

Medieval Eurosceptics

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We think of Euroscepticism as a modern phenomenon, dating its origin perhaps to the re-naming of ‘the EC’ as ‘the EU’ in 2009, or to the introduction of the Euro in 1999 or to the speech which Lady Thatcher made in Bruges in 1988; but perhaps its origins are much older.

The Frankish Empire of Charles the Great or ‘Charlemagne’, known in Germany as ‘Karl der Grosse’, (c.742-814) regarded itself as the continuation of the Roman Empire, by virtue of the idea of *translatio imperii* (transfer of rule). Charlemagne was crowned as Emperor by Pope Leo III in Rome in 800, restoring the title in the West after a gap of more than three centuries, though there was still an Emperor in Constantinople who claimed the right to rule all Christians. ‘Roman’ rule was equated in the West both with Christianity and civilisation; and, in a public lecture delivered on 12 November 2013, the distinguished medievalist Dame Jinty Nelson explained that Charlemagne could be distinguished from his predecessors by his concern for the welfare of his people and his cultivation of learning for learning’s sake. Moreover, she suggested that the way forward for today’s European Union (!) might be to adopt Charles’s practice of consulting his subjects, and by an increased emphasis on ‘subsidiarity’. However, it can also be argued that the origins of English reluctance to become involved in the ‘ever-increasing union of the European peoples’ promised by the Treaty of Rome of 1957 derives from the fact that the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were never part of Charlemagne’s Empire.

Charlemagne and the Anglo-Saxons

Charlemagne has an emblematic status in today’s European Union. The Charlemagne Prize has been awarded each year since 1950 by the city of Aachen in Germany, for ‘distinguished service on behalf of European unification’. Aachen was Charlemagne’s capital and is home to the Palatine Chapel, which he built and where he is buried. Paderborn, also in Germany, was founded as a bishopric by Charlemagne in 795. In 1999, the exhibition *Charlemagne 799* was seen there by over 300,000 visitors. Germany is of course the economic powerhouse, and to a large extent the paymaster, of the EU.

There are many differences between Charlemagne’s Empire and the EU, though the columnist who comments on European politics for *The Economist* nowadays writes under the name of the Emperor. Lord Patten recently recalled that, as an undergraduate, he told his tutor Maurice Keen that Charlemagne was ‘the

father of modern Europe', to which Keen protested 'I beg your pardon!' Keen was right to be sceptical. One of the main differences is that Charlemagne's realms were established by conquest, and held together by military power. Another is that the Anglo-Saxons were never part of them. Unlike the original Roman Empire, which was centred on the Mediterranean, Charlemagne's Empire comprised much of the territories now occupied by France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries – the original six members of the European Economic Community (E.E.C.); but the Anglo-Saxons never owed allegiance to Charlemagne. They were not Franks, nor were they one of those peoples whom the Franks had conquered (contrast the Saxons, Avars and Lombards). They had their own political institutions, including a sort of informal association between the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (or 'Heptarchy'), symbolised by the recognition of a High King, or 'Bretwalda'. In Charlemagne's time, the Bretwalda was Offa (King of Mercia between 757 and 796).

Objectively, Offa was not in any position to compete with Charlemagne. His kingdom of Mercia was much smaller than the Kingdom of the Franks (let alone the Empire) and he never had any influence on the Continent; but, on the other hand, he never recognised Frankish supremacy. On the contrary, he regarded himself as the equal of Charles the Great. In 787 he imitated Frankish practice by having his son anointed as King of the Mercians; and there is a story that, when Charlemagne proposed that his son should marry Offa's daughter, Offa refused unless a Frankish princess also married Offa's son. This insistence on formal equality led to the suspension of commercial relations for a period of some three years.

