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Alessandro Barbero, *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent*. Translated by Allan Cameron. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004. 426 pp. Map, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 (hb). ISBN 0-520-23943-1.

Review by Hans Hummer, Wayne State University.

Charlemagne has attracted a record number of biographers in recent years, an output that surpasses the burst of attention in the decades following World War II. [1] The reasons are easy enough to decipher: the realization of a European Union has stimulated an interest in the roots of a common European culture in the Carolingian Empire, which encompassed nearly all of western and central Europe, as well as most of Italy, portions of Spain, and swaths of eastern and south-eastern Europe. Naturally Charlemagne, the most dominating figure of the period, indeed of the period between the collapse of the Roman Empire in the west and the high Middle Ages, and a ruler whom one Carolingian poet propitiously dubbed the father of Europe, has been turned into a symbol for the possibilities and limitations of European unity. Although major works in German, French, and Italian have appeared, a comprehensive biography of Charlemagne has not been conceived in English, a state of affairs that perhaps reflects the recent Anglo-American preoccupation with Charlemagne's heirs and his Merovingian predecessors. So it is fortunate and timely that the University of California Press has published a translation of Alessandro Barbero's praiseworthy biography of the great Carolingian king and emperor.

As a scholar, Barbero is at home in high and late medieval Italy, a distance that generally serves him well in this particular project which in the interest of accessibility judiciously avoids scholarly arcana and long-winded digressions into source-criticism and historiographical debates. Barbero nonetheless shows commendable familiarity with much of the traditional and recent scholarship on Charlemagne's reign, and effectively communicates to a wider audience the essentials of these debates, both within the text and in the discursive bibliography, with elegance, wit, and attitude. Although specialists likely will find little to be surprised by in this biography, and doubtless will find reason to quarrel with Barbero on any number of points (see below), they nonetheless will benefit from the bird's-eye view of the reign offered here, and enjoy the author's skill in coaxing personalities, especially Charlemagne's, from the sources.

Barbero surveys many of the standard topics long associated with Charlemagne's reign: the conquests, the ruler's family life, the so-called Carolingian Renaissance (which he rightly identifies as mainly religious), the emperorship and relations with the popes, diplomacy with Byzantium, and Carolingian institutions. He also provides an evocative treatment of the economy, daily life, and the peasantry, topics which usually are ignored in biographies of rulers but which admirably round out the portrait presented here. The survey rests on a firm foundation of scholarship, and the author imaginatively engages the sources, in particular Charlemagne's capitularies, the ninth-century biographers Einhard and Notker, annals and chronicles, and the letters of courtiers.

Not surprisingly given the preoccupation of these sources with the political center, Barbero's Charlemagne comes off as a man firmly in control of his empire, his men, his court, and his Church. We encounter a vigorous and aggressive ruler who dominated ecclesiastical affairs, and terrorized the enemies of Christianity by relentless war, the Frankish aristocracy by his constant vigilance, and his own courtiers with his tireless attention to detail. Needless to say, the historically great tend to come off

in biographies as outsized characters, but the commanding figure depicted here is also an artifact of Barbero's adherence to a statist-institutional approach which tends to magnify the rulers control.

That said, Barbero admirably balances the undeniable forcefulness of the personality with the flaws and limitations of Charlemagne's reign. He is careful to interpret Charlemagne's rulership within the social, economic, and religious context of the period, and thus deftly communicates to readers the larger context within which Charlemagne operated and why the reign mattered with respect to the larger story of the development of Europe. In sum, this work is fundamentally honest, accurately evokes the warlike culture and aggressive piety of the Franks, and is blessedly free of the anachronisms, stereotypes, and misrepresentations that often plague attempts by non-specialists to illuminate Charlemagne's reign for more general audiences.

