

Fried, Johannes. *Charlemagne*. Trans. by Peter Lewis. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. pp. xi, 673. ISBN: 9780674737396 (hardback).

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How does one write a book, let alone a biography, about a famous historical figure of whom we barely know anything beyond some bare facts? The solution chosen by Johannes Fried in his nearly 700-page-long study of Charlemagne and his world is to offer his readers the written equivalent of an impressionistic painting. After all, even if we cannot grasp Charlemagne's character and do not have enough information to understand even the basics of his psychology, we do know many things about the world in which he lived and operated, as well as anecdotes written down about him after his death. As every student of this period knows, the primary sources that tell us about Charlemagne and his world are notoriously difficult to interpret, and generally have no more to offer than some tantalising peeks through a keyhole at a world largely lost to us (viii). By virtue of his impressive knowledge of such sources (Latin and vernacular texts, images in manuscripts, but also inscriptions, objects and buildings) and the sometimes rather free use of his imagination, Fried gives his reader many such peeks through as many keyholes, and is thereby able to build up a fragmented but certainly lively image of Charlemagne. We meet the future emperor as an impressionable child, as a tenacious war leader and power-player, as a clever strategist, as a religious man, as an ally to the Roman pontiff, but also as a person who enjoyed intellectual debate, heroic poetry at the open fire place, good food--and of course swimming. The book is intended for a wide audience (x), and especially for those who have the time and patience to follow the author through his often rather longwinded narratives, which take meandering paths from anecdote to story to description in ways that are not always easy to follow. This is a way of writing we are, perhaps, not used to anymore: Fried does not try to prove things by argumentation, he wants to paint his reader as vivid an image as he can muster. In this he has most certainly succeeded.

*Charlemagne* is structured more or less chronologically in a prologue and eight chapters that take the reader from his childhood (ch. 1) to his last years as *imperator augustus* (ch. 8). It concludes with an epilogue about Charlemagne's *Nachleben* up until the present day. Chapters focused on episodes of Charlemagne's life are interchanged with more general ones offering wider context, for instance about the workings of power (ch. 4) or about the royal court (ch. 6). Some seventy images and two maps illustrate the book, the index is concise but useful. There is a selected bibliography at the end, which unfortunately for Anglophone readers contains mostly German literature and, unfortunately for scholars, omits a surprising amount of recent non-German work about Charlemagne. References to primary sources and more literature are hidden in the (sometimes very long) endnotes, in which the author shows his familiarity with (digitised) manuscripts, but also with Wikipedia. Peter Lewis has provided a pleasant translation of the original *Karl der Grosse: Gewalt und Glaube, eine Biografie* with only few glitches (p. 66 has "Normans" for "Northmen"; p. 251 has Theodulf of Orléans writing about the "ritual sacrifice of animals" instead of the ritual of Mass), which recognisably follows the rhythm of Fried's written German. All in all, the book offers its envisaged audience a wealth of insights and stories, through which Charlemagne and the world he knew come to life, and this will no doubt inspire curiosity and interest in non-specialist readers.

However, to a specialist of the period there are some issues with Fried's narrative, and with the interpretation of the early medieval texts that form the basis of what we know about Charlemagne. The first problem concerns the amount of agency assigned to Charlemagne in this book, who according to the author was almost single-handedly responsible for re-organising the exploitation of royal land (172), the revival of learning (224), and even the introduction of "modern" thinking in Europe (281). In these instances, Fried paints a Charlemagne disconnected from the time and place in which he lived--to mention just one example, only Fried's Charlemagne understood how important it was "to establish the first step in the rationalization of European intellectual culture" (284). This Charlemagne "the visionary" does, moreover, not seem to be the same person as the emperor we encounter in the sixth chapter of the book, that emphasises his reliance on a group of highly educated scholars and other intellectuals in more or less every decision he took.

Secondly, Fried occasionally overstretches his interpretation of primary sources, for instance when he makes a case for the *Annales Regni Francorum* as a receptacle for some of Charlemagne's earliest memories (18). Without any further evidence, for instance, Fried interprets the brief entry into the *Annales* of the birth and death of Pepin, Charlemagne's brother who lived just three years, as a reflection of Charlemagne's personal emotions: "This entry does not reflect the grief of some unknown annalist, but rather the king's commemoration of the dead" (19). In these cases, the step between careful hypothesis (the idea that Charlemagne may have had influence on the contents of the *Annales Regni Francorum*) and stated fact ("The *Annales Regni Francorum* reflect Charlemagne's youth") is taken too easily, and conclusions drawn in these instances are therefore somewhat rash. Another example is how Fried reads one admonishment against superstitious practices in the *Admonitio Generalis* of 789 as the king's intention to fully wipe out paganism. Here, too, the author allows himself to jump to conclusions not based on careful analysis of the texts.

In third place is Fried's liberal use of his rich imagination, and the way in which he presents such ideas as entirely self-evident. Even though he admits that it is impossible to know what made Charlemagne tick, act, and feel (515), Fried freely ascribes "suppressed memories of his childhood" to him (41), opens the possibility that Charlemagne was uncomfortable with the "cultural backwardness" of his kingdom as compared to the culture of Byzantium ("We cannot prove it, but it seems plausible" [80]), and states without reserve that just being a warring king was not enough for him, since he "wanted something more, and something different...far beyond mere martial concerns" (224). Of course, every biography contains a certain amount of well-informed imagination, but it seems that in the instances just mentioned, Fried romanticises the emperor and pushes his descriptions beyond anything we can reasonably assume.

Even though these issues make the book problematic at times, Fried at the same time has a few important messages to his readers that do much to dispel some tenacious myths about Charlemagne and his day. He most emphatically tries to do away with the idea that the king and emperor was "the father of Europe" in any meaningful way: the territory was not considered to be more than the sum of countless individual regions, so any concept of Europe that implied widely shared characteristics was meaningless at the time, as were fixed borders (ch. 2). What is more, early medieval Europe never became politically, religiously or culturally uniform in any sense, but was and remained colourful and diverse, featuring many languages, traditions, available knowledge and histories. Additionally, Fried makes it eminently clear that Europe was in many ways a backwater in the early middle ages, and that even under Charlemagne the empire never became more than a peripheral realm to the culturally much advanced Byzantine Empire and the Islamic caliphate (52). The non-specialist reader will therefore not only get as detailed an image of Charlemagne as they may ever hope to get, but will also learn to think about early medieval Europe in ways that go against the grain of what generations have

been taught in school. No matter the drawbacks of this impressive book, this is something for which Fried must be commended.

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