

Donation of Constantine and Charlemagne Source Analysis

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Introduction

The *Donation of Constantine* and Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* are valuable not because they offer neutral accounts, but because they reveal how authority was argued and remembered. The Donation is a medieval forgery presented as a fourth-century imperial grant from Constantine to Pope Sylvester. Einhard was a member of Charlemagne's court who wrote a biography modeled partly on classical imperial lives. Reading them critically requires attention to authorship, purpose, genre, audience, chronology, and silence.

What sections of the Donation of Constantine give advantages to the Pope?

One advantage is universal ecclesiastical supremacy. The text declares that the Roman pontiff "shall have supremacy over the four chief seats, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Jerusalem, as also over all the churches of God in the whole world." This sentence places Rome above other patriarchal centers and converts a supposed imperial act into evidence for papal primacy. ("Donation of Constantine")

A second advantage is the transfer of imperial dignity and material power. The text states that the Roman church should be exalted above the emperor's earthly throne and that Constantine gives it "imperial power, and dignity of glory, and vigor and honor." Elsewhere, the Donation associates the pope and Roman clergy with imperial regalia, privileges, territory, and ceremonial rank. These claims do not merely protect worship; they construct the papacy as an institution with authority resembling or exceeding secular empire.

The advantages should be interpreted in the context of the document's later use. Lorenzo Valla demonstrated in the fifteenth century that the Latin and historical references could not belong to Constantine's age. The forgery nevertheless matters because medieval political actors could invoke it in conflicts over jurisdiction, property, and the relationship between pope and emperor.

Please find at least two quotations in Einhard's Life of Charlemagne that provide evidence of bias.

Einhard softens physical criticism by immediately restoring admiration: "Although his neck was thick and somewhat short, and his belly rather prominent, the symmetry of the rest of his body concealed these defects." The sentence appears candid, which increases credibility, yet the defects are carefully contained within a portrait of strength and proportion. (Einhard)

His account of the Saxon wars provides stronger evidence. Einhard praises the king's "high purpose and steadfastness" and describes punishment as "righteous satisfaction." The language accepts the Frankish objective and presents repeated Saxon resistance as faithlessness. It minimizes the perspective of people subjected to invasion, forced submission, deportation, and compulsory Christianization.

A third example is Einhard's explanation of his duty to write. He describes Charlemagne as his "lord and foster-father" and emphasizes the care the king bestowed upon him. This openly acknowledged gratitude helps readers understand why the biography celebrates its subject.

How would you describe Einhard's bias where Charlemagne is concerned?

Einhard's bias is courtly, personal, political, and literary. He owed status and opportunity to the Carolingian court and admired Charlemagne. He wrote after the ruler's death, when the empire's unity and succession were important concerns. His biography preserves an image of a disciplined Christian emperor whose authority deserved respect.

Bias does not make the text useless or wholly false. Einhard sometimes reports limitations, failed campaigns, family difficulties, and Charlemagne's appearance. These concessions can make praise more persuasive. A historian should compare his narrative with annals, capitularies, letters, material evidence, and sources from affected regions. His omissions are evidence too: the voices of Saxons, conquered Italians, ordinary soldiers, women, and coerced communities are largely absent.

What might have been Pope Leo III's motive for crowning Charlemagne as "Emperor of the Romans"?

Leo III had immediate political reasons. He faced violent opposition in Rome and depended on Charlemagne for protection and restoration. Crowning the Frankish king on Christmas Day 800

publicly joined papal legitimacy with Carolingian military power. It also allowed the papacy to present itself as capable of conferring an imperial title in the West. (McKitterick; Nelson)

The act had broader meaning. The imperial throne at Constantinople was occupied by Empress Irene, and relations between Rome and the Byzantine world were complicated by theology, jurisdiction, and Italian politics. The coronation created a western imperial claim without simply restoring the old Roman Empire. Leo could gain a protector, strengthen his position against Roman rivals, and elevate the papal role in defining Christian rulership.

What evidence suggests that Charlemagne wanted to become an emperor?

Charlemagne's rule increasingly adopted imperial forms before 800. His palace complex and chapel at Aachen drew on Roman, Ravenna, and Byzantine precedents. He assembled scholars, promoted educational and liturgical reform, issued capitularies, standardized aspects of administration, and presented himself as protector and reformer of Christian society.

