Frederick Barbarossa: the Prince and the Myth

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Frederick Barbarossa is arguably one of the most important German rulers of the Middle Ages, and certainly one of the best known. Still, English-speaking readers have had to wait a long time for a biography of this Holy Roman Emperor. More generally, even for an English introduction to German history of the high Middle Ages one had to revert to Geoffrey Barraclough's 1946 *The Origins of Modern Germany* or to Peter Munz' 1969 study of the emperor.⁽¹⁾ Obviously, much has happened since 1946, both in historical studies and in how German history is viewed internationally. For Frederick, the most important scholarly result certainly has been the edition of his diplomas in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*. In the wake of this achievement, scholarly interest in Frederick's reign was revived, resulting in several new biographies, namely those written in German by Johannes Laudage and Knut Görich, and one written in French by Pierre Racine.⁽²⁾ In a like manner, Yale University Press has now published John B. Freed's monumental and learned biography of the emperor.

Reading the first lines of this fine book, one may be surprised to find a reference to Hitler's 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union. However, this is not owed to an often suspected reflex to 'mention the war' whenever thinking about Germany. It serves instead as the ideal example for Freed's main aim for his book. In Hitler's personal choice to name this invasion 'Operation Barbarossa', he sees the 'culmination of the nationalistic appropriation of Frederick' (p. xviii). In modern Germany, the medieval emperor Frederick has often been overshadowed by the mythical figure of Barbarossa, sleeping in his mountain to return one day to restore the glory of the Empire. Moreover, nationalistic zealots hailed this ruler as the heroic epitome of a German man. Freed aims to separate the man from the myth and to present Frederick as a prince rooted in and formed by 12th-century society.

That is not an easy task. Myth-making had already begun during Frederick's lifetime and has profoundly influenced the contemporary sources available for his reign. Otto of Freising's *Gesta Friderici* in particular has long influenced medieval and modern interpretations. This refers not only to Otto's depiction of Frederick's as the bringer of a new age of peace – which was in any case a somewhat premature judgement. The wealth of detail in Otto's *Gesta* and in Rahewin's continuation is unmatched by any later source, and as a result most modern biographies offer considerably more detail for the first eight years of Frederick's reign than for the last 30. Freed also admits the problem (pp. xxix-xxx), but relegates the clearly mythical

elements of Frederick's image to the introduction and the epilogue, whereas the chapters in between offer thorough source criticism and put many of the contemporary witnesses in their context of genre and political outlook.

In the early chapters, Freed draws a vivid tableau of the world in which Frederick grew up and that shaped him: the world of the German nobility after the Investiture Contest. The chapters that follow discuss in chronological order Frederick's coronation as king in 1152, his marriage to Beatrice of Burgundy, the imperial coronation in Rome in 1155, various Italian campaigns with the long wars against the communes of Lombardy, the emperor's stubborn refusal to accept Pope Alexander III in the schism of 1159, and his defeat by both pope and Lombards in 1177. Freed discusses Frederick's conflict with Henry the Lion and, finally, the Third Crusade and the emperor's death. He describes these events with verve and great mastery of detail, and the book thus offers a wealth of information on the general structures of the 12th-century empire, especially in Germany. To present Frederick as a product of his time is a particularly important approach, as it allows Freed to look past later myths and legends. This is all the more important in the biography of a medieval individual who has left no writing of his own.

In this respect, a chapter like the one titled 'Der Kaiser spricht' in Görich's biography may have been helpful. Freed, however, sees little possibility to listen to the emperor himself. Instead, he repeatedly stresses Frederick's illiteracy (pp. xviii, 26, 33, 199, 269, and esp. 514) and that there is no way of knowing 'how familiar Frederick was with the contents of letters and charters that were written in his name' (p. 140), or that 'we do not know whether Frederick personally authorized the use of [a] terminology' (p. 291). He goes so far to suggest that the emperor would have been unable to understand the praise that court poets wrote for him in Latin (p. 269). He does admit that at least in Latin 'he may have become more proficient, out of necessity, during the course of his reign' (p. 34). However, I find it very hard to imagine that an emperor who was constantly and for decades surrounded by chaplains and bishops as his closest advisers, by poets writing panegyrics in both Latin and the vernacular, and by jurists instructing him in questions of Roman Law, would not learn a thing or two about the ideas upon which his empire rested. It is simply very unlikely that Frederick would be so oblivious to any ideological debate at his court and would not take the slightest interest in influencing the political communication that radiated from it. Of course, some of the learned finesse in the texts from his retinue would have been lost on him (as some of it is surely is also lost on us modern historians), and he may also not have taken direct influence on the wording of every *arenga* written in his chancery, but Frederick was certainly more than just a symbolic figure for the intellectual circles around him. The courts of the 12th century were the main hubs for political communication and propaganda. It takes quite a stretch of the imagination to assume that Frederick would not have decided on who was part of these circles and which ideas and ideologies would be allowed in his surroundings.

