The Palace of Memory: The Carolingian Court as Political Centre

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The essence of political centres consists of more than geography. The insights of Edward Shils can serve as a springboard from which to launch this paper: 'Society has a center ... Membership in the society is constituted by relationship to this central zone ... The center, or the central zone, is a phenomenon of the realms of values and beliefs. It is the center of the order of symbols, of values and beliefs which govern that society ... The central zone partakes of the nature of the sacred ... The centre is also a ... structure of activities, of roles and persons within the network of institutions ...'. This paper is concerned with the nature of central value systems and central institutions of authority among the Carolingian élite. What were the institutions that gave political cohesion and identity to the Carolingian empire, a heterogeneous collection of territories covering an area of some one million square kilometres? As far as the political élite was concerned the key institution performing this function was the royal court; it was through the court that the realm was held together. Given the vast scale of this subject and its setting, this paper cannot offer a detailed survey of the court's relationship with the regions of the empire. Instead, I will offer a general survey of some of the main aspects of this relationship concentrating particularly on questions of authority and power. How did the court broadcast and maintain Carolingian royal authority and legitimacy?

Some preliminary notes of caution must be sounded before our survey can begin. First, there was no one Carolingian court. The court was always evolving. For example, the Treaty of Verdun in 843 produced three royal courts within the empire because that treaty divided the empire up into three separate kingdoms. Geographical shifts and changes can be paralleled by

1. E. Shils, 'Center and Periphery', in his Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology (Chicago and London, 1975), pp. 3-16 (p. 3). A given society can, of course, have many centres and a given centre can be subject to many interpretations; see Les lieux de mémoire, ed. P. Nora, 7 vols. (Paris, 1984-1992). See also note 7 below.


chronological ones. The court of Charlemagne was very different in the years of
the great military campaigns such as the 770s, when it sheltered in tents, from
what it became in the 790s, when it resided in a great stone-built complex
buildings in Aachen. Secondly, terms such as ‘court’ or ‘court school’ can be
misleading in their suggestion of a single fixed centre. As Rosamond
McKitterick has argued, in discussing the artistic achievement of the court of
Charlemagne’s grandson Charles the Bald (843–77), royal patronage reached far
beyond the court, making artists in non-court centres into ‘honorary court
artists’: ‘the web of royal patronage extended far and wide in the kingdom’.

How did this web get spun and extended? It was a very sophisticated web.
This emerges clearly from the contrast between the Carolingians and their
successors in tenth-century east Francia, the Ottonians. The latter were cease-
lessly itinerant and governed their realm by travelling effortfully through it.
Such travelling could be difficult for Ottonian rulers whose control of their
palaces was much less tight than Carolingian control of theirs. Ottonian royal
courts were not the key centres of the Reich’s identity; the tenth-century Reich
was in fact polycentric. In contrast, Carolingian rulers seem to have possessed
effortless superiority. They did not try and cover their empire in journeys, nor
did they need to. Their palaces and courts were on the whole focussed in specific
areas of high-density royal power, the Königslandschaften: the valley of the Oise
and Aisne, the area of the lower Meuse, the Rhine valley and the area around
Regensburg. Kings therefore patrolled relatively finite territories but these
territories interlocked, thanks primarily to links of personnel, i.e. the aristocracy,
with yet wider areas.

Such a system, in the accounts of its modern students such as K. F. Werner,
can seem all too smoothly running and effortlessly maintained. Power,
however, is maintained only with continuous effort; power as authority is
masked and the more deeply entrenched and successfully maintained it is the

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4 D. Bullough, ‘Aula Renovata. The Carolingian Court before the Aachen Palace’, Proceedings of
the British Academy 71 (1985), 267–301 (pp. 267–9 and p. 273).
5 R. McKitterick, ‘The Palace School of Charles the Bald’, in Charles the Bald: Court and Kingdom,
6 K. Leyser, ‘Ottonian Government’, English Historical Review 83 (1968), 1–32 and reprinted in
7 H. Keller, ‘Reichsorganisation, Herrschaftsformen und Gesellschaftsstrukturen im Regnum
Teutonicum’, in Il Secolo di Ferro: Mito et ReaIta del Secolo X, Settimane di Studio del Centro
italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo 38 (Spoleto, 1991), pp. 159–95 (pp. 174–8 and p. 185).
Ottonian authority within such a structure should not be underestimated; see J. W.
Bernhardt, Itinerant Kingship and Royal Monasteries in Early Medieval Germany, c.936–1075
8 Werner, ‘Missus–Marchio–Comes’, pp. 193–4; T. Reuter, Germany in the Early Middle Ages c.800–
10 K. F. Werner, ‘Hludovicus Augustus: Gouverner l’empire chrétien – Idées et réalités’, in
and R. Collins (Oxford, 1990), pp. 3–123 (pp. 7–10 and pp. 16–27), and Werner, ‘Missus–
Marchio–Comes’.
more close-fitting is the mask it wears. This paper will examine the role played
by the Carolingian court in the maintenance of a system of Carolingian
authority. Let me say at once that the system did work; such tensions between
centre and regions as did exist served only, as we shall see, to demonstrate just
how central the court was as a political institution. We shall examine the court
from two angles: first, by observing the political gravity exerted by the court as a
centre and, secondly, by examining how political authority radiated out from
the court.

