

INTRODUCTION

AT ITS GREATEST territorial extent, the Carolingian Empire stretched from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Elbe River, and its rulers attempted to impose imperial hegemony onto politically autonomous and locally powerful regions. What I refer to in this book as Carolingian “ecological sovereignty,” the way in which these rulers and their elite contemporaries imagined the natural world as part of the Frankish imperial order, emerged from a theological understanding of empire and self-conscious sense of place in both historical and salvific time. This mode of governance grew from the Carolingian theological vision of a Christian empire situated within the sweep of salvation history. The alignment of church and court was expressed through *correctio*, an unevenly shared commitment to reform and regulation. That same logic informed how Carolingians conceived of their surroundings: nature, bodies, and spaces alike were subject to correction so that they might participate in redemption. For Charlemagne, the first Carolingian emperor, and his successors, a world thus “redeemed” became both a reservoir of power and a mirror of their divine authority.

Of course we should pause over the very vocabulary of *correctio*, for as Carine van Rhijn and others have shown, the categories of “reform,” “renaissance,” and even *correctio* itself are far less stable in the Carolingian sources than modern scholarship often assumes. The dominant image of a court-driven, top-down movement centred on kings, capitularies, and a narrow intellectual elite rests on traditionalist assumptions that continue to structure modern analysis. Manuscript study reveals a much broader field of participation, including the “mostly anonymous inhabitants of the Carolingian world [who] were no mere passive recipients of royal prescriptions or admonishments. They were active agents who shaped and reshaped the ideas and ideals of their world.”¹ At the heart of Carolingian cultural activity was not improvement for its own sake but *for salvation*. Van Rhijn identifies “the single most important idea that inspired the flourishing of Carolingian culture from the later eighth century onwards”: that “God’s own people, no

¹ van Rhijn, “Introduction,” 2–3.

matter their position or place in the world, should strive to lead Christian lives and shine with virtue in the eyes of their stern God in order to reach the Kingdom of Heaven.”² Improvement was therefore teleological; education, knowledge, and moral discipline were meaningful because they served that salvific horizon. *Correctio* then more often referred to individual moral amendment rather than structural transformation. Such a culture of shared responsibility extended well beyond a royal court which mattered enormously but did not operate in imperious isolation.

As members of this imagined community, Carolingian elite cast themselves as labouring lords in a fallen world, preparing both empire and environment for Christ’s return. They believed renewal would not simply restore creation but transform it into something greater, and so their projects of reform, whether in worship, doctrine, or land use were part of the same redemptive work. The tasks of cultivating fields and reaping souls were both economic necessities and spiritual obligations, a way of pruning corruption and progressing toward but never achieving perfection. In this vision, Charlemagne became a new Adam,³ charged with stewardship of an earthly paradise yet ultimately only a forerunner to the final restoration that Christ alone could bring.

This model fits within what can in modern terms be labelled an “inclusive exclusion” because nature was simultaneously marked as something to be disciplined and set apart.⁴ Agamben’s concept of inclusive exclusion helps explain for us how Carolingian understandings of nature, labour, and sovereignty adorned *their* sense of eschatological time. For Agamben, inclusive exclusion describes how certain forms of life are brought into the domain of power only by being set outside its protections, as with the *homo sacer*, the sacred man, who in ancient Roman law was included in the political order only by his exclusion; a figure who may be killed but not sacrificed. Agamben uses this figure to lay out the foundational paradox of sovereignty. In other words, the man’s life was politically significant precisely through his exclusion from rights.⁵ In the context of Carolingian renewal, nature itself is subjected to a similar logic: it is not abandoned or destroyed but subordinated and sanctified through its exclusion from perfection.

2 van Rhijn, “Introduction,” 3.

3 For Paul Dutton’s groundbreaking labelling of Charlemagne as the “New Adam,” see *Charlemagne’s Mustache*, 57, 63.

4 This is a term coined by Agamben, *Homo sacer*, trans. Heller-Roazen, 8.

5 Agamben, *Homo sacer*, trans. Heller-Roazen, 11–13, 22–23.

The natural world, marred by sin and marked as fallen, is drawn into the orbit of Carolingian ecological sovereignty not as a pure object of salvation but as a site of provisional labour, always tending toward but never achieving Edenic restoration, for only Christ could perfect this. Carolingian efforts to prune, cultivate, and “improve” the land are premised on nature’s imperfection, which must be corrected but can never be fully redeemed without Christ’s return. In this way, nature is included in the sacred project of salvation precisely as what must be excluded from perfection until the eschaton. It is a theological ecology shaped by inclusive exclusion. Charlemagne’s role as a quasi-Adamic king reveals how this logic extends to human sovereignty itself: he embodies and directs the labour of redemption, but his very imperfection points beyond itself, anticipating the true and final redeemer.

These themes clearly resonate in one of the most striking poetic evocations of the Frankish ruler at the zenith of his power working to order the human and nonhuman elements of creation into paradisaical order beginning at the still under-construction imperial capital at Aachen. Although only a fragment of this work, *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa* (Charlemagne and Pope Leo) survives, we glimpse in its lines the newly crowned Roman emperor heralded in maximum hyperbolic, imperial magnificence.⁶ The poem’s audience was meant to envision Charlemagne as both a new

6 The debate over the dating and authorship of the poem has a long and vital history nicely delineated by Stella, “Autore e attribuzioni del ‘Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa,’” 19–22. Two dominant theories of authorship are most frequently cited. The first, put forth by Dieter Schaller, relies on a structural and thematic reading of the poem’s Virgilian nature, and suggests that Einhard wrote the poem sometime in the first years of the ninth century. Schaller, *Studien zur lateinischen Dichtung des Frühmittelalters*, 158–63. Christine Ratkowitsch instead explores the stylistic links between the eclogues of Moduin (ca. 770–840) and *Karolus Magnus*. Ratkowitsch, *Karolus Magnus—alter Aeneas, alter Martinus, alter Iustinus*, 60–76. Francesco Stella demonstrates that the case for Moduin’s authorship is more plausible: see above, and also Stella, “Autor und Zuschreibungen des sog. ‘Karolus Magnus et Leo papa,’” 155–75. Helene Scheck has argued persuasively that *Karolus Magnus* was written by a woman—most likely Charlemagne’s cousin Gundrada—who studied with the great poets of Charlemagne’s era at the royal court. That Gundrada wrote it rather than her sisters Rodtrud or Theodrada, or even Charlemagne’s sister Gisla, is suggested by the fact that *Karolus Magnus* omits any mention of Louis the Pious, even when he was involved in historical events the poem described. Scheck thinks this striking omission related to Louis’ “purging” of the court of Charlemagne’s daughters after their father’s death. In any case—Einhard, Moduin, or Gundrada—authoring post-dates the events of 799, and the events described were both recalled from memory and modelled on Latin poetic styles and structures. The author was connected intimately to Charlemagne’s court and poets. Scheck, “Nuns on Parade,” 24–32.

Aeneas⁷ (the mythical founder of ancient Rome who had escaped from conquered Troy), and a new King David, a “beacon of Europe” whose “name is broadcast to the stars,” and comparable to (even surpassing!) the brightness of the sun itself, whose “great love” “illumines the earth.”⁸ From the palace’s high place overseeing and directing the construction of various works, Charlemagne commanded the hewing of stones and extracting the labour of men for the construction of the walls of a “Rome to come”:

From afar the pious Charles stands upon the citadel,
Marking out each site and laying the lofty walls of the Rome to come.
He commands that there be a sacred forum and, by right, a senate—
A place where the people may take up justice, law, and holy decrees.
A busy cohort is set to work: one part shapes stones fit for rigid columns,
Another raises the citadel high into the air;
Still others strive to roll boulders with their hands,
They dig out harbours and lay the deep foundations of a theater,
Enclosing halls with lofty domes.
Meanwhile others labour to uncover the warm springs of baths,
Opening great bathhouses that boil of their own accord,
And they set splendid seats with marble steps.⁹

The labourers bearing stones and fitting marble slabs together were surrounded by the noise of the city that hammered the air—wagons and an industrious legion of people working, while others forged iron for cutting more marble and rocks—while, busy as bees (evoking the labourers in Dido’s Carthage from the *Aeneid*), the Franks worked to construct Charlemagne’s city:

7 On the new Aeneas, see: Stella, “Autore e attribuzioni del ‘Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa,’” 23.

8 “Europae quo celsa pharus cum luce coruscat. / Spargit ad astra suum Karolus rex nomen opimum; / Sol nitet ecce suis radiis: sic denique David / Inlustrat magno pietatis lumine terras!” *Karolus Magnus et Leo Papa*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 60, lines 12–15 (hereafter, *KMLP*). Translation from Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, 199.

