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The Significance of the Coronation of Charlemagne

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I.

On Christmas Day in the year 800 A.D. Charlemagne, king of the Franks and part of the Carolingian line,¹ was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III (795-816). The coronation took place during mass at the Basilica of St. Peter in Rome; immediately following the coronation, the acclamation of the people of Rome was heard: “To Charles, the most pious Augustus, crowned by God, the great and peace-giving Emperor, life and victory.” After this proclamation was made three times, the king “was adored by the pope in the manner of ancient princes; and, the title of *patricius* being dropped, he was called *emperor* and *augustus*.”² The coronation of Charlemagne created the Holy Roman Empire, which endured until 1806. According to James Bryce, the coronation warrants the classification of the most important occurrence of the Middle Ages. Bryce also views the event as exceptional in that if the ceremony had not taken place, “the history of the world would have been different.”³ Bryce implies that the reestablishment of the Roman Empire in the West profoundly affected the course of history, and this suggestion necessitates an analysis of the significance of the coronation.

The reasons behind the coronation were different for both the parties involved. Pope Leo’s motivation for crowning Charles included an opportunity to reward the Frankish king for rescuing him, the need for protection from Roman rebels only an emperor could provide, and the realization that the imperial throne was empty due to the succession of a female, Empress Irene (797-802), in the East. Charlemagne’s assuming of the imperial title was also the only way he could protect the papacy from the Eastern

¹ Charles, born in 742 A. D., was the son of Pepin, king of the Franks from 741-768. Charles was king of the Franks from 768 to 814 and Holy Roman Emperor from 800 to 814.

² Richard E Sullivan, ed., *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1959), 2.

³ James Bryce, “The Coronation as a Revival of the Roman Empire in the West,” in *ibid.*, 41.

Empire. For Charlemagne, the coronation was an attempt to sanctify the power he had already achieved, and an opportunity to become equal in power and prominence with the emperor in the East. The event was also an occasion for the king to become an emperor (although not necessarily a *Roman* emperor), thus satisfying his imperial ambitions. The coronation of Charles may also have facilitated the absorption of the Saxons into his empire.

This paper examines the possibility that the coronation of Charles indicated the beginning of Europe by analyzing the contemporary accounts of the coronation, discussing the interpretation of these sources by secondary historians, and providing a conclusion on the coronation's role in the foundation of Europe. As the events are described in the primary sources and interpreted by historians, the significance of the coronation originates from Charlemagne's restoration of the Roman Church, which indicates a strengthening relationship between the Church and the secular power in the West and a corresponding deteriorating relationship between the Eastern and Western parts of the Empire. The separation of the East from the West made the establishment of Europe possible.

II.

Few contemporary sources relaying the events of 25 December 800 exist. In addition, the extant sources provide only brief accounts of the coronation. Einhard, the Frankish court scholar, and advisor and friend of the Frankish king, wrote his description of the events surrounding the coronation soon after the death of the king. According to Einhard's official biography of Charlemagne, the king embarked on his journey because

of his responsibility to keep the “the church of St. Peter...safe and protected” but also “to restore the Church” after “the inhabitants of Rome had violently attacked Pope Leo, putting out his eyes and cutting off his tongue, and had forced him to flee to the King for help.”⁴ Einhard makes it clear that the king had no part in arranging the coronation. He attributes the coronation to the pope’s “planning” and not to any designs on the part of the king. In fact, Einhard asserts that Charles would not have attended Christmas mass in the cathedral had he been aware of the pope’s intent to crown him.⁵ According to Einhard, not only was Charlemagne uninvolved in the planning of the coronation, but he also was unaware that the event was going to take place.

Einhard thus claimed that Leo had taken the initiative in planning the coronation, and that Charlemagne did not desire the imperial crown. However, one problem is that in writing his biography of Charles, Einhard was modeling his work upon that of other imperial biographers, particularly the Roman writer Suetonius. Thus, Einhard may have been attempting to portray Charles as having the qualities of a Roman emperor, one of which was the refusal to accept power when it was offered: “such an expression of unwillingness was an ancient topos in imperial elevations.”⁶ Essentially, the person who did not want power was the very person who should be granted power. Because Einhard desired to be a Roman imperial writer, his narrative concerning Charlemagne’s involvement in the coronation, as well as the king’s reaction to the event, should not be

⁴ Einhard and Notker the Stammerer, *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 81.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Henry Mayr-Harting, “Charlemagne, the Saxons, and the Imperial Coronation of 800,” *The English Historical Review* 111, no. 444 (1996), 1118.

considered completely accurate. Relying on Einhard as an historian presents an additional problem: although generally reliable, “his admiration for Charlemagne sometimes colored his discussion of the events in which the great king was involved.”⁷ Thus Einhard’s explanation of the coronation and its significance is perhaps affected by his desire to make the Frankish king appear as a majestic emperor.

