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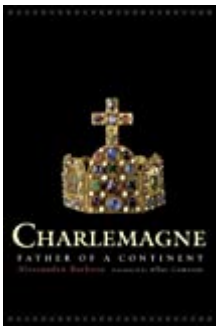
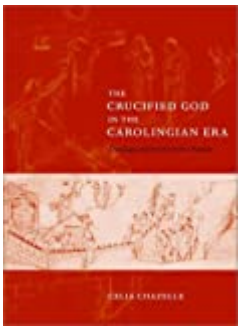
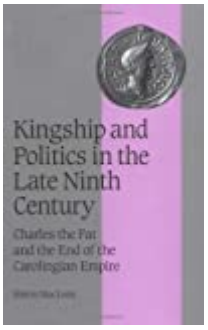


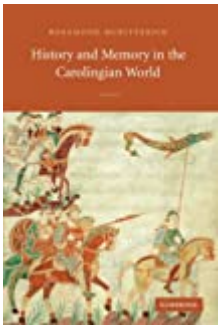
Alessandro Barbero. *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 426 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-23943-2.



Celia Chazelle. *The Crucified God in the Carolingian Era: Theology and Art of Christ's Passion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xiii + 338 pp. $100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-80103-4.



Simon MacLean. *Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xvi + 262 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-81945-9.



Rosamond McKitterick. *History and Memory in the Carolingian World.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xvi + 337 pp. $27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-53436-9; $84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-82717-1.

Herbert Schutz. *The Carolingians in Central Europe, Their History, Arts and Architecture: A Cultural History of Central Europe, 750-900.* Leiden: Brill, 2004. xxxi + 407 pp. $186.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-13149-1.

Reviewed by Anna Lisa Taylor (Department of History, University of Massachusetts, Amherst)

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History, Empire, and What Charlemagne Ate for Breakfast

Four recent books on the Carolingian world deal with issues of empire, history and identity, and the ways that the present and the perception of the past shape each other. A fifth book examines the complex Christological debates of the late-eighth and ninth centuries and shows how theologians constructed their arguments in response to doctrinal controversy. These books deal with issues such as the legitimating myths of identity, the ways that texts are informed by each other, the extent to which history is written by the victors of theological as well as military and political conflict and, more generally, how contemporary context shaped–and shapes–the writing of history and the production of images.

In *The Carolingians in Central Europe*, Schutz aims to integrate the frequently separate areas of political history and the study of material culture. Schutz's large, copiously illustrated work is the fifth in a series on the history of central Europe. While the earlier volumes looked at Germanic, Roman, and Merovingian archaeological evidence, this volume focuses on portable objects, particularly illuminated manuscript books, and sacred and secular architecture. Grounded as he is in the Germanic culture of central Europe, Schutz challenges the interpretation of the Carolingian Renaissance as a revival of classical Rome. Rather, he sees the *renovatio* (a preferable term to renaissance since it was used by contemporaries) as a synthesis of Christian, classical, and Germanic elements promoted by the Carolingians, particularly Charlemagne. Schutz's fairly conventional overview of the Carolingian dynasty's ascendancy, empire, and decline in the first section of the book forms the context for his investigation of material culture. The second and third sections of the work, focusing on the book arts and architecture respectively, show how objects and buildings combined diverse influences to represent the unifying and legitimating idea of the *Imperium Christianum*, a Christian empire on earth in which the new chosen people, the Franks, were ruled over by a new David. Schutz describes various works of literature, manuscripts, ivory carvings, reliquaries, palaces, and churches to demonstrate the variety of styles within the Carolingian realms, particularly eastern Francia. The book is a storehouse of information and illustrations of the diverse artifacts of Carolingian culture, let down only by poor editing, which results in tortuous sentences and typographical errors (for example, "evoque" on p. 226, and "revoqued" on p. 98).

McKitterick, in *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*, also looks at the historical precedents the Carolingians and their allies used to justify their rule over a unified Frankish people. According to McKitterick the identity and validation of the Carolingians and their empire was based not only on their status as heirs to the Christian kingdoms of the Old Testament and Rome, but also in relation to classical, and "barbarian" history. In this original and thought-provoking book, McKitterick looks at a narrower range of sources than Schutz and examines the context of their production and consumption in greater detail.

The copying of older imperial Roman, Christian, and barbarian histories, the composition of more contemporary narratives, and the development of new genres (for example, annals) attest to the intense "historical mindedness" (p. 273) of the late-eighth and ninth centuries. Using the physical evidence of the manuscripts and their transmission patterns, McKitterick rejects the scholarly pursuit of an "Ur" text (the lost original) in favor of examining the specific motivations and requirements of the audience, compilers, and authors of each

manuscript. McKitterick's close reading of a number of texts and manuscripts reveals a wider culture in which memories of the past were selected and shaped to support the Carolingian dynasty and to create Frankish identity. Scholars such as Sharon Farmer, Patrick J. Geary, Thomas Head, and Amy G. Remensnyder have examined the texts and rituals of religious institutions to see how these houses formulated their histories to create communal identity and influence relations with other sources of authority.[1] McKitterick differentiates herself from this school by her relentlessly codicological approach, her primary focus on the politics of empire, rather than religion, and her consideration of the cognitive aspects of memory. Thus she unites two recent approaches to medieval memory, one that deals with the creation of a communal past and another, exemplified by the work of Mary Carruthers, that focuses on the thought structures that underlay medieval memory and creativity.[2]

