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INTRODUCTION

THE DAWN OF THE CAROLINGIAN AGE

Late in the year 753, Pippin, king of the Franks, heard news that the pope had left Rome and was coming to visit him. This journey – the first time a pope had ever crossed the Alps – presented the king with both a problem and an opportunity. On the one hand, he may have known that what Pope Stephen II wanted was military protection, with all the risk and expense that that entailed, against an opponent in Italy, the king of the Lombards, whose predecessor had been Pippin's own godfather. On the other hand, the pope was just the kind of politically neutral and prestigious figure from whom Pippin could seek endorsement for the radical move he had made two years earlier, when he had usurped the throne of the Franks from the Merovingian dynasty that had held it for the previous two and a half centuries.

Neither Pippin nor Stephen quite appeciated the impact that their actions that winter would have but, in a process that typifies the problems faced by historians of this period, political significance was quickly heaped onto their meeting and within a few years the circumstances surrounding it were being intensively rewritten. Thus Stephen II's biographer, a clerk in the papal bureaucracy, reports that Pippin sent his young son Charles to meet the pope 100 miles from his destination and to escort him to the king, who knelt in homage before him. A Frankish source, on the other hand, has the pope

and his attendant clergy kneeling before the king.[1] Other Frankish sources assert that Pippin had already sought the approval of Stephen's predecessor for his usurpation; a claim apparently unknown to papal writers.[2] It was certainly true that each could help the other. Frankish and papal sources concur that the pope anointed Pippin and his family.[3] Pippin then secured the approval of the Frankish aristocracy[4] and despatched campaigns in successive years which forced the Lombard king Aistulf to sue for peace. Returning home, Stephen reinforced his attachment to the Franks by granting buildings near St Peter's in Rome to the Parisian monastery of St Denis, the Frankish royal saint under whose auspices he had secured his alliance with Pippin.[5]

In the short term the effects of this alliance were not decisive for either party. The popes remained relatively weak and for the next two decades the Lombards continued to menace their interests in and around Rome, while the Franks were generally reluctant to fulfil their newly acquired obligation to protect the papacy by committing themselves to military action hundreds of miles away across the Alps. In a longer perspective, however, these events represent what has long been interpreted by historians as an epochal turning point in the history of western Europe. For some historians of the first half of the twentieth century the change of ruling dynasty was regarded as 'the most momentous act of the entire Middle Ages', either because it inaugurated the pope's involvement in the legitimation of kingship, or because of the break it signalled between Rome and the surviving 'Roman' empire in the east – the Byzantine empire that covered the Balkans and Asia Minor.[6] These views were crystallised in the 1920s in the work of the famous Belgian historian Henri Pirenne,

[1] See *LP* I, c. 25, p. 447, trans. Davis, *Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes*, p. 62, and *Chron. Moiss.*, *s.a.* 741, pp. 292–3.

[2] McKitterick, *History and Memory*, pp. 137–8.

[3] *LP* I, c. 27, p. 448, trans. Davis, *Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes*, p. 63; Fred., *Cont.*, c. 33.

[4] As even the papal biographer in the *Liber pontificalis* tells us: *LP* II, c. 29, p. 448; Davis, *Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes*, p. 64.

[5] M. Costambeys and C. Leyser, 'To be the neighbour of St Stephen: patronage, martyr cult and Roman monasteries, *c.*600–900', in K. Cooper and J. Hillner (eds.), *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300–900* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 262–87, at pp. 273–4.

[6] See R. Schieffer, '"Die folgenschwerste Tat des ganzen Mittelalters"? Aspekte des wissenschaftlichen Urteils über den Dynastiewechsel von 751', in M. Becher and

who saw this break as only one component of a structural shift in the political and economic geography of Europe, as the lands of the western Mediterranean separated decisively from the eastern empire and struck up a more intense relationship with the kingdoms of the north, thus permanently fixing the shape of a new, specifically western, European civilisation.[7]

Pippin did not see himself as standard bearer of a new age in these terms. Indeed, he was motivated above all by a sense of his own vulnerability. As we shall see in greater detail in Chapter 2, by having himself proclaimed king in 751 in place of the reigning king Childeric III, Pippin had defied a strong sense among the Franks that the aura of legitimacy rested upon Childeric's family, the Merovingians. Pippin's need to legitimise his action and to undermine the opposition of those hostile to his new royal status, including some members of his own family, lay behind his acquisition of papal blessing not only for himself but for his wife and sons as well.[8] Nonetheless, the novelty of these rituals did reflect a self-conscious attempt to mark off and announce the beginning of a new political era. It was successful in ways that those present in 753–4 could not have foreseen: Pippin was born an aristocrat; his descendants would be kings and emperors of western Europe.