The Anglo-Saxons played a crucial role in the Frankish kingdom in terms of religion. English missionaries in Germany had been dependent on Frankish military power. Charlemagne's father Pepin was baptised by the Englishman St Willibrord and was anointed as king by another, St Boniface. Alcuin of York (c.732-804) was a leading light at the Frankish court: the 19th century French historian Guizot called him 'Charlemagne's minister of education'. As head of the Palace School at Aachen, and abbot of St Martin's in Tours, he superintended the re-discovery of classical texts and placed a renewed emphasis on the use of correct Latin and the development of a new kind of handwriting, known today as Carolingian minuscule. Alcuin called Charlemagne 'the father of Europe' and was enthusiastic about the new imperial status acquired by his master, but his flattery had no practical effects in England. The Anglo-Saxons stood apart from Charlemagne's state, though they did follow his example in re-introducing the ancient Roman practice of using pounds, shillings and pence – a European monetary system which lasted in Britain until 1971. For his part, Charlemagne treated Offa with respect, but there is no evidence that the Emperor ever tried to assert his authority in Mercia or in the wider Heptarchy. Apart from anything else, the Franks were not renowned for their prowess at sea.

The Vikings had the best ships in Europe and they made short work of their opponents when they chose to attack. The Christian West as a whole therefore faced the same challenge in the 8th century, in the form of renewed attacks and eventual invasion by a powerful pagan enemy, who could strike at will. The Carolingian

successors of Charlemagne were unable to make an effective response but, when East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria were overrun, King Alfred of Wessex (849-899) defeated the Viking armies in battle, thereby earning his place in history as 'Alfred the Great'. He went on to make a reality of the title of Bretwalda, creating a unified Kingdom of England which included London, without assistance from the Franks.

Professor James Campbell has written that 'late Anglo-Saxon England was a nation state', with an effective monarchy, uniform institutions (such as the shire), a national language, a national Church, clear frontiers and a strong sense of national identity.' This is a view which many Anglo-Saxon scholars would agree with; but the state which Alfred created owed little to Charles the Great's revived Roman Empire, though both men shared a love of Rome, Christianity and classical learning as powerful civilising forces.

Alfred may to some extent have followed Charlemagne's example as a legislator, and the revival of learning at Alfred's court owed something to the Carolingian Renaissance. There were certainly Frankish scholars in England who served him, though there were also scholars there from other parts of Europe, and Alfred attached great importance to the use of the vernacular, as well as Latin. Moreover, Geoffrey Hindley points out a significant difference between the bibles and psalters created for Charlemagne's grandson Charles the Bald (823-877), and those used by Alfred the Great. The former glorify the monarch and 'distance him from his subjects', the latter are 'part of a dialogue' between the two.

The High Middle Ages

The Carolingian Empire broke up during the 9th century, as a result of civil war and renewed barbarian invasion. The wars resulted in a series of treaties which divided the Empire between the three surviving sons of Louis the Pious - son and successor of Charlemagne – the most famous being the Treaty of Verdun (843). This created three separate kingdoms, those of the East and Middle Franks, and a 'Middle Kingdom' which in turn broke up by 880. The new invasions of the Continental West were mounted by pagan Hungarians and Muslim Saracens, as well as by the Vikings. Some unfortunate places were attacked by all three varieties of raider. Little of the Carolingian infrastructure survived the wreck.

The ruins of the Carolingian state were re-built by Otto I, Duke of Saxony and King of Germany, who defeated the Hungarians in battle, notably at the Battle of Lechfeld (10 August 955). It was this victory which enabled Otto, known to history as 'Otto the Great' to claim imperial status in 962. Like Charlemagne he was crowned by the Pope in Rome and took the title of Holy Roman Emperor (*Imperator Romanus Sacer*). He, rather than Charlemagne, is generally regarded as the founder of 'the Holy Roman Empire'. The term may not have been used until later; but there

is an unbroken line of emperors from 962 until the time of Napoleon, when the Empire was formally dissolved.

The Ottonian Empire was not coterminous with Charlemagne's. In particular, it excluded the kingdom of France, was largely based on Germany, though it included the Low Countries, Switzerland and a large part of Italy. In a decree following the Diet of Cologne in 1512, the name was officially changed to 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'; but the Germanic nature of it had long been clear. By this date it was settled that the Emperor should be chosen by seven 'Electors' – all German - and the imperial crown had almost become hereditary in the Habsburg family.

The Normans were no more a part of the Holy Roman Empire than the Anglo-Saxons had been. The Duchy of Normandy was created by Vikings, and the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 was the work of men who were descended from them – the very people who had helped to destroy Charlemagne's Empire. When the Normans conquered England, they introduced a centralised kind of feudalism, and Norman England became the most efficient state of its day, entirely independent from what had now become the German Empire. Indeed the new rulers of England created empires of their own, in Britain, Ireland and France, which owed little to the Carolingians and Ottonians (though the terms 'Norman Empire' and 'Angevin Empire' were only coined much later).

