



# FREDERICK THE SECOND

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This book defies easy characterization. It is, to be sure, a biography of the last of the great German medieval emperors, Frederick II Hohenstaufen. But it vibrates with a subdued roar under the surface. By turns it is fierce, melodramatic, evocative, pitying, and electric. Maybe, in 1927, with Germany at its nadir,



Ernst Kantorowicz was trying to channel the modern age of steel and thunder, translating it through the works of a long-dead megalomaniac king into a hoped-for new era. Or maybe he aimed to wake the ancient ghost of Frederick, stirring him from his long sleep in the Kyffhäuser Mountains. Either way, Kantorowicz did see reborn the German energies he thought should be reborn. But as with most summoned spirits, the rebirth did not advantage the summoner.

Frederick II, born in 1194, was the son of Henry VI, the Holy Roman Emperor, and Constance, Queen of Sicily. Henry's father had been Frederick I Barbarossa, perhaps the most famous of all German emperors. Constance's father was Roger II, the centralizer of Norman Sicily.

This illustrious pedigree meant that Frederick claimed both all of southern Italy and most of Germany—but not northern Italy, or the Papal States, the combined cause of the greatest challenges of his reign. The High Middle Ages were beginning, and many changes were afoot—not only in Europe, where [Richard II Lionheart](#), [John Lackland](#), and [Saint Louis IX](#) were Frederick's contemporaries, but in the Middle East, where Islam had entered its long decline, accelerated during Frederick's reign by the start of the [Mongol invasions](#).

It was an interesting time, and a tremendously intricate time, and one that it is [hard for us to fully grasp](#). Men and women were the same as us, yet [viewed the world very differently](#) in many ways. Frederick himself is often, far too often, presented to us as some kind of proto-modern, supposedly a man of unique tolerance and liberality.

He was none of those things. He was a man convinced of his world-bestriving importance, fascinated by the new things in his world, and indifferent to much beyond his own sense of destiny. He never quite accomplished his goals, and his heirs died in pain, ignominy, or obscurity, quickly losing grasp of all Frederick had worked for.

But he did not know that, and so, perhaps, he died largely satisfied. And he would no doubt have been pleased that for nearly a thousand years, many Germans have looked to his reign as the apogee of German heroic power, to evoke which Kantorowicz wrote this book.

The reason Frederick is incorrectly perceived as of a different kind of medieval king is because others have always benefited from casting him in a certain light. His brutal lifelong struggle with the temporal power of the Papacy has made him distasteful ever since to Roman Catholics, especially those of an ultramontanist bent.

This grew the legend of him as anti-Catholic, which proved useful for purveyors of Protestant propaganda after the Reformation and anti-Christian propaganda after the Enlightenment. All these groups found that the fevered polemics hurled against Frederick to gain support for the Pope were later fertile sources of lurid, therefore useful, tales about Frederick's perfidy and supposed hatred of religion.

And, of course, Frederick had his own propagandists, which is why he is still known to some as the *stupor mundi*, the "wonder of the world," though perhaps better translated as "marvel" or "astonishment."

After eight hundred years of this, it's hard to recapture the man, but Kantorowicz does a good job—and then uses Frederick for his own purposes, casting him as an exemplar for twentieth-century Germans needing a hero in an age of German degradation.

Kantorowicz himself had a life that fits poorly into our paucified modern categories. Born in 1895, he fought in World War I, and then in the Freikorps against Communist killers. He became a disciple of the poet Stefan George, part of the Conservative Revolution.

George was a mystical, anti-modernist type, focused on the rebirth of the German nation, bidding it emerge as an intellectual creation, breaking through the rough crust of current troubles to create a new Germany, led by a physical and spiritual aristocracy (who, as typical in these cultish groups of eggheads, would be led by the disciples of the Master, as they called George). Some of these ideas, which were in the air all over Germany, were taken up by the National Socialists, as usual modified for cruder, and therefore more effective, propaganda purposes.

However, George's circle is remembered today mostly because they inspired a variety of anti-Hitler plotters in later years, after George's death in 1933, including most famously Claus von Stauffenberg. By that time, though, Kantorowicz, Jewish by birth, was long departed from Germany, moving to California after Kristallnacht. He lived there until 1963, publishing other books and trying to disown this book, but it is still the one for which he is most remembered.

