The "Resurrection" of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen

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Those who visit Goslar, jewel of the Salian and Hohenstaufen emperors, will be introduced to one of the most beautiful and best preserved romanesque Pfalzen, which served the medieval emperors as regional residences. The stately throne hall received its present decor in the years 1879-97, when Herman Wislicenus created a series of huge murals depicting great events in the history of the Holy Roman Empire. The most romantic and prophetic of these paintings portrays Frederick Barbarossa. It is a visual expression of a popular medieval legend that envisioned the return of Kaiser Rotbart.

Two generations earlier, the romantic poet Friederich Ruckert had transformed this legend into a poem which enjoyed the aura of a national prophecy among romanticists and inspired those who witnessed the creation of the Second Empire as well as others later. According to this tradition, the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa had not died but was merely asleep in a subterranean castle in the Kyffhauser mountain where his red beard had grown through the marble table. Aware of the evils that had befallen the Empire, the aged ruler could only periodically check to see if the black ravens still circled his abode. But some day they would disappear, signaling a new era: the return of the red-bearded emperor and the glorious restoration of the Holy Roman Empire.

Such is the romantic legend whose origins lie in a much earlier era. Political confusion, social upheavals, and religious speculation lie at its roots. Popular imagination created paintings, poetic lines and prosaic accounts of an emperor who vivit et non vivit. Over the centuries that imagination also confused the emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, who was expected to return, since many doubted his death in 1250, with his grandfather Barbarossa, the mythological restorer of the medieval empire of the legend in its final form. Most important of all, political, social, and religious factors molded a popular imagination that created a number of rulers who posed as the returned or resurrected Frederick. It is one of these "Fredericks" whose career and reasons for success this paper tries to explain.

There appeared in 1283 or 1284 at Neuss, a city in the Rhineland, a remarkable man who claimed to be Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, the emperor who had died in 1250. Perhaps the same imposter who a year before had appeared in Lübeck, this man was well received by the citizens of Neuss after having recently been driven out of Cologne, just twenty miles up the Rhine. The fact that the two...
cities were at enmity with one another may explain the generous initial reception in Neuss of the would-be Frederick. Though he had been mocked, dipped into a pool of dung-water, and driven from the city by the populace in Cologne, the pseudo-Frederick maintained himself in Neuss for nearly two years.\(^4\)

In Neuss this Frederick established an imperial court. He granted privileges and addressed letters with the imperial seal to princes and cities. One extant letter, directed to the Bishop of Utrecht, demanded protection for the Frisians from the encroachments of Florentius, Count of Holland.\(^5\) The fame of “Frederick” spread to England\(^6\) and even beyond the Alps, for the margrave of Este and the Lombard cities sent envoys to Neuss to inquire about the authenticity of the rumors concerning Frederick. But the imposter finally overreached himself when he invited Rudolf of Habsburg to appear at a diet in Frankfurt where the latter was to justify his crown and his recently decreed increase in taxes. Rudolf hastened north while the false Frederick established himself at Wetzlar in June 1285. Rudolf soon forced the surrender of his opponent from the city, and after confessing his real name as Tile Kolup or Dietrich Holzschuh, he was burned at the stake in Wetzlar on 7 July 1285.\(^8\) Death by fire suggests also his possible confession of heresy or sorcery.

I have sketched the life of the pseudo-emperor in barest outline simply because full accounts are already available in several German versions.\(^9\) A short summary of these is also available in Norman Cohn’s *Pursuit of the Millennium*.\(^10\) What is lacking, however, is a modern reevaluation of the medieval sources and a recasting of the career of the false Frederick in terms of more recent studies in Millennialism.\(^11\)

Medieval sources in both Latin and German for a *vita pseudo-Frederici* are abundant.\(^12\) Some of these are contemporary, or nearly so, but their testimony is by no means uniform. They tend to expound standard libels and suspicions of heresy, necromancy, and accusations of an unorthodox phenomenon supported by the Jews or by heretics. Some sources argue that the false emperor was a creation of, and was supported by, some German princes as a sort of anti-king, an instrument by which they sought to curtail Rudolf of Habsburg’s control of their domains.\(^13\) Others saw in “Frederick” the protector of the Frisians,\(^14\) or the herald of a new age in which the clergy would be purged and the church be forced to return to apostolic poverty.\(^15\)

Clearly, the sources permit a number of explanations; perhaps several or all of the factors listed helped create the emperor and then maintained him. But those scholars who have evaluated the sources have been guilty of a tendency to elevate one source above others and then carefully select from the rest to support their theses, as indicated below.

