

Liutprand of Cremona. Report on his Mission to Constantinople,
translated by Ernest F. Henderson.

Introduction

We first hear of Liutprand at the court of Berengar and Willa, who, in the middle of the tenth century, ruled over northern Italy. Becoming estranged from his royal patrons he wrote against them the *Antapodosis*, or book of retribution, which is one of our most valued historical sources for those times. In 963 Liutprand was envoy of Emperor Otto the Great to Pope John XII... The journey to Constantinople took place in 968. Otto had, in his efforts to bring Italy into his power, come into collision with the Greeks, who regarded Benevento and Capua as belonging to the provinces of the Eastern Empire. Otto went so far as to occupy Apulia and to besiege the Greek town of Bari, but soon came to the conclusion that more was to be gained by negotiations than by war. Liutprand, now Bishop of Cremona, advised peace, and suggested that a Greek princess should be sought in marriage for the young emperor Otto II, who had started to reign at the same time as his father. It was upon the princess Theophano that the hopes of the emperor were fixed, and it was thought that Nicephorus would give Apulia and Calabria as her dowry. It was to arrange this matter that Liutprand, accompanied by a large suite, went to Constantinople. The reception that he met with will be explained in his own words.

Excerpts from the text narrated by Liutprand

... On the fourth of June, as I said above, we arrived at Constantinople and waited with our horses in heavy rain outside the Carian gate until five o'clock in the afternoon. At five o'clock Nicephorus ordered us to be admitted on foot, for he did not think us worthy to use the horses with which your clemency had provided us, and we were escorted to the aforesaid hateful, waterless, draughty stone house. On the sixth of June, which was the Saturday before Pentecost, I was brought before the emperor's brother Leo, marshal of the court and chancellor; and there we tired ourselves with a fierce argument over your imperial title. He called you not emperor, which is *Basileus* in his tongue, but insultingly *Rex*, which is king in ours. I told him that the thing meant was the same though the word was different, and he then said that I had come not to make peace but to stir up strife. Finally he got up in a rage, and really wishing to insult us received your letter not in his own hand but through an interpreter. He is a man commanding enough in person but feigning humility: whereon if a man lean it will pierce his hand.

On the seventh of June, the sacred day of Pentecost, I was brought before Nicephorus himself in the palace called *Stephana*, that is, the Crown Palace. He is a monstrosity of a man, a dwarf, fat-headed and with tiny mole's eyes; disfigured by a short, broad, thick beard half going gray; disgraced by a neck scarcely an inch long; pig-like by reason of the big close bristles on his head; in colour an Ethiopian and, as the poet says, "you would not like to meet him in the dark"; a big belly, a lean posterior, very long in the hip considering his short stature, small legs, fair sized heels and feet; dressed in a robe made of fine linen, but old, foul smelling, and discoloured by age; shod with Sicyonian slippers; bold of tongue, a fox by nature, in perjury and falsehood a Ulysses. My lords and august emperors [i.e. Liutprand's rulers back home], you always seemed comely to me; but how much more comely now! Always magnificent; how much more magnificent now! Always mighty; how much more

mighty now! Always clement; how much more clement now! Always full of virtues; how much fuller now! At his left, not on a line with him, but much lower down, sat the two child emperors, once his masters, now his subjects. He began his speech as follows: "It was our duty and our desire to give you a courteous and magnificent reception. That, however, has been rendered impossible by the impiety of your master, who in the guise of an hostile invader has laid claim to Rome; has robbed Berengar and Adalbert of their kingdom contrary to law and right; has slain some of the Romans by the sword, some by banging, while others he has either blinded or sent into exile; and furthermore has tried to subdue to himself by massacre and conflagration cities belonging to our empire. His wicked attempts have proved unsuccessful, and so he has sent you, the instigator and furtherer of this villainy, under pretence of peace to ... spy upon us."

