

LETTERS FROM ON HIGH AND THEIR RECEPTION IN CAROLINGIAN POLITICS

A RECONSIDERATION OF HOFFMANN'S PARADIGM

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ABSTRACT

Among the thousands of letters that have come down to us from the early Middle Ages, only a few have been kept in their original form, and a handful of these are quite peculiar in their appearance. They are but simple blocks of texts, without dates, subscriptions, seals, or any of the other usual diplomatic tools of authentication; this is true even for those that have been sent by the kings and emperors at the peak of Carolingian power. Their lack of visual markers could be an important clue to the way the messengers used them to create such media effects that were necessary to give the recipients the illusion of the sender's presence. Instead of considering these simple letters as crude objects, we should evaluate their specific purpose and efficiency, which could have been strictly aural, not visual.

This paper argues that certain letters sent by the Carolingian kings and emperors were not written to be read by their recipients, but by the messengers.^[1] Anyone familiar with diplomatics, or with the historical literature on early medieval letters, will know that this is not entirely new. The importance of the messenger in all long-distance communications has been known even before Hartmut Hoffmann expressed it in his famous 1964 aphorism: "in the Middle Ages, the most important thing about letters was the messenger."^[2] In the last twenty years, Mark Mersiowsky has done extensive, determining work on this material, and what I am proposing tries to complement his observations.^[3]

I will first assert that the part of ritual analysis that has survived the publication of Philippe Buc's *The Dangers of Rituals* can be used as a framework to study the few authentic letters that are left of the Carolingian centuries.^[4] I will then proceed in the usual diplomatic fashion: by addressing their external characteristics, and then the internal, textual clues in support of my hypothesis, to wit, that the simplest letters were written to serve as a kind of score (i. e. musical notation) for messengers who were acting as representatives and, quite literally, voice-bearers of their lords.

[1] This article is based on a presentation made at the Aoyama Gakuin University on March 10th 2019, during a workshop organized by professor Shigeto Kikuchi. It has benefited from the insightful comments of the participants, notably professors Sakae Tange, Takuro Tsuda, Shoichi Sato, and professor Kikuchi. My stay in Japan was made possible with the support of professor Takahashi Kazuki and the JSPS research project (JSPS KAKENHI JP17H02377), to whom I extend my heartfelt thanks.

[2] *Das wichtigste am Brief war im Mittelalter der Bote* – H. Hoffmann, "Zur mittelalterlichen Brieftechnik," in *Spiegel der Geschichte*, ed. K. Reppen and S. Skalweit (Münster, 1964), p. 145.

[3] Among his numerous publications related to this subject: M.

Mersiowsky, "Regierungspraxis und Schriftlichkeit im Karolingerreich: Das Fallbeispiel der Mandate und Briefe," in *Schriftkultur und Reichsverwaltung unter den Karolingern*, ed. R. Schieffer (Opladen, 1996), p. 109-166; Id., "Preserved by destruction. Carolingian original letters and Clm 6333," in *Early Medieval Palimpsests*, ed. G. Declercq (Turnhout, 2007), p. 73-98; Id., *Die Urkunden in der Karolingerzeit. Originale, Urkundenpraxis und politische Kommunikation* (Wiesbaden, 2015); Id., "Früh- und hochmittelalterliche Briefe. Ein Überblick," in *Briefe aus dem Spätmittelalter. Herrschaftliche Korrespondenz im deutschen Südwesten*, ed. P. Rückert (Stuttgart, 2015), p. 9-31.

[4] Ph. Buc, *The Dangers of Rituals. Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, 2001).

Rituals became an important object of research for medieval historians, because the long 10th and 11th centuries were seen as problematic from the standpoint of government. Kings and emperors of this age seem to have been able to rule without strong institutions to back them up. Most would agree, then and now, that the efforts of Charlemagne and the early Carolingians to build a state on stable institutions had failed, and that it was superseded by a feudal order, where local magnates were able to govern their lands and play complicated games of alliances and treasons without risking much interference from their kings. This has been described as the iron century, following the idea that the sword was then the preferred tool of negotiation. It was a period during which sovereigns did not matter much, as they were unable to control the aggressions and murderous vengeance that passed for politics in those days. And it is true that issuing decrees, laws and other such royal pronouncements was rare, and so were diplomas, especially in Western Francia, where even reigns of forty years left less than a hundred charters to testify for their administration.

This overall picture is excessive, of course, but it was generally perceived as correct before the 1990s, even though certain historians had tried to bring some nuance to it, notably Heinrich Fichtenau.^[5] With Karl Leyser, Susan Reynolds, and Dominique Barthélemy, some were discussing the possibility of using the concepts of anthropology to go beyond the feudal paradigm and get a better understanding of this stateless society.^[6] In that context, the first focused effort in the direction of political communications was presented by Geoffrey Koziol in his 1992 book, where he argued that in the Western Frankish Kingdom, under the last Carolingians and the early Capetians, state order and political affairs were mostly determined by the workings of rituals, instead of legislative, judicial, and administrative processes.^[7] In short, instead on relying on governmental institutions, feudal lords maintained order through relational customs and their *mise-en-scène*, for instance begging pardons and favors from the sovereigns.

