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# Vocabularies of Grief and Consolation in Ninth-Century Francia

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# Vocabularies of Grief and Consolation in Ninth-Century Francia

**Keywords**

medieval, grief, consolation, Carolingian epitaphs, religious piety

**Comments**

Read at the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America in Chicago

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## **Vocabularies of Grief and Consolation in Ninth-Century Francia**

**Frederick S. Paxton**

**Read at the Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America in Chicago,**

**March 2009, © by Author**

This is a case study. My three cases come from the Carolingian realms in the ninth century and focus on the language of grief and its consolation. My intent is to test the central notion and the methodology of Barbara Rosenwein's recent book, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, using evidence from Carolingian rather than Merovingian Francia. I will discuss first the exchange of letters between Charlemagne's biographer Einhard and Lupus of Ferrières on the death of Einhard's wife Imma, who died in 835. Next, I will consider the poem of consolation composed by Agius of Corvey for the bereaved sisters of Hathumoda, the first abbess of the famous Saxon house of canonesses at Gandersheim. Hathumoda died in November 874 at the age of 34.

Let me say a few things about these two cases before introducing my third one. They have their limitations. The sources I am using were all written by men and the things they wrote are in many ways conventional. They are not, however, simply examples of a genre. They are, each in its own way, extraordinary, as we shall see. They also have two virtues not often present in early medieval sources: they record lay as well as clerical voices and they present men and women as partners, both in life and in their responses to the deaths of women. As Julia Smith has shown, Einhard's wife Imma was as literate, powerful and admired as any woman in Carolingian Francia. Moreover, her marriage with Einhard was not only a loving and successful union, but exemplified a particular form of devotion, a "conjugal piety" as Julia Smith puts it, which is not

normally associated with the early Middle Ages, and which they shared with other prominent couples among the Carolingian aristocracy, including the founders of Gandersheim, the Saxon count and countess Liudolf and Oda. (Smith) Thus, Einhard's grief over Imma's death was real. Too real perhaps, to find a place among his collected letters. If not for Lupus's decision to include a highly-personal letter from Einhard among his own correspondence, it would have been almost entirely lost to us. (Dutton, xxxiii-xxxiv; cf. von Moos, I:186, who notes that the exchange is the only one of its kind from the Middle Ages.) As for Agius of Corvey, he was a close friend and confidante of Hathumoda who attended her in her final illness. His *Life of Hathumoda* breaks the bounds of conventional hagiography in its portrayal of the young abbess's long and arduous death and its representations of the anxiety and uncertainty she expressed in the face of it. Moreover, Agius cast his poem of consolation as the written form of an actual dialogue that he and Hathumoda's sisters had held in the immediate aftermath of her death. The poem is even more a work of art than the correspondence between Einhard and Lupus, but they both contend with real grief and its emotional effects and with the difficulties of consolation in the face of devastating loss. Thus they are good candidates for this kind of analysis.

My third and final case comprises a sampling of the many epitaphs that we now know, thanks to the work of Cécile Treffort, littered the churches and cemeteries of the Carolingian world, accessible to anyone who could read, and even many who could not. (Treffort) Her contribution is especially welcome, given Barbara's exemplary use of such evidence in her study of emotional communities in Merovingian Francia and the impression we have all had that, quoting from Barbara's book, "the epigraphic habit,

which commemorated the dead...petered out at the close of the seventh century.”

(Rosenwein; quotation at 31) That impression may be based less on lack of evidence than a failure to look for it. In the end, I hope to answer two questions. First, do the Latin vocabularies of grief and consolation employed by Einhard, Lupus and Agius suggest that Carolingian elites inhabited an emotional community? Second, does the evidence from epitaphs confirm or complicate the answer to the first question? The data on the accompanying excel spreadsheet provides the basis for the analysis that follows. It is divided into three categories: words that refer to emotion(s) in general, words that express grief and attendant emotions, and words of consolation. Those in boldface appear in more than one of the sources; those in plain Roman typeface appear in only one.] Let’s take a look.

