

KINGSHIP AND POLITICS IN
THE LATE NINTH CENTURY

Charles the Fat and the end of the Carolingian Empire

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

THE END OF THE CAROLINGIAN EMPIRE IN
MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

The dregs of the Carovingian race no longer exhibited any symptoms of virtue or power, and the ridiculous epithets of the Bald, the Stammerer, the Fat, and the Simple, distinguished the tame and uniform features of a crowd of kings alike deserving of oblivion. By the failure of the collateral branches, the whole inheritance devolved to Charles the Fat, the last emperor of his family: his insanity authorised the desertion of Germany, Italy, and France . . . The governors, the bishops and the lords usurped the fragments of the falling empire.¹

This was how, in the late eighteenth century, the great Enlightenment historian Edward Gibbon passed verdict on the end of the Carolingian empire almost exactly 900 years earlier. To twenty-first-century eyes, the terms of this assessment may seem jarring. Gibbon's emphasis on the importance of virtue and his ideas about who or what was a deserving subject of historical study very much reflect the values of his age, the expectations of his audience and the intentions of his work.² However, if the timbre of his analysis now feels dated, its constituent elements have nonetheless survived into modern historiography. The conventional narrative of the end of the empire in the year 888 is still a story about the emergence of recognisable medieval kingdoms which would become modern nations – France, Germany and Italy; about the personal inadequacies of late ninth-century kings as rulers; and about their powerlessness in the face of an increasingly independent, acquisitive and assertive aristocracy. This book is an examination of the validity of these assumptions, and aims to retell the story of the end of the Carolingian empire through the prism of the reign of its last emperor, Charles III, 'the Fat'.

¹ E. Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, new edn (2 vols., Chicago, 1990), vol. 2, chap. 49, p. 213.

² See R. McKitterick and R. Quinault (eds.), *Edward Gibbon and Empire* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. R. McKitterick, 'Gibbon and the Early Middle Ages in Eighteenth-Century Europe', pp. 162–89.

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Charles the Fat (the nickname is convenient, but not contemporary³) was the great-grandson of the emperor Charlemagne, whose wars of conquest and cultural reforms had shaped the territory and character of the Frankish empire under the Carolingians in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. In 843 the empire was split, in traditional Frankish style, between the grandsons of Charlemagne, and despite Viking invasion and periods of internal conflict its constituent kingdoms remained in the Carolingians' hands for nearly five further decades. Charles the Fat is traditionally seen as the squanderer of this family inheritance. The end of his reign heralded the destruction both of the monopoly on legitimate royal power which the Carolingian dynasty had maintained since 751, and of the territorial coherence of the pan-European Frankish empire. At the time of his succession as king of Alemannia in 876 the Carolingian hegemony was very much intact, and Charles was but one king among several controlling the *regna* of the empire. However, within a decade he had become his dynasty's sole ruling representative. A bewildering mixture of illness and misadventure stripped the Carolingian house of all its other adult legitimate males, and delivered into Charles's hands first Italy (879), then Bavaria, Franconia and Saxony (882), and finally the west Frankish kingdom (885). This comprehensive agglomeration of territories amounted to a restoration, for the first time since 840, of the entire empire of Charlemagne, which extended over a million square kilometres. In 881 Charles added the imperial crown to his list of titles, a dignity which enhanced his status and moral authority, although it gave him no new powers. However, Charles's unparalleled success (or fortune) in the acquisition of Carolingian kingdoms during his reign was overshadowed by the abject failure of its conclusion, when, in November 887, he was deposed in a palace coup by his nephew Arnulf of Carinthia, before dying of natural causes a matter of weeks later. Because Charles remained heirless and Arnulf was a bastard, a legitimacy vacuum opened up at the top of Frankish politics. Although descendants of Charlemagne ruled at sporadic intervals in tenth-century France and Italy, the ending of the main Carolingian line's monopoly on legitimate royal power in the crisis of 887–8 meant that parts of the empire were made subject to rule by female-line and non-Carolingians for the first time since 751, and its territories were split apart once and for all. It is generally believed that Charles's loss of power reveals him to have been a failure, an unimaginative and personally weak do-nothing ruler in whose feeble grip the Carolingian

³ The nickname 'Fat' was coined no earlier than the twelfth century: K. Nass, *Die Reichskronik des Annalista Saxo und die sächsische Geschichtsschreibung im 12. Jahrhundert* (Hanover, 1996), p. 49. The dimensions of Charles's girth are thus lamentably unknown. I am grateful to John Gillingham for this reference.

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empire, unprotected from internal conflict and Viking attack, was allowed to tear itself apart. The reign therefore symbolises the end of an era.

As a result of this, the issue of how the reign should be interpreted also has broader historiographical implications. The negative scholarly opinion which prevails about Charles the Fat is based less on critical study of the available evidence than on presuppositions about the course of Carolingian political history as a whole. The historiography of the end of the empire is suffused with ideas from three main strands of scholarly tradition. The first concerns the overall trajectory of Carolingian politics as a curve of rise until about 830, and then decline and fall. It is a commonplace that royal power declined in the later ninth century (according to a recent authority this is 'obvious').⁴ While the landed power of the monarchy dwindled, the aristocracy 'rose', assuming ever more regalian rights, taking over defence against the Vikings and ultimately seizing power in 887–8 from a Carolingian dynasty which was drained of its economic and moral authority. The king–aristocracy relationship is characterised here as oppositional. Late ninth-century kings, and especially Charles the Fat, the ultimate victim of these processes, ruled not with, but rather in spite of the high nobility, who eventually rose up and seized power for themselves. The female-line, illegitimate and non-Carolingian kings who assumed the mantle of kingship in 888 (a contemporary called them *reguli*, 'kinglets') were members of the high aristocracy: therefore, the reasoning goes, any evidence for their activities prior to this date should be read as revealing stages in their 'rise' to kingship.⁵

This type of thinking still lies submerged in many of the standard works on the period: the 'rise of the aristocracy' has become an accepted and largely unquestioned historical reference point the authority of which can be invoked to explain other phenomena of the late ninth century.⁶ The principal reason for this is historiographical: the model, as teleological as it is, fits very neatly into the traditional grand narratives of medieval European history. In particular, it is still often assumed that to explain the supposed emergence of 'feudalism', 'France' and 'Germany' in the tenth century, it is necessary to postulate a crisis of state power developing throughout the late ninth century and facilitating the shift from 'public' (royal) to 'private' (aristocratic) authority.⁷ The work of the

⁴ B. Arnold, *Medieval Germany, 500–1300. A Political Interpretation* (London, 1997), pp. 34, 82.

⁵ *AF(B)* s.a. 888, p. 116.

⁶ C. Lauranson-Rosaz, 'Le Roi et les grands dans l'Aquitaine carolingienne', in R. Le Jan (ed.), *La Royauté et les élites dans l'Europe carolingienne (début IXe siècle aux environs de 920)* (Lille, 1998), pp. 409–36, esp. p. 434, to cite one recent, randomly selected example.

⁷ For apposite comments on the historiographical issues, see T. Reuter, 'The Origins of the German *Sondenweg*? The Empire and its Rulers in the High Middle Ages', in A. Duggan (ed.), *Kings and*

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Belgian author Jan Dhondt, whose 1948 book *Études sur la naissance des principautés territoriales en France* is the classic account of the ‘rise’ thesis, remains the most coherent attempt to expound it systematically on the basis of analysis of the contemporary sources.⁸ Dhondt argued that the ninth century saw a centrifugal redistribution of resources, and by implication power, from the Carolingian kings to a grasping aristocracy, speeded up by the exigencies of defence against the Vikings.⁹ By the late ninth century, some aristocrats were acting as kings in all but name, allowing them to dispense with Carolingian authority. Dhondt’s thesis remains hugely influential, and has become tacitly ratified by and crystallised in historical convention.

