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This article comes from my larger honors history thesis of the same title: “Old Wine, New Skins:

Models of Roman Leadership in the Court of Charlemagne.” I recently graduated from the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa with a Bachelors in History, with a concentration in pre-Modern Europe. I have a background in Political Science, which aided in my analysis of this crossover period between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Writing and researching this thesis project allowed me the opportunity to learn the nature of research as being something that ebbs and flows in unpredictable results and gathering your own primary research can give you a glimpse into the situation or person’s footsteps that you are writing about.

Old Wine, New Skins

Models of Roman Leadership in the Court of Charlemagne

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Senior Honors Thesis (History)

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Modern western society looks back on the Roman Empire as a model for politics, economics, and social relations. The use of the Roman Empire as a foundation for political organization began in the Early Middle Ages with the development of the idea of Christian kingship. However, in early medieval Francia these Roman principles were adapted selectively and Constantine as the first Christian Emperor was not necessarily the model used. During his rule of the Frankish Empire, Charlemagne (747-814 C.E.) consciously choose and incorporated elements from the model for Roman leadership based on the first Emperor Augustus.

In this work I explain the history behind Charlemagne’s coronation and compare ancient and Frankish historical, biographical, literary, and chronicle sources. I explain how Frankish courtiers amended Roman imperial ideas to establish Charlemagne’s Christian rule. Set against the backdrop of an emerging Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire, Charlemagne’s court helped establish the legacy of Christian kingship usually attributed to Constantine.

Introduction to Historical Background & the Imperial Title

Modern western society and historians reflect upon the Roman Empire as a model for politics and social relations. The use of the Roman Empire as a foundation for political organization began in the Early Middle Ages with the development of the idea of Christian kingship. The sixth century of the medieval period was an era of political unrest throughout the Mediterranean world, resulting in a huge chasm between the Western and Eastern Empires over leadership in Europe. The coronation of Charlemagne was the climax in this struggle for authority and had enduring consequences. This is supported by analyzing the many facets of history behind Charlemagne’s coronation and comparing ancient sources with Frankish historical, biographical, literary, and chronicle sources, the title of *Imperator Romanorum* (“Emperor of the Romans”) ranks Charlemagne among the successors of the Roman Emperors dating from antiquity.

During mass at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome in 800 C.E., Pope Leo III publicly crowned Charles I as the *Imperator Romanorum*. With this event, Charles I, better known as Charlemagne, King of the Franks and King of the Lombards, added the title of Emperor of the Romans to his royal lineage. The coronation was a strategic move for the Papacy to secure the Eastern Empire throne from Empress Irene in Constantinople, who was deemed unfit to rule in the eyes of Pope Leo III because of her gender.

There were numerous proposals over many years to confer the title of *Imperator Romanorum* on Charlemagne, since he was the most stable solution for the growing divide between the West and East. This controversial move put Charlemagne in the political game for authority over Europe igniting numerous adaptations of the coronation of Charlemagne and impacting future royal corona-

tions. This event also raised many suspicions and unanswered questions about the motives behind Charlemagne's coronation by Pope Leo III and Charlemagne's acceptance of the title. One of the conflicts was the comprehension and interpretation of the imperial title and who wields the ultimate authority in Europe- the Frankish king or the Papacy.

The brilliant political move of crowning Charlemagne by Pope Leo III ensured that the Papacy had authority over the emperor. This papal view, highlighted in *The Book of Popes (The Liber Pontificalis)*, was first compiled in the 3rd century as a record of the Popes from the first to the fifteenth century. *The Book of Popes* commented on the events after Charlemagne's coronation and purposely emphasized the donations that Charlemagne bestowed on the churches of St. Peter and St. Paul.¹ Charlemagne showed his acceptance of the authority of the church over his emperorship by paying the proper tribute as depicted in this Papal interpretation of the coronation. Subsequently, Frankish views of these same events are drastically different.

