 transformation

Christian hermeneutics and narratives of war in the Carolingian empire

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Abstract:	<p>The Carolingian empire in western Europe (c.700-900AD) has long been defined by its military expansion and Christian renewal. Carolingian historical narratives portrayed their victories as divine gifts and so encouraged soldiers and commanders to interpret their actions within a theological hermeneutic. Previous scholars have seen this hermeneutic as justifying war. This paper shall argue instead that these narratives reflected and reinforced the hermeneutic with which soldiers interpreted their campaigns and the military spirituality practised as a result. It shall examine how various histories interpreted military events and how these interpretations related to their audiences' spirituality and military experience.</p>

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The Carolingian empire

Over the course of the eighth century, the Carolingian dynasty led the Frankish people to a position of unrivalled dominance in western Europe, the largest such political unit there since the collapse of Roman power in the fifth century.¹ In 751, the Carolingian ruler Pippin (*d.*768) deposed the ruling Merovingians, establishing the Carolingians as a royal dynasty which reigned until 888. Under Pippin’s son Charlemagne (*r.*768–814), Frankish dominance reached new heights through further campaigns. Charlemagne ruled from northern Spain in the west to the Danube in the east, from central Italy in the south to the Danish border in the north, and in 800 he was crowned Emperor by the Pope in Rome.

Although rule of the empire was divided between several kings from 840, the Carolingians continued to campaign energetically (albeit sometimes against each other). They also contended with mounting invasions by Vikings, Saracens, Slavs, and Hungarian nomads. The transformation of the empire after the last sole Carolingian ruler died in 888 gave rise to the political landscape of medieval Europe and, with it, the recognisable geography of France, Germany, and Italy. In addition to their military success, the Carolingians oversaw a widespread programme of Christian reform and cultural renewal, which put the Christian tradition at the heart of Frankish politics and self-consciousness.² This renewal affected literature, worship, law and morality, and prompted missionary activity in Germany, eastern

Europe, and Scandinavia. All of this left an enduring legacy which was to shape the medieval west.

The Carolingian enterprise was, therefore, characterised by both warfare and Christian revival and so provides an important case study for the history of violence and religious hermeneutics. Scholars increasingly recognize the influence of Carolingian thought on Pope Urban II, who called the First Crusade in 1095.³ Despite their impact on western culture, however, the Carolingians are often ignored or overshadowed by the crusades themselves.⁴ Yet the Carolingians' religious approaches to war differed greatly from the crusades. They show just how varied the Christian tradition could be in engaging with military action and the warrior cultures which surrounded it.

This paper will explore how Carolingian historians used Christian rhetoric to interpret military violence. Without putting forward the Carolingians as a model for Christians in conflict situations, this article aims to understand their beliefs on their own terms, and show how Christianity influenced their interpretation of warfare and how the demands of warfare influenced Christian practice. We shall see how their belief that battles were won only by God's help was communicated by these narratives to their military audiences. Such a belief drew on theology and liturgy to provide a hermeneutic through which military action could be interpreted in a manner consistent with Christian doctrine. Rather than seeing statements about God's help as justifying warfare, as previous scholars have done,

this paper will argue that they demonstrate two related processes. Firstly, Carolingian histories reflected the spiritual beliefs and practice of Frankish armies. Secondly, they commended and reinforced these patterns of belief and behaviour. The military interests of these texts' audiences was, therefore, integral to how violence was interpreted in this literary form. Historical narratives showed Frankish warriors how they should interpret their military actions. They were handbooks in applying Christian hermeneutics to the dangerous world of early medieval warfare.

