



Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*----Primary Source Analysis and Further Discussion

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Abstract. This paper is aimed to analyze, research and discuss the information, the background and the purpose of one of the most famous biographies during Middle ages: *The Life of Charlemagne*, written by Einhard. First, this paper lays out sufficient facts about the information about the author and the primary source. Then, there is a brief summarize of the content of *The Life of Charlemagne*. The next part is some medieval terminology, which prevents misunderstanding while reading. The major part of this work is the argumentation part. Through numerous discussion there are some conclusions. Einhard's writing is authentic, and he might write this work for multiple reasons: To gratitude for Charlemagne's grace; to rebut a criticism during that time; to recollect old memories; to remind and reeducate the contemporary king and courtiers of how to rule the country based on the chaos after Charlemagne's death. The work can help people better understand the stories behind the biography *The Life of Charlemagne*.

Keywords: Medieval Europe, Carolingian kingdom, Charlemagne, Einhard.

1 Introduction

The Life of Charlemagne and the Medieval Europe has always been different things that we observe in modern life. The biggest background is the daily life of the Medieval Europe. There are already speculations about the exact year when this primary source is written. There are also numerous guesses about the purpose that Einhard wrote this work. However, it is still a problem to connect the source to the contemporary situation.

This work is aimed to do a further and relative comprehensive analysis of the primary source. This work also comes up with new ideas and contains combinations of old ideas. The core conclusion is derived from works above, and is a general, comprehensive conclusion of *The Life of Charlemagne*.

2 Content and Discussion Information about the author

The author of the life of *Charlemagne* is *Einhard*, who was a courtier and a close friend to King Charlemagne. He was a Frankish who was born in 770, at Maingn. His parents were relatively wealthy that they were all nobles. When Einhard was quite young, his

parents sent him to the monastery of Fulda, but he never professed as a monk.[1] The reason for that might be the small size of him [2]. In fact, Einhard's small size is one of his most prominent physical characteristics, but he was very smart as well.

Einhard spent most of his time in the court, he is one of the few who remained in the court after king Charlemagne's death, and kept working there during the reign of Louis the Pious, who is king Charlemagne's son. "*Einhard was already in his early 20s when the abbot of Fulda, Baugulf, to whom Charlemagne sent his famous letter on educational reform, apparently recommended him to Charlemagne's attention as a learned young man who would be useful at court.*" [2] Without doubt He was a diligent courtier, he got quite close to King Charlemagne and became a friend of Charlemagne. Additionally, he served as King Charlemagne's envoy during his life in court [2]. The fact that Einhard was intimate with King Charlemagne and he was highly valued and trusted by King Charlemagne made him seem to be one of the best people who should compose this biography of King Charlemagne. Einhard was not only a courtier but also a craftsman, he was skilled in architecture that he was in charge of the construction of numerous buildings during the reign of Charlemagne. He was one of Alcuin's students at first, but he was distinguished and soon became a personal adviser to the king.[3] Einhard was also engaged in Church buildings, though out of his own will of obtaining holy relics. His superb skill gave him one of his nicknames in the court, Bezaleel. Bezaleel is a name derived from an exquisite craftsman the Bible [2]. Alcuin and Theodulf, who were Einhard's contemporaries, employed this nickname to describe Einhard as an expert in many of the minor arts." [2] The other nickname was Nard, which is simply because the homophony. Einhard got quite wealthy during the reign of Louis the Pious and owned several lands and properties in different areas, mainly monasteries.[1] Einhard's quality of prudent might be the reason why he can stay in the court for such a long time. This characteristic was admitted by his contemporaries as well [2]. This is related to his writing in the next part as well.

However, Louis the Pious had fierce conflicts and wars with his offspring, there were numerous rebellions and wars held against Louis the Pious, which not only harmed people a lot but also made the political state of the Frank was on the edge of breaking apart.[4] Due to these reasons, he left the court and went to a monastery in Seligenstadt and stayed there until his death. During his time in Seligenstadt, he composed the work that he is famous for, *the life of Charlemagne*.

