



*Frederick Barbarossa: The Prince and
the Myth*

John B. Freed

New Haven and London: Yale University
Press, 2016

Reviewed by: Stephen Donnachie



Frederick Barbarossa: The Prince and the Myth. By John B. Freed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-300-12276-3. xxxiv + 676 pp. £35.

The Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick I Barbarossa, is one of the most well-known of all medieval German monarchs, but he is also a ruler around whom many myths have arisen in the centuries since his infamous death: drowning in a river while on his way to the Third Crusade in 1190. These myths have had a considerable impact upon how historians and the general public have viewed Frederick. Modern interpretations have portrayed him as a romantic figure; a Germanic hero who sought to unite medieval Germany; a legendary king sleeping in a mountain; and a nationalist icon misappropriated by the Nazis. In this first full biography of Frederick in English for almost fifty years, John B. Freed has produced a highly detailed account of the emperor's thirty-eight-year reign that adroitly dispels some of those myths, and separates Barbarossa the man from the legends that have overshadowed him. Freed's familiarity with the sources for Frederick's reign, and his comprehensive understanding of the intricate politics of twelfth-century Germany, aptly contextualise the events of Barbarossa's life to create an engaging and thoroughly readable introduction to this important period of German history.

The biography follows a standard chronological narrative of Frederick's life, with the first chapters painting a vivid description of the medieval Holy Roman Empire in which he grew up, and the society in which he operated as emperor. As we have little information on Frederick's early life, a problem common for many medieval biographies, Freed wisely portrays Frederick as a product of his time and shows how the political expectations of the aristocracy of twelfth-century Germany influenced and defined many aspects of his rule. Later chapters then move through the key events of Frederick's reign, from his election as king in 1152, to his imperial coronation in Rome in 1155, his various Italian campaigns and conflicts with the communes of northern-Italy throughout the 1160s and 1170s, his dispute with Pope Alexander III, and finally his conflict with his cousin, Henry the Lion, the duke of Saxony, in the 1180s. Each of these sections is very detailed, providing a clear account of Frederick's actions and those of his court, often on an almost monthly basis.

Freed challenges the notion that Frederick's reign was dominated by his struggle with the Welf family. Instead, the author presents a more convincing image of Frederick adapting to the changing circumstances in the political landscape of the empire, pursuing policies as needed that sometimes brought him into conflict with the Welfs, rather than a dedicated campaign of antagonism. Likewise, Frederick is often portrayed as a somewhat passive ruler, reacting to events rather than acting decisively, particularly in the later years of his reign after his failures in Italy. Freed regularly points out that Frederick was illiterate, and that we do not know how familiar Frederick was with the contents of the letters, charters, and other documents that were written in his name. We therefore do not necessarily hear his voice in the sources authored by the influential men around him. Consequently, Frederick's personality and character do not always jump from the page and, despite the dramatic events taking place about him, we do not get a good feel for Frederick the man and monarch. The book often appears as an account of the events of Frederick's reign and the affairs of the twelfth century empire, rather than a biography of an individual ruler.

Sections discussing aspects of the myths surrounding Frederick's life are dealt with in an introductory chapter and an epilogue. While Freed addresses the history, origin, and development of these myths, the volume would have benefitted from a little more discussion on this fascinating

aspect of Frederick's historical afterlife, though as the book is already almost 700 pages long it is easy to understand why the exploration of this topic is limited. Rather, Freed focuses on discussing the various sources that gave rise to these myths during Frederick's lifetime in their relevant chapters. In doing so, Freed also provides us with an excellent introduction to the different sources, placing their authors into their appropriate contexts and outlining the scholarly debates surrounding them. Freed also notes that sources for Frederick's reign are considerably more detailed for the first decade of his rule than they are for the thirty years that followed, and that this disparity in the quality of the source material has influenced the nature of the scholarship upon Frederick. Though Freed acknowledges this problem, he too is still trapped by the nature of the source material.

Approximately half of the book is dedicated to events that occur within the first decade of Frederick's reign. While many of the events that took place in these years were instrumental to Frederick's later rule and do deserve to be covered in depth, such as his conflict with the communes of Italy and his opposition to Pope Alexander III, this does make later chapters of the book, where less information is available, appear to rush through Frederick's reign far too quickly. Indeed, where source material is lacking for some years Freed often resorts to wider thematic discussions, such as on Frederick's economic and urban policies or his relationship with his family. Though these thematic sections are also very detailed, they often leave the reader a little lost as they jump backwards and forwards to events and people who have yet to be covered in the wider chronological structure of the biography.

Freed's Frederick Barbarossa is a capable but often stubborn ruler, an experienced but not skilled military commander, who could be cruel and ruthless when needed but who was also concerned with the prestige of his imperial position. Crafting an erudite biography on Frederick Barbarossa is no easy task, but Freed offers a comprehensive account of Frederick's reign, rich in historical detail, that is suitable for scholars, students, and the general reader alike. This may be the go-to work on Frederick Barbarossa in English for quite some time yet.

STEPHEN DONNACHIE

Swansea University