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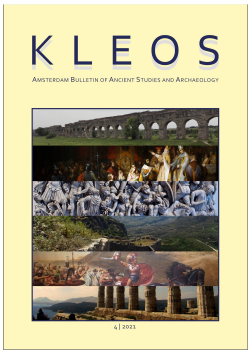


Issue 4, 2021

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**INFORMATION ON PUBLICATION**
Full Title: The Early Medieval Augustus: An Analysis of Orosius' Influence on Charlemagne's Recepetion of Augustus
Author: Ingmar Hof
Published: Kleos - Amsterdam Bulletin of Ancient Studies and Archaeology / Issue 04 / June 2021
Pages: 76-96
ISSN: 2468-1555
**Link to these articles:** www.Kleos-bulletin.nl

RECOMMENDED CITATION:
Hof, I.O., 2021: The Early Medieval Augustus: An Analysis of Orosius' Influence on Charlemagne's Recepetion of Augustus, *Kleos - Amsterdam Bulletin of Ancient Studies and Archaeology* 4, 76-96.

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# The Early Medieval Augustus:
## An Analysis of Orosius' Influence on Charlemagne's Reception of Augustus

Ingmar Hof


### Abstract

Augustus, the first Roman emperor, left a legacy that was used and abused by many political actors well after his death, even up to the present day. During the decline of the Western Roman Empire in the early fifth century AD, a Spanish priest named Orosius created a new, ingenious concept of Augustus as the emperor who, as God's divine instrument, had facilitated the early rise of Christianity. For the next thousand years, this concept was the dominant interpretation of Augustus. One of the most renowned medieval rulers who used Augustus' legacy for his own purposes, was Charlemagne. This paper will examine the extent to which the two so-called 'pillars of Carolingian reception', the imperial coronation of 800 AD and Charlemagne's biography written by Einhard, were based on this 'Orosian' perception of Augustus. By doing so, this article aims to contribute to the ongoing debate concerning Charlemagne's reception of Augustus. It will conclude that Charlemagne and his contemporaries were not as interested in any Christian aspects of Augustus' legacy as, given the dominance of Orosius' perception of Augustus in the Middle Ages, might be expected.


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▶*Profile page*

### Introduction

After his death in 14 AD, Augustus' extensive *nachleben* began. Augustus' image and legacy would take on a life of their own, with many monarchs, theologians and politicians using it for their own ends.[1] The first great post-antiquity monarch, who invoked the legacy of Augustus for his own political purposes, was the Frankish king Charlemagne (*rex* 768-814), supported by his inner circle consisting of the most renowned scholars of his age. Charlemagne was the first medieval ruler, who had been able to conquer a realm

1 For example, medieval monarchs and 20th-century fascists regarded Augustus as a powerful role model, while Renaissance- and Enlightenment thinkers often cited him as a negative example of the absolute monarchy they loathed (Goodman 2018, 1-18, 22-23).

that could rival the old Roman Empire in size. To legitimise his unequalled power he needed a historical precedent, which he found in the first emperor of ancient Rome: Augustus.[2] The extent of Charlemagne's knowledge of the first Roman emperor was mainly formed by one of the Christian interpretations of Augustus constructed by the fifth-century Spanish priest Orosius, which became the prevalent image of Augustus throughout the Middle Ages, and several ancient pagan texts.[3] As this paper will demonstrate, the Roman historian Suetonius (*floruit* 97-122 AD), emperor Hadrian's (*rex* 117-138 AD) private secretary, was the main source for Charlemagne's biographer Einhard. Suetonius' approach of Augustus was very different compared to Orosius' interpretation of emperorship, which is the central topic of this study.

In this paper, a reception study of Augustus is presented, focusing on the appropriation of his legacy by Charlemagne, and, in a broader sense, the Carolingian intellectual elite. The main question posed is, whether the Carolingian reception of Augustus was mainly influenced by the Christian ('Orosian') perspective on Augustus or by Augustus' non-Christian legacy. It is important, however, to remember that the Carolingians lived in a completely Christianised society and everything they did, thought or wrote, originated from a Christian mindset. The dichotomy between Christian and non-Christian perspectives that this article explores therefore only concerns Charlemagne's ruling ideals (and Augustus' influence on it), and not his religious convictions. Charlemagne surely was, just as about everyone in his realm, a devout Christian.

By answering the posed question, this study aims to add to the debate on the Carolingian reception of Augustus by focusing on a subject that has not been explored to its fullest potential, although it has already briefly been touched upon by several scholars.[4] However, most scholars only focus on Suetonius' impact on the Carolingian perception of Augustus and do not discuss Orosius in their studies. The only ones, who go into more depth regarding Orosius' influence, are M.C. Sloan and J. Strothmann. While M. C. Sloan briefly hypothesises on the possible influence of Orosius on, for example, Charlemagne's imperial coronation,[5] J. Strothmann's contribution to P. J. Goodman's edited volume *Afterlives of Augustus* (2018) is the first attempt to actually present fully-fledged research on the position that the concept of 'Augustus'

2 Lokin/Zwalve 2014, 255; Bennett 2011, 80-81; Wolf 1972.

3 Goodman 2018, 7-10.

4 E.g. Sloan 2018; Bagge 2012; Innes 1997.

5 See Sloan 2018, 117-121.

held in Carolingian thinking.[6] Although Strothmann acknowledges the primacy of Orosius' perception of Augustus in the Carolingian period and notes that Charlemagne and his intellectual inner circle were therefore definitely aware of the Spanish priest's interpretation, the only real influence he attributes to Orosius is that through him it was known to early medieval scholars that Augustus was the first 'real' Roman emperor.[7] Otherwise, Strothmann, like most historians before him, disregards any possible influence that Orosius may have had on the Carolingian reception of Augustus. It is this lacuna that I intend to fill in this study.

