

Book Six

HERE BEGIN THE CHAPTER HEADINGS OF THE SIXTH BOOK

1. Introduction.
2. About the fact that the emperor Constantine sends a messenger to Berengar.
3. With what craftiness Berengar sent a messenger to Constantinople, to whom he gave nothing.
4. At what time the same messenger left Pavia, and at what time he reached Constantinople.
5. About the admirable palace that is called Magnaura, and about the reception of the messenger.
6. About the gifts that Berengar's messenger bestowed, from his own property, upon the emperor on behalf of Berengar, who sent nothing.
7. About the fact that the emperor invites the messenger of Berengar to table.
8. About the admirable Decanean palace, and three large gold vases.
9. About the wondrous show performed at table.

1. The nature of the present time would turn me into a writer of tragedies instead of histories, unless the Lord "set a table in my sight against those who trouble me."¹ For I cannot explain by how many losses I am battered, having set out as a pilgrim, and it would suit my external persona better to weep than to write. Instead my inner self, encouraged by the apostolic statutes, is glorified by such tribulations, "knowing that tribulation works patience, and patience trial, and trial hope; and hope does not confound, because the charity of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us."² Therefore, let the external persona imitate the inner self and not only stop lamenting its misfortunes but actu-

1. Ps 22.5.

2. Rom 5.3-5.

ally acquiesce to them; and while hard at work writing, when one describes the wheel of fortune lifting these, lowering those, let one feel one's present loss less and, rejoicing in fortune's mutability, let one not fear worse things—which, frankly, there cannot be, unless death or debility of the limbs were to strike—but let one always expect favorable things. For if one's present condition changes, it will bring that health that is now absent, and chase off the misfortune that now prevails. Let me write, therefore, and add to what is written above the true events that follow.

2. With King Hugh dead in the region of Provence, the name of Berengar, celebrated among several nations, presently became so among the Greek ones, too. For he excelled all the Italians in strength, while Lothar was king in name only. Therefore, having heard that Berengar outstripped Lothar in power, Constantine, who held the empire of the Constantinopolitans, having cast down Romanos and his sons, sent letters to Berengar through a certain Andrew, who was called "count of the manor" from the nature of his office, and in them it was said that he strongly wanted to see a messenger of Berengar's, upon whose return to Italy Berengar would learn in what deep affection Constantine held him. He also wrote recommendation letters to him for Lothar, so that Berengar would be a faithful administrator for him since, with God granting it, he was his executor. Indeed, Constantine had no small solicitude for Lothar's health, piously thinking of it on account of his love for his daughter-in-law, who was Lothar's sister.³

3. So Berengar, pondering, with all the craftiness of which he was stuffed full, the question of whom he could send, to whom he would pay no expenses for the duration of the journey, summoned my stepfather, under whose tutelage I lived, and then said: "How useful it would be to me if your stepson were not ignorant of Greek letters!" And when he answered: "If only I could shell out half my wealth to attain that goal!" Berengar replied, "It is not necessary for you to spend even a hundredth part of it. Through

3. The details of this marital alliance are in 5.20, above.

letters the Constantinopolitan emperor prays that I send him one of my messengers; on account of his steadfastness of spirit, no one could do the chore better, and, on account of his eloquence, no one could do it more easily. Why need I state how much more easily a lad who drank down Latin teachings at such a young age would imbibe Greek ones?" My stepfather, readily encouraged by that hope, underwrote all the expenses, and sent me to Constantinople with great gifts.

4. In fact, leaving Pavia on the day of the calends of August, after three days of following the course of the Po, I reached Venice, and there I also found Salemon, the envoy of the Greeks, a palace butler and a eunuch, who had returned from Spain and Saxony and intended to depart for Constantinople, bearing great gifts and taking with him the messenger of our lord, then king, now emperor, the most wealthy prelate of Mainz, Liutefred. Leaving Venice at last on the eighth day before the calends of September, we arrived at Constantinople on the fifteenth before the calends of October; it will not be a nuisance to write about the unheard-of and wondrous way in which we were received there.⁴

5. For at Constantinople there is a palace next to the Great Palace, of wondrous beauty and size, that is called Magnaura by the Greeks, having inserted a "u" in the place of the digamma, as if it were *magna aura*.⁵ And so Constantine ordered this mansion to be prepared in due fashion both because of the messengers of the Spaniards, who then were coming there for the first time, and because of Liutefred and me. In front of the emperor's throne there stood a certain tree of gilt bronze, whose branches, similarly gilt bronze, were filled with birds of different sizes, which emitted the

4. Liudprand left Pavia on August 2, 949, and Venice on the 25th, reaching his destination on September 7th. Liudprand returned to Italy in early 950.

