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From Defeat to Victory in Northern Italy: Comparing Staufen Strategy and Operations at Legnano and Cortenuova, 1176-1237.

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MARCO MERLO, ANTONIO MUSARRA, FABIO ROMANONI e PETER SPOSATO



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Bacinetto con visiera a becco di passero, Milano 1400-1430,
Museo delle Armi "Luigi Marzoli" (inv. E 2), Fotostudio Rapuzzi

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From Defeat to Victory in Northern Italy: Comparing Staufen Strategy and Operations at Legnano and Cortenuova, 1176-1237¹

by DANIEL P. FRANKE

(Richard Bland College of William and Mary)

ABSTRACT. The wars of the Staufen emperors with the Lombard League have attracted a lot of attention in recent years, and modern scholars have spent much effort correcting the romantic mistakes of nineteenth-century national scholarship. Yet a good deal of work remains to be done. A detailed comparison of the two decisive battles in these conflicts allows us to examine serious issues in medieval warfare, including medieval generals' decision-making processes, the role of chivalry in those processes, the external conditions that shaped military operations, and the utility of force, perceived and actual, in achieving political objectives. Both Frederick I and his grandson Frederick II emerge as capable commanders who pursued rational military policies and made the best decisions possible under the circumstances, despite the different outcomes of these two campaigns.

KEYWORDS: LOMBARD LEAGUE; FREDERICK I; FREDERICK II; LEGNANO; CORTENUOVA; STRATEGY; CAVALRY; WARFARE.

INTRODUCTION

The German emperors' wars with northern Italian cities (often, but not always, represented by versions of the «Lombard League») in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Italy have long been the stuff of legend, both in their own times and particularly in the hyper-national environment of the nineteenth

1 I would like to thank Marco Merlo and Peter Sposato for their patience and encouragement. Any errors of commission or omission are mine alone; with the onset of the pandemic and the suspension of international travel and interlibrary loan services, it has been difficult to acquire several works of scholarship on the topics under discussion here. However, the reader should find a fairly complete historiography in the notes that follow, and in the bibliography at the end.

century. Frederick I's defeat at Legnano in 1176 in particular fueled a romantic German vision of a tragic Great Man striving to overcome Fate. His grandson's victory at Cortenuova over a new version of the League in 1237 stoked the imagination somewhat less, as German historians were more obsessed with inscribing the collapse of the Staufen dynasty on the Hohenzollerns' destiny to succeed where the Hohenstaufen failed. In Italy, the various Lombard Leagues and their struggles against the Staufen were at the center of arguments regarding the Italian nation-state and how history could or could not be used to support various visions of Italy's future.²

Military historians have not been slow to study these two campaigns, and there is now an eclectic but robust literature on Staufer military activities, mostly in Italian and German. There are also a growing number of assessments of Frederick I's abilities, or more accurately characteristics, as a military commander; somewhat less so for his grandson.³ The net result of this work has been to

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- 2 The scholarship on Frederick I, Frederick II, the several Lombard Leagues, medieval warfare, and their reception in the nineteenth century is enormous and only highlights that shed light on the historiography and that have shaped the present arguments can be listed here. For the medieval monarchs as well as nineteenth-century studies, consult Knut GÖRICH and Martin WIHODA (Hg.), *Friedrich Barbarossa in den Nationalgeschichten Deutschlands und Ostmitteleuropas (19.c-20.Jh.)*, Köln, 2017; John FREED, *Frederick Barbarossa: The Prince and the Myth*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2016; Wolfgang STÜRNER, *Friedrich II*, 2 volumes, Darmstadt, Primus Verlag, 2003. For the Lombard League in its various iterations, including how and why it was studied in the nineteenth century, see Paolo GRILLO, *Le Guerre del Barbarossa: I comuni contro l'imperatore*, Rome, Laterza, 2014. Gianluca RACCAGNI, *The Lombard League 1167-1225*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010; Gianluca RACCAGNI, «An Exemplary Revolt of the Central Middle Ages? Echoes of the first Lombard League across the Christian world around the year 1200», in Justine FIRNHABER-BAKER and Dirk SCHOENAERS (eds.), *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt*, London, Routledge, 2017, pp. 130-151; Gina FASOLI, «Federico II e la Lega lombarda. Linee di ricerca», *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento* 2 (1977), pp. 39-74; XXXIII Congresso Storico Subalpino, *Popolo e stato in Italia nell'età di Federico Barbarossa: Alessandria e la Lega Lombarda*, Turin, Deputazione Subalpina di Storia Patria, 1970. For studies on medieval warfare that contribute to understanding the Staufen conflicts in northern Italy, see John FRANCE, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades 1000-1300*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1999; Andreas OBENAU and Christoph KAINDEL (Hg.), *Krieg im mittelalterlichen Abendland*, Wien, Mandelbaum Verlag, 2010; Aldo SETTIA, *Rapine, assedi, battaglie. La Guerra nel Medioevo*, Rome, Laterza, 2009.
- 3 On Frederick I's military career, Martin CLAUS, «Die Kriege Friedrich Barbarossas – Friedrich Barbarossa als Krieger», in Karl-Heinz RUESS (Hg.) *Friedrich Barbarossa*, Schriften zur staufischen Geschichte und Kunst volume 36, pp. 10-31; Knut GÖRICH, «Miles strenuus, imperator incautus. Friedrich Barbarossa as kämpfender Herrscher», in Martin CLAUS

help strip away later accretions, mostly from the 19th-century, and get closer to things «as they were», even if that means substituting uncertainty for certainty, or discarding romantic conceptions of the past. With such advantages, a comparison of these two campaigns cannot but yield some useful insights into how two of the most significant rulers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries used tactical and operational choices to pursue strategic goals.

SOURCE ISSUES

Our knowledge of what «actually» happened on these two battlefields is constrained by the scarcity and partisan nature of the surviving sources—more so for Legnano than for Cortenuova. Accounts of Legnano contradict each other, leading one scholar to describe any attempt to reconstruct the narrative as «nearly impossible».⁴ The most complete accounts, by Cardinal Boso, the Milanese Anonymous, and Romuald of Salerno, present a good deal of raw data but are heavily biased in favor of the League and Papacy; those accounts from the empire, such as the Magdeburg Annals and the various Cologne chronicles, are more even-handed but naturally display a pro-German, if not pro-Staufen, bias.⁵ For Cortenuova, we are faced with a similar problem from the opposite direction: the most complete accounts of the battle derive from Frederick II's letters to Richard earl of Cornwall, the Archbishop of York, and the papal court announcing his victory; accounts from the Guelf chroniclers are less detailed.⁶ This does not even touch the accretions of

et al (Hg.), *Der König als Krieger. Zum Verhältnis vom Königtum und Krieg im Mittelalter*, Bamberg, 2015, pp. 333-370; Holger BERWINKEL, *Verwüsten und Belagern. Friedrich Barbarossas Krieg gegen Mailand (1158-1162)*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 2007; Heinz KRIEG, *Herrscherdarstellung in der Stauferzeit: Friedrich Barbarossa im Spiegel seiner Urkunden und der staufischen Geschichtsschreibung*, Ostfildern, Jan Thorbecke, 2003.

4 Mareike POHL, *Fliehen – Kämpfen – Kapitulieren: Rationales Handeln im Zeitalter Friedrich Barbarossas*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2014, p. 70.

