

Rise and Fall of a Royal Palace

Aachen in Carolingian Times

ABSTRACT

From 806 to 822, Aachen was the *de facto* main residence of the Carolingian rulers. Charlemagne and his son Louis only left the *Pfalz* there in exceptional cases. This was preceded by the emperor gradually settling down, having previously ruled from the saddle. This article traces the significance of this central royal palace, based on when and for how long the Carolingian rulers stayed there and the documents issued in Aachen. Four different phases emerge, as from 822 onwards Louis was forced to return to a more itinerant form of rule. During the succession wars between his sons and the resulting Frankish division treaties, Aachen found itself in a marginalised geopolitical position. The once central importance of the place could then only be symbolised, but it was revived in a different form from the 10th century onwards as the coronation site of the Roman-German kings.

KEYWORDS

Aachen / Carolingian / palace / settlement / charter / monument

No place represents the history of medieval Germany to the same degree as Aachen*. For about two decades around the year 800, it was the *de facto* seat of power within the Frankish empire under Charlemagne (768–814) and Louis the Pious (814–840). Later, it became the place of coronation for the kings of Germany and a site for the veneration of Charlemagne, who was romanticised as the ideal ruler of the European Middle Ages and exalted into sainthood. Politics, religion, and the symbolism of an empire are concentrated in a single location here – entirely removed from the question of whether this highly symbolic place of the royal consecration of 30 kings between 936 and 1531 represented the political heart of the empire as well.

Due to intensive interdisciplinary efforts, research on this central place of remembrance has made great leaps in the last years. A scientific synthesis of several hundred pages concerning Aachen during the Carolingian period was published as the second volume of a comprehensive history of the city in 2013. This included the cross-referencing of findings from archaeological and architectural surveys in the preceding decade with the written sources and, by way of critical contrasting, it created several new perspectives that focused on more than just the monumental palace complex (Müller et al. 2013). Several other publications would follow over the next few years, which examined certain aspects in greater detail and at times led to re-evaluations

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(Müller et al. 2014; Pohle 2015; Krücken 2016; Ley/Schaub 2018, see also the English version of this text in this volume).

A brief exploration of the history, function, and significance of the imperial palace in Aachen, as is presented in the present volume, will undoubtedly be helpful for the investigation of early mediaeval royal seats from a mainly archaeological standpoint. In contrast with many of the places examined here, we are fortunate enough to be able to draw on written accounts of the locations, the main actors, and the events of Carolingian Aachen. These grant, if only at times, an insight into the role of the palace within the empire that Charlemagne created. At the same time, it is necessary to stay mindful of the fact that

these accounts are almost exclusively the result of the interests of chroniclers in the royal court, the mostly itinerant centre of the empire. Like a spotlight that follows the lead actor on a stage, the attention of historical writings follows the ruler and his travelling court. Thus, for the period around the year 800, a direct connection can be established between the wealth of accounts and the practical significance of the palace – a true settlement, let alone a city of Aachen is only attested from the High Middle Ages. Let us therefore try to draw up a highly condensed, superficial outline, a kind of telemetry of the significance of the mediaeval palace in Aachen, from its first mention in a written source until the end of the Carolingian dynasty.

First Appearances

»Tunc Pippinus [...] celebravit natalem Domini in Aquis villa et pascha similiter« – »A that time, Pepin celebrated Christmas as well as Easter in the royal palace of Aquis« (Annales regni Francorum 1895, 22, translation H. Müller). With these words, Aachen is attested by a written source for the very first time. The so-called Royal Frankish Annals, recording notable events from the perspective of the royal court, retroactively announce for the year 765/766 the wintering of the Frankish king, Pepin the Short, at a manor with the relatively unspecific name of *Aquis*, meaning roughly »by the waters« and being the root of the commonly found German toponym »Bad/Baden«.

