

# From Emperor to Holy Crusader: A Historiography of the Charlemagne Legend

---

Colby Turberville

*This article is a historiography of Charlemagne's legend. It roughly covers between the late eighth century to the twelfth century. It focuses on various contributors to Charlemagne's legend such as his contemporary courtiers, especially Einhard. It also pays close attention to the clerical backlash against Charlemagne during the reign of his son, Louis the Pious. This article shows how the diversification of Europe changed the legend of Charlemagne, and thus preserved it. Finally, this article ends by showing the power that Charlemagne's image had accumulated as evidenced by its strong influence during the First Crusade. This article is, in short, an attempt to follow the developing image and legend of one of the most influential figures in European history and show that image's influence on and connection with that history.*

## Introduction

The year 800 was a difficult time for the papacy. The constant threat from the Lombards to the north, the struggle for religious authority with the patriarch of Constantinople, and the political turmoil in the city of Rome itself were chief among the papacy's concerns. Political events in Rome culminated in November with Pope Leo III being beaten by political rivals. Badly injured, Leo escaped north into Frankish lands. Leo had escaped into Francia for obvious reasons. Charlemagne ruled there, and he was Leo's best political ally. Charlemagne was widely known as a successful warlord. He had conquered the ferocious Saxons, subdued the threatening Lombards, and taken on the Muslim threat in Spain. Now, Charlemagne was the savior of the pope, and soon would come into the exceptional position of being the pope's judge as well.

In Rome, Charlemagne would oversee the pope's trial. Although no one would bring allegations against Leo, he was eventually forced to "invoke the name of the Holy Trinity and purge himself by oath of the charges alleged against him."<sup>1</sup> These recording of these events conveyed a message that even the Apostolic See could answer to Charlemagne. An even more emphatic message was sent three weeks later with the crowning of Charlemagne emperor on Christmas Day by the pope. The Royal Frankish Annals record the event in a glorious manner:

On that very same most sacred day of the Lord's birth, when the king, at mass, rose from prayer before the *confessio* of the blessed apostle Peter, pope Leo placed a crown upon his head, and from the entire people of the Romans came the acclamation: 'To Charles, Augustus, crowned by God, great and pacific emperor of the Romans, life and victory!' And after the acclamations he

---

<sup>1</sup>P.D. King, "Annals of the kingdom of the Franks" in *Charlemagne: Translated Sources* (Lancaster, UK: University of Lancaster Press, 1987), 93.

was adored by the *apostolicus* in the way emperors of old were and, the name of patrician having been laid aside, was called emperor and Augustus.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly the events of Charlemagne's coronation in 800 reveal that he was already seen through a legendary lens a decade before his death. This image was largely the result of his courtiers who heaped continual praises on him. Charlemagne's image was reminiscent of the images of Roman emperors, removed and unapproachable. Following Charlemagne's death in 814, his son, Louis would seek to neutralize this image. Thus, a new genre of writing arose. These writings often depicted Charlemagne in a type of purgatory making penance for his past sins. The new image of Charlemagne focused on his moral shortcomings rather than his military career, which was impeccable. Unfortunately for Louis, his own military career was disastrous – constantly plagued by political infighting and failing campaigns. It was in this atmosphere that Einhard wrote his *Vita Karoli*. Einhard's representation made Charlemagne more knowable and friendly. This greatly differed from the removed and unapproachable image portrayed by Charlemagne's other courtiers. Einhard's *Vita Karoli* was successful in saving the memory of Charlemagne. It is Einhard's representation that would be the basis for subsequent *vitae* and *gestae*.

The military turmoil during the ninth and tenth centuries eventually led to the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire. This disintegration created new kingdoms within the boundaries laid out by the Treaty of Verdun (843). These kingdoms developed their own culture and pursued their own agendas. It is out of these agendas and cultures that Charlemagne's image diversified. Representations of Charlemagne began to take on the unique qualities of the regions they were developed in. This period initiates the transformation of Charlemagne's image from a Frankish ideal to a more universal, European one. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, with the rise of the Crusades, Charlemagne had become the perfect avatar for the Christian warrior. Charlemagne was no longer remembered as a great Frankish king, but as the epitome of Christian piety, a holy crusader. The legend of Charlemagne was born in the Aachen court, revived by Einhard in the mid-ninth century, and eventually transformed into a universal ideal of crusading, medieval Europe.

