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An Examination of the Influence of Literacy upon Political, Cultural and Class Unity in
England and Francia during the Early Middle Ages

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History 485

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At first glance, the collapse of the Roman Empire meant a breakdown of the unifying bureaucratic and cultural bonds created by the Roman trade networks and tax collection systems that had tied the Roman provinces together; the fallen Empire seemed to be a fractious mass of warring successors. Yet, despite this loss of central Roman governmental authority, the written word appears to have encouraged the old bonds and fostered new connections within the elite community. Two of the successors to the Romans—the Anglo-Saxons and Franks—provide compelling evidence of the significant role that literacy played in the maintenance and establishment of such cultural bonds. Although these connections grew throughout the middle ages, the period of time between the emergence of the first written law codes in both England and Francia – the Lex Salica and Code of Æthelberht – and the transformative moment of reform under Alfred and Charlemagne will serve as the focus of this discussion. Despite differences, both significant and superficial, literacy in these two regions during this time period not only stimulated intraregional connections, but also, promoted strong interregional ties. In fact, the creation of written documents like law codes, charters, writs, and letters in both regions emerged as an intrinsically corporate task and thus, fortified some old and stimulated many new connections. A close examination of Anglo-Saxon as well as Frankish law, scholarship, and high culture – the expression of societal traditions through shared history and literature- suggests that within both the Anglo-Saxon and Frankish regions, literacy not only encouraged the development of cultural and political unity, but also established the identity of the elite class.

A thorough exploration of medieval literacy in England and Francia must first address concerns raised by modern scholars regarding the extent to which written sources are able to answer foundational questions about medieval society during the early middle ages. Debate has particularly arisen among twentieth century medieval scholars as to the ability of the written

word to conclusively answer questions regarding the evolution of literacy during the early medieval period. These concerns as put forth by historians, of course, may simply be a reaction to the overly credulous treatment of written sources by their nineteenth century counterparts. For example, historians such as Patrick Wormald view medieval law codes as largely aspirational, ideological documents which only provide evidence of the desires of the king. Like-minded historians have noted the similarities between the prologues of barbarian codes and edicts to Roman codes such as the Theodosian Code, and have highlighted the seeming involvement and acknowledged assistance of churchmen in many of these cases.¹ In fact, these historians have claimed that codes like those established by Clovis in *Lex Salica* simply demonstrate the various ways that barbarian kings and Roman advisors cooperated in their efforts to enact a legitimizing performance of *romanitas* and *civitas* and that these codes may not have reflected reality in practice.² This historiographical perspective proposes that these documents were created because barbarian kings perceived written law codes as something quintessentially Roman, and therefore, they created such codes irrespective of their actual practical effects upon what was a largely oral system. Furthermore, this school of thought suggests that histories like Bede's merely provide one person's perspective of reality rather than illustrating any collective understanding of their contemporaneous culture. Even maximalist historians, such as Rosamond McKitterick and the "Bucknell group" tend to de-emphasize these written sources and to focus instead upon the evidence of charters.³ Of course, their emphasis upon charters is not without reason; charters are

¹ For an example, see Patrick Wormald, "*Lex Scripta and Verbum Regis: Legislation and Germanic Kingship from Euric to Cnut*," in *Early Medieval Kingship*, ed. Peter Sawyer and I. N. Wood, (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1977), 105-106.

² Wormald, 125-127.

³ For some examples of this viewpoint, see Rosamond McKitterick, ed., *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

localized, outlining the specifics of actual legal cases in practice. However, a strong argument can be made that law, correspondence, and literature, in fact, provide significant evidence about elite society and its norms. As Ian Wood notes, many members of the Merovingian court were highly literate and made use of written law in practical cases. Desiderius of Cahors, Bonitus of Clermont, and Leodegar were all familiar with and made use of both secular and canon law. For instance, although Desiderius and Bonitus were Bishops, *The Life of Desiderius* reveals that they both exercised secular judicial functions.⁴ In addition, Tom Lambert argues that royal law in Anglo-Saxon England is fundamentally the codification of actual legal practice, and thus not only serves as a useful barometer for the aspirations of the kings but also the perception of society and its laws.⁵

An accurate investigation of literacy in early medieval England and Francia must also address several superficial as well as significant developmental distinctions that initially emerged as literacy matured within these independent regions. First, the Anglo-Saxons maintained much of their original Germanic language; in fact, they appear to have increasingly used vernacular English - instead of Latin - as a conduit for the communication of law, shared scholarly discovery, literature and history. Of course, this did not preclude the parallel use of Latin in some high culture and literature, but over time English became pre-eminent in Anglo-Saxon society. Even Bede, one of the most consummate early medieval scholars of Latin, acknowledged the value of English as a way to make literature more accessible. During the last years of his life, he completed a translation of the first six chapters of the Gospel of John; he was working on a

⁴ Ian Wood, "Administration, law and culture in Merovingian Gaul" *The Uses of Literacy in Medieval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 80.

⁵ Tom Lambert, *Law and Order in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

translation of Isidore's *On The Nature of Things* when he died.⁶ In contrast, the Franks, who were steeped in a Roman tradition of *amicitiae* letters dating back to such figures as Sidonius Apollinaris, used Latin as the vehicle by which class and cultural traditions were conveyed. The respective social environments which fostered literacy in England and Francia also demonstrate their distinctive regional ethos. However, it can be argued that such differences actually represent relatively superficial distinctions with regard to how literacy was utilized within a societal context. The Franks and Anglo-Saxons, after all, both employed the written word as a repository for scholastic, legal, and literary communication, surviving Anglo-Saxon literary sources. Nevertheless, some early, substantial distinctions between the Frankish and Anglo-Saxon societies' attitudes toward and approaches to literacy exist. Undoubtedly, both Alfred and Charlemagne conducted an extensive program of literacy within their demesnes; yet, each positioned himself within the pre-existing traditions of literacy of his particular region. For example, in Francia, the use of writing in pre-existing legal documents is exemplified by the provisions made in Salic law for those in default of an oath or promissory note.⁷ While both legal circumstances have been noted by the law, and thus, seem to be at least theoretically equal, the Salic Code nevertheless treats the promissory note as though it was preferred over the oral oath. In light of this and similar instances, a thorough analysis of early medieval literacy must acknowledge the pre-existing influence of literacy on England and Francia before the reforms of Alfred and Charlemagne.

Finally, before examining the development and use of literacy within these two regions, one distinctive characteristic of early medieval writing must be noted; the ability to read did not

⁶ Susan Kelly, "Anglo-Saxon Lay Society," in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 54.

⁷ *Laws of the Salian Franks*, XXIX, trans. Katherine Fischer-Drew, pp. 113-115.

necessarily guarantee the ability or preference to write. For this reason, medieval literacy demonstrated an inherently social element. At least three or four people, for example, were often involved in the creation of a document. The regular employment of scribes may have been quite common in England since the evidence suggests that Alfred himself may have never learned to write. Indeed, even though his children were very likely taught how to write, King Alfred seems to have initially depended upon men such as Asser to read to him but throughout his life, he continued to rely upon others to write passages for him.⁸ The regular employment of scribes by medieval leaders, however, does not necessarily imply that Einhard, Charlemagne or Alfred were unable to read. The employment of scribes could well have been a medieval convention comparable to the employment of administrative assistants or secretaries in recent history. As a matter of fact, Einhard, records that Charlemagne, who had been taught to read, did not learn to write until his later years.⁹ Even those who certainly knew how to write, such as Einhard, seem to have employed scribes. During his account of the theft of the relics of Marcellinus and Peter, for instance, Einhard discloses that on several occasions, he personally sent a notary to various sites.¹⁰ Such collective witnessing and signing of documents seems to have been an intrinsic part of the creation of many legal texts. The conclusion of a charter in which Einhard and Emma grant land to the Monastery of Lorsch, for example, includes an explicit acknowledgement that “I, Hirminmar, a deacon and imperial notary, at the request of Einhard, wrote out this deed and

⁸ Asser, “Life of King Alfred,” 76-77, 88, in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Source*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 91-93, 98-102.

