

XXII.—Bishop Otto of Freising: Historian and Man

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Otto, bishop of Freising from 1137 until his death in 1158, is the author of two well-known works: his philosophy of history entitled *The Two Cities*, and the biography of his famous nephew, Frederick Barbarossa. In this paper the attempt is made to secure a clear picture of Otto, as historian and as man, by calling attention to the incidental statements and allusions to be found in the latter work. Otto is shown to be a lover of peace, loyal to the emperor Frederick, conscientious and unbiased in his judgment. His thorough acquaintance with the ancient classics is evident in his style.

"In Otto of Freising the German historiography of the Middle Ages reaches its highest point," says Charles Homer Haskins.¹ His two great works are *The Two Cities*, a philosophy of history with which we are not here primarily concerned, and the biography of his nephew, the emperor, Frederick I, commonly called Barbarossa.

In this paper my purpose is to point out some of the notable traits that distinguish Otto as historian and as man, letting him speak for himself on these topics.

I

"It is a grievous matter," says Otto, "that a writer's mind should depend upon another's judgment, as though lacking the power of personal investigation."² In writing the biography of his nephew he had the advantage of first hand acquaintance of both the persons and the places of which he speaks. Otto participated with Frederick in the Second Crusade (1147),³ and refers to it as "an unheard of change" (1.30, p. 48) from fratricidal conflict to united effort under the banner of the Cross. He attributes its inception to divine Providence, and has a definite opinion on the reason for its failure: "because of our sins" (1.47, p. 65).

The disastrous outcome of the Second Crusade he leaves to others to describe, because it is out of harmony with the spirit which animated him in undertaking to recount the exploits of the

¹ *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, 1927) 238.

² *Gesta Friderici I Imperatoris* (Hannover and Leipsic, 1912), Book 2, chapter 41 (p. 150).

³ See 1.42, 46, 47, 57.

emperor Frederick. "We set out to write a cheerful history," he says. Indeed, he has at the outset (Proem., p. 9) commented on the happy lot of those who are privileged to write in "the unheard of serenity of peace," which marked the beginning of his nephew's reign.

Bishop Otto, though a participant in the Crusade and — like the other great nobles of the time — commanded⁴ to accompany the Emperor on his Italian campaigns, was pre-eminently a lover of peace. Having written his first great work, *The Two Cities*, in bitterness of spirit because of the turbulence of the times that preceded his nephew's accession,⁵ he determined to change his style in his joy at the peace and harmony which at that moment had smiled upon the earth (Proem., p. 10). It is an earnest of lasting concord throughout the Roman world under its new master.

Indeed it might be said that *peace* is Otto's main theme in this later volume. So, after a digression, he remarks (1.34, p. 54): "But to return to my topic of the serene peace." And again, after Frederick's return from Rome, where he had been crowned as a successor of Charles the Great, Otto remarks (2.56, p. 161): "The happiness of peace had smiled upon the entire Transalpine realm." It is interesting to note in passing that Otto uses the geographical designation *transalpinus* exactly as Julius Caesar did, meaning "across the Alps" from *Rome* — not from Germany, where Otto was actually living and writing.

To Otto — as doubtless to Frederick also — the climax of the Italian expedition was the coronation as head of the Holy Roman Empire. Otto devotes twenty-three chapters to the episode, and in speaking of Frederick's earlier progress and achievements in Italy he refers to him as "pressing on to greater things."⁶

As a lover of peace and concord, Otto rejoiced over the reconciliation between his kinsmen, the two Henrys — *Heinricus et itidem Heinricus*, as he calls them! — (2.11, p. 112). Duke Henry "Jasomirgott" (so called from his favorite oath) was Otto's brother, and hence also an uncle of the Emperor. The other Duke Henry was the son of Frederick's maternal uncle. After almost two years, their disagreement was terminated in 1154. Otto himself had

⁴ See Frederick's letter to him in 2.50 (p. 158).

⁵ Letter to Frederick serving as dedication of his *The Two Cities* (New York, 1928), 89.

