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Charles the Great: An Analysis of Primary Sources Related to the Reign of Charlemagne

By Amelia Sullivan

While the exact date and location of his birth is unknown, scholars believe that Charles the Great – or Charlemagne – was born in 742 CE, in modern-day Belgium, to King Pepin the Short of Francia and Queen Bertrada of Laon.¹ Following his father's death in 768 and his brother's death in 771, Charlemagne rose to power as the sole ruler of Francia.² As King, Charlemagne instituted a number of religious and secular reforms meant to consolidate Frankish territories under his power. In addition, Charlemagne waged war in an effort to expand territory and evangelize neighboring populations. Under his rule, the roots of Carolingian culture and power were established. One of the most crucial aspects of a historian's career involves the examination of original sources regarding specific places, events, time periods, or individuals in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of history. This close study of documents allows historians to draw a vivid illustration of civilizations long gone. Close analysis of primary source documents such as the Capitulary of Herstal, one of Charlemagne's letters to King Offa of Mercia, and a letter from the Northumbrian monk Alcuin to Charlemagne, reveal various facets of Carolingian society during Charlemagne's reign.

The Capitulary of Herstal, issued in 779, was amongst the first set of reform documents released by Charlemagne. In the years prior to the Capitulary's creation, Charlemagne led a number of successful military campaigns, expanding the limits of Frankish territories. In 774, at Pope Hadrian I's request, Charlemagne led a successful campaign against Lombardy.³ By the conflict's end, Charlemagne crowned himself King of the Lombards and destroyed any opposition to his authority. In 777, Charlemagne attempted to further his holdings by launching a military campaign

¹ Alessandro Barbero, *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 12.

² Jacques Boussard, *The Civilization of Charlemagne* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1968), 24.

³ Francois L. Ganshof, "Charlemagne," *Speculum* 24, no. 4 (1949): 520-521, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2854638>.

in Spain in an attempt to wrest control of Spanish lands away from Islamic rule.⁴ It was a disaster. The Basques were not only able to repel Frankish forces, but nearly decimated Charlemagne's army. Charlemagne's troubles, however, did not end with his military failure in Spain. The territories of Italy and Aquitaine rose in revolt against Charlemagne's rule.⁵ In addition, the Saxons began an invasion of Frankish territories.⁶ In an effort to consolidate his power, Charlemagne called an assembly of bishops, lords, abbots, and counts to confer on a number of topics related to increasing efficacy of public institutions, providing greater security for the people and their properties, as well as increased organization of the church.⁷ The laws and ecclesiastical matters discussed at this assembly were likely recorded by an individual at Charlemagne's court, then reissued to the populations of Frankish territories with the King's approval. This document became known as the Capitulary of Herstal.

The Capitulary starts by stating the year and month of the assembly at Herstal, as well as stating that the decisions were made "in accordance with God's will."⁸ The document's first tenants address the power granted to Bishops. In the first point, Charlemagne states that Suffragan Bishops should be placed under the authority of metropolitan bishops according to canon law, and that if any facet of ministry necessitates correction, Bishops "should correct and improve [them] with willing hearts."⁹ Charlemagne also addresses the lack of uniformity amongst the consecration, or formal religious dedication of Church authorities. He orders that bishops who are not consecrated must be consecrated immediately. He further grants bishops authority over priests, in accordance with canon law, and grants them power to "impose correction on incestuous people."¹⁰ In addition, Charlemagne commands that monasteries should not stray away from the teachings they have been founded on, nor should

⁴ Ganshof, "Charlemagne," 521.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Charlemagne, "9 Herstal, 779," in *The Reign of Charlemagne: Documents on Carolingian Government and Administration*, ed. H.R. Loyn and John Percival (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1975), 47.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

convents deviate from their holy orders.¹¹ From these first several edicts, one learns of the current state of the Church within Francia, as well as Charlemagne's efforts to centralize religious practice within his Kingdom.

The "canon law" Charlemagne references throughout the Capitulary's body refers to a specific canonical collection granted to him by Pope Hadrian I. This collection, called the *Dionysio-Hadryriana*, is comprised of texts detailing religious regulations and papal decrees established by a number of synods, popes, and religious authorities over several centuries.¹² References to canon law within the Capitulary establish Charlemagne not only as a Christian King, but as a ruler on good terms with the Church. In addition, Charlemagne's allusion to canon law confirms the importance of religious texts within Carolingian society. Charlemagne's insistence that Bishops be consecrated suggests church practice regarding the ascension of individuals to the office of Bishop was not yet uniform in Frankish territories at the time of the Capitulary's creation.

