
The Evolution Of The “Franco-Papal Alliance” And Its Importance To Both Parties Involved

The Franco-Papal Alliance, from my understanding, began the moment Pepin the Short was crowned King of the Franks following Pope Zachary’s approval that he should be considered king. Pepin was mayor of the palace, a position which held all the power over the Frankish nations, serving under the de jure King of Francia, Childeric III, who operated solely as a figurehead. With the Pope’s approval, Pepin was crowned king in 751. This seemingly pleased the Papacy, whose other major ally, the Byzantine Empire, was amid a conflict concerning Iconoclasm.

Shortly after the death of Pope Zachary, Stephen II ascended to the position and conferred with Pepin about a growing concern; Lombard forces had toppled the exarchate of Ravenna and began preparing to move to Rome. Pepin decreed that these lands would be returned to the control of the Roman Church, the origination of the Donation of Pepin and a solidifying factor in the Franco-Papal alliance. A time later, Pepin the Short and his army moved to Italy and engaged in battle against Aistulf, the Lombard king, and his forces, eventually causing Aistulf to retreat. According to Historian Elanor Duckett (2018), “Pippin and his men plundered the land around Pavia until Aistulf promised to restore to papal possession Ravenna and all the Roman properties claimed by the pope.” Pepin followed through on his promise around 756 when he and his army confronted and defeated the Lombard king and restored the Papal States to the Roman church. This relationship between Franks and the Papacy only continues during the later rule of Charlemagne, who also took the time to confirm to the Pope (Adrian I at this time) that continued donations ensue.

From the Frankish perspective, the support of the Church truly helped solidify and legitimize Pepin’s rule as the “proper” king, and the alliance with the Papacy was seemingly a win-win for both sides, considering Pepin’s effectiveness with the shifting of rule of Ravenna and surrounding territories to the Pope. Had Pepin not sought the advice of Pope Zachary in the matter of his role, the outcome of this alliance could have been entirely different. Along the same vein, if Stephen II had not received outside aid to address the Lombard problem looming at Rome’s doorstep, it’s possible that Rome could have fallen to enemy forces. Looking at the bigger picture, it’s plausible that the existence of this alliance paved the way for the emergence of the Holy Roman Empire. It’s apparent that both parties involved in this alliance grew in power as a result of it.