

CHARLEMAGNE'S COURTIER: THE COMPLETE EINHARD
A REVIEW ARTICLE

by Courtney M. Booker

Short, pithy, and entertaining, Einhard's *Vita Karoli* has long served as a mainstay of the introductory Western civilization course—an emblematic primary reading that complements the “Carolingian civilization” lecture with great economy.¹ Yet, for many college undergraduates attending schools that adhere to a quarterly schedule, Carolingian society is often encountered only through this famous ninth-century biography of Charlemagne. Little more space can be afforded sources pertaining to the relatively brief history of the Franks under the rule of the Carolingians, given both the ten short weeks of an academic quarter, and the staggering chronological and cultural sweep to be sketched by the course (usually running from Pre-history to the year 800 C.E.). Within such an unfortunate, circumscribed configuration (Carolingian history is generally outlined in the final lecture), Lewis Thorpe's introduction to and English translation of the *Vita Karoli* (*Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, Two Lives of Charlemagne* [Harmondsworth 1969]) has functioned admirably; inexpensive and readily available as a Penguin Classic edition, it has remained steadily in print, and in the hands of students, for the last thirty years. But in 1993, Paul Edward Dutton provided both instructors and students with an inviting alternative.

Published by Broadview Press as a modestly priced paperback, Dutton's judiciously edited volume, *Carolingian Civilization, A Reader*, (henceforth *Civ.*) offers a broad and variegated spectrum of Carolingian primary texts in translation, including the *Vita Karoli* in its entirety. Readers now have the opportunity both to explore the Carolingian world through a variety of sources—many hitherto unavailable in English translation—and to evaluate critically the stories and representations found in these same sources through comparison, contrast, and “triangulation.” But if Dutton's collection problematizes by its diversity the culture that, for Western civilization courses, Thorpe's volume has long been used to typify, its wide range lacks the “manageability” of the latter. Students are left wondering, “Who were all of these (un)interesting people writing these (un)interesting texts, and why were they writing them?”—questions, Dutton claims, he himself raised

¹The subject of this review article is *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, edited and translated by Paul Edward Dutton, *Readings in Medieval Civilizations and Cultures* 3 (Peterborough: Broadview Press 1998), pp. li, 199, 14 plates, 4 maps.

and pursued as a beginning student of Carolingian society; answering them led him from one ninth-century author to another, from Eriugena “to Einhard, Einhard to Boniface, and Boniface to Dhuoda and others” (*Civ.* ix). Of course, with its brief introductory remarks, Thorpe’s discussion of the *Vita Karoli* (1–21) itself hardly works to satisfy these same questions about Einhard. Still, the pedagogical (and pragmatic) advantages of problematizing a single author, or even a single text, as attested by the enduring use of Thorpe’s translation in course curricula, were not lost on Dutton.

Appearing five years after the first printing of *Carolingian Civilization, A Reader*, Dutton’s new collection of translated texts, *Charlemagne’s Courtier, The Complete Einhard* is the verso to that earlier sourcebook’s recto. Focusing solely on the Carolingian aristocrat and intellectual, Einhard (ca. 770–840), Dutton has carefully gathered and translated every extant work of this famous biographer of Charlemagne (as currently ascribed to him by scholars), and bound them together with the few trace remarks left by contemporaries about his life, his achievements, and his artistic merits. Consequently, unlike the editor’s earlier general source collection *Carolingian Civilization*, which was assembled to grant students a “wider exposure to the literary and historical documents of the Carolingian age” (*Civ.* x), *Charlemagne’s Courtier* (henceforth *Courtier*) provides readers with a rare treat: the ability “to lay [one’s] hands all at once on everything about [a] topic and to swallow it whole” (*Courtier* vii). The ensuing paragraphs are an attempt first to savor and describe a few of this latter sourcebook’s bolder flavors.