⁹ Einhard, “Life of Charlemagne,” 24, in *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, ed. and trans. Dutton, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p.21.

¹⁰ Einhard, “The Translation and Miracles of The Blessed Martyrs, Marcellinus and Peter,” in *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, ed. and trans. Dutton, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p.70, p.74, p.78.

signed below.”¹¹ The vast majority of charters created by Einhard seem to have been dictated by Einhard and therefore, written by monks, deacons or other official scribes.¹² Therefore, it appears likely that Einhard dictated many of his writings. As a result of these kinds of pragmatic considerations, then, writing during the early medieval period assumed a fundamentally corporate nature. Even those letters which, from a modern perspective, might appear to be of an unquestionably private nature, were often viewed by at least three people. In light of this, practical usage, at the very least, served to encourage and even define interregional connections and relationships.

Having addressed these preliminary concerns, this study may advance to an in-depth analysis of the developing impact of literacy upon regional cultural and political unity and upon the identity of the elite classes of medieval England and France. A case for the ability of the written word to encourage political and cultural bonds can first be evidenced in early medieval law. Indeed, an increasing interest in the power of the written word and in its efficacy to establish law had begun to surface in both regions. An examination of the early law codes of Æthelberht of Kent and Ine of Wessex, for example, illuminates the formation of written law and provides invaluable evidence for the legal history of Anglo-Saxon England. However, although some historians may seek to classify these codes as examples of solely royal, ideological writs, the evidence fails to support such classifications.¹³ Rather, the code appears to support the theory

¹¹ Einhard, “Emma Grant Michelstadt to the Monastery of Lorsch,” in *Charlemagne’s Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, ed. and trans. Dutton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 55.

¹² For a few examples of these letters see Einhard, *Charlemagne’s Courtier*, pp.59-62.

¹³ For example, see Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent: The Ford Lectures Delivered in the University of Oxford in Hilary Term 1970* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 37, 43-48; Wormald, “*Lex Scripta and Verbum Regis*,” 105-138.

that early medieval literacy developed in response to many of the growing, pragmatic needs of the contemporary culture and that it certainly positioned itself within the pre-existing traditions of the Anglo-Saxon region. For example, the code of Æthelberht seems to be a collection and transcription of previously written, and often memorized, archaic oral law.¹⁴ It appears, then, that written law initially served as a codification of pre-existing oral law. Compiled and written with the assistance of legal experts, this law-code acted as a distilled, transmissible form of societal tradition. As the first extant written law code in Anglo-Saxon England, the code of Æthelberht—as a compilation and codification of existing law—certainly exemplifies the growing influence of literacy and its ability to bring some degree of political and cultural cohesion to the region. The evidence further suggests, unlike the Franks, that early English Kings wielded a comparatively detached level of power over legal procedures. Even so, by writing down these laws, kings like Æthelberht assumed to some extent the Romano-Christian position of the king as a judge, drawing on inspiration from the Old Testament and Roman Emperors. Æthelberht’s code itself, however, appears to primarily portray England’s legal system as one that was defined by a series of localized legal assemblies. The presence of numerous assembly mounds throughout England, for example, may provide focal points for lawmaking to an extent that Tom Lambert defines as *æ* law.¹⁵ This *æ* centers primarily upon the settlement of feuds and other disputes of honor rather than upon issues of property or procedure which were likely decided by *þeawas*, or customary law which tended to be localized and recorded with much less formality.¹⁶ Lambert essentially

¹⁴ For instance, the laws of Æthelberht are peppered with archaic indications such as the mention of payment for the murder of a freeman to the king as “lord-ring” as well as other unique or poetic terms. See, *English Historical Documents I*, 29, trans. Dorothy Whitelock et. al, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.391.

¹⁵ Lambert, 44.

¹⁶ Lambert, 70-71.

argues that Kings assumed the Romano-Christian position of the king as judge, and written law developed as a combination of informal customary law and formalized dispute law. This was then supplemented by Romano-Christianized royal case law, an agglomeration of *domas* which were edicts issued primarily in response to requests for judgement.¹⁷

In contrast, the earliest Frankish law code, *Lex Salica*, displays a more robust and intrusive form of royal authority than its counterpart of early English law. *Lex Salica* suggests a vigorous court with the power to remand to itself court cases, enact fines, summon those who refuse to obey the judgements of the *rachimburgi* to the court of the king, and seemingly issue written documents of royal protection emerges from the lines of early documentation.¹⁸ Likewise, at times, the King appears to preside over trials related to the release of slaves as well as various property disputes.¹⁹ For example, if a man refused to submit to the lower courts and the *rachimburgi*, he was then summoned to the court of the King. In the event that a defendant repeatedly refused to answer summons, his property could be confiscated and placed directly into the King's *fisc*.²⁰ The King appears to have served as the chief judge of the Merovingian Franks; in this way, rather than merely protecting the local legal contracts, the Frankish King seems to have possessed comparatively immense power to legislate, define, and adjudicate law for the entire region.

Early Anglo-Saxon law codes also rarely, if ever, make mention of legal procedure, but instead primarily concern themselves with the pragmatic restitution and resolution in disputes of honor as well as with the role of the king as protector and arbitrator of the legal "contract." For

¹⁷ Lambert, 76-78.

¹⁸ *Laws of the Salian Franks*, LVI, trans. Fischer-Drew, p.119.

¹⁹ *Laws of the Salian Franks*, XXV, trans. Fischer-Drew, pp. 69-70.

²⁰ *Laws of the Salian Franks*, LVI, trans. Fischer-Drew, p.119.

example, as defined by this early law-code, one of the primary roles of the King appears to be his ability to “call the people” to a grand assembly. Throughout this assembly, the King’s protection particularly covers all those in attendance, and anyone who does injury to another while in attendance must pay twofold compensation to the injured as well as an additional 50 shillings to the king.²¹ In this manner, Anglo-Saxon recorded practice differs from that outlined by the Frankish *Lex Salica*. Anglo-Saxon records indicate that in most cases in which the king was owed restitution, fine or compensation, the King had been directly wronged either in his daily life—the breach of *munbyrd* (right of giving protection)—or in his presiding duties during a grand assembly.²² In exchange for serving as the arbitrator and protector, the King was entitled to regular tribute. This view of the Anglo-Saxon King finds expression in the laws of Hlothhere and Eadric and is further corroborated by the laws of Ine of Wessex.²³ In light of this, literacy does not initially appear to have been a crucial element in any Anglo-Saxon bureaucracy. Evidently, the king’s influence upon the structure of the law increased gradually over a protracted period. The laws of Hlothhere and Eadric of Kent, then, introduced a new imposition by the King.

In addition to their underpinnings in long-established English social practice, these codes incorporate elements of the developing Christian Church in England. In fact, it seems conspicuous that the author of the first written English law-code, Æthelberht of Kent, is also the first English king to convert to Christianity. Truly, the very first line of the decree claims that the

²¹ *EHD* I, 29, p. 391.

²² *EHD* I, 29, pp. 391-394.

