

Cambridge University Press

0521819458 - Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the  
End of the Carolingian Empire

Simon Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Chapter 1*

## INTRODUCTION

THE END OF THE CAROLINGIAN EMPIRE IN  
MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

The dregs of the Carolingian race no longer exhibited any symptoms of virtue or power, and the ridiculous epithets of the Bald, the Stammerer, the Fat, and the Simple, distinguished the tame and uniform features of a crowd of kings alike deserving of oblivion. By the failure of the collateral branches, the whole inheritance devolved to Charles the Fat, the last emperor of his family: his insanity authorised the desertion of Germany, Italy, and France . . . The governors, the bishops and the lords usurped the fragments of the falling empire.<sup>1</sup>

This was how, in the late eighteenth century, the great Enlightenment historian Edward Gibbon passed verdict on the end of the Carolingian empire almost exactly 900 years earlier. To twenty-first-century eyes, the terms of this assessment may seem jarring. Gibbon's emphasis on the importance of virtue and his ideas about who or what was a deserving subject of historical study very much reflect the values of his age, the expectations of his audience and the intentions of his work.<sup>2</sup> However, if the timbre of his analysis now feels dated, its constituent elements have nonetheless survived into modern historiography. The conventional narrative of the end of the empire in the year 888 is still a story about the emergence of recognisable medieval kingdoms which would become modern nations – France, Germany and Italy; about the personal inadequacies of late ninth-century kings as rulers; and about their powerlessness in the face of an increasingly independent, acquisitive and assertive aristocracy. This book is an examination of the validity of these assumptions, and aims to retell the story of the end of the Carolingian empire through the prism of the reign of its last emperor, Charles III, 'the Fat'.

<sup>1</sup> E. Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, new edn (2 vols., Chicago, 1990), vol. 2, chap. 49, p. 213.

<sup>2</sup> See R. McKitterick and R. Quinault (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and Empire* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. R. McKitterick, 'Gibbon and the Early Middle Ages in Eighteenth-Century Europe', pp. 162–89.

Cambridge University Press

0521819458 - Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire

Simon Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century*

Charles the Fat (the nickname is convenient, but not contemporary<sup>3</sup>) was the great-grandson of the emperor Charlemagne, whose wars of conquest and cultural reforms had shaped the territory and character of the Frankish empire under the Carolingians in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. In 843 the empire was split, in traditional Frankish style, between the grandsons of Charlemagne, and despite Viking invasion and periods of internal conflict its constituent kingdoms remained in the Carolingians' hands for nearly five further decades. Charles the Fat is traditionally seen as the squanderer of this family inheritance. The end of his reign heralded the destruction both of the monopoly on legitimate royal power which the Carolingian dynasty had maintained since 751, and of the territorial coherence of the pan-European Frankish empire. At the time of his succession as king of Alemannia in 876 the Carolingian hegemony was very much intact, and Charles was but one king among several controlling the *regna* of the empire. However, within a decade he had become his dynasty's sole ruling representative. A bewildering mixture of illness and misadventure stripped the Carolingian house of all its other adult legitimate males, and delivered into Charles's hands first Italy (879), then Bavaria, Franconia and Saxony (882), and finally the west Frankish kingdom (885). This comprehensive agglomeration of territories amounted to a restoration, for the first time since 840, of the entire empire of Charlemagne, which extended over a million square kilometres. In 881 Charles added the imperial crown to his list of titles, a dignity which enhanced his status and moral authority, although it gave him no new powers. However, Charles's unparalleled success (or fortune) in the acquisition of Carolingian kingdoms during his reign was overshadowed by the abject failure of its conclusion, when, in November 887, he was deposed in a palace coup by his nephew Arnulf of Carinthia, before dying of natural causes a matter of weeks later. Because Charles remained heirless and Arnulf was a bastard, a legitimacy vacuum opened up at the top of Frankish politics. Although descendants of Charlemagne ruled at sporadic intervals in tenth-century France and Italy, the ending of the main Carolingian line's monopoly on legitimate royal power in the crisis of 887–8 meant that parts of the empire were made subject to rule by female-line and non-Carolingians for the first time since 751, and its territories were split apart once and for all. It is generally believed that Charles's loss of power reveals him to have been a failure, an unimaginative and personally weak do-nothing ruler in whose feeble grip the Carolingian

<sup>3</sup> The nickname 'Fat' was coined no earlier than the twelfth century: K. Nass, *Die Reichskronik des Annalista Saxo und die sächsische Geschichtsschreibung im 12. Jahrhundert* (Hanover, 1996), p. 49. The dimensions of Charles's girth are thus lamentably unknown. I am grateful to John Gillingham for this reference.

