1 Introduction

We start with a book (see Figure 1.1).

The book has no title of its own. It now bears the prosaic one assigned it by the library that currently owns it: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin Manuscript 2123 (BNF ms. lat. 2123 for short). The book is not large; closed it measures roughly 6 inches wide by 11 inches high (15.5 × 28 cm), and just over 2 inches (c. 5 cm) thick. Looking up at my office bookshelf, it seems comparable in size to my old Webster's *Collegiate Thesaurus*. It is handwritten, and contains a mixed group of texts on a variety of subjects, on which more below. It was copied out at the very beginning of the ninth century in Burgundy, almost certainly by monks at the monastery of Saints Peter and Praiectus in what is now the town of Flavigny-sur-Ozerain.

Flavigny is a very small town (see Figure 1.2). It sits atop a hill in east-central France, on a rocky spur overlooking three streams: the Ozerain, the Recluse, and the Verpant. Today it has a permanent population of around 300. Its only claims to fame are a candy factory that produces the well-known Anis de Flavigny, and the fact that it served as the setting for the 2000 film *Chocolat*.[1]

At the time our book was written, however, Flavigny was significantly more important. It was located right in the middle of the empire created by the Frankish king and emperor Charlemagne (r. 768–814).

This empire stretched from the borders of Spain, the Atlantic Ocean, the English Channel and the North Sea to the Elbe River, and southwards across the Alps deep into Italy (see Figure 1.3). Its ruler, Charlemagne, was a Carolingian, a member of the family that in the person of Charlemagne's father Pippin had usurped the title of King of the Franks from his Merovingian predecessors. It was the greatest political entity in Europe since the West Roman Empire had dissolved

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[1] C. B. Bouchard (ed.), *The Cartulary of Flavigny 717–1113* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 1–2; www.citypopulation.de/en/france/cotedor/montbard/21271__flavigny_sur_ozerain/ (accessed Feb. 4, 2022); www.anis-flavigny.com.
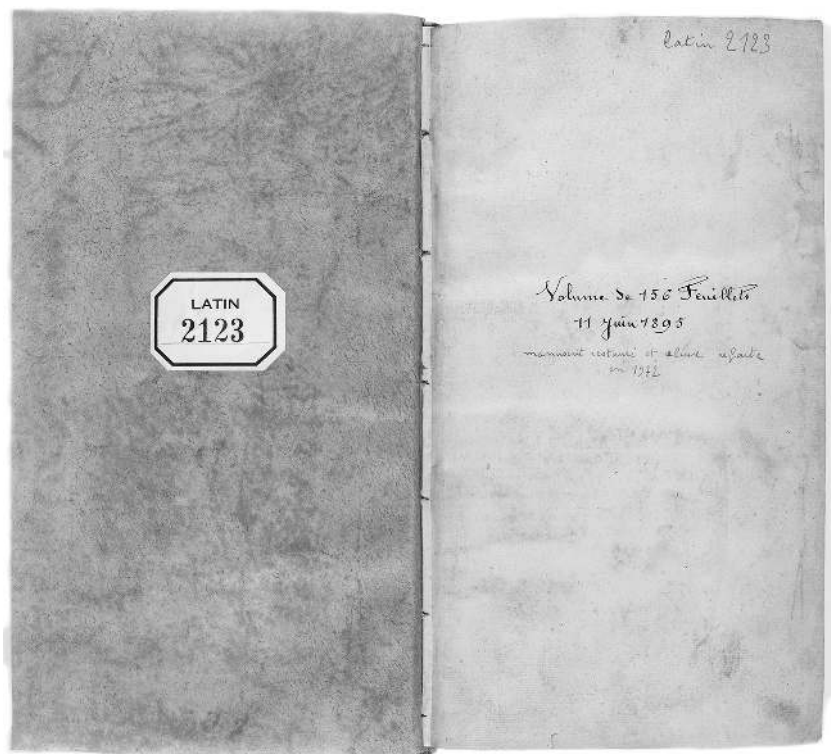
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Figure 1.1 Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Latin
Manuscript 2123. Image courtesy BNF

roughly three centuries before. It was also Rome's ideological successor;
its leaders and propagandists regarded it as the equal of the surviving East
Roman or Byzantine Empire centered in Constantinople. Charlemagne
staked his personal claim to Rome's inheritance on Christmas Day of the
year 800 by accepting, in St. Peter's church in Rome and from the hands
of Pope Leo III, the crown of Emperor of the Romans.[2]

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[2] R. McKitterick (ed.), *NCMH, II c. 700–c. 900* (Cambridge, 1995); M. Costambeys,
M. Innes, and S. MacLean, *The Carolingian World* (Cambridge, 2011); M. Innes,
*Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 300–900: The Sword, the Plow, and the
Book* (London, 2007), 397–425; J. L. Nelson, *King and Emperor: A New Life of
Charlemagne* (New York, 2019); R. McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a
European Identity* (Cambridge, 2008) and *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians,
751–987* (London, 1983); M. Becher, *Charlemagne*, trans. D. S. Bachrach (New Haven,
2005); A. Barbero, *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent*, trans. A. Cameron
(Berkeley, 2004).

