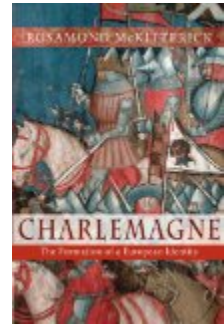


Rosamond McKitterick. *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xviii + 460 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88672-7; \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-71645-1.

Reviewed by Kevin Teo Kia-Choong (Department of English, University of Calgary)

Published on H-German (April, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher



Rex Universalis: Exploring the Germania-Francia-Latin Connection Through Charlemagne

Charlemagne, who ruled as king of the Franks from 768 to 814, was arguably Europe's greatest ruler before Napoleon Bonaparte, and the tendency to ascribe this title to him is a product of associations he conjures. As Rosamond McKitterick herself acknowledges, he was a great warrior who expanded his realm from a region smaller than France to include what is known now as western Europe; a champion of Christianity, education, and learning; and a vital ideological-political link between the Germanic and Roman political worlds as well. This host of associations accounts for many of the attempts by France and Germany to reclaim him as a symbol of national identity and unity in the nineteenth century and subsequently as a symbol of communalism within the European Union in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Owing to all the various permutations in which Charlemagne has been used symbolically and ideologically, a study of Charlemagne's reign in its contributions to the formation of Frankish political identity during the ninth century, as based on contemporary sources, is crucial to challenging the accumulated arguments and theses we have inherited critically. McKitterick's magisterial study of this historical figure makes an important contribution to our understanding of these processes of formation in Frankish identity. In it, she analyzes the various narrative representations of Charlemagne after his death and also the material and literary-diplomatic evidence that sheds light on the Carolingian dynasty, Charlemagne's kingdom and court, the network of communications within the Frankish kingdom, and Charle-

magne's roles in promoting literacy and the Christian religion.

Posthumous reconstructions of Charlemagne's reign by contemporary ninth-century sources, specifically Einhard's *Vita Karoli*, the works of the Poeta Saxo, and the revised version of the *Annales Regni Francorum*, form the focus of her first chapter-long study of Charlemagne's reign. This chapter highlights the overall triumphant narrative of Frankish expansion and Carolingian success constructed by an imperial-affiliated group of authors in this period, and the propagandistic purposes to which historical writing was put within this milieu. McKitterick takes care especially to marshal the yield of the codicological and paleographical approaches by meticulously listing the various manuscript recensions of the *Annales Regni Francorum* and also by studying the stylistic uniformities and changes in vocabulary from entry to entry in the annals, thus pointing to the composite authorship of these annals and the ways in which the annalists cleverly maintain a continuing sequence of Frankish and Carolingian success in rule. One such example is her highlighting of the copy of the annals in Vienna ÖNB cod. 473 and its treatment of Charlemagne's last fifteen years of reign, which were replete with events such as the king's reception of Pope Leo in Paderborn, the location of Saxony's principal palace; the succession of reports from legates who came to the palace from realms as diverse as Mozarabic Spain, Persia, Huns, Venice, Dalmatia, Anglo-Saxon England, and Greece. This manuscript offers a narrative

emphasis on the stability of his rule and the acknowledgement of his power by those on the outer rims of the empire.

Developing the focus that McKitterick devoted to the *Annales Regni Francorum* in the first chapter, the second chapter argues for the complex of motives for Carolingian expansion and its settling of territorial boundaries during Charlemagne's reign, asserting that aggression and defense cannot be used as the sole justifications. On the one hand, she draws attention to the peoples (*gentes*) on the margins of the empire, who were the subjects of written reports made by the legates, but on the other, she draws attention to insurgencies within the empire itself to highlight this tendency as another vital reason for the fervor displayed by Charlemagne in settling territorial boundaries. The *notitia italica*, found in three of the big Italian capitulary collections of the tenth- and eleventh-century period and dated to the decades of the eighth century prior to Charlemagne's rule, are important alternative sources that she uses to buffer this claim, since they point to the problems created by Charlemagne's soldiers camping outside Pavia, for example, and various legal disputes that ensued between his troops and people concerned about the security of their property in wartime.

Chapter 3 examines the network of regional centers of power within the Carolingian period headed by Charlemagne. The traditional critical framework has perceived these centers of power as enhanced by the king's presence in his court, often assumed to be a static and unchanging institution that moved around with him, especially following the current literature, which see this imperial itinerary as "settled at Aachen" (p. 79). Using literary evidence via the coterie poetry of contemporary poets like Alcuin, Modoin, Theodulf of Orleans, St. Angilbert, and Hincmar of Rheims (whose *De Ordine Palatii* is cast in the genre of a mirror for princes) as well as administrative and legal documents that reveal the king's policymaking decisions, such as extant royal diplomas and charters, McKitterick unsettles this traditional conception of Charlemagne's court. In lieu of this consensus, she offers the argument that an itinerant king is not actually consonant with an itinerant court, and that such literary and legal-diplomatic representations of Charlemagne's court might spring from idealized descriptions of the Carolingian palace. A notable segment of this argument against the common assumption of Charlemagne's initial itinerancy having stabilized at Aachen draws on material evidence in the form of the archaeology and architectural history of the palaces.

