

A MUSLIM ON THE THRONE  
OF THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

THE STORY OF FREDERICK II  
OF HOHENSTAUFEN

*A Collection of Essays about a  
little known Part of European History.*

*Compiled and edited by*

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# A Muslim on the Throne of the Holy Roman Empire. The Story of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen

Editor's Introduction  
by  
SALIM E. SPOHR

A website for Shaykh Nazım al-Qıbrisī, the highest spiritual authority of Cyprus and a spiritual leader for Muslims worldwide – cf. [www.saltanat.org](http://www.saltanat.org) – bears the image of a crowned head in its home page header of what appears at first glance to be a rather insignificant personage. This is a depiction of the Emperor Frederick II of Staufen. Many an undiscerning Muslim (even if he does not reside in the United States) might wonder how the home page of a Muslim website comes to be adorned with the image of a Western king and emperor, when it was people of his kind who undertook the crusades and who must have spilt the blood of many thousands of Muslims.

However, the man depicted on the website is none other than the *Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, King of Sicily and Jerusalem*, highly respected and deeply admired by all those in possession of some historical knowledge, and regarded as a wondrous, indeed prodigious personality even now as he was in his own time. Upon closer examina-

tion, Muslims in particular have every reason to respect and appreciate him on account of all the good he did for the Muslims of his day, and quite incidentally for the whole of Western Christianity, despite the violent opposition and hostility he experienced at the hands of the Roman Popes.

More to the point, there are justifiable grounds for assuming that the Emperor *was secretly a Muslim*. *If this was indeed the case, we would have the very odd situation of a Muslim ruling over the lands of Western Christendom while simultaneously acting as the patron of the Christian faith. This fact holds a dramatic tension which deserves a closer look for it to become entirely comprehensible.* Therein lies hidden not only the secret of how Allah's sun could shine upon the West and yet remain undetected, but holds at the same time the resolution to the much-vaunted contradictions in the man's personality, which if understood in their proper context and meaning, not only drop all their mystery but begin to make eminent sense.

A number of years ago, we featured King Frederick in the cover story of our former magazine *Der Morgenstern*<sup>1</sup> with contributions by SCHAFAK GÜNGÖR<sup>2</sup>, TARIK ERICH KNAPP<sup>3</sup> and ABDUL MALIK KONZ<sup>4</sup>. We would like to continue our treatment of the subject with an article written by L. SHAMSUDDIN, in which he points to some important facts in this story, and we plan to publish this and the previous articles mentioned, as well as other writings in a

1 *Der Morgenstern. Zeitschrift für die Wege zu den Himmeln*. II/1996. Verlag Gorski & Spohr, ISSN: 0949-359x, Bonndorf 1996, p. 22-34.

2 „Friedrich II. Pontifex Maximus. Brückenbauer zwischen Orient und Okzident“, l. c., p. 22 ff.

3 „War der deutsche Kaiser, Friedrich II. von Hohenstaufen, ein Muslim?“, l. c., p. 26 ff.

4 „Von Friedrich zu Friedrich oder Islamisches Preußen(tum)“, l. c., p. 31 ff.

separate monograph, possibly both in German and in an English translation. Here, as a foretaste of our forthcoming publication, we would like to present a few episodes illustrating the life of the Emperor Frederick II, which might elucidate the question of how the German emperor managed to live his life virtually unrecognized as a Muslim.

Frederick was born as the son of King Henry VI, son of the German Emperor Barbarossa and Queen Constance of Sicily, the daughter of the Sicilian King Roger II. His birthdate, December 26, 1194 corresponds to the 11<sup>th</sup> of Muḥarram, AH (anno hegirae, after *hijra*) 591 in the Muslim calendar one day after the famous feast of ‘*Āshūrā*’<sup>5</sup> on which the Muslims commemorate many momentous events, such as the creation of the world, the landing of Noah's ark, and the prophet Jonah's deliverance from the belly of the whale. – Is it possible that the date of his birthday gave a hint at the “builder of bridges” he was later to become? – As “pontifex maximus” he would unite the Christian Occident and the Muslim Orient with great power and a profound and ardent love, as no one before him had done or was ever to do again. *He was instrumental in making the cultural, spiritual, philosophical, scientific and even technological treasures of the East accessible to the Christian West, which in those days was in all respects at a much lower level of development, and which is hereby called to finally acknowledge its debt of gratitude for these precious gifts, albeit with a delay of nearly one millennium.*