3 Information about the text

The life of Charlemagne is probably the most famous work of Einhard throughout his life. It is a biography of King Charlemagne that is written about mid-820s, [2] when Einhard was in the monastery of Seligenstadt, after Charlemagne's death. There are possible reasons why Einhard decided to compose this work, which was guessed by people and is still in discussion. First, Einhard believed that he owes Charlemagne a great debt for Charlemagne's help in his career, as he said himself in the preface of *the life of Charlemagne, page1*. Second, he might want to rebut the criticism on king Charlemagne in the beginning years of the reign of Louis the Pious [1]. Third, there is after

all a great possibility that this book was sent to certain people Einhard knew and wanted, in the purpose of education and training not only the emperor but also other courtiers [2]. Fourth, Einhard got tired and disappointed of political state of the kingdom after Charlemagne's death, when he started to look back to the harmonious time and to recollect the memory during the reign of Charlemagne [3].

In fact, the political state of the Frank During the reign of Louis the Pious was chaotic, in fact his reign was not so different from Charlemagne's reign for the last few years. He was a religious person with ambition, which is fundamentally the same to his farther. Louis the Pious and his father are all classical Frank kings.[4] However, he was such an ambitious and aggressive person that resulted in the crush of the whole empire, he expelled several his relatives and his opponent in the court in order to claim an image of authority [4]. He was also not as wise as his farther on the aspect of politic, with the addition of his arrogance and aggressive, numerous rebellions were triggered afterwards, which were extremely detrimental to his reign. In 817, *Ordinatio imperii* [4], the declaration of the division of the kingdom, was proclaimed by Louis the Pious, such declaration was different from others since its innovativeness on giving more title and authority to the elder son rather than divide the kingdom evenly, in fact is a way to prevent it from dividing. Such policy also erased the status of his nephew, Bernard, as the king of Italy conferred by King Charlemagne, He also regarded his nephew Bernard's application of negotiation of an act of rebellion [4]. Additionally, his sons were for sure not satisfied with this innovative announcement, with other unstable elements caused by other politicians, the rebellions and wars were started against Louis the Pious since 829, which heavily injured the reign of the kingdom. Louis the Pious died in 840, and the kingdom was formally divided in 843.[2]

The style of the life of Charlemagne was unique that it is different from other works of Einhard. The main reason is that "*Einhard drew upon Suetonius's Lives of the Caesars, a work that he had probably first seen as a student at Fulda, for the structure and some of the language of his portrait.*" [2] This explains that the language and the description of the life of Charlemagne is linear and simple. Additionally, "*From Cicero Einhard derived certain organizational principles derived from the rules of oratory.*" [1]. By obtaining writing styles and models from other works, Einhard successfully create a vivid biography of Charlemagne.

There are some interesting facts about this work. One fact is that Einhard didn't attached his name to the work when he first sent this work to the court.[2] Another fact is that Einhard's words that are used to describe Charlemagne seems to only compliment Charlemagne, there were barely no criticism and negative lines about Charlemagne. He also ignores several facts that lies behind the story of Charlemagne. For example, the cruel execution of the Saxons in the war or the plan of the division of the kingdom, which he witnessed.[2]

4 Summary of the primary source

The life of Charlemagne, as a biography of a great king in Carolinian era, is after all a vivid text that describes the life of King Charlemagne. The whole work could be divided into four parts in a clearest way.

First, the preface is important, during this part Einhard briefly summarized the reason and some facts about writing this work. He claims that this work should be brief and simple, he also suggests that he is the best choice to write a biography of King Charlemagne since he actually experienced all these stories. Additionally, Einhard mentioned that he was risking since he believed he is not good at Latin and people like him were criticized by Cicero, a great orator and the same person who has writing styles adopted by Einhard (mentioned in the previous part).

Second, the political life, includes wars and court, is described by Einhard. At first, he introduced Charlemagne's family background. After Childeric [743-752] was deposed, Charlemagne's father Pepin held the mayor of the palace and eventually become the king of Frank. And this title was passed down to Charlemagne and his brother. Charlemagne shared his country with his brother Carloman until Carloman's death. Coming next in the text are numerous wars. The important characteristics and events of Charlemagne in these wars can be concluded as below: 1. He was different from his father that once he started a siege, he will not stop until his enemy surrender. 2. He has the perseverance to keep trying to assimilate the Saxons, an ethnic who worshiped the devil in spite of he rarely participates in the war against the Saxons. Besides, the Saxon war is the largest and the longest that it lasted for thirty years and more. 3. During his reign the land that the Frank owned doubled. 4. He was also good at diplomacy that he made great relationship with some countries. Other than War, he was also engaged in numerous public works to decorate his kingdom. 5. His power as a king was extremely high, comparing to the power of the church.