Although this passage is very short and lacking in detail, as is typical with annals, it still tells us that the ruler and his entourage of indeterminable size spent the two most important Christian holidays in Aachen. It follows that Pepin must have been present there at least on 25 December 765 and on 6 April (Easter Sunday) of the following year; most likely he would have remained there in the interim of around three months as well. Weather conditions and the logistical realities of the period made it sensible to spend the entire winter in one place and to depart only for pressing reasons. It therefore comes as no surprise that a later revision of the annals makes an explicit mention of Pepin's prolonged stay in Aachen: »He made camp for the winter in Aachen, where he celebrated Christmas and Easter as well« (Annales regni Francorum 1895, 23, translation H. Müller).

The entry reflects the practices of Frankish rulership at the time, with Pepin having spent previous winters either in his palace at Quierzy (760–761, 761–762, 764–765), about 10 km southwest of Noyon in

what is today northern France, in Gentilly (762–763) just outside of Paris, or deep in the Ardennes in the palace of Longlier (763–764) – and now in Aachen (specific references in Müller et al. 2013, 33). The exact motives for choosing these winter palaces are unclear, but it can be assumed that for longer stays such as these the only suitable residences were those where the royal court could dependably be supplied with provisions and everyday necessities for several weeks at a time (Falkenstein 2002, 133–135). The royal presence in Aachen in the winter of 765 thus represents a novelty only for its debut in the written record, since the decision to encamp there must surely have been made in the knowledge that the location had proven itself able to accommodate the royal court in the past. The infrastructure necessary for this will have been in place in Aachen: permanent buildings, perhaps a modest settlement, certainly an accessible, agriculturally productive hinterland – in summary, a complex of royal estates to which the descriptor villa can refer as a whole, as well as to the court as its central entity and administrative hub (cf. Flach 2008, 7). A church large enough to celebrate the two holidays was certainly also present.

Pepin's winter stay put Aachen on the map of the Early Middle Ages. It would then verifiably become one of the waystations the king sought out repeatedly on his constant journeys. What little information is recorded presents the typical image of early mediaeval rulership: the king and his court would tour the realm, turning this and that way to take counsel, wage war, or deescalate crises. This itinerant style of kingship, ruling from the saddle, delayed the appearance of permanent residences north of the Alps

for a long time, as well as the declaration of capital seats for entire empires.

On his way from place to place, the king took all that he required to exercise his office. An unsteady form of rule was a reality one had to accept in a society with only rudimentary methods of food preservation, undeveloped traffic infrastructure, slow communication, and without a bureaucracy that could extend to the borders of the realm. These structures, inadequate from a modern perspective, needed to be

counterbalanced by a personal royal presence. Being visible to subjects in royal finery and with insignia, being available for the discussion of local or regional issues, acting face to face as military commander, judge, or benevolent patron – these were aspects of itinerant rule that strengthened royal authority and the immediate personal relationships between the ruler and his noble vassals, which formed the basis of mediaeval communities (Ehlers 2022, see also Ehlers, this volume).

Why Palaces?

The Frankish kings of the Merovingian dynasty had favoured cities such as Rheims, Soissons, and Metz as their temporary residences. These settlements, most of which were greatly reduced in size from their late antique predecessors, were soon to be rivalled by royal palaces in the countryside. Beginning in the early 8th century, the Carolingians would come to rely on them almost exclusively for their lodging. These palaces would take the form of manor houses, most often located within an agriculturally dominated complex of estates, so that the travelling court could easily be accommodated and supplied. The word »palace« (and indeed the more exact German »Pfalz«) still bears the Latin root *palatium*, historically referring to the ancient imperial palaces of Rome, located on the Palatine Hill near the Forum Romanum. The mediaeval *Pfalz*, referred to here by the term »royal palace«, rarely encompassed a palace building by itself. The spectrum of their facilities would range from grand, impressive complexes, such as in Aachen or Ingelheim, to rural manor houses whose small size would often have forced a part of the royal entourage to encamp in tents (Zotz 2010, map of royal palaces in Müller et al. 2013, 34 fig. 2).

These latter, spartan incarnations of royal palaces hint towards their original purpose, since the ruler was supplied by the agricultural estate attached to the palace. The goods they produced were provided directly to the court if it was nearby, or they made their way into the royal stores in the form of levies.

