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978-1-107-19839-5 — Writing the Early Medieval West
Edited by Elina Screen , Charles West
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1 Introduction: A Study in the Education of a Society?

Marios Costambeys and Matthew Innes

Forty years ago, a Cambridge PhD thesis was completed. Pointing to the remarkable textual output of the Carolingian rulers and their advisors over a range of genres, it argued for their cumulative transformative impact, such as justified their presentation as 'a study in the education of a society'. (Note, *no* question mark).[1] This was a brave and striking approach to take, at a time when debate was focused on the 'limits' of Carolingian attempts at reform, and when the dominant recent contributions to the literature saw the ninth century as a period in which political failure led to the leaching away of ideological innovation from Carolingian rulers to an increasingly assertive and independent episcopate.[2] Published with characteristic rapidity as a monograph, Rosamond McKitterick's first major academic intervention mapped out a series of concerns and questions which she has pursued through over a hundred articles as well as pivotal monographs and edited volumes, reshaping our understanding of early medieval writing and its role in culture and society.[3] This remarkably focused body of work has inspired all the authors in this volume, whose contributions seek in different ways to develop and take forward this research agenda, refining our understanding of the interaction between early medieval society and the writings it produced.

[1] 'The Carolingian Renaissance. A Study in the Education of a Society', unpublished PhD thesis, Cambridge, 1976. This was submitted under Rosamond McKitterick's maiden name of Pierce. For the conscious use of 'Renaissance' here, see below, pp. 3–4.

[2] Cf. the major study of Rosamond's supervisor, Ullmann, *The Carolingian Renaissance*, to which McKitterick was replying in her title. It is rarely read or cited now, so it is easy to overlook how it was seen as a foundational text into the 1980s at least. See also the piece by McKitterick's near contemporary and fellow Ullmann supervisee Jinty Nelson, 'On the limits of the Carolingian renaissance'. Nelson would of course now take a different view, in the light of her own and McKitterick's subsequent research, which together has transformed our understanding of the Carolingians: for a sense of subsequent trajectory see emblematically Nelson, 'Charles le Chauve'.

[3] McKitterick, *The Frankish Church*.

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The Carolingians and the Written Word

The contours of debate about the uses of the written word in the early Middle Ages in general, and under the Carolingians in particular, have changed fundamentally in the past four decades. Scholars may now disagree over the extent to which Carolingian aspirations were novel in their conception, as opposed to being rooted in the diverse experience of post-classical cultures which saw themselves unambiguously as 'Rome's heirs'; they may grow increasingly canny in the methodologies they use to assess the impact of the Carolingian programme; and they may differ on whether Carolingian cultural achievements fed directly or discontinuously into later medieval cultural developments. But whatever answers they give to these three related questions, there is no longer room to doubt that the Carolingian period saw a concerted cultural effort designed to change social and political norms through the imposition of models contained in and exemplified by authoritative texts.

The classic statement of this programme remains McKitterick's 1989 book *The Carolingians and the Written Word*, a work she subsequently characterised as making the full case she had wished to make in her PhD, if she had had the time and resources to do so.[4] In this landmark study of early medieval culture and society, McKitterick sought to reveal the multiple genres – law, charters, scripture, poetry, history and more – that the Franks of the Carolingian age absorbed from the Roman legacy of written Latin culture, developed in new ways, and projected into the future. So much of what they did was new: a new script, new scriptoria in the new monasteries, new methods of education in writing, a new emphasis on the parchment codex. Yet the content of what they wrote was often far from new: Scripture, above all, and works of Latin literature that were already regarded as 'classics', whether Christian or not.

Simple statistics indicate the success of the scribes of Carolingian Europe in reaffirming the essential written basis of their Christian culture: it is well known that while fewer than 2,000 Latin manuscript codices or fragments of codices survive from the entire period up to AD 800, for the ninth century alone we have over 7,000.[5] This productivity was not simply a massive exercise in copying: indeed, McKitterick was one of the first to appreciate fully how transmission also involved initiative

[4] R. McKitterick, speaking at the Leeds International Medieval Congress, 5 July 2016.
[5] Pre-800 codices and fragments are listed in *CLA* with addenda by Bischoff and Brown, 'Addenda I' and Bischoff et al., 'Addenda II'. In addition to these 1,884 manuscripts, there are the twenty-nine papyri from Herculaneum described by Radiciotti, 'Osservazioni paleografiche'. For ninth-century western manuscripts, see Bischoff, *Katalog der festländischen Handschriften* and Bischoff, 'Über den Plan'; Ganz, 'Study'.