Although G. Koziol's book is the first widely read thesis on the studies of political rituals, it would not be fair to place Gerd Althoff's contribution in second. Based at the University of Münster, this historian started to study similar themes at the same time, while focusing on the Ottonian and Salian empires. He has published extensively on the subject, while encouraging the development of a generation of younger historians working on the rituals of power, notably through their *mise-en-scène* by their actors.^[8] From that perspective, great portentous events such as the humiliation of emperor Henry at Canossa in 1077 appeared as stage plays, made to convey well controlled political messages. In short, according to G. Althoff, the emperors were ruling through public rituals. This thesis was generally considered to be convincing, as it explained many peculiarities of the times, such as the constant movement of the Ottonian and Salian imperial courts, which had been brought into new lights by Eckhard Müller-Mertens and his students.^[9] It also dovetailed with the work of his Münster colleague, Hagen Keller, on the use of royal and imperial diplomas as aural and visual

[5] H. Fichtenau, *Lebensordnungen des 10. Jahrhunderts. Studien über Denkart und Existenz im einstigen Karolingerreich* (Munich, 1984; repr. 1994).

[6] K. Leyser, *Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society. Ottonian Saxony* (Oxford, 1979; repr. 1989); S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900-1300*, (Oxford, 1984; repr. 1997); D. Barthélemy, *La mutation de l'an mil a-t-elle eu lieu? Servage et chevalerie dans la France des x^e et xi^e siècles* (Paris, 1997). The most recent, important contribution to the study of the transition between the Carolingian and Feudal political order is: Ch. West, *Reframing the Feudal Revolution: Political and Social Transformation Between Marne and Moselle, c.800-c.1100* (Cambridge, 2013).

[7] G. Koziol, *Begging Pardon and Favor. Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, NY, 1992).

[8] Among other publications: G. Althoff, "Demonstration und Inszenierung. Spielregeln der Kommunikation in mit-

telalterlicher Öffentlichkeit," *Frühmittelalterlichen Studien* 27 (1993): 27-50; Id., "Ungeschriebene Gesetze. Wie funktioniert Herrschaft ohne schriftlich fixierte Normen?" in *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter. Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt, 1997), p. 282-304; Id., "Die Veränderbarkeit von Ritualen im Mittelalter," in *Formen und Funktionen öffentlicher Kommunikation im Mittelalter*, ed. G. Althoff (Stuttgart, 2001), p. 157-176; Id., "Zum Inszenierungscharakter öffentlicher Kommunikation im Mittelalter," in: *Von Fakten und Fiktionen. Mittelalterliche Geschichtsdarstellungen und ihre kritische Aufarbeitung*, ed. J. Laudage (Cologne, 2003), p. 79-93; Id., *Die Macht der Rituale. Symbolik und Herrschaft im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 2003).

[9] The fundamental publication being: E. Müller-Mertens, *Die Reichsstruktur im Spiegel der Herrschaftspraxis Ottos des Großen* (Berlin, 1980).

tools in political communications.^[10]

There was, however, an important contradiction published in a 2001 book titled *The Dangers of Rituals*. Its author, Philippe Buc, argued that historians caught up in the ritual vogue were oblivious to the problems inherent to using such a concept, which had been developed by modern authors and early anthropologists who were drawing a fictitious line between fully developed and primitive cultures. In short, the concept was flawed from birth, as it served to contrast civilisation and barbarism, and to describe the latter by using poorly defined notions which served the European colonialist mindset. More importantly for our subject, Ph. Buc expressed doubts about the way historians such as G. Koziol and G. Althoff were reading their sources: they were using chronicles, annals and other narrative texts which contained descriptions of such rituals. In doing so, they tended to read those descriptions as if it was possible to take them as essentially correct reports on the events they described. Quite correctly, Ph. Buc forced the reconsideration of the sources as determined by their authors' intent. He might have gone too far, however, in suggesting that this field of inquiry was irrecoverably flawed.

While Ph. Buc's criticism is important, it also overreaches. First, demonstrating that as a concept, "ritual" tends to superpose on the medieval cultures ancient clichés about the European colonies, does not mean that the events themselves never happened, or that their *mise-en-scène* is some kind of historiographical illusion. One simple fact remains: we have good reasons to think that Henry did go to Canossa, and that his meeting with pope Gregory was orchestrated to serve their political purposes. Timothy Reuter had already said quite correctly, that politics were played out during assemblies: acting publicly meant acting in front of people of high standing — generally secular and ecclesiastical elites — who would later report on what they saw. Rumors of this sort have always been at the core of the most important political maneuverings.^[11] One does not need the concept of "ritual" to appreciate this. Second, reaffirming that the authors responsible for describing those public actions were not precise and objective reporters reinforces the idea that these events were important, since these authors considered it useful to create and disseminate versions of them that were adjusted to the specific, political goals of their lords and protectors.^[12] Of course, we should not read chronicles without the proper, critical tools, but this does not mean that we should underestimate them as actions of political communications in their own right.^[13]

