

1-AACHEN

Charlemagne's Aachen

Aachen is the city of Charlemagne. His palace ('Pfalz', the word has no exact English equivalent, though 'palatinate' describes the region it rules over) in Aachen was his favourite residence. A 'Pfalz' was a reinforced support point for the itinerate courts of the early and high Middle Ages. On Christmas Day in the year 800, the Carolingian Charlemagne, who had already ruled for 32 years as King of the Franks, was crowned Emperor by Pope Leo III in the 'old' church of St Peter, forerunner of the current basilica, in Rome. He saw the Christian faith as the decisive framework for the unity of the empire. At that time, the Kingdom of the Franks extended from the North-Sea coast to central Italy, from the Pyrenees to the Elbe. In the autumn of 813, the Emperor rode out hunting once more in the Ardennes forest, returning in November with a fever. He died on 28th January 814 in Aachen. After Charlemagne's death, the Carolingian Empire was divided and reunited several times by his children and grandchildren. Emperor Karl (Charlemagne), who was already referred to in his lifetime as 'the Great', was considered the greatest ruler of the Occident. He was beatified in 1165. Soon after this, the hymn 'Urbs Aquensis' was written in praise of Charlemagne and his city, Aachen. This is still performed on special occasions, such as the annual awarding of the Charlemagne Prize (Karlspreis).

The Church of St Mary (Marienkirche), a coronation hall of spiritual and temporal power

What is known today as Aachen's "Dom" or cathedral was once Charlemagne's Church of St Mary. It was built, as a domed octagonal structure around the year 800, together with other buildings, such as the Royal Hall and the Granus Tower. The marble for this spiritual and temporal place of ceremony came from Ravenna. The copper and gilt chandeliers were commissioned by Friedrich Barbarossa. In this palace chapel, an unbroken line of 30 German kings were crowned. But the church was also a place of manipulation through an impressive use of power. In 936, the Duke of Saxony chose Charlemagne's church as the ideal place to crown himself King of the East Frankish Empire, legitimizing his lineage by wearing traditional Frankish garments on the imperial throne. From the first half of the 11th century, this throne of Charlemagne was considered the visible arbiter of the imperial heritage. In 1155, the bishops crowned Frederick Barbarossa on this "Seat of the Frankish Empire" and, as late as 1520, Charles V was crowned as the Romanic-Germanic King in Aachen and bore thenceforth the title of "Chosen Emperor". Frederick I had the bones of Charlemagne exhumed and paraded as sacred relics at the Aachen Court festival in 1165, thus grounding a tradition of imperial sainthood for Germany. In this way, Aachen was intended to rival St Denis in Paris and Westminster in London as the resting place of divinely sanctified French and English monarchs. The sacred remains of the royal saints Dionysius and Edward the Confessor had long since raised these two locations to the status of pilgrimage centres. When historian and former president of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, Horst Fuhrmann, was asked what Aachen's Marian Church could teach people in today's globalised world, his answer was a single, impressive word: "Respect!"

Charlemagne gathered the learned from every corner of the empire to his court in Aachen

Charlemagne's rule saw an advance in learning. Education, the arts, literature and architecture, all enjoyed a period of expansion. The emperor sponsored intellectual freedom by gathering significant minds of the age to his court as advisors: the Anglo-Saxon Alkuin as director of his academy, the Lombard historian and monk Paul Diaconus or the scholars Peter of Pisa and Theodolph of Orleans. The effect of this ferment of ideas could be felt in the farthest reaches of the empire, as the free exchange of goods and ideas was unhindered by borders. In addition, Charlemagne was interested in the development of his mother tongue, the west-Germanic language of the Franks. Einhard, his first biographer, reports that in later life, the emperor also wanted to learn to write: "He would keep a slate under his pillow, so that in times of restlessness, he could always keep his hand in by practising letters", though apparently without particular success.

