From: *Makers of the Western Tradition: Portraits from History*, ed. J. Kelley Sowards, 6th ed., vol. 1 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994) 152-174.

Marburg/Art Resource, NY

CHARLEMAGNE AND THE FIRST EUROPE

742 or 743	Born
768	Joint succession to Frankish throne with his brother Carloman
771	Death of Carloman; beginning of sole rule
772–787	Saxon wars
774	Conquered Lombard kingdom
800	Imperial coronation
814	Died

In the lifetime of St. Augustine, the Roman Empire in the West had collapsed. Roman political order was being replaced by regional barbarian kingdoms under their German tribal chiefs, and the West had entered irretrievably upon what an earlier generation of historians was fond of calling the Dark Ages.

Though the darkness was by no means as pervasive as scholars once thought, the early Middle Ages were a time of great dislocation, surely one of the two or three most important periods of transition in the history of Western civilization—for the product of the transition was nothing less than what some historians have called "the first Europe."

It was a Europe no longer classical and imperial, no longer a vast free-trade network of cities governed by a centralized system and ruled by a common law. It was a Europe from which long-distance trade had disappeared, to be replaced by an economic localism. It was a Europe of equally localized culture, in which the common classical tradition was maintained by an ever dwindling minority of educated people, with an ever decreasing sophistication. Most, virtually all, of those educated were professional churchmen, for, perhaps most important of all, the first Europe was a Christian Europe.

The great Frankish king Charlemagne (r. 768–814) was, by all accounts and from whatever interpretive viewpoint we choose to see

him, the pivotal figure in this first Europe. The Franks were one of the barbarian Germanic tribes that succeeded to the broken pieces of the western empire. By a combination of luck, talent, and timing, they had come to be the leading power among their fellow barbarians. Their position was enhanced by Charlemagne's immediate predecessors, his grandfather Charles Martel and his father Pepin, who established the claim of his house to the Frankish throne. Frankish supremacy was assured by Charlemagne's dramatic conquests, which brought most of continental western Europe—save only Moslem Spain south of the Ebro River, southern Italy, and the barbarian fringes of the Scandinavian north—under his rule.

Charlemagne's imperial rule was epitomized in his resumption of the ancient imperial title. On Christmas day of the year 800, in the church of St. Peter in Rome, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as "Emperor of the Romans." No one had claimed this exalted title in more than three hundred years, and no barbarian king had ever before presumed to such a dignity. Charlemagne continued to bear his other titles, so we are not sure precisely how he himself saw his imperial role—whether it was an "umbrella" title over his many different dominions, a Christian symbol for "the temporal sword," or simply "a feather in his cap." We do know that it involved him in a delicate and complex negotiation with the other "Emperor of the Romans" in Byzantium, whose rights, however remotely exercised, Charlemagne's act had encroached upon. The assumption of the title, moreover, by virtue of the part played by the pope, was inextricably bound up with the larger role of the church in the secular affairs of the West.

We cannot be sure what Charlemagne's plans for his empire were, although he saw to the imperial succession of his son Louis the Pious. We cannot even be certain of the extent to which Charles was able to realize the plans he did have, for the records of the time simply do not tell us.

But, however many unanswered questions remain, the records do contain a precious contemporary account of King Charles, written by his devoted friend, the Frankish noble Einhard.

The Emperor Charlemagne

EINHARD

One of the most obvious signs of the barbarism of early medieval Europe is the scarcity of records. Even more scarce than documentary records are the literary accounts—the biographies, the memoirs, the formal histories—that can give flesh and substance to historical figures. Most, even the greatest, personages of the early Middle Ages remain simply names, with only a handful of facts (and often doubtful "facts" at that) attached to them. Fortunately, this is not the case for Charlemagne. We might wish that Einhard's account had been longer and more detailed, or that he had included more information about Charles's public policy, his political motives, his plans for the empire, and the structure of his reign. But we are lucky to have what we do. Einhard was sensitive about his modest literary gifts. Indeed, he could not even conceive of a formal framework for his account; he simply took Suetonius's biography of Augustus and substituted his own material in the model. But so indebted was Einhard to Charles, his "lord and foster father," and so important were his lord's deeds that he chose to record them rather "than to suffer the most glorious life of this most excellent king, the greatest of all the princes of his day, and his illustrious deeds, hard for men of later times to imitate, to be wrapped in the darkness of oblivion."[1]

Despite its limitations, Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* is an extraordinarily valuable document. It would have been so under any circumstances. Its value is enhanced because Einhard was an intimate of the king and his family; he had been raised at Charles's court and later was one of his most trusted councillors. No one was in a better position than Einhard to write on Charles the Great.

After sketching the background of Charles's dynasty and how the Carolingians (for this is the name historians have given to the house of Carolus Magnus) succeeded to the Frankish throne, how Charles's father, Pepin, set aside the last of the weak Merovingians with their "vain title of king," Einhard describes in some detail the wars of conquest that earned for Charles the title "Charles the Great"—his pacification of Aquitaine, his conquest of the Lombards and his assumption of the Lombard crown, his long wars with the pagan Sax-

[1]*The Life of Charlemagne by Einhard* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), Preface, p. 16. Translated from the *Monumenta Germaniae* by Samuel Epes Turner.

ons along the eastern frontier, his unsuccessful attempt to invade Moslem Spain, his successful quelling of the revolt of Bavaria, and his wars against the Avars along the Danube, the Danes, and other border peoples. Then Einhard continues:

