clovis’s first wife, inherited the largest part (kingdom of Rheims or Austrasia). Clotaire, eldest son of the second wife, shared the rest with his two brothers; he inherited the Kingdom of Soissons; Clodomir the Kingdom of Orleans; and Childebert the kingdom of Paris.

An unreliable date

The date of the baptism of Clovis is still debated. The ceremony was probably held on December the 25th in honour of Christ – even though traditionally, baptism ceremonies were held at Easter. Was it in the year 496 (just after the battle of Tolbiac) or in 498 (the most widely accepted date) or in 505 or in 508?

An apocryphal prayer by Clovis (according to Gregory of Tours):

“Jesus-Christ, whom Clotilde asserts to be the son of the Living God, who art said to give aid to those in distress, and to bestow victory on those who hope in thee, I beseech the glory of thy aid, with the vow that if thou wilt grant me victory over these enemies, and I shall know that power which she says that people dedicated in thy name have had from thee, I will believe in thee and be baptized in thy name. For I have invoked my own gods but, as I find, they have withdrawn from aiding me; and therefore I believe that they possess no power, since they do not help those who obey them. I now call upon thee, I desire to believe thee only let me be rescued from my adversaries.”

Gregory of Tours *History of the Franks*, Chapter 2



Picture 13 – Baptism of Clovis – Tomb – Saint-Remi Basilica (16th century) – photo TD



Picture 14 – Procession of the Holy Phial, illumination, Paris, © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. lat. 1246, fol. 4 © Bibliothèque nationale de France



Picture 15 – Anointing of the King and Rite of the Sword, illumination, Paris, © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. lat. 1246, fol. 17