

I

Introduction

I. AN EXTRAORDINARY MAN

This book's subject is a man who was by any standards extraordinary: a many-sided character whose sixty-five years of life and doings were driven by unremitting physical energy and intellectual curiosity. He was a man of many parts, a warlord who conquered an empire, a man of peace and a judge who promised 'for each their law and justice', a man who presided over church councils as a prince and defender of the Latin Church, a person who preached and practised both *caritas* (charity) and *amor* (love) and knew the value of giving to the less powerful and the less wealthy, a person whose interests ranged from viewing the night-sky and sending men to supervise the repair of Christian sites in the Holy Land to keeping in touch with kings and potentates from Ireland and northern Spain to Constantinople and Baghdad, a man of flesh-and-blood, a family-man who had at least nine sexual partners, fathered at least nineteen children, and was grandfather to at least eleven more. Charles was someone whose personality still shines through the texts and artefacts and memories he left and the stories (some edifying, some bawdy) that were told about him decades, then centuries, after his time.

Writing a book about Charles, who lived between 748 and 814, in the midst of a period popularly known as the Dark Ages, takes some nerve. All historical biographers, whoever their subjects, have the gift of hindsight denied to their subjects, and face the occupational hazards of teleology – reading back hypothetical causes from later phenomena – and anachronism – an approach inappropriate for the historical time to which the subject belonged. In Charles's case, the biographer has a mine

of evidence about the relevant time and context: evidence that can be presented to modern readers for their own inspection. I have sometimes approached Charles from unfamiliar angles which can be unexpectedly illuminating. I have not assumed that Charles was a ‘Great Man’ (truth to tell, I was taught at my mother’s knee to bridle at those words); nor have I thought of him as ‘The Father of Europe’, or ‘The Lighthouse of Europe’ (though those were names that a contemporary poet conferred on him). I am even less keen on pinning a national label on ‘German’ *Karl der Große*, Charles the Great, or borrowing ‘French’ *Charles-le-magne*, which means the same thing, and which English-speaking peoples have assimilated in modern times. In this book, unless I am quoting someone else, I call my subject Charles, or use one or another of the languages spoken by his contemporaries: Latin *Carolus*, Old High German *Karlus* or Romance *Karlo*. From Christmas Day 800, Charles entitled himself in documents: ‘Charles, most serene augustus, crowned by God, great peacemaking emperor, governing the Roman Empire, and similarly, by the grace of God, King of the Franks and of the Lombards’. Two phrases here are not platitudes but statements of heaven-sent legitimacy; for Charles, ‘crowned by God’, and ‘by the grace of God’ meant what they said. Unsaid in his title, but equally important in underpinning Charles’s legitimacy, was his idea of the mutual trust between king and his faithful men. A German historian put this in a nutshell: *consensus fidelium* (the consensus of the faithful men) was the ‘complementary concept’ to the Christian ideal of kingship.¹

From the 1090s onwards, when Frankish armies marched to the Holy Land in the footsteps they believed were Charles’s, many people across the centuries have thought his life worth remembering – or re-imagining. ‘Great Men’, long known as such and put on school curricula, sometimes remain popular, even now, as national symbols and symptoms of identity. Since the twelfth century, *Charlemagne* has remained a widely known historical figure because of his fortuitous connections with French Crusades, with pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, with heroic French poetry, and – as *Karl der Große* – with political prophecy and German imperial propaganda. In modern times, he has been memorialized by modern rulers and ideologues including Kaiser Wilhelm II and Adolf Hitler. After the Second World War, Charles was reconstructed as the icon of Europe; and it’s since then that his

biography-industry has thrived, especially in Germany but also in France and Italy, Catalonia and Croatia. Charles is more solidly grounded in contemporary evidence than most other persons whose status, power, patronage and posthumous celebrity have ensured their name-recognition by modern citizens of Europe. Behind the myth is a life, a narrative of lived experience. The approaches taken in this book will include an acceptance that Charles colluded in the construction of his own story, thus making his biography in part an illusion.² At the same time, sufficient evidence survives to enable Charles's psychology and subjectivity to be perceived and retrieved, up to a point. In what follows, more will be made than ordinarily of Charles's relationships with his kin, and with women. Distance remains, but feelings of strangeness and connection are not incompatible. A paradoxical sense of being distant yet close is what the late Karl Leyser (a medievalist who specialized on the tenth century) evoked, with another layer of paradox: 'the world of the tenth century is, or ought to be, strange to us'.³ A number of recent biographers of Charles have taken Leyser's message to heart. Strangeness is often precisely what draws people nowadays to remote periods of the past.