5 See the Abbé L. DUCHESNE (Ed.), *Liber Pontificalis*, Volume 2, Paris, 1892, pp. 432-433; the *Annales Mediolanenses Maiores*, published under the colorful title *Gesta Federici I. Imperatoris in Lombardia*, and occasionally cited under the title *Narratio de Longobardie obpressione et subiectione*; as the *Gesta*, Oswald HOLDER-EGGER (Hg.), MGH SS rer. Germ. 27, Hannover, 1892, pp. 62-64; the *Annales Magdeburgenses*, Georg PERTZ (Hg.), MGH SS XVI, Hannover, 1859, pp. 193-194; the *Annales Colonienses Maximi*, Karl PERTZ (Hg.), MGH SS XVII, Hannover, 1861, pp. 788-789; ROMUALD OF SALERNO, *Annales*, Wilhelm Arndt (Hg.), MGH SS XIX, Hannover, 1866, pp. 441-442.

6 See HUIILLARD-BRÉHOLLES (dir.), *Historia diplomata Friderici Secundi*, volume 5 Part

later legend, myth, and simple falsification for political purposes in later decades, to say nothing of centuries; Salimbene introduced a story that, after Cortenuova, Frederick II gave the League's *carroccio* to Rome, which city refused to accept it as a trophy, choosing instead to burn it in protest—something that would have surprised observers at the time, who seem to have accepted it gladly.⁷ The chronicles of the losing side in these battles sometimes skip over what transpired in near-silence, leaving the victors to tell the story.⁸ For neither battle do we have anything approaching a detailed order of battle or information regarding military service; for example, we have various scattered references in Frederick II's letters to terms of military service, one of them from December of 1237 shortly after Cortenuova, but nothing from the battle itself.⁹ Naturally, if we are interested in studying how Frederick exploited his military victory to shape political outcomes, it is important to tease out the veracity of such details, if we can.

LEGNANO¹⁰

The emperor had been northern Italy since 1174, his fifth campaign south of the Alps. From the beginning, it was fairly clear to see that, not only was his actual military strength fading, so too was what moral compass he may have

1, Paris, 1857, pp. 132-145.

- 7 See Marina NARDONE, «Il Carroccio di Cortenuova: Nord e Sud Italia tra Papato e Impero nella Cronaca di Salimbene de Adam», *Incontri* 28 (2013), pp. 14-21, that uses this episode as a way to explore the constructedness of medieval narrative histories.
- 8 For example, the *Annales Mediolanenses Minores*, MGH SS XVIII, p. 399, mentions Cortenuova obliquely in a single line: «A.D. 1237 there was a battle or destruction at Cremona.» This brevity is not uncommon in chronicles of the defeated, suggesting a fundamentally different attitude toward defeat in war that we have today, and that as historians we would wish our medieval sources to have as well. Loquacity, rather than silence, is what historians like to read.
- 9 Peter THORAU, «Der Krieg und das Geld: Ritter und Söldner in den heeren Kaiser Friedrichs II», *Historische Zeitschrift* 268 (1999), pp. 599-634, discussion at p. 605. For the kind of records, we *do* have in some measure from the Italian communes, see Fabio BARGIGIA and Gianmarco DE ANGELIS, «Scrivere in Guerra: I notai negli eserciti dell'Italia comunale (secoli XII-XIV)», *Scrineum – Rivista* 5 (2008), pp. 1-69.
- 10 The main study of Legnano is by Paolo GRILLO, *Legnano 1176. Una battaglia per la libertà*, Rome, Gius, Laterza & Figli, 2010. Other analyses include POHL 2014 (see Note 3), and Holger BERWINKEL, «Die Schlacht bei Legnano (1176)», in Jörg SCHWARZ, Matthias THUMSER, and Franz FUCHS (Hg.), *Kirche und Frömmigkeit – Italien und Rom*, Würzburg, Universität Würzburg, 2010, pp. 70-80.

had. His army was to a large degree mercenaries, not comital retinues, and although Boso may exaggerate when he described them as «desperados» whose sole purpose in life was to commit evil deeds, he was not missing the mark by much.¹¹ Freed has expressed puzzlement over what Barbarossa actually hoped to accomplish with this campaign, as the questions at issue were not such as could be decided by the use of force. There is a strong hint that this was another example of Frederick's tendency toward irrationality in military affairs, as proposed by Laudage in 2006.¹² However, other historians disagree with this assessment, though for different reasons. For Görich, applying his thesis of the centrality of «honor» to Frederick's reasoning makes the situation much clearer. The main goal of the campaign was the capture or destruction of Alessandria, which was the ultimate symbol of League defiance: a city founded by the league, named after Pope Alexander III, it represented the totality of the political problems facing the emperor in northern Italy. Its capture would be a powerful statement, whether or not it fundamentally affected the military balance. As Raccagni put it in his study of the League, for Barbarossa it was «a matter of principle.»¹³

In the event, the siege of Alessandria failed spectacularly. Frederick attempted to trick the defenders by granting them a truce during Holy Week, and then violating the truce by sneaking a couple hundred men via tunnels into the city. The attempt failed, and earned him widespread contempt for disrespecting the Christian religion. As a League army was approaching, Frederick lifted the siege on Easter Sunday and retired to Pavia.¹⁴ There matters more-or-less stood until the early months of 1176; League, pope, and emperor negotiated, seemingly in good faith, but the issues were intractable unless one side gave ground. Frederick

11 BOSO, *Life of Alexander*, in *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 2, p. 427. After the war limiting the use of such mercenaries was a major goal of the Third Lateran Council (1179). See Norman TANNER, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 volumes, Washington, Georgetown University Press, 1990.

12 Johannes LAUDAGE, «Rittertum und Rationalismus: Barbarossa als Feldherr,» in Johannes LAUDAGE and Yvonne LEIVERKUS (Hg.), Cologne, Böhlau Verlag, 2006, pp. 291-314. Laudage goes so far as to say that Barbarossa never learned the necessity of concentrating all his forces on a strategically important point and persevering to victory. («Barbarossa wusste also noch nichts von der Notwendigkeit, die Kräfte am strategisch wichtigen Punkt überraschend zu bündeln und durch zahlenmäßige Überlegenheit zum Sieg zu führen», p. 313).

13 See FREED, pp. 379-289; GÖRICH, *Ehre*, pp. 264-275; RACCAGNI, pp. 115-117.

14 FREED, p. 381; ROMUALD OF SALERNO, *Annales*, MGH SS XIX, p. 441.

had disbanded most of his forces except the core comital retinues of his advisers, and no one seemed to have an appetite for military action. In November Philip of Cologne was sent back to Germany to persuade, order, bribe, cajol and otherwise coerce reinforcements from such nobles as he could reach.¹⁵ So it was not much of a secret, in the opening weeks of 1176, that the emperor was intending to resume the campaigning season at the head of a new army.¹⁶ The question, from the point of view of the papacy and the League, was how big of an army and how to coordinate an effective response when he did. Keeping the members of the League in order, and punishing or discouraging towns that opposed the League, were Milan's top priorities—several defections had occurred since 1174, with Tortona in March 1176 being the most recent. A defeat would doubtless cause defections to increase.

Despite the League's concerns, Frederick's strategic position in 1176 was, if not desperate, at least heavily compromised, and the army the archbishop of Cologne led over the Alps was smaller than in previous campaigns. It was a long way from the apex of complete victory that seemed within his grasp in the summer of 1167—the Lombard League was dormant, its leading city, Milan, devastated since 1162, the «rebel» forces in central Italy destroyed at the battle of Tusculum. And then everything fell apart as the imperial army was decimated by plague, the League reformed, many city allegiances switched, and the emperor was himself cut off from his German kingdom for some time. German nobles themselves were also markedly less enthusiastic to participate in the emperor's campaigns after that, as the mass fatalities among the nobility in 1167 resulted not only in a land grab by the emperor himself, but the stability and lines of succession of many noble families was thrown into turmoil.¹⁷

15 The *Annales Magdeburgenses*, p. 193-194, subtly acknowledge the discrepancy between what Barbarossa decreed versus what he received; ordering all princes «by imperial authority to come to his assistance» (imperiali auctoritate mandans eos venire sibi in adiutorium), Philip of Cologne and Wichmann of Magdeburg with out «with all those they were able to attract» (cum omnibus quos sibi attrahere poterant).

