1 Migration, Interaction and Connectivity

The creation and expansion of the Carolingian empire was a process of crucial importance for European history, as it reshaped the post-Roman world and provided the foundations for medieval western and central Europe. The establishment of the Carolingian frontier zone in central Europe and the eastern Adriatic region triggered a wave of societal and political changes: population movements, transformation of local communities and complexification of existing social networks. These changes were shaped by the different ways in which local communities reacted to Carolingian imperial power – either through resistance or integration of imperial cultural templates and architectures of power that were negotiated on a local, regional and trans-regional level. The establishment of new social networks transformed the localized, almost self-sufficient post-Roman communities which were forming in the 7th century, soon to be integrated in a much larger, interconnected and unfamiliar world. In discussing the 8th and 9th centuries in central Europe and the eastern Adriatic hinterland, it is impossible to overlook the significance of this period in the construction of the ‘historical biographies’ of modern nations located in this region. The impact of preconceptions about the past which were integrated into national narratives of research in the 19th and 20th centuries cannot be overstated. The integration of these preconceptions into national narratives presents significant challenges for the next generation of scholars, but it is also an opportunity for this current generation to reassess the existing scholarship in light of new methodologies and the most recent archaeological research to produce a more balance understanding of the past.

The impact of the expansion of the Carolingian empire on the resultant frontier regions and the societies therein closely resembles that which occurred in other pre-industrial empires. Empires, being complex trans-ethnic and trans-regional political networks, cause changes on their fringes through expansion which reshape local power-relationships and introduce new ideological discourses. Frontier societies actively participate in this transformation by processing imperial influences and templates, changing their political and economic systems and interacting with an empire either as foes or allies.
Elite individuals and indeed the elite groups of these frontier societies exploit interaction with the imperial power by integrating themselves with imperial architectures of power to enhance social dominance over their societies. These same societies also experienced social complexification processes which impacted greatly on their identities and culture.\(^1\) Whether the Carolingian empire was an imperial or proto-imperial formation, finished empire or unfinished imperial project, is of little significance here.\(^2\) What is significant for the purposes of this volume is to recognise how this empire organised power in particular ways, maintained ideological discourses and established a social system that secured social reproduction and integration,\(^3\) all of which makes it a suitable candidate for discussion using an analytic framework for research of pre-modern empires.\(^4\)

The expansion of Carolingian power in northern, central and southeastern Europe established a frontier zone which, rather than being a lineal division beyond the empire’s influence, was an active zone of cultural change, reminiscent of Turner’s well-known conception of the American frontier.\(^5\) The transformations of local communities in the Carolingian frontier regions were clearly caused by two factors. The first of these was imperial reorganisation of power through the establishment of new social networks centred around the imperial core, which necessarily peripheralized frontier regions. The second factor was the negotiation of this new organisation of power on a local level. While medievalists have been reluctant to adopt the Turnerian concept of the frontier, a number of important works have been written in the last few decades, especially in the context of frontiers in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages.\(^6\)

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1. The literature on empires and frontier zones is extensive, see e.g. Elton 1996; Hall 2000; Meier 2006: 78–111; Colás 2007: 47–62.
2. The structure of the Carolingian empire was simpler and less developed than other pre-industrial empires, as argued in Moreland 2001a. Innes (2000) explains at length the system established by the Carolingians, which rested upon the ability of the aristocracy to mediate between the imperial centre and local communities.
4. See De Jong 2015 for an excellent overview of the problem and the historiography. As she points out, it was only after ca. 2000, that the scholarship started to seriously see the Carolingian realm as an empire, e.g. Innes 2000; Goldberg 2006; Garipzanov 2008; Costambeys et al. 2011; Gravel 2012; Latowsky 2013; etc.
5. See the recent cross-historical study of pre-modern borders, borderlands and frontiers from an archaeological perspective by Feuer 2016, who reviews the most important existing literature and clearly defines these concepts.
6. The most significant work concerning the early medieval context is certainly the collection edited by Pohl, Wood & Reimitz 2001, see also Miller 1996; Curta 2005; Pohl & Reimitz 2000; Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae 16 (2011), and in Carolingian context Smith 2002; Miller 1996; Lozny 2013; Majnarić 2018. Generally