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# REVIEWS

Matthias Becher. *Charlemagne*. Trans. David S. Bachrach. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003. 154p.

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Translated now from the 1999 original, *Karl der Grosse*, published in München, Matthias Becher, professor of medieval history at the University of Bonn, presents his readers with a solid overview of the reign of Charlemagne (768-814). He delves into the situations that allowed Charlemagne's ancestors, who had the title of Mayor of the Palace, to assume power over the Frankish empire from the Merovingian line. Becher then describes the events that unfolded to make Charlemagne the undisputed ruler of Western Europe and the only real threat to Byzantium in the east and the Muslim empire to the southwest.

While *Charlemagne* is a very readable text, its only serious flaw is that it is littered with typographical and other orthographic errors. Despite the editorial miscues, the text serves as a solid introduction to one of the most important historical figures for any European country. Becher ably describes the life of Charlemagne, his family (his immediate family such as his brother and his sons as well as his wives and concubines) and his political acumen. Another emphasis of Becher's work is to discuss Charlemagne's relationship with the Church and how this relationship is often misunderstood through the legend that has grown around the figure of "Karl der Grosse."

Central to the Carolingian Renaissance was Charlemagne's ability to govern an area that Becher successfully argues had reached its limits of expansion. Charlemagne undertook efforts to create centers of learning, reform weights and measurements, and create new courts with juries based on revised and codified Frankish law. These accomplishments are essential for a ruler trying to establish himself not only as "*patri-cius Romanorum*," but as "*pacificus imperator, Romanum gubernans imperium*."

His importance, according to Becher, extends far beyond his dynastic conquests of the various Germanic tribes. In taming the fragmented Saxons (with their various leaders and numerous peoples), as well as the Lombards, Eastphalians, Westphalians, Bavarians, and Avars, Charlemagne not only conquered lands and peoples, but spread Christianity to these areas. There was more to Charlemagne's conquest of these peoples than the legend would indicate. According to Becher, Christianity, with its hierarchical structures, provided Charlemagne with the opportunity to

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assign Bishoprics to the newly conquered areas. These Bishoprics in turn had far-reaching impact on patterns of settlement and provided central locations in which impressive stone structures, such as churches and cathedrals, showed Charlemagne's power and resolve.

Becher's most intriguing points of contention are with Charlemagne's official biographer Einhard, who wrote his *Vita Karoli Magni* about ten years after the great ruler's death. Becher takes issue with Einhard on a great many issues, but gives him fair representation and treatment allowing the reader to be informed of what was said, how it was said, and what that meant to an author in Einhard's time. But Becher establishes that Einhard exaggerated and was inclined to make Charlemagne, his close friend, seem more magnificent than he probably was.

The book ends as it begins, with succession issues to be resolved among Charlemagne's heirs. The similarities to the situation of Charlemagne's own succession in relation to his older brother Carloman are shown as a continual dynastic struggle that would continue to shape the face of Europe for centuries to come. There are a few tables or charts (2) that show the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties up to the year 845, but charts depicting the succession of Charles the Great are conspicuously missing.

*Charlemagne* at 154 pages of text, 170 if all indices are included, is easily accessible and is written well enough to hold the reader's interest. Becher is careful not to get bogged down in minutiae and is able to show Charlemagne as a human ruler with faults, but also with an ability to rise above them. The organizational style of the book also lends itself well to accessibility of information, making this text an excellent reference tool. ✱