The same should be assumed for Aachen, which – as we have seen – joined the ranks of the definitively attested residences of Frankish kings as *Aquis villa* in 765. The wintering in Aachen remains the only indication of Pepin the Short, who died on 24 September 768, ever coming to the waters of Wurm and Pau. However, the fact that his son Charles celebrated Christmas in Aachen in the year 768 makes it seem very likely that, even in this early period, a well-functioning demesne existed around the royal estate in Aachen (*Annales regni Francorum* 1895, 28; Müller et al. 2023, 36).

Little is known about the extent of the palace, its specific edifices, or its permanent inhabitants during the mid-8th century. It has been certain from at least 2014 that the palace building was integrated into the partially intact ramparts of a late Roman *castellum* on Market Hill. Thus, even the first palace, that of Pepin, had not been built on empty land, but rather used the favourable location on the hill (Müller et al. 2013, 37–42; Pohle 2015, 273–276). Conversely, the remains and successors of the massive construction efforts undertaken by Charlemagne at the end of the 8th century dominate the cityscape to this day. In comparison with other preserved palaces of the Carolingian period, it soon becomes obvious that this was not a waystation to be used by rulers from time to time, but a highly representative residence (Müller et al. 2013, 93–272; Pohle 2015, 65–434; Ley/Schaub 2018).

Charles Becoming Settled in Aachen

The start of works to expand and remodel the palace, according to recent archaeological findings, coincides with a change in the style of rulership the Frankish King Charles practiced. Charles, having inherited the western and northernmost part of the empire from his father, sought out Aachen – the

»*villa quae dicitur Aquis*« – in his first winter after becoming king in 768, and there he issued the first two charters of his reign that have been preserved. As they date to the »*Aquis palatio publico*«, they presumably represent the first mention of a palace building (Müller et al. 2013, 55–56; for his stays cf. fig. 1).

In accordance with the custom of an itinerant king, Charles would leave his winter camp soon after to tend to other matters. Visits to Aachen are only sparsely attested for the next two decades, but his winter stay of 788–789 produced several important edicts, including the *Admonitio generalis* (»comprehensive admonition«), an ecclesiastical and cultural reform programme that was frequently copied and distributed throughout Charles' empire. His next winter stay six years later would mark a clear change, as it was the first of 17 winters he would spend in Aachen in the last two decades before his death on 28 January 814. It became the norm to spend each winter, and thus the two highest Christian holidays, in this one place – a norm from which only sporadic deviations would occur from then on (Schieffer 1997, 5 incl. note 13).

It is not only the frequency of Charles' stays in Aachen that is noted in contemporary sources, but also their exceptional length (figs 1–2). The Moselle Annals (*Annales Mosellani*) report his stay in the winter of 794, which extended into July of the following year. The annals describe the next winter, when Charles stayed until June 796, almost *verbatim*; both times were noted for their duration and lack of disturbances (*quietus*). Elsewhere, the text adds the qualification of *absque ullo proelio* – without any fighting (*Annales Mosellani* 1859, 498; in detail Müller et al. 2013, 54–60). Armed conflict commonly dominated the period between spring and the start of winter for Carolingian rulers, thus its absence is what is truly notable about this entry. A quiet military situation allowed for two greatly prolonged winter stays in Aachen, after both of which he would go to war against the Saxons. In the winter of 767, he would return again to celebrate Christmas and is even attested to have stayed as late as October 797, whereafter

he would successfully campaign against the Saxons and spend Christmas in Herstal near Liège.

With this rapid succession of prolonged winter stays from 794 to 797, the royal presence in Aachen attained a new quality. Especially considering that, from 806 on, Charles would stay in Aachen permanently, this period assumes, in hindsight, a royal »sedentarisation« (Schieffer 1997, 5, translation H. Müller) over several years.

But why there? Long before 794, as mentioned above, Aachen was part of the selected group of repeatedly visited palaces in the heartland of the Carolingian empire that were deemed suitable for encampment by the court, presumably due to their location and facilities. Wintering outside of this area was rare and was often for demonstrative purposes: it presented the ruler as the sovereign of newly conquered territories, as in Pavia, Lombardy in 780–781, Saxony in 784–785, or Rome in 791–792 and, of course, Rome again for the imperial coronation at the end of 800 (Schieffer 1997, 5). For a regular winter stay, however, Charles clearly preferred the region between the Rhine and Meuse rivers.