9 “Roma secunda...Stat pius arce procul Karolus loca singula signans / Altaque disponens venturae moenia Romae. / His iubet esse forum sanctum quoque iure senatum, / Ius populi et leges ubi sacraque iussa capessant. / Insistitque operosa cohors; pars apta columnis / Saxa secat rigidis, ercem molitur in altum; / Ast alii rupes manibus subvolvere certant, / Effodiunt portus, statuuntque profunda theatri / Fundamenta, tholis includunt atria celsis. / His alii thermas calidas reperire laborant, / Balnea sponte sua ferventia mole recludunt, / Marmoreis gradibus speciosa sedilia pangunt.” *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 66, lines 94. 97–108. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

The wagons give off their noise; a mighty crash strikes the sky,
 A clamor rises, a great din swells in the city.
 The busy cohort comes and goes, spread throughout the city,
 Eagerly gathering the materials for lofty Rome.
 Meanwhile, others prepare useful sharpened iron—
 By which marble may be sculpted and stone may be cut.
 The work boils with energy; just as in summer
 Bees, mindful of the winter to come,
 Gather fine provisions with their mouths, plucking little blossoms—
 Through clear streams and thyme they fly with buzzing wings,
 Some alight on flowers, and strive to return
 With their plunder in tow, revisiting their fragrant camp.
 Some strive to raise up their growing brood,
 Others arrange their nectar-filled cells in order,
 Packing dewy honey in their bended thighs.
 Just so do the Franks roam through the broad city.¹⁰

No other text from Charlemagne's era came close to describing the building work of a city in such vivid detail, adding to the "epic" character of the poem's subject and the imperial city as a "second Rome."¹¹

The poetry of Charlemagne's courtiers after the imperial coronation in 800 evinced a new self-awareness of their geopolitical significance, spiritual responsibilities, and about the "political character and cultural purpose of their own writing." Seen in this light, the construction of Aachen became a "symbol for the *imperium* established by a second but mightier Aeneas."¹² The poet's tableau of industry and manufacture in the building and daily hubbub of Aachen illustrates the exploitative relationship between the Franks and the natural world, characterized by the harvesting of raw materials from the earth and their employment in the fabrication of an un-natural space

10 "Plaustraque dant sonitum; vastus fragor aethera pulsat, / Fit strepitus, magna consurgit stridor in urbe, / Itque reditque operosa cohors, diffusa per urbem, / Materiam Romae certatim congregat altae. / His alii parant acuentes utile ferrum, Marmora quo possunt sculpi et quo saxa secari. / Fervet opus; velutique solent aestate futurae / Pulchra hiemis non inmemores alimenta ciborum / Cum facere, ore legunt carpentes floscula apesque / Per latices, per thima volant stridentibus alis, / Floribus insidunt aliae praedaeque redire / Accepta studeant, redolentia castra revisant / Aut foetus aliae certant educere adultos / Aut cum nectareas componunt ordine cellas / Roscida stipantes sinuoso poplite mella; Haud aliter lata Franci spatiantur in urbe." *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 68, lines 121–36.

11 Schaller, *Studien zur lateinischen Dichtung des Frühmittelalters*, 169–70.

12 Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, 24.

that paradoxically symbolized a “natural” Frankish hegemony and Aachen’s place as a new imperial capital.

Yet in the poet’s descriptions the nonhuman environment structured their capital as much as did the din of human activity. We learn that:

Not far away, there is a grove on high ground and pleasant green thickets—
A verdant wood near the city, and fresh meadows with running streams
Lie at its centre, enclosed all around by many walls.¹³

In this enclosure adjacent to the city:

Here, every kind of bird flutters about the stream...
And near these grassy banks, a herd of stags grazes...
The glade, uncovered by foliage, lies open; and throughout these woods,
Every kind of wild beast lies hidden.¹⁴

Here these creatures were provided with a sheltered place for roaming and eating, encouraged to live and dwell. And here Charlemagne hunted them.¹⁵ The enclosure was a game park, well-watered and surrounded by walls meant to keep creatures within as much as to keep anyone without entering.¹⁶ Very likely the game park lay within the Ardennes Forest that in Charlemagne’s era extended up to Aachen itself. The palace therefore occupied a “liminal position...between settled, cultivated lands to the north and east, and the relatively raised and wilder land to the south,” a position that allowed its ruler to straddle worlds both urban and rural.¹⁷ As with the city’s labourers, the enclosure made legible the hierarchies delineating the Frankish ruler from those beings whose life and actions made the capital and the game park at Aachen; nonetheless, Charlemagne’s role was not one of simple domination. Both scenes highlighted town and forest as built environments that symbolically and materially supported Charlemagne’s capital,

13 “Non procul excelsa nemus est et amoena virecta / Lucus ab urbe virens et prata recentia rivis / Obtinet in medio, multis circumscita muris.” *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 68, lines 137–39. Translation from Godman, *Poetry of the Carolingian Renaissance*, 205.

14 “Hic amnem circumvolitat genus omne volucrum...Hosque toros iuxta cervorum pascitur agmen...Fronde resecta vacat; passim genus omne ferarum / His latet in silvis.” *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 68, line 140; p. 70, lines 144, 147–48.

15 “Hic pater adsidue Karolus, venerabilis heros, / Exercere solet gratos per gramina ludos.” *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 70, lines 149–50.

16 Schaller, *Studien zur lateinischen Dichtung des Frühmittelalters*, 171–73.

17 Rollason, “Forests, Parks, Palaces, and the Power of Place in Early Medieval Kingship,” 431–32.

and whose management demonstrated sovereignty. The poet's Charlemagne was both part of this imagined ecosystem and above it, participating in the enactment of life and supervising its operation.

Aachen, whose construction this poem and its author, the Paderborn Poet, so vividly evoked, was a reimagined earthly paradise, and as such, stands as a microcosm for the Frankish realm, the quintessence of Charlemagne's empire as a "good garden of Carolingian civilization": an imperial capital where its ruler demonstrated sovereignty by the management and domination of worlds both built and natural.¹⁸ The word "paradise" descends etymologically from the game parks that the Achaemenid Persian emperors had maintained. Accreting meaning for the Franks via Greek and Roman interlocutors, the keeping of such reserves, their management of animals and of all hunting within, defined imperial authority in both the ancient Mediterranean and in early medieval Europe.¹⁹

Charters and capitularies from the time reflect Charlemagne's vision of his royal role as both sustainer and taker of life through control over wilderness resources. By claiming ownership of wild animals and restricting hunting rights to designated areas, Charlemagne not only preserved game for royal use but also redefined the forest as a space of sovereign privilege, where the king alone regulated access to life-giving sustenance and the right to kill. Eric Goldberg draws our attention to a dramatic surge in the creation of charters on this topic issued as a departure from Merovingian norms that underscored Charlemagne's authority to categorize and command the natural world. He urges us to examine such encounters among human and non-human actors as containing "encoded messages about sovereignty, political authority, and power."²⁰

Karolus Magnus reveals the interplay between obligations to keep alive and license to kill the creatures inside this "paradise" through its depiction of the royal hunt. Charlemagne, along with an entourage that included his wife, sons, and daughters, arrived at a forest adjacent to the city, pursuing trackers as their hounds chased a particularly elusive and ferocious brown boar.²¹ The scene is worth examining in close detail, for it reveals how Charlemagne's authority was based in part on both the preservation and the

18 Paul Edward Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, 57, 63.

19 Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History*, 35–37.

20 Goldberg, *In the Manner of the Franks*, 72–78, 11.

21 *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 78, lines 267–79.

taking of life in this game park. On the heels of the hounds, the party chased the boar, which hid in shadowy thickets and dense shrubbery:

Here one wanders, deceived by the scent, through the shadowy thickets;
 Another wheels about from this glade to that.
 One has seen the prey, the other scents its fleeting trace.
 A clamour arises, a great din issues from the depths of the woods,
 And the trumpet fires the brave Molossian hounds to fierce battle.
 The savage boar charges forward with menacing tusk,
 And shaken, the leaves fall from the tall trees all around.
 Through the vast wilderness he flees, carving his path
 With swift, relentless flight through trackless places,
 Gnashing as he cuts through the mountain heights.
 Spent by the chase, panting, he halts with weary feet.
 Now he readies weapons of death against the dogs and the pursuing crowd;
 And tosses the raging Molossians with his dreadful snout.²²

When chance, wile, and sheer ferocity seemed to allow the beast to take flight, the opportunity for Charlemagne to perform his role as nature's sovereign had arrived:

Presently father Charles himself charges into their midst.
 Faster than a flying bird he pierces with his sword the beast's
 Breast and drives cold iron through its heart.
 The boar crashes down, vomiting out its lifeblood
 And rolls over in yellow sand as it dies.²³

Any one of the hunters could have slaughtered the boar, but the carefully choreographed scene demanded that Charlemagne do it. In this moment, he stood above the party as both the preserver of the game park and the culler of its inhabitants. In this violent enactment of power, Charlemagne's

22 "Errat hic umbrosis delusus odore frutectis, / Alter in alterius hinc saltibus inde rotatur; / Ille vidit, hic praedam sentit odore fugacem. / Fit strepitus, silvis consurgit stridor in imis, / Et tuba magnanimos incendit ad acra molosos / Proelia. Dirus aper quo se fert dente minaci, / Arboribusque excussa cadunt folia undique ab altis: / Per loca vasta fugit rapidoque per invia cursu / Tendit iter, frendens teret alta cacumina montis; / Cursibus exhaustus lasso pede constat anhelus. / Iam parat arma necis canibus turbamque sequacem / Sternit et horrendo rabidos rotat ore molosos." *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 78, lines 282–26, 80, lines 287–91.