The Royal Frankish Annals (also known as the RFA), a main Frankish chronicle for the Carolingian monarchs, gives a year-by-year account of the events in Francia from 741 to 829 C.E. In the annal for 800 C.E., Charlemagne's route back from Rome to his capital in Aachen describes his travels through Roman cities such as Ravenna in Northern Italy. Einhard, Charlemagne's biographer, documented Charlemagne's route back to Aachen describing his travels through Ravenna and other significant Roman cities while embellished in the authoritative fashions of a Roman emperor. *The Annals of Lorsch*, the oldest manuscript compilation of Frankish annals, is a compatible excerpt of the early years of the Carolingian era from 703 to 803 C.E. which reinforces the Frankish view of the events leading up to the coronation. These annals proclaim that the title was within Charlemagne's right as he controlled the imperial lands in Italy and reinforce that Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne at the appropriate time and place while surrounded by the holy fathers. These annals paint Charlemagne as a ruler who rightfully received the title of *Imperator Romanorum* with the

approval of God and the Christian people.² Frankish views reveal the attempt by Charlemagne's court to strengthen the legitimacy of their king's claim to the Roman title bestowed by the Papacy in Rome.

The Frankish and Papal sources concur that Charlemagne did travel to Rome before the coronation. His purpose was to oversee a council concerning the unrest between the Roman clergy and Pope Leo III in early December of 800 C.E. Pope Leo III relied heavily on Charlemagne and Frankish power to protect him from his enemies and secure his position in Rome. In the spring of 799 C.E., Pope Leo III had an attempt on his life by the relatives of Pope Adrian I, Pope Leo's papal predecessor. When Charlemagne's men in Rome foiled this attempt, Leo traveled to Paderborn in Western Germany seeking aid from Charlemagne. In retaliation, the Roman clergy brought accusations of perjury and adultery against Pope Leo III calling for his return to Rome to stand trial. Charlemagne and Pope Leo III returned to Rome and held the council between the warring sides.

The Franks and the Papacy long relied on each other for mutual support going back to the foundations of the Carolingian dynasty. Pope Zacharias (c. 741-752) supported the Carolingian family and its patriarch Charles Martel (Charlemagne's grandfather) during the unstable period of the Merovingian rule of Francia. Because of this, the pope's successor Pope Stephen II named Charlemagne's father, Pippin the Short (c. 714-724 C.E.), as sole ruler of Francia.³ The formal establishment of the Carolingian dynasty supported by papal approval of the imperial title resulted in documents such as *The Donation of Constantine*, which supposedly stated that the late emperor Constantine the Great transferred all authority over to Rome and the western part of the Roman Empire to the Pope. During the early Middle Ages, this document played a significant role in the Papacy's power, although during the Renaissance it was discovered to be a forgery by Lorenzo Valla, an Italian teacher. A similar document based on this

¹ Joanna Story, "Carolingian Connections: Anglo-Saxon England and Carolingian Francia, c. 750-870," in *Studies in Early Medieval Britain*, 2004. 110-115.

² William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, *The Medieval World View: An Introduction*. Second Edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 143-145.

³ "Annals of Lorsch" in *A Source Book for Medieval History*, by Oliver J. Thatcher and Edgar Holmes McNeal, eds. (New York: Scribners, 1905), p. 37-38.
<http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/lorsch1.asp>

earlier donation inspired *The Donation of Pepin* of 754 C.E. proposed by Charlemagne's father. This donation bequeathed a legal basis for the creation of the Papal States in Italy. In 781 C.E., Charlemagne codified the law in this region and gave the Duchy of Rome temporal dominion which ensured the continuation of the "give-and-take" relationship between the Franks and the Papacy. The dedication and alliances between the Papacy and monarchs of Francia endured for generations amplifying how this history of popes crowning kings was not without anticipated devotion.

The debate over Charlemagne's coronation by modern historians focuses on the manner in which Pope Leo III conferred the title of *Imperator Romanorum* on the Frankish king. The major dispute was whether Charlemagne knew about the coronation in advance. Charlemagne was displeased with the manner in which the title had been conferred upon him as demonstrated in the words written by Einhard: "He [Charlemagne] would not have entered the cathedral at all, although it was the greatest of all the festivals of the Church, if he had known in advance what the Pope was planning to do."⁴ Evidently, Charlemagne had not been pleased with the extent of ecclesiastic participation in his coronation as Emperor of the Romans. After all, the title included lands that the Franks considered already to be in their possession.

This struggle for authority in Europe became a central focus at the court of Charlemagne. Charlemagne and his courtiers found tools of authority in the model of his Roman Imperial predecessors. As a "Roman" Emperor ruling from the north in his capital of Aachen, Charlemagne consciously chose what Roman traditions would come to symbolize his rule while forging his own legacy. He may have become Emperor of Rome in name, but in order to wield such a powerful title, he knew he had to prove that he could resemble a Roman Emperor.

