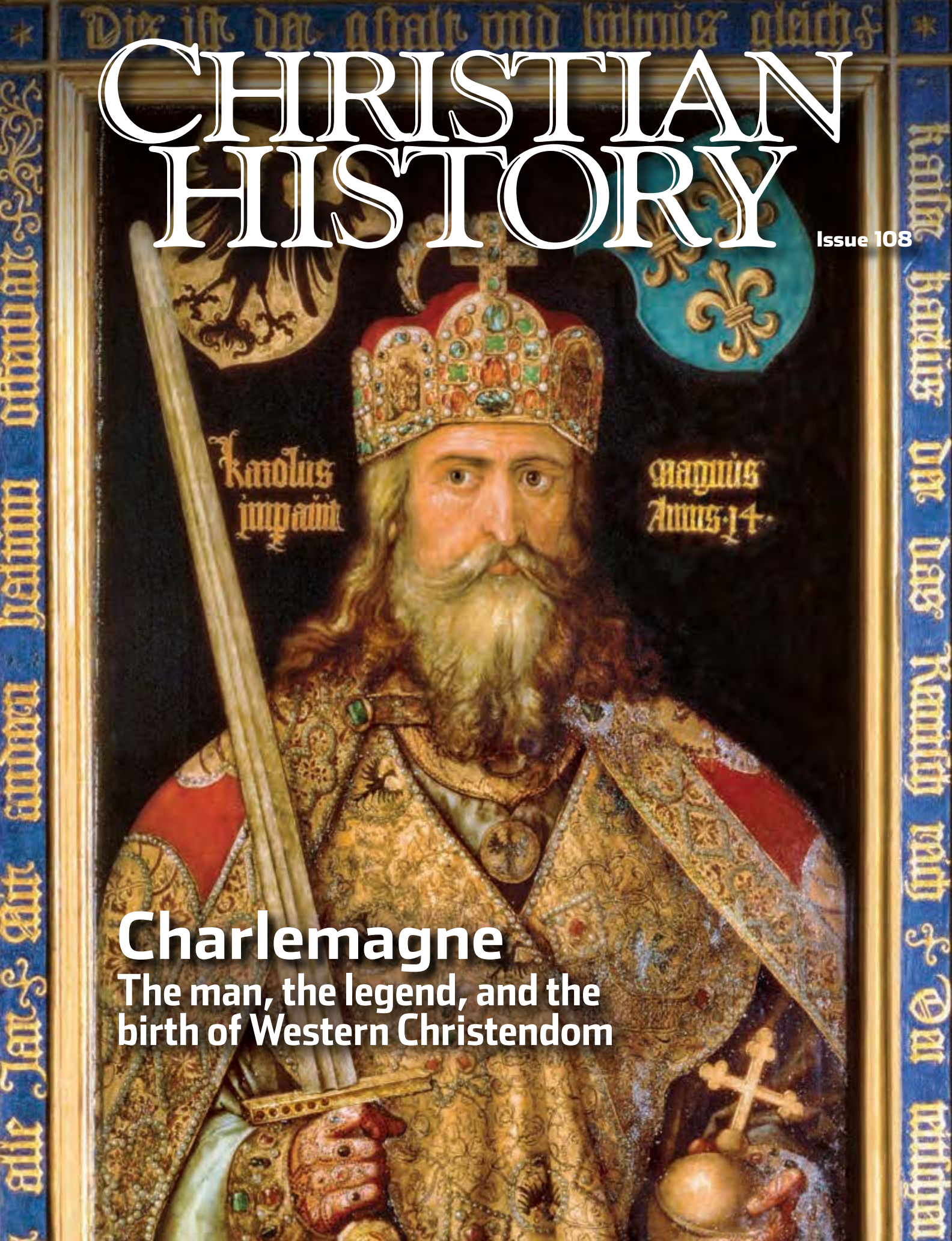
CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Issue 108



Charlemagne

The man, the legend, and the birth of Western Christendom

Constitues eos principes super omnem terram;

CHECKMATE *Far left:* This 11th-c. chess piece may allude to Charlemagne's elephant.

"LISTEN UP, BOY" *Left:* Charlemagne instructs his son Pippin.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN *Above:* Charlemagne and his soldiers ride to battle.

Did you know?

LIFE IN CHARLEMAGNE'S WORLD

CHARLES, LOUIS, CHARLES, LOUIS...

In a world without last names, famous people were known by their nicknames. Charlemagne, originally called Charles or Karl, became "Charles the Great": "Carolus Magnus" in Latin and "Charles le Magne" in Old French. His father was called Pepin (or Pippin) the Short, and his mother, Bertrada, "Bigfoot Bertha." Presumably she was tall—or at least taller than Pepin!

One of Charlemagne's illegitimate sons was "Pippin the Hunchback," his legitimate son Louis (who later inherited the empire) was "Louis the Pious" due to his reputation for devoutness, and one of Louis's brothers was "Charles the Younger." Charlemagne's grandchildren fared worse: "Charles the Bald," "Louis the Stammerer," "Charles the Child," and "Lothar the Lame" were among them. The empire finally collapsed under Charlemagne's great-grandson "Charles the Fat."

CATCHING MICE

Charlemagne encouraged scholarship in monasteries throughout his empire. While monks preserved and copied manuscripts, they sometimes voiced complaints and thoughts in the margins: the heat, the cold, the fact that their pens didn't work, the disruption of nearby battles, and even the singing of birds outside the windows.

One Irish monk wrote a whole poem about his cat on a copy of Paul's epistles. It reads in part: "I and Pangur Bán, my cat / 'Tis a like task we are at; / Hunting mice is his delight / Hunting words I sit all night. . . . Practice every day has made / Pangur perfect in his trade; / I get wisdom day and night / Turning darkness into light" (translated by Robin Flower).

LUNCH IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES...

. . . would have been bread, certainly; meat, probably (although if you were a peasant, maybe not); and ale, without a doubt. It would have been seasoned with many herbs but few spices and cooked over a large open fire in the middle of your house.

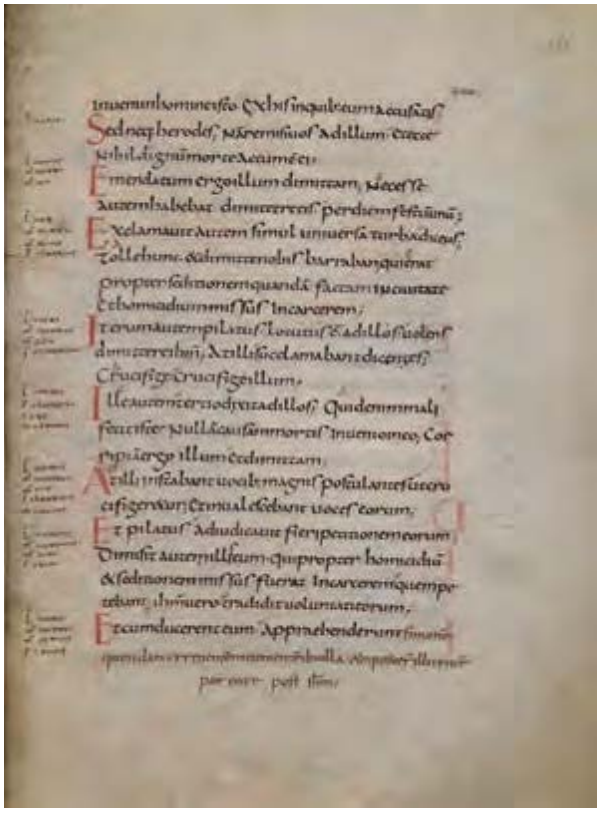
You would have eaten it from wooden plates, mostly with your hands, and finished up the meal with a generous helping of fruit. (Read more about what people of Charlemagne's day ate, wore, and did in "How they feasted and fasted," pp. 34–35).

I WANT AN ELEPHANT FOR CHRISTMAS

In 797 Charlemagne sent ambassadors to the ruler of the Arab world, Harun al-Rashid ("Harun the Upright"), whose magnificent court at Baghdad was later memorialized in the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*. Charlemagne's delegation included two envoys and a Jewish interpreter named Isaac. Imagine everyone's surprise when Isaac returned five years later (the envoys, Lantifrid and Sigimund, had died en route) with a present from the caliph for Charlemagne—an elephant.

No one had seen an elephant in Europe for a thousand years, and they were the stuff of legend; it was as if someone today brought a unicorn to the president.

ELEPHANT CHESSMAN—*WIKIPEDIA* / SIREN-COM
CHARLEMAGNE AND SOLDIERS IN A WOODEN CARRIAGE—14TH CENTURY / BIBLIOTECAMARCIANA, VENICE, ITALY / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY
CHARLEMAGNE AND HIS SON PIPPIN ON THE THRONE—MINIATURE FROM CODEX OI2, FOLIO 154, VERSO, ITALY, 9TH CENTURY / DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY



CAROLINGIAN MINUSCULE—*WIKIPEDIA*
SWORD WITH SHEATH, SAID TO HAVE BELONGED TO CHARLEMAGNE (747–814) (GOLD SET WITH PRECIOUS STONES) / LOUVRE, PARIS, FRANCE / PETER WILLI / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

NINTH-CENTURY PENMANSHIP *Left:* "Carolingian minuscule" was much easier to read and write than previous scripts.

KINGLY BLADE *Right:* This French coronation sword is traditionally said to have been Charlemagne's.

The elephant caused a great sensation in Aachen, Charlemagne's capital, and became a tourist magnet. Called Abbu'l Abbas, it may have died in 810 on a war campaign near the Rhine. Harun's own annals do not mention the gift; Charlemagne's small and far-away kingdom was of little note to the famed Arab caliph.

MEET MY JOYFUL SWORD

Swords were serious business in the Middle Ages, and blacksmiths highly honored. Made from iron and carbon, a good sword could cost as much as three cows. Knights and rulers often named their swords. Charlemagne called his *Joyeuse*, "joyful." Many swords spawned whole legends. English king Edward the Confessor (reigned 1042–1066) supposedly wielded *Sword of Mercy*, and King Arthur's *Excalibur* even gave its name to a movie about the mythical ruler.

TODAYWEDON'TWRITELIKETHIS...

. . . because of advances in handwriting made in Charlemagne's court. At the palace school he encouraged (see "For the love of learning," pp. 24–29), students were taught a new style of writing later called "Carolingian minuscule." Spaces between words and lowercase letters became common—neither had been used before.

Handwriting was not the only thing taught at the school. Charlemagne and his advisors were very interested in the study of the Old Testament, and many took biblical names that they used in their correspondence with each other and in writing poetry. Charlemagne, naturally, was King David.

ARE WE THERE YET, DADDY?

Charlemagne had 17 children that we know of, both legitimate and illegitimate, and was married either four or five times (historians differ as to whether his first long-term partner was a wife or concubine). He liked to take his whole family with him on his travels and his sons on military campaigns. Travels were frequent until Charlemagne established a permanent capital for his empire at Aachen in the 790s.

Charlemagne refused to let any of his daughters marry, not wanting them to become political pawns, but he did not frown on affairs. One daughter, Bertrade (779–826), had a long-term relationship with one of Charlemagne's courtiers, Angilbert. Their son Nithard became a notable historian. Another, Rotrude (775–810), was betrothed as a child to Byzantine emperor Constantine VI. She never married him, nor her later lover the Count of Maine, and ended up as a nun in a convent where Charlemagne's sister Gisela was the abbess.

Editor's note

WHY DOES CHARLEMAGNE MATTER? Why devote an issue of *Christian History* to an eighth-century king of a tribe called the Franks, a king who never learned to write, liked food and drink almost as much as he liked conquest, and went through wives like they were going out of style?

Perhaps we should because that king also ruled over much of modern France and Germany; was crowned emperor of the west—the first such emperor since the fifth century—by the pope, in Rome, on Christmas Day 800; and proceeded to usher in a new western age of intensified Christian education and culture.

The empire Charlemagne founded did not outlive his great-grandsons. But the ideas he founded are living still. As he wedded Christian devotion to state power and the remains of the Roman Empire to the energetic conquering spirit of the Franks, something new was born—the idea of *Christendom*, a Christian nation unified under a Christian king, where church and state worked and prayed hand in hand. Those ripples swelled into tidal waves over the next thousand years, as rulers struggled to build Christian kingdoms across Europe and, eventually, in America as well.

CROSSES AND CROWNS

Charlemagne, despite his own inability to write, also presided over a revival of learning. The idea that Rome "fell" overnight and all its learning was lost is considerably overstated, as you will soon read. But it is undoubtedly true that under Charlemagne's direction, and that of scholars at his court and monasteries throughout his kingdom, many books were preserved, the level of literacy was raised, and a new handwriting was even invented. Later and more famous "renaissances," or revivals of learning, built on the foundation stones Charlemagne laid. Proponents of what eventually got named *the* Renaissance, in the fourteenth century, claimed they had single-handedly "discovered" classical Greek and Roman literature and labeled the millennium before their time as "Dark Ages." They were wrong.

Just as the articles for this issue were coming in from our team of authors, I happened to be traveling in the United Kingdom. There I drove along Hadrian's Wall, which marked the northern boundary of the Roman Empire at its height. And there I stood on the floors of churches built in Charlemagne's day, and I bowed in wonder before stone crosses carved in those remote British outposts, even while he sat on his throne in Aachen (now a city in modern Germany).

When the power of Rome's empire receded in the fourth and fifth centuries, several hundred years before Charlemagne, the power of the church in Europe remained—a complicated power of monastic holiness and fierce conquest, of profound learning in ornate palaces and priests struggling to read the Latin liturgy in tiny rural chapels. This issue tells the story of an emperor and a people trying to make sense of who they were before God and who they were as a kingdom. Those are questions that have not gone away. They trouble us, and our nations, still. Read this story, and you will see that we are all still living in Charlemagne's shadow.

Jennifer Woodruff Tait
Managing editor
Christian History

Find *Christian History* on the Internet at www.christianhistorymagazine.org and on Facebook as ChristianHistoryMagazine.

Christian History thanks G. R. Evans, Timothy Johnson LaBarbera, and David Michelson for their assistance with portions of this issue.

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

CHARLEMAGNE AND HIS COURT—ENGRAVING FROM *THE GREAT CHRONICLE OF FRENCH KINGS* BY ROBERT GAGUIN, MANUSCRIPT, PARIS, FRANCE 1514 / DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / G. DAGLI ORTI / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY
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CHARLEMAGNE AND HIS PALADINS IN BATTLE AGAINST THE SARACENS—MINIATURE FROM *CHARLEMAGNE AND HIS PALADINS* (VELLUM), FRENCH SCHOOL (13TH CENTURY) / PRIVATE COLLECTION / INDEX / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

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The Dark Ages? Think again

CHARLEMAGNE'S KINGDOM AROSE OUT OF THE SCATTERED PIECES OF THE DECLINING ROMAN EMPIRE, BUT ALSO OUT OF A VIBRANT CHRISTIAN CULTURE

Edwin Woodruff Tait

THE ROMAN EMPIRE in the second century A.D. stretched from southern Scotland to present-day Iraq. It gleamed with painted marble, and its economy bustled vibrantly. While it maintained its ancient republican institutions in name, in reality strong emperors ruled. A third of the Italian population lived in cities, where local aristocrats paid for public works out of their own pockets as a civic duty and to build their own prestige.

But in the late second century, crisis came. Philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius left power to a son who was an unhinged spoiled brat. His murder touched off a civil war, won by the general Septimius Severus, who took power. But Severus's dynasty too went down in blood. The cycle repeated itself throughout the "terrible third century."

Military pressures built on the frontiers. In the east, a new Persian dynasty, the Sassanids, challenged Roman claims. In the west, Germanic Goths migrated from present-day Ukraine and invaded the Balkan Peninsula. Out-of-control inflation and the collapse of Rome's international trade networks shattered the economy.

Out of this crisis, a series of strong military emperors arose. They saw themselves as images of the gods from which all order and authority flowed. They separated military and civilian chains of command to decrease the power available to usurpers like those who had knocked off their predecessors. They passed laws binding people to the professions and land of their parents.

FROM OUTLAWS TO LEADERS

In previous centuries, Christians had been a marginal annoyance, just one among many dubious cults attracting the masses. But throughout the 200s Christians grew in numbers and influence. Under Diocletian (reigned 284–305), the only truly large-scale, deliberate, systematic persecution of Christians in the ancient world occurred. Constantine, his successor (reigned 306–337), was also concerned with order and unity. But he concluded that Christians, rather than being a threat to order, could hold the empire together by prayers, moral influence, and organization.

So Christianity became the empire's official religion, and the church took on a new role as the moral glue of society. Bishops functioned as spiritual advisors to emperors, and as judges and community leaders. The empire, in turn, helped build grand and beautiful church buildings. Sharp tensions arose between the apocalyptic, otherworldly claims of the church and its new role as a force of social order.

By 400 the empire looked very different than it had 200 years earlier. It was much less urban. Local leaders

GOTHS AND ROMANS—*WIKIPEDIA*

WHILE SOLDIERS FOUGHT... *Left:* A 3rd-c. Roman marble shows a battle between Romans and Goths.

