

## **The Reputation of Freidrich II**

### ***Emma***

Freidrich II, who lived between 1194 and 1250, was king of Sicily and Germany and the Holy Roman Emperor. He was called stupor mundi, the "wonder of the world". This title is generally thought to express the admiration of his contemporaries. However, due to Freidrich's controversial reign and character, it is also possible that the title refers to his propensity to shock and amaze people. There is evidence to support both views, although in retrospect it is more likely to refer to the admiration of his contemporaries. The answer to the question hinges on whether this title was given to him by his contemporaries or by a later age.

Freidrich's title of stupor mundi does indeed seem to have been used by his contemporaries. Matthew Paris, a Benedictine monk, records Freidrich's title in his history known as the *Chronica Majora*. Paris lived between 1220 to 1259 - the time of Freidrich's reign. It is therefore clear that the title was given by those who had first hand knowledge of the impact of Freidrich's reign, and that the title itself is a relevant piece of information when discussing Freidrich.

Freidrich is known as one of the most brilliant and radical rulers of the Middle Ages. He was "ahead of his age in his thinking." (Hallam p42). All the sources agree that Freidrich had a positive impact on education, arts and science. His court was a centre for learned men (Hamil p53). He was a patron of art and literature, and a leading scientist of his time. He promoted education within his empire, established the University of Naples, and encouraged the school of medicine in Salerno. Such involvement in these areas is unique among medieval rulers, and supports the theory that his title was due to his good qualities. The Franciscan monk Salimbene, with first hand knowledge of Freidrich, wrote this:

"Of faith in God he had none; he was crafty, wily, avaricious, lustful, malicious, wrathful; and yet a gallant man at times, when he would show his kindness or courtesy; full of solace, jocund, delightful, fertile in devices. He knew how to read, write, and sing, and to make songs and music. He was a comely man, and well-formed, but of middle stature. I have seen him, and once I loved him, for on my behalf he wrote to Brother Elias, Minister-General of the Friars Minor, to send me back to my father. Moreover, he knew to speak with many and varied tongues, and, to be brief, if he had been rightly Catholic, and had loved God and his Church, he would have had few emperors his equals in the world." (Tierney, 1970, p254)

One of the most significant aspects of Freidrich's character is the fact that he spoke all of the principal languages of his empire. This Empire consisted of modern Italy, Sicily, Germany and Poland - a vast amount of territory. Freidrich must have had at least four languages at his command and very likely more. Communication is a key factor for any good leader, and the fact that Freidrich had acquainted himself with all the main languages of his empire, if true, gives us an indication of the amazing quality of his leadership.

Freidrich's participation and contribution on the sixth crusade in 1229 is also significant. The sources tell us that Freidrich gained the object of the crusade not by violence and war, like other leaders of the time, but through negotiation and treaty. Even the Arab historians record this achievement:

"al-Ashraf and al-Kamil arranged to meet; they exchanged numerous messages with Emperor Freidrich II, king of the Franks. As a result of this exchange it was established that they would surrender to him Jerusalem and its dependencies" (Ibn al-Athir)

His contemporaries must surely have seen such an event as a wonderful achievement.

However, as well as being noted throughout history for his achievements, Freidrich is also noted for his extremely controversial reign and character. In the same way that some must have thought his regaining of the Holy Land in the Sixth Crusade a wonderful achievement, this event also probably greatly shocked the people of the times. The way that the Holy Land was actually gained was in direct contrast with the previous crusades. Freidrich, far from campaigning to wipe the infidels off the face of the earth, negotiated with them instead. Further evidence of Freidrich's controversial dealings in the crusade is the fact that he was excommunicate when he succeeded in his crusade. Ignoring this fact, he crowned himself king of Jerusalem on 18th March 1229. The *Estoire d'Eracles* relates this event and tells of the awe and shock of the people present. Sixteen years later, Pope Innocent IV included these actions in a list of Freidrich's sins:

"Also after he had joined himself in a detestable friendship to the Saracens, he sent messengers and presents to them on several occasions and received them from the Saracens in return with honour and joy; he embraced their customs, observing them notoriously in his daily life, for he did not even blush to appoint as guardians for his wives eneuchs. What is more abominable still is that once, when he was in the countries beyond the sea (Outremer), he made a treaty or rather a conspiracy with the Sultan and allowed the name of Mahomet to be publicly proclaimed day and night in the Temple of the Lord. And lately, as it is said, he caused the messengers of the Sultan of Babylon (after the same Sultan had inflicted personally and through his subordinates very grave and inestimable injuries upon the Holy Land and its Christian inhabitants to be honourably received and magnificently entertained in the kingdom of Sicily, with praises for the prestige of the same Sultan." (Tierney, 1970, p250)

Freidrich's reign was littered with feuds with important people, particularly the Papacy. During his reign Freidrich was excommunicated and deposed three times, first by Pope Gregory IX in 1228, again in 1239 and finally in 1245 by Pope Innocent IV. Most sources agree that Pope Gregory IX was his most vigorous opponent. Freidrich was continually trying to diminish the pope's power by invading papal territory, and this was a contributing factor to his second excommunication. An extract from Innocent's bulla at the Council of Lyon in 1245, which gives reasons for his excommunication, demonstrates his offences against the church:

"Frederick has committed four very grave offences, which can not be covered up by any subterfuge (we say nothing for the moment about his other crimes); he has abjured God on many occasions; he has wantonly broken the peace which had been established between the Church and the Empire; he has also committed sacrilege by causing to be imprisoned the Cardinals of the holy Roman Church (etc) coming to the council which our predecessor had summoned; he is also accused of heresy not by doubtful and flimsy but by formidable and clear proofs." (Tierney, 1970, p250)

Freidrich's negative views on the Papacy are shown in the manifesto written by Pietro della Vigna on Fredrich's behalf. This document was issued after his second excommunication by Pope Gregory IX. The problems arose mainly because of Freidrich's refusal to recognise the Pope as superior to the Emperor. Pope Gregory's grounds for excommunication were that Freidrich was a heretic, a claim that is not unfounded given that Freidrich is supposed to have jested that Moses, Christ and Mohammed were three impostors who had themselves been hoodwinked (Hallam). His views on both the papacy and religion were probably very shocking to the people of the time.

Also to be taken into account when discussing Freidrich's popularity is the fact that, apart from his title of stupor mundi, he also had other far less complimentary titles. Elizabeth Hallam tells, in *Chronicles of the Crusades*, that his enemies had bestowed on him such names as 'the dragon' and 'the beast'. The Italian writer, Dante, does not seem to have been a fan of Freidrich. In *The Divine Comedy*, he places Freidrich in hell, and portrays him as a very unattractive character.

However, although it is possible that the title stupor mundi was given to Freidrich because of the shocking nature of his reign, it is on balance more likely to express the admiration of his contemporaries. One must remember that it is possible to be shocked by certain actions and admiring of them at the same time. The fact that he was never really deposed or had any serious opposition indicates that even if he was if not well liked by his enemies, he was certainly tolerated by his subjects. Overall Freidrich's character is one of the most controversial and interesting of the Middle Ages.

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