Part Two
Charlemagne

Chapter 5
Charlemagne

It is unlikely that the writings of Alcuin would have been preserved to the extent that they were had it not been for his close association and friendship with Charlemagne. In some ways the King's moral authority and political prestige lay behind them. It is notable that the overwhelming bulk of the material remaining from Alcuin's hand dates from his years on the continent while in the retinue of the King and, after 796, at Tours. His many letters from the last period of his life open a fascinating window onto the court of the great Christian Emperor, as he became, and there is no doubting the respect and affection that flowed between Alcuin and Charlemagne.[1]

This was fully recognised by the two biographers of Charlemagne.[2] The first of these, Einhard, was himself an intellectual and courtier, being close to the King in the latter years of his reign, and also to his son, Louis the Pious. He was educated at Fulda, the monastery created by Boniface and where the saint was buried, and soon after 791 he went to join the royal court around the same time as Alcuin himself, whose friend he became. After Charlemagne's death, Louis gave Einhard several monasteries including Seligenstadt where he built a remarkable church. He retired there and died in 840. His *Life of Charlemagne* was written at the end of his life and it benefits from hindsight. It is modelled on Suetonius' lives of the Roman emperors - most notably his *Life of Augustus*, which Einhard follows closely. It is a judicious encomium, well informed, though in places inevitably selective out of his deep loyalty to the late King, who was his friend and patron.

Einhard was therefore well placed to portray the King's interests and also his friends and he paints a vivid picture of a powerful and energetic personality, noting that Charlemagne spoke 'easily and fluently', not only in his native language but also Latin; he even had a limited reading knowledge of some Greek. 'He paid the greatest attention to the liberal arts, for he had great respect for men who taught them, bestowing high honours upon them.'[3] His initial teacher was Peter, a deacon from Pisa; 'but for all other subjects he was taught by Alcuin, surnamed Albinus, another deacon, a man of Saxon race, who came from Britain and was the most learned man anywhere to be found.'[4] This was high praise indeed from Einhard who was no less able in his own way, and equally close to the King. Under

A clasp made either for a sword or harness out of gold and copper alloy from the time of Charlemagne.

Alcuin's tutelage, Charlemagne studied rhetoric, dialectic and astronomy, each of which clearly fascinated him, as is evident in some of the letters that passed between the King and Alcuin. Charlemagne also tried his hand at learning to write, but without great success, having embarked on it too late in life and amidst too many distractions of duty. Like Alfred the Great later, Charlemagne's commitment to learning was personal and sincere, if at times frustrated by the limitations of his own education and lifestyle. He was a person of high ability in every way, and in Alcuin it would seem that he met his match.

This relationship between King and scholar is also evident in the second *Life of Charlemagne*, written later in the ninth century at the monastery of St Gallen, probably by Notker the Stammerer, around the year 884. By this time, and in the midst of the turbulence of the second part of the ninth century, the memory of Charlemagne had already begun to take on legendary proportions as a 'golden age.' Nonetheless this *Life* contains many valuable reminiscences, including two concerning Alcuin and the King. The *Life* starts with an interesting story about two Irish scholars who arrived at the court of Charlemagne: 'these men were unrivalled in their knowledge of sacred and profane letters, at a time when the pursuit of learning was almost forgotten throughout the length and breadth of Charlemagne's Kingdom.'[5] This was of course a generalisation; but it recalled the decisive role played by insular scholars during the rise of the Carolingians in the eighth century, and at the court of Charlemagne himself. It is in this context and in the second chapter of the *Life* that the monk of St Gallen mentions the arrival of Alcuin, attracted by the patronage of the great King. He described Alcuin as 'a man more skilled in all the branches of knowledge than any other person of modern times, . . . a pupil of Bede, that priest of great learning, himself the most accomplished interpreter of the Scriptures since St Gregory.' The recognition of a direct line of intellectual descent from Gregory the Great through Bede to Alcuin is significant and accurate, even though Alcuin was not a personal disciple of Bede's, being born around the year that he died. It is quite clear that the author knew of the close friendship between Alcuin and the King: 'the Emperor went so far as to have himself called Alcuin's pupil and to call Alcuin his master.' It also asserts that the reason why the King gave Alcuin the abbacy of Tours was so that he would have a base for his teaching of 'all those who flocked to him' there. 'His teaching bore such fruit among his pupils that the modern Franks came to equal the Romans and the Athenians,' a conceit which encapsulated the aspirations of the Carolingian reformers, and that was deployed by Alcuin himself occasionally in his letters.[6]