All this might seem far from the subject at hand, namely the use of letters by the Carolingian sovereigns, but the contrary is true. In their premodern world of slow transportations, where occasions to meet directly were rare, receiving a letter, especially when it came from higher authorities, must have been an event considered worthy of a *mise-en-scène*, and maybe, thereafter, of a spoken account or a written report, at local assemblies, in narrative texts, or elsewhere. If certain actions were staged as public representations, so to speak, then receiving a messenger bearing letters must have been among them.^[14] This is where the Hoffmann paradigm comes to the fore: while it rightly

[10] Notably: H. Keller, "Zu den Siegeln der Karolinger und der Ottonen. Urkunden als 'Hoheitszeichen' in der Kommunikation des Königs mit seinen Getreuen," *Frühmittelalterlichen Studien*, 32 (1998): 400-441; Id., "Die Herrscherurkunden. Botschaften des Privilegierungsaktes — Botschaften des Privilegientextes," in *Comunicare e significare nell'alto medioevo* (Spoleto, 2005), p. 231-283.

[11] Arguments suggesting that there was a specific origin to this in the West are based on an insufficient study of the previous centuries and their source material, e. g. L. Melve, *Inventing the Public Sphere. The Public Debate during the Investiture Contest (c. 1030-1122)*, (Leyde, 2007).

[12] A point conceded by Ph. Buc: "Text and ritual in ninth-century political culture: Rome, 864," in *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography*, ed. G. Althoff, J. Fried, P. J. Geary (Washington, 2002), p. 123-138.

[13] For the debate that ensued, see the references in: J. R. Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire*, (Cambridge, UK, 2015), p. 16, n. 67.

[14] This is particularly evident in the case of embassies, see notably: P. S. Barnwell, "War and peace: historiography and seventh-century embassies," *Early Medieval Europe* 6 (1997): 127-139; M. McCormick, "From one center of power to another: comparing Byzantine and Carolingian ambassadors," in *Deutsche Königspfalzen VIII*, ed. C. Ehlers (Göttingen, 2007), p. 45-72; R. W. Mathisen, "Patricii, episcopi, et sapientes. Le choix des ambassadeurs pendant l'Antiquité tardive dans l'Empire romain et les royaumes barbares," in *Ambassadeurs et ambassades au cœur des relations diplomatiques. Rome – Occident médiéval – Byzance*, ed. A. Becker and N. Drocourt (Metz, 2012), p. 227-238.

puts the emphasis on the messenger, it might be well to consider that the letters he carried were sometimes essential to his work, as tools of interactive communications. From there, it is natural to suppose that the letters were designed to serve this purpose, both as physical and textual objects, two aspects that will now be considered in this order.

In the last years of Louis the German's reign, around 871, an author working for the archbishop of Strasburg wrote a chronicle of the conversion of the Bavarians and the Carantanians.^[15] At some point in his composition, he mentions a man of high repute among the Slavs, probably a priest (c. 7). In just a few words, the author manages to give an impression of this man, named Ingo, by saying that his decisions were never put into doubt, even though he might have sent them through *cartae sine litteris*, a surprising phrase which might be translated as "documents without writing", meaning pieces of parchment without any script on them. Those have generally been understood as charters bearing only some formal sign, such as a personal seal or an autograph subscription, which could be used to show that the bearer was acting as Ingo's representative: such a letter of credence would not need to be read, just to be seen, to be acknowledged as valid, and so, to ascertain the validity of the mandate transmitted orally by the bearer.^[16] Diplomats and historians have had good reasons to support this hypothesis, since the known corpus of Carolingian *cartae* is full of documents with strong visual markers, so strong in fact that the text itself sometimes slips into the background, as in the most impressive royal diplomas.^[17] As far as royal chanceries went, the 9th century could be the high point of strong visual communications through charters. The following schema should clarify this distinction between the ear's and the eye's role:

I. THE AURAL-VISUAL RATIO



Objects to be **heard**, which disappear behind the reading voice.

Objects to be **seen**, their texts barely audible, as shapes, colors and textures take precedence.

Tools of communication best conceived as *recordings* to be heard, not seen, and designed to maximize their *readability* over their visual qualities.

Tools of communication designed to maximize their visual expressiveness, their iconic qualities. Here, the role of text is geared toward its visual qualities.

Result: a memorable event, a story to be told.

Result: an iconic object to be kept, and shown again.

