

‘After his death a great tribulation came to Italy...’ Dynastic politics and aristocratic factions after the death of Louis II, c. 870-c. 890

Simon MacLean

1. Introduction

Near the end of his continuation of Paul the Deacon’s *History of the Lombards*, the late-ninth century historian Andrew of Bergamo recorded the death of the emperor Louis II (855-75), in whose funeral he had participated.¹ Louis was in many ways the central figure of Andrew’s text, and he regarded the emperor’s demise as having grave consequences: ‘after his death a great tribulation came to Italy’ he lamented in his penultimate extant chapter.² Italy had been ruled since 774 by the Carolingians, a Frankish dynasty from north of the Alps. The disintegration of their empire in 888, followed by several decades during which the political landscape was dominated by complex struggles between rival rulers and aristocratic factions, has given Andrew’s gloomy statement the ring of eery prophecy.³ By the time the powerful Saxon king Otto I arrived to assert himself on this fractured landscape in the 950s, he was but the latest in a long line of transalpine rulers who sought to benefit from the internecine divisions which ran through the Italian political community. It is little wonder that Liutprand of Cremona, the kingdom’s next major historian, looked back from Otto’s reign over the pockmarked history of the previous half century and remarked that ‘the Italians always like to have two kings, so that they can use one to terrorise the other.’⁴ Accordingly, modern historians have come to agree that 875 was a major turning point in Italian political history, and that the historical era bookended by Louis’s death and Otto’s arrival

¹ Andrew, *Historia*, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SRL (Hanover, 1878), c. 18, p. 229. For help with this article I am grateful to Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, Conrad Leyser, Janet Nelson, Geoff West and Chris Wickham.

² Andrew, *Historia*, c. 19, p. 229: ‘Post cuius obitum magna tribulatio in Italia advenit.’

³ The classic narrative of the period is still G. Fasoli, *I Re d’Italia (888-962)* (Florence, 1949).

⁴ Liutprand, *Antapodosis*, ed. P. Chiesa, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* 156 (Turnhout, 1998), I.37, p. 26.

(and by the remarks of Andrew and Liutprand) should be regarded as a distinct period, characterised above all by weak kingship and conflict between aristocratic factions.⁵

This is hard to argue with as a general description of this period, which coincides with an era of uncertainty across the continent between the end of the Carolingian Empire and the rise of its Ottonian successor, but it is more difficult to explain *why* warring aristocratic factions came to dominate the political stage. Historians have tended to avoid this question by using a generalised vocabulary of ‘chaos’ and ‘crisis’ derived from two central assumptions: that groups within the Italian nobility harboured ‘pro-French’ and ‘pro-German’ sympathies⁶; and that the aristocracy ‘rose’ in the ninth century at the expense of the kings.⁷ In this view, most systematically and influentially expounded in a classic article by Hagen Keller, the weak post-Louis II kings were not only unable to restrain their nobles but were even forced to recognise, empower and institutionalise rising aristocratic power.⁸ However, recent scholarship has thrown doubt on the central assumptions underpinning these arguments, which ultimately stem from the grand narratives of European history established in the nineteenth century. Historians are increasingly cautious about both the projection of modern national identities onto the past

⁵ P. Delogu, ‘Vescovi, conti e sovrani nella crisi del regno Italico (ricerche sull’aristocrazia Carolingia in Italia III)’, in *Annali della scuola speciale per archivisti e bibliotecari dell’Università di Roma* 8 (1968), pp. 3-72, at p. 3. On 875 as a turning point: O. Capitani, *Storia dell’Italia medievale, 410-1216* (Rome and Bari, 1986), p. 126; G. Arnaldi, *Natale 875. Poetica, ecclesiologica, cultura del papato altomedievale* (Rome, 1990), p. 25; G. Albertoni, *L’Italia Carolingia* (Rome, 1997), pp. 55-8; D. Arnold, *Johannes VIII. Päpstliche Herrschaft in den karolingischen Teilreichen am Ende des 9. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt, 2005), pp. 64-5.

⁶ Delogu, ‘Vescovi’, pp. 35-58.

⁷ W. Schlesinger, ‘Die Auflösung des Karlsreiches’, in W. Braunfels (ed.), *Karl der Grosse* vol.1 (Düsseldorf, 1965) pp. 792-857 was influential. For critiques of this view see G. Sergi, ‘L’Europa Carolingia e la sua dissoluzione’, in N. Tranfaglia and M. Firpo (eds.), *La storia. I grandi problemi dal medioevo all’Età contemporanea* (10 vols., Turin, 1986), ii, pp. 231-62; S. MacLean, *Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century: Charles the Fat and the End of the Carolingian Empire* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 1-22.

⁸ H. Keller, ‘Zur Struktur der Königsherrschaft im karolingischen und nachkarolingischen Italien. Der “consiliarius regis” in den italienischen Königsdiplomen des 9. und 10. Jahrhunderts’, *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 47 (1967) pp. 123-223; P. Delogu, ‘Strutture politiche e ideologia nel regno di Lodovico II (recherche sull’aristocrazia Carolingia in Italia II)’, in *Bullettino dell’Istituto storico Italiano per il medio evo e archivio Muratoriano* 80 (1968), pp. 137-89, at p. 188; C. Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy. Central Power and Local Society, 400-1000* (London and Basingstoke, 1981), pp. 168-70; Albertoni, *L’Italia Carolingia*, pp. 50-5; P. Cammarosano, *Nobili e re. L’Italia politica dell’alto medioevo* (Rome, 1999), pp. 200-2. For a brief critique of Keller see F. Bougard, ‘La cour et le gouvernement de Louis II (840-875)’, in R. Le Jan (ed.), *La royauté et les elites dans l’Europe carolingienne (début IXe siècle aux environs de 920)* (Lille, 1998), pp. 249-67, at p. 259.

and the characterisation of relationships between kings and aristocrats as a zero-sum game in which one became more powerful in direct proportion to the weakness of the other. The fortunes of rulers in this period were determined less by institutional stability than by their ability to create and manipulate patronage networks among the nobility, whose alliance was essential to the effectiveness of royal power.⁹

Due to the regional traditions of Italian historiography and the relative paucity of narrative sources, the implications of all this for the dynastic politics of late-ninth- and tenth-century Italy have not been fully explored, with notable exceptions such as Barbara Rosenwein's important work on the charters of Berengar I (888-924).¹⁰ Taking its cue from Rosenwein's insights, the present article focuses on royal-aristocratic politics between about 870 and 890 and aims to throw some light on the detail of a period whose political history has hitherto received minimal scholarly attention. The central argument is that most descriptions of the immediate post-Louis II era mischaracterise the motivations of both aristocrats and kings, and thus misunderstand the relationship between them. By writing them off as symptomatic of 'chaos', historians have neglected the extent to which the formation of aristocratic factions was conditioned by their ongoing relationship with the political centre, whether or not it was strong. In challenging the simple correlation of royal weakness with aristocratic factionalism, I aim to restore kings to the political history of this period by emphasising the importance of shifts in patterns of dynastic politics and patronage in explaining the behaviour of the nobility.¹¹ The article is structured chronologically to emphasise change over time, but does not seek to provide a comprehensive political narrative. I will look at the factors shaping royal patronage of the aristocracy in two distinct periods: the immediate aftermath of Louis II's death; and the reign of the last Carolingian king of Italy, Charles

⁹ For example: W. Davies and P. Fouracre (eds), *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1995); M. Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: the Middle Rhine Valley, 400-1000* (Cambridge, 2000).