In his comments about Alcuin, the writer appears to have known the *Life of Alcuin*, adding in chapter nine the comment that 'of all his pupils there was not one who did not distinguish himself by becoming a devout abbot or a famous bishop.' He alleged that his own master, Grimald, had studied the liberal arts under Alcuin;[7] even if were not so precisely, he and

his monastery were close to the memory of Alcuin and his disciples. He also records a fine joke between Charlemagne and Alcuin.[8] Despite all his efforts to revive and proliferate Christian learning, Charlemagne on occasion expressed his frustration: 'If only I could have a dozen churchmen as wise and well taught in all human knowledge as were Jerome and Augustine!' To which Alcuin shrewdly replied, with some irony and perhaps suppressed irritation: 'The Maker of heaven and earth Himself has very few scholars worth comparing with these men, and yet you expect to find a dozen!' The writer observed that Alcuin 'considered *even himself* ignorant in comparison with these two': this is probably a genuine reminiscence of both men and of their rapport. What was also remembered was Alcuin's boldness before a king who struck terror in many of his other courtiers. The Gallen *Life* is therefore a testimony to the power of oral tradition across a couple of generations, often highlighting what was significant in relationships and the developments they inspired, even if not always precisely accurate in some of its details. Taken together, the two biographers of Charlemagne emphasise the unique importance of Alcuin in relation to the king's personal life as well as to some aspects of his policy. Their almost *viva voce* judgement is to be respected inasmuch as what they say can be confirmed from the documents that remain which are associated with both men.

The reign of Charlemagne

Before examining the precise ways in which Alcuin interacted with Charlemagne and his court, some outline of his reign must be sketched in order to provide a context for understanding Alcuin's place and his role. Englishmen before him had played a significant role in justifying and supporting the rise of the Carolingians and their accession to royal power in the course of the eighth century.[9] Most notable among these were St Willibrord and Boniface. To their influence may also be attributed to some extent the alliance forged between the new Carolingian dynasty and the Papacy in the middle of the eighth century, as it sought to emancipate itself from Byzantine control and to protect itself from the Lombards in northern Italy. Charlemagne came from a militant and assertive tradition, founded by his great-grandfather, Pippin of Herstal, who wielded supreme power among the Franks after his victory at Tertry in 687 until his death in 714. He was the first patron of Willibrord. His son, Charles Martel, fought the Saxons and the Frisians on the borders of his realm, and in 732 he defeated an Islamic incursion from Spain at Poitiers in 732. The aggressive behaviour of the Frisians and the Saxons, and the rapid defeat of the Christian Visigoth kingdoms in Spain, however, haunted the Carolingian enterprise for many years.

In 741, Charles Martel was succeeded by his brother, Pippin the Short, who assumed control of the whole Kingdom after his brother retired to a monastery in 747. During his reign, the leadership of Boniface and others strengthened the

influence of the Roman church and its practices, as part of a reform movement with which the Carolingian dynasty increasingly identified itself to its profit and to enhance its political control. In 752, Pope Zachary confirmed the legitimacy of Pippin's kingship, setting aside the last representative of the Merovingian dynasty. In 753, Pope Stephen II crossed the Alps to secure Carolingian military support against the Lombards, who had seized Ravenna and most of the Byzantine territory in north-eastern Italy. Pippin agreed to this alliance in 754 and in return the Pope consecrated his two sons, one of whom was Charlemagne himself, as co-rulers, calling them and their father 'patricians of the Romans' and therefore protectors of the Holy See. In 755 and 756, Pippin invaded Italy and conquered Ravenna, handing over the lands of the Byzantine exarchate to the Papacy. In the 760's, Pippin waged continuous war against the south-western provinces of Aquitaine in order to secure their submission as a bulwark against the threat from Spain. He died in 768, and in that year Charlemagne and his brother Carloman inherited the Kingdom.

Between 768 and 771, Charlemagne shared rule with his brother but their relations were not good, failing to collaborate in the subjugation of Aquitaine in 769. Pippin's widow, Bertrada, played an ambivalent role, creating an alliance for a while between Charlemagne, Tassilo of Bavaria and the Lombard King Desiderius, whose daughter was Charlemagne's first wife. Carloman was isolated and in vain did his followers in Rome raise an abortive revolt in 771, bringing the Lombard King to the gates of the city itself, to the unease of Pope Stephen III. Carloman died in the winter of that year, however, and Charlemagne assumed rule of the entire Frankish Kingdom, which he exercised until his death in 814. His Lombard wife returned home to Italy, whither the widow of Carloman also retreated with her children and their retainers.