First, then, the political gravity exerted by the court. What was the court? By
Carolingian court I mean the king and his family and the personnel around
them together with the institutions (e.g. the royal chapel) and buildings (e.g.
palaces) that housed, served and very often, in their scale and design,
expressed the essence of the royal household. Our sources use words such as
aula or palatium; such terms refer to people as well as to buildings. Archbishop
Hincmar of Rheims, one of the foremost ninth-century commentators on the
court, stated that people, not buildings, made the court but buildings counted
and one of the aims of this paper is to locate the court personnel in its concrete
environment.¹¹

The court acted as a magnet, drawing people and resources from all over the
empire. Peasants travelled to royal palaces to seek protection from their own
lords.¹² Monks in great abbeys such as Fulda knew that they needed a nobly
born candidate as their prospective abbot as only such a well-connected figure
could work for them as a patron at court. Young nobles were sent to the court to
learn military skills and courtly arts.¹³ The court’s gravitational pull was felt
outside the immediate confines of the king’s palace. This can be seen clearly in
the case of the best-known royal site, Aachen. The large and elaborate palace
complex here was merely the visible tip of an extensive iceberg of fiscal land and
organisation.¹⁴ It was also a centre to and from which gossip travelled along a
very specific network as, for example, when news of miracles wrought by the
courtier Einhard’s newly acquired holy relics came to the ears of other courtiers

¹¹ ‘Palatium enim regis dicitur propter rationabiles homines inhabitantes, et non propter
parietes insensibiles sive macerias’, Concilia Aevi Karolini DCCCLXX–DCCCLXL, ed.
W. Hartmann, MGH Concilia III (Hanover, 1984), no. 41, c. v, p. 412; see P. Riché, ‘Les
représentations du palais dans les textes littéraires du Haut Moyen Age’, Francia 4 (1976),
161-71 (p. 164). For general discussion of contemporary terminology and concepts, Fleck-
enstein, Die karolingische Hofkapelle, pp. 11-13; J. Fried, ‘Der karolingische Herrschaftsverband
(pp. 35-40); T. Zott, ‘Palatium publicum, nostrum, regium. Bemerkungen zur Königspfalz
in der Karolingerzeit’, in Die Pfalz. Probleme einer Begriffsgeschichte vom Kaiserpalast auf dem


¹³ H.-W. Goetz, ‘“Nobilis”: Der Adel im Selbstverständnis der Karolingerzeit’, Vierteljahrschrift
für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte 70 (1983), 153-91 (p. 173 and p. 182); Tellenbach,
‘Grundlagen der karolingische Thronfolge’, p. 246.

¹⁴ D. Flach, Untersuchungen zur Verfassung und Verwaltung des Aachener Reichsgutes von der
journeying towards Aachen. Aachen itself, according to a late ninth-century source written in the distant monastery of St Gall by the monk Notker, was full of buildings ready to receive 'the bishops, abbots, counts and all the guests who flocked there from all over the world'. According to Notker the buildings of Aachen were erected by workers recruited from far distant regions and his impressionistic hyperbole is in fact confirmed by other evidence; we know, for example, that the church of Rheims owed building service at Aachen in the ninth century.

The court was, and was perceived to be, the centre of the realm and at its core was the king. His central presence betokened authority. The more deeply one penetrated into the heart of the palace the closer one got to this authority. That Notker, and presumably others, conceptualised the court and palace in this way emerges clearly from his text. For example, when a humble cleric tries to reach Charlemagne to warn him of a conspiracy, he races to the palace at night and has to penetrate seven doorways and force his way through the queen’s entourage before he can gain access to the king, who then takes instant action against the conspirators. Similar conceptions can be detected in another of Notker's stories in which he tells of how some Greek envoys are very gradually ushered into Charlemagne's presence through a series of encounters with court officials (all of whom were so grand that the envoys mistook them for the king), being led from the constable to the count of the palace to the master of the king’s table to the chamberlain until they finally reach Charlemagne. Various layers of personnel have to be peeled off, as it were, before the king can be reached. But Notker offers a further gloss; when the envoys finally gain access to Charlemagne he is not alone but is surrounded by other personnel, including his family, abbots, bishops and warriors. Modern scholars have stressed the relatively informal nature of the historical Charlemagne’s court and have argued that relations between Carolingian kings and their great men were characterised by *familiaritas*. The Carolingian court was probably less formal in

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18 Notker, *Gesta Karoli II* c. 6, pp. 55-7.

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its rituals than its Ottonian successor and was certainly less formal than its Byzantine counterpart, but hierarchy is what is being very clearly anatomised in this anecdote. Notions of hierarchy and authority therefore mould and inform Notker’s descriptions of the court and its habitat, the palace. In fact Notker seems, rather surprisingly, to anticipate Michel Foucault in his view of Charlemagne as imposing discipline through surveillance. Notker describes Charlemagne’s palace almost as a variant of the Panopticon in its structure, as the mansiones of his followers were so constructed that they could easily be observed by Charlemagne without their inhabitants’ knowledge. Some of Notker’s picture is fanciful. It is, however, significant that he thought in such terms and the architecture of royal palaces such as Aachen and Ingelheim did indeed serve to display royal power and majesty to the audience that had travelled to the centre. Some sense of the powerful scale of that architecture can be gained from the fact that the palace chapel at Aachen could hold some 7,000 people.

Another text also written at some distance from the court enables us to see how deeply the idea of the court as the centre of the kingdom had taken root in the minds of the Carolingians’ followers. I refer to the book of spiritual guidance written for her son William by a great aristocratic lady, Dhuoda. Dhuoda was the wife of Bernard of Septimania, a magnate who had had a stormy career at court and this means that the calm authority with which she addresses her son on the court is hard won. Dhuoda wrote her text between 841 and 843 in Uzès in the south of France far from the Carolingian court centres. Yet the court is a key element in the scheme of behaviour which Dhuoda proposes to her son; she urges him to serve his lord there with loyalty and humility and to learn from the wise men he will find in the great household, the big house (donus magna). Dhuoda could testify to the impact that the court could make on a young aristocrat for she knew it herself; she had in fact been married in the palace at Aachen some two decades before producing her book.