Christianity and just war

Scholars have long noted how easily Frankish thinkers connected Christianity with warfare (as they did with politics). They have primarily suggested that the Carolingians used Christianity to justify military action. Frederick Russell argued that Charlemagne's wars were 'justified by [his] authority and ecclesiastical purposes', such as the defence of the church or the conversion of pagans.⁵ Sedulius Scottus (fl. c.840–74), advising rulers how to be good Christians, wrote that if the pagan Nebuchadnezzar was zealous for God (c.f. Dan. 3.29) 'how much more fitting that orthodox rulers should be zealous against the enemies of the Christian faith'.⁶ Hincmar of Reims, another theologian and royal adviser (fl. c.820–882), wrote that 'they do not sin who wage wars of which God is the author'.⁷ The religious language of the narrative sources which we shall be considering has, therefore, been seen as a retrospective justification for the campaigns which they describe. However, while

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9 theologians justified warfare in Christian terms, historians were far more concerned with
10 broken treatises or unprovoked enemy attacks. For example, the *Royal Frankish Annals*
11 (henceforth *RFA*) described how in 761 the Aquitanian duke, Waifar, 'showed little regard
12 for his hostages and his oaths' and so attacked the Carolingians, forcing King Pippin to
13 attack Aquitaine 'because of Duke Waifar's slights'.⁸ Only once did the *RFA* use religion
14 explicitly to justify a campaign: Charlemagne campaigned against the nomadic Avars in
15 791, because of the 'evil done against the holy church and the Christian people'.⁹ Given the
16 rarity of such arguments, it is difficult to see Carolingian historians presenting Christian
17 interpretations of wars in order to justify them.
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30 The recurring language of God's favour towards the Franks in these histories has also been
31 seen as propaganda. As Beryl Smalley put it, 'all too easily, the Christian God became a
32 tribal god, fighting on the Historian's side'.¹⁰ Christopher Tyerman accused the *RFA* of
33 displaying 'God's approval of Frankish imperialism and genocide'.¹¹ This risks portraying
34 religious hermeneutics as simply a means to a political end. More recent scholars have,
35 however, begun to take more seriously the importance of religion to the military self-
36 consciousness of Frankish aristocrats. Eric Goldberg argues that King Louis the German
37 (r.840–876) 'fostered an ideology of holy war and proto-crusade', since his share of the
38 empire brought him into frequent conflict with non-Christians.¹² Janet Nelson has seen in
39 some Frankish aristocrats the origins of ideas of knighthood and chivalry which would
40 dominate the remainder of the middle ages.¹³ Such scholarship takes seriously the sincerity
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with which Frankish historians described God's involvement in the military struggles of recent memory. Rather than retrospective justification, we should see these narratives reflecting the beliefs about war of broader Carolingian society.

Historical narratives and Frankish military culture

The Carolingian cultural renewal produced a large number of historical narratives, to the extent that scholars have spoken of a 'historiographical revolution'.¹⁴ These texts were not simply records of events, but articulated the worldviews of the communities in which they were written, governing their behaviour and self-consciousness.¹⁵ The *RFA*, a hugely influential text, seem to have been written for the elites at Charlemagne's court, the very men who helped to build the empire. Although written from the 780s onwards in several stages and by different authors, they provided this courtly community with a narrative of its formation and triumph over several decades. The *Annals of Fulda* (henceforth *AF*), another important text, seem to have been written for the men who later helped build the east Frankish kingdom in the decades after 840.¹⁶ Like the *RFA*, the *AF* were written over decades by several anonymous authors, each of whom tried to make sense of a changing world by producing a coherent narrative. Although possibly not written at Fulda itself, the annals shared the interests of the Rhineland political elites more broadly, especially those of the bishops of Mainz (near Fulda). These Rhineland elites played an important role in east Frankish politics and warfare in late ninth century and the *AF* reflected this perspective.

Historians' audiences included the men who fought for the Carolingians. There has been great debate about who fought in Carolingian armies, which nonetheless seem to have drawn together many sections of society, whether aristocratic landowners or those of lesser social status.¹⁷ Former generations of scholars believed Frankish aristocrats to be illiterate and barely Christian. It is increasingly clear, however, that warriors could be literate, educated, and seeking entertainment, edification, and professional counsel in various texts.¹⁸ Count Eberhard of Friuli (*d.*866) bequeathed a Roman military handbook to his sons so that they could learn how to lead armies in their posts on the frontier.¹⁹ Psalters, moral literature, and prayer books found their way into lay aristocratic hands. These literary interests extended to histories: one Count Conrad commissioned a historical miscellany about Alexander the Great for his edification.²⁰ The lay general Nithard (*d.*844) wrote a history of the civil war of 841–3 in which he had fought, showing that lay figures produced historical literature themselves. Supposedly more literate figures such as bishops and abbots also (controversially) led armies,²¹ and so needed the military advice provided by historical literature. Liutbert, archbishop of Mainz (*d.*889), probably patronised the *AF*, in which he and his warriors could have read about their own campaigns.

