

*The emperor and the elephant. Christians and Muslims in the age of Charlemagne.* By Sam Ottewill-Soulsby. Pp. xx + 364 incl. 4 ills and 5 maps. Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023. £35. 978 0 691 22796 2  
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The elephant, sent to Charlemagne by the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid around 800, certainly looms large in this monograph and serves as a stylistic peg to begin and to end the book. However, the latter neither focuses on one Carolingian king, nor does it provide a social history of ‘Christians and Muslims in the age of Charlemagne’, as the subtitle implies. Rather, this book is about diplomatic relations between the Carolingian and the Muslim-ruled sphere approximately between the middle of the eighth and the last quarter of the ninth century.

The author thus continues the work of Philippe Sénac, so far the historian with the largest and broadest bibliography on Carolingian-Muslim diplomatic relations. Sénac, however, never ventured to draw his studies together in an encompassing treatment of Frankish-Muslim relations on all fronts. His very important *Les Carolingiens et al-Andalus* (2001) is generally ignored by British and German research, not only because of their lack of French skills and a certain degree of sloppiness on Sénac’s part. In spite of having produced a large number of eminent historians, British and German research on Carolingian history has not been able to move out of its Eurocentrist framework. We can read dozens of biographies of Charlemagne, but few books on Frankish-Muslim diplomacy. Sam Ottewill-Soulsby has detected this *lacuna* and has produced an overview on Carolingian diplomacy with the entire Muslim-ruled sphere.

It is the great merit of this book that it firmly deconstructs the entrenched notion of Carolingian history playing out on a post-Roman European continent north of a Mediterranean ‘iron curtain’ between Byzantium, Slavs and Avars in the east, Danes and Anglo-Saxons in the north, and Umayyad al-Andalus in the south. Rather, it makes clear that, from the early period of Carolingian kingship onwards, Carolingian rulers maintained complex relations with Muslim-ruled elites on the Iberian Peninsula, in Iraq, then also in North Africa and Southern Italy.

The book is structured as follows: it first delves into the history of reception of Harun al-Rashid’s gift of an elephant to Charlemagne in the introductory chapter i before introducing its readers to the state of research, a working definition of diplomacy, important theories on the subject and the sources used by the author both on the Latin and the Arabic side.

Chapter ii addresses fundamental aspects of Carolingian-Muslim diplomacy, moving from the relevance of intangible preconceptions and stereotypes to the pragmatic facets of diplomatic exchange as executed by envoys surmounting the obstacles of travelling until finally received, with gifts, by their host. While it makes sense to deal with all these topics, the chapter tends to push the reader off track. It gives many examples from contexts which have nothing to do with Frankish-Muslim relations. In this way, the author tries to compensate for the lack of concrete information on Frankish-Muslim diplomatic encounters. We must ask ourselves, however, whether diplomatic ideas and practices that came into play with the Bohemians or the Byzantines were also relevant in the same way with Muslim interlocutors. It could have made more sense to use chapter ii

to introduce readers to the shifting political frameworks and the personnel involved in frontier and long-distance diplomacy between Franks and Muslims. One cannot emphasise enough that this diplomacy starts from scratch: these are two post-Roman players learning to interact for the very first time.

Chapter iii is dedicated to the exchange between Charlemagne and Harun al-Rashid. Systematically laid out, the chapter argues against two prevalent hypotheses, i.e. that diplomatic relations between Carolingians and Abbasids either served to build an alliance against Byzantium and/or Umayyad al-Andalus, or that Charlemagne sought a closer relationship with the Abbasids in order to be able to interfere in the Holy Land. This chapter digs back deeply into this topic's research history, for example by engaging with the political relevance of this topic for French colonial historians, and comes up with a straightforward solution: Carolingian-Abbasid diplomacy was 'prestige policy' and served, in all instances, to enhance the respective ruler's prestige within his community. There is nothing to be said against this, and the author skilfully demonstrates how each exchange was accompanied by a form of political crisis that made it expedient to receive an envoy from a prestigious, far-away ruler. The concept of 'prestige diplomacy' suggests, at least implicitly, that Carolingian-Abbasid foreign policy was consciously and strategically planned. One wonders if things could also have 'fallen into place' at the right time, but the general argument of why diplomatic missions were sent at specific points of time is convincing. Interesting is the author's explanation for why Arabic sources do not document the exchange: he points to an eastward, i.e. Iranian orientation of the most important historiographical sources and brings a Syriac document into play that may mention Charlemagne. One could have made a bit clearer that this foreign policy took place within a larger Frankish-Byzantine context, in which Charlemagne positioned himself theologically (in the *Libri Carolini*) and politically (as emperor) against Byzantium, thus demonstrating that the Frankish realm merited being acknowledged as a Euromediterranean imperial player.