In the course of the conquest of Southern Italy and Sicily, Frederick's Norman ancestors had encountered a completely new, and in many aspects superior form of culture,

5 Concerning a „small probability of one day error“ which is considered by electronic converting systems the corresponding Hijra date could have been also the 12th or the 10th of *Muḥarram* itself.

which they came to greatly admire on account of its advanced scientific status, its sophisticated administration, its refined lifestyle, its tolerance and generosity, and most of all because of the honourable character of its representatives. Under Frederick's grandfather Roger II, the coins of his kingdom bore an Arabic inscription of the *hijrī* date, while similarly bestowing on him the pious title of "Defender of Christendom".<sup>6</sup> Today's opinionated and querulous Muslims, especially those of Arab lineage, would do well to remember the serenity and cheerfulness of their ancestors, who in those days succeeded in making Islam and Muslims so attractive, in contrast to our present situation.

In this state, Muslims were trusted and enjoyed positions of respect and authority and they had considerable influence on young Frederick's education. The prince grew up in Palermo, which according to the Iraqi traveler IBN HAWQAL in AH 975 comprised more than three hundred mosques, the largest of which would have held a congregation of seven thousand believers.<sup>7</sup>

At his coronation as Holy Roman Emperor on November 22, AD (anno domini) 1220 (corresponding to the 9th day of *Ramaḍān*, AH 617), Frederick wore a magnificent robe of much-sung beauty, which bore an *Arabic inscription* wishing manifold blessings upon its wearer and naming the Sicilian capital as the site of its manufacture, while giving as its date the year AH 525 in the Muslim calendar.

When under papal pressure and after having been repeatedly excommunicated Frederick finally set out on a crusade, his bodyguard as well as the core of his troops consisted of

6 Cf. GERHARD GOLDMANN: *Deutscher Kaiser und Muslim? – Über die Beziehungen Friedrich II. von Hohenstaufen zum Islam*. Norderstadt 2006.

7 See l. c., p. 62.

Muslims, as had been the case for years. Whereas previous crusades had ended in indisputable bloodbaths, Frederick recovered the Holy Land without shedding any blood at all by carrying out negotiations with the Ayyubid Sultan al-Kāmil and his envoys. Whereas the entire population of Jerusalem had been slaughtered after the first conquest of Jerusalem in AD 1099 and all the mosques and sanctuaries of the town desecrated, so that a report was sent to Rome announcing that the Crusaders' horses had "traversed pools of Saracen blood reaching up to their knees" in the temple and the gate of Solomon – now complaints were issued by Gerald of Lausanne, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and fanatical supporter of the Pope against the Emperor, that there had not even been "ten Saracens killed or taken into captivity" during this crusade<sup>8</sup>.

Adalbert of Aachen described the mass murder of the first crusade in the following words: "Women, who had fled into fortified houses and palaces they pierced with the sword. Children, still suckling, they tore off their mother's breast by their feet or from their cradles, and smashed them against the wall and the door sill and broke their necks. Others they slew with their weapons, yet others they killed with stones. No heathen of any age or gender was spared. Whoever was first to invade a house, appropriated it into his possession, with all its equipment, including corn, barley, wine and oil, money and clothes and all assets. Thus the pilgrims (sic!!) took possession and availed themselves of the entire city."<sup>9</sup>

When Emperor Frederick II visited the Dome of the Rock and read the inscription on the Dome: "*Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn cleansed this temple of the impure idolaters*", he was reminded

8 Cf. GOLDMANN, p. 25.

9 See GOLDMANN, p. 25.

of this disgusting example of murderous greed and bloodlust. When it was explained to him that the bars on the windows had been installed to keep out the sparrows, the Emperor replied: “*And yet Allah brought these swine to you*”, thereby using the common Arabic insult for unbelievers, and in particular the crusaders.

When the Emperor saw a priest sitting near the footprint of the Holy Prophet ﷺ reading aloud from the Gospel, as if intending to convert the Muslim “infidels” to the true path, Frederick approached him, and leaning over him, he dealt him an imperial blow that threw him to the ground, while he angrily informed him not to ever show his face at this holy site again.

Frederick demonstrated his great love for the Muslims and their religion, when he blamed Shams al-Dīn, the Qadi of Jerusalem for having instructed the muezzins of the town not to sound the call to prayer during the night out of respect for their distinguished guest. He said: “I have come to spend the night in Jerusalem especially to listen to the Muslims’ call to prayer and their praise of God during the night. If you were at my house, you would see that the Muslims there follow the sunna (*sit venia verbo*) of the Prophet.”

