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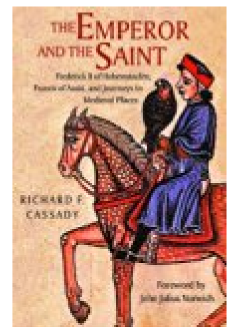
Richard F. Cassady. *The Emperor and the Saint: Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, Francis of Assisi, and Journeys to Medieval Places.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011. 474 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-439-2.



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Contrasting Lives Compared

Frederick II Hohenstaufen (1194-1250) and Francis of Assisi (1181/2-1226) are unquestionably two of the most important figures of the High Middle Ages, and perhaps no two medieval lives have been as closely scrutinized as theirs by both contemporaries and modern historians. The study of their lives is indeed a study in contrasts. Frederick was not only one of the most powerful of all medieval rulers (Holy Roman Emperor in Germany, king of Sicily and southern Italy, and nominal king of Jerusalem), but also the possessor of a keen intellectual curiosity which led one contemporary chronicler to nickname him "Stupor Mundi" ("wonder of the world"). It is an apropos designation for a man who spoke six languages, styled himself as a poet and author, and was known to correspond with the greatest scientific minds of his day. In contrast to Frederick's exudation of authority and polymathic pursuit is Francis Bernardone: a wealthy merchant's son turned religious revolutionary, whose conversion motivated him to embrace the simplicity of life and withdrawal from the world and its many temptations to which he had once so enthusiastically fallen victim as a youth.

It is, perhaps, the severity of these contrasts in the lives of Frederick II and Francis of Assisi that has discouraged almost all of their biographers from treating these two characters together, at least until now. Richard F. Cassady intends to break this mold in *The Emperor and the Saint* by working numerous discussions of Francis into a biography of Frederick. This is indeed how Cassady's work must be described, although the book's title may somewhat confuse its readers by giving them the impression that the author intended a dual biography; this is simply not the case. The amount of discussion devoted to the emperor is enormous when compared to that of the saint, not to mention the fact that Francis's death occurs on page 218 of the 425-page book.

The book is divided into seventeen unnamed chapters, which are then subdivided into sections covering one or more years, beginning just before Frederick's birth and ending with his death (i.e., 1186-1250). This chronological division of the work will come as no surprise to Cassady's regular readership, because he used the same general layout in his earlier book, *The Norman Achievement* (1986). While no great hindrance to one's understanding of the work's main points, its strict chronological organization does impose unnecessary breaks in the prose that detract from the narrative's flow. The same can be said concerning the author's choice to begin every chapter with a translated verse from the *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath), a hymn used in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass. Cassady does not offer much in the way of an explanation for the inclusion of these verses, only commenting in the preface that the "*Dies Irae* is attributed to Thomas of Celano, a Franciscan and a friend of Saint Francis of Assisi" (p. xvii).

Cassady's pairing of these two figures may at first seem an unusual choice, but the author's comparison of them does yield some interesting discussion. The author goes beyond simply describing the myriad differences in the actions and characters of these two men, who he claims together "round out their century," emphasizing just how similarly they envisioned the original mission and function of the church: to attend to the spiritual welfare of Christendom (p. xvi). This similarity is not a mere coincidence for Cassady, but instead came about partially as the result of Frederick's attraction to Francis's preaching. The author stops short of asserting that Frederick and Francis actually met during their lifetimes, an episode almost certainly a creation of later legend, but does point out just how appealing Francis's views of a church removed from the secular world and dedicated to aiding those in need would have been to an emperor constantly at odds with one pope after another. At the same time, however, the author's determination to juxtapose Frederick and Francis also results in many abrupt transitions from a discussion of the one to the other, which sometimes renders the text awkward to read. For example, after a lengthy discussion of the circumstances surrounding Frederick's birth, Cassady quickly changes course: "While the future emperor was being cared for at Foligno only a few miles away, Francesco Bernardone was running unchecked through the streets of his native Assisi" (p. 22). And later we read in chapter 9: "While Frederick was indulging his quest for knowledge, marrying, perhaps neglecting his wife, and certainly alienating his father-in-law, Francis Bernardone was covering Umbria and the Marches on one last preaching cycle" (p. 212).

