

To what extent did the Carolingian Renaissance innovate beyond existing Classical culture?

The most enduring achievement of the Carolingian Renaissance is easy to determine: through a passionate and thorough process of search and duplication, the scholars of Charlemagne's court succeeded in preserving the fruits of Classical culture for the sustenance of the future. In doing so, they saved centuries of genius from the abyss of the Dark Ages. However, this led to their greatest failure: they rarely exceeded or refuted Classical works, rather being content to rejuvenate the laurels of their predecessors. I will argue that the failure of the Carolingians to "take pleasure in creative work" made them less innovative: without artists of sufficient accomplishment to stand shoulder to shoulder with Galileo, Catullus or Leonardo, the Carolingian scholars were "*des nains sur des épaules de géants*", in the words of Bernard of Chartres.^{1 2}

The Carolingian renaissance can be divided into two broad areas: literature and art. By analysing these two, I will argue that it saw few genuine innovations, as most new creations were evolutionary not revolutionary. In fact, "innovative" is probably not the best adjective to describe the Carolingian renaissance—unlike the Italian—and so it would be wrong to answer with a yes or a no. The real successes of the Carolingian renaissance were *preserving* culture that would otherwise have been destroyed, and *combining* existing but separate cultures to make something new. In the later years of the eighth century, the established cultural centres of Christendom came under siege: the Insular school in Northumbria and Ireland by the Vikings, the Spanish by the Moors and the Italians by constant war. In this desert of barbarity, the court of Charlemagne must have seemed an oasis of scholarship. The coming of men like Theodulf the Spaniard, Peter of Pisa and, of course, Alcuin the Northumbrian to Aachen created an extraordinary melting pot of art. The second achievement of the Carolingian renaissance was that it fused the divers and disparate Insular, Classical, Spanish, and even Byzantine and Germanic cultures with one another to create a compelling whole; it will become clear that the great creations of the Carolingians were seasoned with flavours that first came together under their aegis.³ The Carolingians were familiar with the Roman Classical culture not only of Golden Age authors such as Cicero, but also of the later Christian Patristics such as Boethius. However, they were woefully ignorant of Greek.⁴ Hence, I will analyse how the Carolingian renaissance innovated on all the Latin (but not Hellenic) tradition which preceded it, both in literature and art. Innovation is the defining characteristic of a renaissance, found especially in the 15th century Italian Renaissance, which has become the *beau idéal*. To be

¹ Almedingen, E. M., 1968. *Charlemagne (a study)*, London, p. 141

² Brundage, J.A., 2007. 'Review of "Des nains sur des épaules de géants: Maîtres et élèves au moyen âge" by Pierre Riché and Jacques Verger', *Speculum*, 82 (4), p. 1030

³ Almedingen, p. 141

⁴ Theodulf fundamentally failed to understand the Byzantine theology on icons in the Caroline Books, his response to the 787 Second Council of Nicaea, and the work of Aristotle only became widely known in Western Europe with the 12th century and the translations of Gerard of Cremona.

Bullough, D, 1980. *The Age of Charlemagne*, London, p.110

Mortimer, I., 2014. *Centuries of Change*, London, p. 45

innovative, works must be both new and valuable. Completely novel ideas are rare but crucial; Leonardo's work on anatomy or designs for exotic machines fit into this category. However, taking an older idea and using it in a new way is also innovative: Milton's *Paradise Lost* was intended to be the English and Christian epic, and in doing so took the oldest idea in literature but created something fresh with it. The prime example of this in the Carolingian renaissance is Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni*, which was heavily inspired by Suetonius and yet still innovative in many regards.⁵ Secondly, a creation must be successful and valuable, or it will be underdeveloped at best and delusional at worst. Carolingian poetry largely fails this test: even if it were new, it is poorly written and without literary merit, unlike the timeless work of the Classical poets.⁶

The Carolingian scholars introduced the innovative "Carolingian minuscule" form, to replace older Roman uncial forms. It was both easier to read and easier to write, making education and book production faster. For example, it enforced spacing between words and standardised the use of capital letters - uncial was a majuscule script, with no lower-case letters. This development happened largely within the reign of Charlemagne himself. Most of the 500 examples of uncial writing which survive date from before the reign of Charlemagne; Godescalc's Lectionary, the oldest extant Carolingian book, which was produced in 781, is largely written in uncial but has a few pages with minuscule writing.⁷ This represents one of the last major uses of uncial writing: by the ninth century, the Aachen Gospels were written exclusively in minuscule. This development had significant long term consequences: the style continued to be developed and used for centuries, for example by Florentine humanists in the fifteenth century.⁸ The innovative leap from uncial to minuscule occurred under Charlemagne, a clear example of the Carolingian renaissance improving and innovating on existing Classical culture.