This problem refers to a larger one in Freed's book. The whole aspect of ideas and ideologies is very much absent in it, and that is not a minor omission. This also refers not only to this reviewer's personal interests: in the words of W. L. Warren (in his biography of King John), these ideas and mentalities provide 'the sort of information upon which men made up their minds at the time, and so framed their attitudes and actions'.⁽³⁾ They provided the material to legitimize political power and to create consensus among recalcitrant noblemen. Whereas Görich's recent biography studies ideas and mentalities in the notion of honour, such questions only surface sporadically in Freed's book. The important ideological aspects of Barbarossa's early years are discussed on only a few pages each: the imperial coronation, the notion of *sacrum imperium*, the ideological debates at the diet of Besançon, the Three Magi in Cologne, or the canonization of Charlemagne are all mentioned, but not in their ideological dimension. Freed states, for example (p. 294), that it was Rainald of Dassel, the archbishop of Cologne (1159–67) and driving force behind Frederick Barbarossa's break with Pope Alexander III, who turned the Three Magi into Three Kings. Yet Freed never mentions that this transformed the magi into royal forebears older even than the papacy, or explores what this could have meant in this concrete historical context. Freed also discusses Frederick's alleged plans for world domination, even though German scholars in the 1950s have already convincingly demonstrated that *dominium mundi* had a very different meaning in the high Middle Ages than it had for modern historians writing with the experience of imperialism in mind.⁽⁴⁾ For the last years of Frederick's reign, after his

defeats by Alexander and the Lombard League, the search for new ideas and ideological foundations is not mentioned at all. An important figure in this quest was Godfrey of Viterbo, whose writings became some of the most widely disseminated accounts of imperial origins, history, and morals in later medieval Europe (5), yet in Freed's book he appears merely as a notary and chronicler of Frederick's early years (pp. 109–10).

For Freed, such ideas never seem to have influenced political decisions. At best, we see policies, not ideologies, but these are rarely contextualized or analysed in their long-term change and development. This is best exemplified by the contention that Frederick generally continued the policies of his predecessor Conrad III, except with regard to the Normans of southern Italy. Freed sees the marriage of Frederick's son Henry VI to Constance of Sicily in 1186 (p. 53) as the first departure from this pattern. Yet this disregards a long list of changes that this policy had undergone since the 1150s. While political ideas and mentalities are sometimes mentioned, they are never linked together to form a coherent narrative of the changing and developing ideas that legitimized Frederick's power and that helped him create and maintain consensus among the German princes.

This matters all the more, as Freed identifies consensus as a central tenet of Frederick's reign, and rightly so. For most of his policies, Frederick had to secure 'the cooperation of proud, often cantankerous men' (p. 515). Many of his actions (or lack thereof) can be explained by his need to create and maintain a consensus – which also meant not to antagonize some of the princes. With some justification, Freed employs Bernd Schneidmüller's term 'consensual lordship' (6) for Frederick's 'reliance upon the consent and judgment of the princes, the tenants-in-chief of the crown, and his personal prestige, rather than upon formal institutions of government to rule his kingdom' (pp. xix–xx). However, at least for the 12th century, this consensual lordship should not be seen as an exclusively German characteristic of political culture. The example of Philip Augustus's trial of John Lackland in 1202 shows that the French kings of this time still went to great lengths to have their decisions ratified by a representative body of magnates. (7) Without a doubt, the English and French kingdoms were leading the way towards administrative kingship, but even these western 'formal institutions of government' depended on the consensus of the magnates.

While Freed expertly untangles the various networks, factions and kinship groups of the German nobility, he often speaks *en bloc* of Frederick's 'Italian allies' (esp. pp. 276–84, and *passim*), without further differentiating these groups. Yet the Italian kingdom was divided between an equally tight network of interests and loyalties, and that not only among the Italian nobility. No Italian commune was simply pro-papal or pro-imperial, within their walls the different factions also competed for power. At times, one of them would gain the upper hand and would thus define the city as either Guelph or Ghibelline. However, these structures and networks are barely referenced in Freed's book, certainly with nothing of the care and subtlety with which such distinctions were drawn as regards the German part of the empire. A closer exploration of these internal structures in the Italian cities would surely have made their frequent changes of allegiance less 'bewildering' (p. 516).