Personal memories of the court such as Dhuoda’s were important, as we shall see in the second part of this paper, but the court’s role as political centre was also securely grounded institutionally. This emerges clearly from a famous text written by Hincmar, archbishop of Rheims in 882: On the governance of the palace. For Hincmar, the holders of the great court offices ‘kept the confederation of the


Dhuoda, Liber Manualis, Praefatio, p. 84.
whole realm glued together with the palace’. Such office holders were themselves to be recruited from different regions of the empire so that visitors from the regions to the palace could be sure of having a contact there.24 The court was open to more than the charmed circle of the king’s intimates. As the archbishop of Lyons wrote to a count in the 820s: ‘at court you will find lots of kinsfolk and friends’.25

There was, then, a relentless traffic towards the court. In return the court offered prestige, political advancement and jobs and these jobs were sometimes for fairly lowly members of the Carolingian world. Not all courtiers or court officials were of equally high birth.26 We must not, however, think simply in terms of a one-way traffic or of a simple system in which patronage was one-sidedly dispensed by the court. The court offered much but courtiers brought resources and connections with them and the court was by no means the last stop for those anxious to do well out of serving the Carolingians. An example should clarify this point. Gerboldus, an aristocrat from northern Frisia, worked at the court of Charlemagne’s father Pippin as chaplain to Pippin’s wife Bertrada, Charlemagne’s mother. For his good service Charlemagne rewarded him with the abbey of St-Wandrille. Gerboldus, however, maintained connections with the court; he eventually brought his nephew Ansegisus there and this nephew also worked in court service. Among Ansegisus’s court duties, interestingly for our context, was assisting Einhard as building supervisor in the palace of Aachen.27 Ansegisus’s devotion to Carolingian kings was so great that he sought to compile a collection of the legislation of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious; this was not part of his official duties but, as J. Nelson describes it, ‘a piece of “private enterprise” conceived of as an act of piety’.28 Ansegisus may have compiled his collection not at court but in the abbey of St-Wandrille, of which he was abbot as his uncle had been. What we have here are members of an

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aristocratic family with well-maintained court connections, a record of dedicated service to the Carolingians and, as a result of these, the gaining of reward in the form of 'hereditary' control over an abbey away from the court and in what was probably the home territory of that family. The Carolingian kings did not create their court officials out of nothing and such officials used their influence at court to stake claims to prizes in their own localities.

The court was more than a job centre and a political centre. Ansegisus's combination of bureaucracy and piety suggests as much. It was the moral centre of the realm. For Hincmar the court and the state (status), of the whole realm were linked. At the centre of the court, and thus at the centre of the kingdom, was the royal family itself. The queen, according to Hincmar, was responsible for the moral purity, the honestas, of the court. If the court failed, the kingdom failed: 'if the queen does not know how to govern herself, who is to preserve the honestas of the palace and how is the kingdom to be governed?' All these concepts are interlinked. This message is driven home in a variety of other ninth-century texts such as Sedulius Scotus's handbook for a Carolingian king, On Christian Rulers: 'A wise and pious king has three areas of rule: first, he must rule himself, then his wife, his children and his domestici and finally the people entrusted to him.' Such concepts shaped the form and action of contemporary politics. If the court did not function as a moral centre political crisis could erupt. That is to say, accusations of immorality at court had a central place in the armoury of political weaponry. Thus opposition to Louis the Pious in 833 was able to legitimate itself through attacks on the moral chaos of Louis' court. In particular, Louis' queen Judith was singled out. News of her alleged sexual misdemeanours is said by Agobard of Lyons to have travelled far and wide from the palace through the kingdom 'to the ends of the earth'. Louis' sons were therefore right to rise against their father as it was their duty, as members of the royal family, to save the kingdom from pollution: 'seeing their father's bed polluted, the palace made filthy, the kingdom disturbed and the reputation of the Franks, which had once shone over the whole earth, now lost'. Ripples thus spread out from the royal bed-chamber until waves of pollution threatened to engulf the kingdom. The centrality of the court to political life and to political discourse did not always work to kings' advantage. Similar problems overwhelmed Louis' grandson Lothar II (855-69), when his attempts to divorce his

29 Hincmar on the queen's role: De ordine palatii, c. 22, pp. 72-4; the quotation is from Agobard of Lyons, Liber Apologeticus, in Agobardi Lugdunensis Opera Omnia, ed. L. van Acker, CCCM 52 (Turnhout, 1981), I.v, p. 311; see E. Ward, 'Agobard of Lyons and Paschasius Radbertus as Critics of the Empress Judith', in Women in the Church, Studies in Church History 27 (Oxford, 1990), pp. 15-25 (pp. 20-1).
30 Sedulius Scotus, Liber de rectoribus christianis, ed. S. Hellman, Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Lateinischen Philologie des Mittelalters I (Munich, 1906), c. 5, pp. 34-5; Fried, 'Herrschaftsverband', pp. 37-10.
31 Agobard, Liber Apologeticus I.ii, p. 309.
wife and marry his concubine were all too easily glossed by hostile contemporaries as threats to the moral stability of his court and thus to his kingdom. Such rhetoric did not, however, criticise the court as such; there is no sense in such texts as we have been examining of disaffected regions chafing against the centre. The resentment in these texts stems rather from anger at the court's failure to act as a true centre. The criticism reveals the strength of the ideal.