Carolingian secular prose literature was only innovative in one case; otherwise, its success was in preserving existing knowledge. Perhaps the most famous book to come out of the Carolingian Renaissance was Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne*. Einhard took inspiration from Classical culture, but reshaped, extended and adapted it a genuinely innovative way. Einhard had read Suetonius's *De Vita Caesarum*—as it was in the Aachen library—and textual analysis shows how he used it as the basis for his new biography. Both used a thematic *divisio* to break a reign down into manageable sections. Suetonius analysed Caesar's public life, personal life, "signs of his greatness and everlasting good fortune" and death, a structure which Tristan Power argues is original.^{9 10} In contrast, Einhard used a different *divisio*, looking at Charlemagne's campaigns, character, and administration, with a focus on the church rather than the mechanics of government. Moreover, his discussion of Charlemagne's character is based around Cicero's idea of *magnamitas*, rather than traditionally Christian values.¹¹ Hence, Einhard marked a contrast between himself and the Dark Age tradition of hagiography, regenerating the phoenix of biography once more. Whether Innes is right that "Carolingian intellectuals were aware of Einhard's

⁵ Hellmann, S., quoted in Innes, M., 1997. 'The Classical Tradition in the Carolingian Renaissance: Ninth-Century Encounters with Suetonius', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 3(3), p. 267

⁶ Walsh, P. G., 1986. 'Review of "Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance" by Peter Godman', *The Classical Review (New Series)*, 36(1), pp. 182-183

⁷ Bullough, p. 100

⁸ Ibid., p. 127

⁹ Wardle, D., 2014. *Suetonius*, Oxford, pp. 10-12

¹⁰ Wardle, D., 2016. 'Review of Suetonius the Biographer, T. Power and R. K. Gibson', *Histos*, 10, p.73

¹¹ Innes, p.267

debt to the classics in developing a 'new biography'", or, as others have argued, Isaac Casaubon in 1595 was the first historian to notice similarities with Suetonius, it is clear that Einhard used the existing Classical tradition in innovative ways that were, most importantly, relevant to the ninth century: since there was no cult of deification around Charlemagne, there was no need to analyse his "signs of everlasting good fortune", and the warrior culture of the Franks demanded a greater focus on campaigning than might have been necessary among the intelligentsia of second-century Rome.¹² However, although Einhard was innovative with the structure and contents of his work, the quality of his Latin was poor. There had been a shocking decline in Latinity under the Merovingians, and hence Einhard tried and failed to recreate Golden Age Latin.^{13 14} He added nothing new, and did not emulate the skill with which Cicero deployed it. This reduced the value of the *Life* as a work of literature: not only did it try to create a pastiche of Classical culture, it did it badly, and hence fails the second criteria for being an innovative work. However, I would argue that the innovations Einhard made by adapting Suetonian structure and reintroducing biography to the west outweighed his failures of execution for two reasons. Since it is not a work of fiction, the style matters less than the content: his primary purpose is to inform not entertain. Second, the *Life* had long term impacts on the whole genre of biography that were independent of its literary merits. It doesn't matter if the *Life* itself is not particularly well written, only that its innovation inspires more biographies. This is especially true as time passes and authors become more comfortable using mediaeval, not Golden Age, Latin. However, this remains one of the only examples of successful Carolingian prose writing. Other popular works, such as the pre-Carolingian *Liber Scintillarum* by Defensor or Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, were compendiums of knowledge rather than new creations.¹⁵ Although they were derivative from earlier work, they were precursors of the other characteristics of the Carolingian renaissance, preserving and combining existing knowledge; they introduced the knowledge of Spain to Francia. The development of *scriptoria* and new minuscule writing allowed these books to be spread wider than ever before. Einhard was all but alone in creating something new, but other scholars were doing structurally essential work: without their efforts to create reference works, much of Classical culture and knowledge would have been lost to us.