Thus, Kantorowicz was of a specific German political type of the first decades of the twentieth century, often, and often unfairly, associated with the National Socialists. He was one of many who rejected liberalism and cried out for German greatness to be restored. Such ideas were adopted by the NSDAP, but that does not make them National Socialist ideas.

If the besetting sin of left-wing intellectuals is direct participation in and furthering of evil (and it is), the besetting sin of right-wing intellectuals seems to be [their irrepressible belief](#) that their superior intelligence and insight will allow them to control, direct, and rule other men who implement their ideas in a bastardized form aided by violence.

I don't know if the National Socialists used this book to any great degree (it does not appear so), but its author, and Stefan George's circle, seem to fit right into this right-wing paradigm, which always loses out to those less interested in thinking and more interested in doing. Then the intellectuals on the Right invariably wonder what happened—as was the case with Carl Schmitt. It's a vaguely pathetic pattern, and likely one we'll see in America in the coming years.

When Kantorowicz published [Frederick the Second](#), as a young man with an incomplete doctorate in Muslim economic history, professional historians were aghast at the book's departures from history-writing orthodoxy.

Kantorowicz did not offer footnotes (although he later added an entire volume with sources and references to satisfy his critics), and more to the point, wrote history as epic, blurring the line between fact and legend, openly using Frederick's life as a platform for the restoration of Germany on heroic lines.

At this remove, I can't tell if the historians attacking Kantorowicz were legitimate historians, or the type of "historian" that dominates our own times, whose main project is to view history, and rewrite it,

through a Left lens. It doesn't really matter, I suppose; Kantorowicz's book stands now on its own.

In Kantorowicz's telling, Frederick was generous and open-handed; self-assured to an extreme degree and with great personal magnetism; openly proclaiming of his intentions and views; eager to learn but fiercely protective of his prerogatives and his aims.

He was highly educated, speaking several languages (including Arabic) and keenly interested in sports such as falconry. He hated heretics and he hated rebels; they were, after all, the same thing. Frederick saw himself as an instrument of Providence; he may have sometimes confused whether, exactly, God was truly superior to him, but he was not an atheist or even a religious freethinker.

Not that he was a pious man; if anything, he was a proto-Machiavellian, very aware of the uses of religion for power, in his case usually to his disadvantage. Yet his goal was not Machiavellian; he sought the standard medieval formula of "peace and justice," as in the time of the [Emperor Augustus](#).

Like most mighty men, he probably thought God owed him; he reminds one in this respect (and none other) of that moral pygmy Michael Bloomberg, who infamously said "If there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close." No doubt he will find out, soon enough, and no doubt Frederick has as well.

It is all so very complicated. Guelf and Ghibelline; German princes and Sicilian lords; Lombard towns and Calabrian fortresses; Venice and Genoa; Jerusalem and the Eternal City; and much, much more.

In brief, Frederick grew up in Sicily, under his mother's rule of the territory, since his German inheritance (which was technically elective, after all) was in dispute between his uncle, Philip of Swabia, and the Welf contender, Otto of Brunswick, briefly Otto IV.

When his mother died, before Frederick came of age, he became a ward of the Pope, Innocent III, a mighty medieval pope many of whose designs, from the Fourth Crusade to demanding ever-greater papal temporal supremacy, ultimately went wrong. Frederick, when he came of age, avoided open conflict with him, instead focusing on reuniting his Sicilian domains with his father's German domains.

Frederick failed to participate in the Fifth Crusade despite his promise, and was blamed for its failure; he did participate in the Sixth Crusade and negotiated the re-transfer of Jerusalem to the Christians with Al-Kamil, the Ayyubid sultan of Egypt, who had defeated the Fifth Crusade (and had met Saint Francis of Assisi then), but who had his own problems and didn't want the hassle of another war with the Christians.

The episode of the "retaking" of Jerusalem is emblematic of the way everything Frederick did was viewed through two lenses. In the eyes of Frederick and his partisans, this was a heroic victory that buttressed Frederick's claim to be the true inheritor of the mantle of the Emperors of Rome.

