

Ferrante of Naples the Statecraft of a Renaissance Prince

David Abulafia

David Abulafia reassesses the life and motives of a notorious ruler and the complex web of Renaissance diplomacy involving him which led up to the Italian wars.

The invasion of Italy by Charles VIII of France in 1494-95 has acquired a special reputation as the start of a new era in Italian politics after the forty-year settlement between Milan, Venice, Florence, the papacy and Naples that supposedly followed the Peace of Lodi in 1454. For the great sixteenth-century Florentine historian, Francesco Guicciardini, the French invasion marked the beginning of an unending Italian tragedy, continuing through the reigns of Louis XII and Francis I of France and of Ferdinand II and Charles I of Spain; 1494 was:

... a most unhappy year for Italy, truly the beginning of the pears of wretchedness, because it opened the way for innumerable horrible calamities which later for various reasons afflicted a great part of the rest of the world.

It was against the kings of Naples, members of the Spanish royal house of Aragon, that the French king directed his campaign, amid talk that Naples would also be the springboard for a crusade to recover Constantinople and Jerusalem. In order, then, to understand Charles' plans it is important to understand who his enemies in Naples were and what crimes were attributed to them.

King Ferrante or Ferdinand of Naples died after a long reign at the beginning of 1494 and thus did not actually witness the war that was originally aimed against him, and subsequently against his successors. Ferrante seems almost the embodiment of the Renaissance prince, sharing with his contemporaries in Milan, Ferrara and elsewhere a reputation for subtle diplomacy, duplicity and cruelty that has been vividly perpetuated in Jacob Burckhardt's characterisation of him in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*: 'it is certain that he was equalled in ferocity by none among the princes of his time', and yet he was 'recognised as one of the most powerful political minds of the day', who avoided all other vices in order to concentrate on the destruction of his political opponents. He enjoyed above all having his enemies near him, 'either in well-guarded prisons, or dead and embalmed, dressed in the costume which they wore in their lifetime. He would chuckle in talking of the captives with his friends, and made no secret whatever of his museum of mummies'. To this day, shrivelled corpses preserved in the vaults of the Castelnuovo at Naples are pointed out, rightly or wrongly, as Ferrante's victims. John Addington Symonds summed this attitude up by describing Ferrante as 'a demon for dissimulation, treachery and avarice', only moderating the force of his words by remarking that his son Alfonso II of Naples was even worse.

This appalling reputation has its origins in the violent controversies that raged over the

legitimacy of Ferrante's claim to the throne, and in the constant attempts of French princes to assert their own right to the kingdom of Naples, culminating in the celebrated descent into Italy by Charles VIII of France in 1494, and the fall of Naples itself in February, 1495. The French chronicler Philippe de Commines, who served Charles VIII as an ambassador in Italy, established for all time Ferrante's evil reputation, writing of Ferrante's son Alfonso, Duke of Calabria (the future King Alfonso II of Naples), 'never was any prince more bloody, inhuman, lascivious or gluttonous, but his father was more dangerous still, since no one knew when he was angry or pleased'. Such images of the Neapolitan royal family served their purpose in justifying the French invasions of Italy, and should be read as vigorous propaganda. Yet the claim to rule of Ferrante could be faulted; the French king had a genuine claim to the throne of Naples which originated in the conquest of southern Italy, at papal behest, by Charles, Count of Anjou and Provence in 1266.

Ferrante had effective replies to the French claim. In the first place, Ferrante had been nominated as King of Naples by his father Alfonso V (Alfonso I of Naples), the Magnanimous, king of Aragon, Valencia, Sicily and Sardinia, conqueror in 1442 of Naples and southern Italy, whose own rights to the south of Italy originated not simply in conquest but in the will of the profligate last Angevin ruler of Naples, Joanna II, she had died in 1435 without a direct heir. Unfortunately, Joanna also on another occasion chose the Dukes of Anjou and Provence as her heirs to the kingdom, and the years after her death saw bitter fighting in the south of Italy between the armies of Alfonso and those of Duke Rene of Anjou, who even after defeat styled himself, until his death in 1480, 'King of Jerusalem and Sicily', the traditional title of the rulers of Naples. Rene was a prominent patron of the arts who understood how such patronage could be utilised to create a focus for opposition to the Aragonese conquerors of Naples; his chivalric order, the Order of the Croissant or Crescent, acted as a place of refuge for dispossessed south Italian barons of impeccably high birth who lingered in France hoping to join an Angevin army of conquest. In riposte, Ferrante was to create his own knightly society, the Order of the Ermine, unusual in providing access to knights of illegitimate birth as well as legitimate. Legitimacy was, indeed, the heart of the problem.

