

# The Rise and Fall of the Carolingians

## Regino of Prüm and his conception of the Carolingian Empire

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**H**istoriographical texts are of the greatest importance as sources for the early Middle Ages. For our knowledge of the later Carolingian empire the chronicle of Regino of Prüm, which will be the focus of this contribution, is one of our major sources. Yet historiographical texts are never innocent. Their authors always wrote with a specific goal and therefore we should be aware to take their descriptions for granted. ‘To justify the present and to influence the future, the authors (of historiographical works) did not cease to select and reconstruct the past through its myths and practices’<sup>1</sup>. Therefore it is of the utmost importance to understand the goals of an author such as Regino of Prüm as well as his views of history, in order to appreciate his chronicle as a historical source.

Let me begin by briefly introducing Regino. Regino probably came from an important local family in the Rhineland, possibly from Altrip<sup>2</sup>. It has recently been demonstrated that he was a monk of St. Maximin in Trier, before moving to Prüm<sup>3</sup>. This move to Prüm probably took place before 860, when a monk

1. ‘Pour justifier le présent et annoncer l’avenir, les auteurs n’ont cessé de sélectionner et de reconstruire le passé, à travers ses mythes et pratiques’: R. LE JAN, *La société du Haut Moyen Âge, VI<sup>e</sup>-IX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 2006, p. 24. The various ways in which authors tried to achieve specific goals with their texts, is also one of the main subjects of the international research group ‘Texts and Identities’ of which Régine Le Jan is such a valued member. See e. g., *Texts and Identities in the early Middle Ages*, R. CORRADINI, R. MEENS, C. PÖSSEL and P. SHAW ed., Vienna, 2006 (*Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters*, 12). Annotation in this contribution has been kept to a minimum. A somewhat fuller account is available in Dutch as ‘Opkomst en ondergang van de Karolingers. De kroniek van Regino van Prüm’, *Millennium*, 24 (2010), p. 3-18.

2. In some publications he is referred to as Regino of Altrip, see e. g. E. HLAWITSCHKA, ‘Regino aus Altrip: Abt des Klosters Prüm, Musiktheoretiker, Kanonist und Geschichtsschreiber’, *Heimatjahrbuch Landkreis Ludwigshafen*, 9 (1993), p. 38-43.

3. F. ROBERG, ‘Neues zur Biographie des Regino von Prüm’, *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter*, 72 (2008), p. 224-229.

Reginhardus – probably to be identified with Regino – is listed among the monks of this important Carolingian abbey. In his chronicle he mentions that he became abbot of the monastery of Prüm in 892 as a successor to abbot Ansbald, who abdicated voluntarily so Regino tell us, perhaps with too much emphasis<sup>4</sup>. This happened shortly after Vikings had sacked the monastery and there probably is a connection between this sad event and Ansbald's early retirement. Regino remained abbot for only seven years. In 899 he was ousted by two powerful local nobles, counts Gerard and Matfrid, sometimes named the Matfridings<sup>5</sup>. Possibly these brothers had the support of the even more powerful Conradines, as Simon MacLean recently argued. Richar, a brother of Gerard and Matfrid, replaced Regino as abbot of Prüm<sup>6</sup>. Regino had to move to Trier where he was welcomed by Archbishop Ratbod and given the monastery of St. Martin to rule. It was as abbot of this smaller and less important monastery that Regino was able to work on the literary compositions that would ensure his historical fame. In Trier Regino not only composed the chronicle that will form the central theme of this paper, but also a handbook for episcopal visitations and an important treatise on music. Already during his abbacy in Prüm, he may, moreover, have had a hand in the composition of the famous polyptych registering the monastery's possessions, the so-called *Prümer Urbar*<sup>7</sup>. If the latter were the case this would confirm a view of Regino as a practical man looking for order. He would order the monastery's estates and take care of the ordering of sound in his treatise on music. His episcopal

4. REGINO, *Chronicon*, F. KURZE ed., Hanover, 1890 (MGH SRG, 50), a. 892, p. 138-139. There is a recent English translation of the chronicle, which I used for the translations provided here, by S. MACLEAN, in *History and Politics in Late Carolingian and Ottonian Europe. The Chronicle of Regino of Prüm and Adalbert of Magdeburg*, Manchester, 2009. That Regino's succession was a result of 'a crisis over the abbacy' is suggested by M. DE JONG, 'Carolingian monasticism: the power of prayer', in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 2, R. MCKITTERICK ed., Cambridge, 1995, p. 621-653, at p. 652.