²³ *EHD* I, 30, 31, pp. 394-407. These law codes largely seem to display the King serving in the same role. However, the King increasingly shows up as an active agent in laws which do not directly concern him. For instance, under the laws of Hlothhere and Eadric, someone accused of theft is commanded to vouch to warranty at the King’s hall, as can be seen in *EHD* I, 30, p.394.

laws were established “in Augustine’s day,” and the very first law revolves around compensating for “the property of God and the Church,” as well as for Bishops, deacons, and clerics as well as for the payment required for breaching the peace of the Church.²⁴ Furthermore, although no evidence exists that Æthelberht’s codes drew direct inspiration from any Roman law code, Bede claims that they were written “after the Roman model.”²⁵ This implies that written law, by its very nature, was associated with *romanitas*. Of course, while Nicholas Brooks has noted that the laws may have preceded the conversion, the first chapter still suggests that Anglo-Saxons viewed written law as fundamentally religious and Roman.²⁶ Although this emphasis does not appear in the laws of Hlothere or Eadric, the laws of Ine of Wessex further emphasize the importance of written law as a tool for both social and spiritual unity. The chief councilors of the people as well as the two Bishops Hædde and Eorcenwold apparently advised the king to enact this decree as a solution for uncertainty about “the salvation of our souls and the security of our kingdom.”²⁷ Without this code, they imply, there could be no true social nor spiritual unity. Bede, who wrote not long after the establishment of this code, also asserts that a fundamental element of Christian rulership after conversion should be the issuing of written edicts, in much the same way as the Persian King Darius issued a law on tolerance for the Jews.²⁸ It isn’t surprising, then, that Æthelberht’s written law caused an increasing expansion in bureaucracy and royal power.

²⁴ *EHD* I, 29, p. 391. For another discussion of the expansion of royal power brought upon by Christianization in Anglo Saxon England during the reign of King Æthelberht, see Lambert, *Law and Order in Anglo-Saxon England*.

²⁵ Bede, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of England*, trans. A.M. Stellar, 95.

²⁶ Nicholas Brooks, “The Laws of King Æthelberht of Kent,” in Textus Roffensis ed. Bruce O’Brien and Barbara Rombi (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 107-139.

²⁷ *EHD* I, 32, p. 399.

²⁸ Bede, *In Ezram: Bedae in Ezram Et Nehemiam*, 2.349-354, ed. D. Hurst (Turnholdt, Corpus Christianorum, 1969), p. 296.

The Frankish Formularies of Angers and Marculf also appear to provide significantly early evidence of the written word functioning as a device through which to delineate law. For example, Angers formulary 31 offers evidence not only for the existence of archives in the homes of lay aristocrats, but also demonstrates that the Merovingians considered written documents to hold valid, binding power for establishing individual rights.²⁹ This formulary testifies to an established procedure for verifying the binding validity of contracts, exchanges, agreements, deeds, annulments, judgements and records of judgements that have been destroyed or lost. Two more formularies, furthermore, continue to define an extensive procedure for the verification and creation of confirming *appenis*, which are to be duplicated so that they can be displayed both in the public square and privately.³⁰ This requirement of duplication seems to indicate that the Merovingians recognized that the general degree of trust inspired by the written word might serve as a useful tool for determining truth and yet, it simultaneously suggests their cognizance of the possibility of fraud. After all, if these documents had a purely symbolic role, it is unlikely that the Merovingian legal system would have concerned itself with the authentication and verification of documents. Notably, formularies were often collected in eclectic manuscripts containing genealogies of Frankish Kings, zodiac calendars, sermons, catechisms and especially passages from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*.³¹ In this way, formularies are typically included in manuscripts which define the correct way of doing things, and which identify markers of elite identity and doctrinal purity. Although these formularies were not necessarily produced as

²⁹ Alice Rio, ed., *The Formularies of Angers and Marculf: Two Merovingian Legal Handbooks*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 73.

³⁰ Rio, *The Formularies of Angers and Marculf: Two Merovingian Legal Handbooks*, 74-76.

³¹ Alice Rio, *Legal Practice and the Written Word in the Early Middle Ages: Frankish Formulae, c.500–1000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45.

organized official documents, they nevertheless provide fascinating evidence of the role that literacy played in the development and dispersion of a shared cultural and political identity.

One such formulary collection, the *Collectio Flaviniacensis*, clearly demonstrates this kind of connection between legal formula and the development of cultural and political identity. Not only does this collection include texts from both the formularies of Angers and Marculf, but it also contains a set of letters purportedly written by famous fourth-century Roman figures like Constantine drawn from *Acta Sancti Silvestri*, *Historia Tripartita* and a Latin translation of Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History*.³² Notably, the scribe who presumably created this collection seemingly signals his intention to use these letters as textual models for his own letters. The topics that these letters address—such as a letter from Valentinian declaring the appointment of a new bishop—are, in fact, typical of medieval correspondence and for this reason, would serve the scribe's probable purpose well. Conspicuously, the names of these Roman figures are not removed, but remain extant, likely as a testament to the classical prestige of the originals.³³ Thus, while formularies undeniably acted as pragmatic tools for scribes, these texts also reveal the ways in which individual scribes and authors included themselves within the greater political and cultural framework of their region.

The treatment of freedmen during the Carolingian period similarly demonstrates the close connection of written document, status, and individual rights. Legal freedom was, perhaps, the most important personal right in Carolingian Francia, and freedmen were required to present their *carta* to legal courts in the 800s as proof of their freedom. In fact, this fundamental link

³² Rio, *Legal Practice and the Written Word in the Early Middle Ages: Frankish Formulae, c.500–1000*, 47.

³³ Rio, *Legal Practice and the Written Word in the Early Middle Ages: Frankish Formulae, c.500–1000*, 47-48.

between document and liberty was so strong that these freedmen were called *cartularii*, or “charter-men.” Thus, freedom was intrinsically linked to the possession and usage of documents.³⁴ Wormald notes that for the Carolingian Kings, and the very Kingdom itself, the use of written law had become part of a collective, religious commitment closely connected to Mosaic Law and symbolically tied to the Kingdom of Israel.³⁵ It is not surprising, therefore, that correctness in writing might be considered crucial to living a righteous life. Therefore, in Francia, written documents are fundamentally associated with legal and thus social status.

By comparison to the earlier Merovingian period, later Carolingian primary sources additionally reveal an increasing incorporation of written documentation in routine government administration. While it may be argued that the vastly higher rate of survival of Carolingian administrative documents is purely accidental, especially considering that a significant proportion of these documents reproduce originally Merovingian texts, the substantive difference in volume cannot be denied. Such disparities might easily be explained by an increasing recognition of the practical value of such economic documents which not only helped kings efficiently exploit their territory for resources, but also encouraged legal and ultimately, cultural unity. Indeed, by expanding the ability of the King’s authority to intrude into the economic affairs of local landowners, the re-creation and expansion of links between local institutions and royal, courtly systems becomes increasingly evident.³⁶ For instance, the Herstal capitulary of 779 records that tithes and ninths from church properties were determined based on what was

³⁴ Nelson, *Literacy in Carolingian Government*, 262-263.

³⁵ See Nelson “Literacy in Carolingian Government,” in McKitterick, *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, 263; Wormald, “*Lex Scripta and Verbum Regis*,” 105-38.

