Week 5: Script in Gaul/FRancia before Charlemagne

We start in Gaul, the former Roman province, which included essentially modern France and northern Italy. After the fall of the Roman Empire, the tradition of writing persisted in Gaul, as well as in Spain and Southern Italy. All those areas developed distinctive regional scripts, all based on Later Roman Cursive. (We will talk briefly about the script of Spain, called “Visigothic,” and of southern Italy, called “Beneventan,” at the beginning of class.)

As a reminder, Later Roman Cursive looked like this:

In the 5th century, what is now France was conquered by the Franks, a Germanic tribe, and united by them with adjoining areas, including what is now Switzerland and a good part of Germany. The dynasty that ruled the Franks from the 5th to the mid-8th century was the Merovingians, and we generally refer to the area they ruled as Merovingian Gaul, though we also call it Francia, the realm of the Franks, which more accurately describes the larger Gaulish-Germanic region they ruled. (“Francia” obviously gives us the name “France.”)

The Carolingian dynasty came to power in 751 and Charlemagne became king of the Franks in 768. In 774, he also became king of the Lombards, thus adding northern Italy (formerly Cisalpine Gaul) to his realm, and in 800 he had himself crowned Roman Emperor—the beginning of the office “Holy Roman Emperor.” On the next page is a map of the growth of the Frankish realms to the death of Charlemagne in 814.

What is important about this geography from the point of view of the development of script is:

a) The Franks ruled a territory that encompassed both the ancient writing centers from Rome north, especially the cities of ancient Gaul, and the many monasteries founded by Irish and Anglo-Saxon missionaries not only in what is now France, but in Germany and Switzerland. When we explore the riches of e-codices, we’re looking at manuscripts from the scriptoria and libraries of Carolingian Francia.

b) All of the scripts we studied in the early weeks were available within Charlemagne’s territory: descendants of Later Roman Cursive as the everyday documentary and book scripts; Uncial and Half-Uncial for high-grade books; inscriptions in Square and Rustic Capitals all over the place as a reminder of the glory of Rome. And when Charlemagne and his advisors set out to gather ancient books to study, they had access within the realms he ruled to all the places where the most ancient codices were preserved: Rome and the cities of Gaul.

c) The Carolingian realms were multilingual, including both Romance and Germanic language regions, which contributed to Charlemagne’s concern with the uniformity of Latin usage.

d) The reach of Charlemagne’s power was such that once a new script was established at the center of his power base, its use could be spread by edict and by prestige over a very wide area, and even into areas not under Carolingian control that were in cultural contact with Frankia.
Under the Merovingians, script had generally devolved into this kind of thing:

This messy script went along with pretty messy Latin, for reasons I'll discuss in class.

Even before the Carolingians came to power, certain monastic centers in Francia were beginning to develop book scripts which, even if they are very challenging for us to read, show an interest in using script in a consistent way, with distinctive “house styles.”
First among these is Luxeuil in Burgundy. Luxeuil was founded by Columbanus, an Irishman, in the 6th century, though its distinctive script, which develops in the 7th century, is clearly based on Later Roman Cursive/Merovingian chancery script and shows no sign of Insular influence. This is Paris, BNF, MS lat. 9427, the Luxeuil Lectionary, written in about 680:

The fish decoration and the distinctive capitals, features of the main script, and documentary evidence have allowed paleographers to identify Luxeuil manuscripts in various libraries and to see its relationship to the scripts of its daughter houses, monasteries founded from Luxeuil which flourished under royal patronage in the 7-8th century, under both the Merovingians and the Carolingians. These include Laon, Chelles, and Corbie, which all became important centers of manuscript production. This is from a Laon manuscript, London, BL, MS Add. 31031, from the 8th century:
Chelles was noted for the work of its women scribes. In the mid to late 8th century, Chelles and Corbie, in particular, developed the script of Luxeuil into very carefully-written new house styles. Here is the script of Chelles from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce f. 1. Note the use of Uncials as a display script. This looks a bit messy because it’s a damaged fragment, but you can see how carefully the letters have been formed.

And here is the script of Corbie from the later 8th century (London, BL, MS Harley 3063):

The relationship of the Corbie script to the Chelles script is apparent. And compared to Luxeuil a few decades earlier, the scripts are becoming less laterally compressed, the letters both more spacious in themselves and more distinct from one another. Legibility is improving dramatically, though there are still lots of ligatures—two letters joined together in a way that transforms their shapes—which baffle the modern eye.

The upshot of all this is that when Charlemagne consolidated his power in the 770s, invited scholars to his court—chief among them Alcuin, from Northumbria—and set about instituting a reform of education, liturgy, monastic life, Latin usage, and script, he could draw on experiments in improving and regularizing script that had already been under way in several monasteries in his realm that were closely linked to royal power.
Caroline Minuscule

In class, I’ll talk about some of the motivations for the Carolingian reforms and we’ll explore Carolingian manuscripts to see their features. The short version is that from the end of the 8th century, more or less simultaneously, there develops a script of remarkable consistency and clarity at many centers within the Carolingian realms, including Corbie; Tours, where Alcuin was in charge; Charlemagne’s “court school,” which was peripatetic as we discussed last time; and abbeys like St. Gall and Reichenau in what is now Switzerland and Germany, among others. Once established, this script spreads throughout the area of Carolingian influence and lasts for three centuries, far longer than the Carolingian dynasty.

This page shown overleaf, the opening of a Tours psalter from the reign of Charlemagne (London, BL, MS Harley 2795) shows the main features of the script in place:

- The script is spacious both laterally and vertically, and it appears on a relatively plain page with plenty of empty space.
- Minim confusion is minimized because the letters are so carefully separated from each other.
- There are still some ligatures—notably, c and s like to go into ligature with adjacent t—but there are almost none of the ligatures that in earlier scripts made e and i and c and t look almost unrecognizable. The only e-ligature that regularly remains is the & (a ligature of e and t in which both are transformed), which becomes the normal way of writing et.
- In general, most letters now have only one, predictable form, the exception being a, which in early Caroline can still take two forms: one that looks like our typographic a and one that looks like two cs: cc.
- And the Carolingian g has arrived: the 5-shaped g of earlier scripts develops a bowl at its top on the left.
- There are still fish, along with Uncials used as capitals in the text. In the manuscripts we look at in class, we will see the increasing standardization of a hierarchy of scripts using the ancient capitals and uncials in a set order for headings.

```
in congregatione iustorum
```

```
tamquam lignum
```

```
ac nocte
non stetit
et in lege
```
B EATUSUR

quinon cebut incnsilio
impiorum Etimua pecc
otorum nonstett Incahe
dte derorum nonstett
Sednlegedi voluntes
etur & inlege eius medita
busr-die acnocte
Etret tamquamlignum
transpleatatum uxtce

rulor aquarum quodfratum sium
debit intempore sio
Etsuameus nondefluet Etomne quod
secert prosperebitur
Nonsie impi. Sed tam quam pulius quem
proicat uentus
Propterece nonresurgunt impii inidicio
neeq peccatores inconregtione iustorum

Inm nouetdlnisiuuioru &iter-impioriu peribit