

The Reinstatement of Emperor Louis the Pious at St. Denis (1st of March 834) and Its Repetition at Metz (28th of February 835)

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[trans. by Katharina Friege and Courtney Booker, from Ludger Rid, “Die Wiedereinsetzung Kaiser Ludwigs des Frommen zu St. Denis (1. März 834) und ihre Wiederholung zu Metz (28. Februar 835),” in Heinrich M. Gietl, Georg Pfeilschifter, eds., *Festgabe Alois Knöpfler zur Vollendung des 70. Lebensjahres* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1917), 265–75.]

One of the most troubling phenomena in history is that Charlemagne’s successor, Louis the Pious, lacked precisely those virtues of leadership by which [his father’s] great work had been created: determination of action and long-term vision in choosing the realm’s leaders. It was just this deficiency that gave rise to numerous humiliations for Charlemagne’s heir, as well as to numerous disputes in the realm and the fragmentation of the newly formed unity.

Emperor Louis the Pious had established an order of succession for the security of the realm at the imperial council of Aachen in 817.¹ However, it was overturned only six years later when Charles the Bald was born to him. When the eldest son, Lothar, had to renounce a part of his landed property for the benefit of the recently born child, conflict broke out in the imperial family. While Lothar’s indignation was set aside by his subjugation at Nijmegen (830), a new territorial division favoring Charles at the expense of Pippin’s properties reawakened the dissatisfaction of the older sons and their followers. This eventually led to an open revolt against the old emperor, in order to secure the earlier inheritance claims with armed violence.

The armies of the father and sons met on the Rotfeld near Colmar (June 833), where most of the emperor’s troops switched allegiance to the sons. In the end, the emperor had

¹ See Simson, *Jahrbücher des Fränkischen Reiches unter Ludwig dem Frommen* I (Leipzig 1874) 100 ff., and II 1 ff.

no choice but to surrender to his sons' mercy. Thus, the purpose of mutual elevation had been served, and the control of the state passed from the emperor's hands into Lothar's without battle or bloodshed. The latter showed himself in all his imperial splendor for the first time at the imperial council of Compiègne (which opened on the 1st of October 833). In order to curb the already emerging dissatisfaction with the new reign, Lothar's followers felt it was prudent to formally depose the old emperor immediately. Keeping in mind the principle of canon law that those who have performed public ecclesiastical penance should never again be allowed to bear arms,² they wanted to induce Louis to do penance, and thereby prevent him from ever regaining power. Initially a delegation of bishops at the imperial assembly, and then all the bishops who were present, sought to induce the emperor to do penance in view of all he had done to offend God, scandalize the Church, and undermine the peace and quiet of his people. Eventually, he agreed, performed a penance at the church of the monastery of Saint-Médard in Soissons, and thereby lost the right to carry arms. Lothar alone was emperor.

Their father's humiliation filled the two younger sons' hearts with shame and remorse. Lothar's unilateral action caused the two brothers [Louis the German and Pippin] to fear for the loss of their newly acquired properties, and so a reversal soon took place. Louis (the German) sought, by amicable means, to bring about a milder treatment of their father. When this failed, he called on Pippin to assist him in freeing the prisoner through force. While Pippin was approaching with the Aquitanians and Neustrians, the Germanic tribes gathered around Louis. The two brothers marched swiftly towards Aachen, where under these new circumstances Lothar no longer felt safe. He hastened to Paris, where he had sent his loyal followers, and at Saint-Denis delivered his father into the custody of his trusted ally, Abbot Hilduin. He rejected with mockery a demand for the peaceful surrender of the emperor. However, when Louis approached shortly thereafter with a massive armed

² See Simson, *loc. cit.*, II 73 n. 4.

force, Lothar feared of being surrounded, and retreated to Burgundy on the 28th of February.

I.

