

Frederick – Stupor Mundi

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Shire of Wurmwald, Middle Kingdom, Known World

There are hundreds of rulers who were good and influential. There are scores of rulers who were labelled “the Great.” There is only one who was called “the Wonder of the World” - Stupor Mundi.

Actually Stupor Mundi can be translated as the Wonder of the World or Astonishment of the World and the word stupor is the root for the modern English words, stupor and stupid, both of which suggest to be struck dumb or rendered speechless. Undoubtedly, Frederick’s contemporaries who gave him this title were at times both struck dumb in awe and puzzlement at what he accomplished.

Some historians point to Frederick as a prodigy and a ruler of the first modern state. While this is partially true, I think it is dangerous to think Frederick intended some of the “modern” things we see in Medieval Sicily. Likewise, while Enlightenment era thinkers and politicians probably knew of Frederick, I don’t think we can single him out as the sole inspiration. Both Medieval Sicily and the “modern” state are outgrowths of a variety of factors, born of their own times. So while we, as 21st Century people, might admire some of what Frederick did, all of this was quite confusing and unusual for his time.

To put that in perspective, Dante places Frederick in the 6th Circle of Hell, trapped in a burning tomb for heresy. But later, Dante praises Frederick and his son Manfred as paragons of nobility. Manfred is in Purgatory. And Frederick’s mother, Constance, is in Paradise amongst the saved. So, even one author has trouble deciding just what to make of this man. To be fair, Dante was a Guelph, a papal supporter and therefore that probably influenced his decision to place Frederick in Hell.

Setting the stage:

Before I get into Frederick’s story, let’s talk a bit about the Church and Emperors. After Romulus Augustus was forced to abdicate, the Western Empire was without an Emperor for a long time. The Goths established a “King of the Romans” and this will be important later. Famously, in 800 AD, the Pope crowned Charles of the Franks, Holy Roman Emperor.

Regardless of what was intended in 800 AD, by 1200 AD, things were very different between the Church and the HRE (Holy Roman Emperor). The Popes would feel that the HRE served as Emperor by their hand. What the Pope gave, the Pope could take away. The Church had gained quite a bit of power. It controlled this power through two means, excommunication and crusade. Excommunication meant that the Pope could deny Christian company to someone. No last rites, no communion, no confessions. In a time when God was omnipresent, this was a big deal. And it could lead to others using this state to overthrow a monarch. If the blessings of Christ and God were denied to you (as a Monarch), you were not fit to rule anymore. Someone who had the blessings of Christ and God was a better choice. Excommunication also severed the bounds of oaths to you.

Crusade was also a way the Church used to control Monarchs. By calling for a crusade against a monarch (yes, this happened) or for extracting promises from a monarch to go on crusade, a Pope

encouraged resources towards this goal in exchange for the forgiveness of sins and church sanctioning of results.

These were powerful tools for the Pope to influence the secular world.

The HRE's however often felt that the Pope was only confirming what God had already decreed. God had chosen the HRE and only God could take it away. Several of the stronger HRE's felt that they were the direct successors to the Roman Emperors of old or even that they were the rightful rulers in Constantinople.

Also, the HRE's saw and knew what powers and privileges the Eastern Emperor enjoyed. The Byzantine Emperor was the head of the Eastern Church. He (or she) was the appointed representative of God on Earth. The Patriarch of Constantinople was a powerful man, but he couldn't remove the Emperor. The Emperor was also an absolute monarch. Many of the HRE's envied and if they could, desired to emulate the powers of the Eastern Empire.

History:

Henry VI and Sicily:

One of Sicily's greatest Kings and the true founder of the envied Kingdom of Sicily was Roger II, Rogerius Rex. He had many sons but his son William became William I of Sicily, also called William the Bad. He actually wasn't a bad king but because a historian who supported the Sicilian barons called him such, we are stuck with it. His son, William, became William II, the Good (again for the same reasons). To secure a peace with Frederick Barbarossa, William agreed that his aunt, Constance (Roger II's sister) should marry Frederick's son Henry. Also, because William was pretty young and had no heirs, Constance was made William's heir and the barons were forced to make oath to support that. William then initiated several attacks on Saracen strongholds in Africa and against the Byzantine Empire, and ultimately died without an heir.

