# Prologue

## Great Expectations

In 822, in a royal residence near Attigny in the Ardennes, an assembly of bishops, abbots and other notables met to discuss how to improve the state of the Frankish Church. Their conclusions were put on record so that later generations could benefit from the know-how of those gathered there. Judging from this record, their deliberations were predominantly concerned with education and the future of the Frankish Church in general.[1] Schooling was to be made available to people who wished to become part of the clergy, and those so educated had a responsibility to guide and preach to their flocks. The people, in turn, had a responsibility to attend these sermons and heed the guidance provided by their pastors, so they could learn how to live better lives.[2] Finally, in stressing that clerical offices should not be obtained through payment or nepotism, the prelates confirmed that only those worthy of the office, those who had actually learned enough to bear the burden of responsibility for their flock, should be allowed to walk the corridors of ecclesiastical power.[3]

These were important matters. As if the participants were reminding themselves of their priorities, the record of these decisions provides us with a comprehensive picture of which improvements were still deemed necessary after several decades of Carolingian rule over the Frankish Church.[4] Although the composition of the group involved in drafting this text remains unknown, it is clear that it was made up of high-ranking members of the Carolingian imperial court, abbots of monasteries with long and venerable histories, as well as newcomers eager to make a mark.[5] Through it all, however, the internal hierarchy had a clear focal point, a figure who

1 For a general overview of this synod, see Hartmann, *Synoden der Karolingerzeit*, pp. 166-167; De Jong, 'Power and humility', esp. pp. 31-32; De Jong, *Penitential State*, pp. 34-38; Depreux, 'The penance of Attigny'.

2 *Concilium Attiniacense*, c. 3, p. 471; c. 5, p. 472. On preaching and its role in strengthening a community, see Pollheimer, 'Of shepherds and sheep'; Diesenberger, 'Der Prediger'.

3 *Concilium Attiniacense*, c. 6, p. 472.

4 On the Carolingian reforms up to and beyond 822, see among many others, McKitterick, *The Frankish Church*; Claussen, *Reform of the Frankish Church*; Brown, 'Introduction: the Carolingian Renaissance'; Moore, *Sacred Kingdom*; Gaillard, *D'Une Réforme*. Generally on the Carolingian world, see Costambeys et al., *Carolingian World*.

5 For instance, Agobard of Lyon wished for the 'management of ecclesiastical possessions' to be put on the agenda: Wood, *Proprietary Church*, p. 795.

reminded the members of the clergy of their own sinfulness, and inspired the prelates to propose these improvements.[6] This was the emperor of the Franks, Charlemagne's heir Louis, known as 'the Pious'.[7]

During the same council, that same Louis the Pious entered the church, and according to the *Vita Aldalhardi*, composed in the late 820s:

> [He] undertook a public penance because of his many sins. He, who as it were by royal haughtiness had been his own worst tempter, was made the humblest of all, so that those whose eyes he had offended by sin would be healed by a royal satisfaction.[8]

The same assembly of bishops, abbots and notables stood witness to this carefully orchestrated penance, which had been staged because Louis wanted to atone for his role in the death of his nephew, King Bernard of Italy. After having incited a rebellion four years earlier in 818, Bernard had been condemned to be blinded.[9] The procedure was botched, however, and Bernard died of the ensuing complications, forcing Louis to take responsibility for this. His public penance was a way of silencing his accusers, and his strategy appeared successful. In one stroke Louis restored moral authority to himself, and unity and concord to the court.[10]

Even allowing for any events that transpired between the penance, drafting the capitulary, and composing the hagiographical narrative cited, something seems to have gone awry. How could the man who was performing penance in the presence of the ever-watchful episcopate be the same ruler who had inspired the meeting aimed at furthering the improvement of the Church under their responsibility? In a comment written two decades after the event, we gain an impression of how the event was remembered. In his biography of Louis the Pious, the anonymous author known as the Astronomer tells us how the emperor, having called the council, 'openly confessed that he himself had sinned, and, imitating the example of the emperor Theodosius, he spontaneously undertook a penance'.[11]

6 *Concilium Attiniacense*, c. 1, p. 471. On hierarchy, see Bougard and Le Jan, 'Hiérarchie', pp. 12-14.

7 On the changing understanding of this nickname, see Schieffer, 'Ludwig "der Fromme"'; Moeglin, 'La mémoire de Louis le Pieux'.

