

MICHAEL G. CORNELIUS

Conradin, Hawking

This is not a true history of the short and tragic life of Conradin of Sicily.

Much of what I write here is found in chronicles of the day, and the information presented is to the best of my knowledge true, but I have taken some liberties, in accordance with the wants of my discourse.

The different and various accounts of the short and undistinguished life of Conradin of Sicily agree on very little, save for the bare facts of his case. Was he held in a palace, as one modern historian asserts, or the same stinking dungeon as his Uncle Manfred's family? Did he sleep at night beside his beloved in an opulent bed of silk and cherry wood, or on a pile of straw listening to the cries and screams of Beatrice, Manfred's only daughter? We will never know.

What is the value, anyway, of one singular life, of a footnote to the vast encyclopedia of history? Should we care about Conradin, about his love for Frederick of Baden, his unjust and cruel death at the hands of Anjou? Should we care about two men who share such a depth of love that one willingly joins the other on the scaffold, rather

than be left alone? Or is this just another moment in history, largely unknown and forgotten?

Perhaps Conradin's life had no real value, or no more value than the life of any other man or woman. To be completely honest, had he been straight, I would not have cared about this boy king. I would never even have heard of him.

But I do care about Conradin, as I care about any part of a cultural heritage laid waste by years of prejudice and bigoted history. Conradin has been more maligned by historians than he ever was by his contemporaries. He expected Charles to oppose him. But what history has done since then—this is unpardonable.

He should have been forgotten. But his name lived on, in shame, because of who he loved. He was seen not as a man, not a king, but a faggot, a queer, a sodomite. To be slain by a rival, to have your line extinguished by a litany of popes—this may be evil, but at least it's understandable. But to be persecuted hundreds of years after your death, by bigoted men and women who consider themselves enlightened, educated—this is despicable, worse than anything Anjou ever did.

Frederick II was the greatest of the Hohenstaufen line.

The grandson of Barbarossa and Roger II, he was destined for greatness. He did not fail to live up to expectations. The Infidel Emperor, so called for his wars with the Popes of the thirteenth century, was elected Emperor of Germany in 1211, at the tender age of twenty, and ruled steadfastly for almost forty years. His line was ancient and strong, and he saw his own son, the man closest to him in the world, Conrad, elected Holy Roman Emperor in 1236. Despite negotiation, reorganisation, invasion, and

excommunication, he died a proud and substantial man, renowned for his intellect, his unwavering appetite for culture, and his devotion to his beloved Sicily.

His son Conrad IV succeeded him, titular king of Jerusalem and Sicily, Holy Roman Emperor, king of the Germans. But the heavy shadow of his father proved too much for him. The war against the church, the war his father had fought so bravely for years, was going poorly. Treachery abounded, the vehemence of the conflict making assassins out of friars and monks. Despite surviving several attempts on his life, this gloomy young man succumbed to illness only two years after his great father's demise, aged twenty-six years, two months, and three days. He left a grieving widow, a usurping brother, and a small boy, the last hope of the diminishing light of the Hohenstaufens.

The boy's name was Conradin.

A palazzo in Napoli may be truly opulent; its walls may cling to Persian marvels, its fixings gleam with jewels. There may be twelve servants, and thirty rooms, and anything one could ever desire—food, books, garments of the finest silk—all the trappings of imperial life. A palace must be this lavish, to be fit for a king. But if it should have only one door, a door barred with armed men, and windows only with bars, then despite its lushness, despite its finery, it is no longer a palace.

It is a prison.

My beloved lord seems not to realise this, or perhaps he hides it better than I imagine he can. His head bowed before me, his forehead furrows in thought as he stares at the pieces on the board. He carefully chooses his ivory queen, points it at my ebony

knight, but falters. A gentle laugh; “no, Frederick, that is where you want me to go.” And his thought resumes once more.

We have been here three months, he and I, and I would have thought so much time alone with him would be as a gift from God. But every day I wait in fear and terror, for the wrath of Anjou to manifest itself. Exile, banishment, life as his prisoner—these I would bless! I have no fear of these. And if someone must die, let it be me—dear God, please let it be me.

Conradin. Still only a boy, too innocent to be king.

Manfred was a popular king of Sicily, a blond replica of his famous father. Had he but lived, his nephew Conradin might have grown into a strong and capable ruler. But in 1266, Manfred was killed at the Battle of Benevento, and his conqueror, Charles of Anjou, king of France, seized Sicily for himself. The Pope, in his long and vast hatred of the Hohenstaufens, supported Charles. But the island itself called for the light of the Hohenstaufens, the faraway prince they had heard so much about. Rumours had spread to them, even from Germany, about the youth, reputed to be the handsomest lad in all Europe, quietly charismatic, reminiscent of his grandfather. He was now the true king of Sicily, and as cities rallied to support him, Conradin prepared his army and began to march towards Anjou.

