CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF CAROLINGIAN AUTHORITY

Quaesumus omnipotens deus ut famulus tuus ille, qui tua miseratone suscepit regni gubernacula, virtutum etiam omnium percipiat incrementa, quibus decenter ornatus, et vitiorum monstra devitare, et ad te qui via, veritas, et vita es, gratiosus valeat pervenire.

(Missa cotidiana pro rege, App. 5)

A broad range of sources including liturgical manuscripts, diplomas, letters, miniatures, seals, and coins have demonstrated that the indirect communication of Carolingian authority between 751 and 877 was visibly affected by the “horizons of expectations” of diverse social and regional audiences. In the latter case, the expectations of people living in places as different as the Frankish hinterland or former Roman Italy were shaped by regional sociopolitical *habitus*—that is, by various predisposed assumptions, expectations, and beliefs about interactions between the ruler and subjects, their corresponding rights, duties, and obligations, and basic principles of royal legitimation. Those *habitus*, together with more rationalized discourses available via written sources, formed the traditions that shaped patterns of political behavior, thus defining the playing field within which the Carolingians effectively communicated their authority. Some of those political traditions had lasted for centuries; others originated from concurrent social and political changes. This semiotic diversity has been analyzed in the preceding chapters by looking at the use of different titles, graphic signs, visual images, and liturgical formulas to describe royal and imperial authority in the Carolingian realm. This concluding chapter not only summarizes the evidence provided by these non-narrative sources—with focus on those political traditions and corresponding semiotic codes that are most important for understanding both a Carolingian polity and the gradual transformation of the symbolic language of authority—but also contrasts it with relevant Carolingian written discourse and modern debates on Carolingian politics.
The Frankish tradition may be seen in the symbolic language of authority throughout the analyzed period, but its influence was especially strong in the second half of the eighth century. The code “rex Francorum” that communicated this tradition of royal authority as connected to the Frankish gens can be traced back to the Merovingian period.1 As Helmut Reimitz suggests, its intensive use in Frankish narrative discourse started as early as the late seventh century.2 The development of this tradition correlated with the decreasing authority of Merovingian kings and the concurrent increasing power of Frankish nobles; the symbolic language of late Merovingian coins and diplomas attests to this change. This correlation highlights the fact that the category “Franci,” in the narrative and diplomatic discourses of the eighth century most frequently referred to the Frankish aristocracy. Thus, in practice, the stress on the gens Francorum—the imagined political community of the Franks—as the main source of legitimation for rulership in Gaul pointed to a political consensus between Frankish aristocrats and the rising Carolingians.3

Hence, the symbolic language of authority first underlined the dependence of Carolingian rule upon the Franks; thus, in 751, Pippin the Short became not just king but king of the Franks. The traditional Merovingian title “rex Francorum” appeared in Pippin’s royal diplomas addressing the Frankish aristocracy. The monogram of this title, RF, appeared also on his coins accessible to ordinary Franks (fig. 4), which deviated from the Merovingian numismatic tradition. The stress on Francorum in these media propagated the message that the Carolingians acquired royal authority with both the consent of the Franks imagined as a political entity and with the Frankish aristocracy in practice. The same emphasis on a consensus with the Frankish elite is indicated by

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1 On this tradition, Nelson, “Chapter 15. Kingship and Royal Government,” 423, mentions: “The third and fundamental aspect of [Carolingian] kingship, demonstrating both continuities with the Frankish past and similarities with other early medieval realms, Christians and pagan alike, was its basis in a gens, a people, and hence in the bonding of ruler and ruled.”


3 For details and all references, see Airlie, “Towards a Carolingian Aristocracy,” 110–1.