⁶ 2.16 (p. 119). The phrase is reminiscent of Livy, Praef. 4: "legentium . . . festinantibus ad haec nova."

served as mediator in an earlier effort (2.42, p. 151), but on that occasion without avail. The two Henrys "insalutati ab invicem separati sunt." When the feud was finally ended, Frederick (we are told) regarded it in the light of a blessed victory (2.47, p. 155). For it has been achieved without bloodshed. The importance which Otto attributes to Frederick's successful negotiations between his hostile kinsmen is shown by the care he takes to give the exact date (2.55, p. 161).

Otto's secretary and continuator, Rahewin, tells us that a dispute between Otto himself and his brother Henry regarding certain Austrian estates belonging to the church of Freising was settled by the Emperor, who reconciled the brothers at Regensburg in 1158 (3.14, p. 183).

Bishop Otto's aim in his *Gesta Friderici I Imperatoris* is to glorify Frederick's deeds.⁷ He modestly declares himself unequal to the task. His first book sets the stage for his hero's entrance; it has been called a sort of revised version of the seventh book of his *Two Cities*. In it he narrates the deeds of the Emperor's father and uncle. As he himself expresses it in a closing personal word to his nephew: "Haec . . . scribuntur, quedam tibi ut tibi, quedam tibi, sed non ut tibi" (1.70, pp. 98-99). It is the second book which is to begin the account of Frederick's exploits: "huic secundo operi de tui principatus gloria contenturo . . . imponatur initium" (1, Prol., p. 102). We note in passing the use of the second person singular *tuius* — representing the German *dein* — authorized by the writer's relationship to his Emperor. And at the close of the book Otto remarks: "Tanta sunt, quae de tuae maiestatis virtute dici possent" (2.56, p. 161).

Otto is unfalteringly loyal to his distinguished nephew,⁸ and has implicit faith in Frederick's "star" (1.47, p. 65). He pays tribute to the Emperor's valor (2.35, p. 144), and comments on the effect of his presence and personal participation in battle (2.35, p. 144). He refers to his nephew's untroubled calm and unbroken purpose (2.18, p. 120). He approves of the Emperor's disciplinary measures — even at their severest.⁹ He refers scornfully to at-

⁷ Book 2, Prol.: "melius fore iudicavi minus dicendo a materia opus superari quam cuncta tacendo gloriosa facta silentio tecta deperire" (p. 102).

⁸ His admiration for Frederick is shown in his Proemium: "dignissimum putavi priorum virtutibus tuas sicut auro gemmam superponere" (p. 11).

⁹ 2.11: "Nec . . . et hinc obortum non parvum aliorum principum murmur revocare poterat, quin omnia quae retro erant tamquam floccipendens Deo se committendo in anteriora extenderetur" (p. 113). He pressed on!

tempts made to bribe him (2.17, p. 120). His wish for the future is "ut tuo bono principio melior finis apponatur" (Proem., p. 12).

But while he praises Frederick's determination, and advocates humble acquiescence in his rule on the part of his subjects,¹⁰ Otto openly recommends moderation in rulers.¹¹ His objectivity is evident throughout his historical work.¹² He takes a realistic view of the motives actuating those who selected Frederick as Emperor (2.2, p. 103). When he comments on his nephew's influence in ecclesiastical matters (2.10, p. 111), he is seemingly hopeful of an adjustment of the conflicting claims of church and state. His ideal is perhaps expressed in the words he uses in speaking of the conference between the emperor and the pope: "pleasant converse was joined, as between a spiritual father and son; and as though one commonwealth had been effected from the two principal courts, both ecclesiastical and secular matters were discussed."¹³

In extolling the qualities of Frederick — both actual and potential, the admirable and the desirable — Otto reveals himself as a deeply religious man, loyal, conscientious, patriotic, frank and unbiased.¹⁴ As a historian he recognizes ancient Rome as the source of the Middle Ages,¹⁵ and expresses approbation of the democratic principles of the Roman Republic as observed in the selection of German Kings.¹⁶ Thus Otto reveals himself in his writing.

II

If we consider Otto's technique and stylistic traits, we find his approach to history — like that of Tacitus — preeminently biographical. His interest in people is evident throughout the work, and he uses great men as examples "to incite the hearts of mankind to virtue."¹⁷

¹⁰ Proemium: "et sub eius principatu gens vivens humiliter silendo conquiescat, et barbarus quique vel Grecus . . . auctoritatis eius pondere pressus contremiscat" (p. 9).