The military elites of the Christian west were increasingly educated and seeking to equip themselves both intellectually and spiritually for battle. In historical literature they would have found exemplary accounts of politics and warfare to teach them their craft. It is

significant, therefore, that these accounts were bursting with Christian imagery. We are better informed about the Franks' interpretations of warfare than about those of many other early medieval societies. These texts did not adopt a uniform approach. The interpretation of military events depended on context and their own agenda. Most histories, however, shared a common emphasis on divine agency within their narratives. Frankish scholars interpreted the history of recent campaigns as governed by God's will, which in turn affected the religious practices of Frankish soldiers.

Spiritual context of warfare

When the Frankish aristocracy went to war, they did so in a potent atmosphere of spiritual activity. It is in this context that the annals need to be studied, because it shows the annals to be representative of broader spiritual perspectives. Churches back at home would be praying for them and soldiers would be preached to by bishops and priests accompanying the army.²² Armies might prepare for battle by performing penitential rites and by petitioning God for His support. Charlemagne describes such prayers in a letter to his wife, Fastrada, while on campaign against the Avars in 791:

We have with the help of God, celebrated three days of litanies. We have beseeched God's mercy, that He might deign to grant us peace, health, victory,

and a successful campaign and so that, in His mercy and piety, He might be a helper and counsellor and defender for us in all our difficulties.²³

A similar ritual is found in a prayer book of King Louis the German. It describes the king and his warriors praying before a large wooden cross that

forgiveness of sins may be granted and conceded to all here down on bended knee entreating your majesty...Grant...that we frequently witness with our eyes the triumph of divine humility which overthrows the arrogance of our enemy as often as we contemplate it in our mind, and may we attain confidence of strength against the enemy and greater grace in devoted humility to you.²⁴

Before battle Charlemagne and Louis' men confessed their sins and prayed together for victory. Following victory, they celebrated partly through hymns of thanksgiving. Such an account can be found in the 'Astronomer' (fl.840s), an anonymous biographer of the Emperor Louis the Pious (r.814–840). The Astronomer describes Louis, as a young prince, capturing Barcelona in 801.

He refrained from entering until he could decide how to consecrate this desired and welcome victory to God's name with suitable thanksgiving. On the

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next day his priests and clergy preceded him and his army through the gate of the city. In majestic solemnity and singing psalms...they gave thanks to God for the victory divinely bestowed upon them.²⁵

We should not underestimate the impact of such celebrations on these warriors. As Stuart Airlie argues, ‘glory [and] pious thanks to God who had favoured the righteous Franks...came together in an intoxicating cocktail of military victory’.²⁶ Military action was thus framed by rituals which drew attention to God’s active role in battle and to the warriors’ own Christian faith. Even for civilians, warfare was bound up with religious ritual: not only did monks and priests pray for those on campaign, but the anniversaries of victories could be marked liturgically for many years by monastic communities.²⁷

Such observances prepared the faithful warrior for the danger and unpredictability of battle and the possibility of death, and probably heightened morale.²⁸ However, they also conveyed important theological assumptions about battle. The Carolingian warrior was encouraged to set his mind on God when on campaign. However legitimate we see this approach, it would be perverse not to expect this to affect how war was experienced and remembered. This has been shown to be the case with more recent conflicts, such as the First World War, for which we have more direct evidence. Michael Snape has shown the vibrancy of spiritual belief and prayer among private soldiers.²⁹ It need not have been so different for their Frankish predecessors. The warriors who read historical narratives would

