Popular Revolt in the Ninth Century

by Allen Cabaniss

The last note in the annals of Xanten for the year 841 is about "a powerful combination of servile folk" in Saxony who arose against their masters. "Adopting the designation Stellings, they committed numerous irrational acts," in the course of which "the nobles of that country suffered severe and atrocious maltreatment at the hands of those slavish people."¹

The background of that occurrence was a civil war in the Frankish state. Emperor Louis the Pious died in the summer of 840, leaving the government in theory to his three sons.² What followed was a struggle for power among them and their partisans. Rather quickly Louis the German formed an alliance with Charles the Bald to strike at the paramount position of their brother, Emperor Lothair I. At Fontenoy on 25 June 841 the two sides engaged in a fierce battle, marked by frightful and shocking carnage, resulting in temporary defeat for Lothair, but not in a stable peace.³

The observant chronicler then recounted, between the battle and the Stelling insurrection, a prodigy in the sky on Thursday, 28 July. In broad daylight three arcs, semicircular like a rainbow, appeared. The smallest, but most colorful one, lay around the sun; the next, the largest, lay toward the west, but one of its prongs seemed to touch

² Allen Cabaniss, Son of Charlemagne (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1961; 2nd printing, 1985), 122–125
³ See the vivid description in Versus de bella quae fuit acta Fontaneto (Poetae Latini aevi Carolini, II, 138f.).
the sun; the medium-sized one lay toward the north, but touched the other two with its prongs. The two latter arcs were not as bright as the smallest one. During the same period a small cloud, similar in shape to the half-circles, was visible a distance away in the northeast. All these phenomena were witnessed continuously from shortly before nine o'clock in the morning until some time in the afternoon.4

Emperor Lothair correctly perceived that a division existed in Saxon sentiment. Some of the nobility had favored him; some, his brother Louis. After the battle of Fontenoy he determined to gain further Saxon support, not from the nobles (edhilingui), but rather from the lower classes (frilingi = ingenuiles; lazi = serviles) who constituted a majority of the population. In order to do so, he sent envoys among them promising, in return for their aid, that they could revert to the customs of their pagan ancestors. Thus the notable historian, Nithard, illegitimate half-uncle of the warring brothers, wrote.5 He is confirmed less elaborately by the annalist of St. Bertin for 841 who stated: “Lothair . . . sought to gain for his side especially those Saxons called Stellings, the most populous element of that nation, by giving them an option of choosing whatever law by which they preferred to abide.”6

The proposal appealed to the humbler Saxons and the movement spread among them like wild fire. Perhaps it was greed, as the aristocratic Nithard supposed; perhaps it was a smouldering resentment against the Christianity imposed on them so mercilessly by Charlemagne; perhaps it was the simplicity of revolt for its own sake. In any case, they quickly constituted themselves a coherent dissident group, even adopting for their organization a novel name, Stellings. Soon they were roving about the countryside committing acts of terrorism. The lords, taken by surprise, began to flee from Saxony in large numbers. The Stellings, excited by success, proceeded to fall into anarchy, “each man living by whatever law he pleased.”7

The movement began presumably in the autumn of 841 and continued into the early months of 842. It was aided by Northmen whom Lothair had invited and to whom he gave permission to ravage the lands of his brother Louis. The latter became fearful that these two

4 Ann. Xant., 841.
5 Nith., IV, 2.
7 Nith., IV, 2.
parties would be joined in a formal invasion of his kingdom by Slavs (who were in some way related to the Stellings). \(^8\) But for the moment it seemed far more immediate for him and Charles to resume direct hostilities with Lothair.

On 14 February 842 Louis and Charles, along with their troops, met in Strasbourg, where they took the famed oaths of alliance, recorded by Nithard, which have such philological importance, Louis swearing in Romanic and Charles in Germanic so that the other's adherents might understand. The partisans of each then vowed in their own languages to insure the covenant. \(^9\) After the formalities, they launched attacks on the lands of their imperial brother. So hard was the combined pressure on Lothair that by summer's end he was in full retreat. \(^10\)

In the meanwhile, however, the war was causing so much disruption that many magnates became disillusioned. Enough of them on both sides were in agreement that they were able in early autumn (1 October) to intervene and demand an armistice. \(^11\) It was indeed only an armistice, but the brothers welcomed a breathing spell in which to return to their own lands for a time, Lothair to his capital at Aix-la-Chapelle, Charles to Aquitaine, and Louis to Saxony. \(^12\)

Each ruler had affairs to set in order, but none so urgently as Louis. As soon as he got back to Saxony, he began vigorously rounding up members of the Stellinga. In order to curb the insurrectionists, he caused the death penalty to be liberally inflicted. \(^13\) The annalist of St. Bertin noted that a hundred and forty were beheaded, fourteen hanged, many maimed by amputation of limbs, none being left able to resist any further. \(^14\) By its numerical indication, the statement does not suggest that the ruthless treatment was directed only against leadership of the movement, but also against rank-and-file Stellings. It is, therefore, possible to suppose that the uprising really was a popular one without much guidance.