During the reign of Pepin the Short, the office of Bishop that sometimes laid dormant, was overtaken by a powerful noble, or was sometimes assigned to the abbot of a monastery. By insisting that all Bishops be consecrated, Charlemagne ensured each diocese possessed a genuine Bishop.¹³ Furthermore, Charlemagne's call for monasteries established upon certain schools of monastic rule to "live in accordance with that rule"¹⁴ means that monastic practice at the time was either lax or varied throughout Francia. This insistence on uniform monastic practice in combination with the tenant regarding the uniform consecration of Bishops establishes Charlemagne's desire to reform the Church and establish uniformity of practice in all aspects of Christianity.

The second half of the Capitulary addresses secular affairs rather than ecclesiastical ones. This section of the document focuses upon the judgement and treatment of criminals, the raising of armed followings, the establishment of oaths, and the sale of coats of mail. In tenant eight, Charlemagne states that guilty individuals that take refuge in a church "are not to be let off, and

¹¹ Charlemagne, "9 Herstal, 779," 47.

¹² Barbero, *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent*, 234.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁴ Charlemagne, "9 Herstal, 779," 47.

no food is to be given to them there.”¹⁵ The eighth edict points to the existence of sanctuary law within Carolingian society.

In addition, it also demonstrates the limit of Charlemagne’s power over the Church. He does not forbid churches from granting sanctuary to criminals, yet makes it difficult for them to thrive within such an environment by using his authority as King to cut off food supply to guilty parties. Charlemagne again demonstrates this authority in point nine, stating that robbers caught within an area of immunity should be presented “by the justices of that area at the count’s court”¹⁶ and that “anyone who fails to outright comply with this is to lose his benefice and his office.”¹⁷

Charlemagne, again, does not overstep his secular power by extending his hand into church affairs. He does, however, make it difficult for criminals to thrive in areas of immunity, this time by using his authority as King to order his justices and vassals to apprehend the guilty. In addition to demonstrating the divide between ecclesiastical and secular powers, tenant nine’s mention of the duties of justices and vassals points to the existence of an established system of courts and vassalage within Carolingian society. One of the crowning achievements of Charlemagne’s reign was the institution of a court system within Frankish territories. He instituted this system by granting his Lords various benefices, or gifts. Along with a gift of land, Charlemagne also granted his vassals judicial authority.¹⁸ The clear instructions for justices and vassals within the document mean that by 779, Charlemagne established both a court and vassalage system within Francia.

In another section within the latter half of the Capitulary, Charlemagne talks about the punishment awaiting an individual committing perjury. In the order, he states that if an individual accuses another of perjury, they must undergo “the ordeal of the cross,”¹⁹ and that if the swearer wins, the accuser must “pay the equivalent of his *wergeld*.”²⁰ *Wergeld* was an ancient Germanic law where an individual found guilty of murder paid money equivalent to the life of their victim. The mention of *wergeld* within the Capitulary demonstrates the Germanic roots of the

¹⁵ Charlemagne, “9 Herstal, 779,” 48.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Carolingian justice system.

Furthermore, not only does Charlemagne reference Germanic custom within the Capitulary, he also utilizes Latin terms such as “centenarius,” “vicedominus,” and “missus.” Each of these terms refers to a given office of authority, such as a minor public official, deputy bishop, or envoy. The use of Latin within the Capitulary means that the Frankish peoples integrated not only old Germanic custom into their society, but also some aspects of Roman culture as well. The Capitulary of Herstal’s edicts provide evidence for the poor state of the Church at the time of the document’s issue, Charlemagne’s relationship with the church, the importance of religious texts within Carolingian society, the clear divide between the power of the King and the power of the church, the establishment of judicial courts and vassalage, the Germanic roots of Carolingian law systems, as well as Carolingian society’s adoption of certain aspects of Roman culture, such as Latin. While the document provides the reader knowledge about various facets of Charlemagne’s reign, it does not inform the audience of the Capitulary’s effectiveness, how the Capitulary might have been distributed, how entrenched aspects of Roman culture were in Carolingian society, or provide an in-depth look at other facets of Carolingian law during Charlemagne’s rule.