³⁶ Janet L. Nelson, “Literacy in Carolingian Government,” in McKitterick, *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, 260-262.

recorded in the written census.³⁷ Furthermore, the Carolingians revived the Roman practice of using documents to issue letters of protection for merchants, to record the maintenance of toll-stations, license mints and markets, and to facilitate the creation of a wide variety of other governmental tasks.³⁸ Of course, while this economic system did not truly replicate the Roman tax system, but rather, more closely resembled the typical early medieval landlord's exaction on his tenants, there does appear to have been an expansion of bureaucratic texts following the Merovingian period. In addition, the practice of writing as a form of verification is evidenced in the specific treatment of writing as authentication for coinage. In this same capitulary Charlemagne orders that pennies which "bear the imprint of his name," be recognized as legitimate in every part of Francia; in other words, these coins must be accepted as valid payment or the lawbreaker will face the legal penalty of a flogging.³⁹

Not unlike that of the Carolingians, Alfred's actions also notably attest to an expansion of the royal role in the administration of justice, an expansion which coincides with Alfredian literacy reforms that ultimately encouraged greater cultural and political unity. In section 106 of the *Life of Alfred*, Asser reports the exceptional dissension among the ealdormen and reeves at the time; this conflict actually caused them to seek the king's "skill investigat[ion]," and judgement.⁴⁰ In this, Alfred willingly participated and exercised his influence as adjudicator to an even greater extent than had been exercised by many previous English Kings; in fact, the *Life of Alfred* reports that he "shrewdly looked into almost all judgements of his whole country which

³⁷ Loyn and Percival, 9, p. 47.

³⁸ F.L. Ganshof, "The Institutional Framework of the Frankish monarchy," in Ganshof, *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy, 86-110*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 99-100.

³⁹ Loyn and Percival, 13, p. 58.

⁴⁰ *EHD* I, 105, pp. 302.

were made in his absence,” and thereby expanded the reach and power of the King as intercessor in legal matters.⁴¹ Such a process likely would have been difficult without highly literate courts. Indeed, Asser notes that Alfred’s judgements forced the aristocracy to learn to read, so that they could properly understand law. In fact, Asser notes that out of fear of royal justice, “almost all the ealdormen and reeves and thegns” learned to read.⁴² Although Asser attests that the King did send out agents to verbally interrogate the involved parties, it would be difficult to confirm the righteousness of judicial decisions without well-kept records.⁴³

Even if there were not already extant written records, however, the threat of impending royal review would certainly have motivated the creation of an extensive paper trail by which the King could validate and confirm these documents. After all, the King could not personally oversee the legal affairs of distant courts, but if he could threaten to invalidate insufficiently proven cases, he could bring strong pressure upon the courts to create binding documents which could be used to verify the trustworthiness and righteousness of their decisions. For instance, a document written by Ealdorman Ordlafr addressed to King Edward the Elder confirms the submission of dispute-related documents to the King by laymen. This document not only testifies way in which King Alfred’s signature was used to verify the purchase of land, but also provides a record of a document being produced and verified by a local to prove ownership.⁴⁴ In fact, by the time of Alfred’s son Edward and his grandson Æthelstan, it appears that there was an expectation that Alfred’s written code would be used in the routine administration of law. Edward, for instance, declares that the King wishes for his reeves to make judgements according

⁴¹ *EHD* I, 106, pp. 302.

⁴² *EHD* I, 105-106, pp. 302-303.

⁴³ *EHD* I, 106, pp. 302.

⁴⁴ *EHD* I, 102, pp. 544-546.

to the law-books, and he also enjoins the reeves to ensure lawbreakers “pay compensation as the law book prescribes.”⁴⁵ Extensive evidence of documents being produced by local courts also can be found by the time of Æthelstan.⁴⁶ This suggests a growing dependence upon the written word within medieval law and seemingly confirms that literacy encouraged a degree of social cohesion.

Alfred’s use of law as a tool for unifying his realm also becomes evident in the way he framed his Law Code. Alfred particularly stated that he created this code by compiling and selecting the best aspects of the law codes of previous Anglo-Saxon Kings whose former territories Alfred then sought to incorporate into Wessex. Indeed, he introduces the code with a description of how he “gathered together these, [...] which our forebears held [...] And those that I found either from the time of Ine, my kinsman, or of Offa, king of the Mercians, or of Æthelberht, who first among the English received baptism.”⁴⁷ Although it does appear that this statement was true, it is also likely that Alfred used this explanation to cleverly create the impression of a universal law code that would be potentially acceptable to the Mercians and Kentish people he now governed.⁴⁸ Indeed, by framing these laws as those “which our forebears

⁴⁵ Edward the Elder, *Library of Original Sources, Volume 04: Early Mediaeval Age*, trans. Oliver Thatcher (New York: Chicago University Research Extension, 1907), 221-223.

⁴⁶ For instance, III Æthelstan is a report of a Kentish shire-court to the King, while IV Æthelstan and VI Æthelstan appear to be records drawn up independent of any direct royal imposition. For IV and VI Æthelstan see *EHD* I, 36-37, pp.417-427. For more information on III Æthelstan, see Keynes, “Royal Government and the Written Word in late Anglo-Saxon England,” in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 239-240.

⁴⁷ Lisi Oliver, “Who Wrote Alfred’s Laws,” in *Textus Roffensis* ed. Bruce O’Brien and Barbara Rombi, 235.

⁴⁸ For examples of Alfred drawing upon the law code of Æthelberht, see Oliver, 241-245.

held” he thereby emphasizes their shared ancestry and formulates a greater Anglo-Saxon heritage. In this way, an Anglo-Saxon narrative of unity emerged.

While this integration of literacy into elite society clearly had administrative benefits, it nevertheless appears that Alfred primarily viewed the promulgation of literacy as a means for creating cultural cohesion and spiritual elevation. Asser claims that the problems in England could be attributed to “almost all the magnates and nobles of that land had turned their minds more to the things of this world than to the things of God.” This, in fact, led each of them to prioritize “his own advantage [more] than the common good.”⁴⁹ Thus, to remedy this, Alfred asserts that the magnates and nobles must prove themselves worthy of the status of “wise men,” a status which he claims they have been granted by “God’s favour.” The proof of their wisdom, according to Alfred, must be made by the study of wisdom, ergo literacy.⁵⁰ Asser thus asserts that Alfred’s purpose in inspiring literacy was to create cultural unity and spiritual elevation among the aristocracy. The education of the elite as well as the scholarly exchange that it encouraged in Anglo-Saxon England, in fact, provides further evidence for the role of literacy in the creation of elite social cohesion. Initially, evidence points to the role of monastic schools predominantly instructing clergyman in literacy. For instance, *Life of Dunstan* 15, *Life of St. Oswald* IV.4, *Liber Eliensis* II.91, III.35, and the *Vita Wulfstani* verify the existence of church educational institutions in places such as Canterbury and Winchester and also confirm the existence of monasteries like Abingdon, Glastonbury, and Westminster.⁵¹ Secular schooling, however, does not appear to flourish or provide the focus of instruction in these church schools;

⁴⁹ *EHD* I, 105, p. 302.

⁵⁰ *EHD* I, 106, pp. 302-303.

⁵¹ Julia Crick, “Learning and Training,” in *A Social History of England 900-1200*, ed. Julia Crick and Elisabeth Van Houts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 362.

instead, secular education blossomed through private instruction which was a phenomenon, perhaps, not dissimilar to the work of the Merovingian palace *maior Gogo*.⁵² For instance, in *Life of Alfred*, 75, Asser notes that Alfred's oldest son and daughter were educated at court by tutors and nannies rather than in any kind of formalized monastic schools. Furthermore, this Anglo-Saxon educational system apparently incorporated an element of tutelary fostering. The practice of sending one's child to the house of another noble for tutelage encouraged the formation of shared emotional and literary-cultural bonds. An example of this very kind of foster-education is documented in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle Manuscript C s.a 1023. In this account, Cnut arranged for his son to be fostered by Thorkell the Tall. Asser intimates the widespread nature of such foster relationships in his work, *Life of Alfred*, 22. He additionally notes that Alfred did not receive education outside of court, and thus, by implication, indicates that some princes were schooled outside of the royal court. Again, such an education would have been conducted amongst the nobility and orchestrated by a shared tutor. In this manner, royal and noble blood cultivated social and cultural bonds through shared tutelage.

