

REX FRANCORUM ET REX ANGUL-SAXONUM:
A COMPARISON OF EINHARD'S *VITA KAROLI MAGNI*
AND ASSER'S *DE REBUS GESTIS ÆLFREDI*

A Thesis by

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Submitted to the Department of History
and the faculty of the Graduate School of
Wichita State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

May 2007

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I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in History.

Phillip Thomas, Committee Chair

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance.

Anthony Gythiel, Committee Member

Brigitte Roussel, Committee Member

DEDICATION

To Jeff, the love of my life

To my children, Jared, John, Veronica, Michael, Stephen, Jimmy, Hilary, Chris, Natalie

To my grandchildren, Leighton, Nellie, Henry, Cecilia, Roxanne, Vonley, Otto,
Nicholas, Justin

To my parents, Albin and Berenice Bergkamp

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Phillip Thomas, for his scholarly advice and good-humored patience throughout the completion of this thesis. Thank you, also, to Dr. Anthony Gythiel who caused me to fall in love with Medieval History, and to my language teachers -- Drs. Brigitte Roussel, Wilson Baldrige, Patrick Kehoe, and Dieter Saalman -- for their informative and entertaining language instruction. Each one of these professors contributed greatly to the formation of this thesis.

ABSTRACT

Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni* and Asser's *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi* document the lives of two of the most fascinating kings to influence Western civilization – Charlemagne and Alfred the Great. The two biographies were written approximately seventy years apart by clerics who were closely connected to each ruler's court. Einhard and Asser reinvented and popularized the genre of secular biography for the medieval Christian world. Their descriptions of Christian kings aided the development of a specifically European identity which incorporated classical, Germanic and Christian traditions. The two *Vitae* are superb examples of an ever-occurring theme in medieval European history, which historian Patrick Wormald calls "the parallel development and the interdependence of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon history." This thesis compares some of the common themes and distinctive traditions of ninth and tenth century Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society as they are presented in the *Vita Karoli Magni* and the *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi*.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Two of the most significant and uniquely fascinating rulers of the early Middle Ages were Charlemagne and Alfred the Great. Similarly, their biographies -- Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni* and Asser's *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi* -- are the two most important biographies of secular rulers written since Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* and Plutarch's *Lives*. During the 700 years following Suetonius and Plutarch there had been little written in the field of secular biography. With the decline of the Roman classical world and the advent of Christianity, the *Vitae sanctorum* (*Lives of the Saints*) had replaced the *Vitae Caesarum* (*Lives of the Caesars*), giving rise to a genre which often deteriorated into hagiography. Einhard and Asser reinvented and popularized the genre of secular biography for the medieval Christian world. Their descriptions of Christian kings aided the development of a specifically European identity which incorporated the classical, Germanic and Christian traditions. The two *Vitae* are superb examples of an ever-occurring theme in medieval European history which historian Patrick Wormald terms "the parallel development and the interdependence of Frankish and Anglo-Saxon history."¹ This thesis seeks to compare some of the common themes and distinctive traditions of ninth and tenth century Frankish and Anglo-Saxon society as they are presented in the *Vita Karoli Magni* and the *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi*.

The *Vitae* were written approximately 70 years apart by clerics who were closely connected to each ruler's court, in two of the most important early medieval kingdoms. The biographers and the kings themselves, considered the role of ruler as encompassing both a political and religious function. Charlemagne and Alfred are presented as the secular arm of God

¹ Patrick Wormald, *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), ix.

working for the good of the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. The authors invoke themes from three traditions – classical, biblical, and Germanic – in order to bolster their thesis that Alfred and Charlemagne justly held their *imperium* in lands that were threatened by civil war from within and enemies from without – Germanic, Viking, or Arab. The role of ruler in Europe was greatly enlarged in the eighth through tenth centuries, from the Germanic idea of a chieftain governing a small band in conjunction with his *wotan*, to that of a Christian king crowned with a *corona visibilis et invisibilis*,² who capitalized on the Roman ideal of *auctoritas* in order to center the political power around his person and thus unite a larger and more well-defined geographical area.

Much more information is available on the life of Einhard than on that of Asser. Einhard was born around 770 to a noble family who lived near the Main River in eastern Francia. As a child, he was sent to be educated at the monastery of Fulda – that great center of learning established by the English missionary, St. Boniface. In his early twenties, he joined the court of Charlemagne as a scholar.³ While there, he gained a reputation as a poet and as an architect, according to the writings of other courtiers. Although short in stature, Einhard is depicted as bustling around from place to place, carrying books and construction plans. “May the little Nard always run back and forth with steps/ Like your feet, O ant, which come and go, again and again.

² Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997 reprint of 1957 edition), 336. In Subchapter VII 2, “The Crown as Fiction,” Kantorowicz discusses the political teachings of Baldus, a fourteenth century jurist and professor of law, who maintained that Roman emperors and European kings received two crowns, one earthly and one heavenly. “[T]he emperor, whose ‘material and visible’ crown consisted of a diadem, had his ‘invisible’ crown imposed by God.” (“[C]orona Imperialis invisibilis imponebatur a Deo, materialis vero et visibilis erat ipsa Imperialis infula.” Baldus, *Concilia*, III, 159, n. 2, folio 45v.)

³ Louis Halphen, in his *Éinhard: Vie de Charlemagne* (Paris, 1967 reprint of 1938 edition), gives Einhard's age as «près de cinquante ans» when he arrives at Charlemagne's court. Halphen calculates Einhard's age as “almost fifteen,” based on his estimate of Einhard's birth around 775. Paul Edward Dutton reckons Einhard's birth around 770 (*Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard* (Toronto, 1998). Although both Halphen and Dutton are experts on Charlemagne and Einhard, one would presume that the more recently researched and written source (Dutton) is correct.

. . . Now let him carry about his books, and now his other burdens . . .”⁴ Einhard oversaw a number of the royal construction projects, two of which were the palace complexes of Ingelheim and Aachen. After Charlemagne’s death, Einhard became the private secretary of Louis the Pious. For his loyal service, he was richly rewarded by both Charlemagne and Louis. The kings bestowed six monasteries on Einhard and his wife, and Einhard was named lay abbot of two of them. This accumulation of personal wealth and property allowed the courtier time to pull away from the court to some extent, and in the quiet of his religious retreats to write the *Vita Karoli Magni*.

Most of the information known about Asser, Alfred’s Mass-priest, comes from his biography of the king. Asser explains within that text how he was summoned from the monastery of St. David’s in “the remote, westernmost parts of Wales”⁵ in order that Alfred and his court “would derive benefit in every aspect from the learning of St. David.”⁶ The good monk admits that he was reluctant to leave “those very holy places where I had been brought up, trained, tonsured and eventually ordained, in favour of some other worldly honour and position.”⁷ St. David’s may have been, truly, a holy place, but in some ways, it was a “cultural backwater,” according to Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge. Within the walls of that monastery, it is evident that Asser had studied the traditional ninth century texts, except that he still used the “Old Latin” Bible, the *Vetus Latina*. This translation of the Bible had gradually been replaced by Jerome’s Vulgate, and replacement was complete by the eighth century. The fact that Asser still is using the *Vetus Latina*, probably indicates that St. David’s was a step or two behind

⁴ Paul Edward Dutton, ed. and trans., “Theodulf: A Poem for Charlemagne on the Court,” in *Charlemagne’s Courtier: The Complete Einhard* (Toronto: Broadview, 1998), 3.

⁵ Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, trans. and eds., *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and other Contemporary Sources* (London: Penguin, 1983), 93.

⁶ Ibid., 94.

⁷ Ibid.

contemporary scholarship.⁸ Two other medieval sources, Gerald of Wales' *Itinerarium Cambriae* and King Alfred's Preface to the *Pastoral Care* reveal that Asser was also bishop of St. David's. Asser, like Einhard, received monasteries and other rich gifts for his loyal service to his king.

The subjects of the biographies, Charlemagne and Alfred, shared many similarities. The two were skillful military leaders, able administrators, staunch defenders of the Church and passionate promoters of scholarship. They belonged to two of the longest reigning dynasties in European history. Alfred's family, descending from the early ninth century king Egbert of Wessex, reigned for 264 years, if the Danish interlude is omitted. Charlemagne's family, the Carolingians who had descended from Charles Martel, reigned for 236 years. The only other dynasty which was longer lasting was that of the Merovingians, who had ruled for 274 years, before being deposed by Charlemagne's father, Pepin III.⁹ Both kings extended the boundaries of their kingdoms and enlarged the importance of their office. Charlemagne (751-814) ruled a kingdom that extended from the Pyrenees through most of present-day France and Germany, and included northern Italy and Austria. He amassed a huge kingdom which covered much of Western Europe from 795 until 843, when the Treaty of Verdun split it among his grandsons. Alfred (841-899), king of Wessex, ruled a geographically smaller area than Charlemagne which lay in the southwest third of the island of Britain. Nonetheless, Alfred is of great political importance to the history of England for halting Viking encroachment on the island and unifying a number of smaller territories into the nascent kingdom which would become England. Alfred's success over the Danes in the critical ninth century and his promotion of English as a scholarly language equal to Latin are "pivotal moments" in European history.

⁸ Simon and Keynes, *Life of Alfred*, 53.

⁹ Joanna Story, ed., *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 5.

Chapter II, “Comparison of the *Vita Karoli* and the *Vita Ælfredi*,” investigates the two biographies for common themes and distinctive traditions. The first half of each *Vita* emphasizes the king’s *fortitudo* and *constantia* in battle. Included are descriptions of the royal ancestry and right to the throne, childhood, war making and shipbuilding, administration of the kingdom, treatment of enemies, and gift-giving. In the second half of each *Vita*, the biographer describes the kings’ *sapientia*: his attitudes towards the Church and the pope, personal piety, support of monasteries, passion for learning, kingly physique and personality.

Chapter Three, “A Present of Things Past,” considers two topics pertaining to the *Vitae*: “Audiences and Messages,” and “Manuscripts and Research.” Each biography was crafted for a particular audience, but later audiences have discovered messages pertinent to their lives in them. As St. Augustine, the great philosopher and theologian, has commented concerning history, the past exists only in our minds; that is, the past exists only as “a present of things past.”¹⁰ Therefore, each generation will find a different message in the events of the past. Einhard composed the biography of Charlemagne after the death of the ruler, therefore the *Vita* was already “a present of things past.” Asser composed his *Vita Ælfredi* six years before the death of Alfred, but even then, he was writing about events that were part of the past and didn’t exist anymore. The rulers existed not in “sight,” as Augustine would say, but in the subjective territory called the “mind” of the authors. Chapter III also examines the manuscripts and research of each biography. The manuscript history of the two biographies is unique, for the *Vita Karoli* was widely copied and disseminated, but the *Vita Ælfredi* was not. The historiography of the biographies has changed greatly with the passing centuries, as scholars build on the knowledge of the previous generation.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book XI, Chapter 20, #26, trans. E. B. Pusey: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/Englishconfessions.html>

In this thesis, two editions of each *Vita* will be used – one in Latin and one in English translation. For Charlemagne, the standard Latin version of G. Waitz in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* will be utilized, as well as the recent English translation of Waitz by Paul Edward Dutton, “The Life of Charlemagne” in *Charlemagne’s Courtier: The Complete Einhard*.¹¹ The standard Latin edition for Alfred’s life is William Henry Stevenson’s edition of the *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi*, from *Asser’s Life of King Alfred: Together with the Annals of Saint Neots*. For the English translation, Simon Keynes’ and Michael Lapidge’s *Alfred the Great: Asser’s Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources* will be used. These four editions of the *Vitae*, except for the Dutton, have been selected because of their general usage in the current scholarship on Charlemagne and Alfred. For simplicity’s sake, Einhard’s *Vita Karoli Magni* will be referred to as the *Vita Karoli*, and Asser’s *De Rebus Gestis Ælfredi* will be referred to as the *Vita Ælfredi*. The two biographies, whether in Latin or English, will often be referred to as the *Vitae*.

¹¹ Although Lewis Thorpe’s “Life of Charlemagne” (Penguin, 1969) is the English edition commonly used in the scholarly literature, it would have not worked well in this paper. Thorpe did not translate from the G. Waitz edition, but from the Philipp Jaffé. The two editions are based on different Latin manuscripts. Therefore, Thorpe’s English translation does not fit well with Waitz’s Latin. The manuscripts and the variety of editions will be discussed more fully in Part Two of this thesis.

