

## The Penance of Louis the Pious at Saint-Médard de Soissons<sup>1</sup>

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The documents that inform us about Louis the Pious’ penance at Saint-Médard de Soissons in 833 are all tainted with partiality for or against the deposed emperor. Moreover, while his apologists, such as Thegan, the Astronomer, the Annalist of Saint-Bertin, quickly pass over this painful story or wander into fiery but vague diatribes,<sup>2</sup> Lothar’s partisans have left us, in the form of an official statement<sup>3</sup> [= *Relatio*] and an appended note written by Agobard,<sup>4</sup> two extremely detailed justificatory records.<sup>5</sup> This presents a double difficulty for the historian: to untangle the truth among assertions that are not only contradictory but equally suspect on both sides, and to avoid being led, by an imprudent desire for accuracy, to follow exclusively the official accounts.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from *Troisièmes Mélanges d’histoire du moyen âge* published under the direction of A. Luchaire (t. XVIII of the *Bibliothèque de la Faculté des Lettres de Paris*, Paris 1904, in-8°), p. 177–185. We have since then returned, in a no doubt more nuanced way, to the penance of Saint-Médard in our volume *Charlemagne et l’Empire carolingien*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1949, p. 292–295.

<sup>2</sup> It is especially true of Thegan, *Vita Hludowici*, XLIV (ed. Pertz, *Mon. Germ., Scriptores*, t. II, p. 599).

<sup>3</sup> Formerly designated with the inaccurate title of “Acta exauctorationis Ludovici imperatoris,” more appropriately called by the last editor: “Episcoporum de poenitentia, quam Hludowicus imperator professus est, relatio Compendiensis” (*Capitul. reg. Francorum*, ed. Boretius and Krause, t. II, p. 51–55).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56–57. “Placuit ut unusquisque episcoporum, qualiter haec res acta fuerit in propriis cartulis insereret eamque sua scriptione roboraret et roboratam memorato principi Lothario ob memoriam hujus facti offerret,” says the end of the official *Relatio*; of these annexed reports, we have nothing more than that by Agobard.

<sup>5</sup> This intention is formally expressed in the *Relatio*: “Oportet eosdem pastores, ut, quandocumque de generali utilitate vel publica coercitione quippiam in conventibus suis decreverint, id juxta morem ecclesiasticum scriptis committant, videlicet ut posteris omnem ambiguitatem et occasionem juste detrahendi vet reprehendendi penitus amputent” (*ibid.*, p. 52, l. 16–20). Agobard’s report, drawn up to corroborate the *Relatio* and to be delivered with this document to Lothar, was written in the same spirit.

<sup>6</sup> Some secondary information can still be found in a letter by Charles the Bald and a letter by the Fathers of the council of Troyes, both addressed to Pope Nicholas I in favor of Hincmar and against

It does not seem to us that this double difficulty has been, until now, completely overcome or that it even has always been clearly perceived.<sup>7</sup> So it may not be entirely useless to return briefly to the question: if the very nature of the documents does not allow us to uncover the truth in a very certain manner, we would at least like to show upon which uncertain facts the commonly accepted version [of the events] too often lies.

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It was at the assembly gathered at Compiègne on 1 October 833 that the preliminaries of the penance<sup>8</sup> took place: after having examined the “crimes” of the emperor, at that time stripped of power and imprisoned in the abbey of Saint-Médard de Soissons,<sup>9</sup> it was decided to send to him, under the direction of Ebbo, archbishop of Reims,<sup>10</sup> a delegation of bishops to exhort him to “think of the salvation of his soul.”<sup>11</sup>

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Ebbo (*Hist. de France*, t. VII, p. 557 and p. 589). We must add here, from the other side, the *Narratio clericorum Remensium*, a defense of Ebbo by the clerics of Reims (*ibid.*, p. 277). One does not find, on the other hand, any precise detail in Ebbo’s *Apologeticum*; and as for Flodoard’s account in his *Hist. de l’église de Reims*, it is copied from that of Thegan.

