

# The Coronation of Charlemagne

*Christmas Day, AD 800 — how a Frankish king in St. Peter's created Western Christendom, triggered the future East-West split, and preserved the classical heritage the monasteries were already keeping alive • c. AD 751–814*

By Shane Gunn • Primary-source study

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**Where this fits:** Lesson 14 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — a supplementary lesson between **Benedict's Rule (Lesson 10)** and the **Great Schism (Lesson 2)**. Charlemagne's crowning on Christmas Day 800 is the moment Western Europe stops being a broken remnant of Rome and starts being Christendom. It is also the single sharpest provocation the Byzantine East received on the road to 1054. See the full **Series Timeline**.

## WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

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On Christmas Day AD 800, at Mass in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Pope Leo III placed a gold crown on the head of a kneeling, unsuspecting (or so his biographer would claim) Frankish king named Karl. The Roman congregation immediately burst into the formal Latin acclamation of an emperor: *"To Charles Augustus, crowned by God, great and peace-bringing emperor of the Romans, life and victory!"* Leo prostrated himself at the king's feet in the ancient gesture of submission reserved, until that moment, for the legitimate Roman emperor — who sat, at the time, on a throne in Constantinople, and was a woman named Irene who had just blinded her own son to take power.

The Byzantine court received the news with rage. For three hundred years since the collapse of the Western Empire in 476, the theory had been maintained that there was still *one* Roman Empire, ruled from Constantinople, and that the barbarian kingdoms of the West were loyal or disloyal parts of it. On 25 December 800, that theory ended. The West now had its own emperor, crowned by its own Pope, commanding his own armies. The Christian world had, for the first time, two rival Romes.

Everything that follows in Western Christian history — the Holy Roman Empire, the medieval struggle between popes and kings, the eventual **East-West Schism of 1054**, the Carolingian Renaissance that rescued classical literature, even the idea of “Europe” as a Christian civilization — descends from this Christmas morning. This is a lesson about one coronation that re-made a continent.

*Greek NT (Matt 22:21): ἀπόδοτε οὖν τὰ Καίσαρος Καίσαρι καὶ τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ τῷ θεῷ.*

Matthew 22:21 (ESV): “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Charlemagne would spend his whole reign trying to figure out exactly where the line fell. So would the Pope who crowned him.

## PART 1 — THE WORLD AFTER ROME

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To understand what Charlemagne’s coronation did, you have to understand what the world looked like just before it. In AD 800, three centuries after the last Western emperor was deposed, the old Mediterranean Roman world had been replaced by three rival powers:

- **The Byzantine Empire.** The Eastern Roman Empire endured, Greek-speaking, Orthodox, ruled from Constantinople — the actual unbroken continuation of Rome. In 800 its ruler was the Empress **Irene**, a remarkable figure who had deposed and blinded her own son to claim the throne in 797. Her gender gave Western canon lawyers their polite fiction: since “a woman could not be emperor,” the Roman imperial throne was

technically *vacant*, and the Pope could fill it. (Byzantines did not find this reasoning persuasive.)

- **The Islamic Caliphate.** From the deserts of Arabia in the 630s, the armies of Islam had conquered Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain, and by the 720s had crossed the Pyrenees into France. In 732, Charlemagne's grandfather Charles Martel ("the Hammer") had stopped them at the Battle of Tours, preserving Western Europe for Christianity. By 800 the Umayyad caliphate had fragmented; the Abbasids ruled from Baghdad; their caliph Harun al-Rashid exchanged diplomatic gifts with Charlemagne (reportedly including an elephant named Abul-Abbas).

- **The Frankish Kingdom.** In the territory of modern France, Germany, the Low Countries, and northern Italy, the Germanic Franks had gradually built the largest Christian kingdom in the West. Their founding king Clovis had been baptized Catholic in 496 (unlike the Arian Gothic kingdoms around him), and for three centuries his dynasty and their successors had been the principal Christian power of Western Europe. By 800 that kingdom was Charlemagne's.

Against this backdrop, the Pope in Rome was in an awkward position. Nominally still a subject of the Byzantine emperor, geographically isolated from Constantinople by Lombard-held central Italy, increasingly at odds with the East over icons (the Iconoclastic Controversy, 726–843) and the *filioque* — the Pope needed a Western protector. The Franks were the obvious candidate.

