

H-France Review Vol. 10 (September 2010), No. 129

Courtney M. Booker, *Past Convictions: The Penance of Louis the Pious and the Decline of the Carolingians*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. x + 420 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography and index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13 978-0812241686.

Review by Felice Lifshitz, Florida International University

Emperor Charles, known as “the Great,” died in 814, if not quite in the odor of sanctity, then at least respected and in some circles beloved. Sixty-three years later, his grandson and namesake, Emperor Charles, known as “the Bald,” “die[d] an ignominious death...his stinking corpse stuffed into a barrel, sealed with tar, wrapped in leather...and finally buried in Nantua, far from the royal tombs of Saint-Denis, Aachen, or Metz” (p. 205). The road from Charles the Great to Charles the Bald leads through the former’s son and the latter’s father: Emperor Louis, known as “the Pious,” a figure who was paradoxically “sinful” enough to warrant three separate performances of the rite of penance, and “pious” enough actually to go through with them (in 822, 830, and 833).

In the fourth century, Bishop Ambrose of Milan had managed to force the Emperor Theodosius to act the public penitent for a perceived offense; in the eleventh century, Emperor Henry IV would make his famous penitential trip to Canossa, where he forced Pope Gregory VII to absolve him of his confessed sins and lift the excommunication the pope had placed on him. These two events are generally believed to number among the most important moments in the history of “Church-State” relations in Europe, and have been thoroughly studied as epoch-making moments when emperors were placed in visibly subordinated positions vis-à-vis spiritual leaders. Against this background, it is astonishing to realize that Louis “the Pious” thrice permitted himself to be humbled by the bishops of his realm in penitential ceremonies.

Given the attention that has been rightly lavished over the years on Theodosius and Henry IV, it is doubly surprising that the penances of Louis have been relatively little studied, despite what would seem to be their absolutely key roles in the course of ninth-century politics, dominated as they were by the “decline of the Carolingians” (a trajectory implicit in the move from Charles the Great to Charles the Bald). This deficiency has suddenly been remedied by the appearance of two monographs which place Louis’s third penance of 833 at center stage. The larger implications of Louis’s extraordinary penitential attitude are explored in Mayke de Jong’s *The Penitential State: Authority and Atonement in the Age of Louis the Pious, 914 – 840*, a study of the emperor’s entire reign which argues that his authority was consistently enhanced by atonement, an insight that deeply complicates any attempt to situate Louis in a story of Carolingian “decline.”^[1] Likewise suspicious of placing Louis’s penances into the trajectory of Carolingian “decline” is Courtney M. Booker’s *Past Convictions*. This book is paralleled by its author with George Duby’s *Legend of Bouvines* and Alain Boureau’s *Myth of Pope Joan* (pp. 10 and 278 n. 51), and rightly so, for it devotes considerable (if sometimes superficial) attention to the afterlife of the event in histories, plays, visual arts, and culture both popular and political, in order to elucidate why historians have heretofore failed properly to come to terms with Louis’s pious penance.^[2]

The methods and import of Booker’s study are graphically telegraphed in his three tables (perhaps inspired by a similar approach in Walter Goffart’s *Narrators of Barbarian History*) listing chronologically

the key events of Louis's reign and its aftermath, juxtaposed with the various accounts of/sources for those events.[3] The first of these, Table 1, sets forth the six accounts (the *Annales Bertiniani*, the biographies of Louis by Thegan and the Astronomer, Nithard's *Historiae*, and texts by Paschasius Radbertus and Odilo of Soissons) which have consistently been utilized by historians to (re)construct their own tales of the events (p. 25). There is far more to Booker's analysis of the individual rhetorical strategies employed by each of these authors (and of those introduced in subsequent sections of the work) than can be conveyed in this review. For our purposes what matters is what these first six have in common: a tremendously vivid, dramatic, narrative mode of expression which has rendered them particularly appealing and believable to later readers/historians (particularly in the theatromaniacal Enlightenment era), and a loyalist/royalist/apologetic perspective analogizing Louis ("the Pious") to Jacob or Job or Moses or Christ. Therefore, these partisan accounts of the events have become the preferred, canonical sources for the events, with obvious consequences: a very partial understanding of the ninth-century phenomena.

