

Chapter I

ROYAL DISASTER

THIS CHAPTER EXAMINES the eighth-century congruence between rulers' moral standing and environmental conditions. The Insular association of bad kingship with politico-ecological disaster intermingled with the writings of Charlemagne's courtier-theologians, who infused these ideas with Roman and Christian traditions. At the centre of this process was Alcuin of York, whose letters and poetry show how ecological well-being and political order became mutually reinforcing signs of just rule. His writings, alongside those of his contemporaries, articulated a framework in which environmental stability was both the evidence of and the reward for moral kingship. In so doing, this chapter demonstrates how Carolingian thinkers established the "grammar" of imperial sovereignty: a rulebook for effective kingship in the garden of empire, where the health of fields, forests, and waters mirrored and legitimated the justice of the ruler. If courtier-theologians like Alcuin and Wigbod pondered the responsibilities of labourers to preserve and redeem the environment, what guidelines were there for the rulers of the Carolingian paradise? This was one of the most important questions that occupied the minds of Carolingian elites throughout the eighth and ninth centuries.

Writing in the middle of the ninth century, the lay chronicler and grandson of Charlemagne, Nithard (ca. 795–844), offered some of the most detailed accounts of the Carolingian civil war. It was fought among the surviving heirs of Charlemagne's son and sole surviving legitimate male heir, Louis the Pious (778–840), over what had become regional blocs of a formerly unified empire. For the tumultuous years 830–843, Nithard's *Histories* became an incisive, often bitter meditation on the political failures that led to civil war and the division of the empire. The following words, including the final quotation from Wisdom 5:21, conclude his work:

Here, then, let each one consider what madness it is to neglect the common good and rage after private and personal desires—since by doing both, one so greatly offends the Creator that he makes all the elements turn against such madness. And I will readily prove this with examples still well known to almost everyone. For in the time of Charles the Great, of good memory, who died now nearly thirty years ago, because the people then walked one

and the same straight path, and thereby the public way of the Lord, there was peace and harmony everywhere. But now, on the contrary, because each person follows whatever path he pleases, dissensions and quarrels are everywhere evident. Then there was abundance and joy everywhere; now there is scarcity and sorrow everywhere. The very elements, then aligned with each thing, are now opposed to all things everywhere, as the Scripture given by divine gift bears witness: *And the whole world shall fight against the senseless.*¹

Nithard juxtaposed these “natural” consequences of internecine conflict, betrayal, and the forsaking of the good of the realm to the pacific reign of Louis’s father, Charlemagne, beginning the work by recalling “Emperor Charles of good memory, rightfully called the Great by all peoples,” who left behind a Europe “full of every goodness.”² Nithard’s Charlemagne was

A man, indeed, surpassing the human race of his time in all wisdom and all excellence, such that to all the inhabitants of the world he appeared both fearsome, lovable, and equally admirable—and through this, he made the entire empire shine forth manifestly in every way, rendering it honourable and beneficial to all.³

It was, in fact, this very combination of kingly virtues that Nithard found most remarkable in Charlemagne, who conquered the “fierce and iron hearts of Franks and other barbarians, which not even Roman power” was able

1 “Hic quique colligat, qua dementia utilitatem publicam neglegat, privatis ac propriis voluntatibus insaniat, dum ex utrisque creatorem adeo offendat, ut etiam omnia elementa eius vesaniae contraria reddat. Quodque huiusmodi exemplis pene adhuc omnibus notis praefacile probaturus accedam. Nam temporibus bone recordationis Magni Karoli, qui evoluta iam pene anno XXX. decessit, quoniam hic populus unam eandemque rectam ac per hoc viam Domini publicam incedebat, pax illis atque concordia ubique erat, at nunc econtra, quoniam quique semitam quam cupit incedit, ubique dissensiones et rixae sunt manifestae. Tunc ubique habundantia atque leticia, nunc ubique poenuria atque mesticia. Ipsa elementa tunc cuique rei congrua, nunc autem omnibus ubique contraria, uti scriptura divino munere prolata testatur: *Et pugnabit orbis terrarum contra insensatos.*” Nithard, *Historiarum libri IIII*, ed. Müller, 49–50. Italics in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* edition.

2 “Karolus bone memoriae et merito Magnus imperator ab universis nationibus vocatus, hora videlicet plus minus diei tertia, in senectute bona decedens omnem Europem omni bonitate repletam reliqui.” Nithard, *Historiarum libri IIII*, ed. Müller, 1.

3 “vir quippe omni sapientia et omni virtute humanum genus suo in tempore adeo praecellens, ut omnibus orbem inhabitantibus terribilis, amabilis pariterque et admirabilis videretur, ac per hoc omne imperium omnibus modis, et cunctis manifeste claruit, honestum et utile effecit.” Nithard, *Historiarum libri IIII*, ed. Müller, 1.

to do.⁴ Charles “alone” accomplished this through “measured dread” so that “dared to undertake nothing except what was in keeping with the public good.”⁵

This portrait of Charlemagne has complex historical and theological underpinnings. Nithard punctuated his entire chronicle with natural disasters, portents that foreshadow and herald the bad decisions of the powerful combatants in the succession struggles of Louis’s sons, reflecting well-known tropes from the Latin historical genre.⁶ There is more to Nithard’s statements, however, than literary devices that serve as omens to future calamity; the *Historiae* clearly link the behaviour of the natural world with the conduct of its sovereign, and thus show how Charlemagne’s rulership was seen to uphold the ecological sovereignty of the Carolingian dynasty over the environment and its inhabitants. Nithard and other Carolingian writers believed that a good king who worked for the benefit of society would ensure agricultural productivity and climatic tranquillity, while a bad king who behaved unjustly would court famine and disaster. Thus, the upstanding Carolingian ruler created a “good” environment, whose existence proved the sovereign’s good behaviour; likewise, the immoral ruler spawned poor environmental conditions that certified his poor behaviour.

The links between rulership and nature were not only evident to Nithard from personal observation but were also rooted in the same garden-game park framing of empire and society that Carolingian exegetes had found in their study of Genesis. Nithard’s musing on the rebelliousness of creation betrays an implicit assumption that the elements were not in rebellion under earlier rule, meaning that, in his view, within his empire Charlemagne had begun to tame the environment and all its creatures. Charlemagne had successfully carved out a paradise on earth and enjoyed the bounties of its harvest. In the mid-ninth century Nithard and his contemporaries perceived that the Carolingian garden no longer followed the order established by its Adam—Charlemagne. Instead, his grandchildren sowed the seeds of discord and reaped its fruit: the thorns and thistles that have been, since Genesis, the reward of rebellion.⁷

4 “Nam super omne, quod ammirabile fateor fore, Francorum barbarorumque ferocia ac ferrea corda, quae nec Romana potentia domare valuit.” Nithard, *Historiarum libri III*, ed. Müller, 1–2.

5 “hic solus moderato terrore ita repressit, ut nihil in imperio moliri, praeter quod publicae utilitati congruebat, manifeste auderent.” Nithard, *Historiarum libri III*, ed. Müller, 2.

6 Polanichka and Cilley, “The Very Personal History of Nithard,” 196–97.

7 Genesis 3:18.

However, Nithard's ideas and the ninth-century discourse of Carolingian kingship and disaster did not emerge *ex nihilo*. Rather, in his juxtaposition of bad and good rule, Nithard neatly fit his narrative into a grammar of Carolingian kingship that had first taken shape in the later eighth century, one which blended biblical, Roman, and Insular ideas about royal behaviour and responsibilities with the consequences of negligent, bad, and irrational rule. In this paradigm, good kings and prudent rule brought harmony and goodness to the realm while bad kings and reckless, self-serving rule courted divine displeasure and even the rebellion of the natural world itself.

As the framework of Carolingian kingship began to coalesce in the final decades of the eighth century, thirty years after the Austrasian dynasty rose to power, its strongest control mechanisms were *correctio*—the idea that the Carolingian king could and ought to promote one correct version of Christian worship—and the sacralization of the king himself, buttressed by scriptural examples and salvific historical narratives. The Carolingian ruler, both because of the contingent circumstances of the dynasty's political ascent (usurping the Merovingian throne and allying so closely to the papacy in the 750s) and because of contemporary religious beliefs and praxis, embodied and conformed to certain notions of good kingship. Almost all such notions had two roots: biblical example and the practical exercise of power. The contrast between the good rulership and politico-ecological disaster produced by bad rule is key to understanding both Carolingian kingship and ecological sovereignty.

Of course, the idea of disaster as divine punishment for misdeeds or sin has a long history in premodern Europe. In the *Georgics*, the Augustan-era Roman poet Virgil imagines a cosmos rearranging itself around its future god, the seasons and nature itself yielding to the flourishing peace and prosperity of the ruler who was “the giver of increase and lord of the seasons.”⁸ This associated the Roman emperor with a role in and responsibility for environmental conditions. Even the eastern Roman emperor Justinian's novel legislation from the sixth century warned that the offence of blasphemy led to the occurrence of famines, earthquakes, and plagues—dangers that could be prevented by avoiding sin, but which would intensify if the sinful behaviour was not corrected.⁹ In Merovingian Francia, Gregory of Tours used disasters

⁸ Virgil, *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid I–V*, trans. Fairclough, 80–116, at 83.

⁹ “Propter talia enim delicta et fames et terrae motus et pestilentiae fiunt, et propterea admonemus abstinere ab huiusmodi praedictis illicitis, ut non suas perdant animas. Sin autem et post huiusmodi nostram admonitionem inveniantur aliqui in talibus permanentes delictis, primum quidem indignos semetipsos faciunt dei

to reject pagan historical narratives in favour of his own Christian version of history.¹⁰ And fundamental to all such considerations was the medieval belief in the Genesis deluge.

Nor was Genesis the only relevant portion of the Bible for thinkers inclined to correlate God's retribution and natural disasters. Immoral Old Testament kings provoked the most violent disasters in the Scriptures.¹¹ Mayke de Jong shows how the idea of *clades* as "some kind of catastrophe caused by the collective sins of the people, and, in particular, its rulers," characterized later ninth-century Carolingian politics, so readers equated disasters and punishments for kings and emperors having offended God.¹² These endemic beliefs broke through at particular moments during the reign of Louis the Pious when he was vulnerable, but de Jong also alludes to their earlier relevance in actions of "collective atonement" such as fasting, almsgiving, and litanies.¹³ De Jong acknowledges Alcuin's early role in articulating these ideas, but her main focus is the council of Paris in 829 and the age of Louis the Pious in general.¹⁴ This chapter reveals a much earlier dissemination of this royal-disaster paradigm in Carolingian texts, most importantly in Alcuin's writings—especially his letters. In the development of Carolingian kingship theory this late eighth-century phase is an essential "missing link" in the elaboration of Carolingian ecological sovereignty.

***De duodecim abusivis saeculi* (On the Twelve Abuses of the World) and Cathwulf's Letter to Charlemagne**

If a strong Frankish kingship was a practical reality by the opening years of Charlemagne's rule, it took the bishops and clergy a little longer to furnish "the technical equipment in the shape of verbal expressions, allegories, nomenclatures, which enveloped the bare official bones with doctrinal and

misericordia, post haec autem et legibus constitutis subiciuntur tormentis." *Novellae*, ed. Schoell, novel 77, chap. 1, sect. 1, p. 382.