Three German authors have written about the “Kaiser of Neuss”. Of these, Victor Meyer concluded that the false Frederick practiced magic and was guilty of heresy.\(^16\) Georg Voigt\(^17\) explains the career of the pseudo-Frederick in terms of the Sibylline tradition and the more recent Joachite prophecies. According to Voigt, the Franciscans broadcast the Sybil’s claim of an emperor who *vivit et non vivit*, and popularized Joachim of Fiore’s prophecy that Frederick II would live seventy years, and could be killed only by God through a natural death. From Frederick, the masses expected the destruction of the *Pfaffenherrschaft*, while the Franciscans saw in him an Antichrist who would persecute the clergy. Finally, Fr. Guntram Schultheiss\(^18\) absolved the wandering friars and instead placed the blame
on the Waldensians. When the council of Lyons in 1246 deposed Frederick, he and the Waldensians had a common enemy in Pope Innocent IV, but such circumstantial reasons are not evidence and cannot explain the phenomenon of the emperor Frederick of Neuss.

What then can explain the imposter's success? Could it be possible that the sources cannot provide the answer? Or if indeed they provide a solution, why are their explanations so divergent?

It seems to me that the involvement of the enemies of Rudolph of Habsburg in the career of the emperor Frederick of Neuss has been neglected by modern historians. Anti-kings were almost as frequent as anti-popes in the high middle ages, and the imposter could have easily been the beneficiary, if not indeed the creation, of anti-Habsburg princes. It is true that opponents of the Salian or Hohenstaufen dynasties usually elected their anti-kings; but there is no reason why opponents of Rudolph should not support an "emperor" who, by his very presence, was an embarrassment for the house of Habsburg. We must recall the election of Rudolph of Habsburg in 1273. "Already before his election, agreement had been reached on the reoccupation of crown lands and fiefs and jurisdictions usurped during the Interregnum and one of the earliest acts of the new reign was the proclamation, at the Diet of Speyer in December 1273, that all illegally acquired crownlands were to be surrendered." The most powerful prince, Ottokar of Bohemia, against whom the proclamation was chiefly directed, rose in revolt, which led to his death on the field of battle in 1278. With Rudolph's major enemy eliminated, the Habsburgs annexed Austria and Styria in 1282. But this very success undoubtedly created new enemies and intensified the hatred of the old ones.

The defeat and death of Ottokar left as major antagonist his son-in-law, Frederick of Meissen, Count of Thuringia, whose own candidacy in the election of 1273 had been opposed by Pope Gregory X (1271-76). This Frederick, son of Frederick II's daughter Margareta, was the closest surviving heir of the dead emperor Frederick II, and therefore the natural standard bearer of the Hohenstaufen faction. Rudolph's renunciation of imperial rights in the papal states, his granting of the Romagna to the papacy, and his official recognition of the Pope's role in German elections stamped him the traitor of the Hohenstaufen traditions, and earned him the title Pfaffenkonig.

If the anti-Habsburg elements failed to elect an anti-king, they nevertheless seem to have welcomed the prospect of an embarrassing imposter. The presence of the returned or resurrected Frederick must have seemed ludicrous to them; nevertheless they seem to have supported the "emperor of Neuss," and to have made him serve their ends. Four contemporary and independent sources are unanimous in accusing members of the German nobility of promoting the cause of the false Frederick, and one of them actually cites specific names. They argue that some German lords were responsible for the success of the imposter and that their hatred of Rudolph prompted their support for the false Frederick. The contemporary Magdeburger Schoppenchronik reports that the landgrave of Thuringia, Frederick, and the margrave of Meissen, Diezmann, as well as their brother-in-law, Duke Henry of Brunswick, recognized the imposter and bestowed generous gifts upon his envoys. Interestingly enough, we meet again in the Schoppenchronik the same Frederick of Meissen who had been Rudolph's opponent in the election of 1273.
Already in 1270 there had appeared in Basel a Konradin, apparently an imposter from Lombardy. Concerning his role, Oswald Redlich, the biographer of Rudolph of Habsburg, asks the intriguing question, "Should not this supposed Konradin have been in contact with the Ghibelline propaganda of Upper Italy for Frederick of Thuringia?" Having failed in his own election, and having witnessed the failure and defeat of his father-in-law, Ottokar of Bohemia, Frederick of Thuringia probably abandoned his imperial aspirations after 1278. Secretly supporting an imposter like the Kaiser of Neuss by financial aid could at least embarrass Rudolph, whose elevation had thwarted the imperial designs of Frederick's father-in-law, Ottokar, as well as Frederick's own hopes to perpetuate the Hohenstaufen tradition.