The influence of scholarship – principally developed within the context of church - upon the development of a distinctively English identity continued under Alfred the Great. Indeed, Alfred's reforms--not unlike the developments of literacy encouraged by Charlemagne—undoubtedly stood upon earlier regional traditions. For example, the use of vernacular English had begun to spread as early as the time of Bede. Nevertheless, without as strong a connection to the Roman past as embraced by the Franks, the Anglo-Saxons understandably had less reason to

⁵² For more information on Gogo and the education of Merovingian princes, see Gregory of Tours, 5.46, in in *A History of the Franks*, trans. Ernest Brehaut (Harmondsworth; Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), pp.110-111. Furthermore, Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks* 6.24 reveals that Gundovald, a pretender to the throne, was brought up literate. Gregory notes such education as typical for a Merovingian king's upbringing.

draw upon Latin and other such affectations of *romanitas*. In a letter to the Bishop Egbert, Bede reports that he frequently provided the Creed and Lord's Prayer in vernacular to priests who were unfamiliar with Latin. In fact, he recommends that clerics, monks, and laymen who lack knowledge of Latin should instead be taught such texts in Latin. This gap between common and religious language in England, in fact, may have been exacerbated by the very factors which lead to the creation of a new, Carolingian Latin. During the 700s and early 800s, for instance, a large number of talented English scholars emigrated to Francia, where they assisted Boniface in Hesse and Thuringia.⁵³ In this way, the flourishing of a new formalized Latin in Francia ironically may not only have coincided, but also have been caused by the very same factors which caused Alfred to bemoan the lack of Latinity in his own Kingdom, a change which thus demanded increased use of English vernacular.⁵⁴ In addition, although the relatively small, early kingdoms of Anglo-Saxon England did center around the same roving royal courts as the Merovingians (and later Carolingians), Anglo-Saxon loyalties seemingly rested first and foremost with kin and childhood companions. Although the specifics of their shared social spaces were different than that of the Franks, the Anglo-Saxons based personal loyalty upon kinship groups and childhood companions who gathered in seemingly centralized royal halls and assembly-points. In contrast, the Franks established their allegiances upon relationships primarily forged within the royal court. Yet, despite these apparent differences, literacy—as evidenced through scholarship—assumed similar proportions in both England and Francia.

⁵³ See Alcuin, *Soldiers of Christ: Saint and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. and trans. Thomas F.X. Noble and Thomas Head (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 191-192. Alcuin describes the departure of Willibrord and a significant number of his companions to Thuringia. There, they were greeted by Pippin II, ancestor of Charlemagne and powerful palace *maior*.

⁵⁴ Susan Kelly, "Anglo-Saxon Lay Society" in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, edited by Rosamond McKitterick, 59.

The English clergyman Alcuin exemplifies the influence of cross-channel scholarship. If one accepts Roger Wright's groundbreaking 1984 thesis that, before Alcuin and Charlemagne, spoken Romance and written Latin were not actually different languages, and acknowledges that Alcuin was likely habituated to Anglo-Saxon methods of literacy which adapted and combined the vernacular with a more ritualized and perfectly preserved Latin used by Anglo-Saxon intellectuals like Bede as a way to preserve and supplement oral memory, then, it isn't difficult to imagine that Alcuin's exposure to the disconnected and seemingly debased vernacular Latin of Francia may have been inevitably jarring.⁵⁵ It is widely theorized by historians that Alcuin, whom Einhard identifies as Charlemagne's chief teacher in most of the learned arts, may have been the one to re-introduce so-called proper Latin to Francia.⁵⁶ Thus, cross-channel scholarship was central to the development of elite identity in Francia. Indeed, while it is difficult to determine whether the acceptance of formalized Latin precipitated or was precipitated by the increasing importance of documents as demarcations of status and tools for legal injunction, it seems inevitable that they eventually developed conjointly. After all, a more precise form of literacy was required lest rulers stray into error and fail to keep the law.

Evidence certainly suggests that Charlemagne, like his teacher, preferred cultivated Latin; he appears to have considered cultivated Latin—in contrast to a more barbarous form of vernacular language—to be a fundamentally better and more elevated language by which to define civility. Charlemagne displayed a keen interest in personally ensuring that proper Latin

⁵⁵ For information on Wright's thesis, see Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11-12. Indeed, Wright contends that the Carolingians essentially created medieval Latin through their attempts at reforming conventions of speech and writing.

⁵⁶ Einhard, *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, ed. and trans. Dutton, 32. Here, Einhard notes Alcuin's special role as Charlemagne's main teacher and "the most learned man in the entire world."

was spoken and used. The works of Einhard demonstrate the sharp delineation drawn by Charlemagne between Latin and the so-called “barbarous names” which previously dominated in his Kingdom.⁵⁷ Furthermore, Notker, although writing sometime after the reign of Charlemagne, describes Charlemagne as a kind of literary reformer. Of even greater significance, Charlemagne had reportedly reacted unfavorably to the perceived ‘incorrect literacy’ of Frankish noblemen. According to Notker, Charlemagne identified the writings of these noblemen as “silly and tasteless.”⁵⁸ From Charlemagne’s perspective, then, an erudite, classical Latinity likely served as one of the defining features of a proper nobleman. More significantly, however, Latinity—both in pronunciation and spelling—appears to have been treated as one of the primary identifying markers of civilization itself. Although Notker may not draw upon firsthand evidence, it nevertheless seems likely that his works reflect the general perception of Charlemagne that had been passed to immediately succeeding generations through oral tradition. Undoubtedly, Notker’s works draw heavily not only upon literate records, but also upon the generalized Carolingian oral structure.⁵⁹ For example, Carolingian poetry, written and dedicated for Charlemagne, repeatedly mentions language, clearly associating it with the Frankish ruler. For instance, the famous Carolingian poem, “On the Court” by Theodulf of Orleans, ends with stinging pun mocking an Irishman’s pronunciation: “Quam satis offendit, pro qua te, literra salvi, Utitur, haud dubium quod sonat, hoc et erit.”⁶⁰ In other words, due to his slurring, the Irishman

⁵⁷ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 57.

⁵⁸ Notker, *Early Lives of Charlemagne by Eginhard and the Monk of St. Gall*, ed. and trans. A.J. Grant, (London: Chatto, 1926), 63.

⁵⁹ For a further discussion of Notker and how he draws upon both writing and shared Frankish oral history. Matthew Innes, "Memory, Orality and Literacy in an Early Medieval Society," *Past & Present*, no. 158 (February 1998).

⁶⁰ In English, "which he pronounces badly, using instead of it the letter which saves him and he will doubtless be the very sound that he makes." Theodulf in Theodore M. Andersson, “A

cannot pronounce the Latin word for Irishman, “Scottus,” and instead calls himself a sot. In a poem clearly written for the edification of Charlemagne, such a joke most likely appealed to the King’s personal sensibilities.⁶¹

The belief, then, that literacy not only served as a marker of nobility but also of civilization itself may explain Charlemagne’s reported preoccupation with his personal study of Latin. Andersson points out that Charlemagne, in his childhood, almost certainly spoke Romance. Andersson explains that this can be buttressed by a story about the translation of Saint Germanus’ remains from the royal villa at Parlaiseau.⁶² This story seemingly purports to be an eyewitness account of Charlemagne as a child. If one believes, as Janet Nelson contends, that this tale demonstrates strong indications of legitimacy, Charlemagne certainly possessed the kind of familiarity with Romance that would be expected of one who grew up in a French-Romance speaking territory.⁶³ In light of this as well as of Einhard’s report that Charlemagne studied Latin, it can be reasonably argued that the Latin taught reflected the new style introduced by Alcuin. One example of the likely influence of Alcuin upon Charlemagne’s thinking can be seen in one of his letters. Charlemagne, writing to Abbot Baugulf, explicitly lays out the spiritual or sacred case for the importance of writing as a means for communicating righteous thinking and strengthening social order. Charlemagne notes that “just as the observance of a rule gives soundness to their conduct, so also an attention to teaching and learning may give order and adornment to their words,” and he additionally states that it is good for those who attempt to

Carolingian Pun and Charlemagne’s Languages,” in *Along the Oral Written Continuum*, ed. Slavica Rankovic, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 364.

