

On the use of the written word by the government of the
Carolingians: Can the reign of Charlemagne really be called
“the Golden Age of the capitularies”?

by TSUDA Takuro

The primary purpose of this article is to offer a new perspective on the use of the written word by the government of the Carolingian through an examination of the “capitularies”. The capitularies are traditionally recognized as “the edicts of the kings”; and it is widely accepted that their “Golden Age” occurred during the reign of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious. The research to date has concentrated mainly on manuscripts, but this method is not appropriate for an analysis of the governmental system of the Carolingian age, because manuscripts were composed some time after the initial authoring of any given text and show us only information about their later phases. In order to clarify the earliest phase, the author explores references to the use of documents in narrative sources.

His results show that with some exceptions, there are only two categories of information about the use of the written word which emerge in the narrative sources; namely *lex* (or “texts that should be added to *lex*”) and “texts on behalf of the church”. In view of the quantity of such cases, there is little diversity during the Carolingian age, a fact that would belie the alleged “Golden Age”; moreover, references to texts for the church can also be found in the east Frankish kingdom, which historians have considered as a land where no capitulary was issued.

The reason for the discrepancy between the author’s conclusions and the conventional view concerning a “Golden Age” lies in the fact that many “capitularies” of Charlemagne and Louis were texts which had only subordinate functions for the communication, for in the later Carolingian age the communication system had been transformed into a face-to-face system via assemblies; and rulers had not as much need for such texts as before. There are

also indications that in the west Frankish kingdom fundamental changes appeared to have occurred in the use of the written word by the government.

The age of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious can be called the “Golden Age” of those texts that had only subordinate functions in communicating the wishes of the kings; that is to say Charlemagne and Louis the Pious should be not regarded as “great legislators who issued many written edicts”. Therefore, we should reexamine the use of the written word in each kingdom without considering the text category of “capitulary”.