23 "Mox Karolus pater ipse volat ense ferinum / Pectus et intinguens gelidum in praecordia ferrum. / Corruit ille, vomens vitam cum sanguine mixto, / In flava moriens seseque volutat harena." *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 80, lines 294–98. Translation from Goldberg, "Louis the Pious and the Hunt," 621.

sovereignty became clear to all the living human and nonhuman entities in his presence.

The chase was not between boar and Charlemagne alone, but rather involved all the Franks who accompanied him, their hunting dogs, the trees whose presence and silence obstructed and guided both hunter and prey, and even the rough terrain—the desolate place through which it fled and the impassable trail that slowed the boar’s escape.²⁴ The pursuit and slaying of the boar was an example of what I call Carolingian ecological sovereignty, an inclusive exclusion that reverberated from their theological understandings of a Christian empire and a sense of their location (and role) in historical and salvific time. The entangling of Frankish church and Carolingian state reflected the amalgamation of Carolingian theology and politics according to shared (although not uniform) goals of *correctio*, the pursuit of “correct” religious doctrines and practices—and therefore in the salvation and proper management of bodies and spaces. For Charlemagne and his successors, a “redeemed” nature was both a source of power and a reflection of their divine authority.

This is a story of the Carolingian elite living in anticipation of Christ’s return and working to prepare the earth for that event. Carolingian theologians read in both Old and New Testaments not that creation would be restored to its former state at the Second Coming, but that through Christ all things would be made new. It was a renewal—a regeneration, more perfect even than the first iteration. Carolingian efforts to “improve” their environment and their worship were part of the same reclamation project—a slow pruning to shape the empire into a more (but never quite) perfect garden. It rested on a sense of a “fallen” corrupted world that had to be redeemed by working to better it through proper Christian teachings and practice led by God’s agent of power on Earth: the Frankish king, supported by his bishops and magnates, and allied with Rome.

This distinction may be a fine one, but it is the difference between their envisioning nature as a *tabula rasa*²⁵ ready for development and seeing instead an environment manifesting the ecological consequences of sin, which needed to be ameliorated for both economic and spiritual reasons.

24 “Per loca vasta fugit...per invia cursu.” *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 80, line 289.

25 Lynn White argued that medieval Christianity, culture, and technology reshaped nature into a blank slate stripped of intrinsic value, turning it into raw material for human use and thereby laying the foundation for the modern ecological crisis. This view is surprisingly still prevalent among environmental histories. White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” 1203–6.

That improvement could take concrete form in the hard labour needed to work in the vineyards, fields, meadows, and pastures was appropriate, given the sin to be overcome. But for the Carolingians, only Christ himself could truly wipe clean the ledger of sins, restoring nature to a perfect condition—thus, the mission of taming the wild mapped onto salvific time as well. Although they could not return nature to its perfect state, humankind—and particularly the Christian king—had the duty to try. Charlemagne thus took up the mantle and tasks of Adam, Paradise’s fallen custodian, and of righteous Old Testament monarchs. He was, nevertheless, still an imperfect figure, whose role as a “new” Adam was meant to anticipate that of the final Adam, Christ himself.

We see one version of this process at work in the boar’s hunt and its treatment after the fact as the king distributed the animal’s flesh and trophies, offering them as booty to cheer his men and bind them to his cause, enacting symbolically what Timothy Reuter called “plundering-expeditions” that accompanied Frankish conquest and imperialism.²⁶ Then Charlemagne spoke to his companions with friendly words meant to solidify their bonds of shared combat:

Fortune has granted that we draw out this joyful day,
She nods favourably to the omens and blesses our endeavours.
Therefore, all of you, as we carry out this task—
Bring kindly care to the pursuit of the hunt!²⁷

The Paderborn poet wrote quite plainly that this “work”—the hunting—was what they should devote themselves to most zealously. Yet given that the hunt was at this point concluded, how should we understand Charlemagne’s words? What did the poet mean by exhorting the Franks to devote themselves to the “art of the hunt”? Was this merely the extolling of an aristocratic pastime, or a call to something more portentous?

The poet anticipates our questions, zooming out from the local scene to parallel the events of the hunt just outside Aachen to the larger Frankish realm. Hammering the point home for the reader with little subtlety, the poet connected the chase to Carolingian hegemony in wider Europe via the pursuit of not a wild animal but a “savage” people:

26 “Mox aliam Karolus praedam iubet inde movere.” *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 80, line 300. Reuter, “Plunder and Tribute in the Carolingian Empire,” 76–78, 80.

27 “Hanc fortuna diem nobis deducere laetam / Annuit auguriis et nostra incepta secundat; / Ergo favete omnes istum exercendo laborem, / Venandi studio curamque adhibete benignam!” *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 80, lines 302–5.

The hero himself returns to Saxony with many thousands;
 Hosts gather from the diverse quarters of the world,
 And kindred forces hasten over the steep banks of the Rhine
 To subdue the rebellious Saxon people
 And to rend the savage people with cold iron.²⁸

It was a deliberate choice to commemorate Charlemagne's imperial coronation, which was after all the main focus of the poem's composition, with a parallelism that yokes the Franks and "the art of the hunt" to the pursuit and slaughter of the unruly Saxons. Like the wild boar, this "savage people" were supposed to live or die according to Charlemagne's wishes within the larger imperial realm. It signified that this was a paradise to be managed and redeemed on a grander scale. As we shall see, Carolingian ecological sovereignty ensnared not only those animals designated as "game" for the king, but, as it was imagined and articulated by Charlemagne's courtiers and theologians, it implicated all the living human and nonhuman inhabitants of the Frankish realm in hierarchies of obedience and domination under Charlemagne's rule.

It is my argument in this book that Carolingian rulers demonstrated authority and potency through the exercise of sovereignty over "natural" spaces and animals. I broaden this scope beyond the hunting of animals to argue that Carolingian thinkers and writers—especially those courtier-theologians who surrounded Charlemagne during the latter quarter of the eighth century—imagined the empire itself as a kind of reserve or garden, one whose living inhabitants their rulers sought to control and cull, according to their belief in a divine mandate to redeem and tame the natural world. It is this tension between Charlemagne as a sovereign who both preserved life and took lives that the *Karolus Magnus* poem highlighted so clearly, and that informs my arguments in what follows.

But Carolingian control over the human and nonhuman inhabitants of the empire supported Carolingian claims of sovereignty just as effectively as violence did. This ecological sovereignty helps explain how the exercise of power over the people, animals, and plants of Francia legitimated Carolingian claims of imperial hegemony over bodies and spaces in Europe. The *Karolus* poet illustrates how the Franks claimed sovereignty over the living and non-living members of local, regional, and imperial spaces at a

28 "ipse / Saxoniam repetit cum multis milibus heros. / Agmina conveniunt diversis partibus orbis, / Cognataeque acies properant super ardua Rheni / Litora, Saxonum populum domitare rebellem / Et saevum gelido gentem rescindre ferro." *KMLP*, ed. Beumann et al., p. 82, lines 336–41.

time when these took on a distinctly Carolingian flavour. Michel Foucault once argued that in modern times political sovereignty was no longer defined by the power to kill alone, but it was located in “taking charge of life,” because “more than the threat of death...[that] gave power its access even to the body.”²⁹ The artifacts of Charlemagne’s empire (and medieval records generally) reveal premodern and modern articulations of political sovereignty—between the state as taker of life and manager of living beings—were not so disparate as Foucault’s formulation suggested.³⁰ That is not to say that the threat and exercise of violence were not constituent to early medieval European politics. They were. But like many premodern rulers in Eurasia, Charlemagne demonstrated sovereignty in the control *and* supervision of subservient human and nonhuman living beings as much as he did in other ways.³¹

This book examines how Carolingian thinkers and writers near Charlemagne around the turn of the ninth century imagined themselves both within nature and as masters of its human and nonhuman populations. A tension between real and ideal characterized the Carolingians’ conception of and engagement with the natural world and their perceived relationship between the people and the land. Answers to these larger questions become apparent through careful analysis of late eighth- and early ninth-century Carolingian theological and clerical texts by courtier-theologians Wigbod (ca. 780s) and Alcuin of York (ca. 781–804), as well as through study of Carolingian ideological documents that circulated widely among Carolingian *literati*.

As we shall see, Wigbod’s and Alcuin’s roles set them apart as a new kind of courtier-theologian: figures legitimated by their biblical knowledge and spiritual authority, which lent them real political import in Charlemagne’s inner circle. In Carolingian political culture the court advisor was an agent of admonition, a trusted insider who could use proximity to the ruler to offer moral correction and counsel. Along with bishops and other clerics, they were expected to warn against injustice, correct misconduct, and report abuses to the king, who was in turn expected to heed such correction. While some, like Alcuin, felt at times secure enough to directly critique Charlemagne’s actions, more often the courtier-theologian’s advisory culture operated through carefully coded forms of criticism, indirect

²⁹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 141–43.

³⁰ McCracken, *In the Skin of a Beast*, 29–30.