While maintaining a distinctly Frankish identity, Charlemagne and his court emulated the persona and mannerisms to validate his title and be accepted as a Roman Emperor, especially his

predecessors of the powerful and well-respected Augustus Caesar (c. 27 B.C.- 14 C.E.) and Constantine the Great (c. 272.- 337 C.E.). In Charlemagne's official biography, *Life of Charlemagne (Vita Karoli Magni)*, Einhard records Charlemagne as wearing the ordinary fashions of his local Frankish people- linen shirts, undergarments, and stockings. However, for special occasions and when greeting foreign visitors, he would wear the universal Roman fashions of a long tunic, rectangle cloak called chlamys around his neck, and Roman shoes that was the common dress of the time.⁵ However, looking the part of a Roman Emperor and acting under the imperial title did not necessarily mean that he had to rule from Rome.

Charlemagne ruled both Francia and the territories of the empire from his capital in Aachen in modern-day Germany instead of Rome. This is not without precedent because after Diocletian's rule (c. 284 to 285) divided the Roman Empire into Western and Eastern halves. By the time Constantine the Great came to power as one of Diocletian's successors, he was ruling the Empire from Constantinople. Charlemagne was selectively incorporating specific Roman traditions from before Constantine in representations of his rule while continuing to keep his Northern Germanic roots. Charlemagne created a new identity by merging the image of a northern "barbarian" with the accepted civil Roman model of leadership. The accounts of Charlemagne's coronation and recorded life are vast and documented in many mediums.

Significant sources help historians understand past societies. Historians depend on surviving written sources that reveal the transcribed memory, history, culture of past societies, and the civilization's own nostalgia for its past; thus, providing clues to decoding romanticized representations of past people. Narratives from Charlemagne's court reveal what the Frankish court thought of themselves and what each social group within Carolingian society believed. Part of the value of these texts is based on the fact that they give expression to a distinct "collective memory" and "construction of the past." The "collective memory" in Carolingian texts relies on the recording of memories based on shared experiences and images,

⁴ Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," in *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, translated with an introduction and notes by David Ganz (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 2008), 37-38.

⁵ Einhard, "The Life of Charlemagne," in *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, 34-35.

whereas, the “construction of the past” inserts the common perceptions of these past experiences and images that are accepted by the society.⁶ The notions of “collective memory” and “construction of the past” intertwine the Carolingians’ self-identity based on past memory with the recording of their own history.

The Carolingian court writers mimicked Roman histories while incorporating Christian ecclesiastical history and historical traditions of the ‘Germanic’ peoples- Anglo-Saxons, Lombards, and the Goths- in their own courtly narratives. The openness at Charlemagne’s court to receive foreign delegates, allowed the Franks direct contact with a variety of people well-versed in the literature of antiquity. Some of the best-known Roman sources- Cicero, Vergil, and Homer- were quoted in Charlemagne’s time as interpretations of leadership. The authors in Charlemagne’s court used these ancient sources of kings and emperors to portray their own image of leadership and medieval kingship. In this way, the Carolingian court attempted to legitimize a new model of kingship from Roman views of leadership.

The main sources emerging from the Carolingian court are *vitae*, history annals, and books of deeds. Each genre of writing is essential in understanding what elements from antiquity are incorporated into Carolingian writings. Carolingian authors and readers of such material saw Rome as a golden age of rule and they wanted to be a part of this glorious past by incorporating some traditions while rejecting others. This process of selective incorporation, allowed for the creation of a new era and legacy based on the nature of borrowing from the past.

A *vita* is a recording of an individual’s life composed as a biography or autobiography. The topics recorded in the pages vary and rely on how the author wanted to depict the person of interest. These *vitae* are a reflection of the world in which the author lived and reveal personal details of the ruler’s life. Rulers commonly commission the writing of their *vitae* to someone they trust, usually someone within their court; however, some rulers chose to write their own *vita*. Recording the lives of the rulers is a

precedent from antiquity and a common practice that occurred throughout the Middle Ages. The similarity between sources from the medieval world and antiquity includes the purpose of composition and general format.