8 Paschasius, *Vita Adalhardi*, c. 51, p. 530; trans. Cabaniss, *Charlemagne's Cousins*, pp. 56-57. See also De Jong, *Penitential State*, pp. 102-111.

9 Jarnut, 'Ludwig der Fromme', pp. 350-351.

10 De Jong, 'Power and humility', pp. 31-32.

11 Astronomus, *Vita Hludowici*, c. 35, p. 406: 'domnus imperator conventum generale coire iussit in loco cuius est vocabulum Attiniacus. […] Post haec autem palam se errasse confessus est et,

Invoking the example of Theodosius is telling. This Roman emperor (r. 379-395) had also undergone penance and even faced excommunication for his excessive reaction to a rebellion in Thessalonica, which had ended with the massacre of 7000 inhabitants of the city. It was a decision that caused consternation among the emerging ecclesiastical elites – personified by Bishop Ambrose of Milan – who preached restraint and forgiveness instead of violent retributions.[12]

By using this example, the Astronomer attempted to kill two birds with one stone. Not only did he show that Louis' penance at Attigny stood in a long and venerable tradition reaching back to the age of the Church Fathers, but he also reminded his audience that penance – coming to terms with God, and in doing so voluntarily submitting to the moral superiority of the Church – did not damage the power and authority of whomever was undergoing it.[13] Human nature was fallible, but forgiveness was due to everyone, be they prince or pauper.[14] It was the right thing to do: by begging forgiveness in Attigny, the emperor had shown that he was aware of his errors, that he strove to be a better man and, by extension, a better ruler, to the benefit of the realm, his subjects, and his own soul. As far as the Astronomer was concerned, there was nothing wrong with being inspired by an emperor who was august and humble, both a penitent and a prince.[15] The bishops gathered at Attigny in 822 would have agreed with this assessment, even if it was written 20 years later in a vastly different context. Nevertheless, the mode of thinking that allowed the Church to reach new heights as the emperor publicly prostrated himself was not always a given. It was the product of an interdependent relation between court and cloister that had developed over the preceding years between aristocracy and episcopacy. It was part of a mind-set that had self-awareness at its very core, and which

imitatus Theodosii imperatoris exemplum, penitentium spontaneam suscepit [...] et corrigens si quid talium vel a se vel a patre suo gestum repperire alicubi potuit'; trans. Noble, *Charlemagne and Louis the Pious*, p. 262. On the Astronomer, see Tremp, 'Thegan und Astronomus', pp. 695-699.

12 On the exemplary conflict between Emperor Theodosius and Bishop Ambrose, see McLynn, *Ambrose of Milan*, pp. 291-360 and pp. 368-378; Van Renswoude, *License to Speak*, pp. 137-174. I would like to thank Irene van Renswoude for generously allowing me access to her dissertation, which is currently being turned into a monograph for Cambridge University Press.

13 See Schieffer, 'Von Mailand nach Canossa'; Meens, *Penance*, pp. 125-127.

14 Implied by the Astronomer in the Prologue to his *Vita Hludowici*, p. 284, when talking about Louis the Pious' excessive mercy to his enemies, or later in c. 63, p. 550, when Louis forgives his son Lothar for the grey hairs he had bestowed upon him in spite of the latter's unwillingness to seek mercy. Romig, *Be a Perfect Man*, pp. 75-97.

15 One of the main points made in De Jong, *Penitential State*.

refused to take no for an answer, but which would thereby inadvertently raise as many questions as it could ever hope to solve.

This book will shed more light on this mind-set. It was, of course, a mind-set that was the prerogative of the high elite. The world that came together in Attigny in 822 was a world where imperial authority took many forms, where a willingness to improve the Church went hand in hand with the idea that rulers should assume responsibility for their sins. It was a world where ideas of imperial authority were formulated and exported; where political idealism was put in the service of religious ideas and vice versa. Only an extremely small segment of society could afford to think about life, the Church and the empire in those terms: the aristocrats, bishops and abbots whose intellectual prowess or deep familial connections to the rulers allowed them a seat at the high table. Due to their position they felt able look beyond the local level and broaden their horizons to imagine the whole of the Christian world.[16] While the views they formulated thus did not necessarily represent everybody living in the Carolingian empire, it does seem as if those who have been given agency in the cases at the centre of this book were aware that tensions emerged between the ideals propagated from the court and the practical limitations imposed by everyday life, where diversity and flexibility was the norm. Ideas clashed, long-standing traditions came into conflict with new visions of community: the Carolingian empire in the early ninth century was a realm where a multitude of communities was ruled over by an emperor whose reign was characterized by continuous attempts to resolve the tensions that emerged when interests collided. Such attempts could never hope to succeed without simultaneously fostering the realization amongst these communities and those who spoke for them at court that they could in reality hardly hope to function without one another. In other words: they were aware that they might not get everybody on their side, but that should not stop them from trying – and was by trying that they also consolidated their authority.

