Competition and tradition: Carolingian political rituals, 751-800

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In 751, the Carolingians supplanted the traditional ruling dynasty of Francia. This article surveys Carolingian political rituals between 751 and 800, and argues that ritual was one means through which this new royal family sought to construct and legitimate its authority against its dynastic competitors. This article also highlights the neglected spiritual dimension of many of these rituals. Whilst tradition often formed an important part in these ceremonies, early medieval ritual was not static, and there is evidence of innovation and improvisation. The meaning of rituals was also unfixed, as reflected and conditioned by competing textual accounts.

Peasant woman: How do you become king then?
King Arthur: The Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in the purest shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur from the bosom of the water, signifying by divine providence that I, Arthur, was to carry Excalibur. That is why I am your king.
Dennis: Listen, strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government. Supreme executive power derives from a mandate from the masses, not from some farcical aquatic ceremony.[1]

King Arthur's encounter with the 'anarcho-syndicalist'[2] peasants in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* provides an unlikely entrée into our topic. In the past fifty years or so, ritual has become an increasingly popular subject of historical study.[3] However, recent work by historians such as Phillipe Buc and Christina Pössel has sharply challenged how we conceptualise the notion of 'ritual' in the context of

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[1] *Monty Python and the Holy Grail.* Dirs. T. Gilliam & T. Jones (1975).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Interview with Janet Nelson (30 May 2008). Available:
<http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/interviews/Nelson_Janet.html> [Accessed 17.1.13].

early medieval history.[4] In a controversial and strident critique of its traditional treatment by early medieval historians, Buc reconsiders rituals as inherently dangerous, given the potential for disruption, as well as for competition over meanings.[5] It is this latter danger that the Pythons' exasperated King Arthur discovers. Buc also stresses that we do not have full access to early medieval rituals; their meaning is mediated and manipulated through texts.[6] Similarly, Pössel argues in favour of the 'demystification' of ritual; rituals are not 'constitutive', as agency is the province not of ritual but of historical actors.[7] From this standpoint, Arthur's kingship is not contingent on the ritual that gave him possession of Excalibur, but on the acceptance of his authority.

A renewed focus on Carolingian political ritual is particularly appropriate in 2014, which marks the twelve-hundredth anniversary of the death of the dynasty's most prominent member, Charles the Great (d. 814), better known as Charlemagne. Hailed as the 'father of Europe' in his own time, Charlemagne conquered large swathes of Europe, and 'revived the office of Roman emperor in the West (not known there since 476)'.[8] His legacy is complex and contested; indeed, a curious company including twelfth-century emperor Frederick Barbarossa, Napoleon and the European Union have all laid some claim to the figure of Charlemagne since his death.[9]

Yet this article is not concerned only with endings, but also with beginnings. It will offer an exploration of Carolingian political ritual between the inauguration of the first Carolingian monarch, Pippin III, in 751, and the imperial coronation of Charlemagne in 800. It will explore inauguration rituals, alongside royal funerals and baptisms, political submissions, and liturgical developments. The world of the

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[4] See P. Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Oxford, 2001); C. Pössel, 'The magic of early medieval ritual', *Early Medieval History*, 17.2 (2009); cf. G. Koziol, 'The dangers of polemic: is ritual still an interesting topic of historical study?', *Early Medieval History*, 11.4 (2002).

[5] Buc, *Dangers*, 8-9.

[6] Ibid., 1-2.

[7] Pössel, 'The magic of early medieval ritual', 116 & n.17.

[8] J. Story, 'Introduction: Charlemagne's reputation' in her (ed.) *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester, 2005), 1-2.

[9] Ibid., 2; M. Becher, *Charlemagne*, trans. D.S. Bachrach (New Haven, 2003), 5.

Frankish aristocracy was inherently competitive,[10] and rituals were one means through which the new Carolingian dynasty could bolster its authority against potential challengers. As we shall see, tradition often played a significant role in these rituals. However the popular image, projected by such works as Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) and Hergé's Tintin adventure, *King Ottokar's Sceptre* (1938-39), of rulers as dependent on utterly inflexible rituals and traditions for their authority, is not reflective of medieval practice.[11] Rituals were often staged as ad hoc responses to crises, and innovation and improvisation clearly took place. This article will also stress the spiritual dimension of such 'political' rituals, which has often been underplayed in the traditional narrative. Ultimately, it will become clear that the meaning of rituals was often unfixed, and open to conflicting interpretations.

