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Carolingian Baptismal Expositions: A New Frontier

When Leidrad, bishop of Lyon, composed an explanation of the rite of baptism around the year 812, ^{at the request of the Emperor Charlemagne,} he Λ began with the story of the creation of the world. "Thus", wrote Leidrad, "the unformed cosmos, not yet with glowing sun or paling moon or twinkling stars, overwhelmed uncomposed, invisible matter by the magnitude of its abysses and odious darkness. The Spirit of God, alone, was born over the waters in the form of a charioteer, and, in a figure of baptism, brought forth the nascent world." Perhaps Leidrad saw a parallel between the primordial chaos from whose black, watery abysses the earth and life were brought forth, and his world of the early ninth century in which, from the ubiquitously encircling ignorance of paganism, superstition, and error, the holy waters of baptism brought forth Christian life.

This ^{evening} ~~afternoon~~ I would like to talk to you about Carolingian

expositions, or
baptismal tracts in the context of Leidrad's world. After explaining the important educational opportunity that baptism, which consisted of our three separate sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and first Holy Communion, was in the eighth and ninth centuries, I will ^{describe} ~~show~~ how numerous baptismal expositions were composed and multiplied in direct response to clerical reform legislation demanding that priests know and be able to instruct and properly celebrate baptism. Then I will explain how the tracts, or brief treatises explaining the meaning of the ceremonies and of the words of the rite of baptism, ~~directly~~ ~~resulting from clerical reform legislation~~, have contributed to our understanding in two problem areas for modern historians of the Carolingian period. One problem regards how the Carolingian reform laws issued at the royal level were actually implemented at the grass-roots level of society for which they were aimed. The second problem regards the picture of clerical illiteracy suggested by the clerical reform legislation. We would like to know if the picture is true, and to what degree. The answer I will support with the concrete evidence of the baptismal tracts is that the level of literacy of the parish

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*In whose hands
was left the
ultimate responsibility for the education of the masses*

clergy was extremely low and that the program of the Carolingian reformers to "educate" the clergy consisted of providing them with no more than the absolute minimal knowledge they needed to function.

Following upon the "Dark Ages" and the barbarization of Roman society, the Carolingian era of the eighth and ninth centuries has long been acknowledged as a crucial period in western history. Thanks to this era, "civilization", as Kenneth Clark of television fame has put it, "came through by the skin of its teeth." This happened by virtue of a number of remarkable ventures launched by a series of equally remarkable rulers. Their programs were military, administrative, and economic, but they were also cultural. In fact, the greatest monument to their activity that has come down to us is literary works. Without the Carolingian renaissance in letters and the prodigious copying of classical texts, we would never know, for example, Tacitus's minor works, the poems of Lucretius, or Suetonius's 'Caesares'. The Carolingians, however, were not only copyists. They also composed their own literary works.

Surprising as it may sound, given the number of studies that have been done on this watershed era, the extant Carolingian literature has not been fully explored. ~~Very recently, several important works have been published that deal with genres of Carolingian literature previously ignored. The reason for their neglect until now has been two-fold. The first is because of the anonymity, repetitive nature, and seemingly obscure subject matter of their texts. The second is because, until the work especially in the latter half of this century by paleographers, like Bernhard Bischoff, that is, those who study and can date the script or hand of the person who wrote the MS,~~ there was no confirmation that ~~these texts~~ ^{many literary works} were, indeed, Carolingian.

~~The importance of these new monographs on, for example, penitential books, canon law collections, expositions on the clerical orders, and prayer collections is, in part, that their authors, in assembling the texts, have exposed literally hundreds of manuscripts whose contents have never been fully catalogued or brought to light. ~~It has been~~ Now, however, it is possible to assign more precise dates and places of origin to many ~~of~~ ^{medieval} manuscripts, and, even if they are later copies, to identify their contents as Carolingian. The manuscript research now possible~~

on Carolingian texts offers scholars the opportunity to enrich our understanding of that era.

One literary genre of the greatest interest to Carolingian manuscript compilers, it appears, was the liturgical exposition.

