

ROYAL FIGURES AS NATION BUILDERS – KING  
KAMEHAMEHA AND CHARLEMAGNE: MYTH FORMATION  
IN THE EUROPEAN EARLY MIDDLE AGES AND IN  
EIGHTEENTH-AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY POLYNESIAN  
HAWAI'I

Albrecht Classen\*

*Abstract: Historical examples make it possible for us today to understand current issues and phenomena. Kingship has always been associated with charisma and hence with a myth-forming process surrounding the king. The myth of Emperor Charlemagne (d. 814) is well known and was thoroughly examined especially in 2014, the twelfth-hundred anniversary of his death. The myth of King Kamehameha I of Hawai'i (d. 1819) is well present in Hawai'i today, as documented by numerous public sculptures, street and school names, etc. Through a comparative analysis, this paper demonstrates that medieval European history can serve well to explain modern myths and vice versa, especially because Kamehameha's charisma continues to permeate contemporary Hawaiian society. In this regard, we discover that through a structural-historical and anthropological-political analysis we can identify meaningful and significantly shared elements connecting early medieval Europe even with modern-day Polynesia.*

On September 8, 2015, the police of the County of the Big Island of Hawai'i reported that the top section of the royal spear held in the hand of the sculpture depicting King Kamehameha the Great in the Wailoa State Park of Hilo had been stolen. This splendid sculpture shows, in double life size, the figure of the unifier and founder of the Kingdom of Hawai'i, Kamehameha. The following Tuesday, officers found the broken-off piece in the channel behind the statue. It was covered by vegetation along the banks. Soon after, the criminal, 31-year-old William Roy Carroll III, was arrested and charged with this crime. The theft simply occurred because he wanted to enrich himself because the tip of the spear, or *ihe*, was made of bronze covered with gold leaf. The 18-foot sculpture displays

---

\*Dr. ALBRECHT CLASSEN, University Distinguished Professor, Department of German Studies, The University of Arizona, Tucson. Email: [aclassen@email.arizona.edu](mailto:aclassen@email.arizona.edu).

the mighty king with helmet, cape, and sandals, all also covered with gold leaf. Ever since that theft, great efforts were made to repair the spear and to reattach it to the sculpture. A national figure of great significance had been publicly shamed, so the public strove hard to remedy this situation.

A festive ceremony of placing the restored spear into King Kamehameha's hand organized by Kamehameha Schools East Hawai'i Alumni Association, Mamalahoa Chapter and presided over by *kumu* Kahookele Crabbe, took place on December 19, 2015. The re-installation was made possible with the assistance from a Hawai'i County Fire Department ladder truck. Repair work on the 22-foot long *ihe* weighing more than 100 pounds was performed by the Puna metal artist Wes Hammond.<sup>1</sup>

While both the theft and the restoration of the *ihe*, along with the public ceremony, might have been only of local interest in east Hawai'i, we face here a fascinating phenomenon that directly connects the myth of Emperor Charlemagne, or Charles the Great (d. 814), with the myth of this Polynesian ruler, which is very much alive and well in the U.S. state of Hawai'i today. We can draw significant parallels from the modern worship and admiration of this charismatic figure of King Kamehameha for our analysis of the long-term impact of the Carolingian ruler on those countries that emerged from his empire and thus gain insights into the reasons for and actual working of that myth surrounding the Frankish king and subsequent emperor (since 800).<sup>2</sup> Of course, all over the world

---

<sup>1</sup>All this belongs to public knowledge and has been culled from various news outlets.

