

817: A Disastrous and Almost Fatal Year for the Carolingians

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The sources that are available today for knowing about the history of the Carolingian empire during the first years of the reign of Louis the Pious are disappointingly laconic. It is often only through innuendo that they tell us about the difficulties which the new emperor faced during the period that followed his accession to the throne.¹ It seems obvious that diplomats of this time had, at the very least, to be careful,² since the confirmation of Louis’s imperial title by the pope in October 816³ and the rebellion of his nephew, king Bernard in Italy, exactly one year later⁴, reveal the obvious although ambiguous reality of an opposition towards the new monarch and the policy he was pursuing in his kingdom.

How important was this opposition? In what extreme forms did it manifest itself?

These questions remain hidden to a large extent; but our sources provide information which, though hypothetical, suggests certain interesting views of the events of 817, which was a crucial year.

The most important fact of that year was probably the promulgation in July of what has been called the *Ordinatio Imperii*, the document by which Louis tried to settle his succession and ensure

¹ In this article, the following abbreviations are used without any further specification: A.R.F. = *Annales regni Francorum*, ed. R. RAU, *Quellen zur Karolingischen Reichsgeschichte*, I, Darmstadt, 1955, 10–155; Ast. = V.H.J. = *Anonymi vita Hludowici imperatoris*, *ibid.*, p. 258–381; B.M.L. = J.F. BOHMER et al., *Die Regesten des Kaiserreichs unter den Karolingern 751–918*, Innsbruck, 1908; M.G.H. Cap. = *Monumenta Germaniae historica. Capitularia regum Francorum*.

² A cursory examination of the passages in the A.R.F. presents sufficient evidence of this situation.

³ A.R.F. year 816, p. 110. The date is controversial; see on this topic SIMSON, *Ludwig dem Fromme*, t. I, Munich, 1874, 71 and note 10. More generally, see W. MOHR, Reichspolitik und Kaiserkrönung in den Jahren 813 und 816, *Die Welt als Geschichte*, t. 20, 1960, p. 168–186.

⁴ On Bernard, see B. MALFATTI, *Bernardo, re d'Italia*, Florence, 1876; E. MÜHLBACHER, Zur Geschichte König Bernards von Italiën, *Mitteilungen des Instit. für Oesterreich. Geschichtsforschung*, t. II, 1881, p. 296–302; *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, t. IX, Rome, 1967, p. 228–231.

the continuity of the imperial structure.⁵ As far as this last aspect is concerned, the emperor broke with tradition in a decisive and meaningful manner. By contrast, if one considers the first point – the appointment of certain spheres of authority to his descendants – Louis, as he himself points out, followed the practice of his Carolingian predecessors who, wishing to avoid the constant possibility of civil wars, had made their intentions known during their lifetime on how to dispose of the Frankish kingdom. However, Charles Martel and Pepin the Short had only done this on their death bed,⁶ whereas the *Divisio regnorum* of Charlemagne was only promulgated when the emperor, who was in poor health, was sixty-four years old.⁷ On the contrary, in 817, Louis was a healthy man in his thirties⁸, with a fully active life.

The exigencies of Louis's imperial diplomacy can account, to a large extent, for this apparent anticipation, because the *Ordinatio* is, in many ways, an attempt to present the imperial project as a family settlement of the succession, as far as this succession itself is concerned.⁹ But it is not only in this matter that the intervention of Louis appears premature; an aura of premonition seems to surround this document. This is strikingly evident in chapters thirteen and sixteen, which consider the possibility of the emperor's death before his sons would attain their majority.¹⁰ In 817, Louis the German, the youngest son of Louis and Ermengarde, was ten or eleven¹¹; it is hard to believe that Louis the Pious was foreseeing his own death within five years. Might it be that he spoke here in a figurative sense, with reference to the possibility that he had to renounce the throne in order to

⁵ M.G.H. Cap. I, no. 136, p. 270-273. See F.L. GANSHOF, Some observations on the "Ordinatio Imperii" of 817, in *The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy*, Ithaca, New-York, 1971, p. 273-288 and the literature cited by this author.

⁶ B.M.L., nos. 42a, 106c.

⁷ M.G.H. Cap. I, no. 45, p. 126-130 of Feb. 6, 806.

⁸ He was born in 778; B.M.L., no. 515 sq.

⁹ Cf. the article of GANSHOF cited above at note 5.

¹⁰ See *Ordinatio Imperii*, c. 13, M.G.H. Cap. t. I, p. 272: "Volumus etiam ut, si alicui illorum (the sons of the emperor, previously named) "post decessum nostrum tempus nubendi venerit, ut cum consilio et consensus senioris fratris (Lothair) uxorem ducat...;" cf. c. 16, p. 273: "Si vero alicui illorum contigerit, nobis decedentibus, ad annos legitimos iuxta Ribuariam legem nondum pervenisse...;" probably fifteen years. Cf. *Lex Ribuarica*, 84 (81), in M.G.H. *Legum*, sec. I, t. III, pars 2 (p. 130).