¹⁰ B.H. Rosenwein, 'The Family Politics of Berengar I, King of Italy (888-924)', *Speculum* 71 (1996), pp. 247-89; B.H. Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space. Power, Restraint and Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 137-55.

¹¹ The dynamics here described are quite well-known in general: see S. Gasparri, 'The Aristocracy', in C. La Rocca (ed.), *Italy in the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 59-84, esp. pp. 79-82. My argument is that the role of kings has not properly been documented or taken into account.

the Fat. By way of conclusion, I contrast my findings with the period after the end of the empire in 888.

2. Aristocratic factions and the death of Louis II (875)

As Andrew lamented, the immediate aftermath of Louis II's death was indeed turbulent. The wealthy Italian realm, with the associated imperial title, was much coveted by various of the late ruler's transalpine relatives who were poised to take advantage of his heirlessness. Louis's uncle, the west Frankish king Charles the Bald, emerged victorious after fighting off the east Frankish bid of his cousin Karlmann of Bavaria. The conflict came perilously close to open warfare, unusual in Frankish politics of the ninth century, and much incidental damage was done to the property of various important Lombard monasteries.¹² The intrigues did not come to an end when Karlmann succeeded Charles as Italian king in 877. The king's ill health (he may have suffered a stroke) kept him in Bavaria most of the time and his relatives began jostling for position to succeed him. Meanwhile, Pope John VIII, indignant at Karlmann's failure to defend Rome from Muslim and aristocratic assailants, travelled to Troyes in 878 and invited Louis the Stammerer, Charles the Bald's son, to take up the imperial dignity.¹³

For present purposes, the intricacies of these events are less important than the deep divisions within the aristocracy that underpinned them. Immediately following Louis II's death the major nobles of northern Italy divided into two factions: one, based in the north east, supported the claim of Karlmann to the throne; the other, focused on Milan in the north west, supported Charles the Bald. It is clear that these groups were regarded by contemporaries as relatively coherent factions. Paolo Delogu's analysis of the charter evidence showed that while Charles the Bald reigned the Milan faction prospered and the north-easterners were deliberately excluded from the circuits of royal patronage; and that

¹² Andrew, *Historia*, c. 19-20, pp. 229-30; F. Grat et al (eds.), *Annales de Saint-Bertin* (Paris, 1964), s.a. 877, p. 216; *Registrum Johannes VIII. Papae*, ed. E. Caspar, MGH Epp vol. 7 (Berlin, 1928), no. 43. See also J.L. Nelson, 'Violence in the Carolingian World and the Ritualization of Ninth-Century Warfare', in G. Halsall (ed.), *Violence and Society in the Early Medieval West* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 90-107, at pp. 101-3.

¹³ J. Fried, 'Boso von Vienne oder Ludwig der Stammler? Der Kaiserkandidat Johannes VIII.', *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 32 (1976), pp. 193-208.

the reverse held true once Karlmann came to power.¹⁴ These groups had acknowledged leaders. The north-eastern faction was led by the *marchio* Berengar of Friuli and the widowed Empress Engelberga, and included other influential figures such as Bishop Wibod of Parma. Berengar was the guardian of Louis and Engelberga's daughter, and papal letters imply he was perceived to have the ability to control the loyalties of the north-eastern nobility.¹⁵ The other grouping was focused on Archbishop Ansbert of Milan and backed initially by Pope John. The extent of Ansbert's influence is illustrated by a subsequent dispute with the pope. After the archbishop and his subordinate prelates failed to meet John on his return from west Francia in 878, the pope excommunicated him.¹⁶ However, the anathema was not observed in the north-west, where, much to John's disgust, Ansbert managed to consecrate a new bishop to the see of Vercelli with the approval of his subordinates. The precise issue at stake in the dispute is unclear, but may have been connected with the question of the succession: in one letter the pope forbade the archbishop to confer with any would-be king without permission.¹⁷ It is striking that John thought Ansbert was in a position to intervene decisively in the succession to the Italian throne. This suggests his influence extended to the formation of opinion among the secular aristocracy as well as the bishops of the north-west.

How and why did these factions come into being? Our starting point must be the observation that they appeared fully-formed in 875, and were already being played out at Louis's funeral: having been buried in Brescia, a power-base of Engelberga, the king was subsequently disinterred and translated to Milan by Ansbert.¹⁸ Rather than reading the prominence of these factions as a symptom of royal weakness after 875, we must therefore seek reasons for their formation within the pattern of Carolingian politics before Louis's death.

¹⁴ Delogu, 'Vescovi', esp. pp. 21-31. See also P. Delogu, 'Lombard and Carolingian Italy', in R. McKitterick (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History II c.700-c.900* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 290-319.

¹⁵ *Registrum*, ed. Caspar, nos. 74, 109, 241.

¹⁶ *Registrum*, ed. Caspar, nos. 188, 202, 212, 228.

¹⁷ *Registrum*, ed. Caspar, no. 203.

¹⁸ Andrew, *Historia*, c. 18, p. 229. The monastery of St-Ambrose also housed the bodies of the Italian kings Pippin I and, perhaps, Bernard: C. Brühl, *Fodrum, Gistum, Servitium Regis. Studien zu den wirtschaftlichen Grundlagen des Königtums im Frankenreich und in der fränkischen Nachfolgestaaten Deutschland, Frankreich und Italien vom 6. bis zur Mitte des 14. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne, 1968), pp. 373-4.

The politics of the Carolingian dynasty during the 860s were defined by the extended divorce case of Lothar II, the king of middle Francia, on whose outcome depended a series of succession issues.¹⁹ It was only towards the end of the decade, and especially after Lothar's death in 869, that the succession to his heirless brother Louis II became an increasingly pressing diplomatic issue. The rise of Italy to the top of the agenda is reflected in the meeting held in 868 by Louis's uncles Charles the Bald and Louis the German, kings of west and east Francia respectively, who agreed that if the opportunity arose they would divide their nephews' realms between them.²⁰ Meanwhile Pope Hadrian II (867-72) dangled the promise of his backing before both rulers.²¹ Recognising the mounting importance of the issue, in 872 the Empress Engelberga travelled north for discussions with both Louis the German and Charles the Bald about the succession, hoping in return to acquire influence in Francia. However, only Louis was ready to make such concessions, and received in return guarantees that his eldest son Karlmann would succeed the heirless emperor; Charles refused to negotiate.²² Shortly before Louis II died, the east Frankish king renewed this deal by making a grant of Italian properties to the emperor's daughter: he must have received these estates, which were normally controlled by female members of the Italian ruling dynasty, from Engelberga during the original negotiations in 872.²³

Developments in papal-east Frankish relations interacted with these events. As the pontificate of Hadrian II drew to a close, news arrived that the Bulgars, whose ecclesiastical allegiance had been a recent bone of contention between Rome and

¹⁹ See S. Airlie, 'Private Bodies and the Body Politic in the Divorce Case of Lothar II', *Past and Present* 161 (1998), pp. 3-38.