Figure 1.2 Flavigny-sur-Ozerain. Aerial-photos.com / Alamy Stock
Photo

The monastery at Flavigny occupied an important position in the
empire's cultural and political landscape. Ostensibly, monasteries were
supposed to be separate from the world. The communities of Christian
monks they enclosed were supposed to live lives of isolation and pov-
erty, pursuing both individual and collective closeness to God through
tightly scripted routines of communal worship and prayer carried out
under the watchful eye of their abbot. In reality, they were anything but
isolated. As houses of professional prayers, they naturally attracted the
attention and support of laypeople living around them who wanted
monks to intercede for them with God. They received gifts, both of
goods but more importantly of land, from benefactors who asked in
return that the monks pray for them and remember them in prayer after
their deaths. They also received gifts of people, in the form of members
of local families who became monks themselves in order to burnish their
family's religious bona fides, and in the form of the unfree or semi-free
laborers who lived on and worked the land they were given. As a
consequence, many monasteries became religious and economic power-
houses. They owned large estates scattered across the empire. They

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Figure 1.3 Europe at the death of Charlemagne in 814. Original drawn
by Margaret Marshall Andrews

were thoroughly tied into local and regional agricultural economies and
networks of trade. The very wealthiest attracted the attention of kings.
Kings too wanted to be prayed for, by the very best, and they granted
favors in exchange. The favors they granted – royal protection, grants of
immunity from royal jurisdiction or exemption from that of their local
bishop, freedom from tolls on trade – also brought with them the
expectation that kings could draw on "their" monasteries' economic
and military resources (read supplies and manpower) as well as on their

prayers and on the political support of their abbots (whom they frequently appointed).[3]

Monasteries also offered the Frankish kings trained administrators and writers, and institutionally organized education. Abbots knew how to manage complex organizations whose often far-flung properties and economic interests required a good deal of record keeping. Monks had to learn to read the religious texts on which their spiritual education depended, to learn the Latin in which they were written, and absorb something of the history necessary to understand them. They therefore needed to acquire and copy out works of history and grammar as well as religious texts, and teachers had to write texts or commentaries explaining them for their students. Monks were by no means the only ones who could read and write. Nevertheless, they, along with the clerics who served the bishops' churches and who lived in similarly organized and regulated communities, were particularly practiced at it, and had institutions for teaching other people how to do it.[4] For Charlemagne in particular, who was trying to pull and hold together an empire of enormous scope without the bureaucratic machinery available to the Roman emperors, monasteries offered resources useful for a government and administration that required an unprecedented degree of written communication and record keeping. They also offered him a springboard for his wide-ranging efforts to regularize and improve the standards of Christian worship throughout his empire, an effort that was necessary (from his perspective) both to maintain God's support for the Franks and to maintain his image as the divinely ordained steward of God's church and God's people.[5]

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[3] Costambeys et al., *Carolingian World*, 110–18, 125–30; Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe*, 468–72 and *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: The Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000* (Cambridge, 2000); W. Brown, *Unjust Seizure: Conflict, Interest, and Authority in an Early Medieval Society* (Ithaca, NY, 2001); H. Hummer, *Politics and Power in Early Medieval Europe: Alsace and the Frankish Realm, 600–1000* (Cambridge, 2005); M. de Jong, "Carolingian Monasticism: The Power of Prayer," in McKitterick (ed.), *NCMH* II, 622–53; R. S. Choy, *Intercessory Prayer and the Monastic Ideal in the Time of the Carolingian Reform* (Oxford, 2016).

[4] The term *monasterium* in the eighth century could refer both to monasteries *strictu sensu* and communities of clergy, especially at the bishops' churches, who worked in the world but who also lived regulated communal lives; it was in the course of the ninth century that the latter came to be distinguished as "clerics who follow a rule" (*clerici canonici*), or cathedral canons, as opposed to the *monachi* who lived under the Rule of St. Benedict. See de Jong, "Carolingian monasticism," 627–34.

[5] Costambeys et al., *Carolingian World*, 142–53; J. R. Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire* (Cambridge, 2015), 303–22; R. Schieffer (ed.), *Schriftkultur und Reichsverwaltung unter den Karolingern* (Wiesbaden, 1996); R. McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge, 1989).