### Charlemagne's Court

Charlemagne had an "insatiable curiosity" throughout his entire life.<sup>3</sup> During the 780s and 790s, he began gathering educated men from all over the European continent. These men not only educated Charles himself, but also others at court. Alcuin describes the court setting as an academy, although according to Alessandro Barbero, this "might imply a degree of organization and permanence that in reality did not exist."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, those whom Charlemagne brought to his court were diverse and highly educated. The court would have included the Lombards Peter of Pisa and Paul the Deacon, the Englishman Alcuin of York, the Spanish-born Theodulf of Orleans

---

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Alessandro Barbero, *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004), 214.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 215.

and Agobard of Lyons, and the Italian Paulinus of Aquileia. These men would have been influential in the teaching of Latin grammar, the *trivium*, and the *quadrivium*.<sup>5</sup> These men were also the driving force behind the Carolingian Renaissance.

Three important results of the Carolingian Renaissance were a revival of the classical arts in Gaul<sup>6</sup>, a uniformity of writing, and a greater circulation of texts. Alessandro Barbero states that "the majority of men of letters (courtiers) were not Franks, which demonstrates the sorry state of Frankish culture at the time."<sup>7</sup> The teachings of these "men of letters" would eventually produce learned Frankish scholars such as Angilbert and Einhard for future Frankish generations. Out of the desire to circulate knowledge came a need for the writing style to be uniform and useful. Carolingian miniscule provided this in that it was a more practical and less convoluted style of letters. Perhaps the greatest aspect of the Carolingian Renaissance, not just in general, but also as pertained to the development of Charlemagne's legend, was the increase in textual circulation. Immediately following his accession, Charlemagne issued a circular calling for all available books to be donated or copied for the newly built library in his palace at Aachen. Libraries and monasteries throughout Gaul began sharing books and copies of books, both secular and religious. The effects of this widespread circulation can be seen in that 7,000 manuscripts have survived from the ninth century compared to 1,800 of the first centuries CE.<sup>8</sup> This circulation of knowledge also ensured that more documents pertaining to Charlemagne would survive for later generations, including Einhard's depiction, which was vitally important to Charlemagne's literary survival.

Charlemagne's most important teacher and adviser was Alcuin of York. Alcuin was highly influential at court, having taught most of the future generation's scholars. He was also influential, however, in advising Charles on many political and religious matters, coordinated the *Admonitio generalis* and the *Epistola de litteris colendis*. In many of Alcuin's letters to Charles, one can already see the workings of Charlemagne's developing legend. Several of Alcuin's salutations depict Charlemagne as the Israelite King David: "To the most virtuous, excellent and honorable King David," "To the most religious and excellent lord, King David," and "To his lovingly respected and respectfully loved lord, King David."<sup>9</sup> This demonstrates a continuing Roman custom that legitimacy lay within the male past, and also shows that Charlemagne was seen as a great Christian king, but not just any king. Alcuin compared Charlemagne with David, the epitome of godly kingship. Alcuin's letter of June 799 to Charles reveals the almost legendary lenses through which Charlemagne was already being viewed:

There is the Royal Dignity, in which the dispensation of our Lord Jesus Christ has established you as ruler of the Christian people; in power a ruler more excellent than the

---

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 214.

<sup>6</sup>David Ganz, "Einhard and the Characterisation of Greatness," in Joanna Story, ed., *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 39-40. Alcuin's use of Ciceronian and Seutonian rhetoric techniques shows this revival, especially when considering ancients were being downplayed by other Christian scholars and that Alcuin taught much of the next generation's Frankish scholars.

<sup>7</sup>Barbero, *Father of a Continent*, 215

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 234.