This article therefore starts with an in-depth analysis of Orosius' concept of Augustus as a 'Christian hero'.[8] Subsequently, I will analyse Charlemagne's reception of Augustus, using two – what I would like to call – 'pillars of reception': Charlemagne's imperial coronation in 800 AD and his biography, Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni.* Although written after the emperor's death, *Vita Karoli Magni* offers historians insight into how one of the scholars closest to Charlemagne projected Augustus' legacy on him. By comparing these two pillars to Orosius' Christian perception of Augustus, I intend to determine to what extent the Carolingian reception of Augustus was based on Augustus' Christian qualities. Which aspects of the Orosian image of Augustus were appropriated by Carolingians? Which were not? And most importantly, why?

## Orosius' Christian perception of Augustus

Paulus Orosius (ca. 375-420), a priest from Bracara in the Roman province Hispania (modern-day Braga, Portugal), wrote his *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII* (*Seven Books of History against the Pagans*; hereafter *Historiae Adversus Paganos*) in the early fifth century AD in response to the anti-Christian sentiment that prevailed among the intellectual elite of the Roman Empire. Even several decades after emperor Theodosius I established Christianity as the official state religion, the elite remained

6 Strothmann 2018.

7 Ibid., 148-150.

8 As I will discuss in further detail below, I have chosen the term 'Christian hero' because the core essence of Orosius' concept is the idea of Augustus kickstarting early Christianity by facilitating the birth of Christ, which one could, from a Christian perspective, describe as a heroic feat.

predominantly pagan.[9] They blamed the (in their eyes) soft-hearted Christians for the Empire's political and moral decline, especially after the horrendous Sack of Rome in 410, and Orosius tried to divert these sentiments by writing a universal work of history to show that Rome's conversion to Christianity was predestined since the beginning of (pagan) history.[10] Orosius is therefore regarded as one of the early Christian apologists, writers who defended Christianity against accusations from non-Christian thinkers.[11] In recent historiography, Orosius' *Historiae Adversus Paganos* is mostly addressed in relation to Augustine of Hippo's *City of God* (426).[12] Both works were directed at the fifth-century Roman pagans, each in its own way. Whereas Augustine tried to undermine the authority of the old Roman gods and classical philosophy, Orosius' goal was to appropriate the renowned status of classical antiquity and Roman literature by emphasizing its Christian origins.[13]

In Orosius' Christian retelling of Roman history, Augustus plays a crucial part. By incorporating the first emperor of Rome, whose reputation was, even in late antiquity, immense, Orosius hoped to facilitate his persuasion of the pagan elite.[14] According to Orosius, world history contained three 'climactic moments', events he viewed as the most important moments in history: the Nativity, the Passion and the Second Coming. Since Augustus was the most powerful man in the Western world during the first of these, the Nativity, Orosius gave him a key role in his *Historiae Adversus Paganos*.[15] Sloan articulates this role aptly: "Orosius is challenging the pagans not to recognise God over and against Augustus, but rather to recognise God through Augustus."[16]

In Orosius' version of history it was Augustus, who paved the way for Christianity's inevitable victory. His greatest merit lay in creating the perfect and necessary conditions for the birth of

9 There is still a lot of scholarly debate about the degree to which the intellectual elite remained pagan after Theodosius' reign. For a long time, historians assumed that most intellectuals continued to carry-out pagan rituals half-way through the fifth century. A. Cameron, however, argues that paganism in the Western Roman Empire ended much earlier than previously thought. Many activities, which historians considered to be exclusively pagan, he says, in fact played a big part in the lives of Christian Romans as well, and therefore do not imply a widespread continuation of Roman paganism in the fifth century. There is no question, however, that the Sack of Rome (410) evoked many anti-Christian reactions, to which Orosius responded (Cameron 2010, 3-4).

10 Sloan 2018, 103, 114; Ward 2014, 495; Eigler 2006.

11 Pellegrino/Heid 2014, 186. See also Eigler 2006.

12 Ward 2014; Formisano 2013; Van Nuffelen 2012.

13 Ward 2014, 495-496; Van Nuffelen 2012, 15-18. See also Pollmann 2009.

14 Simonis 2015.

15 Sloan 2018, 104-105, 114.

16 Sloan 2018, 114.

Christ. Augustus accomplished this in both a direct and indirect way. According to Orosius, by bringing peace to the Roman Empire, Augustus had created the required socio-political conditions for the birth of Jesus.[17] It was, after all, Augustus, who had ended the civil wars that had ravaged Rome for most of the first century BC, and it was he, who would usher in a continuous period of peace, the *pacis signum praetulit*, commonly known as the *Pax Augusta*.