The discovery not only of palace superstructures at Nijmegen and Ingelheim, which were singled out by Einhard's *Vita Karoli*, but also of other Rhine/Main land residences where Charlemagne sojourned in winter, including Worms and Paderborn, prove important counterpoints to the prevalent claim for Charlemagne's concentration on Aachen in his topography of power.

As an extension of the former chapter, chapter 4 treats the means by which Charlemagne governed his kingdom, through his royal officials and his ability to communicate with them. To elucidate this network of communications between Charlemagne and his officials, especially his *missi dominici*, McKitterick turns to the various programmatic capitularies, especially those produced between 769 and 797, legal-administrative documents comprised of *capitula*, short clauses and sections on a variety of topics indebted to Roman and canon law and the Pauline letters of the Bible. The regional capitularies merit this attention since they shed light on the consolidation of Carolingian rule within newly conquered territories such as Italy, Bavaria, Aquitaine, and Saxony, including the means by which officials adapted to the particular circumstances of administering an outlying part of the empire, resonant of a "colonial mentality" (p. 247). The example of Saxony in particular reveals this colonial mindset among Charlemagne's officials in dealing with the outlying areas of the Carolingian empire, where the act of integrating Frankish rule within Saxony involved not only a greater extent of military campaigning than in other more Christianized areas like Italy, but also required missionary work to Christianize the Saxon religious landscape.

The study of Charlemagne's crucial role in imposing correct thinking and correct language-orthodoxy in religious matters marks the focus of chapter 5, where McKitterick argues that the acquiring of knowledge and the exercise of power were closely intertwined. This last chapter builds a bridge from cultural and religious affairs to prior chapters' focuses on political-diplomatic relations. Arguably, the fact that correct practice and beliefs were promoted under Charlemagne's ecclesiastical reforms highlights the large degree to which he viewed the Christian faith as ideologically invested in the expansion of Carolingian interests abroad. Letters circulated between Charlemagne and his Frankish bishops, as did records from Frankish councils and assemblies that discussed doctrinal beliefs, as well as the *Opus Karoli regis*, composed between 790 and 793 by Theodulf of Orleans, which defined the Latins' emphasis on the primacy of writing and texts over images as a means of teaching

about the Christian faith, and contradistinguished that position with the Greeks' veneration of images. Similarly, McKitterick also draws attention to the *Admonitio generalis* (789) and the circular letter *De Litteris Colendis* (784), both of which emphasized the need for clergy to learn correct Latin. The promotion of correct belief and learning in Frankish circles under Charlemagne's reign thus points to an emphasis on defining and expanding the boundaries of the Frankish Christian realm against encroaching territories and other (Christian and non-Christian) peoples.

Considering this book in light of recent studies in the field of "ethnogenesis," or the germination of the various European identities, we can contrast McKitterick's study with Patrick Geary's *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (2003), which advances a thesis that might prove unsettling for readers who agree with McKitterick's arguments. Geary's book dismantles the attribution theory used in various nationalist myths, with modern-day Europeans attributing their historical origins to the Celts, Franks, Saxons, Huns, Serbs or some combination of the tribes that settled or migrated to the European continent centuries ago. Geary asserts that most of the peoples Europeans honor as shar-

ing their unique sense of nationhood hardly had homogeneous identities. Even the Huns (or Avars), a group that McKitterick's study highlights as a source of Charlemagne's diplomatic strategies, were united only during the ten-year period of Attila's reign, as Geary notes. Considering the instability of the attribution theory, the study of Charlemagne as a ruler of the Franks, which is another of the racial categories circulating in proto-Franco-Germanic myths of nationalism, will probably require greater exactness as well as the application of qualifications, if it is to be used. Noting this problem is not to discredit McKitterick's magisterial volume in its depth and sheer copiousness of details, but reading her book alongside Geary's would further refine our understanding of the assumptions operating behind her volume about Frankish unity and identities. As a study of a seminal historical figure whom French studies scholars and Germanists alike have claimed as an icon for their regional studies, and whom historians as well commonly agree to have been one of the greatest monarchs in Europe, McKitterick's book nevertheless makes an important addition to our understanding of the diplomatic and non-diplomatic (linguistic-cultural, religious, social-ethnic) contributions Charlemagne made to medieval European society.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Kevin Teo Kia-Choong. Review of McKitterick, Rosamond, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24138>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.