It was through these circumstances that Henry VI declares himself the rightful King of Sicily (through his wife's claim). His claim was not undisputed though and he would have to go to Sicily to enforce it.

Henry had several things working for him and a few against him. One, he was HRE and had plenty of knights and soldiers eager for the riches of Southern Italy to accompany him. Against him though was the fact that the Pope did not want the same power controlling the area to his north (the Lombard League, officially part of the HRE) and Kingdom of Sicily. The Norman Barons were not keen on a German king either so they supported another branch of Roger's line for the throne. If Henry wanted Sicily, he would have to fight for it and to shorten the conversation, he does win.

After some twists and turns, Constance was in Vienna and was then asked to make the trek down to Sicily. There is an interesting book by Mary Taylor Simeti titled *Travels with a Medieval Queen* that describes that journey.

Constance was pregnant before she started her journey and had to stop to give birth along the way. She was 40 years old at the time and understood that there would be doubts about her ability to give birth. At the town of Iesi in Apulia, she had a tent erected in the public square and gave birth there. In spite of

the fact that this was rather public, there were still rumors that Frederick was the child of a local tradesman, instead of Henry and Constance.

Young Years:



Statue of Frederick at the Palazzon Reale, Naples.

Frederick's life was not destined to be easy. Henry knew with Constance's age that additional children might be difficult so he wanted to legitimize Frederick quickly. At the age of a few months, Henry got his German vassals to elect Frederick King of the Germans. This is one of the titles typically given to the heir to the HRE. However, not even a year later, Henry died of malaria or poisoning while in Sicily. Frederick was travelling to Germany at the time and was quickly brought back to Sicily. His mother stood as regent in Sicily against various former supporters of Henry's. Constance had Frederick crowned as King of Sicily at the tender age of two. Roughly a year later, Constance would die and Frederick became a ward of the Pope's, Innocent III.

This would not last though. Frederick was still in Palermo. For the next 10 years, several former supporters of Henry's would seize parts of Germany and Sicily and often times, Frederick himself.

It was at this time that Frederick was educated. It is often said he grew up on the streets of Palermo. He learned Greek, Arabic, Latin, French, Sicilian, and German. Normally, we think of someone's heritage as that of their father's but in Frederick's case, he was Norman Sicilian and most often thought of himself that way.

Even now, Frederick understood his situation. He was supposedly the King of Sicily but in a letter to the Kings of Europe (when he was 10 or 11), he wrote (I am cribbing parts of it):

“ . . . from the innocent boy, King of Sicily, called Frederick. . .”

“ . . . I, the offspring of so august a union, was handed over to servants of all sorts, who presumed to draw lots for my garments . . .”,

“ . . . I am ruled instead of ruling. I beg favours instead of granting them . . .”

At the age of 12, Frederick had come of age and determined to start reclaiming his birthright. He was able to organize a loyal army (most of the native Greeks, Arabs, and Norman-Sicilians were unhappy with German rule) and take the island. The next step was to take Southern Italy.

In the meantime, Frederick's uncle, Philip of Swabia and Otto of Brunswick had been engaged in civil war in German and playing politics with Innocent III. During this war, Philip would die and peace would be made between the two houses. The Pope crowned Otto HRE in exchange for a variety of promises and restoring land. The Pope was also keen to keep the Crowns of Germany and Sicily separate. One of the promises was to not attack Frederick. The day of the coronation a riot broke out and Otto was forced to flee Rome.

Otto ultimately decided not to keep his promises and attacked Sicily. The German nobles were also frustrated as Otto spent too much time in Italy instead of dealing with invasions into Germany from Denmark. Innocent III excommunicated Otto.

Frederick now at 14 marched north through Calabria. He met with the Pope, agreed that the two crowns should be separate and married Constance of Aragon. Frederick was once again elected King of the Germans, the emperor-elect, and moved north to combat Otto in German.

One great story about Frederick at this time is about the city of Konstanz. Otto was very sure of himself against a 14 year old boy. He sent his chefs ahead to Konstanz to prepare a feast to celebrate his victory over Frederick. Frederick used guile and slipped past Otto and made it to Konstanz ahead of him. One of the bishops with Frederick convinced the town elders that the excommunication was indeed legitimate. The town opened their gate to Frederick. By the time Otto showed up, Konstanz was closed to him and Frederick was eating his dinner!