Following a brief preface, a nuanced introduction to and evaluation of the sources, and a rich bibliography (*Courtier* i–li), the assemblage begins with an impressionistic portrait of Einhard as painted by the thoughts of his peers, admirers, and sycophants. Alcuin, Modoin, Theodulf, Gerward, Walahfrid Strabo, Ermold the Black, The “Astronomer,” Rudolf of Fulda, Hrabanus Maurus—all were moved in some way by the man that many of them described as “tiny.” Indeed, it was this very feature that often inspired Einhard’s contemporaries to wax metaphorically about his prowess; like the flowering nard with its powerful fragrance (Alcuin, Modoin, Theodulf), the busy bee with its honey (Alcuin), the ant with its industry (Theodulf), or the eye’s pupil with its gift of sight and dexterity (Alcuin), the courtier’s small body belied a tremendous spirit. Equally impressive to contemporaries, however, was the keen restraint which governed this same vitality. Einhard may have been consistently described by his peers as “learned,” “skilled,” and “great,” but, to contemporary encomiasts reflecting back on his life, “prudent” was the adjective deemed most suitable to capture

the essence of his character, whether in his role as poet, abbot, legate, engineer, biographer, or royal advisor.

Section two contains Einhard's crowning jewel, the biography of Charlemagne. Rendered, like all of Dutton's translations, in a prose style that reflects a deep sensitivity to Einhard's Latinity (cf. Dutton's remarks in *Courtier* vii-viii), the text reads with great clarity and ease. The translation itself is based upon the critical editions by Georg Waitz (rev. by O. Holder-Egger, 1911) and Louis Halphen (5th ed., 1981), which are the products of a careful comparison and collation of many manuscripts. This is a major departure from Thorpe's translation, which—for reasons unknown—follows the 1867 edition of P. Jaffé, who relied upon a single manuscript for his text (Paris, B.N. lat. 10758, saec. X). Thus, while Thorpe's rather free translation (which most scholars are wary of quoting without caveats) depends on a dubious edition, Dutton's translation is textually accurate, and—what is perhaps most useful for beginning students—consistent, permitting a critical analysis both of the style and vocabulary of the text, and a greater familiarity with the literary sensibilities of its author.²

Of all the sources in the collection, the notarial documents grouped together in section three will certainly be the most unfamiliar to modern readers. Translated here for the first time, with accompanying maps and a facsimile plate, this mixed assortment of charters associated with Einhard and his properties reveals much about the source of a Carolingian lord's power, as well as the host of responsibilities that was its cost. Beginning with six charters drawn up during his tenure as acting notary for the monastery of Fulda, and ending with the record of a land lease to one of his dependents in 839, these legal instruments allow us a tantalizing glimpse of the relationship between Einhard, his land, and the peasants that tilled its soil.³ To be sure, this view is obscured by the highly formalized language of the documents; endowments of land, grants of immunity, exchanges of dependents, the manumission of servants—all were procedures that required authentication through the deployment of an established set of legal formulae, duly witnessed and subscribed. But, as Eileen Power demonstrated long ago in her famous “recreation” of the daily thoughts and activities of the Carolingian peas-

²For some recent remarks on Einhard's classicism, see M. Innes, “The Classical Tradition in the Carolingian Renaissance: Ninth-Century Encounters with Suetonius,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 3 (1997) 265–282.

³One might note, as a minor addendum to the literature cited by Dutton in his bibliography on Einhard's charters, another contemporary source concerning Einhard's property, discussed by P. Gasnault, “Un document comptable du IX^e siècle provenant sans doute de Saint-Bavon de Gand,” *Bulletin de la société nationale des antiquaires de France*, Séance du 25 novembre (1970) 310–318.

ant “Bodo” (*Medieval People* [London 1924]), and as Patrick Geary (*Aristocracy in Provence* [Philadelphia 1985]) and Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre (*Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages* [Cambridge 1995]) have recently reminded us, there is still a great deal of life to be found in these normative texts. It is simply up to us to ask the right questions. In this sense, then, Einhard’s charters are very much alive, for Dutton’s translation will introduce them to that most curious group of readers—students.

Section four introduces those precious few testaments to Einhard’s renowned patronage of art and architecture: his churches at Steinbach (Michelstadt) and Mulinheim (Seligenstadt), and his small triumphal arch. For photographs and studies of the two churches—beyond the simple floor plans which he provides (*Courtier* 68)—Dutton directs the reader to the art books cited in his bibliography.⁴ The remaining five pages (*Courtier* 63–67) of the section are devoted to Einhard’s wondrous miniature arch. Although the original has been lost, its likeness has been preserved thanks to a highly detailed drawing made by an anonymous hand of the seventeenth century. Not only has Dutton reproduced this image of the arch in his book, but he has also utilized computer technology to correct the distorted perspective in the drawing, providing a speculative reconstruction of how the object might have appeared in three dimensions. Effectively complementing these graphics is a concise, descriptive commentary, including a translation of the inscription by Einhard which appeared on the back of the arch, and an explication of the biblical and classical motifs that once covered the object’s surface. Yet, within these notes, Dutton surprisingly neglects to emphasize the very purpose for which Einhard fashioned the arch in the first place. True, in his dedicatory inscription, Einhard himself says that it was made “to support the cross of eternal victory.” But such a magnificent base for a cross surely should prompt at least a brief reiteration of Dutton’s earlier editorial remarks (*Courtier* xxxv), which underscore the particularly fervent devotion shown by the Carolingians to this holy symbol of Christ’s “victory.” In an age when intellectuals such as Theodulf of Orléans,⁵ Hrabanus Maurus,⁶ and Einhard himself⁷