It regularly triggered surprise when at the sound of the *adhān*, the Muslim prayer call, a large proportion of the Emperor’s retainers “rose for the ritual prayer” as a matter of course.<sup>10</sup>

The successful conclusion of the negotiations and the entirely peaceful conduct of this peculiar crusade crucially depended, as so happily formulated by Goldmann, on “the

<sup>10</sup> FRANCESCO GABRIELI: „Friedrich II. und die Kultur des Islam“ in: GUNTHER WOLF (ED.): *Stupor Mundi. Zur Geschichte Friedrichs II. von Hohenstaufen*, Darmstadt 1966, p. 271.

kinship of the commanders and the mutual sympathy”<sup>11</sup> that had developed between them.

“From that time on the Emperor’s soul was united with the soul of the Sultan by the indissoluble bond of love and friendship.”<sup>12</sup> The fact that the Sultan had presented an elephant to the Emperor, who had returned the favour by giving him a polar bear – “which created just as much of an uproar in Egypt as did the pachyderm in Italy and Germany”<sup>13</sup> – was an action that roused the suspicions of the Vatican. Pope Innocent IV himself chided the Emperor for his “*despicable friendship with the Saracens*”<sup>14</sup> – who, it is said, had “great concern and great suspicion” that “*he wished to convert to the faith of Mohammed*”<sup>15</sup>, even as his enemies claimed that “the Emperor Frederick *was more devoted to the teachings of Mohammed than to those of Jesus Christ*”<sup>16</sup>.

And when the Knight Templars of the time who were nothing but papal stooges informed Sultan al-Kāmil that Frederick was to visit with only a few companions the site of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan river, where he could then easily be killed, the Sultan, “*disgusted by this low betrayal*”<sup>17</sup> immediately forwarded this letter to the Emperor with an accompanying note. This illustrates how unequal a battle was being carried out here: whereas on the Emperor’s and the Sultan’s side we find honour, trust,

<sup>11</sup> Cf. GOLDMANN, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Roger von Wendover, as cited by KLAUS J. HEINISCH: *Kaiser Friedrich II. in Briefen und Berichten seiner Zeit*, Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1968, p. 189.

<sup>13</sup> GOLDMANN, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> HEINISCH, p. 209 [*italics added*].

<sup>15</sup> L. c., p. 190 [*italics added*].

<sup>16</sup> L. c., p. 208 [*italics added*].

<sup>17</sup> GOLDMANN, citing Kantorowitz [*italics added*].

friendship, understanding, culture and generosity, on the side of Pope Gregory IX and his successor Innocent IV there was a lot of dishonesty, deceit, treachery and small-mindedness, the Vatican in that very special time of papal criminals containing bigotry, nepotism, corruption and simony.<sup>18</sup>

Frederick has cultivated good relations with Moslems, Jews<sup>19</sup> and also with the Orthodox Church whereas after the first crusade Roman and Greek Christians “as enemies of faith” have started to hate each other more than the Moslems. Unimpressed by those quarrels Frederick wedded his daughter Konstanze with the Byzantine emperor John II Vatatzes to whom he later should give the famous address: “O happy Asia, o happy emperors of the Orient, who neither fear the dagger of rebels nor the superstition of the priests.”<sup>20</sup>

The Vatican’s obvious hatred of the Muslims most certainly provided Frederick with an additional reason for taking a simple precaution to protect the Muslims and to ensure the peace before he left for Europe: “He had some of the war machines destined for the defense of Acre loaded onto his galleys, and sent ... some to his friend al-Kāmil and destroyed the rest of those he could not take with him.”<sup>21</sup>

A close friendship had sprung up between the Emperor and the Sultan’s envoy, Amīr Fakhr al-Dīn ibn Shaykh. With this highly erudite man the Emperor liked to discuss

18 Cf. GOLDMANN, p. 64. – Who look at this characteristic as exaggerated should know that for instance pope Gregory IX neither shrunk back from instigation to murder nor to send his troops on a conquering expedition like a Tartarian chieftain.

19 Has the mob in Germany eradicated Jewish communities in the time of the first crusade, Frederick himself provided their cover by law.

20 ANGUS KONSTAM: *Die Geschichte der Kreuzzüge*, Wien 2002, p. 335.

21 GOLDMANN citing BOULLE, p. 27.

scientific and philosophical topics, he personally knighted him and permitted him to show the imperial insignia in his coat of arms. He later was to write him the most cordial letters in Arabic, beginning with the customary Muslim formula: “*bismi llāhi r-rahmāni r-rahīm*”, “in the Name of Allah, the All-Compassionate, the All-Merciful”. One letter concludes with the promise that the “Amīr shall be informed of any further news, *inshā’Allāb*”, meaning “God-willing”.