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and creativity, as subsequent research has consistently emphasised.[6] Yet we continue to wrestle with this programme's ability to be at once both conservative and innovative. It aimed to implement a view of 'peace, unity and concord among the Christian people' first fully advocated in the *Admonitio Generalis* of 789 – a key text in McKitterick's writings from her first 1977 monograph through to her monumental 2008 study of Charlemagne.[7] Yet this did not preclude a deep engagement with Rome, and with a Roman past that was not reducible to the aspirations and claims of the popes, as a series of McKitterick's more recent studies have demonstrated.[8] Carried along on the broad tide of Christian and didactic texts are works which have subsequently been foundational in European culture – Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, for instance, or Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* – but which survive only thanks to the interest and activities of Frankish scribes and their contemporaries.[9]

It would be normal at this stage to debate the time-honoured question as to whether these developments can be characterised as a 'renaissance' on the model of the fourteenth century. This question, and the comparisons that underpin it, have inspired some penetrating studies of Carolingian engagement with the classics.[10] Yet no one would claim that the Carolingians or even their most classicising advisors sought to remould their society on the lines of a Roman past as represented in the Latin classics, as at least some thinkers attempted in the fourteenth century, if not before.[11] After all, there is little sense that the division between classical and Christian Rome was meaningful to our authors as a 'hard' break, in the way it was recast from the time of the Renaissance humanists onwards with the development of a tripartite model of the past which created a 'middle ages' dividing a classical norm from its present emulators: the Carolingians were avowedly Christian rulers who happily patronised their wholly anachronistic self-representation dressed in the costume of classical Rome.

6 For example Paul the Deacon's creative use of second-century grammarians in writing his Epitome: see Glinister et al., *Verrius, Festus and Paul*, and Costambeys, p. 57 below.
7 *Admonitio Generalis*, *MGH* Fontes iuris germanici antiqui, 16 (Hanover, 2012), pp. 180–239; trans. King, *Charlemagne*, pp. 209–20.
8 McKitterick, *Perceptions of the Past*, esp. pp. 35–62; McKitterick, 'Roman texts'; McKitterick, 'Transformations'.
9 Two examples from a much longer list: the best starting place remains Reynolds and Wilson, *Texts and Transmission*, and their *Scribes and Scholars*. In the case of Suetonius, the interest evinced by Einhard's revival of this text enables us to see just how fragile the thread was: see the letter and other evidence discussed in Innes, 'The classical tradition'.
10 E.g. Innes, 'The classical tradition'; Kempshall, 'Some Ciceronian models'.
11 Skinner, *Visions of Politics* ; Stacey, *Roman Monarchy*.

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Most easily missed in the sheer weight of the evidence is the concerted and conscious effort of the Carolingians and their agents to create textual models of *Christian* authority, creating a shared history which encoded collective norms. The implication of the 'renaissance' debate – that the classical past has a canonical place and was the only sophisticated textual model to hand worth debating – has invited successive generations to miss the force of the Carolingian project. Yet these newly forged Carolingian, Christian 'texts of authority' were consciously and consistently elevated to restructure cultural and social norms around written models: that is why it makes sense to write of 'the education of a society'.

McKitterick was careful in her 1989 monograph to talk of 'the written word', and selective in her use of the more loaded term, 'literacy'. Influenced by the sociologist Richard Hoggart in his evocation of 'the uses of literacy' among the twentieth-century English working classes, writing appears as a resource to be used and experienced.[12] The judgements and definitional issues involved in ascribing the quality of 'literacy' (reading or writing? Individually or in a group? With what degree of fluency?), whether to individuals or to whole societies, were thus deftly negotiated. Focusing on the specifics of how this text or technology was used, at this time in this place, was a discreetly polite corrective to the grand narratives, inspired by functionalism and structural anthropology, which had opened up the study of medieval literacy for a slightly older generation, an approach exemplified in Michael Clanchy's spellbinding *From Memory to Written Record*, and brilliantly essayed for early medievalists by Clanchy's sometime colleague Patrick Wormald.[13] And McKitterick did not shy from demonstrating that writing had to be understood to be an effective cultural resource – even if the written word had a symbolic importance, it had to be effective as a technology. Hence her striking insistence on the significance of the fainter traces in our record, such as (particularly) those that indicated an extensive lay readership for the new codices. The dissemination of knowledge through writing, to the laity as well as the clergy, was the subject of her very first published articles, and remains among the powerful arguments for real change, as opposed to a change only in the scale of preservation, in the Carolingian centuries.[14]

[12] Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*.
[13] Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*; Wormald, '*Lex scripta* and *verbum regis*'.
[14] See McKitterick, 'Frankish penitentials'; 'A ninth-century school book'.