Chapters iv and v then deal with Carolingian-Umayyad relations in and around al-Andalus. Now, we are not dealing with two distant royal centres in communication with each other, but with a form of frontier diplomacy that involved dissidents, rebels and other forms of collaborators in contexts that are often extremely difficult to reconstruct – not least because sources often contradict each other and many actors are difficult to identify. Dealing with the period 751–820, chapter iv traces how a Frankish-Muslim frontier zone emerged in the wake of the Muslim invasion of the Iberian peninsula. It moves chronologically from Muslim raiding activity in the 730s *via* Pippin III's expulsion of the Muslims from Narbonne in 759 to the invitation given to Charlemagne in 777 to interfere in what was later to become the so-called Spanish March. This period ends with what the author describes as a 'useless peace' (810–20) because it failed to stabilise an Umayyad-Carolingian border in the period of transition from Charlemagne to Louis the Pious. In the period 820–64, the subject of chapter v, we move into a phase of renewed hostilities which were provoked, first, by internal competition between the elites installed by the Carolingians in the border zone, then by the breakdown of the Frankish imperial centre in the civil war between Louis the Pious and his sons from the 830s onwards. A form of stability was regained only under Charles the Bald (r. 843–77), who ruled over a much smaller kingdom

and was continuously challenged by the rest of the Carolingian family and by Viking attacks. Some causalities are clear; others could be debated, given that the situation in the border region was often more than chaotic, making it extremely difficult to reconstruct patterns of cause and effect.

Chapter vi asks why the Carolingians did not develop a comparable diplomacy with Muslim rulers in North Africa and in Southern Italy. The author claims that Charlemagne was interested in North Africa but that circumstances only allowed for few and irregular exchanges. In Southern Italy, in turn, Carolingian players of the ninth century worked in ideological alliance with the anti-Muslim papacy and had to react to the sack of Rome (846). Other than in al-Andalus, Carolingian players were not confronted with an important political adversary, but with several smaller Muslim polities, who had nothing to offer in terms of material gain or prestige. Since they could easily be eliminated if the necessary alliances were built with other Christian Italian players, Carolingian diplomacy turned towards the Christians, not the Muslims.

One could criticise that the book is sometimes a bit wordy and could occasionally come to the point more directly by avoiding information that does not fall into the book's geographical and chronological scope. But it is to be lauded for the fact that it considers Muslim contexts and uses Arabic sources (most of them in translation). The result is Carolingian-centric, none the less, but in an interesting way: the author manages to show that three very different types of Carolingian-Muslim diplomacy developed between the mid-eighth and the late ninth century: a prestige-driven long-distance diplomacy with the East that eventually petered out; a security-driven frontier diplomacy in the West that adapted itself to the shifting power constellation of two regional powers; finally a lack of diplomacy (not of engagement) in politically dependent or fragmented regions such as North Africa and Southern Italy. This first synthesis of Carolingian-Muslim diplomacy will certainly not be the last word on the subject, but will be of use to every student and scholar engaging in this field.

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*Beyond the monastery walls. Lay men and women in early medieval legal formularies.*

By Warren C. Brown. Pp. xiv+385 inc. 11 ills. Cambridge–New York:

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The first part of the title and the image on the cover of Warren Brown's new book – an old portal leading to a sunny vineyard located in a hilly area in Europe – may mislead readers. It must be clear that this volume is mainly focused on legal early medieval formulas, and that the topics that are covered are strictly connected with the previous works on the documentary culture and the laity in the early Middle Ages that Brown has already published alone and as the output of collective projects. The initial reference in the title to the monastery walls and to what lies outside has much to do with the ways sources from the early Middle Ages have come down to us, and with the goals of this book. The focus is firstly on the culture of document use among the laity for which most of the evidence has been lost, since nearly all the information about early medieval laity derives