...CHRISTIANS LABORED *Below:* A church protects sacred vessels during the sack of Rome (410). *Right:* Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) sent missionaries to convert pagans and Arians in northern Europe.

who had built public buildings and paid for elaborate games to entertain their people now faced financial hardship. Aristocrats retreated to live in leisure on their great estates. Taxes crushed middle and lower classes. Little distinction held between slaves and free, as rural lower classes worked the same estates year after year.

The burden of military service to guard the empire's vast frontiers was too great to be borne by this declining population. So Romans hired soldiers from Germanic tribes who lived along the Roman frontier. Romans regarded these soldiers as inferior, and the soldiers often responded with violence and extortion in return. The leader of one tribe, the Goths, even sacked Rome in 410 after Rome refused his demands.

"Barbarians" was a word Romans used for non-Romans. Many were invited into the empire as mercenaries to defend the frontier against other *barbarians.*

The eastern half of the empire, initially ravaged, managed to deflect these barbarians westward. The official date of the "fall" of the Roman Empire was 476, when Germanic warlord Odoacer overthrew boy emperor Romulus Augustulus (himself of barbarian origin). From 476 until Charlemagne's coronation in 800, no Roman emperor had his capital in the west.

But this seems more important to us than it did at the time. Emperors had not lived at Rome for some years. People didn't think the empire ceased to be united just because it had several rulers. Nor did they think of it as fallen because there was no longer an emperor in the west. The emperors living in "New Rome," the glorious Greek city built by Constantine and named Constantinople after him, would still rule in the east for nearly a thousand years.

Western authority now rested largely in the hands of barbarian warlords. Many had learned Roman ways and risen to high positions in the empire. But the sharp division between military and civilian authority structures segregated Germans and Romans. Germans were army, Romans civilians. In some territories laws forbade Romans to carry weapons. Germans held the power of the sword.

Germans brought a radically different culture. Roman society valued law and order, punishing crimes in the name of the sacred State. Germans valued personal dignity and honor, treating crime as a conflict between two people. In Germanic society, theft was punished severely, usually by amputation. Murder, on the other hand, often came from feuds between families. Executing the murderer only prolonged the feud. So instead a murderer paid *weregild*—monetary compensation to the family of the victim.

Roman society put all authority in a family in the hands of the oldest male. Germans distributed

SACK OF ROME—*WIKIPEDIA*
ST. GREGORY THE GREAT AND HIS DEACON ST. PETER, CODEX CASSINOIS, FROM THE *BIBLIA HEBRAICA* OF ST. GREGORY THE GREAT, 1022–35 (VELLUM), ITALIAN SCHOOL (11TH CENTURY) / ABBEY OF MONTE CASSINO, CASSINO, ITALY / ROGER-VIOLLET, PARIS / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

BAPTIZED KING *Left:* Clovis changed Western history by choosing Catholic over Arian Christianity.

DEFEATING SATAN *Below:* Inscribed on the 8th-c. Ruthwell Cross, the poem *The Dream of the Rood* describes Jesus' victory over death.

FOL.11R ST. REMIGIUS, BISHOP OF RHEIMS (C. 438–533) BAPTISING AND ANNOINTING CLOVIS I (465–511), KING OF THE FRANKS, FROM THE GRANDES CHRONIQUES DE FRANCE, 1375–79 (VELLUM) (DETAIL OF 192489), FRENCH SCHOOL (14TH CENTURY) / BIBLIOTHEQUE MUNICIPALE, CASTRES, FRANCE / GIRAUDON / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY
RUTHWELL CROSS— HUMPHREY BOLTON

property *among* a dead man's sons (and to a lesser extent daughters). Territorial boundaries shifted with each generation. Germanic rulers were surrounded not by official bureaucracy but by a band of warriors who had sworn personal loyalty (think *The Godfather*).

Cities continued to exist, but few people lived in them. Buildings crumbled and ruins were hauled away. A world of marble and concrete was replaced by a world of wattle and clay. Scattered settlements were

The Dark Ages were dark if standards of enlightenment involve large urban populations, sophisticated elites with leisure time, and powerful professional armies.

divided by forests roamed by wolves and wild boar. Power rested in the hands of warrior bands loyal to a leader who rewarded them with plunder.

This transition naturally appeared tragic later, and people labeled the time from the "fall" of Rome to the revival of urban society in the eleventh century the "Dark Ages." But in fact many things continued just as they had been. The professional Roman army, for all its impressive armor and discipline, had been corrupt: soldiers supplementing a meager income by extorting money from civilians. Now Germanic warriors did the extorting. Peasants already tied to the land by the decree of Roman emperors now worked for Germanic masters. The new world took root inside the withering shell of the old, and when the shell fell away, people barely noticed.

The primary source of continuity was the church, whose power remained based in Rome. Roman aristocrats furnished the western church with leadership. Steeped in classical culture and learning, with a strong sense of civic responsibility, they mediated between old and new. They spoke for the civilian Roman population to Germanic overlords, intervening in endless feuds among the new masters. Sixth-century bishop Gregory of Tours spent much time trying to keep members of the Frankish royal family from killing each other.

Initially, most Germanic tribes were Arians, who rejected the full divinity of Jesus. By 600 the Arian kingdoms collapsed or converted to Catholic Christianity. From the standpoint of the Catholic Church, pagan tribes were even more promising converts than Arian ones. In the fifth century Christian missionaries such as St. Patrick converted the Irish to Christianity, and the Irish sent out missionaries in turn. Around 600 Pope Gregory the Great sent the monk Augustine to England, where he established Canterbury as a Christian center.

AN ADVANCING TIDE

Typically, Christian missions began when Christian slaves or traders established a presence in a pagan country. (St. Patrick was initially taken to Ireland as a slave.) Pagan kings then married the daughters of

JESUS THE WARRIOR "Then the young hero (who was God almighty) / Got ready, resolute and strong in heart. / He climbed onto the lofty gallows-tree, / Bold in the sight of many watching men, When He intended to redeem mankind." (from *The Dream of the Rood*)

Christian rulers, linking themselves to Roman Christianity's economic and social prestige. With Christian queens came monks and priests, who began attracting converts. In time kings would usually agree to be baptized, followed by important warriors and, in some cases, nearly the entire population.

This initial conversion was often fragile and superficial. If a ruler with a different political agenda took the throne, or if a neighboring king launched a successful invasion, paganism might return for a time. But Christianity was like an incoming tide—it advanced and receded, but each wave came further than the one before.

With King Clovis (reigned 481–511) of the Frankish tribe, history turned a corner. Clovis, baptized in 496, chose to become Catholic rather than Arian. From Clovis on, Frankish kings—Charlemagne one day included—saw themselves as specially related to the bishops of Rome and the Catholic Church. But the relationship was rocky. The church disapproved of Frankish violence and refused to condone Frankish kings taking multiple wives (usually one at a time) and then divorcing them at will.

Meanwhile, another Christian force was arising: monasteries. Many monastics lived in uninhabited places as hermits. Others wandered the roads. But those who established communities—men and women joined by commitment to a common rule of life and the authority of an abbot or abbess—eventually transformed the medieval landscape most dramatically.

Benedict of Nursia (480–543) wrote the rule adopted by most western monastic communities. Like many western Christian leaders of the period, Benedict was a Roman aristocrat. He gave up his privileged lifestyle for radical asceticism, soon attracted followers, and founded the great monastery of Monte Cassino (in modern Italy), a center of learning and spirituality for centuries.

Benedict's *Rule* taught monks to seek union with God not through ecstatic experiences or extreme self-denial but through a disciplined routine of work, prayer, and study. Monasteries soon dotted the landscape, providing education, the protection of strong walls, and prayer and spiritual guidance—and preserving the scholarship of the Middle Ages. As they spread Christianity throughout western Europe, they also spread the use of Latin and Roman culture. But even as they did, they translated Christian concepts into Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic terms, where Jesus, as in the Old Saxon epic *Heliand*, became a lord and the disciples his warriors.

Alongside the monasteries, hermits remained. All over Europe, holy men and women lived by wells or on mountains, talked to birds and beasts, gave spiritual counsel, and brought fame to their homes both in life and in death.

When Charlemagne stepped onto this stage, the Christian Frankish kingdom he inherited had already ruled for longer than all of U.S. history. It was Roman, Germanic, and Christian; monastic and warrior; pagan and devout. Little did he know—though he might not have been unhappy—that this unique fusion would give Europe its shape for more than a thousand years to come.

Edwin Woodruff Tait is a contributing editor at Christian History.

CHRIST AS WARRIOR—WÜRTTEMBERGISCHEN LANDESBIBLIOTHEK

The man behind the empire

CHARLEMAGNE WAS A PARADOX: A WARRIOR WHO FOSTERED SCHOLARSHIP, A MAN CAPABLE OF RUTHLESS RULE AND DEVOUT PIETY

G. R. Evans

CHARLEMAGNE WAS TALL, handsome, and slightly overweight. He resisted the suggestion of his doctors that it might be better for his health if he ate less roast meat. He enjoyed hunting and riding. Bathing in the warm natural spa baths at Aachen was a special pleasure, which he shared in the Roman way with his entire entourage—and sometimes all his servants—until there might be 100 of them in the baths. He seems to have liked to win swimming races, and usually did.

He may have loved Roman baths, but he dressed like a Frank, in a shirt and trousers of linen with a tunic and a blue cloak, covered in winter with an outer garment of sable and otter fur. His sword was always at his side. Dressing was a social business. While strapping on his sandals, he would receive friends and supplicants and often determine a point of law, all while giving the servants orders for the day. He was good-humored and sociable—so sociable that his eagerness to entertain foreign visitors became expensive.

We know these things because one of his courtiers, Einhard, wrote his life story in 814, soon after Charlemagne's death. Einhard had watched the great man closely and knew him well. "I realized," he wrote, "that no one could describe better than me events in which I was involved and of which I was an eye-witness. I took careful notes at the time."

Einhard's own history illustrates the opportunities for social mobility in Charlemagne's age. Einhard had a classical education at the monastic school at Fulda (in modern central Germany). His parents sent him there, not to make him a monk, but to give him a good start in life. Recognizing Einhard's promise, the abbot of Fulda sent him off to be a civil servant at the court of Charlemagne—at that point merely the ruler of the Franks, though a wealthy and powerful one.

Einhard wrote a biography with a message. He had read the *Lives of the Caesars* by Suetonius, a biography of the Roman Empire's earliest rulers, and it was Einhard who helped create the legend that as a ruler Charlemagne was the "greatest of his time."

To the modern reader the story Einhard told seems contradictory. Here was a confessing, committed Christian ruler. He built a great church to the glory of God at Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle), ornate with gold, silver, and fine marble brought from Ravenna in Italy. He provided ceremonial vestments for everyone, from priests to doorkeepers. He gave generously to those in

PORTRAIT OF CHARLEMAGNE (742–814), KING OF FRANKS AND LOMBARDS AND EMPEROR OF HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE, STANDING WITH MODEL OF PALATINE CHAPEL—PAINTING BY SCHEUREN, 1825 / DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / A. DAGLI ORTI / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

BIG CHAPEL, BIGGER KING *Far left:* Charlemagne "holds" the church he built at Aachen, which became his permanent capital.

THE WORLD IN 600 A.D. *Above:* Europe at the time of the Merovingians (see p. 10).

RULING UNDER THE CROSS *Right:* This coin reads, "Charles, king of the Franks."

need at home and also to those abroad—in Egypt and Syria; Carthage, Alexandria, and Jerusalem. Yet most of his life was spent in expansive warfare, conquering and subduing his rivals and ruthlessly expanding the territory he controlled until he had made himself an empire with pretensions to rival Rome at its peak. The spoils of war allowed for his extravagant generosity to the needy.

Europe was no longer what it had been several centuries before under the Romans: governed by a centralized legal system and by educated provincial administrators, in an empire that stretched from the British Isles to the Middle East. Migrations from the east had first weakened and then wrecked those sophisticated governmental arrangements. Charlemagne and his Franks were part of this migration.

A once unified empire had become tribal, ruled by rival monarchs grabbing power and lands from one another in endless fighting, and increasingly multilingual as Latin faded from general use as a universal language. Europe was of very mixed religious beliefs—pagan, Arian Christian, and Catholic Christian. And the new religion of Islam, founded by the prophet Mohammed (c. 570–632) was making inroads through an active program of invasion. Muslims would hold North Africa and much of Spain until the late Middle Ages. When Charlemagne came to the throne in the late eighth century, they were dangerously close to capturing northern Europe and Italy.

CHARLEMAGNE THE EMPIRE-BUILDER

Where did Charlemagne fit in all this? Einhard began by explaining how the Franks, originally from the Rhine River valley and roughly the people who became the modern French, had previously chosen their rulers.

COIN—*WIKIPEDIA* / WWW.CGB.FR

CHARLES IN CHARGE *Left:* Charlemagne and his warriors wage one of their many campaigns. *Below:* Charlemagne sits in state at his court.

The founder of their line of kings, Merovech, was a semilegendary figure; his dynasty, vibrant at first, came to an end in the mid-eighth century after petering out into incompetence.

The last of the Merovingians sat on their thrones wearing their titles, and the long hair and beards that were a sign of royal birth, but the real power lay with the Mayors of the Palace. The mayors tended to represent the interests of factions of nobles rather than to act as servants to the king. The king might receive foreign ambassadors, but in reality he was merely speaking for the Mayors of the Palace, who in turn represented the wealthy nobles.

This figurehead monarchy could not survive in a violently changing Europe. Eventually the mayors became the kings. Charlemagne's father, Pepin the Short, deposed the Merovingians and became king of the Franks from 752 to 768. Pepin had a monastic-school education at St. Denis near Paris and experience serving as Mayor of the Palace.

Pepin divided the Frankish kingdom between Charlemagne and Charlemagne's brother Carloman (who died in 771). Charlemagne later gave power to several sons too. It was a useful device for discouraging attempts to seize power from a parent, and it helped to pin down conquered territories with a visible royal presence who represented the ultimate monarch. Einhard reported that Carloman was jealous and resentful, though Charlemagne showed exemplary patience and never retaliated.

Gangs of tribal leaders were now emerging as European "nobility," a concept, like "kingship," that had not had precedent in the government of the old Roman Empire.

TIRELESS FIGHTER

Einhard put warfare first in his story, detailing Charlemagne's campaigns to conquer territories (often baptizing conquered peoples in the process; see next page). Anyone traveling around continental Europe today is struck by the immense distances Charlemagne's empire eventually covered, as well as his success in fighting on so many fronts at once with the small armies of the time and against tribes that were likely to bounce back after initial defeats. In many ways, his battles transformed a powerful kingdom into an even more powerful empire.

Some wars Charlemagne inherited. First he fought in Aquitaine, to his south and west, following his grandfather and father. Then he was persuaded to fight against the Lombards (modern north Italy). This too was his father's war. At the beginning of the fifth century, the northern Italian city of Ravenna had become capital of the western Roman Empire, but the Lombards then invaded north Italy. Charlemagne's father arrived in Italy in 756 to drive the Lombards out and hand over the conquered lands to the pope.

This was an action of immense importance. It shifted the balance of power. It also gave rise to the papal claim

CHARLEMAGNE BATTLE—© BNF, DIST. RMN-GRAND PALAIS / ART RESOURCE, NY
CHARLEMAGNE AND HIS COURT—ENGRAVING FROM *THE GREAT CHRONICLE OF FRENCH KINGS* BY ROBERT GAGUIN, MANUSCRIPT, PARIS, FRANCE, 1514. / DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / G. DAGLI ORTI / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

that Pepin had renewed a gift known as the Donation of Constantine, under which the balance of power between church and state was settled in favor of church supremacy. This document, a bold forgery, claimed that the first Christian emperor, Constantine (reigned 306–337), had handed over control of temporal affairs to Pope Sylvester I (d. 335). The Donation of Constantine was an eighth-century invention, but it would be centuries until scholar Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457) exposed the fraud.

Charlemagne continued his father's battle. Einhard withheld the details of the Frankish army's struggles to cross over the Alps. Charlemagne helped to consolidate and recapture for the Romans all that they had lost to the Lombards. Once he felt he had Italy under his control, he sent another Pepin, one of his sons, to rule it.

Next Charlemagne renewed a long-standing war against the Saxons. These Germanic tribes held territories stretching from the North Sea to the Rhine. Einhard said this war went on for over 30 years, with the defeated Saxons repeatedly submitting, promising to obey Charlemagne as their ruler, even abandoning their pagan religion for Christianity, then recovering confidence and returning to battle.

Charlemagne fought in person in only two battles, though the cost in death and injury to his loyal Frankish soldiery was high. He eventually began to succeed by capturing groups of Saxon tribesmen and their families and relocating them in Gaul and Flanders.

Charlemagne also tackled the Spanish. On the way home from victory in Spain, bandits ambushed his Frankish army, capturing the baggage train and killing the men in charge. Einhard even gave the names of the dead. Little did either Charlemagne or Einhard know that one day this ambush would be told as Charlemagne's most powerful legend of victory (see "The thousand lives of Charlemagne," p. 39).