There were documents mostly conceived to be seen, others to be read, and others in between. Deriving from one of Marshall McLuhan's cardinal ideas about the changing balance (*i. e.* ratio) in the

[15] *Die Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum und der Brief des Erzbischofs Theotmar von Salzburg*, ed. Fritz Lošek, MGH Studien und Texte 15 (Hanover, 1997). I am here following the extensive study of this text by Thomas Lienhard: "Les chiens de Dieu." *La politique slave des mérovingiens et des carolingiens*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Lille-III-Charles de Gaulle, Université de Hambourg, 2003, p. 212 *passim*.

[16] M. Kos, "Carta sine litteris," *Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 62 (1954): 97-100; Hoffmann, "Zur mittelalterlichen Brieftechnik" p. 158-159; E. Kittel, "Siegelstudien," *Archiv für Diplomatik* 5/6 (1959/1960): 474-475; H. Wolfram, *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum* (Ljubljana, 1979; repr. 2013), p. 155-156.

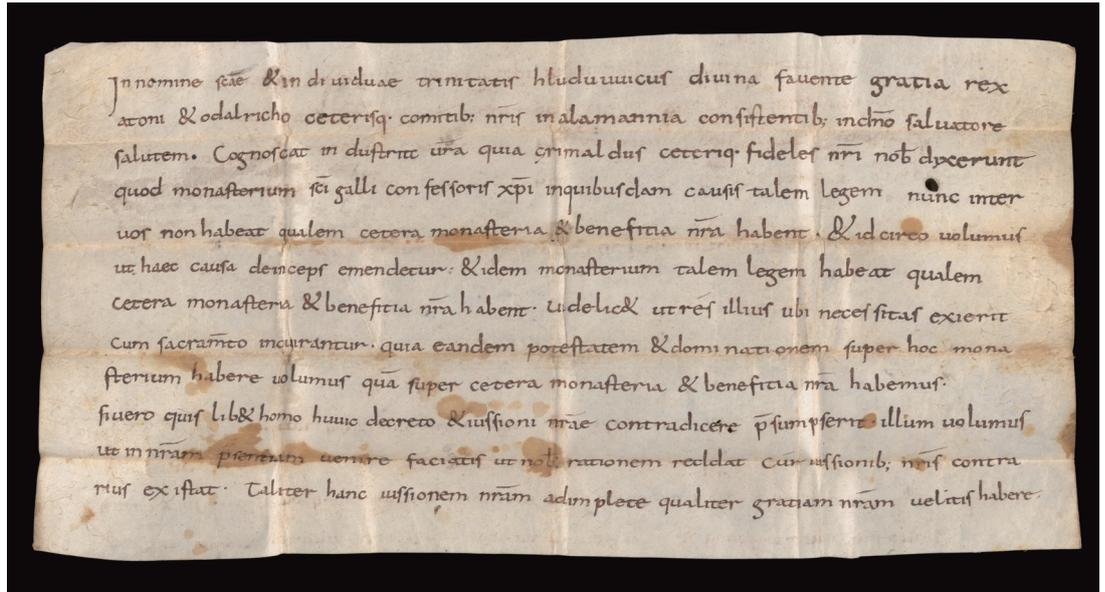
[17] Images of Carolingian diplomas are readily accessible online,

notably through the reproductions of two classic collections: Th. Sickel, H. Sybel, *Kaiserurkunden in Abbildungen* (Berlin, 1891) [<https://geschichte.digitale-sammlungen.de/kaiserurkunden/online/angebot/>]; F. Lot, Ph. Lauer, *Diplomata Karolinorum: recueil de reproductions en fac-similé des actes originaux des souverains carolingiens conservés dans les archives et bibliothèques de France* (Toulouse/Paris, 1936-1949) [<http://www.mgh.de/bibliothek/virtueller-lesesaal/ddkar/>]. One can also access a limited, but wider variety of originals, notably of private charters, through the essential TELMA online catalogue [<http://www.cn-telma.fr//originaux/index/>], and from the excellent *e-chartae* website [<https://www.e-chartae.ch/>]. [All sites accessed on December 16th, 2019].

interaction of the senses, the expression “aural-visual ratio” can help to understand how charters were composed and put to use.^[18]

In the cultural and political context just described, one expects that receiving a letter from a high authority must have been an event worthy of a *mise-en-scène*, and that through this *mise-en-scène*, relationships that bound the local communities, their leaders, and the sovereign found their expression. And so, it is quite surprising to find a small number of such *cartae* preserved as originals, that are free from any of the visual markers that would have supported such representation of power. This letter sent by king Louis the German to his counts in Alemannia will serve as an example:

II. LOUIS THE GERMAN TO THE COUNTS OF ALEMANNIA (A. 854-855)^[19]



This charter is rather small, at about a quarter of the square size of an average diploma from the same king. It has obviously been cut after it was filled with an ordinary book script, showing none of the adornments of true royal *praecepta*. It seems complete, although its text fills almost all its space, leaving but small margins, and no place for a subscription, a seal, or even a dating clause.