Throughout the Middle Ages, England had a much closer relationship with the Papacy than with any revived Roman Empire. The Anglo-Saxons were converted to Christianity by a combination of Celtic and Roman missionary endeavour, and not as a result of military conquest. St Augustine was sent direct from Rome. Several of the Anglo-Saxons kings made the pilgrimage there and the custom of paying the tax known as 'Peter's pence' to the Pope was in place long before 1066. English monks and churchmen, led by Saints Willibrord and Boniface, played the leading role in converting the Netherlands and Germany in the 8th century. In so doing, they greatly strengthened the position of the Pope within the Western Church, at a time when the Byzantine Emperor still claimed suzerainty over the see of Rome. Duke William of Normandy obtained papal approval for his claim to the English Crown, and bore a papal banner when he landed near Hastings. As a result of his Conquest, a separate system of courts was set up in England to deal with matters relating to the Church, governed by its own canon law. In the reign of King John (1199-1216) England became a papal fief.

Relations between England and Germany were generally friendly in the High and Late Middle Ages, not least because the two were often linked in alliance against the French; but Germany was relatively remote. It might seem significant that in 1157, when Henry II (1154-89) wrote to the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa (1122 – 1190), telling him that

Our kingdom, and whatever anywhere is subject to our rule, we place at your disposal and commit to your power that everything may be arranged at your nod, and that the will of your Empire may be carried out in all respects.

This was written at a time when the German Emperor took a very high view of his office, claiming the right to summon a council to choose between rival candidates for the Papacy (1160) and the right to lead the armies of Christendom during the ill-fated Third Crusade (1189-92); but Henry II's declaration was made early in Barbarossa's reign and was not matched by subsequent action: there was no change in the formal relationship between England and the Empire. It must therefore be assumed that Henry was merely flattering Barbarossa. As A.L.Poole put it, the letter was written with 'needless effusiveness and humility', especially since, for much of his reign, the English king was more concerned to foster an alliance with Barbarossa's 'overmighty subject', Henry the Lion, Duke of Saxony and Bavaria.

France and Germany both lay claim to Charlemagne today. (As Rosamond McKitterick observed *Charlemagne's likeness graces the market place in Aachen . . . and the cathedrals of Bremen, Frankfurt and Halberstadt. He surveys the cities of Zurich, Dinant and Liège, and he sits astride his horse in front of Notre Dame in Paris.*) This is largely as a result of developments in the 12th century. In France Charlemagne was regarded as a Frenchman, and the Franks as ancestors of the French. As a result of French leadership of the Crusades, he was glorified as a great crusader. In particular, in *The Song of Roland* his army was described as fighting the Muslims in Spain, though the historical Roland was defeated by Basques. In Germany, Karl der Grosse was regarded as a German. In Barbarossa's time he became a legendary figure endowed with mythical qualities and in 1165, he was even made a saint. Though the Church does not recognise him as such today, he is still venerated in his capital of Aachen.

This renewed enthusiasm for Charlemagne was not shared in England, because in the 12th century the English acquired a hero of their own, in the form of King Arthur, whose story was first told to a wide audience by Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1100 – c. 1155). Geoffrey's 'History of the Kings of Britain' (*Historia Regum Britanniae*) was disseminated across the whole of Western Europe. As a result the French poet Jean Bodel (d. 1210) considered there were three subjects suitable for literary discourse:

*There are but 3 matters that no man should be without,
That of France, of Britain, and of Rome the great.*

In the early 14th century, in his *Voeux du Paon*, Jacques de Longuyon mentioned nine men who were considered to be 'Worthies' throughout Western Europe. These nine included Charlemagne but also King Arthur.

The Late Middle Ages

In the late medieval period, England developed along very different lines from the Continental powers, partly as a result of the so-called 'Hundred Years War' with France (1337- 1453). The theories of government espoused by Englishmen differed greatly from those which were held on the Continent. According to Gerald Harriss (in *Shaping the Nation*, 2005) it was the theory of 'mixed monarchy' which prevailed here, for example in the writings of Sir John Fortescue (c.1394-1476) whereas the theory of absolutism was adopted elsewhere, especially in Capetian France. The divergence between England and the Continent was also evident in the field of law. Roman law was widely revived on the Continent but its reception was limited in England, which adhered by and large to its own 'common' law.

