Europe Needs A Charlemagne!

by Theodore Andromidas

On Christmas Day in the year 800 A.D., at the Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome, Pope Leo III crowned Charles the Great, the first Holy Roman Emperor. In so doing, he elevated the King of the Franks to an equal status and power with the emperors of Byzantium. But the Pope was proclaiming what was already an accomplished fact. By that Christmas Day, Charlemagne had already created the beginnings of what we call modern European civilization. The revolution in culture, the concomitant increase in population growth, which would continue for at least five centuries, rightfully earned him the title, "Father of Europe."

The collapse of the Roman Republic in the First Century B.C. was followed by an imperial epoch of death and devastation. From the First to the Third centuries A.D., population fell from an estimated 70 million, to less than 50 million, a decline of 30%; during that same period, trade within the Empire fell more than 40%. The savage looting by the Roman imperial oligarchy triggered a collapse of population and culture across Western and Central Europe from war, famine, and disease. Rome itself became ungovernable, and the Empire moved east to Byzantium.

Each year, from that point on, literacy and standards of living in the European Mediterranean world would dramatically decline. By 750, the situation had deteriorated to such an extent that illiteracy was nearly universal: None of the military and civil leadership, nor most of the clergy were able read, and writing had all but disappeared. There were fewer and fewer texts, and each decade, the number of written documents of any kind declined dramatically. The Mediterranean had entered a dark age, only to be reversed by the radical change in government led by Charlemagne.

Charlemagne established the foundations of what we now call European civilization, including advances in education, literacy, agriculture, transportation, and public works. He was the first to conceive of modern, government-directed economic-development policies. His was the first modern Western government to order the construction of great infrastructure projects, building schools, monasteries, churches, and cities, and the transportation grid of canals and bridges, whose purpose was to improve the standard of living of his subjects.

His most visionary infrastructure project was the "Fosse Carolina," a man-made channel linking the Black Sea to the North Sea, by connecting the Rhine River and Danube River basins, an achievement not to be replicated until construction of the first Transcontinental Railroad in the young United States.

Charlemagne's Government

As Rosa Luxemburg, one of Europe's most insightful economists and historians of the early 20th Century, emphasized in her *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie* (Introduction to Political Economy), Charlemagne's government initiated economic and political policies which were "historical acts of civilization." He did this through the use of legislative and administrative acts called "capitularies," or administrative decrees, which

were dictated from the Frankish courts of both the Merovingian and Carolingian dynasties, but more of these capitularies were issued by Charlemagne than by all the previous Frankish rulers combined.

Luxemburg describes the famous Capitulare de Villis (On the Management of the Estates) "as a precious jewel that has been historically transmitted in spite of the dust and mildew of the archives."[1]

She points out that Charlemagne founded much of modern Europe: "First, most of Charlemagne's farms later became powerful imperial cities, such as Aix, Cologne, Munich, Basel, Strasbourg and many others which had originally been former farms of Emperor Charles. Second, Charlemagne's economic institutions have served as models for all major secular and religious domains of the early Middle-Ages."[2]

Luxemburg cautions against falling into the trap of judging the Capitulare de Villis as the dictates of a prince for his private domain:

"Yes, indeed, the capitularies concern the economy of Emperor Charles' farms and domains, but he ran his domains as a prince, not in particular. Or more precisely, the emperor was a landlord of his lands, as any important noble landlord of the Middle Ages, especially during the time of Charlemagne, was an emperor in the small; that is to say, by virtue of being a free and noble proprietor of the soil, he enacted laws, raised taxes, and dispensed justice for all the people of his domains. The economic provisions taken by Charlemagne were indeed acts of government, as evidenced by their very strength: they are one of the 65 'capitularies' written by the emperor and published at the annual meeting of the Peers of the Empire."[3]

In the Capitulare de Villis, as in other capitularies, Charlemagne's policy is to promote the general welfare. As he dictates instructions for how each of the imperial farms will be run, he warns the steward of each farm not to overwork "his people," not to work them at night, unless they are compensated for the extra labor, and "That all our people shall be well looked after, and shall not be reduced to penury by anyone. . . ."[4]

There is probably no better statement of Charlemagne's commitment to "establish justice," according to Christian principle, than his General Capitulary for the Missi (officials), a general order sent to all officials under his jurisdiction, as can be seen in these excerpts:

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Charlemagne (742-814) established the foundations of modern European civilization, bringing about advances in education, literacy, agriculture, transportation, and public works. This equestrian statue dates from the 9th Century.

"27. We decree that throughout our whole realm no one shall dare to deny hospitality to the rich, or to the poor, or to pilgrims: that is, no one shall refuse shelter and fire and water to pilgrims going through the land in God's service, or to anyone traveling for the love of God and the safety of his soul. If anyone shall wish to do further kindness to them, he shall know that his best reward will be from God, who said Himself: 'And who so shall receive one such little child in my name, receiveth me.' And again: 'I was a stranger and ye took me in.'"

