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PART I

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: SOURCES AND
INTERPRETATION*Rosamond McKitterick*

THE Frankish dominance of the period covered by this volume poses special problems for the historian, not least because of the apparent concentration of a great diversity of sources from the Frankish heartlands and the relative paucity of material from everywhere else. Indeed, if our understanding of the years between 700 and 900 depended on the historical narratives produced in this period alone, we would be obliged to accept a largely Frankish proclamation of self-confidence and greatness on the part of the ruling elites of Carolingian society, and the Carolingians' distinctive celebration of the intellectual and cultural vigour of their scholarship and art, as the central points of interest for the eighth and ninth centuries.

Fortunately, however, an enormous range of other categories of evidence, drawn on in all the chapters below – charters, secular and ecclesiastical legislation, law-codes, saints' Lives, estate surveys, treatises on a wide variety of subjects, liturgical, school and library books, script, letters, tax-lists, poems, relics and relic labels, inventories, penitentials, seals, coins, library catalogues, inscriptions, confraternity books and artefacts of all kinds, ranging from pictures in manuscripts to weapons, jewellery, sculpture and buildings – redress the balance. The archaeological evidence has played a crucial role in adjusting and augmenting our understanding of many developments in this period, most notably in the economic and ecclesiastical spheres, as is clear from the chapters by Blackburn, Verhulst and de Jong.¹ The palace complexes unearthed at Aachen, Ingelheim or Pliska,² the fortunes of the trading emporia at Dorestad, Hamwic, Hedeby and Quentovic, the astounding range of monastic buildings at San Vincenzo al Volturno,³ the exercise of patronage and display of wealth evident in the abundance of jewellery, metalwork and sculpture adorning churches and

¹ See chapters 18, 20 and 23 below; Hodges (1991) provides a useful brief survey.

² Randsborg (1991), pp. 65–6, and see Shepard below, p. 244.

³ Hodges and Mitchell (1985); Hodges 1993.

filling treasuries charted by Nees,⁴ add a distinctive and essential dimension also in the spheres of politics, power and social status.

Nevertheless, the principal evidence remains written material of one kind or another. Although there are many instances of texts in Irish, Old English, Old High German, Arabic, Old Slavonic and Greek, the vast bulk of our sources are in Latin. In the past, this has raised acute problems for the historian of the early middle ages, in that these Latin sources appeared to imply a major divorce between a tiny educated and clerical elite and a huge illiterate non-Latinate lay population. It has now been recognised, as Banniard explains,⁵ that such problems and misconceptions arose from mistaken assumptions about the development of the Latin language in relation to the emergent Romance languages of western Europe. There was, in addition, a lack of appreciation, despite numerous modern parallels, of the degree to which a conquered people could acquire the language of their masters as a second language, especially when it was used as the language of law, religion and education.

Such was the case with Latin, adopted throughout western Europe as the language of the church, government and learning. Only in the British Isles and Scandinavia, as Keynes, Ó Corráin and Lund make clear, were the non-Latin vernaculars more widely used in law and administration.⁶ Although the role of the Christian church in introducing literate modes of communication to post-Roman western Europe is undoubted, we have to reckon with continuities in the use of the written word within the areas formerly part of the Roman empire. Even in areas outside the old Roman empire, Latin was acquired, along with Christianity, and was soon exploited. This Latin, however, was subject to many local and regional variations, and differs greatly in its level of formality according to the genre for which it is used. It is certainly different from classical Latin, and different again from what is commonly understood to be 'medieval Latin', that is, a Latin understood to be conceptually distinct from the contemporary Romance vernaculars which developed out of Latin in due course. What are we to call the Latin in use in the eighth and ninth centuries? A terminological solution has been proposed by Roger Wright.⁷ He argues that we have essentially complex monolingualism in the Frankish, Spanish and Italian regions once within the Roman empire. Some in the past have chosen to differentiate the elements in this monolingualism into Latin and Romance but they are more appropriately to be understood as many different spoken and written levels or registers of the same language, whether one chooses to call it 'Romance' or 'Latin'. Wright prefers 'Romance' as being less anachronistic and a way of

⁴ Chapter 30 below.

⁵ Chapter 26 below.

⁶ Chapters 2a, 2b and 8 below.

⁷ Wright (1993; 1994).

acknowledging undoubted differences from both classical Latin and medieval Latin.⁸ Banniard below adopts an alternative position. Whatever the difference of opinion on the appropriateness of the terms, or the degree of contemporary recognition of the conceptual difference between ‘Romance’ and ‘Latin’, the upshot for the historian of the eighth and ninth centuries is that the surviving texts are in practice vernacular texts. Literacy, hitherto thought to be confined to a clerical elite, and literate skills, from the king issuing legislation and admonition and the landowner granting property to the church to the unfreed slave clinging to his new social status by means of a charter, were in fact widely dispersed throughout the society of the eighth and ninth centuries. Indeed, all the evidence available suggests that literacy and the written word were central elements of early medieval society, especially in the Frankish world. Written texts could also be made accessible to the unlettered by reading them aloud.⁹ No group could remain unaffected by the activities of those able to make the most of the opportunities afforded them by their possession of literate skills.

