



ASSIGNMENT 01:
ARCHIVAL EXERCISE

Stephen Taylor
2404835
Medieval Studies MA

Flaccus Albinus

Alcuinus

Commonly known as "Alcuin of York", c. 735 – 804.

Archival Exercise: Alcuin of York

Alcuin (known also as Flaccus Albinus Alcuinus, and Alcuin of York, amongst other variations) was a scholar, teacher, theologian, and later an abbot born c. 735 in York, England. He spent at least his first four decades in York where he attended, and later became the head of, the Cathedral School. He later joined the Frankish Royal Court at the behest and persuasion of Charlemagne (King of the Franks and eventually Emperor of the Carolingian Empire) and relocated to Aachen in modern-day Germany. Here, he taught members of the court, studied classics, and wrote poetry. Alcuin eventually became the abbot of Marmoutier Abbey in Tours, central France, where he died in 804.

Alcuin is known for his work on improving and standardising the Carolingian minuscule script – a calligraphy standard that became popular for around 350 years after his death. He is also known for his work on rhetoric (the art of speaking well), dialectic (the art of forming coherent arguments and reason), grammar, mathematics, and poetry. Additionally, Alcuin was a prolific letter writer, around 300 of which still survive.

Alcuin was fond of the use of dialogue as a teaching tool. His work on rhetoric and dialectic especially makes extensive, script-like presentations of imaginary conversations between himself and another person; lines of dialogue are marked with the first initial of the speaker to denote the flow of conversation. He also speaks extensively about the value of this method of teaching and how it can be used practically.

A detailed biography of Alcuin can be found at the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, which has an extensive list of both sources and archival materials¹. A shorter biography of Alcuin is included alongside an extensive history of Charlemagne and the Carolingian

¹ <https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-298?rskey=7626Q6&result=1>

Empire on Britannica.com²These would serve as excellent starting points for further research on Alcuin and his life.

Because of his associations with various European nations, and because so much of his work still exists, manuscripts attributed to Alcuin are scattered in archives across the continent. There are also many manuscripts which serve as a compilation of Alcuin's work, many of which were created well after his death. This includes compilations of letters, books, and poetry.

Below is a collection of archival materials found in digital manuscript collections across Europe. Alcuin's most popular works appear in tens of manuscripts in abridged or full format – where possible I have limited duplication to show unique materials. Two images of Alcuin have also been included; neither is contemporary to Alcuin, but both were created shortly after his death by those who knew him in life.

² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alcuin>

Archival Materials

France

Paris

National Library of France (Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Paris. BnF, Latin 4404³, "*Breviarium Alarici*" – a copy of the Breviary of Alaric (a collection of Roman law), speculated to have been penned by Alcuin. Law was considered a form of rhetoric at the time.

Netherlands

Leiden

Leiden University Libraries

Boethius, BPL 84⁴, "*De Dialectica*" – Included amongst works from Boethius and Victorinus, this is an 11th century codex which contains one the four *Opera Didascalica* (Eng: "educational works") written by Alcuin and is presented in the novel conversational form that Alcuin was fond of. This version makes it easy to discern between speakers, showing an A for Alcuin and a K for Karolus (Charlemagne) before each statement, akin to a script. Charlemagne is asking the questions and Alcuin is providing answers. This codex also contains a section on the importance of dialectic and its value as a teaching tool.

Switzerland

St. Gallen

Abbey Library of Saint Gall (Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen)

³ <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8426042t>

⁴ <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:2348775>

Saint-Gall. Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang 271⁵, “*Collection of 66 letters by Alcuin of York*” – A collection of sixty-six letters written by Alcuin during his time at Tours.

United Kingdom

Oxford

Bodleian Library

MS. Junius 25⁶ - contains “Rhetoric”, “Dialectic”, and a commentary on The Lord’s Prayer, all attributed to Alcuin. Diagrams are depicted for the sections Rhetoric and Dialectic which lay out information in an easily accessible manner which we would still recognise today.

London

British Library⁷

Cotton MS Vespasian A XIV⁸, “The Letter Book of Archbishop Wulfstan” – A collection of letters written by Alcuin, compiled by Archbishop Wulfstan of York in the tenth century.

Included in this collection are correspondence to monks in York, to the monks at Candida Casa in southern Scotland, and to King Æthelred of Northumbria – offering advice on how to cope with Viking invasions which were prolific in the Kingdom of Northumbria at the time, whilst at the same time heavily implying that the Kingdom only had themselves to blame for the attacks.

Cotton MS Tiberius A XV⁹; a book of letters containing Alcuin’s *Epistolae* amongst other letters

Lambeth Palace Library

⁵ <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0271>

⁶ <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/451e88c8-39b6-4cbc-8483-c64b290ea00e/surfaces/b779d6c3-28e0-456a-b9b6-8effab18dd8b/>

⁷ Only a small selection of digitised content is available on the British Library website due to the ongoing effects of a cyber attack in October 2023.

⁸ https://iiif.bl.uk/uv/#?manifest=https://bl.digirati.io/iiif/ark:/81055/vdc_100060437329.0x000001

⁹ https://iiif.bl.uk/uv/#?manifest=https://bl.digirati.io/iiif/ark:/81055/vdc_100057891272.0x000001

MS 218, f. 196v¹⁰, A copy of the letter from Alcuin to Charlemagne, where Alcuin describes the process of choosing an appropriate Christmas gift for Charlemagne (“A gift of the Scriptures which are written with the pen of heavenly grace”).

Vatican City

Vatican Apostolic Archive

MSS Reg. lat. 69¹¹, “*Alcuin’s works and other works*” – A collection of Alcuin’s letters and essays, compiled in c. 876 - some 72 years after his death. The collection includes several letters addressed to Charlemagne, amongst others.

Visual Sources

Germany

Berlin State Library (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin)

Bamberg, Bamberg Bible, MS Bibl. 1, fol. 5v¹², “*Alcuin’s Bible*” – A bible created at Tours during the rule of Abbot Adalhard, successor of Alcuin, which features his likeness embossed in gold.

Vatican City

Vatican Apostolic Archive

MSS Reg.lat.123, f .2v, 3v¹³, “*In Honorem Sanctae Crucis*” (Eng: “*In Honour of the Holy Cross*”) – A collection of poems and abstract images pertaining to the holy cross written by Rabanus Maurus, a Benedictine monk and former student of Alcuin. Alcuin is depicted as perhaps providing emotional support for Maurus as he presents the book to Archbishop

¹⁰ <https://images.lambethpalacelibrary.org.uk/luna/servlet/s/m32zuu>

¹¹ <https://digi.vatlib.it/mss/detail/319165>

¹² <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb00140662?page=12,13>

¹³ https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Reg.lat.124/0009

Otgar of Mainz. A version of this same image in a slightly later version of the work currently held at the National Library of Austria¹⁴ is used on the cover page of this assignment.

¹⁴ https://digital.onb.ac.at/RepViewer/viewer.faces?doc=DTL_7223619