<sup>7</sup> See, among others, Himly, *Wala et Louis le Débonnaire* (1849), p. 173–176, and above all Simson, *Jahrbücher des fränkischen Reichs unter Ludwig dem Frommen*, t. II (1876), p. 63 and following. — P. Viollet, *Hist. des institutions politiques et adminstr. de la France*, t. I (1890), p. 277, appears to have sensed a certain exaggeration in the commonly accepted version; however, A. Kleinclausz, as much in his work on *L’Empire carolingien* (1902) as in the rapid account he inserted into p. 364 of *Hist. de France* by E. Lavisse, t. II, 1 (1903), follows the assertions of the official documents.

<sup>8</sup> Simson, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> *Ann. Bertin*: “Hlotharius arrepta potestate regia . . . patrem secum sub custodia per Mettis usque ad Suessionis civitatem perducens, illic eum in monasterio Sancti Medardi in eadem custodia reliquit” (ed. Waitz, p. 6). The *Relatio* clearly also says that Louis was already considered to be stripped of power: “Quia potestate privatus erat terrena” (*Capitul.*, t. II, p. 53, l. 7). See also Simson, *loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> See Simson, *ibid.*, p. 67. — Ebbo is indicated as the director (possibly a bit reluctantly) not only by Louis the Pious’ apologists, but even by his own defenders; see the *Narratio clericorum Remensium* in *Hist. de France*, t. VII, p. 277 D.

<sup>11</sup> “Dignum duximus ut, per licentiam memorati principis Lotharii, legationem ad illum ex auctoritate sacri conventus mitteremus, quae eum de suis reatibus admoneat, quatenus certum consilium suae

Louis (to believe them) had given without difficulty, *libenter*, his assent to what they counseled him, which is to say that he consented to do penance; but, at the same time, he asked for a brief respite and, moreover, himself decided the day when he would give them a reply.<sup>12</sup>

It is surprising that he was able to give his consent to the penance and at the same time postpone his response about this same issue until later. — He wants to commune with himself, it was said. — Yes, or rather it seems this is the idea that the *Relatio* wishes to suggest to the reader. Similarly Agobard, more deftly, is satisfied to tell us that the delegation came to bring Louis a document in which his “crimes” were recorded, and that his reading of it should incline him to repent.<sup>13</sup> If he had favorably welcomed the proposals that were made to him, would not Agobard have hastened to note it? And when we see the Annalist of Saint-Bertin maintain that Louis only ceded after his adversaries’ repeated efforts,<sup>14</sup> when we see Thegan, though exaggerating, claim that his hero gave a formal refusal to their demands,<sup>15</sup> are we not led to believe that the emperor, accepting nothing, temporarily got rid of the bishops by putting off his response to another day?

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salutis caperet, ut, quia potestate privatus erat terrena, juxta divinum consilium et ecclesiasticam auctoritatem, ne suam animam perderet elaborare, in extremis positus, totis viribus studeret” (*Capitul.*, t. II, p. 53, l. 4–9). This means that the deposed emperor has no other choice but to do his penance. See also Agobard’s corresponding passage, which clearly confirms this interpretation (*ibid.*, p. 56, l. 30–35).

<sup>12</sup> “Quorum legatorum consiliis et saluberrimis admonitionibus libenter assensum praebuit, spatium poposcit diemque constituit, qua de salubribus eorum monitis certum eis responsum redderet” (*ibid.*, p. 53, l. 9–11).

<sup>13</sup> “Propter quod et libellus editus est a viris diligentioribus et ei oblatus de manifestatione criminum suorum, in quo, velut in speculo, perspicue conspiceret feditatem actuum suorum et fieret in illo quod per penitentem perfectum dictum est: ‘Iniquitatem meam ego agnosco; peccatum meum coram me est semper’” (*ibid.*, p. 56–57). We do not believe that there could be a connection between this *libellus* and the opusculum published among Agobard’s works, after his *Apologeticus* (*Mon. Germ., Scriptores*, t. XV, 277–279). On this point, see Simson, *op. cit.*, t. I, p. 399.