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The Functions of the Written Word in Early Medieval Society

Perhaps the strongest measure of the impact of McKitterick's work is that no one now would feel the need to affirm, as she did in 1989, that 'the written word had a function in early medieval society', however much we may still agree that (to complete her sentence), 'it is for us to determine what that function was'.[15] This is the urgent question addressed by this volume. In a sense, reading *The Carolingians and the Written Word* translates the experience of being taught by Rosamond McKitterick into print, as the contributors to this volume, all former students of hers, can attest. That book's insistence on the original written word as represented by the manuscript codices, fragments and single sheets that survive from the period as the starting point of serious inquiry into the Carolingian period can be characterised in at least one sense as quite an old kind of new history, because it brought the weight of amassed primary evidence to bear on the task of historical reconstruction, in a way reminiscent of the early medieval historiography of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[16]

Paradoxically, though, McKitterick dispelled many of the assumptions on which traditional source criticism was based, because in letting the manuscripts speak for themselves she emphasised the malleability, variability and flexibility of early medieval texts. Since each manuscript was a copy of a previous one, or previous ones, and no single text of a work was identical to any other, how can we identify any individual work as a 'source', let alone imagine a version of any individual work that can be regarded as canonical?[17]

Her attitude to documents, as evinced in the great third chapter of *The Carolingians and the Written Word* on the charters of St-Gall, was similar: they were treated not as eternal and unproblematically empirical legal monuments, but as texts whose contexts changed through their life cycle, from their point of redaction through their instrumentalisation as active documents and then their initial archiving and subsequent use as tools of reference and sites of memory, to their role as modern historiographical artefacts.[18] Her study of the St-Gall documents places

[15] McKitterick, *CWW*, pp. 1–2.
[16] To take an example that influenced McKitterick herself: Lesne, *Histoire de la propriété ecclésiastique*.
[17] For this guarded approach to transmission in classical texts, see the typically trenchant comments of Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, pp. x–xi.
[18] McKitterick, *CWW*, pp. 77–134.

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McKitterick alongside Wendy Davies and Barbara Rosenwein as pioneers (all women, it is worth noting) of a new social history based on sophisticated empathetic readings of the multidimensional contexts of charters.[19] These works marked, and in many ways heralded, a departure from the attitudes to documents prevalent among the generation of McKitterick's PhD supervisor, Walter Ullmann. In a world in which ideologies had become less reified, less instrumental, than they had been in the first half of the twentieth century, McKitterick and her contemporaries sought rather to question the transmission of ideas, both in practical terms – manuscripts – and intellectually in terms of pedagogy, communication and networking. They were followed by a welter of similar studies, many of them by McKitterick's own students, that used charters to penetrate to the heart of early medieval local societies, and so to expose as far as possible the experience of the mass of the population in addition to that of the elite.[20]

Determining the functions (plural) of the written word in early medieval society has proved to be an absorbing task for the generation that has followed McKitterick's *The Carolingians and the Written Word*. We have a far better understanding now of the physicality of the written word, and the ways in which books, pamphlets (*libelli*) and single-sheet documents were produced, circulated and kept. We are alive to the ways in which knowledge of the past was perceived and constructed, and fed into the deliberations of the present. And we are keenly aware of the outstanding importance of the written word as a tool of political power.

This book takes its cue from those concerns, seeking to push scholarship forward in the three crucial areas of manuscript transmission, the knowledge of the past and the use of texts in rulership. The time is ripe to do so. Theoretical advances in the significance of archives and networks of communication for the dissemination of knowledge,[21] coupled with new digital technologies, have transformed the study of manuscripts over the last generation. We are now more able, and have begun, to look behind the great editions of medieval texts that have been the foundation of early medieval scholarship for over a century.[22]

[19] Davies, *Small Worlds*; Rosenwein, *To be the Neighbor of St Peter*.
[20] Brown, *Unjust Seizure*; Costambeys, *Power and Patronage*; Davies, *Acts of Giving*; Hummer, *Politics and Power*; Innes, *State and Society*.
[21] Brown et al., *Documentary Culture*; Freeman, *The Development of Social Network Analysis*; McGuire, *Friendship and Community*.
[22] An effort led by the modern heirs of some of those great editorial enterprises, in particular the *MGH*, e.g. Hoffmann, *Schreibschulen und Buchmalerei*; Mersiowsky, *Die Urkunde in der Karolingerzeit*; Ubl and Ziemann, *Fälschung als Mittel der Politik?*

