

Alcuin of York, Linchpin of the Liberal Arts Tradition:

How a Catholic Deacon Saved Western Education

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Introduction

The origins of liberal arts education and of Western learning more generally can be traced to the classical civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome. The foundations were laid by such brilliant minds as Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Pythagoras, Varro, and Seneca, who over time established a curriculum consisting of the preliminary *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, logic) and the more advanced *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music), which were intended to prepare students for higher learning—for philosophy. These seven disciplines, traditionally characterized as the liberal arts, became the basis of a vibrant system of education that flourished in the Roman Empire. This vibrancy, however, was not to last. After the barbarian invasions of the fifth century and the resulting fall of Rome, “the torch of learning in the West flickered and nearly died out.”¹ Yet, all hope was not lost; for this period of near total academic darkness on the European continent was also the time of “the brightest intellectual eminence of the Anglo-Saxon Church, where learning found a shelter until it returned to Europe with Alcuin.”²

Alcuin: Scholar of York

When the Church brought the gospel to the British Isles, she also brought the liberal arts. Missionaries like Patrick and Augustine of Canterbury introduced both the Faith and the Arts to the Isles, where they were preserved by such figures as Theodore of Tarsus, Benedict Biscop, Coelfrith, and Bede. It was Bede’s contemporary and close friend, Archbishop Egbert, who founded the cathedral school at York, which—under the direction of its *scholasticus* or

¹ Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 158.

² Andrew Fleming West, *Alcuin and the Rise of the Christian Schools* (independently published, 2022), 27.

headmaster, Ælbert—soon became arguably the finest school in all of Europe. Born a Northumbrian noble circa AD 735, Alcuin had the good fortune to attend the cathedral school at York and the God-given ability to excel in his studies there—so much so that when Ælbert succeeded Egbert as archbishop of York in 766, Alcuin was ordained a deacon and made *scholasticus* of the cathedral school. Later, he also assumed responsibility for the care of the cathedral’s library, “then the most famous in Britain and one of the most famous in Christendom.”³ Here Alcuin had access to the best schoolbooks of the day, the fervent study of which gained him a reputation as one of the most learned men of his age. Indeed, it is likely that Alcuin himself would one day have been elevated to York’s archbishopric. However, Ælbert’s successor, Eanbald, sent Alcuin on a journey that was to change not only the course of Alcuin’s own life, but also the trajectory of Western civilization.

Alcuin: Architect of the Carolingian Renaissance

Shortly after Eanbald’s elevation to the archbishopric of York in 781, he sent Alcuin to Rome to obtain his pallium from the Pope. While in Italy, Alcuin encountered the king of the Franks, Charles the Great (Charlemagne), who was in the process of building a burgeoning empire and who was seeking a learned churchman capable of assisting him in revivifying Christendom’s intellectual tradition. Alcuin’s reputation made him a perfect candidate, so Charlemagne offered him a position as headmaster of his palace school in Aachen. Alcuin agreed to accept if he could obtain permission from his own king and archbishop, and after doing so he officially transferred from York to Aachen the following year.

³ West, *Alcuin and the Rise of the Christian Schools*, 31.

Alcuin arrived in Aachen with his work cut out for him, for, as West records, “[t]he plight of learning in Frankland at this time was deplorable.”⁴ The negligence of the previous dynasty of kings, the Merovingians, had allowed the monastic and cathedral schools to fall into disuse and the copying of books to effectively cease. Rising heroically to the task at hand, Alcuin began by establishing a curriculum based on the *trivium*, the *quadrivium*, the writings of the Church Fathers, and—of course—Sacred Scripture. Alcuin spent the next several years instructing Charlemagne, his family, his court, and a number of young men who had followed him to Aachen from York, masterfully adjusting his approach to each of his students according to their varying interests and abilities. He taught them not only how to learn, but how to live, often emphasizing the fact that truth cannot be divorced from morality.