Such are the wars, most skilfully planned and successfully fought, which this most powerful king waged during the forty-seven years of his reign. He so largely increased the Frank kingdom, which was already great and strong when he received it at his father's hands, that more than double its former territory was added to it. The authority of the Franks was formerly confined to that part of Gaul included between the Rhine and the Loire, the Ocean and the Balearic Sea; to that part of Germany which is inhabited by the so-called Eastern Franks, and is bounded by Saxony and the Danube, the Rhine and the Saale—this stream separates the Thuringians from the Sorabians; and to the country of the Alemanni and Bavarians. By the wars above mentioned he first made tributary Aquitania, Gascony, and the whole of the region of the Pyrenees as far as the River Ebro, which rises in the land of the Navarrese, flows through the most fertile districts of Spain, and empties into the Balearic Sea, beneath the walls of the city of Tortosa. He next reduced and made tributary all Italy from Aosta to Lower Calabria, where the boundary line runs between the Beneventans and the Greeks, a territory more than a thousand miles long; then Saxony, which constitutes no small part of Germany, and is reckoned to be twice as wide as the country inhabited by the Franks, while about equal to it in length; in addition, both Pannonias, Dacia beyond the Danube, and Istria, Liburnia, and Dalmatia, except the cities on the coast, which he left to the Greek Emperor for friendship's sake, and because of the treaty that he had made with him. In fine, he vanquished and made tributary all the wild and barbarous tribes dwelling in Germany between the Rhine and the Vistula, the Ocean and the Danube, all of which speak very much the same language, but differ widely from one another in customs and dress. The chief among them are the Welatabians, the Sorabians, the Abodriti, and the Bohemians, and he had to make war upon these; but the rest, by far the larger number, submitted to him of their own accord.

He added to the glory of his reign by gaining the good will of several kings and nations. . . . His relations with Aaron, King of the Persians,[2] who ruled over almost the whole of the East, India excepted, were so friendly that this prince preferred his favor to that of all the kings and potentates of the earth, and considered that to him alone marks of honor and munificence were due. Accordingly, when the ambassadors sent by Charles to visit the most holy sepulchre and place of resurrection of our Lord and Savior presented themselves before him with gifts, and made known their master's wishes, he not only granted what was asked, but gave possession of that holy and blessed spot. When they returned, he dispatched his ambassadors with them, and sent magnificent gifts, besides stuffs, perfumes, and other rich products of the Eastern lands. A few years before this, Charles had asked him for an elephant, and he sent the only one that he had. The Emperors of Constantinople, Nicephorus, Michael, and Leo, made advances to Charles, and sought friendship and alliance with him by several embassies; and even when the Greeks suspected him of designing to wrest the empire from them, because of his assumption of the title Emperor, they made a close alliance with him, that he might have no cause of offense. In fact, the power of the Franks was always viewed by the Greeks and Romans with a jealous eye, whence the Greek proverb "Have the Frank for your friend, but not for your neighbor." . . .

He liked foreigners, and was at great pains to take them under his protection. There were often so many of them, both in the palace and the kingdom, that they might reasonably have been considered a nuisance; but he, with his broad humanity, was very little disturbed by such annoyances, because he felt himself compensated for these great inconveniences by the praises of his generosity and the reward of high renown.

Charles was large and strong, and of lofty stature, though not disproportionately tall (his height is well known to have been seven times the length of his foot); the upper part of his head was round, his eyes very large and animated, nose a little long, hair fair, and face laughing and merry. Thus his appearance was always stately and dignified, whether he was standing or sitting; although his neck was thick and somewhat short, and his belly rather prominent; but the symmetry of the rest of his body concealed these defects. His gait was firm, his whole carriage manly, and his voice clear, but not so strong as his size led one to expect. His health was excellent, except during the four years preceding his death, when he was subject to frequent fevers; at the last he even limped a little with one foot. Even in those years he consulted rather his own inclinations than the advice of physicians, who were almost hateful to him, because they wanted him to give up

[2]This was the famous Harun al-Raschid (786–809), not "King of the Persians" but the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad, with whom Charles did indeed enjoy good diplomatic relations. Harun was most likely interested in a possible alliance against the Byzantine Empire.—ED.

roasts, to which he was accustomed, and to eat boiled meat instead. In accordance with the national custom, he took frequent exercise on horseback and in the chase, accomplishments in which scarcely any people in the world can equal the Franks. He enjoyed the exhalations from natural warm springs, and often practiced swimming, in which he was such an adept that none could surpass him; and hence it was that he built his palace at Aix-la-Chapelle, and lived there constantly during his latter years until his death. He used not only to invite his sons to his bath, but his nobles and friends, and now and then a troop of his retinue or bodyguard, so that a hundred or more persons sometimes bathed with him.

He used to wear the national, that is to say, the Frank, dress—next his skin a linen shirt and linen breeches, and above these a tunic fringed with silk; while hose fastened by bands covered his lower limbs, and shoes his feet, and he protected his shoulders and chest in winter by a close-fitting coat of otter or marten skins. Over all he flung a blue cloak, and he always had a sword girt about him, usually one with a gold or silver hilt and belt; he sometimes carried a jeweled sword, but only on great feastdays or at the reception of ambassadors from foreign nations. He despised foreign costumes, however handsome, and never allowed himself to be robed in them, except twice in Rome, when he donned the Roman tunic, chlamys, and shoes; the first time at the request of Pope Hadrian, the second to gratify Leo, Hadrian's successor. On great feastdays he made use of embroidered clothes and shoes bedecked with precious stones, his cloak was fastened by a golden buckle, and he appeared crowned with a diadem of gold and gems, but on other days his dress varied little from the common dress of the people.