The ritual elevation of Pippin III, the father of Charlemagne, to the Frankish throne in 751 was fundamentally conditioned by crisis. The *Continuation of the Chronicle of Fredegar*, which is usually considered to be a contemporary narrative produced under the patronage of Pippin's uncle, claims that Pippin, with 'the consent and advice of all the Franks', sought and received papal endorsement for his elevation to the kingship.[12] The reported procedure for his inauguration is aligned with Frankish tradition: 'In accordance with that order anciently required, he was chosen king by all the Franks, consecrated by the bishops and received the homage of the great men.'[13] No reference is made to the deposition of the incumbent Merovingian monarch, Childeric III, whose dynasty, also known as the 'long-haired kings', had reigned for some 294 years.[14] The Continuator's refrain, laying stress upon the support of 'all the Franks', is an appeal to the established

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[10] S. Airlie, 'Charlemagne and the aristocracy: captains and kings', in (ed.) J. Story, *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester, 2005), 90.

[11] S. Airlie, 'Thrones, dominions, powers: some European points of comparison for the Stone of Destiny' in (eds) R. Welander, D.J. Breeze & T.O. Clancy, *The Stone of Destiny: Artefact and Icon* (Edinburgh, 2003), 123-4.

[12] *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar*, trans. J.M. Wallace-Hadrill (London, 1960), 102; R. Collins, *Charlemagne* (Houndmills, 1998), 3.

[13] *Fredegar*, 102.

[14] P. Fouracre, 'The Long Shadow of the Merovingians', in (ed.) J. Story, *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester, 2005), 5.

consensual model of Frankish politics at the level of the elite; a model underscored by repeated references to political assemblies throughout the chronicle sources.[15]

The so-called *Royal Frankish Annals* offer a similar but more elaborate account, with an embassy dispatched to Pope Zacharias 'to inquire whether it was good or not that the king of the Franks should wield no royal power'. The response was that 'it was better to call him king who had the royal power than the one who did not', hence Zacharias 'commanded by virtue of his apostolic authority that Pepin should be made king.'[16] This probably amounts to an appeal to the moral and spiritual authority of the papacy, as in this period - centuries before the age of papal monarchy - the pope possessed no legal jurisdiction over such affairs. The *Annals* subsequently report that Pippin was 'elected king by the custom of the Franks', again emphasising the importance of the traditional acclamation of the new king by the assembled Frankish aristocrats.[17] Pippin was then 'anointed by the hand of Archbishop Boniface of saintly memory' at Soissons, and 'Childeric, who was falsely called king, was tonsured' and placed in monastic confinement.[18] This requires some unpacking. To begin with Childeric, the ritualised shearing of his hair transformed him into an ecclesiastical figure, and thus stripped him of his secular identity.[19] But he was also shorn of his dynastic identity as one of the 'long-haired kings', as the distinctive hairstyle of the Merovingians was 'a badge of rank' (although, as Nelson has convincingly argued, it was unlikely to have marked them as sacral figures).[20] The choice of Soissons as the site for Pippin's elevation could represent an attempt to exploit, and assert ownership of, the traditional royal associations of a Merovingian palace site.[21] However, the reported anointing of a Frankish king with unction (holy oil) in an inauguration ritual was a novelty and, coupled with the appeal to the papacy, could suggest that Pippin

[15] J.L. Nelson, 'The Lord's Anointed and the people's choice: Carolingian royal ritual', in (eds) D. Cannadine & S. Price, *Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1987), 147.

[16] *Carolingian Chronicles*, trans. B. Scholz (Michigan, 1972), 39.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] The same fate would befall prominent opponents of Charlemagne such as his rebellious son Pippin 'the Hunchback' and Duke Tassilo of Bavaria.

[20] Nelson, 'Lord's Anointed', 140-1.