Secondly, intricately entwined with the ‘rise of the aristocracy’ model is the view that the later ninth century was an era of regional particularism and growing provincial desire to secede from the empire. Ultimately, these concerns go back to the nineteenth century and the dawn of professional history, the practitioners and patrons of which were often preoccupied with defining the character and origins of modern nation-states.¹⁰ However, these early academic enterprises left an enduring legacy to modern historians, notably French but often followed by those writing in English. In the words of Pierre Riché, for instance, the Treaty of Verdun of 843, which divided the empire into three vertical strips, two of which resembled modern France and Germany in territorial extent, was ‘the birth-certificate of Europe’.¹¹ In contrast, post-war German historians have become extremely cautious about ascribing modern nationalities to early medieval polities, anxious to avoid reproducing the chauvinistic and teleological perspectives of their predecessors. Recent work, exemplified by Carlrichard Brühl’s enormous treatise on the subject, has

Kingship in Medieval Europe (London, 1993), pp. 179–211, at pp. 210–11; D. Barthélemy, ‘Debate: the “Feudal Revolution” I’, *Past and Present* 152 (1996), 196–205, at 199; S. Reynolds, ‘The Historiography of the Medieval State’, in M. Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography* (London and New York, 1997), pp. 117–38, at pp. 124–5; D. Barthélemy, ‘La chevalerie carolingienne: prélude au XIe siècle’, in Le Jan (ed.), *La Royauté et les élites*, pp. 159–75, at p. 168.

⁸ J. Dhondt, *Études sur la naissance des principautés territoriales en France (IXe–Xe siècle)* (Bruges, 1948). J. W. Thompson, *The Dissolution of the Carolingian Fisc in the Ninth Century* (Berkeley, 1935) was an earlier but even more flawed attempt.

⁹ On the Viking aspect of the thesis, the most influential work has been F. Vercauteren, ‘Comment s’est-on défendu, au IXe siècle dans l’empire Franc contre les invasions normandes’, in *XXXe Congrès de la Fédération Archéologique de Belgique* (Brussels, 1936), pp. 117–32.

¹⁰ See now P. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: the Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, 2002). However, some nineteenth-century works remain valuable: in particular G. Waitz, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte* (8 vols., Berlin, 1876–96); and E. Dümmler, *Geschichte des ostfränkischen Reiches*, 2nd edn (3 vols., Leipzig, 1887–8).

¹¹ P. Riché, *The Carolingians: a Family who Forged Europe* (Philadelphia, 1993), p. 168; C. Brühl, *Deutschland-Frankreich: Die Geburt zweier Völker* (Cologne and Vienna, 1990), pp. 7–82 comments perceptively on the historiographical issues.

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emphasised that there is no convincing evidence for recognisably French and German national identities before the eleventh century, until which time politics continued to be articulated in a resolutely Frankish idiom.¹² German scholarship has nevertheless continued to debate the emergence of regional political identities in the so-called principalities or ‘younger stem-dukies’ of the late ninth and tenth centuries. Traditionally these have been thought of as provincial solidarities within former Carolingian subkingdoms such as Bavaria, Saxony and Franconia, each one cemented by its own ethnic identity and led by a semi-autonomous duke (a ‘risen’ aristocrat) who represented his people and ruled them more or less in lieu of the king.¹³ Although the dukies’ ethnic basis has been questioned by Karl-Ferdinand Werner and his followers, who prefer to see them as direct successors to regnal structures created by the Carolingians, their emergence continues to be a primary focus for discussions of late ninth-century history.¹⁴

These historiographical concerns, the origins of nations and the rise of the aristocratic dukies, have cluttered up the political history of the ninth century with a considerable amount of unwelcome baggage. The exposition of these alleged processes has been prioritised over the observation of what actually happened. The search for origins encourages teleology, leading to the late ninth-century evidence being interpreted backwards, from the perspective of the known outcome. It has also led to the assumption that the high aristocratic families who went on to lead the post-Carolingian kingdoms and dukies did so as representatives of ethnic groups: the emergence of smaller political units after 888 is therefore linked in historiographical traditions to the model of the rise of

¹² Brühl, *Deutschland-Frankreich* (mysteriously, Brühl’s book has exactly 843 pages); K. F. Werner, ‘Völker und Regna’, in C. Brühl and B. Schneidmüller (eds.), *Beiträge zur mittelalterlichen Reichs- und Nationsbildung in Deutschland und Frankreich* (Munich, 1997), pp. 15–43. Cf. the comments of S. Airlie, ‘After Empire: Recent Work on the Emergence of Post-Carolingian Kingdoms’, *EME* 2 (1993), 153–61 and Arnold, *Medieval Germany*, pp. 1–12.

¹³ The enormous older bibliography on this subject is best accessed through the discussion of H.-W. Goetz, *Dux und Ducatus. Begriffs- und verfassungsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des sogenannten ‘jüngeren’ Stammesherzogtums an der Wende vom neunten zum zehnten Jahrhundert* (Bochum, 1977), pp. 11–91.

¹⁴ K. F. Werner, *Structures politiques du monde franc (VIe–XIIe siècles)* (London, 1979); K. Brunner, ‘Der fränkische Fürstentitel im neunten und zehnten Jahrhundert’, in H. Wolfram (ed.), *Intitulatio II. Lateinische Herrscher- und Fürstentitel im neunten und zehnten Jahrhundert*, (Vienna, Cologne and Graz, 1973), pp. 179–340. See now R. Le Jan, ‘Continuity and Change in the Tenth-Century Nobility’, in A. Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 53–68, esp. pp. 55–6. Goetz, *Dux und Ducatus* is an all-out assault on the concept of dukies which in its desire to demolish the over-legalistic approaches of previous scholars perhaps threw the baby out with the bathwater; see Brühl, *Deutschland-Frankreich*, pp. 303–29. M. Becher, *Rex, Dux und Gens. Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des sächsischen Herzogtums im 9. und 10. Jahrhundert* (Husum, 1996) is a sophisticated study showing how ethnic aspects can be built into a subtle understanding of the political processes at work.

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the aristocracy. Thus, when it comes to explaining the disintegration of the Carolingian empire, the concerns of post-war historians of the early Middle Ages have resulted in similar conclusions to those reached by the constitutional–legal historians of previous generations.¹⁵ The way the story is told has changed, but the plot and the ending remain essentially the same.

The third theme which has dominated historians' thinking on the end of the empire brings these general issues to bear on a specific problem, namely the deposition and death of Charles the Fat in 887–8, the only part of the reign itself which has been studied in any detail. German historians of the twentieth century debated at length the significance of these events for medieval constitutional history (*Verfassungsgeschichte*). The best example of this is the well-known exchange between Gerd Tellenbach and Walter Schlesinger and some others in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. While Tellenbach took the view that Arnulf's revolt was essentially just another military coup of a type common enough in the brutal world of Frankish politics, Schlesinger insisted that his rise represented the establishment of a new kind of elective kingship brought about by the development of an increasingly independent and class-conscious aristocracy which began to impose institutional checks on the power of the monarchy.¹⁶ The matters at stake were essentially whether or not 887–8 saw the creation of a kingdom of Germany, and whether king or *Volk* (the people) had the whiphand within it. The main reason for the spectacular divergence of views lies in the fact that the two continuations of our main narrative source, the *Annals of Fulda* (*Annales Fuldenses*), which inevitably exert great influence on the structure of modern accounts, present diametrically opposed versions of the events of 887. The twentieth-century disputants were thus readily able to find in the contemporary texts exactly what they wanted to find, and to construct contradictory hypotheses accordingly.

