

# **An analysis of the biography of Charles the Great based on the framework of historical narrative theory**

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## **Abstract**

*After reading the biography of Charles the Great written by Einhard, I believe that the brevity of the text, the obvious subjective tendencies, and the author's commitment to using linguistic structures to portray a great and glorious Frankish monarch make the book ideal for analytical study using Hayden White's theory of historical narrative, under which it is possible to understand how Einhard, in his biography of Charles the Great The book's analysis is guided by Hayden White's historical narrative theory.*

## **Keywords**

*Charles the Great; historical narrative.*

## **1. Introduction to Hayden White's Theory of Historical Narrative**

According to Hayden White's theory of historical narrative, the most important thing in the compilation of history is not the "content" but the "form", which in the end is language. In this way, the history in a text is essentially a linguistic structure. Hayden White sees five important aspects of historical writing: (1) chronicles, (2) stories, (3) episodic patterns, (4) formal argumentative patterns, and (5) ideological implication patterns. These five important aspects constitute what White calls the "historical field," which consists of the unprocessed historical record, various historical narratives, and a collaborative relationship between historical writings and their readers.

Chronicles are chronological records of historical events. However, chronicles rely solely on the categories of time and space to interpret history, and are a kind of "dead" history. Hayden White argues that chronicles are the basic elements of historical works, in which recorded historical events provide the raw material for the compilation of history. The story is organized by the events in the chronicle, and the historian arranges the events in the order of initial, transitional, and final motives, using the events as the basic elements of the story and arranging them into a hierarchy of meaning that gives the whole set of events a formal consistency. Hayden White sees narrative as a way of historical understanding and completes the interpretation of history on three levels.

The first level is plotted interpretation, in which historians, in the process of writing historical works, give stories a plot structure, arrange historical events according to this plot structure, and eventually transform the sequence of historical events into a specific type of historical story. Hayden White identifies four types of plot structure: romantic drama, tragedy, comedy, and satire. The second level is the formal argumentative mode, which White calls "formal, extrinsic or inferential argumentative interpretation". This refers to the historian's attempt to build a deductive formal argument to explain the motives for the events in the story and the relationships between them. White distinguishes four paradigms of formal argumentation: formal, organic, mechanistic, and contextual. The third level is the ideological implication paradigm, in which "historians assume a certain position on the nature of historical

knowledge and the implications that may be drawn from the study of the past in order to understand the present"[1], a position that White refers to as ideology. Ideology directly influences the historian's study of the past and determines the structure of the plot and the way he chooses to argue. White distinguishes four positions: anarchism, conservatism, radicalism, and liberalism.[2]

## **2. Chronicles in the first part of Einhard's biography of Charles the Great**

According to Hayden White's theory of historical narrative, the "story" is the further development of the "chronicle", so it is also necessary to use the chronicle as the foundation. However, we can assume from Einhard's own reasons for writing that there were no chronicles of Charles the Great readily available at the time. Moreover, since the biography of Charles the Great was completed in a monastery after Einhard's seclusion, it was actually difficult for the author to find documentary material far from the court, so his sources for writing the biography of Charles the Great were mainly his own memories. As he says in his confession, "Since I was personally involved in these events, was present and witnessed them, I do not think that anyone can recount them more truthfully than I can." [3] So there is very little biographical fiction in this biography, and Einhard always adhered to the principle of "avoiding fiction and keeping it real. But memory is inevitably faulty, so it is difficult to "restore" the chronicles that existed in Einhard's mind from his biography. However, the English translator of Charles the Great, Mr. Grant, added the years of many events in his commentary, together with the relevant chronologies in two other works on Charles the Great, Charlemagne (by [US] Banfield, translated by Shi Qingzhen, China Workers Press, 2010) and Charlemagne (by [US] Harold Lemme, translated by Huang Sihong, Oriental Press, 2020). It was finally possible to compile a chronology of the major events in Charlemagne's "career at home and abroad" section:

1. In 742, Charles was born.
2. In 751, Pippin the Dwarf was crowned.
3. In 768, King Pippin won the battle of Aquitaine and conquered the whole territory of Aquitaine.
4. On September 24, 768, Pippin the Dwarf died.
5. On October 9, 768, Charles was elected king together with Charles the Great.
6. In 768, Charles marched to Aquitaine.
7. In 768, Charles fought against Hurnold and Hurnold was defeated.
8. In 769, Charles forced Lupus to hand over the fugitives and defeated Aquitaine.
9. In 771, Charles the Great died.
10. In 772, Charles the Great sent troops to fight against the Saxons for the first time.
11. In 773-774, Charles attacked the Lombards, the capital of the Lombard kingdom was Pavia.
12. In 774, Charles made himself King of Lombardy and Franks.
13. In 778, Charles sent troops to Spain.
14. In 778, In the Battle of Ronseval Valley, Charles suffered great losses.
15. In 783-793, Charles fought with the Saxons.
16. In 785-786, Pepin, the son of a concubine, and others plotted against him.

