



Charlemagne: A Biography

By Derek Wilson

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An incisive and absorbing biography of the legendary emperor who bridged ancient and modern Europe and singlehandedly altered the course of Western history.

Charlemagne was an extraordinary figure: an ingenious military strategist, a wise but ruthless leader, a cunning politician, and a devout believer who ensured the survival of Christianity in the West. He also believed himself above the rules of the church, siring bastards across Europe and coldly ordering the execution of 4,500 prisoners. Derek Wilson shows how this complicated, fascinating man married the military might of his army to the spiritual force of the Church in Rome, thereby forging Western Christendom. This is a remarkable portrait of Charlemagne and of the intricate political, religious, and cultural world he dominated.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Christian warrior, scholar prince, pilgrim saint and emperor, Charlemagne (742–814) has influenced modern rulers from Napoleon to Charles de Gaulle. As acclaimed British historian Wilson (*Tudor Tapestry: Men, Women, and Society in Reformation England*) points out in this fast-paced biography, the Frankish king who was named emperor by the pope brought civilization and peace to Europe in the Early Middle Ages. An acquisitive king intent on expanding Francia's borders and connecting politics and religion, Charles the Great, according to Wilson, is responsible for the shape of Europe as we know it today. Wilson deftly chronicles Charlemagne's military exploits, political intrigues and religious devotion. In addition to his military leadership, the emperor initiated a revival of humane learning (the Carolingian Renaissance) and the establishment of a clerical hierarchy that could preach, administer the sacraments properly and oversee matters of the empire. Although, as Wilson points out, Charlemagne's sometimes megalomaniacal personality drove his armies to the brink of disaster, he fostered a unity and a culture in his empire that have lasted to modern times. Maps. (On sale June 6)

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From School Library Journal

Adult/High School—A fascinating introduction to the ruler and his world. Several features help readers navigate this complicated era. A genealogy of the Carolingian dynasty helps keep track of Charlemagne's large family. A time line from his birth (742) to the division of his empire (843) lists significant events in Francia, the Byzantine Empire, Western Christendom, and the Islamic world. Nine maps trace the changes in the borders of the empires and the routes of invaders, and 16 pages of color pictures show how legends about Charlemagne captured the attention of artists and craftsmen through the ages. Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, Wilson's account reads like an adventure story. The author comments on the reliability of his sources even as he faithfully quotes them. Charlemagne's intellectual pursuits, his ideas about faith, and his visions for his empires are also covered. Wilson shows how Charlemagne's image changed after his death and over the centuries. Sometimes, he was revered as the world's greatest warrior; at other times, as a saint or a philosopher king. Each age re-created him in a new light, and Wilson demonstrates how the empire he built led to the development of the European identity.—Kathy Tewell, Chantilly Regional Library, Fairfax County, VA

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From Booklist

The British author of popular royal histories explores the life of Charles the Great, whose empire fractured following his death in 814. Yet its reputation redounded through time as an example of civilized, militant, unified Christendom, wedged as it was between the Dark and the Middle Ages. Wilson's interpretation of the long-lived, peripatetic king of the Franks intelligently draws upon the Frankish chronicles and a contemporary biography, converting them into a fluent narrative that views events, from one campaigning season to the next, as a conventional dynastic/territorial dynamic that gained religious impetus as Charlemagne chastised Germanic pagans, stood guard against Islamic Spain, and competed for Christian ascendancy with the Byzantine Empire. Wilson embroiders Charlemagne's actions with the broad-minded personality that has come down to us: Charlemagne may have beheaded thousands, but he also kept his scriptoria busy, preserving many texts from oblivion. Concluding with the symbolic uses made of Charlemagne from the Crusades to Charles de Gaulle, Wilson successfully regales readers with this crucial figure in European history. *Gilbert Taylor*

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