5. For a genealogical table of this powerful family, see R. LE JAN, *Famille et pouvoir dans le monde franc (VII<sup>e</sup>-X<sup>e</sup> siècle). Essai d'anthropologie sociale*, Paris, 1995, p. 444.

6. For this event, see S. MACLEAN, 'Insinuation, Censorship and the Struggle for Late Carolingian Lotharingia in Regino of Prüm's Chronicle', *English Historical Review*, 124 (2009), p. 1-28.

7. Regino's contribution to this document has been questioned by E. WISPLINGHOF, 'Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Klosters Prüm and der Wende vom 9. zum 10. Jahrhundert', *DA*, 55 (1999), p. 439-475. For studies on the economy of the abbey of Prüm on the basis of the Polyptych, see L. KUCHENBUCH, *Bäuerliche Gesellschaft und Klosterherrschaft im 9. Jahrhundert. Studien zur Sozialstruktur der Familia der Abtei Prüm*, Wiesbaden, 1978 and recently Y. MORIMOTO, 'Aspects of the Early Medieval Peasant Economy as Revealed in the Polyptych of Prüm' in *The Medieval World*, P. LINEHAN and J. L. NELSON ed., London/New York, 2001, p. 605-620.

handbook orders existing ecclesiastical legislation, while in his chronicle he tried to create order and therefore meaning in past events. All of this he did, however, to obtain concrete results: in managing estates, in singing, in enforcing ecclesiastical leadership or in influencing political elites.

Regino dedicated his literary works to leading ecclesiastical personalities with close court connections. He dedicated his *De harmonica institutione* to Ratbod of Trier, his *Libri duo de synodalibus causis* to archbishop Hatto of Mainz, and his chronicle to bishop Adalbero of Augsburg, who at that time was the nutritor of the young Louis (the Child), the last Carolingian prince to rule in the East Frankish realm, who was crowned in the year 900 at the age of seven<sup>8</sup>. By engaging with these powerful bishops Regino was clearly hoping to regain royal favour and possibly the monastery of Prüm. If that were the case, he must have died a disappointed man in 915, still abbot of St. Martin in Trier. He was buried not in his own monastery, but at his former monastery St. Maximin.

Regino was looking for order in a world that he experienced as chaotic. In his episcopal handbook he characterized the time in which he lived as a *pessimum tempus* in which the church saw many scandalous crimes (*flagitia*) unheard of in other centuries<sup>9</sup>. The theme of unheard of crimes is regularly repeated in his chronicle, which gives ample evidence of the violence employed by aristocratic factions in Lotharingia in their fierce competition with others. In 892 count Mengigoz, one of the most powerful magnates in the Eifel region, was killed while staying in a monastery<sup>10</sup>. This murder was the start of a series of killings in which the murderer of Mengigoz was killed by count Stephen, who in turn got his deserts dying after being hit by a poisonous arrow while he was in the toilet opening his bowels<sup>11</sup>. This unheard of series of killings indicated that traditional Carolingian political methods no longer worked and Regino noticed that. It dawned upon him that ‘the rules of the political game were rapidly changing’<sup>12</sup>. His famous comments on the

8. S. MACLEAN, ‘Insinuation’, *op. cit.* n. 6, p. 5.

9. *quod multa flagitiorum genera hoc pessimo tempore in ecclesia et perpetrata sunt en perpetrantur, quae priscis temporibus inaudita, quia non facta ...: Das Sendhandbuch des Regino von Prüm*, W. HARTMANN ed., Darmstadt, 2004 (Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters. Freiherr-vom-Stein-Gedächtnisausgabe, 42), *Praefatio*, p. 21, briefly discussed in W. HARTMANN, ‘„Schandtaten von denen man früher nichts gehört hat“. Einleitung’, in *Recht und Gericht in Kirche und Welt um 900*, W. HARTMANN ed., Munich, 2007, p. 1-5.

10. REGINO, *Chronicon*, *op. cit.* n. 4, a. 892, p. 140.

11. *Ibid.*, a. 896 and 901, p. 144 and 149; see S. MACLEAN, ‘Insinuation’, *op. cit.* n. 6, p. 7-8.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

succession of Arnulf of Carinthia clearly demonstrate that Regino saw that Carolingian rule had come to an end:

This [Arnulf being named after Arnulf of Metz] appears not to have been a coincidence, but rather a clear premonition of what would come about in the future, seeing that with him [Arnulf] the royal house began, thanks to divine providence, to proliferate in a favourable ascent over the course of time, until under the great Charles it reached the highest peak of authority not only over the Franks, but indeed over various other peoples and kingdoms as well. After Charles's death fortune changed, such that the worldly glory which had previously flowed beyond everything they had prayed for, began to gradually drain away in the same way it had risen, until not only the kingdoms came to an end, but so did the royal family itself. It withered away partly because of the delicate youth of those kings who died and partly due to the sterility of their wives<sup>13</sup>.