Now that the old emperor had been liberated, his entourage immediately demanded that he put the emblems of his imperial dignity back on.³ But the emperor harbored doubts about such a rushed reinstatement of his dignity; he first wanted to be readmitted into communion with the Church.⁴ This happened the day after Lothar's escape – it was a Sunday – as the *Vita Hludovici* reports.⁵ However, since the *Annales Bertiniani* date Lothar's flight to the 28th of February,⁶ the ceremony took place on Reminiscere Sunday (March 1st). Seeing as all sources⁷ report an immediate reinstatement, the Fulda annals, which only place it in the following summer, are incorrect.⁸

The emperor was reconciled in front of the altar erected at the *confessio* of the holy Dionysus⁹ in the abbey church of Saint-Denis.¹⁰ Several sources report the presence of

³ *Vita Hludovici* c. 51, in M. G. SS. II 638: “At vero hii, qui cum imperatore remanserant, eum ad recipiendas imperatorias ortabantur infulas.”

⁴ *V. Hludov.* c. 51, *loc. cit.* 638: “Sed imperator, quamquam modo quo praedictum est ecclesiae eliminatus communione, nequaquam tamen praeproperae voluit acquiescere sententiae”; Simson (*loc. cit.* II 90 n. 2) here makes the following remark: “instead of *quamquam*, one would actually expect a different conjunction here.” However, precisely this manner of expression indicates to me that the emperor's deposition through a forced ecclesiastical penance was recognized at the time as unjust, as Ebo of Reims later publicly declared.

⁵ *Loc. cit.* 638: “Sed dominica, quae in crastinum advenit.”

⁶ “Hlotharius ... primo Calendarum Martiarum die cum suis aufugit.” *Annales Bertiniani*, ed. G. Waitz in SS. Rer. Germ. in usum scholarum (1883) 8.

⁷ Nithard, *Historiarum libri quattuor*, ed. G. H. Pertz I 4 in SS. Rer. Germ. in usum scholarum ² (1870) 6. *Ann. Bert.*, *loc. cit.* 8.

⁸ *Fuld. Ann.*, Scr. I 360.

⁹ Louis' announcement to Hilduin, M. G. Ep. VI 326 Nr. 19: “ante sepulchrum domni Dionysii.”

¹⁰ *Ann. Bert.*, *loc. cit.* 8: “et in ecclesia sancti Dionisii domnum imperatorem reconciliaverunt.”

bishops.¹¹ Given the rapid succession of events, only the presence of the Bishop of Paris, who could be rushed to the scene because of the short distance, and the Bishop of Soissons, whom the emperor soon thereafter gave an important commission, can be ascertained.¹² After being accepted back into the Church, the emperor received his armor¹³ and royal garments¹⁴ from the hands of the bishops. Nithard alone reports that Louis also received the crown.¹⁵

Thus, the penitent was restored to his old dignity through reconciliation with the Church, and he made full use of his rights.¹⁶

It is therefore all the more surprising that the reconciliation and coronation of Louis was repeated on the 28th of February 835, almost exactly one year later.

After the emperor had celebrated Christmas festivities in 834 with his half-brother Drogo in Metz, he called for an imperial council at Thionville to take place on Candlemas (2nd of February 835).¹⁷ Following a discussion of ecclesiastical grievances, the reinstatement of the emperor was solemnly acknowledged through a unanimous decision, and, just as for the earlier deposition, a double report was drafted. Each bishop individually confirmed with their signature the injustice and invalidity of the earlier deposition. All the bishops also

¹¹ Nithard, *loc. cit.* 8: "... venerunt episcopi, qui praesentes erant et in ecclesia sancti Dionysii domnum imperatorem reconciliaverunt." *Coron. Caroli C.* (M. G. Capitularia II 340): "unanimitate episcoporum et fidelis populi ... ecclesiae sanctae est redditus." *Ep. Carol. C. ad Nicolaum Papam*, in Bouquet, *Rerum Gallicarum SS.* VII 557: "Quem (pium imperatorem) in monasterio beatissimorum martyrum Dionysii, Rustini et Eleutherii a custodia reducentes archiepiscopi et episcopi, ut dignum erat." *Conc. Tric. Ep.* (Mansi XV 792): "... qui affuerunt episcopi, imperatorem in ecclesia Sancti Dionysii reconciliaverunt et ecclesiasticae communioni restituerunt."

¹² See below, p. 7 f.

¹³ *V. Hludov.*, *loc. cit.* 638: "et per manus episcoporum armis consensit accingi." Announcement of Louis to Hilduin, *loc. cit.* "cingulumque militare iudicio atque auctoritate Episcopali resumpsimus." *Annal. Bert.*, *loc. cit.* 8: "armisque induerunt."