CHAPTER II

COMPARISON OF THE *VITA KAROLI* AND THE *VITA ÆLFREDI*

Although Einhard and Asser are related by educational background -- both were products of the Northumbrian school of scholarship which was so influential in continental and insular monasteries -- their biographies differ greatly in structure and in depth of emotion. The dissimilarity is immediately apparent in the opening lines of the two biographies. Einhard begins the *Vita Karoli* with great warmth and intimacy, describing the close personal relationship he shares with Charlemagne. "After I decided to describe the life and character, and many of the accomplishments, of my lord and foster father, Charles, that most outstanding and deservedly famous king, and seeing how immense this work was, I have expressed it in as concise a form as I could manage."¹² Einhard avers that he was not treated as a servant, but as a member of the family. The author warmly recalls "the foster care he bestowed on me and the constant friendship with him and his children after I began living at his court."¹³ The closeness of their friendship and the great amount of time spent together gave Einhard not only the right, but the obligation to tell the "remarkable deeds" of the king, "since I was aware that no one could write about these things more truthfully than me, since I myself was present and personally witnessed them, as they say, with my own eyes."¹⁴ Furthermore, Einhard believes he must write this biography lest he be "fairly criticized as ungrateful" if he "forgot the many kindnesses" the king conferred on him.¹⁵

In contrast to the effusive warmth expressed by Einhard, Asser's introduction to the *Vita Ælfredi* appears emotionless and efficient. The dedication, which precedes the biography, sets

¹² Paul Edward Dutton, "The Life of Charlemagne," in *Charlemagne's Courtier* (Toronto: Broadview, 1998), 15.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 16.

the tone of the entire work and establishes the relationship of Asser to Alfred. “To my esteemed and most holy lord, Alfred, ruler of all the Christians of the Island of Britain, king of the Angles and Saxons, Asser, lowest of all the servants of God, wishes thousandfold [*sic*] prosperity in this life and in the next, according to the desires of his prayers.”¹⁶ Asser holds King Alfred in the highest respect, but the relationship is simply that of a subject to a king. In contrast, Einhard is a subject of Charlemagne’s, but he is also a friend and like a son to the king. After the dedication, Asser begins the biography with a sentence that is regnal and solemn, and establishes little personal connection with the king. “In the year of the Lord’s incarnation 849 Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, was born at the royal estate called Wantage, in the district known as Berkshire, which is so called from Berroc Wood, where the box-tree grows very abundantly.”¹⁷

The kings’ *fortitudo et constantia*

While Einhard elaborates on the close and multidimensional relationship he shares with his king, Asser follows his introductory sentence with a lengthy genealogy of Alfred which extends all the way back to Adam. This is standard procedure for West Saxon chroniclers, but Asser was probably also influenced by the biblical genealogies. Genealogies were used as a way to establish an individual’s authority and establish his prominence in history. For example, the Gospel of Matthew describes the genealogy of Jesus as extending from Abraham and through David in order to persuade his fellow Jews that Jesus of Nazareth is the prophesied Messiah.¹⁸ Luke reverses the order of Jesus’ genealogy, extending it through King David, all the way back to Adam in order to emphasize both Jesus’ royal descent and his direct descent from God.¹⁹ The

¹⁶ *Life of Alfred*, 67.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Matt 1:1-17 NAB

¹⁹ Luke 3:23-38 NAB

genealogies of the West Saxon kings included not only biblical patriarchs from Shem to Adam, but also pagan kings and the pagan god *Woden*. Their lineage, therefore, unites biblical, Germanic, and Christian traditions. Interestingly, the Saxons believed themselves to have come from the ninth descendant of Adam, Scaef, the son of Noah (Asser calls him Seth; Genesis and Luke call him Shem.), who was born on the ark according to Saxon tradition – a foreshadowing of Alfred himself, who will establish the English navy.²⁰

Although Alfred's paternal Anglo-Saxon heritage is quite detailed, the genealogy of Alfred's mother is hazy. Her father's name is given, as well as the names of three other relatives, but not in the precise manner of Alfred's paternal lineage. Asser does say that Alfred's mother was descended from the Goths and Jutes. The inclusion of this bit of information possibly implies that Alfred holds some sway over the tribes of the Jutes and Goths, as well as the Saxons. Besides her Gothic and Jutic heritage, Asser notes that she is "a most religious woman, noble in character and noble by birth."²¹

Einhard's *Vita Karoli* lacks the traditional lengthy genealogy employed by the insular chroniclers. Why does Einhard deviate from this tradition when writing about Charlemagne, who was also a Germanic king, preferring instead to revert to Roman classical biography for inspiration? There are a number of reasons. Although Einhard is a descendant of the insular scholarly tradition coming out of Northumbria through Alcuin, his mentor, and also through Fulda, the monastery of the English missionary St. Boniface, he appears to be more familiar with classical Roman biographies than with Germanic chronicles. Einhard also had greater classical resources at his disposal because of his residency in the court of Charlemagne. The Carolingian

²⁰ *Life of Alfred*, 67. One wonders which biblical and Saxon sources Asser used for his genealogy of Alfred. He omits Jared, the fifth descendant of Adam, whose name is included in both Genesis and Luke, as well as Saxon genealogies. Asser also omits or changes the names of several Germanic predecessors.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

family had established a vast web of monasteries which supported the dynasty's political power through copying and distribution of manuscripts. The libraries in Charlemagne's empire were well-stocked with classical and religious manuscripts, and Einhard, due to his importance in the palace school, had access to them. Einhard says that he owes his great king "proper praise", and that requires "Ciceronian eloquence".²² He implies that his native Germanic language is not lofty enough to describe "the splendid and exceedingly brilliant deeds"²³ of Charlemagne, but that he must use Latin. Einhard ends his introduction with a paragraph which cites Cicero's great instructional guide to rhetoric, the *Tusculan Disputations*, and then bemoans his lack of writing skill in light of the recommendations of the *Disputations*. The reader is lead to believe that the biography which follows will be completely based on that classical guide. In truth, the influence of Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*, especially that of Augustus, is more obvious than the work of Cicero.

Some scholars maintain that Asser also imitated a classical source, Plutarch, when writing his biography of Alfred. This imitation is not as readily proven as Einhard's use of Suetonius. Asser's *Vita Ælfredi* lacks the direct citations that are so obvious in the *Vita Karoli*. In addition, Plutarch's *Lives* were written in Greek, and there is no evidence that Asser knew Greek. Truly, it would be a surprise if he did, for knowledge of Greek was all but lost in medieval Europe. In fact, Alfred chose to write his biography in Latin, probably in imitation of Einhard's *Vita Karoli*. (More will be said later concerning Asser's imitation of Einhard's *Vita*.) Many of the official sources during Alfred's reign were written in the vernacular, rather than Latin. By using Latin, Asser implies that Alfred is greater than any other Anglo-Saxon king, although Alfred himself did not learn Latin until he was 38 years old.

²² *Life of Charlemagne*, 16.

²³ *Ibid.*

Granted that Einhard was quite familiar with classical sources, does he also have motivation to omit the traditional lengthy genealogy of his king's family? Charlemagne did not come from a long line of kings. His ancestors were Mayors of the Palace under the Merovingians until his father's successful *coup d'état* ended their line. Because Charlemagne does not derive his claim to the throne from an exalted genealogy, Einhard probably considered it convenient to skip backwards many generations in order to place Charlemagne's claim to power with the ancients. After all, the Caesars claim to the *imperium* was not necessarily derived from their lineage, but from the strength of their army, "august" auguries, *fortuna*, and in some instances, from the force and charisma of their own person. Charlemagne's mother is not mentioned, nor the year she gave birth to him, possibly because Einhard does not wish to address that issue. Charlemagne's father, Pepin III, did not marry Bertrada until a year after his son's birth. Technically, Charlemagne was illegitimate and could not inherit the kingdom of the Franks from his father. Einhard must explain to his audience why Charlemagne is the rightful heir.

After the dedicatory remarks, Einhard begins the actual biography with a discussion of the Merovingian family rather than with the birth of Charlemagne. He must explain the legitimacy of Pepin III's *coup*, especially to his audience who would have memory of it. The Merovingians, according to Einhard, were a family which "had in fact been without any vitality for a long time and had demonstrated that there was nothing of any worth in it except the empty name of 'king.'"²⁴ Einhard's account of the Carolingians' successful, if unseemly, rise to power is reminiscent of Suetonius, who provides the rationale for many of his subjects' triumphant, but tainted, accession to the throne. Suetonius, however, bluntly states the charges leveled at his subject and does not always refute them. Einhard's Charlemagne is a more noble character than Suetonius' Caesars. After all, Charlemagne is a Christian king, not a pagan Caesar.

²⁴ *Life of Charlemagne*, 16.

Even while Suetonius is enumerating the charges brought by his subject's critics, he keeps the focus on the emperor and his family. Einhard inadvertently shifts the emphasis to the Merovingians by beginning the *Vita Karoli* with the phrase "*Gens Meroingorum*"²⁵ rather than "*Gens Karolingorum*." This beginning is meaningful, because Latin syntax mandates that the most important word of a sentence, or of a literary work, be placed as close to the beginning or end as is possible. An example of this syntactic rule is the opening line of Suetonius' aforementioned *Divus Augustus*, the biography on which Einhard relied heavily for his *Vita Karoli*. "*Gentem Octavium Velitris praecipuam olim fuisse multa declarant*." (There are many indications that the Octavian family was in days of old a distinguished one at Velitrae.)²⁶ The fact that Einhard mimics Suetonius' "*Gentem Octavium*" with his "*Gens Meroingorum, de qua Franci reges sibi creare solit erant*"²⁷ (The family of the Merovingians, from which the Franks used to make their kings),²⁸ emphasizes the fact that Charlemagne is not from that line. Surely this was an unintended error on Einhard's part. Asser follows the Latin syntactical rule more closely than Einhard, thereby highlighting Alfred as the central character of his biography. Asser, however, does weaken Alfred's centrality by listing the year before his name, which echoes the opening of a chronicle entry: "*Anno Dominicae Incarnationis DCCCXLIX natus est Aelfred, Angul-Saxonum rex*."²⁹ (In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 849 Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, was born.)³⁰

²⁵ *Life of Charlemagne*, 16.

²⁶ "Divus Augustus", In *Suetonius*, Loeb Classical Library, vol 1, edited by T. E. Page, et al., translated by J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913), 122-3.

²⁷ Oswald Holder-Egger, ed. *Einhardi Vita Karoli Magni. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Separatim Editi*. (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1947 reprint of 1911 edition), 2.

²⁸ *Life of Charlemagne*, 16.

²⁹ William Henry Stevenson, ed., *Asser's Life of King Alfred: Together with the Annals of St. Neots Erroneously Ascribed to Asser* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), 1. In spite of the English title, this book is the standard Latin edition of the *Life of Alfred*, the *De Rebus Gestis Aelfredi*, and from here on, it will be referred to as the *Vita Aelfredi* for simplicity's sake.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 67.

After explaining away the deposition of the Merovingian king, Childeric III, the king who did nothing but “sit on his throne with his hair long and his beard uncut, satisfied to hold the name of king only and pretending to rule,”³¹ Einhard must now account for the fact that Pepin III had once shared the office of Mayor of the Palace with his brother Carloman, governing together “summa cum...concordia.”³² “Then Carloman walked away from the oppressive chore of governing an earthly kingdom.”³³ In the Latin, these two contradictory facts occur in the same sentence, one after the other. If one is working with another “in the greatest harmony,” one does not usually find the job an “oppressive chore.” Was the brother forced to vacate his prestigious post? Einhard replies to this question before the reader has a chance to ask it. “It is not clear why his brother did this, but it seems that he was driven by a desire to lead a contemplative life.”³⁴ This statement increases the reader’s suspicion, rather than allaying it, because of the inclusion of the phrases “It is not clear” and “it seems.” When someone vacates an official post, he announces his resignation and his reason for leaving. Einhard gives the impression that Carloman was forcibly tonsured and imprisoned in a monastery, as was the Merovingian king Childeric III.

Einhard has addressed two issues concerning Charlemagne’s rightful accession to the throne. There is yet another matter to explain. Charlemagne and his brother Carloman were each given half of the kingdom upon the death of their father. Einhard reports that their relation was strained, “since many on Carloman’s side sought to drive the brothers apart.”³⁵ Some even tried to turn the brothers against each other in war, but “the threat of war was more suspected than real.”³⁶ When Carloman died unexpectedly at the age of twenty, his wife and two young sons

³¹ *Life of Charlemagne*, 16.

³² *Vita Karoli*, 4.

³³ *Life of Charlemagne*, 17

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

quickly took refuge in Italy. “For no reason at all, she spurned her husband’s brother and placed herself and her children under the protection of Desiderius, the king of the Lombards.”³⁷ Einhard quickly tries to lay the suspicions of his audience to rest. “In fact, Carloman had died from disease after ruling the kingdom for two years with his brother.”³⁸ Charlemagne was then made king with the agreement of all of the Franks. Although there is no reason to doubt that Carloman died of natural causes, his wife obviously feared her brother-in-law to such a degree that she fled the country with her two young sons, the heirs-apparent. In Charlemagne’s defense, he was an astute leader who realized the country would have receded into civil war during the lapse of strong leadership. The two young heirs, even with powerful nobles supporting them, could not have defended their grandfather Pepin’s newly-attained crown. Once again, the Carolingians knew how to avoid civil war.

A modern biographer would most likely open with the circumstances of his subject’s birth and childhood, but not the medieval biographer. Little is said of the youth of Alfred, and even less of Charlemagne’s, in the *Vitae*. In the case of Alfred, his age is sometimes listed at the time of important events in Wessex, but no information on his life accompanies the entry: “In the year of the Lord’s Incarnation 851, the third of King Alfred’s life, Ceorl, ealdorman of Devon, fought with the men of Devon against the Vikings,” and “In the year of the Lord’s Incarnation 853, the fifth of King Alfred’s life, Burgred, king of the Mercians, sent messengers to Aethelwulf, king of the West Saxons.”³⁹ The impression is that Asser does not know Alfred well enough to recount the events of his childhood. His knowledge of the king seems to come from an impersonal source, such as a chronicle, especially with the initial listing of the each year. In fact, Asser’s imitation is very close to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* up to the year 887, but Asser

³⁷ *Life of Charlemagne*, 18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Life of Alfred*, 68-9.

personalizes his biography “so that the man, and not just the Christian king who vanquished the paganistic heathen,” is presented.⁴⁰ The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, written in the Anglo-Saxon language, provides the skeleton for much of the *Vita Ælfredi*, which is written in Latin and clearly indicates that Asser was familiar with this work.

Einhard argues that he cannot provide information on Charlemagne’s youth because none exists. “I believe it would be improper to write about Charles’s birth and infancy, or even his childhood, since nothing about those periods of his life was ever written down and there is no one still alive who claims to have knowledge of these things.”⁴¹ That is difficult to believe, because Einhard has professed a close relationship with the king for many years. Certainly he would have heard stories of the king’s youth at court, and he would have had access to the *Codex Carolinus* -- that compilation of papal and Byzantine letters sent to Charlemagne, Pepin III and Charles Martel – and to the *Carolingian Chronicles* – the official court history which begins with the death of Charlemagne’s grandfather. Both of these sources present a major event in the life of the young Charlemagne – his anointing by the pope. “Pope Stephen confirmed Pepin as king by holy anointing and with him he anointed as kings his two sons, the Lords Charles and Carloman.”⁴² Einhard’s failure to include this important event cannot be attributed to ignorance, but rather to avoid the unseemly circumstances of Charlemagne’s birth and the aggressive take-over of his brother’s half of the kingdom. Yet, the anointing would have strengthened Einhard’s case for the legitimacy of Charlemagne’s reign.

Alfred’s anointing is included in Asser’s biography. While Charlemagne was five at the time of his papal anointing, Alfred was four. In 853, King Aethelwulf sent Alfred to Rome “in

⁴⁰ Paul Halsall, Medieval Sourcebook: *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/asser.html>.

⁴¹ *Life of Charlemagne*, 18.