This issue also points to a larger problem in the book: the complete absence of Italian scholarship. In Italy, Frederick had entered into a world that he did not entirely understand. The communes of Lombardy, in the absence of imperial administration after the Investiture Contest, had developed their own political structures – structures that Frederick struggled to understand. Yet these structures occupied a major focus of his reign, one on which he spent considerable political, symbolic, and material capital. Italy was central to Barbarossa's concept of imperial power, and the Italian communes were central to the limitations and opportunities that Frederick Barbarossa faced in practice. To understand the origin and course of Frederick's actions in Italy, it is therefore necessary to understand the communes and how they conceived of their role and origins. Italian scholars have long and extensively studied the origins of the communes and their conflicts with Frederick Barbarossa. However, little reference is made to these works, to earlier Italian biographies like that by Franco Cardini (1985), and even to many more recent publications treating other aspects of Frederick's reign, such as the work of historians of the communes like Renato Bordone, of ecclesiastical history, or of the Normans of southern Italy, like Cosimo Damiano Fonseca. It is, of course, regrettable that so many scholars of the medieval Empire do not read Italian, but it is surprising that so little

reference is made even to Italian scholarship that has been translated into English (e.g. the late Girolamo Arnaldi's *L'Italia e i suoi invasori*, 2004/*Italy and its invaders*, 2005).⁽⁸⁾ If nothing else, that literature would have alerted the reader to how the Italian myth of Frederick may also have influenced modern interpretations of the emperor.

Aside from these problems, the book features also a few minor ones, some of which should be mentioned. For example, the fact that Hagenau had special importance for Frederick in his later life does not necessarily mean that it was his birthplace (p. 15). Henry VI's birthplace was the palace in Nijmegen, and he showed no particular interest in the place in later life. Similarly, one may argue that, while the development of capitals was certainly a result of the 12th century, the comparison with Paris (p. 90) is problematic, not only because the kingdom of France was much smaller than Frederick's empire. In the 1150s and -60s Paris had not yet acquired the importance it would eventually under the reign of Philip Augustus. French kingship, as much as any other in Europe at the time, was still itinerant. It is also very unlikely that Rainald of Dassel had not read the papal letter at Besançon before its public reading (p. 205). Other contemporary examples, such as Romuald of Salerno's report on the legation of Cardinal Henry of SS Nereo e Achilleo to William of Sicily in 1155 indicate that discussing the contents of such letters before their public reading was common practice.⁽⁹⁾ It is at least odd to call Saxo Grammaticus an anonymous (p. 308), or to place the Vogtland 'along the eastern frontier of the German kingdom' (p. 367), especially as neighbouring Bohemia was at this time (as is stated a few pages earlier, p. 358) very much considered part of the German kingdom. The discussion of Godfrey of Viterbo's depiction of William of Montferrat (p. 381) would certainly have been somewhat different, had Godfrey's earlier imprisonment by William's son Conrad been taken into account. Moreover, the appropriation of the mythical Frederick as a precursor of the second Reich was certainly strong and ubiquitous in Wilhelmine Germany, but it should not be exaggerated, at least as regards the crown prince Frederick (pp. 526–7). When he followed his father onto the throne in 1888, he chose to be named Frederick III, continuing the counting of the Prussian kings, and not Frederick IV, which he would have been if his court lawyers had indeed seen the Reich as the continuation of the Holy Roman Empire.

In general, Freed's Frederick appears as a ruler whose agency was very much dictated by the agreement of the princes. These magnates, not only on the highest levels of the German nobility, formed the networks of kinship, friendship and loyalty that held together the medieval empire. Freed is an eminent specialist of the German nobility and in his book does a masterful job in keeping the various factions and political parties, the different groups, families and dynasties apart. It is in these chapters that his book is at its most erudite: in the parts that show how the various networks of 12th-century Germany stretched into various strata of society and how they – in their friendships and enmities – set the framework for political action in the empire.

Within such frameworks, Frederick often appears as almost passive, as reacting rather than acting. Particularly for the later years of his reign, German scholars have pointed to the pressure exerted by the princes on Frederick, such as in the trial of Henry the Lion, his cousin, duke of Bavaria and Saxony, and erstwhile favourite ⁽¹⁰⁾, but unlike other biographers, Freed seems to view this powerlessness as pervasive almost throughout Frederick's reign, at least after his 'coup d'état' that brought him the crown (pp. xix, 65, 197). Particularly in the crisis of 1167 (the importance of which Freed seems to overestimate, at least in comparison to the settlements of 1177), Frederick only ever appears to be reacting to circumstances. Even taking the cross is not seen as inspired by piety, but rather as an 'unintended acknowledgement of his diminished status' (p. 452).

