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REVIEW ESSAY

On Charles V

Parker, Geoffrey. *Emperor: A New Life of Charles V*

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019. Pp. 760 + 40 color illus., 5 maps, 3 figs.

Schilling, Heinz. *Karl V. Der Kaiser, dem die Welt zerbrach. Biographie*

Munich: C. H. Beck, 2020. Pp. 457 + 40 illus., 3 maps.

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Biographies of great men are often undertaken by amateurs. Professional historians prefer to focus on collective institutions that are thought to be the theater of history properly understood. Geoffrey Parker has been a key figure in developing the "military revolution" hypothesis that has guided a good deal of recent work in early modern military history; he understands the perils of a biography better than most. But, having spent years amid the stacks of paperwork left by Spanish-Habsburg rulers, he also knows that the personal decisions of a Charles V (1500–58) made a difference. Charles signed more than 100,000 state documents, many of them with annotations in a distinctive hand that (one might say) only a mother could love.

Indeed, the relevant sources for Charles and his reign are so numerous and found in so many places that one scholar has pronounced it impossible to survey all of them. Professor Parker questions this assertion, and his description of pertinent archival collections in twelve countries ("Note on Sources") suggests that he has indeed gone where others have not. He does not, however, make a show of his labors. For every important decision that Charles took, there were many options, and for every option many pros and cons. Weighing all these considerations, as Charles did, would have required a work of three or four volumes. In the interest of relative brevity, Parker chooses only one or two options for discussion, often with a word of explanation in the notes. *Emperor* is not a book for lazy readers, but it is written well, it reads well, and its conclusions rest on a truly impressive erudition.

Contemporaries and biographers have highlighted the influence of Guillaume de Chièvres. As first chamberlain of the young prince's court from 1509, he had Charles learn the knightly arts as well as the literature and traditions of the Dukes of Burgundy, the last of whom was Charles's namesake, Charles the Bold (d. 1477), his father's maternal grandfather. If Chièvres was the decision maker during Charles's early regnal years, from 1515, he also "made [Charles] study all incoming dossiers, even at night" (Parker, 127).

After Chièvres's death in 1521 Charles made his own decisions. A brief written response to Martin Luther's challenge at Worms may have been the first time he spoke his mind: a single monk must surely be wrong "if his opinion goes against what Christians have believed for the past thousand years." Charles would live and die in the Church of Rome, as his ancestors had done (123). In later years contemporaries marveled at the long hours he spent in his council chamber. Each councilor had to write his opinion, and Charles often made a list of pros and cons before deciding.

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Some of his decisions achieved results that were recognizably related to his intentions. He gave priority to Italy, in keeping with the belief of his chancellor, Mercurino Gattinara, that Milan and Genoa were the "fulcrum" of his lands. In 1529, instead of crossing the Alps to aid in the defense of Vienna, he kept his army in Italy to subdue the states that still opposed a pacification of the peninsula on his terms. In the end, "he created a sophisticated and complex 'system'—perhaps the first of early modern times" to maintain Spanish preponderance. Yet his success nourished "a powerful nostalgia for the return of an Italy where no prince could impose his will" (144, 411, 337).

Charles understood himself as leader of Christendom in its hereditary war with Islam; as a small boy in Mechelen, he formed his pages into troops of Christians and Turks. At some point he made a strategic decision: "he would make his war on the Turks by sea." The corollary was that he favored "a defensive posture in Hungary" (12, 271). In 1535, he mobilized an armada that conquered Tunis and its island fortress, Goletta; this was arguably Charles's greatest publicity success. But his effort against Algiers in 1541 met with disaster. Sailing dangerously late in the season, his fleet arrived near Algiers and was in the midst of debarkation when there arose a memorable storm that sent half of the ships and supplies to the bottom.

Like his contemporaries, Charles understood "acts of God" as acts of God in a literal sense. Why had the Lord disrupted and scattered the Christian emperor's grand fleet? Charles brooded on his sins (he consulted his confessors on policy but often rejected their advice). In fact, he had given little heed to how *conquistadores* dealt with the native peoples of New Spain. He now created a committee of theologians to examine the question, and, as they recommended, he issued in 1542 New Laws for the Government of America. Indians who had been enslaved must be freed, and there were to be no new *encomiendas*—royal grants allowing colonists to monopolize native labor. This concession to his conscience came at a price to the treasury. Charles suggested that if his son and heir, Philip II, resume the sale of *encomiendas*, "I will not have to overcome my scruple" (373).

