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SITUATING WOMEN IN CAROLINGIAN SOCIETY: QUEENSHIP, MONASTICISM AND FEMININITY.

- MRIDANI CHAKRABARTI

Introduction -

Carolingians also known as *Carolingus* or *Carlovingians* the name derived from the old high German where *karl* means freeman or a man. To trace the historical background of the Carolingian society we need to look at how they came into power and established an empire. They are essentially from Frankish aristocrats, originating from a Germanic speaking tribe who invaded the decaying Western Roman Empire in the 5th century and settling in the Gaul region of Western Europe later during the time of Clovis I consolidating it as Merovingian dynasty. According to a charter of June 20 , 751 CE which was issued in the name 'the illustrious man Pippin, mayor of the palace' and another court case mentioning Pippin as *rex francorum* of March 1, 752 CE – from which it can be assumed that between these two dates the Merovingian throne was taken care of, by Pippin (belonging from the Pippinids one of the Frankish noble families) who was jointly the mayor of palace with his brother Carloman, replacing Childeric III last king of the Merovingians.[1] With the establishment of the empire, mainly two things can be noticed, firstly the wider expansions of the Franks helped it to come into contact with the previously active cultural centres like Spain, Rome or even Lombard which secondly, made the newly formed kingdom to attract scholars and other learned people to migrate herein for patronages. Having said that, this can be seen as instrumental to further developments in every cultural, literary spheres as named to be the Carolingian Renaissance by several.

This is where I would state the aim of this paper which is to look at the position of women in the Carolingian society with the time period from the latter half of 7th century till before the fragmentation of the state between the sons of Louis the Pious in the first half of 8th century. The debate on whether the Carolingian empire during Charlamagne's rule, actually attained the heights of development in cultural, ecclesiastical, architectural, literary, aspects is no doubt a grave matter to check. However, it is also important to look at the societal changes be it for the betterment or worsening of people's living conditions. As EH Carr argues

[1] Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Simon MacLean. *The Carolingian World*. of *Cambridge Medieval Textbooks*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 47-48

the condition of women to be one of the most crucial indicators of any society's well- being, I feel, taking up the women question is important while determining the society existing during European history's one of the major events, the Carolingian Renaissance! To look at the society as a whole, position of women will be seen in different roles they played, from different layers of the nobility, papacy, commoners and there after alternating between the black, white or grey lens to look at the Carolingian developments differentiating the era from its former or even latter phases.

Queenship: The Women in Power -

Philippe Buc while looking at the chronicles by Liutprand of Cremona, terms hussies and matrons are well chosen and categorized as hussies being the bad girls who are sexually available while matrons on the other hand is a mature woman who is chaste enough for marriage.[2] In the mid ninth century, several women from royal, to some matrons, hussies, gained annalistic mentions like in the *Annals of Fulda* and the *Annals of St Bertin* which had its own chronicle characteristics. These two are expected to be produced in the monastery of Fulda and in St Bertin if not exactly as an annal, was produced as a manuscript. Also, *Annales regni Francorum* written in c. 790 talks mostly about the courtly affairs and the queen regent. The royal women earn their place in the annals after being accepted as exceptional like Pippin's wife Bertrada named along with Pippin's royal consecration done by Bishop in 751 in the First Continuator of Fredegar's *chronicle*. [3] We will be referring to the *Annales regni Francorum* where Bertrada seemed to have gained influential positions as the queen consort accompanying her husband even to some extent it seems that she had made her position as an effective diplomatic royal with increasing authority on court to a point, Pippin in his last days relied on her skills.[4] Bertrada and her commendable ways of maintaining alliances through matrimony, Charlamagne's marriage to the Lombard princess, Desiderata was her brainchild which was crucial to the newly founded kingdom. Bertha as queen mother was bestowed with power from the Christian consecration as well as the German law of king having a council with his most trusted people that consisted of his wife along others, thus giving certain political domains to

[2] Philippe Buc, *Italian Hussies and German Matrons: Liutprand of Cremona on Dynastic Legitimacy*. Frühmittelalterliche Studien 29 (1995), pp. 207-25

[3] Jinty Nelson, *Hussies, Matrons and Others in Carolingian Chronicles.* (Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 8-9

