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## Einhard: The Lasting Influence of *The Life of Charlemagne* and Other Works

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Aida Dias

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The Carolingian period was of significant importance to the development of medieval history writing. Charlemagne (c.742-814) surrounded himself with scholars in an effort to promote learning and the arts, which had been in decline for centuries. Within this Carolingian Renaissance, there was one scholar who established his place in history by writing a concise but remarkable, and mostly accurate, biography of the greatest king and emperor of the early Middle Ages. This scholar was Einhard (c.770-840), who created impressively original works that had both an immediate and lasting influence on the writing of biographies and hagiographies. A closer look at these works reveals a great deal about the man who wrote them and the social and political climate that shaped them. From his classical education and the influence of Charlemagne's court, Einhard developed a unique style of writing and created works which, in addition to giving him personal power, had social and political significance for the Carolingians.

Einhard was born around 770 to parents who were landowners, after Charlemagne was already co-ruler of the Frankish kingdom. He was sent to be educated at the monastery of Fulda in Eastern Francia at a young age. His short stature probably made it unlikely that he would succeed in a military career. At Fulda he learned Latin and was educated in the classics and the Bible.<sup>1</sup> When Charlemagne sought capable scholars to promote literacy in his kingdom and to improve its workings and administration, Einhard was recommended. Thus he began his career in the royal court, which brought him alongside great scholars like Alcuin of York, a great teacher who had also been recruited. Einhard's exact functions are unknown, but he appears to have been involved in the construction of several buildings, perhaps as an architect, in addition to being Charlemagne's secretary and, apparently, a distinguished poet, according to his contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> His education, both at Fulda and with the scholars at the royal court, especially Alcuin, profoundly influenced his writings, most of which were completed in the later part of his life after the subject of his main work, Charlemagne, had died in 814.

The *Vita Karoli Magni*, or *The Life of Charlemagne*, was written sometime between 817 and 836. Historians have argued over likely dates and their implications

for what sentiments Einhard might have been trying to convey. An earlier date is generally favored, as it had the “immediate purpose of consolidating Louis the Pious’s position as the rightful and appropriate heir to his father’s dominion,”<sup>3</sup> a factor looked at in more detail below. In his preface to *The Life*, Einhard expressed a sense of duty to record the memory of his “lord and foster father,” knowing that no one would be better suited to write Charlemagne’s life and deeds than himself, having been present at the time.<sup>4</sup> He humbled himself, stating his inadequacies as a Latinist and referring to himself as *homo barbarus*,<sup>5</sup> perhaps to excuse not only his writing style but also the content of his work. He lamented that a life as magnificent as that of Charlemagne, a man who had been so kind and generous to him, and so worthy of praise, should be recorded with “Ciceronian eloquence” rather than his feeble attempt.<sup>6</sup> It is clear from Einhard’s words that *The Life* is a work of praise and must therefore be assumed to have been somewhat biased. He was writing the life and deeds of a king to whom he felt indebted, and whose dynasty he served as a member of the court. But historians still generally agree that it is mostly accurate.

Rather than draw on the traditional hagiographies and medieval writings of the time, Einhard modeled his biography on, and at times borrowed heavily from, Suetonius’s *Lives of the Caesars*, especially the *Life of Augustus*. However, as medieval historian Richard Sullivan stated in his study of Carolingian education, “[i]t was not plagiarism but schooling that led Einhard to portray Charlemagne in terms Suetonius had used to describe Roman emperors.”<sup>7</sup> In his essay on Einhard’s portrayal of Charlemagne, the last chair of paleography at King’s College London, David Ganz, praised Einhard’s originality for seeking that “Ciceronian eloquence” which had been rejected by Christians in their hagiographies, noting that by 839, his biography had already inspired a hagiography (Wandalbert of Prüm’s *Life of St. Goar*), “the very genre it had reacted against.”<sup>8</sup> Einhard was undoubtedly familiar with the medieval panegyric style of writing, with kings described in martial terms, but he decided the classical style with more human characterization was more appropriate, drawing some criticism from those who found it too pagan.<sup>9</sup> Einhard wanted to save for posterity the memory of Charlemagne’s great deeds as a great king, but also as a great man, whom he deeply respected.