⁴² *Carolingian Chronicles: Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's Histories*, trans., Bernhard Walter Scholz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), 40.

state, accompanied by a great number of nobles and commoners.”⁴³ During the visit, Pope Leo “anointed the child Alfred as king, ordaining him properly, received him as an adoptive son and confirmed him.”⁴⁴ A number of questions arrive concerning this passage. Did Alfred’s four elder brothers each make an official state visit to Rome in order to be anointed king and receive the sacrament of Confirmation? Why would Alfred be anointed king, or even king-in-waiting, considering that he has four older brothers? Was it the intention of Pope Leo or of King Aethelwulf that Alfred be anointed as king? Was Alfred’s Confirmation misrepresented as a kingly anointing? This section of the *Vita Ælfredi* closely follows the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which was written in its “received form” during the life of Alfred. The anointing of this young child should therefore be understood as merely a sign of his future coronation, just as heavenly stars wondrously appeared to herald the birth of child who would become a saint, according to historians, Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge.⁴⁵

Alfred made a second trip to Rome when he was seven, this time staying there for a year with his father, Æthelwulf, “because he loved him more than his other sons.”⁴⁶ This entry appears to be another example of literary foreshadowing, but it also calls to mind two favorite biblical figures in medieval literature, Joseph and David. Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob, although he was the youngest. “Israel [Jacob] loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age.”⁴⁷ Joseph himself had two dreams which predicted, or foreshadowed, his future kingship, just as Asser foreshadows Alfred’s kingship with the two trips to Rome. David was also a youngest son who unexpectedly rose to kingship. “Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed David in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon

⁴³ *Life of Alfred*, 69.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴⁷ Gen 37:3 NAB

David from that day forward.”⁴⁸ The anointing of Alfred by Pope Leo is not only portrayed as foreshadowing Alfred’s future kingship, but as giving the heir-apparent the powers and gifts of the Holy Spirit, one of which is wisdom. The anointing also plants Alfred firmly in the tradition of David, the archetypal ruler who was not only righteous (usually), but a great warrior and poet.

While Asser’s description of Alfred’s youth is sketchy, his portrait of the king’s beleaguered homeland is detailed. In the long, sad list of Viking incursions which form the initial part of Alfred’s biography, the future king’s age appears to have been simply added to the beginning of several chronicle entry: “*Anno Dominicae Incarnationis DCCCLI, nativitatis autem Aelfredi regis tertio Ceorl, Domnaniae comes, cum Domnaniis contra paganos pugnavit . . . et Christiani victoriam habuerunt.*”⁴⁹ (In the year of the Lord’s Incarnation 851, the third of King Alfred’s life, Ceorl, ealdorman of Devon, fought with the men of Devon against the Vikings . . . and the Christians had the victory.)⁵⁰ Even though Alfred is the subject of this biography, he seems to have been penciled in after the fact, but then, who could have known that he would one day be king? After all, he was the fifth and youngest son born to King Æthelwulf -- and he was sickly. Although Alfred’s age is but briefly noted in the list of national events, he is placed firmly in the midst of those great Christian ruler-warriors who had successfully repulsed the Vikings, or *pagani*, as Asser prefers to call them. The king, from the age of three, is portrayed as the inheritor of the Christian warrior tradition and his future lies in battling the heathens.

The traipsing annular history is briefly interrupted with a delightful passage containing those few incidents of Alfred’s youth which his biographer was able to ascertain. Asser skillfully digresses from the violent incursions of Viking ships to the domestic tranquility of Alfred’s youth by explaining how he has veered off course of this biography in his literary “ship.”

⁴⁸ 1 Sam 16:13 NAB

⁴⁹ *Vita Ælfredi*, 4.

⁵⁰ *Life of Alfred*, 68.

In the same year [866], a great Viking fleet arrived in Britain from the Danube, and spent the winter in the kingdom of the East Saxons (which in English is called East Anglia, where almost the whole army was supplied with horses. But (to speak in nautical terms) so that I should no longer veer off course – having entrusted the ship to waves and sails, and having sailed quite far away from the land – among such terrible wars and in year-by year reckoning, I think I should return to that which particularly inspired me to this work: in other words, I consider that some small account (as much as has come to my knowledge) of the infancy and boyhood of my esteemed lord Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, should briefly be inserted at this point.⁵¹

Asser's deft use of the "water" image to join such dissimilar subjects as murderous Viking raiders with the story of an innocent, young prince's life -- and to foreshadow Alfred's founding of the Wessex military fleet -- demonstrates an innate literary skill.

Asser's description of Alfred's idyllic youth is one of the most charming passages in the *Vita*. Alfred was "brought up in the royal court and nowhere else."⁵² He was the favorite of his parents and "greatly loved, more than all his brothers, by his father and mother – indeed, by everybody --"⁵³ because of his good looks, pleasant demeanor, and way of speaking. He loved to learn, and easily memorized English poems by ear before the age of twelve, since his parents and tutors neglected to teach him to read and write before then. Instead, he was allowed to spend his time hunting, and "no one else could approach him in skill and success in that activity, just as in all other gifts of God, as I have so often seen for myself."⁵⁴ Alfred's desire to learn was insatiable. One day, his mother showed Alfred and his brothers a book of English poetry, and offered to give it to the son who could learn it the most quickly. "Alfred spoke as follows in reply to his mother, forestalling his brothers (ahead in years, though not in ability): 'Will you really give this book to the one of us who can understand it the soonest and recite it to you?'"

⁵¹ *Life of Alfred*, 74.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

She replied, ‘Yes, I will.’”⁵⁵ Alfred took the book to his tutor, quickly learned the poems and won the book. He often complained that he did not have capable tutors as a child when he had plenty of leisure time, and that as an adult, when he had all the scholars at his disposal, he was occupied by royal affairs and beset by ill health. Asser does not insert this passage simply to inform his audience of the facts of Alfred’s youth, but to demonstrate the preeminence of Alfred among his brothers. Alfred is the most loved, the handsomest, the best hunter, and the most intelligent – in spite of the “shameful negligence of his parents and tutors.”⁵⁶ His rise to the throne of Wessex is preordained.

Einhard does not give much information about Charlemagne’s youth, for he is following the classical model. The Roman historian’s dictum was to tell the “public deeds of public people,” rather than the modern historian’s dictum, which is to tell the “private deeds of public people.” The classical model also gives Einhard a reason to omit details of Charlemagne’s illegitimate birth, and move on to the king’s “deeds inside and outside the kingdom, then his habits and interests, and finally his administration of the kingdom and his death.”⁵⁷ With this phrase, Einhard signals his intent to use the thematic approach of classical biography as a way to order his material, rather than the chronological or annalistic method of his age.

Charlemagne and Alfred united and expanded the territories left them by their fathers. For Charlemagne, the chief method of enlarging his kingdom was through the summer campaign, and he did this “*summa prudentia atque felicitate*”⁵⁸ for 47 years. “In those wars he so splendidly added to the Frankish kingdom, which he had received in great and strong condition

⁵⁵ *Life of Alfred*, 75.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Life of Charlemagne*, 1

⁵⁸ *Vita Karoli*, 17.

from his father Pepin, that he nearly doubled its size.”⁵⁹ He waged his first campaign in Aquitaine, finishing the conquest initiated there by his father Pepin, and continued on every season to subdue the Lombards, the Saxons (numerous times), the Bretons, the Bavarians, the Slavs, the Huns, the Bohemians, the Danes, and the Avars. The only peoples he failed to conquer were the Basques and Linonici.

Charlemagne’s fiercest enemies were the Saxons, upon whom he waged war for 33 consecutive years. Einhard charges the Saxons’ with constant *perfidia et mutabilitas* in response to Charlemagne’s *magnanimitas et constantia*. The Saxons were quick to make promises to the king when subdued, and on several occasions they “even promised to give up their worship of demons and freely submit themselves to Christianity.”⁶⁰ Yet, Einhard says, they were quick to break their promises, and Charlemagne “took vengeance on them for their treachery and exacted a suitable vengeance.”⁶¹ In the end, those who habitually rebelled were quashed and brought back under control. Then, he removed 10,000 men “who had been living with their wives and children along both sides of the Elbe River and he dispersed them here and there throughout Gaul and Germany in various small groups.”⁶² Thus the Saxon people gave up their devil worship, forsook their pagan rites, took up the Christian religion and joined with the Franks to become one people.

What peculiarities had marked the Saxon people as different from the various tribes already inhabiting Francia – especially the Eastern Franks who were their neighbors? Saxon facial features and body build were probably similar. The Saxons probably dressed the same and derived sustenance from the land in the same manner as their neighbors. The Saxons and the

⁵⁹ *Vita Karoli*, 25.

⁶⁰ *Life of Charlemagne*, 20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

Eastern Franks both spoke a Germanic language. The Eastern Franks, although united with the Western Franks politically, did not share a common language with them, for the Western Franks spoke an early form of French. One would assume – incorrectly -- that the Saxons, who shared a common border and common language with the Eastern Franks, would not be political enemies. “[O]ur borders and theirs ran together almost everywhere in open land, except for a few places,”⁶³ says Einhard, who was himself an eastern Frank. How then does one demarcate a border between “us” and “them” when geographical borders are muddled? For Einhard, it is simple. The “border” is religious, rather than geographical, or even linguistic.⁶⁴ The Saxons are *cultui daemonum dediti nostraeque religioni contrarii*,⁶⁵ that is “given over to the cult of demons and opposed to our religion.”⁶⁶ When the Saxons finally give up their “devil worship” and practice the Christian faith, they become *unus populus* with the Franks.⁶⁷ To insure that the Saxons do not again break their promise, Charlemagne relocates 10,000 of the most recalcitrant men with their families to various locations in his empire.

Through birth, marriage and military prowess, Alfred united a number of states of the “Heptarchy” of East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Mercia, Northumbria, Sussex, and Wessex. The rulers of these kingdoms recognized that their petty rivalries had hindered an effective response to the Vikings, resulting in the establishment of the feared Danelaw in the northeastern part of Britain. By the time Alfred battled the Danes, these smaller kingdoms of the Heptarchy located in the southwest corner of Britain had already recognized the need to unite under one powerful king. In 886, after Alfred had rebuilt the ravaged city of London, he turned it over to the Mercians. Later

⁶³ *Life of Charlemagne*, 20.

⁶⁴ Wolfgang Eggert and Barbara Pätzold, *Wir-Gefühl und Regnum Saxonum Bei Frühmittelalterlichen Geschichtsschreibern* (Wien: Hermann Böhlaus, 1984), 39.

⁶⁵ *Life of Charlemagne*, 20.

⁶⁶ My translation.

⁶⁷ *Vita Karoli*, 10; *Wir-Gefühl und Regnum Saxonum*, 73.

that year, there seems to have been a ceremony at which “[a]ll the Angles and Saxons – those who had formerly been scattered everywhere and were not in captivity with the Vikings – turned willingly to King Alfred and submitted themselves to his lordship.”⁶⁸ Thus, Asser found it fitting to call Alfred the king of the Anglo-Saxons, rather than king of Wessex.

The greatest problem of Alfred’s reign was how to fight the Danes, for they raided and fled, leaving destruction and terror in their wake. One of the Vikings’ most successful methods included the seizure of a defensible area or even a royal estate. After fortifying it, they would raid the villages of the surrounding area and retreat to the fort if threatened by a more powerful army. Although Alfred often triumphed over the Vikings, the strength of one Viking army in 877 was so superior to Alfred’s that he was forced to retreat to the marshes of Somerset in with a small band of nobles and thegns. He roamed the woody, marshy area in great distress, foraging “by frequent raids, either secretly or even openly, from the Vikings as well as from the Christians who had submitted to the Vikings’ authority.”⁶⁹ In effect, the Wessex countryside was ruled by the Vikings at this time, so the Christian population had no choice except to submit to the Vikings.

This was a desperate time for Alfred and for Wessex, but after building a fortification in Somerset at Athelney, he and his men were able to sally forth to fight the Vikings successfully. Using a “compact shield-wall” for protection, Alfred and his men attacked the Vikings at Edington, and then pursued the escaping army all the way back to its stronghold. The Anglo-Saxons boldly laid siege to the Viking stronghold. After fourteen days, “thoroughly terrified by hunger, cold and fear, and in the end by despair,”⁷⁰ the Vikings sought peace, giving Alfred as many hostages as he wanted and promising to leave his kingdom. In addition, their king,

⁶⁸ *Life of Alfred*, 98.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

Guthrum, promised to be baptized with Alfred as his sponsor. Alfred received Guthrum as his adoptive son and “freely bestowed many excellent treasures on him and all his men.” Guthrum and his men kept their promise and departed Somerset. Alfred’s warm, generous response to his conquered enemy is surprising, considering the situation only two weeks previous, when he had “destroyed the Vikings with great slaughter, and pursued those who fled as far as the stronghold, hacking them down.”⁷¹ Asser portrays Alfred as the ideal Christian king, who attacks the enemy, brings peace to the kingdom, and then accepts the conquered enemy as a fellow Christian king.

Several Carolingian chronicles record an event in the life of Charlemagne – his baptism of the Saxon king, Widukind -- which parallels Alfred’s baptism of Guthrum. Einhard, however, does not mention this event, although he would have known about it from his life at court and from the *Royal Frankish Annals*,⁷² which he used extensively for the *Vita Karoli*. Why does he not mention this event which seems to exalt the memory of Charlemagne? After all, Widikund later becomes a great missionary to his race, pursuing one of Charlemagne’s long sought after goals – the Christianization of the Saxons. One of the reasons is stated by Einhard in his Preface to the *Vita*, where he decries those historians who “insert the famous deeds of other people”⁷³ into their work. Although it is a bit unclear to which “other people” Einhard is referring, one may presume them to be those who are Charlemagne’s contemporaries – either friend or foe. With this phrase, Einhard signals his intent to keep the focus on his subject, “the greatest of all the men in his time.”⁷⁴ There is, however, another reason for Einhard’s silence concerning the baptism of Widukund. To enter upon that subject would revive the memory of Charlemagne’s merciless decapitation of 4500 Saxon prisoners three years earlier, which had occurred

⁷¹ *Life of Alfred*, 84.

⁷² *Royal Frankish Annals*, 62-3.

