

Knut Görich, Friedrich Barbarossa. Eine Biographie, München (C. H. Beck) 2011, 782 S., ISBN 978-3-406-59823-4, EUR 29,95.

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Graham A. Loud, Leeds

As Professor Görich suggests in his introduction, despite the potent patriotic symbolism of Frederick Barbarossa to later generations, especially in the nineteenth century, a biography of the emperor in the conventional sense, as for so many medieval figures, is impossible to write. Detailed sources, revealing the personality of the ruler, simply do not exist, and especially for his early life. This lacuna is all the more notable for Barbarossa because it was never intended that he become emperor, and were it not for the death of Conrad III's eldest son Henry in 1150 he would have remained as duke of Swabia, and no doubt we would have known little more about his life than that of other shadowy ducal figures from twelfth-century Germany. Once Frederick was crowned king in March 1152 it was a different matter. But even here there are considerable problems. The principal narrative sources concerning the emperor himself: the *Gesta Friderici* of Otto of Freising and Rahewin, and the accounts of his Italian campaigns by Vincent of Prague, and Otto and Acerbius Morena, deal only with the early years of his reign. While there are a considerable number of other narrative sources from Germany at this period, their focus tends to be local, and the emperor himself often plays little more than an occasional walk-on role therein, until the Crusade in the last year of his life. What we do have, however, are some 1080 documents issued in his name, now available in a convenient modern MGH edition, from which it is possible to reconstruct a much more detailed picture of his court and policy than before.

Notwithstanding the problems outlined above, there have of course been a plethora of studies of the emperor and his reign. This massive new book by Görich still, however, has much to offer. As one might expect from the author of »Die Ehre Friedrich Barbarossas«¹, he views the emperor's rule set firmly within the confines of aristocratic society and its values – thus, for example, there is a long and interesting chapter on the imperial court and its workings – access to the court, gift-giving and the precedents and ceremonial at court were of vital importance to both the operation of rule and to the interests of the political class. It was a dispute about seating at the great court at Mainz in 1184 that was the catalyst for the breach between the emperor and Archbishop Philip of Cologne that so complicated the emperor's last years. Görich sums up this issue as follows: »honour and a sense of honour stood indeed at the centre of the noble ethos and of the aristocratic mentality« (p. 178): and »the concept of honour played a central role in the rationale of Barbarossa's actions« (p. 659). His account of the politics of the early part of the reign is particularly concerned with Frederick's relations with the upper ranks of the German aristocracy. The centrality of such relations was clear from the first, not least in that Görich sees Frederick's election as king as far from being the *fait accompli* that it

¹ See Pierre Racine's review in: Francia 29/1 (2002), p. 376–378; http://francia.digitale-sammlungen.de/Blatt_bsb00016306_00386.html.

is usually considered. He follows Jan Niederkorn in arguing that Conrad III had never intended his nephew to succeed him, and it was only that ruler's sudden demise which prevented him from having his younger son Frederick crowned as co-king and designated successor in 1152, even though the boy was only eight at the time. Barbarossa then still had skilfully to gather support, particularly from some of the bishops and from his Welf relations, and to manage his election. The latter was thus the product of ambition and calculation, and was by no means inevitable. Görich also gives credence to the account in one recension of the Cologne annals, which suggests that Archbishop Henry of Mainz did his best to prevent the election – which opposition resulted in his deposition a year later. The continuation of the emperor's close alliance in the early years of his reign with Henry the Lion and his uncle Welf VI was also clear, with the latter being raised to ducal rank in the early months of the reign; and he appeared as a witness in a third of Barbarossa's charters up to 1167. Furthermore, Barbarossa supported him rather than Conrad's son Frederick when he sought to end the conflict between their supporters in Swabia in 1166. Henry the Lion meanwhile was restored to the duchy of Bavaria, which his father had formerly held, in 1156. But, as Görich shows, while Barbarossa had probably intended to do this from the start of his reign, the eventual compromise was the product of lengthy negotiation, and the grant of ducal status to the Babenberger duchy of Austria and the fiction embodied in the *Privilegium Minus* that Henry Jasomirgott's surrender of Bavaria was an act of free will, was all designed to save the latter's reputation and status – another example of the importance of *honor*. Indeed, one of the skills that Frederick I seemed to possess was an ability to satisfy and to recompense those who were not necessarily within his inner circle, and to impose an element of checks and balances among the princes. Hence Görich suggests that the appointment of Bishop Wichmann of Naumburg as archbishop of Magdeburg in 1152 (an appointment that was to lead to problems with the papacy) was a sop to the Wettins, to whom the new archbishop was related, and compensation for the favour generally shown to their rival in north Germany, Henry the Lion. Nevertheless, Wichmann proved to be a loyal supporter of the emperor, and one of his key allies in north Germany throughout his long episcopate.

