

Archbishop Hincmar of Reims (845-882), “On the Rapine of Knights that is to Be Restrained” (859)

*In August 858 Louis II “The German” (843-876), king of the eastern Frankish kingdom (roughly modern-day Germany), invaded territory in the western Frankish kingdom (roughly France) that belonged to his brother, Charles II “the Bald” (843-877). By November, Louis had occupied Charles’ palace at Attigny and from there summoned his brother to a meeting to be held at the end of the month in Reims. Charles not only refused to meet his brother but managed to turn the tables on Louis, forcing him back to Germany the following January (859). Archbishop Hincmar of Reims, a faithful ally of Charles, brought the full weight of his office to bear on Louis. The “Hellfire and brimstone” letter that he sent in response to Louis’ summons to the council at Attigny is available in translation in Eleanor Shipley Duckett, *Carolingian Portraits: A Study in the Ninth Century* (Michigan, 1989), 216-218. The letter translated here, written in the wake of Louis’ retreat, shows how Hincmar attempted to orchestrate peace in a world torn apart by internecine violence and foreign invasion.*

[Editor’s title: On the Rapine of Knights that is to be Restrained, addressed to King Charles the Bald, as he prepares for battle so that he might blunt the attack of his brother, Louis]

To my glorious Lord, health and life!

I know that you grieve about those evils that are being perpetrated in your kingdom not only by pagans but (what is to be dreaded and lamented more) by Christians, and (what is to be shuddered at and detested and blamed incomparably more) in your very own palace—which should be considered (and should actually be) sacred—along with [all of] those places where you are and through which you walk. Your heart cannot pass over without trepidation what the Lord says through Isaiah: “the plunder of the poor is in your house;”¹ and “the widow’s case is not brought before them;”² and “from the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no reason in it,”³ that is to say, there is no reason in this kingdom. And again: “adultery and killing, and plunder have overflowed, and blood has touched blood,”⁴ that is to say, crime has been joined to crime. And it is clear that wherever such things occur, God cannot be [present] except for the purpose of judgment. Again he who speaks though the prophet says to those who find themselves in the midst of such things: “Wherefore, go out from among them, and touch not the unclean thing, and I shall receive you; and I shall live among you, and I shall be with you as God, and you shall be to me as sons and daughters.”⁵ What these [evil] ones do is no different than being a precursor of the army of Antichrist, whose voice said: “I shall not be moved from generation to generation without evil,”⁶ that is to say, I will do such evil things in one place, that before I arrive at another place, its inhabitants will already fear my arrival; and they will perceive [me] the same way in the future. I know that you fear that which the entire church, as a result of all of this, prays for: “Arise, O Lord God, let thy hand be raised;”⁷ that is to say, do not forget to avenge the poor people. And the Lord, who does not deceive, promises [this], saying: “On account of the misery of the needy and the groans of the poor, now will I rise up, says the Lord;”⁸ that is to say, I will administer vengeance now or in the immediate future. And knowing that you are becoming discouraged as a result of these and similar things, likewise I, with my own sins and with the afflictions of the people committed to me, unworthy as I am, suffer with you and I sigh along with your sighs. Yet I cannot figure out how I might otherwise succeed in consoling myself, given how exceedingly anxious [I am] about your and my peril as well as about the ruin and affliction of all the people, except to warn you, if not face to face, then with [this] letter, being terrified by the shepherd of shepherds, who says: “The hireling who is not the shepherd sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees.”⁹ He “flees” insofar as he sees evil and says nothing; he sees robbers and plunderings and other miseries made thick around the people committed to him and yet he leaves the admonition unsaid. Therefore, my lord, that which I alone am able [to do] about this, I do; that is, I ask the mercy of God and then I warn you, and I direct

¹ Isaiah 3:14.

² Isaiah 1:23.

³ Isaiah 1:6.

⁴ Hosea 4:2.

⁵ II Corinthians 6:16-17.

⁶ Psalm 9:27.

⁷ Psalm 9:33.

⁸ Psalm 11:6.

⁹ John 10:12.