Among works of this nature, expositions of the rite of baptism abound in the ^{surviving} extant late eighth and ninth century manuscripts. Before I began work on these baptismal tracts seven years ago, they had never been systematically assembled and analyzed. This was due to the ~~same~~ ~~reasons of~~ anonymity, repetitiveness, and obscurity of most of them, as well as our ignorance regarding their quantity and importance to Carolingians. Thus far, I have been able to present an inventory of ~~both the published and previously unknown Carolingian baptismal expositions, consisting of sixty-one different texts in 129~~ ~~manuscripts.~~

To appreciate the value of the Carolingian baptismal literature for our knowledge of Carolingian society, it is necessary to understand one essential function of baptism for the Carolingians and why these tracts explaining the ceremonies of its rite were

written in the first place. We can grasp the importance of baptism for the Carolingians if we imagine for a moment the Latin West at the time Leidrad wrote his treatise.

By the year 800 Charlemagne ruled an empire that stretched from the Spanish March with its capital at Barcelona, north to Frisia, the border of present-day Denmark, north-east to the Elbe, half way across modern East Germany, south-east to the section of the Danube on which lies Budapest, and south down the Italian peninsula almost to Naples. The administration of such a vast realm was an extraordinary feat. Historians have studied and re-studied the huge bulk of reform legislation from that era which sought to bring political organization and cultural unity to the empire. Within its boundaries existed a formidable diversity of peoples, languages, codes of law, and ancient customs and beliefs. The only common bond extending over all the members of Carolingian society was their baptism into the Christian faith. In many areas, however, the people were Christian in little more than name. They had received baptism obligatorily at the time of their submission to Frankish overlordship, but their knowledge of the

faith they were baptized into and their observation of its rules and orthodox comprehension of its rites were minimal or nonexistent.

Baptism was fundamental to the unity of Charlemagne's empire. Baptism was also key in his efforts to maintain its integrity and strength. This is because the acceptance of Christianity not only separated the baptized from the unconquered pagan tribes, but also because baptism necessitated the instruction of every individual in the basics of the Christian faith. At least, ideally. "Education" for the vast majority of the population began and probably ended with their religious instruction at the hands of the parish priest or missionary.

Charlemagne's legislation shows clearly that he regarded the clergy and the liturgy as pivotal to the success or failure of his efforts to unify the empire. Liturgical conformity regarding both the celebration and the understanding of the Christian rites was inseparable from clerical educational reform. Only this latter could ensure that every priest was knowledgable and would instruct his parishioners through his homily or catechesis and through his proper

performance of the liturgy.

Clerical educational reform is the light in which the literary interest in baptism must be seen. The numerous baptismal tracts are instructions for clerics on the meaning and celebration of the ceremonies of the rite. By a systematic examination of all the tracts in their manuscript contexts I have been able to show that what gave rise to the Carolingian baptismal literature was not a theological dispute over the sacrament, but clerical reform legislation demanding that priests know and be able to instruct and properly celebrate baptism. To see this, a full appreciation of the manuscript in which the tract appears is essential to understand its composer's purpose. The manuscript, it must be remembered, is the work of some individual or scriptorium with a specific purpose, probably a specific recipient, in mind. In manuscript after manuscript containing the baptismal tracts, I found these in what constitute clerical handbooks-- manuals for priests including, for example, expositions on baptism, the mass, the order of penance, explanations of the creed and Our Father, selected homilies, canonical collections, and penitentials. Often the

contents are almost a blueprint of the items spelled out in a clerical reform capitulary listing the texts a priest must possess and be familiar with. Very frequently clerical reform capitularies themselves are included in the manuals-- presumably as reminders, admonitions, or exhortations to the priest to learn well the contents of the manuals. In fact, the kind of text found most often immediately adjacent to the baptismal tracts in their manuscripts is clerical reform legislation.

→ Baptism, then, was important to the Carolingians for the instruction it entailed in the Christian faith of every member of society. Its domain belonged to the parish clergy. The baptismal tracts were composed and multiplied to provide instruction on the rite of baptism to clerics in response to clerical reform legislation. → To see this

Placed in their context in the Carolingian world, what is the value of the baptismal tracts for us?

