

## Charlemagne

**Review Number:**

166

**Publish date:**

Monday, 1 January, 2001

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**ISBN:**

9780333650549

**Date of Publication:**

1998

**Publisher:**

Macmillan

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

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The lack of synthetical treatments of the reign of Charlemagne is both striking and surprising. In spite of the ever-growing volume of academic monographs and articles on the Carolingian period, there is no even vaguely adequate introduction in English, French or German. Yet, thanks in no little part to that remarkable cohort of English early medievalists which includes Roger Collins amongst its number, our understanding of the culture, politics and society of Carolingian Europe has been transformed in the past decades. The publication of a well-marketed, nicely-produced and keenly-priced biography is thus timely: here is an ideal opportunity to tap and inform the burgeoning interest in early medieval history amongst both undergraduates and the documentary-watching and book-buying public, through an exploration of the career and achievements of the early medieval ruler par excellence.

Roger Collins is well aware of the problems facing a would-be medieval biographer, even one whose subject is a ruler who was the focus of contemporary attentions to an extraordinary degree. Modestly setting his sights on producing 'a monograph-length treatment of the reign', Collins robustly asserts that 'it is not really possible to write a biography of Charlemagne, in the sense of a work that uncovers its subject's personal hopes, fears, aims, ambitions, phobias and foibles, and tries to explain what he thought, rather than something of what he did' (p. viii). Although not written along strictly chronological lines, Collins' book is essentially a recounting of the unfolding of political events. After two introductory chapters, one dealing with the sources, the other rehearsing the political development of the Frankish kingdom up to 771, individual chapters take through the story of Carolingian involvement in particular areas, in the order in which they became prominent in the reign. The fact that five of these seven chapters concern military and political dealings with various of Charlemagne's neighbours up to their conquest (Saxons, Italians and Spaniards, Bavarians, and Avars), whilst the final chapter deals with 'Frontiers and Wars, 793-813', gives some clue as to the controlling narrative and overall focus of the book; developments within Francia are dealt with in chapters on the growth of a reform programme, the Council of Frankfurt and the building of the Aachen palace; and on the Imperial coronation and its aftermath.

As is clear from this summary of its contents, Collins' book offers rather more about what Charlemagne did than about the society in which he lived. The reasons for this appear to lie in Collins' views on the proper role of the historian. In a gnomic swipe at unnamed contemporaries in the preface, he remarks that he depends 'more upon the primary sources of evidence for the period, reference to which will be found in the notes, than upon modish or other methodologies'. Of course, Collins is quite correct to insist that primary evidence is the basis of historical knowledge. But it certainly is not the case that the type of history essayed by Collins himself is the inevitable and only result of close reading of the sources, or somehow 'truer' or more neutral than its alternatives. Collins does what he does well, but I would have thought that the greatest lesson of the flowering of early medieval history inspired by the work of Collins' generation is that there is room for a thousand flowers to bloom.

The contention that 'methodology' is somehow incompatible with source-based study allows Collins to delimit his subject matter, and deal with the flow of political events in isolation from their wider cultural, economic or social context. In a book of this scope aimed at this readership this is particularly unfortunate as it leads to a relatively restricted view of the period, and means that many of Collins' readers will depart unaware of the most exciting and important developments in early medieval scholarship. And, arguably, the career of an early medieval ruler is particularly unsuited for such a resolutely high political treatment: the informal and uninstitutionalised nature of early medieval politics makes the identification of a formally separate and discrete sphere of political action problematic.

