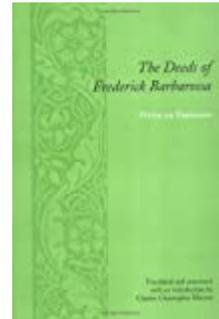




**Charles Christopher Mierow, ed.** *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. 366 pp. \$38.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-13419-4.



**Reviewed by** Gillian Elliott (Department of Art and Art History, University of Texas at Austin)

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The Official Biography of Emperor Frederick I. Barbarossa

“But we would gladly commend to your attention an account, briefly compiled in compliance with your request, of the things performed by us since our accession to the throne” (p. 17). Emperor Frederick Barbarossa wrote these words in a letter to Otto, Bishop of Freising, to preface his outline of the main events that had taken place during the first five years of his reign (1152-57). This brief sketch of his reign was intended to aid Otto in writing an “official biography” for the emperor and his court. Since Otto was a learned cleric who had already authored a chronicle of universal history, called the *Two Cities* (1143-47), he was well equipped to compile a history of recent events.[1] Because he was Barbarossa’s maternal uncle and a loyal supporter of the Hohenstaufen family, Otto was also ideally suited to voice the official court view of history. His work, called *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa* (*Gesta Friderici I imperatoris*) was first translated into English and annotated in 1953 by Charles Christopher Mierow and Richard Emery. It has been reprinted because of its high value as a primary source for medieval historians, philosophers, and scholars of biographies.

Otto of Freising authored the first two books of his biography before his death in 1158, after which his con-

tinuator, Rahewin, a notary and canon of Freising, composed the third and fourth books following Otto’s plan. Otto conceived of book 1 as a genealogical and historical background of events (1075-1152) that led up to the peace and restoration of the empire now enjoyed under Frederick I Barbarossa (1152-90). In book 2, Otto considered the three main accomplishments made by Barbarossa in the early years of his reign (1152-56): his continuation of the peace achieved by Conrad III (1093-1152), the resumption of all powers and authority formerly associated with emperors, and the reestablishment of the original territorial boundaries of the Holy Roman Empire, with special emphasis on Italy. Rahewin covered only three years of Barbarossa’s reign (1157-60) in books 3 and 4. He began with the emperor’s campaign against the Poles and other international business, but his main focus was almost exclusively Barbarossa’s Italian expeditions.

As this history was written on the heels of the Investiture Controversy, a century-long struggle between the papacy (*sacerdotium*) and the Holy Roman Emperor (*regnum*) over the participation of rulers in the investiture of bishops and abbots, this book is of vital importance to scholars of medieval politics and religion.[2] Otto and Rahewin record a number of instances in which Emperor Frederick asserted his rights to the priestly role traditionally associated with Christian emperors. For example,

in book 2 Otto observed that Frederick's imperial coronation at Aachen in 1152 occurred on the same day and in the same church as the consecration of a bishop, also named Frederick (p. 117). This comparison reminded the medieval courtly reader that the emperor was anointed by God and on equal footing with the priesthood. Two paragraphs later Otto launched into a lengthy description of Barbarossa's attempt to choose a new bishop for the church of Magdeburg. Otto justified this imperial act by quoting the compromise reached in the Concordat of Worms in 1122, which had temporarily resolved the papal-imperial conflict over secular investitures. The Concordat deemed that whenever there "happened to be a division in the choice of a successor," a secular ruler could choose the bishop (p. 119). Thus at Magdeburg the emperor had exercised his authority over priests to the fullest extent of the compromise. Otto provided the text of a letter, however, in which Pope Eugenius (1145-53) accused Frederick of having overstepped the limits of his authority in church matters and hoped he would return the choice of bishop back to the church of Magdeburg. Otto does not cast any judgment upon this conflict between pope and emperor, but in the end he recorded that the pope died in 1153 and the emperor installed his new bishop at Magdeburg. Otto concluded that "since that time the authority of the prince has very greatly increased in the administration not only of secular but also of ecclesiastical affairs" (p. 123). The re-establishment of the emperor's priestly powers remained a major theme in the rest of the biography.