[21] R. McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge, 2004), 152; cf. Airlie, 'Thrones', 125.

and his adherents felt obliged to embrace new forms of authority in order to, in Enright's phrase, 'bridge the charismatic gap' and overcome the traditional authority of the Merovingians.[22] Enright contends that the innovative inclusion of unction may have appealed to Pippin as it bolstered his position through the notion of 'untouchability', derived from the Old Testament, although the impact of this ideal is questionable.[23] As Nelson has argued, the Frankish reception of this new rite was ambivalent, as reflected by the surprising absence of references to it in Carolingian court writings and correspondence.[24] What 'mattered most' to contemporaries appears to have been the Frankish (indeed, Merovingian) tradition of the acclamation.[25] This reverence for the customary is paralleled by the symbolic reissue of the traditional Frankish law-code, *Lex Salica*, by Pippin and later Charlemagne.[26]

Yet it is not certain whether Pippin was anointed in 751; the Continuator only tells us that Pippin was 'consecrated', which is an ambiguous term that could merely signify that he received a blessing from the bishops present.[27] The role of Boniface, Archbishop of Mainz, in proceedings can also be challenged. Correspondence between Pippin and Boniface evinces tension between them; moreover, Boniface has been seen as more closely connected with Pippin's brother and rival Carloman.[28] The fact that Boniface is referred to in the entry of 751 as 'of saintly memory', when he was martyred only in 754, betrays that this was not a contemporary composition; it seems more likely that this is a retrospective insertion to associate Pippin with an aura of saintly legitimacy and prestige.[29] McKitterick has argued that the *Continuation* is not a contemporary source, and also re-dates the *Clausula de Unctione Pippini* (which purports to be from 767 and

[22] M.J. Enright, *Iona, Tara and Soissons* (Berlin, 1985), 122-3.

[23] Ibid., 117; Nelson, 'Inauguration Rituals', in her *Politics and ritual in Early Medieval Europe* (London, 1986), 290.

[24] Ibid., 292; 290.

[25] Ibid., 291.

[26] P. Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, Vol. 1 (Oxford, 1999), 35; 47.

[27] Nelson, 'Inauguration Rituals', 291.

[28] McKitterick, *History and Memory*, 150; Becher, 36.

[29] *Carolingian Chronicles*, 39-40.

largely echoes the claims of the *Royal Annals*) to the late ninth century.[30] Her argument for a later date for the *Continuation* is not conclusive, although the silence in papal sources can cast further doubt on the notion that Pippin was anointed in 751.[31] In any case, Pippin's undisputed (re-)anointing in 754 by Pope Stephen II, which will be discussed later, could suggest that the first ceremony was in some way problematic.

Charlemagne's biographer Einhard, writing after his subject's death, similarly claims that Childeric was deposed on papal authority - although he credits this to Pope Stephen II - and denigrates the Merovingians as impotent rulers, with only 'the empty name of king'; power instead rested in the hands of the mayors of the palace, most notably Pippin.[32] Thus the *Royal Annals* and Einhard present and justify the deposition of 751 as a crisis of Merovingian legitimacy. But underlying this was a power struggle within the Carolingian family itself. When Pippin's elder brother Carloman, with whom he shared power, had retired to a monastic life in 746, it can be inferred that a deal was made whereby the childless Pippin would respect the succession of Carloman's son Drogo. However, the birth of Pippin's first son Charles in 748 dramatically altered the political situation and naturally caused Pippin to renege on this agreement.[33] The opposition of Drogo, who remained a danger until his capture in 753, was compounded not only by the prospect of Carloman's return from his monastic exile, but also by the threat posed by Pippin's half-brother Grifo, 'a powerful alternative focus of loyalty for the aristocracy' as another son of Charles Martel.[34] Grifo was only neutralised in 753 when he was killed in battle.[35] This dynastic struggle, which can be partly reconstructed through charter evidence, is masked by the pro-Carolingian sources; Einhard's refusal to describe Charlemagne's childhood doubtless lay in a desire to avoid acknowledging the acrimony of this period.[36] Despite the claims that Pippin

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[30] McKitterick, *History and Memory*, 138; a view endorsed by M. Costambeys, M. Innes, S. Maclean, *The Carolingian World* (Cambridge, 2011), 33.

[31] McKitterick, *History and Memory*, 144.

[32] Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, trans. D. Ganz in his *Einhard and Notker the Stammerer: Two Lives of Charlemagne* (London, 2008), 20-1.