¹¹ He died around the age of 70 on August 28, 876. *Annales Bertiniani*, ed. F. GRAT *et al.*, Paris, 1964, p. 206. He is called "juvenis" in 818, B.M.L., no. 1338b, and "puer" around 826. Ermoldus NIGELLUS, *Poème sur Louis le Pieux*, ed. E. FARAL, Paris, 1932, IV, v. 2010.

embrace the monastic state? Indeed, it is well known that he considered this state to be preferable to his imperial burden.¹² It is certainly possible. But the emperor speaks about death in a very specific way. Consequently, were there factual reasons for him to accept the imminence of such a possibility, and if so, what could their nature have been?

In 817, the royal family was reunited at the palace of Aix-la-Chapelle to celebrate Easter. On Holy Thursday, April 9, Louis and his entourage were about to cross the colonnade, which joined the palace to the chapel where the divine office was to take place. Suddenly, a part of the wooden portico fell, dragging down with it the entire portico, which shattered on the ground. The emperor escaped from the accident with a few minor injuries, which were healed, as reported, within three weeks. However, others were less fortunate; about twenty of his companions were seriously injured.¹³

It is clear that such a serious accident could very well prompt the emperor and his companions to take immediate actions for the future of an insecure empire, which they were hoping to establish on firmer ground. We know that immediately after his healing, Louis stayed at Nijmegen to hunt¹⁴; apart from that, nothing more is known about his activities before the assembly, which took place at Aix in July.¹⁵

Although Louis was known as an avid hunter¹⁶, it was unusual for him to hunt during the spring¹⁷, while the Ardennes and Vosges were, by far, his favorite hunting grounds.¹⁸ Nijmegen, on the other hand, was located in a less wild region, in a territory that offered Louis greater security, and where he could stay during this crucial period in which he and his counselors could safely prepare the

¹² On Louis's desire to enter the cloister, see Ast, V.H.I., c. 19, p. 284 and also c. 32, p. 308.

¹³ A.R.F., p. 112; Ast. V.H.I., c. 28, p. 300.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ B.M.L., nos. 645a-648.

¹⁶ These biographies frequently refer to this taste. According to the sources, Louis hunted at least eighteen times between 817 and 839.

¹⁷ Spring hunts are only mentioned five times: B.M.L., nos. 645a, 794b, 926w, 928a, 962b.

¹⁸ Sixteen of the eighteen cited hunts took place in these regions; see B.M.L., nos. 656a, 701d, 740c, 762b, 782b, 797a, 872a, 894a, 926w, 928a, 945a, 962b, 963b, 982c, 995b, 997b.

text of the *Ordinatio*.¹⁹ In other words, are there not a few reasons to see in the tragedy of April 9 the possibility of a plot, rather than a simple accident?

None of the sources which report the event - the Royal Frankish Annals and the anonymous biography conventionally credited to the "Astronomer"²⁰ - gives explicit information which would allow one to believe that the accident was not fortuitous; but on the other hand, these two sources include certain specific aspects about the facts. The reader is therefore informed in great detail about the cause of the portico's collapse; worm-eaten materials that were of poor quality were used for the crosspieces, and the wood employed for the construction of the colonnades had been exposed to humidity and became rotten over time.²¹ Such detailed information about the natural causes of the accident, and how lucky Louis had been to escape from it, certainly serve to divert attention from another possibility: that the accident should be considered as a manifestation of divine wrath. Indeed, it serves to underscore that it was nothing but an accident.

And yet, it appears strange that material of such low quality was used at Aix, and even more strange that the age of the material was the cause of the accident, when the palace and the chapel had been built less than thirty years earlier, and the colonnade maybe a little less than four years earlier.²²

Other distinctive features appeared that emphasized differences between the two accounts. The version provided by the Royal Frankish Annals - which was nearly contemporary with the

¹⁹ This region was very close to Frisia and Saxony, countries in favor of Louis; see Ast. V.H.I., c. 24, p. 294.

²⁰ For a recent discussion of the author of the A.R.F. during this period, see L. MALBOS, *L'annaliste royal sous Louis le Pieux, Le Moyen Age*, t. 72, 1966, pp. 225-233. On the Astronomer, see W. NICKEL, *Untersuchungen über die Quellen, den Wert und den Verfasser der Vita Hludowici des Astronomus*, Berlin (Dissert.), 1919; M. BUCHNER, *Entstehungszeit und Verfasser der Vita Hludowici des Astronomen, Historisches Jahrbuch*, t. 60, 1940, pp. 14-15.

²¹ A.R.F., anno 817: "...cum et fragili materia esset aedificata et tunc iam marcida et putrefacta...", p. 112; Ast. V.H.I., c. 28: "...carie senioque confecta et humectatione continua putrefacta...", p. 300.

