

Frederick I Barbarossa and Political Legitimacy

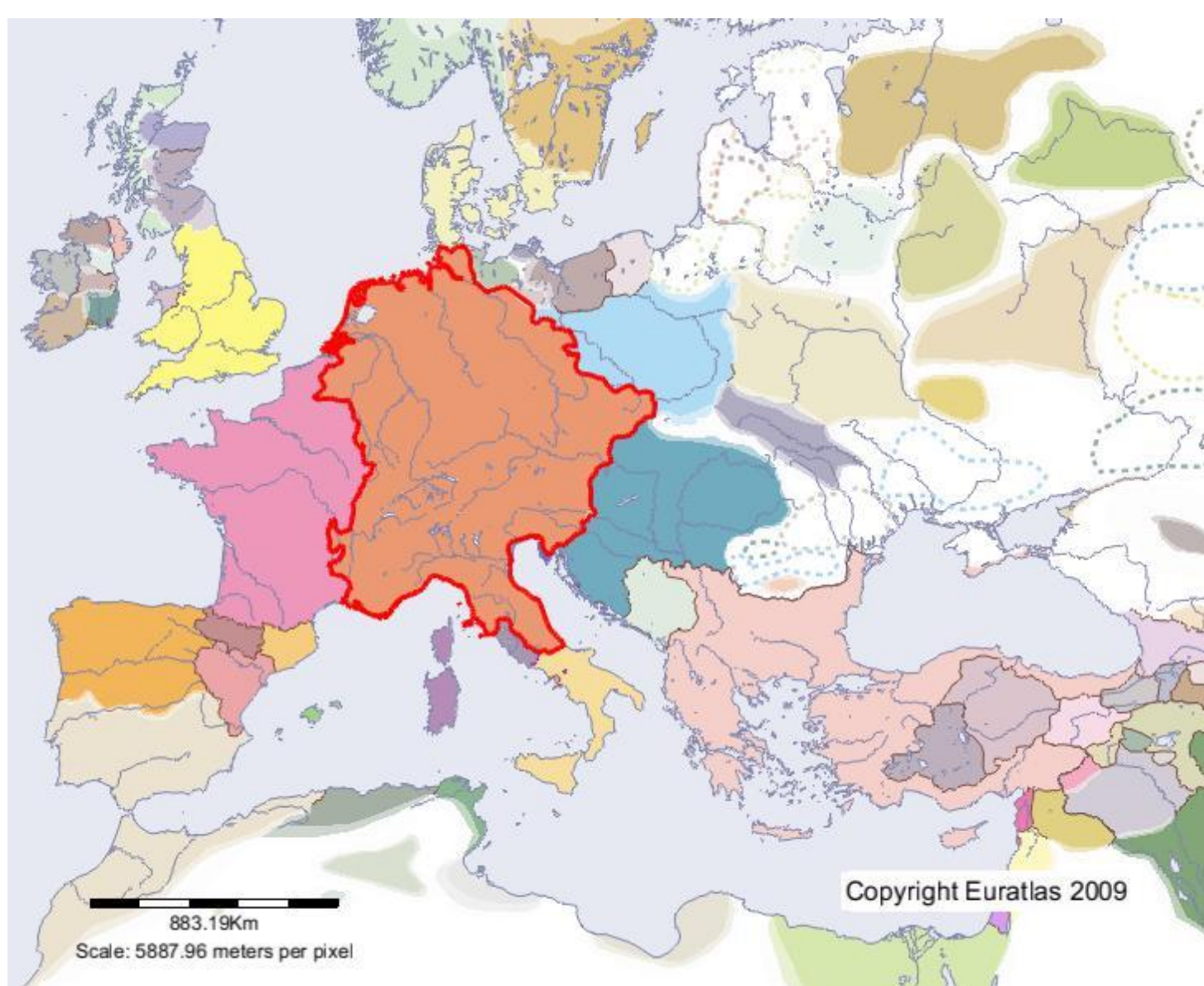
Who Was Frederick I Barbarossa?

