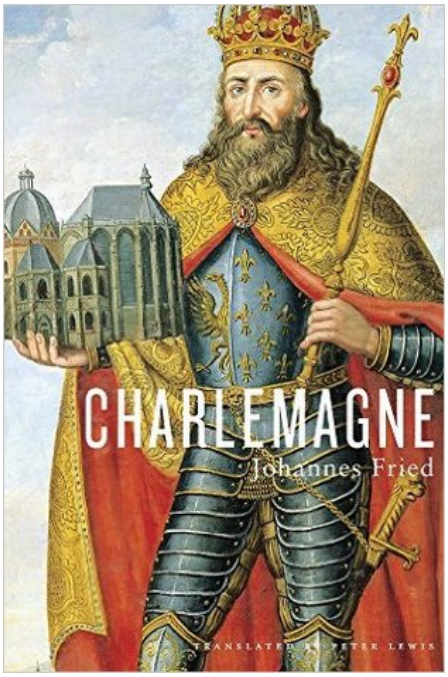

Charlemagne

Johannes Fried , Peter Lewis (Translation)

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When Charlemagne died in 814 CE, he left behind a dominion and a legacy unlike anything seen in Western Europe since the fall of Rome. Distinguished historian and author of *The Middle Ages* Johannes Fried presents a new biographical study of the legendary Frankish king and emperor, illuminating the life and reign of a ruler who shaped Europe's destiny in ways few figures, before or since, have equaled.

Living in an age of faith, Charlemagne was above all a Christian king, Fried says. He made his court in Aix-la-Chapelle the center of a religious and intellectual renaissance, enlisting the Anglo-Saxon scholar Alcuin of York to be his personal tutor, and insisting that monks be literate and versed in rhetoric and logic. He erected a magnificent cathedral in his capital, decorating it lavishly while also dutifully attending Mass every morning and evening. And to an extent greater than any ruler before him, Charlemagne enhanced the papacy's influence, becoming the first king to enact the legal principle that the pope was beyond the reach of temporal justice—a decision with fateful consequences for European politics for centuries afterward.

Though devout, Charlemagne was not saintly. He was a warrior-king, intimately familiar with violence and bloodshed. And he enjoyed worldly pleasures, including physical love. Though there are aspects of his personality we can never know with certainty, Fried paints a compelling portrait of a ruler, a time, and a kingdom that deepens our understanding of the man often called "the father of Europe."

Charlemagne Details

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From Reader Review Charlemagne for online ebook

Hadrian says

The idea of a united Europe is a bastard with many fathers. Under the Romans, Napoleon, the EU, and even Hitler, the whole continent has been held together by the barest of frames and splintered apart with an almost fatalistic certainty.

Charlemagne is one of these parents, at least in a popular understanding. Fried presents the biography of a man who may be almost totally unknowable - the passage of over 1200 years has left precious little documentation for historians to draw upon. Fried uses the words 'perhaps', 'probably', and 'we do not know'. He also avoids a basic chronology, and lists his chapters divided by themes.

One of the constants of Charlemagne's rule was war, as consistent with the image of a Frankish soldier-king. Internal conflicts with a younger brother (who conveniently died young in 771), rebellions in Aquitaine and Thuringia, wars across the Pyrenees, with the Bavarians, the Lombards, the semi-nomadic Avars (who inhabited the Carpathian basin before the Hungarians arrived), the Northmen, and then decades against the Saxons - which ended with either their forced conversion or death.

What Charlemagne is remembered for his not just his military campaigns. Charlemagne made substantive efforts to improve the living standards of his citizens, some 1000 years before the idea of an 'economy'. This included diligence in taxing and controlling manorial holdings, increasing outputs and preventing famines. Any governance at all, any order, was a step forward. This increased security also led to the first outgrowths of learning in a Frankish context - where scribes and translators were only too rare, and the preservation of any books at all was an achievement.

Another trend in the period was the communication between religious and secular order - Charlemagne was willing to work with the Papacy so long as it aligned with his personal interests, and he was conscious of the image of Rome, whose ruins lay about. Fried draws an ingenious reference where he notes that Charlemagne saw his father, King Pepin II, bow before the pope, which would have impressed upon him the role of that religious office. Even further, he deduces that Charlemagne was no reluctant *Imperator*. He was a true believer, who saw concordance between religious belief and an ordered society, and one who had anxiety over the idea of the apocalypse and the looming end of the world, thought to be around 800.