“Whatever he established had the power to flourish”

Charlemagne was Europe’s first protector of consumer rights, as well as the continent’s first ecologist, promoter of public health and minister of agriculture! This, at least, was the position taken by Anton Sterzl, former senior editor of the Aachener Volkszeitung, in his 2001 essay “The Power to Flourish”. He possessed a well-founded understanding of agriculture, knew how best to feed up a calf, preserve sustainable fish stocks in ponds and lakes, the best methods of ploughing and how to brew an excellent ale. But his knowledge also covered the cultivation and care of plants, as well as their use in holistic medicine. For Anton Sterzl, Charlemagne’s herbal garden was “a beautiful attempt to overturn our expulsion from paradise”. This detailed knowledge forms part of an expansive work, “Capitulare de Villis”, which draws up the basis for a new order of land reform, while also covering the development of agriculture, gardening and animal husbandry, together with their historical roots and civic utility. This work also represents the first legislation on food quality, security and consumer protection, long before the vaunted German “Reinheitsgebot” (purity law) for Bavarian beer in 1516. The “Capitulare de Villis” was probably drawn up in 792, against the backdrop of a severe food shortage in Aquitaine. Charlemagne, according to Sterzl, had considered both human idealism and human cupidity. With legal precision he laid down guidelines for the husbandry of land and livestock: clearance, grubbing, growth and fallow cycles, the use of quality seeds and the sustainable care of woodland and wild animals. The requirements laid down in “Capitulare”, such as for harvesting and the maintenance of granaries, or for the transport of produce as well as their control and inspection, were all clearly intended to advance food quality and farming methods. This economic and social order, together with all its guidelines and sanctions, creates a judicial framework that encourages the growth of the commonweal and justice. In the domain of agriculture, Anton Sterzl sees Charlemagne not as the emperor of myth and legend, but as the biblical “good sower”, the wise farmer and clever king. He agrees with the historian Wolfgang Braunfels, director of the 1965 exhibition in Aachen “Karl der Große. Werk and Wirkung” (Charlemagne, his life and work): “Whatever he established had the power to flourish”.

Charlemagne as “Pater Europae”

Already by the end of the 8th century, Charlemagne was being called Pater Europae (Father of Europe), in recognition of the impulse given during his reign to the very spirit and life of western Christianity. With its Gallo-Roman roots, the Frankish Empire combined a variety of peoples, cultures and countries. Charlemagne's reforms established this diverse realm on new foundations. Power was wielded only through the grace of God. Of course, tensions within the empire were unavoidable, such as the rivalry between west-Frankish French and east-Frankish German territories. While Charlemagne was important for the future self-definition of the French nation, so he was vital to the Germans as the symbol of a higher unity. In 1566, Jean Bodin described Charlemagne as the first true monarch to rule uncontested over a civilized European empire, backed with the might of a Gallic army, and defend it against barbarians on its borders. Yet the more the gap between the ideal and the political reality widened, the further were sharp-witted clerics close to the monarchy prepared to go in promotion of the “Pater Europae” theory. And it was this idea of an essentially Christian occident that laid the groundwork for the later political and economic union of Europe.

Charlemagne’s value for today’s Europe

After the Second World War, as wide swathes of Europe lay in rubble and ashes, both materially and spiritually, the European ideal of Charlemagne came as a saving hand. The ancient Carolingian alliance of west-Frankish and east-Frankish wings of the empire was invoked repeatedly as an inspiration driving initiatives to overcome centuries of mistrust and the horrors of recent history between France and Germany. However, there were also scholars ready to subvert the benign myth of Charlemagne, most notably Voltaire, who claimed in his “Essay on Manners and the Spirit of Nations” that the Emperor Charlemagne was to blame for the fatal dominance of the Church over temporal issues in Europe. His conquest by the sword, particularly in poor and undeveloped Saxony, was unproductive and only served to strengthen the clergy. And for some critics, Charlemagne perfected the cult of glorification of godliness that was to serve the Catholic Church so well in its