A pirate? A crusader? A warrior? Not the first, wrong Barbarossa. The second, well yes, but he was older than 65 at that point. The third, again yes, but he didn't spend his entire reign tearing down Italian castles and chasing the Pope. Frederick I Barbarossa was a Holy Roman Emperor of the Hohenstaufen dynasty, often regarded as the greatest medieval German Emperor. His importance to history lies not in that he was the pinnacle of the German chivalric ideal of a knight, though he probably was, but rather in that he was a very capable administrator who held his realm together where his predecessors had weakened it. In attempting to strengthen Imperial control throughout his realm, he fought in bitter struggles against both the Pope and a band of wealthy Northern Italian city-states. He looked to the example and the authority of another great emperor of the past to legitimate his reign, Charlemagne. However, the most significant aspect of Barbarossa's reign is its failure, in that had Barbarossa's administration been a complete success, the further decentralization and eventual disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire could have been avoided.



Barbarossa and Charlemagne

Why is Charlemagne so often considered the greatest medieval Christian emperor Europe ever had? Well, his military accomplishments are always lauded, from his conquests of the Saxons, the Bavarians, and the Lombards, to the defeat of the Muslims in Spain. However, these military conquests are in line with a long tradition of Frankish military success, from their relentless acquisition of Roman Gaul to Charles Martel's victory over the Muslims at Tours in 732 C.E. Though an ambitious and successful commander, in this respect Charlemagne was blessed by having the longest reign of any Frankish king. Is Charlemagne so highly regarded because he brought Christianity to so much of Central and Northern Europe? Despite his policy of intense internal proselytization, Charlemagne never actively encourage missionaries beyond his borders. Christianity's relentless expansion through Europe occurred both before and after his rule, though he certainly expedited it in his kingdom itself. Charlemagne promoted the Christianization of his territory to both make the subject population easier to control and to have at his disposal an educated class of clerical administrators that would owe their position of power to him. Thus, his Christianization effort was actually a part of Charlemagne's greatest accomplishment: the establishment of an efficient imperial administration the likes of which hadn't existed since the fall of Rome. This imperial administration was so effective that Frederick I Barbarossa, an imperial successor of Charlemagne ruling 350 years after him, decided to model his own administration experiment in Northern Italy after Charlemagne's example.



Charlemagne's empire was comprised of the pink country and the highlighted empire. Barbarossa's was merely the highlighted empire.

Frederick I Barbarossa was crowned the King of Germany in 1152, though this kingdom was at the head of the large, multiethnic, 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 struggled against the Popes over the appointment of bishops in the empire. Though the emperor retained the right to invest bishops, his noblemen 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.



A golden bust of Barbarossa, a gift from a vassal

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 lives 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 Podesta, and they received their authority directly from the emperor, were responsible for administering justice in the cities, and collected the money due to the Crown. Barbarossa's Podesta were largely unsuccessful, however, because they were mostly uneducated, violent, and rural-minded Germans unfamiliar with Lombardy. They proved very exorbitant tax collectors and this motivated resentment in the Lombard cities. Had Barbarossa followed Charlemagne's example more closely, his attempt to rule Lombardy could have succeeded in the long term. According to Abbot Einhard, a loyal court chronicler of Charlemagne, Charlemagne "collected together and committed to writing the laws of all the nations under his jurisdiction." These national law codes were written 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 lawgiving 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 the 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.