Despite this problem, and despite the fact that the concerns debated by Tellenbach and Schlesinger are no longer such hot issues as they were

¹⁵ E.g., C. Brühl, *Fodrum, Gistum, Servitium Regis. Studien zu den wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen des Königtums im Frankenreich und in der fränkischen Nachfolgestaaten Deutschland, Frankreich und Italien vom 6. bis zur Mitte des 14. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne, 1968), pp. 35–6; J. Fried, 'The Frankish Kingdoms, 817–911: the East and Middle Kingdoms', in *NCMH2*, pp. 142–68, at p. 158.

¹⁶ Most of the contributions are collected in H. Kämpf (ed.), *Die Entstehung des deutschen Reiches (Deutschland um 900)* (Darmstadt, 1956) and E. Hlawitschka (ed.), *Königswahl und Thronfolge in fränkisch-karolingischer Zeit* (Darmstadt, 1975). For useful commentaries see J. Freed, 'Reflections on the Medieval German Nobility', *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), 553–75, at 555; C. R. Bowlus, 'Imre Boba's Reconstructions of Moravia's Early History and Arnulf of Carinthia's Ostpolitik (887–892)', *Speculum* 62 (1987), 552–74, at 554–7, 573. T. Reuter, 'The Medieval Nobility in Twentieth-Century Historiography', in Bentley (ed.), *Companion to Historiography*, pp. 177–202, at p. 185, n. 28 notes a methodological aspect to the dispute.

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in Germany in the 1940s, the terms of the discussion about the balance between aristocracy and emperor established the paradigms for many further discussions of the rising of Arnulf and the end of the Carolingian empire.¹⁷ Historians are still inclined to sidestep the thorny problem of how to reconcile the contrasting annalistic sources by selecting somewhat indiscriminately from each of them to create a single political narrative. The accepted history of the 880s has become a cut-and-paste catalogue of disasters: individual events are taken out of context from different sources in order to affirm an image of events running out of control. This amounts to a tacit declaration by posterity of Schlesinger as the victor in the debate over German *Verfassungsgeschichte*: the crisis of 887–8 is commonly held to be the direct outcome of momentous but nebulous historical processes, such as the ‘rise of the aristocracy’ and the ‘decline of royal authority’, which the course of contemporary events passively reveals, but does not affect.¹⁸

The discussion of these models over the decades has given expression to a starkly defined arc of Carolingian decline. Although the scholarship on which it originally depended is now old, this picture endures because of its neatness: it explains in a plausible and satisfying manner a wide range of aspects of the period c. 850–c. 950. As such, to challenge it is to question the framework in which Carolingian (and post-Carolingian) political history as a whole is understood. The traditional paradigm hinges in particular on the interpretation of the end of the empire. While the significance of this turn of events is widely recognised, its causes are seen as self-explanatory. The politics of the later 870s and 880s have therefore been in a sense dehistoricised. These years are still usually seen as dismal, dark and semi-detached from the main, implicitly more important, period of Carolingian rule. By turning the late ninth-century Carolingians, and Charles the Fat in particular, into victims of traditional historiographical villains like grasping aristocrats, and inexorable historical processes such as the rise of nations, they are effectively erased from history as political actors, and turned into unthinking ciphers whose fates confirm but do not influence the unstoppable tide of progress towards the high medieval future. As a result, since Ernst Dümmler’s positivist survey of 1888, the reign of the last emperor has never been considered as requiring a major study in any language, and the handful of articles which have dealt with

¹⁷ See for example E. M. Eibl, ‘Zur Stellung Bayerns und Rheinfrankens im Reiche Arnulfs von Kärnten’, *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des Feudalismus* 8 (1984), 73–113, at 75–6.

¹⁸ W. Schlesinger, ‘Die Auflösung des Karlsreiches’, in W. Braunsfels (ed.), *Karl der Grosse. Lebenswerk und Nachleben* (5 vols., Düsseldorf, 1965–7), vol. 1, pp. 792–857 is the classic statement; cf. more recently J. Fried, *Der Weg in die Geschichte. Die Ursprünge Deutschlands bis 1024* (Berlin, 1994), pp. 109, 447–8.

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the period focus almost without exception on the emperor's deposition.¹⁹ To this extent, Gibbon's 'dregs' have indeed been left in the darkness he thought they deserved.

However, although these comments do serve to describe broad patterns and themes still current within the historiography, they should not be taken to imply that scholarship on the later ninth century has stood still since the Second World War, or that all historians subscribe to the views which have just been sketched out. On the contrary, recent work has advanced our understanding of later Carolingian politics considerably. The institutional–statist orthodoxies established in the mid-twentieth century by the generation of the illustrious Belgian historian François-Louis Ganshof are being gradually refined by more subtle understandings of how earlier medieval government worked.²⁰ As we shall see in the next section, political structures are not now measured by the standards of modern state hierarchies, with power defined and delegated from the top down, but instead are characterised as fluid networks of patronage and allegiance within the aristocracy, and between powerful aristocrats and the king.²¹ These new perspectives have problematised older paradigms of political development. The traditional framework for understanding the relationship between king and aristocracy has thus changed. Consequently, since the 1980s, a wave of reassessment has swept over the historiography of ninth-century kingship and rehabilitated the historical reputations of Louis the Pious (814–40) and Charles the Bald (840–77).²²

The present book is intended to build on such research and to apply some of its conclusions to the politics of the 870s and 880s, understanding of which remains encased in conventional orthodoxies. Roger Collins recently observed that it might be about time someone stood up for

¹⁹ The best-known (and best) article is H. Keller, 'Zum Sturz Karls III. Über die Rolle Liutwards von Vercelli und Liutberts von Mainz, Arnulfs von Kärnten und der ostfränkischen Großen bei der Absetzung des Kaisers', *DA* 34 (1966), 333–84. Dümmler, *Geschichte des ostfränkischen Reiches*, vol. 3, pp. 175–295.

²⁰ F. L. Ganshof, *Frankish Institutions Under Charlemagne* (Providence, 1968); F. L. Ganshof, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy* (London, 1971).

²¹ For a full historiographical discussion, see M. Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 1–12. Among the most important works, see J. L. Nelson, *Charles the Bald* (London and New York, 1992); R. McKitterick (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History vol. II c. 700–c. 900* (Cambridge, 1995); B. H. Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space: Power, Restraint and Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe* (Manchester, 1999); Innes, *State and Society*; S. Airlie, *Carolingian Politics* (forthcoming). G. Sergi, 'L'Europa carolingia e la sua dissoluzione', in N. Tranfaglia and M. Firpo (eds.), *La Storia. I grandi problemi dal Medioevo all'Età contemporanea* (10 vols., Turin, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 231–62 is a coherent overview and refutation of the traditional picture.

²² See especially P. Godman and R. Collins (eds.), *Charlemagne's Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious, 814–840* (Oxford, 1990); Nelson, *Charles the Bald*. New work on Louis the German is also forthcoming from Eric J. Goldberg.