We turn now to the second part of our survey, examining how authority radiated out from the centre. We have seen that the court operated as a centre that drew the kingdom of the Franks together. How did the court maintain its hold? This is a large topic which has attracted much scholarly attention and which cannot be examined in detail here but I hope to provide some pointers to what sort of system operated and how it did so.

Many court chaplains left court to become abbots or bishops in regional centres: Einhard, who gained the abbey of St Servatius, Maastricht; Hincmar, who became archbishop of Rheims; Walahfrid Strabo, who became abbot of Reichenau; Grimald, who became abbot of Weissenburg and St Gall and who cherished his memories of the court; such examples could be multiplied. Secular aristocrats also poured out from the court across the kingdom as the careers of Charles the Bald's chamberlains make clear: Vivian went on to become count of Tours, Boso became a duke in Italy and Theuderic became count of Autun. This is not to say that the court was the administrative centre from which bureaucrats were sent out to run the empire. The Carolingian empire was not like a modern state; for example, the choice of royal agents sent out from the court to inspect the regions, the missi, represented a compromise between royal and local aristocratic interests. For favoured individuals, however, the court operated like a great railway junction shunting personnel all over the realm. We can gain some sense of what this meant through examining the career of one of Louis the Pious' court officers, the butler Odo. This was an important post and was held in the ninth-century Frankish world by men of distinction. Odo's origins lay in the central Rhineland and he is found, together with his widowed mother, granting property around Worms to the abbey of Fulda in 821. It is at one of the great palaces of the Rhineland

3 The most searching contemporary analysis is Hincmar, De Divortio Lotharii Regis et Theutbergae Reginae, ed. L. Böhringer, MGH Concilia IV. Supplementum I (Hanover, 1992); there is an analysis of Lothar's divorce in my forthcoming Carolingian Politics.

34 Fleckenstein, Hofkapelle, pp. 103-9.

35 Nelson, Charles the Bald, p. 71.


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region, namely Ingelheim, that we find Odo acting as butler in 826. Odo’s service at Ingelheim may look like a case of local boy makes good but court service opened up horizons that were far from local. Odo profited from the changes at court that resulted in the promotion of his kinsman Bernard of Septimania to the post of chamberlain in 828 by being appointed to the county of Orléans. Henceforth, he appears to have abandoned the Rhineland and to have concentrated all his energies on building up his position in the west; significantly, he died while fighting to retain his post in Orléans in 834. The holding of office at court had brought Odo into the charmed circle of those aristocrats who rose above their peers through being granted honores such as a countship. For such men, service at court gave them the chance to act on a wider stage and the abandonment of the Rhineland for Orléans was an opportunity to be grasped. Only the Carolingian ruler could move men around on a stage this large and favour at court was a key factor in gaining access to such patronage. Odo travelled from the Rhineland to Orléans via the Ingelheim court.

When Odo travelled to Orléans he took memories of court service with him. He had taken part in the dazzling ceremonies there in which the Danish prince Harold and his family were baptized as Christians and Louis the Pious marked the occasion with a great feast, the distribution of lavish gifts and a spectacular hunt. Such ceremonies took place in an impressive setting and the importance of palaces in the Carolingian world needs to be stressed as they are very relevant to our theme. There were over 150 palatia in the Carolingian world. The palace provided a setting for the court. Because the empire was covered with palaces, it was, to some extent, covered with courts or at least with a framework in which courts could be held, maintained and remembered. The palace, not merely as a setting but in its very fabric, its very existence, was a key institutional component of the court. As butler, Odo would not only have participated in great ceremonies at Ingelheim but would have been exposed to the messages of authority which the buildings of the palace complex transmitted to courtiers. And Ingelheim was well designed to transmit specific messages of Carolingian

42 Werner, ‘Missus–Marchio–Comes’, p. 231.
majesty and legitimacy. It was on a large scale and the entrance gatehouse was in the middle of a ‘massive curving range of buildings’ which would have presented an impressive spectacle to those approaching the site of the palace.\textsuperscript{45} Thanks to a surviving literary description, we know that the walls of the inside of the hall and chapel of the Ingelheim palace were decorated with paintings, including images of Carolingian rulers who took their impressive place in a series of rulers from pre-Christian and Christian history. As magnates gathered in the hall, they formed the audience to which these images of the grandeur, legitimacy and divinely approved nature of Carolingian kingship were relayed.\textsuperscript{46}

The Carolingian palace stood in the landscape of its region as a permanent reminder of the royal centre, of the king’s authority; it was a palace of memory, of political memory. The \textit{locus classicus} of this thinking occurs in a post-Carolingian text, the \textit{Deeds of Conrad II} written by the eleventh-century court chaplain Wipo, which tells how the citizens of Pavia demolished the palace there on the news of the death of the emperor Henry II in 1024. Trying to ward off the wrath of Conrad II, Henry’s successor, envoys from Pavia travelled to an assembly at Constance and argued that they had not injured royal authority, ‘since when the emperor died, we had no king, we cannot therefore be rightly accused of having destroyed our king’s dwelling-place’. But, as Conrad snapped back, ‘if the king died, the kingdom remained . . . the buildings were public, not private’.\textsuperscript{47} A palace that was maintained in a distant corner of the empire implied by its very existence that the king might come and hold court there and, even if this happened rarely, the palace itself continued to evoke the royal court.