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9 already have been encouraged by liturgy and ritual to understand their military experience
10 within a Christian hermeneutic.
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15 The liturgical texts discussed above shared important theological beliefs with contemporary
16 theological works, firstly about God's power and secondly about human response. These
17 beliefs pervaded the religious hermeneutics of violence set forth by narrative sources. The
18 first belief was that God had complete power over the outcome of battles, which was the
19 basis on which prayers were offered. Hincmar of Reims cited Augustine to this effect:
20 'Augustine demonstrates that victory is given by the Almighty, through his angel, to whom
21 He wills and orders to give victory'.³⁰ The emphasis here was on divine, rather than human,
22 power and so encouraged humility on the part of the Christian warrior. The second belief
23 was that, as a result, Christian warriors should trust God alone for survival and success.
24 Hincmar concluded from his reading of Augustine that 'faith in battle should not be in
25 large numbers, nor despair in few, if the Lord be with those fighting'. This was inspired by
26 Judas Maccabeus' words: 'the success of war is not in the multitude of the army, but
27 strength comes from heaven' (1 Macc. 3.17–19). Judas was also cited by Sedulius Scottus
28 who then told Christian commanders: 'let the help of God be implored, in whose hand
29 salvation, peace, and victory rest'.³¹ As with the rest of the Christian life, warfare was no
30 place to rely on one's own strength but on God's grace. These ideas frequently informed
31 how historians told the stories of military activity.
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Narrative hermeneutics of warfare: divine agency and human community

Carolingian histories clearly told their audiences that victories were won by God’s will. A particular focus on divine agency emerged in those histories associated with Charlemagne’s court in the late eighth century, as we can see from one example from the *RFA*, an account of Charlemagne’s campaign against the Saxons in 783.³² In it, Charlemagne and his men attacked a Saxon army and, ‘with the Lord aiding, the Franks emerged as victors’. Battle was joined a second time and again, ‘with the Lord helping, the Franks emerged as victors’. These annals attributed such recent victories to God, working through the warriors at court for whom they wrote. Very occasionally, victories might be won by miracles without any reference to the Franks: one Saxon army was routed by the apparition of ‘two young men on white horses’ as the Christians looked on.³³ It was far more common, however, for God to be shown working through the Franks, which did not preclude their own human agency.³⁴ The annalists thus chose to celebrate the happy memory of these human successes within a broader theological framework. These might have been read as triumphalist and clearly heightened the legitimacy and supremacy of the Carolingians.³⁵ They could, however, also be read as grateful acknowledgements of the Franks’ need for God. In that sense, these narratives are related to the hymns of thanksgiving which followed victory: they acknowledged God’s merciful provision of victories granted to His people. Frankish self-consciousness, as reflected in the *RFA*, was bound up with

dependence on their Lord God. After all, they had created the greatest western empire since Rome — how could God not have been on their side?

Charlemagne's Saxon enemies described in the *RFA* were, of course, pagans and their conversion formed a major theme in the narrative. Despite this, the author rarely stated that the Saxons' paganism or the Franks' Christianity was the reason that God sided with the Franks (except *RFA* 776). In fact, God first intervenes in the narrative during campaigns against the Christian Lombards and Aquitanians (*RFA* 755, 769). On both occasions, King Pippin leads the Franks to victory 'with the Lord helping'. The *AF* reported a battle between two Carolingian kings within a similar theological framework. 'Without doubt God fought against Charles in these battles', the annalist wrote of King Charles the Bald (r.840–77), while comparing Charles to the Biblical villain Sennacherib.³⁶ The religious language here was easily as potent and varied as any account of Christians fighting pagans. Religious language seems instead to have reflected the Frankish experience of war in its entirety, be it against other Christians or pagans.³⁷

Carolingian historians showed God's role in events when they mattered most, often personally, to their audiences. The *Continuation of the Chronicle of Fredegar*, for example, described Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel (d.741), defeating the Saracens 'with Christ helping, who is King of kings and Lord of lords'.³⁸ The *Continuation* was written between c.768 and 786 for an aristocratic family whose ancestor, Hildebrand, had fought

