Frederick I Barbarossa and Political Legitimacy

Barbarossa and Charlemagne

Why is Charlemagne so often considered the greatest medieval Christian emperor? Europeans of the Middle Ages and even today, looked at Charlemagne as a model for what an emperor should be. He was the first ruler to be called Emperor of the Romans. He was a exemplar of effective administration, the consolidation of law, and the promotion of education and scholarship. Charlemagne was a leader in the Middle Ages who combined political and military power with religious influence and cultural achievement. His reign was marked by a combination of strength and sophistication, and he is often considered a symbol of the Holy Roman Empire.

Frederick I Barbarossa was crowned the King of Germany in 1152, though this kingdom was at the head of the large, multicentric, and decentralized Holy Roman Empire that theoretically was the continuation of Charlemagne's empire, though the Holy Roman Empire never included most of France. The Holy Roman Empire was weak when Barbarossa came to the throne because, for a century past, the Emperors had been struggling against the Pope over the appointment of bishops in the empire. Though the emperor retained the right to invest bishops, his influence became powerful and effective governance over Lombardy, a region encompassing Northern Italy, was usurped by wealthy city-states that were governed by elected consuls and assemblies, often called communes. Barbarossa decided to return imperial governance to Lombardy, partly because Lombardy was the wealthiest region in Europe at the time, but mainly because he desired to restore the empire to its Carolingian era strength. Lombardy was the perfect testing ground for his new administrative system because the communal governments of the city-states were illegal according to feudal law. Barbarossa not only modeled his system based off of Charlemagne's, but he also used Charlemagne's precedent at the same time to validate his increased imperial power.

Barbarossa sought to expand the role of the emperor to what it had been in Carolingian times via the direct supervision of royal officials, the consolidation of law legitimated by Roman forms, and the extension of Barbarossa's person into the laws of his subjects. Charlemagne administered his empire through a system of missi dominici, or "messengers of the ruler," and these envoys were often prominent clerics or educated laymen. They corresponded directly with Charlemagne, administered justice in their districts, and encouraged the Christianization of their region. Barbarossa's royal officials were called Podestà, and they received their authority directly from the emperor, responsible for administering justice in the cities, and collected the money due to the Crown. Barbarossa's Podestà were largely unsuccessful, however, because they were mostly uneducated, violent, and rural-minded Germans unfamiliar with Lombardy. They proved very cost-effective tax collectors and this motivated resentment in the Lombard cities. Had Barbarossa followed Charlemagne's example more closely, his attempt to rule Lombardy would have succeeded in the long term. According to Abbot Enithard, a loyal court chronicler of Charlemagne, Charlemagne "collected together and committed to writing the laws of all the nations under his jurisdiction." These national laws were codified in the form of Roman law. In 1158, Barbarossa promulgated a series of laws that declared the regalia, or the financial and administrative rights due to the emperor, at the Diet of Roncaglia. Though the decrees were reiterations of customary and feudal law at their core, they were nonetheless compiled in the form of Roman law and legitimated by the Roman legal concept of imperial legislative supremacy. Barbarossa's largess activity thus paralleled Charlemagne's Charlemagne also restored a royal monopoly on the minting of coins, making his currency more valued and respected. He issued coins featuring himself dressed as a traditional Roman emperor, complete with the laureate, making his role as an emperor tangible to his subjects. In Barbarossa's reign, royal mints in the empire increased from a mere two to 28 by the time of his death. This increased the circulation of the royal image of Barbarossa seated on a throne, often with towers or churches in the background, holding the orb and scepter. Barbarossa projected his power to his subjects in a similar way that Charlemagne did. While Barbarossa's administrative system was very similar to Charlemagne's, it failed precisely because it was not similar to Charlemagne's enough, even though admittedly Barbarossa faced a stronger enemy in the Lombard cities and Pope Alexander III.

Barbarossa and Alexander III

Did Frederick I Barbarossa and Pope Alexander III really hate each other? Certainly, they fought a brutal, almost twenty-years-long war against each other. Barbarossa completely insisted Alexander was an illegitimate Pope, and Alexander excommunicated Barbarossa, condemning him to eternal damnation in hell in the event that he died. Alexander, as Cardinal Roland, was the Papal Legate who delivered the ambiguous worded formal insult to Barbarossa in 1157 at Bressan, and Alexander's chronicler and close ally Cardinal Boso wrote a particularly damning life of Alexander that painted Barbarossa as a lawbreaker who had no fear of God. Barbarossa, in turn, besieged Rome, killing thousands, in order to depose Alexander, but Alexander escaped. While these events might imply personal hatred, in truth, the clash was motivated by the question of whether the Emperor or the Pope was the ultimate source of legislative and judicial authority in the Empire.

The Investiture conflict of the 11th century, where the Holy Roman Emperors clashed with the Pope in Rome over the right to appoint bishops and over the independence of the church, weakened the position of the Emperor severely. The Conocordat of Worms ended the conflict in 1122, stripping the emperor of his spiritual authority and affirming the religious supremacy of the Pope. Barbarossa promoted the supremacy of the Empire to ensure his political aims in Lombardy were successful. The Popes, however, had conflicting territorial ambitions in the region. This lead to the second issue between Barbarossa and the Papacy, because the Popes were afraid of being reduced to one bishop among many in an imperial framework. Barbarossa treated bishops in Germany like he treated his personal vassals, appointing them almost at will, and the Popes did not want this replicated in Italy. Barbarossa, already following the example of Charlemagne in pursuing his imperial administrative policy in Northern Italy, also ruled Lombardy, channeling Charlemagne's authority to legitimate his actions and his supremacy over the Pope, causing a similar reaction from Pope Alexander.

Barbarossa and Alexander also clashed over the issue over who's legislative authority was supreme and who had a wider jurisdiction. At the Diet of Roncaglia, Barbarossa made it clear that he viewed the bishops of Lombardy not merely as part of an ecclesiastical structure headed by the Pope, but as the legitimate predecessors to the old Roman Emperors, thus king to the conflict with Pope Alexander. He expected the armies of the bishops to serve the emperor and demanded the taxes due to him by way right. Alexander, above all, wanted the obedience of all the bishops of Europe and wanted their office depoliticized, which is why in Boso's account of his interview with the Emperor, does not diminish the emperor's right, and Alexander's emperor, the son of ceremony and the sale of clerical office. Furthermore, in the same amendment, he ordered all secular knights to attack and arrest heretics in their lands, displaying that Alexander considered all Christian princes within his legislative jurisdiction. Clearly, a compromise between the two positions was impossible. Both parties were invested in their empire's wealth and welfare, and neither party was willing to give in to the other. However, the result was the death of both, and the empire they had ruled was divided.