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**The Carolingian Context: The Life and Work of Alcuin of York**

TASP is currently working to digitalize Alcuin of York’s *De Ratione Animae*, a medieval Latin treatise written for Gundrada, a cousin of King Charlemagne (Alberi 909). This text is thought to originate in the early 9th century near the end of Alcuin’s life, during which time he was an abbot in Tours (Alberi 909, Costambeys et al. 147). However, Alcuin had previously been a part of the Carolingian court in Aachen, having been invited by Charlemagne ca. 782 CE (Costambeys et al. 146). Until his final departure around 796 CE, Alcuin was a scholar and teacher at the palace, and Charlemagne and some members of his family were among Alcuin’s students (Costambeys et al. 147, Lorenz 42-3). Alcuin became a major figure in the Carolingian Renaissance, and some scholars have argued that Charlemagne’s statements on religion and cultural activity reflect Alcuin’s influence (Costambeys et al. 146). But who are the Carolingians, and how did they come to power?

The Carolingian dynasty is named for the Frankish military leader Charles Martel, as the Latinized form of the name Charles is ‘Carolus’ (3). Charles Martel’s son Pippin III was mayor of the palace, a role which several members of the family had taken on before him, under King Childeric III, a member of the Merovingian dynasty, which had ruled the Franks since the 5th century (34-5). In 751 or 752 CE, Pippin deposed Childeric III and became the new King of the Franks (31). The exact details of this event are unclear, as extant documents recording it appear to have been written several years later, and scholars have suggested that the relatively peaceful, reasonable transition of power depicted in these texts may be an attempt to smooth over any perceived wrongdoing rather than a serious attempt at accuracy (32-4). Regardless of the details, Pippin’s role as mayor of palace would have afforded him the necessary power and influence to officially take over in this way (31-2). In a move which also offered Pippin a degree of legitimacy, Pope Stephen II anointed him king ca. 753-4 CE in exchange for the Franks’ support against groups which posed a threat to the papacy, including the Lombards, with which the Franks had an alliance (60-1). Pippin gained control of former papal territories which the Lombards were occupying and officially conferred them to the Pope, leading to the creation of the Papal States (62-3). Additional campaigns also enabled the Frankish kingdom to expand during Pippin’s reign (62-5).

When Pippin died in 768 CE, his two surviving sons, Charles and Carloman, were both named king (65). Carloman died shortly thereafter ca. 771 CE, leaving Charles the sole ruler (66). Charles, also known as Charlemagne (from Carolus Magnus – Charles the Great), would go on to become quite powerful and expand his territory into a vast empire, assuming the title of King of the Lombards ca. 774 CE and being crowned Emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III ca. 800 CE (65-75, 160-70). The Carolingian Empire at its peak encompassed a great deal of western Europe, with much of modern-day France, Germany, and Italy conquered by Charlemagne or his predecessors (53). As part of Charlemagne’s efforts to foster Christianization and encourage ecclesiastical reform, he emphasized the importance of education and promoted scholarship at his court, which gave rise to the aforementioned Carolingian Renaissance, to which Alcuin was an important contributor (142-7).

**Works Cited**

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