Thanks to their monopoly on royal power in the Frankish realms between 751 and 888, the Carolingians ('the family of Charles' (Latin: *Carolus*) – named for Pippin's father Charles Martel) are remembered as one of European history's great dynasties. The first phase of their tenure witnessed a breath-taking territorial expansion. Seeking to consolidate their tenuous position, Pippin and his sons embarked on a spectacularly successful series of campaigns pursued in equal measure through extreme violence and ruthless political manoeuvring. Within fifty years of Stephen's visit to Paris, they had doubled their territory and accumulated an empire spanning approximately one million square kilometres, stretching south from the English Channel

J. Jarnut (eds.), *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751. Vorgeschichte, Legitimationsstrategien und Erinnerung* (Münster, 2004), pp. 1–14.

[7] See Chapter 7 below, pp. 326–8, and H. Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Brussels, 1937), trans. as *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (London, 1939).

[8] See P. Fouracre, 'The long shadow of the Merovingians', in Story (ed.), *Charlemagne*, pp. 5–21; Becher and Jarnut (eds.), *Der Dynastiewechsel von 751*; McKitterick, *History and Memory*, pp. 133–55; M. J. Enright, *Iona, Tara, and Soissons: The Origin of the Royal Anointing Ritual* (Berlin and New York, 1985).

to central Italy and northern Spain, and east from the Atlantic to the fringes of modern Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic: easily the largest European political unit for many centuries. On Christmas Day 800 Pippin's son Charles 'the Great' (or Charlemagne as he is known to posterity, the same boy who as a five-year-old had reportedly been sent to receive Pope Stephen in 753) was crowned emperor in Rome, the first man to bear this title in the West since the deposition of the last Roman emperor in 476. Five of his immediate successors were to be emperors and many more ruled as kings as generations of Carolingians maintained and dominated this huge empire through most of the ninth century, during which the territory was often formally divided between members of the family, but always remained a dynastic unit. The territorial integrity of the empire was definitively ended only in 888, hastened by a succession crisis within the family.

Imperial aggrandisement was the basis, but not the end, of the dynasty's achievement. Inspired by court circles filled with scholars and spiritual advisers of international repute, the Carolingians also declared their aspiration to reform the social and moral behaviour of the peoples under their dominion. They sought to achieve this imaginative goal by exploiting to their limits the technologies of government available in the early Middle Ages. Pippin and his successors constructed a hierarchical political system which could allow the word of the king to penetrate to the furthest reaches of his realms; and they managed to do so in large part because of advances in the production, dissemination and preservation of knowledge. To some extent these advances were down to royal initiative. The foundation or revival by Carolingian rulers and aristocrats of institutions for which the written word was a central raison d'être – particularly, but not exclusively, the institutions of the Church – is a cardinal fact of the age.[9] This is of the utmost importance for historians because those institutions' ability to copy existing works, to produce new ones, and to preserve both, has fundamentally shaped the record not just of the Carolingian period but of every preceding century back to the dawn of western history. We owe a good proportion of what we know of every century before 900 to the hands of Carolingian scribes. Their work attests a fusion of economic vitality (manuscripts

[9] Generally, capital-C 'Church' refers to the institution, while small-c 'church' refers to the building: thus we can write of the Anglo-Saxon (or Roman or Catholic) Church, but the church of St Peter's, cathedral church at Tours, etc.

were very expensive), political will and intellectual ambition which confirms that the Carolingians were distinctive for much more than the novelty of their relationship with the popes.

