

Document-Based Assessment

The Many Faces of Charlemagne

Medieval documents have provided historians with considerable detailed information about the life and reign of Charlemagne. The author of Document A was Charlemagne's personal biographer, who was a student of Alcuin at the Palace School at Aachen. Document C was written by the Monk of Saint Gall at the request of the royal family about 70 years after Charlemagne's death.

Document A

Charles spent much time . . . in learning rhetoric [logic] and dialectic, and especially astronomy, from Alcuin. He learnt, too, the art of reckoning [mathematics], and . . . scrutinized most carefully the course of the stars. He tried also to learn to write, and for this purpose used to carry with him . . . tablets and writing-sheets that he might in his spare moments accustom himself to the formation of letters. But he made little advance in this strange task, which was begun too late in life."

—From *The Life of Charlemagne* by Einhard



Document B

◀ This image of Charlemagne was painted by a German artist in the 1500s.

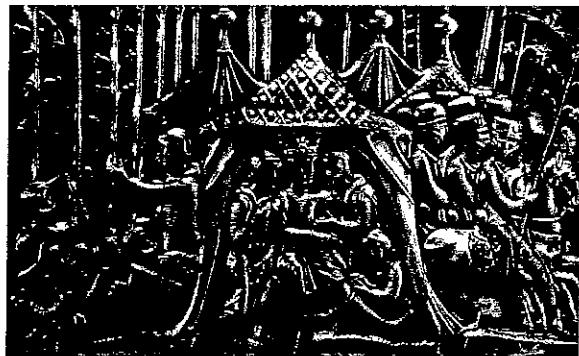
Document C

"Once when he was on a journey Charlemagne came unheralded [unannounced] to a certain town which lies on the seashore in Southern Gaul. While he sat eating his supper incognito [in disguise], a raiding-party of Northmen [Vikings] made a piratical attack on the harbour of this town. As their ships came in sight, some said that they were . . . merchants. . . . Charlemagne in his wisdom knew better. From the build of the ships and their speed through the water he recognized them as enemies rather than merchants. 'Those ships are not loaded with goods,' he said to his men. 'They are loaded with savage enemies.' . . . [His men] rushed off to the ships at full speed, each striving to be the first to reach them. They were not successful. As soon as the Northmen learned that the man whom they were accustomed to call Charles the Hammer was in the neighbourhood, they sailed away at incredible speed."

—From *Charlemagne* by Notker the Stammerer, the Monk of Saint Gall

Document D

This image of Charlemagne on the battlefield was created about 1215. It is at the cathedral in Aachen, Germany, where Charlemagne is buried. ▼



Analyzing Documents

Use your knowledge of Charlemagne and Documents A, B, C, and D to answer questions 1–4.

- The description of Charlemagne in Document A reveals that he
 - did not care about mathematics.
 - tried hard to educate himself.
 - was a great scholar.
 - was a poor student.
- Which of the following statements best reflects what the author of Document C wants to convey about Charlemagne?
 - Both his men and his enemies feared him.
 - He was a knowledgeable and powerful military leader.
 - He was wise and willing to take personal risks.
 - He was powerful but had poor judgment.
- Documents B and C best support the statement that
 - later Europeans admired Charlemagne.
 - Charlemagne was a great king.
 - Charlemagne was admired during his lifetime.
 - all Europeans admire Charlemagne.
- Writing Task** Think about the people who created the documents above and their possible motives for portraying Charlemagne. How reliable do you think the documents are? Write about at least two of the documents. Consider which details are probably reliable, how the documents provide insight into Charlemagne's character, and how they might be exaggerations.

Introduction

The first "larger-than-life" figure of the Middle Ages, the emperor Charlemagne (r. 768-814) expanded the political and military boundaries of the Frankish state significantly and strengthened the alliance between the Carolingians and the papacy forged by his father Pepin I (r. 751-768). His most important biographer, Einhard (c. 770-840), was a product of the Palace School that Charlemagne ("Charles the Great") established at Aachen and became a loyal and trusted advisor both to Charles and to his son and successor, Louis the Pious (r. 814-840). Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* set the standard for political biography in the early Middle Ages and gives us an interesting view of the first man to claim the title "Emperor of the Romans" in the West since late Roman times.

Questions to Consider

What do you make of Einhard's physical description of the king? How does it shape your view of Einhard as a biographer?

Considering what you know about conditions in the West during this time, why is Charlemagne's profound interest in learning so remarkable?

