

CHARLEMAGNE:
A FRANK ANALYSIS

OR

IMPERIALISM IN THE 8TH & 9TH CENTURIES:
AN EXAMINATION OF CHARLEMAGNE AND THE FRANKISH EMPIRE

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Charlemagne has been approached by historians because of the pivotal role he fills as the Father of a Continent. His kingdom spread across Europe and renewed the culture of the Western World; a “mini-Renaissance” that shifted the focal point of Europe away from crumbling Rome. Through his reign, a new Empire was created and the European world began a recovery from the decline and fall of the Western Roman Empire. In turn, that Empire was divided amongst his heirs, laying down boundaries that largely survive in the shape of Europe today. Perhaps more than any other family, the Carolingians shaped the fate of Europe. Charlemagne’s coronation represents the most significant event of the Carolingian dynasty, but where does it fit within context of the history of Europe?

On December 25, 800 A.D., Charles the Great knelt at prayer in Saint Peter’s Basilica in the city of Rome. As he rose, Pope Leo III stood behind him and placed a crown upon his head, saying, “To Charles, Augustus, great and peaceful Roman Emperor, life and victory.” That moment has been examined countless times in the twelve hundred years since the Coronation.

The major debate surrounding the reign of Charlemagne concerns the circumstances of his coronation as Emperor on Christmas Day of the year 800. The traditional view that draws from Einhard’s biography of Charlemagne asserts that Charles entered the church in Rome for the Christmas service and was unaware of the Pope’s intention to crown him as an Emperor. Alternatively, historians have found evidence in the other primary sources to suggest that the Frankish King had been planning and preparing for the coronation in the years leading up to 800. If the latter

is the case, the events of the late 790s favored Charlemagne's intent and allowed him to fulfill his Imperial aspirations. However, even without these events, Charlemagne would have created the opportunity to claim the Imperial title eventually.

The most important primary source is Einhard's biography of Charlemagne. Einhard (770-840 A.D.) was a Frankish noble who, c. 791, came to study at the court school Charlemagne established in Aachen. While there, he had the opportunity to observe Charlemagne directly while serving as one of his advisors, a distinction that few other sources on the Frankish King can claim. His record borrows from the biographers of the Roman Emperors, particularly in the extent to which he uses the wordings of the author Suetonius.¹ These classical works were the only biographies of secular figures on which Einhard could model his own text.²

In his *Life of Charlemagne*, Einhard claims that the Frankish King had no wish for the title of Emperor.

It was then that he received the titles of Emperor and Augustus, to which he at first had such aversion that he declared that he would not have set foot in the Church the day they were conferred, although it was a great feast day, if he could have foreseen the design of the Pope.³

However, it was a common theme of the biographies of the Caesars that the burden of Emperorship was always thrust upon the unwilling individual. This claim would connect Charlemagne to his Roman predecessors and allow Einhard to similarly connect himself to the Roman biographer, Suetonius.⁴

Einhard actually wrote the biography between 829 and 836 A.D., during the

¹ C. Delisle Burns, "The Play Emperor," in *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?*, ed. Richard E. Sullivan (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1959), 16.

² Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, trans. and ed. Samuel Epes Turner (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴ Matthias Becher, *Charlemagne* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 3.

reign of Louis the Pious, Charlemagne's heir. Extolling the virtues of the previous Emperor served to cement Louis in his position. It would be preferable to show Louis' father in a favorable light, if the biography were a political tool.

Historians supporting the Imperialist interpretation of Charlemagne's actions leading up to 800 view the truth behind Einhard's account of the Frankish King's displeasure at the coronation as a misinterpretation. Charlemagne later crowned his son as an Emperor by his own hand, removing the Papal involvement. By this reasoning, Charles' aversion was not to the Imperial title, but to the manner in which he received it from the Pope.⁵

Further problems arise in Einhard's biography, when he also claims to have no records from Charlemagne's youth and that no person from those times remains to give account. He goes so far as to call it "folly" to write anything on Charlemagne's youth. However, other sources that survive contain details about the youth of Charlemagne, referencing his anointment as a King at the hand of the Pope in 753, for example. Despite Einhard's statement to the contrary, there were sources that lived during the time of Charlemagne's youth that were alive when Einhard was compiling his work, a fact of which Einhard was almost certainly aware.⁶

When discussing the history of the Carolingian line, Einhard avoids the full truth of the dissension between Charles' father and uncle (Pepin and Grifo), and between Charles and his brother Carloman. He stresses that Charlemagne acted in all ways with the utmost of patience and other qualities befitting an Emperor who was

⁵ Heinrich Fichtenau, *The Carolingian Empire*, trans. Peter Munz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 74.

⁶ Becher, 42.

plagued with a disagreeable relative. It appears that he is trying to paint a more harmonious portrait of the succession of the Frankish crown and enhance the Imperial image of Charlemagne that he was striving to fix in the minds of his readers.⁷

The relationship between Charlemagne and Carloman, in particular, is played down. Einhard makes it appear that Carloman was the source of the conflict between the brothers, praising Charles for his supposed attempts to bridge the distance between them. However, the death of Carloman in 771 is, perhaps, too convenient in giving Charlemagne the whole of the Frankish kingdom. Coupled with the flight of Carloman's family shortly after his death, a suspicious amount of evidence suggests the possibility of fratricide on Charlemagne's part in order to unify his kingdom. Also, Einhard describes in detail how Charles mourned other deaths, Pope Hadrian for example, but says nothing of his reaction to his brother's death.

In studying the coronation, one must be aware of these shortcomings in Einhard's account. He may have had ulterior motives in wishing Charlemagne to appear more Imperial in his nature; he ignores contemporary sources, and tries to make the succession seem smooth where it was rocky. The points against Einhard by no means make him an unworthy source, but do require one to read carefully and seek connections between events that are not evident from Einhard's words alone.

Other primary source documents include the *Annales Regni Francorum* (Annals of the Kingdom of the Franks; Royal Annals of the Franks), *Libris Pontificalis* (Book of the Popes), Nokter's *Life of Charlemagne*, the capitularies issued during Charles' reign (approximately eighty of which survive), the *Annales*

⁷ François L. Ganshof, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy: Studies in Carolingian History*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 5.