³¹ Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History*, 147.

counsel grounded in spiritual or moral precedents.³² In these Carolingian texts, outward- and inward-looking statements of collective aspirations for “correct” religious beliefs and practices shine through. Indeed, there and elsewhere Carolingian texts explicitly link good fortune, the chance for bountiful agricultural yields and hopes for tranquil weather, with good rule and obedience to the sovereign, who ruled over all with the advice of his bishops. Then (as now) the ecological was political—but this only becomes apprehensible through peeling back the layers of Carolingian theological discourses of power and nature to find their intersections with politics, law, and everyday life.

In the remainder of this introduction, I address four interrelated lines of inquiry. First, I situate Carolingian ecological sovereignty as a dimension of Carolingian kingship, in which authority over the natural world was inseparable from authority over human communities. Second, I locate Carolingian and early medieval environmental history within the broader field of environmental history, a field in which this period has often been marginalized or unevenly treated. Third, I consider the methodological problem posed by the sources themselves: the overwhelmingly formulaic, normative, and prescriptive character of the surviving evidence, which requires careful reflection on how historians can employ such materials to reconstruct Carolingian conceptions of and interactions with the environment. Fourth, I circle back to Carolingian thinkers and how they reimagined Adam as a model for Charlemagne’s role in ordering both society and the natural world. Rather than Paul Dutton’s “new Adam,” Charlemagne functioned more as a “penultimate Adam,” one who could not restore creation to perfection but who could reshape it through *correctio* in anticipation of Christ. Finally, I conclude with an outline for the book.

Kingship, Empire, and Carolingian Ecological Sovereignty

It was the Carolingian conquests in the later eighth century and ruling elites’ attempts to react to crises and events that began to bring about what historians have labelled the “Carolingian Empire.” But I contend that after 789 (following the issuance of the *Admonitio generalis*—the “constitution” of the Carolingian reform program) glimpses of the ideologies of Charlemagne’s empire began to emerge, and these were deeply involved in what becomes Carolingian ecological sovereignty, well underway by the

32 van Renswoude, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech*, 180–81, 190–91, 184–86.

later eighth century. These visions of authority justified and made legible in the landscape Carolingian claims of authority and exercises of power, all rooted in *correctio*. Carolingian ecological sovereignty was meant to hold together a polity that does not always look like what we think an empire should be, in which the emperor could only rule by securing the buy-in of regional and local elites. Under Merovingian rule local aristocracies and the Frankish royal courts coexisted only in a loose association. Carolingian rulers, however, employed political ritual and the rhetoric of spiritual correction to bind local aristocrats to the court and the idea of Carolingian kingship.³³ Consequently, Carolingian sources on “natural” things and on humans’ relationship with ecologies express diverse perspectives while all work to aggrandize the ruler and portray Charlemagne as the lord and tamer of nature.

Expanding historical understanding of how imperial power works, I argue that Frankish sovereignty over vast territories depended on Carolingian environmental imaginings even as it was enforced by Carolingian armies. The later ninth-century Carolingian *renovatio*—the “revival” of Roman imperial ideologies—was rooted in a quest for correct, biblical authority and knowledge, and the redemption and domination of the natural world. For example, when Charlemagne brought “Roman” plants and symbols to Francia it was in service to those ideals.³⁴ Of course the sources used to study Carolingian reform reveal a tension between confidence and uncertainty. Reform texts present themselves as efforts to improve existing structures, yet they also expose deep anxiety about whether those efforts would succeed. Religious ideas and political action were closely intertwined in the Carolingian world, but belief was also personal and shaped by doubt as well as conviction. Public statements of religiosity were therefore not simply political performances. The legislative programs and narratives produced at court should instead be understood as appeals directed at individuals, encouraging them to reflect on their responsibilities within the Christian order rather than merely obey commands for institutional change.³⁵ Focusing on the key courtier-theologians surrounding Charlemagne at the turn of the ninth century opens one significant window onto how such individuals shaped and were shaped by these appeals.

33 Innes, “Charlemagne’s Government,” 86.

34 Blan, “Charlemagne’s Peaches,” 521–45.

35 Kramer, “The Problem(s) with the Carolingian Reform(s),” 26.

Because Carolingian politics and religion were inseparable, a Carolingian environmental history should be ecocritical and material in analysis, but ultimately theological. A “Carolingian” environmental history has to consider how Carolingian thinkers and writers reflected and considered themselves both within nature and as masters of its inhabitants, under God’s authority. Carolingian writers were closer to “nature” than the modern scholars studying them because their world was structured by different and very real constraints of geography, agriculture, and demography. At the same time, Carolingian writers’ worldview was hyper-anthropocentric, and they envisioned their kingdom and actions at the centre of a historical drama that began in the deep past of the Bible and would culminate in an apocalyptic near future.³⁶

This book focuses on the formative years of Carolingian imperialism at the end of the eighth and the beginning of the ninth century. Jennifer Davis refers to this early phase of the Carolingian Empire as “Charlemagne’s,” partially repurposing Heinrich Fichtenau’s statement that the ruler was the “centre (*Mittelpunkt*) of the whole kingdom.”³⁷ By this phrase Fichtenau implied that Charlemagne was something like “the decider” (to evoke a modern political phrase), who was flattered and cajoled by advisors playing on the king’s own sense of self-importance to achieve their ends. My arguments draw on many of the same sources that Fichtenau used, but I see a more active agency on Charlemagne’s part in the shaping of the Frankish realm, and I follow Davis in recognizing the Frankish ruler’s centrality to Carolingian power—he was the great distributor of land, wealth, plunder, and titles for whose attention other Frankish magnates vied.³⁸ Charlemagne and other Carolingian elites governed an empire *in fact* and learned on-the-fly how to articulate or justify it in their symbols and ideology. I add to this claim that Charlemagne and his advisors articulated their nascent imperial sovereign claims over vast territories by incorporating control and redemption of the natural world into their *ministerium*.

Charlemagne sought to arrange life on earth like that of the heavenly kingdom, according to an Augustinian notion of *ordo*, and sought to impose

36 As Paolo Delogu argues, the Carolingian conception of “nature” was the environment in which humans lived. Delogu, “L’ambiente altomedievale come tema storiografico,” 99.

37 Fichtenau, *The Carolingian Empire*, trans. Munz, 29–30; Fichtenau, *Das karolingische Imperium*, 38.

38 Davis, *Charlemagne’s Practice of Empire*, 19.

that arrangement on many Carolingian subjects.³⁹ For Augustine, *ordo* (Latin for “order”) was the idea that everything in creation has its proper place within God’s design. The universe, human society, and even a person’s inner life were meant to reflect a divinely established hierarchy and harmony. When things are in the right order, when love, desire, and action are directed first toward God and then toward other things in their appropriate measure, then life and community flourish. But when this order is disrupted, when people love lesser things more than higher ones (for example, wealth or power more than God), the result is disorder, sin, and conflict.⁴⁰

Mayke de Jong’s work has highlighted the Carolingian discourse of *ministerium*, a spiritual mandate that drew ecclesiastics and lay aristocrats together with this view of *ordo*. This shift in political theology is a drastic change from the previous Merovingian Frankish regime whose records “mention this connection only occasionally,” whereas Charlemagne’s rule increasingly invoked the responsibilities of *ministerium* in preventing realm-wide disorder and injustice. *Ministerium* entailed the overlapping bonds of shared responsibility theoretically linking ruler, episcopate, aristocrats, and all inhabitants of the Carolingian Empire in a process of ongoing spiritual and temporal salvation.⁴¹ The degree to which the Carolingians were able to achieve these goals is debatable, and it may be that the enactors of Charlemagne’s expansive vision of sovereignty could not scratch much below the surface of real dirt and living bodies. Nevertheless, recovering the discourse of Carolingian ecological sovereignty and tracing attempts to justify its claims reveal key practices behind the articulation of royal authority and the exercise of power in the Carolingian polity.

In this framework, the Frankish king received God’s power and authority first, and then transmitted it to the bishops, clergy, and other elites. Carolingian writers preferred a “Christian empire” that, as de Jong puts it, “did not so much represent a return to an ‘original’ Roman (imperial) universality, politically or ecclesiastically...as a micro-Christendom gotten out of hand by its very territorial extension.”⁴² Going further, de Jong adds that the very

39 Fried, *Karl der Grosse*, 70–71. On *ordo*, see de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 37, 121; de Jong, “Charlemagne’s Church,” 110–11. De Jong’s articulation of this notion envisions the Carolingian ruler possessing a divinely-ordained *ministerium* and responsibility for the spiritual wellbeing of a church and kingdom jointly conceived as an *ecclesia*, “united by a correct worship of God.”

40 Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Walsh and Honan, 217–20.

41 de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 121.

42 de Jong, “*Ecclesia* and the Early Medieval Polity,” 119.

