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THE LIFE OF  
CHARLEMAGNE

by  
EINHARD

With a Foreword by Sidney Painter

149

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## FOREWORD

by SIDNEY PAINTER

CHARLEMAGNE or Charles the Great who is counted as Charles I in the conventional lists of kings of France was one of the truly imposing figures of history. At the height of his power he ruled all the Christian lands of Western Europe except the British Isles and southern Italy and Sicily under the titles of king of the Franks and the Lombards and Roman emperor. He held this vast realm in a grip of iron and cowed its foes on every frontier. He also initiated and encouraged a revival of learning which is sometimes called the Carolingian Renaissance. While this was a brief flash of light in a dark age, it left sparks which made the succeeding period less gloomy and supplied the beginnings of a permanent revival in the twelfth century.

In order to understand the magnitude of Charlemagne's achievement it is necessary to know something of the world into which he

was born. In the fifth and sixth centuries after Christ, Germanic invaders overran the western provinces of the Roman Empire. In the year 700 most of England was ruled by a number of Anglo-Saxon kings, Spain by Visigothic monarchs, and northern and central Italy by the kings of the Lombards. The lands covered today by France and Belgium and the part of Germany known in the Middle Ages as Franconia formed the Frankish state ruled by the kings of the Merovingian line. In 711 Moslems from North Africa overwhelmed the Visigothic kingdom and occupied Spain. Along the eastern frontier of the Frankish state were such Germanic peoples as the Saxons and Bavarians. The plains of the Danube Valley were occupied by a Turkish people called Avars. Southern Italy, Sicily, and a few isolated districts such as Rome and Ravenna recognized the sovereignty of the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople, the successor to the Roman emperors.

Roman civilization had gradually disappeared under the rule of the Germanic kings. Except for Ireland where a few monks still cherished the ancient learning and Northumbria where both Irish and Roman missionaries had fostered a brief revival, Western Europe knew little of bare literacy and practically

nothing of real learning. In the Frankish state even the bishops were barely literate.

The economic system of the Roman Empire had also decayed. The Germanic kings had no interest in keeping up roads and bridges and less in policing the trade routes. Overland trade had largely disappeared. The Mediterranean which had formed the heart of the Roman system of communications was harassed by Moslem fleets. As trade declined, the circulation of money grew less and less. By 700 Western Europe was essentially a region of localized agricultural economy. The farmer raised his own raw material and made the crude goods his family needed. The nobles lived on the rents collected from men who farmed their land.

In 700 the Merovingian state was weak and disorganized. The kings were mere figureheads, and the land was ruled by cliques of nobles who fought each other fiercely for power. Its armies were half-armed mobs of little effectiveness in war. While the realm was officially Christian and kings and nobles made generous gifts to churches and monasteries, the clergy were hard to distinguish in life and thought from the secular lords. Christian ethics had as yet had little effect on the ways of the Germans.

Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel, was the head of a victorious noble group. As mayor of the palace, or as he usually called himself *dux* or leader of the Franks, he organized an effective military force by seizing church lands and using them to support soldiers who would serve him as heavily armed cavalry. He repulsed a Moslem invasion and conquered part of Saxony. His successor, Pepin, reorganized the Frankish church with the aid of the great Anglo-Saxon missionary, St. Boniface of Crediton. Pepin removed the last Merovingian king and was himself crowned king, first by St. Boniface and later by Pope Stephen. He drove the Lombards from the vicinity of Rome and gave the government of that region to the pope. This was the origin of the later states of the Church.

Einhard's biography will tell you what Charlemagne accomplished, but it is important to remember the difficulties he faced which Einhard does not mention because he took them for granted. Charlemagne had no revenue in money. He and his court lived on the produce of the royal estates. He supported his officials and his cavalry by giving them land and the labor to farm it. The rest of his army was a general levy of infantry from his subjects. How he succeeded in mustering large

armies at distant frontiers and supplying them during long and strenuous campaigns is almost incomprehensible. Just as difficult to understand is how he procured the obedience of his officials scattered over his vast realm. The only possible answer seems to be that he was a man of amazing ability and force of character. We do not need Einhard to show us that Charlemagne was a great man—the chronicles of his reign and the official documents which are still preserved show that. But Einhard gives us a picture of the man and his way of life.