Cambridge University Press

0521819458 - Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire

Simon Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

empire, unprotected from internal conflict and Viking attack, was allowed to tear itself apart. The reign therefore symbolises the end of an era.

As a result of this, the issue of how the reign should be interpreted also has broader historiographical implications. The negative scholarly opinion which prevails about Charles the Fat is based less on critical study of the available evidence than on presuppositions about the course of Carolingian political history as a whole. The historiography of the end of the empire is suffused with ideas from three main strands of scholarly tradition. The first concerns the overall trajectory of Carolingian politics as a curve of rise until about 830, and then decline and fall. It is a commonplace that royal power declined in the later ninth century (according to a recent authority this is 'obvious').<sup>4</sup> While the landed power of the monarchy dwindled, the aristocracy 'rose', assuming ever more regalian rights, taking over defence against the Vikings and ultimately seizing power in 887–8 from a Carolingian dynasty which was drained of its economic and moral authority. The king–aristocracy relationship is characterised here as oppositional. Late ninth-century kings, and especially Charles the Fat, the ultimate victim of these processes, ruled not with, but rather in spite of the high nobility, who eventually rose up and seized power for themselves. The female-line, illegitimate and non-Carolingian kings who assumed the mantle of kingship in 888 (a contemporary called them *reguli*, 'kinglets') were members of the high aristocracy: therefore, the reasoning goes, any evidence for their activities prior to this date should be read as revealing stages in their 'rise' to kingship.<sup>5</sup>

This type of thinking still lies submerged in many of the standard works on the period: the 'rise of the aristocracy' has become an accepted and largely unquestioned historical reference point the authority of which can be invoked to explain other phenomena of the late ninth century.<sup>6</sup> The principal reason for this is historiographical: the model, as teleological as it is, fits very neatly into the traditional grand narratives of medieval European history. In particular, it is still often assumed that to explain the supposed emergence of 'feudalism', 'France' and 'Germany' in the tenth century, it is necessary to postulate a crisis of state power developing throughout the late ninth century and facilitating the shift from 'public' (royal) to 'private' (aristocratic) authority.<sup>7</sup> The work of the

<sup>4</sup> B. Arnold, *Medieval Germany, 500–1300. A Political Interpretation* (London, 1997), pp. 34, 82.

<sup>5</sup> *AF(B)* s.a. 888, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> C. Lauranson-Rosaz, 'Le Roi et les grands dans l'Aquitaine carolingienne', in R. Le Jan (ed.), *La Royauté et les élites dans l'Europe carolingienne (début IXe siècle aux environs de 920)* (Lille, 1998), pp. 409–36, esp. p. 434, to cite one recent, randomly selected example.

<sup>7</sup> For apposite comments on the historiographical issues, see T. Reuter, 'The Origins of the German *Sonderweg*? The Empire and its Rulers in the High Middle Ages', in A. Duggan (ed.), *Kings and*

Cambridge University Press

0521819458 - Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire

Simon Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century*

Belgian author Jan Dhondt, whose 1948 book *Études sur la naissance des principautés territoriales en France* is the classic account of the 'rise' thesis, remains the most coherent attempt to expound it systematically on the basis of analysis of the contemporary sources.<sup>8</sup> Dhondt argued that the ninth century saw a centrifugal redistribution of resources, and by implication power, from the Carolingian kings to a grasping aristocracy, speeded up by the exigencies of defence against the Vikings.<sup>9</sup> By the late ninth century, some aristocrats were acting as kings in all but name, allowing them to dispense with Carolingian authority. Dhondt's thesis remains hugely influential, and has become tacitly ratified by and crystallised in historical convention.