17. In 788-795, War with the Slavs.
18. In 787, Charles went to Italy with the army.
19. In 787, the Bavarian War broke out.
20. In 788, Charles annexed Bavaria.
21. In 788-795, War with the Slavs.
22. In 788-796, Charles fought against the Huns and Avars.
23. In 792, Execution of nobles who tried to usurp the throne.
24. In 792, Charles fought against the Saxons.
25. In 797, The Saxons surrendered.
26. In 799, The Roman nobles expelled Pope Leo III.
27. On .12.25.800, Leo III crowned Charles in St. Peter's Church in Rome.
28. In 804, Charles' war with the Saxons ended.
29. War with the Norse in the early 9th century.
30. In 814, Charles the Great died.

Based on the above chronology, the second part will unfold the way in which Einhard has connected the events of these chronicles into the events of the story.

### **3. From History to Story in the Biography of Charles the Great**

The image of Charles the Great created by Einhard in his book can be summarized into two aspects - a secular, civil and military king and a religious, devout Christian. The key to the following study of the figure of Charles the Great is to determine what Einhard's chosen "episodic model," "formal argumentative model," and "ideological implication model" "What are they? According to Hayden White's theory of historical narrative, ideology directly influences the historian's study of the past and determines which plot structure and argumentation he chooses, so here we first discuss Einhard's ideological mode of implication in writing his biography of Charles the Great.

#### **3.1. Einhard's model of ideological implication in historical narrative**

"The historian assumes a certain position with regard to the nature of historical knowledge and the implications that may be drawn from the study of the past in order to understand the present"[4], a position that White refers to as ideology. Given the complexity and plurality of ideology. An accurate understanding of Einhard's ideology at the time he wrote his text requires an analysis of the author's personal experience, his mode of identification with his subject, and the context of his time.

Einhard was a famous medieval historian in Europe. He was recommended to the court at the age of about 20 and was highly appreciated by Charles the Great for his outstanding knowledge and later became his court secretary. In his Preface, Einhard refers to Charles as "the noblest and greatest king of our time" and admits that his purpose in writing was to make Charles' life and achievements known to future generations.[5] In this way, Einhard's personal feelings could not have been more evident in his writing.

The Gallic era was a time of heroes, loyalty and patriotism, and the ideal hero and the great king were often combined into one. Charles the Great was an important leader in the long journey that led to the creation of European civilization, holding the ideals of the people.

Charles the Great put an end to the frequent wars in Europe and became a symbol of peace and unity in people's hearts, and naturally became a heroic figure in ancient poetry and history in biographies. In short, the image of Charles the Great portrayed by Einhard in his biography of Charles the Great reflects the characteristics and spirit of the era of the Gallatin Renaissance: devotion to God, reverence for the classics, loyalty to the king and love for the country, and hero worship.

At the same time, Einhard had inherent national attributes and positions in his narrative: Einhard regarded the Frankish kingdom and the Franks as orthodox and righteous, and when he wrote his biography of Charles the Great, he did so from the Frankish standpoint, viewing Charles' foreign conquest as the conquest of civilization over barbarism, of God over the devil, as he expressed through King Charles: "They (meaning Saxons) should renounce the worship of the devil, abandon their own religious rites, accept the Christian sacraments, and fuse with the Franks as one people." [6]As to the cause of the war between Charles and Bavaria, Einhard believed that "the war was caused by the arrogance and stupidity of Tassilo, Duke of Bavaria". [7]All of this reflects his inherent national identity and position at the time of writing.

In summary, I believe that the above subjective factors can be summarized as the period, personal emotional tendencies, nationalism and sectarianism, which contributed to Einhard's "romantic" biography of Charles the Great.

### **3.2. The plotting pattern of the biography of Charles the Great**

By sorting out Einhard's pattern of ideological implication in the narrative, we can see that multiple subjective factors led to the selection of the genre of "romantic drama" by Einhard. What is a romantic drama and whether Einhard's Charles the Great is a romantic drama will be discussed below.

The definition of the romantic drama, according to Hayden White's own interpretation, is a dramatic model of "self-identity" and "success", a plot structure whose prototypes can be found in the Bible and mythology. The romantic drama model, "symbolized by the hero's extraordinary power over the empirical world, his victory in conquering it, and his eventual liberation from it," [8] conveys the idea that light will triumph over darkness, that good will triumph over evil, and that human beings can ultimately be liberated and redeemed.

