

Medieval Sourcebook:
The Conversion of Clovis: Two Accounts, 496

Davis Introduction: In 496 A.D. Chlodovocar (Clovis, or Louis), the founder of the Frankish power which was to develop into modern France and Germany, was converted to Catholic Christianity from heathenism. This was an event of high historical importance. If, like other Germanic kings, he had become an Arian heretic, he would have been hopelessly estranged from his subject Roman population. As it was, the Franks and the provincials coalesced as in none other of the new barbarian kingdoms. The story of Chlodovocar's conversion, of course, gave the pious chroniclers an opening for many edifying anecdotes.

**Chronicle of St. Denis:
Chlodovocar, King of the Franks**

From *The Chronicle of St. Denis*, I.18-19, 23:

At this time the King was yet in the errors of his idolatry and went to war with the Alemanni, since he wished to render them tributary. Long was the battle, many were slain on one side or the other, for the Franks fought to win glory and renown, the Alemanni to save life and freedom. When the King at length saw the slaughter of his people and the boldness of his foes, he had greater expectation of disaster than of victory. He looked up to heaven humbly, and spoke thus: "Most mighty God, whom my queen Clothilde worships and adores with heart and soul, I pledge you perpetual service unto your faith, if only you give me now the victory over my enemies."

Instantly when he had said this, his men were filled with burning valor, and a great fear smote his enemies, so that they turned their backs and fled the battle; and victory remained with the King and with the Franks. The king of the Alemanni were slain; and as for the Alemanni, seeing themselves discomfited, and that their king had fallen, they yielded themselves to Chlodovocar and his Franks and became his tributaries.

The King returned after this victory into Frankland. He went to Rheims, and told the Queen what had befallen; and they together gave thanks unto Our Lord. The King made his confession of faith from his heart, and with right good will. The Queen, who was wondrously overjoyed at the conversion of her lord, went at once to St. Remi, at that time archbishop of the city. Straightway he hastened to the palace to teach the King the way by which he could come unto God, for his mind was still in doubt about it. He presented himself boldly before his face, although a little while before he [the bishop] had not dared to come before him.

When St. Remi had preached to the King the Christian faith and taught him the way of the Cross, and when the king had known what the faith was, Chlodovocar promised fervently that he would henceforth never serve any save the all-powerful God. After that he said he would put to the test and try the hearts and wills of his chieftains and lesser people: for he would convert them more easily if they were converted by pleasant means and by mild words, than if they were driven to it by force; and this method seemed best to St. Remi. The folk and the chieftains were assembled by the command of the King. He arose in the midst of them, and spoke to this effect: "Lords of the Franks, it seems to me highly profitable that you should know first of all what are those gods

which you worship. For we are certain of their falsity: and we come right freely into the knowledge of Him who is the true God. Know of a surety that this same God which I preach to you has given victory over your enemies in the recent battle against the Alemanni. Lift, therefore, your hearts in just hope; and ask the Sovereign Defender, that He give to you all, that which you desire---that He save our souls and give us victory over our enemies." When the King full of faith had thus preached to and admonished his people, one and all banished from their hearts all unbelief, and recognized their Creator.

When shortly afterward Chlodovocar set out for the church for baptism, St. Remi prepared a great procession. The streets of Rheims were hung with banners and tapestry. The church was decorated. The baptistry was covered with balsams and all sorts of perfumes. The people believed they were already breathing the delights of paradise. The cortege set out from the palace, the clergy led the way bearing the holy Gospels, the cross and banners, chanting hymns and psalms. Then came the bishop leading the King by the hand, next the Queen with the multitude. Whilst on the way the King asked of the bishop, "If this was the Kingdom of Heaven which he had promised him." "Not so," replied the prelate; "it is the road that leads to it."

When in the church, in the act of bestowing baptism the holy pontiff lifted his eyes to heaven in silent prayer and wept. Straightway a dove, white as snow, descended bearing in his beak a vial of holy oil. A delicious odor exhaled from it: which intoxicated those near by with an inexpressible delight. The holy bishop took the vial, and suddenly the dove vanished. Transported with joy at the sight of this notable miracle, the King renounced Satan, his pomps and his works; and demanded with earnestness the baptism; at the moment when he bent his head over the fountain of life, the eloquent pontiff cried, "Bow down thine head, fierce Sicambrian! Adore that which once thou hast burned: burn that which thou hast adored!"

After having made his profession of the orthodox faith, the King is plunged thrice in the waters of baptism. Then in the name of the holy and indivisible Trinity---Father, Son, and Holy Ghost---the prelate consecrated him with the divine unction. Two sisters of the king and 3000 fighting men of the Franks and a great number of women and children were likewise baptized. Thus we many well believe that day was a day of joy in heaven for the holy angels; likewise of rejoicing on earth for devout and faithful men!

The King showed vast zeal for his new faith. He built a splendid church at Paris, called St. Genevieve, where later he and Clothilde were buried. Faith and religion and zeal for justice were pursued by him all the days of his life. Certain Franks still held to paganism, and found a leader in Prince Ragnachairus but he was presently delivered up in fetters to Chlodovocar who put him to death. Thus all the Frankish people were converted and baptized by the merits of St. Remi....

At this time there came to Chlodovocar messengers from Anastasius, the Emperor of Constantinople, who brought him presents from their master, and letters whereof the effect was, that it pleased the Emperor and the Senators that he [Chlodovocar] be made a "Friend of the Emperor," and a "Patrician" and "Councilor" of the Romans. When the King had read these letters, he arrayed himself in the robe of a senator, which the Emperor had sent to him. He mounted upon his charger; and thus he went to the public square before the church of St. Martin; and then he gave great gifts to the people. From this day he was always called "Councilor" and "Augustus."

**Gregory of Tours:
History of the Franks, II.40**

While King Chlodovocar dwelt at Paris he sent secretly to Cloderic, son of Sigibert, king of Cologne, and said unto him: "Behold, your father is old and lame. If he should die, his kingdom would be yours on the strength of our friendship together." Then it came to pass that Sigibert quitted the city of Cologne and crossed the Rhine to enjoy himself in the forest of Buconia. And as he slept in his tent about noon time, his son sent assassins against him, and caused him to perish, in order to gain his kingdom. The murderer sent messengers to Chlodovocar saying: "My father is dead, even as was enjoined, and I have in my possession both his wealth and his kingdom. Send, therefore, some of your people, and I will freely commit to them whatever you wish of his treasures."

When Chlodovocar's messengers came, Cloderic opened before them the treasures of his father; but as he thrust his hand deep down in the chest, one of the messengers raised his "Franciska" [the Frankish battle axe] and cleft his skull. Then Chlodovocar straightway presented himself at Cologne, assembled the folk there and spoke to them: "Hear what has befallen. While I sailed upon the river Scheldt, Cloderic, the son of my kinsman, pursued his father, pretending that I desired him to kill him; and while Sigibert fled across the forest of Buconia, Cloderic compassed his death by brigands. Then he himself---at the moment he was opening the treasures of his father---was smitten and slain!---I know not by whom. I am in no way an accomplice in these deeds; for I cannot shed the blood of my kinsfolk---something utterly unlawful! But since the thing is done, I give you council; if you are willing, receive me as your king. Have recourse to me and put yourselves under my protection.

The Ripuarian Franks of Cologne welcomed these words with loud applause, and with the clashing of their shields. They lifted Chlodovocar upon a shield, and proclaimed him king over them.....

Daily did God cause Chlodovocar's enemies to fall into his hand, and increased his kingdom; seeing that he went about with his heart right before the Lord, and did that which was pleasing in His eyes.

Source.

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