10 Arnold, "Rivers of Risk and Redemption in Gregory of Tours' Writings."

11 Blattmann, "'Ein Unglück für sein Volk,'" 89.

12 de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 151.

13 de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 154. See also, the above cited McCormick, "The Liturgy of War."

14 de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 174. De Jong cites Blattmann (n11 above) and Meens, both of whom discuss some of Alcuin's letters, but not systematically. Meens, "Politics, Mirrors of Princes and the Bible."

ideological flesh.”¹⁵ In the last decades of the eighth century non-Frankish political philosophies first entered the “mainstream of western political thought” in Francia via Iberia (mostly through commentaries of Isidore of Seville and those who recycled his writings) and Ireland/Britain.¹⁶ In the mid- to later eighth century, one of these strands of political thought found in the mirror-for-princes genre appeared on the Continent from Ireland, mediated by the so-called *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* (On the Twelve Abuses of the World). Early medieval clergy sometimes cited it as a work of St. Patrick, but usually as the product of Cyprian, the third-century bishop of Carthage, neither of which was probably true, which is why the text’s author is known today as pseudo-Cyprian, and why the text is included in a work known as *Collectio Hibernensis*.¹⁷ In the early Middle Ages *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* was seen as an “Irish” text, and it was the vehicle by which a correlation between kingship and nature first appeared in northern Francia.¹⁸

The text of *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* takes its inspiration and structure from the seventh chapter of the Benedictine *Rule*, which presents twelve steps for achieving humility. However, pseudo-Cyprian’s steps adopt the form of “negative” behaviours: instead of presenting what makes for just rule, *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* focuses on the consequences of an unjust king.¹⁹ It is in its ninth chapter that notions of kingly conduct tied to natural phenomena first emerge. To begin, the chapter lays out the unique position of a king, who must rule himself and his people through correct behaviour and justice. Justice requires that he not use his authority to oppress people,

15 Ullmann, *The Carolingian Renaissance and the Idea of Kingship*, 49.

16 Nelson, “Kingship and Empire,” 52; Hans Hubert Anton offers a broad overview of philosophies and their origin/transmission to western Europe in the seventh and eighth centuries in Anton, *Fürstenspiegel und Herrscherethos in der Karolingerzeit*.

17 Anton, “Pseudo-Cyprian,” 2:569–74.

18 Meens, “Politics, Mirrors of Princes and the Bible,” 351–52, notes that, although there are some commonalities between the conduct of a king and the state of the realm in classical and “Germanic” ideals of kingship, this text should be read “in an Irish context.” Aitchison, “Kingship, Society and Sacrality,” 63, argues that an Irish scholar produced the text on the Continent. Thus this particular correlation between kingship and nature developed in Insular thought for the first time in the early Middle Ages.

19 Meens, “Politics, Mirrors of Princes and the Bible,” 351–52; Pseudo-Cyprian, *De XII abusivis saeculi*, ed. Hellmann. The ninth abuse is on pp. 51–53. The twelve abuses include: a wise man without works, an old man without religion, a young man without obedience, a rich man without charity, a woman without modesty, a nobleman without virtue, an argumentative Christian, a proud pauper, an unjust king, a neglectful bishop, a populace without discipline, a people without law.

that he protect the vulnerable, that he rid the realm of criminals and evildoers, that he take good counsellors, and that he ignore the “superstitions of magicians, soothsayers, and sorceresses”—noteworthy here because of the close connections between a “bad” biblical royal figure like Saul and sorcery.²⁰

All that is fairly commonplace in handbooks for early medieval rulers, which enjoin the king to do and not do things according to Christian ideals. What comes next, however, is more original, for it tethers the king’s conduct to the behaviour of the natural world, since the ruler who fails to follow these precepts will face challenges to his authority in the form of natural disasters:

The peace of the people is broken, and offenses even arise from within the kingdom. The fruits of the earth are diminished, and the services of the people are hindered. Many and various sorrows stain the prosperity of the realm: the deaths of loved ones and children bring grief; enemy invasions devastate the provinces on all sides; wild beasts tear apart herds of cattle and flocks of livestock; storms of the air and disordered seasons obstruct the fertility of the land and the services of the sea. At times, lightning strikes burn up crops, blossoms of trees, and vine shoots.²¹

In this passage, not only is the king’s conduct linked with disaster, but broken peace and hostile incursions work in concert with the forces of nature to generate an environment of waste and want that disrupts the kingdom at every social and economic level. The king in this scenario would be unable to lead effectively or benefit from the labour and service of his dependents because they in turn cannot sustain themselves amid the deaths in their families and the destruction of their fields. Even the sea itself would defy those who plied their trades upon its waves.

The violation of normal kingship breaches a cosmological balance, which is why its consequences extend beyond the sovereign to the realm and

20 Pseudo-Cyprian, *De XII abusivis saeculi*, ed. Hellmann, 51–52. Quotation from p. 51, lines 17–18. “magorum et hariolorum et pythonissarum superstitionibus non indendere.” 1 Samuel 28:3–25.

21 “pax populorum rumpitur et offendicula etiam de regno suscitantur, terrarum quoque fructus diminuuntur et servitia populorum praepediuntur, multi et varii dolores prosperitatem regni inficiunt, carorum et liberorum mortes tristitiam conferunt, hostium incursus provincias undique vastant, bestiae armentorum et pecorum greges dilacerant, tempestates aeris et hiemisperia turbata terrarum fecunditatem et maris ministeria prohibent et aliquando fulminum ictus segetes et arborum flores et pampinos exerunt.” Pseudo-Cyprian, *De XII abusivis saeculi*, ed. Hellmann, p. 52, lines 11–19.

even *through* time, wreaking havoc in its wake on the king's descendants.²² Indeed, the author of *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* concludes this section by warning that "Above all, however, a king's injustice not only darkens the face of the present empire, but also casts a shadow over his sons and grandsons, preventing them from holding the inheritance of the kingdom after him."²³ There is biblical precedent for this claim, noted in the ninth abuse, where the author reminds readers that because Solomon sinned against God, "the Lord scattered the kingdom of the house of Israel from the hands of his sons; yet because of the righteousness of King David, He always left a lamp from his offspring in Jerusalem."²⁴ This is a reference to the division of the kingdom of Israel after Solomon's death, because he had begun worshipping pagan gods and abandoned the example of his father, David, for whose sake he permitted Solomon's heir to retain the city of Jerusalem and its immediate environs.²⁵

The Irish text's account of the abuse of the unjust king addresses the ruler in an abstract way, and although it may have had its origins in the circulation of similar ideas in seventh- and eighth-century Ireland, it does not seem to be connected to any one monarch.²⁶ *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* establishes an architecture for considering the king and his cosmological role mediating divine assent with natural concord, in order to establish and safeguard the peace and productivity of the kingdom. Mayke de Jong highlights the relevance of *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* in her discussion of later ninth-century critics of Louis the Pious and his son Lothar, noting its direct citation in the Paris council of 829 and surrounding texts in the culture of *admonitio* that developed around the emperor.²⁷ However, these ideas and methods of royal criticism were not an innovation of the middle third of the ninth century, but had instead been fully operational during the later eighth century. The first iteration on the Continent of the pseudo-Cyprianic linkage

22 Meens, "Politics, Mirrors of Princes and the Bible," 351.

23 "Super omnia vero regis iniustitia non solum praesentis imperii faciem fuscatur, sed etiam filios suos et nepotes, ne post se regni hereditatem teneant, obscuratur." Pseudo-Cyprian, *De XII abusivis saeculi*, ed. Hellmann, pp. 52–53, lines 19, 1–2.

24 "Propter pisculum enim Salomonis regnum domus Israel Dominus de manibus filiorum eius dispersit, et propter iustitiam David regis lucernam de semine eius semper in Hierusalem reliquit." Pseudo-Cyprian, *De XII abusivis saeculi*, ed. Hellmann, p. 53, lines 2–5.

25 1 Kings 11:1–43.

26 Meens, "Politics, Mirrors of Princes and the Bible," 351–52.

27 de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 174–76.

between ecological phenomena and the conduct of the king in his present and the future took place at Charlemagne's court in the 770s and 780s.

We can see evidence of the linkage in a 775 letter addressed to Charlemagne from Cathwulf, an Insular scholar working at the Carolingian court.²⁸ Preserved in the personal collection of correspondence belonging to the abbots of Saint-Denis, a monastery closely allied with the Carolingian family, Cathwulf's letter may have been written for the February 775 dedication of the abbey's new church. Its themes of kingship and proper moral behaviour were meant to instruct Charlemagne in his role as royal patron to the abbey and ruler of the Frankish people. Cathwulf's letter was also a recognition of Charlemagne's success following his conquest of Lombard Italy and may have been an attempt to guide him at a moment when the king looked to strengthen and solidify his rule under nascent and still materializing urges to reform the Frankish church and governance of the realm.²⁹

Cathwulf's letter lays out the case for Charlemagne's greatness and exhorts him to rule justly over Franks and other peoples, praising the king for his many accomplishments as head of the "kingdom of Europe," and stating clearly that the king should be ascendant over all, followed by (of course) the bishop.³⁰ Cathwulf's acclamation of Charlemagne takes the form of a series of eight "proofs" that Charlemagne had surpassed his peers and his ancestors with the "crown of glory," based on the more or less biographical facts of his ascent to power and crushing or marginalizing of his competitors, followed by eight habits of good kings, presumably as behaviours for which Charlemagne ought to strive: truth, patience, largesse, persuadability, correction of evils, elevation of goodness, modest taxes, fairness of judgment

28 Meens, "Politics, Mirrors of Princes and the Bible," 354. Joanna Story notes that his name seems to be Anglo-Saxon, but his use of Irish materials may complicate that assertion. Similarly, he has been referred to by modern scholars as a monk, a priest, a churchman, and a courtier—all of which may be accurate or none of them. Story, "Cathwulf, Kingship, and the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis," 8n32. "Domine mi rex." Cathwulf, letter to Charlemagne, *Epistolae variorum Carolo Magno regnante scriptae* 7, in *Epistolae Karolini aevi* 2, ed. Dümmler, 501–4, at 502, line 4. Mary Garrison is more confident that Cathwulf was most definitely an Anglo-Saxon living on the Continent. Garrison, "The English and the Irish at the Court of Charlemagne," 101–2.

29 Story, "Cathwulf, Kingship, and the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis," 11, 20–21.

30 "quod ipse te exaltavit in honorem glorie regni Europe...Memor est ergo semper, rex mi, Dei regis tui cum timore et amore, quod tu es in vice illius super omnia membra eius custodire et regere, et rationem reddere in die iudicii, etiam per te. Et episcopus est in secundo loco, in vice Christi tantum est." Cathwulf, *Ep. var.* 7, ed. Dümmler, p. 503, line 1, 3–6.

among the rich and poor.³¹ As Joanna Story notes, these eight proofs and habits correlated to the eight columns of the newly dedicated church at Saint-Denis that Charlemagne would have seen at the February event.³² What came next, however, laid out benefits of good monarchical behaviour in explicit terms, echoing many of the words from pseudo-Cyprian:

And then there shall be calm in the air and weather, fruitfulness of earth and sea with all that grows in them, and you shall rule many nations happily (*feliciter*), and your enemies shall fall before your face, and so on. But on the contrary, as St. Patrick said: "Because of a king's injustice, there shall be unhappiness (*infelicitas*) for himself, strife with his wife and sons, famine among the people, pestilence, infertility of the land, and the fruits of the earth shall be struck by various storms of the sea, and he shall be overcome by his enemies and driven out of his kingdom."³³

Cathwulf's portrayal of the environmental consequences of kingly conduct shares many similarities with, and obviously draws from, the pseudo-Cyprian text.³⁴ The felicitous emotives at work here will be discussed below in chapter four of this book, but for now it is worth observing how Cathwulf echoes the placidity and agricultural fecundity of good rule along with the calamities that follow bad rule: family conflict, natural disasters, food shortages and hunger, and even foreign conquest.

