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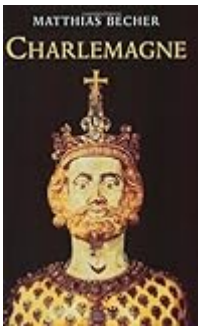

Matthias Becher. *Charlemagne.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. vi + 170 pp. $23.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-09796-2; $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-10758-6.

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The Great One

A brief biography of Charlemagne, translated from German and published in hardcover by a leading American university press, does not immediately strike one as fulfilling an obvious need. The original appeared in paperback in the C. H. Beck *Wissen* series, which aims to "transmit established knowledge and concentrated information about the most important fields in the cultural and natural sciences," according to the publisher's web site.[1] This category makes up a significant segment of the German book market, but such series are typically marketed as quality paperbacks and priced lower than hardcover trade books in the American market. Becher's book obviously found an audience, and it was reprinted in 2000 and 2002. But even allowing for the current unfavorable exchange rate, it sells for less than half of what Yale is asking for the new translation.

The copyright page of the English version lists David S. Bachrach as the translator but also notes that the volume was "originally published in a slightly different form as *Karl der Grosse*" in 1999. The differences between the original and the translation will be discussed below in the context of the individual chapters. Given the function of the series in which Becher (Professor of Medieval History in Bonn and author of many studies on the Carolingian and Ottonian periods in Western Europe) published the original text, we would not expect this slim volume to break new ground in Carolingian studies, except perhaps to the extent that it provides a new synthesis. Becher specifically discusses the relative abundance of medieval sources on Charlemagne, beginning already with the "biography" by his contemporary Einhard. He goes on to observe how difficult it is to apply modern standards of biography to such medieval sources. He concludes the introduction by noting that he is therefore writing "an individual interpretation based on years of engagement with the sources and the scholarly literature" (p. 6).

Chapter 1, "The Highpoint of His Reign: The Imperial Coronation of Charlemagne on Christmas Day in the Year 800," takes us into the middle of the action. By beginning from arguably the most dramatic moment in Charlemagne's full life (a point emphasized both in the chapter title and in its concluding paragraph), Becher has adopted

a rhetorical structure that enables him to discuss the immediate causes of the papal coronation with the appropriate critical distance required by modern scholarship–while still viewing Charlemagne's previous history as somehow culminating with his ascent to the imperial title. Becher describes in some detail how the interests of both Charlemagne and Pope Leo III were served by the coronation, how Einhard's assertion that the Frankish king was surprised can easily be seen as modeled on literary sources, but how, in the final analysis, the sources do not allow us to draw firm conclusions about what the motivations of the participants may have been.

Having set the stage, Becher uses the next five chapters to deal with events prior to Christmas 800. "From the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West to Charlemagne's Accession to Power in 768: A Short History of the Kingdom of the Franks" (chapter 2) describes the rise of the Merovingian empire in the West Empire as competitors to the Visigoths and other Germanic tribes for supremacy in the West, the internal dynamics and dynastic conflicts of the Merovingian kingdom, and the rise of the Carolingians to power, culminating in the official transfer of the kingship to Charlemagne's father Pippin in 751. Genealogical tables of the Merovingians and the Carolingians through Charlemagne accompany the chapter. The list of ten women and the eighteen children they produced with Charlemagne points ahead to a more detailed discussion of Charlemagne's family in chapter 7. The reader without some background in the period may well get lost in the welter of names, while someone more knowledgeable will probably not learn anything new. Still, it is hard to imagine how three centuries of Frankish history can be covered much differently in nineteen pages.

