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Charlemagne, king of the Franks (768-814), united most of western Europe under his authority during his long reign. His large and diverse kingdom – 'Francia' in Latin – was inhabited by different Germanic tribes and the remaining Latin-speaking population of the defunct Roman Empire. Religion was one of the main sources of unity within his kingdom, since all of his territories were either Christian to begin with, or were converted to Christianity after being conquered. As this meant that Charlemagne relied extensively on the Church to help him govern and to provide ideological justification for his power, it was in his interest to protect the Church and foster its well-being. One of his lasting achievements was ecclesiastical reform, which strengthened the Church's hierarchy and promoted the foundation of schools in cathedrals and monasteries throughout Francia. Reform, and his conquest of the Lombard kingdom in northern Italy in 772, brought Charlemagne into close association with the papacy. This alliance resulted in Pope Leo III's crowning Charlemagne emperor in Rome on December 25th, 800.

When Charlemagne undertook ecclesiastical reform in the 770s he inaugurated a cultural revival which historians call the Carolingian Renaissance. Defining its qualities has proved difficult, since the idea of a renaissance evokes images of rationalism, secularism, and revived interest in classical literature. While the Carolingian Renaissance displayed these qualities, its strongly religious character still predominated. This Renaissance existed alongside religious and cultural reform. Although both movements were intended to re-establish order in society after the political turmoil of the mid-seventh century, their scholarly emphases and techniques for achieving this goal varied.

To promote learning, Charlemagne invited foreign clergymen to enter his service. Alcuin, a deacon and master of the cathedral school at York, was the most successful of these foreign scholars. In the 780s he began his career in Charlemagne's service by teaching grammar in the palace school, an informal association of clerical scholars which occasionally included Charlemagne and his family. The curriculum in the palace school was originally designed to train young clerics in Latin grammar, liturgical chant, and computation.

After 794, Aachen, Charlemagne's favourite palace, became a central meeting point for Alcuin and his friends, a group which included the royal family, royal officials, and clergymen throughout the kingdom. Paradoxically, as the king's residence became more fixed, Alcuin spent less time at court. In 796, Charlemagne appointed Alcuin Abbot of Tours, where he spent most of his time until his death in 804. When he was away from court, Alcuin kept his contacts alive through an extensive correspondence, one of our most important sources for information about Charlemagne's reign. Some of this correspondence records discussions in the palace school, since Charlemagne often asked for Alcuin's opinion on complex questions concerning the liberal arts and the Bible.

Charlemagne's favourite subject was astronomy, one of the liberal arts. In 799, at Charlemagne's request, Alcuin wrote Epistula 170 about the moon, which appeared smaller than it ought, given the calendar date. Alcuin realised that his detailed discussion of astronomy would weary some readers, and this led him to make a statement that has attracted the attention of historians who study the Carolingian Renaissance:

And the scornful laziness of readers should not be attributed to the indulgence of the teacher; if many follow the noble inclination of your effort, so perhaps a new Athens might be built in Francia, only much more excellent.

This 'new Athens' did not yet exist, because many students did not have sufficient training to pursue advanced studies in the liberal arts. Even so, Alcuin asserted that Christian Francia already had achieved a higher wisdom than the secular and rationalistic philosophy of ancient Athens, which was 'learned only in the Platonic disciplines' or liberal arts. Alcuin claimed the Franks possessed in Christ's teaching the key to wisdom superior to 'all the wisdom of academic exercise'. The Christian wisdom of Francia, 'endowed besides with the fullness of the sevenfold holy Spirit, is superior to all the dignity of secular wisdom'.

In spite of his assured tone, Alcuin knew about Greek philosophers only through the works of Latin authors who translated and commented on Greek texts, or through Latin theological works which adopted techniques of logical argument from Greek philosophy. Two outstanding sources for Alcuin's knowledge of ancient philosophy were Augustine of Hippo and the Roman senator Boethius. Alcuin, who had a thorough knowledge of Augustine's genuine work, advocated the study of a logical text he wrongly attributed to Augustine, the Ten Categories. This work enabled Alcuin to describe a person or thing logically, by defining such attributes as substance, quality, quantity, location, and so forth. Alcuin also was particularly interested in Boethius' De consolatione philosophiae, which offered a general understanding of the nature of philosophy.