Laureschamanses (Lorsch Annals), and a variety of letters written during the period. The Royal Annals provide a clear, simple chronicle of the major events of the era. It primarily concerns itself with recording rebellions, military actions, and significant political changes from 741 to 829. The Book of the Popes outlines the most influential events during each Pope's service to the Church. Obviously, the focus is religious in nature and often on Rome. For purposes of Charlemagne's reign, the entries for Pope Hadrian and Pope Leo III are most relevant. Notker the Stammerer, a Benedictine Monk of Saint Gall, lived between 840 and 912. His religious biography of Charlemagne was written between 884 and 887 A.D., during the reign of Charles the Fat. It contrasts Einhard's political biography, offering a different perspective on the Emperor through a series of anecdotes. The capitularies indicate reforms to Frankish institutions and provide another chronicle of political shifts within the Frankish realm. The Lorsch Annals follow the same model as the *Annales Regni Francorum*, but provide one particularly interesting passage that will be examined shortly. Finally, the various letters written during Charles' reign often offer a less official or polished outlook on the events of the era. The letters written by Alcuin, Pope Hadrian, Pope Leo III, and Charlemagne are of particular note.

Of course, each of the chronicles records the coronation in its own way. Many of the records closely mirror the account given by Einhard. The Royal Annals are very concise, "when the king, at mass, rose from prayer before the *confessio* of the blessed apostle Peter, pope Leo placed a crown upon his head..."⁸ Pope Leo's entry for the coronation in the *Liber Pontificalis* is essentially the same as the Annals

⁸ P.D. King, *Charlemagne: Translated Sources* (Lancaster: University of Lancaster, 1987), 93.

and Einhard's version. Nokter's account is simplistic in describing the actual coronation, but the paragraphs immediately beforehand are suggestive:

Through his servants Pope Leo sent news of this [the rebellion of Paschalis and Campulus that had imprisoned him] in secret to Michael, the Emperor of Constantinople. Michael refused to help him. 'The Pope has his own royal power,' said he, 'and it is greater than ours. He himself must take vengeance on his enemies.'⁹

This is somewhat confusing as the observant reader will notice that Michael I did not become Emperor of the Byzantines until 811, which means that the Empress Irene was ruling at this time in the East. This point brings into question the validity of Nokter's work. In the introduction to his translation of the Monk of Saint Gall's text, Lewis Thorpe quotes several historians in their treatments of Nokter's biography:

Philipp Jaffé...went on to call the author of *De Carlo Magno* 'a monk...who took pleasure in amusing anecdotes and witty tales, but who was ill-informed about the true march of historical events.' A.J. Grant called the work of the Monk of Saint Gall a 'mass of legend, saga, invention, and reckless blundering.' H.W. Garrod called it 'a largely mythical record.'¹⁰

While it is unclear which sections are historically accurate and which fictional anecdotes imagined by the Monk, not an uncommon practice of early biographers, the source is not without value. Nokter's work portrays Charlemagne in a more religious light, but the anecdotal nature of his writing also does more to capture the personality of the Emperor, real or imagined, than Einhard's stiff account.¹¹ As Ernst Breisach wrote, Nokter's biography "piled story upon story to form a treasury of anecdotes. Little as Nokter's work mattered as history, it signaled a remarkable development; as

⁹ Nokter the Stammerer, *Charlemagne*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 122.

¹⁰ Lewis Thorpe, *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

the years passed, Charlemagne's biography was turning into legend."¹² Nokter continues his narrative:

Thereupon, his Holiness invited the unconquered Charlemagne to come to Rome. In this he followed God's will: for, since Charlemagne was already ruler and emperor of so many people in his own right, he should now in his glory be granted the title of Emperor and Casear Augustus by the authority of the Apostolic See.¹³

Nokter seems to suggest that Leo first sought aid from the Byzantines and was refused, which appears to be unique among the primary sources available. He then approached Charles for assistance. The rhetoric of explaining why Charles deserved to be crowned as Emperor of the Romans is worth considering as it could indicate unavailable records detailing the decision to offer Charlemagne the title. Nokter concludes the coronation:

...in their presence and that of all the unconquered comrades-in-arms of the glorious Charlemagne, who, himself, of course, expected nothing of the kind, Leo pronounced him Emperor and Defender of the Church of Rome. Charlemagne could not refuse what was offered, the more so as he believed that it was pre-ordained by God, but he did not receive his new titles with great pleasure.¹⁴

This mirrors Einhard's account, especially in making reference to Charles' displeasure and lack of Imperial ambition. Though, it adds that Charles believed that the Imperial dignity was his right. Unfortunately, the shortcomings of Nokter make it difficult to ascribe much confidence in the validity of his account of events.

The Lorsch Annals recorded the most unique and interesting of the accounts:

And since the name of emperor ('nomen imperatoris') was at this time lacking among the Greeks and they had female rule ('femineum imperium') among them, it then seemed to the *apostolicus* Leo and to all the holy fathers present at that council, as well as to the rest of the Christian people, that they ought to bestow the name of emperor on Charles himself, king of the Franks, who held Rome itself, where the Caesars had always been accustomed to have their seat...¹⁵

¹² Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 100.

¹³ Nokter, 122-123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁵ King, 144.

As in Nokter's account, the reasoning preceding the commonly found account of the physical coronation suggests that the decision to crown Charles as Emperor was planned and justified by Rome's failure to recognize the legitimacy of Irene's rule in Byzantium. The language used in the Lorsch Annals seems to be claiming that "he who rules Rome should be Emperor," which is similar to the argument used by Charlemagne's father to gain the support of the Papacy in overthrowing the Merovingian Kings, "he who rules should be King."

Several of the capitularies that were issued in the years leading up to the coronation show Charlemagne laying down laws that could be seen as the groundwork for an Empire. These important primary source documents are useful as further evidence to support Charlemagne's intent to assume the Imperial title.

Charlemagne issued a series of declarations requiring general oaths of fealty from his subjects. These oaths gradually become stronger as Charlemagne moved nearer to his coronation in 800. The final such oath followed his coronation, in 802. The gradual increase in this regard suggests that Charlemagne was moving toward a purpose in these oaths. This bound the Frankish citizens more closely to Charles and began the Feudal System that would come to dominate the political structure of the Middle Ages.

The capitulary of Herstal was intended to reorganize and reform several secular, judicial, and ecclesiastical institutions. This move toward reform in Charlemagne's Kingdom came as early as 779 as a response to the political tension caused by the devastating defeat of the expedition into Spain in 778, yet another Saxon rebellion, and a growing anti-Frankish sentiment in Aquitaine and Septimania.