The biography of Pope Leo III, which comes from a compilation of medieval papal biographies entitled the *Liber pontificalis*,⁸ provides another account of the events of 800. The account of the coronation was likely written after 816, but it is likely that the author was present at the basilica of St. Peter in 800. This biography portrays Pope Leo’s arrangement of the coronation as an opportunity to reward Charles for “the defense that he gave and the love that he bore for the holy Roman Church and her Vicar...”⁹ The pope’s important role in granting the imperial title receives primary attention. A potential problem that exists in the papal biography is the point of view the source presents. Clergymen involved with the papal court in Rome were responsible for collecting the papal biographies, and as a result, the events included in the documents provide a perspective favorable to Pope Leo.¹⁰

The third contemporary account of the coronation comes from the Frankish Royal Annals,¹¹ which puts forth a record of the most important events associated with the history of the Carolingians. The Royal Annals present the pope’s role in the coronation as minimal. Although the pope took the initiative in crowning Charles, the focus remains

⁷ Sullivan, *The Coronation of Charlemagne*, 1.

⁸ Book of the Popes.

⁹ Sullivan, *The Coronation of Charlemagne*, 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹ Usually cited as the *Annales regni Francorum*.

solely on the king. Charlemagne was “acclaimed by the whole populace of Rome...And ...adored by the pope in the manner of ancient princes...and...he was called emperor and augustus.”¹² This account was likely written soon after 800 by annalists connected to the Frankish court; the portrayal of events must have been approved by the Frankish king.¹³

The final source for the events of 800 is a monastic chronicle entitled the Lorsch Annals,¹⁴ written about 803. The Lorsch Annals attribute the planning of the coronation to Pope Leo and to the holy fathers in attendance at the council that was called to determine the fate of the humiliated pope. The Roman people, the pope, and the holy fathers were all in agreement that the king of the Franks should be named emperor. Charles held Rome, where the Caesars resided, and the places they held in Italy, Gaul, and Germany were also under Charlemagne’s control. Additionally, the title of emperor was nonexistent in the East due to the succession of a woman to the imperial throne. Once he was crowned emperor, Charles restored peace and stability to the Church at Rome.¹⁵ The Lorsch Annals present the varying opinion of the royal court as to the meaning of the coronation.

III.

Now that the events leading up to coronation and the coronation’s significance as presented in the contemporary accounts have been discussed, the interpretations of historians should be considered. Historians discuss the possibility that the coronation was desired and initiated by either Charlemagne or the pope, or both. Pope Leo III

¹² Sullivan, *The Coronation of Charlemagne*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁴ *Annales Laureshamenses*.

¹⁵ Sullivan, *The Coronation of Charlemagne*, 2.

acquired the papal throne upon the death of Pope Hadrian I (772-795) in 795. Leo revealed himself as a “weak successor,”¹⁶ and from the start, his pontificate was plagued with internal problems. Pope Leo was not of a noble background and thus experienced conflict with the Roman nobility, particularly adherents of Hadrian. Important lay and clerical noblemen wanted to put an end to Leo’s papacy; the loss of the foremost position of power in Rome that coincided with Hadrian’s death and Leo’s accession to the papal throne upset the nobility. The nobility’s realization that “one of its own” would not become pope led to the “desperate tactic of planning and attempting to carry out a coup d’etat.”¹⁷

Pope Leo, in addition to experiencing conflict with the Roman nobility, “did not enjoy in Rome a sound moral reputation: his power was rather shaken;”¹⁸ Leo was accused of simony and immorality. During a revolt on 25 April 799, a mob attacked him in a Roman street near the church of St. Lawrence. The uprising, which was led by Paschalis, Campulus, and Maurus of Nepi,¹⁹ revealed the pope’s precarious situation. Following the revolt, Leo found himself arrested and imprisoned in the monasteries of Sts. Stephen and Sylvester and of St. Erasmus. He “had been so ill-treated that his life was in danger,”²⁰ and he correctly recognized that placing himself under the protection of an emperor was the only feasible way to punish the leaders of the revolt, secure his

¹⁶ Pierre Riche, *The Carolingians: A Family Who Forged Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 119.

¹⁷ Thomas F.X. Noble, *The Republic of St. Peter: The Birth of the Papal State, 680-825*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 201.

¹⁸ Francois Louis Ganshof, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy: Studies in Carolingian History*, trans. Janet Sondheimer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 42.

¹⁹ Paschalis and Campulus were nobles, Pope Hadrian’s relatives, and high Church officers; Maurus of Nepi was a military aristocrat and a neighbor of Pope Hadrian’s family.

²⁰ Ganshof, 42.

physical safety, and keep the papacy in his hands. Leo managed to escape his imprisonment, and he utilized this freedom to meet with Charlemagne at Paderborn in Saxony; the pope was only able to return to Rome with an “impressive entourage”²¹ provided by the Frankish king.