Even with this recognition of the role of writing and uses of literacy in Europe in the eighth and ninth centuries, it is essential that oral procedures and the uses of orality be taken into account. Many of our written texts give clear indications of an oral dimension to their production or reception. Thus in legal business an essential role was played by the oral transaction in the social context of the law court, attended by the sort of people Airlie, Goetz and Wickham discuss in their chapters, where decisions were reached in public and subsequently recorded in a charter or *notitia*.¹⁰ In the famous dispute between the monastery of Tours and Atpert, his sister Agintrude and her husband Amalgar,¹¹ Saraman the provost ordered that those persons who were in possession of that property should show their title deeds, *auctoritates*, at the appointed assembly in his presence. These title deeds were then brought before Saraman and other noblemen at Tours. But they could not settle the issue because of the absence of the neighbours to whom the case was known; their presence was necessary. Written charters also played a part and one of them was judged a forgery, on the grounds that the correct procedure for its redaction had not been followed, thereby fatally undermining Atpert’s case. The oral witnesses, recorded in this *notitia*, told against Atpert, and we are bound to accept this formalisation of what was originally a dispute fraught with tension and grievance, with individuals of relatively modest social status attempting to uphold what they understood to be their rights in the face of a powerful institution. Even in such

⁸ See Wright (1982; 1991); McKitterick (1989); Banniard chapter 26 below for details.

⁹ McKitterick (1989; 1990). ¹⁰ Chapters 16, 17 and 19 below.

¹¹ Discussed fully in Nelson (1986b).

ostensibly objective documents as the Tours case, or those charting the aspirations, claims and disputes of both urban and rural communities, therefore, we have to attempt to distinguish the rhetoric from the reality as much as we do in historical narratives.¹²

The Tours case highlights the interdependence and interweaving of oral and written procedures and discourse that is apparent in every aspect of life in the early middle ages. Often oral discourse and written documents are explicitly placed in sequence in the conduct of business. The Annals of St Bertin, for example, recount how Louis the Pious dispatched messengers to every part of his realm to bring the people the news of his own liberation, to remind them to fulfil the obligations of loyalty which they had promised him and to reassure them that he had forgiven them. Thus written messages, or messages committed to memory, were recited aloud to the people. Further, an assembly in 835, convened to discuss the problem of Ebbo of Rheims and discussed by Nelson below,¹³ again demonstrates the interdependence of oral and written modes of communication and discourse. This is what happened according to the Frankish annalist:

Each one present at the assembly drew up with his own hand a full account of its findings and of their own confirmation thereof, and authenticated it with his own signature. The outcome of the whole affair, how it had been dealt with, discussed, settled and finally confirmed in suitable fashion by the signatures of everyone present: all this was put together, set out in full detail in one collection, bound as a small volume, and agreed by all to be an accurate account. They then wasted no time in making it as widely known as possible, bringing it to everyone's attention with most devoted and heartfelt and kind concern, and with an authority most worthy of so many reverend fathers. For they gathered at Metz in the church of the blessed protomartyr Stephen, completed the celebration of Mass and read out the account of the whole affair publicly to all who were present.¹⁴

In this inevitable stress on written materials and the contribution of oral procedures, therefore, the interplay of oral tradition is clear even if it is extraordinarily difficult to determine precisely in the light of the fact that we can only work from written testimonies. But the questions of reception, transmission and audience, and the role of listening, speaking and ritual gesture, are nevertheless crucial. Who wrote the texts we can still read, and for whom? Who then could understand and use these texts, and for what purposes? Would the texts be read privately, be read out aloud to an audience or their contents communicated in some other kind of way, in an oral paraphrase, in poetic forms, or by gesture? What can be determined about rituals associated with written documents, such as liturgical *ordines*,

¹² Davies and Fouracre (1986); Balzaretto (1994).

¹³ Below, p. 116.

¹⁴ *AB s.a.* 835.

oaths, celebratory recitations, or those that have no written expression, as in gift-giving, banquets, dances or mime where in some cases written descriptions are provided of actions accompanied by formulaic spoken language? The literate modes we are able to examine in our sources may or may not have oral associations or an oral counterpart.