Table 2 repeats the contents of Table 1, but adds to them (also in chronological order) a series of texts justifying the episcopal rebellion which led to Louis's capture, public penance, and (in the bishops' view) definitive deposition from the imperial dignity (p. 132). These texts—a *Relatio* summarizing the proceedings of Louis's penance at Soissons composed by the bishops who presided over the ritual, a letter of pope Gregory IV, and five writings by Agobard of Lyons—all predate the retrospective loyalist narratives in Table 1, and are indeed contemporaneous with the events themselves. Yet the source value of these documents has been largely neglected or even explicitly dismissed by later historians, due to the successful and virtually immediate framing of the rebels' texts as fraudulent, mendacious, and much more by the authors of the loyalist texts (pp. 90-100). As a result of this successful but misleading framing, the rebel bishops (led by Agobard of Lyons and Ebbo of Reims), along with their ally Lothar, Louis's oldest son, have traditionally been seen as devious manipulators of the ecclesiastical rite of penance in the service of their own interested political agenda, and as perfidious actors in a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions, whose penitential proceedings at Soissons have even been called the first "Stalinesque" trial in the history of the West (p. 121)! For "all interpreters, past and present" the entire process of Louis's third penance has been understood (incorrectly in Booker's view) as effectively a show trial in which no one acted with sincerity, not the episcopal leaders of the rite, and certainly not Louis himself, a captive from whom a confession was extorted under duress (p. 124).

Table 3 repeats the contents of Tables 1 and 2, but folds into them a third series of documents: texts related to the on-again, off-again occupancy of the archbishopric of Reims by Ebbo, the not incidentally low-born cleric who took the fall for the entire rebel faction once Louis was restored to power. These include various writings by Ebbo himself, including the text of his 835 *Resignatio*. Ebbo was a scapegoat who had the singular bad luck to lose his see to Hincmar, one of the greatest minds and one of the most prolific writers of the century, a man whose personal interest necessitated the thorough discrediting of Ebbo (pp. 184-185). The historiographical effect of these various polemical texts has also been to corroborate and strengthen the royalist party line. Recognizing the extent to which the rebellion had failed, even Ebbo took the shrewdly pragmatic tack of admitting his own sinfulness, which surely helped him to hang on to his consolation prize: the see of Hildesheim.

Having self-consciously freed himself from all vestiges of the reiterative royalist compulsion that had dogged many of his predecessors, Booker is able to undertake a careful analysis of all the documents related to the events of 833, above all the bishops's *Relatio*, published here in its first English translation (pp. 257-264) based on the author's edition of 2008, itself based on long-overlooked manuscript witnesses.[4] Booker's rebel bishops are no power-grabbing *Realpolitiker*, but devoted clerics steeped in the traditions of a Benedictine monasticism that placed a heavy burden on those with ministerial duties to retrieve errant members of the flock (pp. 140 – 142).

By 833, Louis's "iniquity" (a key concept to which I shall return) had taken many forms, including forcibly cloistering his own siblings against their will at his accession in 814 (p. 169), permitting his nephew Bernard of Italy to be killed in 818 (p. 169), overturning a sworn 817 treaty he had made with his sons (p. 170), permitting his (second) marriage to crumble to the point that his wife Judith had indulged in an affair with the court chamberlain, Bernard of Septimania (pp. 149-153), and much more. When presented with an episcopal indictment of his crimes, Louis duly recognized his burning need for merciful discipline, and gratefully submitted to the penitential rite as "a means to render satisfaction to an angry God" (p. 158), fully expecting to grow stronger in the process. This aspect of Louis's penitential dynamic is already well-known among specialists, since its original path-breaking articulation by Mayke De Jong in her 1992 article "Power and Humility;" as previously noted, this dimension is also thoroughly explored in De Jong's 2009 monograph *The Penitential State*.^[5] Booker's contribution lies in throwing light on the thought-processes of the bishops.