Collins' concentration on the sources brings the reader into frequent and welcome acquaintance with those texts upon which our knowledge of Charlemagne is based, and the problems they pose the modern historian. For those intending to use this book in teaching, this should be a welcome encouragement for students to think about the processes of interpretation on which judgements are based. Rather like the detective in a good whodunit, Collins sees his job as the careful evaluation of the witnesses supplied by his contemporary written sources; like the statements of the cast of a whodunit, their accounts need treating with the utmost suspicion, subjecting to close inspection and comparison to test them and uncover misrepresentations or deceptions. Much of Collins' own published research on the Carolingian period has shown the value of such an approach, and cast doubt on what had previously been agreed 'facts'. Teasing out an outline of events from fragmentary and often contradictory material is very much Collins' forte: he is a distinguished descendant of the great nineteenth-century positivist German tradition of *Quellenkritik* which aimed at constructing a 'true' narrative of political and military events. Much recent early medieval scholarship, particularly in the Anglophone world, has gone further, in the process shifting the object of source-criticism: by very firmly placing written accounts in their contemporary context, they have been read as works of partial and polemical argument which, carefully handled, can provide a road into the social, political and cultural universe in which they were written. Collins occasionally hints at these possibilities, but predominantly sticks to a more traditional approach. If Collins occasionally lets his enthusiasm for source-criticism get the better of him - for example in the paragraph in which it is established that the 'Council of Regensburg' of 792 was 'probably just the ecclesiastical section of the general assembly that was held at Regensburg early in 793' (p.132) - by and large he balances the need to discuss the sources and to press on with his narrative successfully, producing an accessible and readable introduction to the course of the reign.

Ultimately, sources, not people, are what Collins writes about; criticism of their failings, not description of a past society, is his preferred discourse. In Collins' hands, source-criticism becomes a means for determining 'reliability' and so including or excluding testimony in the canon of witnesses who can contribute to working out a narrative of military and political events. Like the best detective, he is no respecter of reputations: indeed, he begins by cutting down the star witness to size. The biography of Charlemagne written after the Emperor's death by his sometime courtier Einhard is sidelined on the grounds that 'he made it clear that his purposes did not include providing a detailed narrative of his subject's life and times'. Collins' attitude towards Einhard rests on the fact that the *Life of Charles* is of relatively little use in supplying 'information or additional details not to be found in other sources' (p.1). This position is almost identical to that essayed by Louis Halphen in 1921, who dismissed Einhard from the canon of reliable sources on the grounds of his uselessness for the purveyor of military and political narrative. Yet scholarship in the eight decades since

Halphen has suggested ways in which Einhard's complex literary text can be read as an interested representation of Charles' exercise of kingship. The *Life of Charles* certainly offers the most attractive and accessible road for the uninitiated into the reign, and an opportunity for students to think critically about the complex relationship between sources, their authors, and their subjects; Collins' lack of interest in discussing how historians have come to use it, in spite of its relative uselessness in providing factual details to fill out a political and military narrative, is unfortunate.

In fact, Einhard escapes relatively lightly for Collins is downright distrustful of contemporary attempts to write even political and military narratives: 'most other Frankish historical writings of the time prove to be equally idiosyncratic, partisan and occasionally downright mendacious' (p.ix). The most immediate and personal sections of the book, indeed, are those in which Collins allows himself to comment on what he sometimes comes close to presenting as a battle of wits with a group of singularly disingenuous and uncooperative witnesses, as in his exclamation at p.81, 'even for this source this is an amazing travesty of the truth'. At points, though, this almost instinctive distrust seems to encourage Collins to throw the baby out of the same window as the bath water (see, for example, the excoriation of Einhard's description of Charlemagne's last will and testament at pp.158-9). The overriding concern with the reporting of particular events can also lead to a strangely disembodied reading of the narrative sources, which can become simply quarries for uncontextualised nuggets of testimony. Collins is quick to stress consistent patterns of misrepresentation in the sources, for example in the Royal Frankish Annals' depiction of Charlemagne's relationship with Tassilo of Bavaria. Unlike many recent historians, he is less interested in proceeding from these patterns of misrepresentation to a reading of some at least of these narratives as conscious representations of the recent past written to influence a current public. Yet such a reading can deepen our understanding of the politics of the reign. Karl Brunner's work on the *Annales Nazariani*, for example, has shown that this particular presentation of the past was an attempt to reconcile conflicting political pressures in the newly-integrated provinces east of the Rhine, which can provide an important insight into the motives of those aristocrats who plotted against Charlemagne in 785-6.