Such simple, unadorned pieces of parchments sent by kings and emperors seem to have been determined entirely by their function as voice notation: this suggests that they could have been used for a specific theatrical artifice, where the messenger was to read the letter himself, in such a way as to create the illusion, for a moment, that the sender was there in front of the recipient and his people, speaking with the full force of his authority: there is the main hypothesis of this paper. We must not be fooled by our own intimate relationship with postal letters, as object we read by ourselves, in silence.

Five arguments resting on the material aspect of early medieval letters support this. However, it

[18] M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA, 1964; repr. 1994). For an efficient effort at clarifying McLuhan's often cryptic pronouncements, notably on the senses's ratio: S. Grampp, *Marshall McLuhan. Eine Einführung* (Konstanz/Munich, 2011), p. 74-89.

[19] Sankt Gallen, Stiftsarchiv, Urk. A4 A5a. Image available online on the e-chartae website: <https://www.e-chartae.ch/de/charters/view/661> [accessed on December 16th, 2019]. It

is also available in print form: M. Mersiowsky, "Merowingische und karolingische Herrscherurkunden," in *Mensch und Schrift im frühen Mittelalter*, ed. P. Erhart and L. Hollenstein (Saint-Gall, 2006), p. 68, abb. 29. Also available in a full-size facsimile: *Diplomata Karolinorum. Faksimile-Ausgabe der in der Schweiz liegenden originalen Karolingerdiplome*, ed. A. Bruckner (Basel, 1969-1974), vol. I, no 31. For the text edition: *MGH DD LD*, p. 101, no 71.

must be stated that the number of such documents that have been preserved is so small, as to make any statistical appreciation impossible: one cannot determine whether this corpus corresponds to the general practices of the Carolingian centuries. Such authentic letters that we have could either be exceptional, perfect representations of the average, or anything in between. The best one can do is try to understand them for what they are, comparing them to the numerous authentic diplomas, and all the while, to restrain from pushing inferences too far.^[20]

First, letters sent by the Carolingians were not sealed from the outside, as the *lettre close* came to be centuries later. Most often, creases show that they were folded tightly, from the bottom up and then from the sides, so as to form a small bundle of about ten square centimeters — half the size of a bank card. The specimens known do not show the typical traces left by wax after a seal has been lost. It has been argued that the folding was held by a string, but the evidence is inconclusive.^[21] In any case, in the absence of a seal, one thing is quite certain: these letters could be opened by anybody who had his hands on them. What the voice score hypothesis suggests, is that the bearer, the messenger was authorized to do so, perhaps to practice reading it before presenting himself to the recipient. There is no positive proof of this, but it is a possibility based on the fact that these letters were easily opened and handled before reception, without apparent damage: the messenger could indeed have been responsible for reading these letters aloud, as the representative of the sender, as he had the possibility of preparing his performance, during the days — more often weeks — of his travel toward the receiver.

A second clue underlines the strictly aural nature of the communication that such a letter supported: unfolded, it did not present a single visual cue to distract the reader's eye. Quite obviously, it was not made to be appreciated visually. The letter appears as a block of text, often without margins, which indicates that the charter was cut off from a larger piece of parchment after writing: this simple composition is a conscious design, resulting in a specific visual effect: this is a text, no more, no less. And there is nothing in its layout that would indicate that it had to be shown to the recipient and his entourage. It was much too small and too plain to serve as a visual prop, and so it could indeed have been designed for the use of the messenger in charge of reading it.

Third, the disposition of the text often submits to a similar model: the page is about twice as wide as it is long. It is small in comparison to most royal diplomas, which could easily reach a width of 70 cm, but it is still spacious, considering the limited amount of words it carries. The lineation is regular and rather wide, an aspect that contradicts the possibility that the chancery was preoccupied by limiting material use, indicating, on the contrary, that readability was the important factor determining its form. When seen in full size, for anybody with a modicum of palaeographical competence, this is what stands out: those letters were graphically composed to be easy to read aloud.

This hypothesis is supported by a fourth material aspect: the script is either a regular book hand, such as caroline minuscule, or a regular, easy to read cursive, unlike the usual diplomatic writing typical of much of the 9th-century royal charters, with its tight verticality, and sometimes visually confusing ornaments. In those simple letters, the characters are big and distinct from each other, with limited use of common ligatures. It is tempting to deduce that they were made to be easy to read, not to express visual solemnity. This makes sense, if one takes into consideration that the level of literacy of messengers certainly varied. Of course, some letters are written in a tighter cursive, but none sports anything so boastful as a high chancery script, or so careless as tablet shorthand. In any case, they look like they could be read easily, as voice scores, by whoever carried

[20] This corpus can be accessed through the following publication: Mersiowsky, "Regierungspraxis und Schriftlichkeit". An ongoing program is publishing facsimiles of all authentic letters that have come down to us from the early Medieval Period: *Lettere originali del Medioevo latino (VII-XI sec.)*, ed. A. Petrucci, G. Ammannati, A. Mastruzzo, E. Stagni (Pisa, 2004-2012).