⁷³ *Life of Charlemagne*, 15

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

immediately after the Saxon defeat at the confluence of the Aller and Weser Rivers. Widukind, at that time still a Saxon king, escaped to Nordmannia. The *Royal Frankish Annals* report this massacre,⁷⁵ but Einhard does not consider this account a fitting record for the memory of Charlemagne, “this most excellent king.”⁷⁶ Charlemagne bestows no “excellent treasure” on Widukind, nor does Einhard give the Saxon king any recognition.

Alfred’s pathetic retreat to Athelney, the two-acre island in the midst of the marshes of Somerset, provided the king with time to analyze his military situation, and impressed upon him the need to reorganize his military, according to historian Richard Abels.⁷⁷ Alfred had an inventive mind, and realized that if he couldn’t travel around fast enough to meet the Viking assaults, then he must establish standing installations. He created a system of fortified centers, or *burhs*, across all of Wessex, which he manned with half of his army, or *fyrð*, so that no inhabitant was more than 20 miles away from safety. The standing armies in these fortified centers protected the countryside until Alfred could arrive with the other half of the army. The restructuring of the army and the establishment of the burghal system proved a successful antidote to the Vikings’ chief advantages: surprise and mobility. These *burhs* are evidence of the growing centralization of Wessex around the powerful person and court of Alfred. What happened to those nobles who refused to obey Alfred’s command to fortify and garrison their lands? Asser says they quickly repented after “having lost fathers, spouses, children, servants, slaves, handmaidens, the fruits of their labors and all their possessions.”⁷⁸ These fortified centers would become Alfred’s greatest monument, for they not only preserved his kingdom against Viking raids, but in the following centuries they developed into important commercial and

⁷⁵ *Royal Frankish Annals*, 61.

⁷⁶ *Life of Charlemagne*, 15.

⁷⁷ Richard Abels, “Military Reforms: The Burghal System” in Chapter 6, “The Defence of the Realm” in *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Longman, 1998)195-207.

⁷⁸ *Life of Alfred*, 102.

administrative centers. Unlike Alfred, Charlemagne's sons and grandsons reigning on the continent at that time failed to mount a sufficiently unified defense against the Viking raids, leading to a decentralization of power and the rise of local rulers there.

Where did Alfred learn how to defend and administrate his kingdom through a system of *burhs*? Richard Abels suggests two sources. The first influence on Alfred was the remains of ancient Roman forts of the "Saxon Shore."⁷⁹ Alfred restored and fortified some of these abandoned Roman forts, and "constructed [others] where previously there were none."⁸⁰ According to the tenth-century document, the *Burghal Hidage*, there were thirty-three of these fortified centers. The second source was Solomon. Asser compares Alfred to Solomon in that he "sought wisdom from God."⁸¹ Alfred also arranges his household as Solomon, so that his followers are divided into three groups. One group served at court for a month, while the other two are at home, so that "the royal household was systematically managed at all times by means of three shifts."⁸² Alfred extended the arrangement of his household to his army -- except that he divided it into only two parts -- so that one-half of his forces were actively serving in the army, while the other half were laboring at home.

The example of Solomon was also the source of Alfred's great generosity. The revenue from the taxation he divided into two portions: the "first part reserved for secular affairs," and the "second part . . . marked out for God."⁸³ Alfred subdivided the secular revenue into thirds to provide for his courtiers, craftsmen, and the foreigners who came to him -- whether asking for money or not. The religious revenue was divided into fourths, in order to provide for the poor, Alfred's two monasteries, his school, and for other monasteries, churches and servants of God at

⁷⁹ Abels, "Military Reforms," in *Alfred the Great*, 201.

⁸⁰ *Life of Alfred*, 101.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 106.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 106-7.

home and abroad. Rulers from other parts of the isle sought out Alfred, and according to Asser, each was given what he desired, whether “worldly power,” “increase of wealth,” or “to be on more intimate terms with the king.” Asser remarks that Alfred bestowed these gifts in a “praiseworthy manner,” for “God loveth a cheerful giver.”⁸⁴ Asser himself did not go away empty-handed, but received four monasteries with all the goods that were in them, an amount of incense equal to a stout man, a silk cloak and daily riches. In this way, Alfred provided for the three divisions of his society: those who pray, those who fight, and those who labor.

Not content to give merely from his goods, he “promised to render to God...one half of his mental and bodily effort both day and night.”⁸⁵ Alfred invented a method by which he could accurately gauge his time spent in prayer -- even at night or on rainy days. He ordered his chaplains to make candles that each weighed the equivalent of 72 pennies, which he placed in a lamp specially designed to exclude gusts of wind. Each candle would burn for four hours, and six of them would accurately mark twenty-four hours. “When these arrangements had been properly carried out in every respect, he was eager to observe the half of his service, just as he had promised to God.”⁸⁶ Thus, Alfred rendered not only half of his goods to God, but also half of himself.

Charlemagne, too, was a great gift giver, as Einhard describes in Chapters 16 and 27 of the *Vita*. The first of the two chapters concerns the king’s *munificencia* to other rulers, while the second concerns his *liberalitas* to the poor. There was a reason for Charlemagne’s gift-giving. Einhard reports *munificencia* as the second of four ways the king extended the power and glory of his kingdom: 1) by means of war “he nearly doubled its size,”⁸⁷ 2) by means of gift-giving

⁸⁴ *Life of Alfred*, 106-7.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 107-8.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁸⁷ *Life of Charlemagne*, 25.

“he also increased the glory of his kingdom by winning over kings and peoples through friendly means,”⁸⁸ 3) by means of building projects he improved and beautified the kingdom,⁸⁹ and 4) by means of ship-building and fortifications he protected the kingdom from the Northmen and Moors.⁹⁰

One of the most interesting instances of gift-giving involves Harun-al-Raschid, the most famous Abbasid Caliph who ruled from Bagdad, and “who held almost all the east except India.”⁹¹ Although Einhard is vague as to the gifts Charlemagne gave Raschid, he does list the many gifts bestowed on Charlemagne by the Persian ruler: control over the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, “robes, spices and other riches of the east,” and an elephant that the king had specifically requested.⁹² Why would Einhard not list the gifts his king gave to the Persian king, when the chapter purportedly concerns Charlemagne’s generosity rather than Raschid’s? The real purpose of the chapter, rather than Einhard’s stated purpose, is to demonstrate Charlemagne’s primacy among all world leaders, rather than his great munificence. Einhard records that Raschid “counted the favor of his friendship as more valuable than that of all the kings and rulers in the world and thought that only Charles was worthy of receiving his honor and generosity.”⁹³

Einhard portrays Charlemagne as even more powerful than the emperors of the Eastern Empire – Nicephorus I, Michael I, Irene and Leo V. These rulers “voluntarily [sought] friendship and an alliance with Charles.”⁹⁴ When he took the title of emperor, Einhard says that “it seemed

⁸⁸ *Life of Charlemagne*, 25.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

to them that he might want to seize their empire.”⁹⁵ How did Charlemagne ameliorate the fears of the emperors? Did he send them rich treasure as a sign of his friendship and good will? Not at all. Rather, he struck a *foedus firmissimum* – a very firm treaty -- with them, “so that no potential source of trouble of any sort might remain between them.”⁹⁶ This sounds like a veiled threat, rather than *munificencia* or *amicitia*. Einhard closes the chapter, not with other instances of Charlemagne’s gift-giving, but with the Greek saying which stands as a warning to the world, “Have a Frank as a friend, never as a neighbor.”⁹⁷

Although the Viking threat was not yet as great in the time of Charlemagne, he constructed a fleet of ships which patrolled along the mouths of the rivers which flowed to the North Sea. “Since the Northmen were constantly raiding and ravaging the coasts of Gaul and Germany, fortifications and guards were set up at all the ports and at the mouth of every river that seemed large enough to accommodate ships.”⁹⁸ Charlemagne took the same precautions in the south, even along the coast of Italy up to Rome, to prevent plundering by the Moors.

Alfred, too, built a fleet of ships in order to battle the Vikings before they made landfall. He realized that the success of the Vikings was due to their ships, therefore, “King Alfred commanded boats and galleys, i.e. long ships, to be built throughout the Kingdom, in order to offer battle by sea to the enemy as they were coming. On board these ships he placed seamen, and appointed them to watch the seas.”⁹⁹ Alfred successfully engaged in naval warfare in 875 and 882, probably using ships modeled after the Viking boats he had captured earlier. In Alfred’s

⁹⁵ *Life of Charlemagne*, 26.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27

⁹⁹ J. A. Giles, ed., *Life of Alfred* (London, 1847) <http://omacl.org/KingAlfred/part1.html>.

Stevenson’s Latin edition includes this quotation in Chapter 51. Simon and Keynes’ English translation, however, does not, for they believe that the Cotton manuscript did not have Chapter 51. Stevenson’s chapter is thought to be a reconstruction from annals of the period. Furthermore, they posit that Chapter 51 had been inadvertently omitted from the copy of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* which Asser was using. (Simon and Keynes, p. 247)

later years, he sought Frisian help in designing his ships. These new ships were much bigger – having as many as thirty oars on a side – with the result that the enemy Vikings, too, had to build bigger ships in Scandinavia.¹⁰⁰ Naval combat in the days of Alfred and Charlemagne would have consisted initially of a barrage of arrows as the enemy ships approached one another, and then hand-to-hand combat once sailors had boarded the enemy’s ship. Fighting was the same on boat as it was on land, because seamen did not yet try to sink the other’s boats as a strategic maneuver.¹⁰¹

Where did Charlemagne and Alfred learn military science, and what was the ultimate goal of their military maneuvers? Charlemagne had inherited a potent fighting machine from his father, Pepin III, and his grandfather, Charles the “Hammer.” As Mayors of the Palace under the Merovingian kings, they were also in command of the army. Their fighting machine had proved itself so awe-inspiring that no one seems to have questioned when Pepin usurped the throne of the Merovingian king, Childeric III. After all, the Frankish population would have still remembered how Pepin’s father, Charles Martel, had defeated the Moors in the battle at Tours in 732 – a critical turning point for Christendom and for Charles Martel’s family. For the Frankish tribes – especially in the duchy of Aquitaine -- this battle impressed upon them the fact that “the Hammer” was their best defense against the Moors. Therefore, when Charlemagne’s father sends him into Aquitaine to fight his first battle against the local duke, he meets little resistance, for the inhabitants view the Carolingians as the only force standing between them and the Arabs. Einhard, however, reports the battle as quite difficult, and states that Charlemagne fought “until he had by sheer determination and persistence completely achieved the goal he had set for

¹⁰⁰ T. K. Derry and M. G. Blakeway, *The Making of Britain: life and work to the close of the Middle Ages*. London: Murray, 1968.

¹⁰¹ Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 172.

himself.”¹⁰² Einhard indicated that Charlemagne’s military goals were primarily personal and that he achieved them through his own effort and talent from the beginning, not necessarily through the will of God.

Alfred’s first campaign is entirely different from Charlemagne’s. Alfred and his brother strike out on campaign – not to conquer any new territory – but to support their forces at Reading, a royal estate. They lose. Filled with shame, they plan an attack against the Vikings four days later. Alfred and his brother split their army in two, in order to better meet the impending two-pronged attack of the Vikings. Alfred and his forces appear on the battlefield much earlier than his brother, King Æthelred. The king is “still in his tent at prayer, hearing Mass and declaring firmly that he will not leave that place alive before the priest had finished Mass, and that he would not forsake divine service for that of men.”¹⁰³ Asser, rather than castigating Æthelred for cowardice or laziness, praises him. “The faith of the Christian king counted for much with the Lord, as shall be shown more clearly in what follows.”¹⁰⁴ The Christians won “by divine judgement” [*sic*]¹⁰⁵ in spite of the fact that the Vikings had seized the higher position early on – probably while Alfred was waiting for Æthelred to appear on the battlefield. The image of Æthelred praying in his tent while Alfred battles the enemy is reminiscent of how Moses prayed while Joshua battled the Amalekites. While Moses kept his arms up in prayer, the Israelites were winning, but when his arms grew tired, the Amalekites gained ground.¹⁰⁶ Asser is careful to give God the credit for the victories between the *Christiani* and *pagani*. Simply stated, these battles are good versus evil for Asser and Alfred. Therefore, Alfred does not attempt to subdue new tribes and bring them into his kingdom, he merely protects his own.

¹⁰² *Life of Charlemagne*, 19.

¹⁰³ *Life of Alfred*, 79.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 80

¹⁰⁶ Ex 17: 8-16 NAB

Charlemagne, on the other hand, is quick to add new lands to his kingdom, especially those of strategic importance. After his first campaign in Aquitaine, he accomplished the same goals at Valencia – repelling the Arab forces and establishing his own governance in the area. The preservation of strategically valuable Provence kept open the communication and trade route which extended from the Mediterranean Sea, north up through the Rhône Valley.¹⁰⁷ Once again, the population would have recognized Charlemagne as their savior, rather than conqueror. The Franks would have agreed with Einhard, that Charlemagne and his predecessors are justly on the throne, due to their military strength, which keeps the peace in the kingdom and allows them to carry on their daily lives.

Charlemagne does not stop conquering new lands, however, which eventually leads to the greatest problem of his empire. How does an emperor unify and protect his far-flung empire? Charlemagne was able to centralize the administration of his kingdom around his own charismatic person, and subdue uprisings along the frontiers with yearly campaigns. The empire was divided into counties, whose secular affairs were governed by counts, and whose religious affairs were governed by bishops and abbots. Charlemagne imposed his will over all by means of *missi dominici* – messengers of the master – who were sent with royal letters to convey his wishes to local officials and to oversee their administration. He left, however, no framework for the governance of the kingdom upon his death. The unity of the empire depended upon his person, and when the physical body of Charlemagne died, the kingdom soon fell into disarray. The organization of medieval states was still intensely personal in the ninth century. It was not until the twelfth century that kingship was rendered more impersonal with the advent of formal law making.

¹⁰⁷ Roger Collins, *Charlemagne* (Toronto, University of Toronto, 1998), 30.

Although the modern reader wearies of the constant warring in the *Life of Alfred* and the *Life of Charlemagne*, Asser and Einhard's audiences would have enjoyed reading or hearing the many conquests of their king, much as we revel in the victory of our military troops or even of our favorite sports teams. In addition, both nobles and commoners would have recognized that their personal safety depended on the *potestas* of the king to quash civil war within the country and to conquer enemies without. The court of Alfred and Charlemagne had more reason to celebrate war than the modern reader, for the courtiers themselves and their kin were the military leaders responsible for those victories. Many of their company had died in these battles, but hearing the triumphal list of battles won would have assuaged their personal grief and given meaning to their loss.