The Carolingians thus left an indelible mark on the historical record, but they also bequeathed an ideological legacy which dominated the imaginations of their successors. The heroes of the dynasty did not take long to pass into the realm of mythology, and posterity quickly canonised Pippin's family as a benchmark for dynastic prestige. It was this aura which, in 1000, drew the German emperor Otto III to Charlemagne's palace chapel at Aachen where, as an act of piety and political theatre, he exhumed and re-interred the great emperor's body, eyewitnesses reporting that apart from overlong fingernails and a touch of decay on the nose he remained bodily incorrupt and upright on his throne. In the twelfth century Suger, abbot of St Denis, built a new church to house the bodies of his patrons alongside the Carolingians already buried there, and thus to create a sense of dynastic continuity that flattered the great Capetian dynasty of his own day. Meanwhile, the German emperor Frederick I 'Barbarossa' sought to outdo the Capetians, and assert unmediated control of the Carolingian past, by translating Charlemagne's remains to a new casket in 1165, and having him recognised as a saint.[10] Post-medieval imperialists have also looked to the eighth and ninth centuries to anchor their sense of themselves: the memory of the Carolingians was appropriated, for instance, by Napoleon, who visited Charlemagne's tomb to contemplate the great emperor prior to his own coronation in 1804. He has also found a place in the ideologies of modern regimes of various hues including those of the Nazis (whose army contained a unit named after Charlemagne) and the European Union (which sponsors a prize for European unity named after him).[11]

[10] Respectively, see: G. Althoff, *Otto III* (University Park, PA, 2003); L. Grant, *Abbot Suger of St-Denis: Church and State in Early Twelfth-Century France* (London, 1998); J. Petersohn, 'Saint-Denis – Westminster – Aachen. Die Karls-Translatio von 1165 und ihre Vorbilder', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 31 (1975), pp. 420–54. In general see M. Gabriele and J. Stuckey (eds.), *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages. Power, Faith and Crusade* (New York, 2008).

[11] R. J. Morrissey, *Charlemagne and France: A Thousand Years of Mythology* (Notre Dame, IN, 2003); J. Story, 'Introduction: Charlemagne's reputation', in Story (ed.), *Charlemagne*, pp. 1–4; R. D. McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 1–3.

It is, then, not surprising that modern historians, whose work is never uncontaminated by the wider ideological atmosphere in which it is written, continue to reinvent the contemporary relevance of the Carolingians by casting them in the role of 'a family who forged Europe', and seeing in their empire 'the scaffolding of the Middle Ages'.[12] Some of the most prominent debates about the origins of modern Europe have revolved around the significance of key events in Carolingian history. The defeat by Pippin's father Charles Martel of a Muslim army near Tours was traditionally seen as decisive in halting the northward spread of Islam;[13] Charlemagne's imperial coronation in 800 was, centuries later, recast as the founding event of the 'Holy Roman Empire'; the Treaty of Verdun in 843, by which the empire was divided into three parts, two of which corresponded roughly to France and Germany, has been seen as 'the birth certificate of Europe';[14] and the end of the empire in 888 was the focus for an intensely ideological debate about the origins of the kingdom of Germany coloured by a barely concealed mid-twentieth-century political agenda.[15] The modern baggage loaded on to these distant moments hints at how the period has been quarried as a source of material for highly charged controversies about modern national identities, particularly those of France and Germany.[16] To some extent this way of thinking was hard-wired into the field from the start: sustained critical study of the period was inaugurated in 1819 by the founding of the *Monumenta Germaniae historica* (Historic Monuments of Germany), an institution whose purpose was explicitly framed as a patriotic attempt to raise German national consciousness through the publication of all texts relating to the medieval history of a country that was at that point still over fifty years from emerging as a full nation-state.[17] Conversely, mid-twentieth-century French historians like Louis Halphen, haunted by the cataclysm of World War

[12] The quotations are from P. Riché, *The Carolingians: A Family who Forged Europe*, trans. M. I. Allen (Philadelphia, PA, 1993) and Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, p. 235.
[13] P. Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel* (Harlow, 2000), pp. 86–7; I. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450–751* (London, 1994), p. 283.
[14] Riché, *The Carolingians*, p. 168.
[15] C. Brühl, *Deutschland–Frankreich. Die Geburt zweier Völker*, 2nd edn (Cologne and Vienna, 1995), pp. 7–17.
[16] P. Geary, *The Myth of Nations* (Princeton, NJ, 2002), esp. pp. 1–14.
[17] D. Knowles, *Great Historical Enterprises* (London, 1963), pp. 65–97.