This can be clearly demonstrated through examining a palace that, unlike Ingelheim or Aachen, did not form part of a central \textit{Königslandschaft}, the palace of Bodman on the shores of Lake Constance in Alemannia. Important monasteries in this area such as Reichenau and St Gall had close royal links


\textsuperscript{47} Wipo, \textit{Gesta Chuonradi II. Imperatoris}, in \textit{Wiponis Opera}, ed. H. Bresslau, MGH Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum ex MGH separatim editi (Hanover and Leipzig, 1915), c. 7, pp. 29–30. This text has occasioned much scholarly comment; see Zotz, ‘Palatium publicum’, p. 86.
but the palace of Bodman itself was rarely visited by kings until the reign of
Charles the Fat at the end of the Carolingian period; Louis the Pious was
resident there only once, in 839, and the next recorded royal stay was not until
857. Nevertheless, Bodman was seen by inhabitants of the region; it continu-
ously expressed royal authority. One way in which it did this was by its
monumental architectural quality; the secular buildings of the Bodman palace
complex were on a similar scale to those of Carolingian Frankfurt. Such a
presence in the landscape was impressive; Carolingian kings may have visited
Bodman itself only sparingly but the palace maintained the image of their power
in the landscape. This is true to a greater or lesser extent of all Carolingian
palaces, but in Bodman's case we are fortunate enough to possess specific
information letting us see how royal authority was maintained through the
palace in the minds of the region's inhabitants. A 'private' charter of 879 records
an exchange of property between a man called Palding and the abbey of St
Gall. From this charter emerge three points which are relevant to our theme.
First, the transaction took place in the palace of Bodman itself and for this the
permission of the king, Charles the Fat, was necessary and was duly obtained as
the charter explicitly states: 'Actum ... in palatio regio, ex permisso quoque
ipsius domni regis Karoli'. Secondly, the presence of three counts, Adalbert,
Udalrich and Hildebold, is also worthy of note; the fact that the transaction was	aking place in the king's palace and that the property involved originally stemmed from a royal gift drew them there. Thirdly, the aura of kings, both
living and dead, suffuses this charter and the transaction which it records. The
land which Palding was giving to St Gall had originally been a grant to him from
Louis the German who is recalled in this charter ('res quas mihi clementia
domini nostri atque serenissimi regis Hludowici dare dignata est'). Although
the lands were now passing from Palding to St Gall, Louis the German's son,
Charles the Fat, was keeping a close eye on their fate. The abbey was forbidden

48 H. Maurer, 'Bodman', in Die deutschen Königspaläzen. Repertorium der Pfarren, Königshöfe und
übriigen Aufenthaltsorte der Könige im deutschen Reich des Mittelalters, ed. Max-Planck-Institut
für Geschichte unter der direction von T. Zotz, 3.i (Göttingen, 1988), 18-45; T. Zotz,
'Grundlagen und Zentren der Königsherrschaft im deutschen Südwesten in karolingischer
und ottonischer Zeit', in Archäologie und Geschichte des ersten Jahrtausends in Südwestdeutsch-
land, Archäologie und Geschichte. Freiburger Forschungen zum ersten Jahrtausend in
Südwestdeutschland I (Sigmaringen, 1990), pp. 275-93 (p. 280).
49 Zotz, 'Grundlagen und Zentren', p. 281.
50 For a parallel, note how the depiction of the empty imperial palace in Justinian's Ravenna
'drew the minds of the beholders into a state of expectancy and awareness of their
absent ruler', S. MacCormack, Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity (Berkeley and London),
51 Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen, ed. H. Wartmann, 3 vols. (St Gallen, 1863-82), III,
Anhang Nr 8, pp. 688-9. Transactions involving St Gall could touch a broad spectrum of the
local community: see R. McKitterick, The Carolingians and the Written Word (Cambridge, 1989),
pp. 79-126.
52 Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen, III, Anhang Nr 8; Maurer, 'Bodman', p. 21 and p. 31.
53 Maurer, 'Bodman', p. 31; M. Borgolte, Die Grafen Alemanniens im merowingischen und
to grant these lands out again as benefice; they were in fact to serve for the maintenance of Louis the German’s memoria (i.e. prayers for his soul); if the monastery failed to carry out this obligation, the lands were to revert to the fisc, implying that royal officials, probably based around Bodman, were expected to keep an eye on things.54

The Carolingian palace was thus a point of reference for the court in a landscape. The palace was also a point of reference in a memory. Thus Helisachar, abbot of St Aubin in Angers, wrote to Nibridius, archbishop of Narbonne, recalling time spent together in royal service at the palace of Aachen, and Hincmar of Rheims held in his memory the image of discussing an important political matter with his colleague Odo, bishop of Beauvais, on a summer evening while standing together by a window in the palace of Attigny.55 The Max-Planck-Institut of Göttingen’s survey of the palace of Frankfurt offers a rich source of material for exploring this theme, the palace as focus for court memory. Louis the Pious spent the winter of 822–3 and the spring of 823 in Frankfurt and a host of the empire’s great men attended the royal court in the newly built palace complex there.56 In June 823 Louis’ second wife Judith gave birth to a son, Charles, the future king Charles the Bald. The birth of a legitimate male heir was an important event, especially as Louis already had heirs and Charles’ birth was therefore not an unmixed blessing and must have triggered off political speculation among the assembled courtiers.

