

Bernard of Italy

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Bernard (797, Vermandois, Picardy – 17 April 818, Milan, Lombardy) was the King of the Lombards from 810 to 818. He plotted against his uncle, Emperor Louis the Pious, when the latter's *Ordinatio Imperii* made Bernard a vassal of his cousin Lothair. When his plot was discovered, Louis had him blinded, a procedure which killed him.

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Life

Bernard was the illegitimate son of King Pepin of Italy, the second legitimate son of the Emperor Charlemagne. In 810, Pepin died from an illness contracted at a siege of Venice; although Bernard was illegitimate, Charlemagne allowed him to inherit Italy. Bernard married a woman named Cunigunde, but the year of their marriage, and her origins are obscure; spuriously she has been called "of Laon". They had one son, Pepin, Count of Vermandois.

Prior to 817, Bernard was a trusted agent of his grandfather, and of his uncle. His rights in Italy were respected, and he was used as an intermediary to manage events in his sphere of influence - for example, when in 815 Louis the Pious received reports that some Roman nobles had conspired to murder Pope Leo III, and that he had responded by butchering the ringleaders, Bernard was sent to investigate the matter.

A change came in 817, when Louis the Pious drew up an *Ordinatio Imperii*, detailing the future of the Frankish Empire. Under this, the bulk of the Frankish territory went to Louis' eldest son, Lothair; Bernard received no further territory, and although his Kingship of Italy was confirmed, he would be a vassal of Lothair. This was, it was later alleged, the work of the Empress, Ermengarde, who wished Bernard to be displaced in favour of her own sons. Resenting Louis' actions, Bernard began plotting with a group of magnates: Eggideo, Reginhard, and Reginhar, the last being the grandson of a Thuringian rebel against Charlemagne, Hardrad. Anshelm, Bishop of Milan and Theodulf, Bishop of Orléans, were also accused of being involved: there is no evidence either to support or contradict this in the case of Theodulf, whilst the case for Anshelm is murkier.^{[1][2]}

Bernard's main complaint was the notion of his being a vassal of Lothair. In practical terms, his actual position had not been altered at all by the terms of the decree, and he could safely have continued to rule under such a system. Nonetheless, "partly true" reports came to Louis the Pious that his nephew was planning to set up an 'unlawful' - i.e. independent - regime in Italy.^[1]

Bernard

King of the Lombards



17th century commemorative fresco from Bernard's grave in Milan, Italy.

Reign	810–818
Predecessor	Pepin Carloman
Successor	Lothair I
Born	797 Vermandois, Picardy, France
Died	17 April 818 Aachen, Rhineland, Germany
Burial	Milan, Lombardy, Italy
Consort	Cunigunda of Laon
Issue	Pepin, Count of Vermandois
House	Carolingian
Father	Pepin Carloman

Louis the Pious reacted swiftly to the plot, marching south to Chalon. Bernard and his associates were taken by surprise; Bernard travelled to Chalon in an attempt to negotiate terms, but he and the ringleaders were forced to surrender to him. Louis had them taken to Aix-la-Chapelle, where they were tried and condemned to death. Louis 'mercifully' commuted their sentences to blinding, which would neutralize Bernard as a threat without actually killing him; however, the process of blinding (carried out by means of pressing a red-hot stiletto to the eyeballs) proved so traumatic that Bernard died in agony two days after the procedure was carried out. At the same time, Louis also had his half-brothers Drogo, Hugh and Theoderic tonsured and confined to monasteries, to prevent other Carolingian offshoots challenging the main line. He also treated those guilty or suspected of conspiring with Bernard harshly: Theodulf of Orleans was imprisoned, and died soon afterwards; the lay conspirators were blinded, the clerics deposed and imprisoned; all lost lands and honours.^{[1][2][3]}

Legacy

His Kingdom of Italy was reabsorbed into the Frankish empire, and soon after bestowed upon Louis' eldest son Lothair. In 822, Louis made a display of public penance at Attigny, where he confessed before all the court to having sinfully slain his nephew; he also welcomed his half-brothers back into his favour. These actions possibly stemmed from guilt over his part in Bernard's death. It has been argued by some historians that his behaviour left him open to clerical domination, and reduced his prestige and respect amongst the Frankish nobility.^[1] Others, however, point out that Bernard's plot had been a serious threat to the stability of the kingdom, and the reaction no less a threat; Louis' display of penance, then, "was a well-judged gesture to restore harmony and re-establish his authority."^[3]

References

- McKitterick, Rosamond, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians*
- Riché, Pierre, *The Carolingians*, p. 148
- McKitterick, Rosamond, *The New Cambridge History, 700-900*

Sources

- McKitterick, Rosamond, *The Frankish Kingdoms under the Carolingians*
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Bernard of Italy Carolingian dynasty Died: 17 April 818		
Regnal titles		
Preceded by Pepin Carloman	King of the Lombards 8 July 810 – 17 April 818 <i>with Charlemagne (810–814)</i>	Succeeded by Lothair I

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