The third part of the book is private life. King Charlemagne had four sons and three girls who were well educated by him. But a strange fact is that Charlemagne forbidden them from getting married. Charlemagne had three wives and four concubines. Before his death, there were already two sons and one daughter of him had died. One of Charlemagne's sons, also named Pepin, once came up with a conspiracy against Charlemagne, who of course was punished and was sent to a monastery. King Charlemagne was a strong, manly and tall person. He wears Frank clothes normally, foreign clothes sometimes when meeting foreigners, though he didn't like it, and a suit especially for festivals. He was obsessed with fasting and rarely drink alcohol that even before his death, he insisted in fasting since he believed it is beneficial for him to fight the illness and the fever. He was an expert in language learning and could speak Latin, though not Greek. He especially concentrated on the development of education and also reformed several law systems. Other than a king, he was a Pious person who also helped the poor a lot.

The fourth part of the work is the Charlemagne's death. Before his death, there were omens such as architects he built was destroyed or a fire ball flew in the sky. He was buried in the basilica he built in the town at his own expense. In his will he subtly divided his treasures and contributed them in different aspects such as church, cities

and also his offspring. Before his death, he made Louis the Pious, his son, the king of the Frank.[5]

5 Terminology

Archbishop---- The principal bishop of a province of the Church.

Barbarian---- someone who was neither Greek nor Roman, whose speech was unintelligible.

Pilgrimage---- A travel by people to approach the saints' relics. Through in practice saints could be venerated anywhere, they were thought to be most responsive to prayers offered near the place where their relics lay in response. People travel to approach saints' relics and such travelling is called pilgrimage.

Steward---- Official in charge of the daily running of a castle/house; a domestic rather than a military officer, though such duties were taken on in an abbot's household, for instance.

Alms---- Charity for the destitute and poor. Such giving was deemed one of the duties of a monastery and the wealthy. Alms were doled out on a monastery's patron saint's day.

Sacraments---- The Latin word "sacramentum" was a term used to signify the oath taken by soldiers binding themselves to service for their country, and it became a fit analogy to speak of the sacrament of Baptism, since the baptized become soldiers of Christ and the Church. However, the Latin term had the broader and more fundamental meaning of "consecrated" or "dedicated," and in this way whatever is consecrated or dedicated to God could be called a sacrament. [6,7]

6 Argumentation

In the *life of Charlemagne*, I have learned a lot about the age of Carolingian kingdom and what kind of person are Charlemagne and Einhard. Einhard is after all a modest man who tried his best to compliment the reign of Charlemagne in his work. An important point that he mentioned is that how much power did a king hold, according to Einhard's description, the power of the king before Charlemagne was almost none, but later Charlemagne held the most power in the court and was crowned the emperor by the pope himself [5]. This suggests that the power of the king has increased significantly during the reign of Charlemagne, comparing to the power of the church and other courtiers. However, Charlemagne is a pious person who contributed a lot to the church. For examples, he built the beautiful basilica with glorious adorns at Aix-la-Chapelle, he also defended the Church of St. Peter the Apostle by sending myriad of money, gold, silver and precious stones [5]. Einhard himself is also a pious person probably due to his early education in the monastery of Fulda, explaining why there are religious elements mentioned in the book such as the omens of Charlemagne's death.[5] I believe it is the characteristic of piety of Charlemagne that guaranteed the peace during his reign and allowed the Carolingian kingdom thrives. After all, Charlemagne dealt with the

conflict between the church and the king with a smooth but effective way: by being pious and getting involved in the church.

Charlemagne's expansion can't be ignored by us. Einhard spend a lot of passages writing and recording the process of Charlemagne's expansion. Although some people believe that the Frank under the reign of Charlemagne still can't compare to the Byzantine in the east [8], but Charlemagne's life is full of expansion and war that the land of Frank doubled during his reign [5]. His feat in expanding of the Frank and his outgoing in diplomacy are two indispensable keys to his successful reign.

Other than the war and piety, Charlemagne is also a person who values culture and education a lot. His feat in education and culture construction of the kingdom is grand. His contribution to the culture, the religion and also the education propelled the society a lot that people later called that period the Carolingian Renaissance.

The text had taught us so much about the time of Carolingian kingdom and Charlemagne himself. I believe it is worthy and necessary of discussing the text itself and the truth that it reveals.