The biography itself is a very short work, the first half of which details Charlemagne’s deeds (as a *gesta*), and the second half describes his life. Because of its length, it seems to receive more criticism for what it omits than for what it includes. But Einhard’s writing style proved to be popular with his contemporaries. *The Life* was one of the bestsellers of the ninth century, often paired with annals and

other biographies, and later used in the education of future emperors Charles the Bald and Charles the Fat, Charlemagne's grandson and great-grandson, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Many biographies written shortly after were directly and heavily influenced by it, notably Bishop Asser's *Life of Alfred the Great* in 893.<sup>11</sup> Einhard's work seems to have also influenced the biographies of Louis the Pious written by the Astronomer, the anonymous writer from Louis's court, and, especially, that written by Thegan of Trier.<sup>12</sup> One interesting work worth mentioning is *Charlemagne* written by the Monk of St. Gall, generally believed to be Notker the Stammerer (840-912), sometime after 883. While regarded as having little value as a work of history, this collection of anecdotes about Charlemagne as a very pious man seems to have more value as political commentary on Charles the Fat's time.<sup>13</sup> But professor Simon MacLean, who specializes in late Carolingian history, argues that "[f]ar from being the naively recorded collection of bizarre anecdotes that it seems to be, Notker's work was actually a carefully constructed exposition of Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*, designed to invert that work's secular values and place God back at the centre of the reader's understanding of history."<sup>14</sup> Regardless of whether it was a direct response to Einhard's work or not, it shows that "Charlemagne's biography was turning into legend."<sup>15</sup>

One interesting aspect about *The Life* is that it appears to have circulated for a few decades without its author's name attached to it.<sup>16</sup> (Some evidence suggests that perhaps Einhard's preface, where he states his inadequacies, was addressed to Louis's librarian Gerward, rather than to the general public.<sup>17</sup>) Nonetheless, the prologue to *The Life* written by the theologian and poet Walahfrid Strabo in 840 offers great praise to Einhard "not only for his knowledge, but also for the complete integrity of his character. It is also known, since he was present at most of these events, that he made his account even stronger by attestation to the simple truth."<sup>18</sup> Walahfrid was, then, establishing Einhard as an honest historian, whose works could be consulted with confidence. To facilitate this, he divided the text into individual chapters. It is not known why Einhard left his name out of his work when it seems everyone knew he was the author—he might have been really that modest, or perhaps he wanted others to introduce him as a great and honorable man.

*The Life* was written during Louis the Pious's reign (814-840), likely at a time of turmoil in the kingdom. Like his father, Louis seems to have held Einhard in great esteem, granting him several properties shortly after Charlemagne's death, as it was the "custom of imperial Highness to honor those faithfully serving it with many gifts and to elevate them with great honors."<sup>19</sup> Einhard seems to have served all his

superiors faithfully and honorably, and remained at court until 830 when, during a time of conflict between Louis and his sons, he retired to serve as lay abbot at his many properties. Medieval historian Rosamond McKitterick argued that *The Life* served to reinforce Louis's legitimacy as king and emperor, pointing specifically to the section in which,

Charlemagne repudiates the daughter of Desiderius and marries Hildegard. Louis the Pious, of course, was the only surviving son of Hildegard. It thus serves to reinforce both the legitimacy of Carolingian succession, and the theme of the genealogy which completes the collection, where the Carolingian line from father to son, from its origins in the Trojan and Gallo-Roman past to Louis the Pious, is elaborated.<sup>20</sup>

Einhard was possibly trying to please the king with the mention of his mother. A noticeable omission from *The Life*, which may reinforce this idea, has been pointed out by Paul Dutton, author of *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*. There is no mention of the "Division of the Kingdom" of 806 (which had been personally delivered to Rome by Einhard), possibly because it "ran counter to Louis's view (prior to 830) of an indivisible empire . . . to which he had been the sole heir,"<sup>21</sup> since his brothers had died earlier. This suggests that Einhard was certainly aware of the political implications of everything he wrote and, as the faithful servant that he was, did not wish to displease his king. "To recognize the propaganda value of such texts as Einhard . . . is to accept that these works were not simply written for an aloof posterity, but as works of immediate purport, with a vital message for the living and those with power."<sup>22</sup> The immediate significance and effect of *The Life* must, then, be considered.