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for Charles.³⁹ This campaign and God's involvement were personally relevant to those reading the text, as well as stating God's favour towards the Carolingian dynasty. The Astronomer conveyed this when he described God saving some of Prince Louis the Pious' men from an ambush. He wrote that 'if divine provision had not prevented *our* men from entering [the valley], the enemy could have killed them'.⁴⁰ The Astronomer assumed a common identity between the characters in the narrative and his audience. He also testified to what he believed was God's intimate involvement in the details of the campaign. This was more a matter of discerning God's role in the actual experience of war than justifying the events that had already taken place.

These examples also show that, where Frankish historians were concerned, divine aid was not confined to kings. Entire Frankish armies were seen as under God's care, often because these soldiers mattered to historians as much as their kings. This broad scope also reflected the Carolingians' reliance on the aristocracy to fight and lead their armies. The Astronomer, for example, described how in 816 'eastern Franks and the counts of the Saxon people' defeated the Slavs 'with Christ's help'.⁴¹ Late in the ninth century, some histories even narrowed the focus of divine aid to specific, named characters. For example, the *AF* described how the local count 'Henry and Bishop Arn came against the Vikings with a strong force of the eastern Franks' and 'with God's help the Christians had the victory'.⁴² Henry and Arn were significant figures in the aristocratic circles for which the *AF* were written. Henry was also a key local figure on whom the distant Emperor Charles the Fat

(r.884–887), who was often in Italy, could rely on to lead troops against the Vikings. This shifting of military responsibility meant that divine aid was perceived in a more specific and localised way. This was, of course, partly because this perspective came from Fulda, which was concerned about the Vikings nearby and far more grateful to Henry than to the distant emperor.⁴³

Although we have seen King Charles the Bald being compared to Sennacherib, Scripture seems noticeably absent from most of these examples. Scripture no doubt inspired Carolingian historians' emphasis on divine aid but its influence often remained in the background. This is unusual as the Bible was integral to Carolingian culture.⁴⁴ Contemporary lawcodes sometimes drew explicit links between the Franks and the Biblical past. One example from 789 spoke of Josiah's reforming example (*c.f.* 2 Kings 22-3) and used the Pentateuch, Gospels, and Epistles as foundations for Frankish law.⁴⁵ Mary Garrison, however, has shown that it was not universally assumed that the Franks were God's new chosen people, and this diversity of interpretation is apparent from historical literature.⁴⁶ The *Annals of Petau* provide the most explicit but also the most exceptional connection between divine agency and Scripture. The annalist writes that 'God fought for the lord-king Charlemagne, just as he did for Moses and the sons of Israel when Pharaoh was drowned in the Red Sea'.⁴⁷ This might imply that Frankish history was a straightforward extension of Biblical history. It is, however, extremely rare to see God's contemporary aid being connected to a Biblical event by Frankish histories in this way: the

Annales of Petau only survive in a single manuscript. Whereas most historians used divine agency to describe warfare, there was no such consistency in using Scripture.

Scripture did not provide a distinctively sacred narrative onto which Frankish history could be mapped or be seen as imitating. It was more common for historians to draw more specifically historical parallels between Frankish and Biblical heroes. The *AF*, for example, compared the heroic Robert the Strong (killed by Vikings in 866) to Judas Maccabeus.⁴⁸ There are many implications to this parallel. Judas' martyrdom might have implied that Robert died a martyr. The Maccabees' success against the Greeks hints that the Franks could also defeat the Vikings. These interpretations, however, are brought by the reader to the text. There is, in fact, little to distinguish Biblical parallels as drawn from sacred history from those drawn from secular, Roman, history. The *AF* compared two of its villains elsewhere to Catiline and to Jugurtha in the same way it compared Robert to Maccabeus (*AF* 869, 875). Scripture did not, therefore, seem to form a definitive part of Frankish historians' hermeneutics of warfare. It no doubt informed attitudes, but did so in a way which remained implicit within the narrative.