Like Joanna II, Alfonso V died without a legitimate male heir, in 1458. He bestowed his Spanish lands and the two Italian islands of Sicily and Sardinia on his brother, John, King of Navarre, from whom they eventually passed to John's son Ferdinand the Catholic. But Naples and mainland southern Italy was not part of his patrimony; it had been won after hard fighting, and became the centre of Alfonso's ambitious operations in Italy. He assumed the right to dispose of this kingdom as he wished, and promised it before his death to his beloved bastard son Ferrante, born in Valencia in 1425, but raised in southern Italy and recognised as Duke of Calabria, that is, royal heir, by the south Italian barons. Ferrante's illegitimacy gave rise to hostile rumours that his real father was a Spanish Moor or a converted Jew, apart from anything else, the strong physical resemblance between Alfonso and Ferrante gives the lie to this accusation, and his mother can almost certainly be identified as a Catalan gentlewoman, Gueraldona Carlina Reverdit. Illegitimate birth was not an irremovable obstacle to political success in fifteenth-century Italy, as the career of Cesare Borgia makes plain. More problematic, however, was the suitability of a bastard as heir to a real throne.

Here salvation could be found in Rome. Not merely could the pope be invited to legitimise Ferrante, but the kingdom of Naples itself was a dependency of the Holy See: the crown of Naples was technically in the gift of the pope, despite a long history of refusal by the rulers of the south to countenance serious papal intervention in their succession plans; indeed, it was only because the pope chose him that Charles of Anjou had been invested with the kingdom that his fifteenth-century successors in France now also claimed. This time such papal intervention would be crucial; yet the pope, Calixtus III Borgia, from Valencia, a close

associate of Alfonso V, ignored his predecessors' acceptance of Ferrante as heir to the throne and obstinately refused to accept him as King of Naples, planning, so rumour insisted, to proclaim one of his own nephews as ruler instead. He seems to have gloried in the chance to act independently now that Alfonso was no longer alive, and he may, as a Valencian like Ferrante, have looked down on the king's mother and her family. It was only with the unexpected death of Calixtus late in 1458 and the election of the great scholar Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini as Pope Pius II that Ferrante received the recognition he craved, largely because Pius was anxious to maintain the peace of Italy while planning a great crusade against the Turks, who had only recently seized Constantinople.

Ferrante triumphantly celebrated in art his coronation as King of Naples by the pope's representative, as a legitimating act which earlier kings had often tried to ignore. What he could not immediately celebrate was the coming of peace. Several key barons, such as the Prince of Taranto, were reluctant from the start to recognise him as king; Rene's son Jean arrived in Italy and fostered revolt among the south Italian barons; Rene tried to exercise influence at the Congress of Mantua in 1459, presenting his cause as one that would also serve the crusade. Ferrante worked hard to contain this first baronial revolt, building close ties to the most important Italian princes, such as Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, to whose daughter Ippolita his own son Alfonso was betrothed; Ferrante's persistent message was that he had no ambitions within Italy beyond the maintenance of the peace of the peninsula.

Ferrante keenly realised that his major task was simply that of imposing order in southern Italy; unlike his father, Alfonso, he possessed no great empire in Spain and the Mediterranean which could offer him the means to dominate all of Italy. Several times Ferrante was on the verge of being destroyed; the battle of Sarno in July 1460 resulted in devastating defeat, from which Ferrante only recovered because the Angevins failed to follow up their advantage. Two years later the tables were turned at the battle of Troia in August 1462, but all the same Jean d'Anjou was not seen off until 1465, after a joint Neapolitan and Aragonese fleet destroyed the Angevin navy.

Revolt spelled treachery, and Ferrante was merciless to those who had stabbed him in the back. His treatment of the great mercenary captain, Jacopo Piccinino, is a famous example of how, when Ferrante believed he was performing a service for the peace of all of Italy, he earned instead obloquy. Piccinino had been seeking to carve out a principality for himself around Assisi, in the papal state, a position perilously close not merely to the borders of the kingdom of Naples but to other influential lordships, such as that of Sigismondo Malatesta, Lord of Rimini and that of Federigo da Montefeltro, Count of Urbino, a very close ally of Ferrante. Frustrated in his ambition (partly because Ferrante himself failed to lend support for fear of damaging relations with the papacy), Piccinino served with his mercenaries in the Angevin armies that were attempting to unseat Ferrante.