To hammer the point home, Cathwulf concluded by directing Charlemagne's attention to the cases of Waiofar, an Aquitanian aristocrat whom Charlemagne's father Pepin crushed after he had broken oaths of fidelity to the Frankish king, and Desiderius, the Lombard king whom Charlemagne's forces defeated after a long siege at Pavia in 774.³⁵ This campaign was

31 Story, "Cathwulf," 3–4, 10; Cathwulf, *Ep. var.* 7, ed. Dümmler, p. 502, lines 14–41 and p. 503, lines 31–38.

32 Story, "Cathwulf, Kingship, and the Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis," 20–21.

33 "Et tunc erit aeris et tempestatum tranquillitas, terre maris cum omnibus in eis nascentibus fecunditas, et dominaberis etiam multis feliciter gentibus et inimici tui ante faciem tuam cadunt et reliqua. E contra, sicut dixit sanctus Patricius: 'Pro regis iniustitia sui ipsius infelicitas erit, uxoris filiorum quoque dissensio, populorum fames, pestilentia, infecunditas terre, maris quoque tempestatibus fructus terrarum diversis percussis, et ab inimicis suis superatus et expulsus de regno.'" Cathwulf, *Ep. var.* 7, ed. Dümmler, p. 503, lines 38–44.

34 There are hints of Isidore of Seville as well. According to Anton, Cathwulf's letter first integrated Isidore of Seville's portrayal of a stern king dedicated to his people's welfare with the idea of good and evil consequences of rule, according to Irish and Anglo-Saxon ideas of kingship. Anton, *Fürstenspiegel und Herrscherethos*, 76–77.

35 Bachrach, *Early Carolingian Warfare*, 222–23; Bachrach, *Charlemagne's Early*

launched in part as a consequence of Charlemagne's repudiation of marriage to a daughter of the Lombard king. This resulted in Desiderius pushing Pope Hadrian to recognize the legitimacy of his grandchildren, who were sons of Carloman, Charlemagne's deceased brother and former rival. This move was perceived as a threat to Charlemagne's sole claim to rule the Franks.³⁶ These direct appeals from very recent memory to the consequences of aristocratic betrayal and a "bad" ruler's perfidy may have signalled awareness on the part of Cathwulf of "what he thought Charlemagne might like to hear," to borrow Rosamond McKitterick's phrase, but it also shows that he sought to link the present to biblical examples of kings who lost their kingdoms through bad conduct: "Rehoboam, Ahaz, Ahab, and the other kings of the Jews, who did evil in the sight of the Lord and did not walk in the commandments of God."³⁷

This insertion of more current events into Cathwulf's warnings characterizes the ways in which Insular notions of kingship interacted with other ideas at Charlemagne's court. For example, like *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*, Cathwulf's letter bid Charlemagne to stamp out practitioners of magic, although the letter included a new addition not mentioned by the pseudo-Cyprian author—storm-makers (*tempestarios*), the first reference to this particular kind of magic user in Frankish texts.³⁸ This term took hold among Charlemagne's inner circle, as it was added to the magic or divination practices mentioned in the Bible and banned in the 789 *Admonitio generalis*: that there may be no "numerologists, enchanterers, storm-makers,

Campaigns, 310–426.

36 Noble, *The Republic of St. Peter*, 131; Bachrach, *Charlemagne's Early Campaigns*, 263–64. For more on the marriage agreement and Charlemagne's repudiation of Gerperga, see Janet Nelson's discussion in "Making a Difference in Eighth-Century Politics."

37 McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 81. "Et sicut habes exempla sufficienter in his diebus et patrum tuorum, sicut de Waepere et de Desiderio filioque eius regnisque illorum et rel.; sicut Roboam, Achaz, Achab et reliqui reges Iudeorum, qui fecerunt malum in conspectu Domini et non ambulaverunt in mandatis Dei." Cathwulf, *Ep. var.* 7, ed. Dümmler, pp. 503–4, lines 44–45, 1–2.

38 "sin aliter puniantur per legem. Maleficos, [vene]ficos, tempestarios, strigas, phitonissas." Cathwulf, *Ep. var.* 7, ed. Dümmler, p. 504, lines 11–12. The *Indiculus superstitionum et paganarium*, an eighth-century list of pagan beliefs and practices includes a reference to a superstition "of storms" (*De tempestatibus*), but does not mark out a specific conjurer of storms. *Indiculus superstitionum et paganarium*, ed. Boretius, p. 223, line 12.

or spellbinders.”³⁹ The injunction appears in an 802 capitulary for the *missi* (royal agents) and among the capitularies collected by Ansegis in the later ninth century, as well as in the Council of Paris of 829, which also alluded to *De duodecim abusivis saeculi*, condemning storm-makers: “For they claim by their sorceries to be able to disturb the air and send hailstorms, to predict the future, to steal crops and milk and give them to others.”⁴⁰

Concern about weather magic and manipulation in Francia has a long history. In *Glory of the Confessors*, Gregory of Tours related a story in which a tree that had been felled by a strong wind moved Martin of Tours to make the sign of the cross over it before then restoring the tree to its rootedness. Gregory reported that the tree still stood in his day, although it was dead because of the many people who had stripped its bark for mixing into a healing medicine.⁴¹ Despite the Merovingians’ relatively syncretic approach to the regulation of meteorological phenomena, the Carolingians seem to have viewed such activities much more suspiciously. Paul Dutton points out that Cathwulf’s initial warnings to Charlemagne on storm-makers was tied to the king’s two responsibilities, that is to say more generally “his good standing with God and his duty to protect Christians from pagan and diabolical beliefs” and his very kingship itself, in which “his religious and royal natures were fused.”⁴²

This mattered to Charlemagne because storm-making and other pagan practices flew in the face of his responsibilities to safeguard the realm and the church. But I argue that weather conjuring also usurped the king’s role as the only person whose conduct legitimately shaped the Frankish natural world. By allowing storm-makers to persist in his kingdom, Charlemagne would have abdicated his unique charge to make it rain, or not, and become unworthy to rule his people.

We can sense echoes of this call during the reign of Charlemagne’s son, Louis the Pious. In 815, Agobard the bishop of Lyons related his encounter of a village whose inhabitants were about to execute three men and one

39 “ut cauculatores nec incantores nec tempestarii vel obligatores non fiant.” Charlemagne, *Admonitio generalis*, ed. Boretius, p. 59, line 2 (hereafter, *AG*).

40 *Capitulare missorum item speciale*, ed. Boretius, 104, line 6; *Ansegisi abbatis capitularium collectio*, ed. Boretius, p. 402, lines 79–80. For the Council of Paris of 829: “Ferunt enim suis maleficiis aera posse conturbare et grandines immittere, futura praedicere, fructus et lac auferre aliisque dare.” *Concilium Parisiense* (829), ed. Werminghoff, p. 669, lines 35–36. Translation from Dutton, *Charlemagne’s Mustache*, 173.

41 Gregory of Tours, *Glory of the Confessors*, trans. Van Dam, 8.

42 Dutton, *Charlemagne’s Mustache*, 173.

woman, referred to as “cloud-sailors,” who were accused of riding in cloud ships from a land of Magic (*Magonia*) to collect crops felled by hailstorms sent by the storm-makers (*tempestarii*) to damage the fields. Agobard ultimately disbelieves the claim of the rural accusers as “stupidity,” and laments its persistence among rural folk as offensive, because these people would render offerings in kind to forestall weather damage when they forgot to pay their tithes to the church and the needy.⁴³ The king was the one who ordained and set rents and tithes; he was the one who demanded and exacted tribute and channelled weather modification, for good or ill. If Agobard had not confronted them he would have allowed the storm-makers (even if only in the popular imagination) to continue to appropriate the ruler’s *ministerium*—his duties and responsibilities as a Christian king—and thus conjure up the very negative consequences associated with bad rule.

To eliminate any ambiguity about Charlemagne’s responsibilities and obligations, Cathwulf explicitly admonished him to remember that in the blending of roles as one who corrects and condemns according to the law, “you serve as God’s official in all these matters and as His avenger.”⁴⁴ Cathwulf’s letter thus demonstrates awareness of the pseudo-Cyprianic notions of good and bad kingship and nature among courtiers of the Frankish king, but it also connects those abstract formulations to real political and religious concerns of eighth-century Francia. It further offers a snapshot of the idea of the kingdom as a paradise, governed and ordered by a divinely appointed steward, which was coalescing during this early phase of Charlemagne’s rule.

The letter’s focus on placid nature reflects those prelapsarian conditions of Eden where creation existed to support and nourish the humans to whom its governance had been entrusted. In case the point was missed, Cathwulf informed Charlemagne in no uncertain terms: “But with those setting things in order rightly—that is, together with trustworthy bishops and counts, and so forth—so that you may root out from your kingdom the thorns, thistles, and stumbling blocks of vice, and piously govern the army of Christians, the members of Christ.”⁴⁵ This statement explicitly connects the end goal of all

43 Agobard of Lyons, *De grandine et tonitruis*, ed. Van Acker. There is a translation of excerpts from this text in Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 189–91.

44 “Haec et his similia corrigere vel damnara pro vindictae legis...recte iudicare, quod minister Dei es in his omnibus et vindex, et reliqua.” Cathwulf, *Ep. var.* 7, ed. Dümmler, p. 504, lines 17–19. Translation from Dutton, *Charlemagne’s Mustache*, 173.

45 “sed recta disponentibus, [id e]st cum episcopis et comitibus probatis et rel.; ut spinas et tribulas et scandala vitiorum possis [e regn]o tuo extirpare et exercitum

those things advised by Cathwulf—to eliminate the consequences of bad rule (“thorns and thistles”), i.e., those things that occur when God’s laws and commands are not followed—with the penalties suffered by Adam and Eve and their descendants after the Fall: expulsion from the garden of Paradise and the curse of the land, which they would sow only to bring forth thorns and thistles.⁴⁶

The letter reflects the commingling of these ideas, but it is difficult to know to what degree an outsider, of whom we have only this mention, influenced policy in Charlemagne’s court. It is likely that Cathwulf’s missive was read at court, because Alcuin revealed in a letter (793) to the Northumbrian king Æthelred that he had read about the “conduct of the king” related to “prosperity of the whole people.”⁴⁷ It is, however, difficult to imagine that Cathwulf’s letter was the main driver of Charlemagne’s policies or construction of kingship twenty years after its writing. It is somewhat easier to imagine that the letter reflected ideas and discussions which had been occurring at the Carolingian court, blending Insular with biblical and Roman ideas of royal authority.

