

The Chronicle of Otto of St. Blasien

This chronicle, one of the main sources for German history at the end of the twelfth century, was written at the monastery of St. Blasien in the Black Forest c. 1209-10. It provides quite a lengthy, if not always entirely accurate, account of Henry VI's conquest of the kingdom of Sicily. One should note, for example, that dates are sometimes given a year in arrears, and that a number of important events are misplaced. Thus Count Richard of Acerra was in fact only captured and executed in 1196, and the account of the brutal repression of conspiracy on Sicily, which Otto suggests took place immediately after the conquest, refers to events which actually took place in 1197. Otto also conflates the conquest of 1194 and the subsequent German Crusade of 1197.

These passages have been translated by G.A. Loud from Ottonis de Sancto Blasio Chronica, ed. A. Hofmeister (MGH Scriptorum Rerum Germanicarum, Hanover 1912), pp. 39-40, 55-7, 58-66.

In the year of the Lord's Incarnation 1186 the Emperor Frederick sent envoys to King William of Sicily, son of King Roger, and arranged for his sister to be betrothed to his son King Henry, and because of this the kingdom of Sicily, with the duchy of Apulia and the Principality of Capua was assigned to King Henry as a dower by his father-in-law [*sic*] after his death.¹ In receiving this he recovered for the Roman Empire what had, after the death of the late Emperor Lothar, been taken away from the empire by Roger when he had captured Pope Innocent and extorted the name of king from him. So he entered Italy by the 'sixth route' with a great number of the princes. The Milanese requested him to celebrate the marriage of his son at Milan as a sign of the recovery of his imperial grace. He agreed to this so that he might confirm their loyalty to the empire (for they had suffered considerably at the hands of his forces). He summoned all the barons of Italy to a general court at Milan, and princes flocked to this court from both north of the Alps and from all over Italy: Tuscany, Campania, Apulia and Sicily. They went forth with the emperor and the bridegroom to receive Henry's fiancée, William's

¹ Constance was actually William II's aunt, although she was about a year younger than him, being born shortly after her father's death in the early months of 1154.

daughter, with the most magnificent splendour and royal pageantry, and the marriage was performed with great pomp and circumstance.² At this court the Italians were fully restored to the emperor's grace, and, after having reconfirmed the peace, an amnesty was granted, namely that a general and permanent pardon for former crimes was laid down. The emperor delighted in the many proofs of their obedience, and when the court was finished everyone returned joyfully to their homes while he, his son and the latter's wife went north of the Alps. Thus, as is read of Theodoric, King of the Goths, all the neighbouring kings were linked to the Emperor Frederick, either by relationship, alliance or submission, and under his rule the prestige of the empire was enhanced in all sorts of ways ...

[A long account now follows of the capture of Jerusalem by the Muslims, Frederick Barbarossa's Crusade and that of Richard the Lionheart].

In the year from the Lord's Incarnation 1190 [*sic*] the Emperor Henry and his wife were, and has previously been described, crowned by Pope Celestine.³ Then, desiring to take possession of Apulia and Sicily after the death of William, and taking her with him, he led his army into the Campania, where he found the whole country in rebellion against him. For on William's death a relative of his, descended from Roger, a man called Tancred, had with the consent of all the barons and cities of Sicily tyrannously set up his own government in that land, which has from antiquity been the mother of tyrants, seizing the name of king and violently resisting the emperor. While he lived he steadfastly deprived him of his wife's inheritance. The emperor thus laid siege to the rebellious city of Naples in the Campania, ravaging all the land round about with fire and sword. During his return from his expedition across the sea the King of France came to him and made an alliance, then honourably taking his leave he went back to France. With his army attacked by pestilence and having gained no advantage, the emperor planned [himself] to return home. It was then that the empress was captured by some of the barons of Apulia who were related to her, and was held for a time in captivity under extremely careful guard. With this lamentable beginning the emperor despaired of obtaining Apulia, and he returned across the Alps, to await better times in future; first however he complained to the

² 27th January 1186.

³ This took place on Easter Monday, 15th April 1191.

pope about his wife's imprisonment. The pope was angered by those who had presumed to do this and laid an anathema upon them, placing the whole land under interdict, and forcing the release of the empress from her captivity. Afterwards she returned north of the Alps and was restored to the emperor, who filled with indignation looked forward to the day when he could take his revenge. ...

[An account follows of the capture of Richard the Lionheart by the Duke of Austria, who handed him over to the emperor.]