To the north, the Lowlands provinces collected by his Burgundian ancestors became an independent territory, as Charles's piecemeal acquisition of new provinces secured the eastern border (296) and the Imperial Diet relinquished its claim to jurisdiction over the "Burgundian Circle" (February 1548).

From the early days of Luther's Reformation it was widely understood that there could be no reform of the Catholic Church without a council, and Charles had a hand in overcoming the papacy's historic fear of reviving a conciliar challenge to its authority. Historians usually point to secret clauses added to the 1544 Treaty of Crépy, by which King Francis I dropped his opposition to have French bishops attending the upcoming first session of the Council of Trent. Parker points instead to the second session in 1552, for which Charles insisted that Lutheran delegates be invited (they came, briefly), and that the agenda include reform of the church, not just matters of doctrine. His presence with an army at Innsbruck, 200 km from Trent, reinforced his message (425–26).

Many of the calamites that befell Charles during a long reign can be traced to his own bad decisions. Soon after his arrival in Spain in 1517, the new king made his "first major error." He appointed, as archbishop of Toledo and primate of Spain, the nineteen-year-old Charles de Croy, Chièvres's nephew. Castile's laws required that such posts be filled by Castilians, and Charles's hasty naturalization of Croy satisfied no one (79–80). Raised in the Netherlands, Charles knew that the various provinces demanded respect for their privileges. But neither he nor the colorfully dressed "Flamencos" (Flemings) of his entourage seemed to grasp that his Spanish subjects were no less punctilious about their privileges. In 1520, as Charles sailed away, bound for the Netherlands and Germany, massive revolts broke out in Castile and then in Aragon.

In 1526, owing to the skill of Charles's commanders in Italy, King Francis I of France, his great enemy, was brought captive to Spain. As the price of his liberty, the Treaty of Madrid compelled him to cede the Duchy of Burgundy, the lost and longed-for patrimony of Charles's ancestors. As was noted by Franceso Guicciardini (d. 1540), "All Christendom marveled" at this agreement, for no one expected that a king of France would in fact surrender one of the heartland territories of his realm. Charles had chosen "the past over the present" (155, 163). The upshot was another war, one that imperiled the Habsburg/Aragonese position in Italy as never before.

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Parker calls attention to occasions when Charles caused problems by propagating lies. His point is that Charles made things worse by persisting in stories credited by no one. In 1541, Charles and Francis I were at peace. Antonio de Rincón, France's ambassador to the Sublime Porte, was headed for Istanbul by way of Venice, traveling incognito through Habsburg Lombardy. Charles ordered his governor of Lombardy, the marquis del Vasto, not to molest Rincón. Vasto disobeyed, thinking to gain praise by eliminating a sworn enemy of His Majesty. But the emperor's advisers judged that the deed was "well done," and he "thought he could lie his way out of trouble" (279, 508). He did not disavow Vasto and professed no knowledge of Rincón's disappearance. No one believed him, especially after Rincón's mutilated corpse was unearthed. His murder afforded a plausible pretext for the next war, in which France and the Ottomans actively collaborated.

In Germany, Charles defeated the two leaders of the Protestant Schmalkaldic League, Elector John Frederick of Saxony and Landgrave Philip of Hesse, in 1547. His victory depended on Protestant allies, especially Duke Maurice, who now became elector of Saxony. Ferdinand recommended that Philip of Hesse be released from captivity after suitable promises, but Charles chose to subject him to an indefinite imprisonment. To those who protested that men of his rank were not treated this way, Charles retorted that Philip had not read the terms of his surrender carefully enough. "Charles would later regret rejecting Ferdinand's advice" (331). It was a mistake to offend the *amour propre* of Germany's great princes, notably Maurice, Philip's son-in-law.

Charles and Ferdinand agreed early on to divide their inheritance. Ferdinand would rule the Austrian lands, and Charles would support his election as king of the Romans, meaning that he would be the next Holy Roman emperor. But in 1549, as he planned to meet Ferdinand at the 1550 Diet of Augsburg, Charles unilaterally changed the family compact: Ferdinand would be succeeded as emperor not by Maximilian, his eldest son, but by Philip II. At stormy meetings in Augsburg, Mary of Hungary brokered a deal between her brothers: after Ferdinand and Philip, emperors would come by turns from both branches of the dynasty. The agreement quickly became a dead letter. By imposing his imperious will, however, Charles had angered those on whom Habsburg rule in Germany most depended. But both he and Philip "seemed oblivious" to the harm they had done.

