

Christmas 800 A paper read to the
Literary Club 20 December 2004

by James M. Murray

"Ultimi adventus sui non solum hae fuere causae, verum etiam quod Romani Leonem pontificem multis affectum iniuriis, erutis scilicet oculis linguaque amputata, fidem regis implorare compulerunt. Idcirco Romam veniens propter reparandum, qui nimis conturbatus erat, ecclesiae statum ibi totum hiemis tempus extraxit Quo tempore imperatoris et augusti nomen accepit. Quod primo in tantum aversatus est, ut adfirmaret se eo die, quamvis praecipua festivitas esset, ecclesiam non intraturum, si pontificis consilium praescire potuisset." (Einhardus, *Vita Karoli*, caput 28.)

I will translate for the few among us whose Latin may be a bit rusty:

"When King Charles made his last journey [to Rome], it was not solely for the purposes [of worshipping at the holy Church of St Peter], but to answer a call for help from pope Leo against the attacks of the Romans, who had ripped out his eyes and torn out his tongue, thus compelling him to appeal to the king. Charles accordingly went to Rome to set in order the affairs of the Church, which were in great confusion, a chore that required him to pass the winter there. It was then that he received the titles of Emperor and Augustus, to which he had at first such an aversion that he declared that he would not have entered the Church that day, even if it was Christmas, if he had known of the pope's plan."

Thus the abbot Einhard described what might just be the second most momentous Christmas day occurrence in history - the crowning and proclamation of Charlemagne as Roman emperor by pope Leo III, in anno domini 800. Written more than a generation after the events it describes, Einhard's passage is a masterpiece of sly dissimulation in its depiction of a plotting pope, a reluctant king, and the treachery of Italian politics - all well established clichés even in the ninth century. Yet interpreting this passage poses a real challenge to the historian, for Einhard, if not an eyewitness, certainly knew many people who were, so this source is practically unique in its proximity to the event. On the other hand, Einhard's passage has almost certainly been tainted by the political history that unfolded after Charlemagne's death, which featured disputes with the Byzantine emperor over the legitimacy of the title, as well as quarrels and struggles among Charlemagne's grandchildren for its possession. As such this story of the making of an emperor has that rich messiness of lies, half lies and half truths out of which so much of life and history is composed.

Well, then, Herr Professor, what is the truth of it all? What really happened on that Christmas so long ago? This of course is the challenge that modern historical science was

founded to answer - "Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist" in the words of the great Prussian historian, Leopold von Ranke. But I must confess that no 21st century historian - a film maker perhaps - but no historian in his right mind would lay claim to having it exactly right. All that we pusillanimous moderns will lay claim to is a possible version of the past - so here goes.

Einhard's passage was intended to conceal as much as inform, for what he presents is an exercise in Realpolitik deeply rooted in the reality of the time. The pope, who was not actually mutilated by his people, needed Charles and a few thousand troops to restore order to the city and insure his rule. To the Romans these Franks, whose fearsome reputation as efficient killers preceded them, must have been regarded with the same mixture of relief and resentment that American marines now encounter in Baghdad. They must have appeared about as strange as well, for we know that Charlemagne stood about 6 foot 3 inches tall, and he and no doubt his men favored the Frankish national dress of furs, breeches, and swords. Einhard tells us that Charlemagne despised the toga and sandals he was compelled to wear for the coronation, which he no doubt considered effeminate and ridiculous.

Pope Leo also stood to win political advantage vis a vis the imperial court of Byzantium in far off Constantinople. His audacious act of creating an emperor in the ancient capital, Rome, for the first time in 324 years was intended to be a gesture of defiance directed at an empire then being ruled by a woman. The background to this story was a two-century long subservience of the papacy to the Byzantine emperor in the wake of Justinian's sixth-century conquest of barbarian-controlled Italy, a situation that decayed to the point that Leo's predecessor Zacharius I had forged an alliance with Charlemagne's father to insure Rome's security against the hostile Lombards. The quid for this quo had been papal recognition of the palace coup that dislodged the previous Frankish dynasty and brought the Carolingians to the throne.

All this leaves Charlemagne's intentions unexplained - what was in it for this King of the Franks, Lombards, Hammer of the Saxons and Avars, man's man and warrior's warrior? What could have possibly induced him to travel across the Alps in November, wear silly clothes, endure a place and people that he loathed, all for a long-defunct and contested title?

Here those moderns who have proclaimed Charlemagne as the "Father of Europe" might credit him with tremendous vision in reviving the imperial title in order to rule all his people under one name. But this is both unlikely and unfaithful to the historical context, for while Charlemagne undoubtedly saw in Roman Christianity and a papal alliance a means to

unity, he never ceased using his other titles after becoming emperor. And he never considered the pope necessary to conferring the title on his son, which he did two years before his death in 812.

We cannot fully appreciate the magic that Rome still exerted on those like Charlemagne who had never seen a proper city, let alone one so stuffed with magnificent buildings, holy relics, and legendary events. Charlemagne stood in a long line of barbarian chieftains in wishing to seize a piece of that history for himself; to have his name added to the list of Caesars and thereby gain a measure of immortality. He was already an old man by the standards of the time, worn out by constant military campaigns and the demands of rule. He had only recently made Aachen his more or less fixed residence because the hot springs there soothed his arthritis, and he had already begun building the Byzantine-Roman church that still stands there, to serve as his burial place.

In this season of lessons and carols, what lesson is there in all this? First, I suppose, is to appreciate the humanity of great men, like Charlemagne, as well as that of weak men, who hold great titles, like Pope Leo. Both types can make important history, though neither may make the kind of history he desires. Charlemagne could not have known that his imperial line would die out within a century, to be replaced in 962 by the Ottoman emperors, who were the true founders of the first German Reich. Morally tainted popes like Leo were replaced in the eleventh century by a line of reformers, whose rigor and intolerance revolutionized the church and launched the crusades.

To some degree we still live with the effects of that history, in this, the fourth year of the reign of George, the second of that name.