II. CHARLES AND HIS BIOGRAPHERS

There are many books in several European languages that offer excellent narratives or thematic accounts of Charles's reign.⁴ Some authors have shied away from claiming to write biography, or, instead, claimed, perhaps in a subtitle, to have written a biography yet not actually delivered on that claim.⁵ The usual explanation given, tacit or explicit, is lack of the sort of material available for individual lifespans in more modern times, or even ancient times. Cicero, for instance, left large numbers of letters, public and personal; St Augustine of Hippo's *Confessions* were a spiritual autobiography of his early life, but he also left many letters and sermons that included elements of life-writing.⁶ Charles, by contrast, left very few letters or other personal reminiscences giving direct access to his thoughts, experiences or intentions. The material is difficult, sometimes treacherous: I have often been conscious of skating on very thin ice.

Difficult is not impossible. Evidence for the personal can come in

unexpected genres: royal charters, for instance, employed symbols, metaphor and rhetoric as codes which can be cracked, as can the actual code known as Tironian notes, or Carolingian shorthand.⁷ In Charles's case, many reported actions are credited to him by contemporary or near-contemporary writers, who make it possible to infer something of his motives and thoughts and, from those, connect him *indirectly* with readers. Sometimes evidence for men and women close to or affected by him is available too, the more welcome for being infrequent. When the biographer happens on such evidence, the possibilities for drawing plausible inferences multiply. They become cues: the biographer interrupts the narrative flow to include pieces, often substantial, of contemporaries' writings, and to work these hard. Though this often means making readers too work hard, the rewards soon become apparent.

My approach in this book resembles in some ways that of an old-fashioned biographer. It is sequential, in a way that reduces, even it can't avoid them, the risks of teleology. Some modern biographies of Charles have been structured thematically, treating themes one by one, across time – say, the thirty years of Charles's Saxon Wars, or of church reforms that spanned his reign. Others have from the outset denied the possibility of writing Charles's life on the grounds that his personality is unknowable. My starting assumption is that more of Charles's personality can be known than first meets the eye. This book therefore goes chronologically, following Charles's life as he lived it, and as we all live our lives – in hope but also in ignorance of what would or could follow a given perception, decision or act. Books about early medieval history (and this is often the case with more modern histories too) are thickly larded with must-haves, perhapses and probables: attempts at calibrating what can never be more than best-guesses. In the writings of historians, avowals of ignorance appear often, but writing chronologically helps reduce the need for them. My chosen tactic – it can hardly be dignified as a method – is as far as possible to omit those qualifying words and phrases. Otherwise, I have tried to follow historians' ground rules: first, go for the sources, treat them critically but also sympathetically; and then do the same with the historiography, which is vast and largely in German. Fortunately, excellent German books on Charles are increasingly often being translated not too long after they first appear. Celebratory commemorations in 2000 of Charles's imperial coronation

in 800, and in 2014 of his death in 814, brought floods of new publications, and in several cases translations soon after. When modern-language teaching in UK secondary schools is steadily declining, the appearance from North American, British and Dutch presses of more translations of Continental works on pre-modern European history is all the more welcome. A British-born biographer, or self-professed ‘biographer’, of Charles can’t help being internationalist.

The first biography of Charles was written in Latin by a contemporary, Einhard, born at or near Mainz *c.*770 and so a generation younger than his subject. Einhard had his own approach to writing a life. He was familiar with the genre of saints’ Lives (*vitae*), and happily borrowed from it. It so happened that he had the benefit of another kind of model as well. Einhard was sent at seven or so, the usual age when an infant became a boy, to be educated at the monastery of Fulda. Multi-talented, he did not become a monk, but re-entered lay life when Abbot Baugulf sent him to join the court of Charles sometime in the mid-790s, and he subsequently married. Einhard did not lose touch with Fulda, where the library had a manuscript of the *Lives of the Caesars* written by the Roman historian Suetonius, a rare work in Charles’s realm. Einhard may have read Suetonius’s work while at Fulda or, more likely, later when he had a copy of his own at his estate at Mulinheim in Hesse. Some fifteen years after Charles’s death, Einhard wrote his *Life of Charles – Vita Karoli* – skilfully and selectively borrowing from Suetonius, and also from Cicero.⁸ He had strong personal motives: a deep sense of obligation to Charles and his family, who had ‘nurtured’ him at court, and a wish to save Charles’s deeds from the oblivion of posterity. Einhard had been among Charles’s leading counsellors, and he remained an influential figure at the court of Charles’s son Louis, where for a while he may have been the tutor of Louis’ eldest son Lothar. Like Charles himself, Einhard became more deeply concerned with religion as he grew older, and – like Charles – ever keener to aid the salvation of his contemporaries by mobilizing heavenly powers through prayer and good works (Charles’s preferred method) or saints’ relics (Einhard’s preference).