efforts to evangelize the entire world. Other historians hasten to point out that this process involved, for the most part, the expansion of Christianity in Northern Europe, rather than the renaissance of the antique nations. Given the orientation of literature and architecture in the time of Charlemagne, the period is often referred to as a “Carolingian Renaissance”. It is certainly remarkable that, with a mostly illiterate nobility, Charlemagne nonetheless managed to so effectively introduce the Carolingian Minuscule, that it has survived successive script reforms to become a standard cursive and remains a reference for the design of typefaces. The Nazis tried to integrate him into their doctrine, first as the slayer of the Saxons, then as the heroic original ancestor of Hitler’s united Germanic continent. This attempt at the political capitalisation of Charlemagne was as quickly lost as it was fabricated. Nevertheless, hardly was the National Socialist “interregnum” over, when the emperor’s cultural heritage arose from the rubble to become more vital than ever, most unsurprisingly in Aachen.

From the ashes of a bombed-out Aachen arises the phoenix of the International Charlemagne Prize

Aachen was especially hard hit by the horror and tragedy of World War II. The fighting in October 1944 was quite particularly harsh for the city’s 20,000 remaining inhabitants (before the war there had been 160,000). Hitler intended the battle for Aachen to signal the turning point on the western front, the German Stalingrad. Yet Aachen became the first German city liberated from Nazism by the allied advance and the first to be controlled by an American military government. In November 1944, following the surrender of German troops, the ghastly quotidian of fear and terror was over. Only rubble remained, the meagre provisions left in bombed-out houses were plundered by survivors. Questions of “what now” and “what next” were the daily, existential norm. Against this backdrop, a group of citizens close to the Textile entrepreneur Dr. Kurt Pfeiffer formed the “Corona Legentium Aquensis”, a circle for reading and discussion. Answers were actively sought to questions of how to build a peaceful and cooperative future of civil engagement, where concerned citizens could have an influence on the political development of Europe. Scholarly and ethical men of rank, such as the philosopher Martin Heidegger or the physician Werner Heisenberg were invited to speak. On 19th December 1949, before a packed meeting of the “Corona” at the local Suermondt Museum, Dr. Kurt Pfeiffer presented the idea of an “Aachen Foundation for a European Prize”. The resonance this received was remarkable. Everyone recognised in this idea the chance to use the status of Aachen and its history at the root of the European ideal as a bridge, not only between former national enemies, but also between the past and the future. Twelve founding members signed the “1949 Proclamation”. Together with the augmentations of the 1990 Declaration, this builds the ideological bedrock of Aachen’s International Charlemagne Prize. From today’s perspective, the almost undamaged structure of the Imperial Church, the “Kaiserdom”, rising above the fields of rubble in 1945, was a potent symbol, not only for the revival of the city, but for the enduring survival of the cultural heritage of Charlemagne.

Winners of the Charlemagne Prize as pacemakers for European development

Since 1950, the “International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen” has been awarded in a ceremony in the city’s Town Hall to persons or institutions that have made a significant contribution to the unity of Europe. These alumni and their legacies are milestones in the post-war development of Europe. First to receive the award was Count Coudenhove-Kalergi, the founder of the Paneuropa-Movement. In the 1950s, the prize went to founding fathers of the European Community, later to become the European Union: Alcide de Gasperi (1952), Jean Monnet (1953), Paul Henri Spaak (1957), Robert Schuman (1958) or Joseph Bech (1960). As political figures whose efforts have led to rapprochement between France and Germany, Konrad Adenauer (1954) and – together – François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl (1988) have been awarded the “Karlspreis”. Champions of EU expansion such as Edward Heath (1963), Konstantin Karamanlis (1978) and King Juan Carlos I. (1982) have been honoured, also representatives of European institutions, such as EU Parliament President Simone Veil (1981). And if Sir Winston Churchill demonstrated prophetic powers in his acceptance speech in 1956, when he said that the freedom of Czechoslovakia and even a reunified Germany could result from greater unification in Europe, then certainly Václav Havel made hay with that particular sunshine when, 35