The monastery at Flavigny was one such "royal" monastery.[6] It was founded at the beginning of the eighth century by a wealthy landowner named Widerad. Widerad himself had family links to the Carolingians; his father had been a sworn follower of Charlemagne's grandfather Charles Martel. Widerad endowed his new foundation with properties scattered throughout an area of roughly 80 × 130 miles (130 × 210 km) around it.[7] Within a few decades the foundation was flourishing. It began receiving gifts from other laymen. Among them was Charlemagne's father Pippin. Sometime between 741 and 751 Pippin gave the monastery a grant of fishing rights on the river Saône enclosed in a pair of precious ivory tablets. In exchange, he asked the monks of Flavigny to pray for him and his descendants.[8] Pippin included Flavigny's abbots in his inner circle. Two of them went with him on military campaigns.[9] Charlemagne kept up the relationship. In 775, he freed the monks of Flavigny from having to pay a variety of tolls.[10] That same year or the following one, he granted Flavigny perpetual authority over a subsidiary monastery along with a silver reliquary that contained relics of St. James the Apostle and the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. In return, he asked for prayers for himself and his sons.[11] Sometime around 797, Charlemagne gave the office of abbot at Flavigny to one of the most prominent members of his own inner circle, the Northumbrian scholar Alcuin of York.[12]

Along the way, Flavigny developed an active writing center, or *scriptorium*, as witnessed by a number of surviving manuscripts written in a characteristic Flavigny script.[13] Among the products of this *scriptorium* is our book. I have singled this book out because it opens a door into the world around Flavigny – and into the early Middle Ages as a whole – that most other surviving books or records from the period do not. As the above sketch of the monastery's history suggests, this world was profoundly different from our own. Religion, specifically Roman Catholic

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[6] Bouchard (ed.), *Cartulary of Flavigny*, 2–16; J. Marilier, "Flavigny (S.-Pierre-et-S. Prix)," in R. Aubert (ed.), *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques* (Paris, 1971), 400–5; "Flaviniacum," in D. Sammarthanus and D. de Sainte-Marthe (eds.), *Gallia Christiana in provincias ecclesiasticas distributa* (Paris, 1728; reprint 1886), 455–65.

[7] Bouchard (ed.), *Cartulary of Flavigny*, 18, map 2.

[8] Bouchard (ed.), *Cartulary of Flavigny*, nr. 3, 33–4.

[9] Abbot Garroinus, Italy; Abbot Manasses, Auvergne: Marilier, "Flavigny," 401.

[10] Bouchard (ed.), *Cartulary of Flavigny*, nr. 4, 34–6.

[11] Bouchard (ed.), *Cartulary of Flavigny*, nr. 13, 48–9.

[12] P. Depreux, "La tradition manuscrite des 'Formules de Tours' et la diffusion des modèles d'actes aux VIIIe et IXe siècles," *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest* 111 (2004), 55–71 at 62.

[13] J. Marilier, "Le scriptorium de l'abbaye de Flavigny au viiie siècle," *Annales de Bourgogne*, 44 (1983), 30–3.

Christianity, was inextricably intertwined with what we would call "secular" society. Priests and bishops, abbots and monks, often came from the same families as lay aristocrats and office holders. Charlemagne and his successors acted as the stewards of the Christian church and Christian people at the same time as they acted as secular rulers, politicians, and military leaders. Each role served the purposes of the others. At the same time, however, religious and secular were not the same. Monks and priests, abbots and bishops, by virtue of the roles that they played in society, were different than peasants, counts, or kings. Written texts distinguish clearly between clerics and laypeople, between those who held church or monastic office and those who did not.

Yet because of the way that our sources from the early Middle Ages have come down to us, we know a great deal more about the former than we do about the latter. Any attempt to explore the lives of any kind of person below the highest elites in this period depends on what we would call archival records: documents or letters that record business transactions or legal matters carried out by people as they went about the business of managing their lives. Put starkly, no one was writing chronicles about the lives of ordinary people, even wealthy ordinary people, unless they became saints or impinged in some other way on the affairs of the great. Most archival records that survive, however, were written and kept by churches and monasteries, or they were issued by kings and kept by churches or monasteries because they somehow affected clerical or monastic interests. The reason for this is quite simple: churches and monasteries as institutions lasted long enough to transmit their archives and libraries to the modern period, where early medieval lay families, even wealthy and powerful families, did not. It is not that laypeople did not use or keep written documents. Far from it. A culture of record keeping and letter writing, inherited from the Romans, which embraced both clerics and laypeople, persisted in western Europe throughout the early Middle Ages.[14] In the early Carolingian period, however, churches and monasteries, in response both to the upheavals that accompanied the Carolingians' rise to power and to the Carolingians' general interest in having everyone keep written track of their rights and resources, began to assemble their documents into organized archives whose contents reflected their institutional interests: records of property transactions and property holdings, disputes over property (which they had won; they had no interest in keeping records of those that they had lost), and grants of rights or privileges from kings. Many of them also copied their