In addition to histories, annals, biographies, and letters, McKitterick uses what she terms non-narrative historical sources, namely cartularies and the confraternity books known as *libri vitae*. She shows how these works, like the narrative histories, can be read as creating a past to serve the present and the future. Such an analysis could encompass an even wider range of texts, such as saints' *vitae* and *miracula*. As Lifshitz has shown, such texts were erroneously labeled "hagiography" in the nineteenth century, but were often considered *historia* by their creators and, like chronicles, annals, and cartularies, they created a particular version of the past to serve the present.[3]

While McKitterick complicates our methods for reading the manuscripts of texts, and therefore how we use them in reconstructing events from the past (such as Bernard's revolt against Louis the Pious in 817), Barbero takes a very different approach, synthesizing vast amounts of information from the primary sources into a straightforward and accessible account. Barbero's *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent*, compellingly translated by Cameron, is clearly intended for a general reading public as well as scholars. To this end, the chapters present clear and straightforward discussions, largely unencumbered by footnotes to secondary sources, of various aspects of Charlemagne's life and empire, while the bibliography for each chapter presents a detailed and well-documented essay on the historiographical arguments that underlie Barbero's synthesis. For this reason, the book will be appealing to non-medievalists, who will be interested to know that Charlemagne, like other people of his time, did not eat breakfast (p. 121), but also useful to scholars for its convenient summations of recent historiography, although the latter may be rankled by the easy use of problematic terms such as feudalism (a term also used by Schutz) and Barbero's ready acceptance of the evidence from laudatory sources, such as Einhard, in the body of the book.

Although it discusses aspects of Charlemagne's origins, character, and family life, this work is not simply a biography, since it includes chapters on social and military history that barely mention the emperor. Because this book covers such a vast subject, it cannot possibly be comprehensive, and so the reader comes away knowing much more about what it was like to be a male peasant than a monk, and more about the size of livestock (Carolingian chickens were smaller than their modern counterparts) than about the daily life of peasant women. The real subject of this wide-ranging book is not the emperor as much as the empire–its administration, military organization, and social structure–and, as Barbero makes explicit in the introduction, he views this subject from the perspective of the European union. This approach creates a tension between seeing the past in its own terms (Barbero observes that it is anachronistic to ask whether Charlemagne's birth was illegitimate) and an interest in finding echoes and origins of the present (Charlemagne's standard currency is described as a "proto-Euro"). This tension is inherent in all historical scholarship and Barbero should not be criticized for rendering it transparent, nor for using it to make his work relevant to a non-specialist audience. Indeed, Barbero's interest in how the present shapes the writing of the past contributes to one of the most interesting features of this book, a discussion of the contested versions of Charlemagne presented by French and German historians in the twentieth century. Barbero's emperor does not bear the anachronistic weight of nationalism but the ideological burden of a unified Europe. That an Italian historian presents Charlemagne's Frankish empire as a way to think about European unification in itself reveals an implicitly western idea of Europe.

In contrast to Barbero's overarching (and largely triumphal) narrative of Charlemagne's empire, MacLean's *Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire* focuses on the political history of Charlemagne's great grandson, a much less celebrated monarch. In the few pages he dedicates to this king, Schutz characterizes Charles the Fat (r. 876-888), as an "inept man" who "gave repeated evidence of his weakness, poor judgment, and general incompetence" (p. 129). It is this standard view, of Charles as a

passive, sickly, ineffective king ruling over a moribund empire, that MacLean challenges.

MacLean discusses the main source for the accepted view of Charles, the Mainz continuator of the *Annals of Fulda*, and concludes that its author's sympathies mean that it should not be taken at face value. Using a number of sources, including other annals, charters, and epic poetry, MacLean creates a picture of a ruler beset by problems of succession, who administered his empire actively and usually with the assistance of local elites. This model of a cooperative, rather than constantly competitive, relationship between the king and the local aristocrats is part of a wider scholarly move toward a more nuanced model of Carolingian politics. In his rehabilitation of Charles the Fat, MacLean follows Janet Nelson, who, in her 1992 book, reevaluated the reign of Charles the Fat's uncle, Charles the Bald, who has also been characterized as a weak king whose empire was in decline.[4]

MacLean argues that the conventional interpretation of Charles the Fat has persisted because it coheres with several historical master narratives about royal power and nationhood (p. 3). MacLean shows that this interpretation is teleological, seeing the fall of the empire as the inevitable result of three factors: Charles's inefficacy, the rise of aristocrats who challenged royal authority, and regional fragmentation, which ultimately led to the rise of nation-states. MacLean argues that Charles governed as effectively as an early medieval ruler could, that the king and the aristocratic magnates interacted as they always had, and that there is inadequate evidence for the evolution of politically cohesive regional units at this time. According to MacLean, Charles's downfall was a direct result of his lack of heirs and the frustrated aspirations of the illegitimate Carolingian Arnulf, rather than an unavoidable consequence of Charles's weakness combined with inexorable forces of fragmentation.