²⁰ A. Boretius and V. Krause (eds.), *Capitularia regum Francorum*, vol. 2 (Hanover, 1897), no. 245, pp. 167-8; J.L. Nelson, *Charles the Bald* (London and New York, 1992), p. 217; E.J. Goldberg, *Struggle For Empire: Kingship and Conflict Under Louis the German, 817-876* (Ithaca, 2006), p. 294.

²¹ Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, p. 238.

²² Grat et al (eds.), *Annales de Saint-Bertin*, s.a. 872, p. 186. The east Frankish designation is also indicated by Basil I's diplomatic contact with Louis the German, probably initiated to discuss the future of Italy: F. Kurze (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses*, MGH SRG (Hanover, 1891), s.a. 873, p. 81. For a general outline of Louis's dealings with Italy see W. Hartmann, *Ludwig der Deutsche* (Darmstadt, 2002), pp. 120-2.

²³ P. Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Ludwigs des Deutschen, Karlmanns und Ludwigs des Jüngeren* (MGH Diplomata regum Germaniae ex stirpe Karolorum 1) (Berlin, 1932-4), no. 157; P. Darmstädter, *Das Reichsgut in der Lombardei und Piemont (568-1250)* (Strasbourg, 1896), pp. 106-8.

Constantinople, had succumbed to the insistent overtures of the Byzantine church. Fearing that the influence of the Greek rite might reach even further west, Hadrian approved the request of the Slavic prince Kocel (a Frankish client) to revive the ancient see of Sirmium and appoint the Greek missionary Methodius as archbishop of Pannonia and Moravia, and papal legate to the Slavs.²⁴ This decision greatly angered the archbishop of Salzburg and his suffragans, who considered the evangelisation of the Slavs as part of their natural remit. A pamphlet was produced to bolster the Salzburg case, and helped the archbishop to draw Louis the German into the dispute.²⁵ Louis had his own aspirations on the eastern frontier which coincided with the interests of the aggrieved prelates, and following military action Methodius was captured, condemned before a kangaroo court of Salzburg suffragans and confined to a monastery. On his succession in December 872, John VIII immediately turned up the pressure on Louis over the Methodius affair, pressing for the missionary's release and attempting to place Pannonia directly under papal control. John also summoned the bishops who had tried Methodius to Rome, threatened them with excommunication, and began to make overtures to Charles the Bald, Louis's rival.²⁶ At exactly the time when Louis II and Engelberga were establishing close political links with the east Frankish royal family, therefore, the pope was adopting a hostile stance towards them.

The stage was thus set for a dispute. Louis II may well have foreseen the trouble these dormant tensions would cause after his death, and he seemingly brokered a reconciliation between the pope and the east Frankish king at Verona in 874.²⁷ Yet this last-minute display of solidarity cannot mask the fact that the succession to Louis II had by this time been a matter of open dispute for some years. This uncertainty provides a context for the

²⁴ J. Shepard, 'Slavs and Bulgars', in McKitterick (ed.), *New Cambridge Medieval History II*, pp. 228-48, at pp. 241-3; B. Bigott, *Ludwig der Deutsche und die Reichskirche im Ostfränkischen Reich (826-876)* (Husum, 2002), pp. 155-6, 167-77; Arnold, *Johannes VIII.*, pp. 167-72; Goldberg, *Struggle for Empire*, pp. 309-20.

²⁵ *De conversione Bagoariorum et Carantanorum Libellus*, ed. G.H. Pertz, MGH SS 11 (Hanover, 1854), pp. 1-15; S. Airlie, 'True Teachers and Pious Kings: Salzburg, Louis the German, and Christian Order', in R. Gameson and H. Leyser (eds.), *Belief and Culture in the Middle Ages. Studies Presented to Henry Mayr-Harting* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 89-105.

²⁶ *Registrum*, ed. Caspar, Fragmenta nos. 21, 23; Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, pp. 231-8.

²⁷ *Registrum*, ed. Caspar, no. 293; Kurze (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses*, s.a. 874, pp. 82-3; Goldberg, *Struggle for Empire*, pp. 324-5, 331-2.

formation of political factions within Italy: the contrasting relationships being simultaneously formed by the papacy and the imperial couple with the east and west Frankish rulers must have had a significant role in shaping Italian aristocratic loyalties. These relationships legitimised the adoption of mutually exclusive positions on the part of the nobles.

The pressure on leading aristocrats to declare for one or other side was intensified by active lobbying on the part of both claimants, who doggedly courted opinion-formers in Italy in the early years of the 870s through the regular dispatch of embassies.²⁸ More importantly, both kings were willing to press their claims with decisive and sometimes violent political manoeuvres. In 871, when a false rumour spread that Louis II had been killed, Louis the German immediately sent his youngest son Charles the Fat to establish east Frankish influence in the Italian-controlled area around Lake Geneva which included important Alpine passes.²⁹ In response to the same rumour, Charles the Bald imprisoned his rebellious son Carloman, in part to prevent him from trying his luck across the Alps and hence to preserve his own opportunity of seizing Italy.³⁰ Louis II soon reasserted his control of the kingdom. Within a year, however, the succession prompted another bout of political intrigue when a faction of nobles tried to persuade the emperor to divorce Engelberga and marry the daughter of Count Winigis of Siena. It is likely that this attempt was underwritten by the Holy See and reflected the pope's hostility to the east Franks: the pressure was put on Louis while he was in Rome.³¹ Moreover, the attempt to undermine Engelberga must have been a reaction to the deal that she had just weeks earlier brokered with Louis the German concerning the succession. The empress herself responded to these events by sending letters of friendship to Charles the Bald. According

²⁸ The scattered references to these legations are collected by: Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, pp. 241-2; Bigott, *Ludwig der Deutsche*, p. 155; Hartmann, *Ludwig der Deutsche*, p. 204.

²⁹ S. MacLean, 'The Carolingian Response to the Revolt of Boso, 879-87', *Early Medieval Europe* 10 (2001), pp. 21-48, at pp. 40-3.

³⁰ This is my inference from Grat et al (eds.), *Annales de Saint-Bertin*, s.a. 871, pp. 183-4. On Carloman's career see J.L. Nelson, 'A Tale of Two Princes: Politics, Text, and Ideology in a Carolingian Annal', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 10 (1988), pp. 105-41; reprinted in J.L. Nelson, *Rulers and Ruling Families in Early Medieval Europe* (Aldershot, 1999).