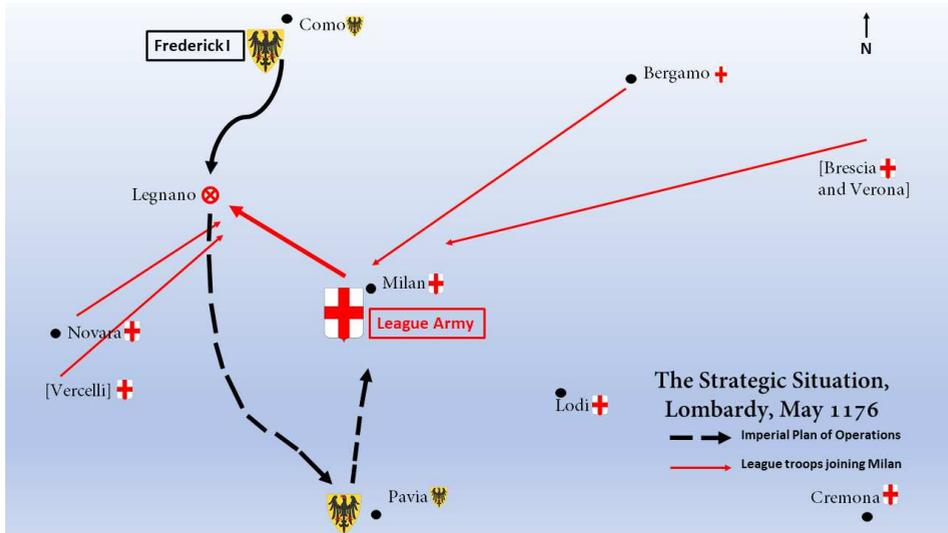
16 Boso, *Life of Alexander*, in *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 2, p. 432; «dum F. expectaret in constituto termino exercitum quem de Alammania excitaverat...»

17 See Jennifer RADULović, *Federico Barbarossa e la Battaglia di Monte Porzio Catone*, Jouvence, Milano, 2014; Peter HERDE, *Die Katastrophe vor Rom im August 1167. Eine historisch-epidemiologische studie zum vierten Italienzug Freiderichs I. Barbarossa*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1991; Freed, *Frederick Barbarossa*, pp. 334-348.

In the late spring of 1176 imperial forces were scattered all over the Italian peninsula, as the emperor's captains attempted to maneuver their forces so as to force political settlements favorable to the monarch. The emperor himself with his main army, now much reduced, was at Pavia. Having secured Bologna as a base, Christian of Mainz was advancing into the Norman realm where he would win several victories before learning of his master's defeat in Lombardy. Philip of Cologne had gathered reinforcements from the Kingdom of Germany and was due to arrive in Como; Philip, who a decade later would nearly go to war with the emperor, financed the troops in part out of his own funds, and a couple of the nobles we know were at Legnano were his vassals. Accompanying him were a fellow archbishop, Wichmann of Magdeburg, as well as the bishop-elect of Worms and «various barons of the lower Rhine» as Otto of St. Blasien puts it. Conspicuously absent from the newly arrived troops was Barbarossa's cousin Henry the Lion, duke of Saxony and Bavaria, who earlier that year had refused to help the emperor despite the latter's asking personally, supposedly on bended knee. Some time around mid-May Barbarossa, taking about 1000 heavy cavalry, left Pavia and traveled north to rendezvous with these reinforcements.¹⁸

A glance at a map shows the emperor's strategic dilemma (speaking of strategy here in the rather old-fashioned sense of the coordination of military forces to achieve the campaign objective). To get the troops back to Pavia, and presumably to renew operations against Alessandria, they would have to pass directly through Milanese territory within easy striking distance of Milan itself. Further, prudence would have dictated the route that Barbarossa would take—to the west side of Milan, where the small imperial force would not have been completely surrounded by enemies. Once across the Olona River, in fact, there was basically only one road south, in a gently rolling landscape with fields, ditches, and scattered woodlands that would make maneuvering and reconnaissance difficult. The imperials would have had two advantages: one, their force was almost completely cavalry, so they could move faster than their opponents, who, despite significant numbers of cavalry, fielded mostly an infantry force. And two, German heavy cavalry was known for being both fierce and professional in a way that Italian

18 FREED, p. 389; OTTO OF ST. BLASIEN, *Chronica*, (Hr.) Adolf Hofmeister, MGH, SS rer. Germ. 47, Hannover, 1912, p. 34. Otto also gives what is the standard account of Henry the Lion's refusal, at Chiavenna, to assist his cousin, pp. 33-34, adding that Henry's military aid was conditional on Frederick giving up major royal holdings in north-central Germany.



[Map 1, Legnano, strategic situation]

civic cavalry could not hope to match. In modern terms, the professionalism of the German heavy cavalry was a «force multiplier» on the battlefield, and would have been factored into Barbarossa's and the League's calculations.¹⁹ And the emperor would have roughly 3,000 of these troops at his disposal—a very large force by any standard.

Barbarossa was to have been aided in his march by a diversionary maneuver

¹⁹ See Grillo's discussion, *Legnano*, pp. 129-132. For discussions of cavalry in the communal armies and an overview of the literature, see Paolo GRILLO, «Cavalieri, cittadini e comune consolare» in Maria Teresa CACIORGNA, Sandro CAROCCI, and Andrea ZORZI (cur.), *I comuni di Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur: Percorsi storiografici*, Rome, 2014, pp. 157-176, and GRILLO, *Cavalieri e popoli in armi: le istituzioni militari nell'Italia medievale*, Rome, 2008. Regarding «force multipliers», there is a considerable literature in military studies. The official U.S. military definition being «a capability that, when added to and employed by a combat force, significantly increases the combat potential of that force and thus enhances the probability of successful mission accomplishment.» This comes from JP 3-05.1, *Joint Special Operations Task Force Operations*, April 2007. It is useful way of conceptualizing Grillo's and others' discussions of the battlefield impact of heavy cavalry, without succumbing to outdated ideas regarding the supremacy of cavalry on the medieval battlefield. See Matthew BENNETT, «The Myth of the Military Supremacy of Knightly Cavalry», in Matthew STRICKLAND (ed.), *Armies, Chivalry and Warfare in medieval Britain and France: proceedings of the 1995 Harlaxton Symposium*, Stamford, Paul Watkins, 1998, pp. 304-316.

from his forces at Pavia, to distract the Milanese. According to Cardinal Boso the emperor's plan, after consulting with the Pavians, was to move secretly to Como to collect his reinforcements and then «without warning» to invade Milanese territory, burning villages and farms while the Pavians advanced against Milan from the south.²⁰ One does have to ask why the emperor traveled to Como at all, given the risks involved and that the German reinforcements had experienced commanders capable of acting independently—Philip, after all, had just organized the entire mobilization and movement of these troops. But Barbarossa was not the kind of commander to leave such a dangerous and important maneuver to others when so much depended on the safe arrival of the reinforcements. If the figure of 1,000 cavalry traveling with the emperor is correct, his army at Pavia was deprived of much of its «punch,” and it is difficult to gauge exactly how convincing the Pavian demonstration would have been. A key part of the plan relied on the Milanese doing nothing as these separate forces maneuvered well out of anything like «supporting distance» (which, beyond a few kilometers, was very difficult to achieve in premodern warfare).²¹ But assuming all went according to plan, the emperor would have had the nucleus of a new army for a new campaign, and the entire summer and autumn to conduct it. Granted, we have no indication that there was a better plan for the siege of Alessandria than had already failed twice. But medieval warfare was bound up in constantly shifting potentialities that could only unfold day by day. The arrival of these reinforcements at Pavia would have been a game-changer.