The capitulary worked to reform the foundations of society and release these tensions.¹⁶

The reforms continued in 789 with the *Admonitio generalis*, which used the text of the *Dyonisio-Hadriana* to standardize Church law and teachings; for example, it contains policies for schools to be opened in monasteries and near cathedrals. This capitulary goes on to support the monarchy through biblical quotation. The *capitulare missorum* forbade judges from accepting gifts or otherwise being influenced by powerful citizens. The 794 capitulary of Frankfurt contained more reforms and a standardization of the systems for weights, measurements, and coinage.¹⁷

In 802, Charlemagne reformed the relationship between Church and State as the Empire formed officially. More importantly however, it was the final reform to the system of vassalage through oaths of fealty. This capitulary secured his power as Emperor and made necessary civil adjustments to establish the Imperial system. Similarly, the last of the great capitularies was issued in 805 to make further changes to the function of the various Frankish institutions.¹⁸

The trend of reforming the Frankish institutions indicates a step toward unifying the Kingdom that Charlemagne was expanding and forging it into an empire. The *Admonitio generalis* moves to unify the Church within his realm, and thereby binds his subjects together through the unity of a common belief. Binding the Church

¹⁶ François L. Ganshof, *Frankish Institutions Under Charlemagne*, trans. Bryce and Mary Lyon (Providence: Brown University Press, 1968), 4.

¹⁷ François L. Ganshof, "The Impact of Charlemagne on the Institutions of the Frankish Realm," in *Speculum* Vol. 40, No. 1 (1965): 47-49.

¹⁸ Ganshof, *Frankish Institutions*, 6-7.

more closely to his rule also insures that Rome has a vested interest in the continued growth of the Frankish Kingdom. A standard system of measures, weights, and coinage would further establish a unity of his people and facilitate a transition into a more unified and regimented political system. His trend of reform continues into his Imperial reign, as his power increased and he was able to strengthen his earlier actions.

Not all of the reforms came in the great capitularies; some are believed to have been issued by Charlemagne verbally and further laws strengthening these appear in later capitularies. In the case of the judicial system, Charlemagne began reforms before 774 when he set permanent judges in place over the small courts. These *scabini* did not appear in capitulary until 780 with clarifications in their power. This judicial system spread as the Frankish Kingdom grew; it would last for centuries in the portions of Italy under Carolingian control.¹⁹

The establishment of a regular judicial body is a strong move to cement the administration of the Frankish government. He continued to reform this justice system and create a solid judicial body, centralizing power. These reforms strove to improve the efficiency of the legal system and remove possible routes of corruption, a major problem of the Roman Empire.

In 796, Charlemagne wrote to Pope Leo III. The correspondence begins with Charles mentioning the grief he felt at the death of Pope Hadrian, then continues to hope that Leo will see to the stability of the Church through frequent prayer.

And to confirm that we are of one pacific heart with you in this most sweet love, we have sent Angilbert, who is close to us and serves as our intimate counselor, to your holiness... And we have charged him with all matters which seemed pertinent to our

¹⁹ Ganshof, "The Impact of Charlemagne," 56.

wishes or your needs, so that you and he, deliberating together, may discuss whatever is perceived to be necessary to the exaltation of God's holy church, the stability of your honor and the security of our patriciate.²⁰

Placing an advisor with the Pope represents a significant move to solidify the relationship between Rome and the Frankish kingdom. Charlemagne was exerting his influence as *Patricius Romanorum* to slowly claim rights that had previously been held only by the Emperors until, by the time of the Coronation in 800, he held most of those powers without the title, which was a significant argument for offering him the Imperial dignity.²¹ The letter continues:

...so I desire to establish an inviolable treaty of the same loyalty and amity with your blessedness, to the end that, by the divine grace which the prayers of your apostolic holiness call upon, apostolic blessing may attend me everywhere I may be and the most holy see of the Roman church may always, by God's gift, be defended by our devotion. It is our function – to the extent that divine goodness aids us – externally to defend Christ's holy church on every side by force of arms against the incursions of the pagans and the devastations of the infidels, internally to strengthen it in knowledge of the catholic faith. It is yours, most holy father, to aid our struggle with hands raised to God, like Moses, to the end that, with your interceding and God guiding and granting, the Christian people should at all times and in all places enjoy victory over the enemies of its holy name...²²

Charlemagne essentially told Leo to concern himself with prayer while the Frankish King dealt with the defending the Church against its enemies, spreading the Christian faith, and the spiritual direction of the West.²³

Leo was nearly deposed as Pope in April, 799, when a group of his political rivals rose up against him. In Byzantine, the Empress Irene had overthrown her son, Constantine VI. In June of 799, Alcuin wrote to Charlemagne of these events:

Now, there have hitherto been three authorities (*personae*) of supreme standing in the world. One is the apostolic sublimity, which is wont to govern the see of blessed Peter, prince of the apostles, in a vicarial function; and your reverend benevolence has been at pains to inform me of what has happened to him who was the *rector* of

²⁰ King, 311.

²¹ Louis Halphen, "The Coronation as the Expression of the Ideals of the Frankish Court," in *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?*, ed. Richard E. Sullivan (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1959), 33.

²² King, 311-312.

²³ Halphen, 29.

the aforementioned see. The second is the imperial office and secular power of second Rome; the report spreads everywhere of how unchristian was the fashion in which the governor of that empire was deposed, not by outsiders but by his own people and inhabitants of his own city. The third is the royal office in which you have been ordained as the *rector* of the Christian people by the dispensation of our Lord Jesus Christ, surpassing the aforementioned dignitaries in the excellence of your power, the lustre of your wisdom and the loftiness of your dignity as a ruler. Behold, upon you alone rests the entire health, deteriorated as it is, of the churches of Christ! It is you who punishes the wrong-doers, corrects the errant, comforts the sorrowing and raises up the good.²⁴

Alcuin illustrated the superiority of the Frankish Kingdom, logically concluding that if both the Papacy and the Byzantine Emperor were unable to hold their power, then it was the place of the third authority to fulfill their responsibilities. As his writings approach the Coronation in 800, Alcuin more often uses the term “Christian people” or “Christian Empire” to refer to Charlemagne’s subjects. This is one of the earliest occurrences.²⁵

Charlemagne is believed to have had a great love of knowledge, he often would have histories read to him during meals as entertainment. During his reign, he gathered, in his court school at Aachen, as many great scholars as he could find. Among these was Alcuin, an English scholar and theologian, who also came to be a trusted advisor of the King and head of the court school. Charlemagne set him the task of revising and correcting the Latin translation of the Bible that was currently in use in the Frankish church. François Louis Ganshof believed that it was Alcuin who suggested that Charlemagne intercede on Pope Leo’s behalf during the rebellion of 799. Further, that it was Alcuin who convinced Charlemagne to accept the Imperial title.²⁶

Henry Mayr-Harting used two letters written by Alcuin to show the counsel he

²⁴ King, 321.