The world of Louis the Pious and his entourage was bewilderingly complex. Yet this complexity remains hidden behind a veil of sources written with a view towards simplification, thereby making a point that went beyond describing mere facts.[17]As narratives offering the resolution of conflicts that are only obliquely alluded to, for instance, such sources thus sometimes leave us with an impression of unanimity at court, presenting single-minded elites burdened with glorious purpose. It is a seductive vision, but it should

16 Werner, '*Missus – marchio – comes*'.

17 Broadly, see Kempshall, *Rhetoric*, esp. pp. 265-427.

not be forgotten that purpose could easily be determined after the fact.[18] The Astronomer's explanation of the events at Attigny does not reflect the realities of 822 but rather those of the early 840s. The different descriptions of Charlemagne's coronation in 800 show the difficulties even contemporary observers had interpreting a seemingly straightforward event.[19] 'Church reforms' proposed at smaller synods were as much a reflection of local interests as a response to an imperial programme – and as the short description of the Council of Frankfurt of 794 in the *Annales Regni Francorum* shows, even large councils that did address a plethora of imperial concerns could be condensed into a single statement about the role of the rulers in defending the Frankish Church.[20]

Modern scholarship has on occasion fallen for the temptation to treat eighth- and ninth-century normative sources as reflective of programmatic reforms propagated by and disseminated from the court, or even as singular statements meant to create uniformity and quell further discussions.[21] For example, a conciliar statement made at the Council of Frankfurt condemning the Adoptionist heresy *una voce* actually covered an intense debate that lasted decades and involved the imperial court, the papacy, and many high-ranking bishops from all across the realm.[22] Those involved in this condemnation must have been aware of this, as well as the fact that a whole dossier about the late-eighth-century controversy existed in letters, conciliar acts, hagiographies, and theological treatises.[23] Even if the final word in such controversies may have been spoken from the top down, they were essentially responses to impulses from below. As such, the sources commonly regarded as establishing norms or reflecting a programme of reforms were also part of a debate about the burdens of authority and how this shaped

18 Foot, 'Finding the meaning'.

19 Nelson, 'Why were there'; Collins, 'Charlemagne's imperial coronation'.

20 *Annales Regni Francorum* (*ARF*), a. 794, pp. 95-96. Kramer, 'Adopt, adapt and improve'; generally, see Hartmann, 'Konzilien und Geschichtsschreibung'.

21 Many key introductory texts, such as those cited above, have interpreted reforms as being programmatic in some way, shape or form. Indeed, McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, pp. 215-245, makes a convincing case for the way programmatic thinking influenced the legislation issued in the late eighth century. Nonetheless, at the level of contemporary sources and local communities, this mode of interpretation is hard to maintain, as seen, for instance, in the works of Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice of Empire*, Vanderputten, *Monastic Reform*, and the work of the international research groups 'Rethinking Reform 900-1150: Conceptualising Change in Medieval Religious Institutions' (Leverhulme International Network) and 'Rethinking Carolingian *correctio*' (co-sponsored by Utrecht University, University of Oxford, University of Cambridge, and SFB VISCOM F42).

22 *Concilium Francofurtense*, c. 1.

