



Carolingian Culture at Reichenau & St. Gall

The Carolingian Libraries of St. Gall and Reichenau

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Tours of the Libraries of Reichenau and St. Gall

Carolingian Literature at Reichenau and St. Gall Richard Matthew Pollard

Introduction

Many of the manuscripts held in our digital collection were produced during the late-eighth and ninth centuries, during a period often called the 'Carolingian Renaissance'. Whether or not we can really call this period a 'renaissance' is still much debated by scholars, but there can be no question that these centuries saw a great upswing in cultural and intellectual productivity. This can be illustrated most simply in terms of book production, that is, by the number of manuscript books that were copied in the Carolingian period. The total number of surviving Latin manuscript books that were produced in Europe before the year 800 is less than two thousand, whereas for the period c. 800-900 we have more than four times as many, perhaps nine thousand.

What was the cause of this new cultural environment? There are many, but perhaps the most important (and certainly the most prominent) was Charlemagne, king of the Franks from the year 768 until his death in 814. His father, Pippin III, had become king in 751 by removing the Merovingian dynasty, which had ruled the Franks since the fifth century. Pippin III's new Carolingian dynasty needed to legitimise itself, and set itself apart from the Merovingians who had preceded it. One of the ways Pippin did this was by showing himself to be a king working toward the salvation of his people. He cooperated with the Church and initiated ecclesiastical reform, in part by convening church councils. By ensuring that the Church was being run correctly, and that monks, priests and the laity were worshipping correctly, he also broke from the pattern set by the Merovingian kings, who seldom intervened in ecclesiastical matters.

Charlemagne, too, was motivated by a strong desire to protect the Church, and ensure the Christian salvation of his people, but his efforts would be much broader and far-reaching than those of his father. With able scholars and ecclesiastics as his advisors, Charlemagne worked to reform almost all aspects of life toward a Christian ideal. Many of his goals were encapsulated in the *Admonitio Generalis* ('General Correction'), a piece of **legislation issued in 789**. Priests were enjoined to live as an example to others, not to introduce novelties into their preaching, but instead should preach the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the Trinity and the Incarnation. The bishops were told to correct the priests, to ensure they preach, perform the liturgy and administer the sacraments correctly. In turn, the *Admonitio* explains how the clergy are to correct the general population toward a Christian ideal. But this population was also to be schooled in correct Christian doctrine: monasteries and bishoprics are advised to set up schools to teach grammar, church-song, the psalms, and so on. Already the emphasis on 'correctness' (Latin *correctio*) should be obvious. Other documents offered more specific recommendations: the *Epistola de Litteris Colendis* ('Epistle about fostering letters') urges monks and clerics to learn, and to master correct Latin, implying that **errors in language breed errors in faith**. Documents such as these were promulgated throughout the kingdom, and monasteries such as Reichenau and St Gall were often headed by men with close connexions to Charlemagne's court. Charlemagne's successor, Louis the Pious (and his successors, in turn), carried on the *correctio* movement, in particular focusing on the reform of monasteries. These monasteries and churches of the Carolingian realm took up this vision for the kingdom, where proper Christian life was seen as resting on correct understanding of Biblical scripture and later venerable theologians ('Church Fathers'), understanding that in turn was based on a correct knowledge of Latin, which in turn could be used for correct preaching, which would lead the populace toward correct prayer and behaviour.

Resources for *Correctio*

But what was 'correct'? In part to determine this, the scholars of the Carolingian devoted a great deal of study to each area that they sought to correct and reform. Many of the books in our virtual library could be seen in association with these efforts. For instance, Gregory the Great's *Liber Pastoralis*, which delineates how clerics should behave, is found in **Karlsruhe Aug. 240**. It could well have been added to the library as a reference to the *correctio* of clerics. We also have, in the manuscripts now **St Gall SB Cod. 7 through 83**, copies of the Bible, but presenting a text 'corrected' through the efforts of abbot Hartmut. This follows on the tradition begun by the Carolingian scholars Alcuin and Theodulf, who studied and compared various copies of the Bible

to create a standard Biblical text that was thought to be free of error. Carolingian scholars were also greatly concerned that this correct Biblical text be understood properly, and so our library contains numerous copies of commentaries on the Bible, many composed by venerable theologians ('Church Fathers') from late antiquity like Augustine (e.g. **Karlsruhe Aug 35**) or Jerome (e.g. **Karlsruhe Aug 81**). Many of the Carolingian books in our collection, therefore, contain works which date to much earlier periods, even if they answered a contemporary need.