<sup>14</sup> “Et tam diu illum vexaverunt, quousque . . .” *Ann. Bertin.*, ed. Waitz, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> “Jusserunt eum ut in monasterium iret et ibi fuisset omnibus diebus vitae suae. Quod ille rennuens non consensit voluntati eorum” (*Vita. Hlud.*, XLIII, ed. Pertz, *Mon. Germ., Scriptores*, II, p. 599). The penance that they wanted to impose on Louis should in fact have as a consequence to make him a penitent for life, in the mind of the bishops and Lothar’s supporters. (see Viollet, *op. cit.* t. I, p. 277):

In fact, shortly thereafter, on the date that was set, they return to the task; and this time it is no longer a mere delegation—all the bishops present at Compiègne come to find him.<sup>16</sup> They admonish him again, remind him of all his sins. If they had expected, without further difficulty, an affirmative response from him, would they have made the effort to lecture to him a second time, and especially, as the *Relatio* says, to repeat to him the list of his crimes *at length*?<sup>17</sup>

Here again, Agobard with greater skill is content to represent the bishops [in this way]: “pitying his [i.e., Louis’s] distress and misery, they supplicate the Almighty to pull him from the abyss, from the mire, where he had allowed himself to be led.”<sup>18</sup> This is a way to persuade us that his acceptance of the penance was already granted, and that the bishops had only come to encourage him to persevere on the path that he himself had entered.

Nevertheless, the official documents insist. According to the *Relatio*, it is again with condescendence, *libenter*, that Louis heard these new proposals; he gave his full assent to all the details of the penance that they [the bishops] wanted to impose on him.<sup>19</sup> — That is the important point; we must not be able to imagine that pressure had been exerted on the

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the fact is clearly indicated at the end of the *Relatio* (p. 55, l. 30). So it is certainly the penance that Thegan alludes to here.

<sup>16</sup> Agobard says: “Pro qua re accesserunt ad eum denuo omnes, qui in praedicto conventu aderant, episcopi” (*ibid.*, p. 57, l. 2). The *Relatio* puts it in these terms: “Cum autem suprascriptus instaret dies, sacer idem conventus unanimiter ad eundem venerabilem virum perrexit.” (*ibid.*, p. 53, l. 11–13). In this sentence, “sacer idem conventus” is the equivalent of “our” (we the bishops); the word “unanimiter” marks that this time all the bishops came, rather than their only sending a delegation. — B. Simson appears to us to have interpreted the *Relatio* here in an inaccurate manner, and wrongly saw a contradiction between this text and Agobard’s note. (*op. cit.*, p. 68, n. 2).

<sup>17</sup> “Sacer idem conventus . . . eum diligenter de quibus Deum offenderat et sanctam ecclesiam scandalizaverat ac populum sibi commissum perturbaverat admonere et cuncta illi ad memoriam reducere curavit” (*ibid.*, p. 53, l. 12–15). And the *Relatio* adds that Louis welcomed this “salutiferam admonitionem congruamque exaggerationem.”

<sup>18</sup> “Condolentes et conpatientes infirmitatibus et miseriis ejus, exhortantes atque exoptantes et postulantes ut omnipotens Deus manu pietatis suae educeret eum de lacu miseriae et de luto ceni” (*ibid.*, p. 57, l. 2–4).

<sup>19</sup> “Ille vero, eorum salutiferam admonitionem et dignam congruamque exaggerationem libenter amplectens, promisit se in omnibus illis acquieturum salutari consilio et subiturum remediale iudicium” (*ibid.*, p. 53, l. 15–17).

unfortunate emperor: the program of the penance was submitted to him, he examined it, accepted it, and this decision even “filled him with joy.”<sup>20</sup>

This is still not enough; Agobard goes further: Louis, having listened to the bishops, suddenly touched by grace, “threw himself at their feet”; he confessed his crimes, “and not only once, but two, three times, maybe even more”; he “solicited” [their] counsel, “beseeched” them to pardon him, “asked” for the penance himself; he promised, no longer only with condescendence, but with eagerness, *libentissime*, to submit himself to the humiliation that was reserved for him; the complete program was read to him: “he found nothing there to reconsider; he approved it without restriction.”<sup>21</sup> A bit more and one would argue that it was Louis himself who had designed this program.