II, wrote the Carolingian story as a great tragedy of failed European unity; while some more recent authors have sketched a very different narrative arc by explicitly claiming the empire as a foreshadowing of contemporary Europe, united in diversity.[18] All these views find support in the sources because the empire was always united (as an ideal) and often divided (in reality): contemporaries saw themselves as simultaneously members of regional or national groupings and of an imperial community, emphasising one or the other depending on who they were talking to or about. Because contemporary Franks argued about their identity in recognisable terms, the contested history of the Carolingian empire is useful for writing any one of a number of modern stories about the past.[19]

It is not the aim of this book to take issue with or propound any one of these possible narratives. Rather, its writing has been prompted by the fact that the most recent general surveys of Carolingian history published in English are now over twenty-five years old, and since they were written there has been a dramatic surge in research that has subjected many aspects of the field to new levels of scrutiny.[20] As is proper, this work has not led to the incremental formation of consensus on all topics, but has opened up new questions by identifying the parameters and paradoxes within which debate about eighth- and ninth-century society can be framed. Thus this often appears to be a world very alien to our own, one in which the ruling class was simultaneously pious and violent (with no sense of dissonance between the two); in which officials fulfilled functions we call 'governmental' and yet had little concept of the state; in which peasants, though legally free, could be bound by complex obligations to landlords and rulers; and in which increasing efforts to define and prescribe Christian belief were made against a background

[18] L. Halphen, *Charlemagne and the Carolingian Empire* (Amsterdam, 1977); J. L. Nelson, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (London, 1996), pp. xiii–xiv; A. Barbero, *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent* (Berkeley, 2004). On the writing of European history across specific periods, see S. Woolf, 'Europe and its historians', *Contemporary European History* 12 (2003), pp. 323–37.

[19] K. Leyser, 'Concepts of Europe in the early and high middle ages', *P&P* 137, pp. 25–47, repr. in Leyser, *Communications and Power in Medieval Europe: The Carolingian and Ottonian Centuries* (London, 1994), pp. 1–18.

[20] The most recent English-language surveys of a specifically defined Carolingian period are Rosamond McKitterick's *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians, 751–987* (London and New York, 1983) and Riché, *The Carolingians*, which also first appeared in 1983.

of enormously varied religious practices. The last twenty-five years have witnessed huge advances in historical comprehension of most of these areas, stimulated in part by increasing interest in the Carolingian period in the Anglophone scholarly world. Our aim is therefore not only to introduce the main features of the period to readers who may not be well acquainted with it, but also to synthesise and engage with the issues debated in the latest research. Working out how to fit all this together involves making difficult decisions, especially in a book aimed primarily at newcomers to the period. Political narrative is an essential framework for modern readers, as it was for contemporary authors. However, one of our aims in this book is to suggest that developments in social structures, rural and elite society, economic forces, religious beliefs and aspects of culture were inextricably tied up with political events, and with each other, in a complex multilateral relationship. One way we have chosen to emphasise this (since writing three-dimensional 'total history' is impossible) is by playing down the political narrative that dominates most textbooks and weaving it throughout the book, mainly restricted to chapters at the beginning, middle and end. Nevertheless, the interleaved thematic chapters do broadly follow a chronological arc so that, for example, it makes sense to know about Charlemagne's wars of conquest before discussing the establishment of structures of religious belief during his reign; but it is also sensible to analyse the main features of elite society before turning to the role of the aristocracy in the years leading up to the end of the empire. We hope that the book therefore not only serves to synthesise the recent flourishing of Carolingian studies, but also reflects scholars' increasing awareness of the complex interrelationships between political, social and economic phenomena that are often regarded as discrete.

At the same time, we have had to decide what to leave out. By focussing on broad themes such as belief, communications, village society and elite culture, we draw on examples that come from a range of geographical areas. Naturally, we are drawn more regularly to some areas than others – those for which sources survive most abundantly, and those that we know best. An inevitable consequence of this is that some important areas are under-represented in this book, for instance northern Spain, southern Gaul and the eastern frontiers. Other very important topics have receded into the background because comprehensive introductory accounts are readily available elsewhere. In this category we might place art,

literature and other high cultural aspects of the Carolingian reform; the role of law and law-making; and warfare.[21] Still others which could have been placed centre-stage, such as the political role of women, the structures of the institutional Church and the workings of government, we have tried to fold into our thematic discussions. We cannot claim comprehensiveness, and the bibliography at the end of the book should be used by readers wishing to learn more about particular subjects.