To him I made this reply: "My master did not invade the city of Rome by force nor as a tyrant; he freed her from a tyrant's yoke, or rather from the yoke of many tyrants. Was she not ruled by effeminate debauchers, and what is even worse and more shameful, by harlots? Your power, methinks, was fast asleep then; and the power of your predecessors, who in name alone are called emperors of the Romans, while the reality is far different. If they were powerful, if they were emperors of the Romans, why did they allow Rome to be in the hands of harlots? Were not some of the holy popes banished, others so distressed that they could not procure their daily supplies nor money wherewith to give alms? Did not Adalbert send insulting letters to your predecessors, the emperors Romanos and Constantine? Did he not rob and plunder the churches of the holy apostles? Who of you emperors, led by zeal for God, troubled to punish so heinous a crime and bring back the holy church to its proper state? You neglected it, my master did not. From the ends of the world he rose, and came to Rome, and drove out the ungodly, and gave back to the vicars of the holy apostles [i.e. the popes] all their power and honour. Those who afterwards rose against him and the lord pope, as being violators of their oath, sacrilegious robbers and torturers of their lords the popes, in accordance with the decrees of such Roman emperors as Justinian, Valentinian, Theodosius etc., he slew, beheaded, hanged, or exiled. If he had not done so, he himself would be an impious, unjust, cruel tyrant. It is a known fact that Berengar and Adalbert became his vassals and received the kingdom of Italy with a golden sceptre from his hand and that they promised fealty, under oath in the presence of your servants, men still alive and now dwelling in this city. At the devil's prompting they perfidiously broke their word, and therefore he justly took their kingdom from them, as being deserters and rebels. You yourself would have done the same to men who had sworn fealty, and then revolted against you.

"But," said he, "there is one of Adalbert's vassals here, and he does not acknowledge the truth of this." "If he denies it," I replied, "one of my men, at your command, will prove to him tomorrow, in single combat that it is so." "Well," said he, "he may, as you declare, have acted justly in this. Explain now why he attacked the borders of our empire with war and conflagration. We were friends and were thinking by marriage to enter into a partnership that would never be broken."

"The land," I answered, "which you say belongs to your empire, is proved by race and language to be part of the kingdom of Italy. The Lombards held it in their power, and Louis, emperor of the Lombards or Franks, freed it from the grip of the Saracens with great slaughter. For seven years also Landulf, prince of Benevento and Capua held it under his control. Nor would it even now have passed from the yoke of slavery to him and his descendants, had not your emperor Romanos bought at a great price the friendship of our King Hugh. It was for this reason also that he made a match between

King Hugh's bastard daughter and his own nephew and namesake. I see now that you think it shows weakness in my master, not generosity, when after winning Italy and Rome he for so many years left them to you. The friendly partnership, which you say you wished to form by a marriage, we bold to be a fraud and a snare: you ask for a truce, but you have no real reason to want it nor we to grant it. Come, let us clear away all trickeries and speak the plain truth. My master has sent me to you to see if you will give the daughter of the emperor Romanos and the empress Theophano to his son, my master the august emperor Otto. If you give me your oath that the marriage shall take place, I am to affirm to you under oath that my master in grateful return will observe to do this and this for you. Moreover he has already given you, his brother ruler, the best pledge of friendship by handing over Apulia, which was subject to his rule. I, to whose suggestion you declare this mischief was due, intervened in this matter, and there are as many witnesses to this as there are people in Apulia."

"It is past seven o'clock," said Nicephorus "and there is a church procession which I must attend. Let us keep to the business before us. We will give you a reply at some convenient season."

