Emperor of the World: Charlemagne and the Construction of Imperial Authority, 800–1229. By Anne A. Latowsky. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2013. xiv + 290 pp. £31.89 (hardback).

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Extract

The heritage of Charlemagne is a subject historians have been preoccupied with since the times of Gaston Paris (Histoire poétique de Charlemagne, 1865), just as the figure of Charlemagne himself has constantly been reinterpreted up to the present day. He is actually one of the few medieval characters who still figure in the popular view of European history. In her monograph, which is based on a thesis defended in 2004, Anne A. Latowsky focuses on an apparently unambiguous aspect: Charlemagne's relationship with the Near East and the Holy Land. As Latowsky claims, Charlemagne was styled as the model of a universal ruler and finally as the emperor of the world of the last days, but he was not depicted as a crusader avant la lettre. This may appear surprising, but her demonstration is clear and convincing. Thorough scrutiny of the sources allows her to retrace the emerging legends since Einhard's Vita Karoli Magni, who for his part drew on different literary models such as Suetonius's and Eusebius's writings on, respectively, Augustus and the Emperor Constantine. Both of them stressed how their hero achieved the annexation of large territories not only through war, but also through deliberate and voluntary submission. In Chapter 16 of Einhard's Vita the author describes how distant nations submitted themselves to Charlemagne. To that end, he rearranges the accounts of several years from the Royal Frankish Annals, interweaving literary references to authors such as Florus and Orosius and even to the Historia Augusta, a text hardly ever used later in the middle ages. Further steps in the reception of Charlemagne as the emperor of the last days are famous texts such as the Gesta Karoli Magni by Notker of St Gall. A decisive new turn is reached in the tenth century with Benedict of Sant'Andrea, who reported that Charlemagne had met Harun al-Rachid at Jerusalem, had visited Constantinople and had brought numerous relics from the east to the Frankish realm. Around the year 1000 another narrative emerged in this context, one that Benedict did not use. The Tiburtine Sibyl was quoted with an alleged prophecy that a king of the Greek and Roman peoples should defeat all enemies of faith and go on to Jerusalem to lay down his power before the Lord. A blend of these two textual traditions became important with the so-called Descriptio qualiter of the 1080s. Drawing from motifs that were mostly used for Constantine, it made Charlemagne the protector of Christianity, whose mere arrival brought about peace in Jerusalem. Furthermore, the emperor rediscovered the relics of Christ's passion that had been lost since the days of Empress Helen. The context in which the Descriptio qualiter was written is unclear, but its tendency is definitely imperial. Since it argues with the four empires and consequently, following Jerome's exegesis of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in the Book of Daniel, with the empire of the last days, it no longer leaves any room for the pope. This direction of the debate is remarkable at a time of bitter controversy regarding the hierarchy between pope and emperor. Benzo of Alba, who probably knew the Descriptio, followed a similar line of attack in his Libri ad Heinricum IV imperatorem. The author lets Charlemagne make an appearance in the dreams of his successor, predicting for him future victories and constructing a continuity from Julius Caesar to Charlemagne and finally to Henry

IV. In this passage, Latowsky clearly sets herself apart from Carl Erdmann, who saw in this work the plan for a crusade based on eschatological ideas. She emphasizes that by using arguments stemming from older literary traditions the author aims to confront the reformed papacy and the Normans, who were just establishing themselves in southern Italy. The early imperial ideology of the Hohenstaufen mostly managed without any reference to Charlemagne, as they justified the universal empire differently. But there was still a reception of the literary tradition of linking universal supremacy and eschatology through texts such as the so-called Prester John, the Hillin letters and the Ludus de Antichristo. The famous canonization of Charlemagne in 1165, evoking neither the sovereign who rushed to the aid of the pope nor the French vernacular King of Saint-Denis, from the outset enjoyed scarce support and thus created little enthusiasm. An important testimony of how Charlemagne was recast from an imperial perspective is the new Vita from Aachen composed presumably in the 1170s. It was assembled in context with the canonization, incorporates an almost complete version of the Descriptio, and frequently tells the reader about different visions. But in this vita, too, Charlemagne is not a crusader, but the protector of the entire Christendom in the tradition of Constantine. The original Roman imperial narrative of peaceful submission makes it possible for later authors to depict Charlemagne as a pacific pilgrim. Here again Latowsky can demonstrate that Charlemagne was not modelled as a crusader. When Emperor Frederick II went to the Holy Land in 1229, he sought to reach negotiated settlements and presented himself at the church of the Holy Sepulchre wearing the imperial crown. According to Latowsky, he did not mean to appear as the emperor of the last days, but yet was keen to stress his claim as a universal emperor.