WAS THERE A CAROLINGIAN WORLD?

Listing some of the topics that do not appear in this book means that we are obliged to try to justify the coherence of those that do. Self-evidently, the book rests on the proposition that the 'Carolingian world' in the eighth and ninth centuries constitutes a discrete historical time and place that deserves analysis; and in doing so it could be seen as privileging a narrative of European history defined by the deeds of a single powerful family that focusses disproportionately on the geographical areas where they owned their greatest estates (in particular the Seine basin, the Rhineland and the Po valley). An important critique along these lines was published in 1989 by the American historian Richard Sullivan, who argued that by underplaying the importance of regionalism and screening out underlying continuities, historians were guilty of overemphasising the distinctiveness and significance of the Carolingian empire and era.[22] He was certainly correct to stress the significance of regionalism in the eighth and ninth centuries. The geographical coherence of the empire is artificially enhanced by modern cartography, which can create the illusion of political boundaries as firm and uncontested lines. Contemporary thought did have a place for precisely defined borders – Carolingian kings thought they could impose restrictions on the passage across their frontiers of some commodities, particularly weapons

[21] Both McKitterick, *Frankish Kingdoms* and Riché, *The Carolingians* have very good discussions of culture; see also R. McKitterick (ed.), *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation* (Cambridge, 1994); on law see P. Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century* I: *Legislation and its Limits* (Oxford, 1999) (which despite the title contains much on continental history); on warfare, G. Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West* (London and New York, 2003). On all these areas, see *NCMH* II.

[22] R. Sullivan, 'The Carolingian age: Reflections on its place in the history of the Middle Ages', *Speculum* 64 (1989), pp. 267–306.

and coins, which suggests a significant level of confidence in their ability to fix and police borders, as does Charlemagne's imposition of a trade embargo in a dispute with King Offa of Mercia around 790.[23] However, the varying degree of royal control in different parts of the Frankish realms means that our maps' sharp edges begin to look frayed under close inspection. Some areas were at times nominally part of the empire but in practice not fully integrated, such as northern Spain, central Italy and Brittany.[24] Other parts of Europe, including the kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England, were clearly beyond the frontier but through regular contact and cultural pressure absorbed many of the characteristics of Carolingian political culture.[25] Nor was the empire cleanly defined against outsiders as a religious entity: while Charlemagne's campaigns against the pagan Saxons are talked about in some sources in terms that suggest religious justifications were used, he also fought Christians in Brittany and Aquitaine, and his attacks on Muslim Spain were initiated not against an enemy defined by its different religion, but on behalf of one faction within the Caliphate against another. By the same token, Frankish Christian elites in the ninth century often pursued internal political and military interests by allying with non-Christian Scandinavians and Slavs. Concepts of religious difference overlapped with, and could be superseded by, a different set of assumptions concerning the cultural difference or similarity of the Franks' neighbours.[26]

Since the Carolingians found it impossible to impose or adhere to rigid geographical boundaries in their world, we have not sought to

[23] On frontiers, see W. Pohl, I. Wood and H. Reimitz (eds.), *The Transformation of Frontiers from Late Antiquity to the Carolingians* (Leiden, Boston and Cologne, 2001) and W. Pohl and H. Reimitz (eds.), *Grenze und Differenz im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna, 2000). On Charlemagne and Offa, see Alcuin, *Epistolae*, ed. E. Dümmler, *MGH Epp.* IV (*Epp. Karolini aevi* II) (Berlin, 1895), pp. 1–493, no. 7, trans. S. Allott, *Alcuin of York: his Life and Letters* (York, 1974), no. 31; J. Story, *Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c.750–870* (Aldershot, 2003), p. 186.

[24] See respectively R. Collins, *Early Medieval Spain: Unity in Diversity, 400–1000* (2nd edn, Basingstoke, 1995); M. Costambeys, *Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy* (Cambridge, 2007), Chapters 7 and 8; J. M. H. Smith, *Province and Empire. Brittany and the Carolingians* (Cambridge, 1992).

[25] J. Story, 'Charlemagne and the Anglo-Saxons', in Story (ed.), *Charlemagne*, pp. 195–210; Story, *Carolingian Connections*.

[26] I. Wood, 'Missionaries and the Christian frontier', in Pohl, Wood and Reimitz (eds.), *Transformation of Frontiers*, pp. 209–18.