<sup>9</sup>Paul E. Dutton, ed., *Carolingian Civilization* (New York and Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), 120-127.

aforementioned ones, in wisdom more radiant, and in grandeur more sublime. Behold, now in you alone lies the salvation of the churches of Christ. You are the avenger of crimes, the guide of those who err, the consoler of the afflicted, the uplifter of the righteous.<sup>10</sup>

Charlemagne was also represented as a "New Constantine", an image that would feature heavily in his taking of the imperial title. The various recordings of the episode of Charlemagne's imperial coronation at Rome in 800 show the masterful work of his courtiers in presenting him as a humble servant-king, reluctantly willing to do what was needed. The Lorsch Annals recorded Charles's acceptance of the title thusly:

King Charles was himself unwilling to deny this request of theirs and, having submitted with all humility to God and the petition of the *sacerdotes* and the entire Christian people, received the name of emperor, with the consecration of the lord pope Leo, on the very day of the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Einhard famously would later claim that had Charlemagne known about the intentions of that day, he would have never entered the church.<sup>12</sup> However, all of the annals record that the church clergy, Pope Leo, and the entire Christian population saw the event as necessary. Alcuin and many of Charlemagne's other courtiers were also expecting some sort of climatic event. It is, therefore, ludicrous to think Charlemagne had no former knowledge or inclination of the intentions of the Mass that day. The annals also record Charlemagne as arbiter of the proceedings concerning Pope Leo's alleged torture and blinding. The *Frankish Annals* represent Charlemagne as more powerful than the pope. According to the *Annals*, as Charlemagne began passing judgment on the perpetrators of the crimes against the pope, the latter "compassionately" interceded with Charlemagne on their behalf. The annals also record that Charles forced Pope Leo to purge himself prior to the proceedings. These images of Charlemagne convey the same one that Alcuin's letter of June 799 did: "... in power a ruler more excellent, in wisdom more radiant, and in grandeur more sublime."<sup>13</sup> The use of Constantinian-style architecture<sup>14</sup> further highlighted Charlemagne's association with Constantine. According to Linda Seidel, this gave "visual expression to this idea of the Carolingian as the Early Christian's successor."<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>Pierre Riché, *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe*, ed. Michael I. Allen (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 120.

<sup>11</sup>P.D. King, "Lorsch Annals" in *Charlemagne: Translated Sources* (Lancaster, UK: University of Lancaster Press, 1987), 144.

<sup>12</sup>Einhard *Life of Charlemagne* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 56-57.

<sup>13</sup>Riché, *The Carolingians*, 120.

<sup>14</sup>Use of a palace *aula* at Aachen, modeled on the roman imperial style, as referenced in Rosamond McKitterick, 'Charlemagne's Palaces and the Status of Aachen' in *Charlemagne: The Formation of European Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008), 162-163, is one example of this architecture. The presence of *aulas* at other palaces indicates that this imperial image was widespread and reiterated at Charlemagne's major stopping points on his royal itinerary. For a more detailed account of Aachen and great contrasting views of it as Charlemagne's capital see R. McKitterick's *Charlemagne: The Formation of European Identity* and Janet Nelson's 'Aachen as a Place of Power' in *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*.

<sup>15</sup>Linda Seidel, "Constantine 'and' Charlemagne", in JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/766771> (accessed January 25, 2012).

The court of Charlemagne proved vitally important to his legend's birth. The educated men Charlemagne brought to his court were extremely influential in the success of the Carolingian Renaissance, which was the catalyst for increased intellectual activity and textual circulation. This improved circulation would ensure the continuation of the depictions of Charlemagne. These depictions were of power, humility, and piety. Charlemagne was seen as the "New David" ready to lead the Franks, the "new Israelites", to their destiny as the chosen people. This image is clearly seen in the writings of Alcuin, one of the most influential men of Charlemagne's court. The recordings of the events of the imperial coronation of 800 in the various contemporary annals, as well as the use of Constantinian-style architecture, show Charlemagne as the "new Constantine". All of these depictions would provide the resources that would be used by later generations in the construction of his legend. However, the greatest provision of Charlemagne's court to the birth of his legend was the image that Charlemagne was unapproachable. "Had subsequent generations possessed the king's direct deliberations, his religious and philosophical thought, his little jokes and outbursts of anger, these might have made him seem smaller and more knowable."<sup>16</sup>

### Charlemagne's Death

Charlemagne's death was met with overwhelming mourning. A minority would have, however, anticipated the opportunities for power and advancement. However, given the praise heaped upon Charlemagne by his courtiers, who were very influential as bishops and abbots, the image of Charlemagne would have been quite favorable in 814. The following excerpts from the *Planctus de obitu Karoli*, written by an anonymous monk of Bobbio shortly after Charlemagne's death, gives good insight into what would have been the emotional atmosphere after his death.