A second focus of Barbarossa's biography concerns the emperor's ambitions to restore the original territorial boundaries of the Holy Roman Empire. In book 1 Otto explains that the state of the realm had disintegrated under Frederick's imperial ancestor, Henry IV (1050-1108), but that Frederick's uncle, Emperor Conrad III, had begun to re-establish peace and build up the empire. Otto described, in his second book, how Barbarossa continued to reclaim lost territory. First, after waging war in Lombardy, the emperor reclaimed his status as King of the Lombards in a coronation at Pavia in 1155 (p. 142). Second, his coronation as Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Hadrian in Rome (1155) showed that Frederick had achieved what even Conrad III had failed to do (p. 150). Finally, Frederick's marriage to Beatrice of Burgundy helped the ruler expand his control in the north (p. 164). Rahewin's last two books lack Otto's sophisticated interpretation of history, but the sheer amount of information provided in books 3 and 4 concerning Barbarossa's activities in Italy further underscores the em-

peror's persistent desire to reclaim Lombardy for the empire.

Although admittedly Rahewin's later work reads much like a catalog, the first two books of *The Deeds* by Otto demonstrate philosophical as well as historical value. In book 1 Otto revealed his keen interest in current ecclesiastical affairs, a concern which immediately raises the question of where he stood in the conflicts between the Church and the State. Otto offered comparatively long discussions of Bernard of Clairvaux's preaching on the crusade, the teachings of Gilbert, bishop of Poitiers, and the case of Bernard of Clairvaux versus Peter Abelard. In addition, he delved into his own philosophical question on the differences between the original and the created, which he grounded in the philosophy of Boethius (pp. 31-40). Certainly this learned bishop was well aware of official church doctrine and of prevalent heresies in France. Did he put this information into book 1 to illustrate that the time was right for further questioning of official church policy by the emperor, or were these theological digressions there to remind Barbarossa that flouting church authority was a serious problem?

The question of Otto's own perspective in writing this work is of particular significance to students of biography. Otto paints a portrait of a heroic and just king, but other contemporary accounts portray Emperor Frederick as the worst form of tyrant. Because the poems by Gunther of Paris, including a recently discovered untitled poem about Barbarossa's Italian journeys (1152-60), and the chronicles of Godfrey of Viterbo and Otto of St. Blasien, are each based so closely on *The Deeds*, it is clear that the biography was well-known and accepted as a factual history by members of the imperial court.[3] Insight into Otto's personal agenda is, however, attainable through comparison of *The Deeds* with the actual collection of imperial documents from 1152-58 and the negative accounts of the emperor's exploits into Italy through 1168 by Otto and Acerbus Morena.[4] By analyzing this range of contemporary sources, scholars have a unique opportunity to investigate discrepancies and to consider the political motives for certain omissions and emphases made in *The Deeds*.

Differences between Otto's account and the later books of his secretary have also intrigued historians who wish to gain a better sense of Barbarossa's era.[5] Because Otto was related to the emperor and had even traveled with Frederick on the Second Crusade, he probably had little to fear from Barbarossa by recording events truthfully. And yet, as Christopher Mierow explains in

his introduction, Otto limited himself to a hopeful and positive history by omitting several incidents that reflected poorly on the Hohenstaufen family (pp. 6-7). In some cases he even interpreted particularly ugly actions as justifiable. For example, when Emperor Conrad sent his nephew, Barbarossa, to “strengthen the condition of the empire” upon their return from the Second Crusade, Frederick executed some of his ministers by hanging them (p. 103). Otto explained that Barbarossa had exercised good judgment in the interests of peace. His rationalizations of tyrannical or warlike behavior are especially interesting in light of the contemporaneous criticism of kings, particularly anti-imperial propaganda that circulated during the Investiture Controversy, and the scathing remarks against monarchs made by John of Salisbury.<sup>[6]</sup> Otto’s praise for all Hohenstaufen deeds may have been a response to such anti-imperial sentiment.

