



The Original Odd Couple: Charlemagne and Irene Lesson for grades 9-12

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I designed this four-part lesson as part of a larger unit on the early Middle Ages which questions the reasons why we have always perceived Charlemagne's kingdom as the natural successor to the Roman Empire. The essential question students come to grips with is: *Was Charlemagne the rightful Roman Emperor?*

The lesson is designed to stimulate creative and speculative interest in the past, but also to maintain the intellectual rigor of working with historical sources, both primary and secondary. My goal is to have students actively participating in historical thinking, engaging deeply with primary and secondary sources in order to experiment with and construct historical arguments from the evidence at hand. Secondly, I hope to expose students to some neglected Byzantine history that is often ignored in classes on the Medieval period. For this particular lesson on Irene and Charlemagne, I begin with the Byzantine Empress Irene in the eighth century.

- **Context and earlier lessons:**

When I teach the end of the Roman world, I move to Byzantium with the founding of Constantinople and we spend several lessons discussing Constantine's shift of the

capital, the reign of Justinian and Theodora (particularly the re-conquering of Western Rome and the building of Hagia Sophia), and the attitudes of Byzantines towards the West, particularly the idea that Byzantine rulers always considered themselves Roman.

- **A few modern comparisons I use:**

With Constantine's moving of the capital from Rome to Constantinople, I remind students that emperors did not always care to live in Rome, but I also use the analogy that if the United States were to move the capital from Washington D.C. to another city (for example, Los Angeles), we wouldn't suddenly cease to think of ourselves as Americans. If Washington D.C. were subsequently lost to an invading army or even in an act of nature, we also wouldn't suddenly stop being the United States. In that way, Byzantines always considered themselves Romans. Why wouldn't they? For Justinian's reconquest of Rome, I suggest to students that for sixth-century residents of Constantinople, the memory of Rome's fall to barbarian tribes would be roughly equivalent to our remembrance of World War II. The fall of the Western half of the empire was still a recent loss.

- **Resources:**

I have found the video on Hagia Sophia from PBS' series *Nova* (available online at <http://www.pbs.org/video/2365432635/>) to be very useful for discussing Justinian and his reign. The video focuses on a modern earthquake team testing the structure for both past solidity and future potential damage. They build a model of the core structure and test it on a shake table; this intrigues students. Additionally, the students see that the building, as exotic as it looks, is essentially a pagan, Roman design (a basilica and a

dome, inspired by Roman law courts and the massive dome of the Pantheon) reinforcing the idea that Byzantines were still Romans in many ways. Lastly, the video follows a Japanese researcher who is hunting for icons in Hagia Sophia that have been plastered over during its time as a mosque. Students are introduced to icons in this way before we begin to really discuss them in class.

Day 1: How can Art influence History?

Goal: by the end of class students will be able to identify icons, some Byzantine symbolism, and identify iconoclasm and understand its significance. Skills: Reading symbolism in art, crafting historical arguments from historical evidence.

I begin by asking students to go to the following websites and examine the images there:

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm

<http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/features/byzantine/icons.html>

If the class is small enough, I will assign each student one of the icons to study and summarize for the class. If not, I have them work in pairs or small groups with each image. They are asked to create a list of descriptors for each icon and to list similarities between icons. They will typically identify the gold backgrounds, the forward-facing figures, the serious expressions, the emphasis on angels, and may also notice that the icons take different material forms – both mosaic tile and paint on wood.

I then project onscreen for students a number of other icons from the time period (8th – 10th century) and ask students for descriptors and for their speculations about the symbolism. I will identify some common symbols and techniques they might have missed, such as the emphasis on large eyes, the Greek lettering, and any symbols such as fish, vines, or bread (representing the creed, the grace of God and the Eucharistic

feast). We then discuss how the Iconoclastic movement might have begun, since there could be a fine line between using the image as a means of prayer and actually adoring the image itself. I highlight Irene's origins (she was likely from Athens) and ask students to theorize about her cultural associations with art and what her feelings might have been about icons. Did her Greek heritage pre-dispose her towards a love of images and icons?

