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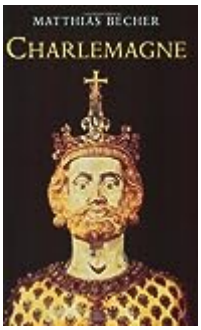


**Matthias Becher.** *Charlemagne.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. vi + 170 pp. $23.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-09796-2; $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-10758-6.

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## The Father of Europe

Matthias Becher's *Charlemagne* is one of a recent spate of studies of the great Frankish ruler. It also joins a list of works by continental scholars that have been rapidly translated due to the relative dearth of comparable English-language treatments (a shortage that may soon end). Consequently, this book probably should have included an introduction, either by the translator himself or another scholar, which might have justified why this study was deemed worthy of wider circulation. Presumably, the conciseness of the volume, and the possibility of issuing it as affordable paperback, made it attractive to Yale University Press as a text that could be marketed for classroom use and to a general audience.

David Bachrach has provided an overall lucid translation. A useful chapter-by-chapter list of suggested readings has also been appended, although strangely it does not include any of the other recent biographies of Charlemagne. The production team at Yale, furthermore, should have seen to the excision of errors that inevitably creep into manuscripts composed on computer screens. Although I wasn't looking for them, I happened upon six (pp. 52, 106, 126, 128, 135, 138). In addition, Charlemagne's height of 1.8 meters should have been calculated to six feet, rather than an improbable seven (p. 3). Despite these nuisances, the volume should be useful to general readers interested primarily in political history; in general surveys of the Middle Ages where an instructor might desire concise coverage of the period and its legacy; and where secondary sources are preferred to primary documents. To that end, it is well illustrated for classroom use, with a map, genealogical tables of the Frankish kings, and six glossy pictures. If primary sources occupy a prominent place on the syllabus, however, Einhard's livelier ninth-century biography would do much of the same, or else the documents could be pared with Roger Collin's biography, which gives a much better sense of the tendentiousness of Carolingian accounts. If one is looking for a wider-angled treatment of Charlemagne and his times, Alessandro Barbero's biography is preferable.

Becher's treatment is divided into an introduction, seven chapters devoted largely to the politics of the reign, and finally an eighth chapter, which is an epilogue on Charlemagne's legacy. The five-page introduc-

tion rapidly dispenses the colorful personal biographical details from Einhard's account, outlines the difficulties of meeting modern expectations of biography with medieval sources, and concludes that the study "is an individual interpretation based on years of engagement with the sources and the scholarly literature" (p. 6). This no doubt is the case, although that declaration might be qualified by noting that the study is preoccupied with themes Becher has written a lot about: succession, family politics, imperial-papal politics, and royal lordship. Becher's survey does not dwell much on the cultural, religious, and social history of the reign, all of which, when they do arise, are reflexively treated as subsets of politics. Becher might be right that the motivations of medieval figures are often elusive, but he nonetheless assumes throughout that motives can safely be attributed to hard-headed political calculation. Einhard's engaging and very human ruler is difficult to find here.

The first chapter, "The High Point of His Reign," begins in *media res* with the events of Christmas day, 800, when Charlemagne was crowned emperor by Pope Leo III. The aim presumably is to grab the reader's attention with the famous coronation drama and to establish Charlemagne's relevance (for a German audience) as the seminal figure behind the "founding of the medieval empire that would later continue as the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation until 1806" (p. 8). In Becher's view, Charlemagne, having taken charge of events in Rome and papal affairs, was firmly in control of the situation and had effectively orchestrated his own elevation well in advance. This is a legitimate interpretation, shared by kindred scholars past and present, although it is fair to point out that Becher sidesteps scholarly interpretations that have emphasized Leo's agency, the ad-hoc nature of the enterprise, and Charlemagne's own ambivalence. Becher does concede that "Charlemagne remained uncertain for a long time about what the name for the empire should be in future" (p. 17), but he attributes this to the technical problem of working out the proper titulature–although Charlemagne's behavior might also gainsay well-laid plans.

The second chapter offers a brief history of the Franks up to Charlemagne's accession in 768. Here Becher presents an admirable synthesis of the accumulation of research that has elucidated the late Roman fiscal, ecclesiastical, and administrative foundations of the preceding Merovingian Frankish kingdoms. The survey begins to suffer a bit, however, as the author moves into the seventh century. At this point, the account gives way to a traditional decline-of-the-Merovingians, rise-of-the-Carolingians narrative. This bypasses a growing body of scholarship which has done much to reevaluate the late Merovingian era. Becher might not agree with it–and there is room to be critical of the replacement of a crisis-ridden Merovingian kingship and a steadily rising Carolingian dynasty with its reverse image, an essentially stable Merovingian kingship and a crisis-ridden Carolingian family–but he might have made tactical use of this work. Becher's own researches on the family crises propelling Pippin to the kingship, work which Becher rightly grants a prominent place in this volume, would have meshed well with the more subtle reinterpretations of late Merovingian politics.

Chapter 3 takes up Charlemagne's youth and early career. Here and elsewhere, family politics drives much of the survey and, by extension, the depiction of the motivations of Frankish rulers. This is surely an important aspect of the story, but in his pursuit of incontestable, transparent fact, Becher grants family concerns a primacy that is not as automatically inferable from the evidence as he seems to assume. The chapter begins with Charlemagne's birth, which Einhard misdated by eight years to sidestep, in Becher's view, the sordid family politics of the late 740s. While this is possible, one would need to explain why a biographer working at least eight decades later would have felt inclined to cover up the now-dim fates of Grifo and Drogo (and how adjusting Charlemagne's birthday was going to do that). Becher reasonably infers from other sources Charlemagne's likely early training and education, and quickly sketches the future king's poorly documented early career. He then moves to the death of Pippin and the consequences of the ensuing rivalry between Charlemagne and his brother Carloman: Charlemagne's marriage to a Lombard princess, his repudiation of her after Carloman's sudden death, and the invasion of the Lombard kingdom after King Desiderius extended protection to Carloman's widow and young son. This scenario is plausible enough, and in places has great interpretive power, but the emphasis on succession anxieties risks overuse here and elsewhere.

