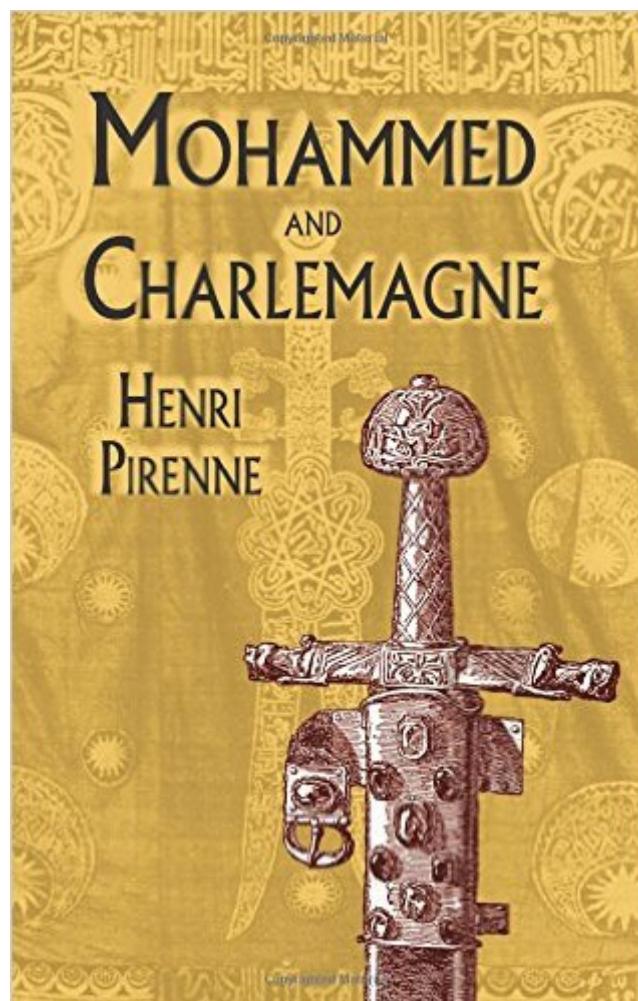


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Mohammed And Charlemagne



Synopsis

The final work of the great Belgian historian Henri Pirenne, this remarkable classic â " published after his death â " offers a revolutionary perspective on how Europe under the influence of a Roman Empire centered in Constantinople evolved into the Europe of Charlemagne and the Middle Ages. Departing from the standard view that Germanic invasions obliterated the Roman Empire, Pirenne advances the radical new thesis that "the cause of the break with the tradition of antiquity was the rapid and unexpected advance of Islam," an event of historical proportions that prevented the western Mediterranean from being what it had always been: a thoroughfare of commerce and thought. It became instead what Pirenne refers to as "a Musulman lake," thereby causing "the axis of life [to shift] northwards from the Mediterranean" for the first time in history. Brilliant and controversial, this volume garnered these words of praise from the critics: "It is a dull reader indeed who does not recognize the light of genius in the pages of this book, without doubt a landmark in contemporary historiography." â " G. C. Boyce, Annals of the American Academy. "â | Pirenne's crowning triumph. The fire of his genius, the boldness of his mind, his profound learning and vivid pen make this volume pleasant reading." â " Commonweal. "â | an important, seminal book, worthy to close one of the most distinguished careers in European scholarship." â " Saturday Review of Literature. Pirenne's masterly study is essential reading for history students, medievalists, and general readers with an interest in the decline of the Roman Empire and the beginnings of the Middle Ages.

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Customer Reviews

Belgian historian Henri Pirenne's thesis, that the Mediterranean World of Antiquity was broken by the rise of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries and not by the Germanic invaders of the fifth and sixth centuries has been subject to endless criticism, debate and revision since Mohammed and Charlemagne was first published in Europe in 1937. In Pirenne's view, the conquest of the eastern and southern coasts of the Mediterranean, of Spain, and of the important islands had shut off the movement of world trade which had flourished during the late Roman times. The result of this closure returned western Europe to an earlier "natural" and rural economic system, which set in motion a shifting of the balance of power in Europe from the Mediterranean region to the north. Although by the time Mohammed and Charlemagne was published the theory that Rome had collapsed suddenly under the impact of the immense German invasions during the fifth century was being qualified, it was Pirenne's theory on the end of the Ancient World and the beginning of the Middle Ages that upset traditional historical conceptions. He advanced the thesis that the Ancient World ended only after the Arab invasions of the seventh and eighth centuries had swept around the coasts of Mediterranean and had converted it into a Moslem lake on which, as one Arab writer said, the Christians could no longer "float a plank." This, Pirenne argued, had been accomplished by the last quarter of the eighth century and had destroyed the essential unity of the Roman Empire. For centuries the Mediterranean had been a "Roman lake" the Mare Nostrum of the Romans which held the great imperial structure together: Rome's trade and commerce, its military and naval might, the important exchange of ideas.

This magnificent 284 page piece of scholarship was first published in English in 1939 by W.W. Norton, and reprinted more than a dozen times afterwards. My copy, published by Meridian and Barnes and Noble in October 1961, is the sixth Meridian printed after its first 1957 issue of the book. But the book had more than a dozen publications in French as well. The Meridian edition was translated "by Bernard Miall from the French of the 10th edition published by Librairie Felix Alcan in Paris and Nouvelle Societe d'Editions Brussels. The author concluded that the Germanic invasions did not destroy the unity of the ancient world or the Mediterranean. By the 5th Century, there was still a Roman culture, even without an Emperor in the West. The regions by the sea had preserved that culture, and spawned the innovations that followed--monasticism, Christian conversion of the Anglo-Saxons and so on. Moreover, much of this culture emanated from Constantinople, which remained, in the year 600, the center of the world. But "the break with the tradition of antiquity" was caused by "the rapid and unexpected advance of Islam." The result was "the final separation of East from West, and the end of the Mediterranean unity." Whereas before, Africa and Spain had been

part of the Western community, Islam attracted them to "the orbit of Baghdad." The root of the change was "another religion, and an entirely different culture. The Western Mediterranean, having become a Musulman lake, was no longer [the] thoroughfare of commerce and of thought" it had always been before.

Henri Pirenne's legacy lies in his famous thesis, published posthumously in 1937 as "Mohammed and Charlemagne" (and stated earlier in numerous articles): namely, that whereas the Germanic invasions of the IV and V century broke the political unity of the Mediterranean world, they did not break its cultural and economic unity. The ancient world kept hugging the coastline 'like frogs around a pond' and the East reasserted its supremacy over the West. All this changed when the Islamic invasions conquered Northern Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, closing the commercial and cultural exchanges between the two halves of the Roman empire and capturing the two most vibrant centres of commerce and culture (especially, theological culture) of the Byzantine empire: Syria and Egypt, whose religious separatism had been a constant worry for the Eastern Roman emperors. As a consequence, the center of gravity of the European economy shifted to the more agrarian and less romanized regions around the Rhine (Charlemagne's capital is in Aix-La-Chapelle, nowadays Aachen) while the cities of Italy and Southern France decayed. It is this which eventually led to the emergence of a diversified Western European culture as opposed to the Middle East and, eventually, Eastern (Orthodox) Europe. And therefore Charlemagne could never have existed without Mohammed. However, this is not the whole story. As Dennett and Lopez noted, lack of Oriental merchandise in Merovingian lists may not necessarily be due to a dearth of imports but to events on the supply side and most importantly to the opening of the Russian route to Baghdad, as Scandinavian coin hoards show (e.g., Bohlin and Riising).

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