In addition to asserting Louis's right to the title, *The Life* served to affirm the title itself. Einhard began the first chapter of the biography with a piteous depiction of the last Merovingian king, Childeric III, holding the empty title of king and later being deposed supposedly by the pope himself, while the mayors of the palace held the real power over all the affairs of the kingdom.<sup>23</sup> (It has been argued that the records concerning the pope's involvement in Childeric's deposition may have been inaccurate, but this would have been from before Einhard's time.<sup>24</sup>) This served to give legitimacy to the Carolingian line, which began with Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles (the Hammer) Martel, that great military leader who had been

mayor of the palace. When Charlemagne surrounded himself with scholars, he may or may not have already had in mind that it would be beneficial to have someone describing his “royal prowess on the field of battle; strengthening the bonds of kinship and personal dependence; effective management of royal resources; exemplary personal conduct; administrative assertiveness; and mustering the powers of the Church to carry God's special favor.”<sup>25</sup> All of this Einhard did with exceptional skill, but not until after Charlemagne’s death in 814.

Einhard described Charlemagne’s military conquests in the first part of the biography. Each of the nations or peoples that the Franks fought was addressed in a separate paragraph (separate chapters after Walahfrid’s addition) in a somewhat Suetonian fashion. While the Royal Frankish Annals described how Charlemagne fought myriad different peoples in one year, *The Life* painted a picture of a highly organized ruler who seemed to plan a series of conquests to expand the kingdom, suggesting a “grand strategy rather than a policy of plunder.”<sup>26</sup> Einhard repeatedly stressed the royal virtue of steadfastness. “The King, who excelled all the princes of his time in wisdom and greatness of soul, did not suffer difficulty to deter him or danger to daunt him from anything that had to be taken up or carried through, for he had trained himself to bear and endure whatever came, without yielding in adversity, or trusting to the deceitful favors of fortune in prosperity.”<sup>27</sup> The concept of fortune, used here and elsewhere in *The Life*, is worth noting as a classical and pagan influence in his writing.<sup>28</sup> In addition to valor in conquest, Einhard emphasized Charlemagne’s goodwill toward other kings and nations, and his mercy toward conquered peoples. In describing the long war with the “faithless” Saxons, he pointed out how Charlemagne took 10,000 of them along with their wives and children, resettling them in different parts of Gaul and Germany,<sup>29</sup> but failed to mention the massacre of 4,500 Saxons at Verden. Given the level of detail in the former description, the latter should have been included, and its omission can be assumed to have been intentional.

Einhard got more personal when describing Charlemagne as a family man. He described the affection and devotion he bore his mother, sister, and daughters, the latter whom he never allowed to marry because he could not bear to part with them. Charlemagne seems to have been aware of the sexual scandals involving his daughters but preferred to ignore them. All of this was mentioned only in passing, as if Einhard did not feel it was his place to expose the family troubles. He claimed that even early in his life, Charlemagne “while sharing the kingdom with his brother . . . bore his unfriendliness and jealousy most patiently, and, to the wonder of all, could

not be provoked to be angry with him.”<sup>30</sup> No evidence in the historic records suggests that Charlemagne was at all involved in Carloman’s death, but it is somewhat difficult to imagine that only one of the brothers was jealous and unfriendly. Likely, Einhard’s assessment was a little biased. Some historians have claimed that this portrayal as a devoted family man (his many concubines seem to have been socially acceptable at the time) was a defense against Charlemagne’s critics toward the end of his life, when his injustices, his lust, and his propensity toward war seem to have been under attack. In the mid-820s, a vision or dream of Charlemagne being punished for his lecherous life was widely circulated—advocates of later writing dates for *The Life* think it was a response to that story.<sup>31</sup> If Einhard felt a duty to preserve the memory of his beloved king, he certainly felt a need to defend him against those who would speak ill of him, but being as close as he supposedly was to Charlemagne, he could not have failed to notice his faults.

Einhard used personal characteristics and habits to portray Charlemagne as a man of the people. He depicted him as “stately and dignified,” but enjoying simple pleasures like hunting, riding, and swimming. Charlemagne enjoyed the warm springs of Aachen immensely, and liked to invite his sons, nobles, friends and, occasionally, his courtiers and bodyguards, so that at times over one hundred people might be bathing together. Einhard also devoted a chapter to describe how the king preferred to dress in regular, common clothes and only dressed up in royal or imperial garb when the occasion demanded it.<sup>32</sup> This section was written in a style used earlier by Paul the Deacon in describing the Lombards’ dress, and used again by Thegan in describing Louis the Pious. This style described dress in an ethnical context in a way not used by earlier medieval writers such as Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, or Bede.<sup>33</sup> York historian Guy Halsall described how Thegan, modeling much of his biography on Einhard’s, depicted Louis’s way of dressing as similar, but Thegan’s emphasis was on the rich vestments rather than the common Frankish dress Einhard described. And as Charlemagne had been moderate in food and drink and enjoyed listening to music and readings from scholars over meals, Louis, in turn, detested the “barbarous” songs of old kings his father preserved. While Einhard stressed the “horizontal bonds” between Charlemagne and his people, Thegan copied his model to stress the opposite about Louis.<sup>34</sup> But Charlemagne’s sociability was perhaps divinely inspired.