¹⁴ *Ann. Bert.*, *loc. cit.*: "regalibus vestibus ... induerunt."

¹⁵ Nithard, *Histor. 4 libri*, *loc. cit.* 6: "coronam et arma regi suo imponunt."

¹⁶ See Böhmer-Mühlbacher, *Regesta imperii* I² Nr. 926v, 927, 928, 929, 930, 930b, etc.

¹⁷ Böhmer-Mühlbacher I² 938a.

signed a document in which the entirety of the negotiations at Thionville were described in detail.¹⁸

After this legal affirmation on the part of the entire episcopate, most of which had demanded Louis' deposition in 833, the emperor went to Metz on the following Sunday (28th of February) with the bishops, a large crowd of people, and numerous nobles.¹⁹ Louis' biographer reports²⁰ that during the Holy Mass in the cathedral of Saint-Stephen²¹ seven archbishops sang the seven orations of reconciliation²² over the emperor, after which, according to the annalist,²³ they placed the crown on Louis' head with their own hands. The people thanked God for the complete reinstatement of the emperor.²⁴

To clarify the question of why Louis' readmission into the Church and the consequent restoration of his imperial dignity, which occurred on the 1st of March 834 in Saint-Denis, had to be repeated on the 28th of February 835 in Metz, we must now examine separately two factors – reconciliation and restitution.

II.

The most obvious solution to the question of a double reconciliation is to be found in the explanation that the first was considered invalid because it was not performed by

¹⁸ Simson, *loc. cit.* II 126–128.

¹⁹ See Böhmer-Mühlbacher I² 938b.

²⁰ *V. Hludov.* c. 54, *loc. cit.* 640.

²¹ *Ann. Bert.*, *loc. cit.* 10: “in basilica beati Stephani.”

²² See Morinus, *Commentarius historicus de disciplina in administratione sacramenti poenitentiae*. App. 67 ff. (Paris 1651).

²³ *Loc. cit.* 10: “missarumque celebratione peracta coronam, insigne imperii, a sacrosancto altario sublevatam sacri ac venerandi antistites eius capiti cum maximo omnium gaudio propriis manibus restituerunt.” Regarding this, see Böhmer-Mühlbacher I² 938b.

²⁴ *V. Hludov.*, *loc. cit.* 640: “atque omnes populi hoc viso pro plenaria restitutione imperatoris multas Deo gratias reddiderunt.”

those with the requisite legal authority. Buchner argues²⁵ that the forgery according to which Pope Stephen II had left the papal pallium and keys in the church of Saint-Denis in 754²⁶ was created on precisely this occasion. Supposedly Abbot Hilduin, who had the greatest interest in regaining the emperor's favor, had claimed authority for himself to undertake the act of reconciliation based on the alleged papal authority given to the monastery of Saint-Denis. One of the justifications Buchner offers in support of his argument is the chronological course of events: Lothar fled on the 28th of February, and on the 1st of March Louis was already placed back in power. Only a small part of the Frankish episcopate could have been present at this overly hasty reinstatement, and yet, according to Buchner, technically only the fully represented episcopate had the authority to carry out Louis' reinstatement, seeing as the same had imposed ecclesiastical penance on Louis the previous year.²⁷

Be that as it may, the validity of the first reconciliation at Saint-Denis does not seem to have been challenged. For one, all sources report that a portion – albeit a small one – of the bishops were present.²⁸ Moreover, the presence of the entire episcopate was by no means necessary for Louis' reconciliation with the Church, since no synod or council had formally imposed the penance.²⁹ The emperor had undertaken public penance in order to

²⁵ Buchner, "Grundlagen der Beziehungen zwischen Landeskirche und Thronfolge im Mittelalter," in: *Festschrift Georg von Hertling zum 70. Geburtstag dargebracht von der Görresgesellschaft* (Kempten-München 1913) 238. I would also like to kindly thank the author at this point for the suggestions regarding this line of inquiry.

²⁶ M. G. SS. XV 3. Buchner intends to publish a comprehensive work on this subject soon.

²⁷ Buchner, *loc. cit.* 239.

²⁸ See above, p. 4 n. II.