The first discussion might be about the question: is the text authentic? *The life of Charlemagne* is now the mainly source that people use to do research and find information about Charlemagne, which makes its authenticity significantly important. In my own opinion, the information that Einhard provided is, for sure, authentic. *The life of Charlemagne* is definitely not the only book that contains information about Charlemagne, after more than a thousand years, the image of Charlemagne still fits with the biography of Einhard. Besides, there is no reason that Einhard lied in his work especially when he is trying to write a biography of a person who has been a superior, a friend and a mentor to him. Finally, Einhard wrote his work around 828, when in fact most of people who knew Charlemagne was still alive. Even though Einhard originally sent his work to the court, no matter how much Charlemagne's old courtiers was still in the court during that time, at least the new king, Louis the Pious, knew his father Charlemagne. As we know, Einhard stayed in his monastery until his death, which means neither the people who knew Charlemagne nor Louis the Pious himself came after Einhard. This, in turn, suggests that Einhard's description is more likely to be authentic, at least authentic to those who knew Charlemagne.

But Einhard did left out several negative facts about Charlemagne, what is the reason for that? I believe this has something to do with Einhard's original purpose of writing this biography. Einhard is known for his prudent, of course he would have written this work for the reason that he mentioned in the text himself that he believed he owes Charlemagne a great debt. However, I insist that it is not the only purpose of Einhard. In my own perspective, I think this text is written for multiple purposes. The first purpose is to recollect the memory and the glorious days during the reign of Charlemagne, since Louis the Pious started to begin wars with his offspring, which made the political state of Frank on the edge of falling apart, every one might generate the idea to recollect the memory in the past, especially a magnificent past. The second reason is that he might wanted to rebut a criticism on Charlemagne made during the reign of Louis the Pious. For me, I believe the most important reason why Einhard wrote this work is that he wanted to remind people of what it was like when Charlemagne ruled the kingdom and to reeducate the new king and the courtiers about how to rule a country. In latter

time of Carolingian kingdom, the empire was on the edge of breaking apart. Louis the Pious had numerous wars with his children, which put the whole society under great danger. Einhard, as the old courtier of Charlemagne, who had experienced the kingdom thrived, was witnessing the kingdom's falling, must feel greatly unwilling to accept this fact. Therefore, there is a great possibility that Einhard also wanted to warn people and reeducate them. After all, the kingdom became prosperous under the rule of Charlemagne. Out of this reason, mentioning some negative facts about Charlemagne might be inappropriate in this work. Therefore, the phenomenon of not mentioning negative facts about Charlemagne can be explained.

These purposes, however, leads to a new discussion: What was Charlemagne like exactly? If there is information that Einhard left out, how can we be sure that Charlemagne is a perfect person? In fact, I think whenever we want to analyze a historical character, we shouldn't suppose that he is absolutely good or absolutely bad, we must get our conclusion through analysis.

Charlemagne is definitely a great king, he was admitted by people, by church, even by the pope himself. That he was crowned emperor is the best evidence [5]. He was a good reformer. His reform was not only in the defected laws of the Franks' [5] but to so to the extent of education, culture, literature and so on [9]. He even propelled the reform in religion [10]. With these reforms, the kingdom of Carolingian was able to thrive. Inside the country he is a great king that improved his country and gave welfare to people a lot, outside the country he is also trying his best to get benefits for his kingdom. To those kingdoms that he believed he should start a war against, he will do it without hesitation and show no mercy to his enemies. To those kingdoms that he believed he should build a friendship with, he will do it as well and show great passion to his friends. I believe his generosity and his piety also earned people's respects.

However, he also had disadvantages. He had so many wars during his reign. The landmass that the Frank owned almost doubled during his reign, he conquered many other ethnics and got these lands through wars. He was also cruel, in order to finish the war against the Saxons, he murdered thousands of Saxons at Verden [2]. No matter in what condition, war is not a good way to solve problems. He also had weird education on his children that he never allowed his children to get married [5]. It must more or less confused or hurt his children. In spite of his disadvantages, we can't deny that it is Charlemagne who helped thrive the Carolingian kingdom and kept developing it. His extraordinary feat shall be remembered by people.

7 Conclusion

In the end, the situation during the reign of Charlemagne and the situation during the reign of Louis the Pious create a great contrast. Charlemagne made the Carolingian kingdom stronger, grander and better. His contributions to the court, to the country, to the whole Europe was significant, despite his few disadvantages. Einhard was more like a watcher, who observed the kingdom thrived and fall, who also recorded the best time of the kingdom and the greatest king of the kingdom. A king and his courtier may leads to thousands of discussions and might made us know and think a lot about the life

of Einhard, after all, Charlemagne's reign was the best of times for him, and what came after might be the worst of times. I admire Charlemagne's great, I also value Einhard's loyal and persistent.

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