From [eastern] lands where the sun rises to western shores,  
 People are [now] crying and wailing  
 Alas for miserable me.  
 The Franks, the Romans, all Christians,  
 Are stung with mourning and great worry.  
 Alas for miserable me.  
 Francia has endured awful wounds [before],  
 But never has suffered such great sorrow as now,  
 Alas for miserable me.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>Dutton, "Karolvs Magnvs", 26.

<sup>17</sup>Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 157-159.

## Louis the Pious's Reign

Charlemagne had attempted to divide his kingdom equally among his three sons. He hoped to ensure that no internal strife would result in the destruction of his and his ancestors' accomplishments. Reality, however, would not work in Charlemagne's favor. Shortly after his *Divisio regnorum* in 806, two of his sons, Pepin and Charles died in 810 and 811, respectively. Thus, by the time of his death in 814, Charlemagne had one legitimate heir to pass his Frankish and imperial crown to, Louis.

Louis, known as the Good-Natured or Pious, immediately set out to establish his own authority. He rid the court of his father's courtiers. (Although, he did retain Einhard.) Thus, Louis established a court loyal to himself. He also made in-house changes by sending his sisters to monasteries to rid the palace of perceived moral laxity. Charlemagne's palace and court had allegedly become morally deficient during his old age when aspiring underlings were left to follow their personal ambitions. Louis would also recognize papal authority over documented papal territories, an act which would weigh heavily against him later in his reign. Nevertheless, when Louis had taken his father's throne, he faced the problem of distinguishing himself from Charlemagne. Louis would have had no chance of denying Charlemagne's military success. However, the allegations of moral depravity towards the end of Charlemagne's reign provided Louis' court with the ammunition needed to launch a literary reappraisal against the great emperor's idealized image.

The *Visio Wettini*, written by Heito, bishop of Basel (803-823), recounts the visions of the monk Wetti. In the *Visio*, Wetti sees a certain prince (Charlemagne) having his genitals gnawed on by an unspecified animal. This stark contrast with the literature produced during Charlemagne's reign is quite representative of the results of Louis' initiative against his father. Similarly, the *Vision of the Poor Woman of Laon* of the 820s displayed a new genre of literature geared at morally criticizing Charlemagne. In the *Vision*, the woman sees Charlemagne being tortured, but is assured that his punishment will pass if Louis "provides for seven memorial services on his behalf."<sup>18</sup> One can see that the author placed the power of the situation completely in the hands of Louis.

Despite Louis's moral reappraisal of Charlemagne, the latter was still seen as a great king. In every account of Charlemagne's punishment, he is eventually released to heaven. Nevertheless, with the moral attacks on Charlemagne's image and the new praises being thrust upon him, Louis began to distinguish himself from his father. Walahfrid Strabo's *De imagine Tetrici* shows this distinction.

You [Louis] rule a people called to the beauties of paradise  
Over temples built upon sacred stones, great king.  
Your famous father at one time enhanced their importance.  
His golden effigies sport at the top of columns,

---

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 203-204.

To his genius I do not apply the teaching of Plato

Later, Walahfrid explains this reference to Plato:

Only then does a prosperous republic arise,  
When kings are sufficiently wise and wise men are kings.<sup>19</sup>

Reality, however, would not allow for Charlemagne's memory to lapse. Louis faced many disastrous military campaigns and internal disorders, which in turn led to an even greater idealization of the "old days" of the mighty Charlemagne. Nithard characterizes this time of internal strife as growing "worse from day to day, since all were driven by greed and sought only their own advantage."<sup>20</sup>