Though Einhard had withdrawn somewhat from public life when competition between interests and policy-options at Louis’ court grew fiercer (flaring into a full-scale political crisis in 828), he decided, early

in 829, and with a view to recovering some of his old influence, to write the *Life*, hoping that from it, not only Louis, but senior counsellors and a junior generation too would find messages and a model for public life in the present.⁹ The *Life* was short and memorable. Einhard, who was anything but naïve, sent a copy to someone he knew well: ‘Here is the book for you!’ he wrote in his prologue, using the familiar second-person singular form of address in Latin, *tu*. ‘You’ was Gerward, the court librarian, who passed it on to Louis with a little dedicatory verse commending Einhard as its author. It soon came to be regarded as a model ruler-biography, a mirror for princes and for their advisers. The *Life* presented lively personal details of Charles that have proved irresistible to readers ever after. The spread of manuscript copies (much slower than of books in a print culture, of course) was rapid for the ninth century, suggesting eager readers and listeners, who almost certainly included Louis’ youngest son Charles, born in 823 and named after his grandfather. Many translations, or reworkings of Charles’s story, sometimes into vernacular languages as well as Latin, show the *Life*’s appeal to readers and hearers in succeeding centuries: the latest count is ‘over 123 manuscripts’.¹⁰

Modern historians have tended to give the *Life* a cool reception. They have severely criticized its errors and its deliberate silences, and flatly rejected some of Einhard’s statements. They have seen as a major drawback his use of Suetonius’ way of structuring his *Lives* thematically, with public life, consisting mainly of wars, followed by private life. They have lamented, though they have not really tried to account for, Einhard’s omission of such important matters as administrative measures and aristocratic involvement in government, topics for which evidence has to be sought elsewhere. I shall not forego using Einhard’s *Life*, however, nor even the monk Notker of St-Gall’s gossipy and anecdotal *Deeds of Charles*, written in the early 880s, which drew much on Einhard’s work. All biographies are authorial constructs, and those of Einhard and Notker (not to mention the present author’s) are no exceptions. Nevertheless, both transmit, beneath liberal sprinklings of ninth-century spice, nutritious grains of historicity in stories and memories. Einhard especially conveys a strong sense of Charles as a man and a vivid personality. ‘I was present’, he asserts in his prologue, ‘and I know these things by the witness of my own eyes, as they say.’ Autopsy, literally, ‘seeing for yourself’, does not necessarily yield truth in any

straightforward way – and indeed Einhard was quoting ‘the witness of my own eyes’ from a third-century bishop’s letter mentioning St Paul’s ascent into Heaven. But I think some psychological truths are inescapably there in the *Life of Charles*.

Charles’s physical traits are described in c. 22. Confidence in their accuracy is dented a little by the number of phrases lifted from Suetonius’ *Lives*, and the fact that Einhard’s personal acquaintance with Charles began in the emperor’s later years (as suggested by the reference to his ‘fine white hair’):

His body was large and strong. He was tall but not unduly so – his height was seven times the length of his own foot. The top of his head was round, his eyes were large and lively, his nose was a little larger than average, he had fine white hair and a cheerful and attractive face. So standing or sitting, his presence was greatly increased in authority and dignity. His neck was short and thick, his stomach protruded a bit, but the symmetry of the other parts hid these flaws. His pace was firm and the whole bearing of his body powerful. His voice was indeed clear but, given his size, not as strong as might have been expected. His health was good until four years before he died . . . He exercised regularly by riding and hunting which came naturally to him . . . He was so good at swimming that no-one was considered better than him.¹¹

