Memorable crises: Carolingian historiography and the making of Pippin's reign, 750-900

Goosmann, F.C.W.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Central to this study has been the historiographical reflection of three major crises that occurred during the reign of Pippin the Short: the succession crisis of 741, the abdication and conversion of Carloman in 747, and the dynastic transition of 751/754. These were not just crucial events in the histories of Charles Martel's successors, but related directly to the formation of the Carolingian dynasty. In each of these cases, their rendering in Carolingian historiography was subject to change. In general, the reinterpretation, or recreation, of the past was driven by the desire to form a positive and uncontested history of the Carolingian dynasty; the past stood in the service of the present. If we take a closer look, it becomes clear that the specific changes made to the presentation of each of these cases served a specific purpose and had been triggered by specific social or political events.

Any attempt to reconstruct these events on the basis of the extant narrative sources – and in these cases historians have very little else to go on – will unavoidably result in speculative conclusions. How had Charles devised his succession? What drove Carloman to the monastery? And what prompted Pippin to seize the throne? Carolingian historiography offers a range of possible answers. To argue that finding the historically correct ones is merely a matter of applying the proper source-critical tools, presupposes that the answers to these questions are hidden in these texts to begin with. Such trust might be warranted if we accept that the historiographical genre is defined by the claim that its content relates to historical events. Historiography, after all, is not the same as fiction. However, fictional elements can, and often do, play an important role in historiography.
Carolingian historiography is not claiming to be an objective rendering of historical events. There is a strong exegetical dimension to it, in that it attempts to derive meaning from historical events through historical (re)interpretation. Court-oriented historiography tends to justify the actions of the dynasty, while being part of a semi-public polemical discourse through which the Carolingian literate elite was able to reflect on and redefine the socio-political structures that kept the polity together. As the case of Carloman’s conversion aptly shows, Carolingian historiography had strong moralistic tendencies and looked to the past to find or create models for emulation. In short, instead of being a descriptive record of past events, Carolingian historiography was highly performative, and historians should treat it accordingly.

In its purpose to manipulate its readership’s perception of the past, these texts would sooner gloss over than expound the traumas of the Carolingian past. However, success was not guaranteed: in some cases the literary strategies with which the past was given new meaning failed. As Grifo’s case revealed, after an initial attempt to have him banned from the historiographical record, he was gradually readmitted in the course of the later eighth and early ninth centuries as Charles Martel’s legitimate, if rapacious, heir. Insofar as historiography could be used as a tool to alter a readership’s perception of the past, such alterations could only be brought about with small and subtle steps. Childebrand’s contemporary attempt to expel Grifo from his Continuations failed, because the solution he offered was too radical and resulted in an incoherent narrative that no longer matched his readership’s recollection of events. This may have been one of the reasons why eventually the narrative of the Continuations was no longer continued after 768 and came to be replaced with that of the ARF.

The success of a historiographical narrative depended on the social context in which it was read; it needed to conform to its readership’s value system. However, social contexts changed, demanding that fundamental episodes of a community’s past were retroactively corrected to fit the new mould. Thus, as my second case study showed, even though the contemporary circumstances that had led to Carloman’s abdication and monastic conversion remain obscure, the event itself would much later come to be explained in a context of public penance. As I have argued, penance was indeed a likely motive, but one that could not yet be acknowledged by a contemporary audience who considered the moral failings associated with penance incompatible with their perception of the Carolingian identity. This changed in the

---

1 Werner, ‘Geschichtsschreiber’. This might hold especially true for the so-called minor annals.
course of the ninth century, in particular during the reign of Louis the Pious, when the political function of public penance developed from being a strategy of exclusion to also one of appeasement and reconciliation. This new perception of penance in turn demanded its historical precursors, for which Carloman was the most obvious candidate.