A major problem with Carolingian studies has been that a large proportion of what historians have claimed is known and have written as fact regarding both the administration of the realm and daily life

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is supposition and not demonstrable. This is because their major source of information has been the large body of reform legislation for which the period is so noted. These legislative documents offer a picture either of an ideal system aimed at by the reformers or of a degenerate situation to be corrected. For example, the De villis, considered one of the most important documents to come down to us from that era ~~because it~~ describes in detail the daily-life workings of a country manor, ^{But, in fact, it, that is, a reform decree,} is a capitulary, [^] It portrays an ideal situation.

Again, from the secular reform legislation we have a picture of a highly systematized and centralized administration with missi, ^{that is,} delegates of the crown, who visit the counties and dioceses annually, enforce the laws, make reports, examine the clergy, and see that there is a school in every bishopric. These are goals set out in the capitularies. Were the reform laws actually effected? The legislation, by itself, is no proof of its implementation.

Regarding legislation on baptism, ~~between the Council of Carlomann and Archbishop Boniface in 742 and the death of Charlemagne in 814,~~ many canons and capitularies dealing with the proper

celebration of baptism, ~~repeating earlier councils,~~ were issued in this famous ecclesiastical reform era. The greatest number appeared between 789 and 813 in the context of clerical reform legislation. One concern predominates: it is that bishops see to it that the priests know, understand, and can explain the rite of baptism. But, from these canons and capitularies, can we ever know, first, whether an educational program for the parish clergy regarding baptism was actually undertaken? Second, if so, how and by whom? And third, what did it consist of?

The baptismal tracts offer us a means to get behind the legislative sources. When the tracts are systematically analyzed, the picture they supply portrays the effective result of legislation. We can begin, humbly, to move from laws and theory to instructional tracts and fact in our knowledge of some fundamental features of Carolingian society.

Using the tracts, it is possible to shed some light on one fundamental feature of Carolingian society-- the activity surrounding the process by which Charlemagne put his clerical reform laws into

effect.

Charlemagne lobbied the leading bishops of his realm in support of the court's cause for the reform of the instruction and celebration of baptism. Shortly before the prelates were to meet and act on this issue in five regional reform councils Charlemagne convoked in the Spring of 813, he sent a questionnaire on baptism to the archbishops of his realm. He asked them to report to him in writing, "how you and your suffragans teach and instruct the priests of God and the people commissioned to you on the sacrament of baptism", and then posed a series of specific questions pertaining to the individual ceremonies of the rite: "Why is an infant made a catechumen; what is the scrutiny; what is the Latin interpretation of the creed;... what is the renunciation of Satan; what are the devil's works and pomp; why is one exsufflated; why exorcized; why does the catechumen receive salt?" and so forth.

What caused the Emperor to concern himself with the minutiae of baptismal instruction in his realm? The answer of one of his contemporaries, Theodulf of Orleans, is that he was not asking these

questions to learn, but to instruct. The emperor's goal was to stir his bishops to see that their priests were able to teach baptism, and not superficially, but in a comprehensive manner with a knowledge of all its ceremonies, as his series of questions suggests.

Charlemagne set the agenda of topics that he wished the bishops to act upon at the five regional councils of 813. One of his chief concerns was baptism. We know this from the Acts of those five councils written up and sent to Charlemagne after the bishops had met, and also from Charlemagne's own capitulary of 813 composed of excerpts from these Acts. His first chapter states: "Concerning baptism, that each archbishop diligently and zealously admonishes his suffragans, that each one does not neglect to carefully examine his priests as to how they celebrate the sacrament of baptism, and that each studiously teaches them how to do it in order."

