

“Going to Canossa” – Exploring the popular historical idiom

NCSS Thematic Strand(s): **Time, Continuity, and Change
(Power, Authority, and Governance)**

Grade Level: 7-12

Class Periods Required: One 50 Minute Period

Purpose, Background, and Context

In order to make history more tangible and explain historical references in context, we are tracing common idioms to their historical roots. The popular idiom (at least in Germany/Europe) to indicate reluctant repentance or “eating dirt” is ‘taking the walk to Canossa’ which references the climax of the Investiture Conflict in the 11th century CE culminating in the below scandal between Emperor Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII.

In previous classes we have discussed the political structures of the time, the power struggles between Church and state, and the social background leading up to this event.

We will illuminate the political/religious situation of interdependence and power-play leading up to this *éc/lat*, the climax of the Investiture Conflict, why it was such a big affair for both sides, and how it was resolved, i.e. who “won” (initial appearances). Additionally, the implications for European rule, the relation between secular and religious rulers after Canossa will be considered in the lessons following this one.

Objectives & Student outcomes

Students will:

- ❖ Examine historical letters between Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII regarding the excommunication, pictures depicting the events at Canossa and others (NCSS Standards 2010, pp. 30-31)
- ❖ Apply critical thinking skills to historical inquiry by interpreting, analyzing and synthesizing events of the past (NCSS Standards 2010, pp. 30-31)

- ❖ Understand the historical significance of the Investiture Conflict and the results of the previous and ensuing power politics in Europe (NCSS Standards 2010, pp. 46-47)
- ❖ Prepare to write a brief essay from either protagonist's point of view on how the events of Canossa impact him politically, religiously, might have made them feel, etc. [might cut that, if time is short and move to next lesson altogether]

Materials

Letters between Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII from 1076, leading up to the event at Canossa in January 1077.

Images (paintings, fresco) of the event at Canossa and of Canossa today

Procedures

Procedure 1:

Give background on the ascension from monk Hildebrandt to Pope Gregory VII: when, how, with whose help and patronage.

Give background on Henry IV, his full title, coronation, power base, rivals.

Explain the Investiture Conflict.

Procedure 2:

Read letter from Henry IV to Pope Gregory VII in 1076. Discuss and individually note [for later use in essay writing] reactions to the board questions in small groups:

What is Henry IV really saying?

What is he accusing Pope Gregory VII of?

Was writing this letter in his own best political interest?

Might this backfire on Henry IV and how?

How might the Pope react?

What is the most powerful instrument of the Church?

How far do you think he will go?

Brief class collection of ideas – main points kept on the board

Procedure 3:

Read Pope Gregory VII's letter of excommunication.

Refer back to ideas on the board to check for accuracy of inferences in students' responses to the above questions.

How does this impact Henry IV? What can he do to hold on to his power?

Procedure 4:

"Going to Canossa" in January 1077 – show/discuss pictures and give short lecture on the event.

Henry IV was restored to the Church – *Why? Who 'won'?*

Procedure 5:

Introduce essay assignment on the individual perceptions of the above events, political and personal implications for either Henry IV or Gregory VII. Ensure students wrote down and will answer all the questions that were asked (see italics).

Outlook how Henry IV's humiliation is only a temporary victory for Gregory VII and that the fully restored emperor will get back at Pope Gregory VII.

Assessment of Outcomes

As students have kept records of their thoughts and the discussion of both Henry IV's and Gregory VII's they have a reservoir of ideas about the time and protagonists.

For homework or in class the next day students [depending on how the lesson plays out] will write an essay on the experience of either Henry IV or Gregory VII citing the sources provided them and class lecture elements.

Extensions and Adaptations

Have students make posters advertising for the righteousness of the Pope Gregory VII's or Henry IV's authority and right to control the Church and politics – pick one.

Make some form of collage (poster, animated PowerPoint presentation, SmartBoard, etc.) depicting Pope Gregory VII's and Henry IV's spheres of influence (geographically, religiously, politically, etc.).

Continue the storyline with the power play after Henry IV's restoration to full power, Pope Gregory VII's fall and deposition, the appointment of Pope Clement III (Antipope) and the succession of Gregory VII with cardinally elected Popes.

End of the Investiture Conflict with a compromise in the papacy's favor in 1122 when neither Gregory VII, Henry IV, nor Clement III are alive anymore.

In future lessons refer back to the conflict between Church and political rulers and the many overlaps in power spheres and claims to authority.

Resources and Primary Sources

Olson, Lynette: The Early Middle Ages – The Birth of Europe, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

Hunt, Lynn, et al.: The Making of the West – Peoples and Cultures Volume I, Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003 (3rd edition 2010)

Lualdi, Katharine J: Sources of 'The Making of the West' – Peoples and Cultures Volume I, Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001 (3rd edition 2010)

- ❖ Letter from Henry IV to Pope Gregory VII (1076)
- ❖ Letter from Pope Gregory VII: Excommunication of Henry IV (1076)

Dysinger, Luke: Medieval Church and State in Conflict,

http://www.ldysinger.com/CH_501_Intro/18_Ch_State/01_txtbk_18_ch-st.htm

(2/1/2012)

Images:

1 - Henry IV and his entourage at the Pope's gate at Canossa in 1077, by August von Heyden

2 - Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII in Canossa 1077, as depicted by Carlo Emanuele

3 - Henry pleads for pardon at the Pope's feet

4 - Photograph of the Rock of Canossa with the ruins of the castle visible at the top

Letters

Henry IV: Letter to Gregory VII (January 1076)

Henry, King not by usurpation, but by the pious ordination of God, to Hildebrand, now not Pope, but false monk:

You have deserved such a salutation as this because of the confusion you have wrought; for you left untouched no order of the Church which you could make a sharer of confusion instead of honor, of malediction instead of benediction.

