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# German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Review of Jace Stuckey (ed.), *The Legend of Charlemagne: Envisioning Empire in the Middle Ages*

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*German Historical Institute London Bulletin*  
Vol. XLV, No. 1 (May 2023), 88–92

ISSN 0269-8552

## BOOK REVIEWS

JACE STUCKEY (ed.), *The Legend of Charlemagne: Envisioning Empire in the Middle Ages*, Explorations in Medieval Culture, 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2021) x + 277 pp. ISBN 978 9 004 33564 6. €134.00/\$161.00

Historical figures can only be considered 'great' when their contemporaries and posterity portray them as such. In the case of Charlemagne (or Charles the Great), his name and epithet are inseparable in English and French. Certainly, his contemporaries thought of him as an outstanding emperor; however, the glorification of Charlemagne as the Christian emperor par excellence started only after his death. (A similar phenomenon can be seen with Constantine the Great.) Einhard, a confidant of Charlemagne, was the first to shape this image prominently, dedicating a vita to him in the style of Suetonius. From the *Gesta Karoli* onwards, written by Notker the Stammerer, the glorification of Charlemagne exceeded the typical idealization of rulers, and was related to the crisis of the Frankish Empire and the declining power of the Carolingians at the end of the ninth century. Not only was Charlemagne portrayed as a hero in *chansons de geste*, but his battles with Muslims and his connections to the Holy Land also led to him being depicted as the leader of Christendom and the liberator of Jerusalem in the high Middle Ages. The kingdom of the Capetian dynasty was legitimized by the *Reditus regni Francorum ad stirpem Karoli*, that is, by the notion that the Carolingians had returned to the French throne with the accession of Louis VIII (r. 1223–6) because his mother, Isabella of Hainaut, was allegedly a descendant of Charlemagne. Furthermore, Charlemagne was worshipped in the Holy Roman Empire as its founding father and was also canonized under Frederick Barbarossa. This was done, however, by an antipope, which is why the cult of Charlemagne was limited to Aachen. Nonetheless, the emperor's good reputation led, among other things, to the establishment of the electoral college being attributed to him.

In short, Charlemagne's image was subject to numerous transformations, shaped by the necessities of different times. The field of research on Charlemagne's reception history is consequently a wide one. Its inception can be dated to Gaston Paris's *Histoire poétique de Charlemagne*, published in 1865, and in the last twenty years there has also been a broad range of research on the emperor's afterlife in the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> The editor of the volume under review here, Jace Stuckey, has already published another important anthology on this topic in 2008, co-edited with Matthew Gabriele.<sup>2</sup> There is also an ongoing project in Bristol headed by Marianne Ailes named 'Charlemagne: A European Icon'.

In his introduction (p. 1), Stuckey emphasizes the importance of examining different images of Charlemagne:

There are, however, real disconnects that should not be overlooked in favor of a teleological telling of Charlemagne's stories. The usefulness . . . of the Charlemagne legend in late-medieval England has little to do with the legend in late-ninth and early-tenth century Francia and the 'Charlemagne' celebrated in the *Chanson de Roland* is not the same 'Charlemagne' of the later Middle English romances. This, however, is part of the appeal of Charlemagne. His legend is flexible and malleable in a way that few other historical figures of the Middle Ages were.

The editor has arranged the volume thematically. It begins with the ways in which Charlemagne was remembered and imagined, including both the Carolingian and the post-Carolingian periods. Cullen Chandler analyses the depiction of Charlemagne in the ninth century

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Matthew Gabriele, *An Empire of Memory: The Legend of Charlemagne, the Franks, and Jerusalem before the First Crusade* (Oxford, 2011); Anne A. Latowsky, *Emperor of the World: Charlemagne and the Construction of Imperial Authority, 800–1229* (Ithaca, NY, 2013); Matthew Bailey and Ryan D. Giles (eds.), *Charlemagne and his Legend in Early Spanish Literature and Historiography* (Cambridge, 2016); William J. Purkis and Matthew Gabriele (eds.), *The Charlemagne Legend in Medieval Latin Texts* (Woodbridge, 2016); Marianne Ailes and Phillipa Hardman, *The Legend of Charlemagne in Medieval England: The Matter of France in Middle English and Anglo-Norman Literature* (Woodbridge, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Jace Stuckey and Matthew Gabriele (eds.), *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade* (Basingstoke, 2008).

and traces its development from Einhard to the Poeta Saxo. Stuckey's essay examines the legendary tales of Charlemagne's connections with the Holy Land, which presented him as the pioneer of the crusades. Stuckey focuses on legendary accounts from the late eleventh century to the thirteenth century in which this connection can be found: 'The representation of Charlemagne in many of the crusade sources is consistent and in a manner that is indicative of a pattern concerning his memory during this era. The vision of Charlemagne became the "prototype" crusader' (p. 60).