Though this book’s subtitle labels the man Charlemagne, and, of course, name-recognition appeals to readerships (and publishers), in the body of the book itself I had already decided not to refer to him by that moniker. ‘Charlemagne’ is certainly distinctive, but it is anachronistic (none of Charles’s contemporaries used it) and cumbersome, and it asserts what needs to be (yet seldom is) defined or demonstrated – greatness, which is just what I wanted to insist was no foregone conclusion. Instead I call my subject, simply, Charles. I differentiate his grandfather Charles by using his nickname Martel, ‘The Hammer’, and his son by calling him ‘Charles the Younger’ or ‘Young Charles’. I have entitled my book in plain English, ‘A New Life’. As for how to write it, I have borrowed royal advice from another source, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*: “‘Begin at the beginning,” the King said, very gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop”.’ It is good advice for the writer of a life-story, for an end will

certainly come . . . But even ‘going on’ is not always plain sailing, because of the patchiness of the evidence for Charles’s life.

In the evidence that remains, especially for the latter half of the reign, a character-trait of this man that shines out is his sociability. The names, and sometimes quite a lot more than names, of his close family, and of some of his counsellors and friends, are known, though even the best efforts to find out much about these relationships leave glaring blanks. Clerics and monks and nuns are disproportionately represented in the record, partly because of their professional grip on literacy (this was far from being a monopoly, however, and the span of Charles’s life covered a great extension of *lay* literacy), but also because of the much higher chances of the survival of church archives than lay archives. About laypeople, it is always harder to find evidence of lives over time. For instance, a name that coincidentally resonated over the centuries was that of Roland, one of Charles’s *palatini*, ‘men of the palace’ (or as later French authors called them, the king’s *paladins*). A thread of references can be spun to show ‘Roland’ as a count in Charles’s entourage at the palace of Herstal in 772; as an official in charge of a mint issuing Charles’s Type-One (768–91) pennies; and as Count of the Breton March killed in the ambush of Charles’s rearguard at Roncesvaux on 15 August 778.¹²

Later in this book, I largely resist the temptation to cite material which is late (written some seventy years after Charles’s death) and locally gleaned from oral traditions preserved in and around the monastery of St-Gall. Notker of St-Gall (c.840–912, also known as ‘Notker the Stammerer’) used Einhard’s *Vita Karoli* and wrote between 885 and 887 in the genre of *Gesta* – ‘Deeds’ – for a royal patron, Charles’s great-grandson Charles III (emperor 881–7 – his nickname ‘the Fat’ dates from the twelfth century). Two of Notker’s many stories are worth quoting in the context of Charles’s personality and sense of humour (jokes are always significant clues).¹³ The first is this:

The habits of men change, and when the Franks, who were fighting with the Gauls, saw them proudly wearing little striped cloaks and were delighted by this novelty, they abandoned their ancient customs and began to copy those of the Gauls. At first the strictest of emperors did not forbid this, because this style of clothing seemed to him most suitable for waging war. But when he found that the Frisians were abusing his permission

and selling these little short cloaks for the same price as the old large ones, he gave orders that no-one should buy from them at the customary price any cloaks except the big ones which were very broad and very long; and he added, 'What's the use of those little napkins? When I'm in bed, I can't cover myself up in them, when I'm out riding I can't protect myself against wind and rain, and when I have to go off to answer a call of nature, I suffer from freezing-cold legs!'

The second is this:

[In the midst of wars and man-management] the great-hearted emperor in no way omitted to send envoys bearing letters and gifts to all kind of rulers of very distant places; and from these, in return, were sent the honours of all these provinces. When, from the midst of the Saxon war, he sent envoys to the king at Constantinople, the king asked them whether the kingdom of his son Charles was at peace or was it suffering incursions from neighbouring peoples? The chief envoy replied that all was at peace except that a certain people called the Saxons were disturbing the frontiers with very frequent raids. 'O dear!', said that man who was sluggish in idleness and useless for any warlike action, 'why does my son struggle against enemies who are so few, have no reputation and completely lack manly courage? You can have that people, together with everything that belongs to them!' When the envoy returned and reported this to the most warlike Charles, he laughed and said: 'That king would have done you a lot more of a good turn if he'd given you a pair of linen pants for your long journey back.'