¹¹ 1.4: "Discant ergo principes orbis in summo positi omnium summum creatorem suum pre mente habendo moderantiam servare" (p. 15).

¹² E.g., in 1.20, when he says of a deed of treachery: "excusatur tamen a quibusdam hoc factum" (p. 34).

¹³ 2.28. See also 2.3 (p. 105).

¹⁴ See 2.11, p. 113; 1.33, p. 53 and 2.6: "ad effectum tunc perducere ea quae menteolvebat non valens ad oportuniora tempora distulit" (p. 107).

¹⁵ Proemium: "dum omnium regnorum vel gentium ad Romanae rei publicae statum tamquam fontem recurrat narratio" (p. 12).

¹⁶ 2.1: "id iuris Romani imperii apex, videlicet non per sanguinis propaginem descendere, sed per principum electionem reges creare" (p. 103).

¹⁷ Proemium, opening words. Cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.65.

He shows a knowledge of and a respect for great teachers of his time (1.52, p. 74), notably Bernard of Clairvaux,¹⁸ and Gilbert de la Porrée.¹⁹ He gives a vivid critical estimate of Peter Abelard (1.49–51). In the cases of those whom he does not respect, Otto is equally frank: his characterization of Arnold of Brescia begins with these words "religiosum habitum, quo amplius decipere posset, induit,"²⁰ and he condenses into a sentence his opinion of Archbishop Arnold of Cologne, declaring him a man of no use for any ecclesiastical or secular business (1.67, p. 96).

Rahewin informs us²¹ that Otto was an ardent student of philosophy in his school days at Paris, and that he later made Freising a center for these studies. And Otto himself states²² that he is addressing a double audience: lovers of history and lovers of logic. Consequently he includes in his biography several highly technical passages dealing with his favorite study.²³ Otto's philosophical interests were not confined to logic, however. So — like Lucan and Vergil, as he informs us (Proem., p. 12) — he occasionally lets his narrative range "to attain to certain intimate secrets of philosophy."

Otto's familiarity with ancient classical literature is apparent from his frequent apt quotations from such authors as Cicero, Vergil, Horace, Ovid and Lucan.²⁴ Moreover his prose style is saturated with poetical words and turns of expression, like the use of *sonipes* — "the sounding hoof" for the more prosaic *equus*; "Tercia dehinc luce" for "on the third day"; and "Caeli principem" for "God."²⁵

¹⁸ 1.35: "vita et moribus venerabilis, religionis ordine conspicuus, sapientia litterarumque scientia preditus, signis et miraculis clarus" (p. 54).

¹⁹ 1.48: "consuetus ex ingenii subtilis magnitudine ac rationum acumine multa preter communem hominum morem dicere" (pp. 67–68). See also 1.52 (p. 74).

²⁰ 2.28 (p. 133). See also 1.28 (p. 44): "quidam religionis habitum habens, sed eum minime, ut ex doctrina eius patuit, servans."

²¹ 4.14. See also Meichelbeck, *Historia Frisingensis*, 350.

²² Proemium: "quibus rerum gestarum audiendi seriem inest voluptas, sed et illi, quos rationum amplius delectat subtilitatis sublimitas" (p. 12).

²³ See, e.g., Proemium (p. 11); 1.5, 55, 65. Moreover we seem to hear Otto speaking in the midst of the reported discourse in 2.25 (p. 129). Cf. also the statement on argument vs. asseveration in 1.53 (p. 75).

²⁴ E.g., for Cicero, 1.8: "Magnifica vox et viro forti digna" (p. 25); for Vergil, 1.4 (p. 16), 1.20 (p. 34); for Horace, 1.17 (p. 31), 2.11 (p. 113): "pulchre communi utilitati consulens" — cf. *Ars poetica* 343, and (p. 43) in 1.26, the expression "nobilis patris futurus heres nobilior" is oddly reminiscent of "O matre pulchra filia pulchrior," *Odes* 1.16; for Ovid, 1.8 (p. 24); for Lucan, 1.8 (p. 25).

