



Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor

David Abulafia

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Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, Holy Roman Emperor, King of Sicily, King of Jerusalem, has, since his death in 1250, enjoyed a reputation as one of the most remarkable monarchs in the history of Europe. His wide cultural tastes, his apparent tolerance of Jews and Muslims, his defiance of the papacy, and his supposed aim of creating a new, secular world order make him a figure especially attractive to contemporary historians. But as David Abulafia shows in this powerfully written biography, Frederick was much less tolerant and far-sighted in his cultural, religious, and political ambitions than is generally thought. Here, Frederick is revealed as the thorough traditionalist he really was: a man who espoused the same principles of government as his twelfth-century predecessors, an ardent leader of the Crusades, and a king as willing to make a deal with Rome as any other ruler in medieval Europe.

Frederick's realm was vast. Besides ruling the region of Europe that encompasses modern Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, eastern France, and northern Italy, he also inherited the Kingdom of Sicily and parts of the Mediterranean that include what are now Israel, Lebanon, Malta, and Cyprus. In addition, his Teutonic knights conquered the present-day Baltic States, and he even won influence along the coasts of Tunisia.

Abulafia is the first to place Frederick in the wider historical context his enormous empire demands.

Frederick's reign, Abulafia clearly shows, marked the climax of the power struggle between the medieval popes and the Holy Roman Emperors, and the book stresses Frederick's steadfast dedication to the task of preserving both dynasty and empire. Through the course of this rich, groundbreaking narrative, Frederick emerges as less of the innovator than he is usually portrayed. Rather than instituting a centralized autocracy, he was content to guarantee the continued existence of the customary style of government in each area he ruled: in Sicily he appeared a mighty despot, but in Germany he placed his trust in regional princes, and never dreamed of usurping their power. Abulafia shows that this pragmatism helped bring about the eventual transformation of medieval Europe into modern nation-states.

The book also sheds new light on the aims of Frederick in Italy and the Near East, and concentrates as well on the last fifteen years of the Emperor's life, a period until now little understood. In addition, Abulafia has mined the papal registers in the Secret Archive of the Vatican to provide a new interpretation of Frederick's relations with the papacy. And his attention to Frederick's register of documents from 1239-40--a collection hitherto neglected--has yielded new insights into the cultural life of the German court.

In the end, a fresh and fascinating picture develops of the most enigmatic of German rulers, a man whose accomplishments have been grossly distorted over the centuries.

Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor Details

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From Reader Review Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor for online ebook

Dan says

In this biography of Frederick von Hohenstaufen – Holy Roman Emperor, King of the Germans (& N. Italians), King of Jerusalem, King of Sicily (including S. Italy), et cetera – Professor Abulafia intended to supersede the classic work on the subject by Kantorowicz. In Abulafia's efforts to revise Kantorowicz' views of Frederick (and van Cleve's derivative interpretation), the argument is put forth that Frederick was not uniquely forward-looking but, instead, thoroughly medieval in action and attitude. In this case, although the argument may be sound, Abulafia pushes his agenda too far, abandoning those aspects of Frederick that are clearly ahead of his time. To be sure, Frederick *was* a product of the Middle Ages and such is reflected in his behavior. He was also, however, a singularly brilliant human being who had the power and leisure to perform remarkably modern scientific inquiry. Yes, he manifested a nasty knack for realpolitik, but he also demonstrated a quasi-modern outlook to minorities (especially in his treatment of Jews within his realm).

A second, and far more alarming aspect of Abulafia's revisionist interpretation of Frederick's life, is found in his treatment of the relationship between emperor and papacy. Here, Abulafia's disproportionate rhetoric belies his ostensible balance. Although Abulafia *claims* that Frederick could be just as much at fault as Gregory IX or Innocent IV, in the actual description of events, the adjectives chosen for Frederick are benign or positive (e.g., determined, tenacious) whereas the pope is described in negative terms (e.g., stubborn, obtuse). In Abulafia's rhetoric, Frederick was guided by precedent, logic and rules of government all to preserve and expand Hohenstaufen power, whereas the popes were governed by malice and self-interest and to unjustly(?) influence the secular world. The rhetoric is not always quite so obvious. Usually the key to Abulafia's true, heartfelt views on the matter are found in a scarcely perceived tone of distain for the pope and the papacy in general. It would be helpful if the author simply came out and stated this.

All in all, it is a good book, but not a great one. Although Abulafia's work is more modern and therefore answers questions more likely to be of interest to twenty-first century students, I still feel that Kantorowicz' work has yet to be superseded. At least with Kantorowicz, one knows where one stands and can more easily disregard the hagiographical rhetoric which surrounds Frederick II. Abulafia's great contribution to the discourse on Frederick is his first chapter, which traces Frederick's Norman inheritance – a subject oft neglected, and much needed. What remains to be written is a truly balanced and impartial biography which includes good footnotes; a feat that neither Kantorowicz nor Abulafia can claim.