Thus, Charlemagne, in an issue of vital concern to his court, saw to it that interest was stirred in the reform of baptism even before the discussion of this topic in ecclesiastical council. He sought to ensure that the prelates would be aware of the importance to

the court of the proper instruction and celebration of baptism in every archdiocese. By sending out a circulatory letter ahead of time and requesting a detailed written report on how baptism was celebrated in each archdiocese, Charlemagne (~~or more probably Alcuin~~) provided a model for diocesan legislation on baptism which would presumably follow after the decisions of the five regional councils had been disseminated to the diocesan bishops. The questionnaire also initiated the composing of baptismal expositions, originally in epistolary form addressed to Charlemagne, but which were quickly transformed into anonymous clerical instructions. Finally, the questionnaire laid out a method whereby the whole archdiocese would be stirred into action. Charlemagne depended on the bishops for the implementation of his reform program in the individual archdioceses. He relied on a highly developed archdiocesan system in which there was close communication between ^{archbp.} metropolitan and ^{bp.} suffragan and ^{bp.} suffragan and parish priest. His questionnaire asks: "how you and your suffragans teach and instruct the priests of God and the people commissioned to you..." suggesting a hierarchical network of

communication from the top to the bottom of society. Did such a developed system of communication exist? In the archiepiscopal province of Sens, it appears it did. Magnus, archbishop of Sens, responded appropriately. The reply he sent to Charlemagne describing how baptism was taught and celebrated in his archdiocese was, in fact, little more than a collection of excerpts taken from the reports of his suffragans. I was fascinated to be able to reconstruct what Magnus did from the ^{surviving} ~~extant~~ baptismal tracts.

It has long been known that Magnus sent his suffragan Theodulf of Orleans a copy of the questionnaire and asked him to compose a response for him, and that Magnus used parts of Theodulf's long baptismal exposition when he composed his own much briefer treatise for Charlemagne. What has not been noticed before is the similarity of various other sections of Magnus's treatise to three other baptismal tracts besides Theodulf's. They are anonymous, but two are unquestionably by bishops. ~~It may be added that the ninth century manuscripts of two of the three tracts are identifiable and have been assigned areas of origin ("Loire" and "Eastern France") which the~~

~~province of Sens includes.~~

It appears, in fact, that Magnus composed his response after polling, not just Theodulf, but all the bishops of his archdiocese. He sent them copies of the questionnaire and urged them to respond to the questions. After fashioning from the reports of his suffragans a reply that was a composite of their explanations, he addressed it to Charlemagne thus: "Most glorious emperor, we your servants, that is Magnus and my colleagues, the rest of the bishops, though unworthy, in the diocese of Sens, have presumed to make known to your highness..."

One anonymous tract that contains a number of passages identical to the wording of Magnus's treatise was published without identification of its manuscript in the seventeenth century. It has

not been appreciated what this baptismal tract is. A key phrase in the first paragraph, however, reveals that it is a ~~synodal~~ address. *an address to a synod, that is, an ecclesiastical council,*

It states: "We will speak no further here on this matter, lest a long speech offend this holy synod." The bishop who convened this synod was concerned with baptism. He begins: "These are the causes which the august lord emperor ordered us [to act upon], always for the

utility of the holy Church, through his letter. Capitulary 1. How each priest of God teaches, preaches, and guides the people commissioned to him by God...Capitulary 2. Concerning the whole mystery of sacred baptism, how we ought to celebrate it... Capitulary 3. Why one is made a catechumen..." and so forth, according to Charlemagne's questionnaire. This capitularly format shows that the questionnaire had become a model for diocesan clerical reform legislation on baptism. The court's cause for baptismal reform was now being taken up at the diocesan level. Most probably, this diocesan synod took place in the archiepiscopal province of Sens following the five regional reform councils of 813. Magnus would have transmitted the decisions of those councils to his suffragans to be repeated at their own diocesan synods with their priests. The bishop of this one synod perhaps used his report on Charlemagne's questions, which he had sent to Magnus, who had in turn used parts of it in his reply to Charlemagne, to admonish his priests on baptism.

Can we go down one level further in the implementation of Charlemagne's legislation in the ecclesiastical province of Sens? We

have nine anonymous baptismal instructions whose composers used the imperial questionnaire as their model. Most of these tracts are cast in question-response form and are found in manuscripts consisting of clerical handbooks. Even if we cannot be sure of their place of origin, we have reached a point in the process of implementation of royal reform legislation at which instructions on baptism for clerics have actually been composed and disseminated in clerical manuals whose manuscripts come from wide-ranging areas.

