

Ideology of the Eighth-Century Aristocracy in Alcuin's Letters

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Abstract: As a leading courtier and distinguished intellectual at the court of Charlemagne, Alcuin wrote works that were widely circulated and influential throughout the Carolingian World. His letters to the many nobles of the Carolingian regime can thus serve as a lens through which to understand the ideology of the eighth-century Frankish nobility.

1. Introduction

The term “ideology” was coined by the French social philosopher Destch de Tracy in the late eighteenth century to refer to the “science of ideas”. By the mid-nineteenth century, Marx and Engels redefined the term, arguing that what is called ideology is in fact the entire system of religion, morality and law by which the ruling class justifies and maintains the social system as dominated by its interests. The ideas of Marx and Engels not only had a major impact on twentieth-century sociology, but were also taken up by historians, such as G. Duby, who used ideology as a path of analysis and whose theories are the methodological basis of this article.

Duby stressed the importance of studying ideology, noting that spiritual elements have the ability to transform human society and make history. The convergence of various spiritual elements creates a system of values, which in turn establishes social relations and contributes to their constant evolution. Understanding the social ideology of a given period therefore constitutes a prerequisite for the comprehension of human society in that period. As such, Duby defined ideology as a system that is present in a given society and is assigned a historical role (with intrinsic ethics and purpose) and representation (impressions, mythology, ideas or concepts).

According to Duby's definition, there are five main characteristics of ideology. Firstly, ideology assumes the form of an integrated system. For example, in medieval European societies, impressions were closely linked to cosmology and mythology. Secondly, ideologies have a tendency to serve the interests of particular groups of people. Thirdly, it is not necessary for a society to have only one ideology; multiple ideologies can exist simultaneously, and the relationship between them depends on the interests of their respective owners. Fourthly, ideologies intended to preserve the dominance of the ruling class contribute to the stability of society. Fifthly, ideologies give rise to human action and historical movements; accordingly, ideologies themselves are constantly changing within these two movements.

The next issue is whether it is possible to reconstruct the ideology of the past with the historical data available to us. This is a difficult task in general. The first problem is the lack of sources, which includes the inevitable distortion of the limited material and historical information that has been handed down from generation to generation. To compensate for the lack of historical material, Duby highlighted the importance of non-textual material, suggesting that coats of arms, clothing, ornaments, insignia, body language, ritual items and processes, and even the construction and decoration of public spaces can all reflect the ideology of a particular period. In addition to the paucity of historical documents, another problem is how to interpret the ideas of those who lived in the past. As modern citizens, historians may not only have various biases when it comes to reading the people of the past, but they may also regard a single case as a common situation and thus draw incorrect conclusions through hasty generalisations. In this regard, Duby also emphasised that the researcher should find out whether someone's behaviour is simply the result of his individual will or is representative of a group pattern of behaviour.

Based on Duby's argument above, this article will seek to explore the ideology of the

eighth-century Frankish nobility, using Alcuin's seven letters as a basic source.

2. Alcuin and His Letters

Alcuin, also known as Ealhwine or Alhwin, a student of Archbishop Ecgbert, was born in 735 to a noble family in Northumberland. He later became a scholar and teacher at the Carolingian court upon the invitation of Charlemagne. Being very instrumental in helping Charlemagne in education, religion, and cultural reforms, which greatly contributed to the later-known “Carolingian Renaissance”, and considered as an important intellectual of the Carolingian period, he played an important role in policy and ideology formation in the Charlemagne era. This is even enhanced by the fact that most of his students were the leading political and ecclesiastical figures of the time.

Alcuin left behind many works, but for the purposes of this article it is his letters that should be given first attention. The *Epistolae* part of the *Momumenta Germaniae Historica* contains three hundred and eleven letters by Alcuin, which he called as *Litterae ammonitionariae/hortatio* or *ammonitiones*, displaying the obligations of each “order”. The research objects of this article are his seven letters to the nobles (*princeps*).