Narrative and theological reflection

This hermeneutical toolkit did not remain static over the course of the period. While God's agency remained at the centre of these military narratives, ninth-century historians became

more varied in their approach. Literature itself was developing and historians also had to record new military contexts, such as civil wars or Viking raiding. The changing experience of war continued to drive literary theological reflection and this reflection influenced beliefs about war.

Some writers began to speculate on God's purposes in acting as He did. The *AF*'s author was convinced that God fought against King Charles the Bald (as we saw earlier) so that Charles might 'realise that victory in war lies not in the greatness of armies but that strength comes from heaven'.⁴⁹ This echoes both 1 Macc. 3.17 and Hincmar's emphasis on the superiority of faith over numbers, as cited above. God might also be seen as using the Franks to punish the (politically) sinful. Twice the *AF* described the Franks killing rebels or traitors as God giving those enemies what they deserved (*AF* 869, 885). This cast those Franks as instruments of God's purpose, further emphasising God's relationship with these texts' heroes and communities.

Though God's purposes may have seemed obvious in victory, but in defeat they became more opaque. This led to a further literary development, as Frankish historians confronted how their religious language might be related to defeat. Some authors saw defeats, especially those at Viking hands, as God's punishment for Frankish sin. The *Annals of St-Bertin* reported that the Vikings 'devastated all the coastal regions, plundering and burning. God in his goodness and justice, so much offended by our sins, had thus worn down the

lands and kingdoms of the Christians'.⁵⁰ The *Annals of Xanten* finished its history, which included plenty of Viking raiding, with the comment: 'the Lord constantly distressed his people with various plagues, visiting their transgressions upon them with the rod and their sins upon them with the whip' (*c.f.* Ps. 89.32).⁵¹ This interpretation can also be found in contemporary literature arguing for church reforms in response to Viking successes. A synod at Metz in 888 observed that 'we should seek Christ's piety, by which the pagans will be kept out'.⁵² The theological interpretation of historical events affected contemporary reforming policy. While this emphasis on divine judgement may seem depressing to a modern audience, this approach was very much a pastoral one for Frankish historians. In these accounts, they diagnosed the problem (sin), and offered both a reason for defeat (God's justice) and a solution (reform and repentance).

This interpretation was, however, too excessive for some. An alternative approach to defeat was not to mention God at all. When Count Henry was finally killed by the Vikings in 886, the *AF* reported his death without any religious interpretation, despite the length of the passage. Henry was too great a hero for the *AF*'s author not to see his death as the absence of God. This was itself an iteration of the hermeneutic: God's presence or absence in victory or defeat was communicated by the very texture of the narrative.

Narrative and warrior spirituality

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9 The formal properties of narrative literature allowed similar variations in how an author
10 might communicate their religious hermeneutic. It was increasingly common for histories
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12 author's own theological statements.
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19 The *RFA*, for example, described the litanies on the Avar campaign about which
20 Charlemagne wrote to his wife. The Franks 'implored God's help for the welfare of the
21 army, for the assistance of our Lord Jesus Christ and for victory'. In battle, the 'Lord struck
22 the Avars with fear' and the Franks returned home 'praising God for such a victory'.⁵³ Just
23 as the experience of the campaign was framed by prayer so was the written form in which
24 it was remembered. These rituals had their own significance in being performed but also
25 played an important role in the narrative.⁵⁴ Portraying Christians as seeking God's aid and
26 thanking Him for victory further communicated that such victories were gifts from God.
27 These rituals of penance, petition, and thanksgiving implicitly communicated what is
28 elsewhere said explicitly about Christ's role in Charlemagne's victory.
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43 The performance of litanies arose from the Carolingians' awareness of their sinfulness and
44 need for forgiveness. Sinfulness could also, as we have seen, explain why God allowed
45 Christians to be defeated. Penitential ritual before battle not only prepared warriors for
46 death but also implored God to show mercy in granting victory, thereby linking personal
47 piety with the theological interpretation of history. This is communicated by the *Ludwigslied*
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poem (composed c.882), which portrayed Viking raiding as God's punishment for sin, thereby offering a theological interpretation of historical events. However, the poem then described the Franks singing the *Kyrie Eleison* in penance as battle with the Vikings began.⁵⁵ Within the text, the theological interpretation of history was paralleled by describing the appropriate ritual response by human characters. The description and interpretation mutually reinforce one another.