The concentration on Aachen, which started in the mid-790s, thus does not fully deviate from the established practice of the court. Instead, this observation presents a rational background to Einhard's claim that Charles greatly enjoyed the hot springs of Aachen and had his palace built there to be close to them, which would otherwise be the sole explanation the historical record gives for the choice of this location (Einhard 1911, 27). This exercise of royal rule, now for the most part geographically fixed, mirrors the self-confidence of a successful king who had neither any real enemies, nor any attractive targets for raids or conquest within a reasonable distance remaining on the continent.

Ruling from Aachen

With the more frequent and longer presence of Charles came an intensifying of royal interaction in Aachen. Contemporary sources accordingly shifted their focus, which was always on king and court, towards Aachen. The place is no longer mentioned only in passing; now its edifices are the ruler's jewels. The chronicle of Moissac Abbey in southern France records for the year 796:

»For here he [Charles] had taken up permanent residence and then begun work on a church of marvellous size, for which he had doors and bars cast from bronze. And this church he filled with other decorations with great diligence and devo-

tion, as was fit and proper. He had a palace built, which he named Lateran, and he ordered his treasures collected and brought from each kingdom to Aachen. He accomplished in the same place many and great things« (Kettemann, 2000, 85, translation H. Müller).

The entry is difficult to gauge in detail, but there can be no doubt that the mention of Charles becoming settled, of his forceful construction efforts, and the rule he exerted from Aachen accurately characterise the situation. The palace, in the process of expansion, was at any rate becoming more and more important.

Fig. 1 Royal presence (in days) in Aachen, 765–911.

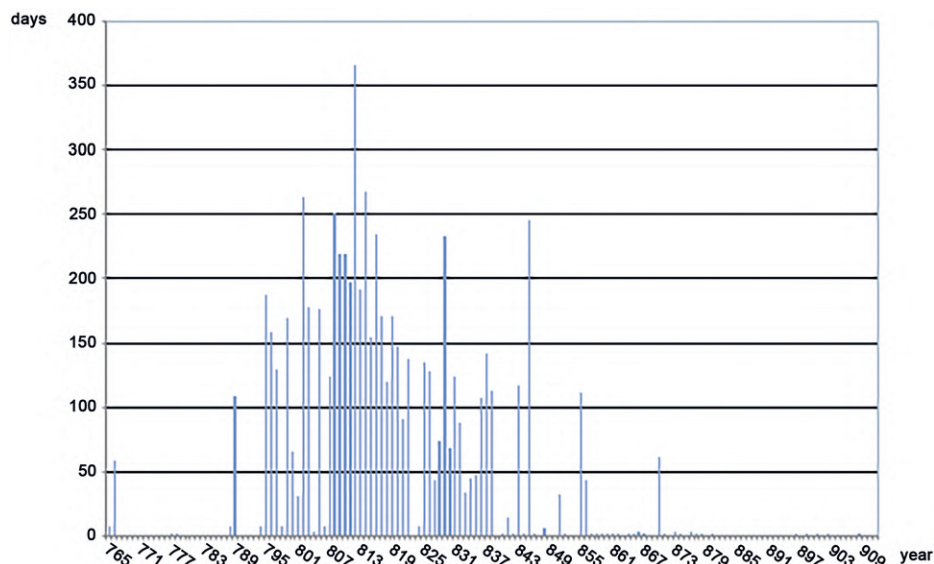


Fig. 2 Royal charters issued in Aachen, 765–911.