Thus, not only did the battles themselves help to protect, unify and define the kingdom of Wessex and of the Franks, but the recording of those battles and other events by court scholars established a pride in one's identity and one's homeland. Historians Wolfgang Eggert and Barbara Pätzold call this sense of identity *Wir-gefühl*, and the sense of homeland *Wir-Stellen*. Eggert and Pätzold maintain that *Wir-gefühl* and *Wir-Stellen* are formed through the recording of the range of experiences – religious, political and social – of the ruling class.¹⁰⁸ Charlemagne and Alfred were quick to discover the value of this identity-forming process, realizing that victory on the battlefield was insufficient for achieving *e pluribus Unum*. The two kings labored diligently to preserve the experiences of their court through the written word. In both of their lands at the time, however, there was a dearth of scholars able to compose historical texts or even the daily letters and administrative documents required of a large and powerful court. Therefore, each of the kings established a palace school and imported scholars to further the writing of texts and to educate the members of the court. Asser and Einhard were brought to their respective courts in

¹⁰⁸ *Wir-gefühl und Regnum Saxonum*, 8.

this capacity, and each must have conceived the idea of writing a biography in order to fulfill that which each king valued so highly – the written record.

The kings' *sapientia*

The bi-partite nature of both biographies has been mentioned previously. The first part of each biography describes the public life of the king, especially his *constantia* or *fortitudo* in battle; the second part, the king's personal or domestic life, especially his *sapientia* or achievements as a philosopher-king.¹⁰⁹ The way in which Einhard and Asser make the transition from public to domestic life is worthy of note because both passages are influenced by other authors. Einhard's transition shows the influence of Suetonius, yet is very much his own style. "Now I should begin at this point to speak of the character of his mind, his supreme steadfastness in good times and bad, and those other things that belong to his spiritual and domestic life."¹¹⁰

Asser employs the nautical metaphor again to begin his transitional chapter: "in order that I may return to that point from which I digressed – and so that I shall not be compelled to sail past the haven of my desired rest as a result of my protracted voyage . . ."¹¹¹ He continues with a paraphrase of a passage from Einhard's Preface to the *Vita Karoli*:

"I shall . . . undertake, with God's guidance, to say something (albeit succinctly and briefly, as far as my knowledge permits) about the life, behaviour, equitable character and, without exaggeration, the accomplishments of my lord Alfred, king of the Anglo-Saxons, after the time when he married his excellent wife from the stock of noble Mercians – briefly I say, so that I do not offend with my protracted narrative the minds of those who are scornful of information of any sort."¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Hill, "Abstract" to "The Crowning of Alfred and the Topos of *Sapientia et Fortitudo* in Asser's *Life of Alfred*" in *Neophilologus*, vol 86, #3/July 2002 (Springer Netherlands), 471-476. Springer Link Date: Saturday, October 30, 2004.

¹¹⁰ *Life of Charlemagne*, 27.

¹¹¹ *Life of Alfred*, 88.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

This passage proves that Asser had knowledge of the *Vita Karoli* – at least of the Preface -- and that the *Vita Karoli* did influence the *Vita Ælfredi* to some extent. Asser’s structure of his *Vita*, however, is more like two other early-ninth century biographies, Thegan’s and the Astronomer’s *Vitae* of Louis the Pious, which combine elements of annular history with biographical information.¹¹³

One of the chief characteristics of the *Vitae* of Charlemagne and Alfred is the close relationship each ruler maintained with the Church throughout his life. Each monarch viewed his kingship as ordained, in some manner, by God, and each tried to live up to that ordination according to his understanding of his political-religious role. Charlemagne’s family had established a close personal and political relationship with Pope Stephen II, when Rome was threatened by Lombard expansion. In return for Carolingian military aid, Pope Stephen II deposed the Merovingian king Childeric, and shortly afterwards, the new Pope Zacharias established Pepin as king. Pope Hadrian was so dear to Charlemagne, that when he died, the king “cried so much that it was as if he had lost a brother or a deeply loved son, for he had thought of him as a special friend.”¹¹⁴ Charlemagne had visited both Hadrian and his successor Leo in Rome, but the last visit was in response to a particularly heinous crime against the pope. The Roman populace had put out Leo’s eyes and cut out his tongue. Charlemagne hurried to Rome and restored the pope to his throne and order to the Church.

While spending the winter in Rome, Charlemagne attended Mass on Christmas Day. During the Mass, Pope Leo unexpectedly crowned him “emperor and augustus,” titles “which at first he disliked so much that he stated that, if he had known in advance of the pope’s plan, he

¹¹³ Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 13-4.

¹¹⁴ *Life of Charlemagne*, 29.

would not have entered into the church that day, even though it was a great feast day.”¹¹⁵

Whether Charlemagne was professing false humility, or was truly unhappy with the titles, is unknown. Einhard, however, never calls him emperor, only king, and records that Charlemagne “wore the customary attire of the Franks,” and “rejected foreign clothes, however gorgeous they might be.” If Charlemagne rejected fancy foreign clothes, it is possible that he also rejected fancy foreign titles, too, preferring simply, *Rex francorum*, as Einhard calls him.

Alfred was not as closely affiliated with the pope as Charlemagne, but then he was not geographically close to Rome. In addition, Alfred’s kingdom was under such attack that he couldn’t have left to help the pope, for he had his own battles to fight. Alfred’s relationship with the pope seems to have been spiritual, rather than political. He was anointed by the pope when he was four, and he spent a year in Rome visiting the pope with his father when he was six. Later, when Alfred was king, Pope Marinus sent him many gifts, chief among them a large piece of the venerable Cross.¹¹⁶

Although both kings strove for personal piety, one strove more diligently. Alfred listened to the divine office and Mass daily in Latin, as well as to Scripture in his own tongue.¹¹⁷ He suffered greatly from several illnesses, all the while carrying on with his kingly duties.¹¹⁸ According to Asser, Alfred found it difficult to reign in his carnal desires, so he asked God for an illness that would keep him chaste. After his wedding, this first illness left him, and a new, sudden severe pain beset him which lasted more than twenty years, until he prayed for it to leave him.¹¹⁹ In contrast, Charlemagne appears unconcerned about the Commandments, especially the Sixth. Einhard records that the king took an unnamed wife for a year, but then sent her away and

¹¹⁵ *Life of Charlemagne*, 33.

¹¹⁶ *Life of Alfred*, 88.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 88-90.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

married Hildegard, who bore him three sons and three daughters. At some point he married Fastrada, who bore him two daughters, and also took an unnamed concubine who bore him one daughter. After Fastrada died, he married Liutgard, who bore no children. After she died, he took four concubines, who bore him two boys and three girls.¹²⁰ Einhard insists, though, that Charlemagne followed the Christian religion “[w]ith great piety and devotion,” and “[f]or this reason he constructed a church of stunning beauty at Aachen and adorned it with gold and silver, with lamps, grillwork, and doors made of solid bronze.”¹²¹ Charlemagne also made pilgrimages to his favorite church, St. Peter the Apostle, in Rome.¹²² The Frankish king strove for piety, but seems to have defined the word differently than the English king.

Both Alfred and Charlemagne gave money for the upkeep of churches, and each monarch established monasteries. Charlemagne, however, came to the throne already heir to the vast web of monasteries which formed his family’s power base. These monasteries were so wealthy and such powerful economic and political centers in the surrounding countryside, that they allowed the Carolingians to depose the Merovingians with no apparent opposition.

Pepin was elected king according to the custom of the Franks, anointed by the hand of Archbishop Boniface of saintly memory, and raised to the kingship by the Franks in the city of Soissons. But Childerich, who was falsely called king, was tonsured and sent into a monastery.¹²³

There is no record of a battle. In the space of two sentences, one royal family is sent packing, and the other inhabits the court. Was the transfer of power as smooth as the *Royal Frankish Annals* and other sources claim? The sources of our information for that time period were controlled by the Carolingians themselves. Their monasteries busily wrote, stored and copied their own records, while Merovingian writing was at an all-time low. Often, the problem was not so much

¹²⁰ *Life of Charlemagne*, 28.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹²³ *Royal Frankish Annals*, 39.

that blatantly false information was reported, but that an event or person was given a false significance, or that an event or person was eliminated from the historical sources. The Merovingian family may not have been as impotent in the eighth century as the Carolingian sources record, but the “long-haired kings” certainly failed to understand the depth of Carolingian power residing in the monasteries. Even the *Vita Karoli*, which Einhard contends is but a tribute to his great king, is a literary work which furthers the “party line.” As historian K. Brunner emphasizes, Einhard “was not an old, retiring man exiled in the cloister, who wrote the *Vita*, rather, an engaged member of a distinguished group of Frankish high nobility who has again rendered the political prominence of his peers.”¹²⁴

Alfred did not inherit the vast number of wealthy monasteries as Charlemagne, but the fact that he had the time and resources to support existing monasteries and build new ones is amazing. Alfred, like Charlemagne, strove to reform the Church, and society in general, by means of scholarship. His monasteries, too, were in the forefront of this reform movement -- recording the historical importance of the realm, storing the administrative and historical records of the court, and copying the ancient manuscripts, which gave new impetus to the scholarly reforms. The books that resulted from these tasks added to the wealth and prestige of the kingdom. One of the most important histories written in the monasteries of Alfred, and used extensively for Asser’s *Vita Ælfredi*, is *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. G. N. Garmonsway provides an excellent summary of the process by which the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* came into being.

At all events it is clear that in the time of Alfred a chronicle extending to the year 891 was made, and . . . copies were circulated to various centres of learning, where they were maintained and kept up to date from

¹²⁴ K. Brunner, *Oppositionelle Gruppen im Karolingerreich* (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung, Bd 25: (Wien, Köln, Graz, 1979), 94, quoted in Eggert and Pätzold, *Wir-Gefühl und Regnum Saxonum*, 39. (My translation) „Nicht ein resignierender alter Mann im klösterlichen Exil hat...die Vita geschrieben, sondern ein engagiertes Mitglied einer bedeutenden Gruppe des fränkischen Hochadels hätte die politischen Vorstellung seiner Standesgenossen wiedergegeben.“

official bulletins of national events which were subsequently issued, as well as by the addition of many items of purely provincial and local interest. From these at times other copies were made as requested, and the surviving manuscripts of the *Chronicles* are, for the most part, transcripts of such copies; they have, as [Charles] Plummer has shown, complex and intricate textual histories.¹²⁵

This process demonstrates the vital work of the royal monasteries, and the way in which many other court histories came into existence.

Alfred and Charlemagne were committed to furthering scholarship in their kingdom, but they also possessed a personal passion for learning. Their longing for knowledge is heart-rending. Asser calls Alfred's thirst for knowledge an "insatiable desire"¹²⁶ and the "royal greed."¹²⁷ He reports that his king suffered no greater distress, not even from the Viking wars or from his illnesses, than from his lack of learning.¹²⁸

[Alfred] used to affirm, with repeated complaints and sighing from the depths of his heart, that among all the difficulties and burdens of his present life this had become the greatest: namely, that at the time when he was of the right age and had the leisure and the capacity for learning, he did not have the teacher.¹²⁹

Charlemagne, too, was dedicated to learning, as is attested to by the fact that Einhard lists the subjects the king studied and his teachers. The biographer also recounts that Charlemagne "attempted to learn how to write and, for this reason, used to place wax-tablets and notebooks under the pillows on his bed, so that, if he had any free time, he might accustom his hand to forming letters."¹³⁰ His efforts, however, came to little success. Whether Alfred learned to write, is doubtful, also. Both kings did succeed in the vital task of urging the writing down of their own language. Charlemagne ordered that "the very old German poems, in which the deeds and wars

¹²⁵ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Trans. G. N. Garmonsway (London: J. M. Dent, 1953), xxxi-ii.

¹²⁶ *Life of Alfred*, 76.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 75-6.

¹³⁰ *Life of Charlemagne*, 32.

of ancient kings were sung,” be written down, and he began a grammar “of his native language.”¹³¹ Alfred was a great proponent of the use of English as a scholarly and administrative language, as well as Latin. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* mentioned earlier was written in English. Alfred’s law codes must have been in English, because Asser reports that he recommended judges have someone “read out books in English to [them] by day and night,”¹³² so that they could learn to read, as he had commanded. Asser also says that Alfred commanded the bishop of Worcester to translate “for the first time the *Dialogues* between Gregory and his disciple Peter from Latin into the English language.”¹³³ Alfred established a school for “nobly born children,” and in this school “books in both languages – that is to say, in Latin and English – carefully read.”¹³⁴

Charlemagne and Alfred wanted the best education for their children, so they too, were included in the palace schools. Einhard states that Charlemagne “believed that his children, both his daughters and his sons, should be educated, first in the liberal arts, which he himself had studied.”¹³⁵ Alfred also educated his youngest daughter, who “was given over to training in reading and writing under the attentive care of teachers, in company with all the nobly born children.”¹³⁶ It is surprising, that in the ninth century, both kings would include their daughters in the school room. This was highly uncommon, but demonstrates the monarchs’ devotion to learning and to their children.

The two biographers differ dramatically in the description of the physical appearance of their subjects. Asser tells the reader nothing of how Alfred looked as an adult. This omission is

¹³¹ *Life of Charlemagne*, 34.

¹³² *Life of Alfred*, 110.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹³⁵ *Life of Charlemagne*, 28.

¹³⁶ *Life of Alfred*, 90.

in keeping with the *topos* of sanctity in the *Vitae Sanctorum*, which deliberately omits any reference to physical appearance, in order that the sanctity of the soul may shine through the earthly body. Asser does mention that as a boy, Alfred was “more comely than his brothers, and more pleasing in manner, speech and behavior,”¹³⁷ and always such an excellent huntsman, that “no one else could approach him in skill and success in that activity.”¹³⁸ From the slight biographical evidence, one may presume that the adult Alfred was handsome, personable, well-spoken, and athletic, in spite of his illnesses.

