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Rebecca Devereaux, Whitworth University, undergraduate student, “Charlemagne: Nuancing the Conventional Narrative”

Abstract: Charlemagne, one of the most famous figures in Western history, continues to attract the attention of contemporary scholars. Historian Chris Wickham argues in his book Medieval Europe, somewhat conventionally, that Charlemagne’s leadership should primarily be seen through his military efforts. However, historian Janet Nelson in her recent biography, *King and Emperor: A New Life of Charlemagne*, published in 2019 reveals a much more complex picture of Charlemagne that places much more emphasis on his Christian worldview and its impact on his life. My paper illustrates the challenge of writing a synthetic overview of such a large subject as Medieval Europe. I raise the issue of how should one read a survey of a large topic recognizing that the reader needs to be skeptical of overgeneralization and over simplification.

Charlemagne: Nuancing the Conventional Narrative

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One of the most difficult components of historiography is the balance between being succinct and allowing for complexity. This can easily be seen through the depiction of Charles the Great (768-814), ruler of the Frankish Kingdom. Historian Chris Wickham argues in his book *Medieval Europe* that the Carolingians fit into the overarching history of Europe by reflecting the values of the Roman Empire. No figure emphasized this medieval mirroring of the Romans more than Charlemagne. In his small slice of Carolingian history Wickham concisely introduces the complex character of Charlamagne as a man trying to lead the next Rome. Wickham focuses his analysis on understanding how the Franks attempted to create an orderly empire, as “it is under Charlemagne that we first have good evidence of how the Frankish kings tried, in practical terms, to keep their vast empire under control.”[1] While Wickham does a fine job of introducing Charlemagne’s significance in a broad context, he cannot cover the in-depth history of this Carolingian ruler. Many other historians have wrestled with the seeming contradictions of Charlemagne's image, displaying him as a product of his historical context. Charlemagne was an influential military and political leader following the legacy of the Roman empire and Charlemagne was a man who valued Christianity and the development of intellectual culture. To expand on Wickham’s work, this essay relies on many Carolingian scholars. Janet Nelson, Rosamond McKitterick, Jennifer Davis, and Eric Goldberg provide vital new scholarship on Charlemagne and the impact of his life. Broadening the narrative of Charlemagne’s life exposes the way in which his multifaceted reputation fits harmoniously together.

Charlemagne was the epitome of what a Frankish man wanted to be. He lived 65 years, a long life in his day, and was described by his biographer Einhard (770-840) as being “large and strong, and of lofty stature, though not disproportionately tall…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."[2] Einhard could have been exaggerating since most of his writing relied on remembering his own experiences as a servant to Charlemagne late in his reign or reflecting on stories about the king. Einhard's reporting could also be faulty since he was writing under the reign of Charlemagne's son, Louis. However, it is clear that Charlemagne lived with vitality. He fathered at least 19 children and outlived each of his three wives. He had at least nine sexual partners, and he lived to see 11 grandchildren. Charlemagne appeared to value the creation of family. One example of this can be found through a poem he commissioned at the death of his infant daughter Hildegard. While this poem could have been written simply as a display of conventional sentiments at the loss of a child, it also can be interpreted as a true act of mourning for the child.[3] Here the complications and contradictions of Charlemagne's identity begin. Nelson reminds her readers that while Charlemagne cared for his family, he was simultaneously responsible for the murders of several of his own nephews, because they could have become challengers to his throne.

This violence does not seem too out of place when paralleled with Charlemagne's focus on territorial expansion. During the warmer months he spent most of his time traveling, and much of this movement was to fight in wars of expansion or suppress rebellion. By being present in the different regions of his kingdom Charlemagne was able to stabilize the politics and ensure that he knew about and could repress any challenge to his authority. Charlemagne's most prominent enemies were the Saxons. The revised version of the *Annales regni Francorum* memorializes the beheading of 4,500 Saxons in Verden in 782 on a single day at the command of Charlemagne. This story is told in celebration of Charlemagne's decision and emphasizes the king's personal participation in the event. Historian Rosamond McKitterick explains that "the Reviser was a wholehearted admirer of Charlemagne, even of his ruthlessness when dealing with rebellions."[4] Charlemagne would end up fighting the Saxons for over thirty years because the Saxons were not a united group to be conquered as a whole. They were an ethnic people group who attacked in smaller independent units, which meant Charlemagne had to defeat each group one at a time. As Charlemagne traveled throughout his kingdom, he was able to maintain a sense of stability and political control which harkened back to the ideal of the Roman Empire. Another reason for Charlemagne's harsh treatment specifically of the Saxons was their disagreement over religious belief. Charlemagne established monasteries and left missionaries everywhere he conquered, so that the people would become subjugated through both military and spiritual means. Those who rebelled against his forced conversions were severely disciplined. As a king 'crowned by God' and given legitimacy by 'the grace of God,' Charlemagne had to either convert pagans to Christianity or take over their lands to ensure that they were stewarded by a God ordained leader. This did not leave room for tolerance and mercy towards those who rejected Christianity.

