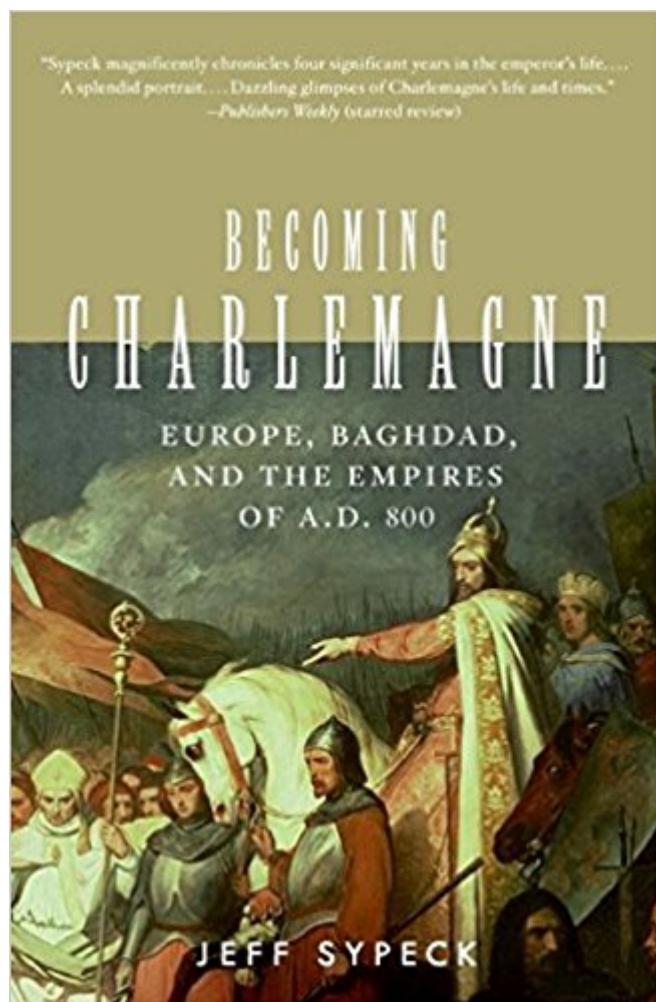


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Becoming Charlemagne: Europe, Baghdad, And The Empires Of A.D. 800



Synopsis

On Christmas morning in the year 800, Pope Leo III placed the crown of imperial Rome on the brow of a Germanic king named Karlâ "a gesture that enabled the man later hailed as Charlemagne to claim his empire and forever shape the destiny of Europe. Becoming Charlemagne tells the story of the international power struggle that led to this world-changing event, illuminating an era that has long been overshadowed by myth. For 1,200 years, the deeds of Charlemagne inspired kings and crusaders, the conquests of NapolÃ©on and Hitler, and the optimistic architects of the European Union. In this engaging narrative, Jeff Sypeck crafts a vivid portrait of the ruler who became a legend, while evoking a long-ago world of kings, caliphs, merchants, and monks. Transporting readers far beyond Europe to the glittering palaces of Constantinople and the streets of medieval Baghdad, Becoming Charlemagne brings alive an age of empire building that continues to resonate to this day.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Sypeck affectionately peers behind the legends surrounding Charlemagne and magnificently chronicles four significant years in the emperor's life. From 796 to 800, Charlemagne, the king of the Franks, consolidated his kingdom through military exploits, religious diplomacy and political treaties. His love for order, his respect for education and books, his reverence for his religion and his dealings with Muslims established his reputation as a king to be feared and respected. In 800, Charlemagne's life and the destiny of Europe changed forever when Pope Leo III anointed the Frankish king as the emperor of Rome. Although the new emperor attempted to bridge

the gap between Eastern and Western Christianity by marrying Irene, the empress of Constantinople, her subjects so feared the alliance that they kidnapped and exiled Irene, preventing Charlemagne from achieving this aim. Sypek, who teaches medieval literature at the University of Maryland, paints a splendid portrait of the emperor's various supporters, including Isaac, his Jewish envoy to Baghdad; Harun al-Rashid, the legendary caliph of Baghdad who, though the two never met, believed that he and Charlemagne would be great military and political companions; and the elephant, Abul Abaz, a gift from Harun. Sypek's history offers dazzling glimpses of Charlemagne's life and times and of his journey to become the legendary emperor. 11 b&w illus., 1 map. (Dec.)

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Shortening the distance to medieval history and imaginatively lifting its obscuring mists, Sypek creates a vibrant Charlemagne narrative. Culminating in the Frankish king's elevation in 800 to emperor of a restored Roman Empire (a coronation retrospectively symbolic of aspirations of European unity), Sypek's drama substantively strives to evoke the king's personality and the lives of his subjects in the few years on either side of Charlemagne's crowning glory. Amid tactile descriptions of everyday toils such as travel or farmwork, Sypek evokes, especially in quotes from writings by Charlemagne's friend Alcuin, the prevalent cultural outlooks suffused in religious, dynastic, and political trends. The latter are covered more conventionally in Derek Wilson's fine Charlemagne (2006), whereas Sypek expands factual nuggets into the immediate experience of events, such as depicting Alcuin's monastic routines amid his advice to Charlemagne, or producing an entertaining vignette about an ambassador's delivery of an elephant given by the caliph of the Abbasid Empire. An inspired, instantly readable work of popular history. Gilbert Taylor

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I recently discovered that Charlemagne is one of my great-grandfathers so this made me very curious about his life. I do understand that authors have a difficult time researching the lives of our ancestors in trying to make a cohesive story out of various obscure documents, some of which are written and conveyed at the discretion of the authors, not necessarily factual. Jeff Sypek has done a great job. Many many books reveal only the battles, since battles are fairly easy to research, but I was seeking more warm and fuzzy information. Even though the title page of this book lists it as fiction, my library has given it a place in the non-fiction section of which I'm pleased. I still seek more

information about daily lives, especially of the women of whom very little information exists -- unless, of course, they were blatantly evil or nasty. I truly enjoyed this book. It gave me a fair picture of Charlemagne, what made him Charlemagne, and what happened to his dynasty. I've learned more about grandpa Louis the Pious and grandpa Charles the Bald. And so it continues.