"30. As to those whom the emperor wishes by Christ's favor to have peace and defense in his king-

1. Rosa Luxemburg, *Einführung in die Nationalökonomie* (*Introduction to Political Economy,*) (Berlin: Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1925).
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. H.R. Loyn and J. Percival, *Capitulare de Villis: The Reign of Charlemagne; Documents on Carolingian Government and Administration,* Documents of Medieval History 2 (London, 1975), pp. 64-73.

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The Cathedral at Aachen (Aix la Chapelle) was one of the "great projects" constructed under Charlemagne's reign. The painting by Jean Fouquet (ca. 1453) shows the cathedral under construction.

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An example of Charlemagne's revolution in government can be seen regarding the use of tolls. The use of tolls on roads, bridges and rivers goes back at least 3,000 years. Until the reign of Charlemagne, most tolls were literally a form of highway robbery. Fortresses were built at the confluence of two rivers, and the builder would exact a toll for safe passage. Ropes would be stretched across bridges, preventing anyone from passing without paying the armed toll-taker. This was clearly an impediment to commerce and trade, not to mention the daily life of most subjects.

Therefore, in two capitularies on tolls, the Capitulary given at Diedenhofen (Thionville) and the Capitulary of Aix-la-Chapelle, Charlemagne instituted a modern approach to this particular form of taxation:

"As to thelony [tolls —ed.], it pleases us to exact old and just thelony from the merchants at bridges, and on ships and at markets. But let new or unjust thelony be not exacted where ropes are stretched or where ships pass under bridges, or in other similar cases in which no aid is lent to the travelers. Likewise concerning those who bring their goods from one house to another, or to the palace, or to the army, without idea of selling them.…"

—Capitulary given at Diedenhofen (Thionville)

"Where thelony should be exacted and where not, We firmly wish it to be made known to all in our kingdom, committed to us by God, that no one shall exact thelony except in markets where common goods are bought and sold; and not on bridges except where thelony was exacted in the past … and not in forests, nor on roads, nor in fields, and not from those going under the bridge, and not

dom—that is, those who, whether Christians *or pagans*, hasten to his presence desiring to announce something, or those who seek alms on account of indigence or hunger—let no one dare to constrain them to do him service, or take possession of them, or alienate or sell them: but where they remain of their own will, there they, under the protection of the emperor, shall have alms from his bounty. If anyone shall presume to transgress this, he shall know that he shall atone for it with his life, for having so presumptuously despised the commands of the emperor" (emphasis added).[5]

5. Capitulary for the Missi, 802 A.D. Source: *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*; Vol. 6, No. 5 (1899), pp. 91-99. Transcribed by Briana Poyer.

anywhere except where anything pertaining to common use is bought or sold for any reason whatever. . . ."

—Capitulary of Aix-la-Chapelle

Educational Reform

Before Charlemagne, during the rule of the Merovingians (5th to 8th century A.D.), despite the importance of the capitularies, the use of the written word had been decreasing steadily. Literacy levels, as well as the number and quality of written documents being produced, had declined significantly. With the collapse of the Western Empire several centuries earlier, as barbarism and isolation increased, communication throughout the Empire began to break down; isolation contributed greatly to the increase in illiteracy and the debasement of language into numerous local dialects.

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Charlemagne recruited the English/Irish scholar Alcuin of York to lead his education reform program. Alcuin is shown in this small panel instructing Charlemagne.

Charlemagne could not govern his kingdom, let alone achieve the revolutionary improvements he intended, without widespread literacy, and the development of standardized spoken and written language. To do this, he needed to radically improve education, on all levels of society. For this, he turned to the great Irish monastic movement.

Charlemagne was himself most likely educated at what was called the "Palace School"; but his education was concentrated on military training and court manners. Reading and writing were not considered necessary skills for a Frankish king. Charlemagne grew up "on the march," accompanying his father Pepin the Short on many of his military campaigns. Pepin was a warrior king who was grooming Charlemagne to follow in his footsteps.

With the death of his brother Carloman, and following his own victories over the Lombards, Saxons, and Saracens, Charlemagne began an aggressive campaign for educational reform, first at Aachen (in today's Germany) in the Palace School, and later, in the various schools established or reformed by his imperial decrees. The first major reform was the change of curriculum in the Palace School, from one of military tactics and court manners, to a place of actual learning.

To ensure its success, he recruited Alcuin of York, one of the leading minds of the Irish/English monastery movement. Born in 732, in Yorkshire, England, Alcuin was a poet, educator, and cleric. His first 50 years were spent in Yorkshire, where he was first a pupil and then, later, headmaster of the Cathedral School of York, the most renowned of its day.