The second part deals with late medieval tradition. First, Carla Del Zotto examines Charlemagne's alleged liberation of Santiago de Compostela in the Iberian and Nordic traditions. In both, the treatment of the topic is similar: 'The historical scenario is inscribed into a widened horizon for the triumph of Christianity, where the call for Crusading is not only towards the Holy land but also to Spain, and linked to the pilgrimage to Santiago and the cult of St. James' (pp. 88–9). Christopher P. Flynn then analyses the detailed compendium of the emperor's deeds in the *Speculum Historiale* of Vincent of Beauvais (d. 1264). Although very influential, Vincent's depiction was contradictory, leaving it to the reader to decide which story was credible. Finally, Jade Bailey focuses on the reception of Charlemagne during the Hundred Years War, in which the English king claimed the French throne and thus positioned himself as the direct successor of Charlemagne. Referring to the Talbot Shrewsbury Book, she illustrates how the presentation of Charlemagne in the fifteenth century served as an example for the English king as well as a warning.

The next section concerns the representation of religion and identity in literary sources. Ana Grinberg shows that the account of Charlemagne's intervention on the Iberian peninsula in the Old French romance *Mainet* does not entirely correspond to the pre-existing ideal of the crusaders. Instead, it was influenced by the idea of *convivencia*: 'Christendom and Islam, in this case, are not opposites in a binary but part of the cross-confessional connectivity and cultural exchange happening around and beyond the Mediterranean' (p. 164). Elizabeth Ponder Melick deals with the presentation of 'Saracens' in Middle English romances about Charlemagne and shows how they were used to justify the crusades: 'The eternal conflict with the Saracens allows

[the crusaders] to feel justified in the violence they committed against Muslims in the East during the major crusades, and even allows them to view themselves as victims rather than perpetrators of violence' (p. 93). Larissa Tracy compares the images of Charlemagne and King Arthur, pointing out how they conveyed the hybrid identity of the nobility, with its French descent and growing English identification (p. 228):

For many poets writing in English in the fourteenth century, the figure who most reflected English interests and sensibilities was Arthur, at the expense of Charlemagne. The iconic status of both . . . diminished at varying times, but Arthur experienced a resurgence in the fourteenth century among English audiences as Charlemagne receded somewhat into the background.

In the epilogue, William J. Diebold examines the exhibition 'Ex Oriente: Isaak und der weiße Elefant [Isaac and the white elephant]', held in Aachen in 2003. This exhibition drew attention to an incident that is usually overshadowed by Charlemagne and does not get much attention. Isaac was a Jewish trader who was sent by Charlemagne as an envoy to Caliph Harun al-Rashid. In 802 Isaac returned to the emperor with a gift from the caliph, and a spectacular one by the standards of the early Middle Ages in Western Europe: an elephant named Abul Abbas (incidentally, no contemporary source mentions the colour of the elephant's skin). Diebold describes the curators' innovative approach. It was Wolfgang Dreßen's idea to shift the focus of the exhibition onto Isaac and the intercultural aspects of his journey instead of foregrounding the two rulers. Beyond that, the exhibition examined Orientalism critically and demonstrated its relevance in the present, focusing on the relationship between the three monotheistic world religions, the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and the Iraq War. The exhibition was also accused of antisemitism and was the subject of other debates. Its depiction of Charlemagne, however, was similar to old traditions that had already been established during the emperor's lifetime.

This outstanding volume is held together by the figure of Charlemagne; however, the editor's caveat, which I have cited above, applies

throughout. The ways in which the emperor's image were used and the contexts surrounding it were diverse and cannot be readily standardized, though this was never the aim of the volume. Moreover, the 'Empire' mentioned in the title is not really touched upon. This is a missed opportunity for a slightly more detailed and comprehensive treatment of the subject matter. The epilogue concerning Charlemagne's modern reception deviates a little from the rest of the volume, but also reminds us of the importance of discussing present-day images of Charlemagne. Edited volumes are often criticized for their lack of coherence, though one should not have the same expectations as when reading a monograph. In this case, however, the articles are well connected thematically and offer a broad, yet detailed, variety of images of Charlemagne. The volume also provides profound analyses of the role these images played in the self-perception of the societies in which they were established, and thus provides important approaches for future research.

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