

Book Review: Jeff Sypeck, *Becoming Charlemagne: Europe, Baghdad, and the Empires of A.D. 800*

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The larger-than-life figure of Charlemagne has become a gauge by which to measure rulers who follow. In his work, *Becoming Charlemagne*, professor of medieval literature Jeff Sypeck explores how this archetypal leader emerged in the context of his counterparts to the east. Sypeck goes as far to say these individuals, in addition to Abbot Alcuin Albinus and a Jewish diplomat named Isaac, “made the coronation possible” for Charlemagne (p.9). He portrays Charlemagne as a visionary, writing that “what was hardly concerned Karl; what *could be* preoccupied him” (p.29).

The first half of the book introduces Charlemagne, Byzantine Empress Irene and Islamic Caliph Harun, and provides a brief history of their domains and capital cities. Alcuin and Isaac are more of a supporting cast, providing first-hand accounts of the events taking place and proof Charlemagne met his objectives. The second half of the book covers the attack on Pope Leo, Charlemagne’s elevation to Holy Roman Emperor, and the dissolution of his kingdom within two generations. The book concludes with examples where Charlemagne was used as a mobilizing figurehead; from Pope Urban II invoking his name for the First Crusade (p.158) to the “International Charlemagne Prize” created in the 1950’s in recognition of significant contributions to community, humanity, and world peace (p.160).

The narrative style of the book is more casual, as Sypeck attempts to immerse the reader by suggesting how individuals may have responded to events. For example, he writes that as a

messenger rode through town, “merchants glared suspiciously at strangers” (p.15) or that, while recalling his imprisonment “Pope Leo may have touched the scars on his face” (p.115). Literary tools such as this can be effective at helping the reader feel connected to the content, but they can also be distracting.

For source material, Sypeck relies on secondary sources and translations of primary sources, he does not reference manuscripts directly. This is understandable as these medieval texts were written in Latin, Greek, German, and Arabic. Depending on the quality of the translation, however, this could create some misinterpretation of the original author’s intent, though Sypeck does pull from a variety of sources to provide cross-checking. For example, the *Parasteseis Syntomoi Chronikai* (pp.196), the *Liber Pontificalis* (p.197), and the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (p.198) are all referenced.

Sypeck relies mostly on first-hand accounts, such as excerpts from a letter Charlemagne wrote to Pope Leo in 796 (pp.28-9) or Sedulius Scottus recording his sentiments following Charlemagne’s death (p.12). Alcuin is a frequent source referenced, often through letters he exchanged with Charlemagne. Sypeck voices reliability as a concern when recounting works by Notker and writes “this anecdote seems implausible” (p.79) or “[t]he story itself is highly questionable” (p.77) given that these were written more than 70 years following Charlemagne’s death. Sypeck explains that he includes Notker’s references more for broader context, such as showing how trade between the regions was a common occurrence and how Charlemagne collaborated with Jews in his kingdom frequently and without reservation (p.79). Sypeck’s concern over source credibility explains why notable Charlemagne authors Einhard and Notker are mentioned, but with little depth or substance.

Through these sources, Sypeck focuses on the diplomatic and circumstantial events that helped Charlemagne advance, in contrast to the familiar theme of Constantine as a hardened warrior. Instead of fighting with the other key figures in the book, Sypeck shows how Constantine was both opportunistic and diplomatic to advance his own agenda.

Alcuin makes the argument that a woman could not be a legitimate ruler so, “was not the imperial throne theoretically vacant” (p.55) and therefore an opportunity for Charlemagne to add it to his kingdom through marriage to Empress Irene? Even though Irene agrees to peace but not a marriage (p.139), her people are incensed at the prospect of her marrying Charlemagne, so she is overthrown and exiled (p.143). Sypeck does not provide Charlemagne’s response, but it illustrates how turmoil in the Byzantine empire allowed Charlemagne to secure his territory as her focus was more on troubles at home.

With respect to Harun, Sypeck portrays him as a rather apathetic character who was not concerned about Charlemagne becoming emperor (p.126). This also would have allowed Charlemagne more freedom to expand and maintain the lands he was conquering throughout Europe. Sypeck does not provide a direct reference to explain why Harun was not concerned about growing Frankish control, aside from claiming advisors saw Charlemagne as an ally due to common enemies in Iberia (p.72) and that Harun was more focused on his own control of the Middle East and northern Africa (p.126).

The inclusion of Isaac, the Jewish diplomat sent to negotiate with Harun, is an interesting choice of character. There are no writings from Isaac directly that are referenced. His main feat, and likely reason for mention in the historic record, is that he returned from Baghdad with an elephant for Charlemagne (p.130), having established good diplomatic ties. In so much as diplomacy between the Frankish and Abbasid kingdoms allowed each ruler to proceed with one

less rival to worry about, Isaac's efforts are important so that Charlemagne could focus on Europe without worrying about invasions from the Middle East. Sypeck does point out the irony that, in contrast to the crusades claiming Charlemagne fought to expel non-Christians, he actually worked very closely with Jews and Muslims during his lifetime (p.85).

Sypek includes a map of detailing the key empires of the period (pp. 5-6). These are helpful when explaining the geographic proximity of these kingdoms and the importance of diplomacy. Also included are a 19th c. depiction of the coronation (p.11) and photos of Aachen cathedral (p. 26), Hagia Sophia (pp.35, 41), and an illustration of the Round City of Baghdad (p.63), which are effective images to show the grandeur of these dynasties.

There are details included which do not necessarily tie to the main theme of the book. There is a large portion of the book dedicated to Charlemagne's family life, as well as his administrative activities in the eighteen months between the attack on Pope Leo and the Christmas Day crowning. These details, while interesting to paint the portrait of the man, do not really contribute much to the story of how he "became" Charlemagne. However, they do provide further contrast to the notion of him constantly at war.

Despite the superfluous details of Charlemagne's family life, his travels, and embellished narratives of characters' feelings, Sypeck provides a fresh look on a widely studied topic. When the first image that comes to mind for Charlemagne is as a great warrior, it is refreshing to read a book where these exploits are hardly mentioned. I do wish Sypeck had provided a more clear summation of his argument for how Karl Magnus "became" Charlemagne through the relationships with his contemporary rulers but enough detail is shared for the casual reader to connect the dots on their own.