Charlemagne also conquered the "Britons" (Bretons), living in modern Brittany. Then followed (787–88) a brief but successful war with the Bavarians; then war against the Slavs on the northern shores of Europe facing the Baltic Sea. The Huns, an important

Charlemagne vs. the Saxons

AMONG CHARLEMAGNE'S CONQUESTS were the Saxons. This group, who had settled in Europe and on the British Isles, spoke the Teutonic language at the root of modern English. Their Frankish conquerors spoke a tongue derived from late Latin. The Saxons on the European continent were still mostly pagans. Anglo-Saxon settlers in Britain had been converted to Christianity by the mission of Augustine of Canterbury, sent from Rome by Pope Gregory the Great at the end of the sixth century. Some missionary work had also been carried out among them by Boniface (c. 675–754) from Wessex, but though he became the first archbishop of Mainz, the mission had limited long-term success.

The Frankish annals that told the story of 30 years of Saxon wars stressed Charlemagne's determination to remove the cultic symbols of Saxon paganism. Boniface himself had famously felled Thor's Oak in 723. Irminsuls, or standing tree trunks, were important in pagan religion.

But it is hard to say whether the Saxon wars were really driven by the desire to convert the Saxon tribes. A famous massacre at Verden in 785, where an angry Charlemagne was described by the royal Frankish annals as seeking revenge for the killing of some of his nobles in a battle, seems to have been motivated most strongly by the lust for conquest.

Whether the wars began for that reason or not, Charlemagne (seen in battle with the Saxons above) was later criticized for seeking to convert the Saxons by force. A poet who wrote an epic on the Saxon wars included lines that said that those who would not be persuaded would simply have to be forced by fear. And when it was all over, Charlemagne himself published a document (see p. 14) setting out the terms of the Capitulation of the Saxons. It stated, among other provisions of enforced Christianization, that anyone who refused to be baptized should be put to death. *—G. R. Evans*

CHARLEMAGNE DEFEATS SAXONS—© BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD / ROBANA / ART RESOURCE, NY

CHURCH AND STATE *Above:* Charlemagne watches the chapel being constructed at Aachen.

AFTER ME, PLEASE! *Right:* The ruler enters a church followed by his bishops.

FR 6465 F.96 CONSTRUCTION OF THE CHURCH AT AIX-LA-CHAPELLE BY CHARLEMAGNE (742–814)—(VELLUM), FRENCH SCHOOL (14TH CENTURY) / BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE, PARIS, FRANCE / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY
CHARLEMAGNE ENTERING A CHURCH FOLLOWED BY PRELATES, MINIATURE FROM "CHRONICLES OF FRANCE" (VELLUM), FRENCH SCHOOL (14TH CENTURY) / MUSEE GOYA, CASTRES, FRANCE / INDEX / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

enemy, were so thoroughly eradicated, Einhard wrote, that all their nobility perished and all their treasures (plundered from other tribes so not really theirs, he suggested) carried off. Charlemagne fought the last of his wars against the Danes, who were arriving in pirate ships to steal from people on the other side of the Baltic.

This was quite a program of warfare. This energetic conquest—defense, Einhard called it—vastly enlarged the realm of the Franks and made it plausible for them to regard themselves as an empire, even before Charlemagne acquired his imperial title.

Charlemagne's standing in the world enabled him to exchange courtesies with Muslim caliph Haroun-al-Rashid, who ruled territory from North Africa to India. His delegation was received with courtesy, and Haroun declared that the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem should be considered Charlemagne's. He even sent Charlemagne an elephant (see "Did you know?," inside front cover).

Relations with the Greek-speaking eastern empire, the last survival of ancient Rome, remained sensitive (see "Sacred kingship," pp. 16–18). Charlemagne needed to ensure that his adoption of the title of emperor would not cause dangerous offense. So he made a treaty with the Byzantines to try to protect against adverse future consequences.

LEARNING TO SPIN AND READ

Charlemagne has the credit for promoting a Carolingian Renaissance (see "For the love of learning," pp. 24–29), although even before he came to the throne, the intellectual life of Europe was mainly in the hands of monastic and cathedral schools, with the exception of a few schools that seem to have survived from the Roman period in some of the Italian cities.

Charlemagne's own birth and childhood are a blank. Einhard said he had no information and no one could tell him anything. But it seems certain that the future ruler grew up a Christian. Einhard claimed that Charlemagne became interested in education when he had so many children to educate, but he described a child-rearing policy that does not seem very intellectual.

The king ordered that the boys should learn to ride and to handle arms. The girls were to learn to spin, sew, and practice arts that would develop virtuous habits, not sit about in idleness that would encourage bad behavior. He spent time with his children, keeping them with him on his travels. The boys rode with him, and the girls traveled in special carriages behind with servants to protect them.

Charlemagne had a flexible view of marriage, with numerous mistresses, but he had only one legal wife at any time. He had many children, including famous bastard son Pepin the Hunchback, the result of one long-term relationship. The first of his series of wives, a daughter of the Lombard king, was his mother's recommendation. He divorced her after a year and immediately married Hildegard, the daughter of an influential Teutonic noble. She bore him seven or eight children including another Pepin; immediately after her death in 783, he married Fastrada, daughter of an

influential Frankish count. His last wife was yet *another* daughter of an influential noble.

Not all his family were happy and loyal. Pepin the Hunchback was caught jealously plotting with ambitious Franks to seize the throne for himself. He was sent to a monastery where he could do penance, with his long royal hair cut short.

Charlemagne never learned to write. This was not for want of trying; he kept a wax tablet under his pillow to practice. Nevertheless his intellectual interests were strong. Charlemagne enjoyed being read to while he ate (and he ate a great deal) and listening to music. He liked history; Einhard mentioned in particular how he enjoyed Augustine's *The City of God*, with its high sense of the providential purpose of God for people and nations and its stories of the ways of demons.

He was a great talker and good at languages. He mastered Latin pretty well and could pray in Latin. Einhard said he understood Greek better than he spoke it, but this was in an age when any knowledge of Greek was becoming unusual in the west. Charlemagne was hungry for education in the liberal arts—the foundational subjects of grammar, logic (philosophical argument), and rhetoric—established long ago in the Roman educational system. He went to grammar classes with an old tutor, Peter the Deacon. He was naturally gifted at mathematics.

Famous scholar Alcuin (c. 735/40–804) entered this picture in the 780s, when he met Charlemagne on a journey back from Rome. The ruler invited Alcuin to join his court. He was not the first intellectual Charlemagne had recruited, but he was the first to stay.

How the Irish saved (Carolingian) civilization

ACCORDING TO a medieval Irish legend, there once was a Celtic prince named Cenn Fáelad ("kwenn FAY-lad") who suffered a serious injury to his "brain of forgetfulness" in battle. From that day on, he could never forget anything.

The legend continues that in the abbey where the prince was sent to recover from his war wounds, there were three schools—one of Latin learning, one of Irish law, and one of traditional Celtic poetry. During the day, he would wander from one school to another, listening to lectures from outside their windows. At night in his room, unable to forget the three lessons, he would weave them together into a single narrative.

While this tale is fictional, it gives an apt description of what was going on in Irish monasteries during the early Middle Ages and why Celtic monks were the perfect educators for Charlemagne's court. In between sessions of harsh ascetic discipline and service to God and community, Irish monks were painstakingly copying classical and Christian Latin texts for posterity (like the *Book of Kells*, at right). But they were also faithfully preserving traditional Irish laws and ancient Celtic legends—through a Christian lens, but exercising very little censorship in the process.

This is precisely what Charlemagne wanted for his schools. He envisioned monks-in-training meditating on a reliable Bible, palace libraries filled with Christian doctrine and history, and students reading Cicero and studying the stars. But he also wanted a literate class who could preserve the laws and legends of his heritage—all things in which the Irish excelled. So one by one, Irish scholars, bards, and scientists were recruited to serve in Charlemagne's court, leading his intellectual reform. The bane of Cenn Fáelad—learning something about everything—would become the defining characteristic of Frankish education.

— Garry J. Crites

MS 58 FOL.34R CHI-RHO, FROM THE GOSPEL OF ST. MATTHEW, CHAPTER 1 VERSE 18, FROM *THE BOOK OF KELLS*, C. 800 (VELLUM), IRISH SCHOOL (9TH CENTURY) / © THE BOARD OF TRINITY COLLEGE, DUBLIN, IRELAND / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

MS 722/1196 F.113V THE DEATH OF CHARLEMAGNE (747–814)—FROM *LE MIROIR HISTORIAL*, BY VINCENT DE BEAUVAIS (VELLUM), FRENCH SCHOOL (15TH CENTURY) / MUSEE CONDE, CHANTILLY, FRANCE / GIRAUDON / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY
HISTORIATED INITIAL 'R' DEPICTING EMPEROR CHARLEMAGNE (742–814) (VELLUM), FRENCH SCHOOL (14TH CENTURY) / BIBLIOTHEQUE DE LA SORBONNE, PARIS, FRANCE / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

Selections from the Laws of Charles the Great, ed. Dana Carleton Munro

3. If anyone shall have entered a church by violence and shall have carried off anything in it by force or theft, or shall have burned the church itself, let him be punished by death.

8. If anyone of the race of the Saxons hereafter concealed among them shall have wished to hide himself unbaptized, and shall have scorned to come to baptism and shall have wished to remain a pagan, let him be punished by death.

10. If anyone shall have formed a conspiracy with the pagans against the Christians, or shall have wished to join with them in opposition to the Christians, let him be punished by death.

Alcuin may not have intended to stay either, but his first period as a courtier seems to have lasted for three years or more. The court was in perpetual traveling motion, so he had the chance to meet other European intellectuals. In the 790s when the court settled permanently in the new palace Charlemagne built at Aachen, Alcuin remained for a year or two. At this time he may have had important influence on the intellectual culture of the court. Charlemagne certainly seems to have found him helpful with astronomical calculations.

Charlemagne was sufficiently anxious to foster education that he required cathedrals to run schools for their canons (clergy belonging to the cathedral). He was alive to the danger of allowing his empire to fill with uneducated clergy, and he needed literate civil servants. But in reality many notable achievements came after his time. (See "For the love of learning," pp. 24–29).

Charlemagne was a regular churchgoer, always at matins, evensong, and the Eucharist if he could manage it in the midst of his travels and battles. He was vigilant in insisting that worship be conducted properly, and he overhauled the order of service personally. That should have raised eyebrows. It was becoming important, in a Europe busy reorganizing itself, to be clear where the boundary lay between secular and spiritual authority.

FROM MAN TO LEGEND *Left:* At the death of Charlemagne, devils and angels weigh his soul. *Above:* Charlemagne reigns as emperor in a 14th-c. manuscript.

Of the four "mathematical arts" (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music) Charlemagne particularly liked astronomy, enjoying calculating the movements of the planets.

Pope Leo III (reigned 795–816) certainly needed Charlemagne's support. His election had been rushed amid factional infighting. The announcement of Leo's election was sent to Charlemagne with a request for his help against the Lombards. Charlemagne wrote back setting out the balance of power: it was his job to defend the papacy, and the pope's job to pray for the empire and the success of its armies. But the new pope was soon attacked by his rivals and thrown from his horse during a procession.

THE WORLD HE LEFT BEHIND *Above:* How Europe looked in 814 after Charlemagne's many conquests.

GIFT FIT FOR A KING *Right:* Muslim ruler Harun al-Rashid presented Charlemagne with this vase.

HELPING OUT THE POPE

Leo fled to Paderborn (in modern Germany) to seek Charlemagne's protection. Charlemagne tried to resolve the dispute. In the end he went to Rome himself and spent the winter of 800–801 there restoring order. Charlemagne had for some time been emperor in all except name, and now at the hands of the grateful pope, on Christmas Day 800 in the Basilica of St. Peter, he was made Holy Roman Emperor—a title that had lain vacant for over 300 years. The Christian Roman Empire founded in this way lasted until the sixteenth century.

Charlemagne was not a theologian but a man of affairs. As a Christian he saw it as his business to defend, protect, and enrich the church where he could and encourage those he conquered to be baptized as Christians too. He respected Rome's power, though he visited Rome himself only four times in a reign of nearly half a century. He took special care for the Basilica of St. Peter. Using plunder from his warfare, he provided gold, silver, and precious stones for its enrichment, and he was eager all his life to see Rome returned to its former glory and the primacy he believed it should have.

The question of Roman primacy at this date was different from the way it later presented itself. In Charlemagne's time the question was which of five ancient patriarchates should be chief, and in what way? The Greek part of the old Roman Empire had four: Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, and Jerusalem, while the west had Rome. Rome could claim preeminence because it was the See of the Apostle Peter, but the Greek patriarchs preferred to see this as a mere primacy of honor, not as giving the bishop of Rome authority over the Christian Church everywhere.

Charlemagne has become such an iconic figure in the history of early medieval Europe that it is easy to forget the difficulties he faced. We remember him today, from his fur-lined coat to his elephant to that Christmas morning when he received the imperial crown, because he created a new Europe, and yet one in which the marks of classical civilization remained.

G. R. Evans was formerly professor of medieval theology and intellectual history at the University of Cambridge. She has published widely on medieval history and theology.

WATER JUG PRESENTED TO CHARLEMAGNE (742–814) BY HARUN AL-RASHID (C. 766–809) (CLOISONNE ENAMEL), BYZANTINE / TREASURY OF THE ABBEY OF SAINT-MAURICE, VALAIS, SWITZERLAND / GIRAUDON / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY
MAP BY DOUGLAS JOHNSON

LEO CROWNS CHARLEMAGNE—*WIKIPEDIA*

Sacred kingship

THE CORONATION OF CHARLEMAGNE HAS ENTWINED STATE AND CHURCH FROM HIS DAY TO OURS

Christopher Fee

IT HAS ECHOED IN ART through the ages: Charlemagne, king of the Franks, at prayer in St. Peter's Basilica before the tomb of the Apostle Peter on Christmas Day. Leo III, pope of the Roman Catholic Church, placing on his head a great jeweled crown and proclaiming him head of a Christian Roman Empire.

Then, a chronicle related, "all the faithful Romans, seeing how [Charlemagne] loved the holy Roman church and its vicar and how he defended them, cried out with one voice by the will of God and of St. Peter, the key-bearer of the kingdom of heaven, 'To Charles, most pious Augustus ["the great"], crowned by God, great and peace-loving emperor, life and victory.' This was said three times before the sacred tomb of blessed Peter the apostle, with the invocation of many saints. And so he was instituted by all as emperor of the Romans. Thereupon, on that same day of the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the most holy bishop and pontiff anointed his most excellent son Charles as king with holy oil."

On November 23, 800, Pope Leo had met the approaching Charlemagne 12 miles from Rome and accompanied him to the gates, evoking the entry of Caesar himself into Rome. Charlemagne then presided over the December 1 opening of a council in the Vatican that absolved of adultery and perjury no less a person than the pope himself. The same council originated (or confirmed) the decision to make Charlemagne emperor, for all that he later pretended to have been surprised about it.

The coronation ceremony blended Germanic kingship rituals, ancient imperial traditions, and Christian pomp and ceremony. The observers echoed ancient Roman custom and imperial law (which required "citizen witnesses") when they acclaimed Charlemagne emperor. And Leo illustrated his subservience to the new emperor by performing the ancient ritual of

CROWNED WITH HONOR *Left:* Leo crowns Charlemagne. *Below:* While Charlemagne was later painted wearing this imperial crown, it was actually made no earlier than the reign of Otto I, who ruled 936 to 973.

IMPERIAL CROWN—*WIKIPEDIA*

bowing before a person of higher rank—in Leo's case, flat on the floor on his face! But Leo still placed the crown on Charlemagne's head—a reminder that while the emperor had divine right to rule, his temporal power was granted through the agency and authority of the pope. The lesson was not lost on Charlemagne.

Einhard suggested that he was annoyed: "[Charlemagne] came to Rome to restore the condition of the Roman church, which had been very much disturbed, and spent the whole winter there. At that time he received the title of emperor and Augustus, though he was so much opposed to this at first that he said he would not have entered the church that day had he been able to foresee the pope's intention, although it was a great feast day." Charlemagne saw that his last surviving son Louis did not make the same mistake in 813 when he joined his father on the throne as co-emperor. Charlemagne did not invite Leo to the coronation, or the party, and he crowned Louis himself.

Charlemagne became the central symbolic figure around which subsequent French kings and Holy Roman Emperors developed their own proof of their right to rule. Many subsequent coronations carefully echoed Charlemagne's rituals. When the Capetian dynasty emerged (in the tenth century), it proclaimed its links with Charlemagne. And from the time of Louis XIII on, French coronation ceremonies employed objects associated with Charlemagne.

Tellingly, when Napoleon rose to power after the French Revolution, a thousand years after Charlemagne, he too self-consciously identified with the famous emperor. He used relics of Charlemagne in his own coronation. And, having learned from Charlemagne the need to subordinate the church while employing its pomp and power, Napoleon took care that it was he himself, not the pope, who placed the crown on his own head. He even announced to his ambassador to the Vatican, "I am Charlemagne."

