

# Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

---

## The Carolingian World

**Review Number:** 1122

**Publish date:** Thursday, 1 September, 2011

**Author:** Marios Costambeys

Matthew Innes

Simon MacLean

**ISBN:** 9780521564946

**Date of Publication:** 2011

**Price:** £21.99

**Pages:** 528pp.

**Publisher:** Cambridge University Press

**Place of Publication:** Cambridge

**Reviewer:** Shami Ghosh

The Carolingian period has long been seen as one of endings (of the Roman world; of the world of an integrated Mediterranean economy and culture) and even more, of beginnings (of the middle ages proper; of feudalism; of the nations that now make up western Europe; of Europe itself). The post-Roman notion of a European 'Roman' empire that was brought to an abrupt end by Napoleon in the first decade of the nineteenth century traced its lineage – not entirely unreasonably – to the crowning of Charlemagne as emperor in Rome in 800. Indeed, the columnist on European affairs for the *Economist* writes under the name of 'Charlemagne'. This is a period with many resonances, then, but perhaps precisely for that reason it has been a little difficult to assess it for what it was rather than for what it meant to later generations (indeed, earlier schools of medieval historians in the twentieth century were not immune to the tendency to interpret the Carolingian world from the perspective of what preceded or followed it). The past three decades have seen a huge amount of scholarship produced, not least in the English language, on the Carolingians; much of this has been refreshingly free from assumptions regarding the meaning of this period in the long sweep of history, and has illuminated in diverse ways the dynamism of this fascinating era. The most recent surveys of the period in English, however, by Rosamond McKitterick and Pierre Riché (1), are now almost thirty years old, and the purpose of the book under review is to provide a new synthesis taking into account the insights of the most recent scholarship. Costambeys, Innes and Maclean are to be commended for having fulfilled their task admirably, surveying and synthesising a vast body of source material and scholarship and presenting it with elegance and clarity.

The Carolingian world, for these authors, is primarily that of the core regions under Carolingian rule, corresponding to modern France (mainly its northern regions) and the Low Countries, western and southern

Germany and Switzerland, and northern and central Italy. These were the Carolingian heartlands ruled most directly by the members of the dynasty, and the regions where the changes they instituted or facilitated arguably took root most firmly. The Carolingian world, then, is defined primarily by its link to the Carolingian family; indeed, this book (unlike, for example, McKitterick's survey) stops in the year 888, when for the first time we find a king not of the Carolingian dynasty ruling in its heartland. After an initial chapter setting out the scope of their book and discussing the nature of the often quite complex and heavily biased source base – a discussion that is taken up again repeatedly at appropriate places – the authors have chosen not to structure their book following a strict chronology of political events, instead providing three chapters (two, four, and eight) with political narrative (which is enlivened by discussions of the nature and effectiveness of Carolingian government and the dynamics of aristocratic patronage); these are separated by chapters on belief and culture (chapter three); villages and structures of rural society (chapter five); elite society (chapter six); and the economy (chapter seven). The volume is rounded off by a brief epilogue considering the impact of the Carolingians for later periods.

While some might find this way of structuring the text less helpful than a chronological section covering the politics of the whole period followed by thematic chapters each also covering the whole period, I found the organisation of the material in itself quite useful in connecting up various themes to the political narrative of kings, aristocrats, plots, and revolts. Thus we begin with the creation of the Carolingian world in the eighth century, learning of the ways in which the family descending from Charles Martel replaced the ruling Merovingian dynasty. Since their efforts to justify this usurpation were based to a very large extent on appealing to religious and moral arguments in their favour, and were strengthened by the support of the papacy, a discussion of belief and culture in the following chapter is a logical progression, as we find here an overview of the kind of mentality that nurtured and was in turn nourished by Carolingian rule. This is a rather difficult subject, and the authors do a good job of balancing on the one hand a purely political perspective, that would view the various religious justifications for rulers' actions that we find in the sources simply as cynical manipulation of belief, and on the other hand the evidence for genuine piety and a desire to define and uphold a correct form of Christianity.

