

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

## **'Charlemagne and Switzerland'**

20.09.2013–02.02.2014

Media release

Embargo: 18.09.13 | 10.00 a.m.

### **Charlemagne, Europe and Switzerland!**

**A visionary ruler who shaped Europe. Charlemagne (\*748–†814) laid the foundations for our culture over 1,200 years ago. He unified Greater Europe and reformed the education system and society. Charlemagne who was also emperor of what is now Switzerland, at the heart of his empire. His life and works will be presented at the Swiss National Museum in Zürich from 20 September 2013 as part of a comprehensive exhibition.**

On Christmas Day in the year 800, a new era in the Middle Ages of the western world began at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome: Pope Leo III appointed Charlemagne as the first emperor since the fall of Rome in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Charlemagne established a strict governing system in the Latin West. The introduction of a comital constitution, a specific church policy and a comprehensive education and coinage reform are keywords in the body of political reforms which shaped the Middle Ages and continue to have an impact today.

2014 marks the 1,200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Charlemagne (\*748–†814). So who was this Carolingian ruler who was already referred to as the 'great' during his lifetime? What impact did he have during the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries in the region defined by the Europe of today?

The exhibition on 'Charlemagne and Switzerland' spans the period from the rule of Charlemagne from 771–814 to the end of the Carolingian dynasty in the late 9<sup>th</sup> century. An epilogue indicates how Charlemagne's legacy lived on and how he was perceived in the centuries which followed.

### **Selected exhibits**

The exhibition features the first 'euro' in Europe. Charlemagne's coinage reform introduced a standard currency which was used in parts of Switzerland until the introduction of the franc (1850). The gold-gilt silver breast cross from the treasury at Aachen Cathedral is thought to have been worn by Charlemagne himself and symbolises Charlemagne's role as patron of the church and Christianity.

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

An exceptional example of early artwork is also featured and has been loaned from the library at the Abbey of St. Gall. This book was produced by the Bishop of Chur, Remedius, in around 800 and features paintings highlighting the significance of the Abbey of St. Gall as a centre for book art. Rare Carolingian silks are also on display, including the exquisite Samson fabric from the Chur Cathedral treasury.

Charlemagne became the subject of legend following his death. Idealised portrait paintings fuelled the development of this legend such as the image of Charlemagne created at Albrecht Dürer's studio in 1514 and on loan from the German Historical Museum and Louis-Félix Amiel's depiction of Charlemagne (1839) from the Musée National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon.

The exhibition brings together some 200 exhibits of artistic and historical significance in Switzerland for the first time. These exhibits are on loan from 48 national and international establishments and attest to the life and impact of Charlemagne.

## **Traces of Charlemagne in Switzerland**

The area which Switzerland covers today was closely linked with the Carolingian dynasty. Charlemagne was in Geneva and crossed the Alps on many occasions. The Alpine mountain passes gained in significance under his rule. The abbeys were built along key transport routes and provided Charlemagne and his followers with accommodation and key strongholds. The Abbey of St. John on the North-South axis in Müstair is said to have been founded by Charlemagne. Today it classes as a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site with its preserved Carolingian wall paintings.

In Switzerland, between 750 and 900 buildings and an astonishing number of works of art have either been preserved or have left archaeological evidence: abbeys, churches and a palace in the Lindenhof in Zürich as well as richly embellished scripts, exquisite ivory and goldsmithing work and textiles for church use. The Abbey of St. Gall flourished during the Carolingian era and its book production was influenced by Carolingian book art. The current Abbey of St. Gall library, the central library in Zürich and the Burgerbibliothek library in Berne contain numerous significant scripts from the Carolingian era. Many of these scripts are on display to the public for the first time as part of the 'Charlemagne and Switzerland' exhibition.

## **Pioneering heritage**

Charlemagne's education reform was ground-breaking. The script he initiated now forms the basis for our printed fonts. Thanks to him the museum has recovered the works of ancient authors as well as the knowledge they convey. His coinage reform

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

formed the basis of our actual monetary system. We also have him to thank for the preservation of works by ancient authors and therefore the passing down of historic knowledge and in addition, his coinage reform formed the basis for our monetary system today. His palaces fuelled stone construction and he also established Christianity in the Western World, firmly anchored the liturgy, edited the Bible, built new abbeys and regulated the lives of the monks. Charlemagne laid the foundations for our culture in many ways.

## **Myths and legends**

There are many legends and speculator ideas surrounding Charlemagne and his relationship with Switzerland. Legend has it that he spent 14 days at St. Maurice's Abbey in 788 and stopped off here on his way back from Rome. Another legend claims that Charlemagne had the Grossmünster cathedral built in Zürich after finding the relics of the city's patron saints, Felix and Regula, here. In the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, worship of Charlemagne began to increase in Zürich and in 1233, relics of Charlemagne were brought to Zürich. There is no historical proof that Charlemagne ever came to Zürich but as the evidence in this exhibition indicates, it cannot be ruled out.