How far we are from his apologists’ assertions, according to which Louis did not stop giving a categorical refusal to all the requests, and that duress was used up to the last moment!<sup>22</sup> And all these features that Agobard believes he needs to pile up to persuade us, even more than the *Relatio*, of the good will and even the enthusiastic spontaneity of the penitent, must they not lead us to believe that if Louis really ended up giving his consent, it was only because he was coerced by his adversaries, and that this consent could not be a conscious approval of all the details of the ceremony? Weak, timorous, shaken by the prelates, the emperor said: yes—and this yes, obtained with much effort, his apologists could declare was not an acceptance, while Lothar’s supporters could maintain, for their part, that it was.

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<sup>20</sup> “Porro de tanta salubri admonitione hilaris” (*ibid.*, l. 17). The *Relatio* adds here that Louis asked to see his son Lothar to reconcile with him: again a small, tendentious detail.

<sup>21</sup> “Quod clementissimus dominus non solum non abstulit, sed nec distulit. Sed mox resuscitata in mente ejus contritione humiliati cordis, prostratus coram eis, non semel vel iterum, sed tertio aut amplius crimina cognoscit, veniam poscit, auxilium orationum precatur, consilium recipit, penitentiam postulat, injunctam sibi humilitatem libentissime impleturum promittit. Innotescitur ei lex et ordo publicae penitentiae, quam non rennuit, sed ad omnia annuit (*ibid.*, p. 57, l. 4–10).

<sup>22</sup> Add to the texts cited on p. 179, n. 3 and 4, this one by Thegan: “Inaudita locuti sunt, inaudita fecerunt, *cottidie impropertantes ei*” (ed. Pertz, p. 599).

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Pleased nonetheless with this alleged compliance, that they would henceforth be able to oppose their enemies' reproaches, the bishops had Louis brought to the church of Saint-Médard de Soissons,<sup>23</sup> and there, in the presence of Lothar and his faithful men,<sup>24</sup> the humiliation began.

According to the *Relatio*, Louis, prostrate, found himself guilty of grave offences, for which he solicited a public penance; then, the bishops responded to him, recommending that he hide nothing, he supposedly said that he had committed all the crimes of which they came to reproach him; they then allegedly gave him a list, and he, holding this list between his hands, supposedly acknowledged his guilt on all the points that were enumerated, he allegedly asked to do penance, and finally he returned the list, which should be preserved in memory of his act of contrition.<sup>25</sup>

From one end of this report to the other, we can see at the same time an excessive insistence regarding the emperor's confessions and his request for penance, as well as a lack of characteristic clarity: Louis seems to have confessed first on all the points which had been the object of the bishops' admonitions, and again, without their indicating that he made another attempt to confess, on all the points enumerated on the list, which has the same

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<sup>23</sup> "Veniens igitur idem dominus Lodewicus in basilicam sanctae Dei genitricis Mariae, ubi sanctorum corpora requiescunt, Medardi videlicet confessoris Christi atque pontificis necnon Sebastiani praestantissimi martyris . . ." (*Capitul.*, II, p. 53, l. 23-25); "Ac demum pervenit in ecclesiam . . ." (*ibid.*, p. 57, l. 10). See also the Astronomer, XLIX, etc. Cf. Simson, *loc. cit.*, p. 69, n. 1.

<sup>24</sup> The *Relatio* says that the ceremony took place "adstantibus presbyteris, diaconibus et non parva multitudine clericorum, praesente etiam praefato domino Lothario filio ejus ejusque proceribus atque totius populi generalitate, quotquot videlicet intra sui septum eadem continere potuit ecclesia" (*ibid.*, p. 53, l. 26-29); Agobard says only that the ceremony occurred "coram cetu fidelium" (*ibid.*, p. 57, l. 10). Evidently, the authors of the *Relatio* sought to give the crowd in whose presence the ceremony took place an exaggerated idea, further skillfully restrained by the words: "quotquot videlicet intra sui septum eadem continere potuit ecclesia." Probably only a carefully selected "crowd" entered the church.