He was fourteen years old.

*Finally, my liege makes his move; it is the move I expected him to make all along.
“Checkmate.”*

Checkmate. In the original Persian, Shah mat. The king is dead.

With a small smile, Conradin places his slim finger on the head of his king, and in a grand, princely gesture, topples it to its side. “You’ve won,” he says to me, reaching across the table and taking my hand. “Shall we play again?”

I smile wanly, and I nod, and eagerly, he begins to put the pieces of the game back into place. “This time, I shall win.” His youth, his zeal—could I have only known him for three years? I cannot remember my life without serving him. I try to take comfort in the fact that if he dies, I die with him. But I find no comfort in that thought.

This is torture, this waiting! Why must it take so long? But Anjou cannot kill him—a king killing a king—it is not done! Even the Holy Father would not agree to that. It is too much a crime against God, against nature. Better Anjou retire him to an out-of-the-way castle, marry him to a minor princess, use his blood to consolidate his royal claim.

“It is done,” he announces, looking at me with bated eyes. I catch his gaze; I want to scream and to laugh and to weep all at once.

Then footsteps, the tromping of soldiers, the harsh sound of fate pounding on the palazzo door.

Charles of Anjou was the greatest potentate in all Europe. He was an excellent fighter, brave and courageous, severe but magnanimous, faithful but firm, a man of few words, rigorous, generous, humourless, and ambitious. According to the Florentine chronicler Villani, when he died, the minstrels would not weep for him.

With the Pope's blessing and capital, Anjou made it his business to eradicate the blood of Hohenstaufen. He had captured Manfred's wife and four children, fettering the dead king's three sons for thirty years, and this brood of poison-swollen adders, as the Holy Father considered them, died in madness in a festering palace dungeon. His wife was killed after five years; his daughter sent to live in confinement. Manfred himself was even cast into the Liris River, so that his corpse would find no rest.

But this did not complete Anjou's task. As the Ghibellines took heart, Conradin entered Rome. The city was handed over to him. Triumphal arches stretched across his way, from the Bridge of Saint Angelo to the Capitol itself. Women swooned, men were roused from their slumber, and all of Rome remembered its glorious past. The last of the Hohenstaufens had come home, to Rome. The city breathed and pulsed after them, as if their very steps hearkened to its heart; Sicily loomed before him. As the tall, slight young man spoke from the steps of the Capitol, it is said that Romulus and Remus themselves wept to hear his voice. And by his side, his friend and advisor, Frederick of Baden, three years his senior, the two young men hailed as the saviours of all Italy.

And all this while, Anjou plotted his moment.

"Why?" I demanded, my voice thundering across the room. "Why am I not to die with him?"

The look on the face of the king's envoy would perhaps had been comical, at another time and place. "You wish to die, foolish boy?" he said to me. He called to his men. "This child wishes to die as a man!" The soldiers laughed. Again, he peered at me.

“I would kill you right now where you stand if I could. Wring your neck with my bare hands and cut out your heart for his majesty to feast upon.”

Eyes blazing, I thrust my chest at him. “I am unafraid.”

He laughs again, but not as derisive this time. “His majesty d’Anjou shows you mercy,” he said, “because of your father, and your mother. But his mercy can be recanted. I suggest you tread carefully.”

If I had had my sword, I would have cut him, killed him where he stood, killed them all. But I am defenceless. I can only watch, then, as the men all leave, the anger roiling inside me, fury and rage all that I now feel.

Until I turn to my liege, my beloved, my lord who tomorrow in the Napoli square will be put to death. He is stricken; the news was unexpected.

“My lord,” I say, but I falter, not knowing what to say, for the first time, not having a thing to say to him. “When you die bravely tomorrow, after, I will die, too, of my own hand. I will not live without you. It is the only way.”

Quietly, gravely, he raises his head to my hand. “Frederick,” he says, his voice almost a whisper, “live. I want you to go on.”

“But, my lord—”

“I am your king,” he says to me. “In this, you must obey.”

The night passes swift, like a song bird darting to escape the dark. We speak not, for there is nothing left unsaid. I hold his frail form against mine, both of us trying not to sob, and I tell him stories, legends of the cold north, and tales of my childhood. As dawn approaches we speak of our memories together, of simpler times in Schwabia, or days

spent in schooling, or in the woods, hunting, or hawking for small game. How he loved to hunt, to hawk, and he asks me always to remember him that way, on his mount with his leather gauntlet, his brave raptor flying overhead, swooping at his bid.