Pertinent here is some knowledge gleaned from a much later text. In his text *On the Organization of the Palace* (882), Hincmar of Rheims wrote that he knew and copied a version of the text from Adalhard of Corbie, who had been a chief counsellor of Charlemagne. Hincmar/Adalhard cites directly *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* as a source of authority for the late-ninth century palace instructions.⁴⁸ Rosamond McKitterick notes that trying to use this text to reconstruct knowledge about Charlemagne’s court is fraught with uncertainties, although “there are a sufficient number of stylistic reminiscences of Adalhard’s phrasing in the Corbie statutes recurring in the *De ordine palatii* to encourage confidence in Hincmar’s claim that the text by Adalhard had indeed once existed.”⁴⁹ Thus, some portion of *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* may have been known at Charlemagne’s court beyond what Cathwulf or Alcuin hinted.

christianorum, membra Christi, pie regere.” Cathwulf, *Ep. var. 7*, ed. Dümmler, p. 504, lines 7–9. Genesis 3 and virtually all other Carolingian writers use *tribulos*.

46 Genesis 3:18.

47 “Legimus quoque, quod regis bonitas totius est gentis prosperitas.” Alcuin, *Epistola 18*, ed. Dümmler, p. 51, line 29 (hereafter, *Ep.*). Meens, “Politics, Mirrors of Princes and the Bible,” 354.

48 Hincmar of Rheims, *De ordine palatii*, ed. Gross and Schieffer, 50, 52, 54. See translation in Dutton, *Carolingian Civilization*, 489–90.

49 McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 144–45.

There is no smoking gun that connects *De duodecim abusivi saeculi* and Carolingian policy. But the same themes enumerated in Cathwulf's letter arise in Alcuin's writings—particularly in his correspondence and his poem to the religious community at York, and they evolved in concert with political events in Britain and on the Continent. Reading Alcuin's exhortations and admonishments of kings both past and present shows him to have been one of the chief architects of Charlemagne's political, religious, and cultural reform program and a transmitter of pseudo-Cyprianic-like concepts of kingship and nature.

Alcuin's York Poem and Early Views on Kingship

In May of 799, Alcuin wrote to Charlemagne on the plight of the whole of Christendom, under attack by "evildoers" from Constantinople to Rome and Francia. By this time the Yorkish cleric had been in the king's service as a counsellor, theologian, and principal educator for at least thirteen years (perhaps as many as eighteen), and had been on the Continent for all but three of them.⁵⁰ Yet in 799 Alcuin wrote from Tours, where he had been serving as abbot for three years, removed from the presence (and possibly the favour) of his king.⁵¹ This perhaps explains why Alcuin begged Charlemagne to consider the letter in a merciful light, prompted as he was to write by his "love of devotion."⁵² In this letter, Alcuin raised the question of leadership and the inability of the pope and the Byzantine emperor to control the situation, hampered as they were by political misfortune—the 799 physical assault and maiming by rebellious aristocrats of Pope Leo III in the streets of Rome and the 797 deposition and blinding (a mutilation that caused his death) of Byzantine emperor Constantine VI on the orders of his own mother.⁵³

50 Bullough argued forcefully that the evidence for Alcuin's arrival at Charlemagne's court in 781 (based on his journey to Rome on behalf of Eanbald and a charter that shows Charlemagne's presence at Parma—where he met Alcuin at some point—in the same year) is entirely circumstantial and outweighed by the preponderance of other evidence pointing to his arrival in 786. Bullough, *Alcuin*, 331–46. In his excellent and economical biographical sketch of Alcuin, Peter Godman follows the conventional view that Alcuin met Charlemagne at Parma on March 15, 781, when he was invited to the Frankish Court, to which he arrived either in 781 or early 782. Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, xxxvi–xxxvii.

51 Bullough, *Alcuin*, 436.

52 "Haec, precor, aspiciat clementi lumine nostras / Litterulas, scripsit quas pietatis amor." Alcuin, *Ep.* 174, ed. Dümmler, p. 288, lines 23–24.

53 "DOMINO PACIFICO DAVID REGI FLACCUS ALBINUS SALUTEM...Nam tres

Both rulers were attacked by those who should have been under their authority, signalling a weakness of rule on their part under the framework of the pseudo-Cyprian model of rulership: bad rule courted rebellion and the loss of one's dominion. The pope was not a king, and his position was soon restored with Charlemagne's aid, but Alcuin's framing of the three figures is not without purpose. The third figure in the discussion was, of course, a ruler like Charlemagne:

The third is the royal dignity, in which you, our lords, have been appointed by the dispensation of our Lord Jesus Christ as rulers of the Christian people—a dignity more powerful than the others mentioned, more radiant in wisdom, and more exalted in the honour of kingship. Behold, upon you alone the entire well-being of the churches of Christ leans and rests.⁵⁴

Echoing Cathwulf's earlier statement, Alcuin then reminded the Frankish king that, because of these responsibilities, "You are the avenger of wrongdoings, the guide of those who go astray, the comforter of the sorrowful, the exalter of the good."⁵⁵ The letter concludes with a poem to Charlemagne, "now aged," exhorting the environment to wish its lord good health:

Let the holy stars of heaven, and the green grasses of the earth,
All cry out together: "Fare well, David, everywhere."
Let earth, sky, sea, humankind, birds, and beasts
With one united voice proclaim: "Fare well, our father."⁵⁶

personae in mundo altissime hucusque fuerant: id est apostolica sublimitas, quae beati Petri principis apostolorum sedem vicario munere regere solet; quid vero in eo actum sit, qui rector praefate sedis fuerat, mihi veneranda bonitas vestra innotescere curavit. Alia est imperialis dignitas et secundae Romae saecularis potentia: quam impie gubernator imperii illius depositus sit, non ab alienis, sed a propriis et concubibus, unique fama narrante crebrescit." Alcuin, *Ep. 174*, ed. Dümmler, p. 288, lines 17–22. Succinct descriptions of the incident in: Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I*, 18; Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*, 244.

54 "Tertia est regalis dignitas, in qua vos domini nostri Iesu Christi dispensatio rectorum populi christiani disposuit, ceteris praefatis dignitatibus potentia excellentiorem, sapientia clariorem, regni dignitate sublimiorem. Ecce in te solo tota salus ecclesiarum Christi incinata recumbit." Alcuin, *Ep. 174*, ed. Dümmler, p. 288, lines 22–26. Translation from Allott, *Alcuin of York*, 111.

55 "Tu vindex scelerum, tu rector errantium, tu consolator maerentium, tu exaltatio bonorum." Alcuin, *Ep. 174*, ed. Dümmler, p. 288, lines 26–27. Translation mine.

56 "Optime quod regem suscipit ipsa senem...Sidera sancta poli, viridis et gramina terrae, / Omnia conclament: 'David ubique vale.' / Terra, polus, pelagus, homines, volucresque, feraeque / Concordi clament voce: 'Valeto pater.'" Alcuin, *Ep. 174*, ed. Dümmler, pp. 288, 289, lines 22, 25–28.



Figure 3. Pen drawing accompanying Psalm 8 in the Utrecht Psalter, ca. 830. Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS 32, fol. 4v. Public Domain.

This version of Charlemagne celebrates the years of successful rule that Alcuin had witnessed as a member of the king's inner circle, a time in which the king has governed so well (at least as Alcuin desired to frame it) that creation itself—described in the very language of Genesis—had been tamed to his rule and sings his praise.⁵⁷

Indeed, the poem alludes to one of the most famous psalms of David, who beheld the “heavens, the works of [God’s] fingers: the moon and the stars which [He] had founded,” and marvelled that the deity bothered to think of humans or that he cared for the “son of man,” whom God made: “a little less than the angels,” crowned by glory and honour and established over the created order.⁵⁸ David’s vision of this ecological dominion was due to God, who “subjected all things under [man’s] feet, all sheep and oxen, even the livestock of the field, the winged creatures of the sky, and the fish of the sea who move about the paths of the sea.”⁵⁹ David’s psalm ends with a cry, “Lord, our Lord, how admirable is your name in the whole world!”⁶⁰ The psalm imagines environmental hierarchy from the point of view of a man humbled at the overwhelming awesomeness of God’s majesty and wondering at the responsibilities of the human tasked with the stewardship of creation.

We perhaps find this Psalm’s interpretation represented visually in the famous Utrecht Psalter’s striking illustration of it (Figure 3). The Utrecht

57 Genesis 1:21–22.

58 “Quoniam videbo caelos tuos, opera digitorum tuorum, lunam et stellas quae tu fundasti. Quid est homo, quod memor es ejus? aut filius hominis, quoniam visitas eum? Minuisti eum paulo minus ab angelis; gloria et honore coronasti eum; Et constituisti eum super opera manuum tuarum.” Psalms 8:4–7.

59 “Omnia subiecisti sub pedibus ejus, oves et boves universas, insuper et pecora campi, volucres caeli, et pisces maris qui perambulant semitas maris.” Psalms 8:8–9.

60 “Domine, Dominus noster, quam admirabile est nomen tuum in universa terra!” Psalms 8:10.

Psalter was almost certainly produced at Reims in the early ninth century, executed in the distinctive sketchy style of the Reims school by multiple creators. The manuscript itself provides no dedicatory verses or colophons, so its authorship, patronage, and dating remain disputed. On stylistic grounds it has long been linked to Archbishop Ebo's first tenure at Reims (816–835) and compared to the Ebo Gospels, though Dominique Alibert has argued for a narrower dating around 823, connecting its imagery with Ebo's role in the Viking embassy at Soissons and with Louis the Pious's penance at Attigny in 822.⁶¹ By contrast, Celia Chazelle has proposed a later date in the mid-ninth century, around 845–855, under Hincmar, reading the illustration of the Athanasian Creed as reflecting concerns particular to his early tenure as archbishop.⁶² Despite these competing hypotheses, scholars generally agree that the Psalter originated in Reims and that its iconography presents a visual mirror for princes, contrasting David's exemplary kingship with the folly and tyranny of Saul and others.⁶³

In the Utrecht Psalter's depiction of this biblical scene, a crowned figure emerging from a half-glimpsed palace occupies the middle left third of the page, teaching children, standing with the beasts of the earth underfoot, while the birds and fish move swiftly through air and water under the stars, which proclaim Creation's majesty.⁶⁴ To the right, the heavens arch over the scene with a thin crescent moon flanked by stars glowing in the night sky. Like the animals of the Ark in obedient twos the cattle, sheep, and goats ruminate while the figure—gazing directly at Christ enthroned above—holds court below. Birds descend in graceful arcs, their movement ominous, as they veer not toward tranquil waters but toward the gaping, beast-like mouth of hell, where the damned are hurled at spearpoint by an angel. Fishes caught in violent perturbations swim either toward or away from the pit watched by waterfowl who cautiously rim the pond's edge. The composition stages a cosmic drama of praise and punishment, where creation's wonder is shadowed by its fall, waiting on the word of this didactic figure and the receptiveness of his children's audience.

Alcuin's poem shifts this perspective to his marvel at a different "son of man," i.e., his David, Charlemagne, repurposing the imagery of the psalm to elevate the Frankish king to whom all creation offers praise as nature's

61 Jaski, "The Ruler with the Sword in the Utrecht Psalter," 73–75.

62 Chazelle, "Archbishops Ebo and Hincmar of Reims and the Utrecht Psalter."

63 Jaski, "The Ruler with the Sword in the Utrecht Psalter," 72–76.

64 Dodwell, "The Final Copy of the Utrecht Psalter," 44.

sovereign. There was, however, nothing inevitable about this view, and it reflects Alcuin's own life experiences with (and disappointments in) other kings.