Traces of the direct role Augustus allegedly played in preparing the Nativity can be found in the New Testament. Luke 2:1-5 describes how Augustus ordered the Census of Quirinius, which compelled everyone in the Empire to return to their birthplace. This caused Joseph and Mary to return to Bethlehem, where Jesus was subsequently born. This made Augustus a small but indispensable link in the fulfilment of an Old Testament prophecy, which predicted the birth of a messiah in Bethlehem.[18] This initially very brief mentioning became a cornerstone in Orosius' portrayal of Augustus as a Christian peace-bringer.[19]

Although he played a pivotal part in preparing the Nativity, it should be noted that Orosius makes it abundantly clear that Augustus did not play an active role in this first climactic moment of history. He was only a passive instrument of God, with whom lies the exclusive agency. Orosius leaves no doubt that it was God, who had chosen the Roman Empire to be prepared by Augustus for the birth of the messiah, and that Augustus did not establish the peace, into which Christ was born on his own.[20] Orosius thus seeks to contrast Augustus' passive role with God's active role. In a broader perspective, Orosius wants to make it clear that the power of historical change is God's prerogative, not Rome's or her greatest emperor's or, indeed, any man's. Orosius' portrayal of Augustus is primarily intended to demonstrate the higher power of God.[21]

But even if Augustus was 'only' an instrument of God, God did choose the person deemed most worthy for this fundamental task. Orosius emphasises this with multiple odes addressed to Augustus. He calls him the "bravest and most merciful of all men" and an emperor, "whom nearly every race honoured with a just mixture of

17 Orosius, *Historiae Adversus Paganos* 6.20.8.

18 This prophecy can be found in Mica 5:2 and was later cited in Matthew 2:5-6.

19 Historically, the existence of this census is highly debatable, but the reason for mentioning it in the New Testament is clear: Jesus, who, according to Christian tradition, had grown up in Nazareth, had to be connected to Bethlehem to fulfil the Old Testament prophecy (Goodman 2018, 7; Rist 2005; Thorley 1979). Orosius mentions the census in *Historiae Adversus Paganos* 6.22.6-6.22.8.

20 Orosius, *Historiae Adversus Paganos* 6.20.4.

21 Van Nuffelen 2012, 151-152. See also Goetz 1980.

love and fear".[22] This rhetorical trick suited Orosius' primary objective perfectly. After all, it enabled him to embrace the glory of Augustus, but still attribute it entirely to God. There was no need for him to deny the glory this great emperor still possessed in the eyes of the pagan elite, to which *Historiae Adversus Paganos* was addressed. He could simply use it for his own ends.[23]

It is clear that Orosius went to great lengths to mould Augustus in the role he needed him to play. He used two literary methods to accomplish this.[24] First of all, Orosius makes selective use of classical texts to portray Augustus (or Octavian, as he was called before 27 BC) as honourable as possible by downplaying his violent actions, exaggerating his almost non-existent military accomplishments and omitting any material that could possibly undermine his vision of Augustus as a Christian hero.[25] Secondly, because Augustus had to be perceived as an emperor, who was virtuous enough to be chosen by God, his life had to be directly linked to Christian events. Orosius does this by synchronising important events from the emperor's life with events from the New Testament. To accomplish this, Orosius uses what would become typical medieval exegetical practices, such as the changing of dates of known historical events.[26] For instance, Orosius makes both Augustus' triumphus and his adoption of the name *Augustus* occur on the 6th of January in 29 BC, thus synchronising two of the most glorious events of Augustus' life with a holiday directly associated with the birth of Jesus: the Epiphany.[27] This Christian perception of the first Roman emperor, forged by Orosius, became widely accepted by the *literati* and would remain the dominant image of Augustus throughout the Middle Ages.[28]

22 Orosius, *Historiae Adversus Paganos* 6.1.7.

23 Sloan 2018, 106-107.

24 In fact, Orosius also employed a third literary strategy, namely the citing of authoritative pagan writers like Vergil (most notably in *Historiae Adversus Paganos* 6.22.7, which is a word-by-word replication of *Aeneid* 1.282), but because of its relative insignificance to the reception of Augustus by Charlemagne it will not be discussed in this article (Sloan 2018, 116-117; Rees 2004, 11).

25 For example, Orosius significantly reduces Octavian's leading role in the proscriptions of the Second Triumvirate (43 BC). He also portrays Octavian as a great tactician in the battles of Philippi (42 BC) and Actium (31 BC), while, thanks to Pliny the Elder, it is well known that Octavian was anything but a military genius. Lastly, as Sloan remarks, the assassination of Caesarion ordered by Octavian went completely unmentioned by Orosius (Orosius, *Historiae Adversus Paganos* 6.18.9-10, 6.18.14, 6.19.5; Pliny, *Historiae Naturalis* 7.45; Sloan 2018, 112-113).

26 Sloan 2018, 115.

27 See Orosius, *Historiae Adversus Paganos* 6.20.1. Octavian's *triumphus* actually took place in August of 29 BC, while he was granted his revered name by the Senate on 16 January 27 BC.

28 Orosius' *Historiae Adversus Paganos* was one of the most used books by medieval students. Until the 16th-century Reformation, it was seen as one of the most important Spanish historical sources (Torres Rodríguez 1985, 81-82).

## The first pillar of reception: the imperial coronation of 800 AD

Charlemagne was, without a doubt, the most powerful man of his generation. He had conquered an empire stretching from Francia, Lombardy and Germania in the west, to the Byzantine border in the east. His literal crowning achievement followed in 800 AD, when Pope Leo III (*rex* 795-816) rewarded him with the Roman emperorship. On Christmas day, in the old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Charlemagne was crowned "*Charles augustus*, crowned by god, great and peace-bringing emperor of the Romans, life and victory",[29] an event, which, according to his biographer Einhard, greatly moved Charlemagne.[30]

This explicit titular imitation of Augustus is why I labelled the coronation of 800 a pillar of Augustan reception. Why Charlemagne was crowned emperor, why he adopted the abovementioned title and whether it was in fact Charlemagne who initiated this coronation, is still heavily debated by historians. As early as the coronation itself, several different motives and interpretations were attributed to it.[31] Most scholars agree, however, that the imperial coronation of 800 was the result of both political and religious motives.[32] I have analysed both sides of the argument in search for a possible Orosian influence.