I think that I shall have as much pleasure in describing this procession as my masters will have in reading of it. A numerous company of tradesmen and low-born persons, collected on this solemn occasion to welcome and honour Nicephorus, lined the sides of the road, like walls, from the palace to Saint Sophia, tricked out with thin little shields and cheap spears. As an additional scandal, most of the mob assembled in his honour had marched there with bare feet, thinking, I suppose, that thus they would better adorn the sacred procession. His nobles for their part, who with their master passed through the plebeian and barefoot multitude, were dressed in tunics that were too large for them and were also because of their extreme age full of holes. They would have looked better if they had worn their ordinary clothes. There was not a man among them whose grandfather had owned his tunic when it was new. No one except Nicephorus wore any jewels or golden ornaments, and the emperor looked more disgusting than ever in the regalia that had been designed to suit the persons of his ancestors. By your life, sires, dearer to me than my own, one of your nobles' costly robes is worth a hundred or more of these. I was taken to the procession and given a place on a platform near the singers.

As Nicephorus, like some crawling monster, walked along, the singers began to cry out in adulation: "Behold the morning star approaches: the day star rises: in his eyes the sun's rays are reflected: Nicephorus our prince, the pale death of the Saracens." And then they cried again: "Long life, long life to our prince Nicephorus. Adore him, ye nations, worship him, bow the neck to his greatness." How much more truly might they have sung: "Come, you miserable burnt-out coal; old woman in your walk, wood-devil in your look; clodhopper, haunter of byres, goat-footed, horned, double-limbed; bristly, wild, rough, barbarian, harsh, hairy, a rebel, a Cappadocian!" So, puffed up by these lying ditties, he entered St. Sophia, his masters the emperors following at a distance and doing him homage on the ground with the kiss of peace. His amour bearer, with an arrow for pen, recorded in the church the era in progress since the beginning of his reign. So those who did not see the ceremony know what era it is.

On this same day he ordered me to be his guest. But as he did not think me worthy to be placed above any of his nobles, I sat fifteenth from him and without a table cloth. Not only did no one of my suite sit at table with me; they did not even set eyes upon the house where I was entertained. At the dinner, which was fairly foul and disgusting, washed down with oil after the fashion of drunkards and moistened also

with an exceedingly bad fish liquor, the emperor asked me many questions concerning your power, your dominions and your army. My answers were sober and truthful; but he shouted out: "You lie. Your master's soldiers cannot ride and they do not know how to fight on foot. The size of their shields, the weight of their cuirasses, the length of their swords, and the heaviness of their helmets, does not allow them to fight either way." Then with a smile he added: "Their gluttony also prevents them. Their God is their belly, their courage but wind, their bravery drunkenness. Fasting for them means dissolution, sobriety, panic. Nor has your master any force of ships on the sea. I alone have really stout sailors, and I will attack him with my fleets, destroy his maritime cities and reduce to ashes those which have a river near them. Tell me, how with his small forces will he be able to resist me even on land? His son was there: his wife was there: his Saxons, Swabians, Bavarians and Italians were all there with him: and yet they had not the skill nor the strength to take one little city that resisted them. How then will they resist me when I come followed by as many forces as there are Corn fields on Gargarus, grapes on Lesbian vine, Waves in the ocean, stars in heaven that shine?"

I wanted to answer and make such a speech in our defence as his boasting deserved; but he would not let me and added this final insult: "You are not Romans but Lombards." He even then was anxious to say more and waved his hand to secure my Silence, but I was worked up and cried: "History tells us that Romulus, from whom the Romans get their name, was a fratricide born in adultery. He made a place of refuge for himself and received into it insolvent debtors, runaway slaves, murderers and men who deserved death for their crimes. This was the sort of crowd whom he enrolled as citizens and gave them the name of Romans. From this nobility are descended those men whom you style 'rulers of the world.' But we Lombards, Saxons, Franks, Lotharingians, Bavarians, Swabians and Burgundians, so despise these fellows that when we are angry with an enemy we can find nothing more insulting to say than –'You Roman!' For us in the word Roman is comprehended every form of lowness, timidity, avarice, luxury, falsehood and vice. You say that we are unwarlike and know nothing of horsemanship. Well, if the sins of the Christians merit that you keep this stiff neck, the next war will prove what manner of men you are, and how warlike we."

Full text available at:

<http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/liudprand1.asp>