³¹ Grat et al (eds), *Annales de Saint-Bertin*, s.a. 872, p. 188; E. Hlawitschka, *Franken, Alemannen, Bayern und Burgunder in Oberitalien (774-962). Zum Verständnis der fränkischen Königsherrschaft in Italien*, (Freiburg, 1960), p. 68, n. 6.

to the west Frankish annalist Hincmar of Rheims this was done in an attempt to disguise the arrangement already made with Louis the German; but it also makes sense as an attempt to mollify those Italian magnates who were pressuring her husband to repudiate her, and who may thus have preferred the prospect of being ruled by Charles the Bald. The record of an assembly held by Charles at this time makes an obtuse reference to Italy as a land ‘that God will grant you hereafter’, which shows that he, in response to Engelberga’s negotiations with his brother, was girding his loins to pitch a claim to the *regnum*.³²

All this very physical jostling for position came to a head when Louis died in late summer 875, opening up a short-lived but spectacular bout of hot conflict whose course confirms the idea that the factional lines between the key players had already been drawn. Both Italian factions invited their respective candidates to come and take the throne.³³ Charles the Bald immediately moved across the Alps and his brother reacted by invading west Francia and sending two of his sons into Italy.³⁴ Both east Frankish armies entered Italy through Berengar’s territory. While one son, Karlmann, confronted Charles the Bald, the other, Charles the Fat, was joined by Berengar and ‘a multitude of the rest of his people’ in an attack on various north-western locations including Milan.³⁵ Hincmar clearly refers to the north-eastern faction as ‘some of the leading men of Italy [who] did not come over to Charles [the Bald].’³⁶ The other faction was alluded to by the Mainz annalist in his description of Charles ‘carving up the kingdom with his followers.’³⁷ The conflict also had repercussions in Rome, where an aristocratic party allied to Formosus, sometime bishop of Porto and future pontiff, used the arrival of Karlmann and Charles the Fat to bring their opposition to John into the open.³⁸ Although on this occasion the

³² Boretius and Krause (eds.), *Capitularia*, vol. 2, no. 277, pp. 341-2.

³³ Andrew, *Historia*, c. 19, p. 229.

³⁴ Kurze (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses* s.a. 875, pp. 84-5; Grat et al (eds.), *Annales de Saint-Bertin*, s.a. 875, pp. 198-9; Caspar (ed.), *Registrum*, no. 43.

³⁵ Andrew, *Historia*, c. 19, p. 230; Kurze (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses* s.a. 875, p. 84.

³⁶ Grat et al (eds.), *Annales de Saint-Bertin*, s.a. 875, p. 199.

³⁷ Kurze (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses* s.a. 875, p. 85.

³⁸ Arnaldi, *Natale 875*, pp. 18-23; Arnold, *Johannes VIII.*, pp. 63-4, 181-5.

pope prevailed, the episode shows how the succession dispute resonated with and legitimised conflicts even within Rome itself.³⁹

Between 871 and 875, then, the succession to Louis II developed from a relatively abstract issue in diplomatic negotiations into a cause of concrete political action on the part of Carolingian rulers and their supporters. Consequently, a hypothetical debate about the future became a pressing issue in the political present. Members of the Italian aristocracy were forced to choose sides in advance: loyalties were created, reinforced and put into action, not merely projected.

It is more difficult to be sure why individual power-brokers decided which way to jump. Although a long-standing east/west division in Lombard political geography helps us make some sense of the general pattern, we still have to explain why such a division was reactivated at this time. Bribery and threats must have played a part in this process, as they often did in Carolingian politics. Indeed, an annalist writing at Mainz claimed that Charles the Bald's ultimate success was more or less exclusively a result of his superior ability to bribe the pope.⁴⁰ However, underlying sympathies were also important. Berengar's support for Karlmann finds a context in the close political links which existed between Friuli and Bavaria during the ninth century.⁴¹ Engelberga, who had consistently supported the east Frankish designation since 872, also provided a focal point for the north-easterners.⁴² Berengar was the guardian of the empress's daughter and was related

³⁹ This group was later involved in the murder of John: Kurze (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses*, s.a. 882, p. 99; Arnaldi, *Natale 875*, pp. 23-5.

⁴⁰ Kurze (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses*, s.a. 875, p. 85. Gifts to St Peter would have been expected of the emperor-elect, and are noted by various sources; the Mainz annalist spins this as corruption. However, Caspar (ed.), *Registrum*, Fragmenta, no. 59 suggests that John had declared for Charles immediately after Louis II's death.

⁴¹ See A. Schmid, 'Bayern und Italien vom 7. bis zum 10. Jahrhundert', in H. Beumann and W. Schröder (eds.), *Die transalpinen Verbindungen der Bayern, Alemannen und Franken bis zum 10. Jahrhundert* (Sigmaringen, 1987), pp. 51-91; U. Ludwig, *Transalpine Beziehungen der Karolingerzeit im Spiegel der Memorialüberlieferung: prosographische und sozialgeschichtliche Studien unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Liber vitae von San Salvatore in Brescia und des Evangeliiars von Cividale* (Hanover, 1999).

⁴² Engelberga's influence was built on her imperial status and her membership of an important aristocratic family: see C. Odegaard, 'The Empress Engelberge', *Speculum* 26 (1951), pp. 77-103; S. MacLean, 'Queenship, Nunneries and Royal Widowhood in Carolingian Europe', *Past and Present* 178 (2003), pp. 3-38 at pp. 26-32; T. Lazzari, 'Una mamma carolingia e una moglie supponide: percorsi femminili di

to the empress at two generations: his paternal aunt was married to Engelberga's cousin, while his own wife was her niece.⁴³ These immediate associations may have played a part in drawing his allegiances away from his maternal uncle Charles the Bald and towards his cousin Karlmann. The north-western faction, on the other hand, must have been shaped in part by the influence of archbishop Ansbert. Behind him stood the pope, who had for the most part favoured Charles since 872.⁴⁴ In any case, these antagonistic factions were forged in the heat generated by disputes within the Carolingian dynasty, and between some of its members and the papacy, during the late 860s and early 870s. Existing aristocratic rivalries were given form and legitimacy by wider dynastic conflicts. Tensions at the highest level created and resonated with rivalries among the aristocracy, sending fault lines down through the bedrock of the political community. These factions did not represent 'pro-French' and 'pro-German' interests, but were a product of the interaction between political deals, royal interventions, doubt over the future and fast-moving circumstances.

The significance of these aristocratic groups during the second half of the 870s was not so much a symptom of weak kingship as of a situation in which two strong rulers disputed the crown. That these disputes were still articulated within the Carolingian dynastic system is illustrated by Bishop Anthony of Brescia's letter to his counterpart Salomon II of Constance early in the year 878.⁴⁵ Anthony feared that the manoeuvrings of the three healthy kings north of the Alps to position themselves to succeed Karlmann would end in violence: 'we expect with great reluctance the plundering of first one, then the other, until they agree amicably among themselves to whom they want to concede that province.' The anxious bishop added: 'accordingly, it is proper that we submit to one alone, and serve the rest gladly as far as we can.' Salomon, a partisan of Charles the

legittimazione e potere nel regno italico', in G. Isabella (ed.), *'C'era una volta un re...'* *Aspetti e momenti della regalità* (Bologna, 2005), pp. 41-57.

⁴³ G. Arnaldi, 'Berengario I', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* vol. 9 (Rome, 1967), pp. 1-26, at pp. 3-4.

⁴⁴ Caspar (ed.), *Registrum*, Fragmenta, no. 59 suggests John backed Charles in 875. The pope's correspondence on east Frankish affairs confirms his frosty attitude to Louis the German: Arnold, *Johannes VIII.*, pp. 158-67.