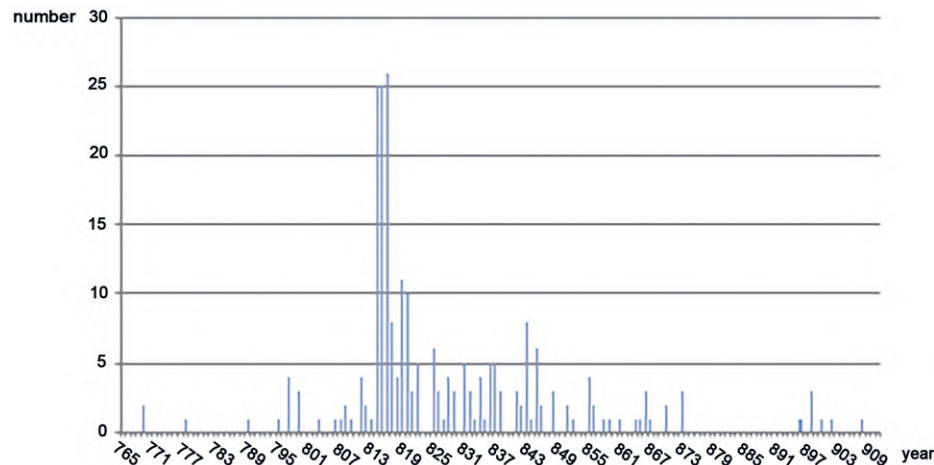
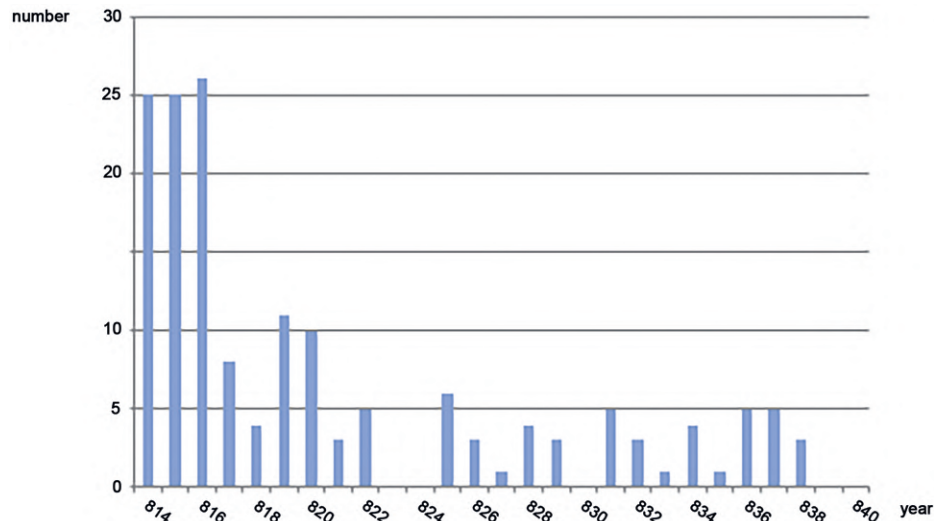


Fig. 3 Charters of Louis the Pious issued in Aachen, 814–840.



However, the Carolingian empire was at this time still in a phase of territorial growth, especially towards the southeast, where Charles had the Avars subdued and achieved the definitive integration of

Bavaria into the Frankish realm in 798 by founding an ecclesiastical church province in Salzburg. Further to the north, Charles was successful against the Veletians across the Elbe river in 789, then in

795 and for several years after 800 he operated on the lower Elbe. Again and again, the Saxon conflict would flare up and provoke several incursions by the Franks from 793 to 797 (Schieffer 2005, 48–67).

Almost all winters would now be spent in this palace; Charles was only ever absent for pressing reasons, such as the campaign against the Saxons in 797, his coronation as emperor in Rome in 800, or the reception of Pope Leo III in the palace of Quierzy in 805. The long presence of the court during the colder months, during which warfare was only possible to a limited degree, allowed Aachen to become the place where the ruler was consistently available. With growing frequency, the records show charters being issued in *Aquis* or *Aquis palatium* as the current residence of Charlemagne (fig. 2). Their beneficiaries include the monasteries of Prüm in the Eifel mountains, Nonantola and Farfa in Italy, and the French abbeys of Saint-Riquier, Saint-Denis near Paris, and Le Mans. Envoys from Rome, southern France, Spain and Sicily came to the royal court in Aachen, and it

was from here that the first mission to the Abbasid caliph, Harun al-Rashid, in Baghdad would depart. The response from Baghdad reached the court in Aachen on 20 July 802 in the shape of a monumental gift from the orient, the famous elephant whose name is recorded as Abul Abaz in the *Annales regni Francorum* (Borgolte 1976, 45–76; Hack 2011, esp. 22–27 for the elephant's itinerary).