HOLY KINGSHIP

Up until the coronation, Charlemagne's title had been *Rex Francorum*, "King of the Franks." This title had clear overtones of Frankish pride. The Franks viewed conquered peoples as subjects. They had no notion of broad citizenship within their borders as Romans had, which enabled many people—even freed slaves—to aspire to become Roman. Any notion of "Roman-ness" to the Franks was associated with the city of Rome and not with the historical Roman Empire. They saw themselves as having cast off the rule of the Romans, whom they did not revere.

The original title bestowed on Charlemagne, *Imperator Romanorum*, "Emperor of the Romans," seems to have been as meaningless to Frankish nobles as it was offensive to Constantinople, the Byzantine capital

"I AM CHARLEMAGNE" Napoleon crowns himself and his wife Josephine.

CORONATION OF NAPOLEON—*WIKIPEDIA*

and the seat of the eastern Roman Empire. But it soon changed to *Romanum gubernans imperium*, "[He is responsible for] governing the Roman Empire."

This was intelligible and perhaps even impressive to the Franks, although hardly more palatable to Constantinople. Einhard wrote, "Nevertheless [Charlemagne] endured very patiently the envy of the [eastern] Roman emperors, who were indignant about his accepting the title, and, by sending many embassies to them and addressing them as brothers in his letters, he overcame their arrogance by his magnanimity."

Charlemagne hoped that his coronation would mark the genesis of an *Imperium Christianum*, a "Christian Empire." The Franks, unlike other Germanic tribes, were not Arians, but held the orthodox Trinitarian faith of Rome. They saw themselves as legitimate defenders of the "true faith." Charlemagne was trying to unify the far-flung and diverse regions he ruled in religious, rather than ethnic, terms: not the Frankish Empire, but what became the "Holy Roman Empire."

And Charlemagne, according to Alcuin, his Anglo-Saxon court scholar and priest, was now the ultimate protector of all the churches of Christ. The transfer into Carolingian authority of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem in 802 suggests that even the Arab world recognized this status.

POPE, EMPEROR, AND THE EAST

The papacy had maintained a long and complex relationship with Constantinople almost since the fall of the western empire in 476. The Byzantines had a military presence on the Italian coast right up to the time of Charlemagne. The Duchy of Rome itself was, at least in theory, Byzantine territory.

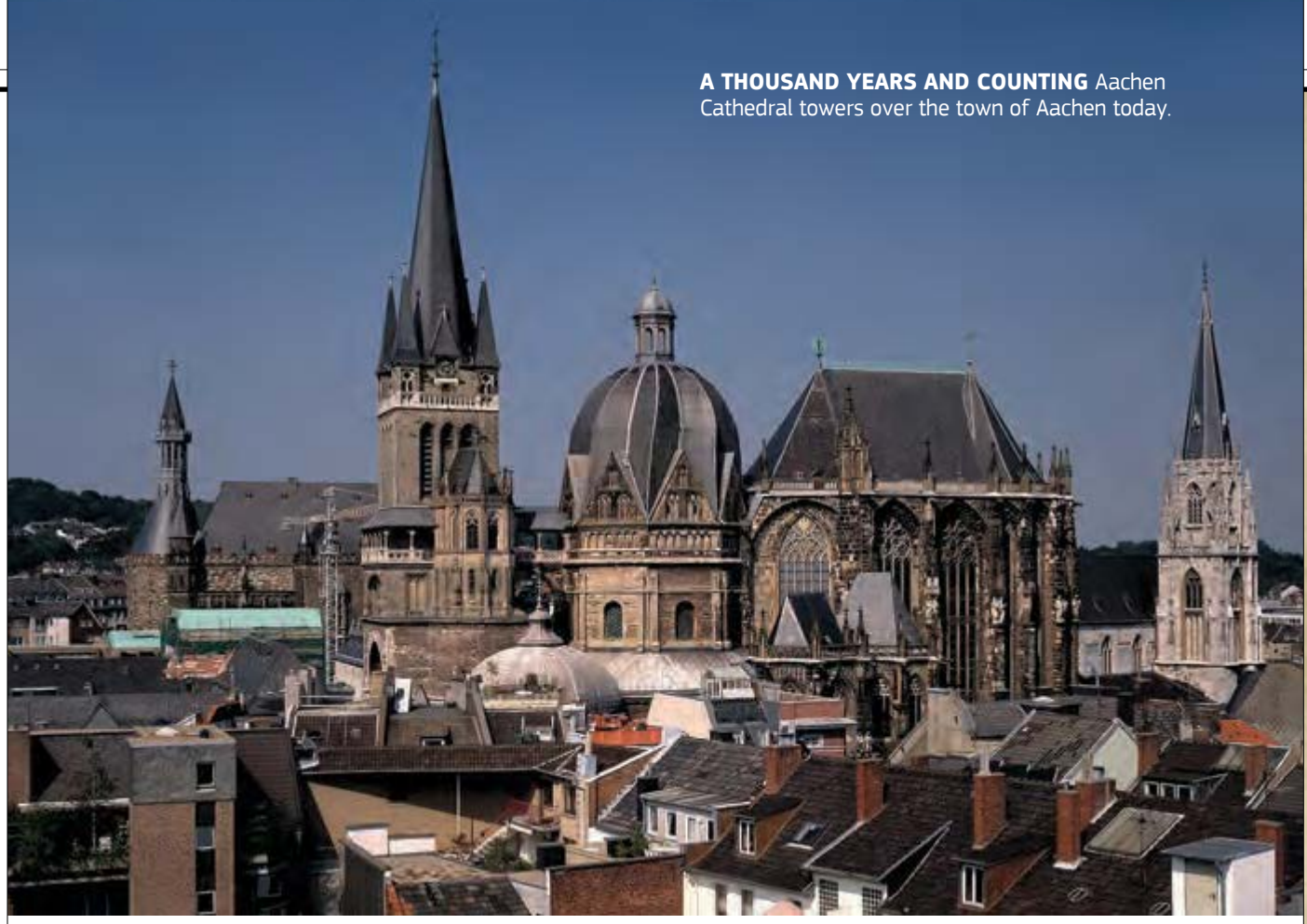
But by the time of Charlemagne, tensions between the pope and the Byzantine emperor were stretched to the breaking point. The Byzantines, occupied with Arab rivals, could spare little help against attacking Germanic tribes who repeatedly harried Rome. Charlemagne stepped into this power vacuum. When Leo became pope, he gave Charlemagne the keys of St. Peter's tomb and the Banner of Rome, acknowledging him as Defender of the Holy See.

The council over which Charlemagne presided was part of this struggle. Leo had been temporarily deposed and maimed in 799 by politically powerful conspirators, who planned to blind him and cut out his tongue, a Byzantine practice used to end an adversary's political power without outright murder. Leo escaped, and his enemies could not replace him without Charlemagne's consent.

Although technically no one could stand in judgment over the pope, all parties agreed to the council. Leo was allowed to prove his innocence by taking an oath on the New Testament, but it is clear that it was Charlemagne's support of Leo that mattered. His coronation sanctified that political reality.

But from the Byzantine perspective, Charlemagne's coronation was the utmost in a long line of offenses against Constantinople, and the pope's role in the ceremony a particular outrage. As Alcuin pointed out, both the Byzantine emperor and the pope had been humbled and savaged by their own inner circles. Charlemagne stood higher than both and had judged even the pontiff himself. By the time of the coronation, the pope owed his very life and office to the man he crowned emperor before St. Peter's tomb.

Christopher Fee is professor of English at Gettysburg College and the author of several books on medieval literature.



A THOUSAND YEARS AND COUNTING Aachen Cathedral towers over the town of Aachen today.

AACHEN CATHEDRAL—HUBER-IMAGES

The idea of Christendom

CHARLEMAGNE FOUNDED IT. SO WHAT WAS IT?

Sarah Morice-Brubaker

FOR MANY MODERN WESTERNERS, the idea of "Christendom" functions like popular Internet quizzes that claim to diagnose personality disorders. The idea has served its purpose once you have figured out if you have a case of "Christendom" or not and the degree of doom you and your companions may therefore look forward to.

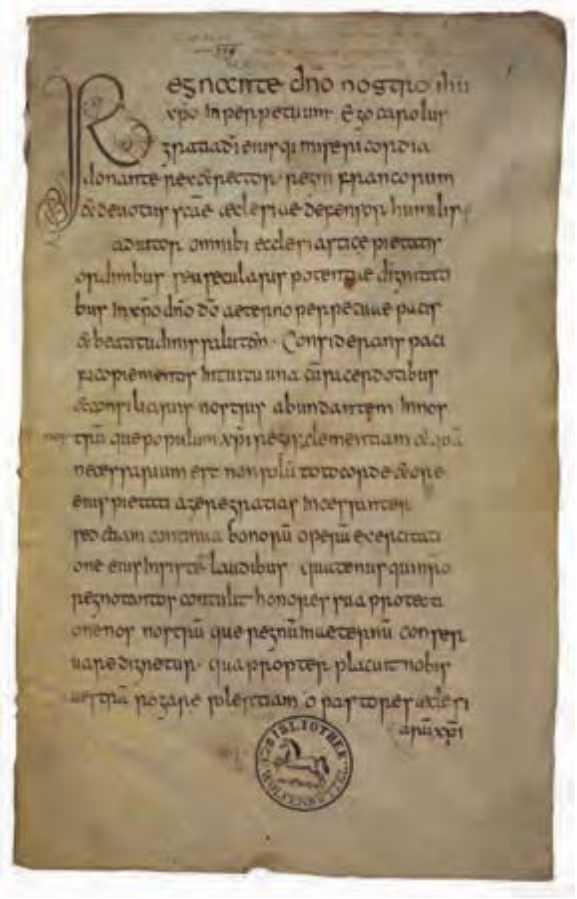
Degrees of doom vary. Modern writers alternately claim that Christendom is being returned to, should be returned to, can *never* be returned to, never existed in the first place, never disappeared, is violent, is nonviolent, is a metaphor, or is a bad idea. To its detractors, the word evokes cynical church people using church language to get power. To its defenders, it stirs nostalgic longing for a time when doing Christian things required far fewer daily negotiations with non-Christians.

Whatever is meant by "Christendom," though, people seem to agree that medieval Europe had it in abundance. Among the first people to think so was medieval monk Alcuin, adviser to Charlemagne, who contrasted Europe's past chaos with the Christianized social order he'd helped to build: "Although the whole of Europe was once denuded with fire and sword by Goths and Huns," he wrote, "now, by God's mercy, Europe is as bright with churches as is the sky with stars."

FIRE AND SWORD?

Yet it turns out that much of medieval "Christendom" was an explanation after the fact—starting with Alcuin. The Roman Empire didn't exactly "fall"; it developed chronic congestive heart failure and was no longer able to do what it had done in days of hardier circulation. And Goths didn't exactly invade, at least at first. Rather, they sought and secured refuge within the Roman Empire from the Huns. Violence occurred later, when the Goths revolted in response to exploitation they experienced in their refugee settlements.

Moreover, the Carolingians—the medieval Frankish dynasty that reached its height of power under Charlemagne—did not see their own war-making as part of a "civilization clash" between Christians and Muslims ("Saracens," they called them). The Saracens



AACHEN THRONE— *WIKIPEDIA* / BOJIN
ADMONIS GENERALIS—HERZOG AUGUST BIBLIOTHEK WOLFENBUETTEL

were just one among many enemies of Christian rulers, including Lombards, Saxons, Normans, and Danes.

The story of "Christendom" really begins with a massive shift that occurred when the Roman Empire ceased to function as a center of power for western Europe. Prior to that, it had served, in Peter Brown's description, as the "crude but vigorous pump" whereby anything that happened economically happened on a large scale. But over the course of the fifth century, that pump lost its prime and its parts stopped functioning. Goods ceased to move. The economies of western Europe became markedly local.

Christianity stepped in to fill the gap, the unifying force in a Europe that lacked any other center. During the 300 or so years between Rome's fading empire and Charlemagne's rising one, western Christianity proved highly portable and adaptable to local custom. For a while it was able to unite different regions into a coherent theological world—a world where God ruled over all, and the heavens were crowded with saints.

But could that unity hold? Even as western Europeans believed they were simply speaking local dialects of Latin, vernacular languages—Spanish, German, French, Italian—were taking shape. Many Christians knew only an oral version of their faith, since they and everyone else they knew were illiterate. What was to stop someone from preaching—whether through ignorance or malice—an unrecognizable version of Christianity? Regional expressions of the church were one thing. Mutually incomprehensible and contradictory versions were another.

PUTTING IT BACK TOGETHER

Such was Charlemagne's worry after his rise to power. It led to the program he called *correctio*—putting things back into order—and which others would call the "Carolingian Renaissance." Charlemagne saw his work as akin to Old Testament king Josiah (2 Kings 22), whose rediscovery of the Book of the Law made faithfulness possible.

Charlemagne and his advisors thought their own day heralded a providential "rediscovery." They spoke, for the first time, of "barbarian invasions" of Goths and other tribes into the Roman Empire—and claimed this was a distinct historical period from which Europe was now emerging, thanks to the special favor in which God held the Franks. A triumphant sentiment, but it had a note of anxiety. If Europe ever ceased to have as many churches as the sky had stars, then God's favor might well be withdrawn.

This was the beginning of the notion of "Christendom." The word itself, an Old English vernacular word, originally meant simply "Christianity." But it came in the Middle Ages to have the sense of "the Christian world" or "lands where Christianity is dominant."

For Charlemagne and his advisors, and for those who followed, it meant that uniformity of Christian practice

A ROYAL SEAT *Far left:* Charlemagne sat enthroned atop these six steps at Aachen.

GETTING ON THE SAME PAGE *Left:* In the introduction to *Admonitio generalis*, the king expressed his concern for his subjects' morals.

REPORTING IN, SIR *Right:* Charlemagne receives some of his bishops.

was insisted on from the top down, as the main way of warding off the disintegration of *the church* into a jumble of *churches*, isolated in their own regions. It meant uniformity of control over a Christian empire. Or did it?

Through pieces of legislation like his *Admonitio generalis*, or "general warning"—a set of 82 laws about church government—Charlemagne insisted upon centralized church oversight. The bleak consequences of imperial disfavor fell upon any who failed to follow the instructions (See "The man behind the empire," pp. 8–15).

But in matters unrelated to church governance and practice, Charlemagne consulted with the leading figures of each region, typically allowing local law to carry the day. This was diplomatically prudent, but also contained clever politics. In allowing local law to hold sway in matters unrelated to church practice, Charlemagne set up *Christian* law as the only law actually uniting all the different subjects of his empire.

CORRECTING AND INSTRUCTING

In such a diverse empire, it was essential that people not merely obey the laws, but also understand them. How did Charlemagne do this? Unlike the centralized approach of the Byzantine Empire (where all roads ran through Constantinople), Charlemagne's *correctio* infiltrated the empire through a large class of learned, aristocratic clergy and monastics scattered throughout the empire. To them fell the responsibility of ensuring that Christian texts were copied correctly so that less literate clerics could recite them without error. A local priest's mistake, after all, could lead an entire region astray.

The *Admonition generalis* singles out for concern those "who want to pray to God in the proper fashion, yet they pray improperly because of uncorrected books." Alcuin tried to simplify all kinds of important theological books from antiquity—rewriting Augustine's *Commentary on John*, for example. Many passages of Augustine's writing were left intact, but many were taken out and replaced with other writings or with Alcuin's own commentary. People responded. Particularly in Germany, local towns competed with each other to show their assent to the requirements of *correctio*.

Charlemagne could not foresee that his attempts to unite a fractured society would have such far-reaching impact. Though his dynasty petered out, his idea that church and state belonged naturally together—and that together they would hold back the barbarians from the gates—lasted long after Leo set the crown on his head that fateful Christmas Day.

It lasted through long lines of popes and Holy Roman Emperors outmaneuvering each other. It lasted through a Reformation in which reformers found their own ways to make governments Christian, even while protesting against the wreck they thought Catholicism had made of medieval government. It lasted as Christianity spread across the Atlantic to a new land, the United States, that had no state church but saw the state itself as carrying out God's mission on earth.

Long after Charlemagne's empire crumbled, long after no one remembered the 82 clauses of his general warning or competed to earn the favor of his bishops and abbots, people throughout Europe—and indeed all of the West—would still be wondering: Is our nation as bright with churches as the sky is with stars? And if it is no longer, should we praise or lament?

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CHARLEMAGNE RECEIVING BISHOPS—BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE

Not your parents' Middle Ages

500 750s 900s 1000s

CORONATION OF CHARLEMAGNE'S GRANDSON, CHARLES THE BALD

500: Clovis, founder of the Frankish state, conquers most of France and Belgium, converting his territories to western Catholic Christianity. His heirs begin fighting one another.

610: Heraclius becomes Byzantine emperor in Constantinople.

650: Arab forces conquer most Byzantine territories. In 677 and 717 they attempt to conquer Constantinople but fail.

687: Pepin of Heristal, Mayor of the Palace under Clovis's descendants, unites the Frankish territories. His son Charles Martel (Charlemagne's grandfather) forms an alliance with the church which helps extend Christianity (and Frankish rule) into Germany.

735: The Venerable Bede, an Anglo-Saxon scholar, writes *History of the English Church and People.*

740: Byzantine emperor Leo III initiates the iconoclastic movement. It flourishes under the reign of his son Constantine V (741-775).