By the age of 21, Frederick had reclaimed the German lands from all of Otto's supporters. At 23, Frederick was finally crowned HRE.

Frederick's heart was in Sicily though. He moved his capital to Palermo and for the most part, let the German barons to their own devices. In Sicily, he was an absolute monarch and didn't have to worry about German politics.

Frederick then turned his attentions to Sicily. While many Arabs were part of the urban life in the major cities, there were still some troublesome Arabs in the mountains. Frederick took the field against these Arabs and defeated them. The leaders were executed and the rest exiled off the island to Southern Italy. However, these Arabs became the core of an elite troop loyal to Frederick.

Another interesting story about Frederick involves a visit from a Franciscan Monk. A monk had come to the town of Bari where Frederick was holding court and hunting. The monk denounced Frederick for his vices. Frederick took the reprove in stride but decided to test the monk's resolve. So, at night, while the monk slept, Frederick had convinced a "lady of light virtue but remarkable charms" to visit the monk and put his virtue to the test. The monk, it was said, "was aided by supernatural powers and put the temptress to flight with a fiery shield." Frederick witnessed the whole thing through a hole in the wall and apologized to the monk for his vices and the practical joke. He then proceeded to have a long discussion with the monk about matters spiritual.

At his coronations, Frederick vowed to go on Crusade. However, by 1221, he still had not shown up and the crusade was deemed a failure. The Pope blamed the failure squarely on Frederick. So, another promise to Crusade was made but that Crusade could not start before 1227. In the meantime, Constance had died and Frederick had married Yolande of Jerusalem, the heiress to the Kingdom of Jerusalem. Frederick started out but took ill. For failing to show up again, the Pope (Gregory IX at this time) excommunicated Frederick. Many believed that Frederick was faking his illness.

Frederick took the news of his excommunication quite calmly. He ordered his Sicilian priests and bishops to continue to give him communion and perform services. Many, if not most, did so. He then proceeded to secure allies in Rome. He invited various patrician families from Rome to his Court. He bought their villas and lands at full valuation and then gave them back to those families as his vassals. Shortly thereafter, Gregory was giving a sermon when the peasant population booed him out of the pulpit and Gregory fled Rome for a time.

A year later, Frederick did set out again on Crusade. But since he was excommunicated, he technically could not go on Crusade and many Crusaders refused to help him or fight for him. For his hubris, the Pope excommunicated him again. He did have his Teutonic Knights who were loyal. The new Sultan in Jerusalem was Kamel and he and Frederick shared a love of philosophy. Frederick sent him gifts and begged to meet. Kamel gifted Frederick with an elephant and other exotic animals. It is said that both Kamel and Frederick were accused of switching religions by their supporters as their friendship grew. Instead of besieging Jerusalem, Frederick negotiated for the return of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem. Muslims retained control of the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque. No fortifications could be built in Jerusalem.

This is definitely one of the astonishment moments. This was the first successful Crusade since the 1st Crusade, yet there was no fighting. Frederick succeeded by diplomacy while excommunicated. Many powerful Christians, especially in the militant orders, despised him for it. More radical Christians praised him and continued to offer absolution in spite of the excommunication. However, the peace with the Muslims would not last and in 1244, Jerusalem fell to them again.

The Pope had excommunicated him yet again and gave sanction to several of Frederick's nobles to rebel against him. Upon Frederick's return, he started winning against some of these rebels but he was weary of war and sued for peace. The treaty was granted and Frederick was reinstated to the Church.

Accomplishments:

It was in these years that Frederick accomplished much of his peaceful pursuits.

Reorganization of the state:

Sicily was very unique in the Medieval world. It was primarily a slave filled wheat farm in Roman times. After the fall of Rome, it soon became a possession of the Byzantine Empire and the Emperor Constantine considered moving his capital to Syracuse. With the Muslim invasions of the 7th century, Sicily became part of the Caliphate. The Muslims tolerated their Latin and Greek subjects. Sicily became a paradise as they changed the landscape with irrigation, brought many more "Asian" plants to Sicily (oranges, lemons, sugarcane, mulberry bushes, cotton, etc), and trade flourished. The Normans captured Sicily but they were not in great numbers so they needed to rely on the native population to keep things running.