In 817, Louis dispensed his *Ordinatio imperii*. This document divided up his kingdom between his sons, Pippin of Aquitaine and Louis of Bavaria, and crowned Lothar co-emperor. After the death of his first wife, Ermengard, Louis married Judith, the daughter of Welf, count of lands in Bavaria and Alemmania. Judith was a strong-willed woman intent on gaining political control for Louis' and her son, Charles. Simply put, Lothar recognized the potential political hazards from Judith's manipulating. Lothar immediately began garnering support, lay and ecclesiastical. According to Pierre Riché, "As an advocate of peace and stability, Lothar would find many supporters among the episcopacy."<sup>21</sup> Defending the dispensation of the *Ordinatio imperii*, Lothar, along with both his brothers, Pippin and Louis, moved to take control and rid his father of Judith and Bernard of Septimania.<sup>22</sup> The negotiations, however, between Louis and his younger sons stopped the rebellion of 830. The loss of support from his brothers soon forced Lothar to comply as well, and resulted in a new partition of lands. According to Riché, this partition "failed to address the underlying reasons for the crisis that wracked the empire."<sup>23</sup> Thus, in 833, Lothar and Louis' other sons revolted again. Although the second rebellion met with defeat, it resulted in what is called the "Field of Lies." The "Field of Lies" was a meeting between Louis and his sons, Pope Gregory I, and some of the Frankish clergy. With what constituted Louis' whole world against him, he had no choice but to comply with their demands. Louis debased himself before all present and did penance, admitting to all manner of sins. This completely humiliating act would forever tarnish Louis' memory. Even after the reversal of the "Field of Lies", Louis never regained the prominence he had had at the beginning of his reign.

---

<sup>19</sup>Walahfrid Strabo's *De Imagine Tetrici* quoted in Thomas F.X. Noble, "Greatness Contested and Confirmed: The Raw Materials of the Charlemagne Legend," in Matthew Gabrielle and Jace Stuckey, eds., *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 7.

<sup>20</sup>Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 299.

<sup>21</sup>Riché, *The Carolingians*, 151.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid. Bernard of Septimania was Charlemagne's godson and distant cousin of Louis the Pious. He began as Count of Barcelona before receiving high accolades and the title of Duke of Septimania as a result of his military prowess in northern Spain. He eventually became counselor to Louis and Judith's protector.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, 154.

In the beginning, Louis had a fresh start. The Frankish kingdom was his, as well as the imperial title. He immediately sought to create a stark, yet favorable, contrast between his reign and that of his father. Louis created a court loyal to him, while dispelling the air of immorality. Thus court scholars wrote favorably of Louis, ever so slightly discounting the reign of Charlemagne. Charlemagne was a great military leader, but his moral shortcomings and his "barbaric" ways were stressed. Louis sought to be remembered not only as a great king, like his father, but also as a godly one. Texts such as the *Visio Wettini* and the *Vision of the Poor Woman of Laon* show the moral backlash against Charlemagne.<sup>24</sup> However due to military failures and political debacles, Louis lost credibility as king and was forced to debase himself at the "Field of Lies". Near 828<sup>25</sup>, with the events of Louis' reign looking bleaker and bleaker, Einhard saw the chance to set the record straight for his former king and friend.

### **Einhard: Charlemagne's Savior**

Einhard's *Vita Karoli* is without a doubt a result of the decline of the political environment during Louis the Pious' reign. However, its construction was not the simply result of Einhard's surroundings. Einhard wrote his *Vita Karoli* of his own volition during a time when no contemporary praises of Charlemagne were being written. Thomas Noble claims that "had nothing more been written about Charlemagne, his legacy might have appeared different to us."<sup>26</sup> Although there was a lessening of the moral attacks against Charlemagne, criticism still "had a free hand."<sup>27</sup> Einhard's *Vita Karoli* would change the literary atmosphere concerning Charlemagne.

Einhard's *Vita Karoli*, according to David Ganz, was a *vita et conversatio*, combining life with deeds; instead of merely deeds (*gesta*).<sup>28</sup> This writing of *vita et conversatio* was limited to saints' lives during the Middle Ages. Ganz claims that Einhard was thus making a profound statement that Charlemagne was among the saints.<sup>29</sup> Einhard's *Vita Karoli* circulated all over Europe, influencing several scholars. The *Vita Karoli's* influence is evidenced by the fact that 134 manuscripts of various dates still exist today.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>This moral backlash is evident in the written sources. Since the clergy were the authors of these written sources, therefore, this was most assuredly a clerical backlash. The common people, who were mostly illiterate, probably did not hold the same views held in the sources. Nevertheless, Louis' literary reappraisal of Charlemagne was not aimed at commoners anyway. The support of the Church and Frankish elite was what mattered, and those were the groups focused on by Louis.

