
Charlemagne, Patron of Scholars: Examining the Role of Carolingian Learning and the Motives Behind Einhard's Portrayal of the Emperor

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The Carolingian Renaissance fostered a renewed interest in learning and education. The Carolingian kings used scholarship as a means of enhancing the administration of their realms, as well as improving the Christian faith. This is alluded to throughout Einhard's (d.840) *Life of Charlemagne* ("Charles the Great"). Being a court scholar, and later a lay abbot, Einhard was indebted to the system that allowed his ascension to such a high status. Thus, he chose to emphasize Charlemagne's (d. 814) intellectual qualities and his patronage of scholars, characterizing him as a man who "avidly pursued the liberal arts and greatly honored those teachers whom he deeply respected."¹ Einhard reveals the administrative and religious roles that education played in Carolingian society. His portrayal of Charlemagne is an expression of gratitude for the system the king created.

Learning was crucial to the Carolingian administration. As such, Charlemagne filled his court with numerous scholars, including Einhard.² The biographer writes of some of these men, including Peter of Pisa and Alcuin of Britain.³ Alcuin (d. 804) was particularly central to the development of education at Charlemagne's Palace School.⁴ His curriculum consisted of the *trivium*: grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, and the *quadrivium*: geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music.⁵ This coincides with Einhard's description of the tutelage Alcuin gave to the king. Einhard writes, "[Charles] invested a great deal of time and effort studying rhetoric, dialectic, and particularly astronomy with him [Alcuin]. He learned the art of calculation [arithmetic] and with deep purpose and great curiosity investigated the movement of the stars."⁶ Even though this level of attention was reserved for the king and his family, other aristocrats were also schooled, albeit in a more pragmatic fashion.⁷ Peter Munz explains that Charles wanted to encourage young men to come and be educated at his court.⁸ His aim was to "build up something like an Imperial staff of administrators."⁹ Charlemagne certainly thought it advantageous to increase the level of education within his realm.

Being surrounded by educated people had practical benefits for administration. As in the Roman Empire, rhetoric and language were valuable skills for an administrator. According to

¹ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, trans. Paul Edward Dutton, in *Charlemagne's Courtier*, ed. Paul Edward Dutton, Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 25.

² Rosamond McKitterick, The Carolingian Renaissance of Culture and Learning," in *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Joanna Story (New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 157.

³ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 25.

⁴ Peter Munz, *Life in the Age of Charlemagne*, European Life Series (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), 117.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 25.

⁷ M. M. Hildebrandt, *The External School in Carolingian Society*, Education and Society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance (New York: E. J. Brill, 1992), 59.

⁸ Munz, *Life in the Age of Charlemagne*, 123-124.

⁹ Ibid.

Einhard, Charles was fluent in Latin and was at least able to understand Greek.¹⁰ In addition to this he was also described as a talented orator.¹¹ Einhard writes, "[Charles] was a gifted and ready speaker, able to express clearly whatever he wished to say."¹² These skills likely helped Charlemagne perform his official duties more effectively. The Carolingians also benefitted from having educated agents and subjects. Bailiffs were expected to submit regular reports, and tenants were seemingly responsible for making their own returns.¹³ The latter point, as Nelson observes, assumes that basic numeracy and literacy were reasonably common.¹⁴ If the tenant was unable to fulfill this duty, the bailiff or another was supposed to do it in their stead.¹⁵ Likewise, illiterate bailiffs were expected to procure a notary.¹⁶ Educated noble women also appear to have had a role in Frankish society.¹⁷ The education that women received would have primarily focused on the "household arts" and the Christian faith.¹⁸ Indeed, Einhard recounts that Charlemagne "ordered his daughters to learn how to work with wool, how to spin it and weave it, so that they might not grow dull from inactivity and [instead might] learn to value work and virtuous activity."¹⁹ Although the princesses did receive the same liberal arts education as the princes, there was a focus on household tasks.²⁰ Valerie Garver explains, "these categories of knowledge would have aided women domestically, particularly in raising children, running an estate, administering a convent, producing and keeping track of daily necessities such as textiles, and managing resources over which they had control."²¹ Thus, being educated greatly helped aristocratic women carry out daily functions. This was a powerful resource for the Carolingians. The proliferation of knowledge was beneficial for the Carolingian administration.

According to Einhard, Charles also personally sought to unify aspects of the Frankish state in a learned fashion. For example, the scholar describes how he "gave names to the months, since before then the Franks were used to referring to them by a mix of Latin and Germanic names."²² He also named eight additional winds, started to write a grammar of his native Frankish, and had old Germanic poems preserved in writing.²³ The ruler also sought to update the laws of his realm.²⁴ Einhard writes:

After assuming the Imperial title, [Charles] realized that there were many deficiencies in the laws of his own people, for the Franks have two sets of laws that differ tremendously at a number of points. He decided, therefore, to fill in what was lacking, to reconcile the disagreements, and also to set right what was bad and wrongly expressed.²⁵

¹⁰ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 25.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Janet L. Nelson, "Literacy in the Carolingian Government," in *The Frankish World, 750-900*, ed. Janet L. Nelson (Rio Grande, Ohio: Hambledon Press, 1996), 14-15.

