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Two Lives Of Charlemagne Einhard Summary

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Introduction

When we think of the monumental figure of Charlemagne, the first emperor of a united Western Europe after the fall of Rome, our understanding is almost entirely shaped by a single, extraordinary text: Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni* (The Life of Charlemagne). Written around 830 AD, just two decades after the emperor's death, this biography remains the most important primary source on Charlemagne's life and reign. However, there is another, often-overlooked account that offers a very different portrait: the *Deeds of Charlemagne* by Notker the Stammerer, written nearly a century later. Together, these two works are frequently published as "Two Lives of Charlemagne," providing historians and enthusiasts with complementary—and sometimes contradictory—glimpses of the Frankish king. This article provides a comprehensive **Two Lives of Charlemagne Einhard summary**, exploring the distinct purposes, styles, and historical contexts of both biographies. By examining Einhard's classic, sober tribute and Notker's lively, anecdotal collection, we will see how medieval biographers shaped the legacy of one of history's most influential rulers. Understanding these two lives is essential for anyone interested in Carolingian history, medieval literature, or the art of biography itself.

Einhard's Life of Charlemagne: A Courtly Portrait

Background and Purpose of Einhard's Work

Einhard was a scholar, courtier, and close advisor to Charlemagne and later to his son Louis the Pious. Born around 775 in the eastern part of the Frankish realm, he received an excellent education at the monastery of Fulda and later at the Palace School in Aachen. He was deeply admired by Charlemagne, who entrusted him with diplomatic missions and architectural projects. After the emperor's death in 814, Einhard felt a deep personal and moral obligation to preserve the memory of his beloved lord. In the preface to his *Life of Charlemagne*, he states that he writes to ensure that future generations will not forget the achievements of a man whose deeds almost defy belief. He explicitly models his work on the Roman biographer Suetonius, particularly his *Lives of the Caesars*, which gives the biography a classical, analytical structure. Einhard's goal was not merely to chronicle events but to present Charlemagne as an ideal Christian ruler, a model of kingship for the Carolingian dynasty and beyond.

Structure and Content of Einhard's Biography

Einhard organizes his work into a clear, logical sequence. After a preface, he divides the life into four main parts: Charlemagne's early life and the campaigns that expanded the Frankish kingdom; his domestic affairs, including his family, education, and religious devotion; his foreign relations and diplomatic achievements; and finally a detailed description of his personal habits, appearance, and death. This structure allows Einhard to weave together military conquest, political strategy, and intimate character sketches. For example, he describes

how Charlemagne reformed the church, promoted learning, and personally oversaw the construction of his magnificent palace and chapel in Aachen. He also records the emperor's love of swimming, his fondness for hunting, and his simple but robust diet. The biography covers major events such as the thirty-year Saxon war, the invasion of Italy and the coronation as Roman Emperor on Christmas Day 800, and the tragic death of his beloved wife Hildegard. Einhard does not shy away from the emperor's flaws, noting his difficulty in learning to write, his occasional weakness in controlling his daughters' behavior, and his grief over the early deaths of his sons and wife. Yet overall, the portrait is that of a heroic, divinely favored ruler whose achievements reshaped Europe.

Key Themes in Einhard's Account

One central theme is the fusion of classical and Christian ideals. Einhard presents Charlemagne as a new Augustus, a builder of a renewed Roman-Christian empire, yet also as a humble servant of God who attended church daily and supported the papacy. Another theme is the importance of education and culture; Einhard highlights Charlemagne's reforms in script, liturgy, and learning, which we now call the Carolingian Renaissance. A third theme is the personal dimension of power. By describing Charlemagne's appearance (tall, with bright eyes and a long, white beard), his speech, and his habits, Einhard makes the emperor human and accessible. This blending of the imperial and the everyday is one reason why Einhard's biography has endured. It is a carefully crafted work that serves as both a historical record and a moral exemplar. For anyone seeking a **Two Lives of Charlemagne Einhard summary**, understanding Einhard's conscious shaping of his subject is crucial: he created a Charlemagne who would become the archetype of the medieval Christian emperor.

Notker the Stammerer's Deeds of Charlemagne: A Monk's Perspective

Context and Intention of Notker's Work

Written around 884–887, Notker's *Deeds of Charlemagne (Gesta Karoli Magni)*offers a radically different view. Notker was a monk at the abbey of St. Gall in present-day Switzerland. Unlike Einhard, he never knew Charlemagne personally; he relied on stories told by older monks and passed down through oral tradition. His work was commissioned by the emperor Charles the Fat, Charlemagne's great-grandson, and was intended to entertain as well as edify. Notker's style is anecdotal, humorous, and at times almost legendary. He does not pretend to write a systematic biography; instead, he collects tales that illustrate Charlemagne's wisdom, justice, piety, and wit. Where Einhard is sober and measured, Notker is lively and embellished. His purpose was to glorify the Carolingian line by magnifying the virtues of its founder, often using exaggeration and fantasy. This makes his work less reliable as a factual source but invaluable for understanding how Charlemagne was remembered in monastic circles a generation later.