“notion of *ecclesia* [church], including all its connotations of the eventual salvation of God’s people, was harnessed to the identity of the Carolingian polity, with the ruler’s responsibility for the salvation of its people as its defining factor. Thus, the Carolingian polity became a *corpus Christi* [body of Christ].”⁴³ In other words, the idea of the universal church became entangled with conceptions of the state, and the body of Christ with the Frankish body politic, at whose head was Charlemagne. The Carolingian renewal centred on *correctio*, the goal of recovering and producing correct scriptural texts and authority and the implementation of biblical knowledge from the ruler down to aristocrats—lay and religious—and the priests who would instruct parishioners. This notion was what gave force and motion to Carolingian reform and political culture, to such a degree that failure to carry out one’s responsibilities under *ministerium* demanded spiritual correction, leading to the implementation of educational reforms aimed at promoting Christian morality.⁴⁴

Ideally, this process functioned on a continuum, with the ruler and the episcopate balancing each other on the scales of “mutual *admonitio* and acknowledgement of sin or error,” but because of the overlapping and interdependent natures of Carolingian *ministeria*, agents of offices required correction when they sinned, and public correction for a public sin.⁴⁵ At the same time, secular magnates expressed anxiety over the toll that the duties of their temporal office exacted upon their immortal souls, seeking reassurance and pastoral guidance from spiritual authorities.⁴⁶ It was in his role as head of such a polity that Charlemagne and subsequent Carolingian rulers, in language of pastoral care, attempted to exercise sovereignty over many parts of that political body, as seen in foundational documents like the *Admonitio generalis*.⁴⁷

But still one may ask: was it an empire in fact? Assessing an empire should never be as simple as whether or not it was a large geographical polity containing a core metropolis that dominated (through violence or

43 de Jong, “*Ecclesia* and the Early Medieval Polity,” 119.

44 Booker, *Past Convictions*, 165, 227; de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 4.

45 de Jong, *The Penitential State*, 135, 152.

46 Smith, “Einhard,” 64; Noble, “Secular Sanctity,” 16; Riché, *Daily Life in the World of Charlemagne*, trans. McNamara, 81–83.

47 On medieval rulers and “the capacity to make live,” see McCracken, *In the Skin of a Beast*, 12–13, 29–30; Booker, *Past Convictions*, 144.

economics) colonies or some other kind of periphery settlements.⁴⁸ The Carolingian court, with its itinerant ruler and tenuous grip on local and regional power, dependent on other magnates, does not share many characteristics with the competent, centralized bureaucracies of more modern empires. Martin Gravel has demonstrated how such relatively “weak” emperors exerted real political control over distant localities through the mobility of the court (even the rumour of an imperial visit could suffice); the omnipresence of the sovereign in coins, sealed documents, and mandatory common prayers; and appointed officials—both lay and ecclesiastic—who owed their position and allegiance to the ruler.⁴⁹ Richard Sullivan anticipated this way of re-imagining the Carolingian polity, arguing that instead of a strong “empire” (as traditionally defined), the “Carolingian concept and practice of empire meant strikingly different things to different people...there was not one unifying and universally shared view of what the Carolingian Empire was and how it should be managed, but many conflicting divisive views.”⁵⁰ In such a polyphonic empire, the meaning of rule itself was a matter of contention, as voices across the Carolingian world sought to shape nature, ritual, and sovereignty in divergent ways.

A Carolingian Environmental History

Recovering Carolingian ecological sovereignty reveals how crucial the eighth and ninth centuries were to the longer environmental history of medieval Europe. It amends medieval environmental histories that celebrate the ecological impacts of the ancient Romans, and then leap from them to the twelfth century. David Herlihy, for example, argued influentially that four distinctive attitudes shaped medieval environmental history. These attitudes corresponded more or less to four separate (but overlapping) periods of medieval history that “progress” as humans’ relationship to their environment became more complex over the course of the Middle Ages.⁵¹ This ana-

48 Reynolds, “Empires,” 158.

49 Gravel, *Distances, rencontres, communications*.

50 Sullivan, “The Carolingian Age,” 288–89.

51 Herlihy, “Attitudes,” 100–101, 112 launched the Middle Ages with an “eschatological” phase (third to fifth centuries) when Christian intellectuals focused on the fallen state of the world and its imminent destruction and re-creation. Next came the “dark age” of dense, misty forests and ravenous wolves, the kind of nature portrayed in *Beowulf*, one inherently hostile to human beings that lasted up to the year 1000 and generated an “adversarial” phase. A new, better “collaborative” period arrived

lytic structure forces sources into a rigid framework of analysis and favours the later medieval periods at the creative expense of the earlier, imposing an artificial barrier of thought between the demarked eras. To his credit, Herlihy pointed this problem out, admitting that the four attitudes “did not supplant one another in sequence,” and no one completely overrode the other.⁵² Nevertheless, the scheme nearly totally ignores the rich Carolingian sources of the eighth and ninth centuries.

Herlihy’s interpretive scheme drew inspiration from the famous arguments of Lynn White, who highlighted the ecological advances of the High Middle Ages. White’s argument pushes the idea that medieval people saw the environment as a blank slate by showing how new technology, cultural imagery, and Christian theology combined to strip nature of intrinsic value or spirit. What remained was raw material—soil to be overturned, forests to be cut, animals to be dominated—available for human exploitation without moral or spiritual restraint. This shift, he postulated, set the foundation for the modern ecological crisis. He notes that medieval calendars visually reinforced this shift. Earlier pagan calendars personified the seasons passively, but new Frankish calendars from around 830 depicted people coercing nature—ploughing, harvesting, chopping trees, butchering animals. These images symbolized a cultural imagination in which humans dominated and remade the environment, or in White’s words, “Man and nature are two things, and man is master.”⁵³ In my reading, White is partially correct here, not to the extent that classical and early post-classical agrarians did not think about exploiting nature; they did. Nor do I deny that Frankish landlords and farmers tried to tame their environment; they did this also. But in the frame of Carolingian ecological sovereignty, it was in support of a theological and political project in which the ordering of fields, forests, and waters was less about blank-slate exploitation and more about manifesting the ruler’s divinely sanctioned role as Adamic gardener, transforming the landscape into a legible, moralized environment that reflected imperial authority and eschatological purpose.

when humans realized and wrote about the ways they could actually shape their own environment, perhaps even collaborating with the divine unfolding of history to usher in Christ’s return by stewarding the natural world to this end. In the wake of the demographic catastrophe of the fourteenth century, the “recreational” stage saw people turn in their sorrow and confusion to the natural world as a place of refuge and renewal.

52 Herlihy, “Attitudes,” 101.

53 White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” 1204.

More recent environmental histories have continued to focus on the second half of the medieval millennium, though methodological innovations have complicated the “progressive” view of ecological change in the European Middle Ages. John Aberth takes the novel approach of analyzing “parts” of nature separately, e.g. the “elements,” the forest, etc., rather than adhering strictly to the four phases. However, in the end he largely agrees with Herlihy’s premises and ignores much of the early Middle Ages, although when he does discuss the ninth-century *Vita Sturmi* (Life of St. Sturm) in some detail, it is noteworthy for the present study that his analysis pertains to the setting up of a “paradise” amidst the frightening wilderness.⁵⁴ We find nothing of the Carolingian period in Steven A. Epstein’s *The Medieval Discovery of Nature*, in which he explores the shifting role of experimentation in medieval people’s thinking and writing about the natural world; this neglect despite the fact that Carolingian writers thought a great deal about their environment *and* their place within it.⁵⁵ These omissions probably derive from a perception of early medieval writers not as authors but repeaters “almost word for word” of earlier texts.⁵⁶ As we shall see, Carolingian writers and exegetes were compellingly original in their recycling and reworking of ancient sources.

Source Questions

Richard Hoffmann’s survey of medieval environmental history argues that the eighth- and ninth-century explosion of Carolingian texts “suddenly open[s] a window” for environmental historians to understand how people began to think about organizing and using land in the post-Roman West.⁵⁷ Tim Newfield has answered this call to use Carolingian texts to understand the Frankish impact on the environment by collating mentions of natural disaster in the early Middle Ages, demonstrating how the hazards of pestilence, climate change, and famine shaped the demographics and economies of early medieval Europe, and that (at some level) contemporary authors were aware of their ecological precariousness.⁵⁸ Indeed, Newfield’s impressive cataloging of natural disasters in early medieval Europe puts forward

54 Aberth, *An Environmental History of the Middle Ages*, 90–91.

55 Epstein, *The Medieval Discovery of Nature* does not once mention a Carolingian author or text.

56 Aberth, *An Environmental History*, 18.

57 Hoffmann, *An Environmental History of Medieval Europe*, 79–81.

58 Newfield, “The Contours of Disease and Hunger.”

a model for how to organize and process seemingly formulaic mentions of incidents across disparate texts.

There is more opportunity for contextualizing the sources within early medieval cultures, as Newfield himself recognizes, to identify “motifs” and “borrowed phrases and terms” from elsewhere that were recycled to describe things like food shortages or other environmental hazards.⁵⁹ Doing so shows how early medieval people deployed familiar language and themes to describe ecological events in ways that made sense to them, as Paolo Squatriti has shown for the floods of 589 in Italy.⁶⁰ Michael McCormick, Paul Dutton, and Paul Mayewski have come the closest to this kind of interwoven analysis for northern Francia, deploying a wider array of sources and materials to understand both environmental history and how Carolingian writers understood ecological change in their own times. In studying paleoclimatic “anomalies” found in proxy records like ice cores, tree rings, and speleothem oxygen isotopes across the Northern Hemisphere, they looked to Frankish annals that documented unusually harsh winters, and found a high degree of overlap between the datasets.⁶¹ The principal hazard in such an analysis is that one set of evidence may overshadow the other, depending on the questions modern historians pose, and it becomes tempting to see climate as *the* main driver for political and social change at the expense of human agency or cultural contingency.