Burckhardt's study of the Renaissance said if Charlemagne had ruled for 100 years, then the Renaissance might have come a hundred years early. Fried suggests this is not quite true. But while, for comparison, the Abbasid caliphate and the Eastern Roman rump state had a garden, Charlemagne nurtured sprouts of what might come later. He also retreads Henri Pirenne's 1937 study, 'Muhammad and Charlemagne', by placing him in a larger context - this world was a direct result of the disintegration of the old Mediterranean order after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, and the Frankish kingdom moved from no conception of the outside world, to being tentatively in contact with the Eastern Roman Empire, the Emirate of Cordoba, and the Abbasid caliphate, and being a power on its own.

Fried comes across as a scholar who is keenly aware of the lacuna of his sources, and understanding the vagaries of rule. Charlemagne was pious, but he is not always saintly. Not a miracle worker, but a builder. Not a myth, just one man in a much harder time.

Jwduke says

If you want to know everything there is to know about Charlemagne, and do not mind academic reading, this book is for you.

I encourage you to read this entire review. My goal in reading this book was to learn everything there was to learn about Charlemagne; the book met my goal at the heavy tax of reading an uninteresting, long, boring text. Careful what you ask for.

I wouldn't do it again, but I also won't forget many aspects of the book that helped me learn about Charlemagne.

I liked that I finished this book. I am happy I read it. I was not happy reading it, and reading it was a chore. It is not enjoyable.

However, it is quite straightforward, academic, factual, and overall an alright read.

Jay Waghray says

Important to establish the age of the earth to know then predicted end of the wold!

Charles says

"Charlemagne" is a rare sort of work—a satisfying biography about a historical figure about whom very little is directly known. The usual result from biography in such cases, as opposed to histories where a mostly hidden person figures merely in the greater context of his times, is the writing of fiction. Authors seem unable to resist ascribing specific thoughts and actions to their hidden biographical subjects. But in "Charlemagne," the German historian Johannes Fried has accomplished the near-impossible, writing a biography of Charlemagne that tells us a great deal about the man, as well as plausible suppositions about him, without engaging in fiction and while clearly identifying that which we do not know.

Fried accomplishes this by describing everything around Charlemagne, using stated sources. The man is glimpsed in the lacunae, as well as from a very few direct bits of knowledge, such as marginal notes made by Charlemagne in writings by others. Fried extracts and conveys a great deal of knowledge from judicious use of official and semi-official chronicles and writings of the time. And Fried's knowledge of the era is immense and precise; in this entire book I could not detect a single inaccuracy, or even over-confident statement (not that I'm an expert on this era, or a professional historian, but in most history books I detect at least a few errors, and anyway being a professional historian today probably inclines one to more errors, rather than fewer, due to the required ideological conformity).

This is not a book about battles, although those are certainly mentioned. It is fundamentally a book about the religious belief of Charlemagne and his times, and how those beliefs directly resulted in the actions Charlemagne took, which ultimately and directly created modern Europe. In our time, the way that religion suffused medieval Europe, in particular its ruling classes, is essentially incomprehensible. We are taught to think of religion as the enemy of modernity, not the spur towards modernity, as it was for Charlemagne. We

are taught that kings and princes were not believers; they supposedly merely paid lip service to religion as the opiate of the people while cavorting about, unconcerned about their own souls, proto-Machiavellians all.

But this narrative is false, as even a casual reader of medieval history knows. As Fried relates, the atmosphere in which Charlemagne lived, worked and breathed was that of saving his own soul and that of as many other people as possible, in anticipation of his own death as well as the imminent End of Days. And he strove to save his soul not by vague good behaviors, as by adhering to a modern-type belief that God just wants us to do what makes us happy, but by performing constant hard concrete actions that God demanded of him, personally, and especially of him as king, for the belief was that on the Day of Judgment, the sins of all his people would be laid on the shoulders of their king.