Structure and Content of Notker's Account

Notker's book is divided into two sections. The first focuses on Charlemagne's deeds for the Church—his defense of Christianity, his patronage of monasteries, and his clashes with pagan enemies and corrupt clerics. The second part covers his secular exploits: his military campaigns, his relations with foreign kings (like Harun al-Rashid), and his legendary generosity. Some of the most famous stories appear here: the tale of Charlemagne's sword, Joyeuse; the story of the bishop who was tricked into eating a mouse; the account of the emperor's humiliation of prideful nobles. Notker also includes vivid details about Charlemagne's appearance, claiming he was so imposing that even his enemies trembled at his gaze. Unlike Einhard, Notker does not provide a coherent chronological narrative; instead, each chapter presents a self-contained anecdote that teaches a moral lesson. For example, one story tells how Charlemagne rewarded a humble priest who gave him hospitality, while punishing a greedy bishop who hoarded his treasures. These tales reflect the values of the monastery: humility, charity, and the fear of God. Notker's Charlemagne is a divine instrument, a king who rules with justice and whom God protects against all foes.

Key Themes in Notker's Work

The most prominent theme is the providential role of Charlemagne as a defender of the faith. Notker portrays

him as a semi-mythical hero, almost a saint. Another theme is the contrast between true nobility (based on virtue) and mere lineage. Many stories show Charlemagne exposing the hypocrisy of proud nobles and exalting the lowly. A third theme is the power of storytelling itself; Notker's work is self-consciously oral and folkloric. He addresses his readers directly and often adds colorful dialogue. This makes his book a pleasure to read, but it also means that factual accuracy is often sacrificed for dramatic effect. For example, he claims that Charlemagne lived to be 200 years old, which is obviously wrong. Yet despite such exaggerations, Notker's insights into Carolingian culture—the importance of hospitality, the role of

Two Lives of Charlemagne Einhard summary Notker's contribution must be recognized as a vital complement, showing how legend soon began to overlay history.

Comparing the Two Lives: Authority vs. Anecdote

Approach to Historical Truth

Einhard writes with the authority of an eyewitness and a trained historian. He cites sources, checks facts, and offers considered judgments. He does not include supernatural elements and always maintains a rational tone. Notker, on the other hand, writes as a collector of traditions. He freely admits that he is repeating what he has heard from older men, and he does not distinguish between fact and folktale. For modern historians, Einhard is the more reliable source for concrete events—dates, battles, alliances. Notker is more valuable for understanding the cultural memory and popular piety of the late ninth century. Together, they offer a fuller picture: Einhard gives us the statesman, Notker the legend.

Characterization of the Emperor

Einhard's Charlemagne is a complex, human figure—powerful yet vulnerable, learned yet fallible. He shows his temper, his sorrow, and his personal quirks. Notker's Charlemagne is almost superhuman—wise, strong, and morally flawless. He never fails, never errs, and his enemies are always routed. This difference reflects the different audiences: Einhard wrote for a courtly, literate elite familiar with classical models; Notker wrote for monks and perhaps for a wider vernacular audience who enjoyed heroic tales. The two portraits are not contradictory so much as complementary, representing two layers of Charlemagne's legacy: the historical man and the iconic king.

Literary Style and Influence

Einhard's Latin is elegant, learned, and modeled on Suetonius. It is a work of high literature, meant to be studied and admired. Notker's Latin is more colloquial, full of direct speech and narrative flourishes. His work influenced later medieval chronicles and chanson de geste (epic poems) about Charlemagne, such as the *Song of Roland*. Einhard's work, on the other hand, became the standard reference for scholars and historians. Both lives have survived in many manuscripts, showing that medieval readers valued both the sober truth and the entertaining tale. In modern times, these two texts are often published together under the title *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, and a summary of Einhard and Notker provides an essential foundation for any study of the Carolingian era.

Conclusion

In summary, the **Two Lives of Charlemagne Einhard summary** reveals a rich tapestry of medieval biography. Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* offers a disciplined, eyewitness account that has shaped our historical understanding of the emperor's reign, his reforms, and his personality. Notker the Stammerer's *Deeds of Charlemagne*provides a lively collection of legends and moral tales that show how Charlemagne was revered in monastic tradition. Together, these two works capture both the factual and the imaginative Charlemagne—the ruler who held Europe together and the mythic figure who inspired generations. For anyone studying the Middle Ages, reading both lives is indispensable. They remind us that history is never a single story, but always a conversation between the chronicler, the subject, and the reader across time. Whether you approach

Charlemagne through Einhard's measured prose or Notker's vibrant tales, you will encounter a king whose legacy remains as towering as the throne he built.

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