Charles was temperate in eating, and particularly so in drinking, for he abominated drunkenness in anybody, much more in himself and those of his household. . . . Charles had the gift of ready and fluent speech, and could express whatever he had to say with the utmost clearness. He was not satisfied with command of his native language merely, but gave attention to the study of foreign ones, and in particular was such a master of Latin that he could speak it as well as his native tongue; but he could understand Greek better than he could speak it. He was so eloquent, indeed, that he might have passed for a teacher of eloquence. He most zealously cultivated the liberal arts, held those who taught them in great esteem, and conferred great honors upon them. He took lessons in grammar of the deacon Peter of Pisa, at that time an aged man. Another deacon, Albin of Britain, surnamed Alcuin, a man of Saxon extraction, who was the greatest scholar of the day, was his teacher in other branches of learning. The King spent much time and labor with him studying

rhetoric, dialectics, and especially astronomy; he learned to reckon, and used to investigate the motions of the heavenly bodies most curiously, with an intelligent scrutiny. He also tried to write, and used to keep tablets and blanks in bed under his pillow, that at leisure hours he might accustom his hand to form the letters; however, as he did not begin his efforts in due season, but late in life, they met with ill success.[3]

He cherished with the greatest fervor and devotion the principles of the Christian religion, which had been instilled into him from infancy. Hence it was that he built the beautiful basilica at Aix-la-Chapelle, which he adorned with gold and silver and lamps, and with rails and doors of solid brass. He had the columns and marbles for this structure brought from Rome and Ravenna, for he could not find such as were suitable elsewhere. . . .

He was very forward in succoring the poor, and in the gratuitous generosity which the Greeks call alms, so much so that he not only made a point of giving in his own country and his own kingdom, but when he discovered that there were Christians living in poverty in Syria, Egypt, and Africa, at Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Carthage, he had compassion on their wants, and used to send money over the seas to them. The reason that he zealously strove to make friends with the kings beyond seas was that he might get help and relief to the Christians living under their rule. He cherished the Church of St. Peter the Apostle at Rome above all other holy and sacred places, and heaped its treasury with a vast wealth of gold, silver, and precious stones. He sent great and countless gifts to the popes, and throughout his whole reign the wish that he had nearest at heart was to re-establish the ancient authority of the city of Rome under his care and by his influence, and to defend and protect the Church of St. Peter, and to beautify and enrich it out of his own store above all other churches. Although he held it in such veneration, he only repaired to Rome to pay his vows and make his supplications four times during the whole forty-seven years that he reigned.

When he made his last journey thither, he had also other ends in view. The Romans had inflicted many injuries upon the Pontiff Leo, tearing out his eyes and cutting out his tongue, so that he had been compelled to call upon the King for help. Charles accordingly went to Rome, to set in order the affairs of the Church, which were in great confusion, and passed the whole winter there. It was then that he received the titles of Emperor and Augustus, to which he at first

[3]What is probably meant here is not that Charles literally could not write but that he could not master the precise and beautiful "book hand," the Carolingian Minuscule, developed by Alcuin for the use of the court copyists.—ED.

had such an aversion that he declared that he would not have set foot in the Church the day that they were conferred, although it was a great feastday, if he could have foreseen the design of the Pope. He bore very patiently with the jealousy which the Roman emperors showed upon his assuming these titles, for they took this step very ill; and by dint of frequent embassies and letters, in which he addressed them as brothers, he made their haughtiness yield to his magnanimity, a quality in which he was unquestionably much their superior.

It was after he had received the imperial name that, finding the laws of his people very defective (the Franks have two sets of laws, very different in many particulars[4]), he determined to add what was wanting, to reconcile the discrepancies, and to correct what was vicious and wrongly cited in them. However, he went no further in this matter than to supplement the laws by a few capitularies, and those imperfect ones; but he caused the unwritten laws of all the tribes that came under his rule to be compiled and reduced to writing. He also had the old rude songs that celebrate the deeds and wars of the ancient kings written out for transmission to posterity. He began a grammar of his native language. He gave the months names in his own tongue, in place of the Latin and barbarous names by which they were formerly known among the Franks. . . .

Toward the close of his life, when he was broken by ill-health and old age, he summoned Louis, King of Aquitania, his only surviving son by Hildegard, and gathered together all the chief men of the whole kingdom of the Franks in a solemn assembly. He appointed Louis, with their unanimous consent, to rule with himself over the whole kingdom, and constituted him heir to the imperial name; then, placing the diadem upon his son's head, he bade him be proclaimed Emperor and Augustus. This step was hailed by all present with great favor, for it really seemed as if God had prompted him to it for the kingdom's good; it increased the King's dignity, and struck no little terror into foreign nations. After sending his son back to Aquitania, although weak from age he set out to hunt, as usual, near his palace at Aix-la-Chapelle, and passed the rest of the autumn in the chase, returning thither about the first of November. While wintering there, he was seized, in the month of January, with a high fever, and took to his bed. As soon as he was taken sick, he prescribed for himself abstinence from food, as he always used to do in case of fever, thinking that the disease could be driven off, or at least mitigated, by fasting. Besides the fever, he suffered from a pain in the side, which the Greeks call pleurisy; but he still persisted in fasting, and in keeping up his strength only by draughts taken at very long intervals. He died January twenty-eighth, the seventh day from the time that he took to his bed, at nine o'clock in the morning, after partaking of the holy communion, in the seventy-second year of his age and the forty-seventh of his reign.

