

**THE  
BIBLIOPHILE  
IS THE  
MASTER OF HIS  
BOOKS,  
THE  
BIBLIOMANIAC  
THEIR  
SLAVE.**



**HANS  
BOHATKA**

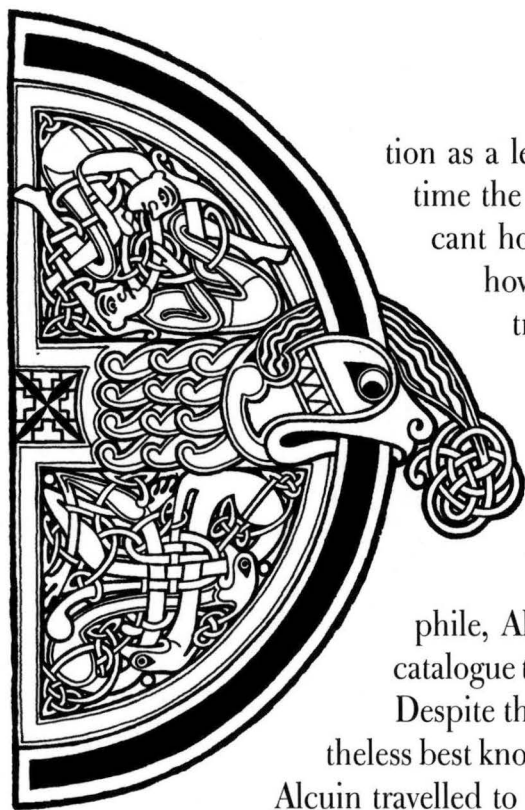
# Alcuin of York

In the Early Middle Ages, few scholars or educators had as high a profile or as great an influence as Alcuin of York. The details of Alcuin's life descend to modern scholars from two sources: the first is letters written to Alcuin as well as letters and other works written by Alcuin himself; the second is a biography written by an anonymous monk whose life was roughly contemporary to Alcuin's own. The anonymous monk's information is derived from the testimony of one of Alcuin's pupils at York, Sigulf, so apart from any bias of a student towards his teacher, this account may be considered accurate.

Alcuin was born to a noble Anglian family in Northumbria sometime in the mid-730s. The exact location of his birth is not recorded in any primary sources, although he is frequently believed to be from or around York, presumably because he entered the cathedral school there while still very young. This school was founded by Archbishop Egbert in 732, so it was still relatively new when Alcuin first attended. At the cathedral school, Alcuin proved to be a particularly apt and pious student, so much so that his efforts attracted the attention of both the archbishop and Æthelbert, master of the school. Under the pair's direct supervision, he was educated at the school in Anglo-Saxon-style liberal arts. Often in later life he reflected fondly upon his time at the cathedral school under tutelage of his two masters.

In time Alcuin became assistant master to Æthelbert. Between 766 and 768, when Egbert died and Æthelbert succeeded him as archbishop of York, Alcuin took the position of schoolmaster. In the years following, Alcuin devoted himself to his role as educator, and through his burgeoning reputation, attracted a great number of students. Several of these disciples went on to become highly influential in the *translatio studii* movement, which emphasized book learning and education in the liberal arts through both secular and liturgical literature. As an example of the range of this curriculum, the library at the school contained works of both Saint Jerome and the pagan poet Virgil.

Alcuin's other great passion through this period, cultivated through his own studies at the school, was collecting books for the cathedral school library. The library had developed a reputation as the leading library in Britain—one of the best in all Christendom. The school also had a reputa-



tion as a leading spiritual education facility. By Alcuin's time the cathedral school library had inherited significant holdings from the library and school at Jarrow; however, from 768 onward Alcuin made several trips to the Continent with Æthelbert, acquiring books for the library and making important connections with Continental scholars and dignitaries. Most significantly, he met a young prince of the Franks who would later become known as Charlemagne, or Charles the Great. Always an ardent bibliophile, Alcuin even initiated a rudimentary attempt to catalogue the library collection at York.

Despite the extent of his success at York, Alcuin is nevertheless best known for his work at Charlemagne's court. In 781 Alcuin travelled to Rome on official business. On this trip he renewed his acquaintance with Charlemagne, who invited Alcuin to join his court. Alcuin would go on to serve in Charlemagne's capital of Aachen from 782 to 796 as master of the palace school, where he not only taught Charlemagne's sons but also became instrumental in the Carolingian Renaissance. Importantly, Alcuin brought his variant of the Anglo-Saxon study of the seven liberal arts to the forefront of Charles's Frankish educational initiative. It is a testament to Alcuin's skill that he was able to instruct a diverse group of individuals, including students who had followed him from York who were already familiar with Anglo-Saxon-style liberal arts, scholars unfamiliar with the Anglo-Saxon style but still adaptable by virtue of their studies elsewhere, and novices to the liberal arts in general, such as Charlemagne's family.

Alcuin's emphasis on book learning and the collection of books helped to define the direction of Charlemagne's educational reforms. Alcuin himself wrote several books to enhance the palace school library. These concerned all of the trivium, the three "new" liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric and logic/dialectics, as well as select subcategories of the quadrivium, the classical sciences of music, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy. In 787, though

Charlemagne's drive towards educational reform had been under way for at least a decade, Alcuin persuaded Charlemagne to codify his educational ideals. This resulted in the very first general charter of education during the Middle Ages. It was presented in the voice of Charles, but as the one extant example of the proclamation demonstrates, it was in the hand of Alcuin.

As Alcuin advanced into old age he became increasingly disillusioned with political life, and seeking to withdraw from it he requested placement away from Charlemagne's court. He was granted charge of the Abbey of Saint Martin at Tours in 796, and here Alcuin spent the remainder of his life. In his eagerness to do honour to his friend and mentor, Charlemagne had in fact provided much more than what precedent typically allowed: Alcuin was made resident abbot even though he had never previously been a monk, either in any other abbey or at Saint Martin's.

Once settled in, Alcuin set about creating a school in the abbey but was hindered by the lack of books at Tours, a deficiency he sought to remedy. Asking special dispensation of Charlemagne, Alcuin sent some of his new pupils to York to acquire a small portion of the York library collection. Alcuin also directly supervised the activity of the abbey scriptorium, where he and his followers developed the Caroline minuscule letterform, which vastly improved upon the scrawl-like Merovingian script that had been used previously. This more legible script, along with attention to orthography and punctuation, led to a vast improvement in written communications, and is perhaps Alcuin's most lasting legacy.

Alcuin died on May 19, 804, a steadfast bibliophile to the end. His epitaph, which he had composed himself, read *Alchuine nomen erat. Sophiam mihi semper amanti*: "Alcuin was [my] name. Wisdom [was] always my love."