Secondly, intricately entwined with the 'rise of the aristocracy' model is the view that the later ninth century was an era of regional particularism and growing provincial desire to secede from the empire. Ultimately, these concerns go back to the nineteenth century and the dawn of professional history, the practitioners and patrons of which were often preoccupied with defining the character and origins of modern nation-states.<sup>10</sup> However, these early academic enterprises left an enduring legacy to modern historians, notably French but often followed by those writing in English. In the words of Pierre Riché, for instance, the Treaty of Verdun of 843, which divided the empire into three vertical strips, two of which resembled modern France and Germany in territorial extent, was 'the birth-certificate of Europe'.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, post-war German historians have become extremely cautious about ascribing modern nationalities to early medieval polities, anxious to avoid reproducing the chauvinistic and teleological perspectives of their predecessors. Recent work, exemplified by Carlrichard Brühl's enormous treatise on the subject, has

*Kingship in Medieval Europe* (London, 1993), pp. 179–211, at pp. 210–11; D. Barthélemy, 'Debate: the "Feudal Revolution" I', *Past and Present* 152 (1996), 196–205, at 199; S. Reynolds, 'The Historiography of the Medieval State', in M. Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography* (London and New York, 1997), pp. 117–38, at pp. 124–5; D. Barthélemy, 'La chevalerie carolingienne: prélude au XIe siècle', in Le Jan (ed.), *La Royauté et les élites*, pp. 159–75, at p. 168.

<sup>8</sup> J. Dhondt, *Études sur la naissance des principautés territoriales en France (IXe–Xe siècle)* (Bruges, 1948). J. W. Thompson, *The Dissolution of the Carolingian Fisc in the Ninth Century* (Berkeley, 1935) was an earlier but even more flawed attempt.

<sup>9</sup> On the Viking aspect of the thesis, the most influential work has been F. Vercauteren, 'Comment s'est-on défendu, au IXe siècle dans l'empire Franc contre les invasions normandes', in *XXXe Congrès de la Fédération Archéologique de Belgique* (Brussels, 1936), pp. 117–32.

<sup>10</sup> See now P. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: the Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, 2002). However, some nineteenth-century works remain valuable: in particular G. Waitz, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte* (8 vols., Berlin, 1876–96); and E. Dümmler, *Geschichte des ostfränkischen Reiches*, 2nd edn (3 vols., Leipzig, 1887–8).

<sup>11</sup> P. Riché, *The Carolingians: a Family who Forged Europe* (Philadelphia, 1993), p. 168; C. Brühl, *Deutschland-Frankreich: Die Geburt zweier Völker* (Cologne and Vienna, 1990), pp. 7–82 comments perceptively on the historiographical issues.

Cambridge University Press

0521819458 - Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire

Simon Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

emphasised that there is no convincing evidence for recognisably French and German national identities before the eleventh century, until which time politics continued to be articulated in a resolutely Frankish idiom.<sup>12</sup> German scholarship has nevertheless continued to debate the emergence of regional political identities in the so-called principalities or ‘younger stem-dukies’ of the late ninth and tenth centuries. Traditionally these have been thought of as provincial solidarities within former Carolingian subkingdoms such as Bavaria, Saxony and Franconia, each one cemented by its own ethnic identity and led by a semi-autonomous duke (a ‘risen’ aristocrat) who represented his people and ruled them more or less in lieu of the king.<sup>13</sup> Although the dukies’ ethnic basis has been questioned by Karl-Ferdinand Werner and his followers, who prefer to see them as direct successors to regnal structures created by the Carolingians, their emergence continues to be a primary focus for discussions of late ninth-century history.<sup>14</sup>

These historiographical concerns, the origins of nations and the rise of the aristocratic dukies, have cluttered up the political history of the ninth century with a considerable amount of unwelcome baggage. The exposition of these alleged processes has been prioritised over the observation of what actually happened. The search for origins encourages teleology, leading to the late ninth-century evidence being interpreted backwards, from the perspective of the known outcome. It has also led to the assumption that the high aristocratic families who went on to lead the post-Carolingian kingdoms and dukies did so as representatives of ethnic groups: the emergence of smaller political units after 888 is therefore linked in historiographical traditions to the model of the rise of

<sup>12</sup> Brühl, *Deutschland-Frankreich* (mysteriously, Brühl’s book has exactly 843 pages); K. F. Werner, ‘Völker und Regna’, in C. Brühl and B. Schneidmüller (eds.), *Beiträge zur mittelalterlichen Reichs- und Nationsbildung in Deutschland und Frankreich* (Munich, 1997), pp. 15–43. Cf. the comments of S. Airlie, ‘After Empire: Recent Work on the Emergence of Post-Carolingian Kingdoms’, *EME* 2 (1993), 153–61 and Arnold, *Medieval Germany*, pp. 1–12.

