

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

CHARLEMAGNE & THE PALADINS



JULIA CRESSWELL

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BY JULIA CRESSWELL
ILLUSTRATED BY MIGUEL COIMBRA



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INTRODUCTION

There was once a time, not too long ago, that stories about Charlemagne were as well-known as those about King Arthur. Why they have fallen out of fashion is a puzzle, because they are just as varied, interesting and exciting as those about Arthur and his knights. Perhaps we are uncomfortable because Charlemagne is a historical figure, and we dislike mixing fact and fiction. For many centuries the stories in this book were treated as historical fact. It was only in the 18th century that people began to seriously question the story presented by the legends. There are many inconsistencies and downright contradictions in the stories, and people must have begun to suspect that miracles did not happen quite as conveniently in real life as they did for Charlemagne in the legends.

There are over a thousand stories about Charlemagne and his paladins told in almost every Western European language, from Welsh, Irish, and Icelandic to Basque, French, and Latin. The greatest number is in German and, of course, French. The same basic stories were shared in many of the languages, but with each re-telling details and emphasis would change, subject to the creativity of the teller, so that a story at one end of the chain could differ considerably from that at the other. This process gives us an idea of how the stories developed. There is a core of truth underneath the main stories, which may be another reason that it took so long to disentangle fact and fiction. This process has been called 'mythistory', where fact and fiction feed into each other. A similar process can be seen at work in modern times, where stories of cowboys in the American West or of fighting in World War II, in both print and film, often blend fact and fiction. In the case of Charlemagne and his paladins, the stories arose in a time when written sources were not readily available, and episodes associated with one person could easily be confused with those that happened to another. This was particularly the case with Charlemagne's successors.

Charlemagne's great empire started to crumble soon after his death in AD 814. His only surviving son, Louis the Pious (also known as Louis the Feeble), was deposed and restored several times by his own sons. The empire was split into three under Louis's sons and had disintegrated into many kingdoms by the next generation. The lands Charlemagne had once ruled were riven by civil war and invasions by Vikings from the north and west and Magyars from the east. Both groups of invaders reached Paris in the course of the 9th century. Charlemagne's successors included another Louis, Louis the German, and two more named Charles – Charles the Bald, a grandson of the great Charles (the meaning of the

name Charlemagne), and Charles the Fat, who was a great-grandson, but only a few years younger than Charles the Bald. Their nicknames give a pretty good impression of how they were regarded as rulers.

Events that happened under these successor rulers got muddled up in popular imagination with those of Charlemagne's and of his predecessors' reigns. During this time of chaos, which lasted for some 200 years, people looked back on Charlemagne's time as a golden age of peace and prosperity, adding yet another element to the tendency to turn fact into fiction.

There is some evidence that full-length narratives about Charlemagne and his paladins were circulating in the 9th century, and they were certainly being told in the 10th century. It is these stories that make up a large proportion of the medieval writings known as the 'Matter of France', and which are the focus of this book.



A reconstruction of the historical Charlemagne by Angus McBride. (Osprey Publishing)