[4]The codes of the two Frankish tribes, the Salian and Ripuarian, that had combined to form the nation.—Ed.

A New Portrait of the Emperor

HEINRICH FICHTENAU

We turn now from Einhard's contemporary account of Charlemagne to the description by the modern Austrian medievalist Heinrich Fichtenau. It is rather more a reconstruction than a description, for in *The Carolingian Empire: The Age of Charlemagne,* Fichtenau goes beyond Einhard's account to the other fragmentary records of Charles's age, as well as to the best of modern Carolingian scholarship. Fichtenau's work is a careful, even conservative, attempt to set Charlemagne securely in his age. The result is a distinguished new portrait of the emperor to set beside that of his adoring friend and subject.

No man's stature is increased by the accumulation of myths, and nothing is detracted from genuine historical greatness by the consideration of a man's purely human side. In order to analyse an epoch it is necessary to analyse the man who was its centre, who determined its character and who was, at the same time, shaped and determined by it. It is therefore not mere curiosity but an endeavour to fulfil the historian's task if we strive to pierce and get behind the myth that has surrounded the figure of Charles. That myth has been built up over a period of centuries and has tended to conjure up in place of a tangible personality, full of vitality, the figure of a timeless hero.

In the case of Charles—and that alone would justify our beginning with him—we can even form a picture of his bodily physique. The bodily appearance of his contemporaries, although we know their names and their works, remains shadow-like for us to-day. But as far

as Charles the Great is concerned, we are not only in possession of his bodily remains but also have an exact description of his appearance. It is true that Charles's biographer Einhard borrowed the terms of his description from Suetonius. Nevertheless it was possible for him to choose from among the numerous biographies of the ancient emperors which he found in Suetonius those expressions which were most applicable to his master. Einhard and his contemporaries were especially struck by Charles's bodily size. Ever since the opening of Charles's tomb in 1861 we have known that his actual height was a full 6 feet 3½ inches. It was therefore not poetic licence when one of the court-poets, describing the royal hunt, remarked: "The king, with his broad shoulders, towers above everybody else." . . .

It is a pity that Einhard fails us when he describes Charles's personality, for his description is entirely conventional. It had to be conventional, for, although emperors may differ in physical build, they must all have the same virtues, namely the imperial virtues without which nobody can be a real emperor. Thus his description of Charles is couched in Aristotelian and Stoic terms, such as *temperantia, patientia,* and *constantia animi.* And in so far as Einhard attributed *magnanimitas* and *liberalitas* to Charles, we can discern a mingling of ancient and Germanic princely ideals. When the hospitality shown to foreign guests resulted in neglect of considerations of public economy, Stoic *magnanimitas* was imperceptibly transformed into Germanic "loftiness of spirit." For Charles "found in the reputation of generosity and in the good fame that followed generous actions a compensation even for grave inconveniences."

The Stoic traits in Einhard's picture of Charles are, however, by no means insignificant. Many of Charles's counsellors must have drawn his attention to the fact that these traits were ideals that had been appropriate to his imperial predecessors and therefore appropriate for him. People must have appealed again and again to his *clementia,* a Stoic concept subsumed under *temperantia,* when it was a question of preventing the execution of conspirators, of liberating hostages, or of returning property that had been confiscated in punishment for an offence. Stoicism was, after all, allied with Christianity. A Christian ruler had to exercise self-control. If he indulged in *crudelitas* and raged against his enemies he was not far from the very opposite of a good king, the *rex iniquus* or tyrant.

Charles endeavoured in more than one sense to live up to the model of Stoic and Christian self-discipline. He could not tolerate drunkards in his palace. Banquets were held only on important feast days. Fasting, however, he deeply loathed. He often complained that it impaired his health. When he was an old man he conducted a long battle with his physicians who never succeeded in making him eat

boiled meat in place of the roast to which he was accustomed. The fact that Einhard incorporated such stories in his biography and that a large number of almost humourous anecdotes, such as were collected later by Notker,[5] were recounted by his own contemporaries, shows that there was a very real difference between the late Roman, and especially the Byzantine, conception of the ruler, on one hand, and the Frankish conception, on the other. Charles did not observe in his court the stiff dignity and the ceremonious distance that became an emperor. In this respect he never modelled himself on anyone; he behaved naturally and revealed his true self.

There is no evidence that Charles ever withdrew from the people around him in order to ponder and work out his plans. He always needed the company of people, of his daughters, of his friends, and even of his menial retinue. He not only invited to his banquets everybody who happened to be about; he also gathered people for the hunt and even insisted that his magnates, his learned friends and his bodyguard were to be present when he was having a bath. The author of a poetical description of palace life at Aix-la-Chapelle refers repeatedly to the noisy bustle in the baths. It seems that Charles was happiest among the din of the hunt or in the midst of the building going on at Aix-la-Chapelle.

Charles was the centre of the whole kingdom—not only because it became him as ruler to be the centre, but also because it suited his temperament. Generally receptive, and approaching both science and scholarship with an open mind, he wanted to feel that he was at the centre of everything. It must have been an easy matter for court scholars, like Theodulf of Orléans, to persuade the king that his intellectual faculties were broader than the Nile, larger than the Danube and the Euphrates, and no less powerful than the Ganges. . . . As a rule the courtiers, and Alcuin among them, vied with each other in hiding from the king that there was any difference of quality between the achievements of ancient Christian civilization and their own. A new Rome or Athens was expected to arise in Aix-la-Chapelle, and they were anxious to emphasize their superiority over Byzantium, where government was in the hands of females and theology was riddled with errors. Charles required all the fresh naturalness of his temperament in order to prevent himself from sliding from the realm of practical possibilities into the world of fantastic dreams and illusions in which so many Roman emperors had foundered. . . .