Correctio as Law

The desire for correct language, correct understanding, correct life and correct faith also drove scholars of the Carolingian age to compose new works, and some of these are found amongst our manuscripts. Most obviously, we find texts of the various regulations and legislation that are the explicit manifestations of *correctio* (dealt with in more detail by Alice Rio's exhibition). **CSG 728**, for example, contains the *Capitularum Collectio* compiled in the 820s by Angesius, and is a collection of earlier legal pronouncements. CSG 728 contains the latter two books of this four book compilation, addressing all manner of issues in secular (vs. ecclesiastical) law: what sort of characters legal witnesses should be (III.32), how subjects of the king must promise to serve and be faithful to him (III.88), even one rule that puts salt producers under royal oversight (IV.8). Similarly, in **Karlsruhe Aug. 103** we find the so-called *Collectio Dionysio-Hadriana*, a compilation of Roman church law. It was originally sent by Pope Hadrian I to Charlemagne in 774 (though its provisions are generally much older), and its authority was affirmed by its use in crafting the aforementioned *Admonitio Generalis* in 789. Another example of more properly 'Carolingian' corrective texts would be the long list of regulations sent by Theodulf, bishop of Orleans, sent to the priests of his diocese; amongst the 46 chapters, **chapter 13 forbids priests from getting drunk in taverns**.

Correcting Language

The desire for 'correctness' made explicit in law is implicit in many of the other Carolingian texts in our collection. In order to properly understand the Bible (and the texts of the Church fathers), one needed a good grasp of Latin grammar. Of course, Reichenau and St Gall possessed older works on Latin grammar and style, such as Bede's *De Schematibus et Tropis* ('Figures and Modes of Speech') in **Karlsruhe Aug. 112** and Flavius Mallius Theodorus tract on meter in **Karlsruhe Aug. 172**. But they also had newer works put together in the Carolingian period: Smaragdus of St Mihiel's (d. c. 840) commentary on the much older grammar of Donatus in **Karlsruhe Aug 241**, for instance. More interesting is the grammatical compendium found in much of **Karlsruhe Aug. 112**. It is not, strictly speaking, a new text: it consists of excerpts from earlier grammarians like Ps. Sergius, Maximus Victorinus and Donatus. But these excerpts are often woven together so intricately and carefully that the result is essentially a new work on grammar. The manuscript itself has - overall - the character of a notebook, and so this work was probably the result of one Carolingian scholar's careful study of the art of grammar and correct Latin. Indeed, being able to see this manuscript in its (digital) entirety is one of the great advantages of our project: we can easily see how whole manuscripts could be organised by a Carolingian scholar to serve the goal of *correctio*.

Commentaries for Correct Understanding

Beyond the question of language, the large number of commentary texts we have from the eighth and ninth centuries is suggestive of a desire to ensure proper understanding of not only the Bible, but other important works. In the first category, there is Einsiedeln, **Stiftsbibliothek, Ms. 182**, with various commentaries on the Pauline Epistles written by Alcuin, one of Charlemagne's closest advisors and abbot of Tours. In **CSG 282**, there is a commentary on Jeremiah written by Hrabanus Maurus, who had studied at Tours under the famous scholar Alcuin. These commentaries, known as 'biblical exegesis', are covered in greater depth by Burton Edwards. But it is worth noting that Carolingian scholars were working not to replace earlier commentaries by Jerome and Augustine (etc.), but rather to fill the gaps left by them, or to offer commentaries that were more accessible to a beginner.

More important perhaps in our collection are the commentaries on various other Christian texts. The Rule of St Benedict, for instance, was greatly promoted as the rule for monasteries of the Carolingian realm during the reign of Louis the Pious (814-840) (**see CSG 914**). Its increased prominence gave rise to a number of commentaries, aimed at explaining how the rule could be followed correctly. Our virtual library contains a copy of the longest Carolingian commentary on the Rule of Benedict, that composed by Hildemar of Corbie (later, of Civate: d. c. 850): it is spread across two books, **Karlsruhe Aug 179** and **Aug 203**. This commentary is covered in **the contribution by Julian Hendrix**, but it's worth noting its extreme level of detail. The Rule of Benedict is itself only about 110 pages in a modern, printed edition, whereas Hildemar's commentary runs to more than 630. But there are also other commentaries on the rule within our collection, including a short excerpt of Smaragdus of St Mihiel's (d. c. 840) **commentary on the Rule of Benedict in CSG 914**. This manuscript is another example (like Aug. 112) of a considered collection of 'corrective' texts; in this case, all of them help the reader understand the correct practice of monasticism. As just mentioned, CSG 914 also contains the rule of St Benedict itself, but also a long letter (possibly from Paul the Deacon, d. 799) that explains **how the rule was followed at the Italian monastery of Monte Cassino**, as well as

several other Carolingian texts on monastic regulation. Our project allows this Carolingian collection to be easily explored in all its idiosyncrasy, revealing in intimate detail what texts the monks of St Gall thought were important for understanding and correcting their way of life.