Alcuin and Charlemagne had met in Italy in 781, where Alucin accepted an invitation to direct the work at Aachen. It was here that the King had begun to gather the leading Irish, English, and Italian scholars of the age. They were assembled at the Palace School, where Charlemagne, his family, friends, and friends' sons were taught. Alcuin introduced the methods of Irish/English learning into the Frankish schools, systematized the curriculum, raised the standards of scholarship, and encouraged the study of liberal arts, including grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, geometry, astronomy, and music.

But Charlemagne was not content with revolutionizing the Palace School. He recruited the services of a small army of clergy and teachers to carry out his revolution in education. One of his first moves was to begin the education of the clergy, most of whom could not read or write. In 787, he issued a famous capitulary, known as the "Charter of Modern Thought."

In this capitulary, Charlemagne addressed himself to the bishops and abbots of the Empire, informing them that he "has judged it to be of utility that," in their bishoprics and monasteries, "care should be taken that there should not only be a regular manner of life, but also the study of letters, each to teach and learn them according to his ability and the Divine assistance." He then presented a critique of the written communications he had received from the clergy of various monasteries, indicating that he found the language "not appropriate to the thoughts and ideas" that the clergy were attempting to express. "Let there, therefore, be chosen [to teach] men who are both willing and able to learn and let them apply themselves to this work with a zeal equal to the earnestness with which we recommend it to them."

Charlemagne also introduced the beginnings of free universal education for all free men. Again, in the "Charter of Modern Thought," he directs that, "every

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Under Charlemagne, Alcuin oversaw the development of a standard script, known as "Carolingian Minuscule," shown in Figure 1, which made possible written communication throughout the far-flung regions of the empire. The painting, by Alexander White, which appears in the Library of Congress, shows monks copying ancient texts.

FIGURE 1
Freising manuscript in Carolingian Minuscule

monastery and every abbey have its own school, in which boys may be taught the Psalms, the system of musical notation, singing, arithmetic and grammar." There is no doubt that by "boys," Charlemagne means not only the candidates for the monastic life, and the male children of nobles and other elites, who were normally committed to the care of the monks, but also the male children of the villages or country districts around the monasteries.

Development of Writing

Across Europe, from Ireland to Bavaria to Italy, there was no calligraphic standard for writing. Although Charlemagne was never fully literate himself, he clearly understood the value of literacy, and of a uniform script, so that written communication could be established. For this, he once again turned to Alcuin.

So that the Latin script could be read by the literate classes from one region of Europe to another, Alcuin oversaw the development of standard script called the "Carolingian Minuscule" (**Figure 1**). This standardized script was used in the Empire between approximately 800 and 1200. Codices, pagan and Christian texts, and all educational material were written in Carolingian minuscule throughout the Carolingian Renaissance and beyond. But, with Charlemagne's death, heralding for Europe the descent into a dark age, this script became increasingly obsolete, eventually to disappear for centuries, only to be revived again during the Italian Renaissance (14th-15th centuries) to become the basis of modern European script.

There was a catastrophic drop in the production of documents, from 25 per decade for 0-700 A.D., to 1 per decade from 700 to 750, the last decades of the Merovingian Dynasty, reflecting the collapse in literacy. Then, a rapid rise, with the beginning of the Carolingian Dynasty, so that by the reign of Charlemagne, the dependence on oral communication had expanded to the written word.

During the Carolingian Renaissance, scholars sought out and copied, in the new standardized script, many ancient texts that had been wholly forgotten. Much of our knowledge of Classical literature today derives from copies made in Charlemagne's scriptoria. Over 7,000 such manuscripts, written in Carolingian script during the Eighth and Ninth centuries, survive.[6]

The 'Fossa Carolina'

Many reasons are given for Charlemagne's initiating the construction of a man-made channel linking the

6. Edda Claus, *The Rebirth of a Communications Network: Europe at the Time of the Carolingians*, Departement de sciences économique, Université de Montréal, June 1997.

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The Fossa Carolina, Charlemagne's great canal linking the Rhine and Danube Rivers, provided access to the eastern borders of Constantinople's Adriatic holdings, and proved to be an example of his strategic foresight. Above: construction of the Fosse Carolina.

Rhine and Danube River basins, yet none are more compelling than the fact that it would become a strategic flank against the Eastern Roman Empire and its Navy. Just as the Transcontinental Railroad of Abraham Lincoln was a strategic flank against the British Empire's Navy, so, connecting the Rhine to the Danube was a strategic flank against the Byzantine fleets that controlled most of the Mediterranean Sea and the Black Sea. The Fossa Carolina created a safe, and relatively short connection between the seat of the Frankish Empire at Aachen, and the Black Sea, which would provide a secure avenue for the movement of men and matériel through much of the territory that Charlemagne would eventually conquer.