James Kane says

Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor from 1220 to 1250 and king of Sicily from 1198 to 1250, was an interesting ruler whom generations of historians have turned into an extraordinary one. In this sober and sobering reinterpretation of Frederick's career, David Abulafia shies away from the wildly imaginative portraits that have often characterised scholarship on the emperor and offers a clear, engaging overview of his life, policies and personality (as far as it can be grasped). Abulafia's assured account of the bitter struggle between Frederick and the papacy, especially under Gregory IX (1227-1241) and Innocent IV (1243-1254), is a particular highlight. Non-specialists might find Abulafia's reappraisal a little too sober, but on the whole this book is a readable, masterly and essential treatment of one of the most intriguing rulers of the Middle

Ages, as well as an important corrective to the reams of fanciful speculation that have been written about Frederick.

Ton says

Very good biography of Frederick II, debunking and re-evaluating a lot of myths and still painting a compelling picture of Frederick.

Laginestra says

Lo stupor mundi ritrattato e riavvicinato ad una dimensione umana, terrena, dove errare è possibile anche per un illuminato. Gran libro.

Steven Wedgeworth says

Not always the most exciting, but Frederick II is a fascinating man who is too much forgotten today. Lots of controversy about him as well, and Abulafia does a good job holding a middle position.

Ellis Knox says

A necessary corrective to Kantorowicz.

Cat says

This book is generally acknowledged as an excellent, recent account of the life of Frederick II. Frederick is famous in the German-speaking world for being an inspiration to the Nazi party. The earlier biography by Kantorowicz (who later taught in America), was seized on by Nazi's and Nazi sympathizers in support for a strong, mystical leader who would bring Germany back to greatness. Although Abulafia notes this troubled history in the notes, his account is mostly concerned with Frederick II's actual life and times. In a way, he is trying to debunk the superstition and legend that was built up around Frederick II in the early part of the twentieth century.

So who was Frederick II? He was the heir to the kingdom of Sicily and the Holy Roman Empire. He managed to unify his vast kingdom during his lifetime, he re-conquered Jerusalem without a fight, he wrote a superb book on Falconry, corresponded with Arab scholars and, oh yes, fought bitterly with a succession of Popes who just hated his guts.

In fact, these Popes, more than Frederick himself, emerge as the focal point of this book. More than anything it was their unreasoning hatred for Frederick's power that defined his life. Particularly, it seemed like Frederick spent the majority of his life fighting rebels in Lombardy who were supported by the Pope.

Recommended.

Graziano says

Fosse riuscito a vivere in pace con le città italiane e il papato, con tutta probabilità avrebbe speso somme più consistenti per libri, bestie e spettacoli... (213)

Uomo di discreta levatura intellettuale e di ragionevoli qualità politiche, complice una doppia eredità si trova suo malgrado invischiato in un'interminabile lotta con le rivendicazioni di primato temporale della Chiesa romana; e quando il guanto di sfida venne lanciato, non seppe contrastare con la dovuta energia il primato morale che il papato si attribuiva nell'universo cristiano. (365)

Matthew Gilmore says

This is a kind of talmudic approach to Frederick...the basic life story is absent. Or maybe Don Quixote is a better comparison--always charging at windmills--in this case straw men representations of previous historians' arguments.

Siria says

David Abulafia's *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor* is a well-written, if somewhat iconoclastic, biography. The book's subtitle is meant as more than just a chronological identifier; Abulafia sets out to show that Frederick's reputation as a Renaissance man avant la lettre, a secular-leaning genius renowned for his moderate treatment of Jews and Muslims, is an undeserved one. Frederick was as firmly grounded in a medieval mindset as his contemporaries, the age of Sicilian *convivencia* came to its end under his rule, and his moderate political abilities were not up to the task of ruling an enormous, fragmented empire in the face of papal ambitions. The groundwork for many of his "achievements" were laid by others.

Abulafia's argument is in some measure convincing, particularly the early chapters in which he places Frederick within the context of his often neglected Norman heritage. But at times, as is common with revisionist works, Abulafia seems to swing too far in the other direction and does not always convince—in particular when it comes to his characterisation of the imperial-papal conflict.

The absence of any kind of footnotes, endnotes or other annotation was highly frustrating.

Mark Anthony Bugeja says

A sweeping biography of a man that epitomises the Middle Ages. He was a king and emperor that was way ahead of his times.