At the end of the war, in 1465, the victorious Ferrante invited Piccinino to his court in what was assumed to be an act of magnanimity, mercenary captains of the stature of Piccinino sold their services to the highest bidder and could claim in a sense to be above politics, making and unmaking supposed friends among the Italian princes with consummate ease. When the war was over, they traditionally had no special reason to fear recriminations. Besides, Ferrante offered Piccinino a safe conduct to attend his court. Nearly a month of feasting in honour of Piccinino, who had just married an illegitimate daughter of Ferrante's ally the Duke of Milan, ended abruptly with the arrest of Piccinino, who then fell in suspicious circumstances out of a high window and died of his injuries. Defenestration, often considered a speciality of Bohemian politics from the seventeenth century onwards, was in fact a tried and tested medieval Neapolitan way of disposing of enemies. What aroused horror was the

king's cynical behaviour, toasting the health of someone he had resolved to kill; yet what seemed an act of treachery was perhaps a symbolically devised ritual to repay the inconstancy of Piccinino himself in switching back and forth between allies. It was also a message to those south Italian barons who contemplated further resistance, if a mercenary captain from outside the kingdom was dispensable, how much more so were they. One great lord took refuge in France, reputedly leaving a note on the gate of his palace in Salerno: *Passero vecchio non in caggiola*, best paraphrased 'The Bird Has Flown'.

The ambition of maintaining the peace of Italy was more easily proclaimed than achieved. Ferrante's persistent professions of friendship towards the other major powers within Italy, Sforza Milan, Venice, Medicean Florence and the papacy, were thrown off balance in 1478 when the enemies of Lorenzo de' Medici sought by assassination to put an end to the ascendancy of the Medici within Florence, characterising it as a tyranny under the mask of respect for a republican constitution. The Pazzi conspiracy against the Medici, from which Lorenzo himself escaped, culminated in a joint campaign by Ferrante's son, Alfonso, Duke of Calabria, and the forces of Pope Sixtus IV against Florence, under pressure from the Neapolitan armies, the Florentine government allowed Lorenzo de' Medici to travel to see Ferrante in Naples and to negotiate a peace. This was portrayed at the time, in a letter from Lorenzo to the government of Florence, as a heroic gesture by a private citizen of Florence who was well aware how capricious the King of Naples could be, and who could easily find himself sharing the fate of Jacopo Piccinino: 'if our adversaries aim only at me, they will have me in their power'.

Indeed, Machiavelli recounts that some of Lorenzo's enemies within Florence were hoping Ferrante would treat him like Piccinino. Yet it is also plain that Lorenzo and Ferrante knew the time had come for peace; Ferrante drew honour from his generous treatment of so mighty a foe as Lorenzo, while Florence was granted an equitable peace which also confirmed the Medicean ascendancy in the city. Ferrante began to regard Lorenzo as one of the chief guarantors of stability within Italy, constantly protesting his friendship and admiration for Lorenzo, even elevating him to the high office of Grand Chamberlain of the kingdom in 1483; in 1492, the king prophetically recognised the clangers to all Italy that followed from the death of Lorenzo. Yet the price of friendship for Florence was papal enmity, culminating in an ugly war between Naples, Florence and Milan on the one hand and Venice and the papacy on the other over control of Ferrara (1482-84), a conflict which generated discord within the Neapolitan kingdom and the outbreak of a second baronial revolt in 1485-86, directed in large measure against royal attempts to rein in the power of the nobility.

The father of the new pope, Innocent VIII, had actually fought for Rene of Anjou against the Aragonese; Innocent now eagerly supported the rebels. Ferrante had been right that the stability of his own lands' depended on the wider stability of the Italian peninsula. It was the papacy that had sanctioned his succession to the throne, and disputes with the Holy See, over border territories and over the payment of annual tribute by the King of Naples, had particularly serious consequences in a kingdom whose barons were suspicious of attempts at royal centralisation and of the king's fiscal policy. Yet what is particularly striking about the revolt is that the ringleaders included new men who had risen to prominence from very modest backgrounds only as a result of royal favour: the millionaire Francesco Coppola, Count of Sarno and Antonello Petrucci, who served as royal secretary.