Although most historians suggest that Irene would never have been chosen to marry Leo IV if she had been pro-icon (either privately or publicly), I ask students if this is consistent with the woman who almost single-handedly overturns over fifty years of anti-icon policy in Constantinople. In other words, Irene entered a foreign city that allowed no images in churches or homes, and yet within decades she had managed to call a Church council that would bring icons back in both worship and in private use. Did her Greek upbringing allow her to be more open to the idea of images? Was she pro-icon from the beginning? If so, why would she be allowed to marry Leo in the first place? Or perhaps – since she was a woman – her personal opinions were of no consideration to the emperor when he chose a bride for his son. Although there is little evidence we can use in class to support any of these arguments, it is often helpful for the students to speculate so they can practice historical interpretation with the few facts at hand.

Day 2: Why Icons?

Goal: by the end of class, students will understand the long-term results of iconoclasm and how the phenomenon created a deep division between east and west. Skills: historical interpretation, synthesis, creating and supporting an historical argument, causation, patterns of continuity and change over time.

We begin by re-visiting our earlier discussion of why people would oppose the use of icons and I show several images to prompt discussion of the essential problems of icons. I ask students to share the icons they studied in the previous class and explain how or why someone might interpret that icon as an idol. I show several mosaics of Christ to also demonstrate the deeper problem with these images. I ask the following questions: In Christian theology, Jesus is both truly God and truly man, so if I create a mosaic or painting of him, which nature is depicted? Have I literally drawn his divine nature? What visual clues can I give to the observer that this is a divine figure and not just a man? (The image will almost always show Christ with a halo, or he might be drawn carrying an open book or a cross, or perhaps he will be dressed as a shepherd, or the gold background might have some Greek letters to identify him). Are these clues enough to make it theologically acceptable to draw God?

We discuss the Second Council of Nicea (787) during which icons were declared a legitimate means of prayer. I use the following points to emphasize what a huge shift this was in the Byzantine Empire:

- It exacerbated the continued problem of the right of the emperor to intervene in religious disputes.
- It antagonized the Pope and served to encourage him in his quest for an alliance with the Franks. The Byzantine influence that was felt in central Italy was lost.
- The acceptance of icons profoundly changed subsequent religious art. Since the Jews and Muslims did not use figural representations, the Greco-Roman tradition was revived in the Renaissance. Would there have been a Renaissance without Irene's support and formation of the Council of Nicea? (I often ask what

my students are studying in art and drawing classes and how these classes would be different had Irene been unsuccessful in restoring the use of icons. Many students suggest that they wouldn't be studying the human form at all, but would be limited to nature, geometric patterns, still lives, etc.)

- In 1054, the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople (Pope Leo IX and Patriarch Michael Cerularius) excommunicated each other. The bitterness over iconoclasm was a contributing factor to this Great Schism, for the popes since the ninth century had long supported the use of icons, particularly for the illiterate, and yet the patriarchs and emperors usually supported an iconoclastic policy. So although the Schism itself was over a theological difference, there was already hostility between east and west over the popes' pro-icon stance being routinely ignored in Constantinople

We also discuss what it meant that Irene ruled alone (without a husband, father, or son as co-ruler) from 797-802. Was she a legitimate ruler? Some students will argue in her favor that she was empress when her husband died, so there should be no question about her right to rule. Other students will point out that Rome and Constantinople had never had a female ruler, so it would not be surprising that people would question her legitimacy.

The homework assignment required students to read their brief textbook account of Charlemagne's kingdom (usually 1-2 pages depending which textbook we are using), and to look up online how Irene came to be empress alone.

Day 3: How does a King wish to be remembered?

Goal: By the end of class, students will have a brief timeline of Irene's tenure as emperor and be able to identify and understand major social aspects of Charlemagne's life, how he wished to be perceived, and identify political reasons why he was crowned. Skills: Chronological reasoning, historical interpretation.