We may with Stuart Airlie regard Regino as the last major historian of the Carolingian era, who for the first time offered a complete account of the rise and fall of the Carolingian empire, and can thus be considered as 'the Edward Gibbon of Carolingian historical writing'<sup>14</sup>. Although Regino's chronicle has recently attracted quite some attention, I think we can still state that 'the significance of the work as a whole has not been adequately appreciated'<sup>15</sup>. It is to this question of the significance of Regino's chronicle as a whole that this paper seeks to contribute.

Stuart Airlie commented on Regino's sensitivity for liturgical time and place<sup>16</sup>. We already saw that Regino mentions that the murder of count Mengigoz took place in a sacred space, i.e. a monastery. Particularly the Vikings showed no reverence for Christian time or sacred places. In 853, for instance, Regino describes how they attacked the city of Nantes and killed the bishop on Holy Saturday in the church while he was celebrating baptism, thereby transgressing three major Christian taboos: killing a religious person in a sacred place at a sacred time<sup>17</sup>. The Vikings attacked Regino's own monastery of Prüm on the feast of Epiphany 882. On Maundy Thursday they attacked the episcopal city of Trier, the place where Regino wrote his chronicle, and

13. REGINO, *Chronicon*, op. cit. n. 4, a. 880, p. 116-117, transl. S. MACLEAN, *History*, op. cit. n. 4, p. 182-183.

14. S. AIRLIE, "Sad Stories of the Death of Kings": Narrative Patterns and Structures of Authority in Regino of Prüm's *Chronicle*', in *Narrative and History in the Early Medieval West*, E. M. TYLER and R. BALZARETTI ed., Turnhout, 2006, p. 105-131, at p. 126.

15. R. MCKITTERICK, *Perceptions of the Past in the Early Middle Ages. The Conway Lectures in Medieval Studies 2004*, Notre Dame, 2006, p. 31.

16. S. AIRLIE, 'Sad stories', op. cit. n. 14, p. 120-121.

17. REGINO, *Chronicon*, op. cit. n. 4, a. 853, p. 76.

they remained in the city until Easter, so during the most holy festivals of the Christian calendar<sup>18</sup>. For the Carolingians, who had always been successful in fighting pagans, seeing holy places being profaned by pagan incursions on holy days, was not only a demoralizing event, but must also have raised questions about the relationship between the Christian God and the Franks; or as Airlie phrased it 'to describe a society whose holy places are attacked on sacred days by pagan warriors is to describe a society under judgment'<sup>19</sup>.

A further indication that Carolingians had lost divine favour comes from the places that the Vikings pillaged. In the Viking campaign of 881, which led up to the attack on Prüm and Trier in the following year, the Northmen camped at Nijmegen in the royal palace there. From there they moved to another camp at Asselt, on the river Meuse, from where they pillaged Liège, Maastricht, Tongeren, Cologne, Bonn, Zülpich, Jülich, Neuss. They attacked the monasteries of Cornelimünster, Malmédy and Stavelot and laid the royal palace in Aachen to ashes, so Regino informs us<sup>20</sup>. Regino is not only describing here the Frankish heartlands, with the major towns and bishoprics around the capital of Aachen, but also its spiritual capital with the monastery of Inden and the double monastery of Stavelot-Malmédy. This is the heartland of the Carolingian royal family, a region that Regino must have known extremely well, laid to waste by pagan invaders. These Northmen twice invaded Regino's own monastery, a Carolingian foundation. No wonder that Regino was troubled by the question what had gone wrong. His chronicle was mainly an examination of this basic question. Let see us what kind of answers Regino came up with.

It has been noticed before that Regino took great care to record military details. Inspired by his Roman model, the *Epitome* of Justin of the Philippic History by Pompeius Trogus, he describes military tactics of specific battles or the military equipment of the Hungarians with great interest. He does not hesitate to criticize Carolingian tactics that he regarded as unsound. Noticeable in this respect is his description of the battle of Jengland in 860 against the Bretons. Regino describes how the Saxons in the Frankish army retreated before the spear throwing power of the Bretons and how the Franks were surprised by the Breton tactics who avoided close fighting to which the Franks were accustomed. Charles the Bald, not one of the heroes in Regino's

18. *Ibid.*, a. 882, p. 118-119.