For example, when comparing Eusebius’ fourth century *Life of Constantine (Vita Constantini)* to Einhard’s *Life of Charlemagne (Vita Karoli Magni)* written after Charlemagne’s death in around 817 C.E., both works were composed by courtiers who desired to preserve the memory of their ruler; although, each author focuses on distinct angles of their ruler’s life. Both *vitae* show the authors’ esteem for their deceased kings. As a scholar in the Frankish court, Einhard became a personal confidant of Charlemagne and composed his commemoration of the king because “he felt no one could imitate his [Charlemagne’s] deeds and he feared that his greatness would be forgotten.”⁷ Likewise, Eusebius, as the Bishop of Caesarea, worked closely with Constantine and wrote his *vita* of Constantine by focusing on his Christian virtues.

Both Eusebius and Einhard portray their emperor in a positive image that represented imperial power and control. Considering that the *vitae* were meant to glorify the emperors for the future generations, the authors were aware of the possibility of opposing views and images that could be expressed by external and internal political opponents and had to counteract such possibilities by creating a strong image of their emperor. Although the *vitae* of Constantine and Charlemagne were written for similar purposes, they differ in specific aspects of the ruler’s kingship. In the *Vita Constantini*, Eusebius specifically wrote of the representative moments of Constantine’s Christian achievements and ethics, declaring that Constantine “appeared to all mankind so bright an example of a godly life.”⁸ Eusebius used Constantine’s religion as a model for unity throughout the Roman Empire in the West and East. Meanwhile, Einhard’s biography is a more personal representation of the ruler that encompasses Charlemagne’s unique

⁷ Einhard, “The Life of Charlemagne,” in *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, translated with an introduction and notes by David Ganz (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 2008), 5.

⁸ Eusebius Pamphilus, “The Life of the Blessed Emperor Constantine,” in *Christian Roman Empire Series*, vol. 8, preface and introduction by Anthony P. Schiavo, Jr. (New Jersey: Evolution Publishing, 2009), 4.

⁶ Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3.

personal habits and his religion. Comprehensively, these biographies reveal how each ruler's memory is revered amongst past kings.

In fact, Einhard, like Eusebius, credited Suetonius' *Twelve Caesars* (*De vita Caesarum*) (c.121 C.E.) as one of the primary influences on his *Life of Charlemagne* rather than modeling it directly on Eusebius' *Life of Constantine*. Suetonius' *Twelve Caesars* is a collection of biographies of the first eleven emperors starting with Julius Caesar (c. 100-44 BC) and ending at Domitian's death in 96 C.E. He dedicated each biographical section to a specific emperor and illustrated their lineage, public affairs, private matters, personal habits, religious beliefs, death, and, in most, their last will and testament. Comparing Einhard's *vita* of Charlemagne to Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* reveals the model for both was Suetonius' chapter on Augustus Caesar. Eusebius paralleled Constantine on the influential image of Augustus, whereas Einhard illustrated Charlemagne's physical appearance and persona based on paraphrasing text from Suetonius' chapter on Augustus.⁹ Of great importance, the Carolingians looked back beyond the first Christian emperor, Constantine, to the first emperors of the Roman Empire as their model for leadership.

The tradition of selective adaption of antiquity by the Carolingian court included annalistic recordkeeping that was modeled on Graeco-Roman chronicles. These chronicles had a basic format beginning with the date followed by a detailed description of what occurred during that year. Each entry varied in length and specifics depending on authorship, the date of composition, and the events recorded. The Carolingian court incorporated the Graeco-Roman annalistic writing of history and modified the text structure into their own method of recordkeeping of Frankish events and the portrayal of the image of their rulers.

The chronicles of the Carolingians were influenced by an older Frankish chronicle called *The Book of the History of the Franks* (*Liber Historiae Francorum*). This chronicle is an anonymous 8th century Frankish chronicle and only one copy of the

original survives today in Paris. The authors of this chronicle claimed the Franks had historical and cultural links to the Romans by presenting the Franks as descendants of refugees from ancient Troy who traveled from the Black Sea and founded Christian Frankish Gaul under the Merovingian dynasty.¹⁰ *The Book of the History of the Franks* sets up the early Merovingian kings as the first attempt to rule, but ultimately fails allowing the Carolingian Dynasty to rise to power. This particular chronicle of Frankish origin is accepted by the Franks and their clients inspiring the Frankish annalists in Charlemagne's court when they added onto *The Book of the History of the Franks* with *The Royal Frankish Annals* (*Annales Regni Francorum*).