<sup>2</sup>There is much research on the myth surrounding Charlemagne; see, for instance, Thomas F.X. Noble, "Greatness Contested and Confirmed: The Raw Materials of the Charlemagne Legend," *The Legend of Charlemagne in the Middle Ages: Power, Faith, and Crusade*, ed. Matthew Gabriele and Jace Stuckey. *The New Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 3-22; Matthew Gabriele, *An Empire of Memory: The Legend of Charlemagne, the Franks, and Jerusalem before the First Crusade* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Andrew J. Romig, "Charismatic Art and Biography in the Carolingian World," *Faces of Charisma*, ed. Martha Rust and Brigitte Bedos-Rezak (Brill, forthcoming); I thank the author for providing me with a draft of his paper. See also ..... *De erfenis van Karel de Grote, 814 - 2014: bij de internationale tentoonstelling in het Provinciaal Erfgoedcentrum in Ennema van 10 mei tot 30 november 2014*, ed. Dirk Callebaut and Horst van Cuyck (Gent: Provinciebestuur Oost-Vlaanderen, 2014); Michaël Antoine, *Les représentations iconographiques de Charlemagne dans les manuels scolaires*

and throughout time mighty rulers have promoted the creation of their own auratic status or that of their predecessors and in that process relied heavily on the common tools used for the establishment of myths. The case of King Kamehameha, in particular, proves to be so useful for the investigation of the myth surrounding Charlemagne because in modern-day Hawai'i the myth of the founder is very much well and alive, which can be conveniently compared with the efforts by Charles's posterity to glorify and even canonize that mighty Frankish ruler. In other words, we can draw from the current workings of that Hawai'ian myth for the explanation of the myth surrounding Charlemagne.

Every year, the state of Hawai'i celebrates the memory of Kamehameha on June 11 and thus continues to embrace the ideology created by this founding father. The state seal shows an image of Kamehameha at the left-hand bearer on the official seals of the Territory of Hawai'i and the U.S. State of Hawai'i. Twice during the twentieth century, the statue appeared on a postage stamp (1937 and 1959).<sup>3</sup> Kamehameha's accomplishments are particularly noteworthy because he was the only ruler in the entire Pacific to achieve that goal of unifying the various parts of the archipelago of Hawai'i as one kingdom (with the exception of Kauai, which later, however, voluntarily joined the kingdom under his rule). There were numerous external factors that made this possible, but above all we can affirm

---

*belges francophones*. Archéobook, 6 (Namur: Institut du Patrimoine Wallon, [2014]); *Karl der Große, Charlemagne: Exhibition Guide*, commissioned by the city of Aachen, ed. Sarvenaz Ayooghi (Dresden: Sandstein Verlag, 2014); *Karl der Große: 1200 Jahre Mythos und Wirklichkeit*, ed. Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, prepared by Bernhard Pinsker and Annette Zeeb (Petersberg: Imhof, 2014); *De erfenis van Karel de Grote 814 - 2014* (The Inheritance from Charlemagne 814 - 2014), compiled by Dirk Callebaut and Horst van Cuyck (Gent: Provinciebestuur Oost-Vlaanderen, 2014); *Karlsbilder in Kunst, Literatur und Wissenschaft: Akten eines interdisziplinären Symposions anlässlich des 1200. Todestages Kaiser Karls des Großen*, ed. Franz Fuchs. Rezeptionskulturen in Literatur- und Mediengeschichte, 1 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2015); for an entire bibliography with research literature on Charlemagne, though by now somewhat dated, see Susan E. Farrier, *The Medieval Charlemagne Legend: An Annotated Bibliography*. Garland Medieval Bibliographies, 15 (New York and London: Garland, 1993).

<sup>3</sup>There is much research on King Kamehameha I, of course. See, for instance, Helen Wong and Ann Rayson, *Hawaii's Royal History*. Rev. ed. (Honolulu, HI: Bess Press, 1987), 51-67.

“that the most important factor of all was the personality of Kamehameha, which completely dominated the period of Hawaiian history . . . .”<sup>4</sup>

Kamehameha, with his full Hawaiian name Kalani Pai’a Wohi o Kaleikini Keali’ikui Kamehameha o ‘Iolani i Kaiwikapu kau’i Ka Liholiho Kunuiakea, was born ca. 1736 and died on May 8 or 14, 1819. His greatest military and political achievement was, to some extent, quite parallel to Charlemagne, that is, to establish the Hawaiian kingdom in 1810. Developing good working relationships with all other major Pacific powers, he secured the continued independence of his kingdom, although in the relatively near future the kingdom was taken over by the United States in a coup by a group of American sugar planters under Sanford Ballard Dole who overthrew Queen Liliuokalani, the Hawaiian monarch, and established a new provincial government with Dole as president.<sup>5</sup>

