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(b. York, England, ca. 735; d. Tours, France, 19 May 804)

education.

Alcuin is not famous for contributing to a specific scientific discipline; rather, his reputation and renown are based upon more general accomplishments. As Charlemagne's educational advisor, he brought AngloSaxon learning and teaching methods to the Franks.

Alcuin was born of a noble Northumbrian family. His English name was Ealhwine (Alchvine), but he preferred the Latin form, Albinus; at the court of Charlemagne he acquired the surname Flaccus. Educated at the cathedral school of York under the supervision of the archbishops Egbert and Aelbert, he was exposed to the best traditions of the early English schools. The school of York was heir to the rich pedagogical legacy of the Venerable Bede, and by the beginning of the eighth century its library was the finest in England. The methods and curriculum developed at York brought vitality to early medieval learning.

Alcuin's abilities attracted the attention of his teachers, and he became the protégé of Aelbert. At the death of Egbert in 766, Aelbert became archbishop and Alcuin assumed a major role in the leadership of the school; in 778 he became head of the school and library. When Eanbald became archbishop in 780, Alcuin was sent to Rome to receive the *pallium*. On his return journey the following year, he met Charlemagne at Parma. By this time Alcuin's fame as an educator and scholar had spread to the Continent. The Frankish king needed a competent educational advisor, for education in his kingdom was in a state of decline; he therefore invited Alcuin to become his minister of education. Upon accepting the offer in 782, Alcuin initiated a reform of the Frankish schools. He now became the guiding force behind Charlemagne's educational policies and the leading spirit of the palace school. Charlemagne rewarded Alcuin well for his services: he was granted the abbeys of Ferrières, Troyes, and St. Martin at Tours.

Alcuin popularized the study of the seven [liberal arts](#) in France and wrote elementary textbooks on these subjects. While these works do not demonstrate brilliant philosophical insight, they do reflect the mind of a creative teacher. His dialogue method of instruction brought needed vitality to teaching; there was now more give and take between teacher and pupil. The emphasis on the elementary subjects of the *trivium and quadrivium* encouraged both secular and sacred learning—indeed, the schools themselves were opened to both clerics and laymen, for both [church and state](#) needed educated servants.

The knowledge of science imparted by the schools was restricted, and Alcuin's works show only a limited awareness of the physical world. In his *Disputation of the Royal and Most Noble Youth Pepin with Albinus, the Scholastic*, there is a very general discussion of man, the universe, and the natural world. This work is presented in the form of 101 questions, problems, and riddles, with symbolic answers. There are almost no natural or scientific answers; the explanations are in terms of effects rather than causes:

Pepin: What is the sun?

Albinus: The splendor of the universe beauty of the sky, the glory of the day, the divider of the hours.

Alcuin expressed some interest in astronomy but it was an interest based on the need for an understanding of calendrical calculations. He helped to develop the Continental interest in the *computus*, and to aid the development of the skills needed to establish the date of Easter, he encouraged the study of mathematics.

In the work ascribed to him *Propositions for sharpening the Minds of Youth*, Alcuin presents fifty-three mathematical puzzles. While some can be solved through elaborate and ingenious calculations, many of them require geometrical and algebraic solutions. His encouragement of education was a valuable stimulant to the culture of Charlemagne's realm, and thus he left a lasting legacy to both the culture and the science of Europe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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