years later, he called out in Aachen: “Winston Churchill, Czechoslovakia is free! Germany is reunified!” Alongside Havel (1991), other eastern and central Europeans have been honoured since the fall of what Churchill first called the “Iron Curtain”: Gyula Horn (1990), Bronislaw Geremek (1998), György Konrád (2001) and Donald Tusk (2010). In 2004, Pope John-Paul II, whose character and work were so exemplary for the European process of integration and the overcoming of partition, was awarded an Associate Charlemagne Prize. As for those who have rendered important service in the reconstruction of Europe after World War II or have been of particular help to the transatlantic partnership, US politicians George C. Marshall (1959), Henry A. Kissinger (1987) and President Bill Clinton (2000) were honoured. Also among the prize-winners were institutions, such as the European Commission (1969) and even the Euro itself (2002) as well as its highest guardian Jean-Claude Trichet (2011). And in 1986, it was the turn of the combined citizenry of the State of Luxembourg, considered the most “European” of all Europeans in their mentality and actions, to receive Aachen’s coveted award.

Reminiscences of Charlemagne’s Europe

In the speeches given by both tribute speakers and laureates of the Charlemagne Prize, the Emperor is never far from the podium. Count Coudenhove-Kalergi, the first prize-winner in 1950, saw the renewal of the Carolingian Empire on a democratic, federal and social foundation as the chance for a united Europe and closed his speech with the words: “Lift up your hearts!” Reminiscences of Charlemagne coupled with European development in the 20th century were also to be heard in the tribute paid to the dual prize-winners Helmut Kohl and Francois Mitterand by the German Federal President at the time, Richard von Weizsäcker, in 1988: “Germans and French together at the Karlspreis – isn’t that a rather delayed family party in the context of the ancient Frankish empire of Charlemagne?” However, he insisted, “Charlemagne’s empire is not the precursor of the political Europe we are striving for today; neither are we completing something he began. But his maxims and motivations have not ceased to affect us and take on new meaning”. With regard to the Carolingian period, von Weizsäcker saw no cause for dismay, but rather focussed on some encouraging signs and examples. “The most influential advisor and friend of the Emperor was an Anglo-Saxon, Alkuin of York”, he said. And “the most influential Anglo-Saxon King, Offa of Mercia, drew up the first European trading pact with Charlemagne.” Furthermore, von Weizsäcker added, after Charlemagne introduced his new silver coin, the Denar, as the currency unit for the entire Empire, it was imported into England by Offa, where it was rechristened the ‘penny’ and established its validity in that island realm. With a tip of the hat to the currently complicated relationship between the UK and the EU, von Weizsäcker added with a smile: “Currency union across the English Channel ... twelve hundred years ago! Who could possibly ask for more?” In 1992, Charlemagne award laureate Jacques Delors clarified the current relationship to the Frankish ruler: “When we think of Charlemagne today, then we must recognise that the history of Europe is not confined to the history of its nation states. Europe is the soil, geographically, politically, economically and socially speaking, from which these states have grown. The perspective of a Greater Europe causes us to rediscover this connection and to be aware of it when we seek to extend the European Family.”

The Vennbahn as an early pacemaker for the “European Coal and Steel Union”

When the people of Luxembourg were honoured with the 1986 Charlemagne Prize for their European attitude, the Grand-Duke Jean of Luxembourg remarked, in his acceptance speech on their behalf, upon the long-standing relationship, ever since the time of Charlemagne, between Luxembourg and Aachen. He made special mention of the economic ties: “For centuries the Luxembourg iron industry has worked with coal from the mines of Aachen.” Already in 1873 the towns and boroughs of Malmedy, Monschau, Eupen and Stolberg called for a rail link to connect the industrial sites of the Aachen area with those of South Luxembourg and Lorraine. In 1889, the opening of the last section of the Vennbahn between St Vith and Ulfigenwar meant that the rail connection between the Aachen industrial zone and the ARBED Steelworks in Luxembourg was complete. Even prior to this, iron and coal had been transported to and fro between the two, but via Liege. Trains rolled along the Vennbahn day and night up to the start of World War I. On 23rd July

1952, the “European Coal and Steel Community” came into being, based on the Treaty of Paris from 18.4.1951 between the Benelux States, France, Germany and Italy. This agreement marked the post-1945 beginning of the journey towards European unity. Thus, the Vennbahn can be understood as an early precursor of economic union.