On a simple level, the birth of Charles turned out to be a peg on which courtiers could hang their memories of court life at Frankfurt. One example of this relatively simple process is provided by Hincmar of Rheims who wrote to Charles the Bald towards the very end of the latter’s reign, recalling the promotion of a fellow courtier: ‘When, as God willed it, you were born in the palace of Frankfurt, the bishopric of Meaux was given to the praecentor of the palace Hucbertus.57 Hincmar himself had been a court chaplain; he had accompanied Hilduin to court when the latter became arch-chaplain. The latter was arch-chaplain from 819 on so Hincmar himself was probably present at court for the birth of Charles the Bald in 823.58 Thus he remembers the

54 Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen III, Anhang Nr 8; Zotz, ‘Grundlagen und Zentren, p. 288.
56 Helisachar: MGH Epistolae Karolinin Aevi III (as above, note 25), no. 6, pp. 307–9; Hincmar: Nelson, Charles the Bald, p. 146. The career and correspondence of Frotharius, bishop of Toul from 814 to 850, are also enlightening here; see P. Depreux, Prosopographie de l’entourage de Louis le Pieux (781–840) (Paris, 1997), pp. 204–5.
58 Fleckenstein, Hofkapelle, p. 52 and p. 73.
The Palace of Memory

appointment of Hucbertus as one courtier remembering another with the memory anchored to a specific place (the palace of Frankfurt), and time (the birth of Charles the Bald).

The preceding example was a fairly simple one, but memories of the palace could generate more complex patterns and associations as the Frankfurt material also demonstrates. Memories were created and instigated by Carolingian rulers. It was unlikely, given its sombre political significance, that the birth of Charles would remain unremembered but his mother Judith in fact took positive steps to ensure that it would be recalled. Immediately after his birth she sent a ring to Archbishop Ebbo of Rheims asking him to remember the boy in his prayers. It is possible that Judith sent a similar gift to all the archbishops of the empire. We know that her gift to Ebbo was accompanied by a promise to help him if ever he were in trouble; in such a case, he should return the ring to her and she would aid him. When Ebbo was caught up in the political turmoil of the 830s he remembered Judith’s promise and sent her back her ring as a desperate plea for help in the face of Louis the Pious’ wrath; Judith pleaded on Ebbo’s behalf but could not save him from political disgrace. All this took place twelve years after Charles’ birth while assemblies were being held in Metz cathedral and the palace of Thionville. We know the story of Judith, Ebbo and the ring from a letter of Charles the Bald himself written to Pope Nicholas I in 867. Judith’s seemingly straightforward gesture thus triggered a series of ripples across time which we can trace in the memories preserved in the sources. Of course Judith’s gift of a ring was not a simple gesture. As Elizabeth Ward has pointed out, Judith genuinely wanted the prayers of the empire’s holy men such as Ebbo as labour and the early days of an infant’s life are dangerous times; but Judith was also seeking to create a network of support for herself and her son, hence her promise of future help for Ebbo; the ring bore a complex message. Ebbo remembered this in his own time of trouble, and in sending back the ring to Judith in 835 he evoked memories of her travail in childbirth at Frankfurt. Our source for all this is Charles the Bald, having his letter written in Troyes some forty years later; he can only have known the story from someone else and that someone was surely his mother Judith. In other words, Charles had been given a memory of the circumstances of his birth and it is the vividness of that memory that leads me to believe that Judith herself had planted it in her son’s mind: ‘in the very hour of my birth, my mother Judith sent a ring to Ebbo’. The tale had obviously lost nothing in the telling. All these memories and associations revolve around the

61 ‘in ipso nostrae nativitatis articulo’, PL 124, col. 873.
Stuart Airlie

palace at Frankfurt which was thus not merely a physical setting for the court but a focus for identity and memory.

Kings set out to make palaces act as conceptual centres of the realm. As we have seen, assemblies were held there, buildings were elaborately constructed and maintained, royal interests were watched over so carefully in the king’s absence that his presence continued to be felt. Kings not only maintained their network of palaces but saw it as a system open to sophisticated manipulation. The western region of the Carolingian empire provides an outstanding example of this in the palace of Compiègne. Compiègne was part of a great chain of palaces stretching north-east of Paris along the valley of the river Oise and linked to the valley of the Aisne. Compiègne had been a palace of the Merovingians, the dynasty displaced by the Carolingians, and its cluster of Merovingian associations seems to have discouraged some of the early Carolingian rulers from frequenting it as often as their predecessors. With the reign of Charlemagne’s son Louis the Pious (814-40), who bore a Merovingian name (Louis = Hludowicus = Clovis), the Carolingians combined the Merovingian aura with their own by now firmly established legitimacy and Compiègne returned to prominence as a royal palace. Such notions may seem rather abstract but a palace such as Compiègne offered a specific and living site through which complex notions of royal legitimacy and identity could be displayed to an important audience. First, Compiègne was part of a region of bustling economic activity and, as we shall see, royal resources were poured with a lavish hand into Compiègne itself. Part of Compiègne’s own economic activities after 864 included the minting of coins; like other Carolingian palaces such as Attigny and Aachen it struck coins with its own name on them. Money talked. Compiègne’s impact spread outside the circle of the court. Second, as a centre for gatherings of the Carolingian élite, Compiègne was a theatre that played to a large audience, and theatre is the appropriate term. Thus, Charles the Bald received there in the winter of 865 envoys whom he had previously dispatched to Cordoba in Muslim Spain; they returned with camels, rich cloths and perfumes – the sort of exotic and luxurious gifts that would impress Charles’ followers as much as the king himself. Audiences, as well as being duly impressed, could also be large; when Charles had the newly built palace chapel consecrated in 877, all the bishops of the kingdom were summoned to Compiègne. When the court gathered around the palace of Compiègne, such a

64 Compiègne was probably also the centre of a fisc, Barbier, ‘Le système palatial’, p. 294; on the importance of the mint, see J. Lafaurie, ‘Moneta Palatina’, Francia 4 (1976), 59–87 (pp. 72, 81 and 83–7), and D. M. Metcalf, ‘A Sketch of the Currency in the Time of Charles the Bald’, in Charles the Bald: Court and Kingdom, pp. 65–97 (pp. 71–5); cf. S. Coupland, ‘Money and Coinage under Louis the Pious’, Francia 17 (1990), 23–54.
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gathering, in Janet Nelson’s words, ‘probably contained virtually all those involved in “the regulation of public affairs” of the kingdom’.66