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Charles the Fat.²³ To some extent, what follows may be viewed as a case for the defence. However, its purpose is not primarily to rehabilitate Charles in order to turn him into a 'better' or 'good' king (although given the consistently bad press he has hitherto had, some such revisionism is inevitable). Nor is it strictly speaking a biography: little will be said, for example, about his earlier life, although much could. Rather, this book aims to use the reign as a window onto the political events and structures of the late Carolingian empire, and hence to reach new conclusions about the reasons for and nature of its disintegration. By thus evaluating the reign in a broader context, it is hoped that some light will also be cast on the workings of Carolingian politics more generally: in studying a political system at the point where it stopped working, as Stuart Airlie has pointed out, we can also reflect on what made it work in the first place.²⁴ To this end, the aim is to consider the sources in context, rather than subordinate their information to historiographical preconceptions about the 'rise of the aristocracy' or the inevitability of the empire's collapse. The conclusions reached suggest that late Carolingian imperial politics retained more vitality and viability than is usually acknowledged. The end of the empire, when it came, was not the inevitable result of unsustainable imbalances in a decaying system, but primarily the outcome of a royal succession dispute which resonated with some wider concerns within the political community of the time. Space does not permit comprehensive coverage of the events and structures of the period concerned. Detailed regional case-studies on the model of Matthew Innes's important study of the middle Rhine valley would, for example, add much to the book's 'top-down' perspective and help refine its conclusions.²⁵ Accordingly, the themes covered, although they contribute to a consistent set of overall conclusions, are focused on the areas where sources are in greatest supply. Moreover, the weight of the traditional historiographical concerns already outlined have an obvious influence on the themes chosen; for example, the nature of the relationships between kings and aristocrats, the ideas and practices of kingship, and the rise of the duchies.

Chapter 2 deals with the evidential basis for the traditional version of events, and argues that historians have been too heavily influenced by the agenda of one particular author, the Mainz continuator of the *Annals of Fulda*. The subsequent two chapters are concerned with political structures, in particular Charles's relationship with the high aristocracy.

²³ R. Collins, 'The Carolingians and the Ottonians in an Anglophone World', *JMH* 22 (1996), 97–114 at 109.

²⁴ S. Airlie, 'Semper fideles? Loyauté envers les carolingiens comme constituant de l'identité aristocratique', in Le Jan (ed.), *La Royauté et les élites*, pp. 129–43.

²⁵ Innes, *State and Society*.

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Here we will assess the evidence for the argument that the period witnessed a decay of the structures of government and a consonant increase in aristocratic authority. Particular attention is paid to the position of the ‘supermagnates’, some of who would take over as kings after the emperor’s death, but we will also address questions of loyalty and secessionism among the political communities of the empire’s regions. Chapters 5 and 6 reconstruct the events of the period from 884 until 888, focusing on developments in the politics of the imperial succession and offering a new hypothesis as to the circumstances of Charles’s deposition. Because this analysis is based on a contextualisation of the changing political positions of the main actors, it will also cast light on broader issues relating to Carolingian kingship and political structures. Finally, chapter 7 offers a new reading of one of the canonical texts of ninth-century historiography, Notker the Stammerer’s biography of Charlemagne, which was written for Charles the Fat, and which will allow us to draw together many of the themes already discussed.

Perhaps surprisingly given the comparative dearth of secondary literature, there is a relatively large body of source material available for the reign, much of it neglected because of a scholarly over-reliance on the evidence of the Mainz version of the *Annals of Fulda*.²⁶ Among the alternative contemporaneous narratives, we are well served up to 882 by Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims’s *Annals of St-Bertin* (*Annales Bertiniani*); after 882 by the Bavarian continuator of the *Annals of Fulda*; and for the whole period by the *Annals of St-Vaast* (*Annales Vedastini*) and Regino of Prüm’s *Chronicon* (the latter written up in 908). The more literary material provided by Notker and the poem on the siege of Paris by Abbo of St-Germain-des-Prés brightly illuminate particular moments and events. Perhaps the most neglected of all the classes of evidence are Charles’s royal diplomas, of which over 170 are included in the standard edition by Paul Kehr: this high number of charters from a reign lasting only eleven years makes Charles perhaps the best-documented of all the Carolingian kings.²⁷ These charters will be used extensively as sources of crucial detail on a variety of subjects which remain opaque to readers of the more (apparently) self-explanatory narrative sources. They are invaluable, most obviously, in reconstructing patterns of political patronage, and in discussing court ideologies. Further points will be elucidated from lesser chronicles, letters, and non-royal charters. It is hoped, therefore, that the

²⁶ See below, chap. 2.

²⁷ R.-H. Bautier, ‘Les Poids de la Neustrie ou de la France du nord-ouest dans la monarchie carolingienne unitaire d’après les diplômes de la chancellerie royale (751–840)’, in H. Atsma (ed.), *La Neustrie. Les pays au nord de la Loire de 650 à 850* (2 vols., Sigmaringen, 1989), vol. 2, pp. 535–63 provides statistics.

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revised narrative presented in this book is based on a more comprehensive range of evidence than that customarily consulted by historians dealing with this period, and hence that its findings will have greater validity when brought to bear on broader historiographical issues concerning the collapse of the Carolingian empire.

THE SHAPE OF POLITICS IN THE LATE NINTH CENTURY

In order to provide some background to the rest of the book, and further introduction to some of its main themes, it is necessary first to outline briefly some of the most relevant features of society and politics in the Carolingian period as they are understood in current scholarship. Carolingian society was essentially rural and agricultural, dominated by rich monasteries and powerful landholders. Following the hugely influential work of the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne, who saw the absence of long-distance trade as crucial, the ninth century was for a long time interpreted as economically stagnant.²⁸ Occasionally this has even been brought to bear as a factor leading to the collapse of the empire.²⁹ Pirenne's pessimistic vision remains much debated, and is still echoed by modern authors.³⁰ However, despite the general dearth of evidence, historians are increasingly inclined to highlight the more positive economic aspects of the period. In the first place, close analysis of coin finds and estate surveys has shown that institutions like monasteries and royal palaces did not scrape by on a purely subsistence basis, but rather produced surpluses which stimulated local markets and economic activity on all levels.³¹ Moreover, it has now become abundantly clear that neither long-distance trade nor urbanism were as stagnant as the Pirenne thesis made out. The decline in the mid-ninth century of the North Sea emporia like Dorestad, which acted as entry points for goods and silver from the North Sea, the Baltic and, indirectly, the Middle East, was offset by the rise of inland towns in their hinterland.³² Powerful landholders could

²⁸ H. Pirenne, *Medieval Cities* (New York, 1925); H. Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (London, 1939). Pirenne was reacting to the more optimistic A. Dopsch, *Die Wirtschaftsentwicklung der Karolingerzeit*, 2nd edn (Weimar, 1921–2), which remains useful.

²⁹ Although principally by Marxist non-specialists.

³⁰ For example, R. Fossier, 'Les tendances de l'économie: stagnation ou croissance?', *Settimane* 27 (1981), 261–74.

³¹ See especially J. P. Devroey, *Études sur le grand domaine carolingien* (Aldershot, 1993).

³² The most sustained direct critique of Pirenne is R. Hodges and D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe. Archaeology and the Pirenne Thesis* (London, 1983). See also R. Hodges, *Dark Age Economics*, 2nd edn (London, 1989); P. Johaneck, 'Der fränkische Handel der Karolingerzeit im Spiegel der Schriftquellen', in K. Düwel et al. (eds.), *Der Handel der Karolinger- und Wikingerzeit* (Göttingen, 1987), pp. 7–68; A. Verhulst, *The Rise of Cities in North-West Europe* (Cambridge, 1999); R. Hodges, *Towns and Trade in the Age of Charlemagne* (London, 2000);

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benefit from these developments. However, the ability of the Carolingian kings right up to the end of the ninth century to exert at least some influence on the directions of trade, and to profit from its proceeds through control of tolls and markets, cannot now be doubted.³³ The production of high-status objects such as luxury manuscripts and elaborate reliquaries testifies to the dynasty's continuing access to sources of wealth.