The question was whether the League would be quiet while the imperials performed this march, and if not what exactly they could do to stop it. The Milanese were well informed of the emperor's movements, and once they had firmly established his route of march (which would have been fairly predictable once they had learned the emperor had crossed the Olona and camped at Cairate), they decided to take immediate offensive action, before his plan could proceed much further. They elected to do so without waiting for the full army of the league to mobilize—a calculated risk, but there was still time for cavalry from Novara, Vercelli, Bergamo, Brescia, Verona, and Piacenza to join the Milanese forces,

²⁰ BOSO, in the *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 2, p. 432. See also FREED, p. 390.

²¹ See Yuval HARARI, «Inter-frontal Cooperation in the Fourteenth Century and Edward III's 1346 Campaign», *War in History* 6:4 (1999), pp. 379-395.

which were organized around the *carroccio*, the sacred banner on the wagon that was the rallying point of the League army. Boso simply says that the other cities sent «companies of picked knights», but the Milan Chronicle gives much more detail: fifty knights from Novara, three hundred from Vercelli, two hundred from Piacenza, infantry from Verona and Brescia in the city while the rest were on the march to join the Milanese army. With these contingents the League army, according to Boso, numbered about 15,000.²²

Despite the well-established reputation of the German cavalry, the League leadership seems to have chosen their position carefully and with an eye to negating those advantages. They established a blocking position along the road leading south from Cairate, most likely, as Grillo argues, a couple kilometers in length and utilizing existing agricultural walls and ditches as improvised field fortifications (this would seem to be the origins of the *Annales Colonienses*'s claim that whole Lombard position was protected by a ditch).²³ The *carroccio* was the focal point of the army. The commanders then sent forward a cavalry screen to make contact with the imperial advance guard. This in due course happened, but the League cavalry, incautious and unable to clearly appreciate the numbers in front of them, seems to have pushed forward regardless of their flanks. The German horsemen gave ground and trapped the enemy cavalry in the medieval version of a «cauldron» battle; soon what was left of the League's advance guard was streaming, routed, back along the road, with the full imperial force following behind it.

Inasmuch as we can mentally disentangle our academic study from the romantic images of the Risorgimento period, it is important to remember that, given the physical space necessarily occupied by a heavy cavalryman on the imperial side and a heavily-armed infantryman on the League side, the battle line was certainly some hundreds of yards in extent, and not a compact struggle around the *carroccio* itself beloved of nineteenth-century artists.²⁴ This position was not an easy one to break with cavalry alone; so why did Barbarossa try to do so anyway? There are basically three different answers to this question. Görlich argues

22 BOSO, in the *Liber Pontificalis*, vol. 2, p. 432; *Annales Mediolanenses Miores*, p. 63. For an analysis of how later accounts inserted the (at the time) fictitious «Company of Death» into the army's order of battle, see GRILLO, *Legnano*, pp. 153-157.

23 *Annales Colonienses Maximi*, p. 789.

24 GRILLO, p. 135.

that Frederick's decision to attack was based on calculations of honor and shame; this follows what we find in those German chroniclers who discuss the battle in any depth, such as the Cologne chronicler and the Magdeburg Annals. Pohl says instead, following Romuald of Salerno, that Barbarossa was misled by arrogance into thinking his cavalry force could rout the Milanese infantry despite being heavily outnumbered. Grillo has proposed that the emperor's attack was simply the result of a sober assessment of the tactical and strategic realities: if the imperials wanted to reach Pavia, they had to break the Milanese line, and the sooner and more violently this was done the better.²⁵

The truth probably lies in a combination of all three arguments—Grillo allows that considerations of honor and chivalry must have been present in the minds of Barbarossa and his knights, and given what has been said about German heavy cavalry he could have been fairly confident in victory. And yet it did not happen. In what seem to have been a series of assaults up and down the line the emperor's horsemen achieved little, even after (as is likely) dismounting to fight on foot. The imperial standard-bearer was killed, and the standard lost earlier in the *mêlée*. The re-emergence of the Lombard cavalry on their flank did not help matters; whether it was decisive is debatable, but it was psychologically damaging to the imperials. Romuald of Salerno says that League infantry actually advanced at the same time, which *did* prove to be decisive. Eventually Barbarossa himself, having gone forward to inspire and urge his men onward, was unhorsed and disappeared from view, at which his exhausted horsemen, in action for over six hours at this point, broke. While we can assume that the League forces suffered not-insignificant casualties, those of the imperials were catastrophic, with most being killed, captured, cut down in the pursuit, or drowned trying to cross Ticino River. The survivors escaped, either back to Como or, as with the archbishops and eventually the emperor, managing to make their way to Pavia where small groups trickled in for a week. The empress Beatrice had already gone into mourning for her husband when he appeared in the city, somehow having eluded the Milanese despite falling at the line of battle—the Lombards, wrote the Magdeburg chronicler, had searched for him diligently in the piles of dead.²⁶

There is a general assumption that with his defeat at Legnano Barbarossa had

25 GÖRICH, pp. 272-274; POHL, pp. 75-79; GRILLO, pp. 135-140.

26 GRILLO, p. 146; *Annales Magdeburgenses*, p. 194.

no option but to admit defeat and conclude the humiliating Peace of Venice with Alexander III the following year, and eventually the Peace of Constance with the League in 1183.²⁷ While not precisely true—the emperor still had forces at Pavia, around Bologna, and pockets of support throughout the Po valley—his defeat had closed off any options for successfully forcing concessions from either the papacy or the League. The killing and capturing of an elite cavalry force of that size was virtually unheard of in medieval warfare, and there was no prospect of replacing those men lost, for months if not for years. Without that force, how was the emperor to maintain his position, let alone prosecute an actual campaign? In any case, the ability to influence the course of events was largely removed from Frederick's hands. The leaders of Cremona, now concerned about Milan's power and prestige after the battle, decided to open another round of negotiations, and most importantly his inner circle of advisers had decided that it was time to end this fiasco. As Sicardo, bishop of Cremona, put it regarding Frederick's defeat, «Oh wheel of fortune, now humiliating, now exalting. But more correctly, it is not fortune, but God.»²⁸

CORTENUOVA²⁹

Sixty-one years later, another Staufen emperor faced off with another League and another League army, on November 27, 1237 near the small village of Cortenuova. This battle, however, would go very differently for the imperial host.

27 FREED, p. 390-391, that despite Giesebrecht's opinion that Barbarossa still had options, «he had lost the war in Italy politically and psychologically.» BERWINKEL, p. 80, «Der zwanzig-jährige Krieg um die Durchsetzung des Programms von Roncaglia war zu Ende.»

28 ROMUALD OF SALERNO, p. 442, and the Magdeburg chronicler, p. 194, both state that it was Barbarossa's counselors, and the German and Italian bishops generally, who decided to bring the conflict to a close. See Wolfgang GEORGI, «Wichmann, Christian, Philipp und Konrad: Die <Friedesmacher> von Venedig? », in Stefan WEINFURTER (Hg.), *Stauferreich im Wandel*, Stuttgart, Jan Thorbecke, 2002, pp. 41-84; SICARDO OF CREMONA, *Cronica*, O. Holder-Egger (Hg.), MGH SS. XXXI, p. 167; Cremonese chronicler ALBERT OF BEZANIS uses much the same language to describe the emperor's defeat; *Cronica*, O. Holder-Egger (Hg.), MGH SS rer. Germ 3, Hannover, 1908, p. 29.