<sup>13</sup> The enormous older bibliography on this subject is best accessed through the discussion of H.-W. Goetz, *Dux und Ducatus. Begriffs- und verfassungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des sogenannten ‘jüngeren’ Fürstentitel im neunten und zehnten Jahrhundert*, (Vienna, Cologne and Graz, 1973), pp. 179–340. See now R. Le Jan, ‘Continuity and Change in the Tenth-Century Nobility’, in A. Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 53–68, esp. pp. 55–6. Goetz, *Dux und Ducatus* is an all-out assault on the concept of dukies which in its desire to demolish the over-legalistic approaches of previous scholars perhaps threw the baby out with the bathwater; see Brühl, *Deutschland-Frankreich*, pp. 303–29. M. Becher, *Rex, Dux und Gens. Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des sächsischen Herzogtums im 9. und 10. Jahrhundert* (Husum, 1996) is a sophisticated study showing how ethnic aspects can be built into a subtle understanding of the political processes at work.

<sup>14</sup> K. F. Werner, *Structures politiques du monde franc (VIe–XIIe siècles)* (London, 1979); K. Brunner, ‘Der fränkische Fürstentitel im neunten und zehnten Jahrhundert’, in H. Wolfram (ed.), *Intitulatio II. Lateinische Herrscher- und Fürstentitel im neunten und zehnten Jahrhundert*, (Vienna, Cologne and Graz, 1973), pp. 179–340. See now R. Le Jan, ‘Continuity and Change in the Tenth-Century Nobility’, in A. Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 53–68, esp. pp. 55–6. Goetz, *Dux und Ducatus* is an all-out assault on the concept of dukies which in its desire to demolish the over-legalistic approaches of previous scholars perhaps threw the baby out with the bathwater; see Brühl, *Deutschland-Frankreich*, pp. 303–29. M. Becher, *Rex, Dux und Gens. Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des sächsischen Herzogtums im 9. und 10. Jahrhundert* (Husum, 1996) is a sophisticated study showing how ethnic aspects can be built into a subtle understanding of the political processes at work.

Cambridge University Press

0521819458 - Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire

Simon Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century*

the aristocracy. Thus, when it comes to explaining the disintegration of the Carolingian empire, the concerns of post-war historians of the early Middle Ages have resulted in similar conclusions to those reached by the constitutional–legal historians of previous generations.<sup>15</sup> The way the story is told has changed, but the plot and the ending remain essentially the same.

The third theme which has dominated historians' thinking on the end of the empire brings these general issues to bear on a specific problem, namely the deposition and death of Charles the Fat in 887–8, the only part of the reign itself which has been studied in any detail. German historians of the twentieth century debated at length the significance of these events for medieval constitutional history (*Verfassungsgeschichte*). The best example of this is the well-known exchange between Gerd Tellenbach and Walter Schlesinger and some others in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. While Tellenbach took the view that Arnulf's revolt was essentially just another military coup of a type common enough in the brutal world of Frankish politics, Schlesinger insisted that his rise represented the establishment of a new kind of elective kingship brought about by the development of an increasingly independent and class-conscious aristocracy which began to impose institutional checks on the power of the monarchy.<sup>16</sup> The matters at stake were essentially whether or not 887–8 saw the creation of a kingdom of Germany, and whether king or *Volk* (the people) had the whiphand within it. The main reason for the spectacular divergence of views lies in the fact that the two continuations of our main narrative source, the *Annals of Fulda* (*Annales Fuldenses*), which inevitably exert great influence on the structure of modern accounts, present diametrically opposed versions of the events of 887. The twentieth-century disputants were thus readily able to find in the contemporary texts exactly what they wanted to find, and to construct contradictory hypotheses accordingly.