The matter was not over, although Louis may have thought so, for he then withdrew to his seat of government in Bavaria to spend the

\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^9\) Ibid., III, 5.
\(^11\) Ann. Xant., 842.
\(^12\) Nith., IV, 4.
\(^13\) Ibid.
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winter. The Saxon Stellings, outraged by the brutal royal vengeance, took advantage of his absence, reorganized, and once more rose in revolt against their masters. The nobles must have been aware of their plans, for this time they, too, were organized to resist. In a pitched battle the Stellings were crushed and slaughtered. "And so," remarked the smug annalist, "the lawless and arrogant insurgents perished at the hands of constituted authority."15

From the records we are entitled to make certain generalizations about the foregoing incident. First, it was obviously a genuine revolt of the "masses" against their masters. Secondly, it was fed by the insane destructiveness of civil strife. Third, it was encouraged by superstition. Fourth, it was, for all practical purposes, leaderless. Fifth, it was quite localized. Sixth, it was supported by part of the "establishment." Seventh, it was aided and abetted by "outsiders." Eighth, it had a certain inherent resilience. But, ninth, it was crushed by superior force.

Several questions now arise. How frequent were such occurrences in the ninth century? How serious were they? What expression did they take? What were the probable causes? What were the fuels that fed the flames? It would be futile to expect much by way of answer from chroniclers of the time. They were not very interested in such questions. Only now and then did something happen that they deemed worthy of their record. Yet they do reveal enough to suggest undercurrents that are intriguing to modern readers.

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The times were exceedingly troubled. Perhaps too much has been made of the description of the year 852 in the annals of Xanten: "The iron of the heathen flashed. The sun's heat was excessive. Famine ensued. Fodder for cattle failed. Only provender for hogs was plentiful."16 Yet the account is not so far-fetched and it certainly does not stand alone. Only two years earlier the annals of Fulda record such a severe famine that in one village alone Bishop Hrabanus Maurus fed more than three hundred of the inhabitants daily. One poor woman, with a sucking child at her breast, collapsed and died as she approached the bread line. In another district a father and mother considered killing their little boy and eating him. They were saved

15 Nith., IV, 6.
16 Ann. Xant., 852.
from that atrocity as they saw a stag brought down by two wolves. Driving the wolves away, they greedily devoured the carcass.\textsuperscript{17}

Still earlier the annals of Xanten gave almost as gloomy a picture for 888, although not in such compressed language as for 852:

Winter was rainy with severe winds. On 21 January thunder was heard. On 16 February even louder thunder was heard and the sun’s heat scorched the earth. In certain areas an earthquake occurred and fire in the shape of a dragon was visible in the air. Heretical pravity made its appearance in that year. On 21 December the crash of mighty thunder was heard and flashes of lightning seen. And in many ways the distress and misfortune of men was daily increasing.\textsuperscript{18}

In 853 famine in Saxony drove many to eat their horses.\textsuperscript{19} In 857 a plague of boils spread among the masses, causing such foul-smelling decay of flesh that fingers and toes, hands and feet, fell away from still living men and women.\textsuperscript{20} In 860 a snow of blood was reported in a number of places.\textsuperscript{21} Less than a decade and a half later pestilential locusts came from the east and devastated “all Gaul.” Unusually large, with six wings, they flew and alighted with military precision. Finally blown into the Atlantic, for many days, thereafter their bodies were thrown up on the shores in mountainous piles. Many persons died from the fetid stench of rotting locusts.\textsuperscript{22}

There were other disasters, man-made, that caused havoc. Muslim pirates from the south struck as much terror as the pagan Northmen did.\textsuperscript{23} From the east there was at least a threat of Slavic uprisings.\textsuperscript{24} Internal strife was almost endemic: kinsmen against kinsmen, ruler against subjects, churchmen against kings. There were rapid changes, constantly shifting loyalties, patent deterioration of government, and, above all, displacement of peoples. Early in the century Charlemagne had compelled thousands of Saxons to leave their homes and seek residence elsewhere in the Frankish state. In mid-century and earlier many Mozarabs fled northward over the Pyrenees from their Spanish

\textsuperscript{17} Ann. Fuld., 850.
\textsuperscript{18} Ann. Xant., 888.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 853.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 857.
\textsuperscript{21} Ann. Fuld., 860.
\textsuperscript{22} Regino, 873.
\textsuperscript{23} Ann. Xant., 846, 850.
\textsuperscript{24} Ann. Fuld., 855.
native land to escape or avoid sporadic outbursts of Muslim repression. Vast multitudes of people were thus homeless wanderers, without root or stability, without means of support, prey to almost any kind of suggestion that might alter, even if not improve, their conditions.