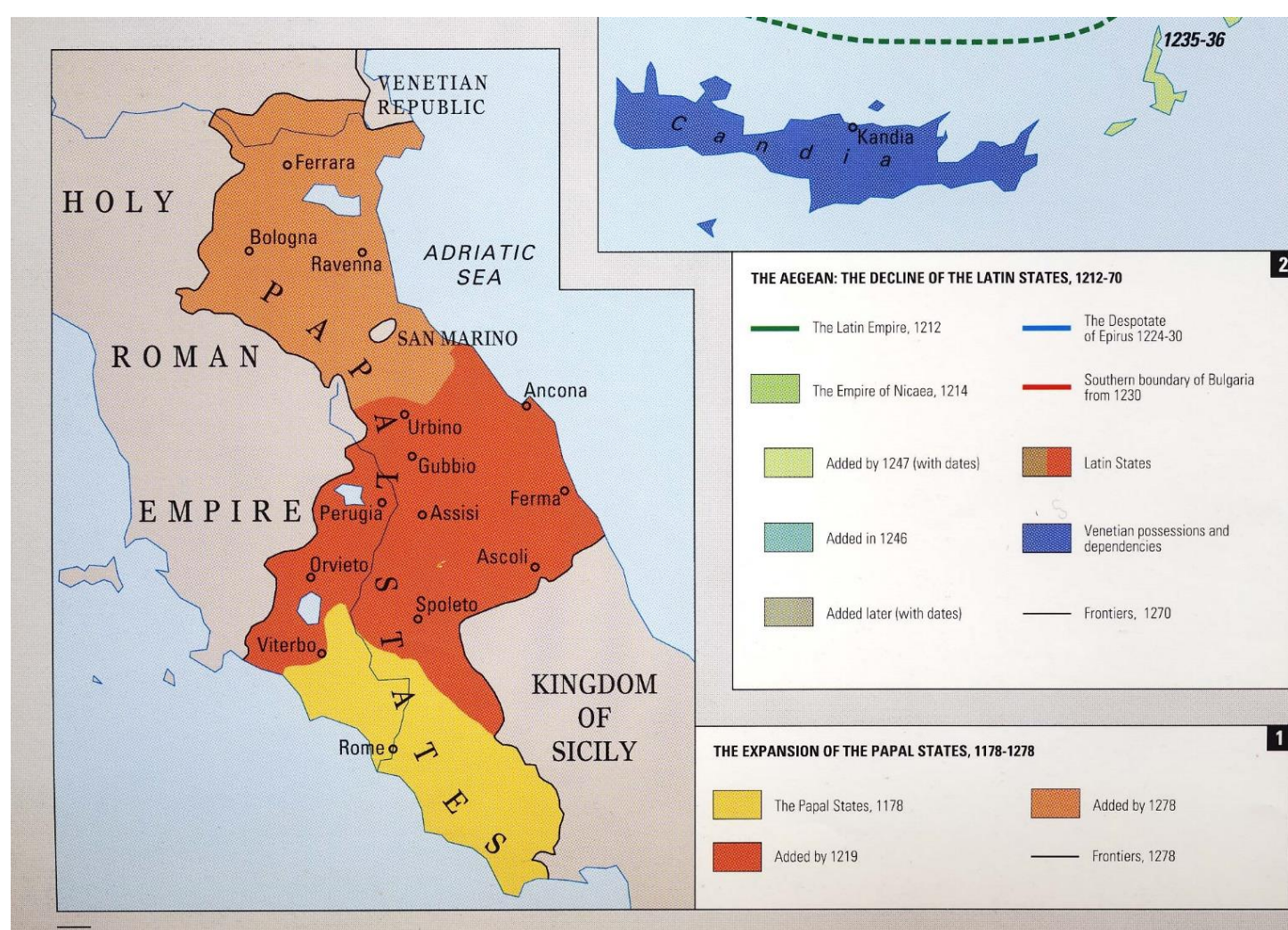


A reliquary of Charlemagne at Aachen Cathedral

Had Barbarossa's experiment succeeded, perhaps today we would talk about him as the greatest medieval Christian emperor of Europe's history. Nonetheless, this does not diminish the importance of his reign, as along with the reign of his grandson Frederick II, it was the last time the Holy Roman Emperor's authority came close to being restored. The consequences of this failure led to the continued decentralization of the Empire and the continued empowerment of the nobles. This strong class of independently-minded nobles prevented the growth of a state in Germany and Italy when at the same time England and France were coalescing around their future capital cities. It is important to remember that this was not an inevitable consequence of the nature of the German and Italian peoples but rather the failure of the emperors in an evenly-pitched struggle between imperial prerogative and regional autonomy.