⁴Namely, the studies by Hubert, Porcher, and Volbach (1970), Conant (1978), Ludwig (1994), and Ludwig, Müller, and Widdra-Spiess (1996). However, one should also see the essay by G. Binding, “*Multis arte fuit utilis: Einhard als Organisator am Aachener Hof und als Bauherr in Steinbach und Seligenstadt*,” *Mittelalterliches Jahrbuch* 30. 2 (1995) 29–46.

⁵*Libri Carolini* 2. 28, ed. H. Bastgen, MGH *Concilia* 2 supplement (Hanover and Leipzig 1924, reprinted Hanover 1979) 89–91.

⁶*In honorem sanctae crucis*, ed. M. Perrin, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis 100 (Turnhout 1997).

were giving considerable attention to the cross in their writings, and Charlemagne's son, Emperor Louis the Pious, was having special liturgical crosses wrought for his royal children,⁸ Einhard's tiny, triumphal arch-as-base for the victorious cross seems less of an anomaly.

Among the medley of Einhard's texts, the narrative in section five provides instructors with perhaps the best counterpoint to the *Vita Karoli*. For, if the biography of Charlemagne is about the radiant embodiment of virtue and might, then Einhard's lengthy account of the *Translation and Miracles of the Blessed Martyrs, Marcellinus and Peter* included here is about paradox, faith, and the process of revelation. Describing the events which followed his quest for, and eventual purchase of, the relics of Saints Marcellinus and Peter, Einhard presents us with a story filled with cloak-and-dagger intrigue, set in a fantastic world where nothing is as it first seems. Double-crossing priests and "restless" relics, the blaze of lightning serving as a beacon for the lost, and decayed bodies reeking of sweet and aromatic scents, a prolix demon sententiously denouncing an iniquitous populace, and a reliquary dripping with a liquid, which had the taste (!) of blood—the sheer variety of the uncanny to be found in this text defies simple summary or interpretation.⁹ Nevertheless, for those encountering Carolingian society here for the first time, a realization that the author of Charlemagne's biography would even write such a story itself goes a long way towards granting readers a better understanding of the sophistication both of the people and of the age. Was Einhard writing to dispel rumors about the suspect integrity and authenticity of his relics, or was he strategically composing a text designed to promote his own reputation as faithful attendant to the saints? Did he seek to gain a "saintly advantage?"

⁷*De adoranda cruce*, ed. K. Hampe, MGH *Epistolae* 5 (Hanover 1898/1899, reprinted Munich 1978) 146–149.

⁸For Lothar's cross, see *Die Urkunden Lothars I. und Lothars II.*, ed. T. Schieffer, MGH *Diplomata Karolinorum* 3 (Berlin/Zürich 1966) 281, no. 122. For Louis the German's cross, *Die Urkunden Ludwigs des Deutschen, Karlmanns und Ludwigs des Jüngeren*, ed. P. Kehr, MGH *Diplomata regum Germaniae ex stirpe Karolinorum* 1 (Berlin 1932/1934, reprinted Munich 1980) 92, no. 66. For Charles the Bald's cross, Nithard, *Historiarum libri III*, 2. 6, ed. P. Lauer, *Nithard: Histoire des fils de Louis le Pieux* (Paris 1926) 56. I thank Eric Goldberg for these references.

⁹But see the interpretations of these events suggested in Dutton's excellent study, *The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire* (Lincoln, NE 1994) 91–97, and the studies cited by Dutton in his bibliography, together with H.H. Weber, "Die Überführung der Reliquien der Heiligen Marcellinus und Petrus von Michelstadt-Steinbach nach Seligenstadt im Jahre 828," *Archiv für hessische Geschichte und Altertumskunde* NF 32 (1974) 55–80; and K. Esselborn, "Einhard's Leben und Werke. Einführung in die Verdeutschung seiner Schrift: Übertragung und Wunder der Heiligen Marcellinus und Petrus," *Archiv für hessische Geschichte und Altertumskunde* NF 15 (1928) 24–86.