III. OTHER SOURCES, OTHER GENRES

By early medieval standards, there is rather a lot of textual evidence for Charles as a historical actor. The most important reason for this sudden plenitude is that charters become unprecedentedly plentiful during his reign: some 7,000 survive, in originals or later copies, made at the request of property-donors both ecclesiastical and lay.¹⁴ These documents, usually recording gifts to churches, reveal huge amounts of information about the social and economic history of Charles's reign at local and regional levels. The 164 surviving charters of Charles himself are especially valuable for the light they, and in particular their timing

and place of issue, throw on political relationships and Charles's own political calculations. Charles's reign also saw the issuing of unprecedentedly numerous, full and detailed administrative documents called capitularies, together with their ecclesiastical equivalents, decrees of church councils and orders issued by bishops, acting more or less at Charles's behest.¹⁵ These cover every kind of governmental action, from the summoning of armies and the running of local judicial assemblies to the issuing and control of coinage and the making of lists of everything from the services owed by peasants on royal estates to hostages and relics of saints. In Italy after the Frankish conquest of 774, a separate kingdom of Lombardy continued to exist with, after 781, a king of its own: Charles's son Pippin, who had his own chancery and issued his own capitularies.¹⁶ In Aquitaine, also a separate kingdom under Charles's son Louis, no capitularies were issued, apparently, and extremely few royal charters survive; instead, the supervisory role of tutors appointed by Charles, and a stream of commands from Charles himself, continued throughout Charles's reign.

Viewed through a wider lens, there was more literacy about in Charles's reign than in any previous early medieval one. This is a major dimension of what modern historians call the Carolingian Renaissance.¹⁷ People – women as well as men – were writing in more diverse genres and forms, from long and fancy letter-poems by *literati* to short messages of the 'send more socks' variety.¹⁸ Letters, especially those written by Charles's most-favoured scholar, the Anglo-Saxon Alcuin of York (c.735–804), many to the king, or about the king, give some of the fullest evidence for Charles the man. Alcuin, like his fellow-countryman Cathwulf, the Spaniard Theodulf, the Italians Paul and Peter, and the Irishmen Clement and Dungal, had been lured to Charles's court, and wrote revealingly in various genres about life and work there. Other letters written to Charles from outside his realm, and especially the letters written to him by successive popes between the 760s and 791 (when the relevant collection, the *Codex Carolinus*, ends), provide invaluable evidence of not just diplomacy and high politics but a whole world of religious beliefs and practices in which the exchange of gifts, including prayers and favours, was prominently involved.¹⁹

As well as the charters, poems, letters, capitularies and lists, a wealth of annals and chronicles were produced, some by clerics at or near Charles's court, others written up by church communities in the regions,

concerned about local issues of their own yet with court contacts.²⁰ The court was ‘not a set of buildings but a collection of people’.²¹ The court was movable: demands of war and political cohesion on the one hand, the management of food supplies on the other, required the ruler’s itinerancy between palaces with their associated royal lands and hunting forests. From the 790s the court became increasingly based at Aachen. The court, or court-connected, annals’ horizons reflected this shift. Annals produced in regional locations like Salzburg or Regensburg in Bavaria, or Wissembourg in the Mosel area reflected it too, yet never lost sight of local concerns. Annals often recorded, however partially and indirectly, Charles’s interests, aims and hopes, and connected them with outcomes, as when well-planned military campaigns outside Francia brought plunder back home. Later in the reign, the pattern may have shifted from plunder to tribute, that is, more regular transfers of revenue to the Aachen court, a trend assisted by Charles’s strengthened grip on coinage management. The annal-writers, whether court-based or local, also signalled how the best-laid schemes could be foiled by unforeseeable disasters, as when 90 per cent of Charles’s horses died in an equine pestilence, or when famine struck Francia, or when tried and trusted men were slain in battles or ambushes, or succumbed to malaria on summer campaigns in Italy.²² Even in a world where war, inherently high-risk, was endemic, and men were expected, and trained, to be warriors, Charles grieved over such losses. Yet when news came out of the blue that the Danish king had been slain ‘by one of his own retinue, a vassal’ (*a quodam suo satellite, a suo vassallo*), Charles seized what he rightly saw as a golden opportunity to redirect events on the northern frontier and to have the vassal’s deed recorded. When Charles’s own son plotted to kill his father and his younger half-brothers, he was foiled by a cleric who alerted Charles at the last minute: the measure of the king’s relief was recorded by the court annalist, who noted the lavish scale of the gifts Charles bestowed on those who had refused to join the plotters. The production of annals at York continued a Northumbrian tradition that was augmented by news Alcuin sent home from Francia during the 790s, while Frankish annal-writers, at the court and elsewhere, benefitted from information flowing across the Channel from several Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Annals attest to the flow of communications and news across Charles’s realm and beyond.