The official visit to Aachen by an embassy of the caliph in 807 resonated even more greatly with the historical sources. The *Annales regni Francorum*, for example, tell with great embellishment of an intricately fashioned tent, of colourful garments and oriental spices, and not least of a marvellous water clock, which the caliph gifted to the emperor. Aachen was widely regarded, as becomes clear from these accounts, as the place where Charles and his court could reliably be reached, being at the same time a military headquarters and the representative centre of the Frankish empire (Müller et al. 2013, 72–75).

Aachen as the Central Point of the Frankish Empire

With Charles' permanent presence in Aachen from 806 onwards, the centre of the empire could dependably be located. From now on, this palace would become, at least for a period of 16 years, the hub and central stage of the empire, since after the death of Charlemagne in 814 his son Louis would continue his father's custom without interruption (fig. 3). Like a string of beads, a succession of significant political and cultural milestones can be traced to this period: in 809, the important synod in which doctrinal differences in the Christian creed were outlined and decided; in 812, the recognition of Charles' title as emperor by the Byzantines; in 813, the coronation of his last surviving son as co-emperor – a ceremony that was no longer held in Rome under the auspices of its bishop, but as an act in the church of St Mary that Charles had richly furnished, underlining his sovereignty.

Under Louis, this sequence would continue with the synods of Aachen in the early years of his reign and the so-called *Ordinatio imperii* of 817, which sought to thoroughly determine succession and the distribution of responsibilities within the imperial family. The subsequent bestowal of the office of co-emperor upon his son Lothair was performed in the same place and the same manner as had been chosen for Louis' own accession to co-emperorship four years prior. In this way, Aachen presented itself as the regular, even natural choice for imperial assemblies and synods in the later reign of Charles and

the early reign of Louis. This made the palace into the stage for the emperor's self-portrayal as ruler. The shining pinnacle of the grand Frankish empire manifested itself, visible to all, in the surroundings of the throne room and palace church (Müller et al. 2013, 273–298 for the events from 806 to 822).

The outstanding significance of the palace, especially in the transfer of power from Charles to his son, is especially noticeable from the number of charters issued in Aachen. In the years from 814 to 817, vassals from every part of the massive empire flocked to the court in order to have privileges originally granted by Charlemagne be confirmed in writing by his son, the new emperor. With these parchments, the name of the new palace was spread into all corners of the empire. The *Aquisgrani palatium* would become known as the central point of the Carolingian empire to a hitherto unprecedented extent (Kölzer 2011/2012; Müller et al. 2013, 286–290).

The singularity of this situation should explicitly be noted, because this type of residence, geographically fixed over several years, was unparalleled north of the Alps until well into the High Middle Ages. We are immediately reminded of this when the practice was forcibly abandoned again during Louis' own reign. After some years of internal stability, conflicts within the imperial family, especially the burgeoning dispute between the emperor's sons over inheritance and succession, required him to return to the older custom. In the face of growing

factionalism, Louis was forced to be more present in other parts of the empire, in an attempt to bind regional princes to himself and prevent an erosion of his authority. It is for this reason that, from 822 onward, the palace of Aachen lost its primacy as the emperor's sole seat, i. e., it would increasingly be rivalled by other imperial residences, such as Ingel-

heim. Louis would still prefer to spend winters in Aachen until at least 829, but the number of charters issued in Aachen would dwindle as the emperor's visits became fewer and shorter. The frequency and exclusivity of imperial assemblies held here rapidly decreased as well. The quantitative evidence paints a clear picture (Müller et al. 2013, 354–355).