Scholars estimate that Charlemagne’s letter to King Offa of Mercia was written in 796 CE, nearly two decades after the Capitulary of Herstal. During his reign, Charlemagne exchanged letters with a number of foreign officials. Through writing, Charlemagne addressed trade, religious, and governmental issues with foreign powers. Thorough analysis of the letter not only reveals the status of Francia’s relationship with Mercia and the protections afforded religious pilgrims within Francia, but further supports the adoption of aspects of Roman tradition into Frankish culture as well as emphasizes the importance of religious text within Francia.

At the letter’s start, Charlemagne lists his titles, naming himself “King of the Franks and Lombards and patrician of the Romans.”²¹ By referring to himself as “patrician of the Romans,”²²

²¹ Charlemagne, “Charles the Great to Offa, King of Mercia, 796,” in *The Reign of Charlemagne: Documents on Carolingian Government and Administration*, ed. H.R. Loyn and John Percival (New York: St. Martin’s Press, Inc., 1975), 113.

²² *Ibid.*

Charlemagne hearkens back to the majesty of the dissolved Roman Empire, aligning himself with the memory of great Roman leaders of old, such as the great Christian ruler Constantine. Just as the use of Latin in the Capitulary of Herstal suggests the adoption of aspects of Roman culture into Frankish society, so too does Charlemagne's adoption of the title "patrician of Rome" demonstrate ties between Francia and the dissolved Roman Empire.

In the letter's second paragraph, Charlemagne extends blessings to Offa, stating that they are joined in "unity of peace"²³ and the "concord of love."²⁴ This friendly language continues till the end of the paragraph as Charlemagne mentions Offa's "brotherly letters,"²⁵ and recognizes him as a "devout defender of holy faith."²⁶ In addition, he also mentions his hope that the treaty established between them will flourish. Charlemagne's use of familiar language toward Offa suggests a closeness between the two leaders, as well as signifies stable relations between Francia and Mercia at the time of the letter's creation. Further, the treaty Charlemagne mentions is likely the reason for cordial conduct between the two Kingdoms.

In the years before Charlemagne penned the letter, he sought to arrange a match between Offa's daughter and his son. When Offa attempted to arrange a reciprocal marriage between his son and one of Charlemagne's daughters, Charlemagne, insulted by Offa's overreach, imposed a trade embargo upon Mercia.²⁷ Trade relations between Francia and Mercia normalized in the mid-790s after the signing of a mutually beneficial commercial treaty.²⁸ Charlemagne's remarks on this treaty signify that by 796, conflict between the Franks and Mercians ceased. In the letter's fourth paragraph, Charlemagne extends protection and support to Mercian merchants, promising them that if they face problems within Francia, they can lodge complaints with a court justice or Charlemagne himself.²⁹ This provision of the letter demonstrates

²³ Charlemagne, "Charles the Great to Offa, King of Mercia, 796," 113.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Martin J. Ryan and Nicholas J. Higham, "The Mercian Supremacies," in *The Anglo-Saxon World* (Yale University Press, 2013), 189, <http://jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bt51.9>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Charlemagne, "Charles the Great to Offa," 114.

Charlemagne's willingness to support trade and relations between nations.

In the fifth paragraph, Charlemagne informs Offa that a Mercian priest named Odberht sought protection from Offa's justice in Francia.³⁰ He further states that he sent Odberht to Rome where he and other exiles will be heard and judged.³¹ This section demonstrates, similarly to the Capitulary of Herstal's sections on the treatment of the guilty within areas of immunity, the divide in secular and ecclesiastical power within Carolingian society. Rather than offer Odberht to Offa for judgement or rendering judgement himself, he sends Odberht to Rome for religious authorities to judge. He makes this divide in power clear within his letter, stating that one of "apostolic authority should determine a case in which the views of others disagree."³²

At the end of the letter, Charlemagne states that he has sent gifts to various episcopal sees within Mercia in divine intercession for Pope Hadrian I's soul. He beseeches Offa to make the same intercessions, stating that "blessed Augustine has taught, that intercessions of ecclesiastical piety must be made for all."³³ Charlemagne references the teaching of St. Augustine of Hippo, a bishop from the fifth century. From this, the reader can infer that Charlemagne not only possesses knowledge Augustine, but has either heard of or read Augustine's writings.

