Charlemagne had employed his sons as “sub-kings,” but Louis politicized his family still more. Early in his reign he had his wife crowned empress; named his first-born son, Lothar, emperor and co-ruler; and had his other sons, Pippin and Louis (later called “the German”), agree to be sub-kings under their older brother. It was neatly planned. But when Louis’s first wife died he married Judith, daughter of a relatively obscure kindred (the Welfs) that would later become enormously powerful in Saxony and Bavaria. In 823 she and Louis had a son, Charles (later “the Bald”), and this upset the earlier division of the empire. A family feud turned into bitter civil war as brothers fought one another and their father for titles and kingdoms. In 833 matters came to a head when Louis, effectively taken prisoner by Lothar, was forced to do public penance. Lothar expected the ritual to get his father off the throne for life. But Louis played one son against the other and made a swift comeback. The episode showed how Carolingian rulers could portray themselves as accountable to God and yet, in that very act of subservience, make themselves even more sacred and authoritative in the eyes of their subjects.

After Louis’s death a period of war and uncertainty (840–843) among the three remaining brothers (Pippin had died in 838) ended with the Treaty of Verdun (843). (See Map 3.4a.) The empire was divided into three parts, an arrangement that would roughly define the future political contours of Western Europe. The western third, bequeathed to Charles (treaty of Verdun)