29 The key studies include Riccardo CAPRONI, «La battaglia di Cortenuova », *TABULAE* 28 (2016), pp. 119-138; Riccardo CAPRONI et. al. (cur.) *Cortenuova e la battaglia del 27 Novembre 1237*, Comune di Cortenuova, 2007; Karl HADANK, *Die Schlacht bei Cortenuova am 27. November 1237*, Berlin, Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin, 1905. Hadank's remains one of the best studies of the battle's sources and interpretive issues.

Indeed, so complete was Frederick II's victory at Cortenuova that the League effectively ceased to exist in a single day. Many of the issues between Frederick II and Pope Gregory IX were not that far removed from those between Frederick I and Alexander III, but diplomacy and military operations in the thirteenth century were conducted on a far larger scale than in the twelfth. Frederick II may have been Barbarossa's grandson, but his was an altogether different world.³⁰ Frederick had the resources of the Kingdom of Sicily at his disposal, so not only did he have far more money on hand than his grandfather did, but he had also no "southern front" to worry about in his conflict with papacy and League. Further, compared to his grandfather he had a vast base of support throughout the Italian peninsula—many supporters self-interested and eager to exploit for their own gain the rewards of loyalty, but loyal, nonetheless. So, while the size and prosperity of the League cities may have grown, so had Frederick's resources.³¹

Nevertheless, Frederick in 1236 does not seem to have been convinced that a full military mobilization against the Lombard League was necessary, nor would he have been able to muster a large army had he been so convinced. The reasons for this are not had to find. After fifty years of relative freedom to develop their power and influence, the Milanese were largely distrusted in northern Italy, and Frederick had plenty of partners willing to commit their own resources to keep them in check. The army he led over the Alps that summer was small, partly because tense relations with the duke of Austria rendered it prudent to leave some resources behind. Upon arrival, Frederick found that Mantua had declared for the League, and consequently he spent much of his time in neighboring Verona, cultivating the acquaintance and services of Ezzolino da Romano, a powerful noble who would eventually become the bugbear of the anti-imperial movement and a byword for evil and despotism. But that time was still to come; letters to his subjects and diplomatic missions involving his trusted adviser Piero della Vigna filled much of his days.³²

30 STÜRNER, *Friedrich II*, is the most important study for Frederick II; his work is usefully supplemented by Pierre TOUBERT and Agostino Paravicini BAGLIANI (cur.), *Federico II.*, three volumes, Palermo, 1994, and David Abulafia, *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988. Ernst KANTOROWICZ's *Frederick II 1194-1250*, trans. E. O. Lorimer, New York, Richard R. Smith, 1931, retains considerable use.

31 See STÜRNER, volume 2, *passim*, for these issues and relevant literature.

32 STÜRNER, volume, 2 p. 327; Abulafia, p. 297. For diplomacy, see the Piacenza chronicles, Munzio da Monza's *Annales Placentini Gibellini*, MGH SS 18, pp. 470-474.

By September it was clear that diplomacy, if it ever had had any chance, was utterly futile, and Frederick found himself facing a League army led by Milan and Brescia, combined with the forces of Ezzolino's main rival for power, Azzo d'Este, based at Vicenza. Thus, began what was, even in the Gibelline chronicle's telling, a dramatic couple of months, with Frederick rallying the troops from the loyal cities of Parma and Cremona, declaring that he would not concede one step of imperial territory. By the end of the campaign season the League army had melted away at sudden approach of Frederick's army, Vincenza had been besieged, stormed, and plundered, and new allies had begun to come over to his side.³³ It was a satisfactory conclusion to the campaign season, though the League remained intact despite the embarrassment of Vincenza.

In fact, in the autumn and winter of 1236/37, the League cities made various political choices that ensured Frederick's unabated hostility; Brescia, for example, had elected as its *podestà* the former imperial vicar of Otto IV, Frederick's great rival for the imperial throne twenty years before. The *podestà*, the count of Cortenuova, controlled the road from Milan to Brescia, and was, in addition to his political connections, in a key location situated between the Serio and Oglio rivers.³⁴ Emboldened by Frederick's absence north of the Alps, League cities began 1237 by going on the offensive in all directions, and Piacenza officially switched sides. It became apparent that Frederick would need to prepare for a military solution to the League's challenge.

Frederick did not arrive with his large army at Verona until September 10, well into the campaign season. In addition to Ezzolino's men, he was joined there by Gaboardo of Arnstein, who brought troops from Apulia and Tuscany, as well as a "multitude" of Muslim archers (referred to as "Saracens" in all sources) from Lucera in Apulia.³⁵ With this force, the most powerful seen in Italy for decades, Frederick proceeded to sweep aside all resistance around Mantua and Brescia, with the goal of besieging and capturing the latter. A number of castles were stormed and destroyed, the Mantuans quickly sued for peace, and by the beginning of November Frederick turned his army south to systematically capture or

33 STÜRNER, volume 2, pp. 330-331; *Annales Placentini Gibellini*, pp. 474-475.

34 CAPRONI, p. 123.

35 CAPRONI, p. 124; *Annales Placentini Gibellini*, p. 476. Caproni suggests that these forces arrived separately, but the Piacenza chronicle makes clear that all troops from central and southern Italy were under Gaboardo's command.

destroy all resources or political power held by Brescia, culminating in the capture of the fortress of Pontevico far to the south.

However, this allowed the League army under the command of Count Pietro Tiepolo, podestà of Milan, to move east from Milan, through Cortenuova, and, after spending a week at Brescia, to assume a blocking position at Manerbio, a few miles north of Pontevico. It appeared that the campaign would end in a stalemate, as both sides did not move for two weeks. Frederick later wrote to Richard of Cornwall that the river was a «fortification» for the Milanese, whom he accused of hiding and trying to sneak away from his army, which was already moving to cut them off from the bridges over the Oglio. The Piacenza chronicle, however, complicates this picture, noting that the terrain was simply impassable for horse or foot, regardless of the commanders' intent. In any case, Tiepolo had no reason to seek a battle this far into the campaign season, and neither side was anxious to risk exposing their flank or their base (Frederick's at the loyal city of Cremona) with pointless maneuvers. Frederick continued to receive reinforcements from Pavia, Tortona, and Bergamo.³⁶

After two weeks of sitting still in dismal weather, the imperial army broke camp and, throwing bridges over the Oglio river, crossed over and divided. The exact order of events is not clear. In his letter to Richard of Cornwall, Frederick claims that the Italian militias first requested to be released to their homes, after which he and his cavalry-heavy force "directed our steps to the bridges" where the Lombards would have to cross; so, the operation was precipitated by the Italian levies growing tired of the campaign. The Piacenza chronicle does not say when the militias requested to be released, but instead simply records the sequence of events: the bridging and crossing of the Oglio, with the communal levies then being released while he, his cavalry and his Muslim archers, marched quickly on Soncino. The Milanese, according to the chronicler, had not moved, and did not begin to do so until they perceived that the emperor's forces were across the Oglio and, presumably, to go into winter quarters on the Po River. Based on the road network and the available bridges Frederick may have reasonably surmised that the Milanese would cross at Palazzolo and march through Cortenuova, but he