In time-honoured fashion, Ferrante destroyed the opposition by inviting his leading foes, supposedly forgiven, to a conciliatory marriage feast in honour of the son of the leading rebel, the Count of Sarno, and Ferrante's own grand-daughter. In the midst of the feasting he arrested the count and his allies, later also arresting many other powerful noblemen who had

resisted him. Apparently those of his enemies who were not tried and publicly executed were murdered in prison, along with their families; 'to make people think that they were all still alive, the king continued to have food sent to them in gaol', a sixteenth-century historian reports. But one day the chief executioner was seen wearing a gold chain that belonged to the Count of Bisignano. The secret was out.

Ferrante's wish for stabilisation within Italy reflected wider Mediterranean concerns; there was simply no time for the luxury of internal squabbles when a powerful external threat to all Italy existed in the east. The arrival of a Turkish fleet at Otranto in 1480-81 served as a bitter reminder that the kingdom of Naples now lay on the edge of the Ottoman world. Indeed, the great Albanian military commander Skanderbeg, who spent much of his career fighting the Turks in his homeland, at the start of Ferrante's reign saved the king from almost certain defeat at the hands of Jean d'Anjou. The Turks were chased away with the help of Ferrante's cousin, Ferdinand, King of Aragon: but the strategic issue of control of the Adriatic ports of the kingdom of Naples remained an important one throughout the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Ferrante's close political and cultural links to Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary, who married his daughter Beatrice, must also be seen as part of a far-sighted wider strategy of building a vast barrier against the Ottomans in the Balkans and the Adriatic.

It was natural that, as an Aragonese prince, Ferrante should seek good relations with his Spanish cousins, who in any case controlled the neighbouring island of Sicily. Yet Ferrante was immune to one major feature of Spanish policy in these years. In 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews from all their lands in Spain and Italy, there was a massive influx of Sicilian and Spanish Jews into the kingdom of Naples which Ferrante openly welcomed. He saw the Jews as a valuable source of artisan skills, for many Spanish and Sicilian Jews were active in such crafts as cloth production; he also reveals, in his public documents, a genuine desire to protect the Jews in southern Italy from increasing persecution at the hands of their Christian neighbours. Few other Christian princes showed such a degree of friendship towards the Jews at this time; Ferrante's attitude has won him the accolade of being described by one modern rabbi as one of the 'righteous among the nations' who set out to save persecuted Jews.

Certainly Ferrante was keen to establish manufacturing industries in southern Italy, notably the silk industry; and he aimed to fit out a royal fleet whose galleys could reach as far afield as England, entering into a treaty with Edward IV in 1468. He attempted to limit the sale of the Catalan and Majorcan cloths which were flooding into southern Italy, to give breathing space to local producers. Peace with Florence in 1479 brought with it handsome privileges for Florentine merchants, who offered invaluable financial help in the struggle against the Turks encamped at Otranto. There may be some validity in the suggestion that Ferrante was conducting an 'anti-feudal policy', that he saw the cities and their potential wealth as a powerful counterweight against the barons; he was, in a sense, a *roi bourgeois* anxious to create an alternative power base that did not depend on noble approval, a policy that would mark a break from his father's ready acceptance of the nobles as partners in government.

Ferrante's close adviser Diomedes Carafa (himself a great Neapolitan nobleman) wrote a tract on economic policy advising Ferrante to moderate taxes so that business could flourish unhampered, 'for a king cannot be poor to whose power wealthy men are subject'; Carafa insisted that 'where one just rule flourishes, there the cities flower and the riches of the citizens grow'. Moreover, 'money is struck not for the profit of the prince, but for ease of buying and selling, and for the advantage of the people'. Carafa thus moves beyond the straightforward fiscalism of earlier south Italian governments towards the enunciation of a liberal economic policy based on the principle that the crown will reap more benefits the less it intervenes

through heavy taxation in the economic life of the kingdom. There are indeed signs that Carafa's ideals were put into practice under Ferrante, who also had the chance to benefit from growing population, expansion of the massive sheep flocks (a major source of revenue to the crown), and commercial recovery in the western Mediterranean. In economic terms, the reign of Ferrante does not deserve the bad press it has traditionally received.