In 772, a new Pope took office, Hadrian I, who was to play a decisive role in the restoration of Rome and in encouraging Charlemagne in his policies and reforms. Their relationship became one of the anchors of his rule. Meanwhile, Desiderius challenged the lands of the papacy and sought the consecration of Carloman's sons. But it was a bluff, and in 773 he retreated from his assault on Rome. Charlemagne was initially loath to intervene but finally did so, and with some difficulty got his forces through the Alps to besiege the Lombard King during the winter, securing the fall, first of Verona and with it the widow of Carloman, and finally of Pavia in 774, and then becoming ruler of the Lombards in place of Desiderius. Having established his political position, he had his son Pippin consecrated King of the Lombards in 781. Irreversibly, the Carolingian ruler was now caught up in the complex jostling between Byzantium, the papacy and the various Lombard and other Italian rulers.

While Charlemagne was thus engaged beyond the Alps, his hereditary enemies seized their advantage and in 774 the Saxons launched heavy raids against the Carolingian borderlands. According to Einhard, the border was ill-defined and hard to defend: the Saxons lacked any united command or political authority and so proved intractable to deal with politically. War with

the Saxons therefore dominated the reign of Charlemagne, and its tortuous and bloody course brought out the worst and the best in the King. By 777 he was in a strong enough position to summon the annual assembly of the Franks to his new headquarters at Paderborn. It was seen as a turning-point: the triumph of Christianity over paganism. In the same year he embarked on an assault on the Islamic rulers of Pamplona and Saragossa in Spain. Returning home, his rearguard was decimated by an ambush in the Pyrenees at Roncesvalles, the setting for the later *Chanson de Roland*. It was a major setback and Charlemagne never again invaded Spain. As a result, in 778 the Saxons rebelled and destroyed his fortress at Karlsburg near Paderborn. Charlemagne reacted with great determination and force and secured the temporary submission of the Saxons in 779 and 780. Over the winter of 778-9, he stayed at his family home at Herstal, and from there issued the second capitulary of his reign, which set out the aims of his rule and reforms as a Christian monarch.

Another capitulary, however, to assert Frankish rule over the Saxons, issued perhaps in 782, incited further rebellion, led by Widukind. It was seen as harsh and alien in some of its demands, including the forcible imposition of tithes, against which Alcuin would later protest. Charlemagne's revenge was ruthless, executing 4000 captive Saxons at Verden on a single day. Violent resistance continued for a number of years until the submission of Widukind and his baptism in 785. Trouble flared up again in 792 and continued until 804, culminating in mass deportations of Saxons in the closing years of the eighth century. Behind the war banners of the King followed the mission of the Church as an integral part of royal policy. But a brutal pattern was created that would be replicated in the treatment of Slavs and others in subsequent centuries. It was well observed by Edward Gibbon that 'so intimate is the association of the throne and the altar that the banners of the Church have seldom been seen on the side of the people.' But Charlemagne's policy did not go completely unchallenged, not least by Alcuin, as revealed in some of his letters. For compulsory conversion to Christianity had been eschewed by the missionaries to the English under the guidance of Gregory the Great. Therein lay one of the secrets of its success to the extent that within a hundred years Christianity had become so acculturated and had given such fertile expression to Anglo-Saxon culture that the *Lindisfarne Gospels* could be produced along with the writings of Bede.[10]

From time to time Charlemagne faced challenges from within his own ruling clan and most notably from Tassilo of Bavaria, who still retained considerable autonomy from direct Frankish rule. He was created a duke by his uncle, Pippin III, in 749, and at his majority had sworn allegiance in 757 to the King, his heirs and successors. But in 763 he broke free and the old King died in 768 before he could reassert his over-lordship. It seems that the young Charlemagne tolerated the situation for a full decade, while Tassilo founded monasteries[11] and defeated the Slavs of Carinthia in 772. But in 781, Charlemagne and Pope Hadrian insisted that Tassilo obey his

oaths and so he came to Worms to renew them. It seems that there was a joint determination to rein him in lest he conspire with the King's enemies, the Saxons, Slavs and Avars, and so weaken the support that the Pope hoped to receive from Charlemagne. In 787 Tassilo fell out with the Pope and refused to attend another Frankish assembly at Worms. Charlemagne invaded with three armies and the Duke capitulated. He surrendered his duchy along with his son as a hostage and then received it back as a royal fief. But in 788 he was arraigned at a further assembly at Ingelheim, again on grounds of treachery and collusion with the Avars, and was condemned to death. Charlemagne instead showed clemency and Tassilo was banished to a monastery, to appear before the synod of Frankfurt in 794 as a penitent.