Three Charlemagne Prize laureates with a relationship to the region along the Vennbahn route

In 1954, Konrad Adenauer, who had by then served five years as Germany’s first Federal Chancellor, was awarded the Charlemagne Prize. His tribute speaker, Count Coudehove-Kalergi, insisted that the hand of friendship from France to Germany would not have been so soon proffered, had the Federal Republik not elected, in Adenauer, a great European to be their Federal Chancellor. The alternative to the process of European construction, he went on, would be that “German and French differences would have led to a national double suicide.” Two years later, Konrad Adenauer negotiated with Belgium for the return of the German exclaves along the German-Belgian border to the south of Aachen. He received a telegram from the hamlet of Hemmeres, south of St Vith, in which its inhabitants demanded to remain Belgian. The political storm in a teacup had its effect, money began to arrive for road-building, mains water, a school and renovation of the church. The Charlemagne Prize laureate for 1957, Paul-Henri Spaak, who, subsequent to his service as Belgium’s Foreign Minister would become NATO General Secretary from 1957 to 1961, was another of the actively involved parties in the border issue immediately after the Second World War. The border region was considered to be a German reparations zone. From the Belgian side, there were even calls for it to be extended, in particular after the integration of the five enclaves along the Vennbahn. But then, most unexpectedly, on Good Friday of 1949, everything suddenly turned out quite different, with Belgium renouncing its claim to the territory. One aspect leading to this was doubtless the emerging Cold War, in the new climate of which it was considered that such a harsh attitude towards a freshly democratic Germany might send the wrong signal. Paul-Henri Spaak emphasised in his acceptance speech for the Charlemagne Prize that he had always been a European in his heart, even after the First World War, as he returned home from a German POW camp. “And at least since 1945”, continued Spaak, “we’ve understood that it is vital to heal these wounds.” Vice Chancellor Franz Blücher pointed out that the 24th September 1956 agreement on the German-Belgian border also bore Spaak’s signature. And there had been few treaties in recent years that had found “such wide acceptance among the people of both signatory nations” as this one. The statesman “who seeks to understand the true nature of things, sees beyond his neighbour’s frontiers.” Subsequently Spaak would draw up the plan for the Benelux union and go on to be a decisive influence in the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community. Rather surprisingly, Henry Kissinger is a further Charlemagne Prize laureate painfully familiar with this region. He came as a US soldier in the Ardennes offensive known as the Battle of the Bulge. In his 1987 acceptance speech in Aachen, he referred, if indirectly, to this time: “As a very young man, serving in the armed forces of the country that had given refuge to my family, I saw with my own eyes the fruits of the hatred of those times in the ruins of this very town”. And the Mayor of Aachen at the time, Kurt Malangré, also underlined this fact: “As a 22-year-old soldier for his new homeland, he returned in 1944 to re-enter the land of his birth only a few kilometres from here and witness its submergence under the flood of chaos left by the defeated dictator.”

Europe of cyclists – networking across the EuroVelo Routes

Another incremental process of unification currently being realised is that of a European web of cycle tracks, now gradually stretching its fibres across the continent. Godparent to this soft mobility network of tracks, separate from existing road, highway, rail, high-speed rail and water networks, is the European Cyclists Federation coordinated project EuroVelo-Routes. These tracks stretch from North Cape in Norway to Gibraltar, from the Loire to the Black Sea, with the heart of this tapestry of cycle tracks running along the Danube, that most “European” of great rivers. The twelve existing EuroVelo-Routes already provide over 63,000 kilometres of track. The “Iron Curtain Trail” represents post-1989 Europe, a 6,800-kilometre link from the Barent Sea to the Black Sea. Two of the EuroVelo-Routes run tangent to the Vennbahn: in the north the route EuroVelo 3, called the “Pilgrims Route”



runs from Trondheim in Norway to Santiago de Compostela in Spain via Aachen, while to the south, EuroVelo 5, the “Via Francigena” takes cyclists from London to Brindisi via Luxembourg.