As a God appointed leader Charlemagne wanted to lead a stable and well-organized empire, paralleling the steady and orderly nature of the Roman Empire. Wickham begins his foundational explanation by stating that the "mission [the Carolingian kings] had was largely seen as moral, even theological, with imperatives which had old roots…, and political procedures which were often almost as old—they were just trying to do it *right*."[5] One of the ways Charlemagne employed to develop his nation was by the use of capitularies, documents which the Carolingians used to legislate their territories. The distinctive quality in Charlemagne's capitularies is that they intertwine both secular and religious commands. The significance of these capitularies goes beyond their connection of secular and religious; they are important because they were written documents. These ordinances were meant to be delivered kingdom wide, which means that literacy had to be increasing as Charlemagne expanded his lands. To make this written communication effective Charlemagne demanded that language be structured in a coordinated grammar system and he sponsored the increased in educational opportunities. He managed to kill two birds with one stone during his conquests. He built monasteries out of piety, and to establish a place for the education of those needed to govern the conquered region. Historian McKitterick expands on Wickham's work by explaining that "the written word itself became an essential element of royal administration, law, education and religious expression in the course of Charlamagne's reign. Literacy was both required and rewarded." And the "cultivation and possession of literate skills were badges of belonging to Charlemagne's greatly expanded Frankish world."[6]Additionally, Nelson points out that the Saxon culture was not a literate one; therefore, the use of the written word in Charlemagne's reign was also an example of Frankish superiority.[7]

As he conquered land Charlemagne did not destroy entirely the local structure of government. To do so would require more personnel, money, and strength from Charlemagne's own supply. Charlemagne combined domination and the fostering of loyalty within his own followers through education. He encouraged those who wanted a position of leadership to become educated. In 784 Charlemagne sent a letter to one of his senior church leaders emphasizing the importance for people to become educated in order to please God.[8] Wickham's larger narrative points out that it didn't just please God to become literate, but education also pleased Charlemagne. As he established extensions of his kingdom, he introduced written communication which allowed him to lead a political system that relied on both oral and literate communication, maintain the superiority of the Franks, and increase the emphasis on the intellectual understanding of Frankish leaders.

Nelson recognizes that kingship in the medieval era was not a position of absolute power, but a position of constant negotiation. The king had to balance the demands of church leaders, his own nobles, and the customs of the people he ruled all while attempting to maintain the image of being incontestable. Charlemagne may have been appointed by God, but he ruled fickle people. The added complication for Charlemagne's kingdom was that he ruled over free men. The Frankish kingdom was not built on the backs of slaves but on the lives of men who had sworn devotion to the king. To manage this issue Charlemagne required that every free man swear an oath of allegiance to the king. The *fideles*, or faithful men, the king thought of as his, but they also thought of the king as theirs. They presented their complaints and disagreements to the king. This was especially the case with the assemblies. In this version of a senate, Frankish leaders could debate and argue against ideas they disagreed with. It was important for Charlemagne, and subsequently all Carolingian kings, to settle the argument with the final decision. When a king was no longer able to decisively resolve the argument, he was in danger of losing his influence.[9] Nelson argues that it was important to understand that Charlemagne justified his position by the divine selection of God, and *consensus fidelium*, or the consensus of the faithful men.[10] Balancing act of wills between the king and his followers requires that Charlemagne had to have been an effective leader and coordinator of his followers.

His leadership was aided by his physical fitness and obvious masculinity. Einhard describes Charlemagne as physically capable. Nelson points out that not only was he capable in battle and bed, but he also exhibited his strength and aristocratic position through hunting. "For the hunt was an exercise in, and a demonstration of, the virtues of collaboration. The aristocracy who hunted with the king shared his favour, his sport, his military training and his largess."[11] Hunting became a source of manly pride for all the Franks. An ambassador from Charlemagne was sent to Harun al-Rashid of the Abbasid Caliphate. The Frankish embassy successfully hunted and slayed a lion after being challenged by the Caliph. Harun al-Rashid responded to the victory of the Franks saying, “now I know that the things I have heard about my brother Charlemagne are true: that through constant hunting and exercising his body and mind with untiring energy, he has grown accustomed to conquering everything under heaven!”[12] This story, true or not, reveals the intertwining of loyalty, masculinity, and military success into the activity of hunting. The activity of hunting an animal to display prowess easily parallels the obsession that the Carolingians had with military conquest, but it does not explain the connection that Charlemagne’s manliness had with his Christian commitments.

Charlemagne collaborated in the cultivation of his own image. “Charles colluded in the construction of his own story, thus making his biography in part an illusion,”[13] explains Nelson. She also describes the narrative of Charlemagne as being distant and yet close. This problematizes Einhard’s title for Charlemagne, “the Father of Europe,” since *Vita Karoli* was written as a celebration of Charlemagne’s life, and as a way of legitimizing Louis the Pious as his rightful heir. Einhard also used the writing of *Vita Karoli* to recommend himself to Louis the Pious and win his favor. In Einhard’s narrative, it was better to risk inaccuracies than to challenge the success of the Carolingian family line.