Einhard described how Charlemagne devotedly cherished the Christian religion, and made friends with foreign rulers so that he could help Christians living under their rule. He also welcomed foreigners who came to his country, offering

them protection. If Einhard is to be believed, Charlemagne had no intention of ever becoming emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, although he had a very close relationship with the popes Hadrian and later Leo III.<sup>35</sup> But, while Thegan and the Astronomer had described Charlemagne as exceedingly pious, correcting the gospels as he was dying, “Einhard resisted such explicit Christian language, because his sense of greatness could not be simply Christian.”<sup>36</sup> His version of Charlemagne’s death was more like the secular death of a hero.<sup>37</sup> Einhard reported that before his death there were many signs, such as eclipses, meteors, earthquakes, and lightning strikes that Charlemagne supposedly recognized as omens but pretended were not relevant to him.<sup>38</sup> So Charlemagne was deeply religious but not excessively so, and his greatness was more a personal characteristic.

The man who “hurled scriptural quotations at corrupt officials or worldly clerics”<sup>39</sup> was perhaps more concerned with reform instead. While Charlemagne seems to have done a great deal to fix problems with existing laws and corruption, it was here that Einhard issued one of his few complaints, stating that the king did little more than add a few missing items, and even so, left those in an incomplete state.<sup>40</sup> But the “Renaissance man born seven centuries early”<sup>41</sup> did a great deal to beautify and improve his kingdom. He built his impressive palace and chapel at Aachen, erected schools for peasants and nobles alike, restored churches that needed repairs, built bridges, and assembled fleets to keep watch over both the northern and southern coasts to protect the kingdom from Vikings, Moors, and others. Einhard attributed the relative safety of Italy, Gaul, and Germany to Charlemagne’s great measures.<sup>42</sup> In these matters, the praise for the emperor might be mostly justified.

Before he left the court in 830, Einhard was already distancing himself from the troubles between the emperor and his sons by spending time at his many properties given to him by Louis. *The Translation and Miracles of the Blessed Martyrs, Marcellinus and Peter* was written around 830 but described events from a few years earlier. It went on to influence the creation of a new subgenre of hagiography, that of the translation of saints’ relics, which gained great prominence in the Middle Ages.<sup>43</sup> This work is a delightfully bizarre tale of the relics which Einhard acquired by theft from Rome for his chapel, their retrieval, the displeasure expressed by the saints concerning their location through dreams and bleeding reliquaries, their translations accompanied by devout crowds, and the miracles associated with them.<sup>44</sup> Evident in the tale is the rivalry between Einhard and Hilduin, an abbot who had acquired the relics of St. Sebastian earlier and, therefore, enjoyed the status of being a relic holder. That Einhard used his personal connection

with the saints to gain prestige and request favors is evident from the literature. He used his position as savior of these saints—justifying their theft—to request of the emperor that he be excused from court matters and be able to remain at his properties. He also requested the building of churches and other necessities, asking in his letters to the emperor to keep in mind what heavenly rewards and worldly praise awaited him if he properly venerated the saints.<sup>45</sup> But it is perhaps unfair to call him an “adept opportunist” who engaged in the relic affairs strictly for power and prestige.<sup>46</sup> Convincing evidence supports the genuineness of his religious beliefs.

Einhard began many of his letters and works, including *The Translation*, with “Einhard, a sinner.” While this could have been a standard of the time, it seems to fit with the humble picture he painted of himself. He also often referred to his smallness compared to somebody else’s greatness when addressing them. But the most genuine of Einhard’s surviving documents is a letter concerning the death of his wife, Emma, written to the Benedictine monk, Lupus of Ferrières. He expressed within it his enormous grief as well as his profound disappointment in the fact that the saints, for whom he had cared and ensured proper reverence, had completely ignored his prayers.<sup>47</sup> The letter, “On the Adoration of the Cross,” turned into a theological treatise in which he analyzed the differences between prayer and adoration or veneration, and stated concerns with how to pray to the saints and venerate the cross.<sup>48</sup> While not of significant theological value, it serves to illustrate the authenticity of his beliefs.