[33] Collins, *Charlemagne*, 32; Costambeys et al., 62; Enright, 114.

[34] Collins, *Charlemagne*, 32-3; Costambeys et al., 55-6.

[35] Collins, *Charlemagne*, 33.

[36] Fouracre, 15-17; Becher, 42; cf. Einhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, 21.

was elected with unanimity then, there was patently opposition to his rule. Whilst it is significant that he was able to attract sufficient support to stage the ritual in the first place,[37] the usurpation of 751 was clearly a significant risk, designed to raise Pippin over his dynastic competitors.[38]

By 754, Pippin's position appears more secure and it was a foreign, not domestic, crisis that triggered the next significant Carolingian political ritual. In the face of Lombard depredations against papal lands, Pope Stephen II personally crossed the Alps during the winter of 753-754 to appeal to Pippin for support.[39] This episode is instructive in a number of ways. The divergent accounts of the first meeting between the pope and Pippin at Ponthion exemplify Buc's argument concerning the textual function of ritual as the 'keystone to a narrative'.[40] Papal sources report that Pippin received the pope with great honour and prostrated himself before Stephen, whilst Frankish sources claim that it was the pope and his entourage who prostrated themselves before the Frankish king.[41] This underlines the potential for narrative manipulations of ritual to delineate power-relationships, which gives rise to competing accounts of early medieval ceremonies.

In exchange for Frankish support against the Lombards, the pope himself anointed Pippin and his two young sons, Charlemagne and Carloman, at the monastery of Saint-Denis; an important Frankish spiritual site. [42] This ceremony conferred additional legitimacy on Pippin, as it linked him to both the prestigious figure of the pope and, through him, St Peter. Moreover, it allowed Pippin to underpin the succession of his dynasty by hallowing his two sons. According to the papal account, the young Charlemagne had also been dispatched almost a hundred miles at the head of an advance party to greet the pope.[43] Thus the spotlight in 754 was

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[37] Nelson, 'Inauguration Rituals', 151; Pössel, n.17.

[38] Becher, 33; Fouracre, 17; Costambeys, et al., 62.

[39] Nelson, 'The Lord's Anointed', 142.

[40] P. Buc, 'Political rituals and political imagination in the medieval West from the fourth century to the eleventh', in (eds) P. Linehan & J.L. Nelson, *The Medieval World* (London, 2001), 190; 198.

[41] Buc, *Dangers*, 260.

[42] *Carolingian Chronicles*, 40.

[43] *The Lives of the Eighth-Century Popes (Liber Pontificalis)*, 2nd edn., trans. R. Davis (Liverpool, 2007), 62.

fixed firmly on Pippin and his immediate family, distinguishing them as special and hence worthy of obedience.[44] Yet the events of 754 should not be viewed only in light of an attempt to legitimise the Carolingian line. It can also be understood as an appeal for divine favour by Pippin on behalf of himself and his family,[45] and the setting of Saint-Denis is suggestive of an attempt to invoke the intercession of the eponymous Frankish saint.

Similarly, the life-cycle rituals of the ruling dynasty, such as their funerary rites, clearly possessed both a spiritual and political dimension, which could be harnessed to bolster dynastic authority.[46] In 768, the dying Pippin III divided his realm between his sons 'with the approval of the Frankish [elite]'.[47] He died on 24th September and was buried 'as he had wished' at the royal abbey of Saint-Denis, 'with great honour'.[48] Nelson plausibly envisages a restricted audience, but a high degree of elite participation in this ceremony.[49] Like his father before him, Pippin was inserting himself into a tradition of royal burials at Saint-Denis, and thus co-opted part of their prestige, as well as spiritual legitimacy through association with an important Frankish saint.[50] His eldest son likewise expressed a desire to be buried there, which could point to an attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to cultivate a more coherent strategy of legitimation. [51] Pippin's funerary arrangements would naturally have served to magnify the distinction of the royal family. However, the reputed manner of his burial, with the corpse notably positioned face-down and buried under the entrance of the church, is strongly suggestive of 'penitential humility' and a sincere desire to propitiate God - perhaps

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[44] S. Airlie, 'Towards a Carolingian Aristocracy' in his *Power and Its Problems in Carolingian Europe* (Ashgate, 2012), 123; cf. Airlie, 'Thrones', 125.