⁴⁵ K. Zeumer (ed.), *Collectio Sangallensis*, MGH Formulae Merovingici et Karolini Aevi (Hanover, 1886), no. 39.

Fat, one of the kings in question, tried to reassure Anthony that the issue was not as confused as he feared, and was being settled by negotiation.⁴⁶ The fact that Anthony felt compelled to decide which potential ruler to support vividly illustrates the unenviable pressure placed on nobles who got caught in the middle of royal disputes. At the same time, it is notable that both bishops assumed the matter would be resolved between the ruling Carolingians. Succession disputes such as the one that produced the Italian factions of the 870s were endemic in the Frankish world, and the tribulations which followed Louis II's death did not stand out qualitatively from the normal texture of Carolingian politics: even Anthony, nervous about the future and clearly out of the loop, did not doubt that the dispute would be resolved, like numerous earlier ninth-century conflicts, within the context of the Carolingian dynasty.⁴⁷ Such tension was a perennial by-product of Frankish dynastic politics, not a symptom of Carolingian power entering a terminal tailspin after 875.

3. Patterns of patronage, 879-88

The factions that dominated Italian politics in the years 875-9 did not remain absolutely static: John VIII, for instance, was ultimately forced to put his trust in Karlmann as premature death eroded the list of alternatives.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, they are usually seen by historians as playing a key role until at least the 890s.⁴⁹ This view has been encouraged by a negative view of the reign of Charles 'the Fat', Italy's last male-line Carolingian ruler, whose flaccid grip on power is thought to have handed more power to the aristocracy and hastened the rapid descent in the fortunes of Italian kingship after 875.⁵⁰ However, there are reasons to question this interpretation. During his eight years as ruler of the *regnum* (November 879-November 887) Charles, called Carlito (Charlie) by the

⁴⁶ Zeumer (ed.), *Collectio Sangallensis*, no. 40.

⁴⁷ Cf. S. Airlie, 'Semper fideles? Loyauté envers les carolingiens comme constituant de l'identité aristocratique' in Le Jan (ed.), *La royauté*, pp. 129-43.

⁴⁸ Though his claim that he ruled Italy in the king's absence was hardly guaranteed to reconcile him to such as the archbishop of Milan or the *dux* of Spoleto: *Registrum*, ed. Caspar, no. 241.

⁴⁹ To some extent, the supporters of the Berengarian/east Frankish party during the 870s formed the core of Berengar's following after 888: Delogu, 'Vescovi', p. 31.

⁵⁰ Hlawitschka, *Franken*, pp. 71-2; Cammarosano, *Nobili e re*, pp. 200-2. Delogu, 'Vescovi', p. 30 noted in passing the easing of factional tensions under Charles.

Italians to distinguish him from his uncle,⁵¹ made no less than six trips across the Alps, each lasting between four and ten months. Over this period he spent around 50% of his time in Italy and issued about half of his charters for cisalpine recipients.⁵² Given that Charlemagne himself only visited his southern realm four times in 40 years, and Louis the Pious never, these figures look even more striking. The fact that in 882 Charles was able to command a Lombard contingent on a campaign against the Vikings on the River Meuse strongly suggests that he was not as insignificant a king of Italy as has been assumed.⁵³

When Charles came to power the most influential figures in Italian affairs, John VIII, Engelberga, Berengar and Ansbert, were set against each other to a greater or lesser degree, each pursuing their own agendas and carrying significant bodies of opinion with them. However, the new king's charters suggest that he made great efforts to avoid the problems caused by his predecessors' reliance on exclusive factions. This is illustrated by the list of counts present at an assembly in Siena in March 881, who were accompanying him back from his imperial coronation in Rome.⁵⁴ They were: Berengar of Friuli; John VIII's kinsman and *comes* of the Holy See Farulf; another count called Berengar; Count Waltfred of Verona; Bertold count of the palace; Winigis count of Siena; Gotfred, count somewhere around Asti; Adalbert, probably the *dux* of Tuscany; Maurinus, active around Ravenna; and Erardus, possibly count in or near Modena.⁵⁵ These men represented not only wide geographical origins, but also came from all sides of the political rifts which had opened up in the years before 879. Farulf, therefore, was able to sit as a representative of the pope alongside Adalbert and Maurinus, two of John

⁵¹ Andrew, *Historia*, c. 19, p. 229.

⁵² For slightly varying figures see P. Hirsch, *Die Erhebung Berengars I. von Friaul zum König in Italien* (Strasbourg, 1910), pp. 137-8; F. Bougard, *La Justice dans le royaume d'Italie de la fin du VIIIe siècle au début du XIe siècle* (Rome, 1995), pp. 57-8.

⁵³ Regino of Prüm, *Chronicon*, ed. F. Kurze, MGH SRG (Hanover, 1890), s.a. 882, p. 119. See now A. Zettler, 'Der Zusammenhang des Raumes beidseits der Alpen in karolingischer Zeit – Amtsträger, Klöster und die Herrschaft Karls III.,' in H. Maurer *et al* (eds.), *Schwaben und Italien im Hochmittelalter* (Stuttgart, 2001), pp. 25-42; MacLean, *Kingship and Politics*, pp. 91-6, 178-85.

⁵⁴ P. Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls III.* (MGH Diplomata regum Germaniae ex stirpe Karolorum 2) (Berlin, 1936-7), no. 31 = C. Manaresi (ed.), *I Placiti del "Regnum Italiae"*, (vol. 1, Rome, 1955), no. 92.

⁵⁵ See Hlawitschka, *Franken*, pp. 175-6, 189-90, 237 and *s.v.*

VIII's most hated opponents during the 870s.⁵⁶ Maurinus seems to have been an associate of Engelberga's, as was Gotfred, whom John VIII commanded, along with two of her brothers, to protect the empress's properties in 879.⁵⁷ Meanwhile Winigis, as we have seen, was at the centre of a faction which in 872 had attempted to force Louis II to repudiate Engelberga and marry his daughter instead; and north-western nobles like Gotfred and Suppo sat alongside north-easterners like Berengar and Erardus for the first time in years. Attendance at court was not a matter of course. Presence or absence could be a political statement on the part of king or noble, as was the case when one or other faction was either excluded or absented itself from major assemblies during the period 875-9.⁵⁸ Whether or not they had forgotten all their differences, it is significant that Charles's entourage included men and women who had hitherto been political opponents.

The roots of this concord went back to the very beginning of his reign in Italy. Charles initially requested to meet John VIII at Pavia in November 879, suggesting that he preferred this as the venue for his inauguration.⁵⁹ John wrote back to say he could not make it, and Charles rescheduled the assembly at Ravenna in early January 880. Pavia, the old centre of the Lombard realm, was not visited often by Carolingian kings, so the selection of this north-western venue hints that Charles envisaged a role in his inauguration for Ansbert of Milan, friendship with whom he now urged on the pope. Their reconciliation was symbolically confirmed at the Ravenna coronation, which was presided over by Ansbert, John VIII, and Patriarch Walpert of Aquileia.⁶⁰ The extent to which Charles had managed to effect a formal reconciliation between the pope and the archbishop is highlighted by the fact that, probably at the same assembly, he succeeded in

⁵⁶ E. Hlawitschka, 'Die Widonen im Dukat von Spoleto', *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 63 (1983), pp. 20-92, at pp. 69-75; on Farulf see also A. Spicciani, 'I Farolfingi: una familia comitale a Chiusi e a Orvieto (secoli XI-XII)', in G. Andenna et al (eds.), *Formazione e strutture dei ceti dominanti nel Medioevo: marchesi, conti e visconti nel regno italico (secoli IX-XII)* (Rome, 1996), pp. 229-95, at pp. 251-2.