Freed's Frederick emerges as a rather powerless and uneducated ruler without a particular set of political ideas that guided his actions and responses. He appears as a ruler deeply rooted in the aristocratic culture of his time, but who would also be ruthless and cruel when it served him. It remains unclear how much of that was Frederick's personal choice, and how much was rooted in the regional political culture out of which he emerged, or how far it may simply have been a matter of political expediency.

For specialists of Barbarossa's reign, particularly in Germany, the book does not offer many new

interpretations, but to wish for more detail in a book of 700 pages may seem improper. Moreover, it is not a book aimed at these specialists. It is, rather, the first English-language biography of Frederick Barbarossa in several decades. It offers an excellent introduction to all relevant sources, which Freed commands in the fashion of a true master, and into most of the relevant scholarly debates, at least in German. Freed has written an erudite and immensely readable biography of Frederick that is very rich in historical detail and that – despite some problems – offers a reliable introduction into German history of the 12th century and into the debates among German scholars about this time. It will remain, for generations to come, and rightfully so, the standard work in English on Frederick Barbarossa and Germany in the 12th century.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Barraclough, *The Origins of Modern Germany* (Oxford, 1946). Peter Munz, *Frederick Barbarossa: A Study in Medieval Politics* (Ithaca, NY and London, 1969). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Johannes Laudage, *Friedrich Barbarossa: Eine Biografie* (Regensburg, 2009). Knut Görich, *Friedrich Barbarossa: Eine Biographie* (Munich, 2011). Pierre Racine, *Frédéric Barberousse (1152–1190)* (Paris, 2009). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. W. L. Warren, *King John* (3rd ed., New Haven, CT, London, 1997), p. 4. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Hans Joachim Kirfel, *Weltherrschaftsidee und Bündnispolitik: Untersuchungen zur auswärtigen Politik der Staufer* (Bonn, 1959). Also cf. Othmar Hageneder, 'Weltherrschaft im Mittelalter', *Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, 93 (1985), 257–78. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Here cf. Thomas Foerster 'Godfrey of Viterbo and his readers: introduction', in *Godfrey of Viterbo and his Readers: Imperial Tradition and Universal History in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Thomas Foerster (Farnham, 2015), pp. 1–12. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Bernd Schneidmüller, 'Konsensuale Herrschaft: Ein Essay über Formen und Konzepte politischer Ordnung im Mittelalter', in *Reich, Regionen und Europa in Mittelalter und Neuzeit*, ed. Paul-Joachim Heinig et al. (Berlin, 2000), pp. 53–87. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Hannah Vollrath, 'Rebels and rituals: from demonstrations of enmity to criminal justice', in *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography*, ed. Gerd Althoff, Johannes Fried and Patrick Geary (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 89–110. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Franco Cardini, *Il Barbarossa: vita, trionfi e illusioni di Federico 1. Imperatore* (Milan, 2003). For the works of Renato Bordone see e.g. his *Città e territorio nell'alto Medioevo: La società astigiana dal dominio dei Franchi all'affermazione comunale* (Turin, 1980); *La società urbana nell'Italia comunale (secoli 11.-14.)* (Turin, 1984); and *Uno stato d'animo: Memoria del tempo e comportamenti urbani nel mondo comunale italiano* (Florence, 2002). For the more than 500 publications of Cosimo Damiano Fonseca, see the overview in Hubert Houben, 'Von Apulien aus nach Europa: Zur Verleihung des Stauferpreises an Cosimo Damiano Fonseca', in *Gesellschaft für staufische Geschichte*, ed. Friedrich Barbarossa und sein Hof (Göppingen 2009), pp. 162–6. Girolamo Arnaldi, *L'Italia e i suoi invasori* (Rome/Bari, 2004), *Italy and its Invaders*, translated by Antony Shугaar (London, 2005). [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Romuald of Salerno, *Chronicon*, ed. Carlo Alberto Garufi (Rerum Italicarum Scriptores VII/1) (Città di Castello, 1935), p. 237: Quo cognito, Adrianus papa Henricum cardinalem Sanctorum Nerei et Achillei ad eum misit, quem rex recipere noluit set Romam redire precepit, eo quod in litteris apostolicis, quas regi portabat, papa ipsum non regem, sed W[ilhelmum] dominum Sicilie nominabat. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. See e.g. Stefan Weinfurter, 'Landrecht und Lehnrecht im Prozeß gegen Heinrich den Löwen', *Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz: Antrittsvorlesungen*, 4 (1989), 1–35; and 'Erzbischof Philip von Köln und der Sturz Heinrichs des Löwen', in: *Köln: Stadt und Bistum in Kirche und Reich des Mittelalters*, ed. Hanna Vollrath and Stefan Weinfurter (Cologne, 1993), pp. 455–81. [Back to \(10\)](#)

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