Table 1 the Numbering And Dating of the Seven Letters of Alcuin

Nr.	Year of Writing	Recipient
18	793	Æthelred I of Northumbria, Noble Osbaldus, Duke Osbaldus
33	c.793-795	Magenharius, count of Sens
111	796	Megenfridus, Charlemagne’s treasurer
122	797	Nobleman Osbaldus of Mercia
224	801	Count Chrodgarius (Count of Limoges?)
302	798-804	Aldo Bertus, dux of Mexia
305	c.801-804	Widonus, count of Britannia Boundary

If, however, these letters to the nobles were to be used in studying and seeking clarity on the understanding of ideology in the eighth-century aristocracy, then certain issues would arise. The first problem that would be encountered is how to assess the extent to which Alcuin's discourse on aristocratic qualities was representative of the aristocratic ideology of the time. The second is on whether Alcuin was addressing the morality of the aristocracy’s official and social status or he was addressing morality in terms of their Christian identity. In the exploration of these two issues, Alcuin's treatise, the *On Virtues and Vices (De virtutibus et vitiis)* dedicated to Count Wido of Brittany (799-803 /13 reign), will be taken as an example.

The first question concerns the representation of Alcuin's thought to that of the aristocracy. Alcuin's ideas, it should be said, were highly compatible with the practical thought of the Carolingian aristocracy, which may be attested to in two respects. On the one hand, the ideas of Alcuin would have been widely disseminated during the period, as can be inferred from the fact that both Count Eric of Friuli, far from Britain, and Dhuoda, a noblewoman with no connection to Wido, in Uzès, on the southern border of France, owned *On Virtues and Vices*. On the other hand, during the same time, other documents in the same period portray that Alcuin’s work reflected the aristocratic ideology of the eighth century. On the other hand, the works dating from the same period, represented by the *Handbook (Liber Manualis)*, written by the mentioned Dhuoda for his son Wilhelm, tell of the qualities expected of a nobleman, in line with Alcuin's views.

The second concern on whether Alcuin was addressing the morality in the aristocratic official and social status or the Christian morality. The idea is if his works were addressing aristocratic identity then it would be successful in bringing out the aristocratic ideology, while if they were to represent a Christian identity then they would deviate from the aristocratic ideology to the Christian one and hence rendering it unsuccessful in aiding the understanding of the thoughts of the noblemen. In Mckitterick and Bullough’s debate on the *On Virtues and Vices*, Mckitterick argues that Alcuin did not write the book to Wido as a court of the boundary but rather as a Christian. Bullough, however, takes the opposite view, arguing that Alcuin was only interpreting Wido's official duties in the context of Christianity and that his focus was therefore still on secular offices. The argument by Bullough seems more convincing because, for example, in Alcuin's letter he wrote to Charles the

individual about sexual misconduct rather than Charlemagne the emperor, as there is no mention of such in the *On Virtues and Vices* but highlighting the ethics related to the official duty.

In summary, because of the representativeness of his ideas and that he was writing to a 'noble identity', Alcuin's letters can serve as a lens through which to peer into the ideology of the eighth century aristocracy.

3. Alcuin's View on Nobility

The first view is on the God-King-aristocratic relationship. Alcuin emphasised that nobility was as divinely ordained as kingship. In the letter he wrote to Æthelred I of Northumbria and his nobles (*optimates*), Alcuin urged them to remember the 'person' who granted them all that they had and the benevolence that 'He' has brought to them such as health, honors, and success against their enemies. The 'Person' here clearly refers to God, This is echoed in another letter.

Table 2 Letters Involving The Origin of Nobility Status

Nr.	Recipient	Text
18	Æthelred I of Northumbria and his nobles	Remember who has granted you all your honour, brought good fortune, bestowed health and made you stronger than all your enemies.
122	Nobleman Osbaldus of Mercia	I have heard that many things have fallen upon you, which your soul cannot endure without great sorrow. There is special trouble not only for you, but for your whole kingdom, and for this reason you should use the wisdom God has given you as a counselor; and indeed, great disadvantages have happened to our country because of the faithlessness of bad people. It is for this reason that, with God's help, you must look with great planning and skillful discernment at what can be useful not only to you but to all Angles peoples.

Further in his letters, Alcuin used "counselor (*consiliarius*)" and "assistant (*adiutor*)" to mirror the relationship between God, king and the noblemen. In the Carolingian world, "counsel and assist" was commonly taken to be an obligation of the vassal to his lord. Hannig argues that these duties may have had a Christian origin as they are not found in Tacitus' *Germania*, but can be traced in Scripture, the resolutions of the councils and the patristic works. Likewise, the letters of Alcuin formed a large part in framing the duty to "counsel and assist". In his letter to the Count Magenharius of Sens, Alcuin admonished that one of the ministries of a nobleman was to be a "good counselor" in the service of God and the king:

Table 3 Letters Concerning The Nobility's Role in Relation to the King

Nr.	Recipient	Text
224	Count Magenharius of Sens	I hope that my letter is a plea, rather than a vulgarity to you. I hope that you will make progress in the will of God and work to ensure your spiritual security in terms of linseed for the poor, justice for everyone, mercy for the poor and good counsel, which is beneficial for the safety and welfare of God's emperor and the kingdom of the Franks.

