# Charlemagne's Empire:
## The Resurrection of Rome on the Ruins of Usurers and Frauds

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This essay will examine the relations of Roman Catholicism and the New Rome created by Charles the Great in the late 8th and early 9th centuries.[1] *The Life of Charlemagne* by Einhard makes several references to this relation in his sections on conquest as well as the emperor's personal piety. The literature on this essential issue is extraordinarily large. However, the focus of this essay will be on Ganshof's (1965) article "The Impact of Charlemagne on the Institutions of the Frankish Realm." This paper is particularly useful for this essay because it has as its primary concern the Church and its relation to the creation of a new legal order in the west.

This article is a perfect companion to Einhard's writings on the empire and religion, since these are orders that were issued from the Emperor both as a political and ecclesiastical figure. There was, in Charlemagne's mind, no distinction between these roles. The church, without strong royal oversight, had decayed under the Merovingian royals, and hence, his role was as extraordinary bishop and monarch simultaneously. Furthermore, these are relevant in his dealings wit the eastern empire (whose title he usurped), as well as, significantly, his desperate Capitulary of Herstal in 779, when the empire seemed to be unraveling. These Capitularies had one theme: the emperor's role was one as churchman and emperor, and, since both have God for their source, they are one.[2]

Einhard states:

> He cherished the Church of St. Peter the Apostle at Rome above all other holy and sacred places, and heaped its treasury with a vast wealth of gold, silver, and precious stones. He sent great and countless gifts to the popes; and throughout his whole reign the wish that he had nearest at heart was to re-establish the ancient authority of the city of Rome. . .[3]

This idea is essential in that it was not some abstract Christianity that the emperor wanted to institutionalize, but the church of Rome. The papacy was the last remaining element of the Old Roman system, and therefore, its office was of immense significance. By connecting with Rome, partly by defeating her enemies, Charlemagne was able to create a new framework for his rule and the resurrection of the west. Therefore, "by the prayers and entreaties of Hadrian, Bishop of the city of Rome, to wage war on the Lombards. His father before him had undertaken this task at

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[1]   This title was already taken by Constantinople, and mentioned in the First Synod of Nicea. However, the west was to usurp this title by the papal granting of it to Charlemagne in 800. It is the opinion of this author that Charlemagne had no claim to the Roman heritage, and even if he did, the papacy had no right to grant it.

[2] Irons, WJ. The Reconstruction of the Civilization of the West, from Charlemagne (Transitio Imperii) to the Era of the Crusades (And Concordat, 1122). Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 9, (1881), 153-155

[3] Einhard. The Life of Charlemagne. Trans: Samuel Epes Turner. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880), sec 27

the request of Pope Stephen." (6) In competing this mission, the city of Rome would then be essentially incorporated into the empire. Charlemagne, without rejecting papal authority, would become Rome itself.[4]

Concerning the wars with the Saxons, Einhard writes,

> The Saxons, like almost all the tribes of Germany, were a fierce people, given to the worship of devils[5], and hostile to our religion, and did not consider it dishonorable to transgress and violate all law, human and divine . . .The war that had lasted so many years was at length ended by their acceding to the terms offered by the King; which were renunciation of their national religious customs and the worship of devils, acceptance of the sacraments of the Christian faith and religion, and union with the Franks to form one people.[6]

This citation from Einhard makes the point of this essay crystal clear. The purpose of bringing the Saxons into the empire were several: first, to remove a possible threat to his northeastern border; second, to carry out his role as extraordinary bishop, and finally, to spread the faith which Charlemagne was completely devoted.

The Saxons cannot be considered the object of pity.[7] The Saxon destruction of the native Celtic population of Britain, their piracy and general Viking-level violence shows precisely the good that Charles did in making their lives miserable.[8] None of this should be taken to mean that the emperor was using the faith politically. This is because, primarily, there was no real distinction at the time, and secondarily, his personal piety is attested to by many contemporary sources and hence, it cannot be seen as just mere social cement.[9]

From Einhard's work alone, the connection between the Church of Rome and the rebuilding of New Rome is clear. It is not out of the bounds of sanity to claim that the western Roman heritage was, by the time of Charles, the heritage of Catholicism. However, this does not justify the papal bestowal of "Roman emperor" on a Frankish king, it merely makes it understandable.

