Recycling Charlemagne in the fifteenth century, north and south

Until the early 1970s a restaurant in the old centre of Zürich much used by impoverished academics was named, with singular inappropriateness, the *Karl der Grosse*. As probably everyone in this audience knows, Charlemagne's first and uniquely influential biographer Einhard (who had been a young man at his court) reports that his hero 'could not easily abstain from eating and drinking, and often complained that fasting was bad for his health . . . his daily dinner consisted of four courses, besides the roast which the hunters used to bring in on spits', and 'he rarely took wine or other beverages more than three times during a meal'. The inappropriateness in this instance is that the restaurant was operated by the Swiss Women's Temperance Guild.

It owed its name, in fact, to its location – below the south tower of the Zürich *Grossmünster* in an arcaded niche of which is a sculptured stone figure of Charlemagne, seated and with a sword across his knees, probably of the third quarter of the fifteenth century. This, in all probability, replaced an earlier one, which would have been the model for the similar seated figure on seals of the *Stift*'s provosts since at least the mid-thirteenth century. A few years earlier, in 1233 to be precise, relics and the text of the liturgical office (*legenda et hystoria cantualis musicata*) for Charlemagne had been brought there from Aachen. The justification, or perhaps more simply the stepping-off point, for these and related developments is a *descriptio* of the church's possessions compiled probably in the disturbed first half of the tenth century: the claim here (which may or may not have been true) is that in part they were gifted to the church in the Emperor Charles's time; and in the middle years of the twelfth century – an equally critical time for southern Swabian church landownership – its wording was only slightly adapted to form the text of a purported imperial diploma of ?810. If other pre-industrial urban communities are anything to go by, it is quite likely that the statue had inspired some popular 'traditions' in the Münsterviertel which it overlooked; but if so I have found no references to them. Statue and restaurant name are nonetheless evidence of a purely local 'Charlemagne

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tradition' enduring for more than 850 years without any wider political or cultural resonance.

In noteworthy contrast is the short-lived revival and refashioning of the rich vernacular literary tradition of the good Emperor Charlemagne, the *pairs de France* and their enemies that seemed previously to have exhausted itself, as one aspect of the assertiveness of the fifteenth-century Valois dukes of Burgundy, whose 'great duchy of the West' so nearly became a new 'Middle Kingdom'. Enjoying wealth as well as ambition, and by marriage the masters of towns in Flanders and Hainault with already flourishing workshops of book scribes and of miniaturists, the ducal family and some of its officials were both collecting older books and commissioning new ones in the first decades of the century. When the first copies of the old *chansons de geste* entered the ducal library is not entirely clear, in spite of the existence of a remarkable series of inventories; and it is disputed whether any of them survive. The implication of the inventories and of entries in accounts collected by M. Pierre Cockshaw is certainly, however – in contrast, say, with copies of *romans* and some of Christine de Pisan's writings – that this did not happen until after the young Philip 'the Good' had succeeded his father John the Fearless (*ob.* 1419).

Among the earliest evidence would be the prose *Chronicques des faiz de feurent Monseigneur Girart de Rossillon a son Vivant Duc de Bourgoingne* composed *c.*1445–46 by Jean Wauquelin – a man already referred to in 1441 as 'translateur et varlet de chambre' – if, as Prof. Georges Doutrepont supposed in 1909, its main source was a lost verse *Girart de Roussillon*. (Latterly however, others have suggested alternative and surviving source texts.) At Wauquelin's native Mons, a luxury copy of the work, with 53 illustrations on its 192 leaves, now Vienna Nationalbibliothek 2549, was produced between 1446 and 1448 specifically for Duke Philip. The choice of text, whether the duke's own, Wauquelin's or someone else's, is clearly deliberate: Girart was 'remembered' as a Carolingian duke of Burgundy who was 'twenty times victorious over the king of France'.