When Lupus heard the *most-troubling* (Dutton has *dreadful*) news (*molestissimo nuntio*) of Imma’s death, he was *shocked/consternatus*. He conveyed that sentiment in a short letter to Einhard that bemoans the fact that he could not be there in person to mitigate the bereaved husband’s *sadness/maestitiam* with his *compassion/compassio*. (Levillain 10-12/Dutton 168-69) Einhard was at Seligenstadt, where Imma lay entombed in the church of SS. Marcellinus and Peter (a church Einhard had built himself and a tomb in which he would join her after his own death four years later, in 840). He was in his 60s and Lupus was around half his age. Imma and Einhard had been married for 20 years, so she was probably older than Lupus and certainly younger than Einhard, but her exact age is uncertain. Lupus was at Fulda, about 75 miles to the northeast. (Smith 70) In his initial, brief letter, which may have been a response to a notice of Imma’s death sent out to Fulda and other abbeys from Seligenstadt, Lupus’s advice was as conventional as

that given by Einhard ten years earlier to the dying Bernharius, bishop of Worms: his suffering was the result of sin, by which death came into the world, and he must bear it “with moderation and wisdom.” (Ibid.; cf. Dutton 144) [Its only curiosity comes when Lupus advises Einhard, in language no doubt picked up from his immersion in the works of Cicero and Virgil, not to succumb to this bit of *bad fortune/huic infortunio* any more than he ever had to *the seductions of good fortune/blandimenta laetioris fortunae*. (Von Moos)]

Einhard’s response to Lupus was by no means so conventional. It is, in the words of Paul Edward Dutton, who has translated all of Einhard’s writings, “the most touching and human of all Einhard’s documents...[whose] poignancy...comes precisely from the fact that his grief was grounded in a personal and particular loss....” (xxxiv) Einhard’s grief at Imma’s death was so great that it had, in his words “banished and driven out...all enthusiasm and concern for my own affairs and those of my friends” (12/169). As the chart shows, the vocabulary he used to discuss his grief is rich and variegated. While different words can be translated in different ways, much of the time they stand in for the word *grief* itself. He uses forms of *dolor/pain* most often (6x), with forms of *m(a)eror/sadness/sorrow* next (3x) along with individual uses of *maestitia/sadness*, *anxietas/anxiety* and *desperatio/despair*. When describing himself, he uses *miser/pitiful/wretched* twice and *infelix/unhappy* twice. When he occasionally considers the sources of consolation, he uses suitable antonyms, like *laetitia/happiness* and *gaudium/joy*. He expects that his present misery and unhappiness will only end with his own death, and hopes to be *beatus et felix/blessed and happy* in heaven. His use of *beatus/blessed* is unique among the data under analysis. Although it may be simply an

epiphenomenon of a scriptural reference, as we shall see, it raises the question of whether or not blessedness might have seemed, to Einhard, to be an emotional state.

More telling than his vocabulary alone, though, is the way Einhard goes beyond the use of “emotion words” to express the depth and power of his grief. It was physical. It had weight. In one instance, he calls it *heavy/gravem*; in another *most heavy/gravissimum*. (12/169; Dutton has *overwhelming* in the second instance) He complains that his heart was *weighed down/depressum* by it. (14/170; 18/171. Dutton has *pulled down*.) And, like Lupus, he sees consolation in terms of *lightening* or *lifting*. (*levare* 10/168; 18/175) His grief was also experienced psychologically. He writes that his *mind/mens* was also *weighed down/depressum* and that Imma’s unexpected death felt like a wound inflicted on his very soul (*vulnus quod animo nostro...casus inflixit* 14/170; Dutton has *mind*). Too large to scab over and heal properly, it broke open again and again as he confronted his loss quote “in every action, in every affair, in every matter of the house and household, and in all the necessary assignments and arrangements pertaining to [my] divine and human duties” (Ibid.) He had turned to the doctors of the Church for consolation but remained inconsolable. The only good thing that Einhard could see in his grief (put once again, in terms both physical and mental), was that it held back “as if with bit and reins, my *spirit/animam*, which was rushing after pleasure and success.” (16/170) Einhard concludes that he will spend the rest of his life in mourning, citing the beatitudes as his guide, “for if...those will be blessed and happy (*beati ac felices*) who lamented and mourned in this life, then those...who do not...will end up unhappy and wretched (*infelices ac miseri*).” (18/170-71)