## PART 2 — CLOVIS, CHARLES MARTEL, PIPPIN

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The Carolingian dynasty was new in 800. Charlemagne's family had not always been royal. Four moments made them the kings they were:

- **c. 496 • Clovis I**, king of the Franks, is baptized Catholic Christian at Reims. Unlike most other Germanic kings of the period (who were Arian), Clovis accepts Nicene

Christianity — the faith of his Gallo-Roman subjects and the Bishop of Rome. This makes the Merovingian Frankish dynasty the natural Catholic ally of the papacy.

**732 • Charles Martel** (Charlemagne’s grandfather), the Merovingian “mayor of the palace” (actually ruling the kingdom in the name of the increasingly powerless kings), defeats a Moorish army at the **Battle of Tours**. This battle did not end Islamic expansion in Europe — it had already nearly run its course — but it cemented the Frankish court’s reputation as the shield of Western Christendom.

**751 • Pippin the Short**, Charles Martel’s son, deposes the last Merovingian king (Childeric III, packed off to a monastery) and is elected king of the Franks in his place. Pippin needs theological cover; he asks **Pope Zachary** whether “the one who has the power without a title should have the title.” The Pope agrees. Pippin is crowned.

**754 • Pope Stephen II**, threatened by the Lombards, travels to France and re-anoints Pippin at the Abbey of Saint-Denis, along with Pippin’s sons Charlemagne and Carloman. In return, Pippin invades Italy, defeats the Lombards, and donates the central Italian territories he conquers to the Pope — the **Donation of Pippin**, which becomes the Papal States, a territorial power the popes will rule for the next 1,100 years (until 1870).

**768 •** Pippin dies. The kingdom is divided between his two sons, **Charlemagne** (roughly 26) and **Carloman** (roughly 17), who loathe each other.

**771 •** Carloman dies of a nosebleed (or so the chroniclers say). Charlemagne becomes sole king of the Franks at 29.

By 800, this young man had spent 32 years fighting his way into position.

## **PART 3 — CHARLEMAGNE THE MAN (C. 742–814)**

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## Karl der Große / Carolus Magnus / Charlemagne

KING OF THE FRANKS 768–814 • KING OF THE LOMBARDS 774–814 •  
EMPEROR OF THE ROMANS 800–814

Frankish king

First Western emperor since 476

Carolingian Renaissance

We know more about Charlemagne than about almost any other early medieval figure because his close friend and courtier **Einhard** wrote a formal biography, the *Vita Karoli Magni*, modelled consciously on Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*. Einhard knew his subject personally for more than twenty years; the book is unmistakably flattering, but the physical and personal details are reliable:

*“He was heavily built, sturdy, and of considerable stature, although not exceptionally so, since his height was seven times the length of his own foot. The top of his head was round, his eyes very large and animated, his nose a little long. He had a fine head of white hair and his face was friendly and cheerful. Hence his presence was always stately and dignified, whether he was standing or sitting... His voice was clear, but a little higher than one would have expected for a man of his build. He enjoyed good health, except that during the four years before he died he had frequent attacks of fever and for the last year of his life he also walked with a limp.”*

— Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne* 22 (c. AD 830)

**What he actually did between 771 and 800.** He spent nearly every summer at war. In 29 years he led more than 50 campaigns:

- **Defeated the Lombards in Italy (772–774).** Took the Iron Crown of the Lombards; made himself king of Italy.

- **Conquered the Saxons (772–804).** 32 years of brutal warfare, forced conversion, and revolt. This is the darkest chapter of his reign — see Part 7 below.

- **Expanded into Spain (778–811).** His rear-guard was famously ambushed at the Pass of Roncevaux in 778, producing the medieval epic *Chanson de Roland*.

- **Destroyed the Avars (791–796).** An ancient steppe people in what is now Hungary and Austria; their treasure, built up over two centuries of raiding Byzantium, was shipped back to Aachen in fifteen wagons.

- **Built his capital at Aachen** (modern Aachen, Germany, near the Belgian border). His Palatine Chapel still stands, the oldest still-standing large building in Germanic Europe.