One of the founding myths surrounding King Kamehameha was that he was able, at the age of fourteen, to lift and even overturn the famous Naha stone after several attempts (today outside of the Public Library in Hilo, HI), a feat similar to King Arthur’s alleged ability to pull the sword Excalibur out of a rock, thus publicly demonstrating his predetermination as the future king. “The fulfilling of the Prophecy, by lifting the NAHA Stone, sealed Kamehameha as the fulfiller of the Prophecy, but other ruling Chiefs, Keawe Mauhili, the Mahoe (twins) Keoua and other Chiefs were defiant of the Prophecy of Ka Poukahi and the High Chiefs of Kauai and supported Kiwala’o even after knowing about the Prophecy.”<sup>6</sup> According to ancient Hawaii legend, the Naha Stone was originally used to identify who belonged to the ruling Naha clan. After a baby was born, it was placed on top of this stone. If it remained calm, the baby was Naha. If it cried, it wasn’t. That massive, 7000-pound rock was transported by canoe from Kauai to Hawai’i.

Without going into numerous historical and biographical details which have

---

<sup>4</sup>Ralph Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom*, vol. 1: 1778-1854: *Foundation and Transformation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1938/1965), 29-60; here 29. He goes so far as to call him “one of the great men of the world” (ibid.).

<sup>5</sup>Gavan Daws, *Shoal of Time: A History of the Hawaiian Islands* (Toronto, Ont.: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 29-60; Edward Joesting, *Hawaii: An Uncommon History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1972), 41-65; Paul Bailey, *Those Kings and Queens of Old Hawaii* (Los Angeles, CA: Westernlore Books, 1975), 15-57.

<sup>6</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamehameha\\_I](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kamehameha_I)

already been discussed by scores of historians, suffice it here to summarize once again that Kamehameha unified all the Hawaiian islands and accomplished thus a feat similar to other founding heroes, such as Charlemagne, irrespective of some slight differences in practical terms. As Paul Bailey underscores, “He held his widespread kingdom together by constant vigilance, and an internal strength that no dissenter dared assault.”<sup>7</sup>

In his honor, various massive statues of him were erected, the first in front of the Aliʻiolani Hale, the Hawaii State judiciary building, across historic Iolani Palace, in Honolulu, and all other ones modeled after the original bronze created by Thomas R. Gould in 1880 in Paris. This project had been initiated by Walter Gibson, member of the Hawaiʻi government, who had first proposed the idea of creating a statue of King Kamehameha in 1878 as part of a commemoration of the 100-year arrival of the famous British explorer, Captain Cook, to the Hawaiian Islands.

Although King Kamehameha had been a Polynesian, Gould, deeply influenced by his studies in Italy, ignored all the photos sent to him and shaped the sculpture in close semblance with Roman and Greek figures, which underscored, however, the figure’s aura as his people’s leader even further. However, the ship transporting the sculpture was wrecked near the Falkland Island near the tip of South America, so a replica was ordered, which is now standing outside of the Aliʻiolani Hale in Honolulu, characterized by a strongly dark skin color. In the meantime, the presumably lost sculpture was recovered by Falkland Islanders, who sold it to the captain, who in turn sold it to Walter M. Gibson. This one was then placed at King Kamehameha’s birthplace in Kapaʻau in Kohala in the northwest of the Big Island.

A third replica was commissioned in 1959 when Hawaiʻi gained statehood (49th state of the USA), and was unveiled in the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C. The Princeville Corporation commissioned the fourth copy from R. Sandrin, then working for the Fracaro Foundry in Vicenza, Italy, for their resort hotel in Kauai in 1963. The residents of Kauai, however, rejected that sculpture because Kamehameha had never conquered that island, despite his otherwise glorious military successes in the Hawaiian archipelago. Consequently, that sculpture ended up in the Wailoa State Park of Hilo, where the theft of the spear occurred recently. A fifth sculpture was created by Herb Kawainui Kāne

---

<sup>7</sup>Bailey, *Those Kings and Queens* (see note 4), 59.