²⁵ Halphen, 30.

²⁶ François Louis Ganshof, “Charlemagne,” in *Speculum* Vol. 24, No. 4 (1949): 524.

offered Charlemagne in ending the resistance of the Saxons. He advised Charlemagne to have his clergy bring the Saxons to Christianity slowly, "as if on babies' milk." Alcuin went on to criticize the compulsory tithe that had been inflicted on the Saxons. Charlemagne took this advice and issued orders to the churchmen working in the Saxon lands.²⁷

This gathering of the learned into the court school at Aachen brought about the Carolingian Renaissance. Classical texts that had been written in Latin and Greek were gathered, copied, and preserved. At the time this was not of major concern, but these texts survived to the Renaissance that would spring up later in Europe. It is likely that this educational movement that Charlemagne favored was a factor in the reforms of his reign.

As a central component of the Medieval era, the Coronation and reign of Charlemagne have been examined by numerous historians. Each has contributed something to the discourse of Carolingian studies. Among the most influential have been François Louis Ganshof, Richard Sullivan, and Henri Pirenne.

In the Introduction to his 1998 *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, Paul Edward Dutton counters the most common attack on Einhard as a legitimate source. Einhard's biography is very similar to the work of the Roman biography Suetonius in his treatment of twelve Caesars, but Dutton does not find the comparison particularly compelling. He argues that Einhard's text is "less Suetonian than Ciceronian and classical...supplied by Ciceroian ideals of eloquence and classical notions about how one was to measure and present the *magnanimitas* or

²⁷ Henry Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800," *English Historical Review* 111 (1996): 1128.

greatness of a ruler.”²⁸

In *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent* (2004), Alessandro Barbero took a look at the culture of medieval Europe to establish the extraordinary qualities of Charlemagne’s Empire. This is also useful in illustrating the argument that Charlemagne actively sought the Imperial Title. Barbero is primarily interested in the domestic applications of power in the form of bureaucracy that he believes Charlemagne focused on in seeking to place himself for the coronation. That is, the dictates and laws that established the framework for the Empire of Charlemagne in the years leading up to the coronation and the years that followed. It also examines the economy of the Frankish Empire and the nature of the Carolingian Renaissance. Barbero was concerned with Charlemagne’s motivations in issuing reforms throughout his reign. He believed that Charlemagne sought above anything else to restore the greatness of the Christian Roman Empire that had been brought down by the barbarians. It was a desire to return to the past that caused Charlemagne to build his Empire.²⁹

International relations in the 8th century have also been examined as possible influences on the coronation; for example, C. Delisle Burns looked to the situation in the Byzantine Empire in his 1947 “The Play Emperor.” The title of the article draws on Burns’ suggestion that Charlemagne’s coronation and the rebirth of a “western” Roman Emperor was ridiculous. He contended that there had never been two Roman Empires, but a single empire ruled by two Emperors of equal power as the Consuls

²⁸ Paul Edward Dutton, *Charlemagne’s Courtier: The Complete Einhard* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 1998), xxi.

²⁹ Alessandro Barbero, *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), xx.

had ruled the Republic. Therefore, it is preposterous that crowning Charles the Great as a Roman Emperor could recreate the Western Empire.³⁰

“Charlemagne and the Renewal of Rome” (2005) by Neil Christie contrasts Burns, using the *Liber Pontificalis* to outline Carolingian projects to restore the city of Rome and spread the Catholic Church. Prior to the establishment of Constantinople as the capital of the Empire, Rome had been the center of Roman culture and power; rebuilding Rome strengthened Charlemagne’s connection to the old Roman Empire. Likewise, building churches throughout Europe brought more influence to the official religion of the late Roman Empire. These projects confirmed Charles in his role as *Patricius Romanorum* and, after the Coronation, as Emperor of the Romans.³¹

Mark A. Noll’s *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* examined the importance of the coronation of Charlemagne in the context of the history of the Catholic Church. Paying particular attention to the way in which the Carolingian dynasty rising to dominance affected the power Rome and the Pope. The Papacy acquired lands around Rome for its own use and Christianity spread across Europe more rapidly. Not to mention the effect of Councils and capitularies passed during Charlemagne’s ascent toward the Imperial dignity on Church doctrine.³²

Werner Ohnsorge wrote on Eastern Roman Imperial influences concerning the

³⁰ Burns, 14-15.

³¹ Neil Christie, “Charlemagne and the Renewal of Rome,” in *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Joanna Story (New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 173.

³² Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 112.

Coronation in 800. In "The Coronation and Byzantium" (1947), Ohnsorge discussed the political tensions between the Byzantines, who considered themselves the epitome of power and culture in their time, and the Franks. Both the Frankish realm and Lombardy bordered the Exarchate of Ravenna, which constituted the last land holding of Byzantium in the west. Thus, as strife between the Lombards and Charlemagne intensified, Byzantine involvement began to grow. In 774, Charlemagne conquered the Lombards without concern for the effect that it would have in the East.³³

Where most historians that look Eastward for the causes behind Charlemagne's move toward an Empire focus on the Byzantines, Henri Pirenne approached Charlemagne from an Islamic slant in *Mohammed and Charlemagne* in 1935. The relationship between the Frankish Kingdom and the Islamic powers of the Mediterranean is worth considering. Charlemagne constituted the great power of the West, particularly following the coronation, while the Byzantines had suffered losses to the expansion of Islam. These three composed the political powers of the Western world. Pirenne's approach to this political version of Charlemagne's ascension is somewhat unique in searching for motivations inspired by Islam, rather than the Byzantine Empire.

The Pirenne Thesis argued that after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, economic and social life in Europe remained largely unchanged until approximately 650 A.D. and the Rise of Islam. Muslim control of the Mediterranean brought trade to a new low, which was the change that actually began the Middle

³³ Werner Ohnsorge, "The Coronation and Byzantium," in *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?*, ed. Richard E. Sullivan (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1959), 81.