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 ambiguously worded feudal insult to Barbarossa in 1157 at Besancon, 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 Papal States towards the end of Barbarossa's reign

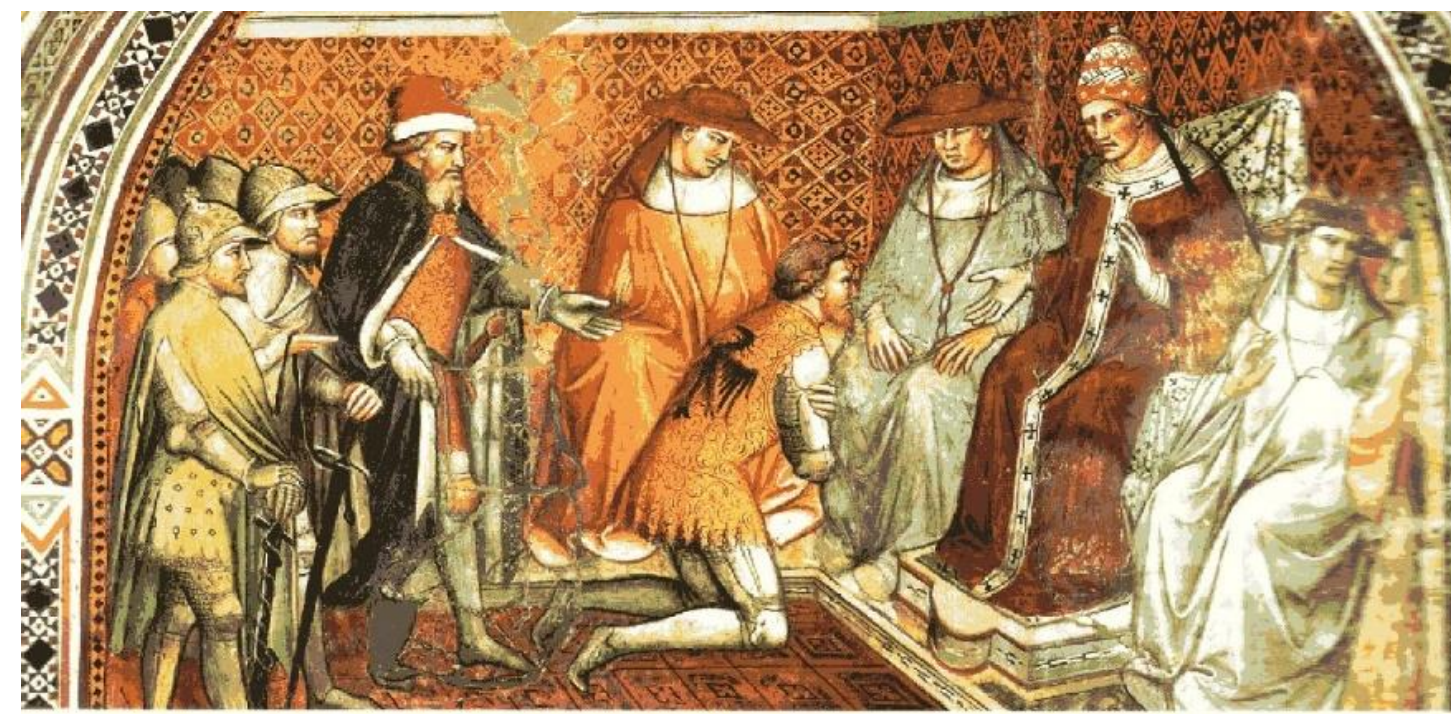
The Investiture conflict of the 11th century, where the Holy Roman Emperors clashed with the Popes in Rome over the right to appoint bishops and over the independence of the church, weakened the position of the Emperor severely. The Concordat of Worms ended the conflict in 1122, stripping the emperor of his spiritual authority and affirming the religious supremacy of the Pope. Barbarossa promoted the supremacy of the Emperor to ensure his political aims in Lombardy were successful. The Popes, however, had conflicting territorial ambitions in the region. This led 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 they were 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 called Lombardy, channeled Charlemagne's authority to legitimate his actions and his supremacy over the Pope, causing a similar reaction from Pope Alexander.