The Gradual Marginalisation of Aachen

The death of Louis the Pious near Ingelheim in 840 signalled the end of a grand Frankish empire under single leadership. Within the next three decades, the power structures that Charlemagne created would crumble under the internal quarrels of his grandsons. For a time, there were three parallel territories which, in the early period, were still modelled on the divisions drawn up with mutual consent in 817. Wedged between the eastern and western kingdoms of his younger, militarily superior brothers was Emperor Lothair I's »central kingdom«, which he left as »Lotharingia« to his son and namesake in 855, not without territorial losses; at its inception, Aachen was one of a pair of prestigious seats of power, the other being Rome. Both Lothairs still used the palace as an important residence. Yet the scope of their actions and the reach of the *diplomata* they issued was now limited to the borders of their rump state, and the palace had nowhere near the radiance it had at its pinnacle at the beginning of the century. Lothair II's death without an heir in 869 led to the division and absorption of his lands into the kingdoms of his uncles. This partition, ratified in 870 by the so-called Treaty of Meerssen, had far-reaching consequences for Aachen. Formerly located within the political and geographic nucleus of the empire, the palace now found itself on the western border of the East Frankish kingdom, where Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium meet today. Aachen had also been brushed aside politically,

as the heartlands of the realm moved from the lower Meuse to the central Rhine and even further south. Consequently, royal visits to the old seat of Charlemagne became a less common occurrence. Most often, they would be motivated by conflict or negotiations with the kingdom's western neighbours (Müller et al. 2013, 354–369).

The palace, as it happens, is not even mentioned by name in the treaty that the Carolingian rulers agreed on in Meerssen. Only the collegiate of St Mary appears as *abbatia de Aquis* (Capitularia 1897, 193–195 no. 251). This is indicative for the late Carolingian period. Only very few hints at a stately presence have survived in the record. Aachen was rarely the stage for important royal acts, save for the short reign of Zwentibold, who was sub-king of Lotharingia from 895 until 900. They reflect the East Frankish effort of maintaining control of the borderlands along the Meuse as a whole. Most telling for the diminished status of what was once the permanent residence of Charlemagne is the complete absence of Charles III (d. 887) from Aachen throughout his entire reign, even though he carried the old emperor's name, managed to attain the imperial crown, and was the only descendant of Charlemagne after 843 to unite all parts of the old empire under his rule. It seems that neither politically, nor as a site of royal symbolism, was Aachen worth a journey in the 880s (Müller et al. 2013, 379–394).

Aachen in the Carolingian Era – Some Closing Remarks

Attempting to briefly sum up the developments outlined here, the political history of the palace of Aachen during the reign of the Carolingians can be divided into four phases:

Aachen's rise from one palace among several to a favoured site for the wintering of the royal court, which was visited with increasing frequency and duration from 794 onwards.

The period of Aachen as the chief residence of the Frankish empire between 806 and 822. This was caused by a geographical stabilisation of the royal

court in the later reign of Charlemagne and the early reign of Louis the Pious.

The return of Louis to an itinerant style of rule after 822. This had become a necessity through the deteriorating situation within the imperial family, and by extension within the empire, and it led to the reintegration of Aachen into a polycentric structure of government.

The geographical and political marginalisation of Aachen, at the latest by the partition of the empire agreed to at Meerssen in 870. The former centre

of the Frankish empire was now on the periphery of the Carolingian successor's kingdoms in the east and the west.

These are the four stages of Aachen's rise from a royal estate to the *sedes prima Franciae* (Nithard) and its demotion to the status of a standard royal palace removed from the central areas of (East) Frankish rule. Such a division is helpful towards understanding the fluctuating position of Aachen within the Frankish empire. Equally as important as this periodisation is, however, the explicit reminder that the pre-eminence Aachen enjoyed in the early 9th century is not necessarily a result of contemporary circumstances, but rests upon the individual

decisions of two rulers. Without Charlemagne turning towards Aachen, deciding to representatively enlarge the palace, and remaining there until his death, Aachen would never have acceded to such a prominent position; without Louis the Pious resolving to remain in Aachen and continue the late practices of his father to an even greater degree from the same location, the *Aquisgrani palatium* could not have been inscribed so enduringly into the historical record as a centre of power. The nimbus of Charles and the fortitude of young Louis are linked; for a combined period of over 16 years, both of them made Aachen the chief and permanent residence of the empire they ruled.

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