Chapter 4 turns to Charlemagne's eastern conquests: the campaigns against the Saxons, Bavaria, and the Avars. Becher has written about Saxony elsewhere, so not surprisingly he devotes more space to those campaigns than to the others. He skillfully evokes the arduousness of the Saxon wars and draws attention to the Frankish setbacks and the ensuing crises of rulership that are downplayed in contemporary accounts. The campaigns into Bavaria and against the Avars, on the other

hand, are given short shrift, and are much more interesting and important than they appear here. Becher subordinates them to Saxon events, which he grants overriding strategic importance. When the Saxons appear to be pacified, he argues, Charlemagne is able to "turn to affairs in the south-east of his kingdom" (p. 71). Even then, Becher portrays plans elsewhere as often hinging on the course of events in Saxony.

Chapter 5 continues the theme of foreign relations, with a focus on imperial rivalry and jealousy: the relations between Charlemagne, Byzantine rulers, and the popes. The presentation is fairly straightforward and conventional, offering a recapitulation of the long-standing Byzantine-papal alliance, papal tensions with the Lombards, the appeals for Frankish protection that culminated in Charlemagne's coronation as emperor, and the tense diplomatic negotiations between the two empires that followed. This Bismarckian story of high diplomacy, and the account of external events in the previous chapter, might have been more profitably interwoven with the internal affairs of the empire, however, and thus set within a richer interpretative framework. As it is, Charlemagne's pursuit of the "highest secular dignity" (p. 93) seems at times to be mere personal vanity and at other times to be a self-evident drive for dominion. Much needed, therefore, is a background summary of the Frankish church. Becher's contention that Charlemagne sought to dominate ecclesiastical affairs and relegate to Pope Leo "only the task of praying" (p. 93) lacks sophistication.

Chapter 6 examines the ruling of the empire. Here Becher struggles to blend his own expertise on the problem of loyalty and oaths with a wider sketch of governance. While his survey lacks the admirable elegance and coherence of his earlier review of the bases of Merovingian rule, he does point out the difficulties of ruling an obstreperous Frankish aristocracy and the lack of statist institutions, both of which made oaths a prominent feature of order. He describes many of Charlemagne's major decrees as efforts to consolidate his rulership in the aftermath of internal crises of loyalty, although the relationship between the two issues might have been clearer had readers been given a better sense of the empire's internal dynamics. The east Frankish conspiracy of 785, for example, the greatest threat mounted to Charlemagne's rule from within, is accorded less than a sentence, and then only as a device to set up, along with the conquest of Bavaria, the issuance of one of Charlemagne's greatest decrees, the *Admonitio Generalis*. Also, Becher's commendable emphasis on the weakness of institutional authority and the ad hoc nature of Charlemagne's decrees sits in tension with his observation that the problem of loyalty shows "how difficult it must have been to enforce state authority in the modern sense" (p. 100), a statement that seems to say that Charlemagne was conscious of, and working towards, a recognizably secular system of government. Becher tries to reconcile the informal and formal aspects of Frankish rule by proposing a transition from one to the other. Having decisively settled the loyalty issue in 802, Becher's Charlemagne embarked on a "program of royal legislation," the "secular aspects" of which included the codification of laws, judicial reform, the organization of comital administration in the east, the creation of a system of accountancy with the *missi dominici*, the organization of the royal court, management of fiscal lands, monetary policy, military service, and education. Only at the end of the chapter does Becher turn to church reform. The impression is of an empire moving ever more towards bureaucratic government, especially after 802, although the chronology here is often vague and in places defies this teleological presentation. Becher might have been better served by downplaying the secular-ecclesiastical divide, emphasizing the aristocratic bases of royal power, moving the moral and religious imperatives and ecclesiastical reform to the center of the story, and thus imparting more resolutely the preoccupations and responsibilities of a Carolingian ruler. Absent that, we're left with a Charlemagne ever on the lookout for more conquests, titles, and glory, though we are not sure why, or to what end (aside from the self-evident acquisition of power).

Chapter 7 takes up again the problem of succession, as Charlemagne tried to control the lines of affiliation in his own household (swollen as it was with the offspring of his semi-polygamous lifestyle), and to make provisions for his succession. Becher reviews the arrangements, the subsequent revisions as legitimate sons died, and the contents of Charlemagne's will.

Chapter 8 offers a remarkably elegant sketch of Charlemagne's legacy in the succeeding periods after his death down to the present day: Charlemagne's role as inspiration to later medieval kings, the appropriation or criticism of the emperor for nationalistic purposes, the interest that made the reign an early object of modern critical inquiry for historians, and Charlemagne's most recent incarnation as the "Father of Europe." Becher concludes with the startling injunction that "the best possible study of Charlemagne is one free of preconceptions" (p. 149). Yet after his preceding survey of Charlemagne's legacy, this is hardly to be believed possible. Further-

more, his own portrayal of Charlemagne as a creature of political calculation, along with his inclination to explicate the reign within the categories of scholarship with which he is most familiar, testifies amply to the impossibility of escaping the preconceptions of one's own time and place. This is not a criticism. The historically great are relevant because they have meaning from age to age; the question is how well, fairly, and persuasively a biographer has translated the figure: Becher has given us a very secular Charlemagne.



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