It has been widely accepted that both Charlemagne and Pope Leo III had major political interests in an imperial coronation.[33] Strothmann cites Charlemagne's imperial aspirations as the main motive for his coronation.[34] The immensity of Charlemagne's *imperium* meant his royal titles – he was *King of the Franks* (since

29 *Annales Regni Francorum* 801, translation by Strothmann 2018, 144.

30 Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni* 28. Charlemagne's dismay is usually explained from the fact that he was so overwhelmed with his 'sudden' coronation that, at first, he did not want to accept the emperor's crown. P. Geary, however, argues that Charlemagne was displeased with what he considered to be an overly active role of the Pope during the coronation. Charlemagne had preferred to see the Pope taking a backseat (Geary 1983, 110).

31 Palmer 2011, 1313.

32 For scholars who emphasize political motives, see Strothmann 2018, 140-143; Palmer 2011, 1313-1315; Bennett 2011, 92; Nelson 2007, 10; Collins 2005, 68; Mayr-Harting 1996, 1128-1129. For scholars who emphasize religious motives, see Sloan 2018, 118-120; Alberi 2010, 3-5.

33 This scholarly consensus can be derived from some of the most influential encyclopaedias and other reference material on the Middle Ages. See Clauß 2017, 82; Bennett 2011, 92; McKitterick 2008, 115-116; Chazelle 1995a, 370; Geary 1983, 110. Besides Charlemagne, Pope Leo III had strong political ambitions of his own too. J. M. Bennett argues that the imperial coronation was Leo's ultimate attempt to restore his damaged authority – Leo had been suffering violent threats from aristocratic factions in Rome. By crowning Charlemagne, the pontiff intended to place his authority above that of the mighty emperor, which he hoped would result in the Carolingian Empire always bearing the papal mark. Charlemagne's awareness of this possibility is shown by the fact that he made sure his son and heir, Louis the Pious, was crowned not by the Pope, but by Charlemagne himself in 813 (Bennett 2011, 92; Lokin/Zwalve 2014, 163-164).

34 Strothmann 2018, 140-143.

768) and *King of the Lombards* (since 774) – were no longer proportionate to the vast power he had amassed. Therefore, he may have wanted a title that, on the one hand, was reminiscent of the Roman Empire, in whose tradition he placed his Frankish Empire, and, on the other hand, was familiar to the Pope, the Franks, and the Byzantines.[35] Charlemagne's search within the Mediterranean memory of *imperium* could have led him to the traditional title of the ancient emperors of Rome.[36] Such imitative policy is also visible in the construction of his Palace Church in Aachen. By using antique materials imported from Rome and Ravenna and by emulating the latter city's Basilica of San Vitale, Charlemagne was consciously trying to place himself in the imperial Roman tradition.[37]

Religious motives have been proposed as well. An interesting attempt to interpret the coronation from an Orosian point of view is undertaken by Sloan.[38] He hypothesises that Charlemagne initiated his own coronation as an act of piety. Sloan argues that Charlemagne, strongly influenced by Orosius' concept of Augustus as the God-chosen architect of the first climactic moment of world history (the Nativity), thought he himself would play a fundamental part in the third climactic moment (the Second Coming), which he and his intellectual circle believed to be imminent.[39] Alcuin of York (*floruit* 781-804), theologian, abbot and renowned scholar, thought that Charlemagne, as *rector populi christiani* (leader of the Christian people), had a duty to reform and purify the Church before the end of time.[40] Thus, purely motivated by the sacred belief that he was able to fulfil his duty during the inevitable eschaton only as emperor, Charlemagne must have decided that he needed to be coronated. Therefore, Orosius' concept constituted a theological justification for Charlemagne's

35 After all, the Byzantines were considered to be the official heirs to the Roman Empire. Therefore, it was no coincidence that Charlemagne, even though he had been in a position of power for years, waited until 800 for the coronation to be held. By then, the Byzantine Empire, his only competitor for the imperial crown, found itself in the midst of a succession crisis. The emperor's mother, Irene, had seized power by crippling her son, which led Charlemagne (and Pope Leo) to declare her rule illegitimate. Therefore, by becoming Emperor of the Romans, Charlemagne only filled a vacancy (Lokin/Zwalve 2014, 207; Bennett 2011, 92; Nelson 2007, 10; Collins 2005, 10).

36 H. Mayr-Harting, in addition, views the consolidation of Charlemagne's conquests of the Saxons and Avars as a direct impulse for the coronation (Mayr-Harting 1996, 1128–1129).

37 Rollason 2015, 447; Bennett 2011, 92.

38 Sloan 2018.

39 Sloan's theory is based on G.B. Blumenshine's reading of F. C. Scheibe's, E. Dalaruelle's and G. Hocquard's research on Carolingian scholarly sources such as Alcuin's *Liber Contra Haeresim Felicis*. See Blumenshine 1983; Scheibe 1959; Dalaruelle 1953; Hocquard 1952.