To do a “Carolingian” environmental history we must read eighth- and ninth-century texts about nature in light of Carolingian culture and society. Three recent books have cleared additional paths for this approach. Jean-Pierre Devroey’s magisterial monograph on empire and the environment during Charlemagne’s reign cautions against increasingly prevalent climate-determinist stories. It is not that climate shocks do not occur or are without significance in their own right, but famine becomes ascertainable as history when markets, institutions, and rulers convert these phenomena into hunger. He treats Francia as an assemblage of environments, with humans acting inside various microclimates, and focuses on the years 740–820, a window that aligns meteorological thirty-year baselines with Charlemagne’s lifetime. Here readers discover how the Carolingian state governed scarcity, with the “pastor-king” Charlemagne obliged to feed, regulate, and discipline

59 Newfield, “The Contours of Disease and Hunger,” 228.

60 Squatriti, “The Floods of 589,” 819–20.

61 McCormick, Dutton, and Mayewski, “Volcanoes and the Climate Forcing of Carolingian Europe.”

his flock. In practice, this means not writing peasants as silent victims of a hostile nature, but centring (as does chapter two of the present study) peasant agency, solidarities, and adaptation. Devroey's evidence includes tree rings, sediments, and volcanic eruptions, but his explanations are found in institutions, law, and decisions for provisioning the empire. The recurring stress points he tracks in the late-eighth and early-ninth centuries anchor that argument. Read this way, Devroey's painstaking analysis undergirds my claims about Carolingian ecological sovereignty: court theology and legislation were meant to work together to order bodies, markets, and landscapes as part of royal *ministerium*.⁶²

Maintaining our attention on the intersection of nature and Carolingian governance, Paolo Squatriti's *Weeds and the Carolingians* shifts the focus to how "wild" plants were mobilized as tools of governance, moral reform, and imperial ideology for the Carolingians. Weeds in the early Middle Ages were understood as deeply temporal phenomena, whose emergence, significance, and management were shaped by seasonal rhythms, agricultural calendars, and theological narratives. Squatriti explores how Augustine, adapting both classical and Christian exegetical traditions, shifted from viewing weeds as postlapsarian punishments to interpreting them as part of God's original and good creation—only perceived as "bad" due to human sin and agricultural needs. Carolingian thinkers inherited and adapted these debates, negotiating different interpretations of Genesis while also incorporating weeds into broader imperial projects of calendrical reform, cosmology, and agricultural ordering. Ultimately, Squatriti shows how weeds were not merely plants out of place, but indicators of sacred and agricultural time, central to how early medieval Christians made sense of creation, sin, and their own labour. Carolingian authors linked the removal of weeds to the purification of communities, both ecclesiastical and secular. Weeding thus became a framework for thinking about *correctio*, in which the emperor was cast as a "weeder-king" tasked with disciplining unruly elements in the body politic. Squatriti concludes that weeding was not merely an agricultural concern but a symbolic and practical tool of governance and religious reform, grounding this in material evidence as much as in texts, so that the weeds of the exegetes are never far from the weeds in the fields.⁶³

⁶² Devroey, *La nature et le roi*, Introduction, esp. 9–16 and 21–27; on the case sequence (763–64, 779, 792–94, 802–13); 132–42 on provisioning measures (tithes, stocks, weights/measures, price rules, anti-hoarding, export bans).

⁶³ Squatriti, *Weeds and the Carolingians*, 4–13, 88–100, 109–21, 180 for the phrase "weeder-king."

The third work turns from land and plants to the texts through which nature was known. Anna Dorofeeva's *Reading Nature in the Early Middle Ages* takes the Latin *Physiologus*, a collection of descriptions of animals, plants, and stones, and follows its manuscript tradition from about 700 to 1000. Dorofeeva's argument rehabilitates early medieval writers who have been dismissed as mere compilers of inherited material, and she shows that compilation was itself creative intellectual work, whether within a single text or in the assembling of a composite codex. For my purposes, the ninth-century portion of that story matters most: the compilers whose glosses, glossaries, and copies Dorofeeva reconstructs were working in the same scriptoria that involved the correction of biblical texts during the Carolingian era, and their texts were not passive repositories of tradition but instruments for reshaping how the natural world was understood. Thus, the Carolingians used reading and commentary not only to inherit but to modify late antique knowledge systems for new moral and political ends. Central to this was collecting, excerpting, and organizing knowledge of the natural world into morally and theologically resonant forms. Through this lens, development of "natural" knowledge was part of a broader Carolingian commitment to renewal and reform.⁶⁴ Though part of a larger story and longer chronology, Dorofeeva's insights on the early ninth century reveals a moment when collecting natural knowledge—glosses, glossaries, calendars, bestiaries—was intimately tied to the work of empire. In Dorofeeva's reading, their texts were not passive repositories of tradition but active instruments for reshaping reality.

Situated alongside these works, *Carolingian Ecological Sovereignty* encounters Wigbod, Alcuin, and others as developers and transmitters of the notion that working within and dominating nature helped to redeem both a corrupted environment and the "Christian people." This "mission" was essential to the ruling family's aims to establish a "Christian empire" across Europe, and Carolingian *correctio* began with a mission to cultivate and promote "correct" Christian beliefs and practice. This book is arranged to show the development of Carolingian ecological sovereignty as it was shaped by exegesis on the biblical book of Genesis, disseminated by key courtiers and advisors to Charlemagne, and finally utilized by Carolingian rulers, who were themselves subject to its strictures. Documents associated with the Carolingian royal court show how the pursuit of "better" biblical

64 Dorofeeva, *Reading Nature in the Early Middle Ages*, 13–15, 29–33, 74–78.

exegesis was a political undertaking meant to bolster Charlemagne's role as the "new Adam," who would master nature.

Carolingian rulers produced hundreds of legislative documents, known as capitularies, and presided over assemblies and synods in which the bodies of animals, but also plants and people, were not merely regulated but managed in ways that were meant to sustain Carolingian structures of power and reflect their notions of authority. The scope of these texts was "vitally concerned about the general population of the empire...touching all people and concerning numerous areas of life."⁶⁵ We see clearly aspects of Carolingian ecological sovereignty in legislation concerning royal estates. Paul Dutton, for example, has argued that "Control and not conquest of the natural world" was the Carolingian goal, and he traces the outlines of these aspirations in the capitulary *De villis*, which instructed Charlemagne's agents in the management of royal estates. Its stocking of flora and fauna on those properties created a fantastical menagerie of peaches and peacocks, among other unusual plants and animals; the created beings in royal gardens were a tangible re-creation of paradisiacal order on earth.⁶⁶ Similarly, one may read the "Aachen" capitulary (ca. 801–813) as echoing *De villis*'s active management of nature, in its authorization to clear valuable woodland if it meant increased viticultural and pomicultural production: "let them plant vineyards and make orchards, and wherever useful men are found, let a forest be given to them for clearing, so that our service may be improved."⁶⁷ Like *De villis* this command directed *iudices* to protect woodlands and forests.⁶⁸ Such land clearance would have increased the empire's agricultural capacity and availability of produce in the short term, but its authorization depended entirely on the direct benefits to the sovereign, Charlemagne. In this case the regulation of trees served as a measure of Carolingian sovereignty. Yet as we shall see in the case of Wigbod's commentary on Genesis, these modes

65 Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire*, 38.

66 For peacocks and exotic fauna, see Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, 54; on pomiculture and the capitulary, see Blan, "Charlemagne's Peaches," 544–45.

67 "Et plantent vineas, faciant pomaria, et ubicumque inveniunt utiles homines, detur illis silva ad stirpandum, ut nostrum servitium in melioretur." *Capitulare Aquisgranense*, ed. Boretius, p. 172, lines 22–24.

68 "Ut silve vel forestes nostre bene sint custodite; et ubi locus fuerit ad stirpandum, stirpare faciant." *Capitulare de villis vel curtis imperialibus*, ed. Brühl, chap. 59, lines 15–17; Grainge, "Assarting and the Dynamics of Rhineland Economies." See also Sonnlechner, "The Establishment of New Units of Production in Carolingian Times," 40.

could be inverted, and trees could teach the apprentice imperialists how to exercise sovereignty.

More recent historians have rightly criticized earlier twentieth-century interpretations that contrasted the documentary practices of the Carolingian polity with more modern empires, and that imagined in Carolingian documents an entrenched professional bureaucracy where there was none or saw a “failed state” in the political fragmentation of the later ninth century.⁶⁹ Yet even within this fragmented empire, documentary practices did not collapse; rather, they circulated and adapted, travelling across regions and sustaining connections that outlived political unity. Prosopography demonstrates the existence of interconnected networks of kinship and patrimony linking the aristocracy and the episcopate to the monarchy through political ritual that emphasized moral authority and a sort of “early medieval consensus politics.”⁷⁰ This mutual co-dependence—embedded in shared religious culture—entangled elites with competing interests into cooperation. And it is thus easier to imagine that erudite texts produced and consumed at court penetrated lay and clerical elite cultures whose members eagerly competed for royal favour and patronage.