Leo needed protection that only an emperor could provide. However, the position of power that Charlemagne held prior to the coronation was apparently not significant enough to put an end to Leo’s difficulties or to judge the pope’s enemies. Prior to the coronation, Charlemagne possessed the title of *Patricius Romanorum*, which Pope Hadrian had granted him. This designation was insufficient for Leo’s designs for Charlemagne: the Frankish king needed to receive the imperial title in order to restore the pope’s position in Rome. According to Henry Mayr-Harting, “Peter Classen’s conclusion on this matter was a masterly one: it was by no means legally clear whether only an Emperor could deal with Roman rebels, but all unclarities were at once removed if there were an emperor in Rome.”²² Although the legality of the issue was uncertain beforehand, if an emperor were to appear in Rome, his word would become law, and he would possess the power to punish the rebels and return Leo to the papal throne. Thus, Leo’s need for protection may have led the pope to take the initiative in crowning Charles on Christmas day.

Beyond Pope Leo’s need for protection, another possible motivation on the part of the pope to initiate the coronation was that the event provided Leo with an opportunity to reward Charlemagne for rescuing the leader of the Church. According to Pierre Riche,

²¹ Noble, 200.

²² Mayr-Harting, 1123.

“Charles was not merely a king vested with immense political power; he was also a Christian prince who placed his resources at the service of his Faith.”²³ Charlemagne expressed his knowledge of his role as defender of the faith with his message to the new pope in 796:

With the help of divine clemency, it is my duty to outwardly defend the Holy Church of Christ by arms from the various attacks of the pagans and the devastation of the infidels and inwardly to fortify her by spreading knowledge of the catholic faith.²⁴

When Charlemagne sent Pope Leo back to Rome and had the rebels arrested and imprisoned until 816, he was fulfilling his obligation as the guardian of his faith. The pope’s gratitude for Charlemagne’s maintenance of the “the purity of the dogma”²⁵ and his defense of the successor to St. Peter is revealed by Leo’s granting of the standard of the city of Rome, as well as the civil authority of Rome, to Charlemagne soon after the coronation. Additionally, he assigned a program of mosaics to be built for the *triclinium*²⁶ of his Lateran Palace, which featured Christ on one side bestowing keys to St. Peter and a banner to Constantine. On the opposite side, quite tellingly, was a representation of St. Peter imparting a pallium to Pope Leo and a banner to Charlemagne. The purpose of this banner motif was to equate Pope Leo with Pope Sylvester I (314-335)²⁷ and to create a connection between Charles and Constantine, the archetypal Christian emperor.²⁸

Although not necessarily a driving force in the coronation, the usurpation of the

²³ Riche, 117.

²⁴ Riche, 119.

²⁵ Ganshof, 43.

²⁶ Audience hall.

²⁷ In the fifth century a legend had developed that Constantine had relinquished the secular government of Rome and the western empire to Pope Sylvester upon founding his new capital in the East.

²⁸ Riche, 119.

Eastern throne in 797 by Irene²⁹ was also a justification on the part of Leo for the proceedings on Christmas day. The Lorsch Annals provide a description of Charlemagne's assembly of December 800, where the discussion changed from settling the pope's problems in Rome to restoring the empire:

Since there was no longer an emperor in the land of the Greeks and they all were under the domination of a woman, it seemed to Pope Leo and to all the fathers who sat in the assembly, as well as to the whole Christian people, that they should give the name of emperor to king of the Franks, to Charles, who occupied Rome, where the Caesars had customarily resided, and also Italy, Gaul, and Germany. Because Almighty God had consented to place these lands under his authority, it seemed right, according to the desire of the whole Christian people, that Charles should also bear the imperial title.³⁰

Irene's succession sanctioned the belief that no emperor remained in the east and that the throne was vacant. However, the presence of a woman on the imperial throne was perhaps not Leo's only motive in crowning Charles and thus affronting Byzantium. The coronation was likely also an essential component of Pope Leo and the Church's struggle for independence from the East.

Pope Leo desired the protection of a secular authority in the West to enable the Roman Church to pursue its secular ambitions. The forged Donation of Constantine of the 8th century had enhanced the legitimacy of the authority of the pope in central Italy. This document claimed to be the imperial charter whereby Constantine, upon moving his capital to the East, granted Pope Sylvester secular authority of Rome and the western empire. The legitimacy of the document was accepted until the fifteenth century, and justified the pope's secular power.³¹ However, according to Thomas Noble, although the

²⁹ Irene, the widow of Leo IV (775-780), seized the imperial throne from her son Constantine VI (780-797).

³⁰ Riche, 121.

document “is a valuable indicator of certain attitudes prevalent in the Lateran,” perhaps it should not be considered “a bargaining chip in eighth-century papal diplomacy.” Pope Hadrian’s letters to Charlemagne regarding the duchies of Benevento and Spoleto and “these regions being under *vestra et nostra* jurisdiction” may express the pope’s awareness of his shared claim to power of these areas and his attempt “to retain some sort of claim to them.” Additionally, a letter from Hadrian to Charlemagne from May 778 mentions the pope’s intention of clearing the Beneventans out of Campania with the force of the army of the Duchy of Rome. Hadrian also emphasizes his desire for Charles to aid the pope in his struggles with the Beneventans, which, according to Thomas Noble, “indicates that Hadrian was beginning to feel as though he would have to manage on his own in Italy.”³²

These letters from the pope to the foremost secular authority in the West reveal that papal secular authority in Italy indeed existed, but the papal letters also suggest papal reliance upon Charlemagne for military aid. After the coronation, the pope’s supremacy in the Roman duchy remained intact, but “Frankish protection” and the acknowledgment of “Carolingian supremacy”³³ were essential elements to this power. While the pope remained politically powerful, the protection and help of Charlemagne remained essential.

