**Lorsch Ivory Clues to a Hidden Past**

 *by Jacqueline Widmar Stewart and Blair W. Stewart*

What secrets is a 1000-year-old book cover whispering to us? It’s an exquisite book cover, of rare African ivory, intricately carved, beautifully designed. And at first glance, it might appear to be religious. Come with us as we delve deeper.

This question goes to the tap root of who we are and how we got here. How do women fit in? Have we gotten to where we are today because of swords and slaughter? Or has it happened organically, from families who helped each other, protected the beauty of their lands and formed a strong, durable fabric?

The question takes on greater urgency because of the governing crisis we are still trying to understand in the US. It also nails one big, unspoken piece of this puzzle. What role has religion played in governance?

So, we’re asking this question by looking at Charlemagne and his times. Some 300 years earlier, Roman armies of occupation had withdrawn following their defeats at Worms and Trier in today’s Germany. The church claims that Charlemagne converted to Christianity. This ivory book cover may be telling us a different story.

The book cover well may have survived because its true import was camouflaged.

So, let’s consider the context. Around the 9th century - after the fall of Rome and before the Crusades began - the Romans invaded northern Europe again and attempted to impose a Holy Roman Empire on the Celts. They destroyed books and art, enforced heresy laws and banned all secular expression. Very few books or pieces of art survive from that era and it is not because they weren’t created.

The account the Christians have given as conquerors is one of conversion by the sword, that the leader of the Celts took the Christian faith and then he went on to spread Christianity in Europe. We challenge that account based on the evidence we have seen and this ivory book cover seems to affirm our suspicions.

Now let’s take a look at this book front cover. It was carved in African ivory – a precious, rare material - about 800 CE, about 10 x 14 inches in size. A key element about it is that fact that it has survived at all. The quality of the ivory carving indicates that this was book of special significance, that may have been produced as an homage to Charlemagne and his family. It also echoes other known images of Charlemagne’s mother, and we’ll get to that a little later.

Charlemagne was the exalted leader of Francia in that era, a likely subject for an image. – Charlemagne himself founded 4 abbeys in the Odenwald in Germany, and Lorsch was one them, known for its library and its scriptoria where books were produced. His family founded 8 or more abbeys in what is now France & Germany. Celtic artwork typically honored accomplishment and valor, so a commemorative book cover would be in keeping with that Celtic tradition.

Jacqui, what caught your eye when you first saw this book cover?

Those wonderful horned animals - they’re very distinctive with endearing almost human qualities - - We saw similar ones at Charlemagne’s mother Bertrada’s hometown of Laon - east of Paris - where they look out with watchful, rivetted eyes from high on the magnificent building that rises above the ancient town, so I recognized them immediately. I had spotted them too at the fest hall in St. Denis near Paris where Bertrada is buried with other Carolingian leaders.

As part of the Christian conquest, public Celtic halls were turned into Christian churches and the Celtic trappings either destroyed or adapted into Christian teachings. Still, you can often see traditions that carry over from the fest hall days. These animals caught my eye on the Lorsch ivory cover because we had seen them at the 2 other places of such special importance to Charlemagne’s family.

I want to mention another design aspect favored by Celts. What stands out about this cover is the archways. Celts typically honored key developments like the wheel – featuring it on coins and paintings. The arch was a landmark architectural discovery that made the domed octagon possible by redistributing the weight of the roof. Especially in the Carolingian era, Celts exalted their heroes by placing them under archways and in alcoves.

Let’s step back and put this period into a broader context for a moment. This was a time after the Roman empire and during the expansion of the Christian church state. We don’t know blow-by-blow how the Christian conquest of Europe was carried out. We do know that from the start that the Christian religion required exclusivity – no other gods, no women as gods. Celts venerated their women; their invaders did not.

Christian doctrine allowed no tolerance. Deviation was heresy, punishable by death. In short, invading Christians terrorized the residents, and especially the women. When women are portrayed on pedestals in Christian churches, for example, they tend to be holdovers from Celtic fest halls.

In Bertrada’s hometown of Laon, the statue of Bertrada holding the torch some 3 stories up may have been spared because it is hard to reach. At street level we saw multiple female statues that were beheaded and one where a child was wrenched from the mother’s arms. You can still see the babies’ little feet there.

We’ve seen empty alcoves and defacement of female sculptures repeatedly in former fest halls throughout Europe.

Let’s take another look at the book cover.

In the center are Charlemagne’s mother Bertrada and child – and this reminds us of Bertrada’s hometown of Laon again. She was born there and the statues there must be for her because they do not conform to the Christian story. – At the top of the roof she holds high a torch – like the statue of liberty – she is leading the charge – she is lighting the way.

The man on the left – clearly a man – is probably Bertrada’s father Count Charibert of Laon, under the archway probably for founding the abbey at Prum. Maybe Charlemagne’s grandmother should be on the right side - but no, wait, is that a man or a woman to the right?

The figure on the right side has been identified as Zacharias because of his characteristic incense burner, but look - the figure is female. The feet, the hips, the clothing, the hair. If this figure on the right is a woman, this piece likely was meant to be a family portrait with parents, daughter and grandson.