- **Revived scholarship** through the Carolingian Renaissance — see Part 6.

He had five legitimate wives (four of them dying young) and an uncounted number of concubines and children. He was fluent in Frankish and Latin, understood Greek, and never learned to write — Einhard notes he kept wax tablets under his pillow in hopes of practising, but the habit “met with ill success.” He was not a saintly man. He was also a remarkable one.

## PART 4 — POPE LEO III (R. 795–816)

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Pope Hadrian I died on 25 December 795. His successor Leo III was elected and consecrated the same day — the last Pope to be so hurriedly installed. Leo was a man of humble Roman origin, not popular with the old Roman aristocracy who had favored his predecessor.

**The attack on the Pope (25 April 799).** Four years into Leo’s pontificate, during the procession of the Greater Litany from the Lateran to the Church of San Silvestro, a gang of relatives of the previous pope ambushed him. They tried to tear out his eyes and cut out his tongue — the technical Byzantine method for permanently disabling a rival — and left him for dead on the steps of the Church of San Silvestro. Miraculously (Einhard says) or by a hurried surgeon (historians guess), Leo recovered both his sight and speech.

**The flight to Charlemagne.** Leo fled Rome to Paderborn in Saxony, where Charlemagne was campaigning, and begged royal protection. Charlemagne sent Leo back to Rome with a military escort and a promise: he himself would come to Rome in 800 to investigate the charges against

the Pope that Leo's Roman enemies had begun to circulate (charges of perjury, adultery, and simony).

**The investigation (November–December 800).** Charlemagne arrived in Rome on 24 November 800. On 23 December, in a dramatic ceremony, Leo III cleared himself of all charges by *swearing an oath* on a gospel book — a novel procedure, since no one on earth was canonically positioned to *judge* the Pope. Charlemagne accepted the oath. The way was clear.

## PART 5 — CHRISTMAS DAY, AD 800

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Two days later, at the Christmas Mass in Old St. Peter's Basilica (the original 4th-century building, demolished in the 16th century to build the present Renaissance basilica), the coronation took place. Einhard gives the famous account:

*“It was at this same time that he received the titles of Emperor and Augustus. He so hated these that he insisted that he would not have set foot in the church that day, even though it was a great Christian feast, if he had had any advance knowledge of what the Pope was planning to do.”*

— Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne* 28

**Should we believe this?** Most modern scholars don't. The ceremony was too elaborate to have been a genuine surprise: Leo had brought out a diadem specifically for the occasion; the Roman congregation knew the exact Latin acclamation to chant in response (a 30-word formal imperial accession formula); Leo's prostration followed court protocol exactly. Einhard is spinning for a Byzantine audience — by the time he wrote in the 820s, Frankish-Byzantine relations had been smoothed over partly by the fiction that Charlemagne had not *wanted* the title.

**The scene.** The Royal Frankish Annals describe it this way: Charlemagne was kneeling in prayer before the tomb of Peter after the gospel reading, about to rise for communion. Pope Leo III produced a golden crown and placed it on his head. The Roman clergy and people, rehearsed or spontaneous (probably rehearsed), chanted the formal imperial acclamation three times:

THE ROMAN ACCLAMATION • 25 DECEMBER 800

*Carolo Augusto, a Deo coronato, magno et pacifico imperatori Romanorum, vita et victoria!*

“To Charles Augustus, crowned by God, great and peace-bringing emperor of the Romans, life and victory!”

Then Leo prostrated himself at Charlemagne’s feet in the old Roman *proskynesis* — the gesture that since Diocletian had been reserved for the true emperor. (Significantly, no later pope ever repeated this gesture to any later emperor; Leo’s prostration was the ceremonial debt owed for Frankish protection, not a precedent.)

**Why it mattered so much.** Three things were established at once.

**1. A Western Roman Empire existed again.** After 324 years of interruption, there was once more an emperor in the West. The name *Imperium Romanum*, claimed in law by Constantinople, was now claimed in fact at Aachen.