In the *Girart* story, Charlemagne and his grandson Charles the Bald are confused and conflated. There was, however, ample other verse and prose material in the ducal library for a comprehensive account of the first-named, of the *neuf preux* and of the *pairs de France*, which would self-evidently provide a model for someone whose aspirations were increasingly to 'kingship'. Moreover, a year after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, the Burgundian court was the venue for 'the vow of the pheasant' when Philip and many of his noble followers undertook to champion a crusade to recover it – which of course never took place. It is in that context that the most assiduous of the Burgundian

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scribe-editors and *translateurs*, David Aubert, whose family had previously provided the court with officials with what was once called 'a good fist' composed his massive *Chroniques et Conquetes de Charlemagne* – apparently on a commission from a named ducal courtier but in its completed form dedicated to Duke Philip himself.

Conceived as a two-volume work (the second now divided into two separate codices, Brussels Bibl. Roy. 9066 and 9067 + 9068), the presentation copy of the *Chroniques* extends to just over 1000 leaves – at least partly autograph – with 105 superb illustrations added by the Audenarde artist Jean Le Tavernier and his workshop between 1458 and 1460. Impressive in form, the range of source texts, Latin and vernacular, drawn on for the reconstruction of Charlemagne's life and (legendary) exploits is hardly less impressive. None of these is merely transcribed. Everything is rendered in what Aubert calls 'clar francois', 'good French prose', sometimes following his source or sources very closely, at other times abbreviating ruthlessly. But at many points in his narrative Aubert tries to do something more. I must limit myself to three or four examples.

Following the first Preface, the text begins with an account of Charlemagne's physical appearance and character as a monarch, under the title *De la facon et corpulence du Noble Empereur Charlemagne*. Its opening section is substantially a literal translation of the twentieth chapter (possibly a later addition to the original text) of the twelfth-century *Historia Karoli et Rotholandi* or 'pseudo-Turpin', here combining 'popular' stories with statements based – directly or indirectly – on Einhard's Chapters 22 and 24 (previously quoted). But for the passage 'Il se delictoit de faire luy devant luy . . .', including the works of Augustine, Aubert seems to have gone back to the *Vita* itself. An account of his boyhood and youth, his succession to the throne and his early triumphs as a warrior-leader, based loosely on *chansons* or previous prose renderings of them, which have only been identified in part, culminates in a short account of Charlemagne's coronation by Pope Leo III, based ultimately on Einhard but through at least two Latin intermediaries. Understandably, Aubert had no wish to emphasize the bestowing of the imperial title on a 'French' king. The importance of the episode is its place in the *Chronique*'s overall narrative structure: it ensured that the most memorable events of Charlemagne's life and reign were in his imperial years.

Central to it, although occupying only one-tenth of Aubert's first volume, is the account of Charlemagne's expedition to the Holy Land and Constantinople, which is vigorous, vivid and blatantly 'propagandist'. Although the literary history of this noteworthy invention had begun in mid-tenth-century Italy, what one may call its 'canonical' form – the so-called *Descriptio qualiter Karolus Magnus clavum et coronam a*

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Constantinopoli detuleri – was (in the view of most scholars) produced at St-Denis in the late eleventh century. Now, after nearly four centuries of emphasis on the 'pilgrimage' and relic-seeking character of the expedition, Aubert is concerned to establish its predominantly military purpose and achievement. His own starting point was the late thirteenth-century Primat of St-Denis's translation of the *Descriptio* incorporated in his *Grandes Chroniques de France*; but he departs from it at innumerable points. Chansons and more recent verse texts, as well perhaps as his own imagination, are drawn on for the names and characterizations of doughty warriors who accompany Charlemagne to the east. When, however, the armies arrive there and triumph over the forces of Islam in siege and battle, it is a version of the Crusade Cycle *Chanson d'Antioche*, with its unusually extensive substratum of historicity, that provides a major part of his narrative. It is unlikely that an audience of Burgundian courtiers and nobles would not have been able both to identify the real historical context of the siege and its protagonists, however uncertain their sense of chronology, and to recognize the implications for themselves.