The emperor had always sought dialogue with Muslims concerning scientific questions. During his stay in Acre he sent seven questions to Sultan al-Kāmil, dealing for instance with the curvature of light, the pupil of the human eye and the peculiarity of celestial bodies to appear larger at their rising than at the zenith. GOLDMANN is entirely justified in considering as “astounding” that the Emperor should have chosen as an example for this last question a star that is not visible at all in Italy and Sicily, but that appears on the southern horizon in North Africa and the Middle East for a few weeks a year and plays a prominent role among Arab astronomers and sailors, and is known to them by the name of *subayl* (Canopus).

During the negotiations about Jerusalem, when, as HEINISCH<sup>22</sup> writes, “in the face of an impending armed conflict the two most enlightened princes of the century presented the world with the unique spectacle of exchanging their views on the most difficult problems in mathematics and philosophy, political science and logic”, the Emperor had evidently asked the *famous question about the succession of the Caliph*, to which Amīr Fakhr al-Dīn replied that the Caliph “was the descendant of the uncle of our Prophet ﷺ. He had received the Caliphate from his father who had in-

22 HEINISCH, p. 170.

herited it from his father, and so on, so that the Caliphate has remained without interruption in the family of the Prophet ﷺ.”

The emperor was delighted and commented on the answer he received by saying: “That is excellent and so much better than the simple-minded Franks, who just chose some person as their overlord who has not the slightest bond of kinship with the Messiah, and make him into a kind of Caliph to gloat over. This man has no right to assume similar rank and status while your Caliph has all the right to do so.”<sup>23</sup>

His “Sicilian questions” (*questiones sicilianae*) deal with Aristotle’s scheme of categories, the creation and eternity of the world and the immortality of the soul, as well as the goal of theology and its possible postulates, and a definition of its limits. The fifth of the Emperor’s questions, which among Christian historians has always been regarded as somewhat of a curiosity, but which Goldmann rightly hails as the “real sensation”<sup>24</sup>, addresses itself to the meaning of a hadith, in that he asks: “What is the meaning of the words of Muḥammad: ‘The heart of the believer lies between two fingers of the Merciful?’” Thereby the Emperor demonstrated his remarkable interest in the *sunna* of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, peace and blessings be upon him and his people, in that he seriously pondered the meaning of a hadith.

If, at the end of this introduction we were to ask ourselves how quite apart from human assessment, the Heavens above and the Prophet ﷺ himself might have regarded this great man, this is easily worked out by closely scrutinizing the following two reports:

23 L. c.

24 P. 44.

A contemporary Christian notes: “He had such love and so much confidence in these heathens, and he knew them so very well that he honoured these people and their institutions. He had infidel Muslims for his chamberlains and made them his most trusted servants, and he kept a guard eunuchs for his ladies. And in many things *he kept the ways of the Saracens*.”<sup>25</sup>

As it was stated in the Patriarch Gerald’s report to Pope Gregory IX on March 26, AD 1229: “We are to report with the utmost sincerity and burning shame that when the Sultan heard that the Emperor thus lived after Saracen custom, he sent him singing and dancing girls (called almées), as well as jesters ... with these the Prince of the World amused himself at his nightly banquets, *with Saracen drinks, in Saracen raiment and in generally every way a Saracen*.”<sup>26</sup>

Both and so many other testimonies show that the Emperor had adopted Saracen customs, that is, he lived according to the *sunna* of the Prophet ﷺ. The fact that he appeared in Saracen attire allows us to think likely that from a Heavenly point of view the Emperor will be counted as a Muslim, according to the well-known prophetic tradition: *man tashabbaba bi-qawmin fa-huwa min-hum*, (whoever resembles a people [in dress and behaviour], will be counted as belonging to them). – We here strongly concur with this view.

When the Emperor Frederick II at last passed away on December 13, AD 1250 (the 2nd day of *Safar*, AH 667) near Lucera, the Saracen town of his founding, he was dressed in the simple habit of the Cistercians, which he had worn previously on certain occasions. When, however, in 1781 his sarcophagus in the cathedral of Palermo was opened un-

25 HEINISCH, p. 190, [*italics added*].

26 HEINISCH, p. 181, [*italics added*].