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Royal Power in the Late Carolingian Age
Charles III the Simple and His Predecessors

English Summary

Charles III the Simple (893/898−923) only became king when nobles rebelling against the Robertian Odo were in need of a candidate for the West Frankish throne. Posthumously born to Louis II the Stammerer, he was of Carolingian blood and thus able to provide the rebellion with an appearance of legitimacy. The rebels on the other hand offered Charles the opportunity of a lifetime: after 14 years of being ignored by the leading nobles of the West Frankish realm, he was finally able to succeed his father. Yet, while his reign lasted for 25 years, it ended how it had started and Charles was deposed by a rebellion led by Robert of Neustria. The circumstances of Charles' elevation and deposition are among the reasons for his image as a weak king, unable to control the nobles, and why he counts as a prime example of the "decline and fall" of the Carolingian empire towards the end of the 9th century. Yet, what does "weak king" mean? Modern scholarship has long discarded the view of kingship as a question of royal orders and noble obedience. Instead, it is understood as the result of a process involving both the ruler and those around him. Successful kingship depended on the ruler's ability to integrate the nobles into this process, to mediate between their and his own interests and to create consensus.

This understanding serves as basis for this new approach to fathoming out the possibilities and limits of late Carolingian royal power. First, the focus is set on the relations between the king and the nobles around him, interpreting royal actions as the result of their interactions. Second, the customary hierarchy of the source material is inverted. Royal diplomas, ideally suited to reveal the networks of royal power, are placed at the centre of the analysis and subjected to rigorous contextualisation, treating narrative sources as secondary. Third, the timeframe of this study is extended back to the late 870s, covering the decades during which the political landscape of the West Frankish realm underwent drastic changes that determined the framework for Charles the Simple's rule. Thus, not only these developments are revealed, but also comparisons can be made.

Charles' first task after he became the sole king of the West Frankish realm was to integrate his old opponents into his rule. This meant that he had to bridge the old rivalry between these individuals and his allies from the struggle with Odo, allies who now occupied key positions in the circle around him. A dominating group of nobles agitating against their political rivals at the royal court was nothing new and can also be observed during the reigns of Louis the

Stammerer and his sons Louis III and Carloman II. Under Charles the Fat this situation changed. The emperor was able to promote men of his own choice since his power base was located in the East Frankish realm and, equally important, key members of this dominating group such as Hugh the Abbot and Gauzlin died. Death also opened the door to new political solutions for Charles the Simple. In his case it was the murder of his key supporter, Fulk of Reims, which allowed him to integrate his most important opponent into his rule: Robert of Neustria.

Ensuring Robert's cooperation was certainly a crucial factor to Charles' rule. Yet, his dependency on the *marchio* (or others like him, notably William the Pious or Richard the Justiciar) should not be overestimated. Early on, Charles was able to create a network of alliances that served as a counterweight. However, to stabilise the realm in the long run, such opposition needed to be overcome. Charles' remarkable gift in integrating Robert and other powerful nobles into his rule is demonstrated by the great successes of his rule: the change in strategy towards the Northmen represented by the treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte as well as the integration of the leading Lotharingian nobles into the circle around him after the acquisition of the *regnum* was accomplished without estranging those of the Western realm. This acquisition also reveals how his political room for manoeuvre had increased compared to his predecessors: given to Louis the Younger as a lease after the death of Louis the Stammerer, Charles' brothers efforts to regain the *regnum* had been thwarted by their dependency on the alliance with the East Frankish rulers to defend the realm against the Northmen and the rebellious Boso. Charles, unhindered by such alliances, was able to pursue his interests much more aggressively against his neighbours. However, the lack of such alliances meant that he missed out on their stabilising effects in regard to the relations between him and his nobles, a circumstance he tried to correct when his relations with the said nobles deteriorated.

The key to understanding this deterioration lies in the importance of trust in the relations between the ruler and the nobles around him. The rebellion against Odo was the result of a crisis of trust that developed when Odo repeatedly acted against the interests and expectations of the West Frankish nobles. Similarly, Charles also appears to have developed a strong tendency to emphasise his majesty and royal prerogative towards the end of his rule, his famous favouring of the ill-liked Hagano being but one example. Yet, where Odo also achieved suppression of the rebellion by taking actions that restored trust in him, Charles continued on his path up to the point where even his closest allies turned away from him. Thus, Charles' neglect of ensuring the cooperation of the nobles and the creation of consensus deprived him of the foundations of his rule and marked the limits of his royal power.