According to Booker, the crux of the matter for the bishops was the accumulated weight of Louis's multiple and multiplying iniquities, for some of which he had already --and to no avail!-- done penance in the past. Their "fecundity" underlined the "self-perpetuating nature of sin" (p. 171). Like an incorrigible addict (my own image, used neither by Booker or the bishops) Louis simply had to be cut off. The penance of 833 was different in the minds of the bishops, who quoted in their *Relatio* a decretal of Leo the Great (c. 458/459) stating that "after such and so great a penance, no one may ever return to the secular military service" (p. 176). That Louis's definitive deposition was the goal of the bishops in 833 had been noticed before, for instance by Karl Leyser and (of course) by Mayke de Jong.^[6] Where Booker diverges from previous commentators is in seeing the bishops' insistence on the need to strip Louis of power not as a strategy in a political game but rather as the logical conclusion of their own thought processes, steeped as they were in the increasingly influential discourses of Benedictine monasticism promoted by Louis himself.

The interpretive heart of *Past Convictions* is Chapter Six: "Eloquence in Equity, Fluency in Iniquity" (pp. 213--246). Booker writes: "...early in his reign, Louis fostered an ideological program within which he would later find himself enmeshed. While this point has long been recognized by scholars, the conceptual apparatus of the program, and more specifically its relationship with the binary system of *aequitas/iniquitas*, has never been examined in detail. On the other hand, the pernicious change that the rebel bishops believed had come over both the emperor and the empire *in processu temporis*, over the course of time, was an impression, I shall argue, itself ironically brought about by a subtle transformation in the bishops' own system of values. Rather than view Louis as an emperor who gradually failed, we should shift our gaze to the criteria by which he was judged, with an eye for the way they changed over time, holding him up to ever-higher standards he was not prepared to meet" (p. 214). Unlike the last Merovingian, Childeric III, in 751, Louis had to be removed from office in 833 because he was "iniquitous," rather than "useless" (*inutilis*). The transformation of the discursive field on which power politics were played was largely the result of Louis's own reform program.

The pages Booker devotes to revealing how the equity/iniquity binary runs through the documents connected to the penance of 833 should certainly be read by anyone interested in Carolingian thought or politics. He makes a persuasive case that this truly was the key to the bishops' mentalities. For instance, they were inspired by Augustine's warning that "feigned equity" is actually "double iniquity," "precisely what Louis' previous attempts at penance in 822 and 830 had produced; feigning equity at the rituals, the duplicitous emperor had only exacerbated the strife, calling down God's wrath upon a realm already suffering from the punishment of sin" (p. 222). The most salient point, however, is how this equity/iniquity binary structured the Benedictine ethos of monastic rulership. Louis conceived his own rule in Benedictine monastic terms, and styled himself as a monarchical abbot of the realm. Therefore he was subject to the directives of the Benedictine Rule concerning the removal of an iniquitous abbot; in deposing him, the rebel bishops were only acting in accordance with that Rule, which warranted episcopal intervention in the process (p. 234). In the end, Louis "was judged in terms befitting an emperor also known as *Monachus* and *Equitatus*" (p. 255).

Courtney Booker has made a very admirable attempt to understand ninth-century events on their own terms, through careful readings of contemporary documents combined with scrupulous attention to the evidentiary implications of the relevant surviving manuscripts and of textual transmission. His monograph, based on a dissertation completed at UCLA under the direction of Patrick Geary, genuinely casts new light on ninth-century politics, including on what went wrong for the Carolingian dynasty. It's not exactly an inevitable hop, skip, and a jump from Louis's penance to Charles's stinking corpse, particularly in that Booker is at pains to remove the events of 833 from the discourse of decline, by insisting for instance that Louis subsequently regained his throne and ruled vigorously until his death (pp. 20 -21 and 24); his general perspective thus accords with that of Mayke de Jong's *The Penitential State*. Clearly, given the overlapping findings of these two specialized recent studies, the imperial penance of 833 cannot be "the" moment (or even "a" moment) when "decline" inevitably set in, as it has so often been described by previous historians. I suppose it is even possible that Louis's penchant for penance played no role in the ultimate fate of the dynasty. Nevertheless, Booker's analysis of the event and its multiple rememberings does help us understand some of the challenges faced by ninth-century Carolingian rulers, challenges that eventually bested them.

Felice Lifshitz
Florida International University
Lifshitz@fiu.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172