Of course, by our standards some of those concrete actions were not in keeping with the Sermon on the Mount. Various northern German tribes, especially the Saxons, were converted at the point of the sword. Various other peoples were also on the receiving end of Charlemagne's sword for one reason or another. And Charlemagne was hardly an angel—he killed or "disappeared" several of his relatives, including his nephews, and he put aside more than one wife, finally ending his life by keeping concubines instead in order to keep things simple. Fried spends quite a lot of time pondering, without deciding, how Charlemagne must have viewed his own chances of salvation. We cannot know his personality, but we can know that "Charlemagne's principal concern, which permeated his every action, was for the Christian faith and the Church." The man himself may have fallen short of Christian virtue on many occasions, but that hardly distinguishes him from every other Christian who has ever lived—it is his legacy in the structure and thought of Europe that distinguishes him, and that legacy is a Christian legacy, through and through.

Fried begins by setting the scene, in a few paragraphs vividly conveying how very different the European world of 748 (roughly Charlemagne's birth) was. Population was thinly spread; forests were everywhere. The Vatican did not exist; nor did Venice as we conceive it; nor really any other European city. None of the cathedrals or castles we associate with the Middle Ages stood. The rhythms of life were totally different; even the educated were only beginning to rediscover traditional modes of thought and reasoning. "The mountain summits of the Alps were shrouded in solitude and silence . . . . The world was a placid place, time was not precious, and no one except fugitives from the law was hounded."

Fried relies heavily on a few basic sources. One is the "Life of Charlemagne," written shortly after Charlemagne's death by Einhard, who knew Charlemagne his entire life and was a courtier and scholar. This book was written in praise of Charlemagne and in implicit criticism of his successor as King of the Franks, Louis I, "The Pious" (whom Fried does not like at all). A second is the "Royal Frankish Annals," official annual summaries of Carolingian rule, begun prior to Charlemagne's birth and continued until well after his death, over which it is believed Charlemagne personally exercised control. Fried views these as extremely valuable, but propagandistic by their nature, and therefore requiring close reading and analysis in order to obtain truth. A third, though highly dubious in its accuracy, is a book of anecdotes written some decades later by the monk Notker (called the Stammerer). Other works also feature occasionally, such as those of the contemporary Lombard historian Paul the Deacon; the "Earlier Annals of Metz," compiled under the supervision of Charlemagne's trusted sister, Gisela, the abbess of a convent; and specific theological works with a political overtone which Charlemagne personally commented on and approved. In addition, the writings of key figures of the Carolingian Renaissance, especially the rivals Alcuin of York and Theodulf the Visigoth, lend color and depth to Fried's narration. But among all these, there is no self-portrayal of Charlemagne himself, not even a hint; we can only surmise what he thought of himself and his world.

Fried organizes his biography roughly chronologically, and within that overall scheme focuses chapters on particular themes. So, for example, the first chapter is "Boyhood," discussing exactly that; the next chapter is

“The Frankish Empire and the Wider World.” As to Charlemagne’s boyhood, Fried sets the stage by describing the life and times of the early Carolingians, focusing naturally enough on Charlemagne’s father, Pepin the Short. Charlemagne was highly educated for a layman of the time, speaking Latin, engaging in dialectics, and, of course, receiving extensive religious and, to a lesser extent, theological education. Throughout his life, Charlemagne maintained and expanded a sizeable library, and constantly strove to increase the learning of himself and his court.

Here Fried introduces one theme that runs throughout his biography—the perceived imminence to all people of that time and place of the Second Coming and the Last Judgment, “the subject of vivid and terrifying portrayals.” At the same time, this was a world of constant warfare, greed and struggle among the elite Franks for status and power—not least the Carolingian monarchs themselves, of whom Pepin was only the first, having formally deposed the Merovingian monarchs to whom the Carolingians supposedly owed homage, as Mayors of the Palace. Fried also here introduces a second theme, Charlemagne’s support for and intertwining with a powerful papacy—Charlemagne first met the Pope (Stephen II) at the age of six, during negotiations between his father and the Pope for Pepin’s needed support against the Lombards in northern Italy, in a theatrical spectacle that Fried reasonably believes made a major impression on the young Charlemagne.

