

The Life of Charlemagne by Einhard

The author of this document, Einhard, was a German, born around 770 to a minor noble family that educated him as well as possible. In the 790s he went to join the school founded by Charlemagne and administered by Alcuin in the Carolingian capital at Aachen. There Einhard came to admire King and Emperor Charles very much and was for many years one of his foremost officials and advisers. After Charlemagne's death in 814, Einhard stayed on as adviser to his son, Louis the Pious. It is during this period that Einhard found time to write the most famous biography of the Christian Middle Ages. Very brief and easily read, the Life of Charlemagne is our chief source of information about the character of one of the great early medieval kings.

....The Emperor was strong and well built. He was tall in stature, but not excessively so, for his height was just seven times the length of his own feet. The top of his head was round, and his eyes were piercing and unusually large. His nose was slightly longer than normal. He had a fine head of white hair and his expression was merry and good-humored....

He spent much of his time on horseback and out hunting, which came naturally to him, for it would be difficult to find another race on earth who could equal the Franks in this activity. He took delight in steam-baths at the thermal springs, and loved to exercise himself in the water whenever he could. He was an extremely strong swimmer and in this sport no one could surpass him....

He was moderate in his eating and drinking and especially so in drinking, for he hated to see drunkenness in any man, and even more so in himself and his friends. All the same, he could not go long without food, and he often used to complain that fasting made him feel ill. . . . His main meal of the day was served in four courses, in addition to the roast meat which his hunters used to bring in on spits and which he enjoyed more than any other food. During his meal he would listen to a public reading or some other entertainment. Stories would be recited for him, or the doing of the ancients told again. He took great pleasure in the books of Saint Augustine....

He spoke easily and fluently, and could express with great clarity whatever he had to say. He was not content with his mother tongue, but took the trouble to learn foreign languages. He learnt Latin so well that he spoke it as fluently as his own tongue; but he understood Greek better than he could speak it. He was eloquent to the point of sometimes seeming almost chatty.

He paid the greatest attention to the liberal arts; and he had a great respect for men who taught them, bestowing high honors upon them....The Emperor spent much time and effort in studying rhetoric, dialectic, and especially astrology. He applied himself to mathematics and traced the course of the stars with great attention and care. He also tried to learn to write. With this object in view he used to keep writing-tablets and notebooks under the pillows on his bed, so that he could try his hand at forming letters during his leisure moments; but although he tried very hard, he had begun too late in life and he made little progress....

At his mother's request he married a daughter of the Lombard king Desiderius but rejected her for unknown reasons after one year. Then he married Hildegard, who came from a noble Swabian family. With her he had three sons, Charles, Pepin, and Louis, and as many daughters...he had three more daughters with his third wife, Fastrada....When Fastrada died he took Liutgard to wife....After her death he had four concubines....

For the education of his children, Charles made the following provisions...as soon as the boys were old enough they had to learn how to ride, hunt, and handle weapons in Frankish style. The girls



had to get used to carding wool and to the distaff and spindle. To prevent their getting bored and lazy he gave orders for them to be taught to engage in these and in all other virtuous activities. Of his children, only two sons and one daughter died before him: Charles, the oldest, and Pepin, who he had made king of Italy; and the oldest daughter, Rotrud, who had been engaged to marry the emperor Constantine in Greece....When his sons and daughter died, Charles reacted to their deaths with much less patience than might have been expected of so strong-minded a man. Because of his deep devotion to them he broke down in tears....For Charles was by nature a man who had a great gift for friendship, who made friends easily and never wavered in his loyalty to them. Those whom he loved could rely on him absolutely.

He supervised the upbringing of his sons and daughters very carefully....Although the girls were very beautiful and he loved them dearly it is odd that he did not permit any of them to get married, neither to a man of his own nation nor to a foreigner. Rather, he kept all of them with him until his death, saying he could not live without their company. And on account of this, he had to suffer a number of unpleasant experiences, however lucky he was in other respects. But he never let on that he had heard of any suspicions about their chastity or any rumors about them....

The king practiced the Christian religion, in which he had been raised since childhood, with the greatest piety and devotion. That is why he built the beautiful basilica in Aachen and decorated it with gold and silver, candelabra, lattices {ornamental patterns}, and portals of solid bronze. Since he was unable to get the columns and marble for the structure from anywhere else, he had them brought from Rome and Ravenna.

As long as his health permitted, the king attended church regularly in the morning and evening....He was especially concerned that everything done in the church should be carried out with the greatest possible dignity....



Charles also worked very hard at improving the quality of liturgical reading and chanting of the psalms. He himself was well versed in both, although he would never read in public or sing, except in a low voice and together with the congregation....

Of all sacred and hallowed places, he loved the Cathedral of the Holy Apostle Peter in Rome most of all. He endowed its treasure room with great quantities of gold, silver, and precious stones....Although he favored this church so much, he only visited it four times during his reign of forty-seven years...to fulfill his vows and offer his prayers.

But there were also other reasons for Charles' last visit to Rome. The Romans had forced Pope Leo, on whom they had inflicted various injuries, like tearing out his eyes and cutting out his tongue, to beg for the king's assistance. Charles therefore went to Rome to put order into the confused situation and reestablish the status of the Church. This took the whole winter. It was on this occasion that he accepted the titles of Emperor and Augustus, which at first he disliked so much that he said he would never have entered the church even on this highest of holy days [Christmas] if he had beforehand realized the intentions of the Pope. Still, he bore with astonishing patience the envy his imperial title aroused in the indignant Eastern Roman emperors. He overcame their stubborn opposition with magnanimity—of which he unquestionably had far more than they did—and sent frequent embassies to them, always calling them his brothers in his letters.

SOURCE: Einhard: *Vita Caroli Magni, The Life of Charlemagne*. Translated by Evelyn Scherabon Firchow and E. H. Zeydel. University of Miami Press, Coral Gables, FL, 1972.