23 Cavadini, *Last Christology*.

the expectations about the future of the empire. Councils such as the one at Attigny, as well as the many capitularies and admonitory texts circulating among the participants in the ongoing debate about the improvement of the Church, should not be seen as attempts at having the last word.[24] Instead, these were highly ambitious attempts at furthering the way everyone understood what it meant to be a good Christian in a Christian empire – or at least to make the elites responsible for their subjects and aware of the stakes of their rulership. The norm was set by the willingness to engage in debates, and by the self-awareness of participants as to what the debates were about. Regardless of whether they had an aristocratic background, an episcopal rank, or a monastic tonsure, they were all part of the same discourse community – part of a debate about the evolution of a Carolingian imperial ideology in the first years of the reign of Louis the Pious, shaped by (and shaping) attempts to provide guidance to the Christian population under the responsibility of the emperor and his entourage.[25] These were series of neverending conversations, pushing various developments forward in their own rhythm while remaining tied together by the assumption that things should get better all the time.[26]

This book will allow us to eavesdrop on this conversation. In the course of three case studies, which will be described below, ideas about imperial power will be analysed both from a courtly perspective and through reactions to initiatives taken by the court. Rather than looking at reforms as policy measures or proposals made by the court, the actual arguments supporting tradition, advocating renewal, or justifying the interference in the daily lives of monks, priests and believers will be important: it is through the rhetorical framing of the texts under scrutiny that we may be able to see how reforms were not only the product of expectations and intentions, but also of reactions and what was seen as simple necessities.

The empire shaped under Charlemagne was in a continuous state of flux, and the people maintaining the momentum were not working towards a set goal, but instead aimed to 'correct' the Church whenever they felt the need. In their own way, everyone was supposed to support a vision of an all-encompassing community. The challenge was to figure out what exactly constituted that vision. It will never be possible to discover what went through Louis' head as his father named him his successor in 813, but

24 See, for example, Depreux, 'Lieux de rencontre'.

25 Barrow, 'Ideas and applications'; Patzold, '"Ipsorum necesse est"'.

26 Schieffer, 'Der Platz Ludwigs des Frommen', highlights three ways to look at the developments under Louis the Pious: exercise of power, empire, and cultural reforms.

it seems clear that the momentum built in the preceding decades was not expended yet. The new ruler represented a fresh start to some and the end of a career for others, but the sheer weight of the ideas developed under Charlemagne was enough to keep the court moving steadily.[27] However, given that Louis' succession was the first instance of a transfer of imperial power in the West since the collapse of the political framework around the Roman empire in the fifth and sixth centuries, the transfer of power presented the court with an occasion to take stock of their accomplishments and reappraise the state of their Church.

This book will focus on the period when this evaluation took place: the first decade of the reign of Louis the Pious, covering the time from his coronation in 813 to the penance of Attigny in 822. This chronological constraint serves a dual purpose. The first is mostly a practical one. The reality of Louis' succession in 813 provides a starting point for this probe into the Carolingian political mind-set, and will allow us to gauge both the persistence of ideals developed under previous generations and the way they interacted with new insights. The development of an ideology that fit with the 'Carolingian' world happened simultaneously at the centre and in the peripheries.[28] Initiatives would, through the very limitations of the early medieval information infrastructure, usually start small, at a local level, reflected in a single manuscript.[29] Nevertheless, the openness of the intellectual world of the early ninth century, which did allow for frequent points of contact between its participants at various levels, caused anything that touched upon larger issues to eventually be appropriated by the court and absorbed into a broader debate. Looking at this as a dynamic process rather than a product of imperial policy will shed light on the idiosyncrasies of the era that are commonly identified as 'Carolingian', and how these defined the way the dynasty asserted itself.[30] Similarly, the events of 822 could be construed as the first 'reality check' faced by Louis the Pious and his court, ushering in a new phase in his reign.

This leads to the second purpose behind the focus on this particular decade: it gives a view of the Carolingian Church still relatively unfettered

27 Wendling, 'Die Erhebung Ludwigs des Frommen'; Schieffer, 'Der Platz Ludwigs des Frommen', pp. 363-364.

28 On the question what made the Carolingian world 'Carolingian', see Costambeys et al., *Carolingian World*, pp. 9-16.

29 McKitterick, 'Political ideology'.

30 Something which has been done specifically for historiographical sources, for instance, by McKitterick, 'Illusion of royal power', and Hen, 'Canvassing for Charles'.