⁵⁷ *Registrum*, ed. Caspar, nos. 62, 239; Hlawitschka, *Franken*, pp. 189-90; Arnold, *Johannes VIII.*, pp. 192-8.

⁵⁸ Note that Charles the Bald had also been criticised for ruling west Francia with the help of a group of *speciales*: Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, pp. 240, 244.

⁵⁹ *Registrum*, ed. Caspar, nos. 233-4.

⁶⁰ Notker, *Erchanberti Breviarium Continuatio*, ed. G.H. Pertz, MGH SS 2 (Hanover, 1829), pp. 329-30.

resolving their dispute over the see of Vercelli by having his archchancellor and chief adviser Liutward installed as bishop.⁶¹

This newly-constructed alliance did not form accidentally: in part, it was the outcome of a deliberate royal strategy. What we know about the significance and stage-management of early medieval assemblies suggests that the orchestration of this display of unity would have been carefully negotiated in advance.⁶² Charles's part in this negotiation may have left traces in the first two charters he issued as king for Italian recipients in late 879. In one, he confirmed six holdings in the estate of Limonta near Lake Como to the monastery of St-Ambrose in Milan.⁶³ This intensely exploited property, which among other things provided a rich harvest of olive oil to the monks, was the object of a very long-running dispute between St-Ambrose and the house of Reichenau in Alemannia, with which Charles had extremely close links.⁶⁴ The second charter also saw the king intervening in an ancient conflict, this time between the churches of Arezzo and Siena.⁶⁵ Bishop John of Arezzo, whose church benefited from the document, was the pope's go-between with Charles the Bald, an arrangement that was undoubtedly connected with Charles's concession in 876 of influence to the papacy in the diocese of Arezzo.⁶⁶ The fact that Charles the Fat's first two acts in Italy were peremptory decisions in favour of long-standing claims of the church of Milan and the chief envoy of the pope is significant, and can be seen as part of a strategy for winning over Ansbert and John VIII.⁶⁷ By neither act

⁶¹ K. Schmid, 'Liutbert von Mainz und Liutward von Vercelli im Winter 879/80 in Italien. Zur Erschließung bisher unbeachteter Gedenkbucheinträge aus S.Giulia in Brescia', in E. Hassinger, J.H. Müller and H. Ott (eds.), *Geschichte, Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft. Festschrift Clemens Bauer zum 75. Geburtstag* (Berlin, 1974), pp. 41-60, at p. 53; H. Zielinski, *Die Regesten des Kaiserreichs unter den Karolingern 751-918 (926)* vol.3/1 (Cologne and Vienna, 1991), no. 601; Arnold, *Johannes VIII.*, pp. 186-92. *Registrum*, ed. Caspar, no. 264 shows John and Ansbert on good terms in November 880 (no. 233 shows Charles's role in this).

⁶² G. Althoff, *Spielregeln der Politik im Mittelalter: Kommunikation in Frieden und Fehde* (Darmstadt, 1997); T. Reuter, 'Assembly Politics from the Eighth Century to the Twelfth', in P. Linehan and J.L. Nelson (eds.), *The Medieval World* (London and New York, 2001), pp. 432-50.

⁶³ Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, no. 11a.

⁶⁴ R. Balzaretto, 'The Monastery of Sant' Ambrogio and Dispute Settlement in Early Medieval Milan', in *Early Medieval Europe* 3 (1994), pp. 1-18 discusses the estate at length.

⁶⁵ Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, no. 12.

⁶⁶ The arrangement was cemented with royal gifts to the bishop: G. Tessier et al (eds.), *Recueil des actes de Charles II le Chauve* (Paris, 1943-55), nos. 383, 404, 413; J.P. Delumeau, *Arezzo. Espace et sociétés, 715-1230* (Rome, 1996), pp. 228-30, 253.

⁶⁷ Ansbert's involvement with the affairs of St-Ambrose is suggested by his orchestration of Louis II's funeral there and other evidence: see G. Porro-Lambertenghi et al (eds.), *Codex Diplomaticus*

could he have hoped to solve the relevant dispute, and indeed both came back to court within a matter of months. Yet the important point is that he decided to intervene in these matters at all, and in view of the timing we should see them primarily as gestures issued with short-term political considerations in mind and intended for specific audiences.⁶⁸ The symbolism of these gestures not only publicised Charles's attitude to pope and archbishop, but also advertised his involvement with the broader political traditions of his new realm: they echoed, for example, the actions of Charlemagne, whose first act after his imperial coronation in 801 had been to assert his new position by ruling on the Arezzo – Siena dispute.⁶⁹

Our source for Charles's inauguration at Ravenna, which was based on an eye-witness report, relates that 'all the bishops and counts and the rest of the leading men of Italy' were in attendance, and that 'he bound all of them except the bishop of the apostolic see to the devotion of his service by swearing oaths.'⁷⁰ A survey of more of Charles's early charters confirms that his contacts were indeed as extensive as this version of events suggests. In addition to further grants to the church in Milan, he made an early concession to Bishop Wibod of Parma, on whose shoulders responsibilities were laid by several Italian kings, and who was also in attendance at Ravenna.⁷¹ Charles further entrusted Wibod with strategic properties in the Apennines which were crucial for provisioning royal expeditions to and from Rome.⁷² The Empress Engelberga and members of her entourage also benefited from considerable royal largesse early in the

Langobardiae (Historiae Patriae Monumenta 13) (Turin, 1873), no. 291; Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, no. 21.

⁶⁸ Arezzo vs. Siena: Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, no. 31 = Manaresi (ed.), *Placiti*, no. 92; Delumeau, *Arezzo*, pp. 230, 475-9. Limonta: Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, no. 23a; Balzaretto, 'Monastery of Sant' Ambrogio', pp. 5-8. On charters as public documents capable of delivering this sort of political message see T. Reuter, 'Regemque, quem in Francia pene perdidit, in patria magnifice recepit: Ottonian Ruler Representation in Synchronic and Diachronic Comparison', in G. Althoff and E. Schubert (eds.), *Herrschaftsrepräsentation im ottonischen Sachsen* (Sigmaringen, 1998), pp. 363-80, at pp. 376-8.

⁶⁹ M. Becher, 'Die Kaiserkrönung im Jahr 800. Eine Streitfrage zwischen Karl dem Grossen und Papst Leo III.', *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter* 66 (2002), pp. 1-38, at pp. 24-6. Arezzo almost always won in rulings on this dispute.

⁷⁰ Notker, *Continuatio*, pp. 329-30.

⁷¹ Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, nos. 21 and 23 for Milan; no. 15 for Wibod, issued at the Ravenna assembly.

