



1992

**Review Essay: Robert Levine, trans., *France before Charlemagne: A Translation from the Grandes Chroniques***

Harry Rosenberg  
Colorado State University-Fort Collins

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Rosenberg, Harry (1992) "Review Essay: Robert Levine, trans., *France before Charlemagne: A Translation from the Grandes Chroniques*," *Quidditas*: Vol. 13 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol13/iss1/8>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

Tharaud also embeds some pertinent historical and literary information in the text itself, as for instance in chapter 7, "The Saga of Finn," to provide greater narrative continuity. He justifies this integrative and interpretative method as a clarification of the "basic Anglo-Saxon values that pervade the poem" (11), a method that can elucidate larger contexts, as he purports it does in his elaboration of a hint in the scene between Wealhtheow and Beowulf. Tharaud emphasizes words and deeds, which he considers the heart of heroic society and a theme centralized in the feast after the Grendel fight. While this method of elaboration generally works well, Tharaud is occasionally enigmatic. For instance, he exempts Beowulf from the contradictions inherent in heroic society and labels him "superhuman" and "semidivine" (21), and he fails to clarify fully what he means by the "moral forcefulness of the original poem" and how the "Anglo-Saxon moral" (30) influence is still evident in our modern culture.

These few negatives, decidedly the by-products of Tharaud's restrictive focus, do not mar an otherwise commendable translation, the appeal of which is enhanced by the eight stark, vaguely cubist lithographs by Rockwell Kent. Tharaud's choice of Kent is both sagacious and reflective of his approach to the poem, since Kent expresses in his art a "story telling quality" (176) that complements the text. Casual readers will be well served by the art and simplicity of this tasteful book.

Anita Obermeier  
Arizona State University

Robert Levine, trans., *France before Charlemagne: A Translation from the Grandes Chroniques*, Studies in French Civilization 3, Edwin Mellen Press, 1990, 287 pp., \$89.95.

The *Grandes Chroniques* is primarily an eleventh-century version of the fundamental chronicle of Merovingian Gaul, Gregory of Tours's so-called *History of the Franks* (Gregory was content to label his work *Libri decem historiae*) plus the supplementary chronicle completed at the juncture of the Merovingian and Carolingian eras, the *Liber historiae Francorum*.

Robert Levine's Introduction to the translation is vital for appreciating the significance of the relationship between "history" and "literature," which Levine discusses concisely. Levine's short introduction provides almost all of the historical and literary analysis to be found in this volume, since the 320 footnotes that accompany the translation are overwhelmingly

brief statements of fact. Had Levine provided more historical and literary analysis he could have enhanced the value of his labors for the student and nonspecialist.

The major rewrite of these early Merovingian chronicles was done by Aimon of Fleury in the eleventh century. Levine calls attention to the changes Aimon made in his Latin version in order to make this history more palatable to those living under Capetian rule. This process was carried a step further by "Primat," who prepared a French version in the thirteenth century. Levine's few pages (6-9), on the literary relationship among these several texts are crucial, for, according to him, this literary history provides "a vivid introduction to medieval historiography" (9).

The translation is based on the standard modern critical edition of the *Grandes Chroniques* by Jules Viard, who figures prominently throughout the translation because "most of the footnotes are taken from Viard" (10). It is to be regretted that there is no indication in these 320 footnotes as to what is Viard and what is Levine (with an exception of 113 n. 135).

The translation itself reads very well. Those who will use this translation must, however, be very conscious of the "historical" and "literary" issues discussed in Levine's introductory remarks. Properly understood, this translation can aid one to better understand medieval France.

Harry Rosenberg

Colorado State University—Fort Collins

J. R. S. Phillips, *The Medieval Expansion of Europe*, Oxford University Press, 1988, 320 pp., maps, biblio., \$15.95.

The frontiers of European overseas expansion are steadily being pushed back. Unlike Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's *Before Columbus* (reviewed in *JRMMRA* 10 [1989], 105-6), which focuses on exploration and colonization in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Islands—the Canaries in particular—J. R. S. Phillips's *The Medieval Expansion of Europe* takes a broader look at European expansion from ancient times to the fifteenth century. Indeed, his coverage is almost global as he ranges from the classical geographers and cosmographers who initiated the medieval fascination with Asia, and the early expansion of north African trade, to the eleventh-century Norse wanderers as far as North America.

The author's threefold objectives are to examine the nature and extent of relations between western Europe and the three continents of