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[14] W. C. Brown, M. Costambeys, M. Innes, and A. J. Kosto (eds.), *Documentary Culture and the Laity in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2013).

documents, or at least some of their documents, into books called cartularies (from the Latin *charta* = written document or charter). They did so not only for the king's sake but also for their own, to secure property claims that could be threatened in a rapidly changing landscape of power. Many of these churches and monasteries survived for centuries. Some were destroyed in the wake of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, or during the revolutionary ferment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, they survived long enough that their records and books were either absorbed by newly created national libraries, drawn into personal collections, or copied by people interested in studying the medieval past. Not so for lay families, whose documents were dispersed or discarded as the families themselves died out, or as their interests changed in ways that made older documents no longer important. That early medieval laypeople kept archives at all we know only from hints left, for example, by dossiers of documents concerning lay properties that ended up in a church or monastery archive when the church or monastery acquired the properties, or in records of disputes between a church or monastery and a layperson that describe the layperson producing a document as evidence. As a result of this pattern of source survival, we know about the early medieval laity for the most part only insofar as they interacted with churches or monasteries, or with secular authority figures in contexts that affected churches and monasteries.

Early medieval laypeople did do things, however, that did not affect or even involve churches or monasteries. The problem is how to get at this aspect of their lives. Here is where our book from Flavigny opens a door. This book appears to have a been a compendium of different kinds of texts that would be useful at a monastery. Most of it is devoted to works on theology and church law. It also contains some short texts on weights and measures, calculation, and other things useful for farming and trade.[15] About two-thirds of the way into it we find our gateway into the lives of the laity: a collection of formulas for documents and letters (see Figure 1.4).

These comprise examples or models that were used as templates for actual documents and letters, as sources for language, or as models for teaching students how to draft documents and write letters.[16] Figure 1.5

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[15] See Chapter 2 below at 41–4.
[16] On the early medieval formula collections, see: R. Buchner, *Deutschlands Geschichtsquellen im Mittelalter. Beiheft: die Rechtsquellen* (Weimar, 1953), 49–55; A. Rio, *Legal Practice and the Written Word in the Early Middle Ages: Frankish Formulae, c. 500–1000* (Cambridge, 2009); S. Patt, *Studien zu den "Formulae imperiales." Urkundenkonzeption und Formulargebrauch in der Kanzlei Ludwigs des Frommen (814–840)* (Wiesbaden, 2016), 10–43.

Figure 1.4 Paris, BNF, ms. lat. 2123, ff. 105v–106r. Flavigny
formula collection, prologue and beginning of the table of contents.
Image courtesy BNF

shows one example. It represents a document by which one man sells
property to another.[17] The placeholder "N" represents the Latin pro-
noun *ille* (or *illa* in the feminine), which scribes used in place of names to
render the text generic:

A Sale

To the magnificent brother N I N. It is agreeable to me to have sold, and thus
I have sold, property that I own, situated in the district (*pagus*) N, in the place

[17] Paris, BNF, ms. lat. 2123, f. 113v, nr. 12. The text in this manuscript ends with the
phrase "or any of my heirs"; I have supplied the penalty clause in brackets from the
source on which the Flavigny copyist drew, namely, a formula from a collection
compiled in Tours, edited by Karl Zeumer as *Form. Tur.* 5, *MGH Formulae*, 138. See
below at 52–3.

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Figure 1.5 Paris, BNF, ms. lat. 2123, ff. 113v–114r. The formula
translated here is labelled "xii. vindicio" in the left-hand column of the
left-hand page. Image courtesy BNF

called N, with its lands, buildings, tenants (*acolabus* [*sic*]), unfree persons
(*mancipiis*), bondservants (*servis*), freed persons (*libertis*),[18] vineyards, meadows,
fields cultivated and uncultivated, lakes and streams, moveable and immovable
property; I give [this property] entirely and completely, with all of its
appurtenances and dependencies and all additions, just as are seen at the
present time to be possessed by me, from my right into your power and
dominion; whereupon I have accepted a price from you, that is well acceptable
to me, in the presence of those, who[se names] have been inserted below, worth
so-and-so many shillings (*solidi*); so that from this day forward, you may have free
power to do [with the property] whatever you wish. And if there should be
[anyone], I myself or any of my heirs, [or any person, who shall presume to

18 On the meaning of these terms see Chapter 9 below at 284–6.