



Roger II, King of Sicily (1130 AD)

When you go to the Church of the Matorana in Palermo, you can't help noticing this rather unusual mosaic of Christ crowning Roger II King of Sicily. What's so unusual about it is that it is Christ doing the crowning and not a Pope, as was the custom in Europe since that day in the year 800 AD

when the Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne “Imperator Augustus” (First Holy Roman Emperor).

Why did Roger deviate from such a hallowed custom to celebrate his own achievement of the throne?

The answer lies in the convoluted political scene in 12th century Church and State Politics. Originally a group of Norman mercenaries had been hired by various Southern rulers and Popes to drive out the Saracens (Moslems) and Byzantines from Southern Italy and Sicily in the beginning of the eleventh century. Soon two brothers, Robert and Roger Guiscard, came to lead this effort and established themselves as Counts, Dukes and eventually, Kings (Roger I) of different areas in the South, even going so far as to sack the city of Rome in 1084 AD to end the rule of the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry IV, over the Papal States.

By 1130, Roger II, the son of Roger I and nephew of Robert, succeeded in pacifying the Island of Sicily and asked Anacletus II, the “Antipope”, to recognize his accession as King of Sicily rather than Innocent II, the generally recognized true heir to Pope Honorius II. Both Innocent and Honorius had grown to mistrust Norman intentions in Southern Italy (fearing further incursion into the territory of the Papal States) and Honorius had actually declared a crusade against him.

When Roger II succeeded in unifying all of Southern Italy and Sicily (with the help, believe it or not, of Moslem troops and Navy) and refused to establish a buffer state between his holdings and the Papal States, Innocent II had Roger excommunicated by the Second Lateran Council in 1139 (after the death of Anacletus in 1138). Roger continued, nevertheless, to strengthen his hold over the area of the “Two Sicilies” by establishing a powerful central government rather than a collection of feudal quasi-independent principalities and baronies, as had been the custom throughout the middle ages.

In 1144, a truce with Pope Innocent II established the boundaries of Roger’s Kingdom, and allowed that regnum to continue, with changing dynasties and overlords (German, French, and Spanish) for the next seven centuries, as the Kingdom/s (sometimes united and sometimes separated) of Naples and Sicily.

So, why the mosaic depicting Roger being crowned King, not by a Pope but by Christ Himself? Well, what would you do if the Pope who first granted you recognition as King was considered an imposter, and the Pope recognized as legitimate had excommunicated you? The mosaic, ironically enough, follows the Byzantine model with letters, not in Latin, but in Greek, declaring him “Rogereos Rex”!! Notice also the frown on Roger’s face. It is as though his appeal to Christ Himself in this coronation scene, was done as an act of defiance rather than gratitude or humility. Notice also, he is not on bended knee, the traditional posture during a coronation.

Roger’s example was not forgotten in European history, by the way. It is considered a precedent not only for the doctrine of the “Divine Right of Kings” proclaimed as late as James I of England in the 17th century (whose son Charles I was promptly beheaded and succeeded by Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector or Dictator), but also by Napoleon Bonaparte who forced the Pope to attend his coronation as Emperor of France and then took the crown in his own hands and crowned himself! With the growing influence of the commercial classes throughout Europe (and the American colonies) the notion of absolute rule by Divine Right soon became an anachronism, leading ultimately to the establishment of Republics, Commonwealths and Democracies.

Sic Semper Tryannis!

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