[45] S. Airlie, pers. comm.

[46] M. McCormick, *Eternal victory: triumphal rulership in late Antiquity, Byzantium and the early medieval West* (Cambridge, 1986), 367-8.

[47] *Fredegar*, 121.

[48] Ibid.

[49] J.L. Nelson, 'Carolingian Royal Funerals' in (eds) F. Theuws & J.L. Nelson, *Rituals of Power: From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages* (Boston: Brill, 2000), 142.

[50] Ibid., 141.

[51]Ibid., 144. Competition between Carloman and Charlemagne undercut this, as the former chose Rheims as his burial place, probably to differentiate himself from his rival, see 176; Charlemagne's plans moreover came to nothing, as he was buried at Aachen.

for the unscrupulous actions that won him the throne.[52] The spiritual dimension of this funerary ritual should not be neglected then.

Nevertheless, Pippin's funeral was followed swiftly by the synchronised royal elevation of his sons Charlemagne and Carloman in the episcopal cities of Noyon and Soissons respectively on the 9th October; significantly the feast day of Saint Denis, when the intercessory powers of the saint were thought to be most potent.[53] Whilst this event was evidently choreographed, Charlemagne is not thought to have returned to Noyon, thus the setting of his inauguration ceremony seems like an improvised response to what was effectively a crisis – a temporary disruption to the kingship brought about by the death of his royal father.[54] The funeral can thus be viewed as 'ritualised crisis' that allowed an expression of aristocratic unity before the realm was reconfigured.[55]

The baptismal rituals of the Carolingians were also exploited as a platform to highlight the distinction of the dynasty. The baptismal shroud of Gisela, Pippin's infant daughter, was transported to Rome in 758, and was deposited by the pope in the burial chapel of St Petronilla; a saint particularly venerated by the Carolingian royal house.[56] This act evidently had both spiritual and dynastic resonances. The choice of high-ranking, battle-hardened Frankish aristocrats as 'couriers' for this shroud was also significant, as such ritualised acts served to inculcate an appreciation of the 'sacred dynastic aura around the new royal family' amongst the elite.[57]

The baptism of Charlemagne's third son Carloman in Rome in 781 also provided the occasion for a dynastic statement. Pope Hadrian personally baptised Carloman and anointed him and his younger brother Louis as sub-kings over Italy and

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[52] Ibid., 142. By contrast, Pippin's father was buried under the choir. For Pippin's dubious actions, see Enright, 115.

[53] *Fredegar*, 121, n.2 & n.3; Becher, 46.

[54] D. Bullough, *The Age of Charlemagne*, 45; Nelson, 'Funerals', 135; cf. Collins, *Charlemagne*, 38.

[55] Buc, *Dangers*, 83; Nelson, 'Lord's Anointed', 151.

[56] *Liber Pontificalis*, 80, n.6.

[57] Airlie, 'Towards a Carolingian Aristocracy', 124.

Aquitaine respectively.[58] A papal baptism was clearly prestigious and appears to have been coveted by contemporary dynasts.[59] Together, the rituals of 781 stressed the specialness of the Carolingian royal line. The creation of the two sub-kings also represents the first expression of Charlemagne's succession plans. However, his eldest sons, Pippin 'the Hunchback' and Charles the Younger, had not yet been provided for.[60] Strikingly, Carloman was rechristened 'Pippin' at his baptism, and this has frequently been viewed as a signal implying that the elder Pippin was being edged out of the succession.[61] Conversely, as Nelson has demonstrated, he retained his prominent position at court.[62] The ins and outs of Pippin's fortunes need not concern us, but the very ambiguity of his position is significant. The uncertainties around these ceremonies may well reflect the often improvised nature of Carolingian political ritual. But this episode also suggests that the meaning of rituals was not always immediately transparent; indeed, with this ritual Charlemagne may have been deliberately circumspect. A clearer attempt to fix the status of the elder Pippin, which excludes him from the succession on the questionable grounds of illegitimacy, can be seen in the 'officially commissioned' history of the bishops of Metz, begun by Paul the Deacon three years later.[63]

The potential for uncertainty in the interpretation of rituals and the importance of texts in shaping their reception can be underscored by the case of the ritualised submission of Duke Tassilo, Charlemagne's cousin, in 787. Under Frankish military pressure, Tassilo 'delivered himself into vassalage… and confessed that he had sinned and acted wickedly'.[64] His 'humiliation' was amplified by the surrender of thirteen hostages, including his son, to Charlemagne.[65] In the ceremony of 787, Tassilo also ceded 'a staff on the head of which was the likeness of a man',

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[58] P.D. King, *Charlemagne: Translated Sources* (Kendal, 1987), 81.