In the eyes of his enemies, it was a craven cop-out by an excommunicate eager to score a cheap propaganda victory of limited durability and thereby aggrandize himself, though they did not explain how many earlier failures to free Jerusalem by force could this time have been bettered by fighting instead of negotiating.

In any case, successive popes, notably Gregory IX and Innocent IV, saw Frederick as a menace, since he threatened to fully surround the Papal States. They could not abide this, and therefore could not abide Frederick. Conflict under these premises was inevitable.

So, Frederick struggled for decades to break the power of the Papacy and its on-again, off-again allies, the north Italian cities of the Lombard League, together with other intermittent allies.

Along the way he had other projects: he masterminded the conquering of Prussia by the Teutonic Knights, under the Grand Mastership of Hermann of Salza, a close counselor of his (and go-between with the Pope), laying the groundwork for seven centuries of the importance of Prussia to Germany (although now, to be sure, most of those territories are no longer part of Germany).

He made a few more half-hearted efforts towards the East, as well; Kantorowicz interprets this as the need for the King of the West to be the King of the East in order to be the World Ruler, which seems a very big leap.

Those were side projects, though; Frederick spent his life primarily in endless back-and-forth fighting to achieve a unified realm with an Italian focus, ultimately falling short and dying of an intestinal complaint

in 1250 at the age of fifty-six. His heirs all died, and his line ended with his grandson, [Conradin](#), executed at age sixteen by Charles of Anjou in 1268 (a man who, strangely, has recently received attention from sections of the resurgent, fermenting American Right).

The long-term effects of the struggle between Frederick and the Papacy were very significant. Kantorowicz blames Innocent for trying to wholly eliminate the separation of the temporal and spiritual power, thereby causing increased conflict with the temporal power and, ultimately, the erosion of the Pope's spiritual power.

To the consequences of this Kantorowicz ascribes most of the events and later consequences of Frederick's career, which might otherwise have resulted in a German Empire from the Baltics to Palermo, with the Papal States still extant but effectively without substantial temporal power.

If Frederick had had a free hand, he would not have had to grant to the great lords of Germany near total independence from the Empire, in effect making them kinglets with only nominal obedience to the Emperor, which caused Frederick little immediate trouble but set the pattern for a fragmented Germany for hundreds of years.

He might have forged a true empire—but he spent his power on the challenges he met, making the compromises he needed to make, and thus he could not weld together Germany into the empire that Kantorowicz so clearly thought was Germany's destiny.

In his Italian possessions, on the other hand, Frederick was a modernizing centralizer, eroding feudal institutions, continuing the rebirth of Roman law and the reformation of justice and administration, and, in general, trying to act like a real Emperor of Rome.

This created the first modern state, though it, too, fragmented after Frederick's death, leaving itself as an example for later monarchs.

I was interested to see that Kantorowicz credits Frederick with presiding over a great flourishing of art, especially of poetry, but also other arts. What matters for great art is having a great ruling class, and this is another piece

of historical evidence for my thesis. Kantorowicz describes it as neither “frivolity nor royal fashion, but an incomparable vigor of the blood, which even in ruin demands glory and fame.” Vigor is it, I think; no vigor, no great art, and vice versa.

Frederick's long struggle with the Papacy is instructive for political debates today, in a way inconceivable even five years ago.

Some, notably the Harvard law professor [Adrian Vermeule](#), who claims to desire a reworked state (but will not fight against any aspect of the current state that might get him disinvited from dinner parties in Cambridge), suggest that Papal supremacy in the mold of Innocent III's program, which he calls integralism, was a political system which it would be desirable to rebirth today. Whether Vermeule really thinks this I cannot be sure (and I am less sure now that he has, for no reason I can fathom other than I am far more charismatic than him, blocked me on Twitter).

But, certainly, actual history does not bear the weight of this optimism. Giving the Pope the power of Caesar inevitably leads to corruption of the spiritual power and, I suspect, a sharp reduction in human flourishing, which requires secular achievement along with spiritual focus. The Pope, or more generally the spiritual power, is not cut out, by vocation or temperament, for temporal power, and this is pretty clear from history.

