

The Scholar and the King: The story of Alcuin and Charlemagne

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YouTube Video: Alocuin <https://youtu.be/DfJ7j4-4Blg>

In 781, as Einhard describes in his *Vita Caroli*, Charlemagne and Alcuin had a fateful meeting near Parma. Even though they had met previously, this particular meeting proved to change both their lives.

Alcuin (735–804), the then already famous Anglo-Saxon scholar and deacon from the cathedral of York, was well known to the Frankish king, who had heard about the good reputation of the clergyman. Likely in 778, Alcuin had become responsible for the school and library in York, then considered one of the best. The deacon, who never became a priest, had been a teacher for many years at that point, embracing and living the term *disce et doce* – “learn and teach”. As a teacher, he was widely regarded as one of the greatest, and his students regarded him as a wise father, and friend. His unique gift seems to have been to form friendships easily, so that he had been able to create a large network of friends and acquaintances all over Europe.

Alcuin was around 50 years old when Charlemagne (742–814) asked him to join the Frankish court and take his place among the other scholars. At first, he was hesitant and returned to York, but he then decided to leave Britain and his school, knowing that there would be others to teach in his absence. Charlemagne aimed to have the best and brightest men at his court. As the sources tell us, there was apparently hardly any other person better in teaching than Alcuin. He received his education in York, and as an avid, curious learner, he knew how to read and write about scripture and exegesis, Latin and Greek, mathematics, natural sciences, astronomy, and possibly more. From the sources we have remaining, including his own letters, it is apparent that Alcuin was knowledgeable in many subjects and was unusually versatile.

The deacon was not only head of the Palace school though. Charlemagne saw a trusted adviser in Alcuin, and besides his teachings, he also had a vast influence on political issues. Even though he grew up at the monastic school at York, he was not a monk, and he was always concerned with worldly matters just as much as with religious ones. He combined both and played a huge role in forming and bringing forward the idea of ideal rulership. He based his ideas on former scholars like Isidore of Seville (560–636) and Augustinus, seeing the king as a *rector et praedicator*, thus on the one hand as a ruler with certain attributes, and on the other, as a preacher who spreads Christianity. In Alcuin’s eyes, a king should guide and rule his realm, ensure justice, renew the church, and unify the people under his rule; being the only person who decides in a just way, defends against oppression, make laws, takes care of strangers and pilgrims, and spreads the word of Christ everywhere.

In letters, Alcuin expressed this view, and seeing how he titillates Charlemagne, it is apparent that he saw in this king, the ideal one, the successor of the ancient Christian Emperors Constantine the Great (272–337), Honorius (384–423) Theodosius II (401–450), and Valentinian III (419–455). Hence, promoting Charlemagne was continuing the Roman Empire and, the idea that (even before he was crowned Emperor in 800) his realm was the *imperium Christianorum* – “the realm of the Christians” – led by a king who embraced Christian ideals. Alcuin was convinced that the Carolingian king was the new David, God’s chosen king.

When it came to being crowned as Emperor, it was destiny, and his right to rule in order to expand the Christian realm. In his letters, Alcuin used distinct words to address Charlemagne, called him the “most excellent and devout lord”, and later even “King David”, “Lord David”. In those words addressed to Charlemagne, it is apparent that he had a lot of respect for the king, liked to discuss matters with him, and surely saw a friend in him. It is not farfetched to assume that Alcuin admired the king who was not only a natural leader, well-versed in politics and military matters, but also a very curious and intelligent person who wanted to gain knowledge in all areas, a kindred spirit to the Anglo-Saxon. As the head of the Palace school, Alcuin decided the subjects and how they should be taught. His students were not only clergymen, but also members of Charlemagne’s family. With some of them, he developed

friendships, notably with Louis the Pious (778–840) from childhood, and some of the king's wives, which drew him even closer to the king.

Testing the limits of friendship

Their close relationship is even more obvious in the disagreements they had. One example of this is well documented in a letter written in 796. Alcuin pays his respects to Charlemagne as usual, but after he praises him, he turns his attention to the matter of the conversion of the pagan Saxons. He does not beat around the bush. Instead, he tells Charlemagne that the method of forcing Christian belief onto Pagans will surely not work and argues that real faith could not be brought with a sword alone. The Saxon war was over but had been prolonged due to the kind of warring employed by Charlemagne. Thus, his letter could be understood as warning to change his ways.

An even more striking test of their relationship was the case of an escaped convict from Orléans. Around 801, late in Alcuin's life, when he had already left the court to be the head of the congregation at St. Martin's Church in Tours, a clergyman from the see of Orléans committed an unknown serious crime and sought sanctuary at Tours. Rumors abounded. People living there believed the shrine in the church was being attacked when men from Orléans tried to arrest the convict. The ensuing turmoil was resolved by Alcuin's men. Orleans' archbishop, Theodulf (750–821) complained to Charlemagne. Alcuin defended the criminal, stating his repentance, his right to appeal to the emperor, and most importantly, that he had sought sanctuary.

Charlemagne, though, thought differently. He wrote back harshly, even accusing Alcuin's clergymen and others, of being ministers of the devil, going so far as to make an ad hominem attack at the Anglo-Saxon. It might be that the king was personally disappointed, seeing that it looked like someone he deeply trusted had erred badly. Alcuin did not retreat but changed his tone. He continued defending the criminal and stated that they had helped the men from Orléans, and the turmoil of the people living there was not encouraged at all by anyone from St. Martin's Church. The issue turned into a dispute about deeper issues, about St. Martin's as a holy place, about the structure of the empire, and about who has the right to speak out about justice. It is notable that, despite being on opposite ends of the argument, there is no hint in other letters and events that their relationship had been strained. They were not to meet again however, as Alcuin died in 804.

It is striking that Alcuin dared to openly disagree with Charlemagne. Even in the early years, their mutual respect and their sense of friendship seems to be evident, especially because there was room for dissent. The king, later emperor, trusted the Anglo-Saxon and was keen to listen to his advice. Under Alcuin's guidance, the Frankish court flourished in matters of knowledge on various subjects, secular and worldly, he taught, administrated, and advised the king. Not only was the amount of trust so high that he was responsible for large parts of the teaching of Charlemagne's children, but there is also evidence that he wrote letters in his name, wrote official documents, and is even responsible for Carolingian minuscule. His influence must have been felt everywhere at the court, and his work as head of the palace school made sure that future generations would receive a profound education. This level of trust by Charlemagne, Alcuin's many roles at the court, and his vast influence, speak of a close relationship, and a friendship that would shape the Frankish realm for generations to come.