

**Xabier Irujo, Charlemagne's Defeat in the Pyrenees. The Battle of Rencesvals, Amsterdam (Amsterdam University Press) 2021, 254 p., 17 b/w ill. (The Early Medieval North Atlantic, 11), ISBN 978-94-6372-105-9, EUR 105,00.**

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par  
**Samuel Ottewill-Soulsby, Tübingen**

In 778, the Frankish Prefect of the Breton frontier was ambushed and killed by Basques in a pass in the Pyrenees. These events immortalised the Prefect, named Roland, and the pass, which goes by a number of different names including Rencesvals or Roncesvalles, but not the anonymous Basques, who were written out of the narrative in later *chansons de geste* and replaced by Saracens. A new academic study in English of the battle, and the wider campaign in which Charlemagne unsuccessfully invaded the Iberian Peninsula at the invitation of Muslim allies, is desperately needed. The battle had an important impact immediately on the Carolingian Empire and on later medieval culture, and the role played by Basques and Muslims in the campaign is poorly understood in much contemporary scholarship.

Written by Xabier Irujo, »Charlemagne's Defeat in the Pyrenees« promises precisely such a study. The book is published by Amsterdam University Press as part of its »The Early Medieval North Atlantic« series, which has recently published a number of excellent scholarly volumes. After an introductory preface, the volume consists of chapters sketching the context for the battle; the course of the campaign; the battle; its consequences; and depictions of the battle in later tradition. At the end comes an appendix listing and commenting upon the sources used. It is therefore a pity that the book is deeply and irreparably flawed, being, much like Charlemagne's campaign, undertaken on bad information and disastrously executed.

Matters are not helped by the appalling editing on display. Spelling mistakes and inconsistencies abound (both »Lombardy« and »Lombardía« on the same page used for the Lombard Kingdom [p. 28]). Latin quotations are mangled by autocorrect (the Spanish March was run by the »committees [sic] marcae hispanicae« [p. 25]). Stranded fossils from previous drafts are detectable in multiple places. New information is presented as if it had already been introduced. The epilogue starts by referring to content from the beginning of the introduction which is no longer present in the volume. The overall argument of the book is hindered by the poor organisation of material, with confusing shifts between topics, and by baffling sentences: »Cortes and Tudela were not in the hands of the Basques but rather controlled by Islamized Basques« (p. 64).



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen  
Historischen Institut Paris |  
publiée par l'Institut historique  
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous  
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

All this would be easily forgiven were it not for more serious difficulties. A first intimation of major trouble is the secondary literature used throughout the book. An alarming amount of the bibliography is elderly and employed in place of primary sources. These include citations of the »Life and Times of Charlemagne, The Religious Track [sic] Society« (1799) to list Charlemagne's campaigns (p. 26 ft. 44) and »France in the Life of Her Great Men: The History of Charlemagne« (1833) (p. 191) to show that the Basques were not under Frankish rule (p. 126). This is a problem, as it seriously hinders Irujo's ability to say anything new. The extended chapter on the later reception of Rencesvals becomes a sequence of summaries of literary accounts of the battle, based on decidedly 19<sup>th</sup>-century conceptions of their use and role in medieval society. Even when more recent literature is employed, it is often inappropriate for the point it is meant to substantiate. This includes the claim that the majority of the Basques in the Iberian Peninsula in the 8<sup>th</sup> century followed their »original religion« rather than Christianity or Islam, backed up by a reference to a throwaway statement in a general history book on medieval Navarre from the 1980s (p. 33).

The historiography of a subject that has been studied for a long time can be restrictive, and a new perspective can be valuable, particularly when it addresses previously underappreciated sources. One of the problems with previous accounts of the battle is that they follow the Frankish perspective of events. Irujo promises to remedy this by employing »Arabic sources« and »the Basque tradition« (p. 13). Unfortunately, neither of these features prominently in the book, and when they appear they are used in an unclear manner. Arabic material is sparsely employed, often via secondary literature, or through unsourced allusions to »the Arabic chronicles«. What Arabic history does appear is generally confused, so that the leading Andalusī 'Abd al-Karīm becomes both »'Abd al-Krim« and »'Abdul al-Karim«, with separate index entries. Basque material appears only in the chapter on reception, with the first English translation of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century »Song of Altabizkar« (p. 149–151) from Basque. Even this is potentially questionable, as ft. 37 appears to state that the text was originally composed in French and first translated into English in 1858. At the very least this is confusing, and at worst it undermines Irujo's claims that this is a Basque perspective being introduced to an Anglophone audience for the first time.