Turning next to “The Frankish Empire and the Wider World,” Fried notes that while the Franks were very much aware of the larger world, including not only Italy but also Byzantium and the Middle East, they had little interest in it, even when visiting abroad, although Charlemagne did exchange envoys with Harun al-Rashid, caliph in Baghdad (who sent Charlemagne an elephant). Nor did they have much interest in Scandinavia, even when the Vikings showed up to cause trouble. Even internally, Carolingian culture did not engage in “attempting a comprehensive abstraction to try to gain a spatial awareness of the whole empire or of individual sections of it”—they traveled, and they found more efficient ways to travel, but they simply did not view space as we do. Here Fried introduces a third theme of his work—the varied and often-contentious relationship between the Carolingians and the Byzantines.

Fried returns the focus in the next chapter to Charlemagne, “The Warrior King.” He was about twenty when his father died; Charlemagne then began a never-ending series of wars, against enemies both external (the Saxons; the Lombards who opposed the Pope; the Avars; and the Muslim occupiers of Spain, against whom he had little success) and internal (his brother, Carloman, to whom Pepin had given half the empire; his cousin, Tassilo III of Bavaria; and his eldest son, Pepin the Hunchback). Early on, he also cemented his relationship with the Pope, visiting Rome for some time and cutting a deal with the pope (then Hadrian I), in which promised support to the Pope (though the degree and details varied depending on who was doing the telling, along with who was said to be in charge), in exchange for increased legitimacy. The spurs for Charlemagne’s wars were mixed, of course, but as Fried says, “It is certainly the case that the cause of religion legitimized each of his wars—not least in Charlemagne’s own eyes. Every war he entered into was either accompanied or followed by measures paying homage to God and His saints. People were meant to gain the greatest benefit from his conflicts: future salvation and a hope of eternal bliss.” Moreover, conquered territories benefited: “Christianity introduced literacy and methodically controlled rationality into countries that until then had not had any form of written culture.” This is jarring to modern ears; many of us do not want to hear such things, either that religion matters or that some cultures are superior to others, although both things are indisputably true. But understanding this way of thinking is key to both understanding Charlemagne and his times, and our times, in that there are many areas of the world where religions that believe God holds us to account are still mainsprings of human action.

Later chapters discuss “Power Structures,” which discusses less how the nobility was structured and more about the economic structures that underlay noble power, including agriculture, the manorial system, estate

management and so on, followed by “The Ruler,” which more narrowly discusses its subject. As others have also noted, expansion of “modern,” scientific farming and land reclamation was led by monasteries, because monks tended to have a much longer, corporate view of land management. Here Fried introduces his fourth theme—Charlemagne’s constant and unevenly successful efforts to centralize management of his empire, using various devices, including written ordinances, or “capitularies” (the “Admonitio generalis” and others) distributed throughout the empire, as well as roaming royal envoys sent to observe and report, and also to deliver specific instructions. Charlemagne’s focus was not on maximizing his return, although money was important, since warfare cost money. Rather, it was on ending disputes and ensuring and spreading justice for all, from the lowest to the highest—because this was dictated by God, and failure to maintain a constant focus on justice would have imperiled Charlemagne’s soul, for justice was one key demand placed on a Christian monarch, together with peace and (Christian) unity.

To these ends Charlemagne also expanded and formalized the system of education and literacy, including by spreading Latin and therefore modes of thought impossible in Frankish, thus laying the groundwork for the later full blossoming of European thought. Foreigners were welcomed in this effort. For example, Alcuin’s “On Rhetoric,” addressed to Charlemagne, was one of the formative documents re-establishing the “reason-oriented Western scholarship” that has made our world what it is today. “The practice of classical rhetoric was education and the beginning and foundation of all scholarship. Not only did it attest the capacity for reason, but also, much more than that, it represented humanity, a rationality-bound human dignity wrested from an animal-like existence.”