Occasionally we can observe the efforts of scribes to present texts in such a way as to suggest that they were designing the text for public reading out loud. Early medieval manuscripts from Britain, Frankish Gaul, Spain and Italy contain various innovations analysed by Ganz below.¹⁵ One of these took the form of punctuation marks to indicate the structure of sentences and new layouts in order to elucidate the text transmitted to the scribe, or corrector, according to the needs of his own audience. These include the use of display scripts for titles and headings. *Diminuendo*, in which the first word of a section begins with a large letter or *littera notabilior* and the following letters gradually decrease in size, first appears in sixth- and seventh-century books and was a favoured technique with insular scribes. A hierarchy of scripts, descending from the capitals of the Roman script system, through uncials and half-uncials to minuscule scripts, flourished triumphantly in Carolingian manuscripts of the ninth century, though is to be observed in English and Frankish manuscripts of the eighth century as well.¹⁶ In the Carolingian period the repertory of signs was increased: *litterae notabiliores* and individual letters modelled on ancient capitals were introduced at the beginnings of sentences; the question mark and various forms of *punctus* or points above or on the line were introduced to indicate minor or major medial pauses and the ends of sense units or sentences.

These signs thus have much to reveal about how such texts may have been read and understood. They establish that writing had its own autonomous conventions and structures quite distinct from those of the spoken word, and this is nowhere more apparent than in such non-literary material as the legal documents of the early middle ages and the texts of various genres designed for record-keeping alluded to above. Written language is fundamentally the textual counterpart of the spoken language, rather than writing being dependent on the spoken word. As Nees demonstrates, illustrations in manuscripts and sculpture often enjoy a close relationship with writing as well. Book illustrations enhance the meaning and associations of a text, are dependent on the text for their meaning, and are often visual translations of the written words. Other forms of art may be wordless but express no less eloquently the thought and aspirations of those who produced them.¹⁷

It may be that the language itself can tell us something about the intended

¹⁵ Chapter 29 below.

¹⁶ Parkes (1993); see also Ganz, chapter 28 below.

¹⁷ Nees, chapter 30 below.

audience and the reception of a particular text. Just as there are several linguistic and stylistic levels in the Merovingian saints' *Vitae*, for example, so there are in Carolingian hagiography and miracle collections. Thus Alcuin in his *Vita Richarii* mentions in his prologue that the monks of St Riquier still used the Merovingian text of the *miracula* to edify the common people, while they wanted a new and more polished text for internal use. There were, in this instance therefore, two written levels, each with its own public. Hincmar of Rheims also distinguished two kinds of public for his *Vita Remigii*: the *legentes* on the one hand and the *audientia populi* on the other. Hincmar explained that he had marked the parts suitable for reading to an audience and those for study by the *illuminati*. But the difference between them is one of content rather than of syntax or style. The Carolingian hagiographers were not writing a simpler, more rustic Latin for the populace.¹⁸ Thus the nature of the language itself does not assist us greatly in determining the audience envisaged for it so much as its message and accompanying rituals. When these can be seen to change, then ritual and language together reveal something of the society that produced them as well as a little of what religion may have meant to the laity, a subject tackled below by Smith.¹⁹

Fundamental changes in the rites associated with an individual's last illness and death, for example, culminated in the creation of a common and coherent, if complex, death ritual throughout the Frankish realm.²⁰ This ritual, and particular attitudes towards dying, death and the after-life it articulates, became the norm in Europe thereafter. Strong links between the living and the dead were created in the Carolingian period, not least by means of organised commemorative prayer on a remarkably large scale and manifest in the monastic sources de Jong confronts in her chapter.²¹ The death rites and prayers were included in the Sacramentaries or Mass Books produced in large numbers in the eighth and ninth centuries for local use, described by Reynolds below.²² Many of the later ninth-century Sacramentaries were produced at St Amand under the auspices of Abbots Adalhard and Gauzlin (also bishop of Paris) who may be credited with the elaboration of the rituals of death. With such evidence, royal involvement is nevertheless not to be discounted. It may be possible to associate the production of the eighth-century Mass Books with the Seine-basin convents and the bishops of Meaux and Paris, bearing in mind the undoubted royal connections of Chelles, chief among these convents in the time of Pippin III and Charlemagne.²³ The stories Einhard and Notker tell us about Charle-

¹⁸ Heene (1991). ¹⁹ Chapter 24 below. ²⁰ Paxton (1990).

²¹ De Jong, chapter 23 below; Oexle and Schmid (1974). ²² Chapter 22 below.