In reality, Alcuin had no wish to return to the rationalistic philosophy of ancient Athens. Instead, Alcuin's 'new Athens' would offer knowledge of the liberal arts because of their usefulness for reaching the goal of all learning, insight into the wisdom of God. Moreover, the constraints Alcuin placed on secular philosophy betray his suspicion of sophistry, which appeared when human reason was unrestrained by the authority of the Bible and the Fathers. Because of this suspicion, Alcuin expressed his hope for a revival of the liberal arts in 'new Athens' cautiously, so that study of the liberal arts seems almost optional in his 'new Athens'.

However, letters Alcuin wrote in 800 or after, show that building 'new Athens' required much more intensive study of the liberal arts, especially one of the most difficult – logic or dialectics. In these letters, Alcuin said that logic could provide essential understanding of doctrines concerning Christ's human and divine natures, the Trinity, and man's soul. Alcuin's perception of the complexity of these theological topics led to the restoration of logic, neglected in ecclesiastical schools for centuries, to the curriculum of the palace school and ecclesiastical schools closely associated with reform.

At the same time, study of philosophical texts suggested to Alcuin an interpretation of Charlemagne's recently acquired imperial title. In Epistula 229, written in 801 to greet Charlemagne as he returned from Italy, Alcuin borrowed from Boethius' De consolatione philosophiae the 'Platonic... proverb' that kingdoms are happy under philosopher-kings. Charlemagne proved the truth of this proverb by seeking philosophers, or 'lovers of that holy wisdom', to assist him in preaching the Christian faith to his subjects. Alcuin, 'the least slave of this same holy wisdom', proudly numbered himself among the philosopher-king's assistants.

In the next year, 802, Alcuin wrote about the philosopher-king's task of imparting Christian wisdom to his subjects. In Epistula 257, which dedicated his handbook on the Trinity to Charlemagne, Alcuin claimed that God had created the 'imperial dignity... to rule over and benefit the people', and had endowed Charlemagne with 'wisdom, that he may rule and teach his subjects with devout care'. Alcuin depicted the imperial philosopher on his throne with his subjects ranked hierarchically before him, awaiting his edicts. The lessons learned from the wise emperor would enable 'each man happily to return home with the rules of everlasting salvation'.

Alcuin asserts that he wrote about the Trinity to aid Charlemagne in 'preaching the catholic faith', and:

...that I might convince those who think it is useless for you to want to learn the rules of dialectics; the rules which blessed Augustine in his book De sancta Trinitate were thought especially necessary when he demonstrated that the most profound questions concerning the holy Trinity cannot be clarified unless by the exactness of the Ten Categories. Which furthermore the pious and devout investigator, if he has not neglected knowledge of philosophy, will easily find in the little work of the same father named above.

Alcuin hoped that Charlemagne would act out the imperial and priestly role of the philosopher-king by defining and establishing one orthodox doctrine 'in the hearts of all'. By 802, Alcuin had concluded that Charlemagne's reform efforts demanded logical exposition of doctrine, in order to unify European society on a religious basis.

These statements show that Alcuin's idea of 'new Athens' and the role of its philosopher-king focused increasingly on the contributions made to Christian wisdom by 'dialectics, which he defined as the discipline' capable of rationally investigating, defining, discussing, and…distinguishing truth from falsehood'. Why did Alcuin give such prominence to logic? Although his scholarship involved him in many projects, such as editing the Bible and advising colleagues on the conversion of pagans, Alcuin's conduct of the theological campaign against the Adoptionist heresy contributed most to his understanding of philosophy and the public role of the philosopher.

In the 780s, Elipand, Archbishop of Toledo, propounded Adoptionism, which distinguished the Son of God from the Son of Man in Christ. The human Jesus was born of a line of humans and could not share in the Father's divinity. Therefore Elipand considered the human Jesus an adopted son of God, with the adoption occurring at the moment of baptism. Elipand found a persuasive advocate in Felix, Bishop of Urgel, whose see was in Frankish territory. Although Toledo was in Moslem Spain, Elipand claimed his authority as archbishop extended into Catalonia and Septimania, territories within Charlemagne's kingdom. This frontier was unstable in the 790s, as local Moslem rulers tried to play off Frankish power against the emirate of Cordova, and dangerous Moslem raids still occurred, as in 793. Only after 798, with the creation of the Spanish March on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees, did the Franks impose stability on this region.