5. "Great Breeze" (Latin). The ceremonial hall (*magna aula*) on the edge of the Great Palace was basilican in plan. In the 900s it was already a venerable four hundred years old. See C. Mango, *The Brazen House* (Copenhagen: I Kommission hos Munksgaard, 1959), 57-59. On the automata favored by Byzantine rulers, see G. Brett, "The Automata in the Byzantine 'Throne of Solomon,'" *Speculum* 29 (1954): 477-87.

songs of the different birds corresponding to their species. The throne of the emperor was built with skill in such a way that at one instant it was low, then higher, and quickly it appeared most lofty; and lions of immense size (though it was unclear if they were of wood or brass, they certainly were coated with gold) seemed to guard him, and, striking the ground with their tails, they emitted a roar with mouths open and tongues flickering. Leaning on the shoulders of two eunuchs, I was led into this space, before the emperor's presence. And when, upon my entry, the lions emitted their roar and the birds called out, each according to its species, I was not filled with special fear or admiration, since I had been told about all these things by one of those who knew them well. Thus, prostrated for a third time in adoration before the emperor, I lifted my head, and the person whom earlier I had seen sitting elevated to a modest degree above the ground, I suddenly spied wearing different clothes and sitting almost level with the ceiling of the mansion. I could not understand how he did this, unless perchance he was lifted up there by a pulley of the kind by which tree trunks are lifted. Then, however, he did not speak at all for himself, since, even if he wished to, the great space between us would render it unseemly, so he asked about the life of Berengar and his safety through a minister. When I had answered him reasonably, and when his interpreter gave a sign, I left and was soon received in the hostel assigned to me.

6. But let it not be a nuisance to recollect what I did then for Berengar, in such a way that it might be acknowledged with what great kindness I loved him, and what manner of recompense I received from him for my good deeds. The messengers of the Spaniards and Liutefred, whom I mentioned above, the messenger of our lord Otto, then still king, had brought the emperor Constantine large gifts on behalf of their lords. Instead I had brought nothing more than a letter on behalf of Berengar, a letter full of lies. My spirit was therefore not a little agitated because of the shame of it, and carefully pondered what it should do about this situation. In my agitation and great hesitation my mind suggested that the gifts for

the emperor that I had brought on my own behalf I should present as coming from Berengar, and that I should adorn the slight value of the gifts with words as best I could. I offered, therefore, nine excellent breastplates, seven excellent shields with gilt bosses, two gilt silver cups, swords, spears, skewers, and four *carzimasia* slaves, to this emperor the most precious of all these things. For the Greeks call a child-eunuch, with testicles and penis cut off, a *carzimasium*. The merchants of Verdun do this on account of the immense profit they can make, and they are accustomed to bring them to Spain.

7. Once these things had been accomplished in this way, after three days the emperor ordered me to be called to the palace. And having spoken to me with his own mouth, he invited me to a meal, and after the meal he gave my retainers and me a great gift. Truly, as the opportunity for telling about it presents itself, I consider it good not to be silent but to write down what his table is like, especially on feast days, and what games are performed at table.

8. There is a residence near the hippodrome, toward the north, of wondrous height and beauty, which is called Decanneacubita. This name did not emerge from the structure itself but for quite obvious reasons; for in Greek the Latin "ten" is *deca* and "nine" is *ennea*, while we may say *cubita* derives from incubating, or lying, on a slope, or something slightly curved. All the more so since on the birthday, according to the flesh, of our Lord Jesus Christ, ten and nine tables are placed inside the residence, at which the emperor, and equally his guests, do not eat sitting up, as on other days, but reclining on curved couches; and on those occasions they are served not with silver but only from gold dishes. After the food, apples are brought in three gold dishes that, because of their immense weight, are not carried on the arms of men but are brought on purple-veiled carts. Only two of these, however, are placed at table. Through three holes in the roof there are [three] ropes wrapped with gilt leather, and they have been positioned with gold rings. Placed through the handles that project from the vessels, these rings allow such bowls to be lifted onto the table and lowered in the same way by means of a jointed device above the ceiling, with

four or more men helping below. Finally, I omit the shows I saw there, since it is a very long thing to write about; but one alone, on account of its astonishing quality, it will not be unpleasant to insert here.