Einhard was born in the ancient Frankish homeland in the valley of the River Main about 775. He was brought up in the monastery of Fulda, which was the chief center of learning in the Frankish lands. In 791 or 792 his abbot persuaded Charlemagne to take him into his court. Early in his reign Charlemagne had gathered men of learning about him and established a palace school headed by a Northumbrian scholar named Alcuin. Soon after Einhard's arrival Alcuin retired to a monastery near Tours. When in 799 Charlemagne asked Alcuin a question about the classics, he told him to consult Einhard. Although Einhard clearly was on intimate terms with Charlemagne and carried out a number of errands

for him on affairs of state, he never achieved high office during his reign. But after Charlemagne's death in 814 his son and successor Louis the Pious made Einhard his private secretary and loaded him with honors and benefices. He retired from court in 828, when the quarrels between Louis and his sons grew acute, and lived in a quiet retreat until 840.

Einhard wrote a number of works, but his *Vita Caroli Magni* or *Life of Charlemagne* is by far the most interesting. It was written between 817 and 836, probably between 817 and 830. Einhard made extensive use of the chronicles known as the *annales royales*, which furnished his basic material on Charlemagne's campaigns and political activities. He also consulted works by some of his colleagues in the palace school and documents in the royal archives to which he had access as secretary of Louis the Pious. While he made a number of mistakes in interpreting this material, on the whole his work appears accurate when compared with other sources. Finally, he drew on his own memory of Charlemagne, his character, and his way of life. To the historian this is his great contribution.

When Einhard undertook the task of writing a biography of his patron, he was faced

with a serious problem. How did one write a biography? The only models being produced by his contemporaries were lives of saints, and they would hardly serve his purpose. Hence he turned to one of the few classical works available, *De Vita Caesarum*, the *Lives of the Caesars* by the Roman historian Suetonius. He used particularly the biography of Augustus. From this work he took the general form and organization of his work. He also borrowed many descriptive phrases. Some scholars have charged that he used expressions of Suetonius even when they did not really apply to Charlemagne and so distorted his result. The best recent opinion, however, holds that he used Suetonius wisely as a guide and copied only phrases that were appropriate.

Einhard was obviously writing to honor Charlemagne. He clearly passes over delicately various details he considered embarrassing, such as the morals of the king's daughters. Nevertheless, his account has the ring of truth. The Charlemagne he describes could have done what we know he actually did. The biography was immensely popular. Some eighty manuscripts still survive and a number of these were produced in the ninth and tenth centuries. This fame was well deserved. Ein-

hard wrote the first medieval biography of a lay figure, and his subject was the greatest man of the age whose memory was revered in both history and legend throughout the Middle Ages.

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THE LIFE  
OF THE EMPEROR CHARLES

1. The Merovingian family, from which the Franks used to choose their kings, is commonly said to have lasted until the time of Childeric,<sup>1</sup> who was deposed, shaved, and thrust into the cloister by command of the Roman Pontiff Stephen.<sup>2</sup> But although, to all outward appearance, it ended with him, it had long since been devoid of vital strength, and conspicuous only from bearing the empty epithet Royal; the real power and authority in the kingdom lay in the hands of the chief officer of the court, the so-called Mayor of the Palace, and he was at the head of affairs. There was nothing left the King to do but to be content with his name of King, his flowing hair, and long beard,<sup>3</sup> to sit on his throne and play the ruler, to give ear to the ambassadors that came from all quarters, and to dismiss them, as if on his own responsibility, in words that were, in fact, sug-

751-52

(5)

gested to him, or even imposed upon him. He had nothing that he could call his own beyond this vain title of King and the precarious support allowed by the Mayor of the Palace in his discretion, except a single country seat, that brought him but a very small income. There was a dwelling house upon this, and a small number of servants attached to it, sufficient to perform the necessary offices. When he had to go abroad, he used to ride in a cart, drawn by a yoke of oxen,<sup>4</sup> driven, peasant-fashion, by a ploughman; he rode in this way to the palace and to the general assembly of the people, that met once a year for the welfare of the kingdom, and he returned him in like manner. The Mayor of the Palace took charge of the government and of everything that had to be planned or executed at home or abroad.