Duke Leopold was however excommunicated by the pope for his capture of the pilgrim king. This was to prevent anybody else similarly daring to kidnap pilgrims to the Holy Sepulchre and discouraging them from going to help the church overseas. Finally, after giving some thousands of measures of gold and silver from his ransom to the emperor, and more gold and silver to Duke Leopold to secure his agreement, and confirming on oath that he would live in peace and be reconciled with them, he was released from captivity and, with this payment, returned to his homeland. I shall not describe the huge weight of precious metal that the ransom provided, lest anyone should consider it so incredible as to be a falsehood. One ought however to know that the contents of the treasuries of all the churches of England were brought together, and the ransom was for the most part composed of chalices, crosses and other sorts of ecclesiastical valuables. After receiving this huge sum the emperor gave generous gifts to his knights, and sent a large army of paid troops to Apulia under the command of the steward Markward of Anweiler and Bertold of Kunisberg, and through their efforts many castles and cities surrendered to him. Berthold was killed there, being hit by a missile from a catapult. Tancred having in the meanwhile died, the leading men of that land conspired together against the emperor, refused to surrender and drove all the German foreigners from their cities.

In the year from the Lord's Incarnation 1193 [*sic*] many pilgrims from the lands this side of the sea took the cross and looked to the Church for help with their passage. In this same year the emperor Henry raised an army, crossed the Alps by the 'second route', ⁴ passed through [northern] Italy and Tuscany and invaded Campania. During this march Richard of Acerra a

⁴ The Splügen Pass between Chur and Chiavenna.

very powerful count, was captured by Diepold of Roggartart [*Rocca d'Arce?*] and was handed over to the emperor at Capua. The latter rightly loathed him because of the capture of the empress, and he had him hanged from a gallows with his head downwards.

Then he either attacked and destroyed, or received the surrender of, all the cities of Campania and Apulia. Burning with anger, he stormed Salerno, Barletta, Bari and many other very strong cities and there seized vast plunder; nor was there any city or fortress which could resist his attack. The army of pilgrims which was preparing for the expedition across the sea crossed the Alps with him and marched along with him for a while, greatly reinforcing his troops. After imposing his rule over all of Apulia and Campania, he marched with his troops into Calabria, plundering that province and then crossed over to Sicily. He sent the marshal, Henry of Kalden, to carry the war into the area round Catania, where without delay he encountered and attacked the powerful army which had been drawn up there ready for battle by the leading men of that land. He gained the victory, and a huge number of men were killed. He pursued the fugitives into the city and stormed it. The bishop, who had been a leader of the rebellion, and many noblemen were captured, and the city was set of fire. The marshal did not spare its churches, and he set fire to and tragically destroyed the church of St. Agatha, killing a great multitude of all ages, both men and women, who had taken refuge there. He then returned in triumph to the emperor, bringing his noble prisoners with him.⁵

The [Sicilian] nobles were absolutely desperate, and treacherously plotted to murder the emperor. In order to fulfil this plan, they surrendered themselves and all their property into his power. The emperor received their pledges of loyalty and treated them decently, and he escaped their plots, albeit only just. Once he had realised their deceit, he decided to overcome their plot by one of his own, even though it was dishonourable to punish treachery by treachery. Hence he summoned the known conspirators, and they (little suspecting) gathered at this court. They were all arrested and thrown into prison where he had them put painfully to death with hideous tortures. He deprived the archpirate Margaritus, one of the country's most powerful barons, and Count Richard, a man of great leaning, of their eyes. He had one person convicted of treason

⁵ This account appears to confuse what happened in 1194 with the later rebellion in 1197, after which we know that the Bishop of Catania, Roger Orbus (Bishop 1195-1206), was imprisoned and his brother blinded.

skinned alive, and he ordered that a man who aspired to the royal crown should have a crown fixed to him by iron nails.⁶ He had some people tied to a stake, surrounded by a pyre and cruelly put to death by burning, and others fastened to the ground with stakes through their bodies. By the actions he struck fear into all the nations round about, not only on this side of the ocean but on the other side as well; all were absolutely terrified by his severity.

In the year from the Lord's Incarnation 1194 the emperor directed his forces against the city of Palermo on the far side of Sicily, which was not only the site of the capital and archbishopric of Sicily but was also the place where its kings' treasury was up to this time stored. After setting up [siege] castles facing it, it was his intention to storm the city. He ordered his troops to break into the great royal garden, which was surrounded on all sides by a wall and filled in a charming way with all sorts of beasts – these animals were consumed to supply his army. The citizens were greatly afraid of the emperor's anger and without a fight held out their hands in surrender, seeking peace terms and offering to surrender themselves and all their property. He agreed to this, the city was surrendered and he received them back into his grace. Imperial banners were displayed on all the towers, and on the appointed day the emperor, in full regalia, was welcomed by the citizens in a procession. He allowed his army to take its leisure in all sorts of pleasant activities and, free from care, to enjoy the extraordinarily rich booty; meanwhile he took pleasure in all sorts of splendid shows and entertainments on the parade ground.