**2. The Pope had just crowned an emperor.** In the Eastern tradition, emperors crowned themselves or were crowned by patriarchs as a constitutional form. In the West, from 800 forward, the tradition would be that the Pope makes the emperor — a principle popes would push as hard as they could for the next thousand years.

**3. The Byzantine Empire was no longer the only Rome.** Constantinople had been deposed, in Western eyes, from its monopoly on Roman identity. The theological wound this opened would contribute directly to the **Great Schism of 1054**, 254 years later.

## PART 6 — THE CAROLINGIAN RENAISSANCE

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Charlemagne’s coronation would matter less if his court had not also executed one of the most consequential cultural projects of the early Middle Ages: the **Carolingian Renaissance**, a deliberate, well-funded revival of Latin learning, Scripture study, and careful book-copying.

## Alcuin of York (c. 735–804)

ENGLISH MONK AND MASTER OF THE CATHEDRAL SCHOOL OF YORK •  
DIRECTOR OF CHARLEMAGNE'S PALACE SCHOOL AT AACHEN FROM 782 •  
ABBOT OF ST. MARTIN OF TOURS FROM 796

Benedictine-trained

Palace school

Carolingian minuscule

The engine of the Renaissance was a Northumbrian monk named **Alcuin**, trained in the great cathedral school of York (the spiritual descendant of **the Benedictine mission** that had arrived in England under Pope Gregory the Great). Charlemagne met Alcuin in Italy in 781 and promptly poached him to run the palace school at Aachen. For the next twenty years, Alcuin trained the next generation of Frankish churchmen, curated Charlemagne's correspondence, and supervised a massive program of manuscript copying.

**The *Admonitio Generalis* (789).** Charlemagne's landmark education decree required every cathedral and monastery in his kingdom to establish a school for boys — taught in correct Latin, with attention to grammar, Scripture, Gregorian chant, and basic arithmetic. For the first time in three centuries, systematic education returned to Western Europe. The universities of Paris, Bologna, and Oxford would eventually grow from these cathedral schools.

**Carolingian minuscule.** Carolingian scriptoria developed a new, clear, legible book script — **Carolingian minuscule** — that replaced the variety of ugly late-antique hands. It is the direct ancestor of the lowercase Roman font you are reading right now. (When Italian Renaissance humanists rediscovered Carolingian manuscripts in the 15th century, they mistook the script for genuine Roman-era writing and imitated it — producing the early printers' typefaces that still shape ours.)

**The Bible itself.** Alcuin was commissioned by Charlemagne to produce a standardized, corrected edition of the **Latin Vulgate**. The **Alcuin Bibles** (c. 800) became the de facto standard text of the Western church for centuries. Nearly every Bible manuscript copied in Western Europe between 800 and 1200 descends, directly or indirectly, from Alcuin's editorial work.

**Preserving the classics.** Alcuin's scriptoria at Tours, and the parallel scriptoria at Corbie, Fulda, St. Gall, Lorsch, and Aachen, made copies of nearly every Latin classical work that survives today. Our oldest manuscripts of Cicero, Tacitus, Quintilian, Caesar,

Livy, and dozens of others are Carolingian copies. If Alcuin's monks had not copied them, they would be lost. The Renaissance itself is a Carolingian inheritance.

## PART 7 — THE DARK SIDE: SAXON WARS & VERDEN (772–804)

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No honest account of Charlemagne can omit the Saxon Wars. For 32 years, Charlemagne waged a series of campaigns against the pagan Saxon tribes of northern Germany — a war combining territorial conquest with **forced conversion to Christianity**. The pattern was relentless: Frankish armies would defeat the Saxons, impose baptism and the tithe, withdraw, and return a year or two later to put down a revolt with yet more brutality.

**The Capitulary on Saxony (c. 785).** This shocking legal code made:

- **Refusal of baptism a capital crime.**
- **Cremation of the dead (traditional Saxon practice) a capital crime.**
- **Conspiring with pagans a capital crime.**
- **Eating meat during Lent a capital crime for Christians.**

**The Massacre of Verden (782).** After a Saxon rebellion led by **Widukind** destroyed a Frankish army, Charlemagne responded with an atrocity that stains his reputation still: he summoned 4,500 captured or surrendered Saxons to the town of Verden on the Aller River and had them all beheaded in a single day. Even Frankish chroniclers, not usually inclined to criticize their king, recorded the number plainly.