Despite this problem, and despite the fact that the concerns debated by Tellenbach and Schlesinger are no longer such hot issues as they were

<sup>15</sup> E.g., C. Brühl, *Fodrum, Gistum, Servitium Regis. Studien zu den wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen des Königtums im Frankenreich und in der fränkischen Nachfolgestaaten Deutschland, Frankreich und Italien vom 6. bis zur Mitte des 14. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne, 1968), pp. 35–6; J. Fried, 'The Frankish Kingdoms, 817–911: the East and Middle Kingdoms', in *NCMH2*, pp. 142–68, at p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> Most of the contributions are collected in H. Kämpf (ed.), *Die Entstehung des deutschen Reiches (Deutschland um 900)* (Darmstadt, 1956) and E. Hlawitschka (ed.), *Königswahl und Thronfolge in fränkisch-karolingischer Zeit* (Darmstadt, 1975). For useful commentaries see J. Freed, 'Reflections on the Medieval German Nobility', *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), 553–75, at 555; C. R. Bowlus, 'Imre Boba's Reconstructions of Moravia's Early History and Arnulf of Carinthia's Ostpolitik (887–892)', *Speculum* 62 (1987), 552–74, at 554–7, 573. T. Reuter, 'The Medieval Nobility in Twentieth-Century Historiography', in Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography*, pp. 177–202, at p. 185, n. 28 notes a methodological aspect to the dispute.

Cambridge University Press

0521819458 - Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire

Simon Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

in Germany in the 1940s, the terms of the discussion about the balance between aristocracy and emperor established the paradigms for many further discussions of the rising of Arnulf and the end of the Carolingian empire.<sup>17</sup> Historians are still inclined to sidestep the thorny problem of how to reconcile the contrasting annalistic sources by selecting somewhat indiscriminately from each of them to create a single political narrative. The accepted history of the 880s has become a cut-and-paste catalogue of disasters: individual events are taken out of context from different sources in order to affirm an image of events running out of control. This amounts to a tacit declaration by posterity of Schlesinger as the victor in the debate over German *Verfassungsgeschichte*: the crisis of 887–8 is commonly held to be the direct outcome of momentous but nebulous historical processes, such as the ‘rise of the aristocracy’ and the ‘decline of royal authority’, which the course of contemporary events passively reveals, but does not affect.<sup>18</sup>

The discussion of these models over the decades has given expression to a starkly defined arc of Carolingian decline. Although the scholarship on which it originally depended is now old, this picture endures because of its neatness: it explains in a plausible and satisfying manner a wide range of aspects of the period c. 850–c. 950. As such, to challenge it is to question the framework in which Carolingian (and post-Carolingian) political history as a whole is understood. The traditional paradigm hinges in particular on the interpretation of the end of the empire. While the significance of this turn of events is widely recognised, its causes are seen as self-explanatory. The politics of the later 870s and 880s have therefore been in a sense dehistoricised. These years are still usually seen as dismal, dark and semi-detached from the main, implicitly more important, period of Carolingian rule. By turning the late ninth-century Carolingians, and Charles the Fat in particular, into victims of traditional historiographical villains like grasping aristocrats, and inexorable historical processes such as the rise of nations, they are effectively erased from history as political actors, and turned into unthinking ciphers whose fates confirm but do not influence the unstoppable tide of progress towards the high medieval future. As a result, since Ernst Dümmler’s positivist survey of 1888, the reign of the last emperor has never been considered as requiring a major study in any language, and the handful of articles which have dealt with

<sup>17</sup> See for example E. M. Eibl, ‘Zur Stellung Bayerns und Rheinfrankens im Reiche Arnulfs von Kärnten’, *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des Feudalismus* 8 (1984), 73–113, at 75–6.

<sup>18</sup> W. Schlesinger, ‘Die Auflösung des Karlsreiches’, in W. Braunsfels (ed.), *Karl der Grosse. Lebenswerk und Nachleben* (5 vols., Düsseldorf, 1965–7), vol. 1, pp. 792–857 is the classic statement; cf. more recently J. Fried, *Der Weg in die Geschichte. Die Ursprünge Deutschlands bis 1024* (Berlin, 1994), pp. 109, 447–8.