The lack of real Arabic or Basque material is disappointing but not a disaster, because the Latin sources offer by far the fullest account of the campaign of 778. Irujo's dependence upon them does result in a very old-fashioned narrative, in which the Franks are the protagonists, which is a problem in a book that sells itself on providing an alternative perspective. The author's sympathies are clearly with the Basques, with Charlemagne's regime being portrayed as a proto-totalitarian state. Despite this, we spend far more time within the Carolingian world than we do beyond it, with figures based in the Iberian Peninsula primarily reacting to decisions made by Charlemagne rather than acting as political



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen  
Historischen Institut Paris |  
publiée par l'Institut historique  
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous  
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

agents in their own right. As a consequence, the book offers only the haziest depiction of the politics of al-Andalus, while making vague reference to a free Vasconia mostly in the context of Charlemagne's desire to crush it.

This Frankish focus is even more of an issue because of Irujo's dubious understanding of the Carolingian empire, which is partly a consequence of his heavy dependence on very late material. A 15<sup>th</sup>-century verse paraphrase of Vegetius, »Knyghthode and Bataile«, is frequently cited as evidence for Carolingian armies. That Pamplona resisted the Carolingian army for some time is proved by the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Pseudo-Turpin »Historia Caroli Magni« and images on the *Karlsschrein* (p. 59). Particularly difficult are the places where he allows these late sources to dictate the shape of his argument. This includes an extended discussion of whether Roland was a relative of Charlemagne's prompted by nothing more than the »Chanson de Roland« (p. 155–156) which concludes »it appears uncertain whether Charlemagne was either the uncle or the father of Roland«, something that no contemporary source offers any support for.

Even when the author is using sources from the Carolingian period, he seems to have limited understanding of how the sources relate to one another, or of the way they were shaped by genre and context, all of which matter for their evidentiary value. A telling example is his belief that the text he knows as the »Einhardi Fuldenses Annales« are a different and separate source from the »Annales regni Francorum«, rather than two different modern editions of the same text. Irujo is also prone to piling up lists of texts as evidence without considering their value as independent witnesses. The anonymous Saxon Poet is cited with no discussion of their dependence on earlier material or how the genre of poetry might shape their work. A recurring feature of the book is the author rightly declaring something inadmissible as evidence, but then using it anyway. The number of Saxons slaughtered at Verden in 774 is simultaneously unreliable but also valuable for estimating the size of Saxon and therefore Frankish armies (p. 47 ft. 47).

Zooming in further, the usage of these sources is frequently sloppy, something this reviewer realised on p. 16 when they were informed that Charlemagne defeated Hunald II of Aquitaine in 770. Not only did this happen 769, but following Irujo's own citation would give you the correct date. Such inaccuracies run throughout the book, raising severe questions about the reliability of the many important statements that receive no footnote at all. More troubling are places where the author plays fast and loose with the sources. Irujo argues that Einhard failed to mention the ambush at Roncesvalles in his biography of Charlemagne by citing the line »Charlemagne crossed the Pyrenees, obtained the capitulation of all places and castles that stood in his way, and returned with his army safe and unharmed« (p. 71), but stops where Einhard continues »except that on his return, in the heights of those very Pyrenees, it happened that he had a brief taste of Basque

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

DOI:  
[10.11588/frrec.2022.2.89153](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2022.2.89153)

Seite | page 3



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen  
Historischen Institut Paris |  
publiée par l'Institut historique  
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous  
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

treachery«. Einhard then describes the ambush. It stretches this reviewer's charity to attribute this lapse to incompetence.

All of these problems manifest with the core argument of the book, which is that Charlemagne's invasion was primarily targeted at the Basques with the intention of establishing a *Marca Hispanica*. His defeat at Rencesvals not only threw the empire into disarray, but in the long run forced him to settle for an inferior »Gothic March«. There is a lot that is interesting about this thesis, but the problems laid out above in this review make it impossible to assess clearly. The heavy Carolingian focus of the book makes it hard to understand who the Basques were, how they might relate to the Gascons or Aquitanians and why a war against them would require one to get involved in Andalusí politics or march on Zaragoza.

Likewise, a lack of understanding of the Frankish world and its sources leads Irujo to repeatedly (and confusingly) claim that the idea of a Spanish March dependent upon the Carolingians died in 778 (p. 126) or in 824 (p. 137), something that would have been news to the people who kept using the term to describe the region throughout the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Irujo may have been better equipped to navigate this terrain had he made use of recent work on the frontier in the early medieval Iberian Peninsula by historians such as Eduardo Manzano Moreno, Cullen Chandler or Jonathan Jarrett, to name just some of a large body of scholarship available in English.

The book is not entirely without merit. Irujo draws upon ten years of walking the terrain of the campaign, later thanking the »Rangers of the Government of Navarre« for their help (p. 71). His locating of the ambush is convincing and helps explain the course of the battle. His emphasis on the importance of the Iberian Peninsula for Charlemagne's reign is also well taken. This makes it all the more frustrating that because of the flaws discussed above, this book cannot be recommended as an antidote to the subject's relative neglect in recent scholarship. Anglophone readers are probably still best served by the work of Roger Collins, but a new account, which combines an understanding of the politics of the peoples on both sides of the Pyrenees, is still to be desired.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen  
Historischen Institut Paris |  
publiée par l'Institut historique  
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous  
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)