The Carolingians were, therefore, able to extract economic surpluses from resources beyond the land they controlled immediately, as landlords in their own right. However, this crown (or fiscal) land was important too, not only in sustaining the progress of the itinerant court around the realm, but also in maintaining the palaces and estates which stood as reminders of kings' authority even when they were absent. As we have seen, historians still view the fate of the royal fisc as an extremely important factor in the Carolingians' demise. Following the work of Dhondt in particular, it is frequently stated that the supposedly increasingly weak dynasty squandered its resources, giving away land, churches and regalian rights in an attempt to buy the support of aristocrats who, by the same process, became ever more powerful and independent. Although not all historians would still subscribe to the details of this model, the endurance of its conclusions demands that we pause to consider its general validity.

It should be re-emphasised that Dhondt's use of the sources was flawed, as Jane Martindale has convincingly demonstrated. He paid too little attention to the relative quality of grants made by the Carolingians to the aristocracy, and to the fact that comparatively few charters were actually issued for representatives of its higher echelons.³⁴ It is clear that fiscal lands distributed by ninth-century kings were not those belonging to the key estates on which their economic position was directly based, and that rulers actually maintained some influence over property after they had granted it out. Resources granted to aristocratic beneficiaries were not simply 'lost' to the fisc.³⁵ Likewise, the oft-mentioned tendency of the later ninth-century Carolingians to concede vital royal privileges such as minting, toll, judicial and market rights and control of monasteries to powerful nobles, especially bishops, has also been asserted without

M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy. Communications and Commerce, AD 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001); J. P. Devroey, 'The Economy', in R. McKitterick (ed.), *The Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 97–129; A. Verhulst, *The Carolingian Economy* (Cambridge, 2002).

³³ T. Endemann, *Markturkunde und Markt in Frankreich und Burgund vom 9. bis 11. Jahrhundert* (Constance and Stuttgart, 1964), pp. 105–61; Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, pp. 19–40.

³⁴ J. Martindale, 'The Kingdom of Aquitaine and the Dissolution of the Carolingian Fisc', *Francia* 11 (1985), 131–91; see also Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, pp. 54–5, 233.

³⁵ See most recently Innes, *State and Society*, p. 204; S. Airlie, 'The Palace of Memory: the Carolingian Court as Political Centre', in S. Rees-Jones, R. Marks and A. Minnis (eds.), *Courts and Regions in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 1–20, at p. 11.

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reference to the political circumstances of such grants.³⁶ The documents revealing such gifts cannot be isolated from their immediate political contexts and understood instead as facets of an amorphous 'historical process'. In any case, the detailed work of historians on the control of these rights points to the conclusion that their concentration in the hands of autonomous local power-brokers was primarily a phenomenon of the tenth century, or in some cases the eleventh.³⁷

Furthermore, the 'self-privatisation' model of ninth-century politics is conceptually misconceived, as it rests on the idea that the most important, or even the only important, historically significant way that aristocrats relate to kings is materially. This assumption tends to ascribe to the aristocracy an anachronistic unity of purpose and over-simplistically suggests that royal power was only as enduring as its capacity to distribute material resources, thus underrating its less quantifiable charismatic or cultural elements. The king's power legitimised aristocratic power and gave shape to the idea of the kingdom as an entity. The traditional view also relies on a modern dichotomy between 'public' and 'private' power which did not apply in the early Middle Ages.³⁸ Strategic grants of rights and land to supporters were not necessarily a drain on royal resources because real, if historically less visible, political capital flowed back in the other direction. Although land was a fundamental element of early medieval political influence, its control cannot be seen as a zero-sum game fought out between mutually exclusive royal and aristocratic interests.³⁹ Similarly, it no longer seems as certain as it did to previous generations of historians that aristocratic families had corporate political identities which meant kings had to deal with their interests *en masse*. Instead, it is now clear that the creation of political affinities with powerful regional nobles was a crucial element of effective royal power which allowed kings

³⁶ For an example, see below, pp. 110–15.

³⁷ R. Kaiser, 'Münzprivilegien und bischöfliche Münzprägung in Frankreich, Deutschland und Burgund im 9.–12. Jahrhundert', *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 63 (1976), 289–338; R. Kaiser, 'Teloneum Episcopi. Du tonlieu royal au tonlieu épiscopal dans les civitates de la Gaule (VIe–XIIe siècle)', in W. Paravicini and K. F. Werner (eds.), *Histoire comparée de l'administration (IVe–XVIIIe siècles)* (Munich, 1980), pp. 469–85; F. Hardt-Friedrichs, 'Markt, Münze und Zoll im östfränkischen Reich bis zum End der Ottonen', *Blätter für deutsche Landesgeschichte* 116 (1980), 1–31; O. Guyotjeannin, *Episcopus et comes. Affirmation et déclin de la seigneurie épiscopale au nord du royaume de France* (Geneva, 1987), pp. 9–65; H. Hoffmann, 'Grafschaften in Bischofshand', *DA* 46 (1990), 374–480; A.-M. Helvétius, *Abbayes, évêques et laïques. Une politique du pouvoir en Hainaut au Moyen Age (VIIe–XIe siècle)* (Brussels, 1994), pp. 153–310; F. Bougard, *La Justice dans le royaume d'Italie de la fin du VIIIe siècle au début du XIe siècle* (Rome, 1995), pp. 253–69.

³⁸ J. L. Nelson, 'The Problematic in the Private', *Social History* 15 (1990), 355–64; Reynolds, 'Historiography of the Medieval State'.

³⁹ C. Wickham and T. Reuter, 'Introduction', in W. Davies and P. Fouracre (eds.), *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 1–16.

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to influence local politics.⁴⁰ Far from being a weak-willed submission to the diminution of royal power, the very act of granting out privileges and immunities, one of the functions of which was to limit the activities of local royal representatives, was itself a statement of authority.⁴¹ In the absence of formal state structures, the deployment of patronage was the very basis of Carolingian power, not its antithesis. It reinforced the noble elite's control over land, and provided the cultural glue which held the empire together.⁴² To study these phenomena properly, rather than appealing to a generalised decline of 'state' power and property which swung the political balance in favour of the aristocracy, we must look at the individual documents which record this kind of patronage, and ask more specific questions about their contemporary meaning and political context.

All this is not to say that the aristocracy remained in stasis during the Carolingian period. For example, there is some evidence in the royal capitularies of later ninth-century Italy that kings were becoming anxious about the growing power of 'patrons', presumably large-scale landholders, over the freemen who lived within their spheres of influence.⁴³ This is not the place to go into these matters in detail. However, we ought to be wary of reading too much political significance into the existence of such figures in the later ninth century. This kind of powerful landlord could often be a useful royal ally in areas far from the centre of the king's authority, and as such were sometimes even deliberately created and empowered by rulers.⁴⁴ It is misguided to think of these lordships as inherently inimical to effective government. Even those freemen who did fall under their influence retained obligations to public duties, although this is not always immediately apparent from the sources.⁴⁵

Moreover, the ethos of lordship and heritability of office did not, as has often been claimed, progressively infect the behaviour and diminish the effectiveness of ninth-century 'public officials', especially counts, the fundamental Carolingian royal representatives. We can no longer be

⁴⁰ As demonstrated by two important studies: B. H. Rosenwein 'The Family Politics of Berengar I, King of Italy (888–924)', *Speculum* 71 (1996), 247–89; Innes, *State and Society*.

⁴¹ Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space*; see also P. Fouracre, 'Eternal Light and Earthly Needs: Practical Aspects of the Development of Frankish Immunities', in Davies and Fouracre (eds.), *Property and Power*, pp. 53–81.

⁴² See Rosenwein, 'Family Politics of Berengar', p. 249; P. Fouracre, *The Age of Charles Martel* (Harlow, 2000), esp. pp. 18–27.