At times Charles's affability, so much praised by Einhard, gave way to surprising explosions of temper. . . . Without a reference to such explosions, however, the portrait of Charles's impulsive and impetu-

[5]A late Carolingian monastic chronicler.—Ed.

ous nature would be incomplete. The king's ire, which made his contemporaries tremble, was quite a different matter. It was part of the Germanic, just as it was of the oriental, conception of a ruler and was contrary to the Stoic ideal. At the beginning of the legend of Charlemagne there stands the figure of the "iron Charles" as his enemies saw him approaching—clad from top to toe in iron, and with an iron soul as well. In confusion they shouted: "Oh, the iron! Woe, the iron!" Not only the king's enemies, however, but also his faithful followers stood in fear of him. Charles's grandson Nithard wrote with approval that Charles had governed the nations with "tempered severity." Charles was able to control the warring men and the centrifugal tendencies of his dominions because the fear of his personal severity made evil men as gentle as lambs. He had the power to make the "hearts of both Franks and barbarians" sink. No amount of official propaganda could produce the same effect as the hardness of Charles's determination. The lack of such determination in Louis, his successor, was among the factors that led to the decay of the empire.

This side of Charles's character, although necessary for the preservation of the kingdom, was well beyond the boundaries laid down by the precepts of Stoicism and of Christianity. Charles himself was probably not aware of this. But Einhard, his biographer, who had much sympathy with both these ideas, felt it deeply. . . . Charles thought of himself as a Christian through and through, but he never managed to transcend the limits of the popular piety of the Franks. . . . He supported needy Christians, even outside the borders of the empire. He sent money to Rome and made four pilgrimages to the papal city. Such were the religious works of Charles as related by his biographer, Einhard. The inner life of the Christian, the regeneration of the soul and the new religious attitude which, at the very time when Einhard was writing, Charles's son, Louis the Pious, was labouring to acquire, are not so much as mentioned. The reason why Einhard is silent about such things is scarcely that he could not find the words to describe them in his model, Suetonius. Charles organized the salvation of his soul as he was wont to organize his Empire. It would have been contrary to his nature, and the most difficult task of all, for him to seek the highest levels of spiritual experience in his own heart. His task as a ruler, as he saw it, was to act upon the world.

We must remember, however, that the world upon which he acted bore little resemblance to the sober and dry reality created by modern commerce and technology. Such modern conceptions were shaped much later, mostly under the impression of Calvinism. They were unknown to Charles, who, for instance, first learnt of the pope's mutilation in distant Rome through a dream. He took it to be one of his duties as a ruler to observe the course of the stars with the greatest

of attention, for the approach of misfortune for his kingdom could be foretold from the stars more accurately than from anything else. For this reason the emperor devoted more time and labour to the study of astronomy than to any other of the "liberal arts." If the observation of the stars had been a mere hobby, he would surely have interrupted it while he was devastating the Saxon country with his army. . . .

Charles the Great was not one of those men who have to fight against their times and who, misunderstood by their contemporaries, are appreciated only after their death. He embodied all the tendencies of his own age; he was carried forward by them and, at the same time, moved them forward. It is impossible to describe him except in close conjunction with his friends and the magnates of his land. But for the picture to be complete he must also be shown in the midst of his family. He was surrounded by his children, his wives and the retinue of females, whose numbers and conduct seemed so unbecoming to the puritanism of his successor when he first entered the palace. Such conditions were not peculiar to Charles. It was all part and parcel of Frankish tradition. Charles lived as the head of a clan. The servants were, at least for the purposes of everyday life, included in the clan. As part of the family they enjoyed peace and protection and were, together with their master's blood relations, subject to his authority. Within the framework of the old tribal law, the master ruled his household unconditionally. . . .

In the king's palace there was a constant going and coming. Emigrés from England and from Byzantium rubbed shoulders with foreign ambassadors and all manner of public officials. There must have been, nevertheless, a few fixed key positions in the organization. There was little love lost among the occupants of these positions. For the most part, our sources remain silent on this matter. But now and again we catch a glimpse of the situation. The office of the chamberlain was one of these key positions. It was he who received the people who had come to demand an audience. He decided whether and in what order they were to appear before the king. He also received the annual "donations" of the magnates to the royal treasure which was in his custody. Alcuin considered himself happy to count this man among his friends and emphasized again and again how many envious people and evil counsellors were busy in other places trying to ruin the king.

Alcuin wrote repeatedly that, though the king tried to enforce justice, he was surrounded by predatory men. His judgment was probably no less partisan than that of his opponents who maintained that he himself was ruining the king. . . . Charles's own open and generous nature had never been inclined to inquire too closely into the intrigues and corruptions of his trusted friends and servants.

All things considered, there is little difference between the picture

we form of Charles's surroundings and the one we have of his ancestors and of other princes of the period. The only difference was that the imperial household, as in fact the empire itself, was greater, more splendid and therefore also more exposed to danger. As long as its power and splendour were increasing, the cracks in the structure remained concealed. It was the achievement of Charles's own powerful personality to have brought about this rise which, without him, might have taken generations to reach its zenith. His efforts were crowned with success because his whole personality was in tune with the progressive forces active among his people. If this had not been the case, no amount of power concentrated in the hands of the king would have suffered to stamp his countenance upon the age. If this is remembered much of the illusion of well-nigh superhuman achievement, that has inspired both the mediaeval legend of Charlemagne and many modern narratives, is dispelled. What remains is quite enough justification for calling Charles historically great.