Chapter 3 ("Charlemagne's Youth and the First Years of His Reign: From Son of the Mayor of the Palace to Conqueror of Italy") is accurately described in the typically lengthy chapter headings. Becher begins by noting the problems caused by Einhard's disinclination to say much about Charlemagne's early youth, including his birth date, attested from other sources, yet in conflict with Einhard's statement of Charlemagne's age at his death in 814. In speculating about the reasons for selecting names for noble sons, including why Pippin chose to name his oldest son Charles and the competition between Charlemagne and his brother Carloman (when both named their oldest son Pippin), Becher continues an earlier discussion of the vacant *nomen imperatoris* in Byzantium (since Irene was ruling), used as a contemporary argument for making Charlemagne emperor. In noting that "modern scholars refer to this type of argument as name-theory," Becher provides one of his few direct references to Carolingian scholarship up to this point, though arguments from historical research often appear indirectly in the issues he emphasizes. The increasingly tense relationship between Charlemagne and his brother Carloman, the treatment of the latter's wife and sons after his early death, the vicissitudes in Charlemagne's relationship with Popes Stephen and Hadrian, and the conquest of the Lombards in 744 are described in as much detail as can reasonably be packed into seventeen pages of text.

"The Expansion of the Frankish Kingdom in the East: Saxons, Bavarians, and Avars" is, as one might expect, dominated by Charlemagne's repeated battles with the Saxons. Noting that it ultimately took Charlemagne more than thirty years to complete his conquest of the Saxons, Becher emphasizes how the decentralized and relatively simple social structure of the Saxons made it necessary not only to defeat various groupings of them repeatedly, but ultimately led to the complete destruction of their traditional society. On three occasions he cites the views of modern historians in this chapter (though they are not recorded in the index), as if to emphasize that he is not relying only on his personal interpretation of the sources.

Chapter 5 ("Charlemagne, the Papacy, and the Byzantine Emperor") marks the transition from Charlemagne, King of the Franks, to Charlemagne, Emperor in the West, and in so doing brings us back to the opening chapter by describing in more detail the events leading up to the coronation in 800, and relations with the papacy and the emperor in Constantinople in succeeding years. Becher concludes the chapter by showing how Charlemagne eventually achieved a degree of recognition even from the Byzantine emperor and how he was able to guide theological matters for the Franks even against the opposition of the Pope (through approval of the addition of *filioque* to the Credo).

The sixth chapter is more tersely titled ("Ruling the Empire"), but it is the longest chapter in the book. It is essentially a review of Carolingian administrative practices, discussing the various reforms Charlemagne attempted to implement, but how little was actually of lasting effect. Here for the first time the text departs somewhat from the German original. The second to the last paragraph of the German chapter, dealing with how Charlemagne sought to emulate rules of conduct for princes, is moved near the beginning of the chap-

ter, where Becher has been describing how Charlemagne redefined his relationship to his subjects after the imperial coronation. The final sentence of the German chapter ("Thus only a few of Charlemagne's measures for organizing his empire had any lasting effect") is elaborated with a lengthy quote from Alcuin and a reference to Ganshof, to the effect that the last years of Charlemagne's reign were marked by decay and crisis. This is followed by the assertion that "only his educational reforms had wide-ranging effects and laid the foundations for a standardized culture of the Latin West" (p. 119).

"Charlemagne's Family and the Arrangement of Succession" describes the Emperor's succession of wives whom he abandoned when it was politically expedient to do so and the relatively relaxed sexual morality at his court. This included his own concubines and his toleration of his daughters' relationships, the latter presumably a substitute for his unwillingness to let any of them marry European nobles who might thereby qualify as members of his family. The arrangement of his succession, his wills, and his death round out the chapter.

Chapter 8, identified as an epilogue, is entitled "Hero and Saint: The Afterlife of Charlemagne" and reveals the major difference between the German original and the English version. The relatively brief chapter of only a few pages in the original has been significantly expanded and now approaches the average length of the other seven chapters. The shorter version noted how quickly chroniclers introduced fantastic elements to Charlemagne's life, how legends of Charlemagne as crusader and model ruler dominated medieval literature, how the Germans and the French struggled to claim Charlemagne's legacy, and how he has now become canonized as the father of Europe in the post-1945 world. The English version adds segments on the relationship of the Ottonian kings to Charlemagne's legacy, medieval forgeries attributed to Charlemagne, and statistics on the number of Charlemagne legends. Above all, however, historical literature and popular views on Charlemagne from early modern times through the Nazi period are reviewed. More than thirty individuals are specifically mentioned, ranging from Hermann Graf Neuenahr in 1521 to Hitler, leading to the conclusion that "the best possible study of Charlemagne's history is one free of preconceptions" (p. 149).