Whilst Collins' attitude towards the historical narratives of the annals is that of a protagonist in a battle of wits, other genres of source-material have little part to play in his account. The surviving poetry, for example, has proved one of the most fruitful sources for the reconstruction of the social and cultural life of Charlemagne's court, but is conspicuous by its absence. Similarly, the letters of Alcuin are used so far as they can shed light on the debates leading up to the coronation of 800, and changing policy towards forced conversion among the Saxons, but not for the insights they allow into the community of the court. Collins' decision to work primarily from one group of sources, the annals, and to concentrate on political narrative, means that whole areas of Frankish political culture are omitted: the treatment of royal ritual, for example, is limited to a discussion of Carolingian palaces which attempts to undermine any function between architectural form and ceremonial function.

Real people are strangely absent. One of the real achievements of recent scholarship has been to populate the Frankish court, and the 'small worlds' that made up Charlemagne's Empire. Even those articulate, evidence-producing, intellectual advisors who have always loomed large in the historiography of the reign are elusive. Thus Alcuin's career is discussed in a bare page, and his presence or possible influence mentioned occasionally in passing, and he towers over his peers ! Women, even royal women, are effectively 'vanished': Collins' political and military focus and his implicit reliance on a restricted definition of political power in formal terms (both of which are scarcely gender-blind) lead to the potential importance of women through informal influence on their kinsmen being ignored. Carolingian women are not spectres conjured up by 'methodology': they are there in the sources, study of which has demonstrated their importance in the politics of the period.

Laymen, even those of the highest social standing and political importance, fare worse still, and are consciously and explicitly excluded: 'not enough has survived to provide the kind of reconstructions of family and institutional property holdings, and the impact of these on local and kingdom-wide politics, that can be undertaken in so many cases in the later medieval centuries' (p.10). The claim that studying the land-owning classes and their relationship to royal government is not worth the candle must come as a surprise to

specialists. After all, the most striking advances in our understanding of the political history of the Frankish kingdoms have come through the painstaking research inspired by the work of the late Gerd Tellenbach and Karl Schmid, and continued over four academic generations by the 'historical prosopographers' of the Freiburg and Münster schools (although the uninitiated reader of Collins would be wholly unaware of their work). Whilst the claims of prosopography have had plenty of critical discussion, few practising scholars would dismiss them altogether, or totally ignore their implications for our reading of politics.

Collins dismisses the possibility of reaching any meaningful conclusions about aristocratic power without really engaging with either the German prosopographers, or the large and growing recent body of research which uses documentary evidence to investigate the workings of rural communities and the social significance of reciprocal relationships between churches and their lay benefactors. For example, his discussion of the value of the charters as evidence highlights the two monasteries of Fulda and St-Gallen as 'exceptional' in the preservation of 'relatively large numbers of early charters' (p.10). Unfortunately, most readers, including many researchers whose expertise lies elsewhere, will understand Collins' comments as indicating that the Fulda and St-Gallen archives are the only substantial sources for land holding and legal transactions, and thus depart unaware of the riches of the surviving charter traditions preserved by Carolingian ecclesiastical institutions from Corvey in Saxony to Farfa in central Italy, from Redon in Brittany to Freising in Bavaria. Elsewhere, Collins claims that unless we have a last will and testament we cannot uncover the full extent of an individual's holdings and so meaningful conclusions are impossible. Such a stance seems odd from an early medievalist, whose profession, after all, is founded on the careful and critical handling of inevitably fragmentary evidence; it also does not really engage with what has been done on aristocratic families. And Collins fails to discuss that the handful of wills which do survive, notably that of Fulrad of St-Denis, which has long been recognised as an important source in understanding the mechanisms of Carolingian expansion and consolidation in south-western Germany. Collins' pessimism about the charter evidence is all the more puzzling given his own participation in the anthology produced by the Bucknall group in 1986 (W. Davies and P. Fouacre, eds., *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe*, CUP) which was a real landmark in highlighting the possibilities of reconstructing the workings of early medieval society from charter evidence.