751: St. Boniface anoints Pepin the Short, son of Charles Martel, as a divinely sanctioned king.

768: Pepin's son Charlemagne becomes king. In time, his empire grows to embrace modern France, Germany, central and eastern Europe, and much of Italy. Charlemagne divides his vast realm into different regions ruled by local "counts" overseen by representatives of the king's own court. To aid administration of the kingdom, he promotes learning in what is later called the "**Carolingian Renaissance.**" Anglo-Saxon Benedictine monk Alcuin sets up schools, sees to the copying of classical Latin texts, and develops a new handwriting.

800: On Christmas Day, the pope crowns Charlemagne emperor in Rome.

814: Charlemagne dies. His surviving son, Louis the Pious, divides his inheritance between *his* three sons, who engage in civil war. Vikings, Hungarians, and Arabs invade, and the Carolingian Empire falls apart in 888.

871: King Alfred the Great of England, imitating Charlemagne, codifies English law, reorganizes the army, founds schools, and promotes Anglo-Saxon literacy.

910: The Benedictine monastery of Cluny in Burgundy (modern France) becomes a place of reform, focused on restoring obedience to the 6th-c. *Rule of St. Benedict* and encouraging art, worship, and devotion.

936: Otto the Great is crowned king in Germany; in 962 he becomes emperor in Rome, the first to use the title "Holy Roman Emperor." Competent successors follow. Later historians call this period the "**Ottonian Renaissance.**"

1046: Emperor Henry III deposes three rival popes and names a German monastic reformer as Pope Clement II. A series of reforming popes follows. They assert papal authority, causing conflict with both the Eastern Church and the Holy Roman Emperors. This leads to the Great Schism between Rome and Constantinople (1054) as well as the investiture controversy over who is responsible for giving bishops symbols of their offices.

1050: Agricultural revolution ushers in widespread use of new farming devices, some previously discovered by Carolingians and Romans.

1059: Cardinals are given the sole right of appointing new popes, with the intention of allowing papal elections to escape the whims of political leaders.

1095: The First Crusade is initiated to rescue Jerusalem from Islamic control. In 1098 crusaders capture Antioch and most of Syria, and in 1099 Jerusalem, killing many of the inhabitants. *The Song of Roland* paints Charlemagne as a great hero in battle against Muslims.

F 106R THE CORONATION OF EMPEROR CHARLEMAGNE 1375 79 (VELLUM), FRENCH SCHOOL (14TH CENTURY) /

CORONATION OF CHARLES THE BALD—*WIKIPEDIA*

c. 1100: Scholasticism emerges, seeking to reconcile classical philosophy with Christianity.

Adapted from http://eawc.evansville.edu/mepage.htm

YOU MAY ONCE HAVE HEARD OF the Middle Ages referred to as "Dark Ages" that fell between the glories of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance, or "rebirth," of classical learning in 14th-c. Italy. But in fact learning, statecraft, church growth, and culture-making flourished throughout the period. Historians have identified no fewer than four **Renaissances** in this period (each shown in **bold**), starting with one inspired by Charlemagne.

1100s *1100s* *1200s* *1300s*

(742 814) BY POPE LEO III (C 750 816) AT ST PETERS, ROME IN 800, *GRANDES CHRON QUES DE FRANCE*, BIBLIOTHEQUE MUNICIPALE, CASTRES, FRANCE / GIRAUDON / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

14TH-C. RELIQUARY—*WIKIPEDIA*

— **1152**: Frederick I Barbarossa of Germany calls his realm the "Holy Roman Empire," the first use of the term.

— **1170**: The first European windmill is developed, aiding agriculture.

— **1198**: Innocent III is elected pope. He attempts to unify all Christendom under the papal monarchy.

— **1200**: The growth of lay education spurs **another renaissance**. Students start entering schools for reasons other than becoming priests, and education is offered in languages other than Latin.

— **c. 1200**: English scientist Robert Grosseteste makes technological advances in optics, mathematics, and astronomy. These are continued by his disciple Roger Bacon.

— **1204**: The Fourth Crusade captures and sacks Constantinople.

— **1215**: Innocent III organizes the Fourth Lateran Council to define central dogmas of Christianity.

— **1225**: Thomas Aquinas born. The most influential Scholastic theologian, he later teaches at the University of Paris.

— **1260s**: Several important philosophical and scientific texts, including Aristotle, are translated into Latin.

— **1265**: Dante Alighieri, author of the *Divine Comedy*, is born.

— **1267**: Italian painter Giotto born. He will initiate a new style of painting.

— **Late 1200s**: Eyeglasses and the magnetic compass are invented. The latter aids in trade and navigation.

— **1305**: The papacy moves to Avignon, beginning the church's "Babylonian Captivity," with the papacy subordinate to French authority.

— **1330**: English theologian John Wyclif is born. Finding the church extravagant, and supported by English nobles who want independence from Rome, he begins a reform movement.

— **1304**: Italian scholar Petrarch is born. His later rediscovery of some classical Greek and Roman texts will be considered as initiating **"the" Renaissance**.

— **1367**: The papacy returns to Rome, but displeased French cardinals eventually elect a rival French pope. The split ends in 1417.

— **1385**: The first German university opens in Heidelberg.

— **1415**: The Council of Constance, called by Emperor Sigismund, affirms the authority of councils to govern the church and burns Czech reformer Jan Hus at the stake.

— **1453**: Ottoman Turks take Constantinople and end Byzantine civilization.

14TH-C. RELIQUARY OF CHARLEMAGNE

LISTENING TO THE SPIRIT St. John the Evangelist is pictured in the *Ebbo Gospels*, one of many illuminated manuscripts created during the Carolingian Renaissance.

ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST—FROM *THE EBBO GOSPELS*, C. 816–835 (VELLUM), FRENCH SCHOOL (9TH CENTURY) / BIBLIOTHEQUE MUNICIPALE, EPERNAY, FRANCE / GIRAUDON / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

For the love of learning

HOW CHARLEMAGNE TRANSFORMED EDUCATION

Garry J. Crites

THE NEXT TIME you are on the Internet, type "Charlemagne" into a search engine and look at the pictures that come up. You will see paintings of Charlemagne looking regal, with an ornate crown on his head. Or you may see warrior Charlemagne, wielding a massive sword. The most dramatic pictures are of Pope Leo III "unexpectedly" placing the emperor's diadem on the head of a majestic (but humble) Charlemagne.

The pictures you never see, though—but ones that would better reflect the importance that Charlemagne had in the Middle Ages—are of the king looking wide-eyed at his first Irish illuminated manuscript, or trying painfully to scratch his name on a writing tablet: K-A-R-O-L-V-S. For one of the greatest contributions that Charlemagne made to medieval civilization was instituting a series of educational reforms that would be the centerpiece of the "Carolingian Renaissance."

EDUCATION BEFORE CHARLEMAGNE

In the world we know, the value of education is seldom debated. Nearly 85 percent of Americans over 25 have graduated from high school, and a quarter have college degrees. But a century ago the numbers were reversed; less than one out of ten people graduated from high school.

It should be no surprise, then, that in the early Middle Ages, education was even less widespread. While it is debatable whether there ever truly were "Dark Ages," it is certainly true that the classical education available to the upper classes of late antiquity was no longer as prevalent in early medieval Europe.

To be sure, certain people—typically males—received a rudimentary education. In the seventh and eighth centuries, the sons of European kings and nobles were often given training. But it was usually not in the rhetoric, philosophy, and grammar that Tertullian or Augustine would have known—rather, it was in the skills needed for warfare. Swordplay and military tactics were far more helpful in securing a young lord's future than conjugating Greek verbs and quoting Cicero.

Priests and monks were given a different form of basic instruction so that they could read their prayer books, learn doctrine, and recite Mass. This education was sometimes spotty and not always successful, however. St. Boniface once complained to the pope that he had heard a priest baptize a person *in nomine patria et filia et spiritu sancta*—which roughly translates as "In the name of the Fatherland, the daughter, and the Holy Spirit."

All of this changed when the Frankish king known at first only as Charles or Karl ascended the throne of the Franks in 768 upon the death of his father Pepin the Short. Beyond the changes in the political landscape

I'M TAKING NOTES, FOLKS A 14th-c. French chronicle imagines how historian Einhard recorded the events of Charlemagne's reign.

EINHARD THE HISTORIAN RECORDING THE LIFE OF CHARLEMAGNE—MINIATURE FROM *THE GREAT CHRONICLES OF FRANCE* MANUSCRIPT 5 FOLIO 100 RECTO, FRANCE 14TH CENTURY / DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

of Europe that he achieved through conquest and intrigue, Charlemagne also ushered in a cultural revolution. At its core was a series of educational reforms that would influence continental Europe and Christendom for centuries.

AN INTELLECTUAL KING?

It may be an overstatement to say that Charlemagne was illiterate, but even his doting biographer Einhard (775–840) admitted that the king had only limited ability to read and write. Charlemagne often kept writing tablets close at hand so that he could practice tracing letters, but, said Einhard, he never made much progress, because he began too late in life. Histories and treatises had to be read to him, presumably because he could not read them himself.

But while the king could not read or write well, he greatly valued intellectual activities. He routinely had the Psalter and writings of the early church fathers read to him at mealtimes—apparently he felt a special fondness for Augustine's *City of God*. But he also listened to secular stories and classical literature, both of which would be important in the Carolingian Renaissance to come.

According to Einhard, Charlemagne became proficient in many of the liberal arts—rhetoric, grammar, mathematics, and astronomy in particular. Moreover, he valued the study of languages he did not know, especially Latin and Greek. The image Einhard sought to portray was one of a thoroughly educated monarch, in the tradition of Roman emperors.

We can't assume that the picture of Charlemagne painted by the adoring Einhard is entirely accurate. But even if the king was not quite as skilled as his biographer indicated, that does not mean that the biography has no value.

To the contrary, the fact that Einhard took such great pains to portray Charlemagne as an intellectual shows how important education had become in the opening days of the ninth century, or at least how important it was for a ruler to be known as an intellectual, especially for political reasons. A Frankish king from northern Europe who seemingly wore the mantle of centuries of classical education—this went a long way toward establishing his legitimacy as the head of the Holy Roman Empire.

There is little doubt that Charlemagne had a great love of learning, but he also insisted that the value he placed upon education should spread to his family, his court, and beyond. He began with his own children.

Like many medieval rulers, Charlemagne made sure that his children learned the skills needed to solidify their places in society. The boys were taught to ride and fight; the girls learned how to manage a household of the high-born. But to this king, these skills were not sufficient. He believed that his children should also be educated in the liberal arts (the *trivium* of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy).

THE PALACE SCHOOL

To achieve this worthy goal, Charlemagne called upon his old friend Alcuin (740–804). Born on the eastern coast of Northumbria (now northern England and southeastern Scotland), Alcuin (see p. 28) showed much promise as a student in the cathedral school of York. When Ælbert (the school's headmaster and librarian) was made bishop of York in 767, Alcuin became the new head of the school.

As bishop, Ælbert was expected to travel periodically to the European continent to oversee the missionaries he had sent to northern Europe and to consult with secular rulers. When he did so, he sometimes took his protégé Alcuin.

On one such journey, in 781, Alcuin met the ambitious young Frankish king, who asked the Northumbrian to be his tutor in rhetoric and astronomy. When Alcuin was invited to join Charlemagne's court, he did so reluctantly. Once there, though, he proved influential and eventually adopted the land of the Franks as his home.

GATES OF LEARNING *Left:* The abbey at Lorsch (whose gate is seen here) was a center of intellectual revival.

WAS THAT XXL OR XXC? *Bottom:* How to count on your fingers in Roman numerals, Carolingian style.

Charlemagne's biographer Einhard believed Alcuin to be the most learned person in the world, a worthy companion to a young ruler who was already the most powerful man in western Europe. Indeed, the Northumbrian schoolmaster was a remarkable scholar. Beyond his skills in the liberal arts, Alcuin wrote Bible commentaries, theological works, and biographies of Christian saints. When Charlemagne decided that his kingdom needed an official version of the Bible, he called on Alcuin to supervise its production.

Who better than Alcuin, then, to be the head of a palace school, where the sons and daughters of Charlemagne and other nobles would be taught not only the skills needed for being leaders, but also the liberal arts?

Lessons were laid out, court libraries were established, and the model for training young nobles that would continue for decades, if not centuries, was begun. The educational reforms of the Carolingian Renaissance were under way.

THE SPREAD OF EDUCATION

Although one could argue that the intellectual explosion of the Carolingian Renaissance began with the education of the king himself and his family, it did not end there. In 787 Charlemagne issued an edict that bishops and abbots (the heads of monasteries) should begin educating young boys in reading and writing, the Bible, theology, and grammar.

The purpose was primarily to educate these lads for service to the monastery. In the same way that the monasteries of Ireland had been islands of scholarly activity that kept classical knowledge alive when continental Europe was in decline, Charlemagne wanted Frankish monasteries to be centers of education, where Christian doctrine could be taught uniformly and preserved correctly for posterity.

Ten years after this first edict, Charlemagne expanded his vision for an educated kingdom by ordering priests and monks to provide for the education of children in their districts, and not just those who were headed for the priesthood or monastic life. So monasteries and churches began basic educational programs in the regions where they were located, providing a level of learning to boys (and sometimes girls) at no charge. While these village schools certainly cannot be compared to widespread public education such as we know today, it was a step in that direction. Education was slowly becoming available to a wider audience than just the elite.

It was no easy task to turn monasteries into intellectual hubs. Libraries needed to be created with books collected from around the western world, the curriculum had to be set, and teachers needed to be employed. Discipline was notoriously harsh. (According to one medieval text, a group of unruly students at one monastic school, knowing that they were destined to receive a

ABBEY OF LORSCH—*WIKIPEDIA* / ARMIN KÜBELBECK; HTTP://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-SA/3.0/DEED.EN
FOL.252R FINGER COUNTING FROM 1 TO 20000—FROM *DE NUMERIS. CODEX ALCOBACENSE* BY RABANUS MAURUS (780–856) (VELLUM), CAROLINGIAN SCHOOL (9TH CENTURY) / INSTITUTO DA BIBLIOTECA NACIONAL, LISBON, PORTUGAL / GIRAUDON / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

"THE SCHOOL" *Below:* This 11th-c. illustration from a text written in Charlemagne's era shows scholars deep in discussion.

THE SCHOOL—FROM *DE UNIVERSO* BY RABANUS MAURUS (C. 780–856) C.1023 (VELLUM), ITALIAN SCHOOL (11TH CENTURY) / ABBEY OF MONTE CASSINO, CASSINO, ITALY / PHOTO © BEBA/AISA / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY
SAINT MATTHEW—FROM *THE GOSPEL OF SAINT RIQUIER*, OR *THE GOSPEL OF CHARLEMAGNE*, MANUSCRIPT, FRANCE C. 800 / DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / G. DAGLI ORTI / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

severe beating from their schoolmaster, decided to burn down the monastery rather than face the lash!)

One remarkable thing about Carolingian schools was that, even though they were attached to monasteries and parishes, their curricula were not restricted to Christian topics. Certainly the Bible and the early church fathers were taught, but so was the pagan philosopher Plato. Students studied the lives of the saints, but also Germanic legends. In these new Carolingian libraries, one could find not only religious texts, but legal writing, travelogues, and language books as well.

ENTER THE IRISH

While Alcuin was the driving force in Charlemagne's early educational reforms, he was not sufficient to the task of educating an empire. So early on, other teachers were called in to continue the reforms. Foremost among these were Irish monks.

Monastic communities such as Glendalough, Clonmacnoise, and Kildare had long been the intellectual and spiritual centers of Ireland, their abbots and abbesses rivaling (or exceeding) Irish bishops in power and learning. Many Irish monks were known for their intellects. They would listen to readings from the fathers of the church at their mealtimes and then retire to cells to make copies not just of Christian texts, but also of Irish law and pagan Celtic legends.

They created beautiful illustrated Gospels such as the *Book of Kells*. They developed a revolutionary new devotional practice of private confession and penance, based on the teachings of John Cassian, which would one day have an impact on all of Europe. And perhaps most important, they were involved in missionary work to Caledonia (Scotland), Britannia (England), and the European continent.

WRITING THE STORY OF CHRIST *Above:* The Gospel book with this illustration of St. Matthew was given to the monastery of St. Riquier by Charlemagne himself.

These Irish monks and theologians were precisely the ones Charlemagne needed to carry on the educational reforms begun under Alcuin. Most notable among them were Clement of Ireland, a successor of Alcuin at the palace school; Joseph Scottus, who served as a poet in Charlemagne's court; and scientist-monk Dungal of Bobbio, who taught the king astronomy.

Perhaps the most famous of these Irish transplants was the Neoplatonist philosopher Johannes Scotus Eriugena (see p. 29), who served as a grammar instructor in the court of Charlemagne's grandson later in the ninth century. He was a remarkable scholar, though a controversial one, whose writings on predestination and on creation would one day be condemned by the Catholic Church.

THE WORD IN THE WORLD

While the Carolingian Renaissance showed diverse and multifaceted intellectual creativity, it had unifying themes in its educational reforms—threads running through nearly every innovation.