Sicily was never really a feudal state, given its history. Since Roger II, Norman Sicily had a strong central government. This was particularly true on the island itself. Most of the "barons" and other nobles had their lands in Southern Italy proper. Frederick further reorganized the state. He tended to appoint his ministers from laypeople. The aristocrats would be too interested in their own privilege and the clergy tends to be faithful to the Pope, his main enemy. This is similar to how Roger ran things. Many of these ministers and bureaucrats would have been Greeks or Arabs.

He forbid the barons from collecting taxes and that cut their revenues.

Language and poetry:

As stated above, Frederick was fluent in six languages. Like his grandfather Roger, Frederick was a strong patron of the arts. In essence, the Sicilian language developed in his court and school of poetry based on Sicilian developed. The Scuola poetica Siciliana, or Sicilian School, produced more than 300 poems on courtly love and greatly influenced other Italian schools, and Dante.

Law code:

Frederick sought to codify the laws of Sicily. Sicily was a mash of Norman, Byzantine, Muslim, and German laws. Like many strong rulers before him, he codified the law and streamlined them. One thing he did though was to establish an independent judiciary. No longer would nobles and clerics sit as judges nor mayors. Judges travelled in a circuit. The written law was the deciding authority, not precedence or privilege. There were penalties for frivolous lawsuits and bearing false witness. Frederick himself was often ruled against by his judges.

He outlawed trials by ordeal because he believed the stronger would always win, regardless of the claims to divine providence. He prohibited physicians from selling cures in order to prevent frauds. This

established the first time where apothecaries (pharmacists) were separate from doctors. Bail was established.

Interestingly, women fared much better under Frederick's legal system. Anyone who was within hearing of a woman's cry for assistance against an attacker but failed to respond was heavily fined. The rapist would suffer death or mutilation.

Related to that, he established the University of Naples as the first secular university. Primarily, Frederick established the University to train bureaucrats and lawyers for his court. Theology was taught but so was law, math, languages, and philosophy. The focus was on both the Classical Greek texts and Arabic ones. He issued a decree that no subject of his would be educated in a foreign university. He basically started the first idea of student loans.

Science:

Frederick also saw himself as a natural philosopher. He believed that everything could be explained by reason.

One of Frederick's most famous studies is the first treatise on falconry, *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus*, the Art of Hunting with Birds. In the words of the historian [Charles Homer Haskins](#):

It is a scientific book, approaching the subject from [Aristotle](#) but based closely on observation and experiment throughout, *Divisivus et Inquisitivus*, in the words of the preface; it is at the same time a [scholastic](#) book, minute and almost mechanical in its divisions and subdivisions. It is also a rigidly practical book, written by a falconer for falconers and condensing a long experience into systematic form for the use of others. [\[26\]](#)



Page from the *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus*

Frederick's court hosted many scholars, including astronomers. Since his court was basically a haven from religious persecution, many found residence there. Frederick also corresponded with scholars, both Christian and Muslim, on mathematics and physics.

From our modern perspective, this is horrific but he also performed human experimentation. He shut a prisoner in a cask with a small hole to see if the soul could be detected escaping when the person died. He fed different prisoners and sent them on different tasks. He then had them disemboweled to determine the effect on digestion.

He attempted to determine if there was a “natural” language for humanity. He was hoping to discover what language Adam and Eve may have spoken. He had several orphans raised without human language interaction. Their nurses could bathe them and feed them but they were not to speak to the infants at all. Ultimately, the infants died without the more intimate measure of human contact.

Back to Germany and War:

Peace would not last. In 1235, Henry, Frederick’s oldest son and King of Germans, rebelled against his father. Frederick marched North to punish Henry and the Lombard League cities that supported him. The Pope both worked with and against Frederick during this time. I will not go into all of the battles and the details but Frederick would slowly conquer most of Northern Italy but the Popes continued to work against him. They excommunicated him again when he made his son Enzo, King of Sardinia and proclaimed that he would take back all of the lands of his Roman fathers. In time, he would eventually succumb to illness and his Empire would divided up.

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