Much of what is known about Classical culture is owing to the efforts of Carolingian *scriptoria*, especially Corbie, Rheims and Fulda, because there was a concerted effort under Charlemagne to find and copy ancient manuscripts.¹⁶ This is a significant achievement of the Carolingian renaissance, but cannot be called innovative. Rather, it demonstrates how old knowledge was preserved. McKitterick argues that the Carolingians mounted "a determined effort to seek and salvage what they could of Classical heritage"; this view is supported by a capitulary from 780 asking for rare and ancient books to be sent to Charlemagne, and a vast increase in surviving texts: 264 Latin books dating from 550-750 survive, of which only 26 are secular works, and most of those are technical, including, for example, the work of Vitruvius.^{17 18} However, between 750 and 800 the majority of Latin literature was recopied, including 70

¹² Ibid., p. 275

¹³ Migne, J. P., 1855. *Patrologia Latina*, 88, p. 1085 gives an example of error-ridden Merovingian Latin: "Abba de basilica peculiaris patronis nostri domni Doinisii marteris ... climenciae rigni nostri sogessit"

¹⁴ Innes, p. 267

¹⁵ Almedingen, Charlemagne, p.141

¹⁶ McKitterick, R., 2005, 'The Carolingian Renaissance of culture and learning', *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Story, J., Manchester, p.160

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 160

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 160

different authors and 35 works by Cicero, who inspired Einhard. In 804, scribes at St. Martin copied out Livy's Third Decade from a fifth-century Italian manuscript in the Aachen library—"almost the earliest evidence of an interest in a major Classical prose writer away from court".^{19 20} It would not be hyperbolic to say that Charlemagne saved Classical culture. Charlemagne also ordered the Germanic prose epics, which until that point had been transmitted orally, to be collected and written down. Although they were largely destroyed by Louis the Pious for being pagan, fragments of the *Hildebrandslied* in particular survive. Charlemagne was determined to preserve all the culture he could, whether Golden Age literature or barbarian tales, rather than just Christian culture, which Louis focused on. The effort to save German work ultimately failed, but shows how the Carolingians tried to preserve secular literature for its own sake. Hence, the argument of Walter Ullmann that the Carolingian renaissance was "by-products emerging from a deeper religious movement" is flawed: although largely religiously motivated, aspects of the Carolingian renaissance were purely secular and hence some secular innovation occurred.²¹ That said, some religious literary work was done in making improved editions of the Bible and psalters. Alcuin and Theodulf wrote their own versions of the Bible with particular goals in mind: Theodulf made a scholarly edition, with alternative readings in several places, and Dagulf's Psalter, made for Pope Hadrian in the early 780s, contained the version of the Mass which the Pope performed.²² There was, then, significant theological activity going on at the time: rather than accepting what had been handed down to them from the Church Fathers, the Carolingians sought to clarify (in the case of Theodulf's Bible) and collate (in the case of Dagulf) their Christian culture. Not much innovative new theology was created—there are no Catholic Doctors of the Church from the Carolingian period, in contrast to earlier and later times which saw men like Isidore of Seville and Peter Damian worthy of that recognition. The effort to save Classical culture demonstrates that the Carolingians preserved what they inherited, and the interest in German oral epics that they brought together different cultures. However, none of what they did was innovative to a significant degree.

Carolingian poetry was largely without literary merit, showing a lack of creativity at the time. Like the Classical authors, all their literature was poetry, with the novel only being developed much later. But unlike Catullus, Ovid and Virgil, there were no great Carolingian poets. Theodulf attempted to write poetry, but did not succeed: his best known work, *Contra Iudices*, about a glass vase depicting the deeds of Hercules, is not well regarded by scholars as a work of literature, unlike his religious works.²³ This general negative outlook may be partially explained by the poor quality of texts surviving to us: scholars can't agree on what the correct version is, and this leads to accusations of clunky Latin and sound which would not have been present in the original.²⁴ That said, the imperfect Latin of Einhard and the Merovingians makes it likely that similar failures were present in poetry, and hence I would agree that Carolingian poetry didn't exceed the work of the Roman poets, failing both tests of innovation.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 161

²⁰ Bullough, p. 127

²¹ Sullivan, R. E., 1970, 'Review of the "The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Kingship. (The Birkbeck Lectures 1968-69)" by Walter Ullmann', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 9(4), p. 339

²² Contreni, J.J., 1984, 'The Carolingian Renaissance', *Renaissances before the Renaissance*, ed. Treadgold, W., Stanford, p.67

²³ McKitterick, R., 1992. 'Review of "A Tainted Mantle: Hercules and the Classical Tradition at the Carolingian Court" by Lawrence Nees', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 78(3), pp. 443-444

²⁴ Walsh, 'Review of "Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance" by Peter Godman', pp.182-183

In the realms of literature, there were few genuine innovations (Einhard's *Life* being the best example). Instead, we see a reinforcement and retrenchment of Classical culture which survived "by the skin of its teeth".²⁵ Hence the literary achievement of the Carolingian renaissance should be characterised less as innovation than as preservation.