Charlemagne's baptismal questionnaire was the greatest impetus for the multiplication of tracts on baptism in the early ninth century. The "suffragan phenomenon" is crucial to understanding why. We have seen its occurrence in Magnus's archdiocese. Such a polling of suffragans by their archbishop was probably not confined to Sens. We also possess the replies to the questionnaire of Archbishops Odilbert of Milan, Amalarius of Trier, Maxentius of Aquileia, and Leidrad of Lyon. By comparing anonymous baptismal tracts and the place of origin of their manuscripts with the tracts written by bishops whose names and localities we know, I have been able to link a

number of the anonymous tracts and the identified tracts in other areas besides the archdiocese of Sens. The implications of the possibility to classify the tracts according to geographical areas of origin is extremely important, because we can then begin to explain the variety we find among the anonymous tracts in terms of different local situations that influenced the composer of each tract.

Differences among anonymous tracts become apparent intentional variations when it is seen, for instance, that an anonymous tract describing the foot-washing ceremony of the ancient Ambrosian or Milanese rite is associated with a tract known to have been written in a North Italian scriptorium.

Let us turn to a second problem area for historians of the Carolingian period,

→ Despite the importance of the ~~Carolingian~~ period and the number of studies done on it, our knowledge of this era is still extremely limited. Not only for questions regarding such a fundamental issue as the effectiveness of its laws, but especially for questions regarding the life and thought of the common people, we must usually confess "we don't know."

The numerous anonymous baptismal instructions that we are finding in clerical handbooks reached the hands of parish priests. One of the most significant events in European history was taking place at this time-- this is the popular conversion of early medieval Germanic society to Christianity. We would like to know much more about how the common people of village and countryside received the Christian teachings and way of life in the face of their pagan ethics, beliefs, fears, and superstitions. The closest we may ever come to knowing what people were taught and thought in thousands of rural parishes across Carolingian Europe perhaps is contained in the literature written during the late eighth and ninth centuries for the education of the parish priest. His homily and catechesis were delivered orally. This we will not recover. But the education of the priest who delivered that homily or catechesis is based on texts. What do we know about the parish priest responsible for the education of the masses? From the reform capitularies we can fashion a picture of a clergy that is illiterate, unequipped with the vessels of his office, living with a woman, wearing filthy vestments, renting out his

church as a hayloft or market place, off hunting, visiting taverns, carousing at banquets and showing raucous behavior in public, absent from his parish, failing to preach on Sundays, charging a fee for the sacraments, and so forth! Was the situation really this bad at the parochial level?

Another value of the baptismal tracts is the light they can shed on one of these portrayals: clerical illiteracy. What were the priests taught in these baptismal instructions? How sophisticated or simple are they? How much formal theology, how much Scripture do we find in them? What language are they in?

Because I cannot summarize here all the evidence that has strongly impressed upon me the extremely low level of literacy evidenced by these tracts, I will give you one example, using four tracts, that epitomizes the general impression I have gathered from the whole corpus of Carolingian baptismal expositions. I will try to show why I think that, after their original compositions, the multiplication of baptismal tracts, with ^{variations} ~~adaptions~~, was due in the main to their utility as reading primers more than as explanations of

baptism. I stress here my distinction between the numerous copies and the original compositions, the latter which were, indeed, written for their instruction on baptism and contain fascinating and informative nuances reflecting Carolingian notions about the sacrament.

The four tracts under consideration consist of glosses on the words in the ordo of baptism. That is, they are interpretations of words taken from the prayers and rubrics a priest would read in a liturgical book when celebrating baptism. I will describe them as A, B, C, and D, from lengthiest to briefest. The composer of A glossed a series of fifteen prayers from the ordo of baptism, providing the entire text of each prayer and inserting after every sentence or phrase of the prayer an explanation of its sense or synonymous phrase. ~~The earliest manuscript of A known to me is s. IX 1/3.~~ The composer of B did not explain the full text of any prayer. Rather, he ^{selected} ~~listed~~ a large number of words that can be found in ten different prayers of the rite, but for which he did not show their prayer contexts. The words, each followed by a synonymous word or phrase, are listed without distinction as to prayer, but in the same order, word- for-