No event will have weighed more heavily on the Carolingian conscience than the coup of 751. Unlike Grifo, the coup could not be ignored — though the reign of King Childeric apparently could. When stripped to its core, how different was this event from a usurpation of the Frankish throne by a powerful magnate who broke his oath of fidelity to his rightful lord? We need only to recall Tassilo’s fate to realize how important the notion of *fidelitas* was in Carolingian society. Contemporary accounts are silent about what happened in the years immediately after the coup, which might suggest that Pippin initially had difficulties consolidating his new position. Gaining apostolic support in 754 helped, but the battle for the justification of Pippin’s coup was above all a literary one. It began with Childebrand, who in his *Continuations* transplanted the papal sanction of 754 to 751, claiming that the coup had been a Frankish, rather than a Carolingian, initiative, for which papal approval had been given before it was actually executed. Subsequent chroniclers and annalists elaborated on the basis of this literary artifice. The author of the *ARF*, writing at the end of the eighth century, gave substance to this papal verdict, and had Pope Zachary instructing the Franks to make Pippin their king and to restore the natural order, which, or so the *ARF* now claimed, required that the royal power and the royal title inhabited the same person. King Childeric, who had only carried the name of king, having lost his *potestas* to Pippin, ‘was falsely called a king’ (*false rex vocabatur*).

In the first decades of the ninth century, the justification of the coup came to rely on a combination of apostolic sanction and the rhetoric of *nomen* and *potestas*. The latter was given a historical dimension when it came to be argued that this ‘imbalance’ was already present in the late seventh century. Pippin’s ancestors, bound by loyalty to do-nothing kings, struggled to maintain the status quo. However, as the early ninth-century chroniclers claimed, it had been a losing battle: Merovingian impotence was slowly breaking up the political fabric of the Frankish realms, something that Pippin’s coup halted. Yet when Hilduin was asked by Emperor Louis the Pious to recount the events of 754, Hilduin was reluctant to invoke the argument of Carolingian *potestas* to account for Pippin’s elevation to the kingship. This is not surprising, given that one year earlier Louis had been rendered as powerless as Childeric III, when he was forced publically to remove his arms and take up the penitential garb. Although
Louis was able to regain his position soon after, the affair had no-doubt hurt the image of Carolingian potestas. In Hilduin’s view, Carolingian authority relied first and foremost on its religious legitimation, which in 754 was bestowed on Pippin by the bishop of Rome. It was a rendering of events that was much closer to the political reality of Hilduin’s own day, when it had become clear that it was foremost an episcopal prerogative to bestow or retract religious legitimation.

This study was written on the assumption that Pippin’s reign, as we encounter it in the extant historiographical narratives, is mostly a literary construct. Or, to be more precise, each narrative presents a unique literary construction that is carefully tuned to the moral standards and political sensitivities of the time of composition. In some cases, new narratives were called for because contemporary developments demanded the past to be reinterpreted, as the example of Hilduin’s Gesta Stephani has shown. In other cases, it may have been because changing conceptual horizons led to different interpretations of the same text, as might account for the gradual acknowledgement of Carloman’s conversion as an act of penance. This does not mean, however, that these literary constructs cannot inform us about the historical figures on which they are based, let alone the political, religious and moral culture in which they were produced and/or transmitted. The link between history and text (between signified and signifier) might be a slippery one, but it exists. To grasp it, we need to understand the conceptual framework with which author and audience looked to the past, and reconstruct the social and political context – the social logic – that prompted the author to write what he wrote.

This study has been an attempt to do just that: to account for the changes in the perception of the past by studying some of the literary strategies with which Carolingian history-writers manipulated their audience’s perception of the past, and their underlying motives. What remains to be done, however, is to answer the call of Alain Dierkens and Matthew Innes, and use these insights to shed new light on that turbulent yet formative phase of Carolingian history that is the reign of Pippin the Short. Also, and despite the now almost two centuries old debate, I would call for a new investigation into the Annales Regni Francorum at the level of the manuscripts. The composition and function of these annals, which form the bedrock of our understanding of Carolingian history, remain in many ways a mystery – which is also one of the reasons why the so-called minor annals, one of the most creative historiographical

---

experiments of the Carolingian age, were mostly left out of this project. In particular, the relation between the \( ARF \) and its \( \text{Revision (or} \ ARF\_e) \) deserves more attention, as this study has made painfully clear. Why was this revision needed, and what were its implications?