An understanding of Pope Leo’s desire for secular authority in the West necessitates a discussion of the relationship between Rome and Constantinople.

³¹ Brian Tierney, *Western Europe in the Middle Ages: 300-1475*, (The McGraw-Hill Co., Inc., 1999), 131-132.

³² Noble, 147-148.

³³ Giovanni Tabacco, *The Struggle for Power in Medieval Italy: Structures of Political Rule*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 115.

Byzantium had traditionally made an effort to preserve the impression that the West remained subject to the East. The Byzantine emperor Anastasius (491-518) bestowed the Roman title of consul, as well as the imperial insignia, on King Clovis of the Franks to illustrate that the West was part of the Eastern Empire and not a separate political entity. However, by 780 most of Latin Christendom was outside imperial control, and by the middle of the eighth century, Rome and the lands of central Italy controlled by the Roman Church were no longer part of the Byzantine Empire. Additionally, papal opposition to Byzantine iconoclasm³⁴ and the inability of the East to protect the papacy from the advance of the Lombard kingdom led to a newly formed relationship between the Carolingian rulers of the Franks and the papacy. Pepin and Charlemagne were prevailed upon to intercede in Italy, and although

The papacy in theory resisted the substitution of one empire for another-- it was at this time that the Roman Church invented the *Donation of Constantine* to claim that Constantine, in founding Constantinople, had relinquished imperial responsibility in Italy to the Pope. However, the practical outcome was that Charlemagne took over the Lombard kingdom in Italy as well as the emperor's role as protector of the Church.³⁵

The papacy needed the Carolingians to provide military resources to prevent the Byzantines from intervening in Italy. A Byzantine military presence in Italy, which the Roman Church was not strong enough to remove, presented the possibility that the secular power of the papacy would cease.

Pope Leo's desire to obtain freedom from the restraints of the Eastern Empire, and thus freedom to pursue his political aims, found expression in the coronation of 800. The

³⁴ Literally the smashing of images. Iconoclasm refers to the movement that forbade the making or veneration of images of God or the saints. Byzantine iconoclasm was instituted in 726 and completely suppressed in 843.

³⁵ Cyril Mango, ed., *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 169.

protection of an emperor in the West would enable the Church to retain its secular authority. According to Walter Ullmann,

...by virtue of the papacy's being part and parcel of the Roman empire, it could not only not offer effective resistance to the roman emperor, but there was also no possibility of obtaining an effective protector and defender. In order to attain these two objectives emancipation from the imperial framework was essential.³⁶

The process of liberation from the Byzantines was initiated by the coronation; the Roman clergy and aristocracy, while unwilling to assent to Lombard authority because of their preference for "the Roman tradition," consented to Charlemagne's acquisition of "titles and symbols"³⁷ of Roman imperial power. The supremacy of Charlemagne and the protection that he provided as "Roman emperor" was necessary for the maintenance of autonomy in some Byzantine areas of Italy.³⁸

Leo's motive for crowning Charlemagne was thus perhaps inseparable from the position of Byzantium at the time. However, the justification of Irene's usurpation of the imperial throne for bestowing the imperial title in the West may have been a façade for far more complex reasons, including the pope's desire to retain secular authority uninhibited by Byzantium, which was perhaps only possible with the assistance of a Western emperor. Although possible motivations for the coronation on the part of Charlemagne may have involved the Eastern Empire, and although Pope Leo may have perceived Irene's succession as an opportunity to crown Charlemagne, the presence of a woman on the Eastern throne was not a significant factor in Charlemagne's possible

³⁶ Walter Ullmann, *The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages: A Study in the Ideological Relation of Clerical to Lay Power*, (New York: Barnes, 1955), 45.

³⁷ Tabacco, 114.

³⁸ Tabacco, 115.

designs for the imperial title. Mayr-Harting points out Louis Halphen's argument that Charlemagne's "imperial fervour"³⁹ did not cease upon Nicephorus I's acquisition of the imperial title in 802. Once Nicephorus overthrew Irene, conflict occurred between the East and the West:

The tension was so great between the two governments of Aachen and Constantinople that the rumor circulated that soon Frankish armies would come down to Sicily--then still Byzantine territory. The negotiations continued in a sabre-rattling atmosphere to end only in 812 under the successor of Nicephorus, Michael I Rhangabe, in a lame compromise, in terms of which the emperor of the 'New Rome'--that of the Bosphorus--finally agreed to treat his colleague of ancient Rome in his correspondence, no longer simply as a barbarian king...but to address him as 'brother.'⁴⁰

It would not be an accurate assessment of Charlemagne's attitude toward Byzantium to propose that he took advantage of an opportunity to rule the Empire because there was a woman on the throne. A more accurate explanation of Charlemagne's views towards the East is that he wished to be on equal terms with the Byzantine Empire, regardless of who was on the throne.