The physical description of Charlemagne is probably the most famous section of Einhard’s biography, for it is so vivid that one would recognize the man instantly if he strode into the room. The king was tall, his forehead round, his eyes “large and full of life,” his nose long, his hair “grey and handsome,” his face “attractive and cheerful.” His physical presence was always “commanding and dignified.” Although his neck was too short and his stomach stuck out, “the symmetry of the other parts of his body hid these flaws.” When he walked, his stride was strong and the movement of his body was powerful. His voice was distinct but not loud. His body was healthy until four years before his death.¹³⁹

Historians have long recognized the influence of Suetonius on Einhard’s description of Charlemagne, although the biographer himself does not acknowledge his debt. Some have praised him for his skillful and selective use of the great classical biographer, others have criticized him for the same. Matthew Innes recognizes that “Einhard’s Charlemagne becomes a mosaic of Suetonian tags,”¹⁴⁰ but maintains that Einhard’s audience would have identified his debt to Suetonius, as well as to Apollinaris Sidonius and

¹³⁷ *Life of Alfred*, 74.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹³⁹ *Life of Charlemagne*, 30.

¹⁴⁰ Matthew Innes, “The Classical Tradition in the Carolingian Renaissance: Ninth-Century Encounters with Suetonius,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol 3, no 3, Winter 1997, 269.

Sulpicious Severus. Innes wonders if the audience was “supposed to recognize these tags and identify the game at which Einhard was playing.”¹⁴¹ Louis Halphen is one of the historians who have criticized Einhard for his borrowing of Suetonius. Halphen faults Einhard for choosing to follow “the plan of all the biographies of Suetonius – a plan in which the monotony is underlined by the lack of variety of expression and by the dryness of exposition.”¹⁴² Einhard not only follows the monotonous design of Suetonius’ biographies, Halphen complains, “moreover, he has taken over the expressions familiar to the Latin historian with such servility that his *Life of Charlemagne* often appears more like the thirteenth ‘life of the Caesar,’ rather than an original work.”¹⁴³

Charlemagne’s personality was marked by strong likes and dislikes. He relished roasted meat, but disliked boiled meat, and was moderate in eating and drinking. He exercised by riding, hunting and swimming often. Aachen was chosen as the site of his winter palace, because he loved to swim in the natural hot springs there with his sons and nobles. Sometimes there were more than a hundred people swimming together. The king dressed as a Frank and disliked foreign dress.¹⁴⁴

Charlemagne’s commanding physique and the charisma of his spirit seem to have been the key to his ability to rule such a large kingdom. Certainly, he possessed prosperous monasteries and a mighty army, but they merely supported the vision of reform and conquest he had for the kingdom. That the real power of the kingdom resided within the person of Charlemagne would be born out during the reign of son Louis. One wonders if Louis would have

¹⁴¹ Innes, “Classical Tradition,” 270.

¹⁴² Louis Halphen, *Éginhard : Vie de Charlemagne* (Paris: Société d’Édition «Les Belles Lettres»), xi. My translation of the following : « . . . le plan de toutes les biographies de Suétone – plan dont la monotonie est encore soulignée par le manque de variété de l’expression et la sécheresse de l’exposé. »

¹⁴³ Ibid. My translation of the following: « . . . il a repris en outre, . . . avec une telle servilité les expressions familières à l’historien latin que sa *Vie de Charlemagne* apparaît souvent plus comme la treizième ‘vie des Césars’ que comme une œuvre originale.»

¹⁴⁴ *Life of Charlemagne*, 30-1.

been stung by the underlying message of the *Vita Karoli*: “You are not your father. Too bad for you and the country!”

Einhard follows Suetonius’s structure of the *Divus Augustus*, concluding the *Vita Karoli* with an account of Charlemagne’s will, written in early 811, three years before he died. Einhard avers that he is giving an exact account of the document and provides a list of the witnesses present. The text, however, that accompanies this list is obviously not the original will, according to Roger Collins, biographer of Charlemagne.¹⁴⁵ It is too brief and imprecise, and it is written in third person. Certainly, there are examples of medieval wills in the third person, written for a dying testator that was too ill to hold a pen. From other evidence in the *Vita*, Charles was well enough three years before his death, and should have written his own will. Collins charges that this purported will is “anachronistic in both form and content, and far too short” in comparison to other wills written during this time and in the previous Merovingian period.¹⁴⁶ The will is also contradicted by other accounts of it in other sources. The will in the *Vita Karoli* is obviously the result of Einhard’s imperfect memory.¹⁴⁷ Or, could there have been a bestowal in Charlemagne’s will that contradicted the interests of the new king, Louis? That question has been asked, but cannot be answered, because no other record of the will exists.

Asser’s *Vita Ælfredi* includes no will, although one exists, because he left off writing the biography six years before Asser’s death. Did Asser become too busy or too ill to finish the *Vita*? Historians have searched in vain for a reason, and little is known in general about the conditions under which this biography was written. The biography abruptly ends with the chapter concerning the law and judges. The manuscript is obviously incomplete, and possibly only a

¹⁴⁵ Collins, *Charlemagne*, 158. Collins bases his appraisal of Charlemagne’s will on the research of two other historians: Antoni Udina I Abello’s *La successió testada a la Catalunya altomedieval* (Barcelona, 1984), 9, and Ulrich Nonn’s “Merowingische Testamente,” in *Die Franken Wegberetier Europas* 1 (Mainz, 1996), 76-92.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 158.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

draft. Those two reasons explain why Asser did not make arrangements to have the *Vita* copied and disseminated. In addition, the *Vita Ælfredi* is 70% longer than the *Vita Karoli*, so even if Asser had finished it, there would not have been as many copies made for practical reasons. Only one copy of it had survived from the Middle Ages, and that one was destroyed by fire in 1731. In contrast, over 80 manuscripts of the *Vita Karoli* exist, because it was widely copied and disseminated through the web of Carolingian monasteries. Its brevity made it a popular choice to reproduce in those days when all copying had to be done by hand.

The biographical evidence given by Einhard depicts a king who has coalesced all the power around his person, much as Louis XIV did. The great problem with equating the power of the state with the person, *L'état, c'est moi!*, is that the king possesses a mortal body and therefore, so does the state. When the person of Charlemagne dies, the *imperium* perishes with him. Charlemagne has also doubled the size of the kingdom, therefore there is the problem of how to police the far-flung frontiers, just as in the age of Augustus. By choosing the Suetonian biography of Augustus for the obvious model of his *Vita Karoli*, Einhard is possibly criticizing Charlemagne's over-reaching power. By writing the *Vita Karoli*, Einhard has tried to resurrect the body of both Charlemagne and Francia. Although the *Vita* is a successful literary attempt which artfully depicts Charlemagne's charisma, military prowess, and overall passion for life, the reader is left with a ominous sense of his power – intentionally, no doubt -- as a warning to Einhard's contemporaries who were threatening Charlemagne's son, Louis. After reading the *Vita*, a dissenter would have understood from Einhard's examples, that the most lenient punishment for a conspirator was to be "tonsured and allowed to pursue the religious life he had always wanted in the monastery."¹⁴⁸ At one and the same time, the *Vita* might have been a "Machiavellian" guide to kingship for the benefit of the young Louis, informing him of how to

¹⁴⁸ *Life of Charlemagne*, 29.

deal with dissent. Einhard, the ever-prudent courtier who knew Charlemagne so well, knew how to get his point across with the greatest subtlety.

The *Vita Ælfredi* lacks the threatening edge of the *Vita Karoli*. From the biographical evidence given by Asser in the *Vita Ælfredi*, his king is a saintly person who acknowledges that his power comes from God. He recognizes the abilities of other individuals in his kingdom and shares the responsibility of protecting and administering the kingdom with them. He does not threaten or abuse his subjects so that they will defend their country and themselves, but “by gently instructing, cajoling, urging, commanding, and in the end . . . sharply chastising . . . he cleverly exploited and converted [all] to his own will and to the general advantage of the whole realm.”¹⁴⁹ Alfred is not the only actor on the stage of ninth-century England or the world, rather, his biography is filled with other major players, which include a former enemy, Guthrum, and Carolingian rulers, Charles the Fat and Carloman, who had little apparent significance for the life of Alfred. The importance of these characters in the *Vita* diminishes the image of Alfred as an all-powerful king, but they add to his image of holiness. He is a humble king who willingly takes up the difficult task of turning back the Viking tide – but does not aggressively seek it -- and establishes a government that will continue to function after his death. Because Alfred did not concentrate all the power of the army or all the administration of the government in his own person, the kingdom does not disintegrate with his death, but continues to prosper. This is the Alfred that Asser celebrates: the suffering servant, who wins some battles but loses others in his attempt to protect his people, and who shares power because he knows that he cannot do all things. Alfred modeled his conduct after those great leaders in the Bible, such as Solomon, who sought only wisdom and then received everything for their wise choice.

¹⁴⁹ *Life of Alfred*, 102.

Asser and Einhard seemed to have understood their subjects as pivotal in the formation of their respective kingdoms. Both biographers began with a chronicle as their primary source and then added personal anecdotes and information to make their *Vitae* a narrative. The *Vitae* were not simple panegyrics dedicated to the memories of the kings, but literary arguments crafted to support the thesis that the king ruled with *auctoritas*, legitimate power given by God, rather than *potestas*, raw power achieved through violence. Therefore, Einhard and Asser present their subjects not only as great military generals, but men who support the Church and scholarship. Both biographies helped establish a national identity, or *Wir-gefühl*, based on the Germanic and Christian heritage of the various peoples inhabiting the kingdoms, and they helped define the boundaries of the realm, or *Wir-stellen*, in an age of elusive boundaries.

CHAPTER III

A PRESENT OF THINGS PAST

The *Vita Karoli* and the *Vita Ælfredi* have an existence which has survived the death of their authors and their subjects. The *Vitae* have remained a source of myth and a source of scholarship for many generations. The messages which later audiences found in the biographies were sometimes quite different from those intended by Einhard and Asser. The two biographers had a target audience in mind when they chose to eulogize their kings, and they recorded their selected memories to suit their purposes. In the end, their memory served their ideology. Rosamond McKitterick says that “[h]istorical narratives are statements about what people remember of the past as well as what they choose to forget.”¹⁵⁰

Messages and Audience

Einhard and Asser each expressed their intent to praise the king whom they admired, and to share this admiration with other members of the court. The biographers say that they knew their subjects well, but there is not much evidence that they knew their faults – or cared to share their knowledge of royal failings. Although modern historiography does not accuse either Asser or Einhard of blatant lies, it is agreed that the biographers did choose to outline only those events favorable to their kings, and then color them in with hues favorable to their king.

Some of the reasons that motivated Einhard and Asser to write their biographies have been discussed in the comparison of the two *Vitae*. To reiterate, the *Vita Karoli* and the *Vita Ælfredi* were written to achieve three aims: to legitimate their king’s authority, to define

¹⁵⁰ McKitterick, Rosamond, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), 3.

geographic boundaries, and to create a single identity for a multi-cultural and multi-lingual territory. Einhard and Asser had more immediate goals in mind for the *Vitae* because of the political instability in their realms.

Historians agree that Einhard wrote the *Vita Karoli* sometime between 817 and 836, during the reign of Louis the Pious, who had struggled to rule effectively. A more specific dating for the *Vita Karoli*, though, makes all the difference in understanding Einhard's intended meaning. Based on internal evidence, Paul Edward Dutton proposes the mid-820's, but not earlier, for its authorship. If it was written as early as 818, says Dutton, then the biography might be tied to Louis' reform of the palace and kingdom early in his reign, and if it was as late as 829-30, it might refer to the looming rebellion of Louis' sons.¹⁵¹

Eleanor Shipley Duckett maintains that Louis' problems stemmed from his misguided understanding of the relation between Church and state. Louis believed that he and everyone down to the humblest subjects of the kingdom were servants of the Church, which directed and blessed their work. Although certainly a noble notion, this new politico-religious philosophy handed over the dignity and independence of the crown to the bishops. Placing the Church over the state also caused dissent within the court, for many of Louis' courtiers had also been Charlemagne's courtiers, and they continued to believe in the firm, autocratic ruler who beat down all opposition – with the sword if necessary.

Louis' reign began peacefully, but then confronted almost insurmountable problems. Viking pirates descended in droves upon the northern coasts and rivers. Earthquakes hit the palace of Aachen. Judith, Louis' second wife gave birth to a son and swore that her son, not Louis' three older sons, would inherit the throne. Frankish peasants complained of poverty and unjust landlords. The discipline of the monasteries and convents became lax after the death of

¹⁵¹ Dutton, *Charlemagne's Courtier*, xviii-xx.

Benedict of Aniane, Louis' stern spiritual advisor who had overseen them. Rebellions occurred along the borders of the Frankish empire. Finally, in 833, the bishops of the realm wrote up their grievances and stated the obvious. Under Charlemagne, there had been peace and unity, but Louis' negligence had brought shame and God's divine judgment. They deposed him, and pressured him to enter a monastery. What great irony, that the Carolingian kings' method of dealing with powerful enemies was being used against one of them! Louis, however, refused. He regained his throne and was reconciled with the Church. According to Duckett, the evidence points to Einhard writing the *Vita Karoli* in order to show Louis that a king can be both religious and strong, and that this is good for the country.¹⁵²

Einhard may not have wanted the dating of the biography to be too precise, because he wouldn't have wanted his intention to be obvious. It is true that, with the exception of Bede, and the annals and some chronicles, the dating of events was not widely practiced. Most classical and medieval writers, however, referred to specific, commonly known events to situate lesser known events within a specific time period. The fact that "prudent" Einhard -- one of the finest medieval scholars -- does not use this well-known tool for the dating of events, has convinced Derek Wilson that Einhard is hiding his intentions. Wilson concludes that the *Vita Karoli* is simple propaganda.

The *Vita* was nothing more or less than a piece of court propaganda designed to silence critics of the new regime. It bolstered the reputation of Charlemagne, associated Louis intimately with the late, great emperor and claimed that the arrangements for the succession had been endorsed by all the Frankish leaders.¹⁵³

Wilson bases his belief on the last line of the *Vita*, which directly follows Charlemagne's will. It is Einhard's avowal that Louis has carried out the will exactly as his father had wanted. "After

¹⁵² Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Carolingian Portraits: a study in the ninth century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1962), 23-50.