40 Alcuin, *Epistolae* 257. Alcuin's letters are numbered according to the classification in Dümmler 1895.

appropriation of the name Augustus as his imperial title.[41] To conclude in Sloan's own words: "Just as the first Augustus prepared the way for the incarnation of Christ, a second Augustus may usher his return!".[42]

The strongest indication for Sloan that Charlemagne's theological beliefs and political acts were influenced by Orosius is the date of his coronation. It is plausible that Charlemagne held a sacred belief that the most important events of Augustus' life had some sort of divine meaning because they allegedly occurred on the same day as important Christian holidays. Sloan presumes this is the reason Charlemagne chose Christmas day for his coronation, to legitimise his ascendency by making it coincide with one of the most holy Christian days, just like Augustus, who was granted his revered title on Epiphany. The fact that this never actually happened on Epiphany – this was after all a fabrication by Orosius – was completely unknown to Charlemagne, as it was to all Orosius' medieval readership.[43]

Interesting as this theory may be, it cannot serve to demonstrate Orosius' impact on the imperial coronation. First of all, the apocalyptic world view Sloan propagates was only created in Adso of Montier-en-Der's *Antichristi* (ca. 950) – thus, well after Charlemagne's coronation.[44] This makes the theological background, against which Sloan places his Orosian reading of events, highly unlikely. Secondly, although the historical context does not totally exclude theological motives – the Carolingians were in fact highly skilled in exegetical practises – I deem the political motives discussed above more likely and more profoundly grounded in the historical evidence.[45]

Although the historical evidence seems to suggest that Charlemagne's imitation of Augustus at his coronation was not explicitly impacted by Orosius, it is of course impossible to disregard all Christian influence. After all, as mentioned before, a religious (i.e. Christian) reading of events does not necessarily imply an Orosian interpretation. In accordance with Strothmann, I think it is very possible that Charlemagne's choice for *Augustus* as his imperial title could stem from a ceremonial perspective: Charlemagne chose *Augustus*, and not *Caesar* or *imperator* (alternative Roman imperial titles), because Luke 2:1, which includes the Census of Quirinius, was an integral part of the Pope's

41 Sloan 2018, 118-119. See also: Blumenshine 1983, 227.

42 Sloan 2018, 119.

43 Ibid., 119-120.

44 Adso, *De ortu et tempore Antichristi* II; Palmer 2011, 1314-1315; McGinn 2002, 4-13; Geary 1994, 74-76.

45 Sloan 2018, 121.

Christmas liturgy. Strothmann argues that the presence of an *Augustus*, while the story of how Augustus had – indirectly – prepared the birth of Christ was read, gave Charlemagne's newfound emperorship an extra divine layer.[46]

It is apparent that none of the commonly accepted explanations for Charlemagne's coronation explicitly reflect any Orosian influence. For a deeper understanding of the Carolingian perception of rulership and Orosius' possible influence on it, it is useful to take a closer look at Alcuin. The renowned abbot left no doubt that he saw Charlemagne as a Roman emperor: in a letter to bishop Theodulf of Orléans (written ca. 801-802) he addressed the Frankish king with 'Carolus' – instead of his common pseudonym 'David' – while he referred to the ancient Roman emperors as Charlemagne's forebearers (*antecessores*).[47] In another letter written in 800 to Charlemagne himself, Alcuin actively tried to persuade his king to accept the imperial crown.[48] Alcuin's reasoning is interesting. He connected Charlemagne to the Roman emperors by ascribing both a fundamental role in God's plan. According to Alcuin, the emperors of Rome had played a pivotal part in the rise of Christianity and he believed Charlemagne did too. God had elected the Frankish king to become supreme ruler in Christendom, in order for him to spread orthodox Christianity throughout Europe by expanding his empire. One could say that Charlemagne continued the work that was started by the ancient emperors. His ascension to the imperial throne would therefore provide his expansionist policy with a historical precedent as well as legitimation. Orosius' thinking is clearly visible in Alcuin's stance towards Carolingian concepts of rulership. Whilst there was no directly detectable influence of the Orosian perception of Augustus on Charlemagne's coronation, Alcuin's thoughts mirror Orosius' larger framework of the Roman emperors facilitating the rise of Christianity.[49]

In conclusion, I believe that the imperial coronation of 800 was above all the result of politically charged motives. Charlemagne primarily turned to Augustus' legacy of the powerful ruler of an immense Western European *imperium* – who happened to be named in the Bible. Charlemagne did appropriate the pagan title of *Augustus*, but seemingly left the first emperor's image as a Christian hero untouched. Although political motives are

46 Strothmann 2018, 143-144.

47 Alcuin, *Epistolae* 246.

48 Alcuin, *Epistolae* 178.

49 Moesch too recognizes that Alcuin might be influenced by the concept of the ancient Roman emperors facilitating the rise of Christianity, however, she attributes this to the writings of Augustine of Hippo. Since Augustine focused more on undermining the Roman emperors' pagan authority instead of appropriating it, Alcuin's stance reflects Orosius rather than the famous Church Father (Moesch 2020, 82-86).

supported by actual historic events – Charlemagne had indeed amassed immense political power and probably possessed imperial aspirations – some degree of religious influence cannot be discounted. After all, the omnipresence of the Christian faith in socio-political decision-making left an unmistakable influence on Charlemagne's policymaking. My research, however, has not uncovered any concrete evidence pointing to the Orosian perception of Augustus directly impacting his coronation. Nevertheless, Orosius' larger framework of interpreting Roman imperial history as facilitating the rise of Christianity was reflected in Alcuin's letters and might have influenced the abbot's – and therefore, Carolingian – thoughts on emperorship. On the whole, however, Orosius' impact on the imperial coronation of 800 seems to have been marginal at best.