This key analysis, sadly, shows why modern public discourse, focused not on reason and human improvement but on the alleged independent validity of emotions and the supposed ubiquity of oppression, leads us toward that animal-like existence, rather than away. Instead of elite-led reason driving a search for objective excellence, we are forced by our elites, the new priests of Baal, to worship a coarse, false reality, where elastic concepts whose only common denominator is opposition to excellence, today “diversity” and “inclusion,” tomorrow doubtless some other set of banal catchphrases, are substituted for actual pursuit of real high human values. The only resulting certainty is our degradation. We like to think that in Charlemagne’s time people saw less clearly, and in some ways perhaps they did, but in many ways, they saw more clearly than us.

Another chapter discusses “The Royal Court” in detail, including the architecture of Charlemagne’s palace complexes (in Aix, for example, designed to evoke Roman precedents and power), and the important role of women in general, who among the nobility had “far-reaching authority,” as well as Charlemagne’s daughters, who were not married off for political gain and instead engaged in various unmarried affairs with men of the court, bearing children as a result, all without provoking their father’s wrath. Two other chapters discuss the run-up to, and the results of, Charlemagne’s deciding to assume the title of Emperor, in opposition to Byzantine claims (and exacerbating already-existing theological differences with them) and in tension with papal claims, though internal Byzantine and papal turmoil led to quick acceptance by both of the new order. Much of Charlemagne’s rule as Emperor, after 800 A.D., was occupied with theological disputes, again in service of Charlemagne’s self-perceived critical role of contributing to Christian unity, along with somewhat frantic and unavailing efforts to bring justice to the land before both Charlemagne’s impending death and the possible imminent Apocalypse.

Finally, Charlemagne died, about age sixty-five, both expecting and prepared for death, and having spent a great deal of effort and trouble to bring to his empire Christianity, learning, literacy, peace, justice, and old modes of learning made new again. Fried closes with an “Epilogue,” discussing not only Charlemagne’s impact in reversing centuries of cultural dissolution in the West, and in achieving sound innovation while pursuing restoration, but also the many uses, not a few pernicious, to which his name and legacy have been

put in succeeding centuries.

The level of detail in this book could be overwhelming, and probably is if you are not keenly interested in the subject matter. The English translation, while not gripping, reads well, seems precise and does not alienate the reader. Aside from the straight history, the book contains many interesting facts I did not know at all—for example, Charlemagne gave Pope Leo III a gemstone cross, which sounds not exceptional, but Fried explains “gemstone crosses traditionally allude to the Second Coming of Christ to judge the world, and represent the future, heavenly Jerusalem,” a fact that adds considerable flavor and color to an otherwise mundane event. Reading this book, immersing myself in a different time, was very enjoyable, and very educational.

Andrew says

Charlemagne, by Johannes Fried, is a new and highly academic biography of Charlemagne, the ruler of the Frankish Empire in the late 8th and early 9th century. Charlemagne ruled over an empire that included most of modern France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Northern Italy, Austria and into Eastern Europe. His empire was diverse, and encompassed many different people groups, from Franks to Lombards, Bavarians, Avars, Saxons and so on. Charlemagne was of a line of Frankish kings that promoted Christianity throughout their realms, and began instituting both a tighter ecclesiastical frame of law - reliant on the assistance of the Pope's in Rome, as well as beginning the implementation of proton-Feudal contracts with his subjects. Charlemagne's reign was one characterized by reform of the law, the church, the state and the very fibre of the people within the Frankish Empire. It was also a reign marked by almost constant military campaigning against the Saxons, Lombards, Bavarians, Avars and into Italy, as well as campaigns against the Bretons, Danes and the Arabs in Spain.

Fried has written an extremely detailed account of everything possible in Charlemagne's court. Although Fried takes pains to mention the lack of good documentary evidence relating to much of Charlemagne's rule in terms of primary evidence, it is still possible to find traces of primary evidence, and to extract ideas, principles and actions from works of art, reproductions of books, poems, capitulary documents and so on. Fried posits that an educational and intellectual boom was begun under the reign of Charlemagne, who wished to see the religious doctrine in his Empire standardized. This led to the creation of documents on the practice of religion sent from Rome, a greater religious dependence on the Pope, and an intellectual boom as scholars from Ireland, England and elsewhere flocked to Charlemagne's court to receive his patronage. Due to the expansion of its borders, the Frankish Empire created new ecclesiastical sees in conquered lands, thus requiring priests, abbots, nuns bishops and support staff to build and administer. One of the more interesting parts of this book related to the creation of new types of script to allow the Bible and other works of religion to be written in compact and readable volumes - as opposed to larger documents and fragments. These books often required great time, intellectual skill and massive amounts of animal skin to create. These books were written and spread throughout the kingdom in order to encourage the tightening of religious doctrine among his people.