Charlemagne's problems with maintaining military and political control along this frontier were compounded by the question of Adoptionism, which found adherents in the monasteries of southern Gaul. Because religious conflict might alienate his subjects in this sensitive region, Charlemagne took direct action against Adoptionism at a series of ecclesiastical councils. Alcuin's involvement in this controversy began in 794, when Charlemagne asked him to advise the Council of Frankfurt on the condemnation of Adoptionism. Because this council's condemnation of Adoptionism had little practical effect, Alcuin continued to work against the spread of this heresy with letters and treatises.

Alcuin produced three major works against Adoptionism between 798 and 800. His treatises are compilations of authoritative statements from patristic theology and the canons of ecclesiastical councils, which maintain that Christ's divine and human natures are inseparably combined in one person and that Christ is the true Son of God. Alcuin occasionally contributed his own comments, in order to explain how the new heresy of Adoptionism contradicted orthodox doctrine. Since he had to explain how Christ's divine and human natures were combined in one person, Alcuin had to deal with the logical category of substance, or essence. Refuting Adoptionism therefore demanded from Alcuin a rigorous and logical analysis of the Bible, aided by patristic theology, especially the logical works of Augustine. This dispute led Alcuin to study logic for the first time in a systematic fashion.

Alcuin's treatises had a 'public' character, for he intended to distribute them to other clergymen involved in anti-Adoptionist activities. This explains Alcuin's particular concern to have scholars at Charlemagne's court and the king's legates against Adoptionism in southern Gaul review his works. His treatises proved to be useful in public debates, as he had one of them, The Seven Books against Felix of Urgel, by him when he debated with Felix in Charlemagne's presence at Aachen in 799. Alcuin's arguments were so effective that Felix recanted. Aided by Alcuin's works, Charlemagne's legates succeeded in eradicating Adoptionism from the monasteries of southern Gaul by 800.

The conduct of theological controversy eventually dominated Alcuin's perception of himself and his associates in the struggle against Adoptionism. In Ep. 200, written in 800, Alcuin claimed that his arrival in Francia was God's will, which his teacher Aelberht had revealed to him years before in his native York. Alcuin believed he was obeying Aelberht's injunction to defend the 'universal faith' against 'new sects contrary to aposto1ic doctrines'. Accordingly, Alcuin dedicated himself to helping the 'doctors of Christ's church' in the Frankish kingdom to eradicate Adoptionism. Alcuin's conduct of scholarly debate against heresy brought important results, for he began to see himself and his associates in the struggle against heresy as Christian doctors, or philosophers, united in the service of the philosopher-king, Charlemagne.

This divinely sanctioned task led Alcuin to deeper appreciation of the function of the 'Platonic disciplines', particularly grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics, in his 'new Athens'. In his treatise on grammar, written for use in the palace school in the later 790s Alcuin told his young students the study of the seven liberal arts won the pagan philosophers worldly glory and lasting fame; but the Christian philosophers, 'the holy and Catholic doctors and defenders of our faith', won victory over 'all heresiarchs in public controversies' by means of the liberal arts. Alcuin admonished his young students to study the liberal arts in their youth and the Bible in maturity. With such philosophical training, they would become in their turn 'invincible defenders of the true faith and asserters of truth'.

Ironically, Alcuin discovered that renewed emphasis on the liberal arts in the palace school led to the same sort of clever sophistry that he considered the source of the Adoptionist heresy. Alcuin attributed the false logic of Adoptionism to the devil's cunning, which constantly attacked the Christian faith everywhere. One instance of these diabolical attacks occurred when some students in the palace school decided that the year should begin in September, probably as a result of studying astronomy at Charlemagne's request. When Alcuin learned of this, he rebuked the 'boys' of the palace school by calling them 'Egyptians', in reference to the Egyptian custom of beginning the year as the days become shorter than the nights. Sarcastically, he pretended that 'an Egyptian school was situated in the palace of Davidic glory'. He then asserted his own preference for the Latin Christian custom of beginning the year with Christ's birth and the 'growing light', and refused 'to return again to the Egyptian darkness'.

