

EARLY LIVES OF CHARLEMAGNE

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Early lives of Charlemagne by Einhard . & A. J. Grant

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EINHARD . & A. J. GRANT

**EARLY LIVES OF
CHARLEMAGNE**

EARLY LIVES OF
CHARLEMAGNE BY
EGINHARD & THE MONK
OF ST GALL: TRANSLATED
AND EDITED BY PROFESSOR
A. J. GRANT

CHATTO & WINDUS : LONDON
MCMXXII

A LUI FINIT LA DISSOLUTION DE L'ANCIEN
MONDE, À LUI COMMENCE L'ÉDIFICATION
DU MONDE MODERNE.

LAVALLÉE

INTRODUCTION

The two "Lives" contrasted.—This volume contains two lives of Charles the Great, or Charlemagne (for both forms of the name will be used indifferently in this introduction); both written within a century after his death; both full of admiration for the hero of whom they treat; both written by ecclesiastics; but resembling one another in hardly any other particular. It is not merely the value which each in its different way possesses, but also the great contrast between them, that makes it seem useful to present them together in a single volume. Professor Bury remarked in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge: "It would be a most fruitful investigation to trace from the earliest ages the history of public opinion in regard to the meaning of falsehood and the obligation of veracity"; and these two lives would form an interesting text for the illustration of such a treatise. The restrained, positive, well-

INTRODUCTION

arranged narrative of Eginhard seems to belong to a different age from the garrulous, credulous, and hopelessly jumbled story of the Monk of Saint Gall. And yet the two narratives were divided from one another by no long interval of time. It is impossible to fix with any certainty the date of the composition of Eginhard's life, but there are various indications which make 820 a not impossible date. An incident mentioned by the Monk of Saint Gall makes the task of dating his work within limits an easier one. The work was suggested to him, he tells us, by Charles III. when he stayed for three days at the Monastery of Saint Gall, and it is possible to fix this event, with precision, to the year 883. We may think, therefore, of the Monk's narrative as being separated from that of Eginhard by more than sixty years, and by about seventy from the death of its hero. But in the ninth century the mist of legend and myth steamed up rapidly from the grave of a well-known figure ; there were few documents ready to the hand of a monk writing in the cloister of Saint Gall to assist him in writing an accurate narrative ; there was no publicity of publication and no critical public to detect the errors of his work ; above all, there was not in his own conscience the slightest possibility of reproach even if, with full consciousness of what he

INTRODUCTION

was doing, he changed the facts of history or interpolated the dreams of fancy, provided it were done in such a manner as "to point a moral or adorn a tale."

And so it is that, whereas through Eginhard's narrative we look at the life of the great Charles in a clear white light, through a medium which, despite a few inaccuracies, distorts the facts of history wonderfully little, when we take up the narrative of the Monk, on the other hand, we are at once among the clouds of dreamland; and only occasionally does the unsubstantial fabric fade, and allow us to get a glimpse of reality and actual occurrence. But now each of these narratives demands a somewhat more careful scrutiny.

Eginhard's Life of Charlemagne is a document of the first importance for the study of the epoch-making reign of his hero. Short as it is, we have often to confess that in the chronicles of the same period by other hands we can feel confidence only in such parts as are corroborated or supported by Eginhard. Its chief fault is that it is all too short—a fault which biographers rarely allow their readers to complain of. But when we consider how admirably fitted Eginhard was for the task which he undertook—by his close proximity to Charlemagne,

INTRODUCTION

by his intimate acquaintance with him, by his literary studies and sober and well-balanced mind ; when we remember that he lived in a brief period of literary activity between two long stretches of darkness—it is tantalising to find him complaining of the multiplicity of books and restraining himself with a quotation from Cicero from writing at greater length.

The Career of Eginhard.—A sketch of Eginhard's career will show how well qualified he was to deal with his subject. He was born about 770, in the eastern half of the territories belonging to the great Charles, in a village situate on the lower course of the river Main. His father Eginhard and his mother Engilfrita were landowners of some importance, and endowed by will the monastery of Fulda with lands and gold. It was to this monastery that the young Eginhard was sent for education. The monastery of Fulda was founded under the influence of Boniface, the great Englishman, whose zeal had driven him from Crediton, in Devonshire, to co-operate with the early Frankish kings in the conversion and conquest of Germany. The monastic movement was strong and vigorous in the eighth century, and nowhere more so than in the eastern half of the Frankish dominions. Eginhard was trained under the Abbot Baugulfus, and showed himself so apt and promising

INTRODUCTION

a pupil that the Abbot recommended him for a post at the Court of Charles (? 791).

The imperial crown was still nearly ten years distant, but Charles was already the most glorious and powerful of European rulers. In spite of all his constant fighting and travelling his extraordinary energy found place for interest in calmer subjects, and he gathered round him in his Court at Aix the best of what the age had to show in culture, knowledge, and eloquence. In this circle the most striking figure was Alcuin of York ; but Eginhard soon made for himself a position of importance. Charles lived familiarly and genially with the scholars and writers of his palace, calling them by pet names and nicknames, and receiving the like in return. The King himself was David ; Alcuin, Flaccus ; Eginhard is called Bezaleel, after the man of whom we are told in Exodus, chapter xxxi., that he was "filled with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones, and in carving of timber." As the allusion implies, Eginhard was no mere book-learned scholar, but had brought from his monastery school much technical and artistic knowledge. He has been called an architect, and