Ages.³⁴ The cessation of trade income crippled the Merovingians, allowing the Carolingian dynasty to begin, while the Byzantines were forced to occupy themselves with Muslim invasion in the East, leaving the Papacy to call on the Franks for the protection that Byzantium would have offered.³⁵ Cities in the west dwindled and collapsed, as individual land holdings became the most important aspect of political power.³⁶ Thus, Pirenne concludes, the coronation of Charlemagne in 800 A.D. was a product of the Muslim expansion; as he writes, "Il est donc rigoureusement vrai de dire que, sans Mahomet, Charlemagne est inconcevable. (It is thus rigorously true to say that, without Mohammed, Charlemagne is inconceivable.)"³⁷

The art and architecture of the period also reflect Charlemagne's Imperial intentions. These mediums provide a method by which Charlemagne can connect himself to previous Emperors such as Constantine the Great and Theodoric the Great. Mosaics in Rome depict Charles accordingly as a Roman Emperor, comparing him to his predecessors. In this mosaic from the Lateran Basilica, Saint Peter is shown bestowing authority on Pope Leo III and Charlemagne. Mark A. Noll notes that both figures are on the same level and Charles receives his power directly from Peter, rather than from Leo.³⁸

³⁴ Gray C. Boyce, "Mohammed and Charlemagne," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 207 (January 1940): 241.

³⁵ Einar Jorason, "Mahomet et Charlemagne," *The American Historical Review* Vol. 44 No. 2 (January 1939): 324-325.

³⁶ Richard Hodges and David Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne, & the Origins of Europe: Archeology and the Pirenne Thesis* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), 5.

³⁷ Henri Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), xx.

³⁸ Noll, 112.



<http://faculty.samford.edu/~tsmcginn/tf/images/Peter.jpg>

Another mosaic in the Lateran Basilica depicts Christ with Pope Sylvester and the Emperor Constantine. Pope Leo III and Charlemagne are shown in the same fashion nearby, underscoring the revival of the Roman Empire in Carolingian Europe. Interestingly, the Pope commissioned this mosaic before the coronation occurred. This suggests that an agreement concerning the Imperial title was in place between Charles and Leo; if not, portraying Charles in the same fashion as Constantine would be premature.

Art was also used to relate Charlemagne to Marcus Aurelius, another of the great Roman Emperors. The statue on the left depicts Marcus Aurelius, while the statue on the right depicts Charlemagne. The mutual lack of stirrups is worth

observing. Charlemagne lived in a period after the invention of the stirrup, which suggests that the exclusion in the statue was a deliberate attempt to connect the Frank with the statues of the Roman Emperors.³⁹



http://poesisorbis.tripod.com/marcus_aurelius.jpg



<http://jbradu.free.fr/mosaiques/germigny/charlemagne-grd.jpg>

The Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, built in Aachen in 798, contains a mosaic patterned after one found on San Vitale in Ravenna. The latter depicts the Emperor Justinian, while the former shows Charlemagne in the same fashion. The mosaic showing Justinian is shown below. Comparing Charlemagne to Justinian serves the same purpose as the similarity of the statues and the mosaic in the Lateran Basilica, creating a link between the fallen Rome and the rising Frankish power.⁴⁰

³⁹ Herbert Schultz, *The Carolingians in Central Europe, their History, Arts, and Architecture: A Cultural History of Central Europe, 750-900* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 315.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.



<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/romanciv/Romancivimages23/justinian.jpg>

The architecture of the Frankish Kingdom in the 790s supports the argument that Charles was preparing himself for the Imperial title. The palace built in 796 for Charlemagne's court in Aachen shows a connection to Roman Ravenna and Byzantine Constantinople in style. Modeling the structure of the building that would house his court on those of Roman and Byzantine Emperors again reinforces an imagery of Charlemagne as the equal of any other Emperor. Likewise, the construction of the palace at Paderborn is reminiscent of the Roman Caesars and Ravenna.⁴¹

Assuming that Charlemagne intended to see himself crowned as an Emperor, then the logical question that follows would be the why of his desire to be crowned by the Pope. What could Charlemagne gain from the addition of Emperor of the

⁴¹ Ibid., 324-325.

Romans to his impressive list of titles with King of the Franks and the Lombards? One historian, Henry Mayr-Harting, suggests a rather unique answer to this question.

In 772, Charlemagne began his conquest of the Saxons, a conquest that would span some thirty-three years of warfare with rebellions rising anew almost on top of the quailing of the preceding rebellion. The Frankish King knew that for the security of his boundaries, he would need to conquer and convert the native peoples of Saxony.⁴² The difficulty in conquering the Saxons was in their lack of a centralized government and King; a group would rebel, be defeated, and swear to obey Charlemagne, only for a different group to rise in rebellion, in turn. Mayr-Harting notes an account of the life of St. Lebuin in connection to this problem.

Lebuin appeared at a gathering of Saxons and claimed to bring a message from God. He told them, "As you have never had a King over you before this time, so no King will prevail against you and subject you to his domination." Mayr-Harting believes that it should have been translated as "so it will not be a King who will prevail against you..." This translation would suggest that the Saxons could not submit to a King without seeing it as a great humiliation; they could, however, accept an Emperor who had conquered and was respected by many different peoples as their overlord.⁴³

Mayr-Harting goes on to point out that the pagan Saxons would have been more able to accept the idea of an Emperor through the religion they practiced. Saxon religious artifacts depict god-princes bearing spear, diadem, and Imperial cloak with brooch. This is perhaps a testament to the legendary invincibility of the old

⁴² Ganshof, *The Carolingians*, 19.

⁴³ Mayr-Harting, 1125-1126.

Roman Empire. This image of Rome's power may have still held power over the northern barbarians; his coronation would allow Charlemagne to tap into this power and wield another weapon against the rebellions in Saxon territory.

In François Louis Ganshof's 1959 article "Immediate Preliminaries to the Coronation: Affairs in Rome in December, 800" the events in Rome and the Pope's motivations to crown Charlemagne are addressed as a contributing factor to the coronation debate. Ganshof describes the rebellion of Paschalis and Campulus, paying particular attention to how Charlemagne could protect Leo and restore his office as Pope. Ganshof suggests that, in exchange for the Frankish King's aid, Leo may have offered Charlemagne the Imperial dignity.

One of the most recent historians published on the topic, Matthias Becher in his 2003 volume entitled *Charlemagne* does an excellent job of gathering together many of the views taken by historians working in this field and settling some of their differences. He draws heavily on authors like Ganshof, Richard Sullivan, and Heinrich Fichtenau, though he does not neglect the primary sources available, either. His approach is not so much new, as it is useful in bringing the varied arguments together for consideration in one place. Within this book, it is easily noticed that the majority of research supports Charlemagne actively seeking the title of Emperor; the motivations behind the move vary wildly from one historian to the next, but the consensus sees Charlemagne as an Emperor even before the coronation.