It seems that in 787-8 the Byzantines collaborated with the Avars while attacking Charlemagne's domains in southern Italy, and relationships between the Franks and their warlike eastern neighbours remained fraught until the King attacked them in force in 790-1 by way of a crusade of revenge, a holy war. They put up little resistance and as a result the King added much of what is now Austria to his domains. In 795-6, one of the Avar leaders came to Aachen to submit to Charlemagne, and in the same year the duke of Fruili, Eric, a friend of Alcuin's, attacked the headquarters of the Avars and despoiled them of a fabulous hoard of treasure. According to Einhard, no war so enriched the victorious Franks, and booty from this hoard was sent by Charlemagne far and wide, including to the English kings, as signs of his prowess. Meanwhile Alcuin urged his friend, Arno of Salzburg, and others to evangelistic activity among the Avars, though not this time by compulsion.

After Alcuin's death in 804, the King intervened on behalf of his Avar subjects against the Slavs of Bohemia in 805-6, and he waged war further east in Pannonia in 811. Charlemagne had to face challenges from the Bretons, whom he subdued, and also from the Danes in the later years of his reign. These he withstood until the Danish Kingdom collapsed from within. His ascendancy north of the Alps was therefore never in doubt. His alliance with the English kings held good to their mutual profit, as it secured the North Sea coasts and the narrow seas of the English Channel and sustained the trade between them, with occasional interruptions. On the other hand, the proverb of the Greeks, cited by Einhard, probably applied to the English: 'If a Frank is your friend, then he is clearly not your neighbour.'[12] The lack of a land boundary protected both sides from each other. The threat from the Vikings, despite Alcuin's forebodings about the sack of Lindisfarne in 793, was still only a distant cloud on the horizon. While Charlemagne commanded significant fleets in the northern seas as well as in the Mediterranean his vast realm might seem secure. His sheer energy as a war-leader never abated until the end of his life.

His engagements south of the Alps were different and in some ways more complicated. Lombardy retained its identity and integrity under Frankish colonial rule. It was the strategic key to Charlemagne's influence

in Italy. It also exerted a significant influence on Carolingian culture. In 774, Charlemagne paid his first visit to Rome where he was received by a wary Pope Hadrian, who extracted an oath from the King before permitting him actually to enter the city of Rome. On this occasion, however, Charlemagne made a solemn commitment to endow the papacy with extensive land grants across Italy. Although the text of this no longer remains, it became a bone of contention between the Pope and the King as its implementation was tardy and incomplete. Charlemagne did not bend to the Pope's will with regard to the claims of the see of Ravenna; nor did he hand over Spoleto, which he visited in 775 rather than Rome itself. Further planned visits in 776 and 778 fell through to the chagrin and frustration of Hadrian.

Charlemagne's presence in Italy drew him into direct confrontation with Byzantine power, which claimed the exarchate of Ravenna and which still ruled extensively in southern Italy. By 781, however, the Byzantines were seeking a marriage alliance with the rising power in the West. In that year, the King visited Rome again, having installed his son Pippin as ruler of Lombardy. It was also the year in which the King and the Pope collaborated against Tassilo of Bavaria. On a further visit in 787, Charlemagne exerted his authority over Benevento, which had been a thorn in the side for him and the Pope for a number of years. He also met ambassadors from Byzantium who confirmed that the marriage alliance was off. War broke out in 788 in the south of Italy and for a time Grimoald, the Frankish appointee ruling Benevento, stood firm with the King against the Byzantine forces. Later he reneged and was attacked by Pippin from Lombardy twice early in the next decade. The Byzantines discovered that the Frankish ruler and his empire were a force to be reckoned with as their own influence in Italy continued to wane.