First, *the value of the written word*. It is hard for us to imagine how valuable books were in the early Middle Ages. For one thing, without mass production of books available, they could be rare and extremely expensive. Owning a set of books showed that you were part of an elite class. It was not very important whether you could

NETWORKING IN THE NINTH CENTURY Alcuin (*middle*) presents scholar Rabanus Maurus (*left*) and his works to church official Otgar of Mainz.

Alcuin of York

IMAGINE if you can: *aworldwithoutcapitallettersorspaces*. Perhaps you owe the fact that you can read this article today to Alcuin of York.

Alcuin was one of Charlemagne's devoted advisors and a major figure in educational, biblical, and liturgical reform. Alcuin reformed education at court and established a palace library. He also tutored Charlemagne and was the head of the palace school at Aachen. (On the facing page, you can see a famous dialogue he supposedly conducted to help educate Charlemagne's son Pippin: the "Debate between the princely and noble youth Pippin and Alcuin the Teacher.")

An important goal of the Carolingian reforms was establishing accuracy and uniformity in textual sources for study. To that end, Alcuin worked to revise and standardize the Bible. In 796 he became the abbot of St. Martin's at Tours, the most powerful abbey in the kingdom, and remained there until his death in 804. Under his supervision, several pandects (complete editions) of the Bible were produced at the abbey, written in newly developed Carolingian minuscule script, much easier to read and write than older ones. For the first time, both capital letters and spaces between words were standard features of writing!

During his time at Charlemagne's court, Alcuin brought over many English books and entertained many English visitors. He was also influential as an outspoken opponent of the Adoptionist heresy, a teaching that Jesus had been adopted as God's son at some point in his earthly life.

A prolific writer, Alcuin authored poems, saints' lives, textbooks, political essays, and hundreds of letters. His incorporation of logic into the study and writing of theology paved the way for later thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas.

He also influenced the later church by revising the liturgy and standardizing the text of the Latin Bible. One phrase in a letter shows his characteristic intellectual humility: "Man thinks, God directs."

—*Jennifer Awes Freeman*

read them or not; they were status symbols even if sitting on a shelf unread.

In Charlemagne's court, though, the written word took on an importance much greater than merely a commodity for filling nice bookshelves. It became the medium by which the institutions of Carolingian society could be standardized and maintained. Ways of living the religious life, secular laws, morality—all were committed to the written word not only for posterity, but for management of daily life.

Second, *the spread of literacy.* We have long known that literacy was not uncommon among medieval clergy and monks. Indeed, that very literacy helped make these groups among the elite of society. They had the mystifying ability to make sense out of scratchings and dots on a page, marks whose meanings were lost on the average person.

In the Carolingian period, though, literacy moved out of the monasteries and sanctuaries and into the towns. Lay literacy, though rare compared to modern standards, became relatively widespread among the nobility, and to a lesser degree, even among commoners and women, two groups that had sometimes been kept uneducated in the early Middle Ages.

Third, *standardized learning.* Charlemagne made sure that education in his kingdom had a high degree of uniformity. His palace schools followed a relatively uniform curriculum, which was taught using a standardized form of Latin. Priests and monks teaching in villages did not have as comprehensive a curriculum to follow, but they were ordered to give their students accepted lessons in Christian theology and morality.

Even writing became standardized through the widespread adoption of the Carolingian minuscule, a type of calligraphy that could be read across the empire (see "Did you know?," inside front cover). Carolingian minuscule was used to produce religious texts that could be read in personal devotion or in public worship. But just as important, it was also used in copies of the classical texts that were resurfacing on the European continent.

Finally, *a merging of the religious and the secular.* The Carolingian period was a fertile time for religious scholarship. People copied and widely studied the writings of the early church fathers. Authors penned commentaries on the Bible, some of which would influence Christian thought well into the High Middle Ages.

Other thinkers took copies of biblical and other religious texts and inserted thoughtful comments called glosses into the margins or between the lines of text, words that could became as influential as the original manuscripts.

ALCUIN OF YORK (730–804). ALCUIN PRESENTS TO RABANUS MAURUS TO SAINT MARTIN. MINIATURE. / PHOTO © TARKER / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

THE WORD OF THE LORD All four evangelists are hard at work writing their respective gospels in this illustration for a Gospel book, the *Aachen Coronation Gospels*, made at Aachen after Charlemagne's death.

But like their Irish teachers before them, the scholars of Charlemagne's court also studied secular, even pagan, texts. They did not hesitate to examine the works of Greek and Roman philosophers or the legends of Germanic heroes—and then to teach them alongside lessons from the Bible and Christian theology. In this, they laid the groundwork for heady, controversial intellectual movements that would dominate Europe in the following millennium.

How long did the Carolingian Renaissance, with its signature educational reforms, actually last? Some scholars say that it stretched from Charlemagne's crowning in 768 well into the tenth century. In truth, though, much of the advancement under Charlemagne stalled a generation later when his empire was divided among his grandsons. But for a brief, shining moment in medieval Europe, a semiliterate king of the Franks inaugurated a period of intellectual fervor. Its influence would be felt 400 years later in the thinking of Scholasticism, 700 years later among the intellectuals of the Renaissance, and even in the musings of Christian intellectuals in the twenty-first century.

That is the Charlemagne whose picture should show up in a Google search.

Garry J. Crites is director of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Duke University.

AACHEN GOSPELS— *WIKIPEDIA* / THE YORCK PROJECT

Eriugena

WE KNOW VERY LITTLE about Johannes Scottus Eriugena (c. 815–c. 877)—a fact that led twelfth-century historian William of Malmesbury to embellish the record with several fantastic stories, including one describing Eriugena's students stabbing him to death with their pens!

Other than his Irish birth (as indicated by his surname, meaning "Ireland-born"), Eriugena's life is a mystery until 843 when he appeared at the court of Charlemagne's grandson, Charles the Bald (reigned 843–877). Charles soon made Eriugena the head of the palace school, a position recently held by Alcuin of York. There was a notable intellectual continuity between the two men and their circles of colleagues; like Alcuin before him, Eriugena was thoroughgoing in his application of logic and philosophy to Christian theology. In his commentary on the book of Mark, he stated, "No one enters heaven except through philosophy."

Described by his contemporaries as a holy man and a scholar, Eriugena's knowledge of Greek enabled him to translate many Greek Christian Neoplatonic writers. Among these were Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

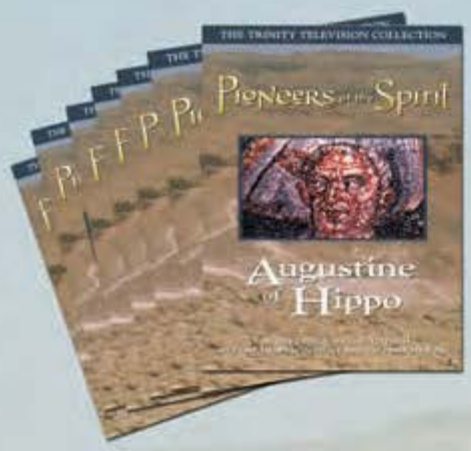
As he made their work accessible to the intellectuals of his day, Eriugena came to hold some controversial views, such as the belief that sin and hell were not real because nothing evil could come from God. But he was nonetheless influential in the development of medieval theology and philosophy. His writings and translations were copied and widely distributed during and after his lifetime.

—Jennifer Awes Freeman

A day at school

PIPPIN: What is a letter?
ALCUIN: The guardian of the story.
P: What is a word?
A: The traitor who betrays what is in your mind.
P: What gives birth to a word?
A: The tongue.
P: What is the tongue?
A: A whip that beats the air.
P: What is the air?
A: The guard of life.
P: What is life?
A: The joy of the happy, the sadness of the wretched, the expectation of death.
P: What is death?
A: An inevitable event, an uncertain journey, the tears of the living, the confirmation of a will, a robber who steals humankind.

—Translated by Edwin Woodruff Tait



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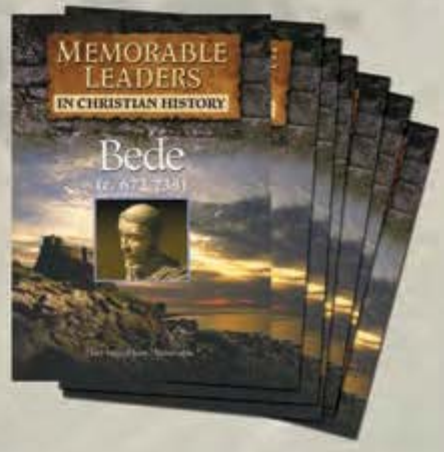

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Broken images

HOW CHARLEMAGNE AND THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE MISUNDERSTOOD EACH OTHER

Jennifer Awes Freeman

POPE LEO may have put a crown on Charlemagne's head on Christmas Day 800, and the people may have acclaimed him emperor, but he was not the only emperor on the block. Over 1,000 miles away, a succession of emperors and one empress who saw themselves as rightfully leading the Roman Empire ruled from Constantinople. They ruled over Byzantium (much of modern-day Greece and Turkey, and at points some parts of the modern Middle East and Eastern Europe.)

The east-west relationship had not been smooth since Constantine set up his imperial capital at Constantinople, not Rome, in the third century. East and west had different languages, cultures, and theological outlooks. Tension grew when the Byzantine Empire failed to aid Rome against Lombard invasions in the sixth and seventh centuries—and in 756, when Charlemagne's father Pepin the Short turned over lands he had reclaimed to the bishop of Rome, rather than to the Byzantine emperor. But Charlemagne's reign would put another nail in the coffin of the east-west relationship.

WE HAVE AN EMPIRE, TOO In this mosiac from the basilica Hagia Sophia, seat of eastern Christianity in Constantinople, emperors Justinian and Constantine present models of the basilica and of the city to the Virgin Mary and Christ Child.

HOLY PICTURES?

Legends once told that what became known as the "iconoclastic controversy" started with a literal bang. In 727 the volcano on the Aegean island of Thera erupted. Supposedly seeing the eruption as a fiery judgment from God for people's idolatry in worshiping created objects, Byzantine emperor Leo III ordered the removal of an icon of Christ from above the Chalke Gate (the main ceremonial entrance to the palace in Constantinople). This action inaugurated Byzantine "iconoclasm," or the destruction of religious images, and caused the people of Constantinople to revolt.

In reality, the controversy emerged more gradually. Byzantines at the time called the debate *iconomachy* ("image struggle"); only in a handful of known incidents were images actually destroyed. But sixteenth-century historians later applied the label "iconoclasm" to the anti-image side, and it stuck.

HAGIA SOPHIA MOSAICS—*WIKIPEDIA*

FIGHTING WITH PICTURES An iconodule Psalter *(left)* illustrates Psalm 22 with a painting of iconoclast patriarch John VII rubbing out an icon of Christ, while a 9th-c. icon *(above)* depicts the restoration of icon veneration.

Religious images, or icons, played a significant part in Christian life from at least the third century, and the practice of venerating them (i.e. kissing, bowing, and lighting candles) dated to at least the seventh. Veneration may have developed in part as a response to the incursion of Islam. Islam was "anti-iconic," forbidding any representation of God in art; in response some Christians emphasized more strongly the fact that their religion allowed God-pictures.

IMAGE STRUGGLES

But controversy dogged the practice. In the 720s and 730s, Germanos, the patriarch of Constantinople, chastised two clergymen for teaching against images and removing them from their churches. By the 730s anti-image sentiments were widespread in the east—even in Constantinople. But the anti-image position was never adopted in Rome.

In 741 Constantine V, Leo III's son, became emperor, and in 754 he called a church council that banned the veneration of images and decreed that Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints could not be depicted in images. The council argued that it was impossible to visually represent Christ's divine nature and that portraits of the Virgin and of saints were insulting to their now-eternal status in heaven.

But another side of the debate soon emerged. *Iconodules* or *iconophiles*, from the Greek words for honoring or loving images, asserted that icons were not idols but significant testimonies to the Incarnation: since Christ was God-made-man, he was image-able.

The debate was not academic. If you bowed before an image in worship, would you find someone coming from the emperor to arrest you? And would you incur the wrath of God either for venerating an idol on the one hand or for refusing to honor holy pictures on the other?

Following the death of Constantine V came a period of relative peace. His iconoclastic son Leo IV married an iconodule, Irene, and allowed exiled iconodule monks to return and others to keep their icons. When Leo IV died, Irene rose to power as regent for their son Constantine VI. She initially aimed for better relations with the west, even trying at one point to negotiate a marriage between her son and one of Charlemagne's daughters, Rotrude.

Irene soon called the Second Council of Nicaea (787) to address the image controversy. It condemned Constantine V's iconoclastic council of 754 and distinguished between the terms *latreia* (worship, service given only to God) and *proskynhsis* (veneration, prostration, gesture of respect). While only God is worthy of worship, the council said, holy images were deserving of veneration (respect) in the same way as the cross, the Gospel books, and saints' relics, since the honor paid to a holy image passed on to the person depicted in it.

Following custom, notes and decrees from the council were translated from Greek into Latin and sent to the west, where Charlemagne read them. But the Latin translation failed to convey the Greek distinction

CHLUDOV PSALTER— STATE HISTORICAL MUSEUM, MOSCOW
THE RESTORATION OF THE ICONS—(EGG TEMPERA ON PANEL), CRETAN SCHOOL (16TH CENTURY) / BENAKI MUSEUM, ATHENS, GREECE / GIFT OF HELEN STATHATOS / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

between "worship" and "veneration." It sounded like the council had approved the idolatrous act of worshiping images.

Charlemagne had a monarch-sized fit and ordered the *Opus Caroli Regis contra Synodum* ("The Work of King Charles against the Council") to be issued. In 792 a draft of the *Opus Caroli Regis* was sent to Pope Hadrian in Rome for approval, which it did not receive.

The Franks may have been disappointed by the pope's response. But they knew that the pope himself had sent legates and a letter of support to Nicaea. Because of the pope's disapproval, the *Opus Caroli Regis* was hastily completed and permanently shelved in the Frankish royal archives. It would not be consulted again until Calvin wrote his *Institutes* more than 700 years later.

The Franks did not dare to contradict the pope directly. They nonetheless condemned the decisions in a council of their own, the Council of Frankfurt (794). While this council was primarily concerned with condemning a new heresy from Spain, it also declared Nicaea II a "pseudosynod," denying it ecumenical status.

Through all this Charlemagne and his advisors asserted the superiority of what was at this point still merely the Frankish kingdom over the Byzantine east. The *Opus Caroli Regis* explicitly asserted that Franks took a middle way between iconoclasm and idolatry. It presented them not only as theologically orthodox rulers but also as the most qualified ones. Rome too would soon find it politically advantageous to switch gears. The crowning of Charlemagne as emperor in 800 by the Roman pontiff powerfully symbolized Rome's independence from Byzantium.

"THE WORK AGAINST THE COUNCIL" *Left:* Charlemagne's advisor Theodulf of Orléans wrote this treatise condemning both the worship of images and their destruction.

WALK THIS WAY *Below:* This Byzantine ivory shows relics carried in procession to be enshrined in a church.

Charlemagne's proposal of marriage to Empress Irene might have bridged this divide, but she was still hesitating over her response when she was dethroned in 802. And after Charlemagne's death, more nails were hammered into the coffin as further disputes arose between Rome and Constantinople.

PHOTIUS IN, PHOTIUS OUT

In 858 Byzantine emperor Michael III deposed Ignatius, patriarch of Constantinople, and replaced him with Photius (c. 810–c. 895). When Ignatius refused to step down, Michael and Photius appealed to Pope Nicholas V in Rome. Despite the fact that his delegates had participated in the synod that deposed Ignatius, the pope declared Ignatius the rightful patriarch.

Photius, whose position as patriarch was not officially acknowledged until after Ignatius's death in 877, had become unpopular with the pope for two reasons. In 867 he issued a letter criticizing the Roman church for its addition of the *filioque* phrase, "and from the Son," to the Nicene Creed, saying the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and from the Son. . . ." His letter also objected to western missionary efforts in Bulgaria, where Constantinople, Rome, and Charlemagne's heirs in Aachen were all competing for converts.

All these questions of authority, and Rome's assertion of its supremacy over the other major bishops of Christendom, eventually culminated in the two churches—Eastern and Western—anathematizing each other in 1054 (i.e., declaring each other to be heretical). Charlemagne was not alive to see it. But by laying the groundwork for a self-confident Western Christendom, he had paved the way.

Jennifer Awes Freeman is a doctoral candidate at Vanderbilt University specializing in the early Middle Ages.

LIBRI CAROLINI— BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE
BYZANTINE IVORY RELIEF— ART HISTORY IMAGES

How they feasted and fasted

EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE EIGHTH AND NINTH CENTURIES

Jennifer Woodruff Tait

YEAR-ROUND LABORS *Above:* This calendar shows appropriate farming tasks for each month.

DON'T FALL OFF! *Left:* A carpenter constructs a roof.

BEAUTIFUL LADIES doing embroidery, strong knights jousting, troubadours serenading their lovers, castles hung with tapestries. That is the Middle Ages in our heads. But it was not Charlemagne's Middle Ages. All of that would come later. The first serious castles were built, not just *as* his empire was crumbling, but because it was crumbling: people needed strong places to defend themselves against attacking armies. And the whole feudal system of knights and allegiances, troubadours and ladies, would not arise for centuries.