[4] P.D. King, *Charlamagne. Translated sources.* (Lambrigg, 1987) p. 109

the queen which even included deciding the alliances, military priorities making her quite an important figure in the court.[5]

Further during Charlamagne's reign, count of his wives is a bit controversial. As seen in Einhard's *Vita Karoli,* Charlamagne is considered to be having four wives and three concubines most of these gave him children and the naming of most of the concubines is incomplete due to the author's forgetfulness.[6] His first wife, known as one of his concubines, Himiltrude who gave birth to Charlamagne's first son Peppin with a hunched back. Was this forgetfulness intentional? Perhaps denying his first wife (wedded along Frankish lines) as the queen and labelling her as a concubine made the heirlooms situation smooth enough to deny rights to the prince with deformities who was both a political and social inconvenience. From the annalists' perspective, it was easier for him to justify the Carolingian rise with Louis the Pious, the rightful son of the king.[7] To talk about Charlamagne's second wife, Desiderata was rather quick as said earlier, it was more of a commanded marriage from the court in order to state alliance with the Lombard which even fell apart rather fast.

His third wife was the earliest wife to be mentioned in *Annales regni Francorum*, Hildegard, an Alemannian Princess with whom he had four sons and five daughters.[8] She was remarkably good as a queen consort as she was with her husband in Italy consecutively in c. 780 and c. 781 being heavily pregnant in the harsh winters too and can be regarded her with a heroic maternal track record. The so called 'mother of the Carolingians' yet she was on the verge of being tagged as a marriage of supposed concubinage, a practice of removing eligible heirs by other stakeholders of the royal family. [9] The fourth wife Fastrada was rather a prominent figure in the Vita among all other wives and concubines. In Charlamagne's absence she kept holding the court together, keeping the palace in good order and her participating in the Carolingian affairs like giving judgement and distributing patronages would evoke reactions either making her responsible for any political miscalculations by the king. This can also be seen as one of the factors behind soiling her image from a kind queen to a cruel one to shroud the king from any words against his diplomatic

[5] Jean Favier, *Charlamagne*. translated version (France, Fayard, 2000) p. 245
[6] Einhard, *Vita Karoli* c.18, chapter XVIII
[7] Janet L Nelson, *Women at the court of Charlamagne: A Case of Monstrous regiment?* (New York, Medieval Queenship, 1993), pp. 43-60
[8] Einhard, Op. cit. chapter XIX
[9] Jean Favier, *Charlamagne*. translated version (France, Fayard, 2000) p. 155

failures.[10] This is for the ironical use of the queen's intentions perhaps makes the queen powerful and influential enough outside domestic quarters, to give rise to conspiracies against the king so much so that the king's political stability depends on the attitudes of Queen. The fifth wife, Liutgard is nothing special in itself, except her death and the duties of patronage distribution or looking after the kids in *Annales regni Francorum*.[11] The notable contrasts in treatment of the third and fourth wife makes the annalistic records too biased to derive information on the queen consorts of the aforesaid time period. Mainly the Einhard records can be assumed to be a medium of defending the kingship even if it takes to hide or exaggerate the real facts according to the writers' wish and convenience.

The women roles in the royal families meant taking up full charge of the household duties, the house helps as well as taking care of the future heir(s), while also when a woman inherits her own estate, she even adapts the political power that comes with it and continuing even when she becomes a widow. On a more serious note, with the introduction of the Carolingian rule, the restrictive Germanic rules of almost purchasing a marriage and incapacity to inherit the previous belongings in any form was now obsolete, while the private rights to acquire, maintain properties was established giving them (wife, daughter, mother), some sort of economic equality in the domestic periphery within the family. During Charlamagne's time he even did not let his daughters get married while encouraging any illicit relationships in order to prevent any kind of divided inheritance issues.[12] On the contrary, his successor, Louis the Pious faced the divided succession problem while his second wife Judith of Bavaria was determined to provide a singular, prominent position in the kingdom for her son, the future Charles the Bald.