19. S. AIRLIE, 'Sad stories', *op. cit.* n. 14, p. 121.

20. REGINO, *Chronicon*, *op. cit.* n. 4, a. 881, p. 117-118.

history, is presented as a coward sneaking away from the battlefield at night<sup>21</sup>. While this may partly be explained by Regino basing himself on Breton propaganda, as Janet Nelson assumes, it sits well with Regino's views that courage and military prowess are crucial qualities for Carolingian kings<sup>22</sup>. If Regino's chronicle was indeed meant as a text to instruct the young Louis the Child, as its dedication to Adalbero suggests, its emphasis on military tactics and the duties of a king in battle is easy to understand. Yet, lacking military leadership of the Carolingian family must rather be seen as a symptom than as a cause of the fall of the Carolingian empire.

Another major theme in Regino's chronicle is violence in holy places. We have already seen that Regino took special notice when pagans attacked holy places such as churches, monasteries and the royal palace in Aachen, with its sacred connotations. But Franks also perpetrated crimes in holy places. Carloman, the unruly son of Charles the Bald, attacked churches and brought violence to these places of peace, behaviour which Regino associates with unheard of crimes (*inaudita mala*)<sup>23</sup>. Regino uses the idea of an unheard of crime (*scelus inauditum*) also in the case of the murderous assault on a bishop in 900 (dated to the year 903 by Regino) when Winemarus, one of the men of count Baldwin of Flanders, attacked and killed Archbishop Fulk of Reims<sup>24</sup>. Regino tells another intriguing story in which violence in a holy place is at stake. For the year 867 he describes how Northmen attacked the Loire region and were countered by two local noblemen: Robert the Strong and Ranulph, count of Poitiers. Under attack, the Northmen fled to a small village and took refuge into a stone building, the local church. The Franks surrounded the building and made preparations to storm it, when the Northmen suddenly fell upon them and a furious struggle broke out, in which the Northmen were victorious and the two Frankish counts killed. Although Regino nowhere explicitly links their death with their plans to storm a church building, the fact that he mentions that count Robert was killed at the entry of the church (*in introitu ipsius ecclesiae*) is significant<sup>25</sup>. Lack of respect for sacred places as well as for ecclesiastical office, was surely a factor contributing to the Carolingian downfall. But this was not the most important factor, so it seems.

21. *Ibid.*, a. 860, p. 78-79; for this episode see J. SMITH, *Province and Empire. Brittany and the Carolingians*, Cambridge, 1992, p. 99-100.

22. J. NELSON, *Charles the Bald*, London/New York, 1992, p. 165-166.

23. REGINO, *Chronicon*, *op. cit.* n. 4, a. 870, p. 102.

24. *Ibid.*, a. 903, p. 149-150.

25. *Ibid.*, a. 867, p. 92-93.

In his episcopal handbook Regino stressed two important domains of human behaviour: violence and sexuality. Both were necessary but needed to be restrained and disciplined in order to accord with the divine order of things. We have seen how Carolingian nobles and members of the royal family did not always control their violent nature with due respect for sacred places and religious persons. It was worse though when the head of the royal family, the emperor controlling the sacred palace of Aachen, could not rein in his sexual urges. This happened when Lothar II was trying to divorce his wife Teutberga<sup>26</sup>. This case involved the leading members of the royal family, the aristocracy, the Frankish church as well as the papacy and for a long period disturbed internal affairs. Its crucial importance in his history is not only manifest because of the attention Regino devoted to it, the greater part of the period covering the years 864 to 869, but also because by reconstructing the affair, he made a story out of a number of related and interlocking events, which perhaps had not been regarded before as constituting a coherent narrative<sup>27</sup>. Regino carefully constructed this narrative with little sentences as: 'let us return to the lamentable case of king Lothar'<sup>28</sup>. Clearly Regino saw the divorce case as a major turning point in Carolingian destiny. This is already demonstrated by the short entry in 856, where Regino mentions the marriage between Lothar and Theutberga and adds: 'The greatest ruin resulted from this union, not only for him [the king] but also for his whole kingdom, as what follows will show in clearer light'<sup>29</sup>. He talks about the conflict in terms of an infectuous, mortal disease that affected the whole kingdom, the results of which would be explained in the later part of the chronicle<sup>30</sup>. The future results that Regino here alludes to, cannot be anything else than the loss of divine protection by the Carolingians, resulting in the death of beloved children, sterility of wives and incursions of pagans into the heart of the kingdom. Carolingian troops when fighting muslim forces in Benevento, were plagued by disease and by spider bites killing Frankish soldiers and this demonstrated that 'God was opposed not only to Lothar, because of his hard and impenitent

26. For this case, see K. HEIDECKER, *The Divorce of Lothar II: Christian Marriage and Political Power in the Carolingian World*, Ithaca, 2010.