Among the few opposing voices to the norm, Ferdinand Lot contended that Charlemagne was not involved in any conspiracy with Pope Leo III that planned the Coronation. In "Certain Reservations to be Made in Interpreting the Coronation," he

did not claim that Charles had no Imperial ambitions, but rather that he had intended to claim the Imperial dignity at a time of his own choosing. Thus, Einhard's account that Charlemagne was unaware of the Pope's intent and was displeased with the Coronation is valid under this line of reasoning.⁴⁴ Geoffrey Barraclough's "Reservations" is more concerned with what he deems a misconception in Charlemagne's position as Emperor of the Romans. According to Barraclough, Charles remained King of the Franks and the Lombards after he was crowned Emperor of the Romans. There was no synthesis of the titles that formed a Frankish Empire, but he served in multiple roles at the same time.⁴⁵

Lot's argument is quite reasonable, though, as the other historians have shown, evidence tends to suggest that the Coronation was the result of planning. Barraclough, however, is somewhat less feasible. In theory the titles would be separate, but in practice Charlemagne treated his holdings, both Frankish and Lombard, as extensions of his Empire. Also, the Imperial dignity was eventually added to Charles' will to be passed on to his heirs.

A considerable majority of texts concerned with the reign of Charles the Great favors the conclusion that the series of events that led to the Coronation were deliberate and most likely planned by the Frankish King. With these arguments in mind, one can study the chronicle of events precluding the Coronation and recognize the elements that historians believe suggest premeditation. The events following the Coronation further support this reasoning.

⁴⁴ Ferdinand Lot and Geoffrey Barraclough, "Certain Reservations to be Made in Interpreting the Coronation," in *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?*, ed. Richard E. Sullivan (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1959), 57.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

The Carolingian dynasty traced its descent from Charles (the Hammer) Martel, the Frankish hero who defeated the Muslims in 732 at the Battle of Poitiers. The Merovingians ruled the Franks in the time of Charles Martel, but the King had become a puppet that Charles, as Mayor of the Palace, could rule through. Pepin III, the son of Charles the Hammer and the father of Charlemagne, ruled as his father had, until the opportunity arose to supplant Childeric II and become King of the Franks, himself.

In 749, Pepin sent two representatives to Pope Zacharias to negotiate the role of Kings, they argued that the Merovingians had become figureheads and that he who ruled should be King. Zacharias needed the support of the Franks to protect Rome as Aistulf, King of the Lombards, began to expand his territory in Italy. In the past, Byzantium had been responsible for the defense of Rome, but from the pontificate of Gregory the Great there had been a strong decline in the western influence of the Byzantine Empire. This was largely due to the conquests of the Muslims into Persian and Byzantine territory in the East. Out of this need for defense, the Pope authorized Pepin to assume the throne.⁴⁶

Boniface, acting as the Pope's representative, anointed Pepin as a King in 751. This is a very clear show of the Church's support of Pepin in his authority over the Franks, anointing Pepin created a bond between the Carolingians and the Church that had never existed with the Merovingians who had undergone no such ritual.⁴⁷ The anointment served as an image for his Christian subjects, connecting Pepin to

⁴⁶ Heinrich Fichtenau, *The Carolingian Empire*, trans. Peter Munz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 18.

⁴⁷ Paul Edward Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 16.

Solomon and David, the great biblical Kings of Israel.⁴⁸ Pepin was succeeded by his sons, Carloman and Charles, the Kingdom being divided between them at their father's death on September 24, 768. The division of property evenly between sons was the traditional inheritance system of the Franks, unlike the later system in which the eldest son would have inherited the entire Kingdom.

In 769, Chunoald II rebelled in Aquitaine and Charlemagne moved to counter the rebellion. He requested his brother's aid and the two met in Vienna, but could not agree on a strategy. Carloman returned home, leaving Charles to quell the rebellion alone.

Without the aid of Carloman, Charlemagne was victorious against the uprising nonetheless. The brothers continued to be rivals fighting amongst themselves until Carloman died on December 4, 771. His wife and children fled to Lombardy; meanwhile, Charles became the sole ruler of the Frankish Kingdom.⁴⁹ There is some suspicion among historians that Carloman was murdered by his brother's order, hence the widow and heirs fleeing to her father's lands, but this is speculation that cannot be verified with solid evidence. In his *Life of Charlemagne*, Einhard wrote that Charlemagne had always shown great tolerance toward his brother's refusal to cooperate; to those who doubt Einhard's account of Charles' life, this only emphasizes the convenience of Carloman's death.

Charles continued to expand his territory across the face of the European

⁴⁸ Robert Folz, "Eighth Century Concepts about the Roman Empire," in *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?*, ed. Richard E. Sullivan (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1959), 11.

⁴⁹ Einhard, "Life of Charlemagne," in *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Penguin Books, 1969), 57.

continent. As the size of his realm increased, Charlemagne needed to improve the political bureaucracy of the Frankish Kingdom. This necessitated a series of laws and dictates from the Royal court to establish a structure that could support the increasingly difficult to manage territories under Charlemagne's rule. This system of laws can also be seen as an introduction to the Empire that would also require an efficient bureaucratic system.

As Charlemagne conquered Italy and Lombardy, he brought his rule into the regions surrounding Rome itself. He had initially moved troops into these areas at the request of Pope Hadrian, that he acts in his office bestowed upon his father before him as *Patricius Romanorum*. In 778, however, Hadrian requested that Charlemagne intervene militarily against the Byzantines further to the south, he refused. Throughout the rest of his reign, he kept a military presence in these territories.⁵⁰ Whether this was in order to keep down rebellion or as a silent threat to Rome and the Papacy is unknown. With control of these territories, and his position as *Patricius*, Charlemagne gained considerable influence in Rome. His Kingdom had grown to cover large stretches of the western Roman Empire and Charlemagne seemed to be the successor of the Roman Emperors by God's will as all the old seats of the Emperors came into his Empire.

Charlemagne had a close relationship with Pope Hadrian, so much so that Einhard wrote that the King was moved to tears as if he had lost a dear brother when Hadrian passed away.⁵¹ During the Pontificate of Hadrian there was a shift away from connection to the Byzantines, a shift that continued with the succession of Pope

⁵⁰ Burns, 20.

⁵¹ Einhard, *Two Lives*, 75.