Compositions beyond *Correctio*: Hagiography and Poetry

All the study and intellectual effort that went into the Carolingian *correctio* had the side effect of creating scholars who were extremely well educated, and who could produce works that had substantial literary merit, which sometimes only had little or only peripheral connexion to the goal of *correctio*. Unfortunately, our collection only contains a few examples of these works. We know that many biographies of saints (in the genre of 'hagiography') were composed in this period, prompted in part by the insistence in Carolingian church councils that only saints of well-documented sanctity should be venerated. One such work in our collection is a biography of St Denis, the founder of the church of Paris, found in **Karlsruhe Aug 233**. It was composed in the 830s by Hilduin, abbot of the royal abbey of St Denis (near Paris) at the request of emperor Louis the Pious, and it offers a detailed account of how Denis (Dionysius) supposedly was a companion of the Apostles before he ended up in France, where he died a martyr. Another Carolingian piece of hagiography in our collection is anonymous, but probably composed about the same time: an account of the translation (i.e. moving) of the relics of St Genesius, which is found in **Karlsruhe Aug. 202**. The account, probably written at Reichenau itself at the request of abbot Erlebold (abbot 823-838), explains how the relics of this saint, martyred in Jerusalem, came to Italy around the year 800, and subsequently found their way to the monastery of Schienen (near Reichenau). In part to legitimise these relics, it also details the numerous miracles that occurred in connexion with this transfer.

Perhaps more indicative of the skill attained by Carolingian scholars are the various works of poetry they produced, a few of which are in our collection. We have, for example, in **Karlsruhe Aug 112** a copy of the inscription on an altar that was built at Reichenau by Gerold, count of Bavaria, in the late eighth century. The poem records Gerold's generosity, and asks the reader to pray for his heavenly reward. We are offered more information on Gerold's fate in a poem in a different genre, namely the so-called *Visio Wettini* ('Vision of Wetti'). This text recounts a vision experienced by Wetti, a monk of Reichenau, in early November 824. The *Visio* was originally written in prose by Heito, former abbot of Reichenau, in 824 or 825. This prose version survives in three of our manuscripts: **Karlsruhe Aug 111**, **CSG 573**, and **Zurich Rh Hist 28**. Heito's version was then promptly turned to verse by Walafrid Strabo (also found in **CSG 573**), who was only 18 at the time but would go on to become one of the most accomplished poets of the Carolingian age. In both versions of the *Visio*, Wetti is shown many parts of the afterlife (similar to the later account in Dante's *Inferno*) and the sufferings and rewards of those who had recently died. Amongst those that have been rewarded are Gerold, who died fighting 'infidel' Avars in 799.

The *Visio Wettini* (in both versions) is one of several Carolingian 'vision' texts that seem to offer corrective to Carolingian society. Walafrid's version, in particular, was sent to the court of Louis the Pious as a way of warning the emperor about all the things that needed to be corrected in the kingdom, lest others receive some of the punishments revealed in the *Visio Wettini*. Monks are warned that they should dress and eat simply, without ostentatious pride, and to avoid being tempted by worldly riches. Government officials are chastised for being too greedy and corrupt. But perhaps most shocking is the fate of Charlemagne, the standard-bearer *par excellence* of *correctio*. Even though Charlemagne worked so hard to reform the Church, correct language, books, education and the behaviour of the clergy, he nonetheless ends up being indecorously punished in the afterlife for his sexual licence.

The Carolingian works that we find in our library, then, can almost all be traced in some way to the reform and *correctio* movement that was originally centred around Charlemagne: these can be the works of exegesis, the commentaries, the works of grammar, even the hagiography, all of which was spurred by a desire to better understand Christian faith and good behaviour. But this desire for *correctio* outlived Charlemagne himself, and ironically during the reign of his son gave rise to the sharply critical *Visio Wettini*, the most significant Carolingian literary composition in our collection from either Reichenau or St Gall.

Further Reading

General

- John Contreni, "The Carolingian renaissance: education and literary culture", in Rosamond McKitterick (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, II (Cambridge: 1995), pp. 709-757. [**Online for subscribers**]
- Giles Brown, "The Carolingian renaissance", in Rosamond McKitterick (ed.), *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation* (Cambridge: 1994), pp. 1-51.
- M.L.W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe, AD 500-900* (London: 1957), pp. 189-361.

Grammar

- Vivien Law, "The Study of Grammar", in in Rosamond McKitterick (ed.), *Carolingian Culture: Emulation and Innovation* (Cambridge: 1994), pp. 88-110.

Visio Wettini

- David Traill, *Walahfrid Strabo's Visio Wettini*, Lateinische Sprache und Literatur des Mittelalters 2 (Frankfurt: 1974).
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