One remarkably refreshing feature of this work is the author's sheer passion for his subject matter. On nearly every page of the book, Cassady displays his talent for eloquent historical description peppered with informative anecdotes that relate the topic to the modern world. Among the most memorable is the author's comparison of Melfi, a small, forgotten town in southern Italy where Frederick issued his now-famous code of laws, to nearby Eboli, "a town so poverty-ridden, underdeveloped, and drowning in hopelessness that it would prompt Carlo Levi to write his memoir 'Christ Stopped at Eboli' " (p. 268). Also evident is Cassady's passion for art and architecture, which frequently manifests itself in the form of lengthy descriptions of the places visited by Frederick and Francis over the course of their lives. The author's discussions of the cathedrals of Venice and Strasbourg are so elegant and convey such admiration, in fact, that one wonders whether he is paying homage to the likes of Henry Adams and his French cathedrals.

This same enthusiasm and affinity for his subject also negatively affect the work, however, on many occasions, leading Cassady to send the text off on a tangent from which it might take several pages to return. These regular diversions from the story of Frederick and Francis to lengthy descriptions of the places they visited have a tendency to make the work read like a travel guidebook in many places. The first half of chapter 13, for example, is essentially a tour of Sicily's castles, but by its end Frederick has made his way to Ratisbon (modern Regensburg), Germany, where the author advises modern explorers of the city that they "will be interested in the Historische Wurstküche to the left of the old salt warehouse, just off the end of the Steinerne Brücke as you face the city. There is no better wurst than the marvelous sausages served as this, one of the oldest eating establishments in Germany.... And the beer! The word 'unbelievable' does not do it justice. It must be stated in German: *unglaublich*. There! That says it" (pp. 317-318). There are also many musings inserted into larger discussions that interrupt their flow: "One of the delights of exploring history is the opportunity to imagine what individuals might have said to one another. What kind of dreams did they have? Were they dapper dressers, or just plain slobs? How many of them were insomniacs; and if one or another was, what kind of night thoughts did he endure? One of the more pleasant fantasies is imagining what someone (in this case an emperor-to-be) ate"; "One likes to imagine them [Frederick and Hermann von Salza] cementing their friendship over steins of good beer and a plateful of marvelous Nuremberger bratwurst, even if neither had been invented yet, at least as we know them"; and "One of Frederick's representatives was the extremely intelligent imperial court judge Thaddeus of Sessa. Thaddeus was a weighty man, if we can go by the prominent-featured portrait bust of him in the Museo Provinciale Campano in Capua, mellow, and probably soft spoken, which admittedly is reading quite a bit into a marble portrait seven centuries old" (pp. 86, 133, 380).

Cassady's book is very well constructed overall, and includes numerous black-and-white images of the towns, churches, and works of art that he discusses, which is a helpful feature for readers who might be less well acquainted with Italy than the author. But there is a smattering of typographical errors that appear in the text, with the most common being the lack of a space between separate words: "hisexpressive," "makeeven," and "Muslimhands" (pp. 45, 325, 399). On some occasions, the author inexplicably fluctuates between the English and

Italian forms of descriptive adjectives, such as on page 181 when he makes repeated references to the "Pisans," "Venetians," and "Genovesi," Why not call them "Genoese" instead? On other rare occasions, Cassady unnecessarily broaches the subject of national/cultural stereotypes, such as when his description of the lavish celebration following Frederick's marriage to Isabella, the daughter of King John of England, concludes with: "Food and wine was served in prodigious amounts, especially the latter, for the Germans were noted even as early as the Middle Ages for having a tendency to get in their cups" (p. 326).

In the final analysis, this book's value will wholly depend on what one seeks to get out of it. Those who read it expecting to find a comprehensive and fresh work of original scholarship on Emperor Frederick II will, in truth, be disappointed. The book is neither based on any new scholarship, nor does the author make much of an attempt to engage in the scholarly debate over Frederick's place in history. Cassady's take on Frederick is indeed difficult to discern. Does Frederick's interest in Muslim and Jewish scholarship, extensive cultural patronage, and fierce resistance to several popes' secular ambitions make the emperor an "enemy" of Christianity and the medieval church? Was Frederick both a political and spiritual leader of Germany and also a vanguard of Italian Renaissance ideas, as Ernst Kantorowicz once asserted? Should one instead interpret Frederick's actions more conservatively and paint him as a believing Christian emperor whose entanglements with the popes were rooted more in secular jurisdiction than theology, as David Abulafia has more recently proposed? The author declares his allegiance to none of these interpretations, but at different times seems to support them all. However, it would be unfair to judge Cassady's book along the above lines, because the author makes no such claims about his work. In the book's foreword, John Julius Norwich indeed recommends his former student's work because it is intended "not for scholars but for the average intelligent reader," while Cassady himself states in his preface that he is "an art historian and a romantic, not a political historian" (pp. xiv, xvi). *The Emperor and the Saint* is a good introduction to an important period of European history and the lives of arguably its two most important figures. If the work is read as such, its reader will most assuredly derive much enjoyment from it.

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