<sup>25</sup> The account of these facts occupies no less than a page and a half of the Boretius and Krause edition (p. 53, l. 29-p. 55, l. 27).

effect. He also appears to have asked twice for the penance. Moreover, what use did he make of the list of his sins? Did he read it? — It is not expressly said. Was it read to him? — No, since he held it between his hands.

What does Agobard say? — Simply this: “He confessed his sins two, or three, or even four times, in a clear voice and while breaking into tears.”<sup>26</sup> Not a single allusion to a request for penance; but, on the other hand, what skillfulness there is in this assertion thrown in carelessly: Louis confessed his sins in a clear voice two, three, or even four times. — Two, three, or four times! But then could there have been a detailed confession, as the *Relatio* would suggest? And if the confession had been made in a clear voice, how could Louis have broken into tears at the same time?

These are all clues that lead us to suspect that the apologists may be closer to the truth when they claim that their hero made no such admission, that he did not confess a single sin, and that he was not convinced to do so.<sup>27</sup>

This last version, is it strictly correct? — Maybe: for a kneeling penitent, breaking into tears while holding in his hands a document that states that he committed a whole

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<sup>26</sup> “Bis terque quaterque confessus in omnibus clara voce cum habundanti effusione lacrimarum . . .” (*ibid.*, p. 57, l. 11–12).

<sup>27</sup> The Astronomer, XLIX: “Adjudicatum ergo eum absentem et inauditum, *nec confitentem neque convictum* ante corpus sancti Medardi confessoris et sancti Sebastiani martiris arma deponere et ante altare ponere cogunt” (ed. Pertz, *Mon. Germ.*, SS, II, p. 637); *Epist. synod. concilii Tricassini ad Nicolaum I*: “In episcoporum synodo Ebbo praesens ab imperatore est accusatus, quod eum falso fuerat criminatus et eisdem falsis criminibus a regno dejecerat armisque ab eo ablatis, nec confessum, nec convictum, contra regulas ecclesiasticas ab ecclesiae aditu ac christianorum societate eliminaverat” (*Hist. de Fr.*, t. VII, p. 590 C); *Epistola Caroli Calvi ad Nicolaum I*: “Imperatorem nec confessum nec ab aliquo convictum, uxore et filio et omnibus fidelibus ac dignitate privatum ab ecclesiae communione removerunt” (*ibid.*, t. VII, p. 557 D). These three texts are categorical: Louis would have been reduced to penance without having confessed his sins and without having been convinced. Simson (t. II, p. 68, n. 6) believes that this is an allusion, which is in fact incorrect, to the events that preceded the penance. This interpretation is not acceptable: the verb “confiteor” applies to the *confession* itself, necessary for the penance, and not to an anterior acknowledgement of sins. Moreover, the Astronomer’s text is very clear: alluding to the accusations made against Louis at the assembly of Compiègne, when the emperor was imprisoned at Saint-Médard de Soissons, he says: “Adjudicatum eum absentem et inauditum”; then, coming to the penance itself, he says (while using the present indicative and the present participle) that Louis is forced to lay down his weapons without even having confessed, or without having been publicly convinced of, his so-called crimes.

series of crimes, is this not, on the whole, an admission, an implicit confession? And that alone should suffice to give some apparent basis to the official reports. Weak as he was, perhaps the former penitent of Attigny would have let escape some word indicating a conscience that was not very sure of itself: a confession, no doubt, but a confession that the apologists could, quite rightly, consider insufficient and worthless.

