

Ethan Shen
Professor Urbanski
HSTAM 112
4 February 2023

Gregory of Tours and Einhard: Clovis and Charlemagne

Gregory of Tours and Einhard were two prominent figures in the Early Middle Ages and are well-known for documenting the lives of Clovis and Charlemagne respectively. Gregory of Tours (d. 594) was the Bishop of Tours and an aristocrat. He wrote *The History of the Franks* to explain the history of Christianity in Gaul and celebrates its contribution to the rise of Clovis and the Merovingian dynasty. The combined effect of Gregory's background, intention, and the limited evidence he had access to decades after Clovis' death makes it likely that *The History of the Franks* is not extremely accurate. Einhard (d. 840) was a talented Catholic scholar and one of Charlemagne's closest advisors, also counseling Charlemagne's successor Louis the Pious. Einhard openly admits that he wrote *The Life of Charlemagne* to praise and preserve Charlemagne's accomplishments.¹ Consequently, while Einhard had access to a plethora of primary sources on Charlemagne, himself included, he likely selected evidence to positively portray Charlemagne. Comparing the *History of the Franks* and *The Life of Charlemagne*, Gregory of Tours portrays Clovis as a strong leader who is ultimately subservient to God, while Einhard depicts Charlemagne as a leader who has risen to greatness through his own military expertise and personality. Gregory's writing reflects his personal religious beliefs, while Einhard's echoes his admiration for Charlemagne. Considering the authors' backgrounds and

¹ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, trans. Samuel Epes Turner (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 3.

writing, Gregory is more credible than Einhard, who compromises his credibility through numerous half-truths and omissions about Charlemagne's life.

Clovis and Charlemagne were both formidable generals, but Gregory credits God's favor for Clovis' military success, while Einhard suggests that Charlemagne's victories were through Charlemagne's own brilliance. One defining moment of *The History of Franks* is when Clovis fights the Alamanni. Gregory explains that faced with defeat, Clovis begs for God's help and promises to convert, and the Alamanni suddenly flee.² It implies that without God, Clovis would have lost the battle. Following Clovis' baptism, Gregory also refers to Clovis as "King Clovis" for the first time, compared to descriptions of the "King" or just "Clovis" before, implying that God gave Clovis authority.³ In this fashion, Gregory constructs a power structure where God is first and Clovis second. This theme is repeated several more times throughout the book. For example, during Clovis' invasion of Gaul, when his army is stopped near the church of Saint Martin, Clovis asks his troops to go into the church and bring back God's blessings.⁴ Gregory convincingly asserts the supremacy of God by suggesting Clovis himself recognizes that his military success is contingent on God's help. Clovis' portrayal of Charlemagne could not be more different. For example, Einhard claims that Charlemagne won the Aquintinian War through his own patience and dedication despite being abandoned by his brother Carloman.⁵ The way Einhard explains Charlemagne's victory, God's favor is a non-factor. Similarly, during the Lombard War, Einhard describes how Charlemagne decimated the Lombards by forcing King Desiderius to surrender, his son to flee, and restoring all of the papacy's lost lands, all on

² Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 146.

³ Gregory of Tours p. 146.

⁴ Gregory of Tours p. 150.

⁵ *The Life of Charlemagne* p. 6.

Charlemagne's own initiative.⁶ As to why Einhard disregards God when depicting Charlemagne's campaigns, it was not that contemporary scholars no longer viewed God's power the same as they did during Gregory's time. After all, *The Frankish Annals* (c. late 8th century) state that Charlemagne won the Lombard War through God's help.⁷ We are left to conclude that Einhard wanted to assert that Charlemagne's victories were his own doing—an important point in an era where conquest was inextricably tied to aristocratic loyalty and economic growth.

Einhard goes further to praise Charlemagne's generosity, religious piety, and kindness. When Einhard describes the ordeal of the Saxon War, Einhard states that Charlemagne literally "excelled all the princes of his time in wisdom and greatness of soul".⁸ In the Early Middle Ages, nobles already considered themselves to be the wealthiest, most educated, and best of the laity. As a result, Einhard effectively claims that Charlemagne was, in turn, the best of the best. Einhard continuously supports this argument. For example, when Duke Aragis of the Beneventans did not personally surrender to Charlemagne, Einhard explains that Charlemagne still accepted the surrender out of concern for how fighting would devastate the Beneventan people.⁹ In a time when many other leaders would have viewed this disrespect and cowardice as unacceptable, Charlemagne's actions instead portray him as merciful and compassionate. These depictions are a stark contrast to Gregory's open discussion of Clovis' gluttony, hypocrisy, and violence. In one instance, Gregory plainly states how after capturing Sygarius, King of the Romans, Clovis had Sygarius killed in secret to clear the path for seizing Roman land, a brutal and dramatic departure from Charlemagne's tendency to only take nobles hostage.¹⁰ In addition,

⁶ The Life of Charlemagne p. 7.