In 1552, Maurice of Saxony led an army toward Innsbruck, forcing Charles to flee across the Alps to Carinthia; Maurice's ally, King Henry II of France, seized the imperial city of Metz. As Charles raised money and men for a counterstroke, Ferdinand and Maurice agreed on terms for a temporary religious peace in Germany, allowing both princes to send troops against the Ottomans in Hungary. When Charles's army was ready to march, in 1553, he focused on the recapture of Metz, even though winter was already setting in and there would not be time for a siege to starve out the garrison. Could his artillery open a breach in the walls wide enough for the city to be stormed? The emperor's hopes were in vain. This was his last major campaign—and his worst military defeat.

In a book on Charles V, one might have expected more on his rivalry with France, his religious and political ideas, or the distinctive constitutional arrangements of the lands he ruled, especially Germany. But Parker sticks to the logic of his chosen genre. To keep the focus on Charles and his decisions, context is relegated to the background, along with family members who shared the burdens of rule, trusted advisers, and bitter enemies. In this respect, *Karl V. Der Kaiser, dem die Welt zerbrach* nicely complements *Emperor*. It offers not a biography but a reflection on Charles's place in European history.

Heinz Schilling has been a key figure in developing the "confessional thesis" that has stimulated a good deal of Reformation research in recent decades. On this interpretation, the communities that formed around new confessional identities—Lutheran, Reformed, and Counter Reformation Catholic—were no longer medieval; they represented distinctly early modern ways of living and thinking. *Karl V* turns to the other wing of this historical diptych, a world that was lost, or "broke to pieces" at the onset of modernity. For Schilling, this world too, the world of Charles V, was a form of early modernity.

It has long been unfashionable to think of medieval Christendom as an integrated whole, connecting the art and life-forms of European peoples who shared a common religion. But Professor Schilling takes no cues from academic fashion. He presumes that Christendom was a *Kultur*, or, in English, a "civilization." From this perspective, the Diet of Worms represented not just a triumph for Luther

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but first and foremost a rupture in the deepest possible sense. Schilling describes it as the beginning of "the modern differentiation of Europe in its cultural core." The emperor's response was a personal statement no less than Luther's had been, and those who heard him were "no less impressed" than they were by Luther. If the unity of Christendom "finally broke to pieces" in the early sixteenth century, "both men were responsible, the emperor and the monk" (Schilling, 34, 138).

But Charles was not a man of the Counter Reformation that was soon to come. *Pace* Schilling, he was not a "disciple of Erasmus" (134), but many of his advisers were, and Schilling rightly presents the emperor's religious policy as representing a transient moment in Catholic history, loyal to tradition but open to possibilities. To point up the difference between pre- and post-Tridentine religion he refers to Charles's last confession in 1558. His confessor, Archbishop Carranza of Toledo, urged the dying emperor to place his trust in the passion of Christ. The seemingly Lutheran ring of these words caught the ear of bystanders and was cited against him when Carranza was arrested by the Spanish Inquisition in 1559; he would eventually be acquitted, but not until 1576.

Schilling's focus is on Charles's conception of his office as Holy Roman emperor. The rituals of office, carefully enacted by Charles and those around him, paid homage to Charlemagne, as a refounder of the Roman Empire and also as a saint. At Charles's coronation as king of the Romans (1520), the cherished head-reliquary of Charlemagne was presented for his veneration. He was then enthroned on Charlemagne's chair, in Charlemagne's church in Aachen. In Brussels, windows for the Blessed Sacrament Chapel of St. Gudula's Cathedral, commissioned by Charles in the 1530s, showed Charles and his wife, Isabella of Portugal, with their patron saints, Elizabeth of Hungary for Isabella, and Charlemagne for Charles (104, 385).

