

Letter on the Sacred Expedition of the Emperor Frederick I Anonymous

Translated by W.L. North from the edition in *Italienische Quellen über die Taten Kaiser Friedrichs I. in Italien und der Brief über den Kreuzzug Kaiser Friedrichs I*, ed. & trans. in German by Franz-Josef Schmale, *Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters*. Freiherr vom Stein-Gedächtnisausgabe 17a, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1986, pp.372-382.

*Better known as the "Letter on the death of the Emperor Frederick", this brief work survives in two manuscripts from the 13th and 14th centuries, respectively.¹ It recounts the experiences of a member of the crusading force as they made their way from the German Empire through Hungary and the Greek Empire to Iconium (Konya) in Asia Minor. Its author's identity is unknown but Schmale, the editor, thinks that he was probably a member of the lower clergy based on the quality of his Latinity and on some rather tenuous allusions to Scripture. Stronger evidence for the author being a religious of some sort comes from the fact that the author is writing, so it seems, to a religious body (*vestra sanctitas*) or perhaps a high-ranking churchman. He may also have been from the region of the Rhine, since at one point he compares the size of Iconium with that of Köln. Ending with the death of the emperor Frederick I and the crusaders' continuing struggle to return to Antioch, the author clearly is writing soon after the emperor's death (in 1190) and while still amidst the trials of the Holy Land.*

Since we believe that your sanctity wishes to have news of what has happened to us, we have taken care to write you with strict brevity about what we have seen and treated with our own hands without any adulterous addition of falsehood.

Now then, your sanctity's discretion should know that after having been received with honor by Bela, the most Christian king of Hungary, and treated by him with kindness and friendship,² immediately upon entering the kingdom of Greece³ we fell into the hands of thieves and robbers — for good faith is not found among the Greeks. Indeed, violating the common law of keeping legates safe, they captured the bishop of Munich and Count Robert. We continued on from there with great difficulty through the

¹ Wolfenbüttel 239 (13th c.) from the monastery of Sittich, and Turin, Accademia di Scienze, M.M.V. 11, (14th c.).

² 4 June 1189.

³ 29 June 1189.

regions of Bulgaria. First, the city of Philipopolis was captured and destroyed,⁴ then the famous fortress of Berrhoe was destroyed and the whole of the surrounding region was laid waste by the sword; the noble city of Adrianople was also captured along with the surrounding towns and region,⁵ and the impregnable fortress of Dimotika⁶ was captured by the duke of Swabia,⁷ after innumerable inhabitants of the village had been killed. A certain fortress named Moniak was also destroyed by our knights and a few people from the army,⁸ and almost eight thousand Greeks perished there by fire and sword. Many other fortresses were also captured and a great slaughter of Greeks occurred, although they also died from starvation. Then suitable hostages were received from the emperor of Constantinople and the emissaries of the sultan and his son, whom [the Greeks] had earlier captured when they were sent to us, were handed over to us. Finally, after the long delay of our journey, we crossed the arm of St. George⁹ on the feast of Easter with complete prosperity in property and persons.¹⁰ But afterward what had been sworn and promised to us by the aforementioned emperor was in no way observed.

Advancing through the region of Philadelphia, we came to Laodicea and each day the knights (militia) of the army of Christ were in fierce combat. Setting forth from there on the Friday before the day of Rogations,¹¹ we suffered inestimable damage to our horses because of the lack of grain and water and a longer day than usual. On the following Sunday, we came to where the river Maeander arises and, although the emissaries of the sultan and his son, who had brought the lord emperor the greatest of gifts, were still with us, we nevertheless found there battle lines of Turks, who had been sent to kill us, arrayed against us in great numbers. But by the gift of God, our leader and creator, at dawn on the next day, Monday, which was the first day of Rogations,¹² under the

⁴ 26 August 1189.

⁵ 22 November 1189.

⁶ 24 November 1189.

⁷ Frederick V., duke of Swabia (1168-1191).

⁸ The author generally maintains a distinction between the knights (milites) and the army (exercitus), which would have included foot-soldiers.

⁹ I.e. the Hellespont.

¹⁰ According to "Ansbert" (cf. Tageno-Tagebuch in Magnus of Reichersberg, Chronicon a.1190, MGH SS 17, p. 509ff), the transfer of men and materiel across the Hellespont began on Maundy Thursday (22 March 1190) and ended on the Wednesday after Easter (28 March).

¹¹ 22 April 1190.

¹² 30 April 1190.

banner of the cross we vanquished them in the mouth of the sword, and after a great slaughter of them had occurred, we passed on that same day through the pass and narrows of the mountains towards Susopolis. In this region, on the vigil of the Lord's Ascension, we again killed a great multitude of Turks in a certain narrow pass. But because we were now feeling the loss of the horses who had been wounded or killed, and could not find fodder or grass because of the coldness of the ground, and since we [ourselves] were already beginning to feel constrained by hunger and were receiving no good advice from the sultan's emissaries, we were forced by necessity to leave the royal road, which the emperor Manuel usually travelled, and head to the left. For [the royal road] was deserted, completely closed in by mountains, and was the longest [route] to Iconium.