²⁵ "ibique sonipede insidens," 1.64 (p. 90), cf. Vergil, *Aen.* 4.135; 11.600, 638; "Tercia . . . luce," 2.20 (p. 122), cf. *Aen.* 3.117, "Tertia lux" and the similar "Crastina

Otto's always vivid style is enlivened by the use of rhetorical questions: "Quid faceret? Quo se verteret?"²⁶ and "Quid ageremus?" (1.47, p. 66). He is fond of alluding to proverbial expressions: "Necessity knows no law" (2.21, p. 125); "by avoiding mid-stream he ran into the bank."²⁷ He uses memorable phrases like "exempt from the peace" — *quietis immunis* (2.56, p. 161), and "ab inexorabili inextauditus abiit" (2.3, p. 105).²⁸ He is interested in the derivation of words, including proper names: he gives the origin of the word "history" (2.41, p. 150), and explains the meaning of the name of the Byzantine ruler Michael Palaeologus — "We might paraphrase it as 'an old story'," he says (2.36, p. 144). It is interesting to observe the apologetic fashion in which Otto employs recently coined words or medieval equivalents for ancient terms.²⁹

Otto is interested in customs and tradition, and frequently refers to time-honored usage.³⁰ One of the most amusing — from our safe point of vantage — was the habit of the Franks, in former times, of forcing a condemned man to carry a dog to the place of execution (2.46, p. 154). Reviving this custom, Frederick obliged a great noble of the realm and his accomplices to carry dogs a distance of five miles!³¹

lux," in 10.244; "caeli principem," 2.11 (p. 113). For other instances of poetic language, see 1.20: "Phebo ab inferis redeunte superioremque aeris regionem illuminare incipiente" (p. 34); 1.21: "propter nimietatem nivium" (p. 35); 1.24: "Hesperiae videlicet et Orientis" (p. 37); 1.33: "tamquam in modum silvae fixa immobiliter manente" — i.e., "rooted to the spot" (p. 52); 1.46: "hyemalis algoris austeritate detersa," etc. (p. 64); "Quo verbo omnium pene auditorum ab illo in se retorsit spicula" (p. 76), cf. *Aen.* 11.676; 2.37: "excandescite amplius in exercitum Canis rabie" (p. 145).

²⁶ 1.20 (p. 33); cf. Vergil, *Georg.* 4.504; and "Quid facerem?" in *Ecl.* 1.41 and 7.14.

²⁷ 1.54 (p. 76). Cf. Horace, *Odes* 2.10.2-4. So also Otto 1.4: "Melius est ad summum quam in summo" (p. 16).

²⁸ Other instances of notable language are: 1.21: "ac antiquae virtutis memoria quasi caelesti rore repletus" (p. 35); 2.28: "plus tamen verborum profluvio quam sententiarum pondere copiosus" (p. 133); 2.54: "per triduum coram principe decertant et conrixantur" (p. 160).

²⁹ E.g., 1.18: "tyrocinium, quod vulgo nunc torneamentum dicitur" (p. 32) — a tournament; see also 4.11 (p. 246); 1.26: "velut tyrocinium celebraturi, quod modo nundinas vocare solemus" i.e., *torneamenta* (p. 43); 1.34: "aptatis . . . trirēmibus et biremibus quas modo galeas seu sagitteas vulgo dicere solent" (p. 53); 2.21: "ex balista, quam modo mangam vulgo dicere solent" (p. 124); 1.62: "ac, ut dicitur, oculo ad oculum videndo" (p. 89).

³⁰ See, e.g., 2.5 (p. 106); 2.12 (p. 113); 2.39 (p. 146); 2.41 (p. 150); 2.44 (p. 152); 2.44 (p. 152, *iterum*); 2.48 (p. 155).

³¹ The German mile (*Teutonicum miliare*) is equivalent to five English miles.

We are conscious, as we read, of the author's endeavor to present a brief and concise account, and to keep clearly before our minds the main thread of the story. He uses certain stock formulas like "Quid plura?" "ne multis morer," and "Sed haec hactenus."³² Occasionally he calls attention to the end of a digression by variations of such a phrase as "to return to our theme."³³

From time to time Otto includes in his account important source material, usually letters.³⁴ In the case of form-letters sent to a number of people, he says "quarum exemplar hoc est" (1.50, p. 70). Among the more interesting letters actually included as part of the historical account are the official condemnation of Peter Abelard as a heretic (1.50); the letter of Pope Eugenius on the outcome of the crusade (1.66); and the same pope's epistle concerning the church at Magdeburg (2.8). Occasionally Otto abbreviates a letter (1.24, end). He refers the interested reader to his sources for greater detail (1.65, p. 93). When sources are in conflict, Otto accepts one point of view, but calls attention to the fact that there is difference of opinion (1.7, p. 24 and again on p. 25).

