

CHAPTER

7

READING

The Life of Charlemagne

The most famous biography of the Frankish emperor Charlemagne is a first-person account written by the monk Einhard, who had known and admired the king for more than 20 years. A brilliant student at a monastery school, Einhard was sent at about age 16 to work in Charlemagne's court at Aix-la-Chapelle (now Aachen, Germany). In his book, Einhard refers to Charlemagne as "my lord and foster father" and mentions his friendship with the king's children. Einhard probably began to write a few years after Charlemagne's death in 814. His book became very popular, and many handwritten copies were made.

[xvii] This King, who showed himself so great in extending his empire and subduing foreign nations . . . , undertook also very many works calculated to adorn and benefit his kingdom. . . . Among these, the most deserving of mention are the basilica of the Holy Mother of God at Aix-la-Chapelle, built in the most admirable manner, and a bridge over the Rhine at Mayence. . . . He began two palaces of beautiful workmanship. . . . Moreover, since the Northmen [Vikings] continually overran and laid waste the Gallic and German coasts, he caused watch and ward [guard] to be kept in all the harbors . . . and in the South . . . along the whole coast of Italy as far as Rome, he took the same precautions against the Moors, who had recently begun their piratical practices. . . .

[xxii] Charles was large and strong, and of lofty stature, though not disproportionately tall (his height is well known to have been seven times the length of his foot); the upper part of his head was round, his eyes very large and animated, nose a little long, hair fair, and face laughing and merry. Thus his appearance was always stately and dignified, whether he was standing or sitting; although his neck was thick and somewhat short, and his belly rather prominent; but the symmetry of the rest of his body concealed these defects. His gait was firm, his whole carriage manly, and his voice clear, but not so strong as his size led one to expect. His health was excellent, except during the four years preceding his death, when he was subject to frequent fevers. . . . In accordance with the national custom, he took

frequent exercise on horseback and in the chase, accomplishments in which scarcely any people in the world can equal the Franks. He enjoyed the exhalations [warm air] from natural warm springs, and often practiced swimming, in which he was such an adept [expert] that none could surpass him; and hence it was that he built his palace at Aix-la-Chapelle [which has natural springs] and lived there constantly during his latter years until his death. He used not only to invite his sons to his bath [in the springs], but his nobles and friends, and now and then a troop of his retinue or body-guard, so that a hundred or more persons sometimes bathed [swam] with him.

[xxiii] He used to wear the national, that is to say, the Frank, dress—next to his skin a linen shirt and linen breeches, and above these a tunic fringed with silk; while hose fastened by bands covered his lower limbs, and shoes his feet, and he protected his shoulders and chest in winter by a close-fitting coat of otter or marten skins. Over all he flung a blue cloak, and he always had a sword girt [belted] about him, usually one with a gold or silver hilt and belt; he sometimes carried a jeweled sword, but only on great feasts or at the reception of ambassadors from foreign nations. . . . On great feasts he made use of embroidered clothes and shoes bedecked with precious stones; his cloak was fastened by a golden buckle, and he appeared crowned with a diadem of gold and gems, but on other days his dress varied little from the common dress of the people.

The Life of Charlemagne (cont.)

[xxiv] Charles was temperate in eating, and particularly so in drinking, for he abominated drunkenness in anybody . . . but he could not easily abstain from food and often complained that fasts injured his health. He very rarely gave entertainments, only on great feasts, and then to large numbers of people. His meals ordinarily consisted of four courses, not counting the roast, which his huntsmen used to bring in on the spit; he was more fond of this than of any other dish. While at table, he listened to reading or music. The subjects of the readings were the stories and deeds of olden time: he was fond, too, of St. Augustine's books, and especially of the one entitled "The City of God." He was so moderate in the use of wine and all sorts of drink that he rarely allowed himself more than three cups in the course of a

meal. In summer, after the midday meal, he would eat some fruit, drain a single cup, put off his clothes and shoes, just as he did for the night, and rest for two or three hours. . . .

[xxv] Charles had the gift of ready and fluent speech, and could express whatever he had to say with the utmost clearness. He was not satisfied with command of his native language [Frankish German] merely, but gave attention to the study of foreign ones, and in particular was such a master of Latin that he could speak it as well as his native tongue; but he could understand Greek better than he could speak it. He was so eloquent, indeed, that he might have passed for a teacher of eloquence. He zealously cultivated the liberal arts, held those who taught them in great esteem, and conferred great honors upon them: . . .*

*From *The Life of Charlemagne* by Einhard; translated by Samuel Epes Turner. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960, pp. 43-44, 50-53.

QUESTIONS

1. Where and against what enemies did Charlemagne have to defend the empire?

2. What was Charlemagne's usual appearance and dress?

3. What pastimes and recreations did Charlemagne and other members of the court enjoy?

4. What was Charlemagne's attitude toward learning and education?

5. Although Einhard admired Charlemagne, do you think he tried to write an honest biography? Explain your answer.