(1928-2011) in 1990 on behalf of the Grand Wailea Resort Hotel & Spa on Maui.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, on Kamehameha Day, June 11, first established in 1871, all the statues are ceremoniously draped in fresh leis fashioned in Hawai'i. All over the Hawaiian Islands, there are streets, schools, hotels, parks, buildings, and other sites bearing the name of the first King of Hawai'i, so his myth strongly lives on and signals how much this figure represents, for the present population of Hawai'i, irrespective of their ethnic background, today highly mixed and originating from all over the world, a source of strength and identity, if not culture for all residents of that state. Kamehameha song contests are just as much part of modern-day life in Hawai'i as are parades and festivals. The fact that Hawai'i is a democratic state of the United States does not change anything with regard to the mythical admiration and celebration of the unifying founder of the Hawaiian kingdom.

As much as King Kamehameha enjoyed enormous charisma and was widely recognized everywhere in the Hawaiian Islands, as much do we also have to recognize the strategic operations by individuals, groups, parties, and the government itself to promote his memory and to elevate him to a mythical status.

In a very similar fashion, Charlemagne was a mighty ruler who established the first fully-fledged empire north of the Alps long after the fall of the Roman empire in the West and thus gained the charismatic status which has kept his name and fame alive until today. While Kamehameha the Great is memorialized especially through those five sculptures of him, we know of Charles the Great through Einhard's biography, the chapel built for the emperor in Aachen, which includes his throne and shrine, and then through countless chronicles and literary narratives in most European languages. Four times Charlemagne was disinterred, first by Emperor Otto III in the year 1000, then by Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa in 1165, and by Emperor Frederick II in 1215, all trying their best to associate themselves with that mythical figure, displaying his bones as relics and having him canonized, at least once through Antipope Paschal III. In 1349, Emperor Charles IV had some of the bones brought out again to pass them on to individual reliquaries, thereby expanding the myth surrounding the founder of the

---

<sup>8</sup><http://blog.get2hawaii.com/tales-of-the-king-kamehameha-statues/>;

<http://www.publicartinpublicplaces.info/PUBLIC-ART-ARCHIVES-HAWAII> (both last accessed on Dec. 28, 2015); there is even a sixth sculpture in Las Vegas, NV, because so many Hawaiian tourists travel there, but this is irrelevant for our topic.

Carolingian Empire ever more widely. In modern times, the grave was opened again twice, first in 1861, then in 1988 in order to verify that the remains were really those of Charlemagne. On Wednesday, January 28th, 2014, on the 1200th anniversary of Charlemagne's death, the results of the research were announced, presenting to us an image of the emperor as a strong, tall, yet slim person:

At 1.84 meters (six feet), he was unusually tall for his time. The team also estimated his weight at around 78 kilograms, giving him a slim body mass index of around 23. The average height for an adult male in the 9th century was 1.69 meters or 5'6" which put Charlemagne in the 99th percentile. Einhard's description of him fits the results of the study even in some of the smaller details, like the limp that struck him in his later years. Researchers found that the kneecap and heel bone had deposits consistent with an injury.<sup>9</sup>

Many of the reasons why Charlemagne has gained such a reputation throughout the centuries thus prove to be the same as in the case of Kamehameha I, also called 'the Great.' By analogy, we are thus in an ideal situation studying formation of the myth of Charlemagne by way of analyzing how the myth of the Hawaiian king came about, developed, and spread all over the islands. Most importantly, the myth of Kamehameha I is a living one, being supported and promoted today, bringing together, more or less at least, the entire population of the state of Hawai'i which appears to recognize in him a figure of identification. Little wonder then, that the myth of Charlemagne also continues to function very well all over Europe until the present. Both the mechanisms and strategies making the development and spreading of that royal myth prove to be strikingly similar, although neither myth was related with or predicated on the other.

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/28944> (last accessed on Dec. 28, 2015).