Cambridge University Press

0521819458 - Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire

Simon Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century*

the period focus almost without exception on the emperor's deposition.<sup>19</sup> To this extent, Gibbon's 'dregs' have indeed been left in the darkness he thought they deserved.

However, although these comments do serve to describe broad patterns and themes still current within the historiography, they should not be taken to imply that scholarship on the later ninth century has stood still since the Second World War, or that all historians subscribe to the views which have just been sketched out. On the contrary, recent work has advanced our understanding of later Carolingian politics considerably. The institutional-statist orthodoxies established in the mid-twentieth century by the generation of the illustrious Belgian historian François-Louis Ganshof are being gradually refined by more subtle understandings of how earlier medieval government worked.<sup>20</sup> As we shall see in the next section, political structures are not now measured by the standards of modern state hierarchies, with power defined and delegated from the top down, but instead are characterised as fluid networks of patronage and allegiance within the aristocracy, and between powerful aristocrats and the king.<sup>21</sup> These new perspectives have problematised older paradigms of political development. The traditional framework for understanding the relationship between king and aristocracy has thus changed. Consequently, since the 1980s, a wave of reassessment has swept over the historiography of ninth-century kingship and rehabilitated the historical reputations of Louis the Pious (814–40) and Charles the Bald (840–77).<sup>22</sup>

The present book is intended to build on such research and to apply some of its conclusions to the politics of the 870s and 880s, understanding of which remains encased in conventional orthodoxies. Roger Collins recently observed that it might be about time someone stood up for

<sup>19</sup> The best-known (and best) article is H. Keller, 'Zum Sturz Karls III. Über die Rolle Liutwards von Vercelli und Liutberts von Mainz, Arnulfs von Kärnten und der ostfränkischen Großen bei der Absetzung des Kaisers', *DA* 34 (1966), 333–84. Dümmler, *Geschichte des ostfränkischen Reiches*, vol. 3, pp. 175–295.

<sup>20</sup> F. L. Ganshof, *Frankish Institutions Under Charlemagne* (Providence, 1968); F. L. Ganshof, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy* (London, 1971).

<sup>21</sup> For a full historiographical discussion, see M. Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 1–12. Among the most important works, see J. L. Nelson, *Charles the Bald* (London and New York, 1992); R. McKitterick (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History vol. II c.700–c.900* (Cambridge, 1995); B. H. Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space: Power, Restraint and Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe* (Manchester, 1999); Innes, *State and Society*; S. Airlie, *Carolingian Politics* (forthcoming). G. Sergi, 'L'Europa carolingia e la sua dissoluzione', in N. Tranfaglia and M. Firpo (eds.), *La Storia. I grandi problemi dal Medioevo all'Età contemporanea* (10 vols., Turin, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 231–62 is a coherent overview and refutation of the traditional picture.

<sup>22</sup> See especially P. Godman and R. Collins (eds.), *Charlemagne's Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious, 814–840* (Oxford, 1990); Nelson, *Charles the Bald*. New work on Louis the German is also forthcoming from Eric J. Goldberg.



Cambridge University Press

0521819458 - Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire

Simon Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Charles the Fat.<sup>23</sup> To some extent, what follows may be viewed as a case for the defence. However, its purpose is not primarily to rehabilitate Charles in order to turn him into a 'better' or 'good' king (although given the consistently bad press he has hitherto had, some such revisionism is inevitable). Nor is it strictly speaking a biography: little will be said, for example, about his earlier life, although much could. Rather, this book aims to use the reign as a window onto the political events and structures of the late Carolingian empire, and hence to reach new conclusions about the reasons for and nature of its disintegration. By thus evaluating the reign in a broader context, it is hoped that some light will also be cast on the workings of Carolingian politics more generally: in studying a political system at the point where it stopped working, as Stuart Airlie has pointed out, we can also reflect on what made it work in the first place.<sup>24</sup> To this end, the aim is to consider the sources in context, rather than subordinate their information to historiographical preconceptions about the 'rise of the aristocracy' or the inevitability of the empire's collapse. The conclusions reached suggest that late Carolingian imperial politics retained more vitality and viability than is usually acknowledged. The end of the empire, when it came, was not the inevitable result of unsustainable imbalances in a decaying system, but primarily the outcome of a royal succession dispute which resonated with some wider concerns within the political community of the time. Space does not permit comprehensive coverage of the events and structures of the period concerned. Detailed regional case-studies on the model of Matthew Innes's important study of the middle Rhine valley would, for example, add much to the book's 'top-down' perspective and help refine its conclusions.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the themes covered, although they contribute to a consistent set of overall conclusions, are focused on the areas where sources are in greatest supply. Moreover, the weight of the traditional historiographical concerns already outlined have an obvious influence on the themes chosen; for example, the nature of the relationships between kings and aristocrats, the ideas and practices of kingship, and the rise of the duchies.