## **Exhibition publication**

This exhibition has been put together in collaboration with the editors of the publication 'Die Zeit Karls des Grossen in der Schweiz' (The times of Charlemagne in Switzerland) Prof. em. Dr. Georges Descœudres, Dr. Jürg Goll and Dr. Markus Riek. The work is being published by Benteli Verlag to mark the opening of the exhibition.

## **Support**

The Swiss National Museum would like to thank the Ernst Göhner Foundation, the non-profit foundation ACCENTUS, the Ars Rhenia Foundation for the inter-regional promotion of art and culture and the Landis & Gyr Foundation for their generous support.

## **Images and text**

All of the media texts and a selection of images are available to download on the website [www.landesmuseum.ch](http://www.landesmuseum.ch) under 'Press'.

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

**Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any queries:**

Dr. Andreas Spillmann, Director, Swiss National Museum

T. +41 (0)44 218 65 01 | andreas.spillmann@snm.admin.ch

Dr. Christine Keller, exhibition curator and project manager, Swiss National

Museum T. +41 (0) 44 218 65 46 | christine.keller@snm.admin.ch

Denise Tonella, research assistant, Swiss National Museum

T. +41 (0) 44 218 65 54 | denise.tonella@snm.admin.ch

Juliette Wyler, communications, Swiss National Museum

T. +41 (0)44 218 65 49 | juliette.wyler@snm.admin.ch

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

## **'Charlemagne and Switzerland'**

20.09.2013–02.02.2014

### A tour of the exhibition

This exhibition has been designed as a tour comprising 8 key themes. Some 200 key exhibits from 48 lenders both in Switzerland and abroad have been paired with numerous media stations, film sequences and listening points in various atmospheric settings to create a broad impression of the first emperor, the time in which he lived and Europe and Switzerland of the day.

#### **Prologue – Charlemagne and the Franconian Empire**

The exhibition starts with an introduction to the life and times of Charlemagne followed by a presentation of the Franconian Empire based on an animated map. Listening stations on the life of Charlemagne and an overview of events are paired with the exhibits which include an equestrian statue of the Carolingian ruler on loan from the Musée du Louvre in Paris.

#### **Circle of scholars**

Charlemagne maintained intensive contact with the intellectual elite of his time. He summoned scholars from Italy, Spain, Ireland and his native France to his residence in Aachen to seek advice: theologians, scientists, writers and master builders. A selection of his most influential scholars and advisors are depicted in an octagon which has been modelled on the floor plan of the Palatine Chapel in Aachen. This circle of scholars included Haimo, the Bishop of Basel and a confidant of Charlemagne, Charlemagne's biographer Einhard and his most important and closest advisor: Alkuin. Alkuin's letters to Charlemagne and the earliest biography about the emperor are featured in the exhibition and are important historic documents from this time.

#### **Charlemagne's reforms – education and monetary system**

The scholars lead to the third key theme: the reforms, in particular an education reform: a new form of script and reading and writing of the Latin language. Scripts from the Abbey of St. Gall library, the Zürich central library and the Bern Burgerbibliothek library highlight the changeover to this new form of writing introduced by Charlemagne: the Carolingian minuscule script. This can still be seen in the *Times* or *Antiqua* fonts of the modern day.

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

Another key reform was the coinage reform. The preparations for this were undertaken by Charlemagne's father Pepin and led to Charlemagne standardising the coinage system across the empire. The Carolingian coinage reform enforced the silver denar as the sole currency. This was also an attempt to promote standardisation across the rather heterogeneous Franconian empire.

## **Abbeys – prayer and education**

The abbeys implemented the new education reform and Charlemagne built over 230 abbeys across the empire to assist the process. The area currently home to Switzerland was dotted with small and large monasteries and nunneries across the land. A touch-screen feature provides information on Switzerland's Carolingian abbey landscape. A model of the famous Abbey of St. Gall from 1877 shows how the theologians under Charlemagne imagined their ideal abbey town. A virtual tour of the abbey completes with detailed reconstructions complements the model. In addition to the Abbey of St. Gall, Disentis Abbey founded by Charlemagne's father Pepin and the Münstair Abbey founded by Charlemagne himself are also presented here.

## **Book and ivory art**

This part of the exhibition leads guests into the fascinating world of Carolingian book art. Magnificent scripts, at times featuring purple parchment pages and bindings with ivory plates, started being produced from the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The centre for book arts (The art book centre) was located at Charlemagne's court in Aachen and its works radiated throughout the Franconian empire.

Book art is presented here from various centres of the Franconian empire, one of which is the Abbey of St. Gall. The carved ivory panels presented to Charlemagne on his coronation are also kept there and have been lent to the museum for this exhibition. The highlights of this part of the exhibition include the Liber Viventium (the book of living and dying) which was created at Pfäfers Abbey shortly after Charlemagne's death. This richly painted work has been lent to the museum by the Abbey of St. Gall archives and lists the names of 4,500 monks, benefactors and founders including Charlemagne's father Pepin, Charlemagne himself and his brother Carloman.

