PREFACE

Does the world really need another book about Charles V, ruler of Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, half of Italy, and much of central and south America? The emperor himself composed his memoirs; hundreds of biographies of him have appeared in dozens of languages; WorldCat lists over 500 books published so far this century with 'Charles V' in the title. Nevertheless, no work is ever perfect. The emperor composed his triumphalist autobiography in 1550, while at the height of his powers, and several of the 'lives' are partisan (even some nineteenth- and twentieth-century biographers used his achievements for ideological ends).

Charles's modern biographers belong to one of two tribes: those who complain that their subject left too few records to allow the reconstruction of an accurate portrait, and those who protest that he left too many. In 2003, Scott Dixon, a member of the first tribe, declared that 'Charles left us little trace in the records of what he was really like . . . Of the many thousands of letters dispatched from his desk, very few make any mention of personal details.' The following year, Harald Kleinschmidt made a similar claim: 'There is an abundance of texts bearing Charles's name. But he never saw most of these and among the minority of letters that he did write with his own hand are some which do not reflect his own thoughts but those of his advisers.'[1]

Karl Brandi, author of a two-volume biography of Charles, belonged to the second tribe. 'Not for many centuries,' he wrote in 1937, 'could any prince compare with him in the number of revealing documents which he left behind.' A few years later, Federico Chabod went even further and claimed that 'Charles V left us more holograph documents than any other ruler in History.' In 1966, Fernand Braudel argued that previous historians failed to reconstruct Charles's 'thoughts, his temperament and his character' mainly because the surviving sources are too abundant. 'Looking for the emperor's personality amid the mass of papers,' he concluded, 'is like looking for a needle in a haystack.' In 2002, Wim Blockmans concurred: 'The body

of source material' concerning the emperor 'is so massive, it is impossible to survey the whole of it'.[2]

Impossible? Certainly, the surviving sources are 'massive'. Charles signed his first letter at age four (Pl. 2), and by the time he died he had signed more than 100,000 documents in Dutch, French, German, Italian, Latin and Spanish, adding a holograph postscript to several of them. His holograph letters (those written entirely with his own hand in French, Spanish and occasionally German) cover thousands of folios. Charles's epistolary output survives in archives and libraries all over Europe, in part because he spent so much of his reign on the move. He spent almost half his life (over 10,000 days) in the Low Countries and almost one-third (over 6,500 days) in Spain; he spent more than 3,000 days in Germany and almost 1,000 in Italy. He visited France four times (195 days), and north Africa and England twice each (99 and 44 days respectively). He created a documentary trail in almost every place he went. He eludes historians only on the 260 days he spent at sea, travelling between his dominions.[3]

Although he never crossed the Atlantic, Charles also left a documentary mark on his American dominions. The viceroy of Mexico issued almost 1,500 orders in the emperor's name in 1542 and 1543 alone, many of them in response to a direct imperial order. Some of his warrants (*cédulas reales*) gained iconic status because they legalized new Mexica settlements (*altepetl*) and became coveted foundational documents of which copies were still made in the 1990s. Moreover, since 'in Pre-Hispanic Mexico, the founding of the various *altepetl* took place under the will and protection of the gods', Charles acquired an honoured place among the panoply of deities in several of the communities he founded.[4]

The emperor strove to achieve immortality in more conventional ways. He sat for portraits, sponsored histories, commissioned works of art, built palaces, and appeared in propaganda spectacles (notably urban 'entries': Pl. 7). Mass-produced images of him appeared on coins, medals, ceramics and even draughts counters (Pl. 30), as well as in books and broadsheets. Musicians composed works to celebrate his successes (the battle of Pavia; the imperial coronation) and sometimes his setbacks (the death of his wife). An international corps of poets, painters, sculptors, glaziers, printers, weavers, jewellers, historians, armourers and scribes strove to project an approved image. The emperor followed the advice of Baldassare Castiglione's study of etiquette, *The Courtier* (one of Charles's favourite books, published while the author was ambassador at the imperial court and translated into Spanish at Charles's command): he did everything – walking, riding, fighting, dancing, speaking – with one eye on his audience.[5] He would have been appalled that in the nine-

teenth century the Spanish government opened his tomb and exposed his naked mummified corpse as a tourist attraction, and that some visitors made drawings while others took photographs (Pl. 39). One bribed a guard to detach the tip of one of his fingers as a souvenir – although this vandalism belatedly proved a boon because forensic examination of the detached digit, now kept in a special receptacle, provided two pieces of important medical evidence: the emperor had suffered from chronic gout, just as he always complained, and he was killed relatively swiftly by a double dose of malaria (Appendix II).