<sup>25</sup>Noble, "Greatness Contested" in Gabrielle and Stuckey, eds., *Legend of Charlemagne*, 9. Dates for the writing of the *Vita Karoli* range from 817 to 833. However, Lupus of Ferrières's letter to Einhard, 829-830, references the *Vita*. Also by 830, criticism of Charlemagne is almost non-existent. Thus, 828 is a logical conclusion, if one acknowledges that after two years of circulation, the *Vita* would have been influential in changing the literary atmosphere.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>David Ganz, "Einhard and the Characterisation of Greatness," in Joanna Story, ed., *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 41.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid, 50.

<sup>30</sup>Dutton, "Karolvs Magnvs," in Gabrielle and Stuckey, eds., *Legend of Charlemagne*, 29.

Evidence for the direct influence of Einhard's work on literature is found in comparing Walahfrid Strabo's *Visio Wettini* and his *De Imagine Tetrici*. The *De Imagine Tetrici* is much more sedate compared to the *Visio Wettini* concerning criticisms on Charlemagne. Einhard's *vita* was written between these two documents, and Strabo certainly had access to it. A decade after the *Vita Karoli* one can see the total impact it had on Charlemagne's image. Einhard's contemporaries praised his *vita* and subsequent generations used it as a model. Charlemagne's image was thus rehabilitated through the *Vita Karoli*'s success. The last criticism of Charlemagne can be found in 839. Wandalbert of Prüm's *Vita et Miracula sancti Goaris* "mildly rebukes Charlemagne for failing to keep a promise to visit Goar's monastery."<sup>31</sup> This slight rebuke contrasts considerably with the criticisms of Charlemagne during the 820s. Charlemagne was no longer being criticized as morally decrepit and "barbarous".

Einhard's depiction of Charlemagne reminded the failing Frankish world of Louis the Pious' last years about the "days of old". Einhard skirted the issues with Charlemagne's morality, perhaps giving credence to them, since Einhard refused to even acknowledge their importance. Nevertheless, Einhard reinvigorated the idealized image of Charlemagne. Einhard, however, also created a new image of Charlemagne. Through writing on his personal life, Einhard made Charlemagne more knowable. Einhard showed Charlemagne as a good, respectable man. One particular excerpt that depicts this characterization concerns Charlemagne and friendship. "For he showed a very fine disposition in his friendships: he embraced them readily and maintained them faithfully, and he treated with the utmost respect all who he had admitted into the circle of his friends."<sup>32</sup> Einhard saved Charlemagne from the brink of oblivion, and it is his depiction that would be used in subsequent generations. Whether Einhard can be trusted is a matter of debate.<sup>33</sup> However, it can undoubtedly be said that without Einhard, the legend of Charlemagne would appear much different, if it survived at all.

### **Verdun to Charles the Fat: Dispersion of the Charlemagne Legend**

After Louis the Pious' reign, Charlemagne was once more idealized as the epitome of godly kingship. The success of Einhard's *Vita Karoli* had ensured that Charlemagne's image would never be attacked again. Thus, later Frankish successors would use the image of Charlemagne to galvanize support. However, the image of Charlemagne would not remain a Frankish concept alone. Eventually, after the breakup of Carolingian Europe, the Charlemagne legend would take on different roles for the resulting new kingdoms. Immediately following Louis the Pious' death,

---

<sup>31</sup>Noble, "Greatness Contested," in Gabrielle and Stuckey, eds., *Legend of Charlemagne*, 11.

<sup>32</sup>Einhard and the Monk of St. Gall, *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, ed., A.J. Grant (n.p.: Digireads.com, 2010), 27.

<sup>33</sup>Einhard's style was heavily influenced by Suetonius. Suetonius is much known as a gossip. Although both author's do have facts in their accounts, this style should be taken into account when judging either one's validity.

the Frankish kingdom was divided into three separate kingdoms. It was at this point, the Treaty of Verdun in 843, that the transformation and dispersion of the Charlemagne legend began.