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Strange visionaries made their presence felt. In 867 two priests in the diocese of Mainz boasted that they could converse with angels and perform miracles. Crowds of both rich and poor alike flocked to their forest lairs bringing gifts, although they were ultimately degraded. In the nearby diocese of Cologne popular frenzy and resentment refused to accept the deposition of Bishop Gunthar. When he returned from trial in Rome, he was received with jubilation, clanging of bells, and processions with Gospel book and incense. In 839 an English priest saw a vision announcing various ills destined to befall mankind because of evil deeds. Among them were preternatural darkness, the Viking long ships, and famine. In 847 a false prophetess, Thiota, came to Mainz proclaiming the imminent end of the world. Many, led astray by her babblings, offered gifts to her in return for her prayers, as though she were divinely inspired. Under interrogation she confessed that she had been prompted by a certain priest. In 874 a dream was reported which depicted Emperor Louis the Pious suffering the torments of purgatory.

In a village not far from Bingen an evil spirit (in human form?) began a series of disturbances, throwing stones at people and beating on the walls of their houses. It then found occasion to speak out in public betraying what people did furtively, sowing discord among the villagers. Gradually the malice of the poltergeist was restricted to one particular man and his family. The persecution became so strong that he, his wife, and children were driven out of their house. No one would give them shelter for fear of the malign force. The family was therefore compelled to live out in the fields, but the spirit set fire to the fields.

Soon the villagers accused the poor, harried man of crimes demanding vengeance, but he promptly and courageously vindicated

28 Ibid., 874.
himself by the ordeal of hot iron. Clergymen were then summoned from Mainz to exorcise the poltergeist. As they began the litany and aspersion of holy water, the "devil" at first retaliated strenuously by a hail of stones, but gradually subsided. Thinking the exorcism successful, the clerics returned to Mainz.

Suddenly the spirit reappeared and declared that a priest (whom he named) had stood by him as the holy water was sprinkled. The frightened villagers crossed themselves in fear, while the demon said of the priest, "He is my slave. Whoever is under his influence is his slave. Only recently, at my persuasion, here in this village he violated the bailiff's daughter." With that revelation, the evil spirit renewed his acts of terror, which continued for three years until almost every dwelling in the village was burned down.29

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There should be no wonder that the illiterate masses—starving, frightened, homeless, diseased—struck out in any way they could to give vent to their discontent, blindly or misguided or shrewdly, as the Stellings did in 841. Their actions took many expressions. One of the commonest and easiest was thievery. On 1 September 853 robbers entered the basilica of St. Boniface the martyr at Fulda and made away with part of the church treasure. The crime was never investigated, the culprits never found, and the money never recovered.30 Occasionally lynching mobs were formed to attack anyone who seemed "different."31 As early as 781 an annalist recorded that "many portents were apparent: among them the sign of the cross was very frequently seen on men's clothes,"32 a statement suggesting an organized band (outlaws, vigilantes, penitentes?), but otherwise unexplained, except that it was something mysterious.

In 823 at the hamlet of Commercq a young twelve-year-old girl began a hunger strike, announcing that she would continue abstaining from food for ten months. The annalist duly recorded this as a "prodigy."33 She was mentioned no further until November 825 when more details were given.34 Apparently her name was known,

29 The three paragraphs preceding this note are derived from ibid., 858.
30 Ibid., 853.
33 Ann. r. Fr., 823.
34 Ibid., 825.
but it has been lost in the course of manuscript transmission. The writer then stated that she had begun to fast immediately after her Easter communion of 823. At first it was from bread, then from other foods and drink, until no food entered her mouth and she lost all desire to eat.

About All Saints’ Day of 825, two and a half years later, she began to take nourishment and to eat “like other mortals.” What are we to make of this story? Obviously it was a prearranged fast, or the annalist would not have known at its inception that it was supposed to last ten months or would not have recorded it as a prodigy. But thirty, not ten, months later, during which there was no reference to her in the annals, we learn that it was a fast gradually undertaken, that it lasted three times the intended period, that it was associated with two major ecclesiastical festivals.

One more note may be added. For the year 858, the annalist records that a monk (Usuard, as we know from other sources) of the Parisian monastery of St. Vincent the martyr and St. Germanus the confessor made a trip to Muslim Córdoba. When he returned he brought with him the relics of certain blessed martyrs, George (a deacon), Aurelius, and Nathalia (Sabigotho), which he deposited for safe-keeping (and veneration?) at Aimant.35

The three deceased persons named had been martyred by Islamic authorities only six years earlier (852). Aurelius, of a Muslim father and Christian mother, was a secret Christian, as was his wife Sabigotho (Nathalia), born of Muslim parents. Deacon George was a monk from Palestine.36 All were victims of persecution that was provoked by their vocal dissidence and all were distrusted even by segments of the Spanish church. It would appear, therefore, that translation of their relics to France might be a form of dissidence in the Frankish church.

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The preceding data are, of course, open to varying possibilities, but it seems to me that they all suggest popular revolt, evoked by miserable conditions, fanned by visionaries and portents, resulting in aimless floundering and meaningless lashing out at the “establishment” by any means at hand.