



*Memorable Crises. Carolingian Historiography and the Making of Pippin's  
Reign, 750-900*

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## Summary

This study explores the way in which Frankish history-writers retroactively dealt with the more contentious elements of the Carolingian past. Changes in the political and moral framework of Frankish society necessitated a flexible interaction with the past, lest the past would lose its function as a moral anchor to present circumstances. Historiography was the principal means with which later generations of Franks were able to reshape their perception of the past. As such, Frankish writers of annals and chronicles presented Pippin the Short (c. 714-768), the first Carolingian to become king of the Franks, not as a usurper to the Frankish throne, but as a New David and a successor to Rome's imperial legacy. Pippin's predecessor, the Merovingian king Childeric III (742-751), on the other hand, came to be presented as a weak king, whose poor leadership had invited the Carolingians to take over the kingdom for the general well-being of the Franks. Most of our information for the period that witnessed the decline of Merovingian power and the rise of the Carolingian dynasty derives from Carolingian historiography, for the most part composed during the reigns of Charlemagne (d. 814) and Louis the Pious (d. 840). It dominates our source base so profoundly that, to this day, historians struggle to see beyond these uncompromising Carolingian renderings of the past. In many ways, the history of the rise of the Carolingian dynasty in the eighth century can be viewed as a literary construction of ninth-century design, and the extent to which this history has been manipulated is not at all easy to discern.

It is with these processes, where Frankish history-writers reshape the past, that this study is concerned. By focusing on the historiographical reception of three specific moments of crisis that occurred during Pippin's reign, this study attempts to reconstruct and explain the corrective processes with which Frankish authors tried to discard or justify the more controversial chapters of their dynasty's past. Central to this study is a selection of Frankish historiographical narratives produced from the mid-eighth to the early tenth centuries. In particular, the emphasis is on court-oriented narratives: texts that were composed and read by members of the upper echelons of the Carolingian literate elite, who were linked to the Carolingian court (not to be understood as a static geographic location, but as a network of lay- and clergymen who derived their status from their physical and social proximity to the ruler and his household), and for whom historiography was a key instrument to express group identity and determine social hierarchy. The main aim of this study is to research how later generations of the Frankish (literate) elite engaged with the dynasty's past and to analyze, more specifically, which strategies they employed to shape and manipulate their vision of that past. Besides deepening our knowledge of the politics of memory in the early Middle Ages, this also helps us to gain a better understanding of the historical figures that played a prominent role in these accounts, notably the sons of Charles Martel: Carloman (d. 754), Pippin and Gifo (d.753). On a more general level, this study offers a critical assessment of those narrative sources that form the bedrock of our modern understanding of the early Carolingian period.

The first of these crises occurred when Charles Martel died in 741. In all likelihood, Charles had appointed three of his sons to succeed him, but the two eldest, Carloman and Pippin, started their reigns by arresting their younger half-brother Grifo. The result was a civil war that lasted almost a decade and that ended with Pippin firmly in control. While this turbulent episode gave rise to the Carolingian takeover in 751, the Carolingians and their supporters preferred rather not to be remembered of this fratricidal struggle that had torn rents in the fabric of Frankish elite society. The initial response of Frankish historiographers had therefore been to exclude Grifo from Carolingian history altogether, although in the long run this strategy could not be maintained: it created too many open ends and the proposed alternative deviated too strongly from the Frankish collective memory. Gradually (and grudgingly) Grifo was readmitted into the Carolingian historical narratives, though he remained the black sheep of the family. The case of Grifo in Carolingian historiography demonstrates the sometimes extreme measures that early medieval history-writers took to create a narrative of the past in which the dynasty's leading members and their direct ancestry were presented in a more positive, and less compromising, light.

In 747, the Franks were confronted with a new crisis, when Carloman abandoned his worldly office to enter the monastery. Virtually all extant sources claim that Carloman abdicated and converted to the

monastic life on his own initiative, though this would have been unprecedented in Frankish history; a ruler's abdication and conversion tended to be coerced and implied political failure and dishonour. The latter especially would have been problematic for one of the dynasty's founding members. While contemporary accounts stress the voluntary character of Carloman's exit, they say little about his motives. A few accounts, though, imply a relation between Carloman's conversion and his violent retaliation against the Alemannian nobility the year before, presenting it thus as an expression of (public) penance. In the ensuing decades, ideas on public penance gradually changed. In the eighth century it meant political failure and shame, which would explain the omission of references to this phenomenon in contemporary accounts that discuss Carloman's downfall. In the ninth century, however, in particular during the reign of Louis the Pious, public penance came to be used and accepted as a tool at the ruler's disposal to establish consensus in the realm. This gradual reorientation is reflected in the historiographical tradition concerning Carloman's abdication and conversion in this period, in which Carloman ended up a model penitent.

The third and final crisis discussed in this thesis concerns Pippin's coup of 751, with which he founded the Carolingian royal dynasty. Very little is known about the event itself and the Frankish elite's initial response. The silence in contemporary sources and the extensive manipulation that occurred in later Frankish records suggest that Carolingian authors struggled to justify what may essentially have been regarded as a usurpation of royal power. Overall, two strategies can be discerned in the historiography of the late eighth to mid-ninth centuries. The first of these was the creation of a grand narrative, claiming that under the last Merovingian kings the royal name and the royal power had come to be divorced, something that was claimed to go against the natural order of things. Over time, this separation of the *nomen* and the *potestas* of the ruler was cast further back in time, which had a double effect: on the one hand it presented the dynastic transition as the inevitable outcome of a long-term degeneration of Merovingian authority, rather than a momentary act of Carolingian opportunity. On the other it allowed Carolingian history-writers to present the Carolingian ancestors as (almost naïve) supporters of the old regime, until finally they, too, had to accept what their peers had known all along: that Merovingian authority had waned to a point where it could no longer be restored.

The second strategy that Carolingian ideologists pursued to strengthen the legal foundation of the Carolingian coup emphasized the papal sanction that Pippin had received in 754, when Pope Stephen II (752-757) visited the Frankish court. In exchange for military support against the Lombards, who threatened to occupy papal lands and even Rome itself, the pope confirmed Pippin's new royal status by publically anointing him as king of the Franks. Such an outspoken justification of the dynastic transition was still absent in 751. Initially, Frankish history-writers remedied this deficiency by retrospectively inventing a papal sanction from Pope Zacharias, Stephen's predecessor, in 750/1. Alternatively, as can for example be seen in Einhard's *Vita Karoli*, the acts of 751 and 754 were combined into a single event.

The first two cases, the succession crisis of 741 and Carloman's conversion in 747, reveal that while the Frankish historian's initial reaction had been to exclude these controversial events from historiography, they later came to be reintroduced as *exempla* for moral instruction: the ninth-century accounts on the succession crisis of 741 can be read as instructions on the importance of consensus, the dangers of succession, as well as a warning against greed. Carloman eventually came to epitomize the humble prince, willing to atone for his crimes. The coup of 751 was a somewhat different matter in this respect. Because the event stood at the core of the Carolingian royal identity, it could not be dismissed but required instant justification. Each of these cases nonetheless demonstrates that the strategies employed by Frankish historiographers occasionally proved unsuccessful. As their visions of the past circulated among the court community, they came to be adapted to new (political) demands and values. By tracking the changes in the Frankish stories about (certain elements of) the Carolingian past, this study reveals just how quickly, and sometimes extremely, historical narratives evolved. In the end, our written sources tell us more about the society that produced them than about the society these texts sought to preserve in written memory.