(*Courtier* xxvii) over his rivals at court, or was he simply “anxious to demonstrate the potency of the martyrs’ relics” (*Courtier* xxix)? Were the final books of the translation account really descriptions written by others and passed along to Einhard, or did the diminutive courtier compose them himself, but present them as independent reports, communicated to him soon after the miraculous events? Thinking through such questions brings the reader closer to an understanding—not only of the difference of the medieval mentality, but also of the historicity of one’s own way of thinking.¹⁰

The last two segments of the volume consist of Einhard’s correspondence. Section six contains those letters that seem to have been preserved in St.-Bavo, one of two monasteries belonging to Einhard in the city of Ghent (the other having been St.-Blandin). Surviving in a unique manuscript (Paris, B.N. lat. 11379, fols. 3–14^r, 20),¹¹ these sixty-five epistles bring us out of the miraculous world of Einhard’s relics and back to the realm of the Carolingian mundane: of roof tile prices, arrangements of marriages, and the securing of foodstuffs and general supplies, of bowel problems, and property rights, and the advantages of messengers over written documents for communicating across great distances. Much like the group of charters in section three, these letters serve to remind us of the daily responsibilities and anxieties of an aristocrat in the ninth century, and, in the case of Einhard, the many voices and roles one would assume in order to negotiate such quotidian concerns successfully.¹² But also like the group of charters, Einhard’s letter collection is fraught with its own set of difficulties as an historical source. To take but one example: as the letters survive in only one manuscript, is there any significance to the order in which they are preserved? While the earlier editor of the epistles disregarded their codicological order, in favor of reestablishing their chronological interrelationship, Dutton presents them in the order found in the manuscript. This decision, as Dutton notes in his introduction, was informed

¹⁰See the comments of P. Geary, *Furta sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton 1978; rev. 1990), and P. Freedman and G. Spiegel, “Medievalisms Old and New: The Rediscovery of Alterity in North American Medieval Studies,” *American Historical Review* 103 (1998) 677–704.

¹¹For a full discussion of the MS, its contents, and its provenance, see J.J. Contreni, “Le Formulaire de Laon: Source pour l’histoire de l’école de Laon au début du X^e siècle,” *Scriptorium* 27 (1973) 21–29.

¹²For an insightful analysis of the voices, roles, and networks employed in letter-writing, see P.D. McLean, “A Frame Analysis of Favor Seeking in the Renaissance: Agency, Networks, and Political Culture,” *American Journal of Sociology* 104 (1998) 51–91, together with G. Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections* (Turnhout 1976), *Typologie des sources du Moyen Age occidental*, 17.

by questions about why the collection was assembled in the first place: that it may have been used “as an example book for writing business correspondence” (*Courtier* xxxii), and that, as such, “the original context and placement of a piece in the strata of this collection [may] have informative and meaningful values of their own” (*Courtier* xxxi).

The final section of the book presents an exchange of letters between Einhard and Lupus, the learned monk of Ferrières, which survive in Lupus's own letter collection. Matters great and small are discussed between the two intellectuals, ranging from the availability of certain ancient texts, to mathematical problems and linguistic questions, to consolation over the death of Einhard's wife Emma, to “the nature of prayer and why it sometimes fails” (*Courtier* xxxiv). Certainly the letters regarding these latter two topics are the most profoundly emotional and personal of all the texts gathered in the present volume, for the death of Emma tested Einhard's faith—and his renowned ability to cope—like no other crisis in his long and tumultuous life had. Moreover, while the letters allow us to empathize with Einhard's grief, they also grant us an example of how people in the ninth century sought to cope with adversity, or, in the case of Emma's death, the throes of grim desperation; Lupus's consolatory reminder that “it is necessary for divine assistance to appear when human assistance falls short” may seem to the modern reader rather cool and dispassionate at first, but upon reflection one is struck by the fact that he was speaking to Einhard in terms the courtier himself had once used for consolation.¹³ Such appeals for divine intercession, however, would this time go unanswered for Einhard. It is in this context, suggests Dutton, that we should understand the forlorn and forsaken courtier's lengthy epistle to Lupus on the adoration of the cross and the nature of correct prayer—as a kind of therapeutic exercise, “fashioned out of the crucible of his own suffering” (*Courtier* xxxv).