²³ See McKitterick, chapter 25 below.

magne's keen interest in liturgical chant,²⁴ the evidence of liturgical innovation in the royal chapel under Louis the Pious,²⁵ the link between St Amand and its royal patron Charles the Bald,²⁶ and the significance of the Mass Book, now Padua Biblioteca Capitolare D47, a member of the group of manuscripts associated with the Emperor Lothar's court school at Aachen, together suggest an abiding and active interest in liturgical matters on the part of the rulers that was closely in touch with developments within the church at large.²⁷ The writing down of oral literature in the early middle ages may resemble the recording of legal transactions and the transcription of music. The ecclesiastical chant tradition was one of oral performance practice, but this oral tradition was first transcribed into writing in the form of neumes in the ninth century. This is as true of the older chant traditions as of new compositions, the tropes and sequences of the later ninth century. To presuppose written composition is to envisage a very different set of mental and physical processes.²⁸

A more conventional source of links between literacy and orality is literature. Poetry in particular has to be considered in relation to theories of oral recitation and composition. Was the original composition in writing or oral? If the former, to what degree do the contemporary literary genres and forms, detailed by Contreni below,²⁹ influence or even distort the forms of what we receive, to the extent of making it impossible really to recapture more than a faint shadow of the oral world to which they may once have belonged? Presentation in a particular form is, after all, in itself a sign language; punctuation in a written text and use of particular vocabulary, conventional metaphor and allusion can indicate appropriate rhythm stresses and patterns of phrasing. Presentation can act as a symbol of a particular cultural tradition and indicates as well as stimulates particular expectations about it. Transformations may well have been effected in an oral text when it was written down and the audience for the spoken and the written versions may well have been different. It is conceivable that the epics *Beowulf* and *Waltharius* and the victory song *Ludwigslied* were first recited at feasts in a lord's hall, composed and memorised for the purpose, but were later transcribed to accord with the needs of those accustomed to writing, or in a deliberate attempt to preserve and record them.³⁰ It is these written versions which survive. Analysis of the written survivor therefore has to take account of the oral conventions (no longer retrievable) which may have

²⁴ Rankin (1993). ²⁵ Bullough and Harting-Corrêa (1989).

²⁶ Deshusses (1977); McKitterick (1980). ²⁷ See also Reynolds, chapter 22 below.

²⁸ Rankin (1993); Treitler (1974; 1981; 1982; 1984; 1988); Levy (1984; 1987; 1990) and Contreni, chapter 27 below. ²⁹ Chapter 27 below.

³⁰ Dronke (1977); O'Brien O'Keefe (1990).

determined the written forms we now see, as well as the literary and generic conventions which may themselves have influenced the original compositions. Words attempted to encompass and express experiences and images in the mind; in any text there is an elaborate cross-referencing system between verbal and visual signs and aesthetic responses in reading and understanding a text. Historical narrative in the eighth and ninth centuries was thus a recreation of the past in words and in a particular form, a form which was itself linked to other, possibly older literary forms. Thus the historical imagination that recorded the events regarded as central to Anglo-Saxon history in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, or the imaginations of the Frankish annalists, may have been fired as much by past imaginings and word pictures as by their response to contemporary events and wish to provide an interpretation of them for posterity.

Certainly the later eighth and the ninth centuries witnessed major developments in the secular Frankish historiographical tradition, with new forms of historical writing, such as annals,³¹ biography and epic poems. These offer essentially contemporary commentary on the events of their own day and are the staple fare for the analyses presented by Fouracre, Nelson, Fried, Brown, Smith and Coupland.³² All Carolingian historiography maintains, in one literary genre or another, a delicate balance between a profoundly and explicitly Christian and teleological sense of the past and an understanding of contemporary history which necessitated a temporary suspension of judgement in order to allow critical and constructive comment on policies or to explain setbacks. What was combined was an older Christian historiographical tradition, with its general explanation of historical change, and an annalistic and classicising approach to contemporary history. Although within this, narrative was the essential principle of organisation, subtle analysis was possible through the use of anecdote, moral fable, symbolism and parallelism in the plot. It is in this structural context that the presentations in our texts need to be understood, for, to a considerable degree, the historiography of the eighth and ninth centuries was a taught mode of organising and preserving memory.³³ The Franks had an especially keen sense both of the past and of the importance of providing a record and interpretation of contemporary events for posterity.³⁴ Yet in such works as the *Lives of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious* by Einhard, *Thegan* and the *Astronomer*, the account of the quarrels between the sons of Louis the Pious by Nithard³⁵ or the portions of the *Annals of St Bertin* written by Prudentius of Troyes and Hincmar of Rheims,³⁶ there is also to be

³¹ McCormick (1975). ³² Chapters 3–7, 9, 12 and 13 below.

³³ Compare Carruthers (1990); Morrison (1990); Morse (1991); Coleman (1992).

³⁴ Innes and McKitterick (1994). ³⁵ Nelson (1986a). ³⁶ Nelson (1990a).