Janet L. Nelson, *Courts, Elites, and Gendered Power in the Early Middle Ages. Charlemagne and Others.* Aldershot, U.K. and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2007. Ix + 332 pp. Notes and index. US $134.95 (hb.) ISBN 978-0-7546-5933-4

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Though dating from the early 1960s, a French popular song, *Sacré Charlemagne*, still rings in my ears. School girls vocally protested their history lessons about a medieval French king, and each stanza ends with the refrain "damn, damn Charlemagne." Those responsible for education in France assumed that the Great Charles was French. Across the Rhine in Germany, of course, he was considered German. Paradoxically, elites such as politicians, business people, academics in France and Germany during this still early stage of the European Economic Community were beginning to think of the Charlemagne as neither French nor German, but rather as the "father of Europe," *pater Europae.* The book under review here is certainly not about French history--though many cataloguers assume that it is. Charles was king of the Franks, not a French king, and the Frankish kingdom, while encompassing modern France, was considerably more than that. The author of this tome, Dame Janet L. Nelson, professor emerita, Queen's College, University of London, is a giant in the field, who knows that myths concerning Charlemagne, which began before his corpse grew cold, are difficult to lay to rest. "What every schoolchild knows takes a lot of learning," she writes, "but sometimes needs a lot of *un*learning (her emphasis). In this case, the proverbial schoolchild's 'knowledge' says much less about Charlemagne than about the growth of states--France and Germany--whose historians and propagandists in modern times have traced their origins to Charles" (chapter twelve, pp. 172-3).

This book is a collection of seventeen articles. All but one was first published elsewhere in journals, multi-authored thematic collections, and *Festschriften*. One was a review article. Two are in German and one in French. An article on Charlemagne's imperial coronation, however, is new. The earliest dates from 1986, but the majority (eleven) appeared in the last decade. All have been referenced. They are arranged in chapters designated by Roman numerals, and the original pagination has been retained. It is divided into two parts. Part one deals with gender issues (female and male) mostly during the Carolingian period. One review-article, however, treats women in the Byzantine Empire. Charles lurks in the background of each, even when he is not the direct subject of Nelson's scrutiny. Part two, titled "Charlemagne and Others," deals with broader issues such as the nature of Carolingian kingship, court life, and the place of Charles and his clan in medieval European historiography.

There are, however, two gender related articles in this section. One is about Charlemagne's mother Queen Bertrada and her role in the dynastic change of 751, when the last Merovingian ruler was deposed. The second is about the many daughters of the Lombard king, Desiderius (756-774), whom Charlemagne defeated and deposed. One (unnamed) Lombard princess was married briefly to Charles, who sent her back to her father shortly before he invaded his kingdom. She became "the fall guy" and "suffered a kind of *damnatio memoriae*" (p. 183) when Charles dumped her to marry Hildegard, a woman from a prominent Aleman family, when he desperately needed to consolidate his power early in his reign. Another daughter married Duke Tassilo of Bavaria, a cousin and rival of Charles whose supporters accused her of influencing her husband to conspire with the still pagan Avars against the king. A third daughter, Adelperga was the wife of another rival, Duke Arichis of Benevento. The surviving pro-Carolingian sources are largely hostile to these women. However, the very depth of this hostility underlines their importance.

For some time a major question has been, did the Carolingian era represent a new beginning or a false start? At the end of World War II historians such as François Louis Ganshof and Heinrich Fichtenau assessed the age of Charlemagne pessimistically.[1] Richard Sullivan continued this tradition until his death just a few years ago.[2] Currently the debate is led by a coterie English scholars, Nelson is among the most important. She stands on one side of this issue while Robert Bartlett and R. I. Moore are on the other.[3] The latter two believe that major trends in medieval history began around the turn of the first millennium, two centuries after Charlemagne. Bartlett stresses aggressive militarism such as expansion into eastern and central Europe, the Spanish *reconquista*, and the crusades, while Moore emphasizes European intolerance and religious persecution. Nelson insists that these and other 'darker' features were already present in the time of Charlemagne (chapter seven, pp. 6-10). She lists them as aggressive and oppressive militarism; racism towards Slavs and Avars and their ilk, as well as Bretons, Basques, Saracens, and even such Germanic-speakers as Bavarians and Saxons; misogamy, such as a tendency to blame women for plots and failures; and, finally, an assertive Roman sensibility which she illustrates by the fact that Greek became a term of abuse, almost a synonym for unorthodoxy.