[59] Duke Tassilo of Bavaria had similarly arranged for his son, Theodo, to be baptised in Rome by the pope in 772. See S. Airlie, 'Narratives of triumph and rituals of submission: Charlemagne's mastering of Bavaria', *TRHS*, 9 (1999), 99.

[60] Pippin 'the Hunchback' was born of Himiltrude, Charlemagne's first partner. Charles the Younger, like Louis and Carloman, was born of Charlemagne's later wife Hildegard. See C.I. Hammer, '"Pippinus Rex": Pippin's Plot of 792 and Bavaria', *Traditio*, 63 (2008), 250.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Nelson, *Opposition to Charlemagne* (London, 2009), 23.

[63] Hammer, 250.

[64] King, 85.

[65] Airlie, 'Narratives of triumph', 105; King, 85.

seemingly an object symbolic of the traditional authority of his dynasty, the Agilolfings, over the duchy.[66] Tassilo was allowed to retain his dukedom; however, he now clearly held it directly from the Frankish king.[67] Both a contemporary Latin poem produced for Charlemagne's court, possibly intended to shape the Frankish opinion of Tassilo, and a Bavarian source which survives only through its early modern transmission, place a more positive spin on events. Tassilo's submission is balanced by his rehabilitation, as symbolised through the gifts bestowed on the humbled duke by Charlemagne.[68] That the latter was ultimately dissatisfied is clear from his subsequent actions. After a short interval, Tassilo was summoned and appeared at Ingelheim in 788, apparently without first seeking assurances in the form of hostages as he had at earlier meetings, which suggests that he felt he had 'gained a level of security' in the events of 787.[69] At Ingelheim, he was condemned at what was effectively a 'show-trial'.[70] With Tassilo tonsured and removed from secular affairs, Charlemagne was able to annexe Bavaria. The meaning of the ritual of 787 thus appears to have been somewhat ambiguous. Both parties exited the ceremony with different views of what had been achieved.[71] The sources moreover reveal that this ceremony could be configured in different ways. This episode is therefore illustrative of the contingency of ritual acts, and - as Airlie has noted - the 'active' role of texts as part of the 'apparatus' that conditioned how rituals were perceived.[72]

Turning to liturgical developments under the Carolingians, we can again see the interplay of tradition and innovation, similar to the case of Pippin's inauguration. The liturgy also represents another area in which political and religious concerns fundamentally intermeshed.[73] Crisis can be seen to have catalysed developments in

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[66] Ibid., 156; Airlie, 'Narratives of triumph', 111.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid., 112-3.

[69] Ibid., 113.

[70] Ibid., 108; 113-4.

[71] Cf. T. Reuter, 'Contextualising Canossa: excommunication, penance, surrender, reconciliation' in his *Medieval Polities and Modern Mentalities*, (ed.) J.L. Nelson (Cambridge, 2006), 165.

[72] Airlie, 'Narratives of triumph', 113.

[73] M. McCormick, 'The liturgy of war in the Early Middle Ages: crisis, litanies and the Carolingian monarchy', *Viator*, 15 (1984) 3; E. Kantorowicz, *Laudes Regiae: A Study in Liturgical Acclamations and Medieval Ruler Worship* (Berkeley, 1946), 14.