To evade heresy laws, artwork & literature had to contain some religious elements. This could explain the figure on the right. At first glance it might be taken as Zacharias. But the main message is that it’s a woman. The Christian dictates could also explain the adult figure that has been squeezed into the flat surface in front of the animals, but, again, the main message is in the animals.

There is also a telltale trace of vandalism that suggests rough treatment. It looks as though the eyes held precious gems at one time,

When I think of the sway Rome held on Europe’s church state, I think of the dominant Christians that tolerated no deviation, not even from other Christians. The sure way to avoid heresy was to permit only the writings that originated in Rome. The church state used the Latin language for communication and to enforce heresy laws. Anything not written in Latin would have been destroyed upon discovery. I’m thinking about the library of Alexandria that Christian missionary Cyril burned. I’m thinking about Mexico. I’m thinking about the Philippines where Christians burned books as their first act of conquest. That means that bibles written in the vulgate are important, not just from the fact they were written in the local language, but because they actually managed to escape destruction as heretical.

With that kind of repressive atmosphere gripping Europe for more than a millennium, the crux of the matter can be seen in terms of loyalty. The loyalties demanded by Christians diametrically oppose Celtic devotion to family. A Celtic mother or father would die to protect their children.

Just imagine how the Christian doctrine of a father sacrificing his own son would strike the Celtic psyche. It is an idea completely abhorrent to Celtic ideals of family. That brings us to another example we’ve seen in the heroic poem the Chanson de Roland, written about Charlemagne’s officer Roland, albeit some 200 years after the events described. Here are 2 soldiers talking about the upcoming battle:

*‘T were good we send the sons our wives have borne;*

*I’ll send mine own, though he should die therefor.*

*Better by far the heads of* ***them*** *should fall*

*Than* ***we*** *should lose honor, estate and all.*

*And be reduced to beggary and scorn.’*

This passage conflicts with Celtic norms, but it makes sense as camouflage, as a way to survive heresy laws. To come at this question a different way, let’s plug in a more likely scenario to the Charlemagne story than the Christian account and play out the narrative. Here we go.

The Roman attackers return to Europe, kill Charlemagne and declare that he has converted to Christianity. They decree that all of Celtic Europe now belongs to the Holy Roman Empire. The Roman overlords turn the secular abbeys into male-only bastions. They ban secularism in the scriptoria.

Lorsch Abbey is in the process of carving an ivory book cover to honor Charlemagne’s family. It shows his mother Bertrada holding him in the center panel. The mother and child can make it past the Christian censors by making the male the focal point with the mother as his accessory. The man on the left is his father, and he’s fine because he’s male. Depicting Bertrada’s grandmother who founded Prüm Abbey is trickier, because the Christians will destroy the entire work if it exalts a woman. Put a beard and mustache on her and call her a biblical figure, say Zacharias. How is Zacharias identified? Give her an incense burner too!

In piecing together a better explanation that comes closer to reality, it helps to know the chain of custody for this exquisite and rare masterpiece. – Blair – you’ve looked into this. Please tell us what you found.

The ivory book cover has been in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London for over 150 years. On arrival, the figure on the right was cataloged as Zacharius. It arrived at the V&A by a circuitous route. Other parts of the book are in the Vatican & Romania - Descriptions of the figure since acquisition by the V&A haven’t changed. It’s time to look at it again.

To wrap up, the figure on the right of this ivory book cover may have been camouflaged as Zacharias because of the incense burner and beard, but it’s obviously a woman. In the center the child would be Charlemagne held by his mother Bertrada as they appeared in Laon. To the left Bertrada’s father, to the right her mother and not Zacharias. These are universally acknowledged founders of abbeys that were so important to Carolingian Europe at a time when women were founding and running them. Once Christianity took over, women were not even permitted in the abbeys – When the Christians took over, they made them all-male. When the women were founding the abbeys, Christianity obviously had not yet become entrenched in those places.

Recognizing the figure on the right as a woman and not Zacharias allows us to see this work of art in an entirely different light - that it is not a religious piece, that it is an homage to a family. We can suppose from the time and place of its creation and its repetitions that it links to Charlemagne’s family. It’s made of very rare materials, made at Lorsch, one of Charlemagne’s abbeys, repeats characters shown before as Bertrada. So we think we’re looking at a hidden message.

When the work was originally catalogued, it was probably done by a Christian man who took one look at the senser, identified it as Zacharias in keeping with Christian doctrine and looked no further.

Why are these things camouflaged? So that the story can be passed down. Maybe not explicitly, but as a memory aid for an oral tradition.

If you find this subject compelling, please pass it on to other interested parties who might be able to assist.

We want to challenge the Christian claim on this masterpiece. An inquiry should be conducted. We feel it is an important part of Europe’s Celtic story, and that the woman’s role has been hidden, as it appears to have been here.

For more background on Charlemagne and his family, please see our book Charlemagne’s Celtic Domain, available on Amazon, and watch our video Charlemagne from Paris to Prague, on our website [www.hiddenwomenbooks.com](http://www.hiddenwomenbooks.com).