Some efforts come up short. Occasionally, an attempt to enliven the presentation with modern analogies, such as the comparison of one of Charlemagne's campaigns in Saxony to Custer at Little Big Horn, falls flat. The extensive use of the ever-entertaining Notker is perhaps a forgivable indulgence in a study striving for accessibility, but the late date of Notker's biography merits more than the perfunctory attention the author gives it. The depiction of the Merovingian period and the Carolingians' rise to power is a bit behind the curve, and in the interest of symmetry might have been balanced with an epilogue on the aftermath of Charlemagne's reign and his legacy. Those versed in the period will be startled to be told that contrary to theories sustained in the past by German historians, the foundation of royal power was not at all a personal relationship. It was a territorial state, exactly as in a modern state (pp. 146-147).

This blithe dismissal, supplemented by additional breezy, and debatable, pronouncements in the annotated bibliography, underestimates the subtlety of German scholarship, which has done the most to illuminate the peculiar features of early medieval Europe; and the confident assertion that Charlemagne ruled over a state overestimates greatly the formality of Carolingian rule. Had Barbero been more willing to engage the German scholarship, he might have done his readership an important service by conveying more forcefully the essentials of lordship, a concept shortchanged in this survey, but one which is fundamental to the period. He comes closest in the chapter, "Patronage and Servitude", but the insights here reinforce the general sense throughout, revealed on the several occasions where the author compares the behavior of magnates to that of mobsters, that shortcomings in Charlemagne's rulership can be chalked up to corruption and the abuse of private power. Barbero appears to have imported assumptions on lords and peasants from French historiography of the high and late Middle Ages, a suspicion that finds support in his off-the-mark complaint in the bibliography that there is no satisfactory bibliography on patronage in Carolingian society (p. 409). Well, that's because the issue is lordship, about which plenty has been said. A willingness to move beyond the public/private dichotomy and the statist-institutional approach, which has been discarded as a meaningful conceptual framework for understanding the politics of Charlemagne's period, might have made clearer that tensions in the early medieval political order were rooted not so much in the illegitimate exercise of power at the expense of a ruler's alleged public mandate, but in the dynamics of lordship.

Allan Cameron has achieved a felicitous translation from the Italian, although because he is not a specialist, he misses on occasion. The progenitor of Charlemagne's ancestors, the Pepinids, should be Pepin the Elder, not Pepin the Old; and it should be the imperial aristocracy, not the imperial nobility. Ratisbon should have been translated to Regensburg, and in one case Cameron has Charlemagne deporting Saxons to France, where surely Francia was meant. In general, the book is sharply produced and well indexed (even Custer, George A. appears!), although readers would have benefited from some detail maps, especially in the instances where Barbero vividly recounts Charlemagne's campaigns and military tactics. The production team at the University of California Press should have been aware that

the bejeweled crown on the dust jacket is Otto II's, which was produced around 980 and therefore can not be, as is confidently claimed, the Holy Roman Empire's golden crown, placed on Charlemagne's head by Pope Leo III in 800. An editor might have also seen to the excision of a parenthetical comment which apparently was meant for the original Italian audience (p. 38), but will only mislead English readers. If a paperback version appears, and this would be desirable indeed, let us hope that the press can address these deficiencies.

These complaints do not detract substantially from the overall high quality and ambitiousness of this work. Barbero has successfully drawn a compelling portrait of Charlemagne and his world, and made it accessible to an educated public, non-specialists, and students. Provided that a more affordable paperback is forthcoming, this text would be a marvelous addition to surveys of the period, especially in combination with Roger Collins's shorter biography which engages the tendentiousness of the sources more directly. It would also work well in broader medieval or western civilization surveys where an engaging wide-angled study of this most pivotal reign would be a convenient way to convey essential aspects of the early formation of Europe and the scholarly issues that surround it.

NOTES

[1] Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne*, trans. David S. Bachrach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); Roger Collins, *Charlemagne* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Jean Favier, *Charlemagne* (Paris: Fayard, 1999); and Dieter Hägermann's authoritative *Karl der Grosse: Herrscher des Abendlandes: Biographie* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2000).

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