²⁹ The bishops' activity consisted merely of persuading the emperor to look after his own salvation after he was relieved of his right to rule; there is no mention of the ecclesiastical penance being a formal demand. *Episcoporum de poenitentia quam Hludovicus imperator professus est, relatio compendiensis* (M. G. Capitul. II 51 ff. no. 197): "nos ... dignum duximus ut ... legationem ... mitteremus, quae cum de suis reatibus admoneat, quatenus certum consilium suae salutis caperet ..."; see also Agobard, *Cartula de poenitentia ab imperatore acta* (M. G. Capit. II 56 f. no. 198): "conventus deliberavit, ut per legatos et missos ammoneretur dominus Hludovicus de suis erratibus et exhortaretur" ... "Pro qua re accesserunt ad eum denuo omnes, qui in praedicto conventu aderant, episcopi ... exhortantes, atque exoptantes et postulantes ..."

avoid excommunication.³⁰ For this reason, it was determined that the bishop, in whose diocese the penitent had done his penance, and to which the penitent belonged, had the authority to give him absolution.³¹ At the time of the dissolution of the penance, the emperor was in the diocese of the Bishop of Paris, who was easily able to rush the short distance from the abbey of Paris to the church service on the following day. When we then read that after his reconciliation the emperor commissioned the Bishop of Soissons (along with the Bishop of Paris) to bring Ebo, the archbishop of Reims, from the hiding place to which he had fled after Louis' release,³² we may well assume Ebo's presence on the memorable 1st of March in Saint-Denis. Louis had done penance in precisely Ebo's diocese, that of Saint-Médard. Based on the small number of bishops present, we can assume that the reconciliation of 834 took place with less pomp and ceremony than the second one in 835; however, that did not impair its legal validity.

The fact that the emperor himself, who from his youth had always been deeply religious³³ and wished to observe ecclesiastical regulations, had no doubt about his reconciliation's legitimacy is supported by the ample evidence provided by his acts as ruler in the years 834/35. He committed to the Easter festivities with all the usual devotion,³⁴ even though attending Mass and receiving the sacrament were only open to him after his reconciliation.³⁵ He founded a bishopric in Hamburg,³⁶ called for a gathering of the army in August, and summoned a state assembly in November,³⁷ all acts of government which he

³⁰ On the "forced penance" undertaken by the penitent in order to avoid excommunication, see Hinschius, *Kirchenrecht* V (1895) 85–100.

³¹ Frank, Fr., *Die Bußdisziplin der Kirche von den Apostelzeiten bis zum 7. Jahrhundert* (Mainz 1867) 755.

³² *Ep. Conc. Tric.* (Mansi XV 792): "per Rothadum coepiscopum et per Escanraum, in cujus ecclesia latitabat ... eum (Ebonem) ad se imperator sub custodia deduci praecepit."

³³ Simson, *loc. cit.* I 37 f.

³⁴ Böhmer-Mühlbacher I ² 926u and V. *Hlud.*, *loc. cit.* 652.

³⁵ Hinschius, *loc. cit.* V 96 and Kober, *Der Kirchenbann* (Tübingen 1857) 288. Morinus, *loc. cit.* lib. X c. XI n. 6.

³⁶ Böhmer-Mühlbacher I ² 928.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 930b; 930g.

was authorized to execute only through the reconciliation and consequent full possession of his rights as ruler.

Finally, however, the episcopacy and the rest of the nobility also recognized the emperor's reinstatement into the Church, as is testified by their acceptance of his gifts and their acquiescence to his summons for general assemblies of the realm.

For the reasons outlined above, we cannot doubt the legitimacy of the first reconciliation in the year 834.

III.

The reinstatement, or restoration, of the emperor's terrestrial dignity immediately followed his reconciliation with the Church in Saint-Denis. Sources unanimously inform us of the girding of the weapons³⁸ and the donning of the royal garb.³⁹ The first ceremony indicated the transfer of royal power,⁴⁰ the latter readmission into the congregation from the class of penitents.