Leo III. This shift is evident in the dating of letters, as Papal letters cease to be dated by the years of the reign of the current Byzantine Emperor; shifting to dating by the years of the Pontiff.⁵² Leo's first act upon becoming Pope was to inform Charles of his election and continue the rapport built up by his predecessor by sending the Frankish king the keys of Peter's tomb and the banner of Rome. The Papal move toward independence did more to tie Rome to the Frankish Kings than to make Rome a force unto itself in the politics of the time.⁵³

Relations between Byzantium and the Frankish Kingdom were strengthened by a wedding pact by which the Emperor Constantine VI would be wed to Charlemagne's daughter, Rohtrud. The contract was broken in the early 780s, though sources conflict as to whether it was due to the actions of the Franks or the Byzantines. The wedding agreement itself suggests that Charles sought justification and recognition as an equal from the Eastern Empire.

In 781, Charlemagne brought his younger sons, Pepin and Louis, to be anointed and crowned as Kings by the Pope, securing political ties to Rome. At this time, Pepin became King of Italy and Louis became King of Aquitaine, the anointing constituted a Papal commitment to the Carolingian dynasty and its future. This alliance was strengthened by the conflict between Byzantium and the Franks over the Councils of Nicaea and Frankfurt later in the decade.

When the Empress Irene of Byzantium held the Council of Nicaea in 787, Pope Hadrian was invited to represent the interests of Christianity in the West. The major issue discussed at this council regarded the display of icons and worshipping of

⁵² Burns, 21.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 22.

sacred images in the church, which had caused a split between East and West. The Eastern Church had long favored the idea of iconoclasm as an aid to the spreading of the Christian faith. However, Iconoclasm came to be viewed by some as a form of idolatry, which was in violation of the Commandments. The Western Empire, at this time, had very little imagery displayed in its churches. Thus, the topic of iconoclasm was not a particularly central issue to the West.⁵⁴

Charlemagne and the Frankish bishops were not invited to participate in the decisions of the council, a fact that the Franks took as a slight. The Frankish Kingdom had grown to cover much of the lands once held by the Western Roman Empire, but failing to invite Charles suggests that the Byzantines did not consider him their equal in any fashion. In response to the Council of Nicaea, Charlemagne had the *Libri Carolini* drawn up stating his position opposing the Council of Nicaea, but did not publish it at the Pope's request. Instead, Charles held the Council of Frankfurt in 794; the Franks discussed the decisions of the Council of Nicaea and opposed a new view of Christ as the adopted Son of God that had risen in Spain. Representatives from England, France, Germany, and Italy attended the council, but the Byzantines were not invited.

The Papacy found itself caught in the middle of a rising conflict between the two great secular figures, East and West. Pope Hadrian, in the end, remained neutral; he supported the decisions of neither council, thus suggesting that Charlemagne was coming to be the Byzantine Emperor's equal in the west. This was not a direct alliance between the Papacy and the Franks, but neutrality in matters between

⁵⁴ Thomas Hodgkin, *The Life of Charlemagne* (New York: A.L. Burt Company, Publishers, 1902), 227.

Charlemagne and the Byzantine Emperor suggested to the world that the Franks were on equal ground with the Eastern Empire. Hadrian went so far as to suggest branding Constantine VI as a heretic if he did not make amends for his great-grandfather's mistreatment of the Church, which is a clearly hostile action that shows the connection between Rome and the Frankish Kingdom.

Charlemagne spread Christianity to many of the peoples he conquered during his reign. This may have been out of a desire to spread the faith, or to appease the Pope, or as a means of control over the populations he brought into his Kingdom. As Charlemagne's Kingdom grew and his new subjects were converted to Christianity, the usefulness of being crowned as Emperor in the Roman fashion would not be lost on the Frank. He would exercise far more authority over the Christian population after being crowned by the Pope, as the title of Emperor rose him above kingship. The connection to Emperors like Constantine the Great would solidify his position as the secular leader of Christianity in the western world.

The situation in the Byzantine Empire also influenced the coronation. In 796, the Byzantine Emperor Constantine VI came of age. He took power, and set his mother, the Empress Irene, aside. She overthrew her son, having him blinded to ensure that he could not hold the throne, and took full power for herself in 797. The Byzantine Emperors had long held the title of Roman Emperor since the fall of the Western Empire, but an Empress now ruled the Byzantines. While Irene had been ruling in her son's place until he came of age, it was acceptable for her to be in power. But removing her son meant that she was in complete command of Byzantium. Rome could not accept a woman as Emperor, the title of Roman

Emperor that had been held by the Byzantines since the fall of the West was vacant.⁵⁵

The Empress Irene was rumored to have offered the Imperial title to Charlemagne as part of a wedding pact in 798; the offer would have confirmed him in his belief of equality and secured him in the knowledge that he had earned the title of Emperor. It was not through marriage that Charles acquired the title, however; the rebellion of the Roman aristocracy against Pope Leo III offered Charlemagne his opportunity. He came to Rome as a King, and left after the Christmas of 800 as an Emperor.

Understandably, the news of a barbarian being raised to Imperial power provoked Byzantium. A non-Roman ruler as Emperor in the west held connotations that the east could not reconcile, among them the threat of the Frankish Emperor waging war on the Greeks and attempting to take Constantinople as his capital. Irene sent an embassy to Charlemagne to ascertain his intentions. She was deposed in 803 and her successor, Nikephoros, continued negotiating with the Franks. War broke out between the two Empires, possibly resulting from the Byzantine refusal to acknowledge Charlemagne in his new capacity as Emperor.⁵⁶

Of equal importance is the question of the agenda Pope Leo III had in the coronation. The move angered the Byzantines and put the Pope in a position of dependence on the new Emperor. What did Leo hope to gain through making Charlemagne an Emperor in the Roman fashion?

Pope Leo's most obvious and plausible motive for planning the coronation was for mitigation in the rebellion of the nobility of Rome on April 25, 799, led by

⁵⁵ Burns, 15.

⁵⁶ Ohnsorge, 85.

Paschalis and Campulus. Unlike many other Popes, Leo had not come from this Roman aristocracy. Discontent over an unknown matter broke out and the Pope was attacked and imprisoned by the group led by Pachalis and Campulus, there was an attempt to blind him and tear out his tongue, which would make him unfit for the position.⁵⁷

Leo escaped and both parties looked to Charlemagne for aid; the rebels knew they could not proceed without the support of the Franks, but the Pope had the power to offer an Emperorship to bring Charles onto his side. It is conceivable that Leo used the title to win the Frankish King to his side, though equally possible that Charles demanded it as payment for his intervention. Some historians believe that Charlemagne could have acted in his authority as *Patricius Romanorum* to settle the matter, but the *lex Romana* required that an Emperor sit in judgment on a case involving the Pope; lending credence to Leo suggesting the idea.⁵⁸

Charlemagne came to Rome on November 23, 800, in order to oversee the series of allegations that were finally laid to rest. When he approached the city, Pope Leo III met him at the twelfth mile marker, hailing him as the hero of Rome, and returned to Rome in all haste to prepare a welcome. This was unprecedented except during the late Roman Empire when the Pope met the Emperor outside the city at the fourth mile marker. Leo is willing to come considerably further to meet Charlemagne than decorum would dictate for even the Emperor. On December 23, 800, Leo was

⁵⁷ François L. Ganshof, "Immediate Preliminaries to the Coronation: Affairs in Rome in December, 800," in *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?*, ed. Richard E. Sullivan (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1959), 39.