If the above letter demonstrates Alcuin's tribute to Charlemagne as the one ruler in the world capable of fulfilling the duties of a just king, then a close reading of his correspondence and the York poem shows how that view took shape in the last two decades of the eighth and the early years of the ninth century. By contrasting his early views on kingship with his response to disaster and his later portrayals of Charlemagne, the trajectory of Alcuin's thinking and his contribution to the pseudo-Cyprianic discourse at Charlemagne's court becomes clear. This analysis is informed and shaped by Alcuin's poetry—particularly the lengthy poem dedicated to his home community in York—where appropriate, as it elucidates or reinforces a sentiment expressed in prose. In the York poem we see how Alcuin first began to associate just kingship with a good environment, and how bad kings wrought havoc and brought disasters on their own lands.

Alcuin's earliest extant views on kingship become evident in his *Versus de patribus regibus et sanctis Euboricensis ecclesiae* (Poem on the Bishops, Kings, and Saints of the Church of York), a lengthy composition dating from 780 or 781, and so of special relevance to the period of his life before arriving at Charlemagne's court. The poem comprises 1658 hexameters largely drawn from preexisting historical and poetic works by Bede (ca. 673–735), followed by original material from Alcuin's era, which served to celebrate his vision of the achievements of both the Northumbrian kingdom and the cathedral school at York, where he was raised.⁶⁵ The poem's modern translator, Peter Godman, suggests it is entirely possible that the poem was substantially revised in the 790s because of Alcuin's disgust with the "nadir of Northumbrian kingship" a sentiment that also emerges in his correspondence of the same period.⁶⁶ Either way, the poem offers a parallel formulation of kingship to that found in Alcuin's other writings.

The first king mentioned in the York poem is Edwin, who ruled over Deira and Bernicia (earlier kingdoms in the Northumbrian region) from 616–633, and embodies many of the kingly virtues praised by Alcuin. A recent convert to Christianity, Edwin gently looked after the welfare of his people even while he waged victorious war against his enemies, and he conquered all the other peoples of Britain, bringing them "in total submission...

⁶⁵ Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, xxxix–xl.

⁶⁶ Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, xlvii.

under his kingly yoke.”⁶⁷ Edwin was a king who had established a peaceful realm through violence, but who “ruled as a judge, with war at a lull, holding his peoples in check with firm reins of justice.”⁶⁸ Edwin’s was not, however, an obedience won out of love, since violence among the people was curtailed through fear, “since everyone feared the axe of vengeance on his own head if he failed wholeheartedly to observe the wise decrees which the leader had determined his subjects should uphold.”⁶⁹ Edwin’s reign was shortened by bloody assassination and sedition, and it took the king’s nephew Oswald, who had been living as an exile in Scotland, to gather an army and crush the regicidal conspirators who had usurped the throne.⁷⁰ Having stamped out that threat to his rule, Oswald reigned for almost ten years until his death in 642, and Alcuin’s poem praises the king for his character: “generous to the poor, self-denying, but unstinting to all, true in his judgments, kindly and pious of spirit, of signal distinction but humbly tempered, terrible to his enemies but genial to each of his friends, as invincible in war as he was scrupulous to maintain peace treaties.”⁷¹

The other kings whom the York poem portrayed favourably follow a similar pattern: violent conquest to overcome disorder followed by peaceful, pious rule until chaos again breaks the narrative. There are exceptions to this formula. Ecgrith (r. 670–685), for example, receives particular scorn because he sent a military expedition to Ireland “to slaughter and ravage the innocent,” which (in the coalescing Insular version of ideal kingship) invited

67 “Qui mox accipiens sceptri regalis honorem / quaesivit propriae genti bona, largus in omnes, / nec per sceptrum ferox, sed de pietate benignus, / factus amor populi, patriae pater, et decus aulae, / assiduus superans hostilia castra triumphis, / imperioque suo gentes superaddidit omnes, / finibus atque plagis qua tenditur insula longa. / Iamque iugum regis prona cervice subibant / Saxonum populus, Pictus Scotusque, Brittanus.” Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, 14–15.

68 “Interea placida regni dum pace tribunal / rexerat armipotens, sopitis undique bellis, / iustitiae validis populos frenebat habenis.” Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, 14–15.

69 “Nec rapit arma furor, legum sub pondere pressus / ultrices timuit capiti quia quisque secures, / provida ni tot servaret pectore scita, / quae posuit populis rector servanda subaxtis.” Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, 14–15.

70 Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, 22–25.

71 “pauperis largus, parvus sibi, dives in omnes, / iudiciis verax, animi pietate benignus, / excelsus mertitis, summissus mente sed ipsa, / hostibus horribilis, cunctis iocundus amicis: / ut bello indomitus, sic pacta in pace fidelis.” Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, 26–27.

retribution in the form of his downfall at the hands of the Picts, who defeated Ecgfrith and left Northumbria in the hands of his more peaceful brother Aldfrith, a “king and a teacher.”⁷² As a model from his own era, Alcuin turned to the figure of Eadberht who ruled Northumbria from 737–758 alongside his brother Egbert the archbishop of York. This alliance, however, marked the zenith of Northumbrian kingship, as Eadberht’s son Oswulf, who ascended to the throne after his father retired to the monastery at York in 758, was assassinated by his own household in the same year, inaugurating a period of internecine conflict and the end of Alcuin’s mentions of Northumbrian kings in the York poem.⁷³

We can glean some generalities about Alcuin’s early predilections for kingly conduct from these poetic images. Past kings Edwin, Oswald, and Oswiu were to be seen as exemplars who would address the needs of the present turbulent politics of late eighth-century Northumbria. Moreover, given the contemporary failures of Northumbrian kings in Alcuin’s era, it was even more imperative that the church have a large role in guiding the king.⁷⁴ To illustrate in brief the tumult of Northumbrian royal succession, when Alcuin departed England for the Continent in the early 780s, Ælfwald I was reigning, who had taken the throne of Northumbria from Æthelred I, the son of Æthelwald “Moll,” who had usurped the throne following Oswulf’s death. Ælfwald himself would be succeeded by Osred II (Oswulf’s son), who was in turn forced out of office and succeeded by a restored Æthelred I, who reigned until his death in 796, when he was succeeded by Osbald, who was expelled in the same year, and then Eardwulf, who managed to hang on until 806, when he also was ousted.⁷⁵ This series of failed or weakened kings, set against the more worthy examples of remoter past Northumbria, informed and shaped Alcuin’s discussion of kingship in his letters.⁷⁶ As Bullough notes, in this context the poem also becomes “an early statement of the link

72 “Ecgfrith.../ *agminibus missis animo trans aequora saevo, / praecipiens gentes Scotorum caede cruenta / vastare innocuas.../ mox adversus eum Pictis bellantibus ipse / occubit victus misera cum clade suorum / imperii linquens Aldfrido regmina fratri.../ ...idem rex simul atque magister.”* Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, 68–71.

73 Bullough, *Alcuin*, 238. For a solid summary of the tumultuous 770s–790s in Northumbrian politics, see Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, 127–33.

74 Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, li, lix–lx

75 Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, 131.

76 Alcuin, *The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York*, ed. and trans. Godman, xlv.

between Divine authority and that exercised in the world by King Charles,” key themes in the development of Alcuin’s ideas on the conduct of a king.⁷⁷

Violence and Natural Disaster in Alcuin’s Lindisfarne Letters

The York poem offers one version of Alcuin’s notions of kingship and the pitfalls of bad rule, but it is overshadowed by the volume of his surviving letters. Relying on Alcuin’s correspondence to narrate history presents challenges because while the standard collection—either that edited by Dümmler in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* or Jaffé’s *Monumenta Alcuiniana*—contains just over 310 letters, only 281 of them were composed by him. This number excludes prefaces to his longer works, letters written on behalf of Charlemagne, and those written to Alcuin but preserved in the collection. Alcuin lived from ca. 735–804, yet none of his letters from before the 780s survive, and only fifteen come from before the end of 793. Most of the extant letters, in fact, cluster around the years 798–801.⁷⁸ My reading of Alcuin’s letters in this section focuses on those letters addressed to kings or those in which he specifically mentions either the conduct of a king or events that echo the warnings of pseudo-Cyprian’s unjust king to trace the shifts in Alcuin’s thinking during his association with the Frankish court.

In 790, fresh from a period of at least four years at Charlemagne’s itinerant court participating in some of the Frankish king’s most important and lasting reform initiatives, Alcuin wrote to Adalhard—Charlemagne’s cousin and the abbot of Corbie, who was himself also accustomed to the company of and access to kings and centres of power—a letter that (in part) criticized the incumbent Northumbrian king, the restored Æthelred I.⁷⁹ Astonishingly,

⁷⁷ Bullough, *Alcuin*, 410.

⁷⁸ The letters are found in these edited collections: *Epistolae Karolini aevi*, ed. Dümmler, pp. 18–493; *Monumenta Alcuiniana*, ed. Jaffé, 132–897. The foremost modern Alcuin expert, Donald Bullough, made a vigorous defence of what he called “the biographical approach” in relying on Alcuin’s correspondence to assemble the most complete version of Alcuin’s life and accomplishments to date. Even Bullough, however, criticized those who would take “a few short phrases, not infrequently employing quite commonplace language and occurring incidentally in letters concerned predominantly with other topics, and [proceed] to induce from them theories of polity and authority and the capacity to influence events in ways that literally changed nations.” Bullough, *Alcuin*, 35, 38, 118. This critique pointedly highlights the danger of overanalyzing language that could have been rhetorical exercise, and the fallacy of taking a phrase out of its context to stretch a broader argument.

⁷⁹ Adalhard was Charlemagne’s cousin, and served as abbot of Corbie and also as a

Alcuin penned this critique during his three-year sojourn in England from within the borders of Æthelred's own kingdom:

Moreover, know this, like-minded brother: I found affairs somewhat troubled in my homeland, and I did not find the disposition of the new king to be what I either hoped for or wished. Nevertheless, we offered him and others some words of admonition. And today we are labouring against injustice, as much as we are able, along with certain magnates.⁸⁰

The disturbances which troubled Alcuin doubtless referred to the deposition and forced tonsuring of Osred II in 790, followed by Æthelred, who later during his restored reign had Osred executed after a failed coup d'état in 792 (Æthelred himself was murdered in 796 in part as retribution for these events).⁸¹ Worthy of note, too, is Alcuin's connection of the king's conduct with broader events, as well as his role as an admonisher and fighter of injustice—all pseudo-Cyprianic themes. In contrast to Alcuin's pointed criticism, a letter that may have originated in the same period (pre-792) to Angilbert (Nithard's father who was described in contemporary sources as "Charlemagne's most beloved abbot"), the chancellor of the Frankish king's son, Pepin, reveals some of the benefits of good kingship.⁸² Alcuin notes generally that "the reward of kings for aiding the wretched...is known to be great in the sight of divine mercy."⁸³

Alcuin's surviving letters do not revisit these themes until after his return to the Continent in 793—the same year that Vikings sacked the monastery at Lindisfarne, a small tidal island about 1 km off the northeast coast of Britain. The monastery itself was crucial in the history of Christianity and

special advisor to the emperor's son, Pepin, in his role as king of Italy. Costambeys et al., *The Carolingian World*, 193; McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, 88.