⁴³ G. Tabacco, *I Liberi del re nell'Italia carolingia e postcarolingia* (Spoleto, 1966), pp. 51–2, 72; G. Tabacco, *The Struggle for Power in Medieval Italy* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 130.

⁴⁴ See below, pp. 110–15.

⁴⁵ Tabacco, *I Liberi del re*, pp. 105–7; A. Castagnetti, 'Arimanni e signori dall'età postcarolingia alla prima età comunale', in G. Dilcher and C. Violante (eds.), *Strutture e trasformazioni della signoria rurale nei secoli X–XII* (Bologna, 1996), pp. 169–285 at pp. 172–4.

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confident that counties became increasingly heritable as time passed (or even if they did, that this necessarily diminished their character as royal benefices). This assumption traditionally rested on a mistaken interpretation of the Capitulary of Quierzy (877).⁴⁶ It is true that members of the nobility often held *honores* in the same areas as their relatives, as time and tradition helped them build up claims.⁴⁷ However, this was a fundamental tendency of early medieval politics which was not simply confined to the late ninth century. As far back as our evidence goes, Frankish kings had always expected their representatives to be well-endowed in their localities: this is what made them useful and effective in the first place.⁴⁸ Equally, leading aristocrats always expected *honores*, and maximising the political benefit of their distribution was one of the basic aims of kingship. There were certainly many endemic tensions within the system, but these often took the form of conflicts over the control of royal offices themselves.⁴⁹ The evidence does not allow us to conclude (as many have) that the end of the empire was caused by the bastardisation of royal service with 'proto-feudal' ties which took counts out of the 'public' sphere and removed them from the king's control.⁵⁰ The king's power depended on the power of the aristocracy. Counts continued to think of themselves as performing royal service right through the century. Aristocratic lordship and royal power always coexisted in the Frankish polity.

These problems with the traditional view are partly derived from their basis in a maximalist reading of the capitularies (broadly speaking legislative documents structured as the proceedings of assemblies), from which it has been concluded that Carolingian rule was underpinned by a fixed hierarchy of royal representatives who became increasingly independent and hard to control. This is not a measure which we can reasonably apply to ninth-century politics.⁵¹ Capitularies may have prescribed a kind of hierarchy in theory, but that does not mean one existed in practice. Early medieval kingship was never about parcelling up morsels of sovereign or 'state' power and delegating them to carefully chosen subordinates. Counts and other key royal representatives like *missi dominici* (the king's inspectors) were not a type of removable official in the modern sense.

⁴⁶ See Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, pp. 248–9; S. Airlie, 'The Aristocracy', in *NCMH2*, pp. 431–50 at p. 444.

⁴⁷ For an example see D. Jackman, 'Rorgonid Right: Two Scenarios', *Francia* 28 (1999), 129–53, at 129–38.

⁴⁸ Fouracre, *Age of Charles Martel*, pp. 13–15.

⁴⁹ For one conspicuous example, a dispute over the county of Autun, see *AB* s.a. 864, p. 114; 866, p. 126. On tension, see Airlie, 'Semper fideles?'

⁵⁰ S. Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals. The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994), esp. pp. 111–14.

⁵¹ See P. Fouracre, 'Carolingian Justice: the Rhetoric of Improvement and Contexts of Abuse', *Settimane* 42 (1995), 771–803.

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Rather, they were members of already powerful regional families who were persuaded to align themselves with the Carolingian polity by re-defining their power in terms of royal service.⁵² There is no overwhelming evidence that, as a rule, royal representatives, such as counts, became more locally embedded as time passed, or that late ninth-century kings had more difficulties than their predecessors in trying to remove them.⁵³ Deposing a count or bishop was always tricky. Throughout the Carolingian period rebellious aristocrats who had their offices confiscated often reappeared back in position after a period of time. Few Carolingians felt secure enough to have one of their leading aristocrats executed or permanently exiled, except in extreme circumstances. These people and their families were wealthy and influential independently of the ruling dynasty: the Carolingians did not create their aristocracy, but emerged from it.⁵⁴ As a result, they could not afford to deal too high-handedly with the nobility. Important noble families did have dynastic consciousness and strong group identity.⁵⁵ However, these factors do not *per se* mean that such families were politically obstructive. Aristocratic family identity, group-consciousness and domination of local offices were not peculiarities of the late Carolingian period, but rather ubiquitous features of the early medieval European nobility.

Carolingian government was thus a loosely constructed entity which depended on a series of alliances and relationships with regional power-brokers, constantly nurtured by the judicious deployment of patronage and also sustained by royal ideology. One conspicuous sign that aristocratic lords remained part of this system in the late ninth century is that kings managed to form effective armies right up until the end of the dynasty's hegemony in 888.⁵⁶ Lordship was the very basis of military

⁵² J. Hannig, 'Zentrale Kontrolle und regionale Machtbalance. Beobachtungen zum System der karolingischen Königsboten am Beispiel des Mittelrheingebietes', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 66 (1984), 1–46; J. Hannig, 'Zur Funktion der karolingischen *missi dominici* in Bayern und in den südöstlichen Grenzgebieten', *ZSRG GA* 101 (1984), 256–300; Innes, *State and Society*, pp. 188–95.

⁵³ A. Krah, *Absetzungsverfahren als Spiegelbild von Königsmacht. Untersuchungen zum Kräfteverhältnis zwischen Königtum und Adel im Karolingerreich und seinen Nachfolgestaaten* (Aalen, 1987), pp. 379–401 provides a handlist of cases. See also Airlie, 'The Aristocracy'. The central issues could be further illuminated by research on more specific cases.

⁵⁴ K. F. Werner, 'Important Noble Families in the Kingdom of Charlemagne – a Prosopographical Study of the Relationship Between King and Nobility in the Early Middle Ages', in T. Reuter (ed.), *The Medieval Nobility. Studies on the Ruling Classes of France and Germany from the Sixth to the Twelfth Century* (Amsterdam, New York and Oxford, 1979), pp. 137–202; originally published with appendices as 'Bedeutende Adelsfamilien im Reich Karls des Grossen. Ein personengeschichtlicher Beitrag zum Verhältnis von Königtum und Adel im frühen Mittelalter', in Braunfels (ed.), *Karl der Grosse*, vol. I, pp. 83–142.

⁵⁵ See now R. Le Jan, *Famille et pouvoir dans le monde franc (VIIe–Xe siècle). Essai d'anthropologie sociale* (Paris, 1995). See also below, pp. 54–5.

⁵⁶ See below, pp. 58, 121.

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service in the period, providing the structures by means of which the army was summoned.⁵⁷ However, the Vikings, against whom most of these armies were assembled, have also been identified as having had a cataclysmic effect on Carolingian rule. Certainly the end of the empire coincided with the most intense period so far of Scandinavian raiding on the Continent. Having been effectively forced out of Francia by the defensive measures of Charles the Bald in the mid-860s, the Vikings began to concentrate their energies on the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms instead. The relative respite enjoyed by the Franks endured until 879, when the so-called Viking Great Army (the term is contemporary) returned to take advantage of the political confusion which attended the death of King Louis the Stammerer.⁵⁸ Although Viking warbands were loosely organised, and could break apart and reform at will, the Great Army was particularly well coordinated, and posed significant problems for the Carolingian kings. Before famine forced it to leave in 892, parts of the Army overwintered in and ransacked areas from Normandy to Burgundy, and in 885–6 besieged Paris and extracted a large ransom, a success which disturbed several contemporary commentators.