His conquests brought the Lombard kingdom and extensive territories under his authority. Royal titles, coinage, seals, architecture, manuscripts, and court ceremonial communicated rule on a scale beyond an ordinary regional kingship. The term "renovation" associated with the Roman Empire after the coronation further suggests that imperial ideology was useful to his government.

These signs do not prove that he planned the exact ceremony performed by Leo. They show that his court cultivated a language of universal Christian rulership compatible with empire.

What evidence suggests that he might not have wanted Pope Leo III to crown him?

Einhard famously claims that Charlemagne would not have entered the church that day if he had known the pope's intention. The statement may reflect genuine dislike of surprise, concern about papal superiority, diplomatic sensitivity toward Byzantium, or later Carolingian presentation. It should not be read as unquestioned fact because Einhard wrote retrospectively and had reasons to defend the emperor's independence.

Charlemagne may have wanted imperial recognition while objecting to the implication that the pope created the emperor. The difference between accepting a title and accepting a theory of papal power is crucial. Later coronation practices and imperial ideology continued to contest who authorized whom.

How reliable is the coronation narrative?

Sources agree that the coronation occurred, but motives and prior planning are harder to establish. Public ceremonies require preparation, and Charlemagne had been in Rome addressing Leo's crisis. Complete ignorance is therefore possible but not certain. Historians compare Einhard with the Royal Frankish Annals, papal accounts, Byzantine reactions, coinage, and subsequent titles.

The responsible answer distinguishes event from interpretation: Leo placed a crown on Charlemagne and the crowd acclaimed him emperor, while the degree of coordination and Charlemagne's private reaction remain debated.

If you had been one of Charlemagne's advisors, what policy would you have approached differently?

I would have advised a different policy toward the Saxons. The long wars combined military conquest with destruction, deportation, harsh penalties, and forced conversion. Even by medieval standards, coercive religious policy created repeated resistance and made political loyalty difficult to distinguish from fear. A policy using negotiated local authority, tribute, hostages under regulated conditions, missionary work without compulsory baptism, and gradual legal integration could have reduced violence.

This advice is not based only on modern values. Rebellion imposed military and administrative costs on the Carolingian realm. Less coercive settlement could have produced more durable legitimacy. It would also have reduced the moral contradiction between Christian conversion and terror.

I would also have recommended clearer succession planning and institutions less dependent on one ruler's personal movement. Charlemagne's achievements were extensive, but governing through court presence and family arrangements left later rulers with conflicts over division. A more predictable administrative and succession framework might have protected imperial cohesion.

The Attack on the Basques and the Limits of Advice

The original response identifies the Basque ambush at Roncevaux as a policy failure, but the event should be described precisely. In 778, Charlemagne's returning army was attacked in the Pyrenees, and the rear guard was destroyed. It was not the greatest defeat of the entire reign in numerical terms, though it became famous through later legend, especially the *Song of Roland*.

An advisor could have recommended better reconnaissance, diplomacy, terrain awareness, and rear-guard protection. The case demonstrates that imperial ambition could exceed local knowledge and logistical control.

Why the Two Sources Should Be Read Together

The Donation and Einhard's biography use different forms to solve related problems of legitimacy. The Donation invents an ancient legal transfer to make papal authority appear inherited from Constantine. Einhard uses biography and classical style to make Carolingian power appear virtuous, disciplined, and Roman. One looks backward through forgery; the other constructs memory around a recently deceased ruler. Together they show that medieval authority depended not only on armies and offices but on persuasive stories about Rome, Christianity, law, and character.

Language, Translation, and Quotation

Quotations from medieval Latin reach students through editions and translations. Word choice can affect tone: terms rendered as "faithless," "righteous," or "supremacy" carry interpretive weight. A careful analysis identifies the edition used, avoids combining passages from different versions without notice, and quotes enough context to show the author's argument. Translation does not eliminate the source's value, but it adds another layer between the historical text and the modern reader.

Source-Critical Conclusion

The Donation gives the pope supremacy, imperial dignity, and temporal privileges by inventing a grant from Constantine. Its forgery does not erase its historical significance; it reveals later efforts to authorize papal claims. Einhard's biography is biased toward admiration, but its selective criticism, classical form, and court knowledge make it an indispensable source when read comparatively. Leo III had motives involving protection, Roman rivalry, and papal authority. Charlemagne's rule displayed imperial ambition, yet he may have objected to a coronation that implied papal control. The questions cannot be answered by quotations alone. Source analysis requires asking why a text was created, whose interests it served, and which experiences it excluded.

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