Like practically all ecclesiastical writers of the Middle Ages, he quotes freely from Scripture, assuming on the part of his readers a wide general knowledge of the Bible. However in one case, when using scriptural language out of its context, he says "to employ the words of the Evangelist" (2.28, p. 133).

Like Thucydides and other ancient historians influenced by him, Otto enlivens his narrative by the use of direct discourse, and sometimes sets down what a distinguished personage probably said as though it were a verbatim report. So, for example, the impassioned plea of the clerics and monks shut up within the besieged city of Tortona, which is embellished by quotations from Scripture and from Boethius.³⁵ "They spoke these words," adds Otto, "raising their hands to heaven and with tears pouring down their cheeks." Without calling the incident into question, we may yet marvel at so polished an oration on the part of the suppliants. Again, we find the Emperor addressing his men on a dangerous mountain

³² See 1.14 (p. 30), 2.3 (p. 105), 2.40 (p. 149); 1.3 (p. 15), 1.31 (p. 49); 1.3 (p. 15), 1.25 (p. 43), 1.47 (p. 67), 1.55 (p. 80), 1.61 (p. 88).

³³ See 1.5 (p. 22), 1.32 (p. 51), 1.37 (p. 58), 1.52 (p. 74), 2.28 (p. 134), 2.53 (p. 160).

³⁴ See, e.g., Proemium (p. 10); 1.25; 1.29; 1.36; 1.43.

³⁵ 2.25 (pp. 127-131). See also 2.29 (pp. 135-136): the insolent address of the Roman legates to Frederick; Frederick's reply, given "inproviso non inprovisé," 2.30 (pp. 136-139).

pass in words somewhat reminiscent of Livy's account of a speech of Hannibal to his followers as they came down from the Alps into the Italian peninsula (Livy, 21.35). "Here," says Frederick (on the return from Italy), "the entrance to our native land seems to smile a welcome to us." The speech is reported partly in indirect discourse, and at the close Otto quotes an appropriate passage from Vergil as an equivalent of what Frederick said.³⁶

Otto, like Plutarch, sees the value of telling anecdotes and striking utterances in delineating character and personality. So he quotes with appreciation the remark "Dux Fridericus in cauda equi sui semper trahit castrum" (1.12, p. 28). He records an emperor's memorable saying at the tomb of a dangerous foe: "I would that all my enemies were as honorably interred!" (1.7, p. 23). He cites the somewhat brutal witticism suggesting that (in a besieged town) it would be better to eat the fat monks than to surrender for lack of food! (1.14, p. 30).³⁷

Among the more notable passages in the book are Otto's vivid account of the great storm that wrecked the camp of the Crusaders on the Propontis — the biggest encampment of the entire expedition (1.47, pp. 65–67); his description of Frederick's entrance into Rome and his coronation there (2.32); the thrilling picture of guerilla warfare in the mountains beyond Verona (2.40); and the important concluding remark on the Emperor's journey to Rome (2.41, p. 150), containing, as it does, the writer's attitude toward history.³⁸

Throughout his works, we are conscious of the earnest Christian character of the writer; of his belief in divine Providence;³⁹ his abhorrence from sacrilege and his satisfaction at Frederick's act of restitution;⁴⁰ of his idealism (1.26, p. 44).

Though his references to himself are tantalizingly few, he is so carried away at times by his memories as to make such revealing remarks as the following: "some of us moved across to the tents of Frederick, our leader" (1.47, p. 67); and again: "while we were sailing across the sea toward Jerusalem, after our dispersal by the

³⁶ 2.40 (pp. 147–148), but in *Aen.* 1.198 our texts of Vergil read "neque enim ignari," whereas Otto has "neque inexpertes." See also the message of the legates from Verona, repudiating the action of the brigands, 2.45 (pp. 152–153).

³⁷ See also 1.7 (p. 25) for an interesting and revealing anecdote; also 2.40 (p. 149).

³⁸ See the first page of this paper, and note 2.

