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Johannes Fried, *Charlemagne*, trans. Peter Lewis. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016. xi + 673 pp. Maps, plates, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-674-73739-6.

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The centenaries of Charlemagne's imperial coronation in 800 and then of his death in 814 generated a flood of biographies and essay collections. In my view, Fried's is the best of them. Very long, richly detailed, and somewhat ruminative in style, the book is a good, but not an easy, read. One of the most eminent medievalists of his generation, Fried has always marched to his own cadence. It is sometimes, indeed, a cadence that only he seems to hear. This book bears the distinctive traits of Fried's prolific scholarly output.

"The following book is not a novel, but it is a work of fiction all the same—a fiction based on this author's visualization of Charlemagne" (p. vii). Fried says, further, that the key tool of the historian is imagination and that everything depends on the present because we ask questions that people in the past did not ask. Here is one example of what this looks like in practice: "Charlemagne was relaxing in his bathing pool, as he was fond of doing. After swimming a couple of lengths, he was now leaning on the poolside... He beckoned Master Alcuin over: 'Reverend Master Alcuin, God has seen fit to bring you back to us. Allow me to ask you a few questions'" (p. 317).

Fried goes on to pose the questions and then to talk about how much Charlemagne loved Aachen (always Aix-la-Chapelle in this translation). This scene is pure invention but there is nothing implausible about it.

Throughout the book Fried carries on a kind of internal dialogue with himself that he permits the reader to overhear. Charlemagne fought numerous wars. Why? What did he aim to achieve? Charlemagne promoted education. Why? To what end? What pushed him to do so? Charlemagne was attached to, perhaps obsessed with, Rome. Why? What was the source of this fascination? What were its implications. In very few cases does Fried offer an explicit answer to his questions. He typically goes on for one or more paragraphs offering different possible answers. As he works his way through the possibilities we see two things: Fried's high-speed imagination and vast erudition as he assesses the voluminous scholarship.

And yet near the end Fried says, "We do not know Charlemagne the human being" (p. 515). This seems a slightly odd conclusion after Fried has spent hundreds of pages working out Charlemagne's aspirations, weighing his joys and disappointments, and noting—brilliantly, I think—the agitated, gloomy, disappointed, morose air the old emperor seems to have assumed in the last years of his life. Some years ago Janet Nelson told us she could hear Charlemagne's voice in some of his last capitularies—those peculiar Carolingian documents that were a bit like executive orders and a bit like legislative acts.^[1] Well, Fried gives his reader tens of pages of meticulous analysis of Charlemagne's

imperial capitularies and I do not see how any reader could fail to “hear” Charlemagne, could fail to feel the presence of a human being. Much earlier in the book, Fried noted the 80 Tironian notes (shorthand) in the Vatican manuscript of the *Opus Caroli Regis*—the Carolingians’ response to Byzantium’s restoration of sacred images in 787—that record Charlemagne’s *ipsissimi verbi*. The words are brief, blunt, direct. Fried’s reconstruction is imaginative but I do not think that it is fictitious.

The book moves along in roughly chronological fashion but its organization is actually thematic. After a chapter on “Boyhood,” Fried offers chapters entitled “The Frankish Empire and the Wider World,” “The Warrior King,” “Power Structures,” “The Ruler,” “The Royal Court,” “Reviving the Title of Emperor,” and “Imperator Augustus.” The book concludes with an “Epilogue” on history and mythology. I shall return to it.

These chapter titles might strike a reader as more appropriate for a history of the age than for a biography of Charlemagne. His boyhood impressed upon Charlemagne the importance of his family, the agonal nature of his society, and the religious climate of his world. Where the wider world was concerned, Charlemagne’s vague sense of continental Europe was only partially mitigated by the presence of foreigners at his father’s and then at his court. Crucially, however, Charlemagne learned not to trust Byzantium. The “Warrior King” fought in Aquitaine, in Saxony—repeatedly, in Italy—in Lombardy and Benevento, in the Pyrenees and in Catalonia, in Bavaria, and in the Danube basin. This chapter runs from 768/9 to around 800. Along the way we learn about marriage alliances and family politics; armies, equipment, and battles; and how Santa Sophia in Benevento and San Vitale in Ravenna influenced his ideas about architecture. The chapter on “Power Structures” devotes a great deal of attention to the economy of the Frankish world. Fried sees prosperity, vast resources, and the skill and determination to use them. Fried effectively synthesizes copious scholarship and non-specialist readers will find this discussion illuminating. The chapter goes on to discuss Charlemagne’s relations with the aristocracy. Fried says Charlemagne could only really act where he was present or when he was in the presence of his aristocrats. His ability to exert pressure and influence was pretty limited: “A Carolingian king acted reactively rather than proactively” (p. 199). Readers of Jennifer Davis’s *Charlemagne’s Practice of Empire* (2015) will find much to think about and argue with in this and in Fried’s next chapter on “The Ruler.”^[2]