Historians generally stop short of ascribing to the Vikings direct agency in the end of the Carolingian empire. Current views of their activity stress their role as an integral part of European political culture rather than an alien and disruptive force.⁵⁹ Although their impact was massive, their aim was not to bring down the empire, but rather to participate in it. Nevertheless, the Scandinavians have been made indirectly culpable for the empire's fate. In the first place, they have been held partly responsible for the deposition of Charles the Fat in 887, the event which heralded the *de facto* dissolution of his dynasty's royal monopoly. The emperor's inability to fight off the invaders, especially at Asselt in 882 and Paris in 886, has been cited as a cause of contemporaries' loss of confidence in him, and thus of his removal from office.⁶⁰ Secondly, the Vikings have been given an important role in the posited rise of aristocratic power, in that the increase in raids supposedly caused a localisation of defence which

⁵⁷ T. Reuter, 'Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire', *TRHS*, 5th series, 35 (1985), 75–94; T. Reuter, 'The End of Carolingian Military Expansion', in Godman and Collins (eds.), *Charlemagne's Heir*, pp. 391–405; G. Halsall, *Warfare and Society in the Barbarian West* (London, forthcoming), chap. 4. Cf. R. Abels, *Lordship and Military Obligation in Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1988).

⁵⁸ For an accessible general discussion see S. Coupland, 'The Vikings in Francia and Anglo-Saxon England to 911', in *NCMH2*, pp. 190–201.

⁵⁹ N. Lund, 'Allies of God or Man? The Viking Expansion in a European Perspective', *Viator* 20 (1989), 45–59; cf. P. Heather, 'State Formation in Europe in the First Millennium AD', in B. Crawford (ed.), *Scotland in Dark Age Europe* (St Andrews, 1994), pp. 47–70.

⁶⁰ For references see S. MacLean, 'Charles the Fat and the Viking Great Army: the Military Explanation for the End of the Carolingian Empire', *War Studies Journal* 3 (1998), 74–95.

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both damaged royal prestige and increased the power of regional leaders who effectively took over as rulers of their areas. We will consider these claims more fully in later chapters.⁶¹ It is undeniable that the Scandinavian presence put a serious strain on the relationship between the king and his regional commanders, upon which the structures of the empire depended. However, it is worth re-emphasising here that the traditional model tends to misconceptualise the problem. It decontextualises the political significance of the evidence by assuming an anachronistic unity of consciousness and behaviour among the aristocracy. In fact, local and royal organisation of defence cannot be seen as mutually exclusive. The king's authority was effective because of powerful regional leaders, not in spite of them. Participation in warfare was always central to the identity of the Carolingian aristocracy.⁶² Although the sources are not always explicit about this, war was usually carried out in the king's name. Central elements of the thesis, such as the appearance of proto-castles as focal points for the newly localised and militarised nobility, rest on broad and unsustainable generalisations from individual sources (in this case a clause in the 864 Edict of Pîtres).⁶³ Far from being agencies of division, the army and warfare were important forums for the building of a common political identity even when, as for most of the ninth century, the type of war engaged in was defensive.

The constant presence of the Vikings must have normalised the duties of defence and of service under the king. This habituation rested on a broader cultural conformity across the empire, the nobility of which instinctively looked, in the ninth century, to the Frankish (Carolingian) kings for leadership. When considering the relationship between aristocracy and king in this period, we must bear in mind that they shared the same thought-world. The Carolingians were essentially an aristocratic family themselves, and as such had had to work very hard to distance and distinguish their power from that of the nobility from which they emerged.⁶⁴ Royal consecration and similar rituals enabled them to assert

⁶¹ See below, Chaps. 3–4.

⁶² See K. Leyser, 'Early Medieval Canon Law and the Beginnings of Knighthood', in L. Fenske et al. (eds.), *Institutionen, Kultur und Gesellschaft im Mittelalter. Festschrift J. Fleckenstein* (Sigmaringen, 1984), pp. 549–66; Barthélemy, 'La chevalerie'.

⁶³ C. Coulson, 'Fortresses and Social Responsibility in Late Carolingian France', *Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters* 4 (1976), 29–36 discusses the broad concept of the duty to defend the homeland. See also MacLean, 'Viking Great Army', pp. 82–3. A. Renoux (ed.), *Palais médiévaux (France-Belgique)* (Le Mans, 1994), provides a survey of such structures in the most affected areas, which uncovers little archaeological evidence for late ninth-century aristocratic forts. See also A. Renoux (ed.), *Palais royaux et princiers au Moyen Âge* (Le Mans, 1996).

⁶⁴ Airlie, 'Semper fideles?'; S. Airlie, 'Narratives of Triumph and Rituals of Submission: Charlemagne's Mastering of Bavaria', *TRHS*, 6th series, 9 (1999), 93–119.

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and reinforce their royal authority. However, court rituals and less formal pastimes such as hunting helped to build corporate identities which bonded kings and nobles.⁶⁵ Aristocratic children were often brought up at royal courts, which provided springboards for successful political and ecclesiastical careers.⁶⁶ Monasteries and nunneries where royal and aristocratic patrons and oblates came into contact and were commemorated together also formed nodes of interaction.⁶⁷ Common cultural values were also defined and transmitted through collections of histories which celebrated the divinely ordained success of the Frankish people.⁶⁸ The existence of these values reminds us that any explanation of politics which rests on the assumption of innate antagonisms between nobility and ruling dynasty must be questioned.

Finally we must return to the political centre and its tools of power. In terms of what we might call the formal structures of government, it is difficult to measure the directions of change in the ninth century. In particular, the tailing off of capitularies in the kingdoms west of the Rhine and south of the Alps after around 840, and their total absence in the east Frankish kingdom, has often been taken as a symptom of governmental weakness. Nevertheless, we continue to encounter active royal representatives like counts and *missi* ('sent men') in local charters right through the ninth century. Clearly, their functioning was not dependent on political structures whose existence was revealed and regulated exclusively by means of capitularies. There is little direct evidence for the practical use of these documents, for example as reference points in resolving disputes, and even an attempt to codify the capitularies at the height of their production at the court of Louis the Pious apparently failed to turn up more than a fraction of those which had been so far compiled.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ J. L. Nelson, 'The Lord's Anointed and the People's Choice: Carolingian Royal Ritual', in J. L. Nelson, *The Frankish World, 750–900* (London and Rio Grande, 1996), pp. 99–130.

⁶⁶ M. Innes, 'A Place of Discipline: Aristocratic Youth and Carolingian Courts', in C. Cubitt (ed.), *Court Culture in the Early Middle Ages* (forthcoming).

⁶⁷ For example, see H. Becher, 'Das königliche Frauenkloster San Salvatore/Santa Giulia in Brescia im Spiegel seiner Memorialüberlieferung', *FMSI* 17 (1983), 299–392; on oblates see M. de Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West* (Leiden, New York and Cologne, 1996).

⁶⁸ From a growing bibliography on the subject, see R. McKitterick, 'The Audience for Carolingian Historiography', in A. Scharer and G. Scheibelreiter (eds.), *Historiographie im frühen Mittelalter* (Vienna and Munich 1994), pp. 96–114; R. McKitterick, 'Political Ideology in Carolingian Historiography', in Y. Hen and M. Innes (eds.), *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 162–74; H. Reimitz, 'Ein fränkisches Geschichtsbuch aus Saint-Amand', in C. Egger and H. Weigl (eds.), *Text-Schrift-Codex. Quellenkundliche Arbeiten aus dem Institut für österreichische Geschichtsforschung* (Vienna, 1999), pp. 34–90.