In the first part of his biography, Einhard recounts that during his forty-seven-year reign Charles launched a number of large-scale military campaigns, most of them victorious, which led to a dramatic expansion of the Frankish kingdom and made it a powerful empire in Western Europe, with the sea on three sides. But Einhard's biography of the only battle Charles' army lost, an ambush in the Pyrenees gorge on the way to Spain, is sparse and evasive, leaving many questions unanswered. In addition, Einhard only describes Charles the Great's firmness and decisiveness on the battlefield, his skill in warfare, and the fear of his enemies, but says little about the suffering and hardships of the people, especially those of the invaded nations. No one would disagree that the first part is a "drama of success", a story of "good over evil, virtue over sin, light over darkness", which perfectly fits the definition of "romantic drama This perfectly fits the definition of "romantic drama".

In the second part, Einhard chronologically records the details of Charles the Great's life and character in a rather trivial way, attempting to portray, through the trivial details of his life, the excellent virtues and character of Charles the Great, which were one of the reasons for his achievements and accomplishments as described in the first part. -It is clear, then, that Einhard's chosen genre of story is the "romantic drama.

### **3.3. Analysis of the formal argumentative mode of interpretation**

In medieval Western Europe, the church or monasteries gradually monopolized the right to compile or write history, and most of the history they wrote was influenced by St. Augustine's City of God. Einhard, however, freed himself to some extent from the domination of theology and adopted the dominant mode of formal argument as formalism. The so-called formalist mode of argument is to determine the uniqueness of the object as well as to describe the diversity and vividness of historical phenomena in the field of history, and the formalist explanatory strategy aims at opening up the horizons. "that is, to give a richer variety to the particular parts which it determines to occupy the historical field".[9]

On the whole, the chronicles in the first part of the text, 6-8, 10-12, 15, 17-22, and 24-29, are direct accounts of Charles the Great's achievements, in other words, all these wars ended in his victory. In his writing, Einhard would attribute all the causes of the war to the enemy, completely ignoring the negative role played by Charles in it: Charles forced the Saxons to accept Christianity, and in 780 A.D., Charles issued the harsh Edict of Saxony, which provided for the death of those who practiced paganism and did not accept baptism; those who conspired against Christianity and killed bishops or clergy; and those who did not pay tithes to the church. [10]We, the Saxons, wished to be 'perfidious', but we fought for our survival. [11] On the contrary, Charles was only "obliged" to fight or wage war out of justice, the prestige of the Frankish kingdom, the interests of the people, or Christian mercy and compassion; the war is depicted mainly in terms of the brutality of the enemy and the calmness of Charles' response. In short, all glory and victory ultimately belonged to Charles, and in the writing of the above chronicles, only the names of Charles and his son appear, while the names of others are omitted.

In the accounts of defeat, betrayal, and usurpation in 13, 14, 16, and 23, Einhard does not explain the causes of the events, but only emphasizes that Charles the Great is indomitable and invincible even in the face of suffering, adversity, and conspiracy, and he refers to all rebellions as conspiracies against Charles the Great, and he portrays the defeat in the war as an inevitable stumbling block on the road to success. In this way, the events that were not conducive to a positive image of Charles become, in Einhard's writing, examples of Charles' valor. It can be said that Einhard's attempt to create a great and glorious Frankish monarch, the purpose of his narrative in the text is essentially to reflect a particularity that only Charles the Great can do, although the biography itself always revolves around the same theme and always takes Charles the Great's growth as a clue, but in essence, Einhard is still dominated by the "formalistic". This is particularly evident in the second part of Charles the Great's biography, "Private Life and Character. Perhaps it is for these reasons that the formalist interpretation is described by Carlyle as "the essence of countless biographies".[12]

#### **4. Conclusion and Remarks**

This paper has mainly organized the main events in the first part of Einhard's biography of Charles the Great, "His Business at Home and Abroad," and "reduced" it to a simple "chronicle". The question of how Einhard made it a "story" is discussed. Based on the "chronicle" in his memory or text, Einhard, influenced by various subjective factors, chooses a romantic drama style storyline, and develops his arguments mainly in accordance with the formalistic form of argumentation, eventually forming a romantic drama style story with no liberation but only an end. This paper intends to show the reader systematically how historical texts or historical writings are made, not as empty expositions or abstract discursive arguments, but as concrete and detailed demonstrations. At the same time, it also reveals that when reading biographies, it is possible to follow this method of "deconstruction" and find out what is hidden by the writers in the historical text.

Through this deconstruction, what we see is no longer a monotonous silhouette, but an impressive flat portrait with light and dark. As The Cambridge History of the Middle Ages states, "Thanks to Einhard, and also to the popular story of the monks of St. Gall's Abbey, the whole image of Charles is portrayed in flesh and blood, very clearly before our eyes." [13]

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