word and prayer-for-prayer, that they are found in the rite. ~~The~~

~~earliest manuscript of B known to me is s. IX, between 820-840. In~~

the same manner as in B, the composer of C listed a series of words

that can be found in fourteen different prayers of the rite. This

tract has a far smaller selection of words from each prayer, however,

than B. ~~The earliest manuscript of C known to me is s. IX 2/3. D is~~

the briefest of all the glosses. Although its composer glossed a list

of words that come from sixteen different prayers of the rite,

sometimes there are only one or two words from any one prayer. ~~The~~

~~earliest manuscripts of D are s. IX 2/3, s. IX med., and s. IX 2/2. A~~

~~close comparison of the four glosses shows that they are independent~~

~~derivations from a common archetype. This archetype consisted of a~~

~~full exposition of the prayer texts, most similar to A. In B, C, and D~~

there is no way of telling from the contents of these glossaries which

prayers they interpret. What, then, is the purpose of these brief

glossary lists? Unless they are accompanied in their manuscripts with

~~the rite~~ ~~a full ordo of baptism showing the prayers they help interpret, they~~

cannot be instructive for the rite of baptism. But the ~~one ninth~~

are not.

~~century manuscript of C contains no baptismal ordo. Of the three
ninth-century manuscripts of B, only one contains an ordo, but it is
not intended to have any association with B, because only four of the
ten prayers glossed in B are contained in the ordo. The earliest
ninth-century manuscript of D does not contain any ordo of baptism.~~

The evidence of ^{their} ~~these~~ ninth-century manuscripts suggests that the glosses had a function other than liturgical interpretation. The aim of the composers of the brief glossary lists disassociated from the prayer texts could not have been instruction on the rite of baptism. The brief glossary lists were an end in themselves. Early baptismal expositions glossing the entire prayers of the rite of baptism were quickly abbreviated to serve another purpose. They became little more than glossary lists, useful as primers for illiterate clerics who needed to learn to read Latin.

Why don't we find similar lists interpreting words taken from other rites and prayers a priest should know? My theory is that baptism was the absolute bottom in terms of what was expected of a parish priest. At the minimal level where knowledge was required of

him, the "educational" reform program of clerics was underway. It was not a theology course on baptism, however. Its aim was no loftier than to make clerics literate enough to function in the minimal duties of their priestly office. The functional quality of the tracts is supported by their brevity, question-response form, simple phraseology, repetition, and lack of formal theology, to mention just a few features. Overall, the evidence of the baptismal tracts is that clerical illiteracy was a tremendous problem for Carolingian reformers. The tracts are concrete evidence of this fact. This conclusion has important ramifications, first, for our understanding of what the common people may have received in homilies or catechesis from their parish priests. Much greater attention, for example, should now be given to the role of oral culture. Second, the evidence of the tracts supports the whole degenerate, materialistic picture of the clergy portrayed in the reform laws. In the laws a realistic situation is being described.

In conclusion, the retrievable Carolingian baptismal tracts are only the tip of an iceberg. Some idea of its vast size can be

imagined by considering how many manuscripts must have perished in the intervening 1200 years! But these tracts should make modern scholars thoughtful about the potential information to be drawn from other so-called thought obscure kinds of texts that have not yet been assembled and analyzed. Outer space, computer technology, and the supply side of economics are not the only areas of the unknown left to challenge man's ignorance. With the manuscripts that have yet to be fully explored, a new frontier, indeed, exists for scholars ^{and} ~~graduate~~ students in Carolingian studies. With their help, Carolingian history can be re-written, supplemented, not with hypotheses derived from legislative sources, but with empirical evidence from texts composed in response to that legislation and actually received, used, and valued by Carolingian society. ~~The texts for the clergy's use may be baptismal instructions, penitentials, canonical collections, homiliaries, books of prayers, sacramentaries, expositions on the mass, the creeds, and the Lord's Prayer, and practice examinations.~~ ~~Some of these areas have recently or are now receiving attention in the U. S. and abroad. Together, these monographs and those yet to be~~

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These texts, once ignored because of their
obscurity,
~~written~~ will greatly enrich our understanding of the complexities of

Carolingian life.