Adding to the complications over Charlemagne’s public image are the events of Christmas Day 800, when Pope Leo III crowned king Charles “*augustus*, the God-crowned great and pacific emperor of the Romans.”[14] His life at this point had already reached heroic proportions. He had supported the beginnings of the French Crusades, conquered much of central Europe, and rescued the pope, reinstating him as religious leader of Rome. This brutal warlord built his reputation on his military feats, and yet he balanced these violent acts with support of

Christian morality and educational efforts. This mix of Christianity and education were actually quite effective tools to use in conquering territories long term. Violence won the land; faith and intellectual development won the minds of the local leaders.

Nelson reveals that in the public persona Charlemagne constructed nothing culturally clashed. Being the king came with the expectation that he defeat all potential competition. While protecting his own family it was acceptable for him to kill his nephews, the sons of Carloman I, Charlemagne's brother and co-ruler 768-771. Charlemagne could claim to rule with justice because he behead 4,500 Saxons who refused to convert to Christianity. He valued the written word, and according to Einhard he was especially fond of Augustine's book *The City of God*. However, Charlemagne could not write himself. To that effect Einhard wrote, "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 effort in due season, but late in life, they met with ill success."[15] Charlemagne managed to create in himself a mix of civilized Christian and barbaric warlord making him a successful leader in his own context, but many states and leaders after him were influenced by the exaggerated account of his carefully crafted image.

Historian Jennifer Davis challenges the aggrandized image of Charlemagne writing, "if anything, too much is attributed to Charlemagne, who is often held personally responsible for everything that occurred in his realm during his rule."[16] Nelson acknowledges this by choosing to regularly refer to Charlemagne simply as Charles, as the names Charles the Great, *Karl der Große*, *Char-le-magne* reflect a biased viewpoint of Charles as a 'Great Man.' Wickham however doesn't acknowledge the humbling of Charlemagne's legacy in his succinct commentary on the Carolingians. Instead, he redirects analysis of Charlemagne by noting that his image had “seventy years after his death, become encapsulated in this idea of vigilance and surveillance…The Carolingian imperial system relied on knowledge and communication, and on the belief that the emperor could potentially see everything.”[17] Wickham uses this remark to support his overarching argument that the Carolingians aimed to emulate Rome. However, in a more focused study of Charlemagne this observation makes an important historical point that even if Charlemagne did not actually do all that was attributed to him, he still deeply impacted the forming of the idea that medieval rulership is God-like and in a sense God ordained. Charlemagne does not deserve the legendary history traditionally passed down. Nevertheless, his perceived vigilance contributed to the creation of his legendary status.

Wickham identifies that Charlemagne was elevated to divine status because he guided the morality of the Franks, but Charlemagne also was memorialized for his great military successes. The wars that Charlemagne led were not glorious and full of chivalrous feats; they were bloody, destructive, and were marked by either compulsory mass conversions or forced migration. He managed to keep his kingdom relatively stable by constantly being at war and living a long time. The constant fighting allowed Charlemagne to amass a significant amount of plunder and land to satisfy his *fideles* and to be recognized as a formidable leader in Europe. However, Jennifer Davis argues contrarily stating, “the ideology of empire so often associated with the Carolingians has little to do with Charlemagne, whose empire was much more profoundly shaped by immediate political concerns rather than deliberately articulated visions of empire.”[18] This bloody and pious leader stands out from the rest of the Carolingian dynasty, for he accomplished much and did it with great energy. Yet to accurately define who Charlemagne was remains an incredible challenge. There are strains of the Carolingians mirroring Roman tactic in governance, but there is so much more to the rule of Charlemagne than that one observation. Nelson concludes her substantial work of scholarship on Charlemagne by humbly asserting “I have not found him—that would be ridiculously too much to hope for. But perhaps I have got nearer to him–and encouraged generations of historians to get nearer still.”[19] While Wickham is able to introduce many of the complexities of Charlemagne, such as his faith, his military prowess, his interest in intellectual development and his complicated family relations, there remains the question of how far simplification can go before it becomes overly general or potentially altogether incorrect. It is vital that historians remain mindful of the overview of history without oversimplifying the people of the past, but there is beauty in the complexity of studying a challenging historical figure such as Charlemagne.

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[1] Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 68.

[2] Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), 50.

[3] Janet Nelson, *King and Emperor: A New Life of Charlemagne*, (Oakland: University of California, 2019), 30.

[4] Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of the European Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 30-31.

[5] Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 61.

[6] McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of the European Identity*, 320.

[7] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 113.

[8] Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 71.

[9] Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 67.

[10] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 2.

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[11] Eric Goldberg, *In the Manner of the Franks: Hunting Kingship and Masculinity in Early Medieval Europe,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 7.

[12] Goldberg, *In the Manner of the Franks*, 1.

[13] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 3.

[14] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 382.

[15] Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 54.

[16] Jennifer R. Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 22.

[17] Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, 75.

[18] Jennifer R. Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 39.

[19] Nelson, *King and Emperor*, 493.

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