Lothar, Louis' heir, began seeking to take the kingdom for himself. His bid proved unsuccessful, however, and after two years of fighting, Louis the German and Charles the Bald seized Aachen, and Lothar was eventually forced to surrender. The result was the Treaty of Verdun. Verdun successfully divided the Frankish lands into three separate kingdoms. Louis received everything north of the Alps and east of the Rhine. Charles was given lands west of the Rhone. Finally, Lothar was given the middle ground stretching from the North Sea to Italy. The Treaty of Verdun would represent a transformation of the European political landscape for centuries to come. Each of the new kingdoms at the time was still largely culturally Frankish. Each kingdom, however, began following its own political, cultural, and ideological path. Essentially, this division would lead to a new Europe; no longer Frankish, but quite diversified. This diversification created changes in accounts of Charlemagne across Europe. For example, changes in the Charlemagne legend can already be seen in the *Vision of Charlemagne*, a text from the court of Louis the German, in that it is written in Old High German instead of Latin like many texts from the court of Charlemagne. Louis the German, as well as Charles the Bald, would also commission copies of Einhard's *Vita Karoli*. However, the word *magni* was added, and in Louis the German's edition a sword "sent by God" is given to a sleepy Charlemagne by an apparition. Interestingly, on this sword are words written in German. These minor changes wrought on the memory of Charlemagne were specific to the kingdom producing them. By the time of Charles the Fat in the late ninth century, Charlemagne was quickly becoming the ideal for every people. In his fifth book, the Saxon Poet depicts Charlemagne leading the Saxons instead of the Franks. The Saxon Poet praises Charlemagne for conquering his people and causing them "to know the light of faith and cast off the darkness of perfidy."<sup>34</sup> Charles the Fat was the last legitimate heir of Charlemagne. Although there would continue to be Carolingian rulers on the thrones of Europe, the fact remains that after Charles the Fat, Europe's political makeup and culture quickly began changing. It was no longer Frankish, but a world of various kingdoms and cultures. However, because medieval Europe was created out of the dissolution of the Frankish world that Charlemagne ideally represented, Charlemagne would come ideally to represent medieval Europe as well.

### **Eleventh and Twelfth-century Europe: The Crusading Ideal**

The actions of Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont in 1095 set off centuries of religious warfare that would not only engulf Palestine but parts of Europe as well. Crusading quickly became a religious ideal for medieval Europe. Various rewards, such as forgiveness of sins, were given to the participants, and crusaders were considered most pious and obedient servants of God. Representations of Charlemagne during this period would depict him as a holy

---

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 535.

crusader: obedient, pious, and humble. Charlemagne's image was invoked because no one would better represent the ideal of Europe, than the "man" of Europe.

Texts such as the *Descriptio qualiter* and the *Chanson de Roland* show the complete transformation of Charlemagne's identity. Charlemagne now represented Europe, and his Frankish heritage was only a footnote if noted at all. In the *Descriptio qualiter* Charlemagne had been asked to come to the aid of the emperor at Constantinople who was under Muslim attack. After warding off the Muslim force, Charlemagne refused to take any gifts home, but reluctantly took relics with him as evidence of God's mercy and provision. Another text showing Charlemagne as the ideal crusader is the famous, *Chanson de Roland*. The *Chanson de Roland* was an attempt to show that the crusading ideal dated back to the days of Charlemagne. These words of *Roland* represent the image of Charlemagne as a great defender of Christendom.

The emperor is happy and joyful  
 He has taken Cordoba and shattered its walls,  
 And demolished its towers with catapults;  
 His knights have captured great booty,  
 Gold, silver, and costly arms.  
 No pagan was left within the city  
 Who was not slain or made a Christian.<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, Charlemagne never ventured to Jerusalem or Constantinople. Therefore, "memory was adjusting history."<sup>36</sup> The extent of Charlemagne's memory was far-reaching, and its power to invoke legitimacy made it unique. Jay Rubenstein shows this power. It is Godfrey of Bullion's Carolingian heritage that showed him as the legitimate ruler of the Latin Kingdom. As a descendant of Charlemagne, Godfrey was seen as quite possibly the Last Emperor, an "ever-vigilant military guard against a demonic enemy."<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