³⁹ E.g., 1.20 (p. 34); 1.47 (p. 67).

⁴⁰ 2.11 (p. 113): Frederick had his soldiers take up a collection and send the proceeds to the despoiled shrines.

Turks" (1.57, p. 81); and: "our army . . . covered the face of the deep" (1.62, p. 88). He has an interesting chapter on the arrival at Jerusalem in Holy Week, and the fascinating observances of Good Friday and Easter Sunday (1.62). On other occasions Otto refers to himself more formally, in the third person (1.68).⁴¹

As might be expected of so great a traveller, Otto is interested in geography, and from time to time inserts a digression dealing with peoples and places.⁴² He refers to "the three most famous rivers of Europe."⁴³ In speaking of Mt. Soracte, he refers to St. Silvester rather than to the Venusian bard, but it is worthy of note that this chapter, describing the country in the vicinity of Tivoli and Horace's Sabine farm, is charged with poetic feeling and Horatian reminiscences.⁴⁴

Though he wrote in Latin, Otto was a German, and it is interesting to observe occasional references to his native tongue. So, in speaking of the river Lithahe, he adds "qui Teutonica lingua Virwelt" — thereupon translating the German word by a Latin phrase: "quod nos vacantem campum dicere possumus" (1.33, p. 51). There are frequent allusions to the German mile (equivalent to five of ours).⁴⁵ In the case of place names he often gives both Germanic and Latin forms: "Franconfurde, quod Latine vadum Francorum dici potest" (1.45, p. 63); "in civitate Saxoniae Martinopoli; quae et Merseburg" (2.5, p. 106); "In Iuvavia, quae nunc Salzeburga dicta."⁴⁶

In summary, we find from such passages from his works as have been considered above that Otto of Freising as a historian is a believer in the importance of personal investigation and research, rather than blind dependence upon the writings of other men. He is unfailingly objective in his judgments. Though an idealist, he can take a realistic view of mundane affairs. He is frank and

⁴¹ Page 96 — where, to be sure, he is speaking of another bishop as well.

⁴² E.g., 1.32; 2.13-14.

⁴³ 2.43 (p. 151): "super Danubium qui unus trium famosissimorum fluminum in Europa a topografs dicitur." Also 2.46 (p. 153).

⁴⁴ E.g.: "Iam tempus imminebat, quo Canis ad morbidum pedem Orionis micans exurgere deberet," 2.34 (p. 142) — cf. *Odes* 3.13.9 — and the Vergilian reference (oddly attributed to Lucan) to "Sulphureas Nar albus aquas." With Otto's allusion to "militem . . . defatigatum," cf. Horace, *Odes* 2.6.

⁴⁵ E.g., 1.33 (p. 52).

⁴⁶ 1.64 (p. 90). To be sure, he also gives both ancient and modern names for cities outside of Germany: "iuxta Papiam quae exhinc Ticinum vocatur," 2.18 (p. 120); "mare Proponticum, quod modo Brachium Sancti Georgii ab indiginis dicitur," 1.47 (p. 66); Cumano (i.e., Como), qui et Scitha," 2.53 (p. 159).

unbiased. He is interested in people, and stresses the personal, biographical element in history. He includes first-hand source material whenever he feels such quotation desirable for the reader's fuller information. He has a vivid style, embellished by various justifiable rhetorical devices. He does not ramble, and seeks always to present a complete but concise account.

As a man, Otto is a lover of peace and concord, rejoicing at his nephew Frederick's accession to the throne because of its promise of better days to come. Though a participant in The Second Crusade, he was not blind to the sinful motives that had prompted many to undertake a holy quest. His *Gesta Friderici I Imperatoris* seeks to herald abroad the exploits of his distinguished nephew, to whom he is loyal and devoted, and in whose career — under God — he has implicit faith. Otto is a man deeply religious, conscientious always, and a patriot loyal to both church and state. A lover of learning, he is deeply imbued with Aristotelian philosophy, and inclined to indulge in occasional digressions dealing with his chief field of scholarly interest. His familiarity with the Bible and with classical literature is apparent from his frequent quotations, incidental allusions, and turns of expression easily attributable to his scholarly background. He was both a doer and a writer, and his occasional personal reminiscences shed additional light upon Otto of Freising as one of the great nobles, as well as a leading churchman, of his time.