¹⁴ Nelson, "Literacy in the Carolingian Government," 15.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Valerie L. Garver, "Learned Women? Liutberga and the Instruction of Carolingian Women," ed. Patrick Wormald and Janet L. Nelson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 122-123.

¹⁸ Ibid., 122.

¹⁹ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 19.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Garver, "Learned Women?," 122.

²² Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 29.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

However, these efforts ultimately failed as "he did nothing about this than to add a few items to these laws, but even those were left in an imperfect state."²⁶ In spite of this, Charlemagne was able to codify the laws of his people.²⁷ Einhard attests that the emperor had the laws of the Franks compiled and recorded.²⁸ Thus, through scholarship, Charlemagne was personally able to improve some facets of his government.

The connection between Carolingian scholarship and Roman Catholicism cannot be understated. Intellectualism centred around religious institutions as it had for centuries. However, Charlemagne sought to enact a "legislative programme for reform and renewal within the Frankish church and society."²⁹ Einhard takes care to highlight his lord's "great piety and devotion" to Christianity.³⁰ The biographer hints at Charles' mentality of reform and improvement when he writes that "he very carefully corrected the way in which the lessons were read and the psalms sung, for he was quite skilled at both."³¹ Literacy was crucial to understanding the Scriptures, thus Charlemagne admonished those clergy who were illiterate.³² His goal was for the clergy to be able to spread Christianity to the public.³³ This was encapsulated by the council of 813, which declared: "let the priests apply themselves to living well and accordingly teach the people."³⁴ In this vein, Charles' *Admonitio generalis* (789) encouraged schools to be organized in all religious institutions.³⁵ Though these schools targeted those pursuing both religious and secular careers, their education centered on the Christian faith.³⁶

Correcting religious texts, from which the word of God was dispersed, was a major aspect of the Carolingian Renaissance.³⁷ Charlemagne warned in the *Admonitio generalis*: "while people want to pray to God in proper fashion, they yet pray improperly because of the uncorrected books. And do not allow your boys to corrupt them, either in reading or copying: if there is a need to copy the Gospel, Psalter or Missal, let men of full age do the writing with all diligence."³⁸ This shows the emphasis placed on producing accurate Catholic texts.³⁹ During this period, scholars such as Alcuin and Theodulf produced new versions of the Bible.⁴⁰ These updated editions were made by combining Old Latin books with Jerome's Vulgate translations.⁴¹ Less than a decade after the *Admonitio*, Charles sent a letter to church lectors observing that "we long ago corrected, God helping us in all things, all the books of the Old and New Testaments, corrupted by the ignorance of the copyists."⁴² In addition, many other texts were corrected

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Charlemagne," by Encyclopedia Britannica, Britannica Digital Learning, 2017. <http://qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/login?url=http://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/ebconcise/charlemagne/0?institutionId=379>.

²⁸ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 29.

²⁹ McKitterick, "The Carolingian Renaissance of Culture and Learning," 152.

³⁰ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, 26.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Munz, *Life in the Age of Charlemagne*, 116.

³³ Hildebrandt, *The External School in Carolingian Society*, 63.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ McKitterick, "The Carolingian Renaissance of Culture and Learning," 153.

³⁶ Ibid., 156.

³⁷ Ibid., 153

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 154.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 155.

⁴¹ McKitterick, "The Carolingian Renaissance of Culture and Learning," 155

⁴² Ibid., 153.

including: "liturgical books for the mass, the Homiliary or book of sermons, the Antiphony, canon law, and the Rule of St Benedict."⁴³ These books were duplicated and dispersed throughout Francia in single volumes and small groupings.⁴⁴ As Rosamond McKitterick writes, this was an attempt to standardize religious practice within Francia.⁴⁵ However, many localities still used the editions they had traditionally employed, resulting in many modes of practice existing side by side.⁴⁶ Despite this shortcoming, an attempt had been made to unify the Empire through book learning.

Noblewomen were important actors in the dissemination of doctrine within the household.⁴⁷ The education women received was likely intended to teach Christian values and ideas.⁴⁸ This knowledge entered the household as mothers and nuns taught the Psalms to children.⁴⁹ Furthermore, as Garver writes, it was expected that "woman ideally should demonstrate moral behavior and practical knowledge."⁵⁰ Mothers, in particular, were responsible for impressing these virtues upon their children.⁵¹ While fathers were likewise expected to impress these virtues, they were often away and thus the instruction of young children fell to their wives.⁵² In this way, women had a unique niche in the spread of Christian ideas, made possible by their schooling.