[21] The string could leave a crease, and the address on the dorse sometimes show a gap where the string might have been: J. Calmette, "Une lettre close originale de Charles le Chauve," *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 22 (1902): 136-139. This seems far-fetched, but is impossible to verify without direct access to the documents.

them to represent their sender.

The fifth material clue in favor of the aural nature of those letters can be found in the way words are presented. A systematic demonstration is not practical, because there are not enough authentic letters to work from, but still, many interesting things appear to the naked eye: word spacing is quite regular; punctuation and capital letters serve to delineate short, simple sentences; words cut at the end of lines are not frequent; the use of abbreviations is mostly limited to common ones. All this fits well with the possibility that reading was staged and effected by the messenger in front of the recipient.

Carolingian original letters that could have served as vocal scores are not exactly similar to each others, from the standpoint of their visual appearance. One could not infer much from this, besides that they are the work of different scribes working for different chanceries; they were not written for the same messenger, or for the same specific practice of representation. While it is true that Charles the Bald's letter to the Barcelonians (a. 876) is written in a faster cursive script, with more abbreviations than the well rounded, slow minuscule of Louis the German's letter, this distinction does not need any more explanation than their different origin.^[22] It could be that the bearer of Charles the Bald's letter was a better reader than the one who delivered Louis the German's.

Textual analysis tend to support the hypothesis of messengers as readers, even without going into precise details. The overall structure of the letters is a simplified version of the diplomas: it follows the same plan, but in a more compact, and direct version. After a short invocation and salutation, the sender might express the general relational context of the exchange, sometimes insisting on certain qualities of the recipient. This first part is not always present, and then the text jumps directly from the salutation to the narration, where the contextual justification of the letter is given. From there, it becomes natural to go to the petition, that is, to the command/request that the letter bears at its core. It is sometimes developed somewhat, though not in any way comparable to diplomas, which often follow up with precise descriptions of their object and with clauses expressed against those who would not respect their injunctions. After the petition, the letter ends, often abruptly, without any conclusion, salutation, or eschatocol of any aspects. Letters sent by kings are short and to the point, a characteristic which made them efficient as expressions of power. This makes sense if the letter did not stand alone as an act of communication: the messenger was expected to accomplish most of the exchange, before and after reading the letter, which played a very specific part in his overall mission of representation.

Another interesting aspect to consider is that their texts follow a simple syntax, building short sentences quite unlike those of the great epistolary writers of the day, such as Lupus of Ferrières, or the fine letters sent by the papal chancery. Though they are short, they will repeat words and phrases central to their matter, limiting their use of pronouns and elliptical formulations. This gives them a straight and direct expression, quite fitting for a king, but also useful for insuring that the reader will be able to recreate it, to effect its *mise-en-scène*. This controlled simplification of the text also applies to its vocabulary: it does not try to impress by its rarity or its precision, but is kept to a minimal number of common words. This epistolary rhetoric joins the strength of directness, and the efficiency of simplicity. This makes a lot of sense, if one keeps in mind that Latin was still the standard language of long-distance communications, but that it was spoken in different forms, and understood at different levels throughout the Carolingian empire.^[23]

[22] Barcelona, Arxiu de la Catedral, stancia III, no 1 (privilegia). The most accessible facsimile remains: Calmette, "Une lettre close" For the edition: *Recueil des actes de Charles II le Chauve*, ed. A. giry, M. Prou, G. Tessier (Paris, 1943-1955), 2.431-432, no 417. Another document to compare is the letter of Louis the Pious to bishop Badurad of Paderborn: Münster, Staatsarchiv, Urk. Corvey Nr. 4. Edition: *MGH DD*.

Kar. 2, 2.815-817, no 330.

[23] Among his numerous contributions on the subject: M. Banniard, "La latinophonie: caractère d'une dynamique vitale," in *Studien zu Literatur, Sprache und Geschichte in Europa*, ed. A. Greule, H.-W. Herrmann, K. Ridder, A. Schorr (St. Ingbert, 2008), p. 215-228.

A last point is that these simple epistolary texts can be construed as short plays. This needs to be stressed, because today, letters have lost much of their theatrical character, and our relation with them is much more visual and personal than aural and communal. In the days of Charlemagne, an imperial letter was almost entirely composed as an address made in the first person to a second person, from a stately *we* to a simple *you*. Upon reading, a letter such as this would flow without a break, permitting all hearers to imagine the presence of the authorial *we* among them, and feeling his attention as if it was turned directly toward them. Diplomas are not like this: they do find a similar statement at their core, but they are also framed by indications such as subscriptions, seals, monograms, date clauses, other visual signs such as beehives, chrism, and sometimes tironian notes — shorthands which only well trained scribes could decipher. Even the elongated letters of the first line transform the text into a visual image that works against the possibility of fluid reading. In themselves, they were sometimes huge, and so difficult to read aloud, as they needed to be held at arm's length. This is an experience worth trying with full-size printed facsimiles. All this breaks the theatrical continuity, as if the magic of reading aloud was expected to be interrupted, maybe because diplomas were not made to be received and communicated as letters were. This is particularly true of the early medieval material.