by the 'paradox of pastoral power'.[31] This paradox – the observation that a pastor's responsibilities are rooted in the fact that the bishop was also part of the flock, while at the same time 'as much value [is granted] to a single one sheep as to the entire flock' – is all but unavoidable when considering any ideology of rulership and Carolingian elites became increasingly aware of its existence in the second decade of the reign of Louis the Pious, especially during the so-called 'crisis' of 829-833. This was essentially a conflict between the sons of Louis and their supporters on the one hand, and the imperial court on the other. It famously culminated in the penance and abdication of Louis the Pious at Compiègne in 833.[32] Although the emperor managed to reassert his power and authority relatively soon afterwards, his reputation and legacy were irrevocably tainted, and many of those with a stake in the Carolingian reform movement scrambled to make sense of what had happened. The ensuing reassessment of the role of the Carolingian empire and its institutions in the greater scheme of things opened the door for different styles of pastoral leadership and new initiatives to be taken. More importantly, however, this event left a clear mark on subsequent appraisals of Louis' reign as a whole. The historical inevitability of the 'crisis' of Louis' reign became palpable in subsequent commentaries and in modern scholarship – starting with the emperor's two main biographies, composed by Thegan and the Astronomer.[33]

Although Louis, for all intents and purposes, remains in his father's shadow, historiographical interest in his reign has grown in recent years, particularly after the appearance in 1990 of a volume focusing on 'Charlemagne's heir' exclusively.[34] Since then, it has become clear that Louis the Pious' court was a ruling body worthy of careful study, even if a focus on the events of 829-833 remains the point around which appreciations of his reign seem to coalesce.[35] The efficacy of Louis' reign post-833 had already been identified as a means to assess the impact of these crisis years.[36] A major change in the way historians think about the difficulties faced by Louis the Pious in the

31 As outlined by Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, pp. 115-134; Carrette, 'Prologue', pp. 40-43.

32 For an overview of these events and their consequences, see Costambeys et al., *Carolingian World*, pp. 213-222.

33 See also Longguo, 'Louis the Pious and the Changes to Latin Imperial Biographies'.

34 Godman and Collins, *Charlemagne's Heir*.

35 Staubach, '"Des großen Kaisers kleiner Sohn"'; Ganshof, 'Louis the Pious reconsidered'; Depreux, 'Louis le Pieux réconsidéré?'.

36 A notable reassessment of the last years of Louis the Pious was proposed by Nelson, 'Last years'. Cf. also the more quantitative approach proposed by Depreux, 'La crise'.

830s came in 2009, with the appearance of Mayke de Jong's *The Penitential State*. De Jong demonstrated that these years, viewed in a contemporary context where religious and political thought were inextricably linked, need not necessarily be viewed as a 'crisis'. They were a product of the discourse about empire, religion, and the responsibilities they had come to represent over the previous decades.[37] De Jong argued that the way Louis the Pious, his court and his opponents handled the happenings as they unfolded shows that they were all aware of the gravity of the situation, but saw that as a reason to persist in the pursuit of a greater good. Courtney Booker's *Past Convictions* appeared almost simultaneously, and concentrated on the impact and legacy of the 'crisis' rather than its onset, showing that the traces of the affair in subsequent literary output attest to its enduring importance for the characterization of the reign of Louis the Pious.[38] More importantly, both these works have shown that to view these years simply as a failure on the part of the system is to apply anachronistic standards to the period.[39]

For this reason, this book will be avoiding rather than seeking this crisis. My aim is, after all, to show how different people saw the 'system' in action before the visibility of its flaws all but forced onlookers to adjust their views accordingly, and engage a different rhetoric altogether.[40] By sticking to case studies based in sources composed before the events of the early 830s, instead of using the narratives composed by Louis' biographers, the otherwise fruitful idea of 'the productivity of a crisis' may be avoided.[41] This means taking an almost deliberately skewed look at history, albeit one where a re-reading of the sources rather than a re-assessment of the period is key. Rather than taking a long view of the legacy of such luminaries as the monastic intellectuals Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel or Benedict of Aniane, both of whom played an essential part in the promulgation of the reforms, their own activities and the immediate response they garnered will be gauged as

37 De Jong, *Penitential State*, pp. 148-159.

38 Booker, *Past Convictions*.

39 Noted by Contreni in his review of the two books by De Jong and Booker in the *American Historical Review*; cf. also the review article by Gravel in the *Medieval History Journal*.