Chapter 2 deals with the evidential basis for the traditional version of events, and argues that historians have been too heavily influenced by the agenda of one particular author, the Mainz continuator of the *Annals of Fulda*. The subsequent two chapters are concerned with political structures, in particular Charles's relationship with the high aristocracy.

<sup>23</sup> R. Collins, 'The Carolingians and the Ottonians in an Anglophone World', *JMH* 22 (1996), 97–114 at 109.

<sup>24</sup> S. Airlie, 'Semper fideles? Loyauté envers les carolingiens comme constituant de l'identité aristocratique', in Le Jan (ed.), *La Royauté et les élites*, pp. 129–43.

<sup>25</sup> Innes, *State and Society*.

Cambridge University Press

0521819458 - Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire

Simon Maclean

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century*

Here we will assess the evidence for the argument that the period witnessed a decay of the structures of government and a consonant increase in aristocratic authority. Particular attention is paid to the position of the 'supermagnates', some of who would take over as kings after the emperor's death, but we will also address questions of loyalty and secessionism among the political communities of the empire's regions. Chapters 5 and 6 reconstruct the events of the period from 884 until 888, focusing on developments in the politics of the imperial succession and offering a new hypothesis as to the circumstances of Charles's deposition. Because this analysis is based on a contextualisation of the changing political positions of the main actors, it will also cast light on broader issues relating to Carolingian kingship and political structures. Finally, chapter 7 offers a new reading of one of the canonical texts of ninth-century historiography, Notker the Stammerer's biography of Charlemagne, which was written for Charles the Fat, and which will allow us to draw together many of the themes already discussed.

Perhaps surprisingly given the comparative dearth of secondary literature, there is a relatively large body of source material available for the reign, much of it neglected because of a scholarly over-reliance on the evidence of the Mainz version of the *Annals of Fulda*.<sup>26</sup> Among the alternative contemporaneous narratives, we are well served up to 882 by Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims's *Annals of St-Bertin* (*Annales Bertiniani*); after 882 by the Bavarian continuator of the *Annals of Fulda*; and for the whole period by the *Annals of St-Vaast* (*Annales Vedastini*) and Regino of Prüm's *Chronicon* (the latter written up in 908). The more literary material provided by Notker and the poem on the siege of Paris by Abbo of St-Germain-des-Prés brightly illuminate particular moments and events. Perhaps the most neglected of all the classes of evidence are Charles's royal diplomas, of which over 170 are included in the standard edition by Paul Kehr: this high number of charters from a reign lasting only eleven years makes Charles perhaps the best-documented of all the Carolingian kings.<sup>27</sup> These charters will be used extensively as sources of crucial detail on a variety of subjects which remain opaque to readers of the more (apparently) self-explanatory narrative sources. They are invaluable, most obviously, in reconstructing patterns of political patronage, and in discussing court ideologies. Further points will be elucidated from lesser chronicles, letters, and non-royal charters. It is hoped, therefore, that the

<sup>26</sup> See below, chap. 2.

<sup>27</sup> R.-H. Bautier, 'Les Poids de la Neustrie ou de la France du nord-ouest dans la monarchie carolingienne unitaire d'après les diplômes de la chancellerie royale (751–840)', in H. Atsma (ed.), *La Neustrie. Les pays au nord de la Loire de 650 à 850* (2 vols., Sigmaringen, 1989), vol. 2, pp. 535–63 provides statistics.