⁷ "Royal Frankish Annals," in *Carolingian Chronicles*, ed. and trans. Bernard Scholz and Barbara Rogers-Gardener (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), p. 50.

⁸ The Life of Charlemagne p. 8.

⁹ The Life of Charlemagne p. 10.

¹⁰ Gregory of Tours p. 145.

Gregory explains that Clovis was eager to help Godigisel betray Gundobad when he was offered annual tribute in exchange, illustrating Clovis' sins of pride and greed.¹¹ Finally, when the feud between Sigibert and Chloderic ultimately results in their murders, Gregory reports that Clovis spoke disapprovingly about killing another king.¹² Yet, Gregory does not even attempt to hide Clovis' hypocrisy. Indeed, by Gregory's own acknowledgement, Clovis killed King Sygarius and had his relatives murdered to eliminate any competition for his power.¹³

Gregory's frank discussions of Clovis' shortcomings make him more credible than Einhard, who misrepresents multiple aspects of Charlemagne's life in order to glorify the emperor. For one, Einhard states that Charlemagne sent enormous amounts of treasure to popes out of love for Rome and the Church of St. Peter.¹⁴ Yet, Einhard completely neglects to mention the political legitimacy Charlemagne gained from the Catholic Church in exchange, a significant benefit Einhard would have been aware of as one of Charlemagne's closest advisors. Similarly, Einhard styles Charlemagne as a well-loved ruler who, through his generosity, gained the deference of other Kings to the point where other Kings referred to themselves as Charlemagne's subjects.¹⁵ While this may have been true for isolated leaders, it seems much more plausible that other Kings obeyed Charlemagne due to his military might and demonstrated willingness to use it, shown by his campaigns against the Saxons, Lombards, and Saracens. Finally, Einhard claims that Charlemagne never wanted the title of Emperor, forcing the Pope to clandestinely spring it on Charlemagne.¹⁶ In this fashion, Einhard depicts Charlemagne as a humble leader unaffected by ego. However, as historian Judith M. Bennett points out, Charlemagne had long been seeking

¹¹ Gregory of Tours p. 147.

¹² Gregory of Tours p. 152.

¹³ Gregory of Tours p. 153.

¹⁴ The Life of Charlemagne p. 19.

¹⁵ The Life of Charlemagne p. 13.

¹⁶ The Life of Charlemagne p. 20.

a higher title than King, as evidenced by how he modelled Aachen after Constantinople.¹⁷

Einhard's decisions not to include any of this information reveal his intention to paint Charlemagne as a brilliant leader and perhaps even critique the rule of Louis the Pious, who had drawn the consternation of many nobles by the time of the book's writing. All this does not mean that Gregory of Tours is more reliable. Gregory constantly misrepresents religious miracles as factual history and includes multiple falsehoods in his book as well. However, inaccuracies in *The History of the Franks* can easily be attributed to issues such as a lack of primary sources and Gregory's deeply held religious beliefs rather than dishonesty. This is an excuse that Einhard does not have. This knowledge, combined with Gregory's willingness to show Clovis' flawed character, makes Gregory the more trustworthy and credible author.

Comparing Gregory of Tours' *The History of the Franks* and Einhard's *The Life of Charlemagne* reveals vastly different portrayals of Clovis and Charlemagne. Clovis is shown as a strong but imperfect ruler, while Charlemagne is depicted as an unrivaled King. However, because of each author's background and the sources' origins, neither portrayal can be considered to be highly reliable. Yet, the sources still hold significant value for historians. *The History of the Franks* gives an important glimpse at how clerics viewed secular authority, and *The Life of Charlemagne* speaks volumes about how Charlemagne maintained and inspired loyalty in those around him. In the end, the goal of historical knowledge is to interpret the past as best as we can, and *The History of the Franks* and *The Life of Charlemagne* are both essential to making that possible.

¹⁷ Judith Bennett, *Medieval Europe: A Short History*, 12th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 92.