80 "Caeterum cognoscas, unanimis frater, turbatas ex parte res me offendisse in patria nec talem invenisse animum novi regis qualem vel speravi vel volui. Tamen aliquid fecimus ammonitionis illi et aliis. Et hodie laboramus contra iniustitiam prout possumus, cum quibusdam potentibus." Alcuin, *Ep.* 9, ed. Dümmler, p. 35, lines 7–10.

81 Rollason, *Northumbria, 500–1100*, 194.

82 Dümmler noted the date as possibly originating from before 792, (possibly as early as 783/5) a position with which Bullough initially agreed, although he subsequently post-dated the letter to the late 790s. Alcuin, *Ep.* 11, ed. Dümmler, 37; Bullough, "'Baiuli' in the Carolingian 'regnum Langobardorum,'" 635n6; Bullough, *Alcuin*, 38n83. For Angilbert's connections and importance to Charlemagne, see Freeman and Meyvaert, "*Opus Caroli regis contra synodum*," in Freeman, *Theodulf of Orléans*, 1:4–14.

83 "Regum vero merces in miserorum iuvamine...magna apud divinam constat esse clementiam." Alcuin, *Ep.* 11, ed. Dümmler, p. 37, lines 10–12.

conversion in Britain. Founded in the mid-seventh century by Aidan, Lindisfarne was the home base for the conversion of northern England and Scotland, and the bishopric of the famous St. Cuthbert. The island mirrored the extreme conditions of the renowned and remote monastery at Iona off the western coast of Scotland. Ironically, it was this very proximity to the shore which left the monks vulnerable to attack by sea.⁸⁴ The *Northumbrian Annals* from 793 recalled the portents that purportedly foreshadowed the Vikings' attack of the monastery at Lindisfarne:

The fourth year of King Æthelred, dire portents terrified the wretched nation of the English, inasmuch that horrible lightning and dragons were often visible in the heavens, and flashes of fire were seen darting and dancing to and fro; and such signs signified a great famine, with the fearful and indescribable slaughter of many men which ensued.⁸⁵

These omens fit neatly into the grammar of the calamitous consequences invited by a bad king, including natural, supernatural, and military disasters.

The raid occurred on June 7 or 8, though Alcuin almost certainly could not have learned of it and had time to compose the seven lengthy letters he wrote to the survivors of the attack until much later.⁸⁶ Other than the terse mentions of famine and slaughter from chronicles like the above, Alcuin's letters offer the only other substantial source for this event, which greatly disturbed him even if contemporary sources from the Continent ignored the attack.⁸⁷ Alcuin's response to the Viking sack of Lindisfarne pertains to these notions of kingship and his transformation of their violent incursion into a natural disaster.

Alcuin's first response takes the form of a letter to the Northumbrian king Æthelred I in which he reminds the king that there is in fact a connection between the decline of royal conduct and authority following the murder of Ælfwald, the king who had usurped Æthelred in 778. The king following him was deposed and exiled, until Æthelred was himself restored in 790. In the eighth-century Northumbrian culture of political violence, sometimes

84 Higham, *The Kingdom of Northumbria*, 133–34, 174.

85 “Anno dcc.xc.iii. qui est anno Ethelredi quartus, dira prodiga miseram Anglorum terruere gentem. Siquidem fulmina abominanda, et dracones per aera, igneique ictus saepe vibrare et volitare videbantur; quae scilicet signa famem magnam, et multorum hominum strategem pessimam atque inedibilem, quae subsectuta est, demonstravere.” Text and translation from *Byrhtferth's Northumbrian Chronicle*, ed. and trans. Hart, 130–31.

86 Alcuin, *Ep.* 16–22, ed. Dümmler, p. 4, 42–60.

87 Bullough, *Alcuin*, 411.

a claimant seized the throne and yet died, a trend that Alcuin viewed as divine retribution. “Consider carefully, brothers,” Alcuin writes, “and examine most diligently, lest perhaps this unusual and unheard-of evil was earned by some unheard-of evil custom,”⁸⁸ before launching a tirade against sexual depravity, greed, and violence, which he claimed had increased everywhere during that time.⁸⁹ Then, Alcuin’s letter echoes those warnings from *De duodecim abusivis saeculi* that examples from both the Bible and history should demonstrate to any thinking person that “because of such sins, kings have lost their kingdoms and peoples their homeland. And while the powerful unjustly seized what belonged to others, they justly lost what was their own.”⁹⁰ Alcuin then presses the portents that came before the calamity. He asks what it signified that blood fell during Lent at York, from the north and in clear air—“we saw it,” he writes—if not that a bloody punishment was to come from the north “upon the people.”⁹¹

There is a proffered remedy for both king and magnates in Alcuin’s admonishment, when, invoking the biblical example of the king Hezekiah and the power of prayer, he told Æthelred to:

Defend the homeland with constant prayers to God, and with works of justice and mercy toward others. Nothing defends the homeland better than the fairness and piety of its rulers, and the intercessions of God’s servants. Be leaders of the people, not plunderers; shepherds, not predators. You received honours (*honores*) through the gift of God: heed the keeping of His commandments, that you may have as your protector the One whom you

88 “Attentius considerate, fratres, et diligentissime perspicite, ne forte hoc inconsuetum et inauditum malum aliqua inauditi mali consuetudine promereretur.” Alcuin, *Ep. 16*, ed. Dümmler, p. 43, lines 6–7.

89 “Non dico, quod fornicationis peccata prius non essent in populo. Sed a diebus Ælfwaldi regis fornicationes adulteria et incestus inundaverunt super terram, ita ut absque omni verecundia etiam et in ancillis Deo dicatis hec peccata perpetrabantur. Quid dicam de avaritia rapinis et violentis iudiciis? dum luce clarius constat, quantum ubique hec crimina succreverunt et populus testatur spoliatus.” Alcuin, *Ep. 16*, ed. Dümmler, p. 43, lines 7–12.

90 “Qui sanctas legit scripturas et veteres revolvit historias et seculi considerat eventum, inveniet pro huiusmodi peccatis reges regna et populos patriam perdidisse. Et dum aliena potentes iniuste rapuerunt, propria iuste perdidierunt.” Alcuin, *Ep. 16*, ed. Dümmler, p. 43, lines 12–15.

91 “Signa enim huius miserie precesserunt...Quid significat pluvia sanguinis, qui quadragesimali tempore Euboraca civitate...vidimus de borealibus domus sereno aere...Nonne potest putari a borealibus poenas sanguinis venire super populum?” Alcuin, *Ep. 16*, ed. Dümmler, p. 43, lines 16–21. For Alcuin’s possible location, see Bullough, *Alcuin*, 410.

had as your benefactor. Obey the priests of God. For they must give account to God of how they admonish you, and you, of how you obey them.⁹²

This statement offered the beleaguered king a lifeline; by asking for divine help and acting justly and mercifully, he could restore his own conduct and the welfare of his realm. By juxtaposing leadership with thievery and shepherding with predation, Alcuin strikingly shows the consequences of bad kingship: the thief makes off with property and predators with lives. The *honores*—land, rank, title, influence, power, etc.—of a king were seen as loaned only by the grace of God, and to reclaim or maintain that authority the king would have to listen to critics like Alcuin. In this view, the stakes were both eternal and temporal, and—like those of pseudo-Cyprian and Cathwulf—their outcome shaped the state of the environment and kingdom.

This is not the final word in Alcuin's correspondence on Lindisfarne and the failings and potential of Æthelred: he spares no detail of the bishop and monks affected by the Viking attack, and among these letters the Yorkish cleric describes their armed violence as a scourge and a pestilence, subsuming two of the consequences predicted by the pseudo-Cyprian author into natural disasters. In the same cycle of letters responding to the attack on Lindisfarne, Alcuin wrote Æthelhard, the archbishop of Canterbury, whose election had been secured in 792 by the Mercian king Offa due to his influence as "over-king" of Kent, meaning that Alcuin's letter may have been a circumspect attempt at reaching another king's ears as a call to action.⁹³ In it, Alcuin reminds Æthelhard (and perhaps Offa by proxy) that their predecessors in Britain were pagans who conquered the island through violence, even though they possessed it and prospered under Christian rule. Alcuin protests, "How great a disgrace it is, then, that we Christians should lose what those pagans acquired. I say this in reference to the scourge that recently befell parts of our island, which has been inhabited by our forefathers for nearly 350 years."⁹⁴

92 "Defendite patriam precibus assiduis ad Deum, iustitiae et misericordiae operibus ad homines...Nichil melius patriam defendit quam principum equitas et pietas et servorum Dei intercessiones...Estote rectores populi, non raptore; pastores, non predatores. Deo dante honores accepistis: attendite observationem mandatorum eius, ut eum habeatis servatorem, quem habuistis largitorem. Oboedite sacerdotibus Dei. Illi enim habent rationem reddere Deo, quomodo vos ammoneant; et vos, quomodo oboediatis illis." And "Mementote, quod Ezechias rex iustus et pius une prece impetravit a Deo." Alcuin, *Ep. 16*, ed. Dümmler, p. 44, lines 13–24.

93 Bullough, *Alcuin*, 401.

94 "Patres itaque nostri, Deo dispensante, licet pagani, hanc patriam bellica virtute

The language of the scourge calls to mind the punishment of the whip, but it is not the lash of the New Testament endured unjustly by Christ as part of his salvific actions.⁹⁵ Rather, Alcuin's word choice echoes the warnings of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, who foretold God's punishment of the rebellious Israelites at the hands of the pagan Assyrians as a scourge, just as the Israelites had been the previous beneficiaries of a divinely orchestrated massacre of their enemies.⁹⁶ Simon Coupland shows how Carolingian theologians in the ninth century came to see the Vikings as the "rod" and the "people of God's wrath," who were sent by God to punish the Franks for their sin, and the Frankish people themselves as those who were called to repent and defend the church at all costs—both spiritually and physically. This point of view helps explain why, later, the Vikings would be accepted as "Normans" in the Frankish realm because they had been adopted into the church by those soldiers of Christ who prayed and worked as missionaries among them.⁹⁷ Later the Isaiah text portrays the king in Jerusalem, confident that his wickedness and pact with hell would protect him from the forthcoming punishment—a notion that the prophet disabuses, stating "when the overflowing scourge crashes over, you will be crushed by it."⁹⁸

Alcuin's imagery of the scourge as a flood wave that overcomes the king in his city reimagines a military conquest as a natural disaster. It is not without purpose that Alcuin never referred to the Viking invaders as north-men or Norse (*Nortmanni*), despite the captions in the modern edition. Alcuin consistently referred to these raiders as *pagani*, a rhetorical device that highlights their instrumentality as agents of divine punishment, precisely as the Old Testament usage of *flagellum* did.⁹⁹ In a similar letter to the monks at Wearmouth and Jarrow, the monastery which produced Alcuin's spiritual

primum pagani possederunt." And "Quam grande igitur obprobrium est, ut nos christiani perdamus, quod illi pagani adquisierunt. Hoc dico propter flagellum, quod nuper accidit partibus insulae nostrae, quae prope tricentis quinquaginta annis a parentibus inhabitata est nostris." Alcuin, *Ep. 17*, ed. Dümmler, p. 47, lines 12–16.