Arma virumque cano ('I sing of arms and a man'): in an important article about the perils associated with writing the life of the emperor, Heinrich Lutz used the opening words of Virgil's *Aeneid* (a text familiar to Charles) to underline the need for his biographers to focus on those matters that absorbed his time, energy and resources – above all on war and preparing for war, both because hostilities took up so much of Charles's reign and because contemporaries noted that he was 'happiest on campaign and with his army'. Lutz argued that other developments, even the Renaissance and the Reformation, should appear only as and when they mattered to Charles, and that they must always be viewed through his eyes.[6]

Bearing in mind Lutz's strictures, this biography deploys the available sources, from documents to digits, to illuminate three key issues:

- *How* Charles took the crucial decisions that created, preserved and expanded the world's first and most enduring transatlantic empire.
- *Whether* Charles's policy failures arose from structural faults or from personal shortcomings: could a monarch with superior political skills have done better, or had circumstances created a polity too big for its own good and impossible to defend? In modern parlance, does agent or structure explain the failure to pass on his empire intact?
- *What* was it like to be Charles? While writing about one of Charles's role models, Alexander the Great, Plutarch (one of Charles's favourite authors) noted that 'The most glorious exploits do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or vice in men: sometimes a matter of less moment, an expression or a jest, informs us better of their characters and inclinations.' This biography draws on many such unscripted but revealing episodes.[7]

Inevitably, the available sources are uneven. Like every other human being, Charles slept, ate, drank and performed other bodily functions every day,

but they left a documentary trace only when they caused a problem (he could not sleep; he vomited; he excreted 'hot piss'; the pain from his haemorrhoids 'made him cry like a baby'). He also spent part of every day at prayer, he regularly attended church services, and each Holy Week he secluded himself in a monastery where he refused to transact any public business – but historians have no idea what else he did at these quiet times unless something unusual happened (he fainted during a church service and lay unconscious for over an hour; he retired to pray or confess at an unusual time, such as just before or just after making an important decision).

Moreover, as Charles lamented in the confidential instructions he composed for his son and heir in 1543, some political decisions 'are so impenetrable and uncertain that I do not know how to describe them to you' because 'they are full of confusions and contradictions'.[8] He made at least one effort to clarify everything. In November 1552 his valet Guillaume van Male confided to a colleague that the emperor had just ordered him to:

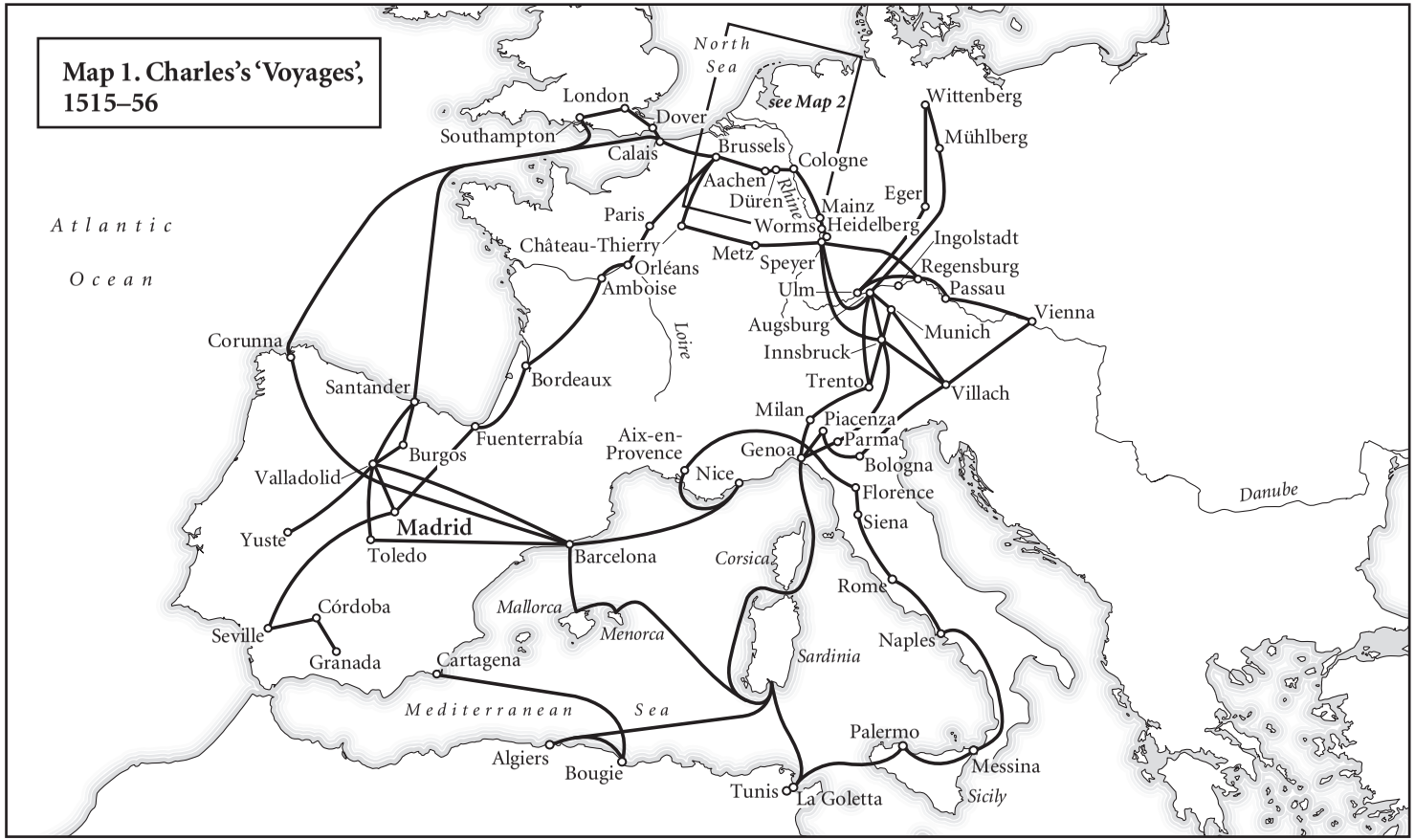
> . . . close the doors to his chambers and made me promise to maintain the utmost secrecy about the things he was about to tell me . . . He held back nothing. I was stunned to learn what he told me. Even now I shudder when I think of it and would rather die than tell anybody but you. Now I can write freely because the emperor sleeps, it is the dead of night, and everyone else has left.

'It will take a long time to share all the details with you,' van Male continued tantalizingly, because the emperor had just 'told me everything that ever happened in his life', and 'even provided me with a handwritten paper that listed all his past misdeeds', including 'many things he should have handled differently, either because he forgot something or because he later made changes'. Unfortunately for historians, at this point sleep overcame van Male too, and he laid down his quill. If he committed 'all the details' to paper at some later date, then his letter (like the emperor's handwritten list of misdeeds) has perished.[9]

Nevertheless, enough sources have survived to resolve many of the 'confusions and contradictions' in Charles's life. Apart from the mountain of his own surviving correspondence, the emperor attracted the attention of a large number of people: friends and foes alike wrote more about him than about any of his contemporaries, even Martin Luther. From his birth until his abdication numerous foreign diplomats observed and reported his every action, word and gesture; and a dozen or more eyewitnesses described major

public events (such as his coronation in Bologna in 1530 and his abdication in Brussels in 1555). Records multiplied whenever the emperor travelled by land – and over the course of his reign he stayed in over 1,000 different places, from Wittenberg to Seville and from London to Algiers (Map 1) – so that it is sometimes possible to reconstruct his movements hour by hour.[10] Charles was never alone. Courtiers and diplomats accompanied him on even his loneliest journeys, including his first weeks in Spain in 1517 when he hiked across the Picos de Europa to claim his inheritance, sleeping in hovels surrounded by livestock and beset by bears; and again during his flight across the Alps in 1552 to escape capture by his German subjects, when his staff had to commandeer emergency bed linen for him in remote villages. He was closely observed even after he retired to the small palace attached to the monastery at Yuste, in Spain's Gredos mountains. At least two monks kept a journal in which their august guest played a starring role; virtually every day his courtiers recorded what their master had said and done; and twenty eyewitnesses provided sworn testimony about what they had seen and heard as the emperor lay dying. Bizarrely, Charles's last days are the best-known period of his entire life.