While Barbarossa canonized Charlemagne, emphasizing his piety and his initiative, Alexander's chronicler Boso depicted Charlemagne as a law-abiding and loyal emperor to the church. In a diploma Barbarossa issued when he made Charlemagne a saint in 1165, Barbarossa pointed out that divine grace, not the pope, chose the emperor, and emphasized Charlemagne's own initiative in his role as the protector of the church and Christianity. Boso referred to Charlemagne as an orthodox emperor, who had held up the right of the old empire, unlike the law-breaking Barbarossa. Through Roman law, both saw themselves as the inheritors of the ultimate legislative authority that the Roman Emperors had possessed, and they both employed their depiction of Charlemagne to bolster their claims.

Barbarossa and Alexander also clashed over the issue over who's legislative authority was superior and 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 lawful yet loyal vassals of the Emperor, thus leading to the conflict with Pope Alexander. He expected the armies of the bishops to serve the empire and demanded the taxes due to him by royal 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 amendment to the Canon law Alexander so forcefully denounces simony, or the sale of clerical office. Furthermore, in the same amendment, he orders all secular princes 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 very difficult, leading their schism to last 18 years and plenty of bloodshed to resolve, and even then the supremacy of neither was decisively decided.

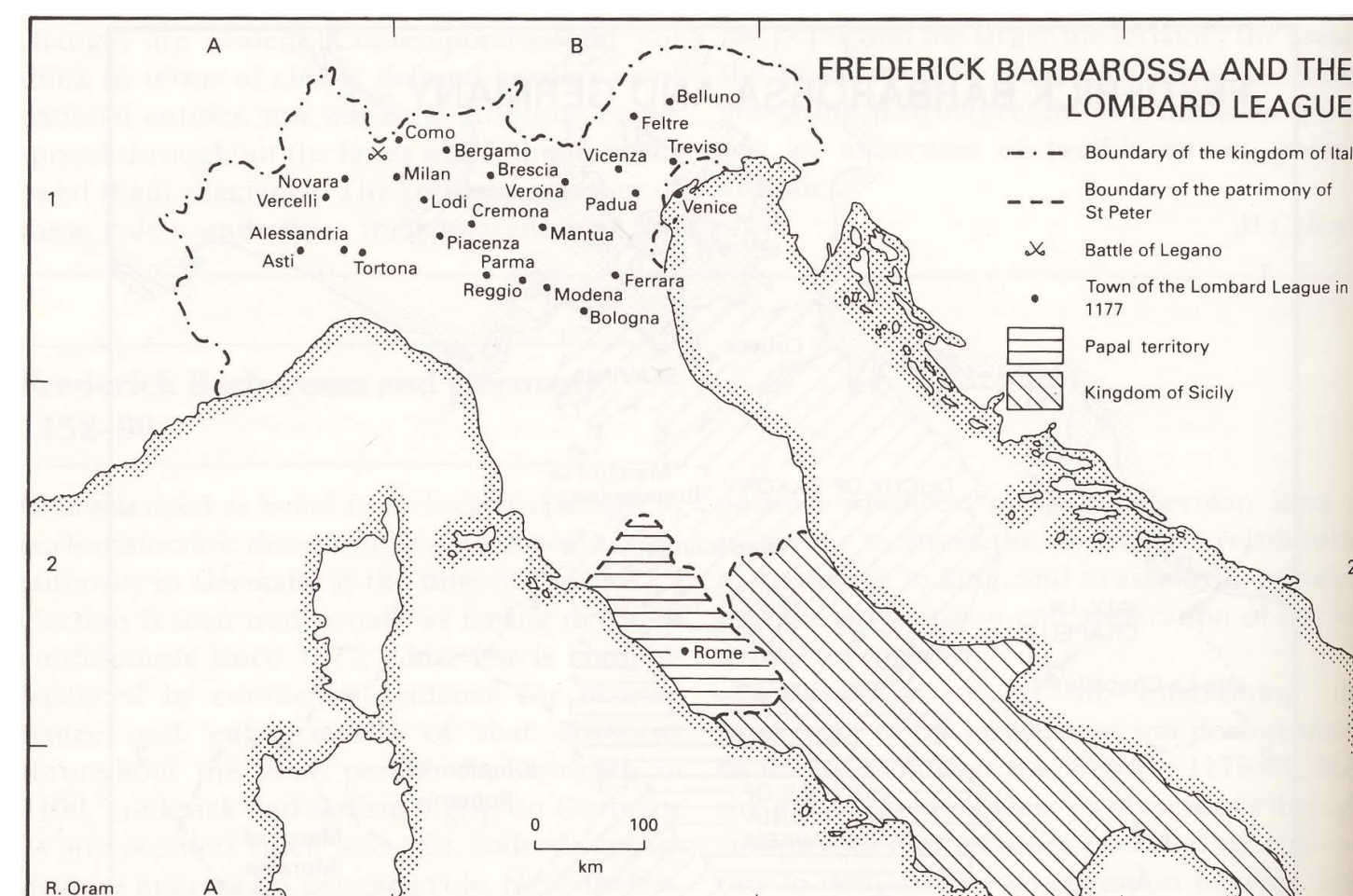
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Barbarossa making peace with Alexander in Venice, 1177