this sphere, particularly in the turbulent 790s.[74] A letter from Charlemagne to his queen, Fastrada, in September 791 on the eve of his crossing into Avar territory epitomises these changes. It relays in great detail the provisions for 'three days of litanies' by the army that included votive masses, litanic processions, a fast, and a sliding-scale of alms-giving in order to beseech divine favour for military victory.[75] Charlemagne also requested that Fastrada, at court in Regensburg, make similar arrangements.[76] The spontaneous character of the event is clear from both the letter and the account in the *Royal Annals*.[77] Whilst like anointing ceremonies, the initiative appears to have been clerical, royal authority was used to extend such liturgical practices.[78] This can be located within a wider context of royal sponsorship of victory liturgies under the Carolingians, as the production of the elaborate Sacramentaries (mass-books) of Angoulême and Gellone attest.[79] Victory services and prayers for rulers in time of conflict were not original; there is some evidence of similar Merovingian traditions in the eighth century. [80] What distinguishes Carolingian practice appears to be a marked expansion and intensification of these activities under direct royal patronage.[81] In such liturgies, the Carolingian royal family was once again foregrounded, along with key Frankish institutions, such as the judges and the army. [82] Indeed, McCormick contends that the likely purpose of such rituals was to intensify identification with the ruler amongst his subjects, bridging the gap between the centre and localities.[83] It is difficult to gauge the impact of these central commands on the ground, but the severity with which Charlemagne responded to the alleged refusal of Abbot Potho of St Vincenzo to honour the monarch in the traditional psalm may suggest that efforts were made at enforcement.[84] Yet the spiritual intention of

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[74] McCormick, *Eternal Victory*, 353; cf. Kantorowicz, 47.

[75] King, 309-10.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid., 310, cf. 87; McCormick, *Eternal Victory*, 353.

[78] King, 310; McCormick, *Eternal Victory*, 347.

[79] Ibid., 347; 352.

[80] Ibid., 344-5.

[81] Ibid., 347.

[82] Nelson, 'The Lord's Anointed', 153.

[83] McCormick, 'The liturgy of war', 22; cf. Kantorowicz, 62.

[84] McCormick, 'The liturgy of war', 3-4.

these liturgical acts as part of an effort to secure divine favour for the dynasty and the realm should not be underestimated.

It is fitting to end with some consideration of Charlemagne's imperial coronation at St Peter's in Rome on Christmas Day 800. The *Royal Annals* report that Charlemagne was crowned by Pope Leo III and subsequently acclaimed as emperor.[85] The meaning of this ritual is inherently uncertain and the accounts we have are 'subtly argumentative and were written as part of a contemporary struggle to control interpretation'.[86] For example, the Frankish claim that the pope subsequently 'adored', or prostrated himself before, the new emperor finds no echo in the papal record and may reflect an effort to downplay Leo's seemingly superior role in bestowing the imperial title by placing him in a deferential position to Charlemagne.[87]

The context for the imperial coronation was that of two concurrent crises in Rome and, at least from a Frankish perspective, Byzantium.[88] The entries in the so-called *Annals of Lorsch* are our nearest contemporary source, and were likely composed shortly after 801.[89] Collins contends that these annals may represent how the issue of Charlemagne's elevation was first communicated to those in Francia.[90] The journey to Rome was precipitated by remembrance of the 'injury that the Romans had done to Pope Leo', when the latter had been attacked by a mob, apparently with the intention of mutilating him so as to render him unsuitable for office.[91] The entry for 801 justifies Charlemagne's elevation by claiming that the imperial title, the 'name of emperor', was vacant given the unprecedented rule of a woman, the Empress Irene, in Byzantium.[92] The Lorsch account also advances the

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[85] King, 93.

[86] Costambeys, et al., 160; cf. Buc, *Dangers*, passim.

[87] King, 93; cf. *Liber Pontificalis*, 188. This discrepancy recalls the competing accounts of the meeting of Pippin III and Stephen II at Ponthion.

[88] J. Herrin, *Women in Purple: Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (Oxford, 2001), 121.

[89] Collins, 'Charlemagne's imperial coronation and the Annals of Lorsch', in (ed.) J. Story, *Charlemagne: Empire and Society* (Manchester, 2005), 64.

[90] Ibid., 66.

[91] King, 144.