Had the full restoration of the emperor's rights thus been completed? Considering what the sources report, we can respond to this question with a clear affirmative. The girding of the sword, which was a telling symbol of royal power, is especially emphasized by Louis' chroniclers. The same is true of the donning of the royal garb. The fact that only one source⁴¹ reports a coronation ought not surprise us, for the crown was not originally known as a symbol of royal dignity.⁴² The coronation was never part of creating a king, but was rather a declaration that the chosen one should be king.⁴³ However, the ability to reclaim

³⁸ See p. 4 n. 13.

³⁹ See p. 4 n. 14.

⁴⁰ Schreuer, *Die rechtlichen Grundgedanken der französischen Königskrönung* (Weimar 1911) 115 ff.

⁴¹ Nithard, *loc. cit.* 6.

⁴² Waitz, *Deutsche Verfassungsgeschichte* II 2 (3rd edition), 174 f.

⁴³ Schreuer, *loc. cit.* 68.

public office was also declared in the moment of the girding of the sword. Therefore, even though we cannot assume that a coronation occurred, given the lack of its explicit mention in other sources, the legitimacy of the restoration in the year 834 cannot be doubted.

When we then read of a grand coronation with the imperial crown in the year 835,⁴⁴ it is easy to assume that Louis was here restored to his imperial dignity, while the restitution in the year 834 had merely concerned the royal office. However, the fact that Louis again designated himself *imperator* after March 1st, 834,⁴⁵ as well as the fact that being emperor was considered an addition to, or, as it were, an exponentiation of, Frankish kingship, and that imperial power was not thought of as separate from royal power, both speak against this assumption. “The royal rights had become imperial rights.”⁴⁶

If we thus assume that the restitution of full power to the emperor as well as his legal reconciliation already took place in the year 834, then the reason for their repetition can only lie in the demands of the emperor himself. In undertaking the public ecclesiastical penance, which was induced – not to say forced⁴⁷ – at the repeated insistence of the entire episcopate, he humbled himself before the potentates of the realm and its people. The emperor correctly realized that his rebellious sons would not have been able to advance so far without having the leading figures of the episcopate on their side. In the aftermath of Lothar’s punishment, the emperor wanted satisfaction for the – in his eyes – serious damage that had been done to his imperial reputation, including the humiliation of those same church dignitaries who had sealed his deposition on the “Field of Lies” (833) through the

⁴⁴ See p. 5.

⁴⁵ Böhmer-Mühlbacher, *loc. cit.* no. 927.

⁴⁶ Brunner, *Deutsche Rechtsgeschichte* II (Leipzig 1892) 94. See Waitz, *loc. cit.* III² (Kiel 1883) 249 f.: “It is, however, not quite clear, when the crown began to be used in this way (crown as insignia of power) and whether the imperial coronation may have exercised special influence in some manner. Later, no specific distinction is made between the royal and the imperial crown.” In reference to the coronation of the year 835, Waitz explains, “there is no intended differentiation from a royal coronation” (p. 250 n. 2).

⁴⁷ See L. Halphen, “La pénitence de Louis le Pieux à St Médard de Soissons,” in *Bibliothèque de la faculté des lettres (de l’université de Paris)* XVIII (1904) 172 ff.

penance at Saint-Médard. The emperor's thinking in this regard had been expressed quite distinctly in the same uncharacteristic, immediate sharpness with which he acted against Ebo of Reims, his main opponent,⁴⁸ from the moment of his reconciliation.⁴⁹ As soon as he heard of Ebo's flight and learned of his hiding place, the emperor had him seized and held in custody in the monastery of Fulda. Ebo wished to soothe the emperor's wrath and restore his good favor, since he knew of the ruler's irritation with him. He wished to do so by publicly repeating in an oral declaration what he had already set down in writing, namely that the whole process against the emperor had occurred in opposition to justice and equity.⁵⁰ But even this humiliating confession was not sufficient for the emperor. Since Ebo had directed the ecclesiastical penance at Saint-Médard, he was to atone for this day with his removal from office; the emperor did not rest until Ebo voluntarily renounced his bishopric on the 4th of March.

In early February 835, Louis mainly used the realm's general assembly, held in Thionville and attended by almost all the bishops,⁵¹ to revive his prestige among the people through the public declarations of leading men, in particular church dignitaries. The purpose of the conference, in addition to the establishment of ecclesiastical discipline,⁵² was the discussion of the events of the last few years: the events by which "the pious emperor had been unjustly deprived of his realm and throne he had inherited from his father, as well as stripped of the royal name, through the faithlessness of malevolent actors and enemies of God."⁵³ And we clearly recognize, in the way the decision resulting from these discussions

⁴⁸ Simson, *loc. cit.* 75.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 131 ff.

