Charlemagne

Charlemagne was a giant of a man in history and in stature. He stood six feet four inches tall, which was an unusually great height for a man of his time. He was also powerfully built with large shoulders and chest. His massive build was made more curious by the fact that he was the son of a ruler called Pepin the Short, King of the Franks. When Charlemagne succeeded his father, he extended his kingdom to include not only all of present-day France but much of Germany and parts of Italy, Bavaria and Spain. These lands became known as the Holy Roman Empire, and Charlemagne was crowned emperor.

Charlemagne was well-educated in both Latin and Greek and showed great interest in the preservation and spread of knowledge; he considered himself guardian of the Christian faith and spread Christianity to the many lands he conquered. At the same time he promoted education, art, commerce and farming. He also established a system of law and order.

After Charlemagne’s death, his son, Louis the Pious, was unable to hold the empire together. Louis's three sons at the Treaty of Verdun in 843 A.D. further divided the kingdom into three parts, one part for each. This division gave rise to many wars between France and Germany which were to continue for centuries. With no strong central power to look to for protection, free men began to go to their local lords for aid, thus paving the way for the system called feudalism.

The top map on the next page shows Charlemagne’s empire before it was divided. Color Charlemagne’s empire with a color to suit you.

The bottom map shows how Charlemagne’s empire was divided between his three grandsons at the Treaty of Verdun: Use three different colors to show each division. Compare these areas to a present-day political map of Europe. You will find one on page 4.
The boundaries of present-day European countries are very different from those during Charlemagne's reign. Compare the above map of modern Europe to the maps on the preceding page to answer the questions below.

1. What three great modern European nations did Charlemagne's Empire include?

2. Much of present-day France was given to which grandson?

3. Which grandson inherited most of Italy along with Switzerland and territories extending northward to the English Channel?

4. Which grandson inherited great parts of East and West Germany?

5. Did Charlemagne extend his empire far into what is now modern Spain?

6. Did Charlemagne conquer England?

7. Discuss how history might have been changed if Charlemagne's empire had not been divided. Include in your discussion the effects on language and culture of modern Europe.

8. Do you think there would have been fewer wars in Europe after Charlemagne's death if much of France, Germany and Italy had remained one great nation? Why or why not?