My final example is, inevitably, from the expedition to Spain and its disastrous conclusion at 'Roncevalles', although not the battle itself, and for which he makes a different point. Aubert devotes nearly twenty folios to the separate advances into Spain by Roland and Charlemagne and their respective armies before they meet up at Pamplona; it is in the course of this that the former disobediently captures *Noples*, referred to merely in passing in the *Chanson de Roland* (Oxford version) and reputedly the subject of a lost *Prise of Nobles*, which, it is suggested, Aubert might have known. But having seemingly resolved a modern interpretative crux by (falsely) identifying it with a town in the French Midi, not in Spain, Aubert then reveals his own geographical uncertainties and his method by constructing a single seamless narrative out of what were in origin descriptions of a western Pyrenean and an eastern Pyrenean route.

Tavernier's illustrations in conjunction with Aubert's and his workshop's accomplished penmanship ('Burgundian bastarda') make the Brussels *Conquetes* a masterpiece of fifteenth-century book production. But did anyone read it or 'hear it read'? In his still unsuperseded *La Littérature Francaise à la Cour des Ducs de Bourgogne* (1909), Doutrepont posed those questions briefly in relation to the ducal book collection as a whole, and answered them almost as briefly: for many decades there is no germane evidence in any text; only in Philip the Good's last decade do we encounter occasional contemporary testimony that the duke was both read to (while doing something else?) and may have engaged in private reading. Is this, however, anything more than the traditional encomium of 'the complete ruler' by those who

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sought and benefitted from his patronage? Moreover, nothing in the very detailed financial accounts points directly to 'public reading' at the great ducal banquets: 'propaganda' there took the form typically of symbolic action and display, in which the illustrated books played a supporting role for a privileged few.

This negative conclusion is reinforced by the lack of reported marginalia or signs of wear and tear in the Brussels *Chroniques*. The case for believing that the *voyage* section was a deliberate attempt to encourage and shame those who were already openly backing down from their Crusading vows is nonetheless still a strong one; and Aubert may have had good reason for believing – as he suggests in other prefaces – that at least passages from his works would be read aloud when the duke or members of his family dined with a more intimate circle of *conseillers* and *valets de chambre*, including of course Aubert himself. Could there perhaps have been discardable 'reading copies' in the current chancery hand?

Gaston Paris, in his epoch-making *Histoire Poétique de Charlemagne* made a generous assessment of Aubert's achievement: the *Chroniques*, he claimed, 'gave their hero's life a unity which had previously been lacking in the fabulous tales of which he was the subject', and was far superior to previous attempts at the genre. In truth, by recycling his material in the way he did, Aubert had sounded the death knell of a half-millennium of *Histoire Poétique* and effectively ensured that it had no afterlife – except among art historians – for almost another half-millennium. It was not the works of Aubert that made an early transition to print. An edition had to wait for the present century, the first of three volumes going to press just before Belgium was invaded in May 1940 by the armies of a *Führer* who had persuaded others to 'recast *Karl der Grosse* in his own image'.

Four years before Philip the Good's succession to the Burgundian dukedom, the Florentine Leonardo Bruni – having finally abandoned a position at the Papal curia – had demonstrated his commitment to his native city and its republican ideals by completing and 'publishing' a first volume of his *Historia Florentini populi*. For the better part of the next four years, 1415–19, on his own testimony, he made no attempt to continue it because he was engaged on a *Commentaria Tria de Primo Bello Punico*, which seemed to him the more urgent(!), although in ?1418 he prepared a Preface claiming that Florence's achievements 'will not appear inferior in any part to those great deeds and events of Antiquity which we are used to admire whenever we read of them'. And that delay, as he again tells us, was a cause of complaint in the circle of his fellow-citizens, whose mouthpiece he had become. For a time, therefore, Book I of the *Historia*, in which his remarks on *Carolus Magnus* are to

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be found, must have circulated on its own (or been accompanied by the Preface), although there is no surviving codicological evidence for this. Books II–IV were written and known about in the years 1419–21, Books V and VI in changed political and personal circumstances in the last years of the decade, and the six completed books were entrusted to skilled calligraphers for 'fair copying' in the last weeks of 1428 or early weeks of 1429.