⁵⁰ *Ann. Bert., loc. cit.* 12: ... "Sed et Ebo Remorum pridem archiepiscopus ... coram omnibus libera voce professus est, eundem augustum iniuste depositum, et omnia quae adversus eum patrata fuerant inique et contra totius tramitem aequitatis fuisse machinata ..."

⁵¹ Hincmar, *De praedestinatione* c. 36 (Migne 125, 390).

⁵² *Ann. Bert., loc. cit.* 11: "inter cetera ecclesiasticae instituta disciplinae."

⁵³ "... ventilatum est, quod annis prioribus idem religiosissimus imperator malivolorum Deoque adversantium tergiversatione immerito depositus paterno hereditarioque regno et honore et regio nomine fuerat."

was recorded, that those bishops who had been involved in 833 were being reprimanded. “When, through God’s help, the intrigue of those men was made shameful, and the emperor was restored to his paternal glory, and rightfully and justly clothed in royal dignity, all were required to honor him as their lord and emperor with the most faithful and unconditional obedience and submission.”⁵⁴ This statement – just like the earlier process in Soissons – had to be recorded twice. Every single participant at the assembly had to sign the above statement with their own hand.⁵⁵ At the same time, a more complete and detailed record of the assembly also was composed in a collective effort.⁵⁶ Within it, the whole course of the matter was examined – how it was negotiated, investigated, decided, and finally, with all due declarations and signatures, how the decision was ceremoniously confirmed.

If the emperor had been justified by his noblemen through this declaration, it is the annalist who tells us what the emperor’s next intention was: “They (the report’s signatories) did not hesitate to bring their most sincere and devoted sentiments, their decisions worthy of their high position and prestige, to the people’s notice.”⁵⁷ Now Louis wanted to be reinstated with his ecclesiastical and regal rights, with all formality and in front of the entire populace, and by those same figures who in 833 at Soissons had caused him to do penance, and thus to lose his right as ruler before his people. If the bishops, after having reconciled the emperor in the most dignified of ecclesiastical ceremonies, now also performed his coronation in the company of various noblemen of the realm, then it must have left a deep impression on the populace. The people would had to have clearly recognized the imperial

⁵⁴ *Ann. Bert., loc. cit.* 10: “inventum atque firmatum est, ut, illorum factionibus divino auxilio cassatis, ipse avito restitutus honori decorique regio merito reformatus, deinceps fidelissima firmissimaque oboedientia et subiectione imperator et dominus ab omnibus haberetur.”

⁵⁵ *Ann. Bert., loc. cit.* 10: “Quam inventionis suaeque confirmationis seriem et unusquisque proprio scripto comprehendit propriaeque manus scriptione roboravit.”

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*: “Et plenius atque copiosius communi cunctorum descriptione in unum corpus in modum libelli comprehensa totius rei patratio, qualiter acta, ventilata, inventa et omnium subscriptione denuo digneque fuerit roborata, devotissima sincerissimaque benivolentia et tantis patribus auctoritate dignissima cunctorum notitiae manifestissimum facere non distulerunt.”

⁵⁷ See p. 11 at the end of n. 56.

dignity through the acknowledgement of the episcopate. However, since everything that happened in Metz was only done at the request of the emperor for the sake of public satisfaction for the events at Saint-Médard, his biographer could speak of a “*plenaria restitutio*.”⁵⁸ The reconciliation and coronation at Metz were merely the formal public expression of what had materially already taken place in the presence of a small circle at Saint-Denis: the reconciliation and reinstatement of Louis the Pious. Only from this moment onwards was the emperor fully restored to the old splendor of his dignity before the entirety of the people, who met the occasion with joyous cheering⁵⁹ and by giving thanks to God.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *V. Hludovici, loc. cit.* 640.

⁵⁹ *Ann. Bert., loc. cit.* 10: maximo omnium gaudio.

⁶⁰ “omnes populi ... multas Deo gratias reddiderunt.”