We usually begin by sharing research from the homework: what did the students discover about Irene? Most sources online have conflicting information, so it can be useful for students to put it all up on the boards in the classroom and see where they found reliable information and where they did not. Students may or may not have discovered the following information (a fuller account can be found in Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple, Rulers of Medieval Byzantium*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004)

Among the facts they may find (some of which are quite difficult to search out online) are:

- Irene negotiated a marriage between Constantine and Charlemagne's daughter, Rotrude (Erythro), when the two were children.
- A primary document to demonstrate the above point can be useful for reading aloud: "In this year Irene sent Konstaes the *sakellarios* and Mamlos the *primikerios* to Charles the king of the Franks to betroth his daughter (who was called Erythro) to her son the Emperor Constantine. After they came to an agreement and exchanged oaths with each other the eunuch scribe Elissaios was left behind to teach Erythro the Greek's letters

and customs and to educate her in the customs of the Roman Empire.”¹

The engagement was broken off some years later and Constantine was reportedly upset about it (different sources will blame Charlemagne and others will blame Irene). I often ask students why this engagement would be broken off. What would scare either Irene or Charlemagne and lead them to break the agreement? I show them a map of Charlemagne’s territory along with the Byzantine and Islamic Empires and ask for some ideas. I may have to lead them to the interpretation that Charlemagne’s territorial expansions in southern Italy are making Irene very nervous, for his acquisitions there bordered on what little territory the Byzantines still weakly held.

- Irene found another bride for Constantine, Maria, who was not given the title of empress when they married.
- Constantine VI and his mother Irene struggled for power (this may include details such as Constantine trying to arrest a eunuch at the court who served as one of Irene’s chief advisors or that Irene tried to gain control over the army)
- Constantine confined Irene to her palace; a few years later, he allowed Irene’s reinstatement
- Constantine had some success on the battlefield, but also suffered some serious defeats which may have damaged his credibility.

¹*The Chronicle of Theophanes*, ed. and trans by Harry Turtledove, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 141.

- Constantine decided that he wasn't particularly fond of his wife, Maria, and had her exiled (along with their two daughters.) Some students will realize that his wife not having a son might have made Constantine's grip on the throne precarious.
- Constantine remarried. Some students will recognize that many in both the army and the church will think this marriage adulterous. That will turn people against him.
- Irene is able to sway enough people to her control and she is able to give the order to have Constantine, her own son, blinded, which will make him unfit to be emperor. So, she begins her sole rule in 797 with this event.

We then leave Irene and I briefly review with students what we have already discussed regarding early Western kingdoms that emerged after the fall of Rome, particularly the territory now controlled by the Franks.

The excerpts from Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* they are assigned include the very short chapters 17, 18, 24-28 (readily available on the Fordham site) about the personal dress, appearance, habits, studies, generosity and coronation of Charlemagne.² (Note: when we studied the Roman Empire, we read excerpts from Suetonius about *The Twelve Caesars*, so students are already familiar with this biographical style although they will rarely connect the two).³ I then break them into two small groups to brainstorm answers to the following questions:

²<http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/einhard.asp>

³<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/home.html>

! Group A receives the detailed questions:

1. Why does Einhard mention what Charlemagne likes to do (particularly his favorite readings) during meals?
2. What kinds of education does Charlemagne have?
3. Do you agree with Einhard's explanation for why Charlemagne couldn't learn to write?
4. If Charlemagne could not write, why does Einhard consider Charlemagne learned?
5. Why does Einhard mention Ravenna? (what do we already know about the city that would help answer this question?)

! Group B receives the larger, "big-picture" questions:

1. What do you think Einhard's motives were for writing?
2. Why does Einhard discuss Charlemagne's generosity towards Christians?
3. What were Einhard's reasons for Charlemagne being crowned Emperor?
4. What elements make you think this is an accurate biography? What might make you think it is idealized? (List three reasons for each.)