The ceremony concludes at last: Louis, the *Relatio* says, gives up his weapons and deposits them on the altar, then he removes his clothing to receive the habit of a penitent.<sup>28</sup> Agobard, wanting to avoid any notion of duress, insists in saying that it is by his own hand, *manu propria*, that Louis deposited his weapons.<sup>29</sup> — By his own hand, no doubt! But did they not coerce him? And was it of his own will that he clothed himself in a penitent's habit? — He was assaulted, maintains Thegan; his sword was seized from him.<sup>30</sup> — The Annalist of Saint-Bertin and the Astronomer, being more moderate, maintain only that there had been the use of coercion.<sup>31</sup> They are doubtless closer to the truth.

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<sup>28</sup> “Cingulum militiae deposuit et super altare collocavit et habitu saeculi se exuens habitum poenitentis per impositionem manuum episcoporum suscepti: ut post tantam talemque poenitentiam nemo ultra ad militiam saecularem redeat” (*Capitul.*, II, p. 55, l. 28–30).

<sup>29</sup> “Deposita arma *manu propria* et ad crepidinem altaris projecta, suscepit *mente compuncta* poenitentiam publicam per manuum episcoporum impositionem cum psalmis et orationibus. Sicque deposito habitu pristino et assumpto habitu poenitentis, *congratulus et confidens* postulat piissimi pastoris humeris reduci se ad inventae et redemptae ovis unitatem” (*ibid.*, p. 57, l. 12–16).

<sup>30</sup> “*Abstulerunt* ei gladium a femore suo, iudicio servorum suorum *induentes* eum cilicio” (*Vita Hlud.*, XLIV, ed. Pertz, p. 599). Likewise, Louis the Pious clearly accused Ebbo of having taken his weapons: “Ebbo praesens ab imperatore praesente et accusatus, quod eum falso fuerat criminatus et eisdem falsis criminibus impetum a regno deiecerat *armisque ab eo ablatis*, nec confessum, nec convictum, contra regulas ecclesiasticas ab ecclesiae aditu ac christianorum societate eliminaverat” (*Epist. concil. Tricass.*, in *Hist. de Fr.*, VII, p. 590 C).

<sup>31</sup> *Ann. Bertin.*: “Tam diu illum vexaverunt quousque arma deponere . . . cogentes, liminibus ecclesiae pepulerunt” (ed. Waitz, p. 7). The Astronomer, XLIX: “Eum . . . ante corpus sancti Medardi confessoris et sancti Sebastiani martiris arma deponere et ante altare ponere cogunt” (ed. Pertz, p. 637). It is impossible to claim, as has been done, that this is an allusion to the coercion which preceded the penance.

In short, there is, among the *Relatio*'s authors and Agobard, as we see, at one and the same time a very marked tendency to misrepresent the facts through a series of shrewd distortions, small inaccuracies, exaggerated details, and yet, in places an indirect admission of the difficulties that the bishops experienced in the process of overcoming Louis the Pious's resistance: this is clearly proven in their recounting of all the preliminary negotiations, in the *Relatio*'s supply of detail, which Agobard sought to silence as much as possible [through his carefully restrained reporting]. Ultimately, it [is this tension between overstatement and restraint that] brings us closer to the version given by the penitent's least fierce supporters, such as the Annalist of Saint-Bertin.

We can guess the real situation of this unfortunate emperor, who, locked up under close guard at Saint-Médard de Soissons, was hounded by the bishops, exposed to their reproaches, their castigations, maybe their threats, until the day when, weary of conflict, he finally let them wrest from him an alleged consent to a public penance.

The day of the ceremony arrives: the authors of the official documents want to persuade us that Louis submitted to it spontaneously and with good grace; but they hide their ruse poorly, they pile up so many incongruent details, and they go one better, trying to outdo each other to the point that it is impossible not to glimpse the arduous task that, in fact, they had to complete. They finally triumphed: given the absolute impossibility of the emperor offering them serious resistance, he had to go where they wanted; after a mock confession, he had to strip himself of his military insignia and clothing of the time.

But for this ceremony to have its full value, it was necessary that the deposed emperor was supposed to have acted of his own accord, to have confessed his "crimes," to have voluntarily submitted to the degradation: this is clearly what they wanted us to believe; but this is not the truth.

L. HALPHEN