## The second pillar of reception: Einhard's *Vita Karoli magni*

The second pillar of the Carolingian reception of Augustus is the most important written source on Charlemagne's life: his biography *Vita Karoli Magni,* written shortly after his death (somewhere between 814-830) by the Frankish poet Einhard.[50] Although it was produced after the emperor had died, *Vita Karoli Magni* must still be regarded as an integral part of Charlemagne's reception of Augustus because, as this article will demonstrate, the book explicitly mirrors Charlemagne to Augustus. Einhard's work therefore constitutes one of the most important transmitters of the Carolingian reception of Augustus and simply cannot be overlooked when examining this episode of Augustan reception. After all, as is important to note, the Carolingian reception of Augustus is larger than just Charlemagne himself. The way members of the Frankish intellectual elite like Alcuin and Einhard dealt with Augustus' legacy provides valuable insight in the Carolingian reception of Augustus as well.[51] In this part, I will examine to what extent Orosius' perception of Augustus played a part in Einhard's portrayal of Charlemagne.

Einhard's famous book has been subjected to extensive research and scholars agree that *Vita Karoli Magni* was in fact heavily influenced by Suetonius' biography of Augustus, *Vita divi Augusti* (121), something that must be understood in terms of the

50 The debate on when V*ita Karoli Magni* was written is ongoing. M. Innes and R. D. McKitterick argue that Charlemagne's biography must be written before 821, probably in the years immediately following the emperor's death. S. Patzold and T. F. X. Noble, on the other hand, believe that *Vita Karoli Magni* was not written until 829-830. I concur with the latter, because I believe it is plausible that events from 822 and 829 (treated in this article below) may have incited Einhard to write his biography of Charlemagne (Innes/McKitterick 1994; McKitterick 2008, 11-14; Noble 2008, 9; Patzold 2013, 193-195).

51 Pausch 2012; Chazelle 1995b, 601; Firchow 1984, 412.

classicist revival that took place at Charlemagne's court.[52] Suetonius' position in the imperial bureaucracy gave him access to the imperial archives, which contained the documents he used as groundwork for his biographies of the first emperors.[53] By contrasting Orosius' perception with Suetonius' portrayal of Augustus, I will argue that the latter had a much bigger influence on Einhard than the former.

Einhard wrote his *Vita Karoli Magni* during the reign of Charlemagne's son and successor, Louis the Pious (*rex* 813-840). Einhard's biography is first and foremost understood by historians as a response to Louis' tumultuous reign.[54] In his book, Einhard offered implicit criticism of the emperor by mirroring him to the image of the perfect ruler, Charlemagne. Furthermore, Einhard also may have wanted to react to Louis' penance of 822, where the Frankish emperor discredited his father by condemning the latter's immoral conduct.[55]

Therefore, Einhard intended to write a book in which the focus was on one secular ruler, his accomplishments and his personality. For such a biography, however, Einhard could not find any medieval precedent. The only early medieval literary genre that showed any biographical traits was the hagiography. The lives of secular people, like kings, on the other hand, were never chronicled, apart from incidental references in more broadly oriented works on complete dynasties, peoples, or countries. Neither suited Einhard's needs and therefore he resorted to one of the few precedents from antiquity: Suetonius' biography of Augustus. Einhard, after all, wished to write a biography that placed his emperor in the centre, not the almighty God, as was usual in early medieval writings such as *Historiae Adversus Paganos.* The absence of the Christian God in Suetonius' work provided Einhard with the perfect reference framework.[56]

Suetonius' *Vita divi Augusti* influenced *Vita Karoli Magni* on two separate levels: structure and content. Einhard composed his work roughly the same way as Suetonius by copying his use of a *divisio*, which is the subdividing of different aspects of the subject's life in

52 Pausch 2012; Bennett 2011, 88; Chazelle 1995b, 601; Firchow 1984, 412.

53 Pausch 2012.

54 Su 2018; Kempshall 1995, 30.

55 Su 2018, 88-89.

56 Bagge 2012, 50; Noble 2012, 14; Ganz 2005, 39-40; Innes 1997, 267; Beumann 1951, 340-341, 345. In addition, M. Su argues Augustus was an appealing role model, because both, he and Charlemagne, were the second generation of a ruling house without a proper legal claim to the throne and both had brought unsurpassable prosperity to their empires (Su 2018, 78).

different categories.[57] The content of Einhard's biography also exhibits various similarities with Suetonius. While Charlemagne's physique is a word-for-word replication of several sections from *De Vita Caesarum*, his most important resemblance with Augustus was his depiction as a bringer of peace.[58] Although Charlemagne's glorious conquests are definitely not withheld from the reader, Einhard explicitly stressed that the Frankish emperor's greatest merit was that he had resolved most conflicts without bloodshed.[59] Bringing his large realm to peace was, according to M. Su, Einhard's main reason for mirroring him to Augustus. He was, not in the least through Orosius, known to the Carolingians as the emperor, who had procured peace for the Romans.[60] Emphasizing Charlemagne's ability to establish peace was mainly meant to criticise his son's inability to do just that. Louis' reign was indeed infested with many wars – a significant amount of them ending in defeat – most notably a revolt of his sons led by Lothar (829).