95 Matthew 27:26; Mark 14:65; John 19:1.

96 "Et suscitabit super eum Dominus exercituum flagellum, juxta plagam Madian in petra Oreb." Isaiah 10:26.

97 Coupland, "The Rod of God's Wrath," 536, 538, 553–54.

98 Isaiah 28:15, 18. "flagellum inundans cum transierit, eritis ei in conculcationem."

99 Bullough, *Alcuin*, 414. Coupland also notes that the Vikings are "often" described in other Carolingian texts as *pagani*, while the Franks are *christiani*, and destruction occurred "divino iudicio" and victories achieved "adiuvante Domino." Coupland, "The Rod of God's Wrath," 535.

forbear Bede, located just over 100 km south along the Northumbrian coast, Alcuin even further naturalized the Viking incursion. “You dwell by the sea, from whence the pestilence first fell upon us,” wrote Alcuin likening the assault on Lindisfarne to a disease.¹⁰⁰ He then alluded to the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah: “From the north evils will blaze forth, and from the Lord will come a dreadful notice.”¹⁰¹ In this vocabulary of fire, a natural disaster, Alcuin repurposed the prophetic warnings from Jeremiah, which were originally intended to provoke the king in Judah and his subjects to repent and turn back from their sins or face the punishment: invasion and destruction at the hands of the Chaldeans.¹⁰²

Equipped with that knowledge, we can see the same device at work in the other letters of Alcuin’s Lindisfarne cycle. When Alcuin wrote Æthelred in 793, he admonished the Northumbrian court to “Fear the scourge that has come upon the Church of St. Cuthbert...now miserably laid waste by the pagans. Whoever does not fear this, does not amend himself, and does not weep to God for the prosperity of his homeland, has not a heart of flesh, but of stone.”¹⁰³ In a letter to Higbald, the bishop of Lindisfarne, Alcuin again links the Vikings and the calamity¹⁰⁴ that they wrought to pagan invaders of the past, sent by God to destroy places that he had marked for punishment:

Jerusalem, the city beloved by God, perished with the temple of God in the Chaldean flames. Rome, encircled by the crown of the holy apostles and countless martyrs, was torn apart by the devastation of the pagans...Nearly all of Europe was emptied by the swords and flames of the Goths and Huns.¹⁰⁵

100 “Vos maritima habitatis, unde pestis primo ingruit.” Alcuin, *Ep. 19*, ed. Dümmler, p. 55, line 7.

101 “In nobis impletum est, quod olim per prophetam praedictum est: ‘Ab aquilone inardescunt mala et a Domino formidolosa laudatio veniet.’” Alcuin, *Ep. 19*, ed. Dümmler, p. 55, lines 7–9. Coupland notes this allusion to Jeremiah as well, although only as a prelude to the discourse that arises in the ninth century. Coupland, “The Rod of God’s Wrath,” 538.

102 Jeremiah 1:14–16.

103 “Timete flagellum, quod venit super ecclesiam sancti Cudberhti...nunc vero miserabiliter a paganis devastatum. Qui hoc non timet et se ipsum non corrigit et pro suae patriae prosperitate non plangit ad Deum, carneum non habet cor, sed lapideum.” Alcuin, *Ep. 18*, ed. Dümmler, p. 52, lines 26–29.

104 “Sed versa vice vestrae tribulationis calamitas licet absentem multum me cotidie contristat.” Alcuin, *Ep. 21*, ed. Dümmler, p. 57, lines 5–6.

105 “Hierusalem, civitas Deo dilecta, cum templo Dei Chaldea flamma periit. Roma, sanctorum apostolorum et innumerabilium matrum corona circumdata, paganorum vastatione disrupta est...Tota pene Europa Gothorum vel Hunorum gladiis evacuata

This is grim stuff indeed, but the comforting point here, it seems, is the discernment that, however piously Higbald and his brethren had lived, certainly, if Jerusalem and Rome had endured these disasters and rebounded, then Lindisfarne would, too. In a lengthy poem on the destruction of Lindisfarne, Alcuin repeats these same historical reminders, adding to them the Christians of the Iberian peninsula, whose churches and fine things had been seized by Muslims over the course of the previous decades.¹⁰⁶ To the Yorkish cleric, the attack on Lindisfarne is just the most recent in a long history of good places ruined because of the sins and bad behaviour, not of the locals, but of others—namely kings.

Developing the nature-disaster theme in his Lindisfarne letters, Alcuin also refers to the Viking onslaught as *castigatio*, translated typically as a punishment or a correction. This certainly fits with the surrounding rhetoric of his Lindisfarne letter cycle, but the word also echoes language from Pliny's *Natural Histories*, a text that Alcuin likely knew at least in part from the Aachen court library.¹⁰⁷ On the pruning of trees, Pliny wrote

Some trees are improved by severe treatment or stimulated by a pungent application...Ashes also have the effect of salt, but it acts more gently; consequently they are sprinkled on figs and on rue, to prevent their getting maggoty or rotting at the roots. It is also advised to pour salt water on the roots of vines if they are too full of moisture, but if their fruit falls off, to sprinkle ashes with vinegar and smear them on the vines themselves, or ashes with sandarac if the grapes rot; but if the vines do not bear, to sprinkle and smear them with ashes mixed with strong vinegar; and if they do not ripen their fruit but let it dry up first, the vines should be lopped down to the roots and the wound and fibers of the wood drenched with strong vinegar and stale urine and covered up with the mud so produced, and repeatedly dug round. If olives give too little promise of fruit, growers bare their roots and expose them to the winter cold, and the trees profit by this drastic treatment (*castigatione*).¹⁰⁸

et flammis." Alcuin, *Ep. 21*, ed. Dümmler, p. 57, lines 29–33. Bullough thought that this letter could be from 799, although that does not alter its contribution to the discussion of Lindisfarne and royal disaster. Bullough, *Alcuin*, 433n3.

106 Alcuin, "The Destruction of Lindisfarne," in Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, 126–37.

107 Bullough, *Alcuin*, 285–86; Bischoff, *Manuscripts and Libraries in the Age of Charlemagne*, trans. Gorman, 29, 57.

108 "Quaedam poena emendantur aut morsu excitantur...salsis enim aquis aluntur. salis vim et cineres sed leniorem habent, ideo ficis adsparguntur rutaeque, ne fiant verminosae neve radices putrescant. quin et vitium radicibus aquam salsam iubent adfundi si sint lacrimosae, si vero fructus earum decidunt, cinerem aceto conspergi

Alcuin wrote no gardening manual for the monks of Lindisfarne, yet his sentiment in the letters to them that the attack was a divine punishment for laxity and impious behaviour resonates metaphorically with the notion that some trees must be pruned, have ash or salt poured over them, along with bitter vinegar, and cruel exposure to the harsh air of northern winter in order to thrive and develop new growth. Even the positive consequences of the pruning, which was for Pliny that the trees would profit (*proficunt*) from this harsh treatment, have an eerie similarity, as Alcuin argued that Lindisfarne's *castigatio* was appropriate, because it would profit (*proficiat*)—the same root verb—their eternal salvation.¹⁰⁹ Here we find clear parallels to the idea of a kingdom as a garden that must be tended and improved: England needed the kind of *correctio* that Alcuin had seen in Francia, and the rule of a gardener-king like Charlemagne who could transform it into a paradise of strongly rooted and obedient trees.

The sack of Lindisfarne seems to have marked a caesura in Alcuin's consideration of the prosperity and fortunes of his native country, and it sparked a shift in his hopes for kings and how a good sovereign can shape the environment. For, as Bullough wrote, "[n]o later event, not even [Charlemagne's] Imperial coronation of 800 which has so often been claimed as the centre of Alcuin's thinking in the late 790s, provoked or inspired in him a comparable literary outpouring."¹¹⁰ Because of this, it is worth considering some of Alcuin's remaining thoughts on kingship in his letters from the later eighth and early ninth century. Regarding kings in Britain, Alcuin viewed, for a time, the stable rule of Offa the king of Mercia similarly to Charlemagne. Alcuin's few letters addressed to Offa and his son, written during his travels in England and in his capacity as Charlemagne's representative, highlight their just and good qualities.¹¹¹

ipsasque inlini, aut sandaraca si putrescat uva, si vero fertiles non sint, aceto acri subacto cinere rigari atque oblini; quod si fructum non maturent prius inarescentem, praecisarum ad radices plagam fibrasque aceto acri et urina vetusta madefacere atque eo luto obruere, saepe fodere. olearum, si parum promiseret fructus, nudatas radices hiberno frigori opponunt eaque castigatione proficiunt." Text and translation from Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. Rackham, 5:180–81, bks. 17–19.

109 "Castigatio vero, quae facta est in monasterio vestro, dignum est, ut vobis proficiat ad salutem sempiternam." Alcuin, *Ep. 21*, ed. Dümmler, pp. 57, 59, lines 6–7.

110 Bullough, *Alcuin*, 418.

111 For a copiously detailed synopsis of this period in Frankish-Mercian relations and travels between England and the Continent, see Story, *Carolingian Connections*.

In the late 780s or early 790s, Alcuin wrote Offa's son Ecgrith a letter reminding him that he did not "lack anything in the way of necessary instruction from your most wise and excellent parents, whose examples of virtue are themselves proclamations of salvation for the people," echoing the moral health and wealth pseudo-Cyprianic message.¹¹² Similarly, Alcuin also praised Offa as the "glory of Britain, the trumpet of preaching, the sword against enemies, the shield against foes," presenting the Mercian ruler as a just king who fulfilled his royal obligations.¹¹³ After the assassination of Æthelred in Northumbria, Alcuin complained to Offa, noting that the diplomatic gifts intended for the northern court sent by Charlemagne were withdrawn due to the Frankish king's ire at the treachery of the aristocrats who were "worse than pagans"—which was saying a lot considering the blame placed previously on non-Christians.¹¹⁴

Alcuin sets the Northumbrian desolation before Offa's eyes: "Behold the most holy places laid waste by pagans, the altars defiled with broken oaths, the monasteries violated by adultery, the land stained with the blood of lords and princes."¹¹⁵ Alcuin's point in this appeal was to convince Offa to "diligently correct your people from their corrupt ways and instruct them in the commandments of God, lest the homeland given to us by God be destroyed because of the people's sins," lest the same fate befall Mercia.¹¹⁶

Sadly, for Alcuin, Offa's achievements unravelled beginning with his decision to execute the king of the East Angles in 794, which led to armed occupation of the south under the overlordship of Mercia. After Offa died on July 26 or 29, 796, his son and successor, Ecgrith, reigned for only 141 days, then died suddenly. In retrospect, Alcuin interpreted this dynastic misfortune (as one might expect) as God's punishment for Offa's brutal policies of murdering rivals and kin to ensure that his son would reign alone and

112 "Non quod tibi aliquid desit a sapientissimis et optimis parentibus ammonitionis necessariae, quorum honestatis exempla populo praedicamenta sunt salutis." Alcuin, *Ep.* 61, ed. Dümmler, pp. 104–5, lines 32–33 and 1.

113 "Vos estis decus Britanniae, tuba praedicationis, gladius contra hostes, scutum contra inimicos." Alcuin, *Ep.* 64, ed. Dümmler, p. 107, lines 13–14.

114 "peiozem eam paganis estimans." Alcuin, *Ep.* 101, ed. Dümmler, p. 147, lines 10–16.