Why was this so important? Charlemagne was born and raised as a devout Christian and followed Church doctrine closely. He was fluent in Latin, and good speak and hold a conversation in Greek. This language skill furthered his academic interests, but also instilled in him a deep belief in the coming Apocalypse preached in the Church. In order to save his own soul, he needed to be a good and righteous king, and encourage proper religious practices in his country. This meant the suppression of older pagan ritual's still common throughout the realm, the baptism of the Saxons, the elimination of rivalry with his own family in

Bavaria, Aquitaine and Lombardy in order to promote lasting peace, and so on. His belief system allowed the kingdom to flourish in new intellectual directions as well. During his reign, many scholars from all over Europe flocked to his court, encouraging the translation of classic Greek texts into Latin and Germanic languages. Charlemagne greatly encouraged learning and education among the clergy of his realm, and led by example. He was taught grammar, dialectics and rhetoric, as well as math, cosmology, astronomy and so on. These were important concepts to ensure proper religious grounding, to tell time, and to learn better communications skills.

Charlemagne went on to found an Empire, and incorporated many people's into his short lived realm. He defeated his own kinsman in battle, conquering their kingdoms. He destroyed the threat of nomadic incursion from the Avar's in Eastern Europe. He invaded Lombardy, annexing most of the realm and returning valuable lands to the Papal throne. He defeated his cousin in Bavaria, conquering that kingdom and expanding the borders of the Empire to new extremes, and finally, he fought a 30 year war with the unruly Saxons. All these lands brought visions of Empire to Charlemagne, and he sought no less than the recreation of the Roman Empire of old - desiring an eternal peace, the reintroduction of lost Latin intellectual arts, and the spreading and adoption of Christianity in its properly ordained form. His empire was internally fragmented, however, and was doomed to splinter after his death. The use of Feudal style rewards for service, in the granting of land, and the division of borders into diverse sets of counties, duchies, ecclesiastical sees and so on encouraged the fragmentation that would come soon after his death. His realm struggled to find rewards for service after a time, and this made his vassals unhappy, and disloyal. The struggle of ruling a vast Empire in a time of poor communications and roads made ruling a vast holding logistically difficult. Although Charlemagne was well respected in his realm, his word was only heard in the areas geographically nearest where he currently was. After leaving, things often returned to normal, with local disputes, wars and factionalism dominating the realm.

Frid's book on Charlemagne is all encompassing, sometimes to a fault. The book is extremely detailed and covers every aspect of Charlemagne's time in power. These details do being to bog down the reader, in my opinion, especially in the religious front, as minute doctrinal details are accounted at great length. For the layman reader, this becomes difficult to read, and in my opinion, although certainly of interest to many readers, I found it largely irrelevant to the wider story. Even so, I appreciated the detail, and their are many interesting tidbits of history in this text. From book making to translating Aristotle, from the creation of certain types of text and font, to the organization and management of abbeys and lands, this books contains many interesting details of Early Medieval life. Charlemagne's realm is well described in Fried's work, and this book can easily be recommended to any interested in the subject. This is a well written text, and is certainly worth the time.

Andrew Dockrill says

charlemagne

I was lucky enough to receive my copy early. The book is a bit of a mixed bag for me. With so little of the man concretely known as well as the events around him due to little of it being written and alot of it destroyed, the man can be hard to get a handle on and pinned down. With that said the book was not too bad. The author would begin to mention something interesting about Charlemagne like a battle/conflict with the Avarrs or Bavaria or Saxons but then he would stop in his tracks and say "little is known of it" or he would describe it a little but not very much, so it just left you with a twinge of annoyance.

Aside from that when the author does go into detail it is quite interesting, Charlemagne was quite a good ruler when put in the context of the time. He was an extremely devout man and a ruler with large plans and aspirations. He also had quite an interesting family which is touched on, not so much in terms of his wives but more so with his sons, which was quite interesting.