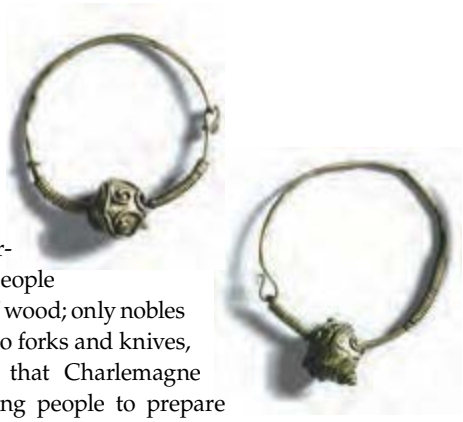
The world of Charlemagne's day was very local and very dark. Roads built by the Romans were in disrepair, despite Charlemagne's orders that they be kept up. Most information traveled at the speed of feet. All but about 10 percent of the people lived in small villages, growing and hunting their own food. Surrounded by large forests full of wild animals, few traveled far.

Beeswax candles and oil lamps were expensive; people went to bed when the sun went down. Frequently they rose after about four hours, having completed their "first sleep." They might do household chores, have sex, or simply rest in bed. Then they would go back to "second sleep." (This sleeping pattern persisted until the 1600s.) Charlemagne kept a lamp and wax tablet by his bed to learn to write, supposedly in part so he could record his dreams.

Houses were small (80–300 square feet), drafty, and leaky. Frequently a house had only one room with a fire in the middle, which often threatend to get out of control and burn the house down. Benches, stools, tables, and beds were common furniture. A bottle of holy water under the bed kept the devil away, and only babies had their own cradles; everyone else shared a bed. Chairs were a bigger extravagance. The very wealthy might have chairs with arms and dressers with drawers. But extra clothes to put in those drawers were few. Laws did not limit rich clothing to the aristocracy (as they did later), but people could only

CARPENTER— GIANNI DAGLI ORTI / THE ART ARCHIVE AT ART RESOURCE, NY
CHRONICLE OF THE MONTHS—ERICH LESSING / ART RESOURCE, NY

THE NECESSITIES OF LIFE *Right:* These 9th-c. earrings were made of silver. *Below:* A goose-seller deals with a customer.



THE GOOSE SELLER—FROM *DE UNIVERSO* BY RABANUS MAURUS (C. 780–856) C.1023 (VELLUM), ITALIAN SCHOOL (11TH CENTURY) / ABBEY OF MONTE CASSINO, CASSINO, ITALY / PHOTO © BEBA/AISA / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY
JEWELRY—FROM CAMON, AMIENS, SOMME, CAROLINGIAN, 7TH–10TH CENTURIES (SILVER, GILDED BRONZE), CAROLINGIAN SCHOOL / ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, UK / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

make a fur cape if they could catch a bear, fox, weasel, or squirrel. Men practiced skilled trades, such as blacksmithing and goldsmithing, but only women made clothes. The average woman had a spindle in her hands all the time, even while making dinner.

Nobles wore silk and brocade, and long woolen cloaks over everything. For a time short cloaks came into fashion. Charlemagne hated them, supposedly exclaiming: "What is the use of these little napkins? I can't cover myself with them in bed. When I am on horseback I can't protect myself from the wind and the rain. When I go off to empty my bowels, I catch cold because my backside is frozen." When Charlemagne really dressed up, he wore cloth of gold and shoes with jewels.

During Charlemagne's lifetime, many people moved from hunting and gathering to settling down and growing large fields of grain. Rye, wheat, barley, and oats were used for bread, which people consumed avidly, and for ale, which they also consumed avidly. Common people ate meat, but how much they ate depended on how good they were at hunting and catching. And famine was common. Weather could easily destroy crops.

During Lent, when meat was not allowed, fish was popular. Depending on their skills at gardening and beekeeping, people could supplement their meals with eggs, onions, leeks, root vegetables, pears, apples, peaches, mulberries, walnuts, honey, garlic, and all kinds of herbs: mint, parsley, sage, and many others.

And people could drink wine (mulberries were as popular as grapes for making it), mead (made with honey), cider, pear juice, and "garne" (fermented grain). Most people ate off of dishes made of wood; only nobles had glass. There were no forks and knives, and—despite the fact that Charlemagne passed laws encouraging people to prepare food with the "utmost cleanliness"—hardly anybody washed their hands.

HERE COMES THE JUDGE

Charlemagne's laws governing daily life, called capitularies, covered everything (one historian wrote) "from incorrect grammar and choral singing in church to road tolls and murder." Charlemagne sent pairs of royal messengers (one lay, one ordained) around to read the laws out loud, see that they were being obeyed, and hold court to hear appeals when they weren't. It was another way of unifying his kingdom.

Churches had been few outside of cities and towns up until about 600. When Charlemagne came to power, he increased rural church-building. Local priests, usually not well educated, knew enough Latin to recite the service. They preached about basic Christian doctrine and behavior, conducted weddings at church doors (followed by Eucharist inside), and sat with people at their deathbeds. Many were beloved by their flocks.

Sundays and saints' days were times of celebration. No one had to work except for "carrying for the army, carrying food, or carrying the body of a lord to its grave," the laws said. Eucharist in the church would be followed by singing and dancing on the lawn (despite repeated objections, people sang pagan songs and women danced in circles). Once a year, there might be a great fair in a nearby large city, with booths full of honey, salted meat, wine, cloth, and imported goods like peacock feathers and monkeys (for the wives of Frankish nobles).

At Charlemagne's court in Aachen, politics were brewing, reforms were stirring, and endless wars were being planned. Those things would touch the lives of all the common people and set into motion changes that would last 1,000 years. But news, after all, traveled slowly. For the moment, people swept their hearths, danced at their weddings, rocked their babies, and laughed to think that anyone might be able to afford an imported monkey.

Jennifer Woodruff Tait is managing editor of Christian History.

Charlemagne's furniture

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE?

David A. Michelson

FIT FOR A KING AND A SAINT? *Left:* This golden shrine holds Charlemagne's bones today in Aachen Cathedral. Frederick II, who had the shrine built in 1215, is pictured on it also (*right*).

WHEN CHARLEMAGNE DIED on January 28, 814, his will listed an unusual set of matching furniture. Charlemagne owned three ornamental silver tables, each with a map or image of a city engraved on it. The first bore an image of the city of Rome. The second depicted the Byzantine capital city Constantinople, which thought of itself as "New Rome." In his will, Charlemagne left these two tables to two different bishops. He sent the "Constantinople" table to the bishop of Rome and the "Rome" table to a bishop of former Byzantine territory that he had conquered.

These gifts were a calculated symbolic gesture, their meaning clear when compared with the third silver table. This one Charlemagne left to his heir, Louis. Biographer Einhard notes that this last table was far larger and superior to the other two, showing not just a single city, but "a plan of the whole universe, drawn with skill and delicacy." With this bequest Charlemagne left his son not merely a symbol of authority over old Rome, or even over new Rome, but also a claim to rule over the whole civilized world.

But this claim did not reflect reality. At the time of his death, Charlemagne controlled only a small fraction of the former Roman Empire. He left his heirs limited influence over Rome and no authority at all over Constantinople. In fact over the next two generations, Charlemagne's empire declined rapidly. While Charlemagne was memorialized as "the Great," his son Louis earned the less impressive nickname "the Pious." His grandchildren began a civil war between themselves that permanently shattered the empire; its last ruler was Charlemagne's great-grandson "Charles the Fat," only 70 years after Charlemagne's death.

Nevertheless Charlemagne left a noteworthy heritage, embodied by these three tables. It was a vision of uniting east and west into a single universal empire under a Christian emperor. Charlemagne's most influential and lasting legacy was intangible: the idea of "Christendom."

A NEW ROMAN EMPEROR

Pope Leo III's coronation of Charlemagne was the pivotal moment in that idea's arrival. This short-lived revival of the Roman imperial title in the west struck a chord that resonated in the political imagination of western Europeans for over a millennium.

Called "Emperor and Augustus," Charlemagne restored to the city of Rome the glory of having an emperor after nearly 300 years without one. Although Charlemagne's biographers noted his "surprise" at the

CHARLEMAGNE SHRINE—PHOTO FROM WWW.MIKESTRAVELGUIDE.COM
FREDERICK II—12TH-CENTURY CHARLEMAGNE SHRINE IN GOLD, PRECIOUS STONES, AND ENAMELS, KEPT IN THE PALATINE CHAPEL OF AACHEN'S CATHEDRAL, GERMANY. GOLDSMITH'S ART / DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY / A. DAGLI ORTI / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

I'M IN CHARGE HERE *Left:* Otto III (reigned 996–1002) sits enthroned among admiring clergy.

...AND HERE *Below:* A medieval king invests a bishop with symbols of office.

MS CIM.4453 F.42R HOLY ROMAN EMPEROR OTTO III ENTHRONED (980–1002)—C. 998 (VELLUM), GERMAN SCHOOL (10TH CENTURY) / BAYERISCHE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK, MUNICH, GERMANY / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY
INVESTITURE WOODCUT—*WIKIPEDIA*

"impromptu" coronation, it was quite likely the result of careful political calculations by both the Roman church and Charlemagne himself, and it increased his status as legitimate and divinely ordained ruler of western Europe. As a "Roman emperor," Charlemagne could not only claim to be an equal with the empress then ruling over Byzantium, but he could even aspire to be on par with Christian Roman emperors of old, such as Constantine the Great.

For the next 1,000 years, the monarchs of Europe cited Charlemagne's title as the key link that connected them, and the many kingdoms of medieval Europe, to the Roman Empire. The memory of Charlemagne's claim to the Roman imperial title emboldened the dream: if Charlemagne, no matter how briefly, could reunite the Roman Empire (or at least western Europe and the city of Rome) under a single Christian ruler, then perhaps it could be done again by someone else.

This vision of a united church and state became a long-running political and religious goal of western European Christians. It was a frequent theme in western European art and literature; one poet gave Charlemagne the title "the Father of Europe."

The dream shaped how European kings thought of themselves. It affected how Christians perceived their encounters with Muslims in southern Europe and on the Crusades. It shaped how the Catholic Church viewed its political authority and relationship to the kings of Europe. Even after the Reformation ended most hopes of uniting Europe under one Christian king, Charlemagne's memory still held power over faith and politics. And even at the end of the twentieth century, Charlemagne's Christendom was whispered as the forerunner to the modern European Union.

SAINT CHARLEMAGNE?

Charlemagne's larger-than-life reputation developed little by little with new traditions and legends attaching to his name like the annual rings of growth around the trunk of a tree. First came highly flattering biographies and tributes. These described Charlemagne as an ideal Christian ruler, a task made easy by ready comparison to the civil war under his grandchildren. Because of that political chaos, the title of emperor itself eventually lapsed for almost half a century. Not until Pope John XII crowned king of the Germans Otto I "the Great" as Holy Roman Emperor in 962 could western Europe once again claim to have a "Roman emperor." His son, Otto II, and later heirs also claimed the imperial title.

Otto II married a Byzantine princess, renewing the eastern connection. In the year 1000 their son, Otto III, opened Charlemagne's tomb in Aachen and "discovered" that Charlemagne's body was miraculously preserved without decay (seen as a divine sign that the deceased was worthy of veneration as a saint). In this way Otto expanded Charlemagne's reputation as a truly "holy" Roman emperor.

Enhancing Charlemagne's Christian credentials gave later Holy Roman Emperors political legitimacy and connected them to religious authority at a time when an intense rivalry over political and religious power was developing between the papacy in Rome and the various monarchies of Europe. By emphasizing Charlemagne's role as defender and ruler of all Christians, the emperors reminded the Roman pontiffs that popes were not the only ones with a God-given charge of leadership over the church.

THE STUFF OF LEGEND Roland (*left*) dies blowing his horn and (*facing page*) summons Charlemagne and his warriors to defeat Muslim troops.

...AND OF REALITY *Below:* Charlemagne eventually did learn to write his name.

A LONG CHRISTENDOM

About a century and a half after Otto opened Charlemagne's tomb, Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (reigned 1155–1190) had Charlemagne formally recognized as a saint and changed the official name of his empire to "the Holy Roman Empire." The idea of Christendom was now captured in a name.

Frederick I Barbarossa's grandson, Frederick II, carefully imitated the now-idealized Charlemagne. Frederick II was crowned publicly in Charlemagne's old capital, Aachen, in 1215, and while there he ceremonially reburied Charlemagne's relics in a magnificent reliquary. Frederick then took a vow that he would lead a crusade to Jerusalem in the defense of Christendom. Now Charlemagne was not only remembered in folklore as the great Christian emperor of Europe, but as the first, even greatest, Crusader.

In real life Charlemagne never set foot in Jerusalem. But in popular songs by minstrels across Europe he now performed legendary feats, liberating Jerusalem and even conquering Constantinople. Heroic myths of Charlemagne and his mighty companions were beloved by knights and nobles. When Pope Urban II called for an army to liberate Jerusalem from Islamic rule in 1095, he urged, "Let the deeds of your ancestors move you and incite your minds to manly achievements; the glory and greatness of king Charles the Great, and of his son Louis, and of your kings, who have destroyed the kingdoms of the pagans, and have extended in these lands the territory of the holy church."

As this army began to march on the First Crusade, they followed a highway across eastern Europe that they believed to have been built by Charlemagne. They even circulated rumors that the ghost of Charlemagne had been seen among their number. Even when the Crusades failed, Charlemagne's legends continued to flourish—perhaps to satisfy a European longing for what might have been.

After the political and religious fragmentation of the Reformation, the ideal of unifying Europe under one Christian emperor became more unreachable. But the dream of Christendom did not disappear. European rulers and intellectuals continued for centuries to use Charlemagne to support visions of empire and culture. In 1811 a statue of Charlemagne was set up in Aachen with the inscription: "Only Napoleon is greater than I." From the 1950s to the present, the International Charlemagne Prize has been given in Aachen to people who have contributed to the development of Western Europe as a community.

Although Charlemagne's actual empire was short-lived, it cast a long shadow. Christians today are sometimes wary over alliances between secular and ecclesiastical power. But the fact remains that for centuries, western Christians dreamed of sitting at Charlemagne's universal tables. CH

David A. Michelson is assistant professor of the history of Christianity at Vanderbilt University Divinity School.

DEATH OF ROLAND—BPK, BERLIN / STAATSBIBLIOTHEK ZU BERLIN, STIFTUNG PREUSSICHER KULTURBESITZ / RUTH SCHACHT / ART RESOURCE, NY
CHARLEMAGNE SIGNATURE—© RMN-GRAND PALAIS / ART RESOURCE, NY

The thousand lives of Charlemagne

HOW MEDIEVAL POETS TURNED A BORDER SKIRMISH INTO A FOUNDATIONAL MEDIEVAL LEGEND

CHARLEMAGNE AND HIS PALADINS IN BATTLE AGAINST THE SARACENS—MINIATURE FROM *CHARLEMAGNE AND HIS PALADINS* (VELLUM), FRENCH SCHOOL (13TH CENTURY) / PRIVATE COLLECTION / INDEX / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

PASSING CENTURIES only increased Charlemagne's mythic stature. Of all medieval legends about "Holy Roman Emperors," over 1,000 were composed about Charlemagne. The next most popular was Frederick I Barbarossa, whose 50 pale in comparison! Perhaps no legend is a greater example of the power of myth than the epic poem *La Chanson de Roland* (*The Song of Roland*).

This is ironic, because the event it recounts, the Battle of Roncevaux in 778, was in fact an embarrassing and utter defeat for Charlemagne. Through a secret alliance, Charlemagne had gotten himself embroiled in an Islamic civil war in Islamic Andalusia (modern Spain). But his attempt to invade and conquer portions of Andalusia did not go well, and Roncevaux was the campaign's final disaster.

When Charlemagne's armies arrived in Andalusia, a key Islamic ally had turned against them. As they retreated back across the Pyrenees Mountains into France, the rear of the army fell prey to an ambush by a local, most likely Christian, Basque raiding party looking for a quick profit. Charlemagne lost his baggage train (no doubt carrying spoils of war) and Roland, one of his military lords.

Neither Charlemagne's failed invasion nor the ambush of Roland were particularly glorious. But as time passed the embellished story became the opening scene of a legendary "defeat" of the Islamic rulers of Spain. In this mythical account, the dying Roland sounds his horn, "Olifant," before being carried to heaven as a martyr.

COME BLOW YOUR HORN

Responding to Roland's call, Charlemagne assembles an army of hundreds of thousands. In bloody conflict he defeats not only the Basques but—more importantly—Islamic armies. The Chanson ends with a vision of Charlemagne as the acknowledged defender of Christians against Islam.

Oral versions of this story, widely popular, were sung for centuries. As his Norman army rode to conquer England in 1066, William the Conqueror had his musicians sing of Roland and Charlemagne to inspire them. One of the earliest written versions (1150s) runs to over 4,000 lines long.