We bathe, eat, confess ourselves to a holy Franciscan, partake of the consecrated host. Then the soldiers come. I am taken, too; Anjou wishes me to watch.

Four weeks after his arrival in Rome, Conradin leads his forces against Anjou at the Battle of Tagliacozzo. The battle is long and gruelling, and for a time, Conradin's forces might prevail. But Anjou is cunning, and he spreads word amongst the boy's troops that the day is theirs. Eager for the spoils of victory, Conradin's army disperses to loot, and Anjou seizes the day and the young king. All of the royal retinue are captured and imprisoned. For three months Conradin and Frederick were held in Naples, until Anjou had decreed their fate, an unheard-of judgment at the time—death on the scaffold. No judge would concur with the sentence, but the Pope did, and in 1268, at the age of sixteen, Conradin, last of the Hohenstaufen line, in full view of Charles of Anjou, was murdered in the market-place of the town square of Naples.

Conradin stands in the centre of the square, his arms tied behind his back. Thousands have come to watch. Some men sell food, others drinks, and all await the presence of the executioner.

Anjou sits on the balcony of the Church del Carmine, watching with anticipation. I stand beneath him, held at bay by two armed men. The hangman, dressed all in red, approaches. Conradin is unbound, that he might pray. I watch as he crosses himself. "I

forgive thee that thou killest me," he says to his executioner before kneeling and placing his neck on the block. The hangman raises his axe.

"No!" I scream, and with a burst I break away from my guards and tear through the crowd. The execution is halted momentarily by the chaos. The guards pursue me.

"Let him die!" Anjou cries as I reach the scaffold. The assembled masses break into a loud cheer.

I lock my eyes with my lord's. Unblinking, gazing right at me, he crosses himself three times and raises his arms to God. The axe falls, once, then twice. His neck bones crunch and break, and his blood sprays on to the man in red, on to the crowd, on to me.

Some historians will say I shrieked with anguish at that moment, with despair, as was my disposition. This is not so. I could not have shrieked, for I was biting my lips, so hard they bled. Instead, I watched, my face a mask of stone, as the man in red kicked the lifeless body of my lord to one side, to make room for me. Inwardly, I retched, but I moved to re-join my lord.

Suddenly, and out of nowhere, an eagle, a large majestic creature, came swooping in from heaven. And as the great bird flew past us all, he trailed his right wing into the blood of my lord, into the blood of the last of the Hohenstaufen kings. The crowd was silenced by this miracle. Even Anjou was taken aback. I knelt then in the blood of my lord, crossed myself, and prayed that I might share in his fate.

In 1847, the Crown Prince of Bavaria commissioned a statue of Conradin and Frederick to be built in the church grounds of the monastery of Santa Maria del Carmine

in Naples and placed over the grave of the two young lovers. I don't have the money to erect a statue, nor the talent to make one myself. I only have words.

There is, to my knowledge, only one known contemporary likeness of Conradin in existence. It is a wood carving, a dull piece, entitled "Conradin, Hawking." It depicts a florid young man, a youth resembling a king on a deck of cards, with another, identically detailed youth, Frederick, and a large, swooping bird. When it was carved, I don't know. Who did it, I don't know. What it was originally attached to, I don't know.

But I'd like to believe that when you see that picture, or hear those words, "Conradin, Hawking," that instead of thinking of the drivel and prejudice that has so long passed for history, that you instead think on these words. And remember that much of our queer past has been for too long defined by those who hate us.

What is the value of one life lived, of one queer life lived? For now, I can't answer that question. I doubt I ever will be able to. But I know that some people in history come down to us, as heritage, as cultural ancestors, and that they matter, they matter a lot. Is Conradin one of those people? He matters to me. And that is enough for now.

The information gathered in this essay derives from numerous sources. Most accounts of Conradin's life barely rate more than a paragraph in a larger work about one of his more famous ancestors. The longest account I found was in Paul Wiegler's *The Infidel Emperor* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930), an historical biography of Frederick II. Outdated and outmoded, it was also the most homophobic of the sources used. Better, but much less detailed accounts can be found in *Frederick the Second 1194-1250* by Ernst Kantorwicz (London: Constable, 1957) and David Abulafia's *Frederick II* (London: Penguin, 1988.) I first came across the name of Conradin in Leigh W. Rutledge's *The New Gay Book of Lists* (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1996), a work of enormous entertainment and historical titbit that, unfortunately, does not list other sources. Numerous books about Sicily in the thirteenth century do not even mention Conradin, though whether this is indifference or prejudice is difficult to determine.