The relations between the emperor and the leaders of the German Church form another important theme of this book. Several bishops, notably the brothers Gebhard of Würzburg and Gunther of Speyer, it is argued, played an important role in Barbarossa's election. Episcopal cities and bishop's palaces formed the principal residences on his itinerary round the *Reich*, far more so than royal castles or his own palaces (though Hagenau in Alsace was rather exceptional in this respect). Prelates participated in, and contributed substantial military contingents to, his Italian expeditions, and to his Crusade in 1189. They played a crucial role in his diplomacy, and especially in trying to rescue the emperor from some of the consequences of his own obstinacy – for example Wichmann of Magdeburg's role as an intermediary in trying to secure peace with the papacy in the 1170s. He also stresses the importance of Archbishop Philip of Cologne in the politics of the later part of the reign.

Frederick, unlike his immediate predecessors, devoted a great deal of his reign to Italy, and his ultimately fruitless efforts to enforce his rule on the north Italian cities. After the early chapters, much of this book is devoted to his (ultimately unavailing) Italian campaigns. Görich is good on this topic, both

on the military aspects of the expeditions, and on the political implications and diplomacy. He shrewdly points out that for all the rhetoric of rule and authority he and his advisors employed, Frederick was always reliant on his allies within Lombardy, notably Cremona, and inevitably became a party to the internal disputes of the region, rather than being able to stand above these (p. 314). While he might secure short-term victories such as the surrender of Milan in 1162, ultimately he lacked the resources to enforce his rule on northern Italy; and the truce with the Lombard League in 1177, and the eventual peace at Konstanz in 1183, were recognitions of reality. One might suggest, however, that although Frederick was far more concerned with Italy than were his immediate predecessors, and spent much more time there during his six Italian expeditions, Görich's concentration on this aspect, and also on the diplomacy of the papal schism, leads him relatively to neglect Frederick's rule north of the Alps. After the early years, Germany enters into the story as little more than a source of reinforcements for the Italian campaigns, until we return for a brief and fairly straightforward account of the fall of Henry the Lion, which includes some background about the duke of Saxony's relations with his fellow north German princes before 1180. Görich stresses the importance of Archbishop Philip in securing Henry's downfall, and that the emperor's freedom of action was very much circumscribed by the corrosive dislike for Henry by many of the other princes.

While Görich is surely correct to suggest how much the language and concept of »honour« permeated the reign, and the sources which describe it; and issues of prestige, precedence and *amour propre* were undoubtedly very significant, one may also suggest that such language and ideas sometimes masked a more complex reality. Thus from Barbarossa's point of view it was vitally important that when he held the pope's stirrup on meeting Adrian IV before his coronation in 1155, this was because he *chose* to do so of his own free will, not because he was in any sense obligated to do so. But, as the author himself admits, there were fundamental differences in political ideology between emperor and pope, and squabbles over the *minutiae* of diplomatic prestige were a symptom, not a cause, of dispute. The Germans ultimately saw the imperial coronation as declarative rather than constitutive, and imperial authority being derived from the princes, not from the papacy (p. 275–276). Similarly, for all that Frederick saw the opposition from the Lombard towns as not just disloyal, but as an insult to his honour and prestige (hence the emphasis on the symbolism of submission in surrender agreements), there were also significant material interests at stake here – and in that sense the Konstanz treaty was not a complete surrender.

Summarizing a book of such detail, richness and complexity is by no means easy. It will undoubtedly be the standard biography of Barbarossa for the next generation, and one would hope that translation might be made into English, and other foreign languages, although the size of this book may be a deterrent to prospective publishers. But in the meticulous examination of contemporary diplomacy, in the often-compelling depiction of the great set-pieces of the reign, as the diets at Besançon in 1157 and Mainz in 1184, or the summit conference at Venice in 1177, and in a lengthy concluding chapter on contemporary perceptions of the emperor, we do approach an understanding of how twelfth-century observers understood their politics, and of the realities of imperial rule. What we lack here, however, after c. 1156, is a more analytic and in-depth appraisal of the twelfth-century *Reich*. What Professor

Görich has to say about this in his discussion of the early part of the reign whets the reader's appetite, but thereafter, as with the emperor himself, his preoccupation with Italy distracts him from affairs north of the Alps.