But if divine faith or the act of writing could afford some measure of relief from the troubles of the world, they were not the only methods by which Einhard negotiated his way through current crises. Indeed, if there is a unifying theme to all of the works assembled in the present volume, it is the notion of “coping”—an ability that contemporaries such as Walahfrid Strabo described with such terms as *prudencia et probitas*, Einhard's defining traits (*Courtier* 8). Royal biography, wills

¹³Cf. Lupus's quotation (*Courtier* 179) to that by Einhard (ep. 31, *Courtier* 142), ca. 833. The quotation itself, which Einhard attributes to Philo, is from Rufinus's translation of the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius II, 5, 5 (*Eusebius Werke*, ed. E. Schwartz, T. Mommsen, 2 [Leipzig 1903] 119), as noted by P.K. Marshall in his 1984 edition of Lupus's letters, 10.

detailing the fate of property, the purchase of relics and their subsequent promotion, timely sickness and absence, a perpetual concern with haste—all were, in their own way, “strategies” adopted by Einhard in response to the world around him (cf. *Courtier* xxi-xxii, xxxviii, xl).¹⁴ Little wonder, then, that Dutton claims to have taken great care with his translations to restore a sense of Einhard’s “personal agency” (*Courtier* vii). For the courtier was, at all moments of his long career, thoroughly engaged with the matters of the world. Even during his “retirement” at Michelstadt and Seligenstadt from the affairs of the palace, Einhard was constantly kept apprised of current events through his epistolary network.¹⁵ Such careful navigation through the tempestuous sea that was the Carolingian realm in the 820s and 830s earned Einhard not only the admiration and esteem of his immediate peers, but that of later generations as well. Indeed, the “idea” of Einhard—that is, how he has been imagined and represented over the course of the last millennium, and beyond—is the deserving topic for another book.¹⁶ For the time being, *Charlemagne’s Courtier: The Complete Einhard*,

¹⁴Cf. Dutton’s examination of the equally creative ways in which peasants of the ninth century coped with adversity, “Thunder and Hail over the Carolingian Countryside,” in *Agriculture in the Middle Ages: Technology, Practice, and Representation*, ed. D. Sweeney (Philadelphia 1995) 111–137, or kings with the difficulties posed by senescence, “Beyond the Topos of Senescence: The Political Problems of Aged Carolingian Rulers,” in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. M.M. Sheehan (Toronto 1990) 75–94.

¹⁵One notes Einhard’s persistent request in his letters to be “filled in” (“*facere certum*”) about various matters (nos. 41, 44, but see also 11, 37, 46). Dutton’s translation here of “*facere certum*,” while perfectly correct, is perhaps a bit colloquial. Cf. *Courtier* 92, “sticks to this plan” (“*ordinem servare*”); 143, “check out” (“*interrogare*”); 147, “sticks to those promises” (“*in promissis permanere*”).

¹⁶See, for example, the eighteenth-century image of Einhard as helmsman of the church of Seligenstadt, reproduced by Dutton on p. xl. For some late ninth-/early tenth-century descriptions of Einhard, see the *Visio Karoli*, ed. P. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY 1994) 74–76; trans. P. Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization, A Reader* (Peterborough 1993) 423–424, “Einhard, who was said to be wiser than the others”; Poeta Saxo, *Annalium de gestis Caroli Magni imperatoris libri quinque*, IV, anno 803, line 118, ed. P. von Winterfeld, MGH *Poetae* 4 (Berlin 1899, reprinted Munich 1978) 48; trans. M.E. McKinney, *The Saxon Poet’s Life of Charles the Great* (New York 1956) 72, “one among the Franks who is a famous and truthful and wise narrator, whose name is Einhard”; Odilo of Saint-Médard, *Epistola ad Ingrannum*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, MGH *Scriptores* 15, pt. 1 (Hanover 1887, reprinted Stuttgart 1992) 379–380, “Einhard, a wise man.” For a number of ninth-century texts once attributed to Einhard by scholars, see the various works listed under his name in *Clavis scriptorum Latinorum medii aevi. Auctores Galliae 735–987*, ed. M.H. Jullien and F. Perelman, 1 (Turnhout 1994) 336–351.

expedited with Dutton's care and grace, lets us savor the complexity of the ninth-century fare. *Bon appétit!*

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