⁵⁸ Karl Heldmann, "The Coronation and Local Politics in Rome," in *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?*, ed. Richard E. Sullivan (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1959), 63.

reaffirmed in his office after a religious ceremony in which he declared his innocence; the belief was that if he were guilty of the charges, God would not allow him to complete the oath without faltering. Shortly thereafter, the rebels were cast out and Charlemagne became an Emperor and confirmed Leo as Pope.⁵⁹

When Charlemagne arranged for the succession in 806, he did not pass on the Imperial title. In 811, the Byzantines faced a crisis when Nikephoros was defeated and killed with a large portion of the armies while fighting the Bulgars. Michael I, who followed Nikephoros on the throne, recognized Charlemagne in his position as Emperor, ending the conflict between Byzantium and the Franks. The Byzantine representatives bearing word of this arrived in the Frankish Empire in the summer of 812.⁶⁰

It was not until after this recognition that Charlemagne added the Imperial title to his will and crowned his son, Louis, by his own hand at the palace in Aachen in 813. His reason for waiting to pass on the title is unclear, though it seems that he wished to acquire Byzantine approval first. François Louis Ganshof suggests that he crowned his son himself in order to remove the dependence of the Carolingian dynasty on the Papacy.⁶¹

One can see that Charlemagne was working to reform his Kingdom, unify the church, streamline the justice system, and tie his subjects more closely to him. The reforms had a tendency toward a consolidation of his power, bringing the government and his vassals into a more centralized structure. These actions will all aid him in

⁵⁹ Pierre Riché, *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe*, trans. Michael Idomir Allen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 121.

⁶⁰ Becher, 95-96.

⁶¹ Ganshof, "Immediate Preliminaries," 39.

turning the Frankish Kingdom into an Empire.

A trend of decline in the Frankish Empire began in the last years of Charlemagne's life. The death of Charles and Pepin, Charlemagne's elder sons, was seen as divine intervention; the last son, Louis, came to be viewed as the man God had chosen to rule after the Emperor's death. This added to the connection Pepin had begun with having the Carolingians anointed by the Church, giving Louis a strong religious support. A connection which strengthened Louis' hold on the Empire during his reign.⁶²

In the last years of Charlemagne's reign, Einhard recorded numerous signs that, in his opinion, foretold the Emperor's death. Eclipses of the sun and moon, a black spot visible on the sun for seven days, the collapse of a portico Charlemagne had built, and the burning of the bridge Charlemagne had constructed to span the Rhine. Most importantly to a militaristic society, while on campaign in Saxony, the horse Charlemagne was riding threw him after a meteor fell across the sky. Einhard reported that Charlemagne ignored all such portents.⁶³ With the death of Charlemagne on January 28, 814, the Empire was divided as per Frankish custom amongst the heirs and the Imperial title passed to Louis the Pious.

It is the coronation of Charlemagne in 800 that lies at the epicenter of the historical debates concerned with the Carolingian period. Did Charlemagne intend to be crowned as Emperor of Rome? Or, considering the Pirenne Thesis, was the coronation significant at all? These are important questions because of the role that Charles the Great has played as an idealized figure in European history. This fact

⁶² Schultz, 79.

⁶³ Einhard, *Two Lives*, 83-85.

alone proves Charlemagne and his coronation hold a significant value. Otto the Great spoke of Germany becoming “Charlemagne’s Empire reborn” during his reign as Holy Roman Emperor from 962 until his death in 973. The memory of the Frankish Emperor came very near worship as Napoleon Bonaparte founded the Cult of Charlemagne in an attempt to connect himself to the last great Emperor to unite Europe across its borders. After visiting the Frankish Emperor’s crypt at Aachen in 1804, he wrote to the Pope, saying, “Je suis Charlemagne. (I am Charlemagne.)” Charlemagne’s massive Germanic Empire inspired Adolf Hitler and served as a model for the Third Reich. These leaders were among the most influential of their times and they were trying to forge connections with Charlemagne to strengthen their own power; the name of the Frankish Emperor was so legendary that the imagery of his rule still invoked authority.⁶⁴

Relation to the legendary figure of Charlemagne became an important aspect of lordship in the medieval world. Not only was the feudal system that dominated European politics during the Middle Ages a direct result of the reforms to the feudal oaths issued by Charlemagne’s court by capitulary, Carolingian blood was an important measure of nobility. The French monarchy, in particular, derived its right of succession in decent from the Frankish Emperor.⁶⁵ By influencing such prominent forces in the centuries after the height of their power, it is obvious that the Carolingians shaped European history to a degree that rivals the involvement of any other family; thus, understanding their time is central to understanding the history of Europe. Since 1950, the city of Aachen has given an award for those working toward

⁶⁴ Becher, 144-148.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

the unity of Europe in honor of Charles the Great, the Father of the Continent, called the *Karlspreis*, or Charlemagne Prize.⁶⁶

Far more evidence supports Charlemagne as a cunning ruler that set himself perfectly in place to attain a title that would justify him as an equal in the eyes of the Byzantine Empire, in particular, than the opposing viewpoint. Little beyond Einhard's account, which is arguably skewed to put the Emperor forward in a favorable light, suggests that when Charlemagne rose from prayer in Rome on Christmas Day in 800, he did so unaware that he was about to be crowned by the Pope to give the Roman Empire a new life in the West. His actions led him steadily and progressively closer to the coronation in 800. The events of the late 790s certainly accelerated his ascent, but without them Charlemagne would, no doubt, have found the means to attain the title. It gave him greater authority over his Christian subjects, it allowed him to bring the Saxons into his Empire, and it made it clear that he was on equal ground with the Emperor in Constantinople. It is, therefore, logical to deduce from the evidence that Charlemagne's policies were intentionally Imperial in nature and he was actively seeking a chance at which to become more than a Barbarian King, but an Emperor with every bit as much influence and power as his counterpart in the East.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 148.

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