Einhard's suffering was compounded, as he told Lupus, by the fact that his prayers on behalf of Imma had not been heard, even by SS. Marcellinus and Peter, whose relics he had personally obtained from Rome and whose cause he had championed for nearly a decade. He does not make it clear, however, what he had actually prayed for. He admits to obsessing about *the nature of her death/extinctionis illius qualitatem*. He even loses control over his succinct style when describing it in the same sentence as *an unexpected calamity/casus repentinus* that her *unexpected* (literally, *not yet hoped for*) *death/nondum sperata morte* inflicted upon him. (12-14/169-70 Dutton has *the sudden blow of an unexpected death*). Did his devotional practices include prayers for protection from sudden death? Or was Imma struck down by a stroke or accident that left her lingering long enough for him to pray for her recovery? Einhard does not say. In any case, contemplating both the loss of his beloved and his failure to move his saintly patrons to come to her aid elicited the most anguished of Einhard's cries to Lupus: *Do these [troubles] not seem to you [to have been] of the kind that could provoke sighs and groaning/suspiria [et] gemitum in [such] a small and puny man, that could force him to moaning and wailing/ gemitum et planctum, and even cast him into an abyss of despair/desperationis baratrum?* (14/169 Dutton has *tears* for the first instance of *gemitum*) His emotional state was so intense that he could not resist its outward expression. It seemed as if he had been thrown, physically, into a dark pit, where he lay, crying and groaning.

In the brief note that elicited Einhard's extraordinary letter and the much longer response that followed, Lupus used a similar vocabulary of grief. Forms of *dolor* once again appear more than any other term (10x in his longer letter of consolation), followed



by forms of *m(a)eror* (3x). His use of *consternatus/shocked* and *molestus/troubling* is, as the chart shows, unique. When discussing Imma, he twice cites Einhard's *love and affection/affectum [et] amore* (28/178 Dutton has *commitment* for *affectum*; cf. 34/179) for her and how *deeply affected/tam immaniter afficiat* he was by her death. When he turns to consolation, his approach is similarly affective. He assures Einhard that his friends were wrong to insist that he be happy over the death of his wife: *super excessu...uxoris gratulandum monerent* (20/175). That is not true consolation, for they do not understand how *personal/intimum* Einhard's grief is. (Ibid.) Oddly, in spite of his unique use of *compassio*, Lupus's vocabulary of consolation is relatively restricted, especially given the purpose and length of his letter, which is over three times as long as Einhard's. Moreover, he fails to really address Einhard's emotional loss, concentrating instead on the possibility that he maybe enjoyed his wife's body too much, along with her help with day-to-day business, which to be fair, Einhard did say compounded his troubles. (16/170; cf. Von Moos) Lupus also rejects Einhard's understanding of the beatitude about those who mourn, arguing that Jesus meant grief over one's sins not over the loss of a loved one or *worldly advantages*. (36/180)

Turning to Agius's dialogue of consolation to the bereaved sisters of Hathumoda of Gandersheim, we see a similar picture, although because of the length of the poem and the demands of its form, Agius uses more separate emotion words in more forms than either Lupus or Einhard. Like theirs, however, his language is richly affective. He speaks of feeling in general, although not as much as Lupus, and he offers the bereaved standard images of Christian hope, happiness, and joy as antidotes to their pain (pumping it up for the sisters of Hathumoda, whom he assumes is already in paradise, to the level of

exultation), although he is freer in his employment of expressions of affection and love for the dead and those who mourn them than either Lupus or Einhard. When discussing grief, forms of *dolor* once again predominate, and Agius, too, draws on the vocabulary of sadness and deep sorrow with forms of *tristitia* and *maeror maestus*. Where he really stands apart is in his use of “emotion markers,” that is, words that direct attention to the outward signs of grief, especially those additions to the older Latin list of emotions compiled by Cicero that Rosenwein has shown are the product of St. Jerome’s vulgate translation of the Bible. (cf Rosenwein 40, 42-46, and 52-53)