FIGURE 2
The Fossa Carolina

Following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the East, the Mediterranean Sea was no longer a "Roman lake." The Byzantine fleets were critical for the defense of the Empire's far-flung interests around the Mediterranean basin, and for the defense of the imperial capital at Constantinople. Although the Byzantine Navy was a direct descendant of its Roman predecessor, it played a far greater role in the survival of the Eastern Empire, than it did when the center was in Rome. At that time, the fleets of the unified Roman Empire faced few serious naval threats, but the sea became vital to the very existence of the Empire when the center was moved to Constantinople.

The Fossa Carolina (**Figure 2**) provided access to the eastern borders of Constantinople's Adriatic holdings, which were protected by its Navy, posing a threat to the Eastern borders of the Frankish Kingdom. Construction of a channel connecting the Frankish heartland with these outlying areas of potential conflict would prove to be an example of strategic foresight that was Charlemagne's genius. If the canal were operational, as all current archeological evidence indicates it was, it would have been critical to moving men and supplies in a war against Byzantium itself.

The earliest written reference to the channel is found in the Annals of Lorsch,[7] which describe Charlemagne and members of the court taking a journey, and an extended visit, to the building site itself, so the King could personally oversee much of the construction. The Fossa Carolina was begun in 793, eight years before the coming war with Byzantium. The Rhine and Danube River basins would be connected by a navigable channel between two smaller rivers, the Altmühl and the Rezat. Whether the Carolingian engineers completely succeeded in their task is disputed. Some historical sources tell us that there were long periods of heavy rains and unfavorable geo-

7. The *Annals of Lorsch* are records of the history of Frankish Kingdom, covering the years 703 to 803.

logical conditions that prevented completion. Geoarcheological evidence from a 2010 study done at the University of Leipzig indicates, though, that it was a success, and Charlemagne's successors let it fall into disrepair.

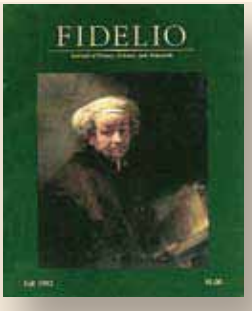
The Carolingian-Abbasid Ecumenical Alliance

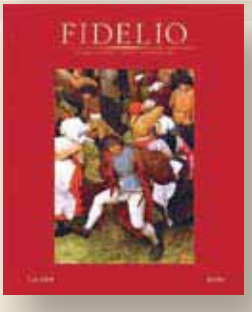
The Frankish-Byzantine War began in 801, and following nine years of conflict on land and sea, Charlemagne had seized all of northeastern Italy, the Istrian Peninsula, and the Dalmatian coast to the borders of Greece. Constantinople was forced to surrender almost all of its holdings in Italy and the Istrian peninsula, and was forced to recognize Charlemagne as Emperor of the West.

In the Eighth and Ninth centuries, the strategic alignment was between the Carolingian Dynasty and the Abbasid Caliphate on the one side, and the Eastern Roman Byzantine Empire and Umayyad Caliphate of Moorish Spain on the other. One of Charlemagne's key allies was the Islamic leader of the early Medieval world, Harun al-Rashid, fifth emir of the Abbasid Caliphate, then centered in what is today Iraq. Ruling from 786 to his death in 809, his reign was marked by scientific and cultural advances.

To counter the growing threat of Byzantine alliance with the Umayyads in Spain, Pepin the Short had sent an embassy to Baghdad in 765; an Abbasid embassy then visited France in 768. In 777, pro-Abbasid Islamic rulers of northern Spain responded positively to Charlemagne's offer of military support against the Umayyad Caliphate. To engage the enlightened Abbasid Caliphate as a natural ally against the Byzantine Empire, Charlemagne expanded his father's policy, and sent three embassies to Harun al-Rashid's court; the latter sent at least two embassies to the court of Charlemagne.

The death of al-Rashid in 809 put an end to the ecumenical alliance between these two great kingdoms. The death of Charlemagne four years later ensured that the Eastern Roman Empire would continue to dominate the Mediterranean and Black Seas. By the late Ninth Century, the Byzantine Navy was once again the dominant maritime power in the Mediterranean. By that time the Fossa Carolina was in disrepair and disuse, this great project all but disappearing from the landscape of Europe. By the Tenth Century, the chance to establish government based on the principle of the general welfare would not come again for 800 years, in America.





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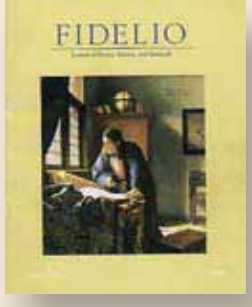

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