Ivory book covers are one of the most recognisable products of Carolingian art, and in many ways they were innovative: however, they were also a canvas for artists of many different backgrounds to work together. The tradition of making ivory diptychs extends back to the fourth century, where consuls were entitled to wax tablets with ivory covers depicting imperial imagery.²⁶ Many of these were repurposed into book covers, but the first example of ivory being used specifically for books covers came in the late fifth century, which is now preserved in Milan.²⁷ This had Christian imagery, and this was a theme continued into the Carolingian period, since the most valuable books were religious in nature. Dagulf's Psalter was made with ivory covers, but the real creativity came in the designs, not the materials: rather than just the Classical Christian images which adorn the Milan covers, Insular ideas about page design are mixed with Celtic patterns and Classical materials such as gold leaf. These foreign ideas were introduced to Francia by migrant artists who had much in common with Clement and Dungal, showing how Charlemagne's court became a meeting-place for scholars and artists who found Ireland and Northumbria increasingly uninhabitable. Clement and Dungal arrived in Francia around 771, before Viking raids began, but attacks starting in 793 with the raid on Lindisfarne intensified until work on the Books of Kells had to be abandoned around 800 and Aachen was a hugely tempting refuge. The designs on the cover of Dagulf's Psalter attest to the mixture of cultures that occurred under Charlemagne, with cultures that had existed in relative isolation since the Roman abandonment of Britain now reunited to produce strange yet wonderful offspring. The covers of the Lorsch Gospels represent the culmination of this tradition of ivory: Bullough states that the artist "imposed his own interpretation on the models" of the Gospel scenes in a Classical style.²⁸ The artist continues the tradition which he inherited, but his glorious creation changes the tradition set by Godescalc and his predecessors. Carolingian book-covers were innovative in terms of their design, and valuable because of their eminent beauty, but the most interesting work comes from the way different cultures, not merely Classical, were brought together. This is because the introduction of foreign cultures broke down whatever complacency may have existed among the Frankish artists, inspiring them to innovate.

The beautiful illumination of Carolingian manuscripts, with purple pages and silver letters drawing a striking contrast to the monochrome utility of modern books, is a testimony to the diversity of Charlemagne's artisans. The first references to purple-stained pages appear in the third century, and examples survive from the end of the fourth century; The Emperor Constantine received a collection of purple odes.²⁹ The Carolingians were building upon a long Classical tradition with works such as

²⁵ Clark, K., quoted in Contreni, 'The Carolingian Renaissance', p. 62

²⁶ Norman, J., (n.d.), The Earliest Treasure Book-Covers
<http://www.historyofinformation.com/expanded.php?id=2213>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bullough, *The Age of Charlemagne*, p. 139

²⁹ della Torre Arrigoni, D., 2015. *Colour in Painting: Materials and Spirituality*, p.73

Godescalc's Lectionary - but the extraordinary beauty and grandeur of their creations makes them valuable even if there were no innovation. However, Godescalc contains the first depiction of the "fountain of life" motif, and a new trend towards more realistic depictions of people is apparent in the Lorsch Gospels, with lifelike loose robes, and faces which can convey emotion.³⁰ The best Carolingian books combine the Classical tradition of purple pages and vines with Insular influences on page design, while incorporating Mediterranean techniques of perspective and drapery.³¹ This provides a clear rebuttal to the historians who have argued that Carolingian art "in a sense, grew out of nothing" - i.e. the void of the Dark Ages.³² In fact, Carolingian art is so valuable precisely because of the way it united foreign schools of art to form "something that is not a mannerist hodge-podge but is, in fact, a new and coherent style", Byzantine working together Celt.³³ There was incontrovertibly innovation in Carolingian art: its beauty is timeless and contains several examples of new techniques and symbols. However, the more important factor in its creation was that it connected men from across Christendom, as this caused the innovation. The Carolingian renaissance was less Frankish than pan-European, the friction of separated cultures creating the blazing splendour of Carolingian illumination.