Influenced by his classical education and the scholarly environment of Charlemagne’s court, Einhard wrote an influential biography which served to affirm the great royal values he attributed to Charlemagne—valor in battle, mercifulness, devotion to family, amiability, and aspiration to improve the kingdom. The political climate during Louis the Pious’s reign played a role in shaping the work, as did Einhard’s affection for his mentor, but the style and structure of the work were almost immediately copied by other writers. Less well known but significant in its own right is his work on the translation of relics that inspired a new type of hagiography. It reflects the religious climate of the age as well as the author’s genuine beliefs. The humble Einhard would have been surprised by the influence his works have had on the writing of history since his time. Or perhaps starting trends was his goal all along.

## Notes

1. Paul Edward Dutton, ed. and trans., *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 1998), xi.
2. *Ibid.*, 1-3.
3. Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29-30, accessed October 16, 2011, <http://apus.aquabrowser.com/?itemid=%7clibrary%2fm%2fapus%7cebr10131663>.
4. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, trans. Samuel Epes Turner (New York: American Book Company, 1880), 11-12.
5. W. R. Jones, "The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13, no. 4 (October 1971): 389, accessed November 29, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/178207>.
6. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 13.
7. Richard E. Sullivan, *The Gentle Voices of Teachers: Aspects of Learning in the Carolingian Age* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1995), 122.
8. David Ganz, "Einhard's Charlemagne: The Characterisation of Greatness," in *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Joanna Story (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 39-40.
9. Guy Halsall, *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 138, accessed November 30, 2011, <http://apus.aquabrowser.com/?itemid=%7clibrary%2fm%2fapus%7cocom52568957>.
10. Simon MacLean, *Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 228, accessed October 16, 2011, [http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=120712&site=ehost-live&ebv=1&ppid=pp\\_C](http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=120712&site=ehost-live&ebv=1&ppid=pp_C).
11. Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 99.
12. Halsall, *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, 137-145.
13. Notker the Stammerer, "Charlemagne," in *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer: Two Lives of Charlemagne*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 93-172.
14. MacLean, *Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century*, 199.
15. Breisach, *Historiography*, 99.
16. Dutton, *Charlemagne's Courtier*, xxii.
17. Ganz, "Einhard's Charlemagne: The Characterisation of Greatness," 41.
18. Walahfrid, "Prologue," in Dutton, 7-8.
19. Louis the Pious, "The Charters," in Dutton, 43-45.

20. McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*, 123.
21. Dutton, *Charlemagne's Courtier*, xx.
22. Rosamond, McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 241, accessed October 16, 2011, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.01227>.
23. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 15-17.
24. McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*, 24, 136.
25. Sullivan, *The Gentle Voices of Teachers*, 64.
26. Ganz, "Einhard's Charlemagne: the Characterisation of Greatness," 47.
27. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 30.
28. Ganz, "Einhard's Charlemagne: the Characterisation of Greatness," 44-45.
29. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 28.
30. *Ibid.*, 47-48.
31. Dutton, *Charlemagne's Courtier*, xix.
32. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 56-59.
33. Walter Pohl, "Telling the Difference: Signs of Ethnic Identity," in *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms*, ed. Thomas F. X. Noble (London: Taylor & Francis Routledge, 2006), 113-114, accessed October 16, 2011, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=156431&site=ehost-live>.
34. Halsall, *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, 137-145.
35. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 62-66.
36. Ganz, "Einhard's Charlemagne: the Characterisation of Greatness," 44.
37. Halsall, *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, 137.
38. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 72-74.
39. Will Durant, *The Age of Faith: A History of Medieval Civilization—Christian, Islamic, and Judaic—from Constantinople to Dante: A.D. 325-1300*, vol. 4 of *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), 467.
40. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 66-67.
41. *The Dark Ages: The Fall of Civilization, the Rise of a New World Order*, DVD, directed by Christopher Cassel (New York: A&E Television Networks, 2006).
42. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 45-47.
43. Dutton, *Charlemagne's Courtier*, xxx.

44. Einhard, “The Translation and Miracles of the Blessed Martyrs, Marcellinus and Peter,” in Dutton, 69-130.

45. Einhard to Emperor Louis, “The Collected Letters,” in Dutton, 152, 156, 163-164.

46. Charles Freeman, *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 77-79.

47. Einhard to Lupus of Ferrières, “Correspondence with Lupus of Ferrières, Including ‘On the Adoration of the Cross,’” in Dutton, 169-171.

48. *Ibid.*, 171-174.

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Walahfrid. "Prologue." In Dutton, 7-8.

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