Source

Charles was large and robust, of commanding stature and excellent proportions, for it appears that he measured in height seven times the length of his own foot. The top of his head was round, his eyes large and animated, his nose somewhat long. He had a fine head of gray hair, and his face was bright and pleasant; so that, whether standing or sitting, he showed great presence and dignity. Although his neck was thick and rather short, and his belly too prominent, still the good proportions of his limbs concealed these defects. His walk was firm, and the whole carriage of his body was manly. His voice was clear, but not so strong as his frame would have led one to expect....

He took constant exercise in riding and hunting, which was natural for a Frank, since scarcely any nation can be found to equal them in these pursuits....

He wore the dress of his native country, that is, the Frankish; [and] he thoroughly disliked the dress of foreigners, however fine; and he never put it on except at Rome....

In his eating and drinking he was temperate; more particularly so in his drinking, for he had the greatest abhorrence of drunkenness in anybody, but more especially in himself and his companions. He was unable to abstain from food for any length of time, and often complained that fasting was injurious to him. On the other hand, he very rarely feasted, only on great festive occasions, when there were very large gatherings. The daily service of his table consisted of only four dishes in addition to the roast meat, which the hunters used to bring in on spits, and of which he partook more freely than of any other food.

While he was dining he listened to music or reading. History and the deeds of men of old were most often read. He derived much pleasure from the works of St. Augustine, especially from his book called *The City of God*.... While he was dressing and binding on his sandals, he would receive his friends; and also, if the count of the palace announced that there was any case which could only be settled by his decision, the suitors were immediately ordered into his presence, and he heard the case and gave judgment as if sitting in court. And this was not the only business that he used to arrange at that time, for he also gave orders for whatever had to be done on that day by any officer or servant.

He was ready and fluent in speaking, and able to express himself with great clearness. He did not confine himself to his native tongue, but took pains to learn foreign languages, acquiring such knowledge of Latin that he could make an address in that language as well as in his own. Greek he could better understand than speak. Indeed, he was so polished in speech that he might have passed for a learned man.

He was an ardent admirer of the liberal arts, and greatly revered their professors, whom he promoted to high honors. In order to learn grammar, he attended the lectures of the aged Peter of Pisa, a deacon; and for other branches he chose as his preceptor Albinus, otherwise called Alcuin, also a deacon, - a Saxon by race, from Britain, the most learned man of the day, with whom the king spent much time in learning rhetoric and logic, and more especially astronomy. He learned the art of determining the dates upon which the movable festivals of the Church fall, and with deep thought and skill most carefully calculated the courses of the planets. Charles also tried to learn to write, and used to keep his tablets and writing book under the pillow of his couch, that when he had leisure he might practice his hand in forming letters; but he made little progress in this task, too long deferred and begun too late in life.

Charlemagne and the Carolingian Renaissance (Overview)

For several hundred years after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, various states arose from an assortment of tribal governments. One of the most important states of post-Roman Europe was the kingdom of the Franks. In about AD 742, Charles—the future Charlemagne (meaning "Charles the Great")—was born to Pippin the Short, ruler of the Franks. On Pippin's death in 768, his kingdom was divided between his sons, as was the custom among the Franks. After his brother's death in 771, Charlemagne became the sole ruler of the kingdom.



Charlemagne continued his father's program of conquest over neighboring kingdoms. He subjugated the Lombards in present-day Italy, subdued the rebellious Saxons in present-day Germany, and destroyed the Avars' power in Eastern Europe. By the time of his death in 814, Charlemagne ruled nearly all of Christian Western Europe except for the British Isles.

From the beginning of his reign, Charles maintained friendly relations with the pope in Rome and helped to defend the pope's territories from invasion. On Christmas Day in 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne emperor in a ceremony at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Although the coronation was primarily a ceremonial gesture without any legal basis, it symbolically associated the seat of political and military power in Western Europe with the Roman imperial tradition.

Charlemagne built a "New Rome" in his capital city to the north, Aix-la-Chapelle, and fostered a cultural renewal that reintroduced the traditions of the Roman Empire: organized government, the rule of law, literacy, art, and architecture.

Charlemagne's Military

According to the 16th-century French history *Annals of the Franks*, the army of Charlemagne was so intimidating that opposing forces often gave up without a fight. The army was large and well trained, with cavalry and foot soldiers drilled to move in formation and respond quickly to commands sounded by trumpet. Many historians also identify the Franks' adoption of the stirrup (invented in Asia in the second century BC) as a key event that improved the effectiveness of mounted soldiers.