Groups A and B each receive 5 giant post-its and markers and write one question at the top of each. As a group, they decide on the appropriate answer to each question and write it on the sheet. They then hang the posters around the room and swap places for silent commentary. At this point, students should be roaming around the room reading each other's questions and answers. They are encouraged to write comments and questions on the post-its.

We then return to a large group and discuss the answers to these questions. Generally, student conclusions are that Einhard was writing a biography meant to emphasize Charlemagne's virtues, his Christianity, and his fairness.

Homework:

Students choose one of the Einhard topics about Charlemagne that we read (personal dress, appearance, habits, studies, generosity and coronation) and write a similar short passage in the same biographical style about Irene.

- What was Irene reading at dinner?
- How did she dress?
- What was her coronation with Leo like?

Students are provided with an image of Irene from Byzantine coins. They are allowed to do outside research, but it is not necessary. They are free to invent supplemental information that we did not cover in class. Sometimes students will search online for Irene and produce the mosaic from Hagia Sophia. Although that image is *an* Irene, it is not *our* Irene and so it provides an opportunity for discussing the veracity of internet sources, particularly in image searches.

Day 4: Is Charlemagne a fraud?

Goal: to examine primary and multiple secondary sources to discuss conflicting interpretations. Skills: Comparison and Contextualization, Historical Interpretation and Synthesis.

I ask the students to imagine what Irene's thoughts might have been when she received news of Charlemagne's coronation. I give them a few minutes to write down what they think her reaction was. We gather up the sheets to read later, and I give the

students a very small excerpt from *The Chronicle of Theophanes* that relates how Charlemagne wished to invade Sicily but stopped because he wanted to marry Irene.

In this year – the ninth indiction – on December 25 Charles the king of the Franks was crowned by Pope Leo. He wished to marshal an expedition against Sicily, but desisted, wanting instead to marry Irene. In the following year – the tenth indiction – he dispatched ambassadors to gain that end.”⁴

I then ask students why he might wish to marry Irene. Did he think to unite the two kingdoms despite the distance between them? Would it be only a marriage of convenience? Was he thinking to make himself *truly* a Roman emperor by marrying the last Roman empress?

The class is broken into four groups and each is given a secondary source explaining the attitude of the Byzantines towards the coronation of Charlemagne. They

⁴*Theophanes*, 801. As with any primary or secondary source I provide them, I require them to look up words they do not recognize on their own. In the case of the source above, an indiction was a fifteen-year cycle used for dating documents in both Byzantine and some western sources.

ought to have an online or paper dictionary for words they do not recognize, and they should discuss the context of those words among themselves. We then come together as a group and each small group reports on their source, summarizing the argument of each and we discuss the similarities and differences among the four, deciding whether there is a consensus in the argument. Typically, I will write their comments on the board as each group discusses each source:

! Source 1:

“But the fall in 751 of Ravenna, the centre of the Byzantine exarchate in central Italy, and the inability of Constantine V to halt the Lombards because of his intensive military campaigns against the Bulgars and the Arabs, isolated the papacy. The result was that three years later Pope Stephen II journeyed beyond the Alps to meet the Frankish ruler Pepin – a step which started the famous partnership between the Carolingians and the papacy and culminated in Charlemagne’s coronation by the pope in Rome on 25 December 800. This act deeply disturbed the Byzantines because it violated the principle of one empire, and they attempted to oppose Charles’ usurpation. But in the hostilities which ensued Constantinople was forced to concede to Charlemagne the title of Basileus in 812. There was now an empire of the east and one of the west as well, and the Byzantine monopoly was broken. The emergence of the western empire is the most spectacular moment in the rise of a new society in western Europe. ... As the centuries passed the two societies grew apart in political, social, economic,

culture and spiritual life and their separate development is the basis of the difference between western and eastern Europe in modern time.”⁵

Source 2:

“By whom, however could [the Pope] be tried [for crowning Charlemagne]? Who, in other words, was qualified to pass judgement on the Vicar of Christ? In normal circumstances the only conceivable answer to that question would have been the Emperor at Constantinople; but the imperial throne was at this moment occupied by Irene. That the Empress was notorious for having blinded and murdered her own son was, in the minds of both Leo and Charles, almost immaterial: it was enough that she was a woman. The female sex was known to be incapable of governing, and by the old Salic tradition was debarred from doing so. As far as Western Europe was concerned, the Throne of the Emperors was vacant: Irene’s claim to it was merely an additional proof, if any were needed, of the degradation into which the so-called Roman Empire had fallen.”⁶

Source 3:

⁵Speros Vryonis, *Byzantium and Europe: History of European Civilization Library* (Norwich: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1967), 66-68.

⁶John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries*. (London: Viking, 1988), 378.

“But (Irene’s) rule was not very successful. To secure popularity she reduced taxes, and this resulted in a disastrous financial crisis; she neglected the frontiers and was faced with attack from two sides, for Arab incursions had been taking place since 781 and in the Balkans the Byzantine forces were defeated by the Bulgars in 792. At the same time prestige in the west was falling as a result of the rise of the Carolingian Empire and events were brought to a head by the crowning at Rome in 800 of Charlemagne as emperor of the West, which was no doubt designed as a gesture by the Pope to indicate that he no longer owed allegiance to the Byzantine emperors. The idea of a single emperor was deep set, and this event marked more than anything else the split between Italy and Byzantium as well as that between the Latin and the Orthodox Churches. Charlemagne made an effort to achieve union – to his advantage – by sending an embassy to propose marriage to Irene, but she was deposed before it arrived and a court official, Nicephorus, was crowned in 802.”⁷

Source 4:

It has justly been said that in Byzantium, imperial power was an autocracy tempered by revolution and assassination. The fact is that this absolute power had a weakness. Like Rome, Byzantium had no law of succession, at least until the end of the ninth century. Theoretically a man became Emperor either through election by Senate, people, and Army, or by the decree of the reigning Emperor, who, during his lifetime, designated and installed at his side a successor chosen by qualification of birth, adoption,

⁷David Talbot Rice, *The Byzantines*. (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 53.

or association. In fact, it was most often by brutal usurpation that emperors were made, and for a long time there was no reigning family or blood royal in Byzantium. It was for the emperors of the Macedonian line 'to give imperial branches of dynasty.' Thenceforward it was more difficult to overthrow so firmly rooted a tree; an imperial family now existed, whose members were given the name of Porphyrogeniti, and it is from this period that we may trace an increasing emphasis on legitimacy ...Even usurpers respected the lawful dynasty, and among the people there grew up an attachment – a loyalist devotion – to the ruling house. Public opinion now held that “he who reigns in Constantinople is always victorious,” which made usurpation not only criminal but, what was worse, foolish. In this Eastern monarchy, even women might ascend the throne – a thing unknown in the West – and those such as Irene, Theodora and Zoë were popular.”⁸

I will sometimes also read the following quotation aloud: “...Maria was not crowned as basilissa before her wedding in November 788. While the marriage must have been celebrated in identical style, the young bride from Amnia was not raised to the higher status of empress. Imperial wives often had to wait for this honour, which was sometimes bestowed after the successful delivery of a male child.” I will stop to ask: Is it significant that Maria did not receive this honor and Irene did, even before her marriage? Does that lend additional weight to Irene’s role as emperor? The author continues: “But since this occasion had been masterminded by Irene, she made sure that

⁸Charles Diehl. *Byzantium: Greatness and Decline*. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1957), 37.

Constantine and his young bride remained subordinate to her.”⁹ I ask students, did it matter that Irene was crowned as empress before her marriage to Leo? Did it give her a credibility that other empresses did not have?

To wrap up with an active assignment, I ask students to theorize what might have occurred had Charlemagne and Irene married. How would European and world history have altered?

