CHAPTER THREE

NOMEN AUCTORITATIS:
COMMUNICATION OF AUTHORITY
IN CAROLINGIAN TITLES

Quapropter et nostros ad vos direximus missos, qui ex nostri nominis auctoritate una vobiscum corrigerent quae corrigenda essent.

(Admonitio generalis (a. 789), in Capitularia regum Francorum, vol. 1, 53.)

Intitulature (intitulatio), the official titles of a ruler, was an important mode of communicating early medieval authority, and, hence, constituted another syntactic part of the symbolic language of authority. Carolingian charters, letters, and coins naming the Carolingians demonstrate discrepancy between titles used at the royal chancery, on the one hand, and those employed in local mints and private letters sent to the court, on the other. Subjects living in diverse regions of the Carolingian realm also used different titles to address their rulers. For instance, in northern France, Charlemagne was called king of the Franks, while in Lombardy after 774 he was known, first and foremost, as “Our Lord, King of the Lombards.” Thus, the diplomatic formulas of intitulature provided a constant dialogue on the name of Carolingian authority.

(a) Communicative nature of Carolingian titles

Research on early medieval intitulature owes a great debt to the works of Herwig Wolfram;¹ his studies demonstrate that the titles of early medieval rulers contain, in a latent and concentrated form, rich information about their holders. According to Wolfram, early medieval

intitulatio describes the name, rank, and function of a ruler, as well as his personal and divine Begnadung (endowed virtues) in relation to his function. Yet early medieval titles also articulate royal authority distinctly as relationships binding the ruler, the subjects, and God. Expressions like rex Francorum (king of the Franks) or rex Langobardorum (king of the Lombards) pertain not only to a ruler, but also to his subjects. These titles present not only the ruler’s relationship to a gens, but also its relation to the ruler. Other titles, like gratia Dei rex (king by the grace of God), refer to a third party in the construction of authority in the early Middle Ages, namely, God. As a result, titles also played an important role in the construction of early medieval identities by defining both gentes involved in the creation of royal authority and a subject’s self-perception vis-à-vis his or her ruler and the Lord. Hence, early medieval intitulature described the relationships involved in the creation of authority, and changes in intitulatio usually reflected the modification of roles in these power relations.

Wolfram begins his first work on early medieval intitulatio with a passage from the New Testament, John 1.19–22, in which John the Baptist is asked: “Who are you? . . . What do you say of yourself?” (Tu quis es? . . . quid dicis de te ipso?) The latter question becomes a key issue in Wolfram’s work, which is focused on the Selbstaussage (self-statement) of kings and princes. I begin with a passage from another work written much closer to the Carolingian period, namely, Dudo of St. Quentin’s History of the Normans, dated to the late tenth or early eleventh century. The anecdote describes the conversation that, according to Dudo, took place between the Vikings and Frankish aristocrats in the late ninth century. When ambassadors of the Frankish duke Regnold met the Northmen who had arrived in northern Gaul with their leader Rollo and asked them, “By what title does your chief hold office?” (Quo nomine vester senior fungitur?), the latter answered, “By none, because we are equal in power” (Nullo, quia aequalis potestatis sumus). This response clearly demonstrates the awareness of the early medieval historian that the titles of the ruler, or his or her nomen, reflected the power relations

---

2 Wolfram, Intitulatio, 1:12 and 25.