⁶¹ Andersson, 363-364.

⁶² Andersson, 39.

⁶³ Janet L. Nelson, “Charlemagne the Man,” in *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Jo Story (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2005), 27. See also Andersson, 359-360.

please God by their lifestyle to also please God by “the rightness of their speaking.”⁶⁴ Quoting the book of Matthew, Charlemagne reasoned that it is necessary for men to know truth before they can carry it out, and that a proper understanding of language is required to properly praise God and to do so without error. Charlemagne even goes so far as to indicate that without an understanding of correct grammar, speech, and prose, it becomes impossible for men to properly discern truth from falsehood. In this commentary, then, Charlemagne once again links writing errors – the inability to express knowledge properly – with the possibility of errors in fundamental doctrine.⁶⁵ Thus, Charlemagne connected literacy and a proper understanding of Latin to the ability to properly fulfill one’s duties as a religious or lay leader, and in this way, literacy appears intimately connected to one’s identity as well as to the temporal and wellbeing of the greater society. In other words, he seems to suggest that without an understanding of proper Latin, the ability for souls to be saved or for the strength of society to be maintained became tenuous at best. The crux of his thinking seems to be that if a society’s leaders didn’t understand the Bible or the classics, there could be no temporal or spiritual well-being.

He states, in fact, that correct expression is crucial to correct religious practice, and says in reference to monasteries that “we have perceived in quite a few of these writings both correct thinking and rude language; for, what pious devotion faithfully dictated internally, this an uncultivated language caused by the neglect of learning could not express overtly without error.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, Charlemagne continues by exhorting monks “not to neglect the study of letters,” and to “learn zealously so that you may more easily and correctly penetrate the

⁶⁴ Einhard, *The Reign of Charlemagne: Documents on Carolingian Government and Administration*, ed. and trans. H.R. Loyn and John Percival (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 63-64.

⁶⁵ Loyn and Percival, 14, pp. 63-64,

⁶⁶ Andersson, 365.

mysteries of divine scripture.”⁶⁷ It is also suggested that without a keen understanding of the writing, as well as the study, of literature, monks will find that the “spiritual meaning” of the Bible becomes obscure since the text contains both figures of speech and metaphors.⁶⁸ This letter, though officially credited to Charlemagne, seemingly written by Alcuin’s hand and expressing his ideas about literacy, finishes with an order to send copies of this letter “to your suffragans and fellow bishops, and to all the monasteries.”⁶⁹ Significantly, this emphasis upon correct usage seems directly correlated to a growing interest in correct doctrine. Charlemagne expressed a keen interest in gathering Church synods and assemblies. These Church assemblies, recorded in capitularies such as the Capitulary Franconofurtense, demonstrate a preoccupation not only with determining the truth, but also with recording that truth in writing.⁷⁰ Further establishing the Carolingian focus on the creation of proper doctrine through writing, early Carolingian letters also exhibit an increasing discussion of detailed points of theology. Attuned to the Byzantine theological debates over questions such as iconoclasm, the veneration of saints and objects, and other quandaries, such correspondence exemplifies an emerging genre of letters explaining the finer points of theology.⁷¹ In fact, such discussions delve into matters of exegetical interpretation which include the close examination and analysis of textual phrasing, word-choice and grammar.⁷²

This increased interest in the accuracy of writing in both form and grammar also coincides directly with a growing interest in ensuring correct religious doctrine as a source of

⁶⁷ Andersson, 365.

⁶⁸ Loyn and Percival, 14, p. 64.

⁶⁹ Loyn and Percival, 14, p. 64.

⁷⁰ Loyn and Percival, 12, pp. 54-59.

⁷¹ Einhard’s Response to Lupus, Early 836, in *Charlemagne’s Courtier: The Complete Einhard* ed. and trans. Paul Dutton, pp. 169-174.

⁷² Dutton, 174.

moral legitimacy for the elite class. In addition, during a dispute between Ursio, bishop of Vienne, and the advocate of Elifantus also known as the bishop of Arles at the synod, multiple letters were produced as evidence for how Church land should be distributed and who should have authority over which apostolic sees.⁷³ The maintenance and guarantee of the veracity of letters becomes a primary concern, revealed by policies that limit clerks to one church. For example, clerks could not be moved without both the knowledge of the bishop and a letter of commendation from their home diocese.⁷⁴ Such preoccupation with written authorization also permeated social spaces immediately adjacent to and significantly influenced by the church. In one notable instance, a pupil named Fiducia personally testifies that Charlemagne pricked him with a pen to chide him for an error in his writing. This anecdote certainly appears to validate the idea that conscientious attention to correct writing had become a high priority. Although this tale may simply have evolved during the genesis of the mythos of Charlemagne as literary reformer, Charlemagne's courtier and biographer Einhard provides corroborating evidence for the reputation of Charlemagne as a ruler who expressed deep interest in literary edification; Einhard reports that Charlemagne was fluent in Latin, a student of Greek, and an avid reader of the classics--especially of the likes of St. Augustine's *City of God*.⁷⁵

Capitularies would also seem to support such a portrait of Charlemagne as the champion of sacred writing since it commands that a bishop should always "give good teaching and instruction to those placed in his charge so that there will always be men who are worthy to be chosen according to the canons."⁷⁶ Not only does this mandate that clerics be educated, it also

⁷³ This is evidenced by a capitulary issued by Charlemagne. See Loyn and Percival, 13, pp. 56-63.

⁷⁴ Loyn and Percival, 27, p.60.

⁷⁵ Einhard, *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, 31.

⁷⁶ Loyn and Percival, 29, p. 61.

sets out a standard of suitability which is based upon written church law, the canons. Once again, we see the increasingly sacral link where proper literacy is emphasized as a means of guaranteeing a purer veracity. Charlemagne's fascination with the *City of God* likely belies part of his intent in linguistic reform. Indeed, Augustine essentially lays out an image of a Christianized Roman Empire, formulating an argument for how an Emperor and government might feasibly sustain itself while still remaining Christian.

The transmission of scholarship through the written word and its resulting influence upon the identity of the elite class becomes particularly clear in light of the effect that Alfred the Great's cosmopolitan court appears to have had upon him. In much the same way that the English Alcuin influenced Charlemagne, the Franks within Alfred's court influenced Alfred. Thus, the connectivity between these regions through both legal transaction and scholarly exchange becomes clear. Some aspects of Alfred's Law Code actually resemble legal codes first instituted by Charlemagne. The Frankish monk, Grimbold, may be one possible originator of such similarities. According to Asser, Alfred invited Grimbold, because of his scholarship, to visit England from Gaul. Such an invitation was not uncommon as demonstrated by Alfred when he also invited another expert in literature known as John from Francia to join his court. These, along with "other Gallic men," served as some of Alfred's principal tutors, and Asser claims they were greatly rewarded.⁷⁷ For this reason, it may be reasonably hypothesized that it was not only Anglo-Saxons such as Alcuin who influenced the literary reforms of the Carolingians, but that, at least to some extent, the later reforms of Alfred were also influenced by Frankish scholars. In fact, the tutelary influence of Grimbold, John and other Frankish clerics upon Alfred also seems

⁷⁷ Asser, "Life of King Alfred," 42, 94, in *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Source*, trans. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 79-81, pp. 102-103.

to have afforded them an instrumental role in the actual development of Alfred's law code. Elements of Alfred's law code not only draw directly from Æthelberht of Kent's legal code, such as its provisions on skull wounds, but also from Frankish Carolingian laws. A series of laws incorporated by Alfred's code seem to closely parallel and even directly match no other code excepting the *Lex Frisionum*, a legal code developed by the Carolingians through the collection and modification of Frisian custom to help ensure they were properly integrated into Frankish society.⁷⁸ This inspiration from Carolingian law would help to further explain the remarkably unusual translation of Mosaic Law that begins the code. This addition, the so called, "Mosaic Prologue," is remarkable not only for its adoption of the Carolingian's tendency to associate law and royal power with Old Testament Israel, but also for its similarities to actual Carolingian law. As Lisi Oliver notes, this Mosaic Prologue contains alterations which seem to reflect clauses found in the Frankish *Theodore* and *Penitentiale Martenianum*, and this seems to suggest potential Frankish influence.⁷⁹ Not only did the Anglo-Saxon Alcuin, then, influence the development of Frankish law, but Carolingian scholars also influenced Alfredian legal development.