A More Somber Light

F. L. GANSHOF

Just as Heinrich Fichtenau represents the tradition of Austrian-German scholarship in modern Carolingian studies, the other great tradition, the Belgian-French, is represented by the Belgian scholar François Louis Ganshof, who has been justly called the dean of Carolingian studies. The passage excerpted below is from an address presented to the Mediaeval Academy of America in 1948. It is in the nature of a summary judgment drawn from a lifetime of patient study and reflection, and has not been materially altered by his continued work of the last thirty years. Ganshof does not really dissent from the portrait created by Fichtenau, but he has always had a penchant for analysis rather than interpretation. He therefore strives to go beyond the limitations of Einhard's biography and other contemporary biographical fragments to describe not so much Charlemagne the man as Charlemagne the statesman. The result is a somewhat somber judgment, dwelling more upon his limitations than his accomplishments. For Ganshof is sharply aware that if Fichtenau sees Charlemagne as the universal father figure of the first Europe,[6]

[6]D. A. Bullough, "*Europae Pater:* Charlemagne and His Achievement in the Light of

it is of a Europe hardly yet born and due for many turns and reverses before it can realize the promise anticipated in the age of Charlemagne.

We begin just before what Ganshof calls the fifth and last period of Charlemagne's reign.

It would seem that by 792, when Charles was fifty years old, he had acquired experience and wisdom; perhaps, also, the advice of certain counsellors had brought him to understand that moderation is necessary to consolidate the results of victory. One of the deep causes of the Saxon revolt of 792–793 had been the reign of terror of 785, caused especially by the *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniæ,*[7] to secure the Frankish domination and the authority of the Christian religion. One must mention, also, the ruthlessness shown by the clergy in exacting payment of the tithe. In 797 a more gentle rule was introduced in Saxony by the *Capitulare Saxonicum* and the results of this new policy were favorable. In the Danube countries the methods used were less rigorous than formerly in Saxony.

A feature which at this period seems to have developed strongly was Charles' special care concerning the interests of the church and their close association with the interests of the state. In the capitulary, where dispositions made by the Synod of Frankfurt in 794 were promulgated, regulations of purely political or administrative character are next to those concerning the life of the church, e.g., the measures taken to extend the right of exclusive jurisdiction of the church over the clerics, and those aiming to render the discipline of the higher clergy more strict by reestablishing over the bishops, chiefs of the dioceses, the superior hierarchical office of the metropolitan.

In matters of dogma the Synod of Frankfurt, under the presidency of Charlemagne, had agreed with Pope Hadrian to condemn adoptianism, a christological heresy. Contrary to the advice of the pope, the synod had condemned the worship of images, which had been restored to honor by the decision of a so called œcumenical council of the Eastern Church. Charlemagne had already got his theologians to criticize this worship in the *Libri Carolini.* In spite of his reverence for the Holy See, Charlemagne appears to be, far more than the pope, the real head of the church in the West. When Leo III ascended the pontifical throne in 795, on the death of Hadrian, Charles stated

Recent Scholarship," *English Historical Review,* 85 (1970), 59–105.

[7]"The Capitulary on the Saxon Regions." Capitularies were edicts of the crown which had the effect of law and are among the best evidence we have of Charlemagne's paternalistic style of government.—ED.

precisely their respective positions in a letter which leaves no doubt on the subject. The pope became more or less the first of his bishops.

Alcuin and a few other clerics had developed an idea linked with ancient traditions. To protect the church against many corrupt practices and dangers, the realization of the will of God on earth required the reestablishment in the West of an imperial power that would protect faith and church. Charlemagne, in their eyes, fulfilled the necessary conditions to be that Roman Christian emperor; to be, indeed, an emperor quite different in their minds from the historical Constantine and Theodosius. Favorable circumstances occurred. A revolution in Rome overthrew Pope Leo III in 799 and created an extremely difficult situation which remained confused even after Charles had had the pope reestablished on his throne. Charlemagne not only admired in Alcuin the theologian and the scholar to whom he had entrusted the task of revising the Latin text of the Bible, but he also had confidence in his judgment and was strongly under his influence. It was, I believe, owing to Alcuin that he went to Rome with the idea of putting order into the affairs of the church; it was under the same influence that he accepted there the imperial dignity. Pope Leo III crowned him emperor on 25 December 800.

To give even a short account of the immediate and later effects of this great event would be irrelevant here. I shall merely mention the fifth and last period of the reign of Charlemagne, which began on the day following the coronation. It is a rather incoherent stage of his career. One notices this when trying to distinguish what changes in Charlemagne's conduct could be attributed to the influence of his newly-acquired dignity.