It should be noted however, that Einhard was not unique in his efforts to attribute features of illustrious predecessors to Charlemagne. The depiction of early medieval kings was to a large extent subject to certain conventions, one of which was the mirroring of a king's physical attributes to those of his heroic predecessors. The goal was to further legitimise a king's position. The degree, to which Einhard's literary strategies are a reflection of this tradition, is still a topic of ongoing debate among historians.[61]

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57 Although Einhard followed Suetonius' structure of *divisio*, he implemented it in a slightly different way. *Vita divi Augusti* consisted of two central sections ('affairs of state' and 'mores'), preceded by an introduction on the emperor and his family and concluded by an epilogue on his death. *Vita Karoli Magni,* by contrast, was divided in three sections ('conquests', 'everyday life', and 'care for the Empire'), supplemented by a short introduction on the emperor and his family and a long epilogue on Charlemagne's death. For a more detailed comparison of the structures of both works see Innes 1997, 267-268.

58 For example, Charlemagne and Augustus had their temperance, perfect body proportions and modesty in clothing in common. The Frankish king is also attributed specific characteristics from Julius Caesar, Tiberius, Claudius, Nero, and Titus. See Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni* c. 22-24; Suetonius, *Vita divi Augusti* 79.

59 Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni,* c. 16.

60 Su 2018, 80-87.

61 J. Contreni argues that Einhard's description of Charlemagne's physical appearance should be explained as a typical manifestation of these early medieval conventions and therefore he views Einhard's choice for the powerful emperors of ancient Rome as self-evident. M. Innes, on the contrary, argues that Einhard's use of Suetonius was anything but self-evident. Suetonius was, in fact, virtually unknown in the Early Middle Ages. Probably very few copies of his *De Vita Caesarum* had survived in early medieval Francia (including the so-called *Fulda-manuscript*) and Suetonius stood – like all other classical authors – in the shadow of Cicero, whom early medieval intellectuals viewed as the greatest author from Antiquity. Innes therefore views Einhard's literary strategy as a deliberate choice to distance himself from the early medieval literary conventions (Contreni 1995, 737; Innes 1997, 268-270. See also Pausch 2012; Morse 1991, 145).

Within this debate, I position myself next to M. Innes, who views Einhard's literary strategy not as a subjection to the early medieval literary conventions, but as a deliberate choice to distance himself from it.[62] Due to Suetonius' marginalised status in the Early Middle Ages, it is rather implausible that any medieval author like Einhard referenced him, which indicates that Einhard must have had a specific motive in mind: this motive must have been his desire not to portray Charlemagne as any ordinary king, but as an extraordinary model emperor, contrasting his struggling successor.

So Einhard relied upon Suetonius with regards to the layout of his portrayal of Charlemagne and occasionally to the content as well, but what does this imply for the Carolingian reception of Augustus? S. Hellmann believes that the similarities between the two works suggest not only that Einhard modelled the composition of his biography on Suetonius, but also that he was consciously trying to present Charlemagne as a Roman emperor.[63] However, as S. Bagge has pointed out, there are not enough details directly drawn from Suetonius and not enough similarities between Augustus' and Charlemagne's characteristics to corroborate the assertion that Einhard's principal objective was to place Charlemagne in the tradition of the Roman emperors. After all, personality was one of the central motifs in Einhard's biography, not the 'Romanness' of his emperorship. While Augustus' character was described by Suetonius as somewhat cold, calculating and cynical, Charlemagne is presented as a glorious warrior-king, but at the same time as a humble, cultured, and intellectual family man. Another notable difference between the two writers is their respective position in relation to their subject: Suetonius is a neutral bystander who observes Augustus from a distance – both in time and social status – while Einhard, who is part of Charlemagne's court, tries to portray *his* emperor as virtuous as possible.[64] Although his main goal was to show Charlemagne's greatness, he also tried, by including many personal details, to give his audience a concrete impression of the man behind the emperor.

While Suetonius' influence on Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni* is evident, this is somewhat harder to determine for Orosius' *Historiae Adversus Paganos*. In emphasising Charlemagne's role as peace-bringer, Einhard clearly resembles Orosius' portrayal of

62 Innes 1997, 268-270.

63 Hellmann 1961, 182, 189.

64 Bagge 2012, 53-54. See also Dutton 2008, 29-31. In Dutton's view, Einhard embellishes Charlemagne's behaviour and omits his flaws deliberately. Therefore, Dutton considers *Vita Karoli Magn*i to be historically inaccurate.

Augustus as the divinely ordained bringer of peace.[65] Nevertheless, Orosius did not influence Einhard to the extent that Suetonius did. As opposed to Suetonius' *Vita divi Augusti*, Orosius' work did not offer the right foundation for what Einhard tried to achieve: while Einhard wanted to focus on the emperor's human side, his virtues and characteristics, Orosius' emperor in *Historiae Adversus Paganos* constituted a divine instrument that, by playing a fundamental part in the birth of Christ, heralded the ultimate victory of Christianity. This perception of Roman emperorship was of no use to Einhard. Charlemagne was to be the centre piece of *Vita Karoli Magni*, while in *Historiae Adversus Paganos*, Augustus was only a glorified means to Orosius' end game – the conversion of the pagan elite of the late Roman Empire.