Homework (or additional classwork):

Each student is assigned a role (listed below) for which he or she must design, create and write a postcard (including an appropriate picture), based on one of these roles. This exercise allows students to work on a creative and active assignment which also calls for some research and allows the teacher to modify for differing abilities. I have found that this assignment in particular encourages students to revisit some of the icons from day one as they search for images to use on the front of their postcard. They are allowed to also use contemporary images or photoshop or cut and paste their own images and ideas if they are appropriate and topical. Roles may be duplicated so that two students in the class are inhabiting the same role, but they may not work together.

Postcard roles for Charlemagne:

- Charlemagne to Pope Leo III (before or after his coronation)
- Irene to Pope Leo about the coronation of Charlemagne
- Charlemagne to Irene proposing marriage

⁹Judith Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 131.

- Irene to Charlemagne proposing marriage
 - Irene on her honeymoon with Charlemagne
 - Charlemagne's daughter Rotrude to her fiancé, Constantine VI
 - Charlemagne's son Pepin (the Hunchback) to his mother on the subject of the coronation
 - Charlemagne's son Pepin (the Hunchback) to his mother on the occasion of his father's marriage to Irene
 - Charlemagne's ambassador to Constantinople, reporting back on Irene being deposed
 - Einhard writing to Charlemagne with a description of Irene
 - Irene's son, Constantine VI to his mother on his opinion of her possible marriage to Charlemagne (before he was blinded and killed)
- ! For older students I may also require an essay (or the essay can be assigned in lieu of or before the Postcard exercise). On occasion, it can be helpful to brainstorm some ideas before students sit down to write the essay, although it can also lead students down a path that isn't original. Students may suggest that Charlemagne's building program was an attribute appropriate to a Roman emperor, or that his capital at Aachen was patterned on Ravenna, thereby connecting himself to Justinian's version of Rome. Other students have suggested that Charlemagne was deliberately trying to legitimize his reign with his building projects. Others have argued that although Irene might have been legitimate, the Arab threat to Constantinople demanded

unification with the West or at least stronger leadership on her part. Some have also brought up the death of Latin in the East as a characteristic of an empire that is no longer Roman. Many will argue that Irene’s coronation was genuine and that Constantinople was in every way the successor state to Rome.

Final Essay Topics:

- ! Although Charlemagne and Irene both consider themselves the rightful Roman Emperor, does one of them have a stronger claim? Use primary and secondary sources to support your argument.
- ! Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of a Byzantine union with the Franks.
- ! How would a marriage of convenience between Charles and Irene have affected the succession issue?

An essay rubric follows: (a modified form from the AP rubrics)

	Excellent	Good	Average	Below Average
Historical information is correct				
Grammar, spelling and citations				
Thesis				
Thesis is substantiated with adequate historical evidence from the sources found				
Uses at least two sources, demonstrating understanding				

and analysis				
Essay makes at least one or two relevant, direct comparisons between societies (Franks and Byzantines)				
Analyzes at least one reason for a similarity or a difference in a comparison				

Final reflections:

The advantage of this lesson is that it can be modified in a number of ways. I have taught with only the secondary sources, or taught with only the primary sources of Einhard and Theophanes. The homework assignments can be done in class, assigned to be completed at home, or not used at all. The second day's lesson on iconoclasm can be omitted altogether for the sake of time, and the essays can be used alone, without the other writing prompts, although they are most effective when students have enough time to process the material over several days.

I have found that when the question is framed as which emperor is the rightful one, the students become quite passionate about arguing for their favored candidate. They particularly enjoy the postcard assignment which allows them to work in a creative way and it also, as I wrote above, encourages them to re-visit the icons and artwork from day one as they search for appropriate images. I have had students use icons as the front of the postcards, photos of Aachen's cathedral or other buildings in Aachen, and even

one student who photoshopped an image of Charlemagne's face onto the mosaic of John Comnenos and Irene of Hungary from Hagia Sophia. Whether you use the postcard assignment, the essays or any of the material above, the students have some exposure to long-neglected Byzantine history and a chance to re-interpret the traditional story of Charlemagne, anchoring it in its more complex framework.

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