40 Cf. Cameron, *Christianity*, pp. 1-14; and the opening remarks by Van Renswoude, *License to Speak*, ix-xii.

41 The term 'productivity of a crisis' hearkens back to the project within which I started writing the PhD thesis which would turn into this book: the DFG/ANR-sponsored *La productivité d'une crise. Le règne de Louis le Pieux (814-840) et la transformation de l'Empire carolingien – Die Produktivität einer Krise: Die Regierungszeit Ludwigs des Frommen (814-840) und die Transformation des karolingischen Imperium* (led by Stefan Esders and Philippe Depreux). A report of the final conference may be found here: https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-3680 (last accessed 30 July 2018).

part of an ongoing 'Carolingian project'.[42] Instead of regarding everything as either anticipating or leading up to a crisis period, the sources at the core of this book convey an image of an environment within which the authors of our sources felt that creative tensions were allowed to flourish. By focusing on the early years of Louis the Pious' reign, it becomes possible to regard the main texts from this period as reflective of a prevailing mentality, as being part of their own social logic: commentaries on current events rather than narratives prefiguring what had yet to occur.[43] A Christian empire had taken shape again in the last years of the reign of Charlemagne, and it had passed into the hands of a legitimate heir almost in its entirety.[44] Louis and everyone around him must have been impressed by the possibilities created by this fortunate turn of events, while they were also aware that these came with responsibilities. They would need to cope with these new circumstances.

Following a brief outline of the early life of Louis the Pious and some of the main methodological and thematic approaches used in this study, this book will offer three 'snapshots' of this optimistic era – three case studies that each offer a view of the empire from a distinct vantage point. The first of these gives an impression of the inner workings of the Carolingian empire through an analysis of the way reforms were envisaged in the course of a series of Church councils. Starting in 813, when five such councils were organized simultaneously throughout the realm, and finishing in 816 with the *Institutio Canonicorum*, one of the main carriers of the Carolingian reform ideology, it will be shown that these texts, while ostentatiously normative, actually reflect negotiations in action, showing us to what extent the Carolingian ideal was based on dialogues instead of decrees. The second case highlights the life and works of one single actor living through these times: Abbot Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel. The astute observations of Smaragdus, an active participant in Carolingian court politics, explore the many different paths along which the empire could progress. In doing so, he presents us with a microcosm of the empire, where the local and the individual are connected to the ideals propagated in the name of the collective. The third and final case will focus on a single community that, although seemingly peripheral, played an important part in this movement all the same. This was the community of Aniane, founded by Benedict of Aniane even before

42 Costambeys et al., *Carolingian World*, p. 430.

43 Cf. Burke, 'Strengths and weaknesses'; Chartier, 'Intellectual history'; Spiegel, 'History, historicism'.

44 Lauwers, 'Le glaive et la parole'.

he became one of the most active players at the Carolingian court of Louis the Pious. Instead of focusing on the role of Benedict himself, however, this last chapter will contextualise the narratives produced at his monastery, so as to show how a single community would deal with the obligations and implications of being part of a Christian empire.

Between them, these case studies show a community in action, an elite group sharing a distinct way of framing and discussing the challenges facing them. While each of the cases showcase a distinctly elite perspective, they nonetheless demonstrate how the Frankish world of the eighth and ninth centuries essentially consisted of a multitude of voices, each of which had an identity of its own, and each of which needed to harmonize with those around it. Rather than studying the empire in its entirety, the chosen structure will allow us to appreciate the many cogs and wheels that made up the machinery of Carolingian politics by studying several of them in great detail. Doing this will, in turn, contribute to the recent wave of scholarship re-appreciating the Carolingian 'reform movement' by reframing it not as a unilateral, strictly top-down process, but as a meeting of minds, an attempt to reconcile different points of view. After all, the view from the top is but one of many options at our disposal to appreciate the impact of the policies of the Frankish rulers. It is an inspiring view precisely because it provides the context from which many of the sources at our disposal have sprung. But therein also lies the importance of not taking that perspective for granted. As will be argued, those espousing the elite viewpoints scrutinized in this monograph were acutely aware of their own place in the greater scheme: the way of life they proposed depended as much on changing the mentality of their subjects as it did on the mere implementation of new policies, if not more so. It is this self-awareness, rather than the actual reforms proposed, that will form the core around which this book is structured. My aim is to show how these authors, rather than being participants of an unstoppable movement, were active observers who were aware that the way they reflected upon the changes around them might open new ways of thinking – or remind people around them how things should be done.

Before that can happen, however, the first chapter will provide some necessary reflections on the nature of 'reform' and the sources through which we attempt to understand this phenomenon. By giving a brief overview of the earliest years of the political career of Louis the Pious, it will moreover elucidate the historical backdrop to the cases presented in subsequent chapters.