'My God, how does one write a Biography? Tell me,' Virginia Woolf asked a friend (and fellow biographer) in 1938. 'How can one deal with facts – so many and so many and so many?'[11] Four centuries earlier the Spanish Humanist Juan Páez de Castro, whom Charles had commissioned to write 'the life of Your Majesty', wrestled with the same dilemma. Before he started work, Páez de Castro drew up an outline that explained to Charles how he planned to deal with 'so many facts'. First, he set out his own credentials: he claimed fluency in six languages (including Chaldean) and knowledge of law, natural history and mathematics. Next, 'since writing is not just the product of ingenuity or invention but also of work and effort to assemble the materials that will be written about, it is necessary to seek them out'; and so Páez de Castro planned to visit every place 'that has seen the banners of Your Majesty, in order to provide the lustre that I desire for this work'. At each location he would 'consult venerable and diligent people; read the inscriptions on public monuments and graves; dig into the old registers kept by notaries, where many things that make up history are found; and copy all previous histories, old and new, by good and bad authors'. Finally, 'it will be necessary to consult Your Majesty about many things, to find out the rationale' for controversial decisions. It was an excellent outline, but Charles died before Páez de Castro could interview him, and its author died before he had completed any part of his biography.[12]



In his abdication speech in Brussels in 1555, Charles reminded his listeners that he had undertaken forty 'voyages' on their behalf. He would make one more, his last, to the convent of Yuste in Spain, making him the most-travelled monarch of early modern Europe.
Source: de Boom, 'Voyage', pull-out

This volume presents Charles's life in four chronological sections separated by 'portraits' of how he appeared to his contemporaries at critical moments: in 1517, when he left the Netherlands for the first time; in 1532, when he reached full maturity; and in 1548, when he attained the height of his power. The only exception is a thematic chapter on 'The Taming of America'. Charles, the first European to rule significant parts of the Americas, developed a keen interest in the continent: although he focused primarily on how best to make the resources of the New World pay for his endeavours in the Old, the emperor also displayed lasting interest in its flora, its fauna and its people, both natives and newcomers. In particular, he sought to provide his native subjects with spiritual guidance and material security. He saw this as an issue that affected his 'royal conscience' because 'when he found out how all the native inhabitants of Hispaniola and Cuba, and the other [Caribbean] islands had died through being sent to the mines, he became convinced that he would go to Hell if he permitted the practice to continue'.[13] Few Netherlanders of his day cared about America – even Erasmus 'hardly let an allusion to the New World pass his pen' – and Charles was the only sixteenth-century ruler to make a principled stand for the rights of native Americans. His legislation 'long continued to be a powerful break on the oppression of native Americans'. Charles's New World initiatives therefore merit detailed attention.[14]

Páez de Castro, too, intended to include Charles's New World achievements in his biography, but he planned to omit some other matters. Although he believed that historians should 'condemn and denigrate the bad, so that nothing similar should take place in future', as well as 'exalt and praise the good to encourage repetition', he distinguished between 'the details that are proper to history and those that, without compromising the truth, should remain in the author's inkwell'.[15] For better or worse, few details about the emperor remain in my own inkwell. On the personal level, I have exalted and praised his facility with languages (he eventually mastered Italian and Spanish as well as his native French, and could speak some Dutch and German); his prowess in marksmanship and horsemanship; and his personal courage when commanding troops under fire. He also knew how to foster loyalty and affection. According to a diplomat in 1531, Charles addressed a crowd 'in such a moving and gentle way that it almost made the audience weep' and by the time he had finished, his hearers 'were of one mind, as if they had become his slaves'; when he died, the sorrowing members of his entourage 'gave great cries, hit their faces and butted their heads on the walls'; and a few years later, Ferdinand told a confidant that 'I loved and revered the emperor as if he had been my father'.[16]