27. For the importance of Lothar's divorce in Regino's chronicle, see L. BOHNENKAMP, 'Regino von Prüm und die religiöse Bedeutung der Geschichtsschreibung im Frühmittelalter', *Concilium Medii Aevi*, 24 (2011), p. 289-317, at p. 306-312.

28. REGINO, *Chronicon*, op. cit. n. 4, a. 866, p. 85.

29. *Ibid.*, a. 856, p. 77.

30. *Ibid.*, a. 866, p. 89-90.

heart, but also to his entire kingdom'<sup>31</sup>. In the year 883, when relating the violent effects of the bid for power by Lothar's son Hugh, son of Waldrada, Regino speaks in the following terms: 'Thus almighty God was enraged at the kingdom of Lothar and began to act against and to utterly destroy the strength of that same kingdom by increasing disasters of such a kind that the prophecy of the most holy pope Nicholas, and also the curse which he had pronounced over his kingdom, was fulfilled'<sup>32</sup>.

It seems therefore that violence in sacred places and the violation of the marital bond by the Carolingian ruler are two important factors which in Regino's eyes contributed to the demise of the Carolingian Empire, but there is another factor which is important here. It is already indicated by the reference to pope Nicholas in the last quote<sup>33</sup>. Rosamond McKitterick noted the importance of Roman history in Regino and called attention to its focus on Christian history and 'the close interweaving of secular and ecclesiastical matters'<sup>34</sup>. This importance of the nexus between sacred Christian and secular history – that is the history of kings and emperors on the one hand and that of martyrs, bishops, popes and ecclesiastical authorities on the other – is clearly indicated by the pivoting point of the whole work: the end of book 1 and the beginning of the second book. Book 1, starting with the Incarnation and running up to the year 741 punctuated by its emphasis on the history of Rome, its martyrs and the papacy, ends with a list of popes<sup>35</sup>. Book 2 begins with the death of Charles Martel and the start of the reign of the first Carolingian to become king: Pippin. Regino follows the traditional account of the *Royal Frankish Annals* of papal intervention in Francia resulting in the taking of the royal crown by the Carolingians. Regino also included part of the *Revelatio Stephani Papae* stressing the close relationship between the Carolingian dynasty and papal authority<sup>36</sup>. The close link between the papacy and the Carolingians thus functions as a crucial turning point in Regino's *History*. As long as the Carolingians entertained good relations with the papacy, the kingdom was thriving, but once the Carolingian emperors became disloyal to the popes,

31. *Ibid.*, a. 867, p. 98.

32. *Ibid.*, a. 883, p. 121.

33. Well observed in L. BOHNENKAMP, 'Regino', *op. cit.* n. 27, p. 310-311.

34. R. MCKITTERICK, *Perceptions of the Past*, *op. cit.* n. 15, p. 31.

35. REGINO, *Chronicon*, *op. cit.* n. 4, a. 655-718, p. 38-39. This catalogue serves computational ends but its inclusion also stresses the role of the papacy in world history. It is not included in MacLean's translation.

36. *Ibid.*, a. 753, p. 44-45; see for this text A. STOCLET, 'La clausula de unctioe Pippini regis, vingt ans après', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 78 (2000), p. 719-771, at p. 720-722.



as was the case with Lothar, this resulted in the withdrawal of divine favour from the Carolingians and the Franks. The importance of the theme of proper reverence for the papacy, is also indicated regularly in book 1, for example when Regino described how Theoderic had imprisoned Pope John and had been responsible for the death of Boethius and Symmachus. 'Theoderic dies suddenly', is Regino's powerful comment<sup>37</sup>.

In the end Regino regarded the pertinent relationship between secular and religious authority the defining feature in history. As long as the Carolingians entertained the right connection with the papacy, divine favour would be with them and the Franks. When they disregarded this relationship and defied the ultimate religious authority incorporated in the papacy, they would lose divine favour. This disruption of the strong bond between God and the Franks was shown through symptoms such as a lack of restraint in matters of violence – encompassing acts of bloodshed in holy places but also cowardly behaviour by the king – and the lack of sexual discipline. As a result of this the Franks were plagued by sterility of royal wives, the shameful death of young princes and by pagans turning up at the doorstep of Aachen and Prüm. The connection between royal power and religious authority had once brought the Carolingians to the height of power and now brought them to extinction. If his history really served as an educational treatise for the young Carolingian prince Louis, it was thus that Regino explained the Rise and Fall of the Carolingians.

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37. REGINO, *Chronicon*, op. cit. n. 4, a. 450-458, p. 20.