Monasticism and Female Sanctity –

The hagiographical records saw a rise in the by the mid ninth century, with introduction of several learned scholars and particularly the increase in hagiography richness was also aimed for the ecclesiastical reform which also contributed to Carolingian Renaissance in the later times. Hagiography provides for the importances of male and female sanctity which was mainly constructed on the Christian past which originated with the past

[10] Ibid, p. 245
[11] Jinty Nelson, *Hussies, Matrons and Others in Carolingian Chronicles.* (Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), p. 14
[12] Jo Ann McNamara, Suzanne Wemple, "The Power of Women through the Family in Medieval Europe: 500-1100", *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3/4. Winter- Spring, 1973, pp.132-134.
< https://www.jstor.org/stable/1566483>, accessed October 23, 2024.

culture but no direct experiences of it. [13] Mentions of the female in the hagiography is observed in scarce amounts when compared to the records of their male counterparts. There had been geographic discrepancies in the Carolingian realm as a whole. In areas like Provence, Aquitaine of Italy has been completely dominated by male saints and no such traces of female saints can be found in the records. However, beyond the areas of Loire and Alps, clusters of Seine and Meuse with Rhineland outliers as well as Saxony missionary activities can be found. The uneven distribution indicates how political was the situation of female *vitae* in Siene and Meuse as in later years it emerges to be one of the most important political centres of Carolingian kingdom or even Saxony as the emerging core of further political activities. [14]

There has been an interpretation regarding the patristic notions adapted in order to convey differences between females and males. Pauline Christianity had emphasised "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female: for you are all one in Christ" (Gal. 3:28), yet the ascetic discipline was limited to the manly approach to have full chastity and femininity needs to take a back seat in order to be a part of the ascetics' inner core. To some extent the sexual status was pushed further into the emotional sphere to juxtapose women's tears and men's resilience. Rictrude (c.690) a female saint in a monastery was determined to lose the 'womanly' features of herself and had to endure one of her daughter's deaths on a Christmas Day – intervening in her consciousness where she had to repress her grief and celebrate Christmas in happy spirits. As recorded in *Vita Rictrudis*, written by Hucbald (c.907), she was completely chaste being champion of her sexuality and all the features it comes with, termed as *femina virilis*.[15]

Carolingian women in the monastic field were projected a bit different from the men, the former ones were seen leaving monastic institutions for marriage and prioritising the family while the men had to leave behind their familial aspects in order to be a part of the clergy. Certain vitae like that of Liutberga, even mentions how female sanctity was mainly based on familial aspects without a strict choice between family or religion, almost all being associated with aristocratic kin group some of which achieved juridical and financial independence from them. [16] Monasticism also included the miraculous events as well as the

[13] Julia M H Smith, "Early Medieval Hagiography in the late Twentieth Century", *Early Medieval Europe*, i, 1992, pp. 69-72

[14] Julia M H Smith, "The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe c. 780- 920", *Past & Present*, No. 146, 1995, pp 8-9. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/651150>, accessed October 22,2024.

[15] Ibid, pp. 18-20

[16] Valerie L. Garver, *Women and Aristocratic culture in the Carolingian World*. (London, Cornell University Press, 2009), pp. 69- 70

saints, bishops, nuns were expected to be spiritually strong and chaste enough to perform any life- saving wonders but the hagiographers would locate them only when they are coming from convents or any communities related. To be fair, Carolingian female chastity did not only get limited in the institutes but also in the soul of one, interior spirituality expressed in visions is the most distinctive aspect of the hagiography writing on women; the visions are direct and personal written vividly with blended Biblical reflections.[17] In this context the compulsory aspect of biases in the hagiography is important to be addressed, along with the challenges faced by hagiographers in representing women's lives within the constraints of patristic patrons influencing to create a woman's life out of male hagiographic traditions. While portraying female sanctity in a set up that valued exemplary conduct while being hostile to living 'wonder workers.' The lingering question of whether sanctity requires an audience to recognize it, that Carolingian laws restricted religious women from engaging with the secular world, limiting their visibility and ability to perform miracles. Not only the royal constraints even the Carolingian church would never allow the manifestation of charismatic miracles. Their existence was largely confined to familial and cloistered settings, away from political and social power, projected to be the caretaker of familial institution for which even within the closed quarters of convents they could not show their complete devotion to God but had to do that very privately.[18]

To sum up, the roles of monasticism was even controlled by the royal line of restrictions and absolutely controlled by the monastic institutions. This also somehow clarifies the fact how the clergy and the King as well as his close councils monitored the mobility of women in convents which can be seen as a way of keeping their popularity under check to prevent any kind of messiah fame to tarnish the image of rising church and expanding Carolingian. To execute this thought perhaps arrangement of women roles was made family-centric so that they are further kept under supervision in the domestic quarters while also providing for the participation in religious activities or become completely devoted to God institutionally! Critically speaking, the reflection of subtle control from both the sectors of society can be reflected in the hagiographic records when relying on those as main source should be treated with caution.