The great buildings of the Carolingian period were not gleaming skyscrapers or dark castles, but churches - some of the only large permanent structures in Europe; between 768 and 855, 27 cathedrals, and 417 monasteries were constructed.³⁴ However, there wasn't a revolution in Carolingian church building of the magnitude that was effected after the Norman Conquest: rather, there were small improvements of mixed quality. We know very little about Merovingian churches, as few survive to us today, and so it is impossible to compare them to Carolingian ones. As such, we can only compare to Classical culture, especially in Italy. The most famous church stood at Aachen: Charlemagne's Palatine Chapel. It was based heavily off the late-Roman design of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, copying the octagonal floor plan in particular, but also literally reusing columns from the Palace of Theodoric in Ravenna, whence it also takes inspiration for a large niche in the facade.³⁵ The extensive borrowings from foreign cultures illustrate how the Carolingian renaissance was able to unite them into a cohesive whole, but in this case there were significant innovations: the details of the art show extraordinary workmanship that was innovative and valuable, most likely made by Byzantine craftsmen.³⁶ Innovations in other churches were small, such as the transepts in the church of St. Denis, built in 775: improvements were gradual not revolutionary, especially outside the main cathedrals.³⁷ Even Palatine Chapel didn't have the impact of a development like Gothic architecture from the Romanesque style used by the Carolingians. The power, wealth and stability of Charlemagne's court brought together artisans from across Europe to work together.

The characterisation of the Carolingian renaissance is a topic of much debate. Some historians, such as Walter Ullmann, saw it as a purely religious movement with secondary artistic consequences.

³⁰ Bullough, p. 134

³¹ Ibid., p. 137

³² Ibid., p. 131

³³ Ibid., p. 137

³⁴ Contreni, p. 64

³⁵ Bullough, p. 150

³⁶ Ibid., p. 150

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 145-6

This view is supported by the 789 *Admonitio Generalis* and *De Litteris Colendis*, which calls for education to “More easily ... penetrate the mysteries of divine scripture”.³⁸ However, this view doesn’t account for the fact that as time passed, the Carolingian scholars grew more interested in secular arts. There was certainly debate at court over whether secular writing should be patronised, but the collection of German culture and the interest in Latin prose authors demonstrates that what started as a movement to educate priests quickly took on a life of its own, reflecting Charlemagne’s own growing intellectual maturity. I wouldn’t go as far as Sullivan, who argued that “Ullmann’s whole case falls to pieces if one does not accept his interpretation of the Carolingian renaissance as an effort to achieve a rebirth of society conceived in theological terms”, since the revival of learning had little impact during Charlemagne’s lifetime on the empire as a whole, but was more of an epiphenomenon, due to the “absolute liberty of action given [to the court scholars] by their royal patron”.^{39 40} In fact, I would tend to agree with Contreni that “any account of the Carolingian Renaissance that omitted its detours, contradictions and idiosyncrasies would make it seem too schematic”.⁴¹ It was complicated and without central guidance: Charlemagne never commissioned a new edition of the Bible, and yet Theodulf and Alcuin separately wrote their own version. I would divide the successes of the Carolingian renaissance into preservation, concatenation and innovation. The literary side saw much more preservation: they had to focus on what Janet Nelson called “corrective change” in order to save and adapt the works of their predecessors for their own time. Even more so than Einhard, the embodiment of this theme must be Alcuin of York, whom Almedingen calls “the outstanding intellect of his day, even though he was no creative genius”.^{42 43} The theme of concatenation, joining together cultures from across Christendom, is seen perhaps more clearly in art, where Byzantine drapery literally interweaves with Classical vines and Insular colour and design, providing a metaphor for Charlemagne’s court, which was so multicultural that he had his own elephant - wonderfully enabling him to disprove Solinus’s assertion that elephants are unable to lie down.⁴⁴ Thirdly, innovation is present in the work of Carolingian scholars, but it almost no case is it as important the other two. Hence I would argue that the most important achievements of the Carolingian renaissance were not in innovating beyond Classical culture, but rather in passing it on in an adapted form to the Middle Ages, and uniting it with the other cultures too long kept apart.

(3977 words)

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³⁸ McKitterick

³⁹ Sullivan, p. 340

⁴⁰ Almedingen, p.160

⁴¹ Contreni, p. 67

⁴² Nelson, J. L., 1996. *The Carolingian World 750-900*, London, p. xiii

⁴³ Almedingen, p. 154

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