He certainly appreciated his new position. He intended to make the most of it towards Byzantium and he exercised a political and military pressure on the eastern emperor until the Byzantine prince recognized his imperial title in 812. However, in matters of government Charles's attitude was not constant. In 802, shortly after his return from Italy, he appeared to be fully aware of the eminent character of his imperial power. He stated that it was his duty to see that all western Christians should act according to the will of God; he ordered all his subjects to take a new oath of allegiance, this time in his quality of emperor, and he extended the notion of allegiance. He started legislating in the field of private law; he stipulated that the clergy must obey strictly canonical legislation or the Rule of St. Benedict; he reformed the institution of his enquiring and reforming commissioners, the *missi dominici,* to make it more efficient. In spite of all this, when (806) he settled his succession, the imperial dignity appeared to have lost, in his eyes, much of its importance. Unless it were

to lose its meaning entirely, the empire was indivisible. Yet Charles foresaw the partition of his states between his three sons, according to the ancient Frankish custom, and took no dispositions concerning the *imperialis potestas.* Doubtless those things that had influenced him a few years earlier were no longer effective and the Roman tradition and Alcuin's influence no longer dominated him. Everything was as if the imperial dignity had been for Charles a very high distinction but a strictly personal one. In the very last years of his reign, however, he seemed again to attach more importance to this dignity and most likely some new influences had altered his mind. His two older sons, Charles and Pepin, being dead, he himself conferred the title of emperor on his son Louis in 813.

During the end of the reign, with the one exception of the Spanish "march," which was enlarged and reinforced (Barcelona was taken in 801), no new territorial acquisition was made, in spite of military efforts often of considerable importance. The campaigns against the Northern Slavs, against Bohemia, against the Bretons of Armorica, and against the duke of Benevento only resulted in the recognition of a theoretical supremacy. Actually, fearful dangers became apparent. The Danes threatened the boundary of Saxony and their fleets devastated Frisia; the Saracen fleets threatened the Mediterranean coasts. The general impression left by the relation of these events is the weakening of the Carolingian monarchy. This impression increases when one examines internal conditions of the empire. In the state as in the church abuses increased; insecurity grew worse; the authority of the emperor was less and less respected. The capitularies, more and more numerous, constantly renewed warnings, orders, and interdictions which were less and less obeyed. Charles had grown old. Until then, his personal interferences and those which he directly provoked, had made up for the deficiencies of a quite inadequate administrative organization in an empire of extraordinary size. The physical and intellectual capacities of Charles were declining; he stayed almost continuously at Aachen, his favorite residence after 794, and he hardly ever left the place after 808. The strong antidote present before was now missing; all the political and social defects revealing a bad government appeared. When Charlemagne died in Aachen on 28 January 814, at the age of seventy-two, the Frankish state was on the verge of decay.

I have tried to describe and characterize briefly the successive phases of Charlemagne's reign. Is it possible to grasp his personality as a statesman? Perhaps. A primary fact that must be emphasized is that—even compared with others of his time—Charlemagne was not

a cultivated man. In spite of his thirst for knowledge and his admiration of culture, he was ignorant of all that is connected with intellectual life and he had little gift for abstraction.

But he had a sense for realities, and especially those of power. He knew how one gains power, how one remains in power and how one reaches the highest degrees of superior and supreme power. His attitude towards the imperial dignity revealed this. The conception of the clerics, and especially of Alcuin, for whom that dignity was an ideal magistrature infinitely above the royal power, was quite inaccessible to him. He knew or rather he felt, that the real basis of his power was solely his double royal authority[8] and he refused to omit evidence of this from his titles after the imperial coronation. For him the imperial dignity magnified and glorified the royal authority; it neither absorbed nor replaced it.

Charles had also the sense of what was practicable. Save for the campaign in Spain in 778, he undertook no tasks out of proportion to his means.

Einhard praises the equanimity of Charlemagne, his *constantia.* This was, indeed, a remarkable aspect of his personality. In the two periods of crisis which shook his reign—in 778 and in 792/793—no danger, no catastrophe, could make him give up the tasks he had undertaken or alter his methods of government. The moderation with which he happened to treat his vanquished enemies at certain times was not in contradiction with the constancy of his character. On the contrary. Equanimity implies a clear view of one's plans and one can therefore understand the variations of Charlemagne's attitude towards the imperial dignity, the full significance of which he never really understood.

To have a clear line of conduct and keep to it is one thing, but it is quite another to follow out a complete and detailed program. Charlemagne had, indeed, certain lines of conduct that he followed persistently. The facts presented are sufficient to show this as regards his foreign policy. It is also true as regards political, administrative, and juridical institutions. Charlemagne wanted to improve their efficiency so as to bring about a more complete fulfillment of his wishes and to achieve greater security for his subjects. But one cannot make out a real program in his actions. He resorted to shifts; he adopted and improved what was already existing. This is true of the institution of the *missi,* true also of the royal court of justice, of the royal vassality and of the "immunity." Occasionally he created something new, but without troubling about a general scheme. His reforms were empiric and at times went through several stages of development: as in the case of the organization of the *placita generalia,*[9] which was roughly outlined at the beginning of the reign but did not assume a definite shape until about the year 802, and also the use of writing in recording administrative and juridical matter, prescribed by a series of distinct decisions relating to particular cases.

One must avoid any attempt to credit Charlemagne with preoccupations proper to other times. Because of his efforts to protect *pauperes liberi homines,*[10] for instance, one cannot attribute to him the inauguration of a social policy; nor because he promulgated the *Capitulare de villis*[11] can one speak of an economic policy. In both cases he acted on the spur of urgent interests then on hand; free men of modest condition supplied soldiers and the royal manors had to be fit to maintain the court. . . .

This sketch of Charles as a statesman would be distorted if stress was not laid upon his religious concerns. It is indeed hard to draw a line between his religious and his political ideas. His will to govern and to extend his power was inseparable from his purpose to spread the Christian religion and let his subjects live according to the will of God. If something of the "clerical" conception of the empire struck him deeply, it was the feeling that he was personally responsible for the progress of God's Kingdom on earth. But always it was he who was concerned. His piousness, his zeal for the Christian religion were no obstacles to his will to power; in religious matters as in others the pope was nothing more than his collaborator.