The Royal Frankish Annals, also commonly referred to as RFA, is a Frankish chronicle composed over the course of the late 8th century by anonymous authors. It is a year-by-year official court-based account of the Carolingian monarchs from 741 to 829 C.E. This source originates with Charlemagne's father, Pepin the Short's, accession to the throne, covers the reign of Charlemagne, and concluded with Charlemagne's son and successor Louis the Pious. The annals survives today in five parts that are copies from Louis the Pious' sovereignty. The authors of *The Royal Frankish Annals* strove to influence public acceptance and depicts a favorable history of the Carolingians.¹¹ To control his image, Charlemagne and his court needed public support to reinforce his identity as a powerful king. Together *The Book of the History of the Franks* and *The Royal Frankish Annals* emphasized the legitimacy of the Carolingian dominion and succession while immortalizing a Roman Carolingian past and its tradition.

Similarly to chronicles, the Books of Deeds are a depiction of literature that boasted about a ruler's accomplishments in life. This additional resource reveals how rulers across the ancient world and the Middle Ages kept records of their military and political exploits in order to promote their kingly

⁹ Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, "The Twelve Caesars," Revised with an Introduction and Notes by J.B. Rives and translated by Robert Graves. (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), xxxvii-xxxviii.

¹⁰ Dörler, Philipp, "The Liber Historiae Francorum – a model for a new Frankish self-confidence" In *Network and Neighbours* vol 1, no. 1 2013: 30-31. <http://networksandneighbours.org/index.php/n/article/view/34/15>.

¹¹ "Royal Frankish Annals". In *Carolingian Chronicles*, translated by Bernhard Walter Scholtz with Barbara Rogers. (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 5.

images. Books of Deeds are relevant to an examination of the life of a ruler because it outlines the political events shedding light and embellishing on their leadership style. These accounts were commonly companion books, drawing on annals to create *vitae* biographies. As a political tool, Book of Deeds secured the ruler's image as an effective and unforgettable leader setting the standard of "how to rule" for generations. An example of a Book of Deeds for the Romans is expressed in the writings of Emperor Augustus Caesar (c. 63 B.C. to 19 B.C.). Composed by the emperor himself before his death, Augustus' *Res Gestae* is unique because it highlights his political accomplishments in public administration and military. Augustus' account and similar Roman texts influenced the recording of Charlemagne's deeds and helped transform Charlemagne's legacy after his death with Notker's *Deeds of Charlemagne*.

In 883 C.E., a monk named Notker the Stammerer was approached by Charles the Fat (the great-grandson of Charlemagne) to write *The Deeds of Charlemagne* in three books. Notker had grown up hearing different tales of the famous King of the Franks and from these different descriptions, he portrayed Charlemagne as being as godlike as Augustus. Unlike Einhard's or Eusebius's accounts, Notker's depiction of Charlemagne centered on the legendary stories of Charlemagne's military campaigns to bolster the king's martial image. This is because Notker was writing for a different audience set in a different era of politics. Notker crafted his

image of Charlemagne to strengthen Charles the Fat's personal claim to the Frankish throne. The name and reputation of Charlemagne continued to be used politically after his death. *The Deeds of Charlemagne* remain an example of the Carolingians court's concerns over matters securing royal legitimacy and demonstrate how Charlemagne's ruling style became the foundation from which his successors imitated. The influence of the *Res Gestae* on Notker's work, whether purposeful or accidental, affected how Charlemagne was remembered a generation after his death.

Charlemagne's coronation was a strategic entry that changed the world politically, religiously, and militaristically in 6th century Europe. The controversies and circumstance of the coronation itself amplified Charlemagne's significance. The magnitude of his Papal-Frankish alliances encouraged vast documentation of his reign of power which continued for centuries. Written histories preserved in multiple mediums, such as *vitae*, chronicles, and Books of Deeds, ensure his heritage is infused in perpetuity. These interpretations composed separately in time but overlaid using antiquity formats, strengthened the magnitude of his historical impact and created his ruler identity. A ruler's legacy is born out of the many records of valor. The many portrayals of Charlemagne transformed his image to a king of legend whose ruling style bridged the old world of Roman emperors to the new world of medieval kings.

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