One of the key aspects of Carolingian government was in fact a self-aware sense of reform, primarily of the Church and its institutions, but leading therefrom into the realms of education, the economy, and secular administration. Certainly, the Church was used as a political tool, but the authors of this book stress correctly that this does not by any means indicate a lack of genuine belief: the modern separation of secular and religious goals and justifications was quite alien to this age. Moving on from defining belief and culture in the third chapter, the theme of reform is taken up next in chapter four, in which we return to the political narrative, but are also introduced to Carolingian government at work: the world of *missi* and counts, of capitularies and itinerant rulers, all harnessed to improve the functioning of the Church, to ensure that local lawgiving was just, and above all, perhaps, to make manifest the presence of the Christian king through his missives and messengers who laboured to ensure a correct form of Christianity was practised – and equally to maintain the stability of the ruling sovereign's grip on power. The first half of the ninth century was a period of structural consolidation: the last decade and a half of Charlemagne's rule, when expansion ceased, and when his relatively stable and very long reign was succeeded by the initially secure and later turbulent era of his son, Louis the Pious. The politics of this, as of the previous period when Charlemagne himself rose to power, were dominated above all by jockeying for power within the family: one of the insights of this volume is to show how various events, from Pippin's coronation to Louis's penance, and perhaps even Charlemagne's assumption of the imperial title, might have been motivated at least as much by a desire to secure a position vis-à-vis other members of the ruling family as by a wish to impress other non-related notables within and without the Carolingian domains. The two were, of course, linked: aristocratic families operated within a system of patronage in which the presence of powerful members of the dynasty, who could potentially threaten the incumbent on the throne, allowed for the build-up of alternative power bases. The success of the Carolingians was

based on a system of integrating a wide range of aristocratic families within the network of power and patronage emanating from the royal (and later imperial) court. It was precisely their success that ultimately provided a source of instability to Louis the Pious, because, for the first time in over half a century, in his surviving sons there were multiple potential, legitimate contenders for power, all backed by their own networks of nobles in the regions where they represented royal and dynastic patronage. Yet, as the authors show, the success of the system was such that there were no attempts at revolt (as yet) in which a non-Carolingian tried to seize the throne: the power-struggles from the 830s onwards were played out between various legitimate members of the ruling family, and were caused not least by the fact that there were so many of them.

The other factor behind strife was simply that – as Timothy Reuter elegantly argued over two decades ago – the Carolingian political system had been based on expansion, leading to plunder of and tribute from the conquered; this loot was used to reward the nobles fighting on behalf of the ruler.<sup>(2)</sup> Once the empire had reached a certain size, further expansion became, if not impossible, certainly difficult; keeping everyone happy now depended increasingly on spreading the wealth that was available within the empire. One aspect of this world that I feel could have been addressed somewhat more closely is the effect of this pressure from above on the dynamic of economic change at lower levels. The authors provide insightful discussions of rural production, manorial organisation, and regional and long-distance exchange, but perhaps slightly more space might have been given to the relative effects of, on the one hand, peasant production and the changing rural economies conditioned by demographic change, and on the other hand, aristocratic demand (and promotion of markets and trade as a means of raising cash), as a motors of growth.

This period saw the spread of what is known as the bipartite manor, the development of fairly sophisticated methods of keeping tabs on production and distribution of agrarian produce, and, by the end of the ninth century, an increasingly market-oriented rural economy. There was certainly no coherent ‘economic policy’ in a modern (or even late-medieval) sense, and for the most part estate managers seem to have been focused on self-sufficiency, with markets used to supplement the income (in cash or kind) from estates rather than as a means of creating wealth. Yet at the lowest levels of society, by the end of the ninth century, market exchange seems ubiquitous in the Carolingian heartlands, and as the authors show, some level of specialisation in the agrarian and craft production sectors can also be found. Crucially, although some historians are seduced by the glamour of hoards of glittering gold accumulated not least through long-distance trade in high-value goods – including glass, silk, spices, and perhaps most controversially, slaves – Costambeys, Innes, and MacLean soberly and correctly point out that this was simply the icing on the cake: surpluses were certainly exported, and high-value imports are definitely to be found, but the economy functioned on a pattern of local trade and local and regional demand that fuelled growth, without any sort of orientation towards long-distance trade.<sup>(3)</sup> I would have welcomed some more engagement with the issues relating to demographic growth (controversial for this period) and rising demand not just from above, but even from within the peasant sector, as well as more on the social status of agrarian cultivators, craftsmen (and women), and petty traders (the few paragraphs on freedom and unfreedom do not quite do justice to this complicated topic); but the discussion of economic issues is nevertheless well-balanced and sound (and, my caveats notwithstanding, more thorough and nuanced than that of their predecessors).