My only issue is that so little is known about Charlemagne and the period, that the book I do not believe should have been called Charlemagne but rather perhaps Charlemagne and his age or his empire etc.. as not enough of the book centers around the man himself which was kind of disappointing for me at least. If you bare that in mind though you may enjoy the book, but for me I was expecting a book like Edward III by Mark Ormrod which stands as my favorite bio to date, which perhaps is a bit of an unrealistic expectation as their times were extremely far apart. Long story short, I did not really get what I expected and wanted, so it was a bit of a letdown. But the author did a great job with what he likely had at his disposal and should be given a round of applause for that. The book is very readable and moves with ease as well.

Christina says

I FINISHED IT! Yes, this was quite the accomplishment... First off, it is a translation. Second, it's pretty dense. Third, it is a well researched book with about 60 ages of end notes... No Joke. Which right there makes it my kind of book. Of course, I don't expect to see this on any 10 Ten Best Seller Lists soon.

Still, it was a well researched account of Charlemagne and his times.

Melinda says

Very interesting period in history and well researched and well written book. I find it fascinating that we know so much about these historic figures, from so far back in history. It’s a testament to the historians and writer that they keep this info alive.

Marks54 says

This is a new and compelling biography of Charlemagne by a recently retired German scholar. The intellectual challenge here is that while many who have read medieval European history have heard of Charlemagne, there is relatively little known about him as a person, as opposed to in court references, after the fact short accounts, and the like. The author, who clearly knows all the source material, raises the problem early on by noting how even with the historical record, we have very little access to what life in the eighth and ninth centuries was like and as a result even a meticulous biography becomes indistinguishable from a work of historical fiction.

This is a really good story about a king who reigned for nearly 50 years and whose reign set the parameters for how the political history of Europe would evolve for a millennium. Not bad for a Frankish king! There are lots of really interesting story lines in Fried’s book. The relations between Charlemagne and the two Popes he worked with is an obvious line to start with, since his coronation in late 800 set the stage for Church-State conflicts going forward.

An even more interesting line for me was just how Charlemagne maintained a consistent administrative and financial order across a realm that encompassed most of Europe at its height. Without much technology and with little literacy, how does a ruler get anything to happen in a consistent and predictable manner? The story is fascinating and set the stage for political and social organization in ways that continue up to the present. Fried's extended discussion of the Carolingian Renaissance is also worthwhile.

There is a lot about battle and warfare but that is not the primary or most interesting aspect of the book. It was the eighth and ninth centuries and chaos was averted to the extent that it was by force of arms! (The discussion on the beginnings of the Viking attacks is a bit of an exception.) That is not very surprising. Fried tells a much stronger story about the economic basis for the Carolingian Empire, how famines were averted, how commerce happened without much infrastructure, etc. There is also a lot about the concerns of elites at the time that the end of the world was fast approaching. This was much more widespread than it appears to be today and the intellectual context of numerology, architecture, and scripture comes across as quite foreign today.

Fried tries hard to paint a picture of a civilized and principled Charlemagne who tried to be a good steward of those under his control and lead the people towards God. Perhaps, but he seems like he has the least to work with on this, and his kids did not behave very well after his passing (especially Louis the Prius). Some things do not change. To be fair, the potential heirs of rulers could have a very bad time if they were seen as threats to some other potential heir. It was a rough time for even the children of the elites to grow up in.

Overall, medieval history is very different from modern history and always repays an effort to think hard about what was going on. Professor Fried is very thoughtful and does a good job. I am sure he was a fine professor before he retired, but I am grateful that he has kept writing in retirement, as long as he keeps Peter Lewis as his translator.

There is a lot going on in this book. There are lots of pages with a fairly small font. Working through this is worth it, however.

Kevin Moynihan says

Incredible book. As others have noted, Charlemagne is a small portion of all that is covered here. Brings to life Europe in the late 8th / early 9th centuries. Brings in earlier history for explanation and nicely notes items that carry forward to today. The Epilogue is very insightful. (Also, the translation is epic. Hard to believe English was not the original language.)