When English kings wanted to appeal to historical precedent and example, they did not invoke the memory of Charlemagne or Otto the Great, but to home grown heroes like Arthur, or, in the case of Richard II, the Saints depicted in The Wilton Diptych (c. 1395–1399) - John the Baptist and the Anglo-Saxon kings Edward the Confessor and Edmund the Martyr. Nevertheless the title of Holy Roman Emperor still commanded respect, and perhaps fear. After all, England had been the richest and most settled part of the Roman province of *Britannia*; and the ancient Roman Emperor had universal pretensions. There must have been something about the Imperial title which caused Englishmen to think, from time to time, that the medieval German Emperor might still claim the right to rule the whole of Europe.

This explains why Richard Earl of Cornwall (1209 – 1272), a son of King John and brother to Henry III, wanted to become Holy Roman Emperor himself. (He was elected King of the Romans in 1257, but never crowned Emperor). It also explains the curious incident which occurred in 1416, when the Emperor Sigismund (1368-1437) landed at Dover at the head of a diplomatic mission. In the words of Gerald Harriss, Sigismund had 're-asserted the imperial leadership of Christendom' in 1410 when he proposed that a General Council be held in Constance, to resolve the crisis in the Church resulting from the Great Schism (1378 to 1417); and, as part of that project, he wanted to end the long war between England and France. There is reliable evidence that when he arrived in England, King Henry V's youngest brother, Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, rode into the water to meet Sigismund, drew his sword, and declared:

That if he intended to enter the land as the King's friend, and as a mediator to entreat for the peace, he should be suffered to arrive, and if he would enter as Emperor, as into a realm as under his Empire, or any thing of his Imperial power therein to command, they were ready to resist his entry in the King's name. And this was thus devised for saving of the King's Imperial Majesty, which is an Emperor within his realm.

C. L. Kingsford pointed out that this attitude to the office of emperor was common in 15th century England. For example, his poem on the Siege of Rouen (c 1420), John Page wrote that Henry V

...is King excellent.
And unto none other obedient,
That liveth here on earth by right,
But only unto God almighty,
Within his own emperor,
And also King and conqueror.

Accordingly it would seem that Henry VIII's Statute in Restraint of Appeals of 1532 (sometimes regarded as revolutionary) was correct when it recited that:

By divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles, it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an Empire, and so hath been accepted in the world, governed by one Supreme Head and King having the dignity and royal estate of the imperial Crown of the same... being also institute and furnished, by the goodness and sufferance of Almighty God, with plenary, whole, and entire power, pre-eminence, authority.

Conclusion

We might well conclude that England was never interested, even in the Middle Ages, in political union. David Cameron explained the historic background to this point of view in a speech which he gave on 23 January 2013, setting limits to the UK's enthusiasm for the European Union:

We have the character of an island nation - independent, forthright, passionate in defence of our sovereignty. We can no more change this British sensibility than we can drain the English Channel. For us, the European Union is a means to an end - prosperity, stability, the anchor of freedom and democracy both within Europe and beyond her shores - not an end in itself.

The Prime Minister was not the first statesman to take this view. In 1962, Hugh Gaitskell warned the Labour Party Conference that in his view Britain's participation in a federal Europe would mean *the end of Britain as an independent European state, the end of a thousand years of history*; and, over thirty years before that, in 1930, Winston Churchill had commented that, although a European Union of some kind might one day be possible between Continental states, Britain wanted no part in it:

We see nothing but good and hope in a richer, freer, more contented European commonality. But we have our own dream and our own task. We are with Europe, but not of it.

There are those – notably the late Edward Heath - who have sought to argue that Churchill was no Eurosceptic, on the basis of another speech which he made in 1946, urging his audience to *build a kind of United States of Europe*; but Churchill made this speech at a time when it was the formation of the Council of Europe which was being discussed, not the E.E.C. or E.C., let alone the E.U. Although he was awarded the Charlemagne prize in 1956, it is difficult to believe that he would ever have favoured British membership of a political union, or even of a body whose objectives included increasing union, given his knowledge and love of English history.