Frankish historians increasingly reflected on the spirituality of warriors as they faced battle. As we have seen in both theological and narrative texts, only God could be relied upon for victory, and historians were keen to show this by both negative and positive examples. The *AF* explained one defeat by the Bohemians as the fault of prestige-hungry commanders quarrelling amongst themselves. When they attacked, they 'immediately learnt what the strength and daring of the quarrelsome can do without the fear of God'.⁵⁶ Quarrelling and competition could be a common and practical problem,⁵⁷ and so it is significant that the annals framed his rebuke in spiritual terms. It suggests that contemporaries linked military professionalism with spirituality. The *Annals of St-Vaast*, written Arras in the 880s and 890s, was especially concerned about Frankish military professionalism because Arras lay in the direct path of the Viking raids. The annalist laments Frankish ineffectiveness not only militarily but also spiritually. The annalist wrote about how, in 881, a Frankish force fought a Viking raiding party and gained the upper hand. However, the Franks 'began boasting that they had achieved this by their own strength, instead of giving God the glory'. They

suffered significant casualties before finally winning.⁵⁸ The same annals described elsewhere what truly Christian warriors ought to do. When the Vikings besieged Paris the Christians ‘were always delivered as they cried unto the Lord with great earnestness’.⁵⁹ In both cases, the *Annals of St-Vaast* hinted that spiritual attitude (or lack of it) determined the outcome of battle and commended this to their readers. Spirituality was an important part of the mechanics of warrior culture. While fighting itself could sometimes be critiqued,⁶⁰ it was the way warfare was undertaken that attracted religious comment.

Some Frankish narratives gave words to these prayers. The *Waltharius* poem, a Latin epic, offered Frankish warriors a fictional ideal of what such spirituality might look like. The hero, Walter, prays before a battle ‘to the maker of the world...without whose permission or even command nothing stands...I give thanks that He has defended me from the unjust blows’, thereby expressing his dependence on God. Walter continues: ‘I beseech my kind Lord with a repentant mind’, thereby acknowledging his sin in petitioning God.⁶¹ We find in Walter’s speech the same themes of repentance and submission to God expressed in battlefield ritual. To the modern mind, especially in Protestant thought, ritual can be seen as precluding heartfelt or ‘real’ personal prayer. This dichotomy does not hold for the spiritual life we are shown in Carolingian narratives. They assume that rituals went alongside what we might call ‘personal’ prayer.⁶²

Communicating hermeneutics of violence

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These interactions between description and interpretation came together in speeches given by characters within these narratives, which pointed to God’s work and encouraged their listeners (within the narrative or its audience) to depend on God. These speeches communicated the theological view of the author and showed how a Frankish warrior ought to see God at work. These speeches illustrated the same process that the histories themselves undertook, of acknowledging God’s role in history. Two final case studies from the *AF* illustrate this and many of the ways already discussed in which Carolingian historians interpreted battles for their audiences.

The first example involves the Viking leader Rudolf attacking Frisia in 873.⁶³ Rudolf was, the annalist wrote, ignorant of the ‘revenge which was to pursue him from heaven’. This portrayed Christian defenders pre-emptively as agents of divine justice. Before battle the Christians ‘invoked the Lord, who had so often preserved them from their enemies’. Once again the *AF* commended spiritual submission to God but also drew attention to the Christians’ memory of God’s faithfulness in battle. The latter was something which the text itself did for its readers. Rudolf was killed and the battle pauses. The Christian commander (who was incidentally a converted Viking) reminds his men that ‘it is not due to our strength, but to God’s that we few have prevailed against so many’. This unnamed character attests to God’s continued faithfulness in this battle. His language of the few defeating the many with God’s strength echoes the now familiar words of Judas

Maccebeus, that 'the success of war is not in the multitude of the army, but strength comes from heaven' (1 Macc. 3.19). This commander adds that 'the outcome of battle is uncertain', heightening the sense of dependence on God. The Christians, therefore, take counsel and negotiate a truce, causing the Vikings to leave. Practical military action was shown to be informed by a proper spiritual attitude.