II. At the time of Childeric's deposition, Pepin, the father of King Charles, held this office of Mayor of the Palace, one might almost say, by hereditary right; for Pepin's father, Charles, had received it at the hands of his father, Pepin, and filled it with distinction. It was this Charles that crushed the tyrants who claimed to rule the whole Frank land as their own, and that utterly routed the Saracens, when they attempted the conquest of Gaul, in two great battles—one in Aquitania, near the

715-41

town of Poitiers, and the other on the River Berre,<sup>5</sup> near Narbonne—and compelled them to return to Spain. This honor was usually conferred by the people only upon men eminent from their illustrious birth and ample wealth. For some years, ostensibly under King Childeric, Pepin, the father of King Charles, shared the duties inherited from his father and grandfather most amicably with his brother, Carloman. The latter, then, for reasons unknown, renounced the heavy cares of an earthly crown and retired to Rome. Here he exchanged his worldly garb for a cowl, and built a monastery on Mt. Oreste, near the Church of St. Sylvester, where he enjoyed for several years the seclusion that he desired, in company with certain others who had the same object in view. But so many distinguished Franks made the pilgrimage to Rome to fulfill their vows, and insisted upon paying their respects to him, as their former lord, on the way, that the repose which he so much loved was broken by these frequent visits, and he was driven to change his abode. Accordingly, when he found that his plans were frustrated by his many visitors, he abandoned the mountain, and withdrew to the Monastery of St. Benedict, on Monte Cassino, in the province of Samnium, and passed the rest

747

754

of his days there in the exercises of religion.

752-68  
 Sept. 24,  
 768  
 760-68  
 III. Pepin, however, was raised, by decree of the Roman Pontiff, from the rank of Mayor of the Palace to that of King, and ruled alone over the Franks for fifteen years or more.<sup>6</sup> He died of dropsy, in Paris, at the close of the Aquitanian war,<sup>7</sup> which he had waged with William, Duke of Aquitania, for nine successive years, and left two sons, Charles and Carloman, upon whom, by the grace of God, the succession devolved.

Oct. 9,  
 768  
 (5)  
 The Franks, in a general assembly of the people, made them both kings, on condition that they should divide the whole kingdom equally between them, Charles to take and rule the part that had belonged to their father, Pepin, and Carloman the part which their uncle, Carloman, had governed.<sup>8</sup> The conditions were accepted, and each entered into possession of the share of the kingdom that fell to him by this arrangement; but peace was only maintained between them with the greatest difficulty, because many of Carloman's party kept trying to disturb their good understanding, and there were some even who plotted to involve them in a war with each other. The event, however, showed the danger to have been rather imaginary than real, for at Carloman's death his widow<sup>9</sup> fled to Italy with

her sons<sup>10</sup> and her principal adherents, and without reason, despite her husband's brother, put herself and her children under the protection of Desiderius, King of the Lombards. Carloman had succumbed to disease after ruling two years<sup>11</sup> in common with his brother, and at his death Charles was unanimously elected King of the Franks.

IV. It would be folly, I think, to write a word concerning Charles' birth<sup>12</sup> and infancy, or even his boyhood, for nothing has ever been written on the subject, and there is no one alive now who can give information of it. Accordingly, I have determined to pass that by as unknown, and to proceed at once to treat of his character, his deeds, and such other facts of his life as are worth telling and setting forth, and shall first give an account of his deeds at home and abroad, then of his character and pursuits, and lastly of his administration and death, omitting nothing worth knowing or necessary to know.

v. His first undertaking in a military way was the Aquitanian war,<sup>13</sup> begun by his father, but not brought to a close; and because he thought that it could be readily carried through, he took it up while his brother was yet alive, calling upon him to render aid. The campaign once opened, he conducted it with

Dec. 4,  
 771

769

compensated for these great inconveniences by the praises of his generosity and the reward of high renown.

xxii. 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 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

5875



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.

xxiii. 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 feasts 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,<sup>59</sup> the second to gratify Leo,<sup>60</sup> Hadrian's successor. On great feasts 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.

xxiv. 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; but he could not easily abstain from food, and often complained that fasts injured his health. He very rarely gave entertainments, only on great feasts, and then to large numbers of people. His meals ordinarily consisted of four courses, not counting the roast, which his huntsmen used to bring in on the spit; he was more fond of this than of any other dish. While at table, he listened to reading or music. The subjects of the readings were the stories and deeds of olden time: he was fond, too, of St. Augustine's books, and especially of the one entitled "The City of God." He was so moderate in the use of wine and all sorts of drink that he rarely allowed himself more than three cups in the course of a meal. In summer,

after the midday meal, he would eat some fruit, drain a single cup, put off his clothes and shoes, just as he did for the night, and rest for two or three hours. He was in the habit of awaking and rising from bed four or five times during the night. While he was dressing and putting on his shoes, he not only gave audience to his friends, but if the Count of the Palace told him of any suit in which his judgment was necessary, he had the parties brought before him forthwith, took cognizance of the case, and gave his decision, just as if he were sitting on the judgment seat. This was not the only business that he transacted at this time, but he performed any duty of the day whatever, whether he had to attend to the matter himself, or to give commands concerning it to his officers.