**The voice of Alcuin.** Not every Frankish Christian was silent. Alcuin of York, Charlemagne's closest ecclesiastical advisor, wrote a series of letters pleading with him to stop forcing conversions. Baptism, Alcuin argued, had to be the free act of a

believing adult; a baptism extorted under threat of the sword was worthless. Charlemagne did not listen at first. Eventually, after 804, the policy softened.

Alcuin's letters to Charlemagne on forced conversion are one of the earliest Christian arguments for religious liberty. They would be cited a thousand years later, on the other side of the Reformation, by the **American Baptists and Madison** in their fight against religious establishment.

Charlemagne was a baptized, church-building, psalm-singing Christian monarch who executed pagan ritual specialists and murdered 4,500 prisoners in a day. A church that wants to think clearly about its past has to hold both facts together.

## PART 8 — THE *FILIOQUE* AT AACHEN (AD 809)

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We covered the *filioque* controversy in detail in **Lesson 2 Part 2**. But Charlemagne's court is the crucial political moment the single Latin word became a permanent addition to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the Western liturgy.

**What happened.** At the Council of Aachen in 809, convened by Charlemagne, the Frankish bishops formally included the phrase *filioque* ("and from the Son") in their liturgical recitation of the Creed. The Frankish theological rationale was Augustinian: the double procession of the Spirit (from both Father and Son) is the best summary of Latin Trinitarian theology since **Augustine's *De Trinitate***.

**Pope Leo III's surprising reply.** Charlemagne sent legates to Rome to get papal endorsement. Leo III refused. He considered the doctrine of the double procession defensible, but he believed *no regional council had the authority to alter an ecumenical creed*. Leo had two massive silver shields engraved with the Nicene Creed in its original 381 form — in Greek and in Latin, without the *filioque* — and hung them in St. Peter's to make his point. They stayed there for nearly 200 years.

The Franks continued to sing the *filioque*. Rome held out until 1014, when Pope Benedict VIII finally added the phrase to the Roman liturgy to please Emperor Henry II at his coronation. From 1014 on, the Latin church has recited the *filioque* as part of the Creed. The Orthodox East has not.

Charlemagne's push on the *filioque* at Aachen is the single clearest example of how the Carolingian political framework enabled liturgical and theological changes Rome itself would not have made alone. Byzantine observers noticed.

## PART 9 — THE LONG CONSEQUENCES

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**814** • Charlemagne dies at Aachen on 28 January, at about 72. Buried in his own Palatine Chapel, which still stands.

**843** • Treaty of Verdun. Charlemagne's empire is divided among his three grandsons into what will become the kingdoms of France, Germany, and the middle kingdom (including northern Italy, Burgundy, and the Low Countries — sources of European conflict for a thousand years).

**962** • Otto I of Germany is crowned emperor by Pope John XII, formally inaugurating what would become known as the **Holy Roman Empire** — a political construct explicitly modelled on Charlemagne's. The empire, famously neither holy nor Roman nor an empire (Voltaire), would limp on until 1806.

**1054** • The **Great Schism**. Centuries of Franko-Byzantine tension over the *filioque*, the Pope's authority, liturgical differences, and the legitimacy of the Western imperial claim culminate in the mutual excommunications in the Hagia Sophia.

**1165** • Frederick Barbarossa, Holy Roman Emperor, has Charlemagne canonized as a saint by the antipope Paschal III — a dubious canonization Rome never officially ratified but also never officially nullified. Charlemagne is still venerated as "Blessed" in Aachen.

## WHY THIS MATTERS FOR US

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• **Political-religious fusion always cuts both ways.** Charlemagne's alliance with the papacy gave the Western church three centuries of security, an education system, a manuscript revival that preserved Scripture and the classics, and a political framework that lasted a thousand years. It also produced forced conversions, Verden, and the beginnings of the medieval church's entanglement with imperial power that eventually required the Reformation to correct. When we today are tempted to reach for political power to advance the gospel, Charlemagne's reign is the case study we need to read carefully — not to celebrate or denounce, but to notice what the fusion actually produced.

