

**The Sicilian Vespers**  
**By**  
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**In the year 1000 AD almost all of Italy was in the control of non-Italians: the German Holy Roman Empire in the North (successor to the eighth century conquest of Europe under Charlemagne), the Byzantine Greeks (in rivalry with the resident Lombards) South of Rome and the Papal States, and the Arabs in Sicily. Gradually, the towns in both the North and the South began to develop commercial interests which sought to free themselves from their feudal overlords, both Imperial and Papal. As they did so, nation-states organized around hereditary Kingships and Principalities took control, not just of Italy but of most of Europe as well. And the Papacy struggled to find its proper place in this new political environment.**

**The Prelude**

**By 1154, after a long struggle, the Normans succeeded in defeating the Byzantines and the Arabs south of Rome, bringing basically good government to those areas and uniting them in loyalty to the Catholic Church, under the title of the “Kingdom of Sicily.” North of Rome quasi-independent Duchies, Principates and City States thrived commercially, with and without declaring their fealty to the Papal States and/or the Hohenstaufen German Empire. Eventually the**

**Hohenstaufen line succeeded to the “Kingdom of Sicily” and became fully integrated into the culture of the south under Frederick II who was born in Jesi (Apulia) and brought up in Palermo.**

**However, upon the death of Frederick in 1250, the Kingdom was once again subject to internecine rivalries and the Pope called upon Charles of Anjou, brother of St. Louis, King of France, and ruler of Provence and other French territories in the Balkans and the Near East (Kingdom of Jerusalem), to take it over. After a series of battles against the rival heirs of Frederick, Charles declared himself “Charles I of Anjou and King of Sicily” in 1266. This struggle gave rise to a long series of rivalries between the Papal parties (Guelfs) that supported Charles (and vice versa), and the Imperial or German parties (Ghibellines) that preferred the Hohenstaufens and their heirs, all over Italy.**

**Satisfied that he had succeeded in dominating the South, Charles set his aim to extending his rule across the entire Mediterranean, conquering the Arabs in Tunis just opposite Sicily, and the rich Byzantine Capital of Constantinople, then ruled by Emperor Michael VIII Paleologus. The Popes, most of whom were French (with Charles’ support, if not direct intervention in Papal elections) encouraged and supported this goal by phrasing it as a “Crusade” to unify the Latin and Greek Churches under Papal rule, as well as to drive out the Arabs in Tunis and North Africa.**

**Since Charles ruled both parts of Sicily from Naples and had given tax royalties and positions of power to French and Neapolitan nobility but none, not even areas of local self government, to the inhabitants of Sicily proper, the people of the Island portion of the Kingdom saw themselves reduced to being merely donors to fund Charles' imperial ambitions.**

**To avoid the conquest of Constantinople by Charles, Michael Paleologus at first agreed to the unification of the Greek and Latin Churches, including acceptance of the "filoque" clause in the Creed which was the source of the original schism between the two. But the Greek Patriarchs and citizens of his Realm bitterly opposed such a move. Michael then had little choice but to seek out a partner in this conflict among the heirs of the weakened Hohenstaufen line. He found it in Pedro III of Aragon, husband of the last heir of that family, who was a truly devout Catholic and therefore reluctant, at first, to oppose the brother of the saintly King Louis and the will of the French Popes.**

**Nevertheless, the overwhelming financial support given this Aragonese/Spanish/Hohenstaufen King Pedro III by Michael Paleologus, Byzantine Emperor of Constantinople, enabled Pedro to finance the expedition that would eventually allow him to thwart the Angevin/French King Charles of Sicily's ambitions in the east, while independently sparking an uprising**

**among the Sicilians who truly despised their Angevin/French overlords.**

### **The Tipping Point**

**On March 29, 1282, at the start of Vespers or evening prayer on Easter Monday, at the Church of the Holy Spirit outside Palermo, a French Sergeant who had had too much to drink during the festivities, dragged a young married woman out of the crowd and tried to impose his advances on her. Her husband drew his knife and killed the soldier, and when the bells tolled for Vespers, the cry went out all over the city to kill the French occupiers. (“Moranu li Franceschi,” in Sicilian.) Every Frenchman they met was killed; families of those who had married Sicilian women with their children were also killed; Convents were invaded and everyone who could not pronounce the name of Cicero in the Sicilian dialect (“Ciciri”--- impossible for Frenchmen) was slain. By the next morning some 2,000 Frenchmen and their relatives were dead.**

**The uprising spread like wildfire throughout the island. Leaders of the resistance were elected in Palermo and within six weeks the entire island was in rebel control. Even the heavily fortified port of Messina was broken into on April 28, and the fleet of warships gathered there in anticipation of Charles’ invasion of Constantinople, was set afire and destroyed.**

**The Sicilians sent envoys to Pope Martin IV asking that each city in Sicily be declared a free commune under the suzerainty of the Pope, as was the custom in Venice, Genoa, Pisa and other cities in the North. But this French Pope refused and ordered them to recognize Charles as their rightful King.**

**At this time, Pedro III of Aragon had his own fleet stationed off the coast of Tunis, presumably waiting for the order to move against the Arabs there (but not against Constantinople). When he heard of the revolt in Sicily, he moved his fleet to Trapani on August 30 and began a slow march towards Palermo—to permit the Sicilians to do most of the fighting before he needed to get involved.**

**At first some of the inhabitants of Sicily were reluctant to accept Pedro as their overlord, despite his connection to Frederick II. But they realized they could not remain independent for long, considering Charles' overwhelming forces and their own scattered and as yet non-unified political situation. When Pedro promised them the same liberties and privileges they had enjoyed under the Normans and Hohenstaufen, they agreed to accept him. And thus, with his military and naval help, the island of Sicily became subject to Aragonese control, with the rest of Southern Italy remaining in the hands of the Angevins.**

## Aftermath

**Despite the fact that Charles moved a second fleet from Naples to blockade the port of Messina, he was unable to land his troops on the Island and undo the agreement between the Sicilian Communes and Pedro III. All his attempts to conquer the Greek Empire in the East and return it to Latin control were also defeated, and, as Steven Runciman, in his book on the Sicilian Vespers (1958) stated, it was not so much Byzantine gold but the Sicilian people themselves who destroyed Charles' dream of Empire.**

**Eventually, Naples and Sicily were reunited under Alfonso V of Aragon in the fifteenth century, and became known as the "Kingdom of the Two Sicilies" --- with dominance alternating between Naples and Palermo, and continually fought over by the descendants of the Spanish and French crowns---until the French Revolution and its aftermath deposed the last of the Bourbons (from Navarre, a border territory between France and Spain) in the region. The constant clash over Southern Italy and Sicily ended only with the Unification of Italy in the nineteenth century.**

**But the cultural and linguistic differences between the North and the South remain distinct, even today. And the initial reaction to the French speaking Savoyards who were put in charge of administering the South after the Unification, caused the massive emigration out of**

**the South in the following decades, to more hospitable places like the Americas, including the United States.**

**As for the Papacy, its distinctive leaning toward the French in this conflict, also caused it to lose its reputation for being a non-political, incorruptible mediator among the evolving nations of Western Europe. Its increasing involvement in such hereditary and territorial disputes eventually led to the Avignon Captivity in the Fourteenth Century and the Protestant Reformation in the Sixteenth. Today, the Pope is once again an honored spokesperson for truth and morality in Europe and around the world, but his political domain is considerably smaller---just a few square miles, in fact: Vatican City.**



**Church of the Holy Spirit, site of the Sicilian Vespers,  
outside of Palermo,  
March 30, 1282.**



**Pedro III lands at Trapani, August 30, 1282.**