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

## **Church and religion – Charlemagne as patron of the church and Christians**

Charlemagne was crowned emperor by the Pope and was deemed to be the patron of the church and Christians. The bust cross from the treasure of Aachen cathedral is said to be that of Charlemagne. It was first discovered during the opening of the grave in 1000 and depicts Charlemagne as a faithful Christian. When Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne emperor in the year 800, Charlemagne took over responsibility for spreading the influence of Christianity, as his father Pepin did before him. He had numerous churches built, standardised the liturgy and had the Bible revised. His efforts to drive forward the spread of Christianity are reflected in the exhibition by the oldest preserved copy of the Lord's Prayer in German still in existence, one of the many objects on loan from the Abbey of St. Gall library. This section of the exhibition presents relics and other church treasures which reflect the wealth of the Carolingian legacy in Switzerland.

## **Palaces – a construction boom in stately residences**

Charlemagne also made his mark on the architecture. He had the first monumental stone structures built since Roman times to the north of the Alps: palace complexes. There were sovereign palaces distributed across the Franconian empire which served as a symbol of power for a ruler who was constantly travelling. The architecture and function were based on that of the Roman imperial palaces – a visible symbol of Charlemagne's recourse to Late Antiquity and early Christianity. His favourite residence was Aachen.

During Carolingian times, the first sophisticated regal palace was built on (the) Lindenhof in Zürich. We offer an insight into the Zürich of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. This includes presentation of a document from the year 807 which features the first mention of the settlement on the Limmat. Charlemagne was both a king and emperor as well as a warrior. During his almost annual military campaigns, he conquered vast areas of land and turned them to Christianity. The long-lasting battles with the pagan Saxons, their defeat, the baptism of their leader Widukind and the subsequent Christianisation of the Saxons deserves particular mention. Carolingian weapons from Switzerland and abroad attest to Charlemagne's warfare and offer insight into the armaments used by the Carolingians.

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

## **Epilogue – Charlemagne: legends and myths**

Shortly after the death of Charlemagne in 814, he had already become a figure of myth, surrounded by numerous legends. Proof of this can be found in a biography written by St. Gallen monk Notker in 883 (the *Gesta Karoli Magni*) of which a copy is presented here. An overview of the events taking place after Charlemagne's death in 814 up to the end of the Carolingian dynasty in 888 shows how the Franconian empire broke down following Charlemagne's death. There are numerous works documenting the cult of Charlemagne in Zürich, from early times to the modern day. Images on glass panels, paintings and silver cups depict him as the alleged founder of the Grossmünster cathedral or worship him as a saint.

The exhibition ends with a look at how Charlemagne is claimed to be the leader of both France and Germany at a European level, as symbolised by two contrasting portraits: a portrait of Charlemagne as the German emperor produced by Albrecht Dürer and the 'French Charlemagne' by historical painter Louis-Félix Amiel from 1839.

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

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## Supporting programme and general information

### **Guided Tours**

#### **Public guided tours in English**

Fri 08.11.13 | 6pm – 7pm

Fri 20.12.13 | 6pm – 7pm

#### **Guided tours on request**

Tours can be arranged outside opening hours from Monday to Saturday. Duration: 1 hour. CHF 150.–. Registration required: T. +41 (0)44 218 65 04 | [fuehrungen@snm.admin.ch](mailto:fuehrungen@snm.admin.ch)

### **Schools**

Introduction for teachers in English. Upon request.

Registration and information:

T. +41 (0)44 218 65 04 (Mon – Fri 9am – 12.30pm) | [fuehrungen@snm.admin.ch](mailto:fuehrungen@snm.admin.ch)

#### **Guided tours and workshops**

School classes are offered insight into the life and work of Charlemagne, the first emperor of the medieval age. The focus is on his seminal reforms in the fields of education, writing, coinage and monastic life as well as on the empire he built, in other words, the foundations of European society and culture. For an overview and details go to: [www.karl.landmuseum.ch/schools](http://www.karl.landmuseum.ch/schools)

Materials for schools

Materials on the exhibition as well as work material for preparation and follow-up in class can be downloaded at: [www.karl.landmuseum.ch/schools](http://www.karl.landmuseum.ch/schools)

# Landesmuseum Zürich.

## Publication

In German

The exhibition comes with a richly illustrated catalogue published by Benteli Verlag Zürich. Twenty-eight contributions and a comprehensive section on the exhibits on display provide splendid insight into the age of Charlemagne, including for the first time an overview of the Carolingian legacy in Switzerland. Die Zeit Karls des Grossen in der Schweiz, 336 pages, 225 colour illustrations. In German. Edited by Georges Descoedres, Jürg Goll and Markus Riek. Benteli Verlag.

ISBN 978-3-7165-1781-9 | CHF 78

The publication is available at the museum shop and in bookstores or by order at [buchbestellung@snm.admin.ch](mailto:buchbestellung@snm.admin.ch)

## General information

### Opening hours

Tue – Sun 10am – 5 pm | Thu 10 am – 7 pm | Open on public holidays

### Admission

Adults CHF 10.– | Red. CHF 8.–

Children up to 16 years free of charge

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Museumstrasse 2, 8001 Zürich

T. +41 (0)44 218 65 11

F. +41 (0)44 211 29 49

[kanzlei@snm.admin.ch](mailto:kanzlei@snm.admin.ch)

[www.karl.landessmuseum.ch](http://www.karl.landessmuseum.ch)