Clearly Einhard had no interest in Augustus' Christian aspects. In contrast, Einhard and the other scholars in Charlemagne's intellectual circle were actually very intrigued by Augustus' pagan heritage. This was part of a broader movement of classical interest known as the Carolingian Renaissance.[66] The appreciation for the classical elements of Augustus' legacy is reflected in the way Charlemagne and his court identified themselves with classical Augustan literature. They gave each other aliases based on famed Augustan poets, and Charlemagne was praised in several poems as if he were Augustus himself.[67] For example, in Alcuin's *Carmina*, Charlemagne is addressed in the same manner as Octavian in Ovid's *Fasti*.[68] Einhard's application of Suetonius can also be understood in terms of this Renaissance: when narrating Charlemagne's life, he was merely doing so from within the classical tradition the emperor had established at court during his lifetime.[69] This widespread fascination only strengthens the notion that Orosius' Christian Augustus was not the popular view that the Carolingians had of the first Roman emperor.

Therefore, I conclude that the fundamental differences in respectively Orosius' and Einhard's motives for writing their works explain why Einhard did not use the influential Orosian interpretation of Augustus. It is true that in stressing

65 See Orosius, *Historiae Adversus Paganos* 6.20.5.

66 McKitterick 2005.

67 Alcuin named himself Flaccus (Horace's *cognomen*), while the poet and future bishop Modoin of Autun named himself Naso (Ovid's *cognomen*). Charlemagne's son in law, the diplomat and poet Angilbert, called himself Homer, and archbishop Riculf of Mainz, the Eastern-Frankish count Audulf and Charlemagne's treasurer Meginfried derived their aliases from Vergil's *Bucolica*.

68 Alcuin, *Carmina* 21, 25, 27, 82; Ovid, *Fasti* 2.127. See also the anonymous epic *Karolus magnus et Leo papa* v. 14, 92-94 (ca. 802), in which Charlemagne is mirrored to the Carthaginian queen Dido, Aeneas' lover in Vergil's *Aeneid*. Note: *Karolus magnus et Leo papa* and Alcuin's *Carmina* are numbered according to the classification in Dümmler 1881.

69 Innes 1997, 280.

Charlemagne's role as peace-bringer, Einhard seems to reflect Orosius' interpretation of Augustus. But the differences are more striking than the similarities: Einhard specifically portrayed his emperor as a *man*, who had achieved peace through his hard work and sublime qualities, while Orosius perceived Augustus as an unwitting, divine instrument used by God to establish peace and prosperity. This passive role ran counter to everything Einhard tried to achieve. Suetonius offered him a better model. After all, Einhard was in demand for a character-based biographical model, and the absence of any suitable medieval literary traditions in combination with the classicist revival sentiment of the Carolingian Renaissance led him to draw on the Roman secretary, instead of the late-antique Christian priest or contemporary writers. Although Einhard also borrowed part of his content from Suetonius, this happened far too inconsistently to support the argument that it was Einhard's main goal to portray Charlemagne as a classic Roman emperor. In the end, it was the layout of Suetonius' work, not the content, which influenced Charlemagne's biography the most.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to provide more insight into the reception of Augustus by Charlemagne and his intellectual circle. The main question posed was, whether this reception was predominantly influenced by the Christian ('Orosian') interpretation of Augustus or by Augustus' non-Christian legacy. After analysing primary sources and secondary literature, I have concluded that the Orosian perception of Augustus, despite being the prevalent image of Augustus throughout the Middle Ages, only marginally impacted Charlemagne's appropriation of Augustus.

This was reflected in what I referred to as the two pillars of Carolingian reception of Augustus. The first pillar, Charlemagne's imperial coronation in 800 AD, made extensive use of Augustus' secular legacy. After all, Charlemagne and his intellectual circle of scholars were looking for a precedent for his *de facto* position as ruler of a large Western-European *imperium* that could compete with his imperial Byzantine neighbours, not that of a divine puppet. By appropriating Augustus' legacy, he was able to claim the proper title for his unparalleled power. Some influence of Orosius' perception of emperorship, however, can be detected in Alcuin's thoughts on rulership, which might have incited Charlemagne to have himself crowned. While the prominence of Charlemagne's political motives makes this highly unlikely, Alcuin's letters show that Orosius' Augustus was at the very least present in Carolingian political thinking.

The second pillar of reception, Charlemagne's biography written

by Einhard, did not leave much room for the Christian interpretation of Augustus either. Einhard primarily turned to Suetonius' biography of Augustus as inspiration for the composition of his *Vita Karoli Magni*. In absence of any contemporary examples, Suetonius' *Vita divi Augusti* was the only source that could pose as a model for what Einhard wanted to achieve: a biography which focused on Charlemagne's human side, in particular on his deeds, talents and traits. It was only in stressing Charlemagne' ability to procure peace without fighting that Einhard seemed to adhere to Orosius' Augustus. But overall, Orosius' perception of Augustus did not yield the desired particular qualities and as such was of no use to Einhard.

Therefore, as my research has pointed out, no immediate traces of this Orosian perception can be found in Charlemagne's two main forms of reception. Only a marginal presence of Orosius in Carolingian thought has been uncovered. This leads me to the only plausible conclusion, namely that Orosius' direct influence on Charlemagne's reception of Augustus was negligible. On the one hand, because of Orosius' medieval prevalence, this is surprising, but on the other hand, it can be reasonably explained by Charlemagne's need for a political precedent, not a spiritual one. In the end, Orosius' popular conception of Augustus was definitely not on Charlemagne's mind when he looked back at the renowned first emperor of Rome. Instead, he saw the perfect role model of a powerful monarch in a Christian context.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank dr. Martijn Icks (University of Amsterdam), whose enthusiastic and intellectual support encouraged me to write this article. Further words of gratitude are owed to the two anonymous peer reviewers, as well as the editors of Kleos, for their valuable feedback.

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