

MEDIEVAL CHIVALRY AND THE SICILIAN PUPPETRY

Puppetry has been a long-standing part of the Italian and Sicilian culture arguably since Roman times. The Catholic Church has used puppetry to parley Christian teachings to the masses. The word “marionette” is believed to have originated from this, meaning “little Mary” or the doll of Mary. Puppetry in Sicily has not been an exception. Its development had followed suit, culminating in its high point during the first half of the 13th century as Opera dei Pupi, which is today on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. Opera dei Pupi is performed in the 11th century Provençal troubadour tradition, and typically renders acts from the Song of Roland, an epic tale of medieval chivalry retelling the heroic death of Roland at the end of Charlemagne’s expedition of Iberia in 778 CE. Similar to Orlando Furioso, the story depicts Christian knights in shiny armor and tall steeds fighting Muslims and their allies in Spain in a distinct black-and-white good-versus-evil manner.

The history of Sicily has been fraught with conquests by foreign powers, subjugation and exploitation of the native Sicilians, and the replacement of one foreign power by another leading to inevitable cycles of turmoil and poverty. These foreign powers include the Greeks, Carthaginians, Phoenicians and Romans during the Roman period, the Vandals, Goths and Ostrogoths in the Germanic period, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans, the Hohenstaufen (Swabians of present day southwestern Germany), and finally the Aragonese (Bourbon) of Spain, before the capture of Sicily by Giuseppe Garibaldi in 1860 during the Italian Unification. It is reasonable to say that the Sicilians have seen more than their share of foreign influence in their documented history. Therefore, the question that begs to be asked is *why should Opera dei Pupi, one of Sicily’s intangible cultural heritages, be a story from a Carolingian tale of medieval knights in shiny armor? Why have the Sicilians chosen an exploit of a foreigner, Charlemagne, the Frankish Holy Roman Emperor (a Romanized German) to represent their Sicilian culture and ideals? And why should the Opera be performed in the 11th century Provençal troubadour (southern French) tradition?*

The second question may be easier to answer, and will be surmised first. Opera dei Pupi has had its heyday in the early 13th century, during the rule of the Sicilian regent Frederick II. A troubadour

was a singer and possibly composer of Occitan songs (previously spoken in all of southern France, closely related to the present day Catalan language and Provençal dialect) in the High Middle Ages (1100-1350 CE). Dante Alighieri has described their songs as “rhetorical, musical and poetic fiction” in his treatise *De vulgari eloquentia*. The troubadour school started in the late 11th century and ended during The Black Death (bubonic plague) in 1347. Troubadour entertainment was popular in southern France, Spain and Italy. The Sicilian era during the regency of Frederick II was one of prosperity, unusual in the history of Sicily and for its populus. With the citizens fed and extra resources at hand, entertainment was obviously next on the agenda. It should be a good guess to say that during the time of Frederick II, troubadour performances were all the rage, even far away in Sicily, even with wooden puppets, and the style has stuck ever since.

As to the first question, “why have the Sicilians chosen to elevate a Carolingian lore to represent their own high ideal?” this will take a little more to conjecture. First, who doesn’t love a good action film? I surely did when I was young. I loved Star Wars and its cast of heroes and villains. Those were the fanciful thinking of a young average Joe. I understand perfectly. As then a recent impressionable Chinese immigrant to the United States, I have had nothing in common with Americans in general, let alone galactic warriors in a sci-fi action adventure. However, those characters occupied a special niche in my young psyche. If I loved action heroes in my teens in late 20th century America, it doesn’t take much to infer the same for the average Giuseppe in early 12th century Palermo. He would have idolized Germanic knights in shiny metal chainmail suits just as much as I did with the Galactic Stormtroopers in glacier white armor plates.

Second, Frederick II, the King of Sicily and Holy Roman Emperor was the ultimate patron of the arts in Sicily, and likely gave charismatic motivation to Opera dei Pupi during his reign in the early 13th century when Opera dei Pupi was at its apex in popular patronage. Frederick was the son of Henry VI, grandson of Frederick I (Barbarossa) from the House of Hohenstaufen (German Swabian father), and Constance, Queen of Sicily, from the House of Hauteville (Norman mother, born in Palermo, Normans being the Frank, Romanized Gaul and Viking settlers of Normandy). He was raised and mentored in German and Sicilian cultures. Therefore, the German-Sicilian Frederick probably encouraged the

teaching of Carolingian lore to the Sicilian population (Carolingian being the Frankish Germanic noble family dynasty from west of the Rhein River that succeeded the Merovingian dynasty in 750 CE).

Finally, for the third postulation to the first question, a short vignette of Frederick's life is in order. Frederick was born in Iesi in the Marche region of Italy in 1194, and baptized in Assisi. In 1196, he was elected the King of the Germans. His father Henry died unexpectedly in September, 1197 (possibly from either malaria or poisoning by his own entourage at the instigation of his wife Constance and Pope Celestine III). In 1198, Frederick was crowned King of Sicily by his mother. However, he had been captive in Palermo to Markward of Annweiler and Philip of Swabia (youngest brother to Henry). In 1208, Philip was assassinated in Bamberg, thereby ending Frederick's captivity, who was then declared of age (at 11 years old). Frederick consolidated power in Sicily and Naples. In 1220, Pope Honorius III, who was Frederick's tutor during captivity, crowned Frederick the Holy Roman Emperor. Unlike many previous foreign kings, Frederick spent most of his life in Sicily or on the Crusades (5th and 6th), an important duty of a respected Christian monarch. According to historian William Maehl, despite having German-Norman blood, by tutelage, lifestyle and temperament, Frederick was most of all Sicilian. This may partly explain his popularity in Sicily. Frederick created the Sicilian School of Poetry and saw the first use of the Sicilian language in literature. This was recognized by Dante and his peers more than half a century later. Frederick also created the University of Naples in 1224 (now Università Federico II, the oldest public education college in the world). He reigned long and prosperously over Sicily and Naples, and is still recognized today as an effective regent for Sicily. Therefore, with the constant strife in Sicilian history, many must see Frederick's reign as the good old days. How can Sicilians not celebrate their grand native son, his benevolent reign, and its golden age in medieval lore through *Opera dei Pupi*.