Summary

Medieval documents had more value in practice than their simple value as instruments of bureaucracy or Roman law. They were an integral part of a system of symbolic communication of power, rule, and governance. The study focuses on the documents and rule of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen in Italy, where he started his reign as king of Sicily and where he spent most of his life as Emperor after 1220. It examines the relationship between three different roles of official documents: their value in administration, law, and symbolic communication. In order to understand documentary practice holistically, a prototypical curriculum vitae of documents from the perspective of the addressees underlies the analysis: people living under the rule of Frederick II (as well as in subject or affiliated territories). This includes the appeal for granting a document at the sovereign’s court, its production in the chancery, handing the charter over to the supplicant, promulgating it to a wider audience, its use in the practice of law and politics, copying, storage, and archiving, as well as how it was discussed by historical writers of the time.

While diplomatics research has hitherto focused on the administrative and legal aspect of the documents, this study highlights the ways in which charters played a part in symbolic communication. Reports of negotiations in the Lega Lombarda and in contemporary histories show that petitioners themselves distinguished between the different values of charters while negotiating their requests: a respect for the honor of the emperor appears as a consideration at the same level as the practical and political. The interpretation of imperial documents in the ars dictaminis and requests for golden seals or golden letters demonstrate that Italians expected that the material and stylistic form of the documents would reflect the social status of the emperor, not just their legal value. Legal considerations could include symbolic communication, as references to Roman law demonstrate. The term sacrae litterae in the official documents, for example, is a part of legal language in general rather than sacralization as part of Frederick II’s concept of emperorship, but it still creates a sacral context to the social role of the emperor and his charters.

This double role of documentary features as standard administrative and legal actions on the one hand and symbolic communication to establish social order on the other can also be seen in the imitative copies from Italy that survived only outside the Regnum Siciliae or in the decision on how and where to insert imperial documents into the municipal „libri iurium“. Notaries copied visual features of documents even when they were not part of the contemporary authentication methods, and in compilations, the scribes of the books did not care too much on the legal or economic value, but ordered documents by the rank of the issuer. In the Regnum Siciliae, royal/imperial officials claimed their authorisation and power with a clause of reverence to the imperial order, again combining symbolic communication with a practical administrative and legal use of the document.

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Symbolic communication is often connected to face-to-face communication. Personal encounters with the emperor took place in particular during the reestablishment of Frederick’s rule in imperial Italy and the Regnum Siciliae in 1220–1221. Still, the written product of the imperial chancery was received independently from the verbal communication. Solemn staging of the handing over of documents was limited to exceptional situations such as the Treaty of San Germano.

The usual route to the receipt of an imperial charter went through courtiers and the chancery. While the influence of intermediaries is well documented in the first half of the reign of the emperor, by the middle of the 1230s the documents no longer show any third-party influence. Imperial documents and chancery rules from the 1240’s demonstrate sovereign autonomy in decisions and were perceived to demonstrate this in the contemporary historiography.

Publishing imperial orders to the local people affected by it involved many forms of symbolic communication. In Southern Italy there is (rare) documentation of a respectful bow in front of an imperial document or (much more often) the wording _reverenter suscipere_ and _sollemniter perlegere_ in notarial documents. In Northern Italy, a formal procedure of _repraesentatio litterarum_ could be identified: offering, accepting, reading, and understanding were all necessary for legal validity. Reading the document aloud and handing it over was an occasion to demonstrate the relationship of the audience to the emperor or his representative through the treatment of the document itself: there are documented cases where the charter was denied a reception and was even itself the subject of aggression.

The close connection, from the perspective of the recipients, between the emperor and his documents can also be seen in archival notes on the documents. Many of those contemporary to Frederick II document legal facts, but it was more common for them to refer to the issuer in person, for instance reinterpreting royal charters, issued before 1220, as imperial charters. In the same way, 13th-century historians showed much higher interest in the personal presence of the emperor than in his written documents.

Symbolic communication with and in the documents demonstrated rank, super- and subordination, and related the document to behaviour specific to Frederick’s role as _imperator_, who had to show splendour and moral superiority. Comparing the Staufer monarch and his documents to other rulers and their documents shows that many symbolic forms of the documents can be observed in those of his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors: _sacrae litterae_ are also documented among the Norman and Angevin kings of Sicily; the _repraesentatio litterarum_ is used in all types of public documents in Northern Italy.

Most of the the symbolic qualities attributed to documents by the Italians under the rule of Frederick II stem from similar uses in oral communication. In many cases oral communication was even given priority over written forms of communication. Furthermore, the documents were regarded by the recipients as equivalent to oral statements by the emperor. Thus, the study confirmed that Frederick II’s documents
could have been like media events for his contemporaries, for which Peter Rück coined the phrase „document as poster“. In the historians’ retrospective view, however, communication with the ruler was not based on the *Herrscherurkunde* itself, but on personal forms of communication, represented by and in the parchment documents.