For to discuss a few outstanding points among many: Not only have you dared to touch the rectors of the holy Church – the archbishops, the bishops, and the priests, anointed of the Lord as they are – but you have trodden them under foot like slaves who know not what their lord may do. In crushing them you have gained for yourself acclaim from the mouth of the rabble. You have judged that all these know nothing, while you alone know everything. In any case, you have sedulously used this knowledge not for edification, but for destruction, so greatly that we may believe Saint Gregory, whose name you have arrogated to yourself, rightly made this prophesy of you when he said: “From the abundance of his subjects, the mind of the prelate is often exalted, and he thinks that he has more knowledge than anyone else, since he sees that he has more power than anyone else.”

And we, indeed, bore with all these abuses, since we were eager to preserve the honor of the Apostolic See. But you construed our humility as fear, and so you were emboldened to rise up even against the royal power itself, granted us by God. You dared to threaten to take the kingship away from us – as though we had received the kingship from you, as though the kingship and empire were in your hands and not in the hand of God.

Our Lord, Jesus Christ, has called us to kingship, but has not called you to the priesthood. For you have risen by these steps: namely, by cunning, which the monastic profession abhors, to money; by money to favor; by favor to the sword. By the sword you have come to the throne of peace, and from the throne of peace you have destroyed the peace. You have armed subjects against their prelates; you who have not been called by God have taught that our bishops who have been called by God are to be spurned; you have usurped for laymen the bishops’ ministry over priests, with the

result that these laymen depose and condemn the very men whom the laymen themselves received as teachers from the hand of God, through the imposition of the hands of bishops.

You have also touched me, one who, though unworthy, has been anointed to kingship among the anointed. This wrong you have done to me, although as the tradition of the holy Fathers has taught, I am to be judged by God alone and am not to be deposed for any crime unless – may it never happen – I should deviate from the Faith. For the prudence of the holy bishops entrusted the judgment and the deposition even of Julian the Apostate not to themselves, but to God alone. The true pope Saint Peter also exclaims, “Fear God, honor the king.” You, however, since you do not fear God, dishonor me, ordained of Him.

Wherefore, when Saint Paul gave no quarter to an angel from heaven if the angel should preach heterodoxy, he did not except you who are now teaching heterodoxy throughout the earth. For he says, “If anyone, either I or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.” Descend, therefore, condemn by this anathema and by the common judgment of all our bishops and of ourself. Relinquish the Apostolic See which you have arrogated. Let another mount the throne of Saint Peter, another who, will not cloak violence with religion but who will teach the pure doctrine of Saint Peter.

I, Henry, King by the grace of God, together with all our bishops, say to you: Descend! Descend!

Gregory VII: Excommunication of Henry IV

O blessed Peter, prince of the Apostles, mercifully incline thine ear, we [*sic*] pray, and hear me, thy servant, whom thou hast cherished from infancy and hast delivered until now from the hand of the wicked who have hated and still hate me for my loyalty to thee. Thou art my witness, as are also my Lady, the Mother of God, and the blessed Paul, thy brother among all the saints, that thy Holy Roman Church forced me against my will to be its ruler. I had no thought of ascending thy throne as a robber, nay, rather would I have chosen to end my life as a pilgrim than to seize upon thy place for earthly glory and by devices of this world. Therefore, by thy favor, not by any works of mine, I believe that it is and has been thy will, that the Christian people especially committed to thee should render obedience to me, thy especially constituted representative. To me is given by thy grace the power of binding and loosing in Heaven and upon earth.

Wherefore, relying upon this commission, and for the honor and defense of thy Church, in the name of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, through thy power and authority, I deprive King Henry, son of the Emperor Henry, who has rebelled against thy Church with unheard of audacity, of the government over the whole kingdom of Germany and Italy, and release all Christian men from the allegiance which they have sworn or may swear to him, and forbid anyone to serve him as king. For it is fitting that he who seeks to diminish the glory of thy Church should lose the glory which he seems to have.

And, since he has refused to obey as a Christian should or to return to the God whom he has abandoned by taking part with excommunicated persons, has spurned my warnings which I gave him for his soul's welfare, as thou knowest, and has separated himself from thy Church and tried to render it asunder, I bind him in the bonds of anathema in thy stead and I bind him as thus commissioned by thee, that the nations may know and be convinced that thou art Peter and that upon thy rock the son of the living God has built his Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Images



1

Henry and his entourage at the gate of Canossa

What are they wearing and why?

What is the weather like?



2

Henry VI in Canossa with Pope Gregory VII (1077)

Who is who?

What does this setting suggest in terms of hierarchy? Who is in charge and power here?



3

Henry IV at Pope Gregory VII's feet in Canossa 1077

What is Henry IV doing?

Why?

Should he have done this?



4

Ruins of the
Castle at
Canossa
today

Imagine
what it was
like in the
winter of
1077

2012;
Canossa
was cut off!