⁶⁹ H. Mordek, 'Karolingische Kapitularien', in H. Mordek (ed.), *Überlieferung und Geltung normativer Texte des frühen und hohen Mittelalters* (Sigmaringen, 1986), pp. 25–50; though cf. R. McKitterick, 'Zur Herstellung von Kapitularien: Die Arbeit des Leges-Skriptoriums', *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 101 (1993), 3–16.

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Capitularies seem, in any case, to have functioned less as formal legislation than as 'instruments of power' proclaiming Carolingian authority and empowering regional agents to act upon it.⁷⁰ The progressive increase in royal charters during the ninth century suggests that in some senses they had replaced capitularies as tools for building the power of royal agents. Like capitularies, charters were intensely royal objects, the presence of which imparted something of the king's presence even when he himself was absent.⁷¹ Possession of the documents and the grants of lands and rights they sanctioned enabled royal representatives to assert themselves on behalf of the ruler.⁷² There are hints in the narrative sources that late ninth-century east Frankish kings did issue capitularies which have not survived.⁷³ However, the abiding impression is that things were done differently east of the Rhine, where the conduct of politics was less reliant on the written word, but where royal authority was nevertheless at least as secure as elsewhere.⁷⁴ For example, we learn from an annalistic source that Charles the Fat met with his men in May 884 'and sent guardians of his frontiers against the Northmen'.⁷⁵ This report of what was probably an oral decision could nevertheless serve as a concise paraphrase of the type of defensive arrangement recorded in written capitularies of the early ninth century. Similarly, we have evidence for Charles regulating the conditions of military service in 887 in a royal charter.⁷⁶ The political aims of both these acts are consonant with the intentions of the early Carolingian capitularies, even if the medium of delivery was different.⁷⁷

The stability of all these structures of rule was frequently unbalanced during the ninth century by conflicts within the Carolingian dynasty. Power struggles between fathers and sons, a prominent feature of Frankish politics since at least the sixth century, took on extra complexity with the division of the empire in 843, which created the circumstances for in-house conflicts which cut across the family tree horizontally and diagonally as well as vertically.⁷⁸ Once uncles and cousins (not to mention Vikings and Slavs) became potential allies for disaffected sons, the possibilities of trouble were exponentially increased. Particularly potent

⁷⁰ Innes, *State and Society*, pp. 253–4. The coincidence of the high point of capitulary output and the most energetic court sponsorship of reform was presumably no accident.

⁷¹ Airlie, 'Palace of Memory', p. 11.

⁷² For the example of Geilo of Langres, see below, pp. 110–15.

⁷³ *AF* s.a. 852, pp. 42–3 (on which see T. Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages, c.800–1056* (London and New York, 1991), pp. 84–9); less definitely *AF(M)* s.a. 882, p. 99.

⁷⁴ Reuter, 'Plunder and Tribute'; Reuter, *Germany in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 84–94.

⁷⁵ *AF(M)* s.a. 884, p. 101. ⁷⁶ D CIII 158; MacLean, 'Viking Great Army', pp. 83–5.

⁷⁷ These comments are intended to be general: this is an area in need of much further research.

⁷⁸ See now the exhaustive study of B. Kasten, *Königssöhne und Königsherrschaft. Untersuchungen zur Teilhabe am Reich in der Merowinger- und Karolingerzeit* (Hanover, 1997).

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outbreaks of rebellion could threaten the positions of even very powerful rulers, as they did those of Louis the Pious in the early 830s and Charles the Bald in the late 850s. Paradoxically, however, this kind of in-house revolt, although dangerous to individual kings, helped to reinforce the hegemony of the Carolingian dynasty as a whole. Every rebellion of the ninth century except one was fronted by a member of the dynasty. This pattern testifies to the success of the Carolingians in nurturing the idea that only they could be kings, and that one king could only be replaced by another from the same family.⁷⁹ Rebellions of this kind provided outlets for the frustrations and ambitions of the aristocracy, while simultaneously reaffirming the normality of Carolingian royal legitimacy. Naturally, this mechanism could only work as long as there was a sufficient number of royal family members. As we shall see, in the circumstances of the mid-880s, when the stock of adult male Carolingians had been drastically reduced by illness and accident, the system could swiftly turn against the dynasty.

There is no obvious upwards trend in the intensity of conflict within the ruling house in the later decades of the ninth century. There was no generalised phenomenon of unrest in response to increasingly effete kingship. Such conflict was endemic, and the simple fact of its existence cannot explain the collapse, or even the weakening, of the empire. However, the single ninth-century usurpation attempt led by a non-Carolingian, that of Count Boso of Vienne in 879–80, posed more serious problems.⁸⁰ Boso's attempt to seize the throne of west Francia was made in response to the power vacuum created by the dispute over the succession to Louis the Stammerer (d. 10 April 879). Successions were often times of high tension which prompted manoeuvring and realignment within the political community, and the fast turnover of kings in the 870s and 880s did make this an unusually turbulent period of Carolingian history. Because Boso was an outsider (despite his wife being Carolingian), his initial success in having himself crowned and anointed as king in Provence represented a challenge to the very basis of Carolingian hegemony.⁸¹ If Boso succeeded in showing that non-Carolingians could become kings, the dynasty's monopoly on royal legitimacy would collapse, along with the empire it supported. In the event, this is not how it turned out. The four Carolingians ruling at the time were spurred to common action by the rebellion, sending several armies to defeat Boso militarily, and then coming

⁷⁹ Airlie, 'Semper fideles?'

⁸⁰ For the following paragraph see S. MacLean, 'The Carolingian Response to the Revolt of Boso, 879–87', *EME* 10 (2001), 21–48.

⁸¹ Airlie, 'Semper fideles?', pp. 139–41; S. Airlie, 'The Nearly Men: Boso of Vienne and Arnulf of Bavaria', in Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and Nobility*, pp. 25–41.

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together to decide a political alliance which would prevent such a figure emerging in the future. The sworn settlement which they sealed at Vienne in 880 tidied up a number of outstanding territorial disputes. However, it also included a family arrangement which provided for the mutual succession to each other of the four kings, all of whom were heirless. Not only did this work out in practice more or less as planned, but the evidence also suggests that the kings continued to cooperate politically. The rising of Boso, as dangerous as it was, therefore actually brought about a rare period of accord within the Carolingian house. The dynasty's real problems only surfaced in subsequent years when, as we will see, the early deaths of the rulers who were party to the Vienne agreement brought about a new and different kind of succession crisis which was not so easily resolved.

One aim of this very selective and highly compressed preliminary survey of pertinent themes is to highlight the extent to which this book's conclusions build on the findings of recent research by other historians. This research demonstrates in general terms that almost all of the concepts and arguments on which the traditional 'decline and fall' model of the end of the empire rests have been effectively dismantled. Many of the phenomena traditionally thought to have catalysed late Carolingian stagnation, such as intra-dynastic conflict and aristocratic power, were in fact fundamental elements of the early Middle Ages as a whole. This is not the same thing as saying that nothing changed over the period: the dynamic nature of early medieval culture and politics is becoming increasingly apparent. Rather, the point is that explanations of the end of the empire can no longer be allowed to rest on broad assumptions about 'historical processes' such as the rise of the aristocracy or the declining strength of the Carolingian kings. Such assertions do not stand up to detailed scrutiny, and need to be replaced with explanations which interpret all the sources in their political contexts, rather than using them selectively to illustrate a story whose plot and ending are pre-determined by historiographical convention. The fact that this kind of analysis has never been fully applied to the events of the late 870s and 880s testifies to the strength of these conventions, whose axioms have become part of the grain of historiographical tradition, and remain central to the master narratives of the course of Carolingian history as a whole. With these conclusions in mind, we now turn to an analysis of the reign of Charles the Fat, in the hope of understanding the end of the Carolingian empire in a clearer light.