In Fried’s view everything Charlemagne did derived from his role as leader of the church. Charlemagne aimed to produce a “knowledge-based society” that would advance the faith. In this chapter Fried talks about the court scholars, books, libraries, and educational reforms. Fried also points to Charlemagne’s attention to such diverse matters as coinage, weights and measures, and the structure of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Charlemagne’s vision was nothing if not comprehensive. Like all the other chapters, this one is full of detailed digressions. “The Royal Court” begins, engagingly, with how little we know about the royal women and about emotions and affections in Charlemagne’s world. It then turns to sections on sons, nobles, and rebellions followed by a fine discussion of the personnel and organization of the court as a political and institutional center. The chapter has a lengthy account of the planning and construction of the palace complex at Aachen along with an excellent discussion of the symbolism of many of the palace’s features. “Reviving the Title of Emperor” focuses quite precisely on the years from about 797 to 801. Fried’s line is that Charlemagne considered himself the leader of the church and of the Christian world. He intended to become emperor. The attack on Pope Leo III that precipitated Charlemagne’s fateful trip to Italy was in many ways a coincidence, an accident in the midst of other, more powerful dynamics. The most important single source is the account in the Lorsch Annals.

“Imperator Augustus” looks at Charlemagne as emperor. As always Fried looks at the narrative sources, but he especially focuses on the fifty-five capitularies issued between 802 and 813. The sheer volume of directive activity is telling: by contrast the thirty-two years of Charlemagne’s kingship saw the issuance of fourteen capitularies. As with some of the royal capitularies, say the famous one of Frankfurt (794),

there continued to be a fastidious attention to minute details. But the tone and emphasis changed. Religious sentiments are even more pronounced along with a profound sense of accountability—people to rulers and all to God. I noted above the somewhat dispirited tone of some of this legislation. The chapter just creeps into the succession of Louis the Pious whom Fried treats rather savagely.

The “Epilogue” reads well and talks about how historical writers handled Charlemagne into the high Middle Ages followed by a nice, succinct account of how Charlemagne passed from history to myth. This has been a particularly active area of research in recent years after a long hiatus following the publication of Robert Folz, *Le souvenir et la légende de Charlemagne dans l'empire germanique médiéval* (1951).^[3] There have been collections of essays by international teams of scholars and impressive monographs by Americans such as Matthew Gabriele and Anne Latowsky.^[4] Fried has little new to say but he permits readers to get up to speed and he mentions lots of obscure writers. Fried adds a valuable section on some of the ways in which Charlemagne has been misappropriated for dubious, even odious, causes, by racists, nationalists, and Nazi acolytes of Alfred Rosenberg. And then, he concludes: Charlemagne was neither French nor German. He was not the “Father of Europe.” His greatest legacy was cultural.

The book is replete with both sparkling and startling statements. Let me mention just a few by way of example. The Orthodox Church did not foment any dogmatic rifts with Western Christendom because the papacy was so strongly influenced by the Orthodox Church. At Chasseneuil in 778 Charlemagne named his new-born sons Chlothar and Clovis, victorious Merovingians, to eclipse his defeat at Roncesvalles. Irene put a stop to the proposed marriage of Rotrud and Constantine VI. Charlemagne’s dealings with Tassilo of Bavaria were all mendacity and treachery. Visits to Italy taught Charlemagne how backward his realm was. Calling Charlemagne “David” at court was an implicit criticism of his amorous life. Charles the Younger was gay and accepted as such. “First and foremost” the court was a place for scholars. Leaders in the Frankish world were constantly concerned about the end of time. The ritual of the imperial coronation was closely and deliberately modeled on Byzantium. I agree with some of these positions and disagree with others. Little matter. Fried is unabashed in expressing his views.