Two other sources that shed light on particular aspects of Charles’s

reign, each of them for different reasons, contribute perspectives of unique value. The first, written in Constantinople in the years c.810–15, was the *Chronicle* (*Chronographia*) of Theophanes, an aristocrat brought up at the imperial court with extensive connections. His interest in the west was variable, but on some topics his evidence is important – for instance on the Empress Eirene’s initiative in proposing her son’s betrothal to Charles’s daughter Rotrud, on military encounters in the eastern Mediterranean, and on Charles’s imperial coronation.²³ The second source was a *Chronicle* written in the eighth century in Latin by Creontius (Crantz), the chancellor – or chief counsellor – of Duke Tassilo of Bavaria; the early-modern scholar Aventinus (1477–1534) translated it into German. This work adds a distinctively Bavarian voice to those of other contributors to the contemporary historiography, providing details of Tassilo’s wars with the Carantanians (Carinthians).²⁴

At Rome, scribes in papal employ maintained the production, somewhat episodically, of the *Lives of the Popes*. These writers did not regularly record even what was going on in their own backyards, and their eyes only spasmodically turned to Francia; however, when they did, their testimony is uniquely valuable, not just because, like letters, they reflect strictly contemporary reactions, but because their views were *not* Frankish, and they were *not* looking out from Charles’s court.²⁵ Rome’s eighth-century information-network, as revealed in the papal letters, stretched especially densely from Benevento, Naples, Amalfi and other cities south of Rome, and from the Adriatic ports via the Mediterranean, to Constantinople in the east; and north of Rome through central Italy to the Lombard heartlands and the Alps.

In Aquitaine, that is, Gaul south of the Loire and west of the Rhône, an important text reflecting a regional view was the substantial part of the *Life* of Charles’s son Louis that was written up on the basis of information from one of Louis’ Aquitanian closest advisers during his tenure of the sub-kingdom between 781 and 814. This, together with an Aquitanian chronicle, the letters of Aquitanian churchmen and also of Aquitanian laypersons in need of protection, gives historians access to a vast region which the Frankish and court-focused annals hardly ever reached. These various bits of evidence make very clear Charles’s strong if spasmodic interest in Aquitanian affairs and a growing investment in the Spanish March, involving contacts with Christian kings in the Asturias. To fill out this map of Charles’s geographical horizons: there

survives a list, compiled in 808 by trusted agents sent at his behest and working on the spot, of Christian communities in the Holy Land. Charles sought and duly received statistical information about personnel and locations, in order to send them material help. This document shows better than anything else the extent of Charles's ambition and the actual reach of his regime. It also shows a good deal of what motivated him in the latter years of his reign. Finally, in the church Charles built at Aachen, there is not a text but a body: the physical remains of Charles himself, bones that have been inspected thrice in modern times. They confirm what Einhard's text says about the man's height – 6'3" – and they tend to support recent textual findings of his age at death, on which more below.

This brief and selective summary of the main types of evidence is put here at the beginning for positive reasons: first, to indicate how and why it is possible to write an account of Charles's reign; second, to suggest that it's possible sometimes to impute to Charles calculations, motives, plans and decisions, as well as emotions; and third, to claim that Charles's physical being is in part knowable, and that he enjoyed good health for almost the whole of what for those times, and for a layman, was an unusually long life. This third point was important for Charles, and for those he ruled (a modern parallel would be Queen Victoria): it did not guarantee, but it did I think contribute immensely towards, a sense of continuity and stability, a sense that he was fortunate, divinely blessed, a sense of trust evoked and sustained between the king and his people, his faithful ones (*fideles*). Charles's own constancy, praised by Einhard, might be said to have been reflected in *their* constancy.