One is often tempted to turn Charlemagne into a superman, a farseeing politician with broad and general views, ruling everything from above; one is tempted to see his reign as a whole, with more or less the same characteristics prevailing from beginning to end. This is so true that most of the works concerning him, save for the beginning and the end of his reign, use the geographical or systematic order rather than a chronological one. The distinctions that I have tried to make between the different phases of his reign may, perhaps, help to explain more exactly the development and effect of Charlemagne's power; they may help us to appreciate these more clearly. Perhaps, also, the features that I have noted bring out the human personality in the statesman and lead to the same results. The account I have given and the portrait I have drawn certainly justify the words which the poet ascribed to Charles in the

[8]As king of the Franks and of the Lombards.—ED.

[9]The General Assembly.—ED.

[10]Impoverished free men.—ED.

[11]The Capitulary on Manors.—ED.

last verse but one of the *Chanson de Roland:* "Deus" dist li Reis, "si penuse est ma vie." ("O Lord," said the king, "how arduous is my life.")

Review and Study Questions

1. What kind of picture do you gain of Charlemagne from the readings in this chapter?
2. What kind of picture of Charlemagne's court do you gain from the readings in this chapter?
3. What kind of picture of Charlemagne's programs and government do you gain from the readings in this chapter?

Suggestions for Further Reading

The almost unique value of Einhard's biography of Charlemagne is dramatized by the scarcity and poor quality of other contemporary sources. Students can become aware of this contrast by looking even briefly at some of these other materials. There is a life of Charlemagne nearly contemporary with Einhard's, authored by a monk of St. Gall—possibly Notker the Stammerer. But, unlike the solid and straightforward narrative of Einhard, the monk's account is disjointed and rambling, filled with legendary matter and scraps of the history of his monastery, and almost totally unreliable. It is available in a good modern edition, *Early Lives of Charlemagne by Einhard and the Monk of St. Gall,* tr. and ed. A. J. Grant (New York: Cooper Square, 1966). Of the same sort are two somewhat later biographies of the brothers Adalard and Wala, abbots of Corbie, by the monk Radbertus of Corbie, although they contain only a few casual bits of information about Charlemagne, despite the fact that the two abbots were Charlemagne's cousins and both had played prominent roles at court: *Charlemagne's Cousins: Contemporary Lives of Adalard and Wala,* tr. and ed. Allen Cabaniss (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1967). The only other narrative source of any value for the reign of Charlemagne is the Royal Frankish Annals, but they are thin and uncommunicative. They can be read as part of *Carolingian Chronicles: Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories,* tr. Bernhard W. Scholz with Barbara Rogers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970). Several of these accounts and other sorts of documentary materials relating to Charlemagne's reign have been collected in a convenient and well-edited series of selections, *The Reign of Charlemagne: Documents on Carolingian Government and Administration,* ed. H. R. Lyon and John Percival (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975).

Because of the stature and importance of Charlemagne and despite the problem of the sources, scholars continue to write about him. Many of their works are specialized scholarly studies. Some can be read profitably by beginning students, such as the several essays in Heinrich Fichtenau, *The Carolingian Empire,* excerpted above, or some of the articles of F. L. Ganshof collected in *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy: Studies in Carolingian History,* tr. Janet Sondheimer (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971). Pierre Riché, *Daily Life in the World of Charlemagne,* tr. Jo Ann McNamara (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), is a fresh and useful work of social history by a great French authority. For a recent and authoritative overview of all Carolingian history, including Charlemagne, see Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians, 751–987* (London and New York: Longman, 1983). There are three excellent modern works, all brief and readable, that treat interesting aspects of Charles's reign: Richard E. Sullivan, *Aix-la-Chapelle in the Age of Charlemagne,* "Centers of Civilization Series" (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), focuses on the cultural achievements at Charles's capital; Jacques Boussard, *The Civilization of Charlemagne,* tr. Francis Partridge (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), presents a favorable revisionist interpretation of the Carolingian culture; and Robert Folz, *The Coronation of Charlemagne: 25 December 800,* tr. J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), is a close study of this important event, its background and context. One of the most important and most readable of the works on this period is Donald Bullough, *The Age of Charlemagne* (New York: Putnam, 1965).

Of the several biographies of Charlemagne, the best, as well as the most exciting and readable, is Richard Winston, *Charlemagne: From the Hammer to the Cross* (New York: Vintage, 1954). A somewhat briefer and less colorful biography but by an established authority is James A. Cabaniss, *Charlemagne,* "Rulers and Statesmen of the World" (Boston: Twayne, 1972).

Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne,* tr. Bernard Miall (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1958 [1939]), is the masterwork of a great medieval historian and the chief entry in an important medieval scholarly controversy which continues to be of some interest to students of Charlemagne's reign. It has to do with the question of when and how the Middle Ages actually began. (Pirenne says they did not begin until Charlemagne.) The controversy and its chief figures are represented

in *The Pirenne Thesis: Analysis, Criticism, and Revision,* ed. Alfred F. Havighurst (Boston: Heath, 1958). Students are also referred to two more recent works which indicate that the Pirenne controversy is still alive: Bryce Lyon, *The Origins of the Middle Ages: Pirenne's Challenge to Gibbon* (New York: Norton, 1972) and Robert S. Lopez, *The Birth of Europe* (New York: Lippincott, 1967).