Charlemagne's legend is definitely the result of fortune. Although its beginnings were the result of his own courtiers and the Carolingian Renaissance, its preservation was not. Charlemagne's memory was preserved by the disastrous reign of Louis the Pious and more importantly by the success of Einhard's *Vita Karoli*. Einhard's *Vita Karoli* would influence later generations' views on Charlemagne. It would be the basis for subsequent biographies, such as

---

<sup>35</sup>*Chanson de Roland* as quoted in Jace Stuckey, "Charlemagne as Crusader? Memory, Propaganda, and the Many Uses of Charlemagne's Legendary Expedition to Spain," in Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey, eds., *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 141.

<sup>36</sup>Noble, "Greatness Contested," in Gabriele and Stuckey, eds., *Legend of Charlemagne*, 13.

<sup>37</sup>Jay Rubenstein, "Godfrey of Bouillon Versus Raymond of Saint-Gilles: How Carolingian Kingship Trumped Millenarianism at the End of the First Crusade," in Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey, eds., *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 70.

Notker's *Gesta Karoli Magni*. Nevertheless, by the end of Louis the Pious' reign, Charlemagne was the embodiment of Frankish ideals. After the Treaty of Verdun in 843, subsequent kingdoms would transform the legend of Charlemagne to create support and legitimacy for their rules. It is this slow transformation that would continually preserve Charlemagne. Charlemagne no longer represented the Frankish world, but rather medieval Europe. Finally, the culmination of the development of the legend of Charlemagne came in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when images of Charlemagne showed him as a humble pilgrim, a holy crusader, and a predecessor of the Last Emperor. It was these images that were thought to carry enough power and influence to invoke legitimacy for the ruler of Jerusalem, the center of the Christian world.

## Bibliography

- Barbero, Alessandro. *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent*. Translated by Allan Cameron. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004.
- Dutton, Paul Edward. *Carolingian Civilization: A Reader*. New York & Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004.
- . "KAROLVS MAGNVS or KAROLVS FELIX: The Making of Charlemagne's Reputation and Legend" in Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey, eds. *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade*. New York & London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.
- Einhard. *The Life of Charlemagne*. Foreword by Sidney Painter. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Einhard and the Monk of St. Gall. *Two Lives of Charlemagne*. Edited by A.J. Grant. n.p.: Digireads.com, 2010.
- King, P.D. *Charlemagne: Translated Sources*. Lancaster, UK: University of Lancaster Press, 1987.
- Latowsky, Anne. "Charlemagne as Pilgrim? Requests for Relics in the *Descriptio qualiter* and the *Voyage of Charlemagne*" in Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey, eds. *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade*. New York & London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.
- McKitterick, Rosamond. *Charlemagne: The Formation of European Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008.
- Nicholson, Helen. *Palgrave Advances in the Crusades*. New York & London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.
- Noble, Thomas F.X. "Greatness Contested and Confirmed: The Raw Materials of the Charlemagne Legend" in Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey, eds. *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade*. New York & London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.
- Riché, Pierre. *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe*. Translated by Michael Idomir Allen. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- Rubenstein, Jay. "Godfrey of Bouillon versus Raymond of Saint-Gilles: How Carolingian Kingship Trumped Millenarianism at the End of the First Crusade" in Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey, eds. *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade*. New York & London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.
- Stuckey, Jace. "Charlemagne as Crusader? Memory, Propoganda, and the Many Uses of Charlemagne's Legendary Expedition to Spain" in Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey, eds. *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade*. New York & London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.
- Runciman, Steven. "Charlemagne and Palestine." *The English Historical Review* 50, no. 200 (October 1935). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/553491> (accessed March 27, 2012).
- Seidel, Linda. "Constantine 'and' Charlemagne." *Gesta* 15, no.1/2 (1976). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/766771> (accessed January 25, 2012).
- Story, Joanna, eds. *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*. Manchester & New York: University of Manchester Press & Palgrave, 2005.

Williams, Hywell. *Emperor of the West: Charlemagne and the Carolingian Empire*. London: Quercus, 2011.