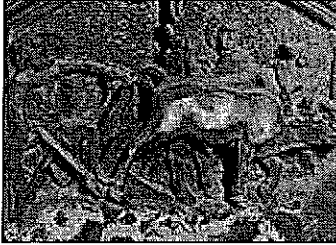
Every year within Charlemagne's empire, there was a roundup of troops at the Spring Assembly. Based on the size of the realm, the potential existed for an army of 100,000 men, but it is unlikely that more than a few thousand at a time were levied. Each soldier was expected to provide his own armor and equipment and bring enough food for up to three months. A huge caravan of wagons loaded with supplies followed the army. The Franks waged war only in the spring and summer, both because it was impossible to pull heavy wagons over the mud in winter and because horses and oxen could feed in the fields, so the army didn't have to carry food for them.

Steel swords were also part of the formidable military strength of the Carolingian Army.

Good steel swords were very valuable, but sword production was expensive because it took so much time and effort, so only the wealthiest could afford the highest-quality swords. Other weapons used by cavalry and infantry

included the short sword (made of iron), the adze or two-headed ax, bows and arrows, spears, and lances (used on horseback).

Agriculture

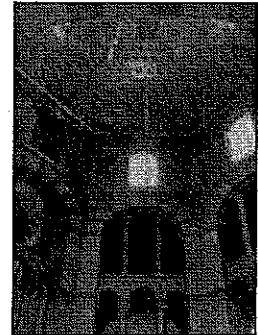


The vast majority of the population in the age of Charlemagne lived and worked on farms. It was a constant struggle to produce enough food. Most of the farmers were freemen who owned the land they worked, although monasteries made up the largest landowning complexes in Charlemagne's time.

Two major innovations led to increased agricultural production at about this time: the large wheeled plow and three-field crop rotation. It had long been known that the soil would become worn out by repeated crop planting, so usually half of a farm's land would be left empty, or fallow, each year to allow it to recover. During the Carolingian period, farmers began to divide their land into three sections—planting two and allowing one to lie fallow. That practice increased the productive area significantly and made more food available each year.

Church and State

When the kingdom expanded into an empire under Charlemagne, the Franks' tribal system of government was no longer sufficient. He had to control a vast territory and several different ethnic groups with different traditions of government. Charlemagne turned to the Roman Catholic Church for a model of orderly government. The Roman Catholic Church was the only Europe-wide social structure remaining after the fall of the Roman Empire, and churches had become the central sources of justice, security, and wealth in each community. The continued health of the Church was therefore an important consideration in maintaining the health of the empire.



Because the administration of the Catholic Church was based on the administration of the Roman Empire, Charlemagne's government also resembled Roman imperial government. In Charlemagne's new civil government, governors or barons were responsible for large regions, with counts ruling over subdivisions of those regions, called counties. Legal assessors were assigned to counties and villages to make sure that abuses did not occur. To further ensure the enforcement of the realm's laws, royal envoys were sent out in pairs, directly from the emperor, to check up on the government of each county.

Educational Reform

Before Charlemagne's rule, education had not been a priority in Frankish culture. While there were still some outposts of learning in the monasteries, only a few members of society could claim any degree of education, and many of those could barely read and write.

Charlemagne encouraged the production of educational manuscripts at the monastic libraries, especially texts by Saint Augustine of Hippo and Saint Jerome. Charlemagne also gathered scholars from all over Europe to establish new schools in his kingdom. The most famous was the "Palace School" attached to the royal court, where the Anglo-Saxon Alcuin of York served as schoolmaster to noble families. Charlemagne was himself interested in scholarship and education. He studied diligently and apparently learned to read, although he generally had others



write for him. He supposedly said that his fingers had been so formed by training for the sword that they could not adjust to using a pen.

All books had to be copied by hand, and many classical works exist today because scribes made copies of them during the reign of Charlemagne. Moreover, Carolingian monks adopted a standard script that was clear and easy to read. That script was used as the basis for most modern typefaces when printing presses came into use in the 15th century.

The Carolingian Legacy

Charlemagne's rule lasted from 768 to 814. Within two generations after his death, the effects of most of his reforms had dissipated because his successors, weakened by Viking invasions, could not sustain them. Nevertheless, Charlemagne left behind a lasting and important legacy. He established a lasting model for future European kings, and he relit the candle of classical learning.

ID: 1185681

[back to top](#)

Charlemagne and the Carolingian Renaissance: Discussion

1. Why do you think Charlemagne emphasized the improvement of education?
2. In what way did Pope Leo III's granting of the title of "emperor" to Charlemagne serve the interests of the papacy?
3. Some historians have suggested that Charlemagne was surprised and even angered when the pope crowned him emperor. What advantages and disadvantages for Charlemagne—and for Europe—were there in accepting the crown and imperial title?