Ultimately, the Carolingian world faded away because of a surfeit of Carolingians – and also, paradoxically, because of a lack of them. At any rate, this is the quite convincing picture presented in this book. The years following the revolt of Louis the Pious’s sons were poisoned by the possibility of alternative bases of power among multiple legitimate claimants to imperial title; while the discourse was couched in terms of fraternal love and cooperation, for an aristocrat of the time it would have been quite clear that, unlike in the time of Charlemagne himself, no one ruler could necessarily be seen as most powerful. Of course, the dynamic of internecine strife had been a factor all through the Carolingian period and even before; Charlemagne, however, was fortunate (as was Louis) in that his

other sons died early, and his brother had been able to be persuaded – without, it seems, very much violence – to lead a religious life. From the 830s onwards, there were always many contenders for imperial title, leading to a splitting up of patronage networks in the various kingdoms as the legitimate kings jockeyed for relative superiority over their brothers, nephews and uncles. Yet the first effort by a non-Carolingian to claim the throne for himself is found only at the end of the ninth century, after a series of deaths that left the empire, rather suddenly, with a lack of legitimate, mature Carolingians who could claim the throne, leaving the way open for members of other noble families to take their place. Nevertheless, all the shifts in the power networks continued for some time to take place within the frameworks cultivated with care by the Carolingian family over the past century and a half; the legacy of the Carolingian world to the tenth century was not least a notion that it would be helpful, and perhaps even essential, for those wishing to rule a kingdom to be able to convince their peers of some link with Charlemagne.

There is much to praise in this book. Perhaps one of its the most valuable qualities – given the intended audience and its appearance in the ‘Cambridge Medieval Textbooks’ series – is its clarity. Little is taken for granted; while it is perhaps a depressing commentary on the state of knowledge of modern undergraduates that the authors feel it necessary to explain what syncretism means, it will certainly be helpful to students to find a number of terms clearly and briefly glossed, and the exposition as a whole is not just well-structured but also expressed in a manner that ought to be easily accessible to readers of all stripes – without, however, simplifying what are often quite complex arguments about confusing processes and events. Thus the Carolingian world is presented on its own terms as complicated, without a clear narrative of rise and fall or a *telos* in sight, and often with multiple causal factors to be discerned behind events – but this is done without the obfuscation that sometimes creeps into specialised scholarship. The differences between modern and early medieval social and mental structures are clearly outlined, and aspects of belief and culture that are very alien to modern minds are explained and sympathetically presented; there is no attempt to make the Carolingians just like us, but they are not needlessly exoticised either. To aid the reader unfamiliar with the geography of the period, there are nineteen maps; an admirable effort has been made to try and provide, without raising costs prohibitively, some insight into the materiality of the period through seventeen illustrations; and there are useful genealogical tables to help diminish readers’ inevitable confusion in the welter of royal Pippins, Carlomans, and Louis’s that litter the narrative. Generous footnotes refer to an extensive bibliography that brings to monoglot readers the results of the very industrious continental scholarship of the past generation, and also provide numerous cross-references to relevant discussion throughout the book. The process of reading the arguments put forth is in all chapters enlivened by many vivid narrative examples drawn from across the Carolingian empire – and not just the usual stories of Charlemagne’s coronation or Louis’s penance.

Obviously, a synthesis like this cannot cover everything, and apart from the issues regarding economic change and social status raised above, I would personally have liked a somewhat more nuanced discussion of literacy, and particularly the use of the vernacular; I was also surprised that women play such a minimal role in this book. Other scholars will doubtless find that aspects of their own specialisms have been neglected. But these are minor cavils, and should not detract in any way from the value of this volume. It is dedicated to Rosamond McKitterick and Jinty Nelson, the two historians who have, more than anyone else in English-speaking academia, illuminated the Carolingian world for us; and, synthesising so effectively as it does much of their work (and those of their students, among whom the three authors are to be counted), it is a fitting tribute to these giants and heartily to be recommended as a one-volume introduction for students and a useful work of reference for seasoned scholars.

## Notes

1. Rosamond McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians, 751–987* (London: Longmans, 1983);

- Pierre Riché, *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), originally published in French in 1983.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Timothy Reuter, 'Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire' (1985); 'The End of Carolingian Military Expansion' (1990); both now reprinted in his *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities*, ed. Janet L. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 321–50; 251–67.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For somewhat different emphases, see Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce AD 300–900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).[Back to \(3\)](#)
- 

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1122>

**Links:**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7762>