[17] Julia M H Smith, "The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe c. 780- 920", *Past & Present*, No. 146, 1995, pp 32-33.
[18] Ibid, pp. 35-37.

Experiences of Common Women in Society –

The mass and one of the most major tiers of the society constituted the maximum amount of importance which is eventually the yardstick to test the successes of the empire as reflected on the livelihood of the people, in this case stressing on women. However, it is necessary to keep the availability of the sources in back of the mind, it is rather scanty when we talk about the commoners. Annals commissioned by the royal houses were used to document the maintain records of time, achievements of the kings, nobility and papacy coexisting in the society. To assess the Carolingian era women the original source of the power, Merovingian polity is to be noted which will help in drawing a parallel to understand the later one. The Merovingian era had a matriarch tendency where they could act as a replacement to her dead husband as she had been a part of the negotiations and other political and diplomatic discussions while also managing estates, donate lands as well as looking after their children. They were more capable of raising their status in society by marrying across class lines. By the mid eighth century, the emergence of institutions even the church in its initial years encouraged equal treatment of women but interestingly once it became the official religion of Roman empire, they started disqualifying women and their religious participation labelling them as 'impure' due to their monthly menstruation.[19] This system went on to become very rigid in further years as seen in the Carolingian era, the women were almost eliminated from any kinds of political ventures specially in the nobility and the royal classes.

The common females, the working classes was bound to be engaged in even the minors of the works on the lands, trades as the upper nobility, clergy had earned enough lands to be rented out where these people would work. The females were responsible for waking up at the dawn, cook for the family or the duty would be allocated to any girl while the woman of the household is off to work in fields alongside their husbands. The ones staying at home would tend to the children, the gardens, domestic animals like sheep and pigs which required care and protection against any wild animals.[20] There has been traces of several labour- based works while women were mainly involved in works like wine brewing, cloth production made out of

[19] John J. Butt, *Daily Life in the Age of Charlamagne*. (United States of America, Greenwood Press, 2002), p.- 6
[20] Ibid, pp. 76-77

wool or beat flax, combed into thread and woven into linen which was also mostly looked after by the women.

Marriage, Motherhood, Widowhood –

Family relations, specially marital relations supplied moral constructs by means of which society was imagined in the West for which we also see intervention of the courts and papacy authorities to uphold the 'purity' of union while the women were treated as some kind of 'animate treasure' in the process.[21] Several trials and tribulations (c. 820) as well as Gregory of Tours mentions how there has been great deal of 'kindred feuds' during the sixth century and kinship of a woman was important to derive status from both the sides. Exogamy in outside kinship families was not accepted within the Germanic tribes on the contrary, Church in the later years would intervene and encourage exogamy for which by 11th century, it was impossible to find anybody for marriage, who is not related. Though in the Carolingian Era, the nobility was seen marrying their relatives due to its own political benefits. To marry someone in the family would let the wealth be within one's kinship and also to reduce the control the wealthy Germanic males held over women. [22] The common people, peasant groups where they married outside kinship as well as outside marriageable estate. The Carolingian rulers were directly getting involved as the protector of a lawful marriage while also asserting himself as the father to the kingdom 'family' as *patresfamiliae*, as well as the guarantor of public rights in the kingdom. Girls were considered marriageable at age of twelve yet Pepin and Charlamagne made legislation to stop marriages before puberty of the girls, Louis the Pious stressed on the lawful marriages, and to prevent abduction, hypothetically speaking, if the abductor of a woman being betrothed to someone, he will have to give a compensation to both the kin and to the injured fiancé. [23]