Fried’s bibliography is twelve pages long and in his seventy-one pages of end-notes there appear many titles not cited in the bibliography. It would be churlish to badger so eminent a scholar for omitting this or that work. Still: Janet Nelson appears once in the bibliography and a handful of times in the notes. No one has done more in the last thirty years than she has to interpret the reign of Charlemagne.^[5] In several instances Fried’s arguments run parallel to some of my own that have been out there for thirty years or more but pass unnoticed. American and British scholars tend to be punctilious in citing non-English scholarship. European scholars rarely return the favor. Is this oversight or disdain?

I have serious questions about whether Harvard University Press vetted the English translation of Fried’s book that appeared in German in 2013. The volume is unfortunately riddled with mistakes. In preparing my review I did not have access to the German edition so I cannot say if the mistakes are attributable to Fried or to his translator. Occasionally things get stuck between the two languages: Adalhard von Corbie, St. Gallen. Sometimes things just go wrong: Bardengoi (for Bardengau), Arabic for Arab, palatinate for palatine, Donatistic for Donatist. I do not know if Königreich and Reich or König and Kaiser were used carelessly by Fried or by his translator but they are slapdash in the book. So too we find such oddities as “earldoms” in Italy and a “Lombard Empire” (pp. 50, 138, 205) The palatine chapel at Aachen is repeatedly called a “cathedral” (e.g., pp. 171, 297, 347, 348, 353, 354, 359, 458, 508, 520–21, 527) It became a cathedral in 1802. These kinds of things may well be translator’s slips. In fairness, I should say that Fried is a fluent and readable author and the translation of his *Charlemagne* is on the whole excellent.

But there are other puzzling slips that any knowledgeable press reader would have caught. Here are a few that I jotted down. Paul I was pope when Charlemagne married Himiltrude (p. 50). Dietrich von

Bern is Theoderic and his statue came from Ravenna not Rome (p. 52). Paul I, not II, died in 767 (pp. 92-3). Leo III, not II, succeeded Hadrian (p. 139). The Via Amerina is confused with the Via Flaminia (p. 203). The Carolingians did not reside in Pavia but in Verona because of fears of the Avars (p. 210)? This is exactly backwards. What proof is there that the former exarch of Ravenna was living in Rome in 774 (p. 228)? One cannot say, in speaking of the mid-eighth century, that Boniface lived “centuries before” (p. 235). Alcuin’s chronology is confused (pp. 238, 253, 261). Theodulf’s Bible was not the first pandect (p. 239). Bertha did not marry Angilbert (p. 300). Einhard never says that Charlemagne asked if he could bring Alcuin to Frankfurt (p. 303). Canon 56 of Frankfurt says this. I do not know what imperial buildings on the Coelian Hill are referenced (p. 350). Theoderic was an Ostrogoth, not a Visigoth (p. 350). Theodulf did not accept the didactic theory of images (p. 389). Grado is in Italy, not Spain and Patriarch John IV was not murdered (p. 415). Charlemagne’s sons did not receive “empires” in 806 (p. 477). Charlemagne died in January, not February (p. 520).

NOTES:

[1] Janet L. Nelson, “The Voice of Charlemagne,” in Richard Gameson and Henrietta Leyser, eds., *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages: Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 76-88.

[2] Jennifer R. Davis, *Charlemagne’s Practice of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[3] Robert Folz, *Le souvenir et la légende de Charlemagne dans l’empire germanique médiéval* (1952: repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1973).

[4] Matthew Gabriele, *An Empire of Memory: the Legend of Charlemagne, the Franks, and Jerusalem before the First Crusade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Anne A. Latowsky, *Emperor of the World: Charlemagne and the Construction of Imperial Authority, 800-1229* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[5] Nelson’s bibliography would run to several pages. A good start is one of the several collections of her essays: *Courts, Elites, and Gendered Power in the Early Middle Ages: Charlemagne and Others* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

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