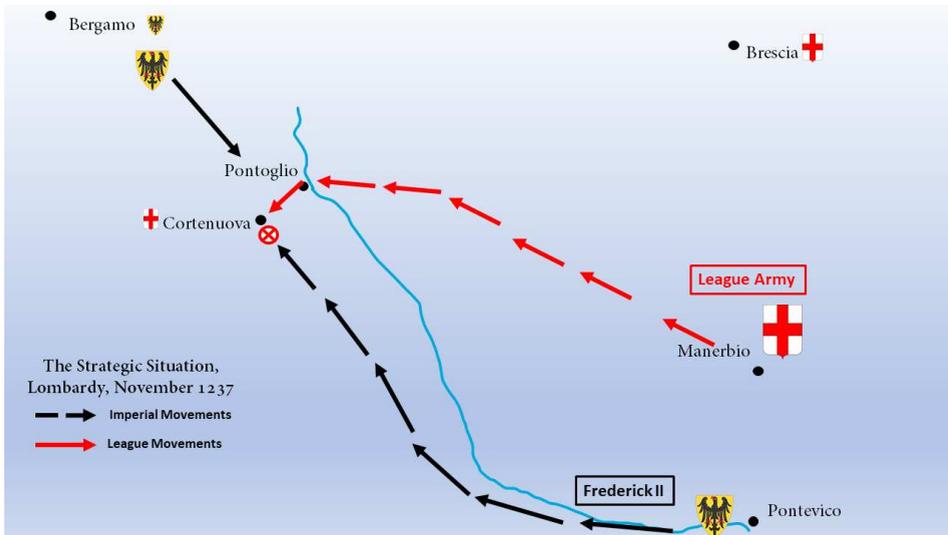
³⁶ Frederick's letter to Richard of Cornwall, in HULLARD-BRÉHOLLES (dir.), *Historia Diplomatica Friderici Secundi*, Paris, Henri Plon, 1857, volume, 5 part 1, p. 133; *Annales Placentini Gibellini*, p. 477; CAPRONI, p. 126.

could not be sure of the timetable, and his army might need logistical support at Soncino for some days. It says a lot for Frederick's use of scouts and skirmishers, and the League's correspondingly diminished military acumen, that his troops were able to accomplish this maneuver, and to sit at Soncino for two days, without being detected. The League army headed north on the opposite bank of the Oglio, unaware that they were walking into a trap; according to the Piacenza chronicle they waited at Palazzolo for two days to allow their scattered columns to gather. Frederick even had the foresight to coordinate with his allies from Bergamo, who were to observe the League's crossing of the river without engaging, and only when they had seen the army cross were they to send up a smoke signal to the imperial army to attack.³⁷ Thus was set the stage for Cortenuova.

Compared to Legnano, it is relatively easy to reconstruct what happened at Cortenuova and why, once the sources have been sorted and the more sensational and remote have been disposed of.³⁸ The League army began crossing the river early on the morning of Friday November 27, and eventually, marching over muddy roads, reunited at Cortenuova with the *carroccio* which had been sent ahead to the count's castle. The Milanese troops began to make camp south of the village around three in the afternoon when the Bergamo troops in Civate castle, who had been watching, raised the smoke signal, and Frederick ordered his divisions forward to make contact. The Piacenza chronicle gives the impression that this advanced guard was not expecting to find what they did: not a line of battle, but the whole Milanese camp spread out in front of them. The imperial knights launched an immediate attack on the hapless Lombard troops. Frederick's report suggests that it was not so much the camp as the ease with which they routed the enemy that surprised the imperials; in any case Frederick, not known for pressing his .

37 Frederick's letter, in the *Historia Diplomatica*, p. 133; *Annales Placentini Gibellini*, p. 477.

38 This would seem to include such perennially popular accounts as that of Matthew Paris's *Chronica Majora*, which presents a sequence of events rather at odds with other sources, including Frederick's letter to Richard of Cornwall that Paris records some pages later in the year 1237. See MATTHEW PARIS, *Chronica Majora*, Henry Richards Luard (ed.), London, Longman, 1876, 7 volumes; volume 3, pp. 406-410 and 441-444. Much of Paris's narrative, given on pages 406-410, is either fabricated or simply incorrect; he transforms the battle into a valiant clash of arms between two determined opponents. Frederick's own letters, as well as several of the Italian chronicles, especially the Piacenza chronicle already cited, provide copious and often corroborating details on what transpired.



[Map 2, Cortenuova, strategic context]

In their reporting on the battle, even sympathetic sources da Monza and Paris felt the need to make the fight less one-sided than it was; da Monza, in the *Annales Placentini*, records an imperial knight on a white horse giving the Piacenzans fair warning before the attack. Paris reports that the Saracen archers got ahead of the cavalry and were wiped out by a resolute League counterattack. It is doubtful whether either of these things happened, particularly the latter. Caproni suggests that da Monza may have been uncomfortable with Frederick's elaborately successful ambush, which as a feat of arms was of less worth than defeating a determined enemy. Paris, for his part, may have misinterpreted a passage in Frederick's letter to Richard of Cornwall, where he says that he rushed the rest of his troops forward because the «auxiliaries» (not the archers) had attacked the enemy camp on their own, to mean that, as Frederick had feared, they had actually been repulsed with heavy losses; or perhaps he simply wanted to erase any part Muslim troops may have had in gaining the victory. In any case, Frederick betrays no knowledge of this supposed disaster in his letter—he stresses that what they found instead was a field of riderless horses and dead or dying enemy troops, knights and infantry together, and that he ordered that they press their advantage and capture the *carroccio* immediately. As at Legnano, however, the imperial troops found that storming the positions around the *carroccio* was a difficult task,

even with the enemy army in disarray. Though there was no denying the élan of the imperial cavalry, who arrived on the field shouting «Miles Roma! Miles Imperator!», the core of the Milanese and Alexandrian troops would not yield. With night falling, the emperor felt it was prudent to pull back and resume the attack in the morning. The whole affair had lasted about three hours.

However, the next morning the imperials found that the League army had melted away during the night. The castle of Cortenuova soon surrendered; the commander of the League army, Pietro Tiepolo, was captured, as was the *carroccio* itself, abandoned by its defenders in the mud outside the village. In addition, the Bergamese had been mopping up Milanese logistical trains since the day before, and capturing many League soldiers who, confused in the darkness, had wandered into the Bergamese lines to the north of Cortenuova. «To bring things to a conclusion,” wrote Frederick to Richard, «the captured and dead...are calculated to be 10,000.»³⁹ Richard of San Germano, in his brief notice of the battle, described it as a «massacre.»⁴⁰

Frederick lost little time extracting the maximum amount of propaganda advantage from his victory. Letters went out to all the major political players in Europe. A triumph was organized in Cremona; a seemingly endless column of prisoners, chained at their necks, processed after the army, followed by the *carroccio*. Reassembled, it was pulled through the streets by an elephant from his menagerie, with the *podestà* of Milan hanging where the Milanese banner would have been. Frederick donated the wagon, as a sign of respect, to the city of Rome, accompanied by the poet Ricobaldo, who composed a poem for the occasion that still survives: «Cry Milan, now you know how vain it is to despise imperial power.»⁴¹ With the League effectively destroyed, and a triumph such as had eluded his grandfather for decades, it looked as if Frederick II would finally impose an imperial peace on northern Italy.

39 *Historica Diplomatica*, volume 5 part 1, p. 134.

40 RICHARD OF SAN GERMANO, *Chronica*, Georg PERTZ (Hg.), MGH SS XIX, Hannover, 1866, p. 375

41 In CAPRONI, p. 131: «Fle Mediolanum, iam sentis spernere vanum imperi vires.»

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Why did Barbarossa lose so decisively in 1176, but his grandson achieves the opposite over fifty years later? And can we learn anything from this comparison that would enhance our understanding of the historical actors involved, their institutions, and their times?