9. There enters some fellow sustaining on his forehead without the help of his hands a wooden pole that is twenty-four and more feet long, which had, a cubit below its tip, a crosspiece two cubits long. Then two naked boys were led in, but girt with short knickers, that is, wearing brief costumes, who climbed up the wooden pole and played around there, and then, clambering back down it with their heads turned upside-down, they maintained the pole so motionless that it appeared rooted to the earth. Finally, after the descent of one, the other, who remained there alone, cavorted up there and left me stunned with even greater admiration. For in some way it seemed possible as long as both played, since, although that was marvelous, too, actually by their not unequal weight they steadied the pole they had climbed up. But the one who, by balancing his weight, stayed on the top of the pole, where he even played, and then came down unscathed, left me so agape that my admiration did not escape the emperor himself. Wherefore, having invited an interpreter, he asked which seemed to me more wonderful: the boy who moved so circumspectly that the pole remained steady, or the fellow who held it with his forehead so resourcefully that neither the boys' weight nor their playing tipped the pole even a little. And when I replied that I did not know which seemed *thau-mastoteron*⁶ to me, he swelled with loud laughter and said that he did not know, either.

10. But I reckon that this ought not to be passed over in silence, namely, what else I saw there that was novel and marvelous. During that week that comes before the *vaiophóron*—which we call “palm branches”⁷—the emperor makes a payment of gold coins both to

6. Liudprand's Greek for “more marvelous,” transliterated into Latin characters here.

7. The penultimate week of Lent, leading up to Palm Sunday and a holy time in the Christian calendar.

the soldiers and to those appointed to the various offices, according to what their rank deserves. Since he wanted me to be present at this pay day, he ordered me to come. It happened in this way. A table ten cubits in length and four in width had been set down, which supported the coins, bound in bags according to what each was owed, with numbers written on the outside of each bag. Thereupon, they entered before the emperor not in a jumble, but in an order, according to the summons of the herald who recited the written names of the men according to the dignity of their rank. The first of them to be called in is the rector of the palaces, on whose shoulders, and not into whose hands, the coins are placed in four military cloaks. After him are called *o domesticos tis ascalonas* and *o delongaris tis ploos*,⁸ of whom the former commands the army and the latter the navy. These two, taking an equal number of coins and cloaks, as their dignity is equal, because of the volume could not carry them away on their shoulders but dragged them off with an effort, aided by others. After them twenty-four generals are admitted, to whom are issued pounds of gold coins, twenty-four to each, according to his number, with two military cloaks. Lastly, right after them the order of the patricians follows and is given twelve pounds of coins and one military cloak. And since I do not know the number of the patricians, I do not know the number of pounds either, except that given to each. After that is summoned the immense horde of first swordsmen, swordsmen, swordsmen-in-training, chamberlains, treasurers, first headsmen, of whom the first received seven, and the others according to their dignity received six, five, four, three, two, and one. Nor do I want you to think that it was all accomplished in a single day. Having begun on the fifth day of the week at the first hour of the day, it was finished by the emperor at the fourth hour of the sixth and seventh days;

8. The Greek titles were transliterated into Latin characters by Liudprand. Perhaps the author sought to make his text more user-friendly, realizing that his northern European contemporaries knew even less Greek than might his Italian ones. If this is true, then Liudprand was recalibrating his style for a new, previously unexpected audience.

for to those who receive less than a pound, the chief of the imperial bedchamber, not the emperor, makes payment throughout the whole week before Easter. Thus with me standing by and considering the procedure with admiration, the emperor asked through the minister what had pleased me about the whole matter.⁹ To this I answered: "Of course it would please me, if it profited me, just as the repose given to Lazarus would have benefited the rich man as he suffered the heat, if it had come his way; since it did not happen to him, how, I ask, could it please him?" Chuckling and a little embarrassed, the emperor signaled with a nod of his head that I should come to him, and I gladly accepted a large cloak with a pound of gold that he gladly offered.¹⁰

9. Constantine knew that Byzantine administration was more complex than what a young courtier from Pavia had ever witnessed, and displayed its bureaucratic workings precisely to evoke wonder. Royal administration in Europe, even in the relatively sophisticated kingdom of Italy, relied more on personal relationships between ruler and aristocrats, and less on money.

10. This witticism, worthy of that of the Byzantine wife in 4.10 above, brings a happy ending and prevents *Retribution* from being tragic, as Liudprand had promised (6.1). But the joke is also transgressive (Liudprand represents himself as a blasphemer, making fun of the story in Lk 16.23–25 of the poor man Lazarus) and thus contradictory of the high moral standards that Liudprand espouses elsewhere in this text. The abrupt end to *Retribution* may reflect the interruption that the journey of 949–50 brought to Liudprand's life and career (Vinay, "Oltre il giardino delle maschere," 27). By accepting the emperor's largesse, Liudprand confirmed his family's traditional disengagement towards the Macedonian dynasty (Leyser, "Ends and Means," 128), which may have displeased Berengar II enough to cause a rupture that launched Liudprand's years as exile and historian.