Now, Andrew Willard Jones argued in his recent analysis of the society of Louis IX, [Beyond Church and State](#), that matters are not so simple. Jones drew thirteenth-century France as a state where church and state acted as one, with no conception of the secular being divided from the spiritual, or of those as indistinguishable concepts at all.

This model, also called integralism but of a much different and much more durable character, did not imply papal temporal supremacy, but rather a set of joint obligations based on custom and the needs of both Church and State, which were one and the same as the needs of society.

That model, common in the West from the time of Charlemagne until the Renaissance, does not have the same grievous problems as the overreaching Innocent III model, though as always practice is harder than theory, and Louis had plenty of conflicts with the Church.

Of course, Frederick was no Saint Louis, but had the Pope been less overreaching, the Holy Roman Empire might have ended up closer to this type of cooperative monarchy.

I analyze such matters, and their current applicability, at greater length in my review of Jones's book, so I will not repeat myself here. But that the Pope should not be given significant temporal power is also supported by a running theme in Kantorowicz's book—the role in both state and society of the new mendicant orders, especially the Franciscans, but also the Dominicans.

Saint Francis was a contemporary of Frederick, and the mendicant orders frequently openly supported the Emperor against the Pope, correctly seeing the medieval Church as corrupt and overly focused on the things of this world. The [pope we have now](#) named himself after Saint Francis, and seems to think that pretending he is poor makes him the heir of Saint Francis, so it would seem that the battle was won.

But that perception is false. The point of Saint Francis was that he set himself against the things of this world, which in his day meant wealth and the corruption it wrought.

Today, when the whole world has wealth of which men in that age could not even dream, the things of this world that corrupt are not primarily wealth, but instead the corruption birthed by the Enlightenment, flowing from the worship of the atomized self.

The manifestations of this are many, but they may all be subsumed under the desire of men to be as gods, to be subject to no limits and no unchosen bonds. This corruption, through either stupidity or malice, Pope Francis and the evil men who surround him have mostly fully embraced.

I have little doubt that Saint Francis would scorn Pope Francis far more than he scorned the rich prelates of his own time, seeing this essentially spiritual corruption, cloaked with oily words spoken with forked tongue, as far more damaging to the Church (and to the State, though that was Frederick's, not Saint Francis's, area of concern).

What this means in the context of this book is that, logically, those within the Catholic Church today who still hold to its ancient truths, must, like the mendicant orders of the thirteenth century, in practice align with the new, rising temporal right-wing powers against the princes of the Church, together to, in

Kantorowicz's words, "fight the common foe, the degenerate Church."

Since the Church shows no sign of reforming itself, the aim should be the overthrowing of the Catholic Church's hierarchy, by force, if necessary, and its restoration through a (hopefully temporary) form of caesaropapism, thereby benefiting both Church and State.

That sounds bizarre, but such events were, until the modern era, more the norm than today's state of evil dreaming. Returning to the old way, where the temporal power dictated to the spiritual power when it got too far out of line and became destructive of larger society, seems pretty attractive right now.

But the Catholic Church wasn't what Kantorowicz cared about. He cared about Germany, and its once and hoped-for future greatness. For all that he was ultimately a failure, Kantorowicz credits Frederick with forging a new German spirit by combining German traditions with Roman forms and culture.

What Kantorowicz explicitly wanted is what Frederick fell short of, "that full perfection of the German Empire, a mighty Emperor surrounded by his mighty princes." In a few short years after this book, Kantorowicz saw that Empire reborn, and no doubt it was nothing as he had hoped.

Today, of course, [Germany is a dying thing](#), pathetic and useless, like all of [Western Europe](#), eagerly abasing itself before invaders who are only too happy to assist the suicide of what little remains of the high German culture and spirit that Kantorowicz so admired, built up over a thousand years.

Even were there no invaders, Germany is, it appears, exhausted at the end of history. It certainly seems unlikely to be reborn, and one wonders, what would a man like Kantorowicz, or a man like Frederick, say if he saw it today? Probably nothing. He would just cry.

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*The [photo](#) shows a portrait of Frederick the Second from his book, *The Art of Hunting with Birds*, from the 13th-century.*