Religion was a public matter, since the concept of "private" religion did not exist at the time. Therefore, Charlemagne's self image was consistent with cultural norms. The empire was not really a state, since the state was actually Charlemagne himself and his ever-changing army. Therefore, in no way was Charlemagne tyrannical, since that was physically impossible in an empire without a bureaucracy. A lasting bureaucracy in 800 was solely the domain of Rome itself, Constantinople. Further, the concept of "state" did not refer to the coercive elements of power, but rather to the cultural unity of a people. That ingredient is more questionable, but the Latin heritage of the Roman church would fix that.[10]

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[4] Odegaard, CE. The Concept of Royal Power in Carolingian Oaths of Fidelity. Speculum, 20, No. 3 (1945), 280-281

[5]  This may be "daemons" or the idols of the ancient pagans. It is not the same as "demons" as fallen angels.

[6] Einhard. The Life of Charlemagne. Trans: Samuel Epes Turner. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880), sec 7

[7] For an extremely demagogic example of this, see Collins, R. Charlemagne. (University of Toronto Press, 1998) 163-164

[8] Blair, PH. An Introduction to Anglo-Saxon England. (Cambridge University Press, 2003) 8-9

[9] Sidey, TK. The Government of Charlemagne as Influenced by Augustine's "City of God." The Classical Journal, 14, No. 2 (1918), 120-124

[10] Innes, M. Charlemagne's Will: Piety, Politics and the Imperial Succession. The English Historical Review, 112, no.

The Capitularies of Charlemagne were aspects of this dual role as "bishop" and "emperor." A "Capitulary" was a brief order, aimed at a specific problem or set of problems, that was to be carried out by the *missi*, or loyal servants of the crown that saw to the establishment of law throughout the empire. It was often the case that a Capitulary was issued after lengthy discussion with the elites of the empire and, to some extent, was a summary of these debates. Charles was the final world, but, given both Roman and German custom, the emperor had no right to rule alone.[11]

Ganshof writes concerning the 779 Capitulary of Herstal:

> Among other things one finds here, supported by biblical quotations, the fundamental rule of the Carolingian method of government: there must be peace and concord, that is to say, trusting collaboration between the ecclesiastical authorities and the secular agents of royal power (Capitulary of Herstal, defeats 779: 48)

Ganshof makes it clear that this particular order was given at a time of military defeat, rebellion, conspiracy and disorder many years before becoming emperor. In taking the wreckage of the Merovingian society (there can be no reference to an "empire" or state in their case), even such a man as Charlemagne would struggle to create some order. Surrounded by enemies, dealing with rebellious tribes and an empty treasury would strain the abilities of even the greatest of leaders. One of the keys to his success was to show the natural unity of the church hierarchy and crown. The bishops were popular, urban figures acting as a check on the monarch. They were essential for ruling.[12]

Making this more explicit, Ganshof writes,

> The imperial coronation of 25 December 800 brought to Charlemagne problems of extreme gravity. Chiefly it sharpened the agonizing sense of responsibility which he felt towards God now that he had become the recognized holder of an universal power intended to protect and promote the Christian Faith and the Church.[13]

The Capitulary of 802 was about the role of the new emperor. In this case, the Aachen Capitulary had more to do with Charlemagne's personality than any specific policy. The commentary of Ganshof speaks of the personal suffering the rulership over the west could create, and that power, as a result, is not a good to be sought. It was precisely in having responsibility over western Christendom that this suffering was based. Charlemagne could not have been ignorant of the Byzantine status as Rome, recognized as such by all important political forces. Nor could his own empire's weakness and lack of stability have escaped him.

Another example is a Capitulary deriving from the infamous Council of Frankfurt in 794.