The Carolingians' secular and ecclesiastical ambitions overlapped in the form of the lay abbot. Charlemagne realized that monasteries would be central to his reforms.⁵³ Monasteries were extremely important allies for the crown and he recognized their educational value.⁵⁴ As such, he personally chose the abbots in the monasteries that he "owned," of which there were many.⁵⁵ His appointees were often drawn from the ranks of his court scholars.⁵⁶ Einhard himself was part of this system, being granted the abbacies of Blandin and St-Bavo by Charles' son Louis (r. 814-840).⁵⁷ This practice likely ensured that Frankish monasteries were run by loyal and capable abbots. For example, Charlemagne granted Alcuin several monasteries, including the wealthy St Martin of Tours, despite him not being ascetic.⁵⁸ Charles ensured that Alcuin would have long-term financial stability that he would not have otherwise.⁵⁹ In addition, Alcuin was extremely knowledgeable and therefore, would have been more than capable of administering his abbeys effectively. A considerable number of Charlemagne's courtiers also became teachers at abbey schools.⁶⁰ This would have made Charlemagne's reforms much easier, as students were

⁴³ McKitterick, "The Carolingian Renaissance of Culture and Learning," 155.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Garver, "Learned Women?," 137.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 136.

⁵¹ Ibid., 134.

⁵² Ibid., 134-135.

⁵³ Hildebrandt, *The External School in Carolingian Society*, 54.

⁵⁴ Munz, *Life in the Age of Charlemagne*, 104-105.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 105.

⁵⁶ McKitterick, "The Carolingian Renaissance of Culture and Learning," 157.

⁵⁷ Paul Edward Dutton, "An Introduction to Einhard," in *Charlemagne's Courtier*, xvii.

⁵⁸ Munz, *Life in the Age of Charlemagne*, 120.

⁵⁹ Munz, *Life in the Age of Charlemagne*, 120.

⁶⁰ McKitterick, "The Carolingian Renaissance of Culture and Learning," 158.

being taught by the scholars whom he approved of. Thus lay abbots were a critical part of Carolingian society.

Einhard and his portrayal of Charlemagne, must be examined within this culture of learning. For one, his career would have been impossible if not for the policies of the Carolingians. Being a small man, he was ill-suited for the army.⁶¹ Instead, he went to the monastery of Fulda to receive an education.⁶² Young Einhard joined the court of Charlemagne upon being recommended by Abbot Baugulf of Fulda.⁶³ He worked tirelessly at court, saddled with "the heavy burdens of court business."⁶⁴ He was later rewarded by Louis with the two monasteries previously mentioned, as well as lands in Michelstadt and Mulinheim.⁶⁵ Einhard had every reason to be grateful for Carolingian scholarship, which made his life prosperous. He makes this gratitude clear in his preface: "could I keep silent about the splendid and exceedingly brilliant deeds of a man who has been so kind to me and could I allow his life to remain without record and proper praise as if he had never lived?"⁶⁶ It is clear that Einhard felt a great deal of gratitude to Charles. The way in which he describes his intellectual character can be seen as both a reflection of this appreciation and an encouragement of the system that had allowed for Einhard's ascension. He calls attention to the scholarly ways of his liege and finds even his shortcomings praiseworthy. After all, Einhard does not hide the fact that for all his patronage, Charlemagne was illiterate.⁶⁷ He does, however, make clear to his audience that the emperor:

. . . attempted to [learn how to] write and, for this reason, used to place wax-tablets and notebooks under the pillows on his bed, so that, if he had any free time, he might accustom his hand to forming letters. But his effort came too late in life and achieved little success.⁶⁸

It was this image of the king engaged in learned pursuits, whether successful or unsuccessful, that Einhard wanted to convey. He also wrote about the common experience they had at court.⁶⁹ David Ganz writes that this was a world in which "poets were prized and courtiers discussed comets."⁷⁰ "Einhard's Charlemagne" was a scholar like himself, being interested in the liberal arts and fond of Saint Augustine's *City of God*.⁷¹ Thus, the biographer was paying respect to the man and policies that made his career possible, and reflecting on the culture they had been immersed in.

In conclusion, Einhard shows that learning was a means for the Carolingians to improve both their administration and their faith. Being a court scholar and lay abbot, he was at the centre of this process. In *The Life of Charlemagne* the biographer attempted to express his gratitude for the attitudes that made his career possible while recounting the intellectual court life that he had been a part of. He ultimately succeeds in conveying the benefits of Carolingian scholarship, such as a more efficient government and uniform faith.

⁶¹ Dutton "An Introduction to Einhard," xi.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., xi-xii.

⁶⁴ Ibid., xiv-xv.

⁶⁵ Ibid., xvii

⁶⁶ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, Preface.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ David Ganz, "Einhard's Charlemagne: The Characterization of Greatness," in *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Joanna Story (New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 49.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

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