As for the noble role of "assistant", Alcuin applied it not only to lay nobles but also to clergy like himself, stating that they should assist the king when he was carrying out his God-given duties. Alcuin set no distinction between clerical assistants and those of the lay nobility, for in his view what they should both be committed to was to assist the king in building an "Christian empire (*imperium christianum*)".

The second thing highlighted was the relationship between aristocracy and the church. In his letters, Alcuin admonished the king on two moral requirements which were justice (*justitia*) and mercy (*miser cordia*). The concepts of justice and mercy originated from Pseudo-Cyprianus and Saint Isidore respectively. According to the letters that Alcuin sent to Offa, King of Mexia and the other Carolingian princes, mercy meant the degree of devotion expressed by a monarch and his concern for the Church while justice referred to the kings' guidance and direction to his subjects. In his letter to King Pippin of Italy, he gave certain instructions which include, recognising the Church, loving God, offering protection to the poor, and appointing counselors. Then what demands did

Alcuin put on the nobles? The following letter may provide some clues.

Table 4 Letter Concerning The Nobility's Role in Relation to the Church

Nr.	Recipient	Text
18	Æthelred I of Northumbria and his nobles	With my letter I exhort not only you, who must be distinguished men and dearest sons, but also all leaders of the beloved and names of different status [i.e. nobles], whether of ecclesiastical orders or of the heights of secular power, with the shared intention of charity as a nursling devoted to your love, I pray that they (all of the above) most diligently obey the commands of God, (and) be subject to the preachers of your salvation. These, that is, the (role) of the bishops, do not remain silent about the word of God. Your (role), O princes, is to obey humbly and to be diligent in your task. (The role) of the king is to overcome all evil by the power of his piety. Likewise, the princes and judges of the people are to rule over the people. To widows, orphans and the poor they are to be like fathers; and since the justice of princes is the exaltation of the people, they are to be the defenders and guardians of the Churches of Christ; so that, through the prayers of God's servants, they may live in long-lasting prosperity. Indeed, the Church is the spouse of Christ; and whoever "endeavours" to violate or steal what belongs to her; God Christ, the spouse of the Holy Church, takes revenge on him.
33	Magenharius, count of Sens	But be just in (your) judgement and pious in your mercy, treating widows and orphans like fathers and protecting them from all violence.
111	Megenfridus, Charlemagne's treasurer	And you, the most faithful treasurer of treasures, counsellor and the most faithful assistant, are keeping the sins of men gently under control, helping the stream, making peace in the court, and the prudent man legislating.

Alcuin highlighted the idea that the aristocracy was the guardian of the Church in Nr.18. The aristocracy's duty was to follow and faithfully do the will of God just like the priest who was to deliver the will of God. In his admonishment, Alcuin inferred that the nobility was appointed by God himself and they were to be the protector of the weak and poor and generally the Church. He, however, did not give a clear way in which the nobility could carry out these duties but he highlighted the wrongs that should be avoided such as stealing what belonged to the church (Nr. 18). But he gave consequences of such action was experiencing the wrath of God. In Nr.33, Alcuin suggested the use of violence in executing the duty to protect the Church.

In summary, Alcuin defined the nobles as a group separate from the king, an order not derived from the king but from God's providence. They were supposed to act as "counsellors" and "assistants" of the king in order to help him in the performance of his divine office, and to act as protectors of the weak and of the Church by virtue of the law and even by force. Thus, the identity as a faithful warrior and the identity as a devout Christian were made compatible in the nobility.

4. Conclusion

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, Alcuin offers a better understanding of eighth-century aristocratic ideology. In the view of the Carolingian nobility, the whole Christian empire was a community, of which the king, as the "head", made and proclaimed the laws that guided Christian life, and the nobles, as the king's "counselors" and "assistants" in the will of God, had the right and the duty to support the king on matters of state. Furthermore, the nobles were obliged to protect the Church and to strike back against the enemy when the Church was threatened. This counter-attack could even take the form of force if necessary. It was perhaps these ideas that laid the foundations for the subsequent conscious rebellion of the nobility against the king.

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