On the day of the Lord's Ascension, after occupying the mountain peaks through which our passage lay, we descended on the same day, contrary to the hopes of all, to the plain of Philomelium by way of the roughest of mountains and narrowest of paths and with the utmost difficulty and a great loss of property and persons. For the Turks had surrounded the entire army from all sides — like a crown — and were attacking it. But the duke of Swabia, along with the duke of Meran,¹³ the margrave of Bodin,¹⁴ and other nobles and archers had remained in the rear to protect those ahead of them who had to descend on foot with their horses sent on ahead. So great was the Turkish attack with arrows, slings, and stones that our men were separated from each other and placed in a dire straits and the duke of Swabia was wounded, with one upper tooth completely knocked out along with half a lower one. Many of our knights were also wounded, but only one was killed. Pack animals with much money, clothing, and vessels were lost; many of them were killed. From then on, the Turks' might increased daily — beyond what can be believed. For suddenly we had the duke¹⁵ of Gradra with his army, the duke of Philomelium with his army, and the duke of Firmium with his army on the attack along with an infinite number of others. We did battle from morning to evening on each of the following days with all the combined [forces] and, although many of our men were wounded and many of our horses killed, God always placed the victory in our hands. On the next Sunday after the day of the Ascension,¹⁶ Frederick von

¹³ Berthold IV.

¹⁴ Hermann IV.

¹⁵ The author refers to the Muslim commanders as duces, which I have translated as dukes in order to suggest that, aside from the sultan, whom he calls by his proper Arab title, the author characterizes the Turkish forces using his own military categories. The German translators translate the word as "emir".

¹⁶ 6 May, 1190.

Hausen¹⁷ fell from his horse while pursuing [the Turks] and died, his neck broken. On the following day, we encamped at Philomelium. There, when the Turks attacked our camp around vespers so that they might now seize the spoils from certain dwellings, we put them to flight with our armed men and more than 6000 of them fell, among whom 374 of the best men of all Turkey were killed. Not one of us was killed, but many horses were. And the mountains echoed with the cries of those wailing, and night divided us from one another. Hunger was already beginning to grow strong among us, for wine and flour were utterly lacking, and I, along with others, ate horse flesh. For the horses were dying of starvation, because we were finding neither grain nor fodder nor grass, and the Turks were pinning us down day and night with so great an army that no one was permitted to leave the encampment. On the Wednesday before Pentecost,¹⁸ we killed a large multitude of [horses].

After the holy day of Pentecost,¹⁹ we found Melic, son of the great sultan, and his battle lines arrayed against us along with a great multitude of Turks, around 400,000 horsemen, and they had covered the land like locusts. Against them, we raised the victory eagles before us in the name of Christ, feeling then neither hunger nor the loss of the wounded, and although we were scarcely six hundred on horseback, we conquered them under the sign of the living cross and turned them to flight. There, Melic, son of the great sultan, was thrown from his horse and four of his most beloved princes were killed as were many others. There, too, something happened which is worthy of memory: Saint George, on this day as before, was seen by Ludwig von Helfenstein²⁰ to precede some of our battle lines, rendering aid to our army, just as Ludwig himself confessed publicly under oath and upon the religion of his pilgrimage before the lord emperor and the army. And indeed the Turks themselves later recounted to us that they had seen certain battle lines dressed in white array and upon white horses.

On that same day, we pursued Melic who had fled towards Iconium, and yet, after so glorious a victory, we came to a hospice just around nightfall and found no water there, and the men, livestock, and horses were without food and water. As a result, we fell in a certain way to despairing over our lives. For the horses, which had previously remained to us, all died from hunger and because of the long journey. Setting off from there at first light, even though we were already only a mile or so from Iconium, we

¹⁷ Ministerial and minnesinger, attested 1171-1190.

¹⁸ 9 May 1190.

¹⁹ 14 May 1190.

²⁰ Count of Helfenstein bei Sigmaringen.

drew nearer and found water and there we stayed all of Wednesday.

On the following day²¹ we recovered next to a certain very pleasant garden enclosed by walls near the city of Iconium itself, and there we also destroyed two very noble palaces of the sultan. But because the necessities of life's end pressed upon us — for the greatest hunger had invaded us, we now had barely five hundred knights or so on horseback, and no plan for retreating or advancing remained to us — we divided our knights in two — with necessity forcing us, teaching us — and proceeded on the Friday after Pentecost by a direct route to capture the city. There, something which seems amazing and unbelievable in the saying occurred — the duke of Swabia with a company of six men occupied the city, after its inhabitants had been killed in the mouth of the sword. Meanwhile the lord emperor, who had remained behind, fought against other Turks in the field; and although they numbered around two hundred thousand knights of the utmost virtue, he defeated them and put them to flight. Here is something not unworthy of memory: the city of Iconium is equal in size to Köln. After capturing great spoils, we remained there from Friday to Wednesday. Then the sultan, who had betaken himself and his men to a fortress farther inside [Iconium] offered us twenty hostages of our own choosing. We are still holding them as captives because [the sultan] did not keep faith.

Shifting our camp from there on the following Saturday, we went by the direct route to Laranda, where we stayed on Saturday, that is the first of June. And in the silence of the stormless night, so great an earthquake occurred that we thought the battle lines of the Turks were crashing down upon us. We believe that this foreshadowed the change concerning the emperor that was to come. After leaving that place immediately, we went to a place where we found a route of such great harshness and difficulty as it passed through the mountains that we barely made it to Saleph on Sunday, which was the vigil of St. Barnabas the apostle,²² and this with the greatest loss of property.

When the lord emperor was crossing by way of a certain shortcut a certain very rapid stream amidst the mountain gorges and the water had received him safely upon its opposite bank, he ate lunch there. After the innumerable and unbearable labors which he had endured now for a month, he wished to bathe in this water and to swim in order to cool himself off. He drowned by the hidden judgment of God in a lamentable and unexpected accident.

²¹ 17 May 1190.

²² 10 June 1190.

His remains we are carrying with us with due veneration and we have arrived at the famous city of Tarsus. As we proceed towards Antioch, we have suffered the greatest despoliation of our property and have labored for six weeks with a lack of food, because no goods are found to be for sale.

Of our many perils, we have take care to write to you just these few, as we, for the rest, await solace from God's mercy.