IV.

The evolving relationship between the East and West, revealed in particular by Charlemagne's actions, suggests Charlemagne desired political equality with the Eastern court. His actions also suggest that he desired the coronation to officially establish this equality. In 787, Empress Irene convened the Second Council of Nicaea. The council focused on the problem of the worship of images, and Irene attempted to resolve the

³⁹ Mayr-Harting, 1123.

⁴⁰ Louis Halphen, *Charlemagne and the Carolingian Empire*, trans. Giselle de Nie (New York: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1977), 96.

Iconoclastic Controversy by allowing the veneration to be reinstated. Likely in an attempt to affront the Frankish king, Charlemagne was not invited to attend the council, although a papal legate was included in the proceedings. “The behavior of Irene proved that she had not departed in the least from her Greek arrogance, which according to the Frankish view was only a prejudice.”⁴¹ In response to the Eastern court overlooking Charlemagne, the king organized the Council of Frankfurt in reaction to the Second Council of Nicaea. The council included clergy from the Frankish kingdom, papal representatives, and delegations from England; Charlemagne led the council in an action reminiscent of Irene and her supervision of the Nicaean Council. Charlemagne raised several issues, including reforms within the Frankish kingdom, the Adoptionism heresy, and, quite tellingly, the Iconoclastic Controversy. The king proceeded to make decisions about these problems, thus challenging “the pretensions of Empress Irene,”⁴² who refused to acknowledge the powerful position Charlemagne held in the West.

Charlemagne’s involvement in the compiling of the *Libri karolini* is purported to be a direct result of the “religious-dogmatic quarrel” between East and West. The document boldly requested that the East acknowledge that the West was on equal terms with Byzantium in the political realm. According to Werner Ohnsorge, “The Frankish empire, which included so great a part of the ancient Roman empire, claimed equality of rights with Byzantium.”⁴³ The *Libri karolini* clearly expressed what the Council of Frankfurt only implied. Whereas the council appeared to be a challenge to the Eastern

⁴¹ Werner Ohnsorge, “The Coronation and Byzantium,” in *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?*, ed. Richard E. Sullivan (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1959), 41.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ohnsorge, 83.

emperor and an expression of Charlemagne's desire to be considered as politically powerful as the emperor, the *Libri karolini* boldly proclaimed Charlemagne's competition with the Eastern court.

Now that Pope Leo's reasons for carrying out the coronation have been discussed, and Charlemagne's views toward the Eastern Empire have been deliberated, the role that Charlemagne may have played in the coronation should now be considered. Did the king possess imperial ambitions great enough to elicit his involvement in the planning of the coronation? Did he truly desire to become an emperor by being crowned by Pope Leo on Christmas day? Did Charlemagne desire to become an emperor, or more specifically, a Roman emperor?

While it remains uncertain whether Charlemagne's ambitions led him to arrange the coronation, Charlemagne certainly appeared to hold a fair amount of imperial ambition. The *Libri karolini*, in addition to revealing Charlemagne's personal rivalry with the Eastern emperor, appeared to demand that the West, and the Frankish kingdom in particular should achieve power beyond the regional level. According to Ohnsorge,

Moreover, this claim to equality of rights was raised on the basis of a concept of monarchy. The king of the Franks was in no way inferior to the "king" (Rex) on the Bosphorus. The Frankish kingdom thus emancipated itself from East Rome and openly announced its claim to world prominence.⁴⁴

Ohnsorge classifies the competition between East and West, which was revealed in the *Libri karolini*, as a monarchy in the West desiring the "monarch" in the East to acknowledge the Frankish monarchy's power. However, Ohnsorge also points out that the liberation from Byzantium that the document asserted was perhaps an attempt to

⁴⁴ Ibid.

claim power greater than that possessed by the emperor in the East. Ohnsorge's interpretation suggests that the Frankish kingdom, and more specifically, Charlemagne, desired imperial power. Responsibility for the ostensibly imperial declaration rests upon Charlemagne, the sponsor of the *Libri karolini*.

The summer meeting between Pope Leo and Charlemagne at Paderborn in 799 may provide additional evidence for Charlemagne's imperial ambitions. According to Mayr-Harting, "...the Paderborn meeting may be taken to mark the first direct arrangement for an actual imperial coronation." The poem entitled *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa* is directly related to the meeting and its proceeding, and the amount of "imperial phraseology" included in the poem to describe Charlemagne is noteworthy:

Charlemagne is the beacon of Europe, the king who excels all other kings in the *culmen imperii*, and bathes his dukes and counts in the brilliance of his great love, the father of Europe, and augustus; while Aachen, with its forum, its baths, and its meeting place for the holy senate is described as a second Rome.⁴⁵

The fact that a general consensus exists among historians that the Paderborn meeting was the launching point for the coronation, in addition to the fact that Charlemagne played a central role at this meeting, may lead to the conclusion that Charlemagne was involved with the preparations for the coronation. At the very least, the inference could be made that Charlemagne wished to be perceived as imperial.