The first thing that must strike even a casual observer is the difference in the strategic context between their respective situations. Frederick I was attempting to carry on an increasingly unpopular war with diminishing resources and allies, and with an aura of past history of failure and defeat surrounding his presence. Despite any propaganda his chancellery might produce, by 1176 Barbarossa had largely lost the diplomatic war and was widely regarded as a bombastic oppressor of the Church and breaker of religious and military norms of behavior. As Racagni has argued, the cause of «liberty», however interpreted by foreign observers, proved a more noble and even romantic one than that of an emperor attempting to recover authority by oppressing his subjects till they consented. Whatever else happened, he was essentially «playing for position, » not for a decisive victory. Frederick II, while certainly not regarded as a champion of «liberty» in any sense of the word, proved to be much more careful than his grandfather in cultivating the good will of his German subjects and in enticing his Italian subjects with order and prosperity, even if he sometimes allied with suspect characters to do so. These different contexts would influence how each emperor could assemble and employ military force to achieve their objectives.

Moving to strictly military strategy, the strategic contrast is particularly stark, and is remarkable for the mirror image in which the two emperors were operating. Frederick I was maneuvering on exterior lines, vulnerable to League attacks from interior lines, and seems to have made little use of scouts or informants that we can tell. Frederick II was in precisely the opposite situation; not only were the Milanese attempting a long march outside of his army's reach, but he was well-informed of the enemy's movements, and made effective use of scouts throughout the campaign, in stark contrast to the League army. A nineteenth-century general might comment here on the value of interior versus exterior lines of maneuver, but that would, in this case, be an accurate conclusion to draw from these two examples. Operationally, Frederick II in 1237 found himself in a much better situation than his grandfather had enjoyed.

Tactically, Cortenuova was won in a very different way than Legnano was lost. The Milanese in 1176 used their advantage to block Barbarossa's path, but aside from the cavalry screen they fought mostly on the defensive. Frederick II used his advantage to attack, and in this he was helped by both the difference in scale between his forces and those of his grandfather, and especially the difference in composition. At Legnano Frederick I commanded about 3,000 cavalry; the League, by Grillo's best estimates, had perhaps 13,000 men on the field, mostly infantry with about 2,500 cavalry. At Cortenuova, Frederick II commanded upwards of 20,000 troops, a mix of German heavy cavalry, Italian allied infantry, and Muslim archers from his southern kingdom. The League had perhaps 15,000 troops, balanced among troop types rather similarly to the army at Legnano. The difference, therefore, lay in the size of the army fielded by the emperor and its combined-arms nature.

Regarding combined arms and the decision-making involved in each battle, it is worth noting that in both decisive battles of the Lombard League wars, cavalry either did not win, or was not solely responsible for the victory. This should lend support to those historians who see medieval cavalry's importance as misunderstood, if not over-inflated. Yet in Frederick I's case, when cavalry was all he had available, it is unlikely that he could have made better decisions than he did. Both emperors made sound calculations based on their appreciation of the troops at their disposal and the enemy's situation; one of the great developments of the last twenty years has been a growing appreciation, thanks mostly to Paolo Grillo's work, that Barbarossa made sounder decisions than recent German scholarship has been willing to admit. In both cases, however, when the force capabilities are cross-referenced to the campaign objectives, the time available, the terrain, and the enemy forces, it is difficult to see how either commander's decisions could have been bettered.

Particularly in Barbarossa's case, we must reckon with the role that «chivalry» played in his calculations, especially since various German historians have played up both his connection to chivalry and its impact on his military decision-making.⁴² Grillo, as we have seen, makes a convincing case that shrewd

42 In addition to LAUDAGE (see note 12) and Görich (see note 3), see Josef FLECKENSTEIN, «Friedrich Barbarossa und das Rittertum: Zur Bedeutung der großen Mainzer Hoftage von 1184 und 1188», in MAX PLANCK INSTITUT FÜR GESCHICHTE (Hg.), *Festschrift für Hermann Heimpel*, volume 2, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, pp. 1023-1041; reconsidered

military calculation explains Frederick I's decisions at Legnano, without the need to invoke the rather strained dichotomy of irrational chivalry and rational 12th-century philosophy. This does not mean that chivalry, or his conception of it, had no impact on his thinking. As has been discussed, Romuald of Salerno claimed he thought he could simply bowl over the Milanese foot, and the *Annales Magdeburgenses* describes his decision to attack as the decision to choose an «honorable death over an ignoble flight.» If these sentiments can be supposed to be in chronological order, we have a very fair progression of thought and feeling in a commander steeped in a martial culture, built on the military and social supremacy of the mounted warrior, when faced with a body of infantry who, as time progressed, looked like it would actually defeat him. But if we are to invoke «chivalry» as a deciding factor at Legnano, we need to be aware of it as culturally rooted in the practical realities of cavalry's frequent superiority over infantry, professionals versus militias, and the commander's ability to make rational choices based on the military instrument at his disposal, all embedded in the matrix of dominant discourses on rulership and violence. Ultimately, the chivalry we find in these battles resembles the grim, dirty, bloody, adrenaline-filled world of the German *Song of Roland*, Bertran de Born's poetry, the *History of William Marshal*, and Barbour's *The Bruce*. Less of it certainly would not have somehow given Barbarossa victory instead of defeat.⁴³

What would have made a difference, particularly for Barbarossa, was a change in the conditions that produced *that* particular mix of troops at *that* particular time. And this is next point: the relative size of the imperial armies was not the result of better military planning on the part of the grandson, but rather due to entirely

by Heinz KRIEG in «Friedrich Barbarossa und das Rittertum», in Caspar EHLERS and Karl-Heinz RUESS (Hg.), *Friedrich Barbarossa und sein Hof*, Schriften zur staufischen Geschichte und Kunst 28, Göppingen, 2009, pp. 127-154.

43 See the most recent overviews of the topic of medieval chivalry, Richard KAEUPER, *Medieval Chivalry*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016; and Robert W. JONES and Peter COSS (eds.), *A Companion to Chivalry*, Woodbridge, Boydell, 2019. For the literature cited, see J. W. THOMAS (ed.), *Priest Konrad's Song of Roland*, Columbia, Camden House, 1994; William D. PADDEN Jr., Tilde SANKOVICH, and Patricia H. STÄBLEIN (eds.), *The Poems of the Troubadour Bertram de Born*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986; A. J. HOLDEN, S. GREGORY, and D. CROUCH (eds.), *Histoire de Guillaume le Marechal: History of William Marshal*, 3 volumes, London, Anglo-Norman Text Society, 2002-2006; M. P. McDIARMID and J. A. C. STEVENSON (eds.), *Barbour's Bruce*, 3 volumes, Edinburgh, Scottish Text Society, 1981-1985.

non-military factors relating to the governance of realm. The political situations facing the two emperors were drastically different. True, in both instances emperor and pope were at odds and this gave imperial opponents a point around which to rally—in theory, anyway. In practice the polities of northern and central Italy did not rely on papal support in order to maintain their struggle against imperial power. But Frederick II enjoyed much greater diplomatic freedom of action than his grandfather had, and furthermore had a larger and more capable set of allies in northern Italy. This is not to dismiss Barbarossa's diplomatic initiatives in 1176, which had produced a slow «drip» of defections from the League, and which a victory at Legnano would certainly have accelerated. But in 1237 Frederick II's relationship with his German nobles was at its peak. Having formally recognized what has sometimes been called «territorial lordship» as the basis for royal power in the German kingdom, Frederick had consistently honored this arrangement, even against his own son Henry, siding with his nobles against the King of the Romans.⁴⁴ The result was much greater support for the emperor's endeavors in Italy. Frederick I's relationship with his nobles, by contrast, was at its nadir in 1176, with his cousin Henry the Lion clearly signaling that he intended to expand his power in Germany at the expense of the emperor. And although Henry had many enemies, they were unlikely to leave their lordships to go fight in Italy when he seemed to have no check on his ambitions. It is a salutary reminder that the factors that shape the theater of operations often have little to do directly with the operations themselves and cannot easily be rectified within the theater.