Our final case study comes from a Bavarian author who continued the *AF*.⁶⁴ He described the victory of King Arnulf (r.887–99) over the Vikings at Leuven in 891. Arnulf addressed his men thus: 'while you have honoured God, and have always protected the fatherland under God's grace, you have been invincible', appealing to their memory of military experience and God's mercy. He then outlined Viking crimes against the Church and fatherland which needed punishing by the Franks. He called on the Franks to 'attack our enemies in God's name, avenging not our shame, but that of Him who can do all things!' encouraging his men to see themselves as instruments of God's justice. As with the previous example, Arnulf finished his speech with a call to action, in this case, to attack. This shows how the spiritual informed the practical. Battle was joined and the annalist reported that 'God's grace granted victory'. Arnulf's speech contributed to this interpretation in advance. Although listing the Viking atrocities justified their attack, it also explained why God had graciously granted victory to the Franks. Arnulf's speech also illustrated how commanders might spiritually encourage their troops and how those troops should see themselves. After the battle, Arnulf 'ordered litanies to be celebrated and he

went in procession there with his army singing praises to God, who had given such a victory to his men'. Arnulf and his men's ritual behaviour shared the interpretation of the victory offered by the annalist. In all these different ways, therefore, the account demonstrated both God's hand in victory but also how Christian warriors ought to see it for themselves. As with all the texts discussed, the narrative of the battle of Leuven constructed a worldview in which warfare could not be interpreted outside a Christian framework.

Conclusion

King Arnulf appealed to his men to remember how God had protected them in the past. This hints at how the historical narratives we have discussed might have functioned in Carolingian military society. Far more than simply describing events, they applied clear theological hermeneutics to the memory and military self-consciousness of the Frankish soldiers. They pointed their readers to where God had been faithful or just and, in so doing, acknowledged His power over their past and present. In this, they shared the outlook expressed not only by eminent theologians but also the liturgy with which Frankish armies went to war.

The texts of the Christian tradition encouraged Frankish annalists and warriors to view all aspects of life through a Christian lens. As warfare was integral to life of the Carolingian

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9 elites, this too needed to be related to God. Narrative, however, offered a different means
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11 for this outlook to be communicated. God could be *shown* to be faithful as well as declared
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13 to be such. Narratives also showed their audiences where they and their patrons, rulers, and
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15 colleagues could be found in the story of God's mercy. Whereas liturgical and theological
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17 literature inhabited the distant and sacred narrative of Scripture or made abstract assertions
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19 about God, narrative history inhabited the lived experience of God's recent mercies. Their
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21 repeated and mounting references to submission to God commended the proper human
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23 response. The Franks were told be a faithful people and should engage in precisely the
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25 acknowledgement of God's mercy which the texts themselves were doing. We see in these
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27 texts the footprint of the spiritual dynamics of Carolingian armies.
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33 To acknowledge the sincerity of these dynamics, however, is not to condone them. It lies
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35 outside the historical approach of this paper to offer a contemporary ethical judgement on
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37 the Carolingians. It should nonetheless be stated that the Carolingians' Christian
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39 hermeneutics grew from their assumption that war could be legitimate for Christians.
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41 There were many in that preceding Christian tradition (whose voices were less perhaps
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43 accessible to the Carolingians) who would have disagreed strongly with this approach.⁶⁵
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45 Modern interpreters, similarly, would be wise to question the enterprises which the
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47 Carolingians saw within a theological framework. It is unclear how far Jesus' teaching was
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49 allowed to critique these fundamental assumptions about war.⁶⁶ It is hoped, however, that
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understanding the Carolingians on their own terms shows their self-conscious dependence on God in all of life, which, rightly or wrongly, included warfare.

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For Peer Review