Whereas the meeting at Paderborn and the *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa* indirectly associated Charlemagne with imperial ambitions and the eventual coronation, the Aachen gathering of 802 provides substantial evidence for Charlemagne's imperial strategy in the years following the coronation, if indeed an "imperial strategy" existed. Dukes and

⁴⁵ Mayr-Harting, 1117.

counts attended this meeting presided by Charlemagne, who, "...like an Augustus...gave the various peoples over whom he ruled their own written laws." Another noteworthy aspect of the gathering was the exhibition by Charlemagne of an equestrian statue, obtained by the king in Ravenna, of Theoderic the Ostrogoth. Although many of the "Carolingian *eruditus*" were disgruntled by Charlemagne's decision to display this statue, Charlemagne likely disregarded their fears that Theoderic, as a heretic, was somewhat at odds with the Christian empire. The fact remained that the Ostrogothic king "was an invaluable germanic hero for Charlemagne."⁴⁶ More significantly:

And who was Theoderic but one who had been widely regarded as having the power of an emperor yet had not had the title of Roman emperor, who had ruled over a large part of the western empire as a kind of *gubertor*, and who had exercised varying degrees of superiority over diverse peoples (*gentes*) of germanic origin?⁴⁷

Charlemagne's actions at Aachen reveal imperial ambition. The conferring of a law code and the decision to display the statue suggest that he had aspirations similar to those of Theoderic: to be an emperor.

Although Charlemagne evidently had imperial objectives, the initiative for the coronation likely originated with the pope and not with Charlemagne. Charlemagne, according to Einhard, expressed unwillingness upon Leo's act of coronation. This reluctance to receive the imperial crown may have resulted from the fact that the king "did not wish to seem as if he held his empire from the pope and especially not from a pope who owed him so much and had taken him now by a kind of treachery."⁴⁸

Charlemagne probably did not believe he should not be an emperor, but instead he likely

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Mayr-Harting, 1121.

⁴⁸ Ganshof, 48.

felt that he should not be receiving the imperial crown from the disgraced and humiliated pope.

Despite Charlemagne's alleged hesitancy concerning his acquisition of the imperial title, little doubt remains that the Frankish king was aware of the impending coronation.

A letter written by Alcuin to Charlemagne in June 799 alludes to the need for a new emperor:

...Second, there is the holder of the Imperial Dignity, who exercised secular power in the Second Rome, and rumor spreads everywhere of how impiously the governor of that empire has been deposed by his own circle and citizens... Third, there is the Royal Dignity, in which the dispensation of our Lord Jesus Christ has established you as ruler of the... Behold, now in you alone lies the salvation of the churches of Christ.⁴⁹

A court poet also described Charlemagne as "head of the world and summit of Europe, the new Augustus who reigns in a New Rome."⁵⁰ Thus there seemed to be an expectancy on the part of the counselors of Charles that the Frankish king would be crowned emperor; such complimentary language suggests that Charlemagne was viewed as the supreme ruler in the Western world, and as such it would be appropriate to grant him the title of emperor. If those closest to Charlemagne were aware of the likelihood of an imperial coronation, then it can be inferred that the king knew it as well.

According to Einhard, the advisor and friend of the Frankish king, not only was Charlemagne not involved in the planning of the coronation, but also he was unaware that the event was going to take place.

Charlemagne really came to Rome to restore the Church, which was in a very bad state indeed... It was on this occasion that he received the title of Emperor and Augustus. At first he was far from wanting this. He

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Riche, 120.

made it clear that he would not have entered the cathedral that day at all, although it was the greatest of all the festivals of the Church, if he had know in advance what the Pope was planning to do.⁵¹

Charlemagne's involvement in the Paderborn meeting, where the idea of the coronation apparently originally formulated, and the awareness on the part of Charlemagne's counselors that the king would become an emperor, suggest that Charlemagne was also aware of the coronation.

Although Charlemagne was likely aware that the coronation would take place, he may have been unenthusiastic about taking the title of Roman emperor. Mayr-Harting asserts that any "actual aversion was not due only to the mode of crowning and Leo's wresting a ceremonial initiative for the papacy in it, but also to the fact that Charlemagne did not wish for the name of Roman Empire."⁵² The title that he took would not have diminished Byzantine feelings that their Roman Emperors were being taken over, a political upset that may have been one cause of Charlemagne's declaration of aversion.⁵³ The fact remained that the Byzantines symbolized everything that Charlemagne would like to achieve, but he may not have been audacious enough to believe that he was as powerful as an Eastern emperor.

There was also a distinct difference between a Roman and a non-Roman empire in the Middle Ages; essentially, the name of emperor could be held without simultaneously being known as a Roman emperor. An essential component of the Roman concept of empire was a coronation at Rome, and it was universal in that all other power should be a manifestation of the one true Roman *imperium*. On the contrary, the non-Roman empire

⁵¹ Einhard, 81.

⁵² Mayr-Harting, 1119.