Overall, Becher's biography is balanced and informative. It appears to this reviewer (who studies the Carolingian period primarily as a philologist) to be a good synthesis of the current state of scholarship. Yet the question remains as to the potential audience for the English version. I could imagine a history professor preferring to assign Einhard's biography and some other translated documents in order to engage in critical analysis of medieval sources. If a reader is sufficiently lacking in knowledge of German culture to be unable to read German, what will he or she make of all the references to places, people, and events that might be more obvious to Germans? For example, the reader learns that Charlemagne attempted "to build a Rhine-Main-Danube canal" that failed because of "logistical difficulties" (p. 74). Slightly more than a page later, we learn that Charlemagne cancelled a planned campaign against the Avars to concentrate on the "construction of a canal between Rednitz and AltmÃ¼hl." Most Germans will immediately recognize that this is the Rhine-Main-Danube Canal finally finished in 1992, but how many English readers are likely instead to assume that this was a different canal-building project and that Charlemagne was rather obsessed with canal-building?

The index reveals the same issue in a peculiar way. The names added in the final chapter are dutifully recorded in the index, but without any attempt to help the reader. Thus the "German writer Herder" (p. 145) appears only as "Herder"; the "poets Grimm and Uhland" (p. 146) show up as "Grimm" (which one?) and "Uhland"; but the "German historian Leopold von Ranke" (p. 147) becomes "Von Ranke, Leopold." In other words, you get a first name in the index only if you had one in the text. I suppose that this will not present much of a problem for English-speaking students in the case of "Hitler," but one wonders how adequate the identifications will otherwise be?

There are occasional glitches in the text, e.g., "Aler" for "Aller" (p. 67); "so too is a parallel is drawn" (p. 11); "Austrians" for "Austrasians" (p. 32); and overuse of "this" on a number of occasions (for example, five times in four sentences at the top of page 43). The latter stylistic quirk is not the result of direct translation from the German text but seemingly results from a desire to overspecify anaphoric reference, though it does so to the detriment of reading fluency. Most of these items are minor and easily corrected, though I do hope that no reader thinks that "Monte Casino," where Charlemagne obtained a copy of the rule of Benedict of Nursia, is some sort of gambling establishment!

The English volume is definitely superior in one respect: the eight photographic plates between pages 90 and 91 provide a good selection of Carolingian *memora-*

bilia. These are lacking in the German text, except for the mosaic from the Lateran Palace showing Saint Peter presenting a standard to Charlemagne that is given in the German text in reconstructed form, while the English text reproduces a drawing made from it in the eighteenth century before reconstruction was undertaken, arguably a more authentic representation of the original artifact.

Another strong point is provided by the selected readings, identified as having been compiled by Jennifer Davis (pp. 155-166). There are separate sections providing general works, source collections and translations, and bibliographies for each chapter, with emphasis on items available in English, though also with a judicious selection of German references. Becher's German text has a useful descriptive bibliography, but it contains only about a third as many references. The selected readings will surely be an asset for a student seeking further information on Charlemagne or on the Carolingian period, not to mention for a colleague preparing a lecture for a survey course.

In short, *Charlemagne* can serve well to provide information on the life of the emperor we now call Great. College libraries that wish to maintain a good undergraduate history collection should certainly purchase it. It is likely, however, to contain quite a few references to places, people, and events that are puzzling to the general reader not already knowledgeable about German culture.

Note

[1]. Matthias Becher, *Karl der Grosse* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1999).