This book is clearly written and structured, enabling the reader to navigate the complex debates about intricate political machinations, such as the fall of the archchancellor Liutward and the divorce of the empress Richgard in 887, or the meaning of Louis of Provence's adoption. MacLean's sly sense of humor occasionally shows through, for instance in his footnote attesting that we do not actually know the girth of Charles the Fat, whose unflattering nickname derives from the twelfth century (p. 2). The main problem that besets the author is the partial nature of the evidence. Having undermined the reliability of the Mainz continuator of the *Annals of Fulda*, he is forced to reconstruct both the character of Charles's reign and the events leading to Arnulf's coup from fragmentary sources. The piecemeal nature of these sources means that some arguments–such as the link between Liutward and Richgard–are based on layers of well-argued probability rather than any firm evidence. It attests to the clarity of MacLean's writing that the reader is able to discern exactly where the evidence ends and the author's interpretation begins.

While Schutz, McKitterick, Barbero, and MacLean are variously interested in political history, and its intersections with literary and artistic production, Chazelle deals with theological texts and images. In *The Crucified God in the Carolingian Era: Theology and Art of Christ's Passion*, Chazelle draws on some of the same sources as Schutz, such as the Utrecht Psalter and Rhabanus Maurus's picture poems on the cross, but while Schutz aims for a broad synthesis, Chazelle's focus is on close readings of the sources in their historical contexts.

Carolingian theology is often treated as the origin of later thought or the foil against which developments of the high middle ages are read.[5] By focusing exclusively on the late-eighth and ninth centuries, Chazelle is able to discuss the sophisticated Christology of this period in its own right in the detail that it warrants. Recent studies of Carolingian religious culture, like Schutz's book discussed here, have tended to examine the ways in which the Old Testament was used as a model for kings.[6] Chazelle, however, gives a heightened sense of the importance of the New Testament to Carolingian religious thought. She situates the theological texts by examining how they responded to doctrinal controversies over the nature of Christ and predestination. By placing the Christological texts at the very center of her book, Chazelle works in the same tradition as Amy Hollywood (who looks at late medieval mystical texts) and Rachel Fulton, who read their sources as the serious theology that their authors intended.[7] Chazelle, in clearly explaining the complex texts and disputes, posits various different relationships between the worshipper and Christ (who could be both lordly and compassionate), and shows that there was not simply one, static Carolingian Christology, but a subtle and nuanced set of interpretations that changed over the ninth century.

While her approach is less codicological than McKitterick's, Chazelle also undertakes a sensitive reading of individual texts, privileging the specificity of each work. Unlike Schutz and McKitterick, Chazelle does not provide an overarching narrative about the purpose or message of the sources she studies as much as she emphasizes the

subtlety and diversity of their doctrines. According to Chazelle, this diversity was possible within the Carolingian church because the authors all participated in the shared and unifying ritual of liturgy. The comparison of Schutz and McKitterick with Chazelle points to a tension in the five books reviewed here, between specificity and synthesis, between emphasizing the complexity of Carolingian intellectual and political culture and fitting the myriad details into a coherent story. Using very different methodologies, Schutz and McKitterick both attempt to balance the details and the big picture. MacLean, by contrast, evinces a distrust of overarching narratives. He uses meticulous source analysis to dismantle the accepted story of the inevitable fall of Charles the Fat and the rise of nation-states and replaces it with a more complicated and contingent version of events. Barbero writes a different kind of history, whose very purpose is the presentation of a coherent, meaningful, and relevant narrative to a wide audience. Accordingly, he embraces an updated version of the narrative of the Carolingian origins of Europe. While McKitterick focuses on a recent historiographic obsession, how medieval people remembered and rewrote their pasts, Barbero provides the most transparent example of the continuity of this process. Like the compilers of ninth-century cartularies, or the Mainz continuator, modern scholars write a Carolingian past that reflects a contemporary set of concerns, about European origins, complex political negotiations, and a self-conscious literary culture that deliberately created and recreated its own history.

Notes

[1]. Sharon Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin: Legend and Ritual in Medieval Tours* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1991); Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of Saints: The Diocese of Orleans, 800-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Amy G. Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past: Monastic Foundation Legends in Medieval Southern France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

[2]. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Faith Wallis, "Ambiguities of Medieval 'Memoria' " *Canadian Journal of History/ Annales canadiennes d'histoire* 30 (1995): pp. 77-83.

[3]. Felice Lifshitz, "Beyond Positivism and Genre: 'Hagiographic' Texts as Historical Narrative," *Viator* 25 (1994): pp. 95-113.

[4]. Janet Nelson, *Charles the Bald* (London: Longman, 1992).

[5]. Rachel Fulton, *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800-1200* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

[6]. See especially Yitzak Hen and Matthew Innes, eds., *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[7]. Amy Hollywood, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete, and Meister Eckhart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

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