But Schilling insists that Charles was "decidedly not, as he is sometimes described, the last emperor of the Middle Ages" (139). Gattinara (d. 1530), a Savoyard jurist whom Charles appointed grand chancellor for all his realms in 1519, presented the emperor with a "*Universalpolitik*," a perspective that transcended his Burgundian past. Because Charles was now a candidate to succeed his grandfather, Maximilian I, as Holy Roman emperor, Gattinara worked out "a programmatic conception of order," one that Charles "accepted, at least in its basic elements." Indeed, as emperor-elect, Charles claimed more than he was entitled to by imperial law. The three archbishop-electors (Mainz, Cologne, and Trier) were *ex officio* chancellors of the empire's lands, but in view of Gattinara's position as grand chancellor they agreed to exercise their respective offices only when resident at Charles's court. The imperial postal service established offices in parts of Italy (like Venice) that were never claimed by medieval German emperors (86, 89, 103, 108).

In Schilling's view, the fact that Charles ruled so many lands "made it necessary to develop an idea of empire capable of dealing with the centripetal forces represented by Europe's many princes and states, for purposes of propaganda as well as *Realpolitik*." Gattinara's ideas were "more or less decisive" for Charles in his policies and in his self-understanding. *Universalpolitik* entailed a close collaboration of church and state. Charles and Pope Clement VII agreed that he would be crowned as emperor in Bologna in 1530. At one point Charles helped Clement into the saddle and led his horse for a time, a "gesture of humility desired by popes, but seldom observed by emperors." Pope and emperor then processed into the city, riding side by side and holding hands, as if to show, for all to see, the enduring unity of Christendom (139, 140, 210).

What Gattinara proposed was nothing less than a *monarchia universalis*. (It might be noted that the very word *monarchia* meant a universal monarchy, in Latin as well as Greek.) For Gattinara, *monarchia* was "the ideal representation of a new European order of peace that placed kings and princes under the authority of the emperor, not by subjugation, but in the sense of a graduated … rank order." But other rulers confronted with this "order of unity" were likely to mobilize all their forces against it. Hence the great dilemma of Charles's reign: his grand conception of order could be achieved only from a position of strength; to have peace, he had to wage war (141–52). Near the end of his reign, Charles seems to have realized that he could not be an emperor over the states of Europe. The marriage treaty for Philip II and Mary Tudor (1554), intended to join the interests of Spain, England, and the Low Countries, had the more modest goal of achieving hegemony, not least in the control of Europe's overseas trade (381).

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One may ask whether Gattinara's idea of empire was entirely new; he admired Dante's *De Monarchia* and once tried—without success—to interest Erasmus in a new edition. There is, however, no doubt that he stressed what he saw as the universal character of the imperial office. But if Gattinara thought that governing so many realms required an *Ordnungsprinzip*, was Charles of the same mind? Did he adopt the basic elements of Gattinara's thinking in making his own decisions? Instead of examining the question, Schilling assumes an answer.

The fact that he elides the distinction between adviser and prince may be related to his understanding of Charles as representing a first failed effort to reunite a Europe that was already "differentiating," or breaking to pieces: "Charles's failure to achieve his conception of unity brings out a constant in the history of Europe: its peoples and states tolerate no hegemony or single monarchy, certainly not an overarching lordship for all lands and regions, or a unitary state. This was true for the Middle Ages, and more so for modern times. And it remains true today, for the process of democratic unification" (390).

We scholars cannot help bringing the mental armature of our own times to the reading of sixteenth-century documents. In looking for what is emerging or what is fading, we may fail to notice ways of thinking that have a murky past and no future. For example, in places where a later ruler might refer to the "sovereignty" that elevated him above his subjects, Charles spoke in early letters of his *hauteur*; what exactly did he mean?

The correspondence of a prince who read all his dossiers shows that Charles had a fine eye for political and military detail, especially for what he called a *conjuncture*, a fleeting constellation of circumstances that might threaten the interests of his dynasty or offer some advantage. He was devout in his religion but had little interest in the finer points of doctrine. He was a conscientious ruler; but did he have any more interest in the finer points of political thought? To my recollection at least, the only time he discussed *monarchia* at any length was in a 1536 speech before the papal court in which he rejected any and all accusations that he had ever sought to achieve a *monarchia*. To his mind, as he once wrote Ferdinand, it was the "Grand Turk" who strove to be "monarch and sole lord of all."

Parker has given us a splendid biography, and Schilling has posed questions that, fashionable or not, have to be addressed by serious students of early modern Europe. But in the vast material left behind by Charles, there are problems still to be unraveled and issues yet to be raised.

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