Compiègne did not, in fact, often play host to the general assembly of Charles’ kingdom; but the court, i.e. the king and his followers, met here very frequently indeed.67 Charles the Bald seems to have visited his palace here more often than any other palace of his kingdom, especially in the last decade of the reign.68 Compiègne therefore loomed large in courtiers’ minds as an important palace. As we might expect, and as we have seen happen at other palaces, courtiers established their own connections there. This is made plain by a letter of the 870s from an unknown figure (‘A’), to an equally unknown learned colleague (magister ‘E’), in which ‘A’ recalls a scholarly encounter with one Manno when ‘A’ was at the palace of Compiègne.69

So far none of this is exceptional. After all, one of the central arguments of this paper is that Carolingian palaces had an impact on the surrounding landscape and on the memory or consciousness of courtiers even when they were away from the palace. Compiègne was intended, however, to be a very special palace indeed. In the last decade of his reign Charles the Bald did not merely visit and reside there ever more frequently, he sought to build it up as a great palace complex that articulated messages of Carolingian power and authority.

Charles’ intentions for Compiègne can be recovered from the very full statements in the elaborate charter he issued for the palace chapel on 5 May 877:

Because our grandfather [Charlemagne], to whom divine providence granted the monarchy of this whole empire, established a chapel in honour of the Virgin in the palace of Aachen, we therefore, wanting to imitate the pattern set by him and by other kings and emperors, namely our predecessors, since that part of the realm has not yet come to us by way of share in its division, we have built and completed within the territory under our sway, in the palace of Compiègne, a new monastery, to which we have given the name ‘royal’, in honour of the glorious mother of God and ever-virgin Mary, and we have decreed that there 100 clerics should continually implore the Lord’s mercy for the state of the holy church of God, for our fathers and forefathers, ourselves, our wife and offspring, and for the stability of the whole realm.70

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70 Recueil des Actes de Charles II le Chauve, II, no. 425; the translation is essentially from Nelson, Charles the Bald, p. 247; cf. McKitterick, ‘Palace School’, p. 331.
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68 Brühl, Fodrum, Gisturn, Servitiurn Regis, pp. 40-2; McKitterick, 'Palace School', pp. 330-1; Barbier, 'Le système palatial', p. 294.


70 Recueil des Actes de Charles II le Chauve, II, no. 425; the translation is essentially from Nelson, Charles the Bald, p. 247; cf. McKitterick, 'Palace School', p. 331.
Several points are relevant to our theme here. First, this is a dynastic act; Charles wishes to inscribe himself in the series of Carolingian rulers. Specifically, he is imitating his grandfather and namesake Charlemagne. Further, the monastery is to be a centre for dynastic prayer; the monks' prayers for Charles, his ancestors and his wife and children are bound up with prayers for the security of the realm. Secondly, as the charter makes clear, Compiègne's new building complex was explicitly intended to recall Aachen. If Charles could not have Aachen, he would evoke it, and its dynastic associations, in the central region of his own kingdom. It is possible that the new chapel was actually modelled on the architecture of Charlemagne's chapel at Aachen. Although Charles only lost his final hope of gaining Aachen after 876 the seeds of his ideas on Compiègne must have been planted earlier, i.e. in 870 when he failed in his first attempt to gain it; in this context, it is significant that, when he was driven out of Aachen in that year, he and his entourage travelled directly back to Compiègne.

The palace complex of Compiègne was thus intended to bridge distances of time and geography. In evoking Charlemagne, it reached into the past; in its prayers for the dynasty, it looked into the future. Erected in Charles the Bald's kingdom, its roots were explicitly declared to be in Aachen. Compiègne was to be the conceptual centre of the kingdom: Carlopolis.

It is of course difficult to judge precisely what impact Charles' activities had on the intended political audience, particularly because the heavenly court was part of that audience. In fact, Compiègne could never function quite as Charles had wished because of the crisis of legitimacy and fragmentation that afflicted the Carolingian dynasty at the end of the 880s. None the less, Charles built well; Compiègne did achieve a very special status. First, the sheer scale of the Compiègne project is striking. Charles the Bald decreed that his monastery should have a hundred monks (this high number actually outdid the Aachen model), and should be richly equipped with landed resources as well as wonder-working relics and earthly treasures such as gold and precious stones. The effort required to build and maintain this establishment was considerable and Charles urged his son and magnates to continue the project's momentum. Twice the monastery burned down and Charles the Simple, Charles the Bald's grandson and eventual successor in west Francia, restored


72 McKitterick, 'Palace School', p. 332; M. Herren, 'Eriugena's Aulae Sidereae, the Codex Aureus and the Palatine Church of St Mary at Compiègne', Studi Medievali 28 (1987), 593-608.


74 McKitterick, 'Palace School', p. 332; M. Herren, 'Eriugena's Aulae Sidereae, the Codex Aureus and the Palatine Church of St Mary at Compiègne', Studi Medievali 28 (1987), 593-608.