Alcuin’s role in Francia was not to be limited to the grounds of the palace school. His were the brains behind Charlemagne’s grand initiative, known as the Carolingian Renaissance, to reignite the academic vitality of all of Christendom—the first such intellectual renewal to take place in the West since the fall of Rome. It was likely the hand of Alcuin that penned the famous capitulary issued by Charlemagne in 787, distinguished as “the first general charter of education for the middle ages,”⁵ which encouraged the abbots of the numerous monasteries in his realm to strenuously prioritize the “study of letters” and to seek out “men who are both able and willing to learn, and also desirous of instructing others.”⁶ Subsequent documents promulgated from Aachen instructed the priests and bishops of the land to erect schools where elementary education could be provided to the kingdom’s children free of charge. After fourteen years of serving Charlemagne, accomplishing the renewed education of both his court and his kingdom, Alcuin,

⁴ West, *Alcuin and the Rise of the Christian Schools*, 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*

now 61-years-of-age, was rewarded with a retirement in the form of his installation as the abbot of the illustrious Benedictine monastery at Tours.

Alcuin: Abbot of Tours

Alcuin spent the last eight years of his life serving as the abbot of Tours, where he ensured that his monks adhered strictly to the Benedictine rule, and—of course—that they received an excellent education. Most of Alcuin’s known correspondence also dates to this time, during which he often wrote to his former student and successor at the palace school of Aachen, to Charlemagne, and to various churchman throughout the kingdom, continuing to instruct and encourage them all in their efforts to revivify Christendom’s intellectual tradition. However, Alcuin’s primary and most profound contributions of this time occurred in his monastery’s *scriptorium*.

One of the greatest legacies of Alcuin and of the Carolingian Renaissance is found in the copying of books, an activity that took place in the *scriptoria* of Europe’s monasteries. Alcuin took great pains to form his monks, as well as those in other monasteries, as expert scribes capable of perfectly transcribing the available manuscripts of the Bible, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the works of the classical Greco-Roman authors. To this end, he instructed his monks in the proper writing and correct spelling of Latin, and played a crucial role in the development of the script known as Carolingian miniscule. This script (which is based largely on the script of Alcuin’s own native Northumbria), with its lower- and upper-case letters and spaces between words, drastically improved the ease and accuracy of reading and writing—and remains to this day the basis of Western writing. Such was the efficacy of Alcuin’s efforts that “the oldest

surviving copies of most ancient Roman literature date back to the ninth century, when Carolingian scholars rescued them from oblivion.”⁷

Alcuin: Linchpin of the Liberal Arts Tradition

As seen, Alcuin’s efforts during the Carolingian Renaissance he spearheaded were instrumental in rescuing the West from utter darkness. After the fall of Rome, the liberal arts curriculum developed in antiquity was all but extinguished from the European continent, preserved only in the British Isles, from whence hailed Alcuin. By joining his brains to Charlemagne’s brawn, this Northumbrian deacon was able to orchestrate a profound renewal of Christendom’s intellectual tradition, even if this renewal unfortunately floundered in the generations following the death of his patron, Emperor Charles the Great.

Although political instability rendered the Carolingian Renaissance unsustainable in the short term, Alcuin’s efforts, particularly regarding the copying and preservation of books, proved to be “of inestimable value when the more comprehensive revival came two centuries later,”⁸ and ultimately facilitated the subsequent successes of both Scholasticism and the Renaissance, the effects of which permeate the modern education system. Indeed, every college-educated person today owes some debt of gratitude to Alcuin, for although the university system itself may not be a direct descendent of his efforts, when the first universities emerged in the late

⁷ Thomas E. Woods, Jr., *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2012), 17.

⁸ David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (London: Longmans, 1962), 76.
<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.553368/page/n75/mode/2up>

Middle Ages, “[t]here was but one tradition available for their use, and that flowed from the schools of the age quickened by Alcuin.”⁹

Without the efforts of Alcuin, the West’s intellectual tradition may well have been lost forever. The very texts used by subsequent revivals in learning, from Scholasticism to the Renaissance and down to this day, date almost exclusively to the work performed by his monks and those in the abbeys influenced by him. His is not a household name, but he is arguably the linchpin of the entire liberal arts tradition and the savior of Western education itself.

⁹ West, *Alcuin and the Rise of the Christian Schools*, 139.

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