In the last resort, Collins' refusal to include the aristocracy in his picture does not just narrow his perspective. I fail to see how we can adequately understand or interpret Charlemagne's reign or Carolingian politics without discussing those figures who, as Karl-Ferdinand Werner put it so pointedly a quarter of a century ago, were simultaneously the king's only partners and main rivals. The blurb on the back cover draws vague and undeveloped contemporary parallels, talking of Charlemagne's 'attempt to create a single European-wide state'. The book itself contains no demonstration that this indeed was Charlemagne's objective, nor any consideration of what might have constituted such an attempt in an early medieval context. Our understanding of the process of political expansion through which the Carolingian Empire was created is being transformed by work which has looked at the changing alignments of local elites and their ecclesiastical foundations: it is through such work that we can begin to reach a fuller understanding of the possibilities and problems of integration within the Carolingian Empire than is possible from a chronology of conquest and revolt. Because of his failure to discuss the elites in whose hands the success or failure of the Carolingian project lay, Collins can do little more than venture opinions on the balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces, dismissing 'Frankish ideas of rulership' as 'very ethnocentric' (p.150) and once mentioning the possible role of Christianity as an integrating factor (p.151). Similarly, only by studying the changing mechanisms through which local elites exercised their power, and the interrelationship between public office and family inheritance in creating that power, can we understand the functioning of Carolingian government. Again, Collins simply offers dismissive asides: legislation was 'possibly impractical', whilst 'practice is all too likely to have fallen short of these [royal] injunctions' as 'the governmental machinery at Charles' disposal was insufficient' (p.156).

In fact, Collins' book is ultimately unable to answer the central questions posed by a study of Charlemagne's reign. The methodology he uses to shape a political narrative from the annals does not allow the kind of structural analysis that is necessary if fundamental issues about the integration of regional elites into an

Imperial polity, and the transmission of orders from court to locality, are to be addressed. When it comes to considering the functioning of government and the relationship between the ambitions of rulers and the realities of local power, Collins suddenly and jarringly departs from the sources: narrative gives way to broad interpretative statements, made with no indication of the contested and evolving historical arguments from which they are derived. Collins advances an ultimately pessimistic verdict on Charles' achievement as doomed to long-term failure because of the lack of 'an adequate centralised administration', but fails to offer any discussion of how government may or may not have worked, or what might have constituted 'an adequate centralised administration' in a world where land was power: his source-based political narrative and dismissal of the documentary evidence leaves no space for such evaluation. It is not only when dealing with structural questions that Collins' abandons strictly source-based neutral comment. Value judgements about Charlemagne's 'less than satisfactory successor' (p.158) are made without any justification: they are contested arguments about historical interpretation, not unmediated truths found in the contemporary sources. Nor could the interested reader go away and find reference in the sources to the vivid image of Frankish helplessness against Vikings marauders in the 830s because 'Charlemagne's war fleet .may have rotted away' (p.171). The shadow of Collins' perception of ultimate failure falls long over this Charlemagne, yet at no point is that perception of failure discussed or justified from the primary evidence.

In terms of his own stated aims, Roger Collins' book is a definite success: here is an accurate and accessible narrative whilst explaining its basis in the problematic primary sources. Nonetheless, it is unfortunate that many readers will remain unaware of the breadth and diversity of current approaches and interpretations, and the good-natured and lively debate that typifies recent research. And it is impossible not to wonder whether the author of seminal studies of law, literacy and regionalism in early medieval Spain could not have successfully attempted something more ambitious and more important. Better, I would have thought, to have explained that there were areas of research which authorial choice and the structure of this book made it difficult to integrate, than to attempt to argue whole swathes of the historiography out of existence. Roger Collins should be thanked for giving us a solid and easy-to-use account of Charlemagne's reign, whose accessibility and price are guaranteed to bring it to the attention of a wide audience. But there remains the need for a treatment of Charlemagne that locates a convincing account of the events of the reign within an accessible exploration of their wider cultural, social and political contexts.

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