• **A church that cannot say “no” to its king will one day lose its voice.** Alcuin's letters protesting forced baptism are the best moments of his career. Pope Leo III's silver shields refusing to alter the Creed are one of the best moments of his pontificate. A church always attached to the imperial project cannot tell its emperor he is wrong. A church with no moral distance from its civil authority cannot protect the gospel.

• **Every manuscript you read is a Carolingian inheritance.** The Cicero, Livy, Virgil, Augustine, Bede, and every ancient Christian father we read today were preserved by people who believed books were sacred. The Protestant Reformation, the scientific revolution, and the modern university system all grew out of the cultural soil the Carolingians tended. Gratitude to them is overdue.

• **Forced conversion is never real conversion.** This is the great lesson of Verden. Alcuin was right. The American Baptists were right. Madison was right. Free conscience is not a modern innovation; it is a Christian insight the church has had to keep rediscovering because it keeps forgetting it.

*Greek NT (John 18:36): ἡ βασιλεία ἡ ἐμὴ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου.*

John 18:36 (ESV): “My kingdom is not of this world.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. Einhard insists Charlemagne did not want the imperial title. Why would Einhard spin the story that way a generation later? What does it tell us that he thought he had to?

2. Pope Leo III prostrated himself at the feet of a newly crowned king. No later pope ever did so. What kind of authority was being established in that single act?

3. Alcuin wrote to Charlemagne pleading for free rather than forced conversions. Would our culture today make that argument more easily or less easily than a 9th-century Frankish monk did? Why?

4. The Carolingian scriptoria preserved nearly all of surviving classical literature. What does it mean that the ancient world survives today because medieval monks thought books were worth copying?

5. The *filioque* was inserted into the Western Creed under Charlemagne's sponsorship, against Pope Leo III's theological and procedural objections. What does that tell us about who really has power in a Christendom arrangement?

6. Verden and the palace school of Aachen came from the same reign. How do we teach Christian history that honors both what the church did right and what it did catastrophically wrong?

## CLOSING PRAYER

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Lord Jesus Christ, whose kingdom is not of this world, we thank you for the Carolingian scriptoria that preserved the Scriptures, for Alcuin who protested the wrong our own church did, for Pope Leo III whose silver shields refused what power wanted. We repent with the whole Western church for Verden and for every baptism compelled by the sword. Teach us never to confuse the empire we happen to live under with the kingdom to which we belong. Give us Alcuin's courage to write letters of protest when our own leaders are wrong, and Leo's stubbornness to refuse to alter what we have received. Make our witness free, free because you are Lord. Through the King whose crown was of thorns. Amen.

## FURTHER READING

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### Primary sources:

- Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni (Life of Charlemagne, c. AD 830)* — the indispensable first-hand biography. Penguin translation by Lewis Thorpe (1969) is accessible.
- *Annales Regni Francorum (Royal Frankish Annals)* — official court chronicle.
- *Liber Pontificalis (Book of Popes)* — Leo III's biography, including the attempt on his life and the coronation.
- Alcuin's *Letters* (c. 782–804) — especially Letters 110, 111, 113 on forced conversion of the Saxons.
- Charlemagne, *Admonitio Generalis (789)* — the education decree.
- *Capitulare de partibus Saxoniae* (c. 785) — the harsh Saxon law code.
- Notker the Stammerer, *Gesta Karoli Magni* (c. 884) — a later, more legendary biography.

### Modern studies:

- Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points* (3rd ed., 2012) — Charlemagne figures significantly in ch. 4 (Benedict and the cultural rescue) and frames the run-up to ch. 5 (Great Schism).
- Rosamond McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (2008) — the definitive modern scholarly treatment.
- Roger Collins, *Charlemagne* (1998).
- Alessandro Barbero, *Charlemagne: Father of a Continent* (ET 2004) — elegant and accessible.
- Paul Edward Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (2004).
- Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom* (3rd ed., 2013) — especially chs. 16–18 on the Carolingian world.
- Richard E. Sullivan, *Aix-la-Chapelle in the Age of Charlemagne* (1963) — a classic shorter study.
- Alcuin's biographer: Donald A. Bullough, *Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation* (2004).

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