76 McKitterick, 'Palace School', pp. 331-2.
it and lavished further resources on Compiègne right up to the end of his reign. But Charles the Simple not only preserved and enhanced the fabric of the buildings, he maintained the conceptual framework instituted by his grandfather. Prayers were to be said for members of the royal family and even for Charles the Simple’s own predecessor, the non-Carolingian Odo, who was thus incorporated into a web of Carolingian continuity; Compiègne thus continued to function as a centre for strongly dynastic commemoration. Compiègne certainly did function as a politically important Carolingian memory centre. Nor was memory confined to liturgical acts. In the final phase of the struggle between the Carolingians and the Robertians/Capetians in the last quarter of the tenth century, a history of the west Frankish kings was written up in Compiègne and it loyally glorified Carolingian deeds while harshly condemning those rash enough to challenge Carolingian legitimacy. Significantly, such memories were also transmitted from Compiègne to other centres. Carolingian genealogical material from there was used by the priest Witger when he composed a genealogy for Count Arnulf of Flanders, of whose chapel he was a member.

Of particular relevance for this paper is the fact that Charles the Simple was aware that Compiègne was meant to ‘echo’ Aachen. He issued two charters for the royal monastery of Compiègne in July 917 while he was actually in the palace of Aachen. Compiègne evoked Aachen; the king in Aachen remembered Compiègne; Compiègne and Aachen were thus two manifestations of an ideal and universal Carolingian court. Compiègne was indeed one of the conceptual centres of the Carolingian world. Compiègne’s status was also well known outside the Carolingian world as is revealed in the dark tribute paid to it in being singled out as one of the sites ravaged by Otto II’s army in his attack on the western kingdom in 978.

We have now seen how the court operated as a centre from which Carolingian authority radiated and we have traced sections of the network along which that

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78 Recueil des Actes de Charles III le Simple, nos. 75, 90, 91, 93, 95 and 109; for Odo, see also Recueil des Actes d'Eudes roi de France (888–897), ed. R.-H. Bautier (Paris, 1967), no. 43.
82 Leyser, Communications and Power, p. 169.
authority was transmitted. The court could also devolve a courtly aura onto non-courtly centres and this forms our final area of investigation. If the Carolingian empire was covered with a grid of palaces it was also covered by great abbeys, many of which were in the hands of Carolingian family members. If one of the functions of the court was to provide a space in which members of the aristocracy could be brought close to the royal family and there absorb messages of its authority then this function was very well performed by some of the great abbeys of the empire. Space permits examination of only one example: San Salvatore–San Giulia in Brescia in northern Italy.

This abbey is particularly interesting for the fact that the prominent Carolingians in it were women. They dominated it even though they did not always hold the post of abbess. Charters of Lothar I from 848 and 851 refer to his wife Irmgingard and their daughter Gisela as being in charge of the abbey alongside the abbess and reveal the Carolingian grip on the community, a grip maintained after Italy became separate from the middle kingdom on Lothar's death in 855; after Gisela's death in 860 her brother the emperor Louis II saw to it that his daughter and wife controlled the abbey. The determination of Louis to ensure that Carolingian women controlled this abbey and something of the special nature of that control emerges from the fact that his daughter was given a prominent position in it even though she was young and sickly. Her individual qualities mattered less than the fact that she was the daughter of a king; her youth and illness were transcended by the charisma stemming from her blood. For a generation, then, royal women dominated an abbey whose personnel was drawn from the top-drawer families of Carolingian Italy, including that of Eberhard of Friuli, whose daughter, Gisela's cousin, was a nun here in Gisela's time as were the daughters of counts Adalbert and Rambertus. Brescia thus functioned as a bond between Carolingian kings and their magnates, and its connections reached over the Alps beyond Italy throughout the ninth century.

As the sons of the aristocracy were sent to the court, so its daughters were sent to royal abbeys. Abbeys functions replicated, to some extent, those of the court; an abbey could act as a sort of parallel court.


84 For a fuller account of this topic, see my forthcoming Carolingian Politics; there are stimulating general insights in P. Geary, Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium (Princeton and Chichester, 1994).


86 Becher, 'Frauenkloster', p. 311.

87 Becher, 'Frauenkloster', pp. 303-5, 337-56 and 373-4.
As such, abbeys could get caught up in court politics. San Salvatore’s reputation as a centre for the aristocratic women of Italy made it a good stage on which Carolingian rank could be displayed but it also made it impossible for the abbey to be preserved from the hurly-burly of contemporary politics. In fact the abbey’s good connections may have been a little too well known for its own good. In 887, Liutward, bishop of Vercelli and a vaultingly ambitious courtier of Charles the Fat, pounced on it and carried off a high-born nun as a bride for one of his friends. Liutward’s knowledge of Brescia’s human resources was paralleled by the knowledge of the chronicler who tells us of this incident. His account reveals that the victim was a relative of Charles the Fat himself and that the outrage of her abduction was instantly avenged by God who, in response to the nuns’ call for vengeance, struck down the would-be husband before the marriage could be consummated. The annalist’s narrative reveals Brescia’s perspective on this episode and from that angle the story displays, not the abbey’s vulnerability, but its strengths: neither God nor the (Carolingian), women of Brescia are to be mocked; the prayers of Brescia’s nuns are answered instantly and with devastating effect. Brescia’s links with earthly and heavenly powers are neatly meshed in this story and we can catch something of the special aura surrounding the community and thus something of Brescia’s significance as a Carolingian centre. San Salvatore, like Compiègne, also functioned as a liturgical memory centre for the dynasty. The community was regularly requested to offer prayers for its royal patrons. In addition to this, the meetings of Carolingian kings in Italy, e.g. at Ravenna in 880, triggered the recording of names in the abbey’s commemoration book. Royal courts had many echo-chambers.

It is high time to conclude. Drawn from the Rhineland, Alemannia, west Francia and Italy, our illustrations have not been isolated examples. They display a form of systematic power. Carolingian thinkers were right to stress the links between the microcosm of the court and the macrocosm of the kingdom. On a political level, the distance between the court and the regions could be abolished. The court was the kingdom.

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