Finally, high culture—or, as defined for the purpose of this discussion, the expression of societal traditions through shared history and literature—also reveals the overall development of literacy and literacy's impact upon regional bonds and class identity in England and France. In fact, the elite appeared to be preoccupied with genealogical records and writings that defined the qualities of nobility. Certainly, as a result of his drive to unify his new English Kingdom, Alfred

⁷⁸ See Oliver, 235-255.

⁷⁹ Oliver, 237-239. Some historians have argued that this may have also been the result of Irish influence. However, as Oliver notes, although some sections may have come from Ireland, others only share similarities with Frankish documents.

the Great inspired the creation of new poems and chronicles which could foster a sense of shared identity among the elite. For example, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, originally and primarily formulated during the reign of King Alfred by pro-Alfredian sources, demonstrates consistent attention to a variety of perceived unifying connections and bloodlines. For instance, although the Mercian Register is often viewed as a signal of division, it might also be interpreted as a means by which the Mercians situated themselves within the West-Saxon tradition.⁸⁰ Alfred himself appears eager to promote high culture that is expressed in the unifying vernacular of English; he also appears particularly interested in the collection and publishing of genealogies, such as a manuscript fragment (British Library MS. Add. 23211) containing, among other things, a West Saxon regnal list and a collection of East Saxon royal pedigrees.⁸¹ During Alfred's reign, literacy thus served as a unifying cultural force as well as a defining tool for shaping the identity of the English elite. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for instance, suggests a keen interest in using the written word as a tool for establishing legitimacy as well as for strengthening cultural connections among the elite classes. As a matter of fact, a case may be made for the hypothesis that Alfred used *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* to unite formerly disparate peoples together through the creation of shared ancestry. For example, manuscript A, which is generally believed to be the oldest version of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, begins by appending a genealogy of the Kings of Wessex and the manuscript initially ended by documenting the reign of Alfred, including the

⁸⁰ For a more extensive treatment of the argument that the Mercians as a whole were intentionally attempting to situate themselves within the West-Saxon context, see Keynes, "King Alfred and the Mercians," in *Kings, Currencies and Alliances: History and Coinage of Southern England in the Ninth Century* ed. Mark Blackburn and David Dumville (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998), 1-46. Keynes thoroughly explores the numismatic and charter evidence to make the case for West-Saxon and Mercian co-operation.

⁸¹ Henry Sweet, *The Oldest English Texts* (London: Early English Text Society, 1885), 167-179.

story of the creation of the West Saxon Kingdom.⁸² Because this manuscript apparently originated in Winchester, a bastion of Wessex, it is not surprising that as a whole, the A manuscript and consequently the Chronicle attempt to push the Alfredian and, thus, the West-Saxon agenda. Indeed, this chronicle, while focusing on the West-Saxons, includes tales of the founding of Kent and Northumbria, which were seemingly positioned to parallel the West-Saxon founding.⁸³ In light of this, the very creation of a formalized timeline through the writing of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* signals an attempt not only to record a memory of what happened, but to create a coherent, legitimizing bond between past and present.

The chronicle, in fact, was copied by scribes across England and in the process, local scribes amended and altered the text to incorporate their own local histories within the greater Anglo-Saxon narrative. Within the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, one such appended chronicle known as the Mercian Register especially demonstrates influence of literacy upon the elite class' identity. For instance, the Mercian Register appears to chronicle the formation and development of a shared identity between the Mercians and the West Saxons. In the time before the rise of Alfred, the Mercians under such great kings as Offa had reigned pre-eminent and received tribute from many other, lesser kingdoms. Offa seemingly acted as the sole ruler acknowledged by Charlemagne, and the two kings had exchanged letters.⁸⁴ However, after the West Saxons under Alfred gained pre-eminent power in England, the Mercians solely ruled by a council, and failed to regain their previous monarchy. Yet, despite this significant shift, no evidential signs exist to suggest that the population longed for the restoration of a Mercian monarchy. Instead, the

⁸² *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Whitelock (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1961), 3-4.

⁸³ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 3-6.

⁸⁴ *EHD* I, 18, pp. 848-849.

Mercians appear to have assimilated the West-Saxon English identity. In addition, although the physical marriage of Alfred to the Mercian lady Ealhswith and the subsequent birth of Alfred's child, Æthelflæd, certainly played an important role in this assimilation, the creation of the Mercian Register also demonstrates the literary aspect of the creation of this new narrative. This originally independent document actually seems to assert the power and greatness of a ruler who is both West-Saxon and Mercian. Beyond exercising short-term influence by asserting the genealogical connections of its new leader, the Register achieved a significant position within the region's historical narrative when it was incorporated into the local copies of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. In this way, the Chronicle established the Mercian Register's credibility as well as placed it securely within the greater West-Saxon narrative.⁸⁵

The written expression of high culture as defined by shared history and literature in Francia exercised a more direct influence over the formation of a unique identity within the Frankish elite classes. For example, in Merovingian Francia, a facility with Latin and classical literature, while mutated and transformed by the adaptation of Latin into vernacular, served as a distinct marker of social and cultural unity in the Frankish world. The letters of Venantius Fortunatus reveal just such a distinctly classical cultural lens and denote the basis for an extensive system of friendship, or *amicitiae*, letters designed to curry favor and develop a network of patrons and contacts. For instance, Venantius-- in response to a poem written under a pseudonym by the Marseilles aristocrat, Dynamius--writes florid poems richly pregnant with classical references. He references such figures as Erato, the Muse, the Roman goddess Camena,

⁸⁵ For a fuller treatment of this argument, see Charles Insley, "Collapse, Reconfiguration or Renegotiation? The Strange End of the Mercian Kingdom, 850-924," *Reti Medievali Rivista* 17, no. 2 (2016): 231-249.

and “the one begotten of Telamon,” Ajax.⁸⁶ In a similar letter to the aristocrat Iovinus, Fortunatus references the classical poets Homer and Ovid as well as Greek heroes including Hercules, Hector, Achilles, Ajax and Achilles. Furthermore, his letter also runs the gamut of famous Greek statesmen and philosophers like Plato and Pythagoras.⁸⁷ Yet, at the same time, he also juxtaposes the fading glory of dead Greeks and Romans with the everlasting glory of the Christian saints, who unlike the Greek heroes, are believed to enter eternal life upon their physical death as well as to anticipate future physical resurrection. Additionally, three letters by Fortunatus to Lupus, who later became Duke of Champagne, demonstrate that Fortunatus frequently flattered prospective patrons by comparing them to illustrious, classical heroes. In his panegyric for Lupus’ promotion, Fortunatus compares Lupus to Scipio, Cato and Pompey, and Fortunatus also appropriates within his work the words *antiquos animos romanae stirpis adeptus / bella moves armis, iura quiete regis*, a typical form of Roman praise for leaders.⁸⁸ Thus, through this recall of shared cultural landmarks and monuments, Fortunatus forges interpersonal bonds with other members of elite society by writing letters.