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That return to the manuscripts has made us more aware of the malleability of knowledge and the hesitancy of canonical texts in this period: while, as McKitterick recognised, the written word was imbued with immense authority, there was a constant need to establish and then to reaffirm the authority of individual written texts. In this regard, the burgeoning resources devoted to the transmission of historical knowledge were aimed not only at the preservation of the past, but also at its reconstruction, even its invention.[23] Thus, for instance, we are now sharply aware how much of what we thought we knew about the Merovingian dynasty of Frankish kings has been filtered, refracted and/or concocted by writers working for the dynasty that supplanted them, the Carolingians.[24] The rewriting of Merovingian history is a stark example of the exercise of power through the written word, even though, paradoxically, the evidence for the pragmatic use of written documents in ruling the Merovingian realms is if anything stronger than it is for the Carolingian period. This paradox – Carolingian texts writing out a pragmatically literate Merovingian past that felt less need for aggrandising dynastic narratives – calls into question our generation's inherited assumption that literate government was stronger government.[25] By extension, and informed by very modern experience, our concern now is to show how command of 'the media', suitably defined for an early medieval context, was a necessary tool of strong rulership, or even a by-product of the creation of empire, as has been suggested for the medieval Islamic world.[26]

Looking Ahead

Much of the force of impact of *The Carolingians and the Written Word* derived from the challenge that due attention to the manuscripts and documents posed to the notion of modernisation and the teleological approaches that supported it. McKitterick wisely did not then explicitly seek to replace ideas such as the clerical monopoly on literacy with a grand vision of her own. But the impetus in this respect was expressed with typically memorable wit by Timothy Reuter: 'You may expel Grand Narratives with a pitchfork, but they will always return, as Horace might have said to Lyotard'.[27] Accordingly, historians have spent some energy

23 Gantner et al., *Resources of the Past*; Innes, 'Historical Writing'; McKitterick, *Perceptions of the Past*.
24 Fouracre, 'Long shadow'; Reimitz, *History*.
25 Bisson, *Crisis of the Twelfth Century*, e.g. pp. 350–8; Wickham, 'Lawyers' time'.
26 König, *Arabic-Islamic Views of the Latin West*, p. 343, sees a 'link between imperializing culture, expansionism, and the systematic production of records'.
27 Reuter, *Medieval Polities*, p. 7.

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recently discussing how to integrate the Carolingian achievement – exemplified, as far as promotion of the written word goes, by the statistics cited at the beginning of this introduction – with notions such as that of a twelfth-century revolution of the literati.[28] This might involve (among other things) serious consideration of the different media and target audiences of different types of writing: what texts of authority, communicated in what ways, to which groups? The transmission of key concepts and debates between the ninth and twelfth centuries – not least those, like the issues of jurisdiction over churches and clerics, through which the boundaries of sacred and secular were established – is one crucial question only now beginning to be addressed.[29]

Consider too the parallel question of the use of writing at law, and the transition from early medieval legalism to the professional lawyers who start to emerge everywhere by the twelfth century. Debate here used to be focused on relatively narrowly defined 'charters', understood as formal legal documents, but recent discoveries like the scratched tablets from Roman London have underlined the continued use of often highly localised and wholly impermanent media of pragmatic literacy, from the cedar wood of the Tablettes Albertini to the birch bark of Novgorod, via slates in Visigothic Salamanca and wax tablets everywhere.[30] The greater precariousness of their survival in comparison with charters goes some way to explaining their relative neglect, while also enjoining us to think about changes in archival practice – storage, registration and reorganisation – as explanations for the changes in the volume and type of legal documentation. And, of course, such artefacts invite us to think about the materiality of the written word in its different manifestations, and to remember that one key experience of writing right across late antique and early medieval Europe was with the formal stone inscription, in a changing range of contexts.[31] Drawing the inevitably complex grid of relationships that would show which registers of pragmatic legal literacy were pursued in which media in which institutional contexts across the whole vast expanse of space and time that constituted early medieval Europe is a huge task, barely begun.

We are ourselves living through a change in our own literate media quite as profound (if not more so) than that from, say, papyrus to parchment. The digitisation of the written word, the proliferation of

[28] Moore, *The First European Revolution*.
[29] West, *Reframing the Feudal Revolution*.
[30] Kennedy, 'Oldest handwritten documents in UK unearthed in London dig', *The Guardian*, 1 June 2016.
[31] Cooley, *Cambridge Manual of Latin Epigraphy*.