The Byzantine historian Procopius of Caesarea (d. c. 562), imitating Thucydides, defined his work as a historian in the following terms: ‘while cleverness is appropriate to rhetoric, and inventiveness to poetry, truth alone is appropriate to history.’\(^3\) Leaving aside Procopius’s ability to meet his own standards, his definition of the historian’s \textit{metier} seems incompatible to Carolingian historiographical practice, in which, as this study has attempted to illustrate, the historian’s search for truth met with the sharp pen of the rhetorician and the ingenuity of the poet. The Carolingian \textit{homen palatii} are presented in our extant sources, first and foremost, as a literary community, whose histories, hagiographies, poems and biblical commentaries were composed in the highly competitive climate of the court. For those who wrote on the dynasty’s past, history was a stage that could host many versions of the same play. That play revolved consistently around the leading members of the Carolingian dynasty, but each version introduced new scenes and modified older ones, through which political and moral arguments could be communicated. For the courtiers and would-be courtiers of the later eighth and ninth centuries, Pippin’s reign was such a stage.

On a more general level, contemporary historiography was important to an elite that defined itself in relation to the ruling dynasty – not just in a physical sense, but also morally and historically. The function of Carolingian court historiography went beyond mere justification or promotion of the new regime, nor was it merely a platform for polemical writing; history also was a lifeline that linked the present to an older and ultimately sacred past, giving it new meaning. In a rapidly changing world, history functioned as a moral anchor, and it was by reflecting on the relation between past and present that a community could reassure itself that it was not adrift on the tides of change, but continued steadfast on its path to deliverance.

I conclude with Notker the Stammerer’s \textit{Gesta Karoli Magni}, the last Carolingian narrative actively to recall and recast the early days of the dynasty. In this somewhat fantastical account, Pippin emerges one last time as an ancient Carolingian model for his youngest descendents. This concluding example will serve to illustrate that, regardless of how far the memory has come to be

\(^3\) Procopius, \textit{History}, 1, 11, p. 5.
CONCLUSION

removed from the remembered, the link between the two remained. For all his creativity, Notker realized that he stood in a historiographical tradition and wrote on a subject that tolerated only so much change. His portrayal of Pippin is, in other words, a case in miniature, illustrating the main points of this dissertation.

On 4 December 883, Emperor Charles the Fat visited the monastery of St Gall, where he commissioned a monk called Notker to compose a history of the deeds of his admired ancestor and namesake, Charlemagne (indeed, one wonders if Pippin would have been the subject of more eulogies if more of his descendants had bore his name – though this probably confuses cause and consequence). Just as the poet Ermold the Black, with whom this study began, has been criticised for his failure to be another Virgil, so Notker has been criticized for not being another Einhard. Notker knew Einhard’s work very well, but he had no intention of copying it. Compared to the stiff and classicizing prose of Einhard, Notker’s style was anecdotal, lurid and often quite humorous. To his mind, this made his text much better suited to convey important lessons on good and virtuous leadership to the emperor and his family.

Although Charlemagne stands at the heart of this work, Notker occasionally digressed to other members of the dynasty. On two occasions, Notker’s attention shifts to the deeds of Pippin, Charlemagne’s father and Charles the Fat’s great-great-grandfather. Notker introduced Pippin as Rome’s saviour, who had come to Italy to protect it against the Lombards. Following his victory, Pippin entered the city to pray at the graves of the apostles, though he soon wished to return to Francia as he is said to have feared ‘the envy of the people of Rome or, more truly, of Constantinople.’ As it turned out, Pippin also had much to fear from his own people, whose respect, it appeared, the new king did not yet command:

When he found out that the leaders of his army were accustomed in secret to speak contemptuously of him, he ordered one day a bull, terrible in size and with an untameable spirit, to be brought out, and then a most savage lion to be let loose upon him. Charging into it with tremendous fury, the lion seized the bull by its neck and threw it to

---

4 Notker, *Gesta Karoli Magni*, ed. Haefele. The *Gesta* originally comprised three books, but the prologue, part of the second book and the complete third book are now lost.
5 De Jong, *Penitential State*, p. 89.
7 Notker, *Gesta Karoli*, 1, 2, c. 15: ‘Ipse vero invidiam Romanorum, immo ut verius loquar Constantinopolitanorum, declinans, mox in Franciam revertitur.’
the ground. Then the king said to those who stood round him: 'Drag the lion from the bull, or kill the one on top of the other!'

They looked at one another, with a chill in their hearts, and could hardly utter these words amid their gasps: 'Lord, there is no man under heaven, who dare attempt it.'