Diomedes Carafa was one of a group of distinguished men of letters who gathered at Ferrante's court. Alfonso the Magnanimous had already established a lively court in Naples, and under Ferrante the emphasis shifted slightly; Ferrante himself had been trained to a high pitch in law, and there was a shift

towards what might be called more practical learning and away from the patronage of lyric poetry and the fine arts. But this was a movement of degree only; Naples continued to attract artists of the stature of the painter Antonello da Messina and the sculptor Guido Mazzoni, whose life-size terracotta depiction of the entombment of Christ in the church of Monteoliveto in Naples incorporates portraits of the royal family. The sculptured triumphal gateway to the Castelnuovo in Naples was completed under Ferrante, who commissioned portrayals in this complex of his own escape from the rebellious barons and of his coronation; Duke Alfonso of Calabria initiated plans for the rebuilding of Naples which promised to make the town into a model city, furnished with fountains, streams and straight streets, which 'would, besides giving the city beautiful proportions, have turned it into the cleanest and most elegant in Europe', to cite the Neapolitan humanist Summonte, a figure who gave the Aragonese kings of Naples an unusually good press.

Important innovations in court music resulted from the arrival in Naples of Flemish composers such as the royal cantor Johannes Tinctoris, who spent twenty years at Ferrante's court; Ferrante's policy was to offer salaries to the best musicians he could find in Europe. Distinguished literary figures at court included the eminent poet and administrator, Giovanni Gioviano Pontano, who was active in the literary circle that still persisted as the Accademia Pontaniana of Naples; Antonio Beccadelli, or Panormita, a reformed pornographer, wrote an elegant history of Ferrante's life up to his assumption of the crown, the royal librarian, Giovanni Brancati, built up a splendid collection of books, and was himself the author of several political tracts and translations of key classical works. Ferrante took an interest in the new craft of printing, extending his protection to such figures as the immigrant German printer, Sixtus Riessinger, and Naples became one of the major centres not merely for the printing of Latin and Italian works, but also for Hebrew printing.

Given his legal interests, it is not surprising that Ferrante stimulated the dormant university of Naples into new life, a policy which had a knock-on effect on demand for printed books. One of the early printed books to survive from Naples is Riessinger's edition, dated 1475, of the famous law-book of 1231 composed for Ferrante's predecessor as ruler and as patron of Naples University, Emperor Frederick II. In intellectual circles considerable thought was given to the problem of how to adapt the predominantly civic republican ideals expressed in the political tracts of early fifteenth-century Florentine humanists to the political structure of a large Italian kingdom. Indeed, Naples became a magnet for Florentine intellectuals, with Ferrante himself earning elegant praise from Francesco Bandini in the 1470s on the grounds that he had brought justice, stability and prosperity to his kingdom at a time when Florence was lacking all three.

Ferrante I died early in 1494 as the sound of French war drums began to be heard from across the Alps. Egged on by the current Duke of Milan, Ludovico il Moro, who was suspicious of Ferrante, Charles VIII proposed to enter Italy, as rightful heir to the house of

Anjou, to recover Naples and to launch from there a crusade for the recovery of Constantinople and Jerusalem. His advance on Naples resulted in the panic-stricken flight of Ferrante's heir Alfonso II, and the futile defence of the city by Alfonso's son, Ferrante II. French rule was short-lived, and the Aragonese dynasty briefly re-established itself, soon to be swept aside by further French invasion and by the King of Aragon, Ferdinand the Catholic, who asserted his own claim to southern Italy in 1502.

What needs to be stressed here is that the destruction of the Aragonese dynasty resulted in a propaganda victory for Ferrante's enemies. He was illegitimate by birth; but so were many contemporary Italian rulers, and he had the benefit of papal sanction as they generally did not. He was duplicitous and cruel, but his enemies gave in equal kind; he was, after all, a contemporary of Louis XI and Richard III. Yet he also had ideals which were not simply self-centred: the preservation of peace within Italy, which only occasionally proved achievable, the stabilisation of his kingdom in the face of baronial power; the prosperity of his subjects. He was conscious enough of the precarious nature of southern Italian politics not to allow himself, in imitation of his father, to be bewitched by vainglory and grandiose ambition.

17159

[History Today](#) [David Abulafia](#) [Archives](#) [Archives \(1980-2009\)](#) [HT SECTIONS](#)
[This Month](#) [Top menu](#) [WHAT](#) [WHEN](#) [WHERE](#) [Volume: 45 Issue: 2](#) [Medieval](#)
[\(4th-15thC\)](#) [Renaissance](#) [1995](#) [Political](#)

Source URL: <http://historytoday.prod.acquia-sites.com/david-abulafia/ferrante-naples-statecraft-renaissance-prince>