Writing to one of his close friends and contacts, the exceptionally literate Felix of Nantes, Fortunatus demonstrates his easy familiarity with high culture by incorporating an even grander and more flowery display of conspicuous *romanitas*. He consequently fills his correspondence with references to Greek mythology including comparatively obscure Homeric characters like Canopus, mountain ranges from the myths of Herakles, ancient Roman foes such as the Volsci, and also punctuates his letters with a smattering of quintessentially Greek vocabulary. However,

⁸⁶ Fortunatus in Tyrell, 73.

⁸⁷ Tyrell, 74.

⁸⁸ In English, this is, “inheriting your time-honoured virtues from your Roman parentage, you wage war with arms, you govern with law in times of peace.” Alice Tyrell, “Merovingian Letters” (PhD. diss., University of Toronto, 2012), 76.

Fortunatus limits his use of Greek to letters addressed to Felix. Given this self-censorship, it appears that the Greek references more likely included in response to Felix's particular fluency with Greek rather than in respect to a singular and universal aspect of Merovingian high culture.⁸⁹ Yet, lest Fortunatus and his writings be discounted as mere outliers in letter-writing, it should be noted that his letters were highly regarded by later figures such as Paul the Deacon and even Alcuin. In addition, such formalized style, filled with classical allusions, can not only be seen in letters by Venantius Fortunatus and various other Merovingian courtly figures and Bishops, but also in the work of Gregory of Tours.⁹⁰ Gregory, for example, reports that Domnolus, future bishop of Le Mans, begged King Chlothar I not to appoint him to be Bishop of Avignon because Domnolus did not wish to be subjected to what he saw as the intolerably boring discussions of philosophy and rhetoric practiced by ancient senatorial lineages.⁹¹

By the later Merovingian period, however, allusions to a shared *romanitas* become more infrequent; the memory of the Roman Empire faded and, in its place, it appears that these letters evoked a new form of high culture, namely that of shared educational experiences at the King's court. An excellent example of this can be found in the collection of Bishop Desiderius of Aquitaine's letters from c. 630-655. Preserved in the *Codex Sangallensis* 190, this collection of Desiderius' works is the sole intact collection of a Merovingian bishop's writings. Furthermore, it also serves as one of the few sources available offering insight regarding the relatively poorly

⁸⁹ Tyrell, 81-83.

⁹⁰ Excellent examples of sixth century Merovingian epistles with a focus on *amicitiae* are the collections of Ruricus of Limoges and Avitus of Vienne. For English translations, see Ruricus of Limoges, *Ruricius of Limoges and Friends: A Collection of Letters from Visigothic Gaul*, ed. and trans. Ralph W. Mathisen (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999); Avitus of Vienne, *Letters and Selected Prose*, trans. Danuta Shanzer and Ian Wood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002).

⁹¹ Gregory of Tours, 6.9, in *A History of the Franks*, ed. and trans. Ernest Brehaut (Baltimore: Penguin, 1974), 110-111.

understood 600s.⁹² Although these letters are much simpler in style compared to Fortunatus' poetic and panegyric masterpieces, they demonstrate a similar concern for the creation and maintenance of patronage and alliances through the use of *amicitiae* letters. The broad usage of such stylized texts extends from cities such as Verdun, Metz and Trier in the northeast to Valence in the southeast, as well as to Rouen in the northwest and Bourges in central Gaul.⁹³ Indeed, by the time of Desiderius, it appears that although Roman customs have faded, letters are still used to highlight shared experiences and forge lasting bonds. For instance, writing to the Abbott of Metz, Desiderius brings up their shared past as young men telling stories.⁹⁴ In another letter, written to Paul of Verdun, Desiderius states that he looks forward to discussing the happy times they had in court. For instance, the Formulary of Marculf indicates the widespread importance of standardized, ritualized letters exchanged between Merovingian Kings. Such letters were frequently issued for the purpose of recommendations, for church feasts, for personal communication with relatives, and even for communication with the mayor of the palace. In fact, these kinds of letters were written so frequently that scribes produced formularies, demonstrating the necessity and frequency of ritualized letter-writing in maintaining diplomatic relations and bonds.⁹⁵ Thus, literacy once again serves as a means of establishing bonds, reinforcing shared history, and providing cultural unity to the courtly Frankish elite.

Indeed, many other contemporary written works reveal similar elements of the ritualized display of high culture; one example can be found in the letters of Einhard to his fellow compatriots, including Lupus of Ferriere. Lupus' letter to Einhard displays a particular

⁹² Tyrell, 110.

⁹³ Tyrell, 114.

⁹⁴ Tyrell, 47.

⁹⁵ See formularies in Rio, *Legal Practice and the Written Word in the Early Middle Ages: Frankish Formulae, c.500–1000*, 141-142, 225-28, 222-224, 232-233.

veneration for classical Roman works such as Cicero; this veneration combines with a denigration of a perceived, debased, modern literary tradition. Lupus complements Einhard particularly on the similarities between Einhard's work and the classics – a foreseeable nod of recognition given that Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* appears to have portions modelled directly on Suetonius' *Life of the Caesars* with the aim of replicating the particular style. Lupus, however, with much exaggerated expression notes that, "the study of the ancients ... had almost disappeared from long neglect," and how "many today" consider learning pointless.⁹⁶ He likewise initially positions himself as small and meaningless compared to Einhard whom he seems to excessively flatter by modern standards. Einhard, in like manner, repeatedly references his own inability to understand "in my smallness," to display his humility.⁹⁷

If it were not for additional sources, it might be easy to mistakenly believe that the Carolingians had only just emerged from a period of literary darkness, and that many still dismissed the study of the classics. However, as has been previously established, keen observation of the Merovingian period reveals that such letters were in fact a typical affectation of Frankish *amicitiae*, or friendship letters. In fact, an observation of the works of Venantius Fortunatus, Avitus of Vienne, and other such Merovingian figures reveals that they likely inspired the florid Carolingian prose peppered with classical quotation and poetry characteristically written in the Roman style. Both Alcuin's *de santa cruce* and his pupil, Hrabanus Maurus' *de laudibus sanctae crucis*, for instance, were likely inspired by Fortunatus' Holy Cross Poems.⁹⁸ This emphasis on classical works, then, was added to the tradition of court-

⁹⁶ Lupus First Letter to Einhard, 830, in *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, ed. and trans. Paul Dutton, p.166.

⁹⁷ Einhard, *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, p.160, p.167, p.172, p.181.

⁹⁸ Tyrell, 99.

centric *amicitiae* established by Desiderius to form the new milieu for cultural bonds. In effect, these letters fundamentally draw upon the shared cultural background and societal distinction shared by the letter-writers. For example, even in a letter expressing grief for the death of his wife, Einhard references the works of great Roman churchmen and pagan intellectuals who wrote with regard to medicine.⁹⁹

Throughout the early Middle Ages, then, literacy functioned as a powerful vehicle for Anglo-Saxon and Frankish development. Law, scholarship and high culture, as expressed in shared history and literature, particularly demonstrate the impact of literacy upon the solidification of cultural and political unity as well as class identity in medieval England and Francia. Ultimately, even before the cross-pollinating reforms of Alfred the Great and Charlemagne, literacy developed to create cultural, political and class unity in both regions.

⁹⁹ Einhard's Response to Lupus, Early 836, *Charlemagne's Courtier: The Complete Einhard*, pp.169-171.

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