By contrast, Rahewin, a less socially exalted cleric, offered few of his own opinions about Barbarossa’s aggressive exploits or conflicts with the pope. Mierow points out that Rahewin frequently borrowed texts from earlier histories (p. 8), an approach designed to enhance his objectivity as a historian because it freed him from the necessity of using his own voice. Whenever Rahewin recorded controversial situations, such as his accounts of Barbarossa’s anger over Pope Hadrian’s letter in 1157 (p. 184-186) and later Frederick’s decision to elect Victor IV over Alexander III at the 1160 council of Pavia (p. 307-330), he protected himself from potential imperial or papal rebuke by incorporating whole texts of official letters into his chronology. Still, the choice of letters he included in his books is telling, for they are primarily imperial.

*The Deeds* is an indispensable resource for those interested in events and general practices of the mid-twelfth-century. It is also of immense value to historians of the Hohenstaufen family and scholars of papal-imperial relations in the medieval period. This translation and now reprint of Barbarossa’s biography make what was formerly available only to an elite and privileged echelon of medieval society accessible to a much wider public. Like the medieval courtly audience of this biography, however, today’s readers must still determine for themselves just who Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa really was.

#### Notes

[1]. See Otto, Bishop of Freising, *The Two Cities: A Chronicle of Universal History to the Year 1146 AD*, trans.

Charles C. Mierow, ed. Austin P. Evans and Charles Knapp (repr. 1928; New York: Octagon Books, 1966).

[2]. For an overview of the Investiture Controversy, see Uta-Renate Blumenthal, *The Investiture Controversy: Church and Monarch from the Ninth to the Twelfth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); and Gerd Tellenbach, *Church, State and Christian Society at the Time of the Investiture Controversy*, trans. R. F. Bennett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959).

[3]. Fritz Peter Knapp, ed., *Der “Ligurinus” des Gunther von Pairis* (Gppingen: Kummerle Verlag, 1982); Thomas Carson, trans. and ed., *Barbarossa in Italy* (New York, 1994). For more on the Gesta Friderici and the Liber universalis by Godfrey of Viterbo, see Oliver Killgus, “Studien zum Liber Universalis Gottfrieds von Viterbo” (Ph.D. diss., University of Augsburg, 2001), esp. pp. 20-30 and 105-110. See also Otto of St. Blasien, *Die Chronik des Otto von St. Blasien*, trans. Horst Kohl (Leipzig: Verlag der Deutschen Buchhandlung, 1894).

[4]. Heinrich Appelt et al., eds., *Die Urkunden Friedrichs I. 1152-1158 (Monumenta Germaniae Historica. Diplomata regnum et imperatorum Germaniae 10:1-5)* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1975-1990); and *Italische Quellen ber die Taten Kaiser Friedrichs I. in Italien und der Brief ber den Kreuzzug Kaiser Friedrichs I.: Ottos Morena und seiner Fortsetzer Buch ber die Taten Kaiser Friedrichs*, trans. Franz-Josef Schmale (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1986).

[5]. On Rahewin’s commission and political motivations for writing, see the discussion between J. B. Gillingham and Peter Munz in *The English Historical Review* 83 (1968): pp. 294-303; 84 (1969): pp. 771-79; and 86 (1971): pp. 73-78.

[6]. For polemical writings between Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII during the Investiture Controversy (late-eleventh to early-twelfth centuries), see Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State, 1050-1300* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964), pp. 33-96. On John of Salisbury’s position against tyrants, especially Frederick Barbarossa, see Cary J. Nederman and Catherine Campbell, “Priests, Kings, and Tyrants: Spiritual and Temporal Power in John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*,” *Speculum* 66 (1991): pp. 572-90, and Horst Fuhrmann, “Quis Teutonicos constituit iudices nationum? The Trouble with Henry,” *Speculum* 69 (1994): pp. 344-58.

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