World History I

HST 218 – 102

# Charlemagne.

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November 18, 2002

*The happiness and prosperity of the citizens*

*is the only legitimate object of government.*

* Thomas Jefferson

Sometimes one great man is all it takes to change the course of history around for a nation, a civilization, or even the entire world. Luckily for the proponents of its proponents, it is hard to disagree with the theory of “persona magna.” The world has seen the historical repercussions of the distinguished exploits of such men as Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and Abraham Lincoln. The remarkable accomplishments of Charlemagne undeniably earn him a place among the most triumphant individuals in history.

Charlemagne was born into the family of the Mayor of the Palace in the court of King Childeric. Despite the lack of royal ancestry, Charles’ father, Pepin was the true ruler of the Franks until the eventual deposition of impotent Childeric, at which time Pepin was named the official monarch. Upon Pepin’s demise, the state, which Pepin had gloriously expanded, was passed on to Charles and his brother Carloman who ruled jointly for some three years, and after Carloman’s death, Charles became the King of the Franks (Einhard 27).

The reign of Charlemagne was a most glorious one. During his forty-five years in power, Charles distinguished himself as a successful conqueror, an imposing sovereign, an able diplomat, and an active advocate of learning. His conquests doubled the empire he inherited, his masterful diplomacy helped him establish strategic alliances with neighbors, and his appreciation for knowledge and scholarship sparked a “Carolingian Renaissance” (Painter 5), a period of revival of learning, while popular education was waning in Europe during the early Middle Ages.

For the purpose of determining the medieval Franks’ view of an ideal ruler, Einhard’s positively biased biography of Charlemagne is the best source for information. As pointed out in Sidney Painter’s foreword to the book, Einhard slants the focus toward the positive aspects, while “passing over delicately details he considered embarrassing” (Painter 11). As a result of such omission of most of the unfavorable biographical facts, the somewhat idealized view of Charlemagne becomes a model of a “perfect King” as envisioned by the people of his time.

Perhaps the skill most highly valued by Einhard as well as by the people of the turbulent Middle Ages was the ability to conduct victorious warfare. After the fall of the Holy Roman Empire, the nations that came to inherit the land were engaged in frequent wars, trying to conquer lands in order to collect tribute. Clearly, in times like those it was necessary for a king to be an apt military commander because the welfare of a nation almost directly depended upon the territory, and therefore the amount of arable land and natural resources. Einhard dedicates a large portion of the biography to the history of Charlemagne’s conquests. He mentions Charles’ charisma and outstanding leadership skills. If one were to closely examine the record of the most famous or most notorious kings in the history of mankind, the top of the list would be dominated by the warrior kings: Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Sundiata, Ivan the Terrible, and others. In today’s world, the violation of other nations’ borders seems if not outrageous, then at least unethical. But in the Middle Ages, when all government was done by the sword, the winner was the one who was most adept with that sword. What difference does it make that Charlemagne could not read or write if his fifty-three successful conquests brought all of Christian Western Europe except for Britain, Italy, and Sicily (Painter 5) to the Franks’ feet? In contrast to Charlemagne’s spectacular example, Einhard briefly describes the personality of the official king in the time of Pepin, Charlemagne’s father:

*There was nothing left the King to do but to be content with his name of King, his flowing hair, and long beard, to sit on the throne and play the ruler, to give ear to the ambassadors that came from all quarters, and to dismiss them, as if on his own responsibility, in words that were, in fact, suggested to him, or even imposed upon him* (Einhard 23-24)*.*

If anything had caused Einhard to give mention to such a petty figure as King Childeric, it must have been the need for an antithesis to contrast with the marvelous personality of Charlemagne. Fulfilling the duty of a historian would not explain such a motion because in Einhard’s own foreword, he indirectly confesses of creating a somewhat biased picture of his master and benefactor, thereby renouncing the duty and the title of a historian.

Einhard undertook a considerable effort to discuss Charlemagne’s positive personal traits: determination and steadfastness to go through with all his endeavors; strict adherence to justice and readiness to counteract any “faithless behavior” with righteous vengeance (Einhard 31). Through Charlemagne’s example, Einhard specifies more valuable character traits of a worthy ruler: perseverance to withstand whatever comes, without yielding in the face of adversity or difficulty (Einhard 33).