⁷² Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, nos. 32-3; K. Schrod, *Reichsstrassen und Reichsverwaltung im Königreich Italien (765-1197)* (Stuttgart, 1931), pp. 27-31; R. Schumann, *Authority and the Commune. Parma, 833-1133* (Parma, 1973), pp. 25-6.

year 880.⁷³ At Christmas in the same year the king cemented his relationship with the empress by confirming properties and privileges of the royal abbey of S. Salvatore / S. Giulia in Brescia at the request of her daughter Irmingarde, its proprietor.⁷⁴ Berengar of Friuli's association with the new ruler was advertised when the pair sat in judgement, together with members of the *marchio*'s extended family, on a *placitum* at Pavia in November 880.⁷⁵ The king also advertised his relationship with some of the kingdom's main power-brokers by making them a series of interconnected land grants near the royal palace of Corteolona in 880-1.⁷⁶

Charles's many charters, then, do not constitute a checklist of alienated rights and properties which diminished royal power in favour of aristocratic. Rather, they hint at attempts to form, maintain and advertise the political alliances with powerful aristocrats on which early medieval kingship depended. That this endeavour was still working even in the very last years of Carolingian Italy is confirmed by the broad nature of the support that followed Charles the Fat to Rome in 881. Nonetheless, such alliances between kings and aristocrats in this period could never be taken for granted, but had to be constantly maintained. Charles mostly succeeded in this respect, but not without setbacks. A feud between Berengar and the archchancellor, Bishop Liutward of Vercelli, temporarily set two of his chief supporters against each other in 886-7, a result of the parvenu bishop's unwelcome attempts to forcibly marry one of his relatives into the *marchio*'s blue bloodline which may have reactivated north-east/north-west tensions.⁷⁷ A clearer failure was in central and southern Italy, where Charles's influence was only as good as his unstable relationship with the rebellious Guy, *dux* of Spoleto; he was never able to intervene there in as direct a fashion as had Louis II.⁷⁸ Despite this article's emphasis on

⁷³ Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, nos. 18 and 22.

⁷⁴ Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, no. 28. On his first visit in 879-80, Charles left Italy via S. Salvatore in Brescia, where his party's names were recorded in the memorial book: see Schmid, 'Liutbert'. He had some bridges of his own to rebuild here after having damaged the abbey on his previous visit across the Alps in 875: *Registrum*, ed. Caspar, no. 43.

⁷⁵ Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, no. 25 = Manaresi (ed.), *Placiti*, no. 89.

⁷⁶ MacLean, *Kingship and Politics*, pp. 93-6.

⁷⁷ Kurze (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses*, s.a. 886, 887, pp. 105-6, 114; Schmid, 'Liutbert', pp. 45-7.

⁷⁸ Kurze (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses*, s.a. 883, pp. 100, 109-10.

coherent aspects of royal strategy, such moments of crisis are an equally important part of the story, and serve to illustrate the contingent and precarious nature of royal power.

Nevertheless, Charles the Fat's reign is striking in its contrast to the period of Italian conflict after the death of Louis II. Why? The king's careful use of patronage is part of the answer, but cannot completely explain why previously antagonistic parties were willing to back him. Other candidates for the kingship were available: Charles's brother Louis the Younger, king of Saxony and Franconia, was also manoeuvring to make a bid for the crown after 876, and both he and Louis the Stammerer were courted by John VIII as possible successors during the illness of Karlmann. However, the lessons taught by the divisions of the years 875-9, which were not confined to Italy, were taken on board by this new generation of Carolingians, and in 879-80 they agreed a new family settlement which brought to an end a number of outstanding political and territorial disputes. These included the destination of the Italian realm, which was acknowledged by all parties as belonging to Charles the Fat.⁷⁹ As the anxious letter of Anthony of Brescia showed, divisions in the ruling house caused tensions in the aristocracy. The need, present or foreseen, to choose sides created considerable insecurity which damaged the confidence of nobles in the stability of their future positions and consequently undermined royal authority. The fragile consensus in the configuration of the royal house during the early 880s meant that Charles could be acknowledged by all aristocratic factions in Italy as the single source of royal patronage, and provided a fixed reference point around which disputes among the kingdom's ruling elite could revolve.

This situation was not guaranteed to last. To some extent the status quo was perpetuated by the early deaths of the emperor's relatives, which by late 884 left him as the only surviving legitimate male Carolingian. His more frequent sojourns north of the Alps after that date, particularly to west Francia, did not therefore have the same destabilising effect as had Karlmann's absenteeism. Another potential cause of division was the revolt of Boso of Vienne, who had himself proclaimed king in Provence in late 879. Boso was married to Irmingarde, the daughter of Engelberga and Louis II, and had audaciously

⁷⁹ As argued by MacLean, 'Carolingian Response.'

named his children after his in-laws, marking his closeness to the former empress and his aspiration to appropriate a royal Carolingian identity.⁸⁰ The count had further Italian links from the time he spent as Charles the Bald's representative in the *regnum*.⁸¹ Mindful of the potential rift that the revolt could open up between himself and Engelberga, Charles the Fat took the empress with him to Alemannia to prevent her from mobilising her influence in favour of her son-in-law. Although he kept her there for about two years, only releasing her on the final defeat of Boso in autumn 882, the emperor worked hard to maintain his relationship with her. The flow of charters in favour of Engelberga, her followers and her institutions did not abate.⁸² She may or may not have colluded in her 'kidnap': either way, she came quietly, thus avoiding the danger of fractures appearing in the network of political alliances established by Charles the Fat in his kingdom of Italy.

4. Conclusion: Factionalism and conflict after 888

Boso's rising was unique in the ninth century in its overt challenge to the Carolingians' monopoly on royal power.⁸³ His defeat ensured the continuation of this dynastic monopoly. However, when Charles the Fat died in January 888 without a legitimate heir, causing the definitive break-up of the Frankish empire, the situation necessarily changed. Rival bids for the Italian throne from the *marchiones* Berengar of Friuli and Guy of Spoleto renewed conflict among the aristocracy. However, these events cannot be explained simply by invoking a tipping of the scales from royal to aristocratic power: the factional politics of the 890s were superficially similar to those of the 870s, but were not driven by the same dynamics.⁸⁴ To finish this article, a few impressionistic examples will

⁸⁰ S. Airlie, 'The Nearly Men: Boso of Vienne and Arnulf of Bavaria', in A. Duggan (ed.), *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 25-41, esp. pp. 32-5.

⁸¹ Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, pp. 242-3.

⁸² Kehr (ed.), *Die Urkunden Karls*, nos. 22, 28, 29, 56; cf. F. Bougard, 'Engelberga', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (vol. 13, Rome, 1993), pp. 668-76, at p. 673.

⁸³ Airlie, 'Semper fideles?'

⁸⁴ Cf. Capitani, *Storia*, pp. 149-52. Rosenwein, 'Family Politics', esp. pp. 265-76 discusses networks within the aristocracy which helped determine the political behaviour of individual nobles; here I am only dealing with more general patterns of royal-aristocratic interaction.

serve to illustrate some of the subtle but significant changes in patterns of royal patronage after 888.