Then Pippin confidently rose from his throne, drew his sword, and with one blow cut thorough the neck of the lion and severed the head of the bull from his shoulders. Then he put his sword back into its sheath and sat down on his throne and said: 'Well, do you think I am fit to be your lord? Have you not heard what little David did to that giant Goliath? Or what the very short (brevissimus) Alexander did to his very great (procerissimis) nobles?'

They fell to the ground, as though a thunderbolt had struck them, and cried: 'Who but a madman would deny your right to rule over all mankind?'

Notker’s account has been judged as not very reliable for purposes of historical reconstruction.9 Many elements in his account about Pippin cannot be verified and are probably fictional. Notker loosely borrowed his historical framework from Einhard’s *Vita Karoli*, in which Einhard compared Charlemagne’s conquest of Lombard Italy (774) with Pippin’s earlier campaigns against the Lombards to demonstrate that the son had outdone the father. Where Pippin had been satisfied with plunder, oaths and hostages, Charlemagne conquered. According to Einhard, the reason for Pippin’s lack of persistence was that ‘some of the chief men of the Franks, whom he regularly consulted, were so opposed to his desire that they said openly that they would abandon the king and return home.’

---


9 Thorpe, *Two lives of Charlemagne*, p. 102.

CONCLUSION

Notker modified Einhard’s narrative considerably. Pippin’s return to Francia, according to Notker, owed foremost to Pippin’s fear for the ‘envy’ of Constantinople. Unlike Einhard, Notker did not state that Pippin’s nobles were angry at their ruler because he failed to listen to their counsel. Notker’s account is much worse: Pippin’s nobles had lost their respect for their lord or, differently put, questioned his _potestas_. Though Einhard and Notker accused Pippin of different things, both were extremely serious and may attest to a rarely voiced memory of the fragile state of the dynasty in the first years of its existence.11

It had not been Notker’s objective to provide the emperor with lessons in Carolingian history, but rather to provide him and his progeny with moral instructions on good leadership, using historical anecdote as a rhetorical instrument. For Notker, history was merely a convenient medium for moral truth.12 The genre of history provided him with a degree of artistic licence, which could be exploited further because his subject matter stood beyond living memory. Nevertheless, certain restrictions remained in place. Notker’s anecdotal history still had to appeal to the expectations of his readership, and if anything, Charles the Fat will have expected his ancestors to be pious, victorious and brave. What Charles may also have recalled, if perhaps not through the channels of written historiography from which it was duly kept, is that the consolidation of his family’s royal authority had posed quite a challenge.

Within these bounds, Notker could adorn his story of Pippin with tales of ferocious animals, unconquerable swords and famous heroes from the biblical and classical pasts.13 These embellishments nonetheless carried within them an admonition: rulers had to publically assert themselves in order to maintain the respect and support of the nobility. Of course, Notker knew better than to say this to the emperor directly, hence he began his account with the explication that this was a lesson ‘that, divine clemency willing, your future little Charles or little Louis might soon imitate.’14 There may have been some urgency to Notker’s message: four years after the emperor visited St Gall, Charles the Fat was deposed and, for the first time since 751, succeeded in various parts of the empire by kings who stood outside the dynasty. Once more, it seemed, the nobles had talked disdainfully about their Carolingian _dominus_, though Charles,

11 Nelson, ‘Bad kingship’.
12 Fentress and Wickam, _Social Memory_, pp. 72-5.
13 The legend of Pippin fighting a lion is allegedly captured in stone on the façade of a twelfth-century capital of the church of Ferrières-en-Gâtinais: Thouvenot, ‘Légende de Pépin’.
CONCLUSION

unlike his great-great-grandfather, had been unable to convince his subjects of his God-bestowed virility.

Pippin, colourfully portrayed in Notker’s account, ended up a ‘memorable example’ of a ruler who knew how to make his subjects respect him, just as Regino of Prüm would turn his older brother Carloman into a memorable example of Benedictine monasticism. To us, they reveal how the perception of the past is subject to continuous reinterpretation, or at least until the past stopped being of relevance to the present. But however far-removed Notker’s Pippin has come to be from the man who, more than a century earlier, had been elevated to the kingship and successfully passed it on to his descendents, the link between the two, however strained, continued to hold.