During his reign, Charlemagne encouraged the translation, preservation, and reading of various liturgical texts. Some, especially the writings of St. Augustine, became required reading in the Carolingian educational system. References to St. Augustine's teachings, in addition to mentions of canon law within the Capitulary at Herstal, emphasize the importance of religious text within Francia. The letter from Charlemagne to Offa provides evidence of Francia's ties to the dissolved Roman Empire, the status of relations between Francia and Mercia, Charlemagne's foreign policy, the divide between secular authority and ecclesiastical authority within Carolingian society, as well as the translation and preservation of religious literature during Charlemagne's reign. It does not, however, provide a look at Charlemagne's foreign policy with other powers; it offers only

³⁰ Charlemagne, "Charles the Great to Offa," 114.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

Charlemagne's perspective of the alliance between Mercia and Francia, and says little of the preservation of classical literature at Charlemagne's court.

In 796, a monk wrote a letter to Charlemagne offering the King advice regarding the evangelization of populations newly added to the Frankish Kingdom. The letter's author, Alcuin, was a scholar and monk. He hailed from York, located in the Anglo-Saxon Kingdom of Northumbria. At a young age, Alcuin was entrusted to the clergy. There, Alcuin became well-read in a number of topics including grammar, religious texts, as well as the classics.³⁴ While serving as a messenger from Northumbria to Francia, Alcuin was introduced into Charlemagne's company and became the King's close friend, mentor, and advisor.³⁵ By 796, Alcuin left Charlemagne's court and became Abbot of Tours. Though far from Charlemagne's side, Alcuin continued to provide the King with advice on a variety of topics. By analyzing Alcuin's letter to Charlemagne, one can not only learn about Alcuin and Charlemagne's relationship, but a number of things regarding the reformation of the Church and the importance of religious text within Carolingian society. Alcuin greets Charlemagne, acknowledging his titles of "king of Germany, Gaul and Italy."³⁶ He spends the first paragraph lavishing praise and blessings upon Charlemagne for having "spread abroad the rule of Christianity" to "numerous peoples far and wide."³⁷

The second and third paragraphs reference Charlemagne's efforts to Christianize foreign enemies. Alcuin first states that Charlemagne has attempted to the "unhappy Saxon people"³⁸ to enlightenment, though many "remain in the squalor of evil custom"³⁹ and are "damned along with the devil."⁴⁰ From Alcuin's words, one can infer that Charlemagne conquered some or part of Saxony by 796, that he made efforts to evangelize the population, and that some Saxons resisted. Saxony proved a threat to Francia

³⁴ Douglas Dales, *Alcuin: His Life and Legacy* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2012), eBook, 67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁶ Alcuin, "Alcuin to Charles the Great" (796), in *The Reign of Charlemagne: Documents on Carolingian Government and Administration*. ed. H.R. Loyn and John Percival (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1975), 120.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

through the rule of several generations of Frankish Kings. Even Charlemagne's father, Pepin, led a number of expeditions to defend his territories from Saxon incursion.⁴¹ Charlemagne, however, took the Saxon threat more seriously. He believed that the Saxons would remain a threat to his Kingdom should they be allowed to remain independent. In addition, as a devout Christian, Charlemagne believed it his duty to spread Christianity. Therefore, it was his God given duty to Christianize the mostly pagan Saxon population. By 785, Charlemagne conquered Saxony as far as the Elbe, incorporated it into Francia, and then divided it into bishoprics.⁴²

The Saxons, however, were not easily cowed. They rose in rebellion against the Franks in 794 and were able to retake some territory until Charlemagne recovered Saxony in 797.⁴³ Alcuin penned his letter in 796, only a year before Charlemagne regained Saxon territories. Alcuin's reference to Saxon resistance provides evidence of Charlemagne's struggle with reconquering and evangelizing Saxony. In addition, it proves there likely existed some form of prejudice against the Saxons amongst the Frankish population, since Alcuin states that Saxons who resisted salvation were "damned along with the devil."⁴⁴

Alcuin continues to praise Charlemagne, stating that God subdued the Huns to His service through Charlemagne's military campaigns. By Alcuin's words, one can draw the conclusion that Frankish forces launched attacks against the Huns and were successful in their venture. The Avars, known as the "Huns" to the Frankish populations, were an Asiatic tribe occupying countries in the middle Danube area.⁴⁵ In 791, Charlemagne launched a campaign against them. This attack failed, forcing Charlemagne to regroup. From 795-796, Charlemagne was able to subdue to Avars and claim their territory as a protectorate.⁴⁶ Since Alcuin states that the Huns have already been added to God's service, this means that by the time Alcuin wrote his letter to Charlemagne, the King subdued the Avars.