²² The construction of the palace began in 794/795; W. BRAUNFELS, *Die Welt der Karolinger und ihre Kunst*, Munich, 1968, p. 125. Eginhard informs us that the original passage in stone between the palace and the church collapsed during the last years of Charlemagne's life, *Vita Karoli Magni*, c. 32, ed. RAU (see note 1 above). GANSHOF, in his article "Eginhard, biographe de Charlemagne," places the event in 813 (*The Carolingians and the Frankish Monarchy*, p. 137, note 42). See a detailed map of the palace and a model of the complex in Braunfels, *op. cit.*, p. 129 and plates 133 and 134 on p. 238.

events – is the least easy to envision; the analyst reports that it was the top of the colonnade which gave way; it fell on the one below and dragged him down to the ground.²³ For this part of the reign of Louis, his anonymous biographer chiefly depends on the royal Annals,²⁴ and yet, according to his interpretation, it was not the roof but the lower part of the construction that collapsed, because it was old, ruined, and worm-eaten due to the humidity.²⁵ Perhaps the Astronomer relies here on another source²⁶; or perhaps he wanted to make the history look more dramatic and have it comply with the injuries that Louis received?²⁷ What is important to note is that, once again, the sources give different versions, and that the accident – if it was an accident – is described in a very imperfect manner.

During these first years of Louis's reign, the Frankish court was a nest of intrigue; the timid emperor tried to avoid the threats he perceived by eliminating possible conspirators, including his half brothers and cousins Adalard and Wala.²⁸ The assassination of the emperor and his family was among the rumors going around in the palace circles; it is precisely this intention that certain sources attribute to Bernard, the rebel king of Italy.²⁹

Did other people try to realize such a plan? If so, no more favorable opportunity could be found than during Holy Week, when one was almost completely sure that the entire royal family – or

²³ A.R.F., anno 817: “[...] lignea porticus... quae contignationem et tabulatum sustinebant, transtra pondus aliquod ferre non possent, incedentem desuper imperatorem subita ruina cum viginti et eo amplius hominibus, qui una ibant, ad terram usque deposuit...” p. 112.

²⁴ This is true for the period 821-829, chap. 21-43.

²⁵ Ast. V.H.I., c. 28: “[...] porticus lignea per quam redeundum erat... fatiscentibus inferioribus, sub pedibus imperatoris comitumque illius conlapsa...” p. 300.

²⁶ He was present at the court at least since the year 837. Ast. V.H.I., c. 58, p. 364. Cf. the related remarks regarding his sources, in the prologue, p. 260.

²⁷ Cf. A.R.F., anno 817: [Louis didn't suffer any injuries] “praeter quod capulo gladii, quo accinctus erat, imi pectoris pars sinistra contusa est et auris dextra in parte posteriore vulnerata, femur quoque dextrum cuiusdam ligni pondere iuxta inguina conlissum...” p. 112. Compare with the Ast. V.H.I.: “[...] pectoris locum cui inlissus est capulus ensis, ultimaque auris paululum cute expoliata; sed et crus illius iuxta inguina cuidam ligno inlissum, cui tamen citissime est subventum » p. 300.

²⁸ L. WEINRICH, Wala. Graf, Mönch und Rebell. Die Biographie eines Karolingers, *Historische Studien*, 386 (1963), pp. 28 sq.

²⁹ See A.R.F., anno 821, p. 126.

most of its members – as well as Louis’s closest counselors would be present at Aix-la-Chapelle³⁰, and be reunited, at a specific time known in advance, in the same building: the chapel. In addition, one knew for certain when the procession would go out of the palace and return.

The historian cannot possess a comparable certainty. However, if the accident of April 9 were indeed part of a plot, the changes in Louis’s usual behavior, the long silence in the sources, the journey to the borders of loyal Frisia, and finally, the accent of urgency that can be sensed in the *Ordinatio Imperii*, become easier to explain.

Chicago

Peter R. MCKEON

University of Illinois.

³⁰ We can agree that the empress and the majority of the notables of the emperor’s court were there with him, and were among the nobles who accompanied him from the chapel. We do not know if, at that time, the imperial family was very close. Charlemagne, according to Eginhard, had extremely close contacts with his children. *Vita Karoli magni*, c. 19, in RAU, ed. p. 190. Even though, at that time, Lothair and Pepin resided regularly in Bavaria and Aquitaine respectively, Louis “puerilibus adhuc consistentem in annis” was staying near the emperor (Ast. V.H.I., c. 24, p. 294). Eginhard, counselor and protector of Lothair, was at Aix-la-Chapelle (*M.G.H. Epist.* IV, 114) at the same time as the three sons of the emperor, to sign a treaty with Pope Pascal, which was done some time between March and July 817 (*M.G.H. Cap.* I, 355). All three were certainly at Aix in June-July 817. See A.R.F., p. 112 and the text of the *Ordinatio imperii*.