It is also true that success builds on success, and in 1237 the momentum was very much in Frederick II's favor in ways it was not for his grandfather. In Barbarossa's case, it is probably true that the catastrophe of 1167 affected not only German nobles' enthusiasm for Italian campaigning, but also the troops available for such an enterprise. However, one thing that seems apparent in much of military history is that troops are available if means can be found to get them. Those means were simply not forthcoming in 1176, and the reasons need not be found 1167. Barbarossa's previous year and a half in Italy had done little to inspire confidence that he would attain his objectives.

44 Poignantly discussed in ABULAFIA, pp. 226-248. For the most recent survey on the relationship of the crown to the princes and a guide to the scholarship on this topic, see Graham A. LOUD and Jochen SCHENK (eds.), *The Origins of the German Principalities, 100-1350*, London, Routledge, 2017.

Which leads to the last point of analysis: the rather curious place military activity holds in the larger causative patterns of human experience. In one sense, a fairly obvious claim is that, however we may contextualize warfare and locate its determining factors outside the realm of military affairs, the fact remains that what happens on the battlefield actually matters in terms of its real-world effects. Milanese victory at Legnano actually mattered in altering the lived experiences of hundreds of thousands of people; Cortenuova had the same effect. This goes beyond the immediate impact on the lives of those who fought in these battles, who experienced the grotesqueness of mortal combat at arm's length and lived to tell about it, or those who lost family and loved ones in the conflict. For those studying political communities, it seems a matter of course that battles and sieges shaped what political scientists call conditions-of-possibility for future actions, and for that reason the way commanders reached and attempted to implement their decisions is very important to a fuller understanding of *how* things transpired the way they did.⁴⁵

And yet, as a way of disrupting ideas that motivate, causes people believe in, and interests that guide human behavior, battles are far more uneven modifiers. At neither Legnano nor Cortenuova did battle produce such a rupture. True, Frederick I had been humbled and peace between the emperor and his adversaries was eventually restored, but the underlying issues remained. As the 1180s unfolded, it became apparent that Frederick was achieving more through diplomacy and quiet, if unheroic, statesmanship, than he ever achieved through imperial majesty and force of arms. With his grandson, the singular inefficiency of war to deliver results beyond loss and personal trauma becomes particularly apparent. «The imperial victory,» writes Caproni, «produced no important political effects.»⁴⁶ Frederick stayed in Italy through the winter, and was busy strengthening his hold over the polities surrounding Milan. But, with encouragement from Gregory IX, the Milanese had recovered some sense of poise in 1238 and by 1239 Cortenuova might as well have never happened. Forced to lift the siege of Brescia, repulsed in his invasion of Milan, Frederick was back where he started.⁴⁷ Personal and occa-

45 See Andrew LATHAM, *Theorizing Medieval Geopolitics: War and World Order in the Age of the Crusades*, New York, Routledge, 2012, for an application of this idea to medieval politics and warfare.

46 CAPRONI, p. 132. «La vittoria imperial non produsse importanti effetti politici...»

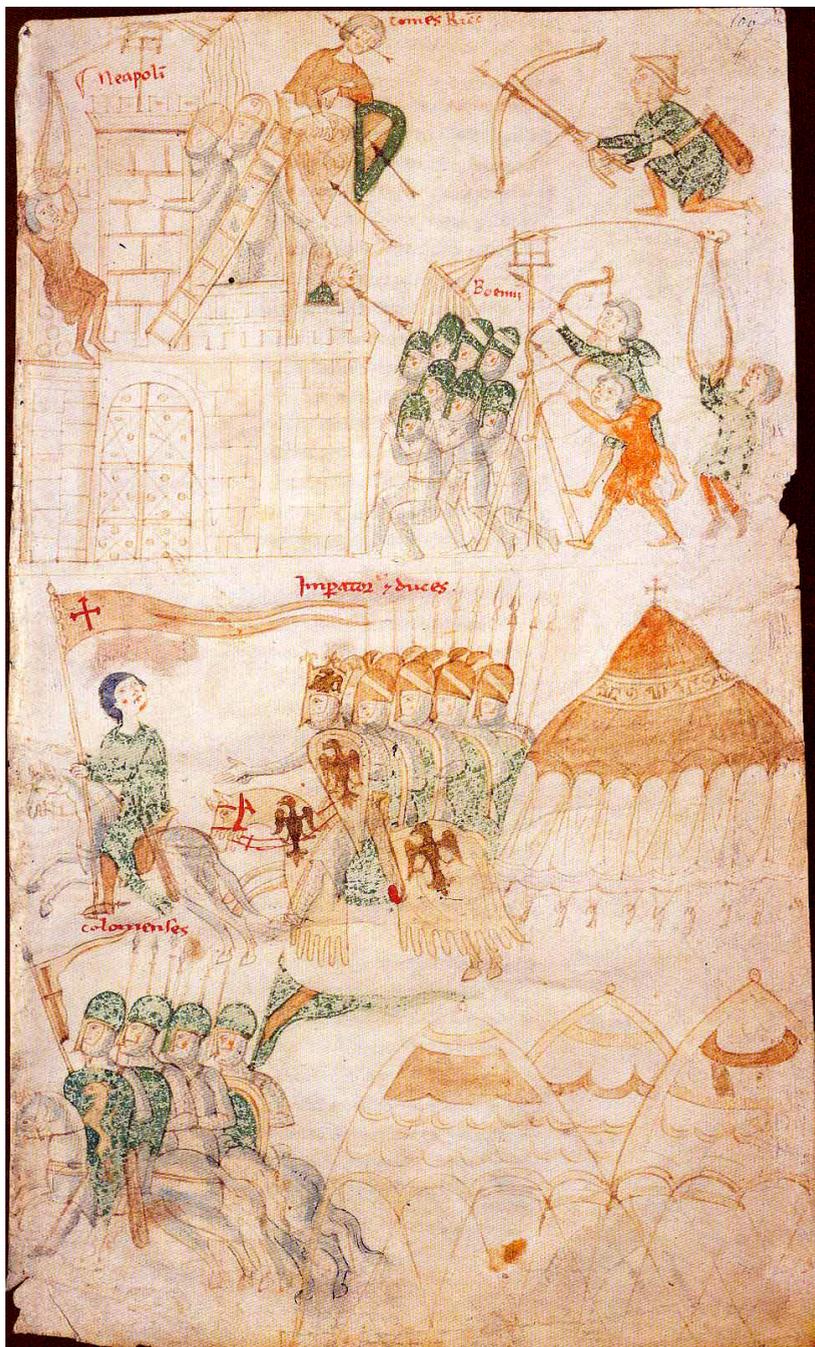
47 STÜRNER, volume 2, pp. 338-341; CAPRONI, pp. 132-134.

sionally civic fortunes may have been changed by the battle; in terms of arresting, directing, or reversing social and ideological trends, battle mattered little unless, as with Legnano, it happened to validate those trends anyway. And so, it would go on, long after 1237. Year followed year, and the wars continued, as they would for centuries: swords to ploughshares remained a dream ever deferred.

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