[92] Ibid.

territorial logic that Charlemagne held the traditional seats of empire in the west.[93] This challenge to Byzantine authority can also be situated within a broader context of Frankish competition with the Byzantines. The Franks had earlier taken aim at the eastern empire in the religious sphere, in the mistaken belief that the Byzantines had turned to idol-worship; a practice the Franks condemned in the *Libri Carolini*, or 'Books of Charles', and at the Council of Frankfurt in 794.[94] Frankish opposition to Byzantium should not be overstated though, as their efforts to secure Byzantine recognition of Charlemagne's imperial title attest.[95]

However, Einhard claims that Charlemagne 'was so averse to [the imperial title] that he said he would never have entered the church that day… if he had known the pope's plan beforehand.'[96] It is very plausible that the protestation ascribed to Charlemagne was in fact a manifestation of a classical trope whereby worthy candidates would initially refuse an office, thus underlining their humility.[97] Alternatively, Charlemagne's supposed displeasure may reflect some retrospective unease about the role of the pope in the ceremony. In 813, it was Charlemagne and not the pope who crowned his son Louis as co-emperor in Aachen, following in the tradition of the Roman emperors, whose authority was by no means dependent upon the papacy.[98] Whilst there is clear evidence of prior planning of the ritual, as suggested by the perfectly timed arrival of envoys with symbols of favour from Jerusalem, there does not appear to have been a completely coherent strategy behind the imperial coronation.[99] There was a surprising delay in the formulation of Charlemagne's imperial title, and it was arguably not until 812 that it was deployed on the Frankish coinage.[100] It is possible to view the imperial coronation rather as a tactical attempt to press Charlemagne's ambitions in Italy,

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[93] Ibid.

[94] Bullough, 111-2.

[95] Costambeys et al., 168.

[96] Einhard's *Vita Karoli*, trans. J.L. Nelson in her 'Why are there so many accounts of Charlemagne's imperial coronation?' in her *Courts, Elites and Gendered Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot, 2007), 7.

[97] Collins, *Charlemagne*, 144; as Bullough has noted (*Age of Charlemagne*, 183), a modern parallel is when the Speaker of the House of Commons is elected and has to be 'dragged' to the chair.

[98] King, 105; cf. *Liber Pontificalis*, 187, n.59.

[99] King, 93.

[100] R. McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge, 2008), 116.

exploiting Byzantine weakness and papal desperation; this is hinted at by the perceived threat to Byzantine Sicily recorded by the Eastern chronicler Theophanes. [101] Cumulatively, this reflects the often ad hoc character of Carolingian political ritual. There was some continuity in practice, however, in that ritual was once more used to underpin the future of the dynasty, as Charles the Younger was finally anointed king by the pope on the same occasion.[102]

In conclusion, the frequent foregrounding of members of the Carolingian family in key ceremonies served to shore up their dynastic authority in the competitive world of Frankish politics. This impression of Carolingian exaltation should not be pushed too far though: Charlemagne evidently remained a relatively accessible monarch.[103] Buc has rightly highlighted that the meaning of a ritual was unfixed and ultimately often contested, as witnessed by variations in the textual accounts. Whilst tradition could play a significant role in contemporary political ritual, the form of Carolingian rituals was likewise unfixed. There was a degree of improvisation and creativity, which would seem to be partly rooted in the fact that key rituals between 751 and 800 were often staged as ad hoc responses to both internal and external crises. That is not to say they were ineffective at fostering the legitimacy of the Carolingian line. The problematic origins of this new royal dynasty arguably continued to haunt the family's efforts to transmute its power into authority. This may also account for the new forms and authorities embraced in royal ritual, as well as in Carolingian exertions to shape perception through the writing and rewriting of history. [104] In some respects, the Carolingians were inventing a new tradition: one of Carolingian authority. Yet, it should not be forgotten that there was clearly a spiritual dimension to many of these 'political' rituals, which is often lost given the prevailing historiographical emphasis on legitimation. Moreover, it should be remembered that ritual was just one means of promoting legitimacy: judicious patronage, conspicuous Christianity, and military success likewise played an important part in securing the Carolingian line.

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[101] Costambeys et al., 167; Collins, *Charlemagne*, 148; King, 339.

[102] *Liber Pontificalis*, 188.

[103] Nelson, *Opposition to Charlemagne*, 6.

[104] See R. McKitterick 'Political ideology in Carolingian historiography' in (eds) Y. Hen & M. Innes, *The Uses of the Past in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000).

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