Finally, the whole city was prepared for his triumphal entry, decorated with great expense and labour by the citizens, filled with carpets and garlands of all sorts of flowers, valuable decorations, the squares both inside and outside the city permeated by the smell of frankincense and myrrh and other expensive scents. The emperor and his army remained some way outside the city, and so the citizens went out in groups arranged according the differences of rank, class and age, the nobles in their own party, the older men in order of age, and the younger and stronger, then the young people not yet old enough to grow beards or to serve in war, adorned with every sort of clothing and trappings for their horses. They went to meet the emperor in the

⁶ The latter may have been Jordan Lupinus, Count of Bovino. These executions probably took place in June 1197, and Margaritus of Brindisi, the former commander of the Sicilian fleet, and Count Richard of Ajello, who had been prisoners since Christmas 1194, were blinded shortly afterwards.

order of their rank, each and every one of them applauding in time with the music from the various instruments. The emperor meanwhile, with no small effort, drew up his army in the proper military manner. He absolutely forbade all indiscipline among the Germans, threatening that those who disobeyed him would have their hands cut off. He paraded his troops with their armour glittering superbly, slowly marching two by two along the road towards the city. He himself then made a glorious state entry into the city, followed by the princes, with everyone properly acclaiming him with the *laudes*; and when the crowd who stood in the squares saw the emperor then, as is the custom of that land, they prostrated themselves face downwards on the ground in front of him. So he was received as king and established his peace. He was given many gifts by the citizens, most excellent horses with golden saddles, and reins and trappings and other things of gold, silver, silk and jewels, with all of which he generously rewarded his army. First he gave royal gifts to the princes, then he showed himself most generous to the knights who deserved reward, and thus he bound all of them in a variety of ways to his service.

A huge sum of gold and silver was then discovered in the royal treasury which he sent to the public treasury at Trifels and from this he greatly enriched a number of other imperial palaces. For he found there the riches of Apulia, Calabria and Sicily, lands which are very rich in metals, a glorious collection of precious stones and all sorts of gems. He also took with this infinite treasure Tancred's wife, daughter and son, and the latter's fiancée, the daughter of the emperor of Constantinople, and bringing the captive nobles with him, he celebrated a wonderful victory. Thus after having conquered Samnium, Apulia and Calabria, Henry, that most warlike of emperors, reduced all of Sicily and Sardinia to obedience. He dismissed the army of pilgrims, honouring it with many gifts, and despatched with it from his own forces to help the Church across the sea five hundred stipendiary knights, paid for from the public treasury. These sailed from Siponto and Brindisi across the Mediterranean and landed at Acre where they were joyfully received by the Christians. With their help the Christians recovered many castles and, after both sides had met in a number of battles and the Christians had invariably been victorious, they forced the pagans to ask for peace. As a result, when the peace was concluded, the pagans energetically fortified the cities and castles which they held, and above all Jerusalem, which they rendered impregnable, surrounding it with a double wall and very deep ditches, and building an antemural [fortification]. They granted safe-conduct to Christians wishing to see the Lord's

Sepulchre, but the pope forbade anyone to take advantage of this favour, lest the pagans profit from the gifts of the Christians, and bound those who transgressed his prohibition with the bond of anathema. ...

[A paragraph was here inserted, quite unconnected with what went before, concerning the leading Parisian scholars of the day].

The year from the Lord's Incarnation 1195. The Emperor Henry went to Taranto where there were ships laden with an abundance of every sort of provision which had been sent across the sea by the army of the Christians. He decided to send the noble captives back to Germany, sending them before him to await his triumphant return, and he ordered them to be guarded at suitable places. He ordered that the son of King Tancred, who was just a boy, be brought to Regensburg and deprived of his eyes, and then consigned to perpetual captivity in the castle of *Amiso*.⁷ When he came to adulthood, he abandoned transitory matters and, so it is said, sought those eternal with good works, eager for Heaven since he was unable to attend to earthly affairs. For having been forcibly removed from the active life, he studied the contemplative, which is the more meritorious.⁸ The emperor betrothed his fiancée, the daughter of the emperor of Constantinople, to his brother Philip, and sent the Apulian queen, Tancred's wife, whose name was Sibilialia, and her daughter under guard to the nunnery of Hohenburg in Alsace. He despatched the archpirate Margaritus and Count Richard, the empress's [*sic*] relative, who had, as said, been deprived of their eyes, to be held in perpetual chains at Trifels.⁹ And so, completely victorious both by land and sea, the mighty emperor returned home to Germany.

⁷ Probably Hohenems, in the Voralberg.

⁸ However, the *Gesta Innocentii Papae Tertiae*, c. 25, MPL ccxiv, col. xlvi, (written c. 1210) said that he died while still a child. He may still have been alive in May 1202, when his arrest was mentioned by the pope in a circular letter to the people of Sicily, with no reference to him being deceased, *Die Register Innocenz' III. 5 Pontifikatsjahr 1202/3*, ed. O. Hageneder *et alii* (Vienna 1993), pp. 67-70 no. 37, at p. 68.

⁹ Here Otto has confused Count Richard of Ajello with Queen Sibilialia's brother, Count Richard of Acerra, who was put to death in 1196, and whose execution he had mentioned earlier. Furthermore Tancred and Sibilialia had three daughters who were sent with her to Germany, and subsequently released after Henry's death.