⁵³ Ibid.

was not universal, and it was not inevitably associated with Rome; it was centered on the rule of the many peoples. It has been argued that the non-Roman idea is crucial to comprehend “Charlemagne’s need for emperorship.”⁵⁴

The suggestion that Charlemagne’s vision of his empire was not Roman can be confirmed by his actions after the coronation took place. According to C. Delisle Burns, “That no new institution was founded and no old one revived in A.D. 800 is proved by the action of those who bore the title of Emperor.”⁵⁵ Rome was never made the center of imperial authority by Charlemagne, or, for that matter, by his successors. In addition, there was neither a palace nor a central office instituted in Rome; the Emperor returned to his seat of government at Aachen. The impression of a Roman Empire in western Europe during the Middle Ages seems to be “entirely fantastic.” Perhaps the purpose of the coronation was to give Charles a title as opposed to creating an institution.⁵⁶ Charlemagne did not pass the imperial title on to his heirs, thus suggesting that no real empire was created.

V.

Although not necessarily a motivating factor in the coronation for Charlemagne, the coronation did make easier the process of completing his Saxon conquests and ruling them peacefully. Carolingian expansion had security concerns due to the defenselessness of the Rhineland; the Rhine, if near the frontier of Frankish settlement, was also a channel of Carolingian economic and cultural life. The region

⁵⁴ Ibid., 1120.

⁵⁵ C. Delisle Burns, “The Play Emperor,” in *The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?*, ed. Richard E. Sullivan (Boston: D.C. Heath and Co., 1959), 14.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

between the Rhine and the Weser provided no natural defense from the pagan Saxons who were located to the east and west of the latter river. Charlemagne's strategy towards the Saxons is revealed in the Frankish Royal Annals: in order to protect the Rhine he had to control the Weser, and thwart the movement of Saxons between the rivers.

Essentially, in order to manage the Weser, the Saxons had to be conquered and, additionally, Christianized. By the time he issued the Second Capitulary of 787, Charlemagne believed that he had shattered Saxon opposition permanently. The Capitulary gives the impression of instituting Frankish rule among the Saxons, but with consideration for Saxon laws and public assemblies.⁵⁷

According to Mayr-Harting, "Charlemagne needed the imperial coronation because emperorship was the only conceptual framework within which he could validate and make acceptable his rule of the Saxon aristocracy after he had defeated them."⁵⁸ The Saxons created a dilemma for Charlemagne because they had no kingship; in fact, they made a point of not having a kingship, likely because they feared that kings were representative of tyranny. St. Lebuin, a mid-eighth century Anglo-Saxon, is said to have declared at an annual meeting of the Saxons "no king will prevail against you and subject you to his domination." However, it is possible this passage should have been translated as " 'so it will not be a king who will prevail against you and subject you to his domination.' No, it would be an emperor."⁵⁹ The Saxons, because they were an ethnically conscious group, would not submit to the burden of kingly rule, but they could bear to accept an emperor who had secured the support and fear of many peoples. As

⁵⁷ Mayr-Harting, 1114-1123.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1114.

⁵⁹ Mayr-Harting 1125-1126.

much as the Saxons would have disliked to be ruled by a king, it would also have been a complicated matter for Charlemagne if he were to rule them as a king. “Charlemagne would have lost face by calling himself the king of a people who were still mostly pagan...”⁶⁰ Thus if the Saxons were going to be incorporated into Charlemagne’s rule, it was best for both sides concerned if he possessed imperial power.

Besides the possibility of incorporating the Saxons into the empire, one immediate consequence of the coronation was that there were no more controversies concerning the veneration of holy images, at least during the lifetime of Charlemagne. This was part of an overall trend on the part of Charles to avoid irritating the Byzantines, and also an attempt to obtain the acknowledgment of Byzantium. Charles even attempted to settle the matter by using a political marriage; if the Byzantine sources can be relied upon, he made an effort to secure his imperial title by a marriage with Empress Irene.⁶¹ This attitude of appeasing the East suggests that Charlemagne’s power was limited even after the coronation.

VI.

Einhard’s description of the events of 25 December 800 A.D. convey the Frankish court scholar’s interpretation of the significance of the coronation. Einhard contends that Charlemagne’s primary purpose in traveling to Rome was to ensure the safety and protection of the church of St. Peter and to restore the Church at Rome. The pope’s reliance on a Western secular authority to restore his position of power signifies the papacy’s worsening relationship with Byzantium. Although a Byzantine military

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Fichtenau, 75.

presence remained in Italy, Pope Leo implored the Frankish king for aid because of his desire to retain secular authority that was threatened by the East's presence. The granting of the title of "Emperor and Augustus" by the pope was also an affront to the East and a sign of a poor relationship between the Western Church and the Byzantine Empire.