Letters generally have an initial salutation that stands outside of their main, first person to second person monologue. But this reinforces the theatrical metaphor, rather than undermine it, because it works as an initial setup of the situation. It is written as if the writer is standing on the side the stage, where he can see the actors and present them in relation to each other, before the curtain is lifted and the illusion of the sender's presence can be realized through the messenger's voice. This is not so different from the beginning of any play, in written format. The first words of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* are as follow: "Elsinore, a platform before the castle. Francisco at his post. Enter to him Bernardo." And so, in fourteen words, the audience know where it stands, and who it is looking at, so the play can begin, as it does, with the voice of Bernardo asking "Who's there?" And the magic operates. This is not different from the salutation of Louis the German's letter to the Alemanian counts: "In the name of the holy indivisible Trinity, Louis, king by divine grace, gives salutation in the Lord savior to Ato, Odalric and our other counts in Alemania." Twenty-five Latin words are used to set the stage, before the king start to speak through his unnamed messenger: as a media, a letter cannot effectively work before its hearers recognize the sender, recipient, and context of their exchange, as characters in a play.^[24] And once it has begun, the audience will not appreciate the illusion being lifted before the end. Such could have been the media experience expected of royal letters.

If the hypothesis of a formal *mise-en-scène* of letter reading by the messengers makes any sense, it should find support in the experience of reading these letters aloud, using full scale facsimiles. Any student of a dead language knows this kind of play and its formative qualities, but in this case, the problem put by these original letters makes it especially worthwhile to try to pronounce and hear these texts, going as far as adding a bit of theatrical emphasis, in an effort to bring us to their original aural perception. Over time, this exercise has led me to appreciate the construction, the sound qualities and overall rhetoric of those letters. Let's consider the transcription of Louis the German's letter already discussed. The abbreviations have been underlined to show that they are limited to the simplest kind, notably the variations on *noster* and *sanctus*, the suffixes *-bis/-ibus*, and so on:

In nomine sanctae et indiuiduae trinitatis. hluduuuicus diuina fauente gratia rex

[24] The importance of the initial salutation in early medieval letter writing, even before the development of its theoretical blueprint in the *ars dictaminis*, has already been well studied, for instance: C. D. Lanham, "Salutatio" *Formulas in Latin*

Letters to 1200: Syntax, Style, and Theory (Munich, 1975); Ead., "Freshman composition in the early Middle Ages: epistolography and rhetoric before the *ars dictaminis*," *Viator* 23 (1992): 115-134.

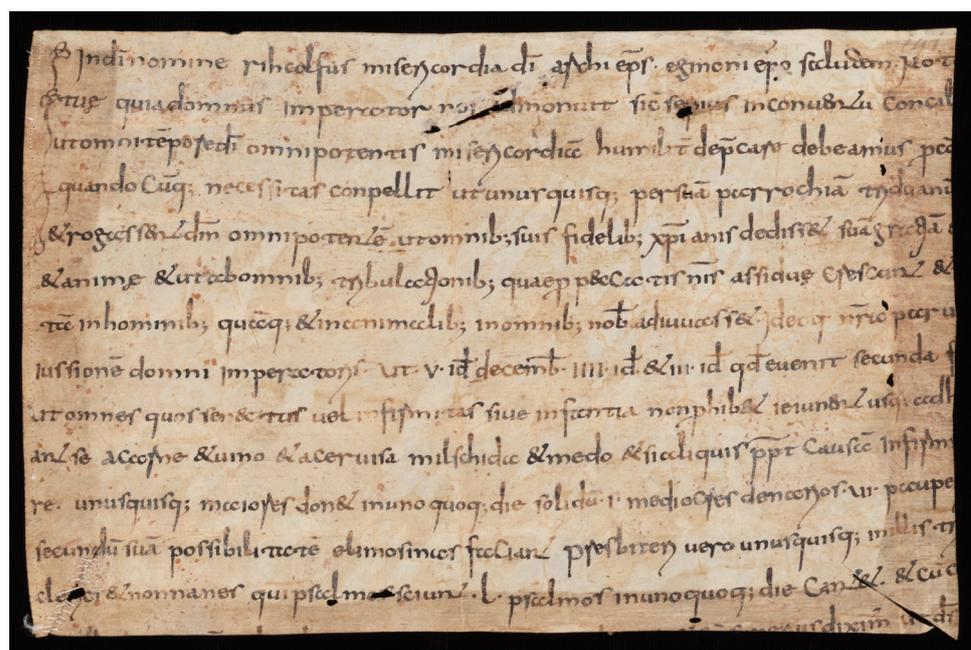
atoni et odalricho ceterisque comitibus nostris in alamannia consistentibus in domino saluatore salutem. Cognoscat industria uestra quia Grimaldus ceterique fideles nostri nobis dixerunt quod monasterium sancti galli confessoris christi in quibusdam causis talem legem nunc inter uos non habeat qualem cetera monasteria et beneficia nostra habent. Et idcirco uolumus ut haec causa deinceps emendetur. Et idem monasterium talem legem habeat qualem cetera monasteria et beneficia nostra habent. Uidelicet ut res illius ubi necessitas exierit cum sacramento inquirantur. Quia eandem potestatem et dominationem super hoc monasterium habere uolumus quam super cetera monasteria et beneficia nostra habemus. Si uero quislibet homo huic decreto et iussioni nostrae contradicere praesumpserit illum uolumus ut in nostra praesentiam uenire faciat ut nobis rationem reddat cur iussionibus nostris contrarius existit. Taliter hanc iussionem nostram adimplete qualiter gratiam nostram uelitis habere.