Read in its own terms, without reference to its later continuations, the theme of Book I's twenty-seven folios, or twenty-two printed pages, is not quite what one might have expected. It is conspicuously different from the universal-historical and legendary narratives, in a thousand-year tradition, that constituted the first book of Giovanni Villani's *Croniche Fiorentine* in the previous century. Bruni launches straight into his subject with a strictly historical account of the origins of *Florentia* based on the best ancient sources, with conclusions not so very different from those proposed by, e.g., the late Colin Hardie writing in 1965. But then more surprisingly – although in the end perfectly intelligibly, since its purpose is to show the 'republic's' emergence into a position of leadership of other cities – the narrative changes focus, to provide a succinct history of *Etruria*, i.e., the ancient region in which *Florentia* had been a relative latecomer.

As such, it can reasonably claim to be the first of its kind. Since late antiquity, *Etruria* as a current regional name had dropped out of use, being replaced by (the originally colloquial?) *Tuscia*. The old name would, of course, be familiar to readers of the *Aeneid* and consulters of Servius's Commentary; but not even the latter made clear its original extension, let alone its origin in the name of its pre-Roman inhabitants. So much so that Paul the Deacon, influenced here by Isidore, distinguished between 'Etruria' and 'Tuscia', locating the former too far east and south. Even Petrarch, who included perceptive remarks on the topography of south Etruria in his letters, was very vague about its past.

But how and why does Bruni introduce 'Carolus Magnus' into his narrative? The Frankish monarch's historically documented connections with Florence, or with its region (excluding the southern city-territories that had long been under papal jurisdiction), are minimal. He visited the city, or was in its immediate vicinity, only twice. The evidence for the earlier passage, in 781, could not have been known to Bruni or anyone in his day; while the later visit, in 787/8, was almost certainly unknown to him also. Interestingly, the one royal grant in favour of a Florentine church – now incomplete and lacking a dating clause but almost certainly to be associated with that occasion – survives only in a sixteenth-century copy, which may indeed have been prompted by a reading of Bruni's History. Nevertheless, Carolus enjoys a fuller

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treatment than anyone else in Bruni's Book I (the Goth Alaric running him closest!), figuring there in five – even six – separate places.

The first mention comes at the end of an account of Lombard rule in the peninsula, and particularly its first phases, based essentially on Paul the Deacon, although Paul is not the source of Bruni's perfectly correct statement that while the 'royal capital' of the Goths was at Ravenna, that of the Lombard kings was Pavia. (The manuscript of the *Historia Langobardorum* used by Bruni seems not to have been identified.) Influenced here by Villani's much more discursive treatment of the subject, Bruni records how the Frankish or French king, having been called in by the pope and defeated King Desiderius, then received from the next pope (Leo III) the imperial name and dignity. On which Bruni comments – in a noteworthy anticipation of what an immediately post-war generation of historians labelled 'Die Zweikaiserproblem' – as follows: 'so was born the division of the Roman Empire, enduring until the present time, with rulers both among the Greeks and in Gaul or Germany usurping the name of the Roman prince'. This leads him to a digression on the history of the Roman Empire in which he is partly repeating his earlier treatment of the peninsula's, and specifically *Etruria*'s, past; but again it is a digression with a purpose. Following Villani, Bruni poses the question as to *how* the Frankish king Charles was made emperor: irregularly if that was on the pope's own initiative, lawfully if the initiative came originally from the Roman people; and as a true historian he is not sure.

Howsoever he was chosen, the Frankish king was, in Bruni's view, fully worthy of that elevation. An all-embracing one sentence characterization, in a direct line of descent from Einhard's exemplary *Vita Karoli*, describes him as *profectus vir dignus imperatoris culmine*. Charles has earned his epithet of 'the Great' not only by the scale of his deeds but also by the excellence of his virtues: at once outstandingly tough and outstandingly mild, when exercising justice or engaging in war, and, in addition, devoted to the 'liberal arts' and the encouragement of learning. Bruni, like others of his day and unlike modern scholarship with its 'Renaissance' conceptualizations, made no attempt to develop this latter aspect of his rule; and, of course, he and his fellow-humanists had no notion that their 'ancient manuscripts' and their *littera antiqua* were in fact essentially Carolingian.