Marriage essentially consisted of three steps – betrothal, settlement of terms and finally, marriage. Betrothal includes giving a gift a ring or something as a token of promise which is done solely between the two subjects getting married. In Carolingian times, settlement of terms would be done when the family of the girl would be given dowry (continued from ancient

[21] Pauline Stafford, *Queens and Dowagers: The Kings wife in the Early Middle Ages*, (Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 1983), pp. 64-70
[22] John J. Butt, *Daily Life in the Age of Charlamagne*. (United States of America, Greenwood Press, 2002), p.57
[23] Sylvie Joye, "Carolingian rulers and marriage in the age of Louis the Pious and his sons", London, *Institute of Historical Research*, 2012, pp. 3- 6

Rome) as a compensation for the family losing their beloved one or even compensating for the loss of virginity of the girl, post marriage. Marriage was taking vows not compulsorily to be held in the churches, if so, they would be insisted that the marriage is monogamous and indissoluble. Divorce was prevalent from different penitential(s) issued by the churches if the condition relates to the couple's impotency, leprosy or abduction, adultery or absence of consent. Concubinage was very much present in the noble tier as they were entitled to maintain sexual relationships when in a marriage since polygamy was not encouraged by Carolingian courts. The kings would have to divorce the former wife if he gets 'tired' of the marriage and can remarry after divorce while they could have sexual relations with several other women, concubines. [24]

Childbirth in the middle age have been barely recorded and whatever scarce resources can be sourced it mostly talks about mostly the elites and history of reproduction and nothing related to the pregnancy and childbirth in the medieval ages, let alone the Carolingians. Only handful of the accounts are clerical who were writing from the 'ecclesiastical' viewpoint which lacks the proper perspectives of the ones undergoing the whole process of childbearing. For example, writings of Pope Gregory written in the Merovingian times was to some extent copied by the Carolingian writers which yet again needs the caution of drawing a landscape from the disputed sources. [25] Hagiographic records as well as penitential were from the clerical point of views as said earlier, yet somehow it provides their approach to distinct features of female sterility, contraception, abortion, sexual intercourse during pregnancy which according to them (in Carolingian period) are problems that 'least cropped up'.[26] The clerical and legal discourse also dealt with infant loss, conception, infants' care which lacked glorification and normalisation. As a result, the narratives kept on lingering for several years to come in the West which makes the sphere of motherhood and childbirth instrumental in shaping the society in the 'right way' that even involved the goodwill and image of the king as well as the clergy people. Determining the extent of knowledge in gynaecology can be difficult to assess due to the scarcity of individual survey records but based on surviving manuscripts, most of the conceiving mothers did not have enough access to medical care but depended upon passed down advices from the ancestors and the ancient rule that dominated in

[24] John J. Butt, *Daily Life in the Age of Charlamagne*. (United States of America, Greenwood Press, 2002), p. 60
[25] Valerie L. Garver, "Childbearing and Infancy in the Carolingian Period", *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 21, No. 2. May 2012, pp.2-4. < https://www.jstor.org/stable/41475078 >, accessed October 23, 2024.
[26] Ibid, p. 7

the past. [27] Information regarding the obstetrics, was sometimes derived from Byzantine commentaries yet this scantiness of any guidebook or a rulebook is absent in all sorts of medicine streams. Whatever remaining texts like *De universe* written by Hrabanus Maurus in the mid eighth century would have been able to only be a book useful to scholars or readers interested to learn about the process but ironically would be of no use to the midwives, laywomen or doctors of that time. [28] Childbirth and fertility had been politicised very normally as the future of the nation depended on fertility of the women, from military, diplomatic and political perspectives. Salic law conferred relatively higher legal status to fertile young women and while they were married off once they hit the age of puberty. Elder, barren women according to medieval law codes can be on the verge of losing their legal status as the inhabitant of Carolingian areas which actually is correlated to their menopause with old age, ranging between forty and fifty. Additionally older women (*mairoes feminae*) were prohibited to marry any younger man (*viri minores*) which might disturb the fertility expectations of the state (age of the women is directly proportional to their fertility rates, younger the woman is better for the state). [29]