Sufficient as the evidence is to encourage modern readers to gain some acquaintance with Charles, beginning to feel at home with him is a moment to feel wary. Karl Leyser's words about strangeness, remember, are words of warning. The values and priorities of Charles and his contemporaries are not ours – though neither are they wholly different. Love of children or siblings, and rivalries between them, the value of trust and the horror of mistrust, a sense of wry or ribald humour that could turn to insult: all these we can share, up to a point. Yet we gain deeper understandings only by keeping our distance, and by being stringently and precisely critical. Poems, for instance, had classical

echoes that dulled but didn't silence the sound of axes' grinding. Annals were not just records but constructs, designed and timed to strengthen particular loyalties, persuade audiences at court or in specific localities to accept a particular version of events, or to signal changing priorities. The timing of the compilation of annals at court was determined by the need to produce a justificatory dossier for Charles's engineering of the condemnation of Duke Tassilo of Bavaria and his family at Ingelheim in June/July 788. In October, Charles and his arch-chaplain, Bishop Angilram of Metz, were at Regensburg. There Charles issued a charter donating the Bavarian ducal monastery of Chiemsee to the Carolingian ancestral church of Metz, 'recalling to our control the duchy of Bavaria, alienated from us in a faithless manner (*infideliter*) by the malign men Odilo [Tassilo's father] and our kinsman Tassilo'.

Charles summoned a small team of churchmen, including Alcuin, to stay at Aachen over the winter of 788–9 and to produce the *Admonitio generalis*, a capitulary issued in letter-form by 'Ego Carolus', and an unprecedentedly full set of instructions, old and new, on law and morals. Its call to general heart-searching presupposed plans for wide distribution, and the number of its manuscripts produced in the latter years of Charles's reign show that the plans were implemented. The selection of papal letters, the *Codex Carolinus*, collected in 791 when Charles was residing at Regensburg, was originally accompanied by a parallel selection – now lost – of letters from the emperors in Constantinople. Every one of these texts was a characteristic product, not just political but ideological, of Charles's world: each had its timing and purpose. Charles and his agents were learning to become planners on a more than merely regnal scale.

IV. THE BROAD CONTEXT OF FRANKISH HISTORY BEFORE CHARLES

A biography needs to be set in a broader context, not just of changes in the few generations immediately preceding the life of the subject, but of longer-term continuities. At this point, therefore, and drawing heavily on other scholars' work (while keeping references to a minimum), I want to present a brief and rather general sketch of the transformation of the Roman world from the fourth century to the end of the early eighth.

The migration of peoples (*ethnē* in Greek, in Latin *gentes* and hence, in adjectival form, ‘ethnic’ or ‘gentile’; often translated into English as ‘tribes’) who called themselves Goths and had previously lived as agriculturalists in the lands north of the Black Sea, where archaeological evidence reveals their distinctive pottery, forms of burial and settlement, started in the later fourth century. It was then that Hunnic nomads, driven by drought on the Eurasian steppes and population pressure, began to move westwards, pushing the Goths away from their old lands and forcing them ‘across the imperial frontier en masse’, where they imposed terms on the East Roman emperor. They spoke various versions of Germanic languages, had shared cultural traits, and their elites cherished ‘gentile’ origin-myths and variant forms of customary laws that defined and legitimized their identity. ‘The Goths’ split between western and eastern branches – Ostrogoths, who settled in Italy and Visigoths, who settled in Spain – but they were in fact composed of many different ethnic groups. The Vandals comprised a similar mixture and, after traversing Gaul and Spain, settled in North Africa. In the course of the fourth and fifth centuries, Saxons settled in north Germany; Franks, whose name allegedly meant ‘Fierce Ones’ or ‘Free Ones’, settled in the Rhineland, with Thuringians to the east of them; Alamans, meaning ‘All Men’, settled to the east of the upper Rhine (hence *Allemagne*). Burgundians settled in southern Gaul. By c.500, these movements and settlements of peoples had produced a patchwork-quilt effect, which with a degree of improvisation modern scholars can map.²⁶

The history of the Franks is comparatively well-documented from the sixth century onwards. Though the Franks had a sense of common descent, distinct Frankish kingdoms emerged from the transformation of the western Roman Empire in the fifth and sixth centuries through processes of dynastic succession and division. Early medieval scholars who wrote about the Franks regarded them as distinctively warlike. Whether or not that was true, in the course of three or four generations they conquered the Roman provinces west of the Rhine, together known as ‘the Gauls’, or simply ‘Gaul’. The Franks were distinctive in a second sense too: unlike other rulers and peoples who had accepted, and clung to, a heretical form of Christianity known as Arianism, the earliest Frankish warlord to be called king, Clovis (481–511), chose to convert to Catholic Christianity, as adopted by the Emperor