We have seen how Einhard was “moved” by his grief to sigh, weep and groan audibly. (14/169) Such behavior among the bereaved sisters of Gandersheim is at the center of Agius’s *Dialogue*. Like Einhard, they were inconsolable: physically and mentally unable to give up their grieving. As the chart shows, *weeping/fletus* (which is surprisingly unique to Agius), and *crying/lacrimare* were the most prominent markers of their grief, followed by *groaning/gemere* and various other forms of lamentation, marked by forms of *luctus*, *planctus*, and *ploratus*. Agius and the women know that his work of consolation has succeeded when they admit that their “weeping and lamenting is completely useless” and agree that “It is better for us to go on from here, as if from a long exile, accepting the loss that we have endured. With our tears of grief wiped away and our eyes dried, our lament ended, our sighing contained.” (*Dialogue* II. 467-74)

Can we conclude from this analysis that, at least when they grieved for the dead and attempted to console one another, Einhard, Lupus, Agius, and the women of Gandersheim were part of an emotional community? The overlap in the data and the ways it is employed in the texts under examination suggests that they were. Ninth-century

Carolingian elites had the full range of classical and biblical Latin at their disposal and they employed it similarly when sharing their reactions to death and dying, in ways that were often strikingly intimate and innovative. What is most striking about these people, however, may be the degree to which they struggled against the normal expectations of Christian consolation. Although obviously devout, neither Einhard nor Hathumoda's sisters were easily consoled. Einhard's use of the word *extinctio* to describe his wife's death is, as Peter von Moos has pointed out, a most un-Christian term (von Moos, 116). Agius uses the more usual *migratio ad Dominum*/passing over to the lord when writing of Hathumoda's equally untimely death. (*Dialogus* l. 30) Before her death, however, he represents Hathumoda as having some of the same fears and doubts as Einhard. In his *Life* of the abbess, Agius recorded that, as she lay dying, Hathumoda expressed anxiety about God's Judgment, asking "if she should hope for any forgiveness" for her sins and even "if the saints could really succor others or good people help anyone." (*Vita Hathumodae*, ch. 22). He also described Hathumoda's mother, Oda, praying for her daughter's recovery at the tombs of the saints at Gandersheim (as Einhard did for Imma at Seleginstadt), so that "the one who came into this light might be also the first to leave it," and torn between the altar and her daughters deathbed unable in her agony to decide where best to be. (*Ibid.*, ch. 21) If emotional community they had, it was as much around their common struggle to come to terms with loss and grief within a Christian framework as it was to share in its presuppositions.

Let us now turn to the last of our cases: epitaphs. The data comes from Cécile Treffort's recent study, which is based on some two hundred and fifty epitaphs from France, which she has catalogued and analyzed in most every imaginable way,

supplemented by examples from elsewhere in Carolingian Europe between the middle of the eighth and the end of the tenth centuries. I drew my sample from the many epitaphs that she presents in full, as editions in effect, often with drawings or photographs of the originals (which were scratched, inscribed, inked or painted on wood, metal, stone, and parchment). I selected all those from the ninth century that drew on or added to the vocabulary of grief and consolation. That gave me a body of 34 texts. About a quarter of them (9) are epitaphs of or written by well-known people; the rest (25) memorialize people who for the most part are otherwise unknown.