Barbarossa and Alexander eventually made peace, but it took a long time to finally conclude an agreement because Alexander insisted Barbarossa stop fighting his allies, the Lombard League and the King of Sicily. Barbarossa accepted Alexander as the pope and thereby as his spiritual superior, while Alexander conceded that Barbarossa was the legitimate emperor and overlord of Italy. Crucially, however, the territorial fate of central Italy was not decided, nor was the ultimate supremacy of Pope or Emperor agreed upon either. This ambiguity would lead to Barbarossa's grandson, Frederick II, to get in another bitter struggle with the Papacy, as he attempted to unite all of Italy and Sicily together in one state that would have doomed the independence of the Papacy.



These are the main cities of Lombardy that either fought with or against Barbarossa



Aachen Cathedral

Further Reading

Are you as interested in Barbarossa as I am? Do you want to read all of the books I read when researching this topic? I doubt it, so I've provided a list and a short summary of the most influential books I consulted on the topic, as well as the works that most influenced my thinking, in case you were a little interested. If, however, my doubt has proven misplaced, please do contact me, and I will gladly share the full-length paper I've written on the topic.

Frederick Barbarossa: a Study in Medieval Politics, by Peter Munz. Probably the most famous biography of Barbarossa, yet also rather controversial, Munz presents Barbarossa as a very logical and astute politician, unafraid to try new ideas and strategies. He coins the term the "Great Design" to describe Barbarossa's ambition to create a directly administered state in present-day Southern Germany, Eastern France, and Northern Italy. Munz also asserts that the ultimate goal of Barbarossa's reign was to become powerful enough to go on Crusade.

Charlemagne: the Formation of a European Identity, by Rosamund Mckitterick. A great, thorough introduction to the reign of Charlemagne, and why it was so impactful in the development of Europe. Particularly useful to me was her description of Charlemagne's internal communication and administration.

The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa, by Bishop Otto of Freising, translated by Christopher C. Mierow. Bishop Otto of Freising was Barbarossa's uncle, whom Barbarossa personally commissioned to write this biography, so this account becomes not merely a history but also a piece of propaganda. This does not, however, diminish its historical accuracy, as overall it is quite a faithful account.

The Struggle for Power in Medieval Italy: Structures of Political Rule, by Giovanni Tobacco. This book nicely lays out the development of the communes in Northern Italy, though its breath reaches from the fall of Rome to the Renaissance.

Baudolino, by Umberto Eco. A novel of semi-historical fiction, semi-medieval travel narrative, this work is particularly enlightening in its imagination of Barbarossa's character. The beginning of the work is more interesting, especially as it begins with Barbarossa's Italian campaigns.