In the letter's fourth paragraph, Alcuin states that it is now

⁴¹ Ganshof, "Charlemagne," 520.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 521.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 523.

⁴⁴ Alcuin, "Alcuin to Charles the Great," 121.

⁴⁵ Ganshof, "Charlemagne," 522.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 523.

Charlemagne's duty to send preachers to evangelize the newly subdued populations.⁴⁷ Alcuin references the teachings of St. Paul, the Book of Mathew, as well as the teachings of St. Jerome in order to impress upon Charlemagne the importance of sending the educated priests to Christianize the new territories.⁴⁸ Like the mention of canon law in the Capitulary of Herstal as well as Charlemagne's mention of St. Augustine's writings in his letter to King Offa of Mercia, Alcuin's quoting of religious texts demonstrates the importance of Christianity in Carolingian society. In addition, Alcuin alluding to a diverse pool of text, like Charlemagne's letter to Offa, supports the idea of the translation and preservation of various works of literature during Charlemagne's reign.

In the following paragraph, Alcuin offers Charlemagne advice regarding whether or not this new population of believers should pay tithes, or payments to the church.⁴⁹ He advises Charlemagne to look to the example of the Prophets to find whether or not tithes should be imposed upon "uncultured peoples in the early days of their faith."⁵⁰ The advice to look to the example of religious figures in order to find an answer for an issue of both secular and ecclesiastical import displays the deep entrenchment of Christianity into the Frankish Kingdom. Alcuin stresses the importance of the office of preaching and the sacrament of baptism being properly ordered. He again references the letters of St. Paul to the Corinthians and works of St. Jerome to provide an example of the proper order of baptism.⁵¹ Alcuin's insistence on following a uniform method of baptism amongst the new territories hearkens to the Capitulary of Herstal's edict upon the uniform consecration of Bishops within Frankish territories.

Both documents stress the importance of a fixed application of certain religious practices, whether they be the application of sacraments or the granting of religious offices. This demonstrates that after two decades, Charlemagne's reorganization of the Church remained in progress. In the document's final paragraph, Alcuin tells Charlemagne the proper order in which a grown man should be baptized, referencing St. Augustine's "On Catechizing

⁴⁷ Alcuin, "Alcuin to Charles the Great," 121.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 121-122.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

the Unlettered” as evidence.⁵² This mention of St. Augustine, alongside mentions of St. Augustine within Charlemagne’s letter to King Offa, provides further evidence for the translation and preservation of literature during Charlemagne’s reign. Alcuin’s letter to Charlemagne displays the deep bond between mentor and student, provides evidence for the process of the evangelization of pagan territories under Charlemagne, confirms the importance of religious text in the Frankish Kingdoms, demonstrates the deep entrenchment of Christianity within Frankish society, affirms the importance of uniform religious practice in all areas of Francia, and illustrates the importance of translating and preserving literature during Charlemagne’s reign. The document, however, fails to establish how much of Saxony Charlemagne conquered at the time of its writing, does not tell much of the availability of certain religious texts within Carolingian society, or why Charlemagne did not immediately established a tithe system within the newly evangelized Saxon territories.

Careful analysis of primary sources allows readers to obtain more information about major historical events, historical figures, or periods of history. Close examination of the Capitulary of Herstal, Charlemagne’s letter of King Offa of Mercia, and Alcuin’s letter to Charlemagne reveal facets of Carolingian society during Charlemagne’s reign, such as the importance of religious texts within Frankish society, the reorganization of the Church, the careful divide between secular power and ecclesiastical power, the translation and preservation of various works of literature, as well as Charlemagne’s policy toward foreign entities. Though these sources provide a detailed look into some aspects of Charlemagne’s kingdom, however, they are written from a fixed perspective, offer little insight into the lives of ordinary peoples, and provide information regarding only a few facets of Carolingian society. These documents’ issues can be solved by the addition of more primary sources, secondary sources, and further analysis. Primary resources are vital to the study and understanding of history. They must be preserved so future generations might access their wisdom and learn from their forefathers’ mistakes.

⁵² Alcuin, “Alcuin to Charles the Great,” 122.

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