¹⁵³ Derek Wilson, *Charlemagne* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 137.

examining this same charter his son Louis, who succeeded by divine right, saw to it that this division of properties was fulfilled as quickly and faithfully as possible after his father's death."¹⁵⁴ Einhard was attempting to tie Louis' reign more closely to that of Charlemagne, and avers that all of the Frankish leaders had agreed to the "arrangements" for succession, when indeed, they had agreed to no such thing, according to Wilson.¹⁵⁵ Einhard most likely wrote the *Vita Karoli* for a number of reasons. It is even quite plausible that Einhard wrote the *Vita* at the urging of Louis. After all, he was the one who had the most to lose if the kingdom fell apart.

When Asser wrote his biography of King Alfred in 893, he made his use of the *Vita Karoli* obvious. John Niles believes Asser did this in order to endow "that king of Wessex with an antique, quasi-imperial aura."¹⁵⁶ There is an "intertextuality" of meaning here, that is, the reader brings his knowledge of the *Vita Karoli* to the *Vita Ælfredi* and correlates Alfred's kingship with that of the highly successful Charlemagne. R. H. Davis says that Alfred needed to indoctrinate the court "with loyalty to himself and enthusiasm for his cause."¹⁵⁷ "Even in a kingdom as small as Wessex it was impossible for the king to oversee everything that concerned him, because he could not be everywhere at once; he had to rely on his ealdormen, bishops, reeves and thegns" to faithfully carry out his orders.¹⁵⁸ Alfred had no means of forcing his agents to obey his commands. He had to persuade them, and through court propaganda – such as the *Vita Ælfredi* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – to remind them how close they had come to being overrun by the Vikings. In the course of the *Vita*, Alfred's brothers receive short shrift, as do the accomplishments of the great eighth-century Mercian kings. Asser, however, laid aside his

¹⁵⁴ *Life of Charlemagne*, 19.

¹⁵⁵ Wilson, *Charlemagne*, 137.

¹⁵⁶ John Niles, "Appropriations: A Concept of Culture", Chapter 9 of *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Identity*, by Allen Frantzen and John Niles (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1997), 218-9.

¹⁵⁷ R. H. Davis, "Alfred the Great: Propaganda and Truth," *History* vol 56, 1971, 182.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 181.

powerful work of propaganda six years before Alfred died, so that it did not reach his intended audience: “the monks of St. David’s, the royal court, the king’s sons, and, not least, Alfred himself, to whom the work was dedicated.”¹⁵⁹

Why did Asser lay aside the *Vita*? The most likely explanation is that Asser became too busy to finish it. After all, Asser was reluctant to come to Alfred’s court even for half the year, because he had responsibilities to his people. Some scholars believe that Asser was already bishop of Sherborne when he joined Alfred’s court for half of each year. Asser would have had religious duties to fulfill in his diocese, which was in “the remote, westernmost parts of Wales.”¹⁶⁰ Asser implies that the journey is long and arduous, and that he had to “travel across great expanses of land to meet [Alfred].”¹⁶¹ The bishop possibly became too occupied with his diocese and could not return to the royal court, or he could have been in poor health, or he might have died. His health is mentioned several times in the course of the *Vita*. After Asser first met King Alfred, he rode home and was almost immediately “seized by a violent fever” from which he suffered “for twelve months and a week.”¹⁶² He seems to have been truly ill, for he was very concerned that Alfred would receive word of his illness and of his intention to return to the king’s court. Why was Asser willing to serve in Alfred’s court, in spite of the great distance and his poor health? Asser says that he and his people are hoping that friendship with Alfred will result in protection from the destructive King Hyfaidd, “who often assaulted that monastery and the jurisdiction of St. David, sometimes by expelling those bishops who were in charge of it, as

¹⁵⁹ Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 12.

¹⁶⁰ *Life of Alfred*, 93.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 94.

happened to my kinsman Archbishop Nobis; he even expelled me on occasion during this period.”¹⁶³

After the deaths of Charles and Alfred, their heirs were unable to maintain the kingdoms for long. Their *Vitae*, however, continued to inspire future generations long after the disintegration of their political realms. Following the examples of Asser and Einhard, historians and literary writers used the kings of the *Vitae* in legitimating a ruling power, giving an identity to a people and defining boundaries. Often, truth mixed with fiction, as each generation found an Alfred or Charlemagne to fit its needs. The kings became not only Christian warriors, lawgivers, and scholars, but also saints, founders of universities, and precursors of the Reformation. Joana Story comments that “[t]here has been a Charlemagne for every age and political expediency.”¹⁶⁴ The same can be said about Alfred.

The basic story line of the *Vita Karoli* was greatly embroidered already in the first millennium after the death of the king. One thousand stories or anecdotes – many of them spurious -- were added to the canon of Charlemagne literature, according to biographer Derek Wilson. “The Charlemagne legend became a veritable portmanteau into which chroniclers, troubadours, churchmen and kings stuffed whatever ideological baggage they needed for their own purposes.”¹⁶⁵ After the death of Charlemagne and Louis, Carolingian historical writing tried to unify the splintering kingdom around the centralizing figure of Charlemagne. Indeed, Charlemagne was the most note-worthy monarch to cross the European stage since the Caesars. His persona, however, became larger than life in Notker the Stammerer’s *Gesta Karoli*, or *The Deeds of Charles*. Notker was a monk of the monastery of St. Gall who tried to legitimize the reign of Charlemagne’s grandson, Charles the Fat, as Einhard had done for Louis, the son of

¹⁶³ *Life of Alfred*, 94 and 96.

¹⁶⁴ Story, *Charlemagne*, 2.

¹⁶⁵ Wilson, *Charlemagne*, 144.

Charlemagne. This work of literature barely fits the definition of biography, for it is but a collection of fanciful anecdotes.

In the first several centuries after Einhard's *Vita Karoli*, the Church had the greatest motive in using the *Vita* of Charles. Charles had been the Church's greatest protector, unifier and reformer. Catholicism had enjoyed a great unity of teaching and spirit within Charlemagne's centralized government. As the kingdom splintered under his sons and grandson, the power of the Church waned. The Carolingian monarchy ceded to two centuries of anarchy – rule by local leaders who continually fought each other for power and land. Although Charlemagne's physical empire disappeared, the idea of a European empire remained. As Charlemagne's most recent biographer, Derek Wilson, states: "The body of Charlemagne's legacy may have perished, but its soul lived on."¹⁶⁶

Charlemagne had been hailed as the "King and Father of Europe" already in 799 by an anonymous poet.¹⁶⁷ Out of the chaos of the fallen Roman Empire, Charles brought together those political, religious and economic elements which are the hallmarks of a specifically "European" culture with its power centered around the major European rivers, such as the Rhine, the Seine, the Loire and the Rhône, rather than the Mediterranean. Even though Charles' empire splintered after his death, the culture constructed by his political administrators and abbots lived on through what is commonly called the "Western tradition."

As Derek Wilson muses, a "luxuriant myth grew out of the seed of ninth-century reality, putting out new shoots in every generation." Charlemagne is the central character in a number of French *chansons-de-geste* of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as well as in literary works which derived from these in France, Germany, Italy and other countries. In the oldest

¹⁶⁶ Wilson, *Charlemagne*, 142-3.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

cycle of *chansons de geste*, the *Geste du roi*, Charlemagne, or one of his immediate successors, is usually the chief character. In these literary works, Charlemagne is always portrayed as the champion of the Church. The most famous of these is the *Chanson de Roland*, which most certainly existed in oral form long before it was written down. The oldest existing manuscript of it is dated c. 1080. This cycle of *chansons* whose hero was Charlemagne, spawned a body of literature that lived on after the genre itself had waned. In the resulting literature, Charlemagne was often depicted as the ultimate crusader, cutting down the enemies of Christendom. For example, in the *Chanson de Roland*, Charlemagne is the avenger and protector of Christianity against the Saracens, or pagans. The king quickly exacts retribution for the death of Roland and of his rear guard, and continues on to conquer all of Spain. According to Einhard, however, the ambush of the rear guard was carried out by Basques, rather than Saracens as in the *Chanson*, and revenge was impossible, because “the enemy had so dispersed after the attack that there was no indication as to where they could be found,”¹⁶⁸ and Charlemagne does not go on to conquer Spain. The literary character of Charlemagne in the *Chanson de Roland* helped to combat the fears of Christian Europe in the face of the Arab world, which at that time was more powerful, more learned, and wealthier than the West.

Renaissance scholars regarded Charlemagne as a “cultural and religious leader,” and the competing monarchs of the age sought to draw their genealogies back to him.¹⁶⁹ That Renaissance scholars and kings would care about Charlemagne is surprising, for it was out of keeping with their general intent, which was to return to the ancients and dismiss those dark ages between them and the antique society. Renaissance scholars, however, did try to

¹⁶⁸ *Life of Charlemagne*, 22.

¹⁶⁹ Wilson, *Charlemagne*, Illustration #8.

“demythologize” Charlemagne, that is, they attempted to sort out the truth from the fiction that had accompanied the persona of Charlemagne.

Not all references to Charlemagne were written. European monarchs sought to portray themselves as inheritors of Charlemagne’s *imperium* by using the visual arts as well. In 1215 Frederick II of Germany ordered a golden shrine to be made in honor of Charlemagne. Louis XIV staged elaborate allegorical presentations at Versailles, based on Charlemagne legends, in 1664. Henri Paul Motte’s painting, *Napoleon at Charlemagne’s Throne*, shows the emperor-to-be gazing ambitiously on a crown positioned on Charlemagne’s throne, shortly before his own coronation in 1804.¹⁷⁰

The *Vita Ælfredi* has done much to construct an Anglo-Saxon identity for the English. Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, finished in 731, began the self-conscious process of forming a national and racial identity, which the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* and the *Vita Ælfredi* affirmed 200 years later. The *Vita Ælfredi* constructs a heroic past for the English. These three works acknowledge the Germanic heritage and the commitment to Christianity and Rome which were so important to the Anglo-Saxon people.

The *Vita Ælfredi* was little known in the century after its writing. The unfinished manuscript sat on a shelf, forgotten for a time, but by the year 1000, at least two copies of it had been made. According to historian R. W. Chambers, “[t]he living tradition of Alfred, recorded by chroniclers and poets, is one of the things which kept the English spirit alive in the three centuries after the defeat at Hastings.”¹⁷¹ One can imagine the sudden importance this text had for the English in keeping their sense of identity alive as they suffered under the rule of Norman lords, hoping for the day of English independence.

¹⁷⁰ Wilson, *Charlemagne*, Illustrations #11, #22, #23.

¹⁷¹ Garmonsway, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, xxx.

After briefly seeing the light of day, the *Vita Ælfredi* and other texts of Anglo-Saxon history were banished to obscurity for 400 years, because of the influence of Geoffrey of Monmouth, a twelfth-century historian with important Norman ties. In his *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Geoffrey “systematically distorted and effaced Anglo-Saxon history, characterizing the English as little more than a band of cutthroats and intruders who had interrupted the providential flow of history from the ancient British past to a new glorious age that was soon to unfold.”¹⁷² Although Geoffrey’s history is little more than “colorful lies and fantasies,” the “calumny dominated European historiography for 400 years” as T. G. Kendrick opines.¹⁷³

The *Vita Ælfredi* had quite a different message in the sixteenth century. The *Vita* was used in Renaissance scholarship in the search for native origins and also as the basis for a “clean break” from Rome. With the dissolution of the English monasteries during the reign of King Henry VIII, manuscripts now belonged to the crown, rather than to monasteries. Suzanne Hagedorn describes how these manuscripts were used to support the validity of the Anglican, or English Church during the English Reformation.¹⁷⁴ To this end, Matthew Parker, the chaplain to Queen Elizabeth I and her first Archbishop of Canterbury, sought out historical evidence to support Anglican theology concerning the Eucharist and English translations of the Bible. Parker headed an ambitious program of collection and publication of medieval manuscripts. He published prayers, sermons, penitentials and other texts in Old English in order to tie the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon Church a half-millennium before to the Church of England. He published the *Vita Ælfredi* to meet this goal, for he saw in Alfred an example of a good, holy king who was totally English with little tie to the Rome.¹⁷⁵ How ironic, that Alfred, the king who

¹⁷² Frantzen and Niles, *Construction of Social Identity*, 7.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Susan Hagedorn, “Received Wisdom,” in Frantzen and Niles, *Construction of Identity*, 86-107.

¹⁷⁵ Frantzen and Niles, *Construction of Identity*, 7.

was an ardent promoter of the Catholic Church in the English realm, and personally so pious, was later depicted as the founder of the Anglican Church.

Allen Frantzen and John Niles, in their book, *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, believe that “political agenda and historical scholarship intersect” in John Spelman’s *Life of King Alfred the Great*.¹⁷⁶ Charles I had summoned Spelman to Oxford after the king had made Oxford the headquarters for his royalist forces. Spelman wrote his *Life of King Alfred* while living in Oxford in the years 1642 and 1643, but he died before he could publish it. His work remained in manuscript form until after the Restoration, when Obadiah Walker had it translated into Latin and published it with copious notes as *Aelfredi Magni Anglorum Regis* in 1678. Spelman’s *Life of Alfred* reflects the mid-seventeenth-century political situation in that it portrays Alfred as an exemplary king besieged by foreign invaders. Spelman’s original English version was edited by Thomas Hearne and published minus Walker’s controversial notes in 1709 as *The Life of King Alfred the Great*. Although this work was considered the authoritative biography on Alfred for two centuries and provided the basis for his glorification by the general public, it is now regarded by scholars as merely a “quaint curiosity.”¹⁷⁷

The *Vita Aelfredi* served as an inspiration in the nineteenth century for both the English and the Germans. Sir Walter Besant, Mayor of Winchester, in an address delivered on November 9, 1897, quoted by Alfred Bowker, in his *The King Alfred Millenary: A Record of the Proceedings of the National Commemoration* presents the late Victorian belief that “Alfred is, and will always remain, the typical man of our race, call him Anglo-Saxon, call him American, call him Englishman, call him Australian – the typical man of our race at his best and noblest.”¹⁷⁸ Liberal

¹⁷⁶ Hagedorn, in Frantzen and Niles, *Construction of Identity*, 92.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 94.

¹⁷⁸ Alfred Bowker, *The King Alfred Millenary: A Record of the Proceedings of the National Commemoration* (London: MacMillan, 1902), 9.