Despite these characteristics, Nelson insists that there was much "positive" as well. The new Europe of Charlemagne was both smaller and larger than ancient Europe. Although some Roman Mediterranean provinces had been lost, Carolingians successfully incorporated territories across the Rhine, which became its central axis. In Roman times the river was a boundary. As a result of expansion, this new Europe came to include a plurality of peoples who had their own laws, languages, and histories. This new Europe had a growing mixed economy that developed from a peasant entrepreneurship that produced rural surpluses, enabling a market exchange system and the quest of traders for profits. She is convinced that the Carolingian world also had a mixed ideology. In this case she stresses the Second Saxon Capitulary of 797, which was more tolerant of Saxon diversity than was the first one of 782. Although she admits that Carolingian courts were harsh, and religious conformity was imposed, she justifies stern justice because of a pressing need to root out corruption, and she notes that Carolingian scholarship was directed at correcting texts and removing scriptural errors and abuses.

Positive or not, Carolingian expansion did in fact take place. Charles inherited a realm that was over twice the size of the *regnum* that his grandfather Charles Martel (d. 741) had left Pippin. By the time of his imperial coronation this state, now an empire, had doubled once again.[4] The prevailing paradigm of the rise of the Carolingians and the expansion of the Frankish kingdom into an empire is as follows. From roughly the mid-seventh century the Frankish kingdom, governed by incapable (Merovingian) dipsomaniacs, was in an advanced state of anarchy. After the mayor of the palace Pippin II won the battle of Tertry in 687, three generations of Carolingians focused on the reunification of a kingdom that had become divided into a large number of virtually independent duchies, rectorates, and episcopal principalities. Year after year these leaders assembled resources (men, animals, food, fodder, weapons, equipment, etc.) in order to destroy the power of wealthy families who had gained control over lay and ecclesiastical offices. In 751 Pippin III (d. 768) deposed the last Merovingian king, and with papal permission took the crown for himself. Although Pippin intervened in Italy on two occasions at the request of the papacy, he was reluctant to expand his power beyond the traditional boundaries of the Frankish kingdom and beat a hasty retreat in 756, never to return. After Pippin's death, Charles shared the kingship with his brother Carloman, however, when the latter died mysteriously in late 771, Charles' one-man rule (the sources use the word monarchy) began with the expansion his power beyond the *regnum Francorum* (Italy, Saxony, the Danubian lands, Brittany, portions of northern Spain, etc.).

A question that Nelson asks, but does not answer, is what motivated this aggressive expansionism? Some political scientist (and historians influenced by them) explain state aggression by the so-called "Realist" paradigm, positing that states exist in a Hobbesian universe of *interstate* anarchy that demands continual preparation for war and aggression simply to ensure survival.[5] Did the Frankish kingdom expand because it was threatened by neighboring powers? Islamic Spain? The Lombard kingdom? The Byzantine Empire? Other Germanic peoples (Saxons, Vikings and their ilk) to the north? The Avars to the east? A close look at the circumstances in western Eurasia in the eighth century reveals that no neighboring polity represented an existential threat to the Frankish kingdom. Narbonne, the last Muslim fortification in France, fell to Pippin in 751, the year of his coup

d'état. Afterwards the Carolingians became the aggressors. If the Lombards were aggressive, it was against the papal state in central Italy, not against the Franks. The Byzantine Empire was primarily interested in maintaining the status quo, using naval power and diplomacy to ensure the safety of its capital. Carolingian annalists accused Avars of plotting (with Tassilo and Liutperga) aggression against the Franks, but we have no independent verification that this was really the case. As for the Saxons, some of their war bands occasionally raided into Frankish territory, but they were too internally disunited to undertake systemic conquests of the Frankish kingdom.