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devices for reading and writing, the quantum leap in the capacity for organising and retrieving knowledge, are all in full flow as we write. The history of this unfinished transformation has, of course, not been written. But the process itself surely must help us understand changes in the early medieval period, in the choices of particular forms of writing for particular uses. Moreover, the modern digital revolution serves to remind us that changes are not necessarily unilinear and do not inevitably result in an ever-increasing volume of preserved material handed down over the centuries. The trope that we are facing a future 'digital dark ages' as electronic data prove less stable and accessible over time than physical documents is doubtless over-hyped, and, like any invocation of the 'dark age' paradigm, needs serious critical interrogation. But there are echoes nonetheless of some persistent images in the historiography of the ancient-to-medieval transition: of a late Roman world that had been suffused with pragmatic documentation which unfortunately does not survive, except where, as in the dry conditions of Egypt for its papyri, ecological conditions allowed; and, on the other hand, of an early medieval world from which a far higher volume of written material survives, the direct transmission of which is however connected to just a relatively small number of institutional contexts.

The current technological transformation not only impels us to rethink our frameworks for interpreting early medieval writing. It also creates opportunities for us to interrogate surviving texts in new ways, with the strong possibility that this will result in new interpretations of the material. For one thing, the actual manuscripts themselves have become far more accessible thanks to digitisation. Looking at a digitised interactive facsimile, as opposed to a static modern edition, of an ambitious Carolingian project like Cozroh's carefully classified and collated copy of the church of Freising's documents, brings home the extent to which the Carolingians were organising and using their written records.[32] More than this, some of the most frustrating of early medieval texts, which have refused to submit to the classical techniques of editorial scholarship established by Karl Lachmann and his contemporaries in the nineteenth century,[33] might prove more amenable to the more interactive and relational approaches enabled by digital technology: mapping the connections and variations within a complex field of diverse manuscript witnesses, rather than attempting to establish a textual archetype, may sit more easily with medieval practices of authorship and dissemination,

[32] See www.bayerische-landesbibliothek-online.de/freisingertraditionen.
[33] See Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, pp. 209–11.

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and certainly facilitates the manuscript-based approach exemplified in Rosamond McKitterick's own work.

Digitising existing editions has the welcome effect of making available for scrutiny much larger datasets than have hitherto been possible. At the same time, however, in relying on existing editions there is a danger of simply carrying over their editorial assumptions and thereby reinforcing existing canons and hierarchies of source criticism.[34] After all, it is becoming increasingly clear – to draw examples from documentary culture again – that mechanisms of transmission conditioned the type of material transmitted. Sales and exchanges of property, including those between lay people, are far more prevalent among surviving original charters, while cartularies – books of copies of charters – tended to be dominated by gifts. By the same token, the fascinating episodes of complex negotiation that have been the focus of accounts of Carolingian dispute settlement characteristically survive through absolutely atypical and sometimes dubious mechanisms of transmission.[35] The historiographies of the relationship between orality and writing, and of the transition from manuscript to print culture, teach us that characteristically a new technology of communication is first used to reproduce existing content and forms more accessibly and easily; but that in time new possibilities are explored.

Our challenge now is precisely to define those new possibilities while retaining all the benefits that close, contextualised readings of documents and manuscripts have brought us over the past decades. Mapping the data embedded in our texts holds out the hope of more efficiently defining broader contexts against which to set our close readings. It also opens out the possibility of significantly expanding our evidence base, and allowing us to embrace fragments which do not fit into traditional editorial hierarchies: briefs, addenda, dorsal notes, stray scraps attached to earlier documents; and other documentary traces that are still more intangible, notably documents that are now lost but whose interpretation, production and sometimes even destruction is alluded to in the surviving record.

Much remains to be done. Each generation has to decide anew how to deal with the textual legacies that the past has handed down. In formulating our programmes of research into the written legacy of the early Middle Ages we shall continue to be guided by principles laid down by

[34] Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital'.
[35] Brown, 'Charters as Weapons'; Costambeys, 'Disputes and documents'.

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Rosamond McKitterick's pioneering work. As she has shown, studying early medieval texts on their own terms not only offers us glimpses into the full range of social experiences of the time, it also provides us with lessons in the relationship between communications and power that may be timeless, but are certainly timely, in the early decades of the twenty-first century.

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