So what information is there about Charles specifically in relation to Florence? Bruni's contribution is an interestingly negative one. As the authority of the revived Empire weakened, the 'republican liberties' of the Italian cities re-emerged. Several of those in ancient *Etruria* were no more, while others had been grievously damaged by barbarian invaders. Bruni had read in his (mediaeval) sources that Florence had been sacked

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by the Ostrogothic leader Totila – or as other claimed, by Attila the Hun – and had then lain empty for two (alternatively three) centuries, until resettled by Charlemagne; and this would necessarily imply a major discontinuity in the city's history. He had no difficulty in denying any authority or justification for such assertions. The most he would concede to Charlemagne was – in an interesting anticipation of some modern notions, although with a totally different chronology – that he could have reconstructed the city walls and brought back within them 'nobles' who had previously left the city for fortified residences on their country properties: 'urbem denique ipsam varie disiectam in formam urbis redactam, sed reparatem magis quam rursus conditam, existimo'.

Early in 1429 Bruni, now Chancellor of the Florentine Republic, presented the recently completed *Historia* Books I–VI to the Signoria. Even beforehand its potential impact on 'public opinion' well beyond the walls of Florence had been recognized by the archbishop of Milan's commissioning a history of *his* city as 'counter propaganda'. The first 'official' copy does not survive, but the Signoria subsequently acquired two and possibly more examples of the complete twelve-book work. Before the end of 1429, at least two other copies of the first six Books had been made for individual patrons, one of them (strangely misdated by the late B.L. Ullman) the earliest of three, was produced by the distinguished calligrapher Antonio di Mario. The last editor, Emilio Santini, was able to locate more than twenty other copies either of the complete *Historia* or of its first part, written during the remainder of the century, mostly in Florence or its vicinity; and to these can be added, from 1473 onwards, the copies of the 'official' translation into the *volgare*.

It would be difficult – it is perhaps impossible – to establish that the 'image of Charlemagne' in the minds of individual Florentines and others, later in the century, was formed by a reading of Bruni's Book I. Indeed, there is ample evidence, as argued by Baron in *The Crisis of the Italian Renaissance* that the story of the city's destruction by Totila and its consequent second founding by Charlemagne 'retained wide currency . . . in spite of Bruni's penetrating criticism' because of its appeal to the city's 'Guelfism'. (In our own day, three or four years of university teaching conspicuously fail to dislodge cherished stories in school textbooks.) But it is legitimate to ask what other widely available text offered a comparably succinct and balanced account of the reign of *Carolus Magnus* seven centuries previously. Moreover, although this could hardly have been envisaged by Bruni himself, the future of 'characterizing Charlemagne' was to lie with his spare approach rather than with the spectacular, legendary treatment of his younger contemporary Aubert, in two quite different ways. Italian local historiography

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down to the 1950s, lacking specific evidence for the post-Roman centuries, regularly filled the gap with a summary of the succession of Lombard, Frankish and German rulers in the peninsula; national and international historiography interpreted Charlemagne's military achievements teleologically, the pre-condition of the revival of emperordom.

The recycling is not over. The bureaucrats of Brussels improbably inhabit the *Palais Charlemagne* and sought intellectual respectability for their endeavours in the triumphalist, if undoubtedly scholarly, 1965 *Karl der Grosse* exhibition. The current rash of exhibitions commemorating 799–801, starting with that at Paderborn which opens next week, seems a little less assured, and may presage another change of image. In a world of 'popular history' in which a single fifteenth-century chapel in south-east Scotland has become in quick succession a key to Templar mysteries, the burial place of a pre-Columbus discoverer of North America and the repository of the Holy Grail, perhaps even the *chansons* and Aubert will find that their time has come again.

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