As you can see on the chart, the general vocabulary of emotion is absent from the sample and the greatest overlap with the vocabulary of grief is in the relatively frequent use of *lacrimae/tears* and the overall concordance of seven out of eight terms with ones in other sources. Epitaphs provides the only instances of *ira/anger* (in a reference to the *anger of God/ira dei*) and *paenitare/repent* and most of the instances of words having to do with sin, like *peccata* and *peccator*. Three things stand out on a more general level. First, there is a balance of sorts between the range and, somewhat less, the instance of the vocabularies of grief and consolation among the epitaphs, which are roughly equal in both cases. Second, this balance is in striking contrast to the imbalance in favor of both the range and the instance of expressions of grief over those of consolation in the other sources. Third, this balance is achieved by restricting the vocabulary of grief by as much as half, matching the vocabulary of consolation in all but two cases, and adding two more not represented elsewhere, *misericordia/mercy* and *pius/devoted*. In one particular instance, the epitaph of Godemerus *peccator*, by his wife Goda, which is preserved in the Church of St-Pierre de Melle, we meet another couple like Einhard and Imma it seems,

for Goda writes that the corporeal love that she and her husband shared in this life will be matched by the spiritual joy they will share in the next (*diligere corporaliter/spiritualiter gaudere*; Treffort, 115-16, n. 65)

So what does this add to our analysis? Overall, there seems to be enough overlap with the other sources to suggest, first, that the community of emotion among ninth-century Carolingian lay and clerical elites may have stretched to encompass more ordinary people, and second, that what they shared were the essentials of a common understanding of grief and consolation, their forms of public expression, and even something of their ‘feel’ to private persons. Moreover, as was true of the other two cases, the specifics and unique features of the data are as revealing as their more general characteristics. This is particularly true in their more frequent references to sin and penance on the one hand and mercy on the other. But it is also true of other characteristics of epitaphs they have less to do with vocabularies of emotion than with the discourse of sin and penance; anxiety in the face of death, like that expressed by Hathumoda; and the fact that epitaphs speak to those who view them, indeed even to those who are simply walking by. In the face of the fear that the dead might not be found in their resting places on Judgment Day, the dead say, “Do not disturb me.” But their most common request is “Stop and pray for me, for I am a sinner. If you do, God will hear your prayers and I will be refreshed.” (Treffort 48, 89-92, 95-99) In some cases, the epitaph that speaks even promises that those who pause and pray will gain divine rewards themselves. Thus they invited ordinary men and women to perform acts of commemoration usually reserved to monks, nuns and priests, bringing the laity into a liturgical community, in language so simple and clear the even the illiterate could

participate, in effect creating one Christian community of the living and the dead dedicated to each other's salvation. (Treffort 301)

There is another form of community that Carolingian epitaphs point to, one that is particularly characteristic of the age: the confraternity of prayer for the dead. Such a voluntary association may be behind my final example: a group of twelve closely related epitaphs in the church of St-Oustrille in Bourges carved on the tomb slabs of eight men and four women. Treffort takes the shared vocabulary and syntax of the twelve epitaphs as evidence of a written formulary behind their composition, that is, a book or booklet laying out a basic structure, which could then be customized for individual use. She may be right, but the fact that they provide 7 of the 9 instances in the sample of the use of *pius/devoted* suggests another reading. What the epitaphs of 2 of the women and 5 of the men say is that the person buried here *studuit vitam semper habere piam/always strove to live a life of devotion*. Those of 2 of the women and 3 of the men add that *pro cuius anima omnes precamur/we should all pray for her/ his soul*. One of the women, Ildia, alone of the whole group, says both of these things and then adds a request to whomever reads her epitaph to *ora pro ipsa/pray for her*. Taken as a group, they sound like a “society of the twelve apostles,” like the one created around the same time by the clergy of the cathedral of Paris. (Paxton 195-96) But this one includes both men and women, perhaps even laymen and laywomen (none of them are given titles, like priest, monk or nun) and may even have been led by a woman, Ildia. Whatever the case may have been, the group seems to have been bound in community in both affection and devotion. When describing the “holy households” of couples like Imma and Einhard, Julia Smith wrote that it represented the domestication, “in some magnates’ households,” “of codes of

moral conduct first articulated at court in the years around 800.” (Smith 75) I am as willing as she is to admit that such couples were not the norm, anymore than the men and women buried together at St-Oustrille, but the evidence suggests that the forms of devotion those codes of moral conduct helped engender also forged emotional ties that reached across the divide of life and death and bound together a significant number of ninth-century people, men and women, clerical and lay, in such a way that they deserve to be regarded as an emotional community.

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