



Charlemagne: Father of a Continent

By Alessandro Barbero

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The most important study of Charlemagne in a generation, this biography by distinguished medievalist Alessandro Barbero illuminates both the man and the world in which he lived. Charles the Great—Charlemagne—reigned from a.d. 768 to a.d. 814. At the time of his death, his empire stretched across Europe to include Bavaria, Saxony, parts of Spain, and Italy. With a remarkable grasp of detail and a sweeping knowledge of Carolingian institutions and economy, Barbero not only brings Charlemagne to life with accounts of his physical appearance, tastes and habits, family life, and ideas and actions but also conveys what it meant to be king of the Franks and, later, emperor. He recounts how Charlemagne ruled his empire, kept justice, and waged wars. He vividly describes the nature of everyday life at that time, how the economy functioned, and how Christians perceived their religion. Barbero's absorbing analysis of how concepts of slavery and freedom were subtly altered as feudal relations began to grow underscores the dramatic changes that the emperor's wars brought to the political landscape. Engaging and informed by deep scholarship, this latest account provides a new and richer context for considering one of history's most fascinating personalities.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Charles the Great, crowned emperor by the pope on Christmas Day A.D. 800, has at least three claims to be the progenitor of Europe. First, as this excellent translation of Barbero's text indicates, he was the grand orchestrator of a supranational, continental Europe that pre-empted the rise of nationalist allegiances and shaped the cultural underpinnings of today's EU. Second, he attempted to weld together a specifically Christian unity, building on the Franks' long tradition of Catholicism and their close strategic alliance with the papacy. And third, as Italian medievalist Barbero makes quite clear, Charlemagne paved the way for brutal forms of Western colonial aggression conducted in the name of religion. In the course of a war of "unparalleled ruthlessness," 4,500 Saxon rebels were decapitated in a single day. The author of this rich, scholarly but accessible study provides an intimate portrait of the man—right down to his shirt and underpants—and a sensitive analysis of his government and times. Particularly intriguing is Charles's instrumental role in the formation of Catholic doctrine. The apparent paradoxes of Charlemagne's character—his deep intellectual curiosity; his drive to reform Christian practice; and a degree of brutality criticized even by some of his closest supporters—are at root explained by a conviction in his divinely ordained mission that was both culturally productive and deeply destructive. 1 map.

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Review

"Barbero's lively and entertaining study provides a superb overview of the latest scholarship on the Carolingian age and constructs a compelling argument for Charlemagne's pivotal role as the father of Europe. We gain a sense of the look and feel of peasant villages, the dynamic interplay of monastic economies and long-distance trade, and the manipulation of justice by local notables. This is *histoire totale* at its best." - Sharon Farmer, author of *Surviving Poverty in Medieval Paris*; "This up-to-date account focuses on the man and his times while clearly and judiciously dealing with key historiographical issues. Barbero explores and explodes the myths that have grown up around the emperor." - Barbara H. Rosenwein, Loyola University"

From the Inside Flap

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