admonitions to the priests so that they read them to the robbers throughout the villages, in which not only men on horseback but also the brokers themselves commit plunder. A copy of these [admonitions] I send to your domain, so that you might keep it in secret, and then, on a particular day, order your faithful to come, saying that you wish to announce to them whatever you want to say; then before they return home from your court, warn them according to the wisdom given to you by God. And may you inform [*habeatis*] your uncle Rudolf,¹⁰ who fears the Lord and hates evil, and who holds you and your kingdom dear, about this admonition so that he might help you and the others who are so faithful to you, as you well know. And, if it seems right to you, by intermingling threats—infrequently and not very harshly—with mercy, as the occasion calls for, by issuing threats for no other reason than that in this you will see who is faithful to God and who holds you dear and who from your kingdom longs to do right by you, you will strive to be worthy to God, if a helper should emerge for you for the deliverance of all so that these evils may recede from this kingdom. He who will not be a helper of God [*adjutor Dei*] in such matters and who will not be your friend or His, you will not be able to hold delight [in him], to the point that you would do something good for him the way you would if you truly knew him to be a friend. Whether in this manner or another, you know better than I am able to tell you, and you know better than I the qualities of those who are faithful; so temper your words according to what you know to be appropriate for any one of them. We know that a gentle whistle that can calm the wildness of a horse can also trigger the attentiveness of dogs. To those men whom it is not necessary for you to have with you now—who move from their dwellings with nearly all their family such that they have to live from the labor of others—entrust certain tasks that are pleasing and necessary to you so that they may [then] either return to their homes or stay with you with only a few [of their men]. That way they will be able to live in a just manner, insofar as you spend your time in a more fixed place in your kingdom until that time when you wish to go forth from there owing to some particular need, and the whole body of your faithful comes to you, to a place that you shall have specified. I greatly fear that such a people who offends God this way and does not correct itself will be incapable of assisting you or itself whenever it be necessary. Send [your] men out according to the custom of your predecessors so that they go far away for the sake of provisions and thereby assume responsibility for the peace. Do not send those who are like the ones about which the Apostle speaks when he says: “You who preach that men should not steal, steal.”¹¹ I am sending to you, as I said, a copy of our admonition, which I have sent through the villages so that—if it be pleasing to you—after your admonition you might command it to be read to those faithful to you in your presence, and you might tell them beforehand that these are the words of God, and [those reading them] are messengers of God, and [therefore] they ought not to neglect [these words] as [they pertain] to themselves or to their [men]. Guard these [admonitions] which I am furnishing and sending [to you], so that they may know nothing [of them] beforehand, but only through you; because if they know [about them ahead of time], it could be said that you [yourself] do not maintain them in full. You ought nevertheless to take counsel, that you command someone to admonish them everyday in your place so that it might be read to them on a daily basis as they come to your court and so that, if there are any who have not heard this admonition before, they will have no excuses, while you [having ordered it to be read] will have an excuse in the presence of God, having done as much as you were reasonably able to do. And do not neglect those chapters which the Council of Quierzy¹² sent through [the bishops] Wenilo [of Rouen, 858-862] and Erchanraus [bishop of Châlons, 858-868] to Attigny [*ad hunc Attiniacum*]¹³ last year to your brother Louis [the German] and which, with me having passed them on, my son Hincmar [bishop of Laon, 858-871] gave to you when he was with you in Burgundy. Read them diligently because, believe me, they were made more for you than for [Louis]. I believed that the mercy of God ought to recall you and that this admonition could be necessary and useful for you. Of the remaining [chapters], my lord, three came to me, which I was inclined to leave unsaid to you, lest among [all] the others your heart be moved too much as a result of it. But I have [since] decided it would be better to show them to you, because you cannot correct those things that have not come to your notice; nor can you escape some degree of divine judgment [even] if you, to whom whatever is committed by your subjects pertains, are ignorant of them [i.e., the chapters]; for even in our ignorance, we have been punished for non-trivial cases. And I would without a doubt incur blame, if I, knowing what might be useful for you to know, had not brought

¹⁰ Charles the Bald was the son of Louis “the Pious” and Judith. Rudolf was Judith’s younger brother.

¹¹ Romans 2:21,

¹² Hincmar gathered a synod at Quierzy from which he addressed a letter to Louis, taking him to task for his destructive invasion and threatening him with hellfire. For a translation of the letter, see Duckett, *Carolingian Portraits*, 216-218.

¹³ 50 kilometers northeast of Reims.

it to your attention. With regard to these three things that I heard, I refused to believe two of them and the third I accepted only reluctantly. The first of which is that it is being spread through the mouths of many that you say you ought not to involve yourself [*misculare*] at all with regard these plunderings and deprivations, that each person should defend his own to the extent he is able. Even though I knew it to be a lie, I did not want to conceal it from you; that way you could demonstrate with your actions that what is rumored by either ill-wishers or the aggrieved is false; because while it is the office of the king to always direct himself and others who do well toward doing better, and to keep the depraved from their evils, it is impious, concerning a kingdom subjected to himself, to demand goods and services from subjects, and not to make provision for them so they might have those things that are owed and demanded and be able to give back from them; and [thus] to command and order those things that are pleasing to [the king] and to prohibit and remove those things that are displeasing to God. Therefore am I presuming to suggest [these things] to your majesty because, with the kingdom of your father and grandfather divided into many parts, many chief places of your realm are lost—and it is essential for you, for the sake of the royal honor that befits you, that nothing be diminished with regard to those [places] which your predecessors were accustomed to hold—and pagans and false Christians usurp the most exhausted portion of your kingdom. And if the small portion in which your faithful ones are obliged to remain with you, were to be annihilated like this, neither you nor they [your faithful] will not be able to assemble in that place. The second of [these things] was [actually] told to me: that those who come to your palace crying out receive no consolation or good response there; I refuse to believe this one as well, knowing that you keep in your heart what Lord said: “He that plugs his ear to the cry of the poor, shall also cry himself and shall not be heard.”¹⁴ And when those of this type are not heard when they cry out, it points to the gospel, which says: “They will come, saying: ‘Lord, Lord, open to us.’ And he answering will say: ‘Amen I say to you, I know you not.’”¹⁵ The “not knowing” of God, to whom nothing is hidden, is condemnation, because there [in heaven] he cannot merit what he is asking from God, who here [on earth] refuses to hear what he has decreed; and in vain does he come to the door of the kingdom with his entreaties who wastes an opportunity [to do] suitable penance. The third, which I believed though not very willingly, is that after securing everything needed to eat and drink, the robbers either demand ransom from churches or they destroy them [i.e., the churches]. Whence I say with a profound sigh: what will come of such Christians as these [*de talibus poterit esse Christianis*]? Paul bore witness saying what he thought to be among the most grave sins, saying, “thou that abhorrest idols, committest sacrilege,”¹⁶ and indeed these ones pile up sacrilege with all the others and idols are not abominated, because that same Saint Paul himself identifies avarice as “the serving of idols.”¹⁷ May Omnipotent God, in accordance with this same apostle, grant that you desire and bring about for the sake of good will what is necessary for you and for us and for the kingdom committed to you.

¹⁴ Proverbs 21:13.

¹⁵ Mathew 25:11-12.

¹⁶ Romans 2:22.

¹⁷ Ephesians 5:5.