The claims of the post-888 competitors were not only equal but also inter- rather than intra-dynastic. Although Berengar was a female-line descendant of Louis the Pious, unlike Guy, none of the ‘kinglets’ who rose to power after the death of Charles the Fat could lay claim to the rhetoric of male-line legitimacy which had sustained the Carolingians, except perhaps Arnulf of Carinthia, Karlmann’s bastard son.⁸⁵ The second new development was that each contender had spent his whole political career in Italy, although Guy’s initial bid for a crown in 888 was made in west Francia.⁸⁶ As a result, each had well-established entourages and connections among the aristocracy. These were focused primarily in their home bases of Friuli and Spoleto, but both men had connections in the heart of the *regnum* as well. The fight was therefore very even in terms of both practical support and rhetorical justification.

Guy won the first round with victory in the battle of the River Trebbia, forcing Berengar back to his north-eastern stronghold in Verona. However, despite Guy’s ascendancy Berengar maintained his claim to control all of Italy, and continued to issue charters as king. This situation actively fomented tension within the aristocracy. A telling example is the case of the county of Piacenza which, in the aftermath of Guy’s victory at the Trebbia, was granted to Sigefrid, one of his leading supporters.⁸⁷ However, in a charter issued by the would-be ruler Berengar at Verona in 890 we meet Adelgisus, the nephew of Engelberga who had been count of the city under Charles the Fat, also bearing the title of ‘illuster comes’.⁸⁸ Although Berengar did not control the region where Piacenza lay,

⁸⁵ Regino of Prüm, *Chronicon*, ed. Kurze, s.a. 888, p. 129 is the classic account; Kurze (ed.), *Annales Fuldenses*, s.a. 888, p. 116 uses the term ‘kinglets’; E. Hlawitschka, ‘Waren die Kaiser Wido und Lambert Nachkommen Karls des Großen?’, in *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken* 49 (1969), pp. 366-86 discusses the contenders’ Carolingian credentials.

⁸⁶ B. Simson (ed.), *Annales Vedastini*, MGH SRG (Hanover, 1909), s.a. 888, p. 64.

⁸⁷ Manaresi (ed.), *Placiti*, no. 97; F. Bougard, ‘Entre Gandolfingi et Obertenghi: les comtes de Plaisance aux Xe et XIe siècles’, in *Mélanges de l’école française de Rome. Moyen age* 101 (1989), pp. 11-66, at p. 17; Hlawitschka, *Franken*, pp. 264-8. This shift of control had implications for the administration of the city: F. Bougard, ‘Pierre de Niviano, dit le Spolétin, sculdassius, et le gouvernement du comté de Plaisance à l’époque carolingienne’, in *Journal des Savants* (1996), pp. 291-337, at p. 294.

⁸⁸ L. Schiaparelli (ed.), *I Diplomi di Berengario I* (Fonti per la Storia d’Italia 35) (Rome, 1903), no. 9.

he evidently backed Adelgisus's claims in the city, which was one of the main centres of his family's power. It is not difficult to see how a situation in which two men as powerful as Sigefrid and Adelgisus claimed the same *honores* (offices), and both with (competing) royal approval, was inherently destabilising. Indeed, there is some evidence that the kings of the 890s actively encouraged this latent tension. In 898 Berengar gave Count Ermenulf, his 'comes militiae', rights in the county of Stazzona, on the western shore of Lake Maggiore, where he had interests before 888.⁸⁹ This grant was, however, made after the implementation of a regnal division between Berengar and Lambert, Guy's son, and Stazzona was well into Lambert's territory. The grant thus created an aspiration rather than establishing effective possession, as with Adelgisus's claim to Piacenza. The respective aristocratic followings of Berengar and Guy were thus given vested interests in continuing the struggle between their kings.⁹⁰

The tactic of 'hypothetically' granting the offices of hostile aristocrats to kings' allies was occasionally employed by Carolingian rulers.⁹¹ However, in Italy during the 890s such grants were used by kings to wrest control of the kingdom's heartlands, not just to snap up contested frontier regions, and also played out in the context of a new zero-sum dynastic game: rival Carolingian rulers at least recognised each other as potential kings. Multiple rulers meant multiple sources of patronage, and this helped aristocratic insecurity and conflict become an inbuilt feature of Italian politics, exacerbated by the arrival of transalpine pretenders who had no deep roots in the kingdom. These patterns of patronage had an effect on the status of *honores*, an important basis of aristocratic authority.⁹² Institutional rivalries were actively enhanced and perpetuated by successive kings: for example, shortly after Berengar confirmed long-disputed rights in Limonta to St-Ambrose in Milan, Arnulf granted them to Reichenau, before Lambert returned them

⁸⁹ Schiaparelli (ed.), *I Diplomi di Berengario*, no. 19. He had been involved in the administration of Engelberga's properties in the region: see Hlawitschka, *Franken*, pp. 177-8; Schiaparelli, *I Diplomi di Berengario*, no. 13.

⁹⁰ Although the grant was made after Berengar's advance to Milan, it was before Lambert's death.

⁹¹ For an example see Grat et al (eds.), *Annales de Saint-Bertin*, s.a. 869, p. 167 (Charles the Bald's grant to Boso of *honores* outside his kingdom). A similar model of conflict is proposed for Stephen's England by E. King, 'The Anarchy of Stephen's Reign', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 34 (1984), pp. 133-53.

⁹² On *honores* see S. Airlie, 'The Aristocracy', in McKitterick (ed.), *New Cambridge Medieval History II*, pp. 431-50, at pp. 443-7.

to Milan.⁹³ Where Charles the Fat had intervened in the Limonta dispute as a way of constructing consensus, the emergence of multiple aspirant dynasties meant that it now became an arena in which dynastic competition was played out. Examples like this suggest a situation in which key estates and *honores* distributed by one king to build aristocratic alliances could be swiftly redistributed by the next, creating a plurality of claims and a general lack of confidence in the security of office- and property-holding. The resulting insecurity made it a small step for losers among the magnates to seek to restore their standing by inviting in ‘their own’ king.

The post-888 period is desperately in need of renewed historiographical attention. These brief comments are intended only to highlight the complexity of the contemporary political scene and hence to underline this article’s central argument: namely, that the factionalism that dominated Italian politics after 875 cannot be explained as a simple manifestation of the progressive decline of royal authority at the expense of disruptive aristocratic power. Rather, fluctuating patterns of royal patronage must be seen as central to understanding aristocratic behaviour. Dynastic politics did not cease to matter after the death of Louis II, as historians have often assumed. On the contrary, dynastic and aristocratic politics remained intimately linked. The turmoil in the years following 875 was played out in a Carolingian framework, and its partial resolution in the reign of Charles the Fat followed from the restoration of concord within the ruling house. The real breach came after 888 when the end of the Carolingian male line sparked off a struggle for kingship fought out by two native competitors who were equal in legitimacy and military strength. Even when dynastic politics helped to perpetuate conflict through the weakness of rulers rather than to create consensus through their strength, in early medieval politics kings always mattered. With this in mind, it is surely time that the political history of Italy after the death of Louis II was re-evaluated.

⁹³ Manaresi (ed.), *Placiti*, no. 101.