This same distrust of irresponsible speculation in the palace school appears in Ep. 307, which Alcuin wrote to Charlemagne between 801 and 804 in response to a riddle put by a certain Greek master to the 'boys' of the palace school. The Greek asked to whom Christ had paid the price of human redemption. Apparently, the Greek argued that a redemption is a 'buying back', and if there is a sale there must be a buyer and a seller. He concluded that death must be a person and that Christ had purchased human salvation from death.

Alcuin thought this teaching was dangerous because it suggested that death had some sort of power over Christ. Alcuin countered this danger by reference to the patristic teaching that Christ had 'paid the price' of human redemption with His body and blood, and He paid the price to Himself. Alcuin then criticised the Greek for disregarding the authoritative sources of Christian doctrine in order to follow his own line of speculation. Alcuin also wanted to show that he was not to be outdone by this rival master, and he decided to fight back with his own 'Platonic argument'. Accordingly, Alcuin proposed his own 'dialectical syllogisms' to the 'Athenian sophist from an academic school'. Alcuin attacked the Greek's assumption that death is a person, or a unique substance, by arguing that death is nothing more than the 'absence of life'. So death could not possibly have accepted the price of human redemption.

Such controversies made Alcuin painfully aware that scholarship at Charlemagne's court could occasionally overstep the limits imposed by Christian authority. An explanation for this boldness can be found in the court's growing secularism, one of the major trends in the Carolingian Renaissance. With its imitation of classical literature and fascination with logic, this Renaissance brought about a slight shift away from a purely religious value system among some scholars under Charlemagne's patronage. Charlemagne probably encouraged scholars at court to pursue secular goals in learning because of political considerations. He was searching for theoretical understanding of his authority in the West even before his imperial coronation in 800. Classical Graeco-Roman culture offered Charlemagne literary and philosophical precedents for claiming the same absolute authority, at least in theory, as the Roman emperors had exercised centuries before. The rationalism of the liberal arts, and logic in particular, offered Charlemagne a way to define not only religious orthodoxy, but also the imperial quality of his power, and to decide on the most effective ways to exercise it.

Both the Greek master's attempt to analyse religious doctrines with logic and the speculation of the 'Egyptians' on the best time to begin the r can be considered manifestations of the revival of classical Alcuin could fight back so decisively indicates the tentative nature of the early Carolingian Renaissance. Alcuin preferred to advocate reform of politics and scholarship according to the standards of the Bible and the Fathers. Ultimately, his goal was the preservation of the religious foundations of European society.

The divergent approaches towards speculative logic displayed by Alcuin and some of Charlemagne's court scholars show how hard they found the task of defining a community of interests and culture in western Europe after the upheavals of the early Middle Ages. A unified culture was necessary to support Charlemagne's empire and to manifest the unity of the Christian Church. Charlemagne's patronage of learning aimed at finding a valid synthesis of inherited classical, Christian, and Germanic traditions. At times, Charlemagne's court scholars showed signs of favouring classical traditions, which ultimately would promote the growing independence of imperial authority. Alcuin advocated a more conservative reshaping of learning which would preserve ecclesiastical culture in his 'new Athens'. He was able to maintain the balance between reason and religious authority during his lifetime because of his superior scholarship and because of the strength of ecclesiastical institutions.

Within his self-imposed limits, Alcuin's work was vital for the continued development of Carolingian culture. He explored the Greek philosophical tradition, albeit at second hand and in a theological context. Yet this rediscovery of philosophy entailed study of logical texts, which had been neglected for centuries, and early attempts to teach logic in ecclesiastical schools. The struggle against heresy also gave Alcuin some vindication of his claim that philosophical unanimity and concord bound Charlemagne and his scholars together in a truly Christian association. Furthermore, the study of philosophy helped Alcuin to respond to Charlemagne's imperial coronation with the Boethian image of the philosopher-king, which helped to set a new standard of royal conduct. All of this indicates the dynamism of Alcuin's concept of the philosophy appropriate to a 'new Athens' rising in Christian Francia during the reign of Charlemagne.