115 "Ecce loca sanctissima a paganis vastata, altaria periuriis foedata, monasteria adulteriis violata, terra sanguine dominorum et principum infecta." Alcuin, *Ep.* 101, ed. Dümmler, p. 147, lines 20–21.

116 "Tu vero, sapientissime populi Dei gubernator, diligentissime a perversis moribus corrige gentem tuam et in praeceptis Dei erudi illam, ne propter peccata populi destruaturs patria nobis a Deo data." Alcuin, *Ep.* 101, ed. Dümmler, p. 147, lines 28–30.

uncontested. Instead, his vast kingdom was taken up by a magnate, Coenwulf, who claimed (perhaps falsely) distant relation to the dead king.¹¹⁷ The change in regime may have threatened Alcuin's standing at the Mercian court, and he saw within his lifetime an end to any hopes for the kind of just kingship in England that he found and wrote about in Francia.¹¹⁸ Coenwulf's reign outlasted Alcuin (d. 804), and so we do not know if the Mercian king lived up to the Yorkish cleric's hopes. By the last years of the century Alcuin's eyes had turned back toward the Continent.

The Sights and Smells of Disastrous Rule

Carolingian writers measured the success of kingship not only in laws or victories but in the sights, smells, and conditions of the spaces that made up the Christian empire. Just as illuminated gardens and flowing fountains could serve as rhetorical images of right rule, so too could their opposites—dilapidated, defiled, and foul-smelling holy places—function as warnings of disastrous governance. Here we encounter Alcuin's imagery of filth and disrepair, reading it within the same grammar of kingship that produced heavenly images like those *fons vitae* images discussed above: both paradise and ruin, blossom and stench, belonged to the same symbolic language of ecological sovereignty.

Alcuin saw in Charlemagne the closest approximation of the just king whom nature affirmed and obeyed. Although the eighth- and ninth-century associations between the Frankish ruler and Old Testament figures like Moses, David, and Solomon are many, even Charlemagne did not escape all of Alcuin's warnings. In a missive to the Frankish king in 798 (the well-known "two swords" letter), Alcuin praised the king:

Most beloved and honourable defender and ruler of the churches of Christ, let the venerable zeal of your most holy wisdom encourage some by admonition, correct others by rebuke, and instruct still others in the disciplines of life—so that, becoming all things to all people, you may deserve to gain from all an everlasting reward, and may appear glorious in the sight of the Lord your God, accompanied by a great and praiseworthy multitude of people.¹¹⁹

117 Kirby, *The Earliest English Kings*, 147–48.

118 Bullough, *Alcuin*, 442.

119 "Nec enim hoc solis sacerdotibus vel clericis audiendum ibi arbitreris, sed etiam bonis laicis, et bene in opere Dei laborantibus dicendum esse credas; et maxime his, qui in sublimioribus positi sunt saeculi dignitatibus, quorum conversatio bona et vitae sanctitas et ammonitoria aeternae salutis verba suis subiectis praedicatio

And yet, in the same letter, Alcuin notes caustically that in Francia “We have also seen, in some places, the altars of God negligently left without a roof, befouled with bird droppings or the urine of dogs.”¹²⁰ Mary Albieri sees in this contradictory conclusion to an otherwise straightforward letter a concrete example of Alcuin’s wishes that Charlemagne listen to his bishops on how the church should be administered.¹²¹ In fact, Alcuin’s charge (*vidimus* – we have seen) reads less as a case for episcopal autonomy than as a report that the clergy were neglecting their sovereign’s commands. For by this time, Charlemagne had demonstrated a particular concern with the roofing of churches and their general upkeep under royal purview in his own kingdom and abroad, having promised to Pope Hadrian materials to replace the roof of St. Peter’s in Rome in the 780s.¹²²

As part of the Frankish reaction to Byzantine Iconoclasm in the early 790s, Theodulf of Orléans prepared for Charlemagne’s court a response to the Second Council of Nicaea (787) known as the *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum* (The work of King Charles against the Synod). Several times in this lengthy theological treatise Theodulf criticizes the Byzantines for having allowed their shrines and holy places, and especially their roofs, to fall into disrepair.¹²³ Michael McCormick notes the sarcasm in Theodulf’s response that Charlemagne “did not need lessons about honouring churches from an empire in which many shrines lacked not only lighting and incense but even roofs.”¹²⁴ At the Council of Frankfurt in 794 (the previously discussed large assembly that met to discuss the Byzantine controversy, among other topics), Charlemagne looked to the churches of his own realm, commanding:

poterit esse...Quapropter, dilectissime et honorande ecclesiarum Christi defensor et rector, tuae sanctissimae sapientiae venerabile studium alios ammonendo exhortetur, alios castigando corrigit, alios vitae disciplinis erudiat; ut, omnibus omnia factus, ex omnibus mercedem habere merearis perpetuam; ut cum magna et laudabili populorum multitudine gloriosus in conspectu domini Dei tui appareas.” Alcuin, *Ep. 136*, ed. Dümmler, p. 209, lines 1–5, 7–12. For a close reading of this letter, see Albieri, “The Sword Which You Hold in Your Hand,” 117–32.

120 “Vidimus quoque aliquibus in locis neglegenter altaria Dei absque tecto, avium stercoribus vel canum mictu fedata.” Alcuin, *Ep. 136*, ed. Dümmler, p. 210, lines 14–15. Translation from Allott, *Alcuin of York*, 82.

121 Albieri, “The Sword Which You Hold in Your Hand,” 130–31.

122 McCormick, *Charlemagne’s Survey of the Holy Land: Wealth*, 148.

123 Theodulf, *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum*, ed. Freeman, p. 494, lines 33–37 and p. 495, lines 1–6.

124 McCormick, *Charlemagne’s Survey of the Holy Land*, 147–48.

Let the buildings of churches and their roofs be repaired or restored by those who hold benefits from them. And wherever it is found by trustworthy men that timber, stones, or tiles that belonged to church buildings are now in someone's private home, all such materials are to be returned and restored to the church from which they were taken.¹²⁵

Later in an 807 capitulary, Charlemagne ordered his *missi* to reexamine this question, focusing in particular on churches and their roofs, cataloguing the information in an inventory and swearing to the accuracy of their assessment.¹²⁶ McCormick detects in this command the king's voice as an "experienced administrator" because in practical terms a roof must be tended to before anything else in a dilapidated building.¹²⁷

Yet the capitulary is also evidence of a trope in texts produced for and in the vicinity of Charlemagne that saw in solid roofs a sign of right repair and functioning of a church or holy site. And if, as de Jong argues, Charlemagne's empire was imagined as *ecclesia* (a large church), the status of its roofs and coverings very much mattered as a manifestation of the realm's wellbeing.¹²⁸ Therefore, on the surface Alcuin's observation, bizarrely placed in a reply for a technical question on exegesis, reveals perhaps the potential for untidy habits to take hold and eat away at Charlemagne's authority and the prosperity of his kingdom.

Alcuin's chosen language is uncannily evocative of his earlier communication to Offa, in which he lamented the Northumbrian "holiest places" that had been defiled (*foedata*) by perjury and stained with blood, while the Frankish altars had been befouled (*fedata*), by bird excrement and dog

125 "Ut domus ecclesiarum et tegumenta ab eis fiant emendata vel restaurata, qui beneficia exinde habent. Et ubi repertum fuerit per veraces homines, quod lignamen et petras sive tegulas, qui in domus ecclesiarum fuerint et modo in domo sua habeat, omnia in ecclesia fiant restaurata, unde abstracte fuerunt." *Capitulare Francofurtense*, in *Concilia aevi Karolini*, ed. Werminghoff, p. 169, lines 4–7.

126 "Volumus itaque atque praecipimus, ut missi nostri per singulos pagos praevidere studeant omnia beneficia quae nostri et aliorum homines habere videntur, quomodo restaurata sint post annunciationem nostram sive destructa. Primum de ecclesiis, quomodo structae aut destructae sint in tectis, in maceriis sive parietibus sive in pavimentis necnon in pictura etiam et in luminariis sive officiis... Qualiter autem sit, hoc unusquisque vicarius singulis comitatibus in suo ministerio simul cum nostris missis praevideat, et sicut ipse hoc coniurare valeat, totum sicut invenerit in brevem mittat, et ipsos breves nobis deferant." *Capitula de causis diversis*, in *Capitularia regum Francorum*, ed. Boretius, 1:136, lines 9–13, at 16–19.

127 McCormick, *Charlemagne's Survey of the Holy Land*, 147.

128 de Jong, "Charlemagne's Church," 106.

urine.¹²⁹ Perhaps Alcuin buried in such feculent imagery his dire fears about the same fate looming over the Frankish kingdom. If the clergy who oversaw these holy sites neglected their roofs, and if the *missi* who were to report on their statuses to the king faltered in their duties, their failure reflected on Charlemagne and represented a breakdown in his authority. Such oblique criticism may have been safer than openly accusing Charlemagne of the same negligence that led to devastation in Britain.

In this case defiled and dirty churches both revealed a lack of Charlemagne's oversight as the ruler of the Christian empire and presented an opportunity (e.g., the restoring of roofs) to exercise sovereignty via supervision of environments. Alcuin's mention of unroofed holy sites and urinating dogs and defecating birds was more than a curious one-off remark. The inability of the Frankish king to maintain his churches and control these animals (and their inappropriate excretions) disrupted the harmony of Charlemagne's ordered garden-empire. Dilapidated churches and incontinent beasts were an early warning sign that things were not as they should be, that Charlemagne was not behaving rightly—i.e., listening to and (when appropriate) correcting his clergy.

If the lush, ordered gardens of the *fons vitae* manuscripts (see above, Figures 1 and 2) discussed in the Introduction offered an ekphrasis of just rule—an image where obedient animals, verdant growth, clear waters, and sweet fragrance displayed the righteous harmony of the Carolingian paradise—then Alcuin's descriptions of bird-droppings and dog urine upon neglected altars provided their rhetorical counterpart, an anti-ekphrasis of disastrous rule. The same grammar applied, but with reversed signs: where blossoms once proclaimed divine favour, foul smells marked divine displeasure; where sturdy roofs had symbolized protection and stability, leaking timbers signalled neglect and disorder.

In this inversion, Alcuin demonstrated that the Carolingian garden was never a neutral backdrop but a stage on which sovereignty was constantly judged by its material and sensory conditions. The rhetoric of filth thus belonged to the same "rulebook" of kingship as the rhetoric of paradise, showing that in the Carolingian grammar of rule a flourishing garden was proof of sovereignty, while a stinking ruin was proof of its failure.

129 Alcuin's letter to Offa above. This is a variant spelling of the same word.

Conclusion

Alcuin's letter reiterates that Carolingian ecological sovereignty rested on both natural and built environments; as with hunting game parks, the intersection of these areas revealed the ruler's precarious sovereignty most clearly. Alcuin's conviction that Charlemagne could succeed if he acted accordingly is patently clear in his letters and other writings. It is in these other works that Alcuin's notions of good kingship most clearly merge with the ideal of just rule in the person of Charlemagne himself. But how could a king inculcate these sentiments in himself and into the kingdom at large? It turns out that this very question shaped the development of some of the most foundational "reform" documents of the Carolingian Empire and led to a renewed focus on Genesis commentaries.