Obviously, its vocabulary is simple and limited, as certain formulas are repeated like hammer strikes, like the three variations on: *talem legem super monasteria et beneficia nostra habere uolumus*. The sentences are short and as such, they do not let much space for interpretation: the king's ruling is clearly expressed. It seems that the Alemanian counts could be impressed by such a text, once read aloud to them, especially if reading was left to the messenger representing the king, not a member of their entourage unfamiliar with the text just received, susceptible to mismanage its oral delivery. The king obviously wanted the letter to work to its maximum effect and his envoy must have been suited to this task, in a way that a man of the recipient's house could not.

This proposal is but an hypothesis, and it is highly improbable that it will ever be considered certain: there is not much positive proof to be hoped for, only oblique support. But still, it is probably the best there is, as it fit nicely with what little information we have from the few authentic, original letters that have come down to us. It is also capable of offering a plausible explanation for certain difficult facts about these letters. This can be illustrated by considering one last document.

In the year 810, Charlemagne called for a general fast to be held on the 9th, 10th, and 11th days of December. To make sure that this would be correctly done, he had the archbishops transmit his order in writing to their suffragan bishops. We have been fortunate enough to keep one of these, sent by archbishop Riculf of Mainz to his suffragan, bishop Egin of Konstanz.

III. LETTER OF RICULF OF MAINZ TO EGINO OF KONSTANZ (A. 810) ^[25]



This piece of parchment was salvaged from a book cover, as the photo shows. Upon studying it, Mark Mersiowsky has proposed that its script is typical of the Konstanz region, not of Mainz. This would suggest that it is a copy, not the original sent by Riculf. This would not need further explanation, if M. Mersiowsky had not found crease marks on the parchments that are coherent with the folding of letters.^[26] If he is correct, then we have to assume that upon receiving the letter of his archbishop, Egino made copies to put it in circulation in his diocese. And so, the version we still have today would be the one addressed to the monastery of Sankt Gallen, as it has been kept in the monastery archives. This surprising practice can be explained by the intention of having the archbishop's letter read aloud in the monasteries and the clerical communities of the bishopric, in a *mise-en-scène* coherent with the hypothesis submitted here.

This idea has the benefit of explaining the findings of M. Mersiowsky, while offering a plausible scenario for this communication effort. One has to consider that this call for an empire-wide fast was a rare and important event, requiring the active participation and correct synchronization of all the churches in the realm. In this situation, making sure that all monks and clerics would hear their archbishop's words, which were themselves transmitting those of the emperor, is a reasonable proposition, certainly better than imagining the bishop writing his own letter in which he would have had to expound something like: "the emperor told the archbishop to tell me to tell you that there will be a fast." This does not make for strong rhetoric, so it was better to have the same epistolary play staged again, and again, throughout the land. This could be the reason why the bishop of Konstanz had "original copies" made for circulation within his own diocese. At this point in the history of the Carolingian empire, the idea that the highest powers were intent upon delivering specific pronouncements on a large scale appears credible. There was strength in creating such representations of authority through the voice of its envoys, who were in charge of creating this voice, as they were chosen to do so, as they could practice the text they carried, as they were indeed his direct representatives, coming from outside the receiver's circle.

All this depends on a very small corpus and a lot of suppositions. In the best of cases, this idea of letters as theatre pieces or voice scores could help us get a better idea of the effective practice of epistolary communication and, in a more general sense, of reading and writing in a world where audition was the primary sense of political communications, as it would let the imagination see what the eyes could not. As we tend to rely more and more on visual medias today — even our phones have transformed into something we mostly peruse with our eyes and fingers —, as we have come to think that the truth is something we *see*, it requires some effort to understand a culture where the truth might have been about what you *heard*. And this requires more attention from early Medieval historians.

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[25] Sankt Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 1394, p. 141 (Nr. XV). High quality online facsimile: <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/de/csg/1394/141> [accessed on January 14th, 2020].

[26] M. Mersiowsky, "Karolingische Briefe," in *Mensch und Schrift*, p. 73; Id., "Preserved by destruction," p. 91-92. The creases are visible on the online facsimile.