Because the early Carolingians came to conceive of their polity as both *ecclesia* and a renewed, Christian empire, their political experiment was rooted ultimately in the most fundamental textual source: the Bible. Theirs was not the last community to employ the scriptures as a sort of constitutional document, but Carolingian thinkers took more seriously than most the commands in Genesis to master and safeguard God’s creation.⁷¹ This included every being living within the empire and the “stuff” of the earth, such as rocks, waterways, and winds. Carolingian exegetes found in Genesis

69 Even the most ardent imaginer of a vigorous Carolingian machine of state, François-Louis Ganshof, admitted that in practice the Frankish monarchy lacked the organizational resources to enforce royal legislation at every level throughout the empire, relying instead upon the administrative talents of episcopal and lay authorities as well as royally appointed officials. Ganshof, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy*, 87–90, 145.

70 Matthew Innes acknowledges that Carolingian rulers likely desired the power that Ganshof described, but Innes diverts attention away from institutions in favour of social actors. Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages*, 5–11; Innes, “Charlemagne’s Government,” 72–73.

71 Genesis 1:28 reads, “And God blessed them, saying: Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth.” Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate.

a model of and justification for the exercise of authority over other creatures and thus for politics. Of course, they did not always agree on exactly how to apply this knowledge, imagining and recycling different ways that humans and nonhuman creatures could relate with and among each other. Medieval humans defined themselves and their sense of self through the violent domination of animals,⁷² and Carolingian hunting was a perfect example of this process. But as we shall see, biblical commentaries, like Wigbod's on Genesis, offered alternative views to this dynamic: authority need not always mean forceful domination.

Charlemagne and Adam

Whether violent or not, for Carolingian notions of sovereignty, it was crucial to liken Charlemagne to the biblical Adam. This permitted Carolingian writers to perceive the new empire as a game park, the management of which instructed rulers in the exercise of sovereignty even while it propelled Frankish conquests.⁷³ Paul Dutton demonstrates how idealized gardens in two *Fons vitae* (fountain of life) manuscript illuminations painted for Charlemagne (the Godescalc Evangelistary ca. 781–783 and the Gospels of Saint-Médard of Soissons ca. early ninth century) reflected what was then known about the garden of Eden. Enclosed by a wall and surrounded by the four rivers of paradise (symbolizing the four gospels), the fountain in the centre was supported by four pairs of columns.⁷⁴ In the enclosure depicted in the Godescalc Evangelistary (Figure 1), the fourteen birds of paradise of the first painting enact their own hierarchical relationships while a stag at the bottom approaches the fountain of life. In the Saint-Médard gospel (Figure 2) twenty-one birds accompany four deer. Like the *Karolus* poet's imagined Aachen, these images overlay built and natural environment, as the human-made stone structures and the animals give shape to the enclosure, while the fountain of life—adorned by the cross itself, the figurative tree of life—anchors the composition. These painted enclosures were microcosmic reenactments of a properly ordered nature. The hierarchies of authority in the garden were the realm of the “first” Adam that rested on the

⁷² Steel, *How to Make a Human*, 24.

⁷³ On Adam and sovereignty over creatures as a model for rulers, see Piron, “Ève au fuseau, Adam jardinier.” On “paradise” gardens as manifestations of sovereignty and microcosms of an ordered world, see: Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History*, 46–49.

⁷⁴ Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, 54–55; Psalms 41:2.



Figure 1. Depiction of an idealized garden in the Godescalc Evangelistary, ca. 781–783. Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), MS n.a.l. 1203, fol. 3v. Courtesy of the BnF. Public Domain.



Figure 2. Depiction of an idealized garden in the Gospels of Saint-Médard of Soissons, early ninth century. BnF, MS latin 8850, fol. 6v.
 Courtesy of the BnF. Public Domain.

“correct” governance of creatures and environments. The cross of Christ, the “last” Adam, lay at its heart.⁷⁵

These visual representations were not mere artistic endeavours but ideological expressions reinforcing Charlemagne’s role as caretaker of creation. They visually demonstrated how Charlemagne’s rule, informed by *correctio*, could transform chaotic wilderness into structured gardens, echoing Adam’s original command to name and manage creation. They are not only sumptuous works of Carolingian manuscript art but also microcosmic representations of the empire as a cultivated garden. Each image renders the fountain of life, as the centrepiece of a paradisiacal enclosure. This fountain, adorned with a cross—the new Tree of Life—anchors the scene, while the supporting colonnades, four in number, recall both architectural grandeur and theological order: they mirror the four rivers of Eden, the four gospels, and the fourfold structure of creation under divine law.⁷⁶

In the Godescalc Evangelistary, the structure shelters the fountain at the core of a lush garden populated by birds and a single stag. The fourteen birds do not flit randomly but enact a careful choreography of hierarchy—some perched above, others below—mirroring the ordering of creation and, by extension, of society within Charlemagne’s empire. At the fountain’s base, the stag bends toward the water, recalling Psalms 41:2, “As the hart panteth after the fountains of water; so my soul panteth after thee, O God.”⁷⁷ Here, desire for the divine is linked with obedience to order, just as the Carolingian subject’s fidelity to ruler and empire was bound up with salvation. The Saint-Médard Gospels elaborate this vision with still greater abundance. Here the enclosure teems with twenty-one birds and four deer, multiplying the signs of life and prosperity. The animals, wild but tamed, coexist within the human-built structure. The balance between stone architecture and the living creatures demonstrates how culture and nature interpenetrate when rightly ordered. The fountain remains at the centre, crowned by the cross of Christ, the “last Adam,” but the scene is unmistakably imperial: a vision of paradise domesticated, contained, and managed, just as the empire itself was to be structured and cultivated under Charlemagne’s governance.

Together, the two images function as visual sermons on sovereignty. They reimagine Eden not as a lost paradise but as a present possibility, an

75 The idea of the first and last Adam comes from 1 Corinthians 15:45: “The first man Adam was made into a living soul; the last Adam into a quickening spirit.” Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate.

76 Coon, *Dark Age Bodies*, 21–22.

77 Douay-Rheims translation of the Latin Vulgate.

enclosure that can be recreated in manuscript, palace, and empire alike. Just as Adam was charged to name and govern the creatures of the first garden, Charlemagne was to order creation anew through *correctio*, ensuring that beasts, birds, and even human subjects dwelt harmoniously within the imperial game park. These illuminations thus show the Carolingian Empire as a garden in which natural abundance is enclosed by architecture, hierarchies are visibly displayed, and the fountain of life flows under the sign of the cross.

Paul Dutton reads these two images alongside the gathering of exotic animals and plants in Charlemagne's royal gardens that the capitulary *De villis* called for, noting that Charlemagne was "cast as a new Adam returning his estates to that prelapsarian state of perfection in which God had begun it."⁷⁸ Thus, the Frankish ruler's wishes to re-name plants, animals, the winds, and even the months of the year echoed God's instructions to the first man in the first garden. Although Carolingian writers associated Charlemagne with several biblical figures, most obviously Josiah, the ancient king of Judah who restored God's temple and the ancient Hebrew laws given by Moses. There is no extant evidence explicitly naming the Frankish ruler as Adam, though, as we shall see, Alcuin came closest to doing so. Nevertheless, Carolingian readers would have remembered the New Testament verses that tied the ends of Christian teleology from beginning to end through the bodies of two humans: Adam and Christ. By means of the "first man Adam" (*primus homo Adam*) sin and death entered the world, and through the actions of the "last Adam" (*novissimus Adam*) forgiveness and resurrection became possible.⁷⁹

For the Carolingians this was not an idle distinction, as the legislative and theological documents of the era evoked a millenarian sense that the latter days were much closer than the first ones,⁸⁰ and that it was "Charlemagne's solemn responsibility not simply to root out sin but also to ready the world for the end of days."⁸¹ Indeed, as Matthew Bryan Gillis puts it: "Carolingian theology was imperial politics on a cosmic scale, as rulers and intellectuals sought to make sure their realm maintained divine favor."⁸² Although the Carolingians may not have known their exact location in eschatological time, both Charlemagne's rhetorical and real efforts to order and re-order

⁷⁸ Dutton, *Charlemagne's Mustache*, 55–56.

⁷⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 45.

⁸⁰ Palmer, *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages*, 160.

⁸¹ Romig, *Be a Perfect Man*, 36.

⁸² Gillis, *Heresy and Dissent in the Carolingian Empire*, 2–3.

society and its natural context were rooted in the establishment of a Christian empire and the ushering in of the end of days.