The failure of the marriage alliance meant that Charlemagne was on a collision course with the Eastern Roman Empire, which is part of the background to his own assumption of the imperial title in 800 at the hand of Pope Leo III. It was also part of the background to the Carolingian criticism of the decrees of the second council of Nicea of 787, which sought to reverse the policy of iconoclasm in the Byzantine realms. This resulted in the preparation of the *Libri Carolini* by Theodulf of Orleans and others in 792 and its adoption by the Synod of Frankfurt in 794, despite the justifiable protestations of Pope Hadrian, who pointed out that it had completely misunderstood the decrees of the synod of Nicea due to a faulty translation. The Latin word *adorare* had been used to translate both the 'worship' due to God alone and the 'veneration' that might be offered his saints to and through icons. Despite Charlemagne's respect and friendship towards Pope Hadrian, his sense of his own duty and authority stood firm on this issue.

It was during the 790's that the imperial cult of Charlemagne began to gain ground, and in this Alcuin was to play a hidden but perhaps decisive

part in the years immediately leading up to Christmas 800. The King's new title reflected primarily the extent of his rule. His authority lay behind the *Libri Carolini* and his other capitularies of reform as that of the defender of Christian orthodoxy in the West. The palace complex that he began to build at Aachen became his fixed winter capital after 794. Its chapel imitated Ravenna and Rome, from which some of its decorative materials were pillaged – or purchased. By the end of the decade, Pope Leo III portrayed Charlemagne as a modern counterpart to Constantine in a mosaic flanking the apse of his *triclinium* in the Lateran palace in Rome.[13] To some extent the synod of Frankfurt in 794 was Charlemagne's answer to the synod of Nicea seven years earlier. It asserted his authority to judge the heresy of Adoptionism in Spain, which much preoccupied Alcuin, and it condemned image-worship in the East as the Frankish ruler perceived it to be.

The new Pope, Leo III, looked to Charlemagne as his protector and perhaps as the co-ruler of Rome itself. He certainly needed that protection for he was nearly killed in 799 by his enemies and had to flee across the Alps to his northern patron at Paderborn. Meanwhile, in Byzantium itself, the Empress Irene ruled alone, having blinded her son in 797. The plight of the Pope drew the King to intervene in Roman affairs, ordering a commission of enquiry to exonerate the Pope and securing his restoration. Alcuin was one of the advisers who in 799 urged Charlemagne to assume formally the imperial role apparently being offered him by Leo at Paderborn. To mark the King's elevation, Alcuin sent him a specially prepared copy of the Bible. So on Christmas Day 800, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as emperor in St Peter's basilica, an event much discussed by historians and with hindsight pregnant for the future of Europe. Einhard asserted that the King accepted this with great reluctance, but this is most unlikely in reality. He was however crowned first and then acclaimed, and this may have irritated the King though why remains unclear unless it was that he felt that the hapless Pope had presumed too much authority in the matter.

Nonetheless a new political fact was created, which Charlemagne exploited to the full in his title and in his actions. It gave him renewed moral authority as a political and religious reformer, and this was reflected in various capitularies issued at Aachen in 802. This encapsulated his whole vision of a Christian empire and a well ordered Church, enjoining new oaths of loyalty to himself and to the standards of justice and Christianity. It was also at this synod that the *Rule of St Benedict* was laid down as a norm for monastic life. Further war with Byzantium broke out, after Alcuin's death, in 806-8 over the territories of Venetia and Istria at the head of the Adriatic, which had fallen under the lordship of Charlemagne. During peace negotiations in 812, envoys from Byzantium acclaimed Charlemagne as 'emperor'. The coasts of Spain and the inroads of pirates in the Mediterranean also required the King's attention throughout his reign. Moorish attacks from North Africa into Sicily and southern Italy

also posed a challenge which was successfully met in 799. Naval power was the key to relative political security and also to trade, in which the Carolingian dynasty had a keen interest.

Byzantine ascendancy in the western Mediterranean was no more however, and the focus of European development now lay north of the Alps.[14] The impact of Charlemagne's *imperium* was therefore of decisive importance for the subsequent history of Europe. Although effective control of such a wide domain proved impossible under his successors, and the northern borders of the Frankish realm became under increasing Viking attack throughout the ninth century, the model of Christian monarchy and reform of the Church remained as a tangible ideal, with education, liturgy and monasticism at its heart, to inspire their restoration under the Ottonian kings as well as in England in the tenth century. In the formulation and dissemination of this vision and its practical implementation, Alcuin and his writings played a decisive part, during his lifetime and long afterwards.