xxv. 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,<sup>61</sup> at that time an aged man. Another deacon, Albin of Britain, surnamed Alcuin,<sup>62</sup> 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.

xxvi. 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,<sup>63</sup> for he could not find such as were suitable elsewhere. He was

a constant worshipper at this church as long as his health permitted, going morning and evening, even after nightfall, besides attending mass; and he took care that all the services there conducted should be administered with the utmost possible propriety, very often warning the sextons not to let any improper or unclean thing be brought into the building or remain in it. He provided it with a great number of sacred vessels of gold and silver and with such a quantity of clerical robes that not even the doorkeepers who fill the humblest office in the church were obliged to wear their everyday clothes when in the exercise of their duties. He was at great pains to improve the church reading and psalmody, for he was well skilled in both, although he neither read in public nor sang, except in a low tone and with others.

xxvii. He was very forward in succoring the poor, and in that 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

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. He likewise designated the winds by twelve appropriate names; there were hardly more than four distinctive ones in use before. He called January, Wintarmanoth;<sup>68</sup> February, Hornung;<sup>69</sup> March, Lentzinmanoth;<sup>70</sup> April, Ostarmanoth;<sup>71</sup> May, Winnemanoth;<sup>72</sup> June, Brachmanoth;<sup>73</sup> July, Heuvimanoth;<sup>74</sup> August, Aranmanoth;<sup>75</sup> September, Witumanoth;<sup>76</sup> October, Windumemanoth;<sup>77</sup> November, Herbistmanoth;<sup>78</sup> December, Heilagmanoth.<sup>79</sup> He styled the winds as follows; Subsolanus, Ostroniwint; Eurus, Ostsundroni; Euroauster, Sundostroni; Auster, Sundroni; Austro-Africus, Sundwestroni; Africus, Westsundroni; Zephyrus, Westroni; Caurus, Westnordroni; Circius, Nordwestroni; Septentrio, Nordroni; Aquilo, Nordostroni; Vulturinus, Ostnordroni.<sup>80</sup>

xxx. 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,

813

19

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<sup>81</sup> and the forty-seventh of his reign.

Nov. 1,  
813Jan. 22,  
814Jan. 28,  
814

xxxI. His body was washed and cared for in the usual manner, and was then carried to the church, and interred amid the greatest lamentations of all the people. There was some question at first where to lay him, because in his lifetime he had given no directions as to his burial; but at length all agreed that he could nowhere be more honorably entombed than in the very basilica that he had built in the town at his own expense, for love of God and our Lord Jesus Christ, and in honor of the Holy and Eternal Virgin, His Mother. He was buried there the same day that he died, and a gilded arch was erected above his tomb with his image and an inscription. The words of the inscription were as follows: "In this tomb lies the body of Charles, the Great and Orthodox Emperor, who gloriously extended the kingdom of the Franks, and reigned prosperously for forty-seven years.<sup>82</sup> He died at the age of seventy, in the year of our Lord 814, the 7th Indiction, on the 28th day of January."

xxxII. Very many omens had portended his approaching end, a fact that he had recognized as well as others. Eclipses both of the sun and moon were very frequent during the last three years of his life, and a black spot was visible on the sun for the space of seven days. The gallery between the basilica and the palace,

which he had built at great pains and labor, fell in sudden ruin to the ground on the day of the Ascension of our Lord. The wooden bridge over the Rhine at Mayence, which he had caused to be constructed with admirable skill, at the cost of ten years' hard work, so that it seemed as if it might last forever, was so completely consumed in three hours by an accidental fire that not a single splinter of it was left, except what was under water. Moreover, one day in his last campaign into Saxony against Godfred, King of the Danes, Charles himself saw a ball of fire fall suddenly from the heavens with a great light, just as he was leaving camp before sunrise to set out on the march. It rushed across the clear sky from right to left, and everybody was wondering what was the meaning of the sign, when the horse which he was riding gave a sudden plunge, head foremost, and fell, and threw him to the ground so heavily that his cloak buckle was broken and his sword belt shattered; and after his servants had hastened to him and relieved him of his arms, he could not rise without their assistance. He happened to have a javelin in his hand when he was thrown, and this was struck from his grasp with such force that it was found lying at a distance of twenty feet or more from the spot. Again, the palace at Aix-

*May, 813*

*810*

*1/2  
Augustus  
in Saxony  
x  
618-1*

*(12)*