Rather than Dutton's "new Adam" who would return creation to its prelapsarian state, I argue that "the penultimate Adam" was the kind of Adam Charlemagne aspired to be, for this Adam could aid the Carolingian reshaping of the environment while also conforming to their sense of eschatological time. For Carolingian thinkers, in the long history of salvation there could be many Adams on the way to the final iteration, but Charlemagne was the most recent and, more importantly, the ruler, and the one best positioned to root out sins and their "natural" consequences: the thorns, thistles, wild animals, and unruly humans that descended from the first Adam's missteps. Through the implementation of *correctio* and the enlargement of Frankish hegemony a Carolingian ruler could redeem the land and re-order it into a "garden" or a game park. Its occupants would dwell under the divinely designated authority of the latest Adam, Charlemagne, and their obedience would help usher in the final Adam's return.⁸³ Human morality tied into both personal salvation and the wellbeing of the entire realm, which would face either tranquil seasons and fecund agriculture or natural disasters and dearth of resources, depending on the successful implementation of *correctio*. In the pages to come, my recalibration of Adam considering these views confirms Dutton's allusory insight on Charlemagne as an Adamic figure.

Outline

Chapter one examines the writings of Alcuin of York, like Wigbod a close advisor of Charlemagne in the last quarter of the eighth century, alongside contemporary Carolingian writings and reveals that perceptions of Carolingian kingship were tied to ecological phenomena. It begins with an anecdote from the mid-ninth-century chronicle Nithard's *Histories*, which explained how the Carolingian civil war, fought among Charlemagne's grandchildren for control of a fractured empire during the early 840s, perverted the tranquil and fecund environment established by "good" rule. This idea evolved from ancient Roman, Christian, and early medieval Insular origins and accreted new meaning in the Carolingian context, becoming the key principle undergirding Carolingian ecological sovereignty. Alcuin was the main transmitter to the imperial court of the royal-disaster paradigm established in chapter

83 On the fallen condition of early medieval nature and its violent deterioration up to the Apocalypse if left un-redeemed, see Dendle, "Plants in the Early Medieval Cosmos," 47–50.

nine of the famous pseudo-Cyprianic text *On the Twelve Abuses of the World*. The Northumbrian cleric's blending of these ideas with ancient Roman and early Christian notions of disaster changed over time in response to natural disasters and perceived calamities like the Vikings' sack of the monastery at Lindisfarne in 793. Examples of "bad" kings from Alcuin's native Britain shaped the cleric's notion that Charlemagne could not only be a great ruler but was perhaps the only king capable of inaugurating a paradise on earth.

Chapter two unearths the biblical roots of Carolingian politics, authority, and theories of sovereignty under Charlemagne by reconstructing the ideological underpinnings of the Carolingian political project, which was aimed at building a Christian empire through the correction of Christian beliefs and practices (*correctio*) and the renewal of Roman culture (*renovatio*). The combination of these two ideals is what gave Carolingian imperialism its flavour. One of the first directives that Charlemagne issued when he became ruler was the command to correct and disseminate biblical texts, and to learn from older commentaries and produce new ones. I connect *correctio* to exegesis because Carolingian ecological sovereignty derived from a specific understanding of theology that fuelled their mission to build a Christian empire. Carolingian understandings of nature in this context matter for understanding Charlemagne's symbolic role as a new Adamic figure in the governance of his empire. Texts such as the Capitulary of Herstal (779), the *Epistola de litteris colendis* (On the Cultivation of Letters, late 780s), the Synod of Frankfurt (794), and particularly the *Admonitio generalis* (789) represent foundational documents for these efforts, explicitly connecting the proper understanding and stewardship of nature to theological and political correctness.⁸⁴ The Carolingians did this in the spirit of *correctio*, but it turned out that spending so many hours pondering late antique commentaries on Genesis shaped the ecological thinking of Charlemagne's courtiers. This chapter discusses these larger changes, and introduces Wigbod, a pivotal courtier-theologian at the royal Frankish court during the 780s.

Surprisingly little modern scholarship has focused on this important figure. Wigbod was long marginalized or ignored by most scholars of early medieval Europe because apparently little to no evidence supporting his actions or influence survived outside his biblical exegesis.⁸⁵ This chapter takes the fact of the extant commentaries as a strength, arguing that Charlemagne's

84 Dorofeeva, *Reading Nature in the Early Middle Ages*, 13–14.

85 Michael M. Gorman is the exception to this generalization, see various citations below.

commissioning of Wigbod to produce the first “official” biblical commentary of his reign proves the author’s influence as a courtier. Wigbod’s theological exegesis was both a metaphor and medium for discussions of and experimentations with power, authority, and sovereignty. Wigbod’s interpretation of the creation story was politicized. He thought Genesis granted humans a particular role in nature, one that licensed Carolingian redemption and redress of the ills of the postlapsarian environment. Because the first humans’ sin had twisted the hierarchies of nature established in the first garden under the first Adam, in the Carolingian garden Charlemagne, the latest Adam, had to work to reestablish order among the unruly creatures. Human-animal relations structured by human sin and mortality required the subjugation and management of animals by well-informed people. The Carolingian projects of empire and *correctio* were means to that end.

Chapter three outlines a Carolingian moral ecology of individual, collective, and environmental salvation based on “redemptive” agricultural labour that was the key to membership within the empire. Taking Wigbod’s observations about what the Old Testament book of Genesis revealed to Carolingian elites about humans and trees the chapter historicizes them within Carolingian socio-political transformations of the era. Wigbod’s commentaries were theological texts that operated as historical, social, and political commentaries. In them, Wigbod metaphorized humans, trees, authority, and obedience to teach Carolingian elites how to dominate and supervise both the environment and those who laboured within it, namely the many peasant farmers who cultivated and worked the land. Contextualizing Wigbod’s commentary within a web of Carolingian sources shows how Carolingian elites began to valorize agricultural labour and labourers rather than denigrate them (as was previously commonplace) as the deserved consequences of Adam’s curse to toil the land. To the Carolingian elites, this new “moral ecology” presented an opportunity for peasants to participate (via their obedience and labour) in the Carolingian imperial project: the pan-European subjugation and “salvation” of peoples, animals, plants, and environments.

Alcuin established and popularized the vocabulary and rubric for assessing the signs of “good” kingship that would later be deployed against the Carolingian emperor Louis the Pious by his critics in the 820s and 830s. Chapter four thus exposes how, from the later eighth century, when the Frankish king’s doings became linked with the ecology of the realm, the formula was contested, reshaped, affirmed, and transformed over the course of the early ninth century by clerics and royal advisors. Extant expressions of the prescription for a prosperous realm from important luminaries of the era like Alcuin and Theodulf of Orléans (among others) underscored

the conjunction of felicity and good rule that shaped Carolingian imperialism. Theodulf emerges as a hefty counterweight to Alcuin's optimism: his poetry revealing a sense of environment that darkly mirrored earlier buoyant praise of Charlemagne. Theodulf's is a gloomy vision of a barren and disordered natural world manifested in the disruption of its seasonal cycles, its infecundity, and changing climate. Theodulf feared that these changes signalled that the end of all things was perhaps on the horizon. Carolingian ecological sovereignty dictated that just as disobedience led to the original Adam's expulsion from Eden, so it would (and did) result in the Frankish king's downfall and the deleterious effects on nature of a bad king.

The linkage between Adam and Charlemagne skilfully inserted the Carolingians into theological time and salvific history (as well as into existing early medieval discourses about bad kingship). Long before the *clades* (disasters) that haunted Charlemagne's son and successor as emperor Louis the Pious,⁸⁶ critics' voices warned against sin, death, and the abnegation of sovereignty through misdeeds, all themes bound up in the nature-disaster discourse and language of felicity and Carolingian ecological sovereignty. This chapter concludes by showing how Alcuin's Genesis *tituli*—short captions meant to accompany images of Creation—placed Charlemagne directly into the biblical drama of Adam's sovereignty, obedience, and fall. Alcuin's verses crystallized a Carolingian theology of ecological sovereignty, linking biblical stewardship with Frankish kingship. I also argue that the *tituli* bound Charlemagne's rule to eschatological time, presenting him as an Adamic figure whose success or failure in cultivating order—like Adam's—would determine the fate of his dominion. In doing so, I position the *tituli* as both theological commentary and political instruction, encapsulating the Carolingian paradigm of empire as a garden to be curated, guarded, and potentially lost.

Finally, in its conclusion this book traces the trajectory of these formulae after Charlemagne's reign by considering the monk Wetti's deathbed vision of Charlemagne (824). Captured in a poem, *Wetti's Vision*, written by Heito (his abbot at Reichenau) and later reworked and amended by Walafrid Strabo in 827, Wetti described encountering a place of purgatory, where he saw the previous ruler Charlemagne being slowly devoured by one of the beasts over which he should have held mastery. It was further proof that the imperial game park's warden had lost his mandate through his own sinful desires and actions; a mandate that Louis the Pious was meant to restore.

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

Even after Charlemagne's death, control and subjugation of nature continued to justify and support Carolingian claims to sovereignty, and the failure to do so proved to contemporary observers the catastrophe of bad rule. Carolingian ecological sovereignty continued to structure Carolingian politics even as Louis' political actions and motivations differed from Charlemagne's, and his advisors and fellow aristocrats became even more dedicated to the idea of a Christian empire. This book recovers the first crucial period of the Carolingian era, Charlemagne's reign, as critical for understanding the transformation of European ecologies and environmental cosmologies and asserts the importance of the early Middle Ages for understanding medieval environmental history.