Over time the stories of Charlemagne's military feats were translated repeatedly (including into Swedish and Old Norse) and even spawned "spin-offs." Lesser companions of Roland, love-struck knight Orlando and sword-wielding archbishop Turpin, became central figures in their own legends. New exploits accrued to the legendary leader, including the liberation of Jerusalem and the subjugation of the entire Byzantine Empire.

These legends reflect the societies that created them. Charlemagne's use of violence in defense of Christendom was glorified to the point of being physically impossible. His enemies, including the Christians of Byzantium, were extreme stereotypes. The stories also show a lack of basic knowledge about Islam, which the authors seem to think involved idol worship (Muslims in fact forbid any representation of God in art).

It is likely that such legends helped to fuel the violence between Christians and Muslims and between eastern and western Christians that marked much of the Middle Ages. Their effects continue to echo into our own day. —*David A. Michelson*

MISTAKEN IDENTITY? *Left:* This illustration of Augustine from the late Middle Ages pictures Rome itself, not the New Jerusalem, as the "city of God."

A LONG SHADOW *Below:* Charlemagne's bones are enshrined in the cathedral he built at Aachen.

MS 218 F 2R VIEW OF ROME AS THE CITY OF GOD, AND ST. AUGUSTINE WRITING—FROM *DE CIVITATE DEI* BY ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO (354–430) 1459 (VELLUM), ITALIAN SCHOOL (15TH CENTURY) / BIBLIOTHEQUE SAINTE-GENEVIEVE, PARIS, FRANCE / GIRAUDON / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY
AACHEN CATHEDRAL. PALATINE CHAPEL. INTERIOR WITH MAIN ALTAR, KNOW PALA D'ORO (1000) AND SHRINE OF THE VIRGIN MARY (1238). GERMANY / PHOTO © TARKER / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

After Christendom, what next?

A MODERN THEOLOGIAN REFLECTS ON WHERE WE ARE TODAY

***CH**: This issue shows us how Charlemagne contributed to the idea of Christendom, the merging of throne and altar. Are we still in Christendom today?*

D. STEPHEN LONG: In a literal sense, I would say no. There are still pockets of Christendom. In Britain the queen and prime minister appoint the archbishop of Canterbury. And there are still leftovers of christendom in our modern culture. Every American president has to say "God bless America."

There are also people who want to resurrect a new kind of Christendom. They are frustrated that leftovers are all that remain. Some may not even realize that Christendom is gone and won't return.

***CH**: How then should church and culture relate today?*

DSL: Theologian Karl Barth said that the end of Christendom has set the church "free for the service to its own cause within the secular world which it had for the most part neglected in pursuit of its own fantasies."

Christendom recognized the power of the church, though it didn't recognize it properly. It was a secular recognition of church power, trying to contain that power within another power. But—and I think this is more so with Charlemagne than even Constantine—it was antithetical to the power revealed in the Gospels.

The loss of Christendom is a new opportunity. Look at the papacy. When we had Christendom, we had secular popes. Markus Wriedt said that now that

the culture has become more secular, the pope has become more Christian. The church no longer needs to be accountable to the kind of politics present in Christendom. That frees it up to be a truly political force of its own.

The church is a transnational body. Our most important identity is in baptism, and our primary obligations are to other Christians. But we are still obligated to our neighborhoods, our villages, our cities. The *Epistle to Diognetus*, an early Christian letter, tells us to live in the midst of our neighbors and love them all: "[Christians] dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. . . . They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives."

We need once again common life, common worship, common discipline, common teaching. Not uniformity, but something recognizable from place to place.

***CH**: Two themes prominent in Charlemagne's story are Christian-Muslim relations and the involvement of the church in education. Where are we on those themes today?*

DSL: Christians understand ourselves as transnational. We should not then try to make Islam fit within national politics. In that sense I am more than willing to concede Islam space as part of common decency. But there needs to be a better way of dialogue going forward. Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are all essentially social, with political significance.

As far as education, I'm not sure Christians need their own educational institutions as much as new ways to educate people in the basic teachings of the faith. I tell people to ask their pastor if he or she knows their Myers-Briggs letters and then ask their pastor to explain the hypostatic union. I would argue that far more pastors know the first than the second. But knowing how the divine and human natures of Christ relate is more important for the future of the faith. Clearly we need some new ways of teaching. I'd love to see ecumenical schools emerge, places like the Scriptural Reasoning Project, talking from the orthodox heart of the faith, not its margins. We need to advocate for space for faith in the academic world; otherwise we will not have wiser, saner voices speaking of faith. When you police out confessional voices, that backfires.

QUEEN ELIZABETH II AND FORMER ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY ROWAN WILLIAMS—REUTERS/MATT DUNHAM/POOL

QUEEN AND ARCHBISHOP Church and state still come together in many ways and places, even in the waning of Christendom.

***CH**: How can the Christian tradition help us here?*

DSL: Besides the *Epistle to Diognetus*, I think we can learn from Augustine's two cities in *The City of God*. Both maintained that our earthly politics are made relative in the face of God's kingdom. That would be my criticism of Charlemagne—that his earthly politics were too central.

Gerald Schlabach has said, following Stanley Hauerwas, that Catholics and Anabaptists both need to become more like each other. Christians can't continue with the "counters"—where the one thing Catholics know is that they're not Protestant and the one thing Protestants know is that they're not Catholic. Think back to Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine on politics. They were not necessarily against the empire, but they knew what they were *for*. They were for the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord.

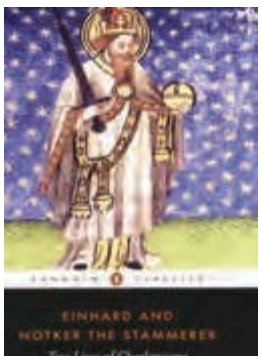
D. Stephen Long is professor of systematic theology at Marquette University.

Recommended resources

BEGIN EXPLORING CHARLEMAGNE'S LIFE, THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF HIS REIGN, AND HIS IMPACT ON EUROPEAN CULTURE AND RELIGION WITH THESE RESOURCES RECOMMENDED BY *CH* EDITORIAL STAFF AND THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS.

BOOKS

• We are lucky to have a good English edition of two biographies written close to Charlemagne's own time:

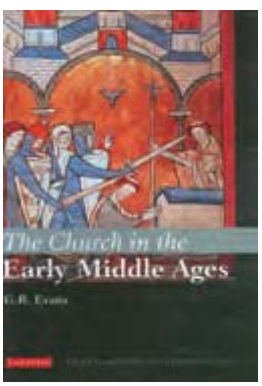


that of Einhard, referred to many times in this issue, and that of the monk Notker the Stammerer who wrote 70 years after Charlemagne's death. You can find them in *Two Lives of Charlemagne* in the Penguin Classics series, edited by medieval historian David Ganz.

• Modern biographies include Alessandro Barbero's thorough *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent*; Matthias Becher's concise *Charlemagne*; and another *Charlemagne* by Roger Collins that focuses on politics and culture.

• The intriguing *Becoming Charlemagne* by Jeff Sypeck puts Charlemagne into his historical context by imagining the lives of those around him, from Empress Irene in Constantinople to Isaac, the Jewish North African who brought Charlemagne's elephant back from Baghdad.

• Find a good timeline of world events surrounding Charlemagne's court in *The World in the Time of Charlemagne* by Fiona Macdonald. Read more on Christianity in this era in *The Church in the Early Middle Ages*, *Faith in the Middle Ages*, and *The History of Christian Europe* by G. R. Evans. And regarding why the Dark Ages may not have been as dark as once thought, check out *Barbarians to Angels: The Dark Ages Revisited* by Peter Wells.

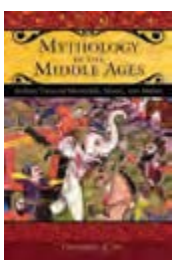


• Do you want to know more about what they ate in the ninth century? The aptly named *Daily Life in the Age of Charlemagne* by John Butt and *Daily Life in the World of Charlemagne* by Pierre Riché will tell you that and more, as will *Charlemagne and His World* by Friedrich Heer. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval Europe* and the *Shorter Cambridge Medieval History* are thorough, encyclopedic sources on every aspect of the early Middle Ages.

• The iconoclastic controversy profoundly affected Charlemagne's relationships with the Byzantine Empire. Read more in Thomas F. X. Noble's *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*. Diverging views on Charlemagne's relationship with Islam appear in *Mohammed and Charlemagne* by Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne Revisited* by Emmet Scott, and *Mohammed, Charlemagne, and the Origins of Europe* by Richard Hodges.

• And dig into the achievements of the Carolingian Renaissance in Marcia Colish's *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400–1400*; Jean Hubert's *The Carolingian Renaissance*; and *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation*, edited by Rosamond McKitterick.

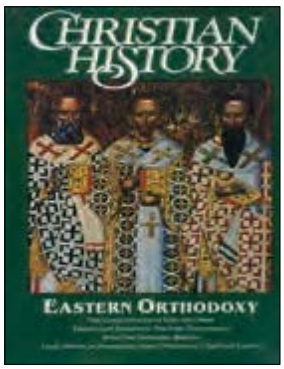
• Finally, *The Song of Roland* was crucial in turning Charlemagne's life into legend. It can be read in translation in the Penguin Classics series, edited by Glyn Burgess, and in a more contemporary prose retelling by W. S. Merwin in the Modern Library series. Guides to reading it include *Reading the Song of Roland* by Eugene Vance and *The Sense of the Song of Roland* by Robert Francis Cook. Larger considerations of medieval legend are addressed in Christopher Fee's *Mythology in the Middle Ages: Heroic Tales of Monsters, Magic, and Might* and Robert Morrissey's *Charlemagne and France: A Thousand Years of Mythology*.

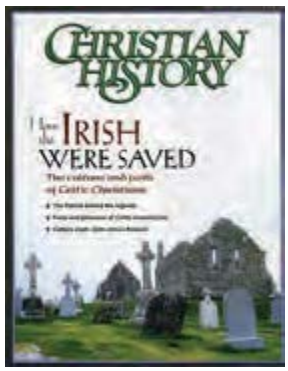


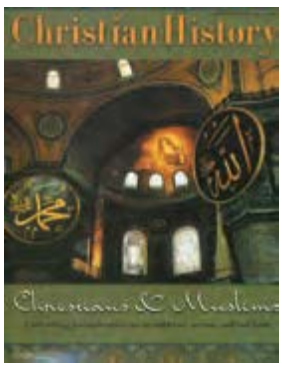
PREVIOUS ISSUES OF *CHRISTIAN HISTORY*

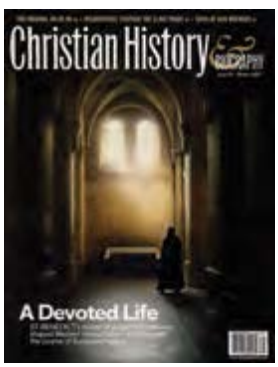
• Read back issues of *Christian History* magazines or purchase print copies of available issues at www.christianhistorymagazine.org. Most relevant to this issue's theme are

30: *Women in the Middle Ages*
54: *Eastern Orthodoxy: Then and Now*
60: *How the Irish Were Saved*
74: *Christians and Muslims*
93: *A Devoted Life* (western monasticism)





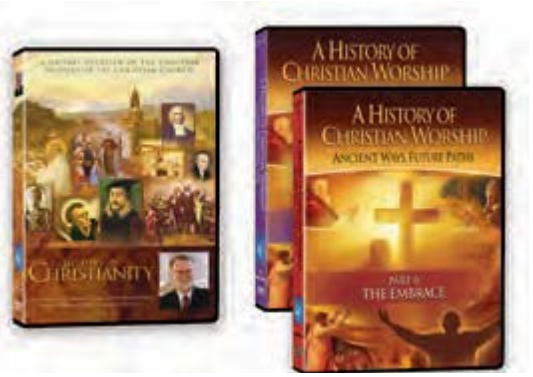




• In addition, *CH*'s guide, *The History of Worship from Constantine to the Reformation*, "zooms in" on worship in the century before Charlemagne as one of its areas of focus.

VIDEOS FROM VISION VIDEO

• Check out the *History of Christianity* and *History of Christian Worship* series to put the early Middle Ages in perspective and *Great Epochs of Christian Art* to view art from many periods of the church, including Charlemagne's.

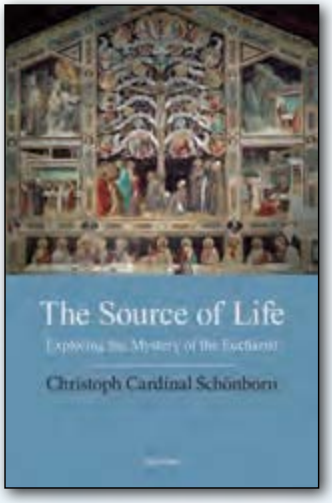


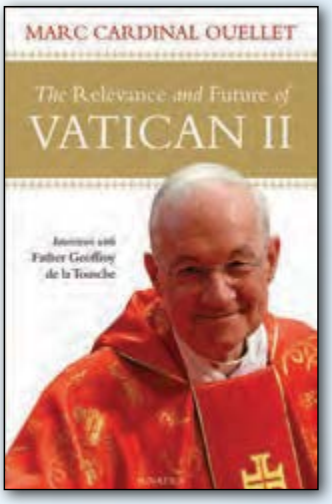
WEBSITES

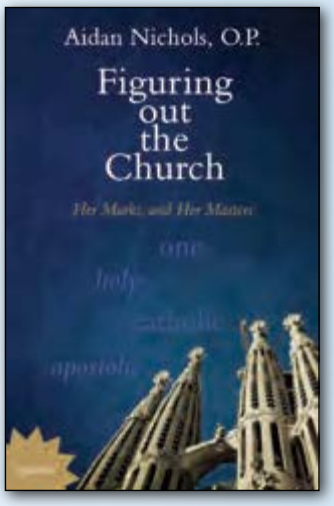
• You can read all sorts of texts from Charlemagne's era (including both the Einhard and the Notker biographies) at the "Carolingians" section of Fordham's Medieval History Sourcebook, www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook1h.asp. Excerpts from texts specifically about his coronation can be found at pirate.shu.edu/~wisterro/coronation.htm.

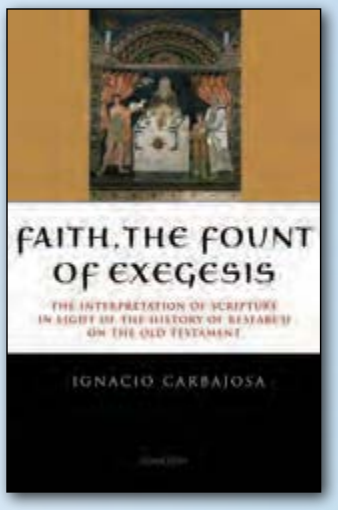
• A lecture from the *Ancient and Medieval History Guide* about Charlemagne and the Carolingian Renaissance, with many pictures and links, is at www.historyguide.org. Or you can access a similar page from the History Channel at www.history.com/topics/charlemagne.

• The Medieval History section of About.com has a collection of images of Charlemagne in art, historymedren.about.com. Another collection is in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*'s article on Charlemagne, www.britannica.com, and even more are at Smart History (smarthistory.khanacademy.org) and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (www.metmuseum.org). CH









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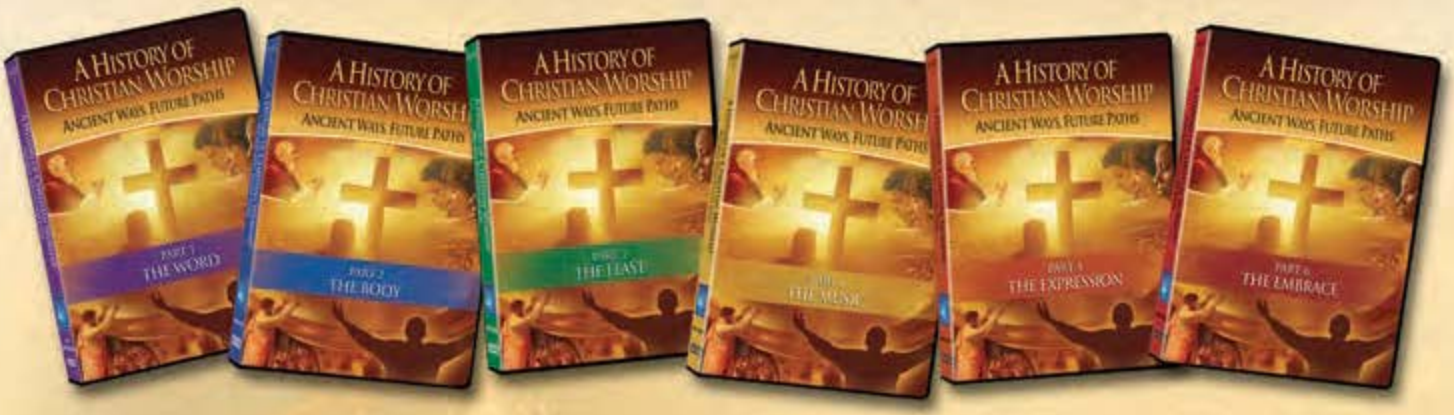

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