Germans, such as Reinhold Pauli, found in Alfred a heroic example of the liberal spirit they desired for the greater Germany. Pauli conceived his biography of the Saxon king, *König Aelfred und seine Stelle in der Geschichte Englands*, while studying at Oxford during the political crisis of 1848, “at a time when German hearts trembled, as they had seldom done before, for the preservation of their Fatherland.”¹⁷⁹ Pauli was interested in the place “which Alfred occupies in the organic development of the history of the liberties of England.”¹⁸⁰

Each generation finds their own meaning in a particular text, as demonstrated by the *Vita Karoli* and the *Vita Aelfredi*. In the field of literary criticism, this participation of the reader in the meaning of the text is often called “reader response” or “reception” of the text. Robert Jauss, one of the primary scholars in the field of “reception history,” describes reception as a process in which the audience participates. “In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions but rather itself an energy formative of history.” When one of these readers is himself a biographer or historian, he passes on his interpretation of the text in the form of a new edition of the text, or as the basis of a newly written biography or history. Both occurred in the reception history of the *Vita Karoli* and the *Vita Aelfredi*, resulting in new images of the heroes through the ages.

There are a number of ways in which manuscripts, such as the *Vita Karoli* and the *Vita Aelfredi*, were edited and translated to influence the meaning of the text. The process of copying, whether by hand or by printing press, caused the texts to be emended interpolated, and punctuated differently. Editors often preceded the *Vitae* with a new introduction which informed the reader of the “messages” which could be found in the text. All of these changes, including the size of the book or the intentional inclusion of other texts with it, affect the reader’s response

¹⁷⁹ Reinhold Pauli, *König Aelfred und seine Stelle in der Geschichhte Englands* (Berlin, 1851), *The Life of Alfred the Great*, trans B. Thorpe (London: H. G. Bohn, 1853), ix.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

to the text, whether the reader realizes it or not. It is not the intent of this paper to delve further into the intricacies of editing and publishing, but merely to use the issue of reception as an introduction to the historiography of the *Vita Karoli* and the *Vita Ælfredi*.

Manuscripts and Research

The *Vitae* have a rich scholarship history, which has taken two general forms. Before World War I, historians analyzed the truthfulness of the biographies by comparing them to other sources of the time or to archaeological finds. This was the critical method employed by most pre-World War I historians as they analyzed the *Vita Karoli* and the *Vita Ælfredi*. Even before the war, however, some scholars were beginning to identify ideological goals and literary methods employed by the authors of the *Vitae* to achieve their ideological goals. For example, in the 1950's and 1960's, Siegmund Hellmann and his pupil Helmut Beumann, mined the *Vita Karoli* and other sources for “*Ideengeschichte*,” the history of ideas,” rather than comparing fact against fact to find historical errors.

This new approach to the examination of historical texts has meant a great deal for the historiography of both the *Vita Karoli* and the *Vita Ælfredi*. The new approach examines the historical texts as both “constructed texts and bearers of memory targeted for particular audiences, and as an important element in the promotion of the political culture and identity of particular groups,”¹⁸¹ as Rosamond McKitterick states. The *Vitae* of both of these Germanic kings achieved these goals.

There no longer exists a medieval copy of the *Vita Ælfredi*. It was possibly a rough draft - - pieced together with no overall design -- which Asser laid aside six years before Alfred's death. With the death of his subject, Asser might have been too occupied with other matters as bishop

¹⁸¹ Rosamond McKitterick, *History and Memory*, 2.

and never finished it. The *Vita* has an abrupt ending and the Latin is confusing, but there are some delightful passages in it, especially the three passages with the drawn-out “water” metaphor. Even Asser seems to take pleasure in these diversions.

There have been some questions raised over the authorship of the *Vita Ælfredi* since the nineteenth century, but it was V. H. Galbraith in the mid-twentieth century who mounted a serious assault against Asser’s authorship of the *Vita*. He emphasized two anachronisms in the text and concluded that the *Vita* was a forgery.¹⁸² Dorothy Whitlock again restored faith in the authorship of Asser in “The Genuine Asser.”¹⁸³ She convincingly argued that the anachronisms were not out of place for the time. Alfred Smyth revisited the issue in 1995 with his book, *Life of King Alfred*. He maintained that the *Vita* was written by an eleventh-century Welshman named Byrhferth who wished to add to the prestige of his monastery of Ramsey.¹⁸⁴ His reasons for questioning the authorship are numerous, but seemed to have convinced no serious Alfredian scholars.

Questions concerning the authorship of the *Vita Ælfredi* will continually arise, because there is no extant medieval manuscript, and thus no manuscript tradition. There did exist an early eleventh-century copy, at least twice removed from the original, which survived until fire destroyed it and other priceless Anglo-Saxon manuscripts in the Sir Robert Cotton collection in 1731. Before the fire, Francis Wise printed his edition of the *Vita* using Matthew Parker’s heavily annotated and “improved” printed edition of the Cotton manuscript, rather than the Cotton itself. Wise was aware of the Cotton manuscript, and even had a paleographer examine it, but he himself did not look at it. His decision to use the printed Parker edition -- possibly

¹⁸² V. H. Galbraith, “Who Wrote Asser’s Life of Alfred?” in *An Introduction to the Study of History* (London: C. A. Watts, 1964), 91-96.

¹⁸³ Dorothy Whitlock, “The Genuine Asser,” in *From Bede to Alfred* (London: Variorum, 1980), 14.

¹⁸⁴ Alfred Smyth, *King Alfred the Great* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1995), 149-157.

because of ease in reading – is a great loss to Alfredian scholarship.¹⁸⁵ The best edition today in Latin is the W. H. Stevenson edition, which was reconstructed using all the best historical evidence. This reconstructed *Vita* has become the basis for the modern editions, such as Simon Keynes' and Michael Lapidge's standard English edition.

There are a number of modern critical editions of the *Vita Karoli* due to the great number of existing medieval manuscripts. G. H. Pertz used sixty of these for his critical edition done for the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, published in 1829 in Berlin. A. Teulet's 1840 edition, *Œuvres complètes d'Éginhard*, published for the *Société de l'Histoire de France*, also contained a French translation of the *Vita*. Philipp Jaffé, in 1867, published a single manuscript, the MS. Paris, Bibl. Nat., *fonds latin* 10758, which was copied in the ninth or tenth century, for his *Einharti Vita Caroli Magni*, part of the *Bibliotheca Rerum Germanicarum*, the fourth volume of the *Monumenta Carolina*, published in Berlin. In 1880, G. Waitz organized the eighty-some manuscripts into three basic families, and published a critical edition based on twenty of the most reliable manuscripts: the *Einharti Vita Karoli Magni* for the *Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum*. O. Holder-Egger revised these in 1911 for inclusion in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. H. W. Garrod and R. B. Mowat published *Einhard's Life of Charlemagne* in 1915 at Oxford. Louis Halphen published *Éginhard, Vie de Charlemagne* (Paris), in 1938 with a third edition in 1947, for the *Classiques de l'Histoire de France au Moyen Âge*. Both the Garrod-Mowat and Halphen editions were based on the Paris manuscript used by Jaffé and on MS. Vienna, Bibl. Pal. 510, with variants from other manuscripts. Lewis Thorpe used MS. Paris

¹⁸⁵ Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 318-9.

Bibl. Nat., *fonds latin* 10758, as published by Philipp Jaffé in 1867, for his translation in modern English in 1969.¹⁸⁶

Some historians began to examine historical narratives for their literary and ideological goals, and not just as texts informing posterity of facts with no intent. The obvious approach is to question the veracity of the biographies when they are compared to other sources of the time or to archaeological finds. Even before the war, scholars were examining medieval texts for the authors' ideological goals and for their literary methods and conventions. For example, in the 1950's and 1960's, Siegmund Hellmann and his pupil Helmut Beumann, mined the *Vita Karoli* and other sources for *Ideengeschichte*, "the history of ideas," rather than comparing fact against fact to find historical errors.

The idea of studying historical texts for other meanings, has been dealt with extensively by Rosamond McKitterick in her books, most particularly in her *History and Memory in the Carolingian World*. "Historical narratives are now studied both as constructed texts and bearers of memory which were targeted for particular audiences, and as an important element in the promotion of the political culture and identity of particular groups."¹⁸⁷ This concept has had a great influence on other medieval historians, including those researching the *Vitae*.

The most extensive amount of scholarship on the subject of the *Vita Karoli* and on Charlemagne used to be by German and French scholars, but since World War II, there is more by English and American scholars. A recent study of the *Vita Karoli* manuscripts by Matthias M. Tischler examines how they were set down, delivered and received. He has also placed each and every *Vita Karoli* manuscript in a "family" extending down from Einhard's no-longer-extant original, which he calls "Seligenstadt A." Tischler's two-volume, almost 1700 page tome is the

¹⁸⁶ *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer: Two Lives of Charlemagne*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 21.

¹⁸⁷ *History and Memory*, 2.

most complete examination of the *Vita Karoli* manuscripts, and it is surprisingly interesting. The highlight of Tischler's study is the stemma of the *Vita Karoli* manuscripts on pages 1312-3.¹⁸⁸

The two most recent biographies on Charlemagne are by Roger Collins and Derek Wilson. Although both scholars have entitled their books *Charlemagne*, the two examine different topics. Collins' book is a political-military history, while Wilson's book concerns Charlemagne's construction of a totally new entity – Europe.

¹⁸⁸ Matthias M. Tischler, *Einhalts Vita Karoli: Studien zur Entstehung, Überlieferung und Rezeption* (Hannover: Hahnsche, 2001), 1312-3.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Einhard's *Vita Karoli* and Asser's *Vita Ælfredi* document the lives of two of the most fascinating kings who influenced Western civilization "by the sword and the cross."¹⁸⁹ Einhard and Asser themselves, in composing these biographies, contributed to their kings' importance. The *Vita Karoli* was an immensely popular work, as evidenced by the survival of over eighty manuscripts of it. Einhard had created a new literary form – biography – and it was copied by many biographers, such as by Notker in his own biography of the emperor, by Thegan in his life of Louis the Pious, by the anonymous monk of Caen in his life of William the Conqueror, and by Asser in his *Vita Ælfredi*. Einhard also inspired those historians who inserted biographies into their histories, for example, William of Malmesbury, the twelfth-century hagiographer and historian. Once Einhard had devised the model for secular medieval biography, these authors and others, copied the form and embellished it with anecdotes as Suetonius himself had done.

The biographies of Charlemagne and Alfred were influenced by the ancients, in that classical historiography dealt primarily with war and diplomacy. The ancients did investigate the character and morals of their subjects, but religion was rarely mentioned, and it rarely if ever informed classical subjects' decisions on war and politics. Einhard and Asser reinterpreted the classical model for presenting their subjects' character and morals in a Christian light, influenced by hagiography and Christian annals and chronicles. Christian historiography concerned itself more with religious beliefs and practices, wars against persecution and heresy, struggles with

¹⁸⁹ François Guizot, "The Career of Charlemagne," in *The Holy Roman Empire* (London: Macmillan, 1901). Guizot used the phrase to refer to Charlemagne. It is, however, also appropriate for Alfred.

evil and the devil, and fortunes of the Church.¹⁹⁰ For example, Gregory of Tours' primary emphasis was war -- not just kings against foreign forces, but also the Christian Church against the pagans, and martyrs against their persecutors -- and even their own baser human inclinations. In addition, once the greatest persecutions were over, one did not need to face a physical martyrdom to suffer, as Gregory shows in his "Glory of the Confessors." Daily tribulations, and even our own fallen nature, provided a long-term dying to self. This influence is seen in Einhard and Asser, as they present their subjects' decisions in war and politics as based on their Christian beliefs. Wars are fought against the "army of pagans" and enemies must accept baptism to become part of the realm. Charlemagne and Alfred make political decisions based on their religious beliefs.

The *Vita Karoli* marks the point where hagiography begins to be replaced by secular biography. The *Vita Karoli* was a greater success than the *Vita Ælfredi* in the Middle Ages, as evidenced by the great number of surviving manuscripts and the great number of its imitators, which included the *Vita Ælfredi*. The *Vita Karoli* has survived in over 100 manuscripts and codices, making it one of the Middle Ages most popular works, while the *Vita Ælfredi* has no extant medieval manuscripts and was largely unknown throughout the Middle Ages. As has been discussed earlier, the *Vita Ælfredi* had the distinct disadvantage of being unfinished, forgotten for a time, and then disparaged by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Some historians still denigrate the *Vita Ælfredi*. Historian D. H. Farmer, for example, goes so far as to judge the *Vita Ælfredi* "unsatisfactory" because of the abrupt ending, the lack of structure, and the confusing nature of the Latin.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Rosamond McKitterick, *Carolingian Culture: emulation and innovation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 195.

¹⁹¹ D. H. Farmer, "Two Biographies of William of Malmesbury," in *Latin Biography*, ed., T. A. Dorey, (New York: Basic Books, 1967), 159.

Of the two biographies, the *Vita Karoli* is certainly the more satisfactory of the two. Its tightness of form and description of the physique and habits of Charlemagne leave us wanting more. The *Vita Karoli* is brief and to the point. Although the *Vita Ælfredi* is 70% longer than the *Vita Karoli*, the reader does not learn more about Alfred, but less. The *Vita Ælfredi* is replete with information about other rulers, and loses its focus at times when talking about other people. Although this information is useful to the historian, it takes the focus off of Alfred – the purported subject of the biography.

Although the *Vita Ælfredi* may be judged the less satisfactory literary work, it seems to have birthed a lively legend that has caught the attention of the modern imagination in a way that the *Vita Karoli* has not. The Victorian images of “England’s Darling” are quite charming, and Alfred continues still to be the subject or background for modern fiction: for example, G. K. Chesterton’s epic poem published in 1911, the “Ballad of the White Horse,” and the 1969 movie “Alfred the Great.” There are also three very recent novels by Bernard Cornwell, entitled *The Pale Horseman*, *The Last Kingdom*, and *Lords of the North*, which deal with “the efforts of Alfred the Great’s Saxon forces to defend Wessex after England’s three other kingdoms had fallen to the Danes.”¹⁹²

Einhard and Asser preserved the lives of their kings for future generations, but their preservation was not a static thing. Successive generations will continue to find their own meanings in the *Vita Karoli* and the *Vita Ælfredi*.

¹⁹² Anne Stephenson, review of *The Pale Horseman*, by Bernard Cornwell, *The Wichita Eagle* (February 19, 2006): 4.

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