As for 'condemning and denigrating the bad', I have documented how Charles falsely denied that he had approved in advance the attack on Rome and capture of Pope Clement in 1527; how he lied about the murder of two French diplomats, Fregoso and Rincón, in 1541; and how he reneged on a solemn promise to marry his son Philip to a Portuguese princess in 1553. In some cases, Charles vehemently, publicly and repeatedly denied that he had lied (as in 1527 and 1541); in other cases, he simply refused to discuss his reprehensible conduct (when a Portuguese envoy came to protest the repudiation of the princess in 1554, 'we told him what was necessary, without wishing to justify or discuss the matter further, because when these matters are past it is best to dissimulate').[17] Charles could also behave badly in private. When he discovered in 1517 that his older sister Eleanor was in love with a courtier he forced her to appear before a notary and make a formal deposition renouncing her lover and promising to obey her brother in all things; the following year he forced her to marry an uncle more than twice her age. In 1530 he ordered that Tadea, one of his three illegitimate daughters, should receive a permanent 'mark on her right leg below the knee' (at best a tattoo, at worst a brand mark); and three years later he negotiated a marriage contract between his 11-year-old niece Christina of Denmark and a man four times her age, with the right to consummate the union immediately. Most shameful of all, Charles abused his mother Queen Joanna. He kept her confined and under guard until her death in 1555, and for some years he surrounded her with a fictional world, full of fake facts (such as insisting long after the death of her father, King Ferdinand, that he still lived). Moreover, on his visits to Joanna, Charles plundered her tapestries, jewels, books, silver goods and even liturgical vestments, which he recycled as wedding gifts for his sister and his wife, filling the empty chests with bricks of equivalent weight, hoping that his mother would not notice that he had robbed her until after he left.

These are perplexing paradoxes, and I have tried to understand them by establishing *how* Charles came to act as he did, before studying *why*. This methodological decision has some important consequences. As Christopher Clark observed in the preface to *The sleepwalkers*, his breathtaking study of the origins of the First World War:

> Questions of why and how are logically inseparable, but they lead us in different directions. The question of *how* invites us to look closely at the sequences of interactions that produced certain outcomes. By contrast the question of *why* invites us to go in search of remote and categorical

> causes . . . The why approach brings a certain analytical clarity, but it also has a distorting effect, because it creates the illusion of a steadily building causal pressure; the factors pile up on top of each other pushing down on the events; political actors become mere executors of forces long established and beyond their control.

Like Clark, I have therefore tried 'to let the *why* answers grow, as it were, out of the *how* answers, rather than the other way round', even though asking 'how' inevitably privileges agency and contingency whereas asking 'why' foregrounds structures and continuities.[18]

To understand and explain how Charles behaved, like Páez de Castro I have learned several languages (though not Chaldean) and studied other disciplines (though not law, natural history or mathematics); I have visited the places 'that saw his banners' (and especially those that received his archives); I have read most 'previous histories, old and new, by good and bad authors'; and I have ransacked written records. Although I was unable to consult His Majesty in person 'about many things, to find out the rationale', more than enough material survives to allow readers to choose whether to believe those who revered the emperor or those who reviled him.

Should we side with Luis Quijada, who had known the emperor for over twenty years and after he watched him die declared him 'the greatest man that has ever lived'; and with Francisco de Borja, who asserted that when he spoke with Charles he spoke with God? Or should we believe Pope Paul III who claimed 'Your Majesty is an ingrate who only remembers his friends when he needs them'; and the French ambassador who echoed that 'If you examine the matter closely, you will find that the emperor has never cared for anyone, except insofar as he can make use of them'?[19] Do we join Gustave Bergenroth, who spent a decade in the archives of western Europe transcribing some 18,000 pages of documents by and about Charles, and rejoice as we watch the emperor 'break down, piece by piece . . . politically, morally, bodily, until he finishes his miserable life in his miserable retirement at Yuste', and deem his life 'one of the greatest tragedies ever enacted'? Or do we endorse the verdict of Karl Brandi, one of the few scholars to have read more documents than Bergenroth by and about the emperor, that he 'was a man, with the daily weaknesses and caprices of his kind, yet in the permanent motives of his desire, in the courage of his convictions, something more than a man, a great figure in the history of the world'?[20] Is there more to exalt than to denigrate about Charles V? Does the world really need another book about him? Gentle reader: the decision is yours.