Johnny says

A bit long and repetitive.
But, great information on the consolidation of power in Europe, the salvation and expansion of the role and authority of the Catholic Church and lots of tiny but important tidbits about how the country was run.

James Spencer says

While not a traditional biography, this is a fascinating piece of detective work. As Fried points out, we cannot really know or understand Charlemagne. He comes from times totally alien to us in every possible way and there are none of the biographical sources that a political figure from more recent times would have available. But Fried does a fabulous job of explicating what we can learn from the sources that are available and speculates convincingly on what that tells us. All of this is done in a brilliant text (credit for which at least in part must go to Fried's translator Peter Lewis.). This is not a story of knights and daring do, it's about the development of political, legal, and religious systems. But for those interested in very early European political history, I recommend this highly.

Megan says

Great scholarship, but...

The author uses the word "admittedly" over and over again. It was distracting.

The Latin translations could have been better. If not for those two things, I would have given it five stars.

Grumpus says

As a lover of history, I knew of Charlemagne, but I never really had any interest in him or gave him much thought until I learned from the TV series “Who Do You Think You Are?”, that he is Cindy Crawford’s 41st great-grandfather. As a dabbler in my own genealogy, I thought that was the coolest thing. No slight is meant to my forefathers (and foremothers), but why couldn’t I be related to someone of great historical importance? Well, it turns out that just because I am of European descent (German/Austrian), it means that I am too a likely descendant of Charlemagne. If you meet this broad criteria, it means that we’re family because odds are, all Europeans are likely descendants of Charlemagne.

Even if you don’t have the official linage documentation like Cindy Crawford, math proves the point. In a “It’s good to be the King” situation, Charlemagne had 20 children with eight of ten known wives and concubines. According to http://www.iflscience.com/editors-blo...,

So why is this? Well, fortunately, it’s not actually that complicated to explain. You, as a human, were presumably not created in a laboratory – we’d guess you had two parents that assembled you.

Now, in that generation, you have two ancestors.

Each of your parents has two parents too, meaning in just two generations past, you have a total of 6 ancestors. Go a generation further, and you have 14 ancestors.

This is essentially a “power series” problem. If you want to know how ancestors you have descended from X number of generations ago, use this formula:

Number of ancestors = 2X + 2X-1 …

So say you want to know the total number of ancestors you have five generations ago. That works out to be: 2^5 + 2^4 + 2^3 + 2^2 + 2^1 = 62 direct ancestors five generations ago.
For ten generations, you have 2,046 ancestors. For twenty generations, that's 2,097,150 million direct ancestors.

Thirty generations back, just in that generation, there are 1.073 billion people. Considering that back in time there were fewer people on the planet to have been descended from than there are today, you can easily see how pretty much everyone is related to royalty at some point.

So, sadly, being of blue blood is not that special after all. If your grandparent is a monarch, then fair enough – but Charlemagne just isn't that special these days.

There you go, math equals buzzkill. That takes away any reverence or coolness to any relationship any of us can claim to the Frankish King.

Alright, on to the book itself. . .it was over 30 hours long and I liked it—didn't love it but liked it. This is probably due to my ill-conceived expectations. I expected a true biography, but because of lack of records about his early life, the first half of the book was more about the history of his time than his life. It was interesting to learn what life was like for people during the late 700s but it wasn't what I was expecting. The second half of the book was more interesting. Learning of his reign and how he united such disparate people across the continent and simultaneously disappointing to learn how quickly it all fell apart after his death despite his best efforts to ensure his legacy through planning before he died.

Maynard Handley says

Disappointing.
When a lay reader works through a book like this, what's being hoped for is not just a biography, but a total portrait of a society. Fried tries for that, but the effort never really gets off the ground; you learn more specific facts about very early medieval Europe, but you don't gain any greater insight.

It's obviously a large problem that we have limited historical material with which to work, but what I was hoping for was a book that incorporated all manner of additional material -- archeological, cliometrics, what was being said by the Byzantines and Islamic world, ...
But for the most part, this additional possible material is not investigated and utilized, rather we get simply an extremely detailed exegesis of the baseline annals and broadly contemporaneous writings.

A missed opportunity! If you're hoping for something like, say, Robert Massie's _Peter the Great_, keep looking.