Could it be that Carolingian expansion can better be explained by internal structural factors rather than external dangers? Were the Carolingians were simply more aggressive and warlike than their neighbors? Timothy Reuter has posited a predatory Carolingian polity whose leaders pounced on their neighbors in an insatiable quest for booty.[6] When it ceased rolling in, the Carolingian state unraveled. Nelson expresses reservations concerning Reuter's position (chapter seventeen, p. 7). She is currently writing a biography of Charlemagne which may well bring her close to a more convincing explanation of the forces underlying this expansion. As she notes, it is easy to get caught up in the triumphalism trumpeted by the Carolingian narratives. Recent scholarship has demonstrated, however, that much of this triumphalism is hollow. For an early medieval kingdom, this realm left a long paper trail, much of it intended to justify what Charlemagne and his followers were doing to his subjects and neighbors. Falsehoods are generally difficult to cover up completely, and it proved impossible for annalists to weed out all of the contradictions in the master narrative that they concocted. In the last half century, much progress has been made in straightening out the Carolingian record. Thanks to the work of such scholars as Matthias Becher we now know that Carolingian annalists went to great lengths to falsefy the narrative accounts.[7] The Carolingian polity was obsessed with loyalty oaths due to a systemic lack of trust. Scholars are now stripping away the triumphalism of the master narrative. "Look closely at the centre of the Carolingian Empire," Nelson writes (chapter ten, p. 172), "and you will detect seams pulling apart. Look closely at the fringes and you will detect fraying. The where and why of that may explain the regime's persistent insecurity: not just the single crisis in 778 diagnosed by F. L. Ganshof, but, frankly, one goddamn crisis after another."

Rather than being a secure and triumphal commander who led a well oiled Frankish war machine from one victory to another, the heavy head that worn two royal crowns, Frankish and Lombard, and an imperial diadem to boot may not have rested very easily. Domestic insecurity, rather than the threat of foreign enemies or predatory tendencies, may have driven Charlemagne's aggression. By scratching the sources deeply recent historians have discovered ubiquitous mendacity, corruption, and distrust within the Carolingian *imperium*. A recent study in political science posits that precisely these characteristics motivate the aggressive behavior of states.[8] *Intrastate* anarchy rather than interstate anarchy may have been the primary reason for Charles's conquests. It would be an exaggeration to assert that under Charlemagne the Frankish state was on the verge of coming unglued. States in an advanced state of anarchy (such as the Merovingian one) are unable to muster the resources to engage in aggressive activity on the scale that he did. Such states become tempting targets for aggressors who are convinced that they cannot effectively defend themselves. States with middling levels of domestic anarchy are the most likely ones to engage in aggressive behaviour because, absent a high degree of domestic trust, they are best able to maintain internal cohesion by rallying their populations against external threats real or imagined. Charlemagne's polity, continually tittering on the brink of "one goddamn crisis after another," may have waged wars of aggression because domestic trust was lacking. Such a program of conquest could have been a useful tool in reducing domestic tensions temporarily, but it may have also led to the dire consequences that Charlemagne's successors faced when military reverses and outright failure placed strains on the system. It seems possible that Nelson's thoughts may be moving in this direction.

NOTES

[1] François Louis Ganshof, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971) and Heinrich Fichtenau, *The Carolingian Empire*, trans. Peter Munz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957).

[2] Richard E. Sullivan, "The Carolingian Age: Reflections on Its Place in the History of the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 64 (1989), pp. 267-306.

[3] Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1993) and Robert I. Moore, *The First European Revolution, c. 970-1215* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[4] Chris Wickham. *The Inheritance of Rome. Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000* (New York: Viking, 2009), p. 380.

[5] Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War and the Rise of Rome* (Berkeley: University of California 2006).

[6] Timothy Reuter, "Plunder and tribute in the Carolingian Empire," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 35 (1985), pp. 75-94.

[7] Matthias Becher, *Eid und Herrschaft: Untersuchungen zum Herrscherethos Karls des Großen* (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke, 1993).

[8] Michael Jasinski, "Domestic Anarchy as a Predictor of Conflict Behavior," (PhD. Dissertation, University of Georgia, 2008).

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