The scene is set in the opening paragraph, with the author's description of the coronation of the Frankish king who would become known as Charlemagne, an event, he claims, that would not have been possible without "a Saxon abbot; a Greek empress; an Islamic caliph and a Jew named Isaac who was slowly making his way home to Western Europe from Baghdad, accompanied by an elephant named Abul Abaz." That sentence also captures the book's tone: it is an engaging and lively survey of Charlemagne's evolution as the one of the first of the Holy Roman Emperors (a title that would last, more or less, for some nine hundred years until 1806) which makes a fascinating and ultra-accessible introduction to the man and his times for the general reader. (It's not likely to be of interest to someone with a scholarly interest in the Frankish kings, for instance.) Why read this today? Charlemagne was the first to conceive of a Europe that was broader than any single small kingdom or fiefdom since the disappearance of the Romans (who thought in larger terms still); indeed, the European Union's buildings, etc. pay tribute to him by using his name. He was a patron of the arts and while people focus more on the Renaissance that began in the 14th century in Italy, the emperor oversaw an earlier "Carolingian renaissance." Syeck leaps effortlessly from the bloody battles over the use of icons in the Byzantine court to the fascinating personality of Haroun al-Rashid in Baghdad, and shows a skill for reading between the few lines that history has in the passage of more than a millennium. He uses his imagination (anathema to scholars) to show us not a 21st century version of Charlemagne, but how he might have been perceived by his peers during the time he ruled, when kingdoms like those of the Merovingians had replaced an all-encompassing Roman empire. Too often, events in different countries in these "Dark Ages" are viewed in isolation from each other -- how could, for instance, what was happening in Baghdad or Byzantium affect Charlemagne's ability to consolidate his power? Alas, Syeck's attempts to make a case for a first millennium networked world strikes me as over-ambitious, and he doesn't really prove his case. That's not to say that his digressions into papal politics and diplomacy with the caliph or marriage overtures to the Empress Irene are irrelevant, simply that he doesn't prove that they carry the weight that he claims for them. The analysis, however intriguing in its own right, doesn't rise to that level, particularly with reference to Isaac and the elephant. Still an extremely compelling read and one that should be able to convince any reader that history -- however far away in time and space -- can be

as fascinating as anything taking place in our own lives. I'm a big fan of anyone able to take ancient records and spin them into stories like this, some of which kept my 5-year-old nephew enthralled for an hour. (Ok, I simplified for him, but now he's bugging my brother for more about Charlemagne...) Highly recommended to general readers; historians or those with a solid grounding in the Merovingian kings and emperors will want to look elsewhere unless they are in the mood for the scholar's equivalent of fun weekend reading.

This minimalist popular work of history, written by a medieval literature professor, attempts to shed some light on a larger than life figure from the late eighth century, the Frankish king Karl, later known as Charlemagne. The book is at best an overview of the powerful forces and individuals of the times, be they religious or military, with cursory depictions of the nature of basic life, harsh as it was, ranging geographically from northern Europe and Italy to Constantinople and Baghdad. The author acknowledges that there is only a scanty record of Charlemagne's life, consequently he, in the manner of historical fiction, often relies on recreation of scenarios as he imagines them or creative interpretations of the writings of various poets and religious figures, most of all of whom wrote in a flowery manner largely worded to flatter the king Karl. Charlemagne remains more an enigma than not. He appears to be a Frankish warlord of above average ability, who had a penchant for surrounding himself with some of the leading minds of the day - of course, all of whom were religious officials or monks. Karl may have had intellectual pretensions, but apparently was unable to grasp the concept of writing. It's rather doubtful that he had some grand vision of a united Europe; he had his hands full putting down constant threats from regional rivals, especially the Saxons. The best evidence for the lack of such a vision conceived by Karl is the return to the old splintered order just years after his death. The author begins and ends his book with the coronation of Karl as the Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III in 800 AD. The author seems to have ignored the irony of the Pope being protected by descendants of the very Germanic tribes that sacked Rome in the previous centuries. The author also gives some attention to the intrigues of the empress Irene in the eastern portion of the old Roman Empire as well as to the powerful caliph of Baghdad, who felt compelled to send Karl an elephant. Maybe the most interesting bit in the entire book is the origin of "iconoclast," which refers to the edict of Irene's predecessor to destroy religious idols or icons. The book does not succeed as history. The author abruptly jumps from one subject or locale to the next with incomplete or confusing accounts of the matter at hand. In such a short book, the author has attempted to cover far too much of the world as known at that time - historical context suffers as a consequence. Furthermore, the author hardly makes clear the basis of the myth of

Charlemagne. He was the most powerful European warlord during a relatively brief period of time to whom others paid homage, including the Pope. However, his influence scarcely lasted beyond his death.

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