Einhard also describes the tension that the coronation caused between the East and Charlemagne, the most important secular ruler in the West:

Once he had accepted the title, he endured with great patience the jealousy of the so-called Roman Emperors, who were most indignant at what had happened. He overcame their hostility only by the sheer strength of his personality, which was much more forceful than theirs. He was forever sending messengers to them, and in his dispatches he called them his brothers.⁶²

Not only did the Western Church find itself at odds with the East; so too did the leading Western secular power. Additionally, these two Western powers were not only divided from the East, but also united together. Charlemagne's attempts to receive recognition of equality from the East (by relaying communications to the imperial court and equating himself as their "brother") suggest that he was aware of a political entity in the West that was distinct from the East which should be recognized as such. Einhard's reference to the "so-called Roman emperors" implies that Charles is the "true" Roman emperor by virtue of his coronation taking place in Rome.

Einhard's assertion that Charlemagne would not have attended mass on Christmas day had he been aware of Pope Leo's intentions may be fabricated by the court scholar. Einhard's desire to be a Roman imperial biographer may have led him to include the anecdote concerning the king's aversion to his imperial coronation, and, notably, the

⁶² Einhard, 81.

three other primary sources that describe the events do not mention any such statement by the king. If Charlemagne did express aversion, it may have been an attempt to assure the Byzantine court that he was unwilling to threaten their claim to imperial power in the empire. However, it seems likely that Einhard had motives for inventing this anecdote: to make Charlemagne appear imperial. Thus Charlemagne probably did not express hesitation, and likely did not fear any reprisal from the East for his acceptance of the imperial crown.. His involvement with the publication of the *Libri karolini* suggests that he believed in the equality of the West with the East and was willing to assert it.

The portrayal of events in the biography of Pope Leo III, from the *Liber pontificalis*, suggest that the coronation's significance stems from the pope's desire to reward Charlemagne for defending the Roman Church and its leader. The compiling of the papal biographies was completed by clergymen associated with the papal court and thus portray the events in a manner favorable to the pope. Pope Leo is portrayed as purely religious figure who desires to reward the king for his defense of the Church. Any secular ambitions that may have influenced the pope in his decision to crown Charles are not mentioned. However, although the pope's desire for retaining his secular power is not given any attention, it is notable that Pope Leo deems himself to be capable of rewarding the king with a grant of secular power. Although the pope was saved by Charlemagne, Leo still considers himself to be on fairly equal terms with the king.

The Frankish Royal Annals provide a picture of the coronation that is favorable to Charlemagne because he approved the content of the description. This brief account was written soon after 800, and does not reveal many insights as to the importance of the

coronation. However, it does mention that the pope adored the new emperor in the manner of ancient princes, an anecdote that Pope Leo's biography leaves out. If the adoration actually occurred, then the fact that the Frankish Royal Annals included it and the biography of Leo neglected to mention it is quite telling. The Frankish court would prefer that the coronation be viewed as an expression of exaltation of the Frankish king by the pope for Charles' services to him, and the papal court would like to make the pope appear equal in power to Charlemagne.

The Lorsch Annals present the changing opinions of the royal court as to what the coronation meant. The justifications for granting Charlemagne the imperial throne included Irene's succession in the East and the fact that he held Rome and other areas where Caesars resided. Once he became emperor, Charlemagne is said to have restored peace and stability to the Church at Rome. The justification of a woman's presence on the imperial throne to crown a new emperor in the West was a thinly disguised attempt on the part of the pope to break with the East to ensure his continued exercise of secular power. Charlemagne's identification with the Caesars suggests a desire on the part of those in the western portion of the empire to witness the return of imperial authority to the West. The reference to Charles' restoration of the Church is a common theme among all the primary sources, and it signifies an emerging relationship between the papacy and the Carolingians, and a subsequent alienation between the West and the East.

VII.

By describing the contemporary accounts of the coronation and discussing the interpretation of these sources by secondary historians, I am able to conclude that the

coronation of Charlemagne signified the beginning of Europe. Common interpretations of the events of 25 December 800 include that Pope Leo crowned Charlemagne because he needed the protection from Roman nobles only an emperor could provide, because he wished to reward Charlemagne for protecting the successor to St. Peter and the Church at Rome, or because he desired the protection of a secular authority in the West to evade the interference of Byzantium in his exercise of secular power. All of these interpretations have truth in them: the papacy was unwilling to yield its exercise of power to the East and thus looked for the protection of the Frankish king. The newly formed relationship between the papacy and the Carolingians signaled a permanent break between East and West. Charlemagne also exhibited imperial ambition, was thus not discontented with receiving the title of emperor, and attempted to assert his belief in the equality of the West with the East. Despite the fact that Charlemagne did not view himself as a Roman emperor, he accepted the title granted by the pope in the face of potential Eastern objections. Charlemagne's restoration of the Church was the most significant aspect of the coronation. It indicates a strengthening relationship between the Church and the secular power in the West and a corresponding deteriorating relationship between the Eastern and Western parts of the Empire. Pope Leo, by seeking Charlemagne's help with his problems in Italy and rewarding him for his efforts, and Charles, by answering the pope's cry for help and assenting to the title of emperor, formed a bond that implied Western unity. With the unity of the West came the end of a civil relationship between Byzantium and Rome. The separation of the East from the West made the establishment of Europe possible; the coronation of Charles thus indicated the beginning of Europe.

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