Widowhood in the Carolingian society was more of a sudden abandonment of a protector rather a guardian who previously used to safeguard women like some helpless being which is questionable due to the lack of any liberating steps taken by the rulers for the women. The Carolingian texts recognise widows as powerless people and protection of their being can justify the ideological and moral righteousness of the kingdom. During the time of Louis the Pious, widows were subjected to restrictions like monastic retirements and bring them under the church's scrutiny as reflected in poetry, hagiography records. One of the causes to this system can be due to the widows getting entitled to the estates, lands and wealth from their husbands which would override the desired plans to utilise it under the rule, as the widows would be very much present in the system and that is why they are bound by the patriarchal restrictions. [30] The political impact in the Queen's widowhood is both better from other widows and also worse with increasing amount of resentment within the royal quarters, for which they would donated to religious spaces and fund nunneries with the believe in themselves that their,

[27] Julia M H Smith, "Gender and Ideology in the Early Middle Ages", *Gender and Christian Religion* (Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 1998) p. 59
[28] Valerie L. Garver, "Childbearing and Infancy in the Carolingian Period", p. 10
[29] Pauline Stafford*, Queens, Concubines and Dowagers,* p.90
[30] Simon MacLean, "Queenship, Nunneries and Royal Widowhood in Carolingian Europe" Oxford, *Past and Present* No. 178, 2003 p. 6

'sacred aura' would help her and the family get rid of any spiteful attacks.[31] In Frankish period, widows were entitled to a better freedom while managing their own properties even better than the married or unmarried women. Certain hagiographic records also shows that widows would seek church's protection to keep the properties out of their relatives' sight. Remarriages of the aristocrat widows in the Carolingian times would mainly serve two among many purposes; the wealthy widows would bring in wealth in the new marriage while the man remarrying would get an ideological boost in his reputation as he took the responsibility of 'protecting the helpless'. Some widows would enter religious households and run those with experiences gathered from the hardships after getting widowed for the betterment of administration in newer communities. [32]

Precisely, women in their different stages of life with newer features of femininity had to cope up with the society, the rule, verdicts, advisories from Churches where perhaps they had forgotten to live as themselves. I would say this to be due to sheer conditioning going on for centuries that normalised women questions to be silenced as that prevented the society to be responsible for the misdeeds, mistreatment. This is why women were apparently convincing them as centre of society after the God, the King which was essentially a way to ignore their needs and experimenting different rules, new systems on their femininity just to project themselves as the most appropriate 'reformers' of the society.

Conclusion –

The Carolingian society was the backdrop against which I tried to paint the most vital and important aspect of a society – women. It is compulsory to address the sparse sources that can be derived from this age among which the few recovered resources, biases of the commissioned, writers, annalists are inevitable. This is why it is difficult top delve into the day-to day conditions of women or even their relationships individually with the royals and the clergy group of the society. While dealing with different aspects of a woman, it is clear that Carolingian, though derived from the Frankish nobilities of the predecessor, Merovingians, was better off at some extent as in, succession, representation of women in vitae, coexistence of family life and religious devotion. On the contrary Carolingians started restrictions on women's' spiritual experiences out in the open, widowed women being entitled to managing

[31] Ibid, p. 11
[32] Valerie L. Garver, *Women and Aristocratic culture in the Carolingian World*. (London, Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 185

their own estates, disrespectful labelling of a lawful marriages as concubinage (even in royal quarters) which would tarnish the novel Renaissance, rebirth image to some extent. The extraordinary interferences of the Bishop and clergymen in political, cultural decisions had even lead to producing baseless narratives like, regarding marital age, childbirth, with double standards while encouraging concubines and futile sexual encounters apparently as a step towards reducing non institutional relationships!

The scholarly intentions of glorifying the Carolingian Renaissance must be critical and selective without skipping the minor yet effective shortcomings emerging in this era even coexisting with the so-called golden age as well. I would still stress on the woman question which was efficiently ignored by poor representation of women and lack of their perspectives or personal opinions in the advisories or hagiographic records rightfully written by the ones who never experienced being a woman. For which either they are made to be the helpless creatures that sustains on protection of a man with marital rights or they are tagged as barren woman without a child or an available woman suitable for manifesting their sexual desires on them! Yet on an optimist note, initial years of Carolingian era was perhaps a transitional phase before entering into the golden age which was unknown to Europe since its inception.

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