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448 (1997), pp. 840-841

[11] Bhote, T. Charlemagne: The Life and Times of an Early Medieval Emperor. (Rosen, 2005), 51-55

[12] Ganshof, FL. The Impact of Charlemagne on the Institutions of the Frankish Realm. Speculum, 40, no. 1 (1965), 47

[13] Ganshof, 49

This council was rejected by both east and west eventually, and its sole purpose was to challenge the East over the question of icons. The issue was that, in taking advantage of Byzantine errors on doctrine, both the pope and western emperor can better claim these august titles. It held that icons could be used as teaching tools, but were not to be venerated. In this case, the Emperor erred grievously. It did not set the Franks off against the Greeks, since, even in the pope's mind, the Greeks were correct. In this case, the relation between church and crown showed strain.[14]

Not only was this a purely political council, but no Orthodox theologian anywhere in the Christian realm held to such a view. The iconoclasts had a clear position, as did the iconodules. This third view has no real standing and can easily be confusing. Add to this the fact that the ancient canons were not yet translated into Latin, and Charlemagne's life is made even more difficult. In summarizing his discussion of the Capitulates, Ganshof describes the basic mentality of Charlemagne,

> Charlemagne very simply put his religious faith and his respect for the law above all other considerations; he fully realized his responsibilities as the head of an important state and later as emperor in the West; he did his best to make the realm's institutions achieve their maximum efficiency while still safeguarding the rights and property of his subjects.[15]

This final quotation shows the identical argument being made in Einhard's work. Church doctrine was the law, albeit fused onto a Roman core. The church was powerful due to its superior organization and overall popularity. No one could rule without the support of the church, and a church in its Orthodox and Catholic form. The church was probably the only organized force in the entire western middle ages. Monasteries and cathedral chapters were the backbone of education, poor relief and urban administration.

Charlemagne is a controversial figure not because the facts are in dispute, but because his role as the defender of the church and imperial power makes him abhorrent to the modern view. The result is that some scholars have no interest in looking at the facts, but only in discrediting the church. Similar treatments of Constantine in the east are well known.

The facts are not in dispute. Charlemagne inherited an society from the Merovingians and Charles Martel that was almost ungovernable. It was poverty stricken, with powerful nobles often more significant and richer than the monarch. Rebellions were everywhere. Communications were difficult, making law enforcement haphazard. The church was a genuinely popular institution, especially in its monasteries and served as the repository of Roman law, which Charles wanted to restore. The church, too, was important as a means of unifying the different people's of the empire. The religious policy of the empire, therefore, was all important.

Few would debate these facts. Logically, the rule of Charlemagne could not, under these circumstances, be based on anything but the judicious use of force. Chances are, he was always outnumbered by the nobles who controlled the economy. He also had Islam to consider, and the endless raids into Rome. Given all this, the fact that his violence was so restrained is remarkable. Violence, given the facts above, is justifiable to the extent that it reestablished law, order and a

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[14]Noble, TFX. Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 169-177

[15]Ganshof, FL. The Impact of Charlemagne on the Institutions of the Frankish Realm. Speculum, 40, no. 1 (1965), 62

moral code that had decayed under the previous reigns. as it was is remarkable. Charles' violence could not be systematic because there was no system.

What matters most of all is his Catholicism. It was genuine, it was revolutionary and it linked Charles to Rome. In fact, it was the only link he had. The pope had his own emperor in Charles. It was, however, the imperial authority alone could call ecumenical councils, not the papacy. The pope, as an important bishop, could not make emperors. That emperors could unmake bishops for heresy was accepted by all. Given all of Charles' gifts, he was historically in the wrong: while remaining a significant monarch, to call himself "Roman emperor" could only be justified centuries before, when two emperor's reigned. Since this was no longer the case, only the emperor (or empress, as in the if Irene) in Constantinople could decide this. There was no canonical or religious grounds for either the pope's claim to legitimize empire or Charlemagne's acceptance of it.[16]

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[16] The canonical issues involved are discussed in McGuckin, JA. The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture. (Wiley, 2010), 381-382ff

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