Unfortunately, the city archives in Neuss were destroyed by fire in 1583. The local voices and the testimony of the city that for two years harbored the imperial imposter remain silent. We will most likely never know to what extent the city supported its "emperor." A chronicler in near-by Cologne reported "many visits of gentlemen and cities that the pseudo-Frederick received," and the contemporary chronicler Gottfried von Ensmingen also observed, "a large assembly of German nobility and of citizens of various cities," finding their way to Neuss. Other sources complement these accounts. Apparently, segments of the German nobility, led by Frederick and Diezmann of Thuringia, and wealthy citizens from various towns, financed the "imperial court" in Neuss. That town alone could not have supported the imposter, although the gesta Heinrici archiepiscopi states that "its citizens granted him large resources and he was exhorted by all." The contribution of Neuss to its official lord, the archbishop of Cologne, had been established at forty marks of silver annually in 1222. By comparison several sources speak of "Frederick's" generosity in handing out gifts of money, food and drink. His vessels were made of silver and gold and one source reports that he consumed 980 marks of silver in one year, while another claims the enormous figure of 5,000. Even if we make reservations for exaggerations by the chroniclers, it is abundantly clear that neither the Franciscans, nor the Waldensians, nor the citizens of Neuss could have provided the financial resources of the false emperor. Once more, the political considerations and financial resources of Rudolph's noble opponents suggest that these men were Tile Kolup's benefactors. The repeated references to "citizens of various cities" who visited the false emperor may have been another financial source. It was on their behalf that Tile Kolup summoned Rudolph to appear at the diet in Frankfurt in the summer of 1285. Here Rudolph was to justify his crown and the newly enacted tax of 3 1/3 percent. Several of the cities refused to pay the increase. Rudolph "obeyed" the summons, but arrived with a well-equipped army. The emperor of Neuss and the King of the Romans met at Wetzlar in June 1285 where the former soon found himself deserted. His most daring act — summoning Rudolph — also became his final and most fateful act. Imprisoned, tortured, and forced to confess, the emperor of Neuss admitted to be a poor peasant whose real name was Tile Kolup (High German: Dietrich Holzschuh) who had once served at the court of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen. The sentence, "death by fire", sealed the terrestrial fate of Tile Kolup, but it was the beginning of a new prophecy. In the ashes was found a "bone" (or no bone), proof for some that he was still alive. Tile Kolup was dead, but the
political, socio-economic and religious elements that had molded him into a returned or resurrected Frederick II remained. The crucible still intact, new events were cast in the traditions of the Joachite prophecies and the phrases of the Sibyl. Tile Kolup, the emperor of Neuss, continued to live in the national legend of an emperor who *vivit et non vivit.*

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**NOTES**


2. This interchange of attributes and the resulting confusion in identities of the two Fredericks and the development of the legend of a sleeping Kaiser is admirably traced by Georg Voigt, "Die Deutsche Kaisersage," *Historische Zeitschrift* XXVI (München, 1871), 131-87. The substance of this study is more readily available for the English reader in Peter Munz, *Frederick Barbarossa* (Ithaca, New York, 1969), chapter I, "The Kyffhauser Legend."


4. The exact date for the appearance of this "Frederick," and subsequently the exact length of his "reign" (although his death on 7 July 1285 is well documented), cannot be determined from the sources. Cf. Meyer, *op. cit.*, 18-27; Voigt, *op. cit.*, 145-49; Schultheiss, *op. cit.*, 26-28; Cohn, *op. cit.*, 113-15.

5. "Frederick's" letter to Florentius, as well as the reply by the latter are reproduced by Meyer, *op. cit.*, 30-31. Another letter from the false Frederick, "unmistakably modeled after Frederick's chancellery," again addressed to Florentius and count Henry of Brabant, asks these rulers for money. Schultheiss, *op. cit.*, 29-30.


9. See above notes 2 and 3 for full bibliographical information.

10. Cohn, *op. cit.* in note 3 above.


12. See the impressive collection of sources cited in the studies of Meyer, Voigt, and Schultheiss, who are discussed below.

13. See the sources cited in notes 24 and 25 below.


17. Voigt, *op. cit.*


22. Barraclough, op. cit., 301; Redlich, op. cit., 146-49, 155, 529.


25. Magdeburger Schoppenchronik, 170 cited by Schultheiss, p. 34, op. cit.: "In dem 1286 jare hadde keiser Frederich von Stauff 30 Jar dot gewesen, do erhof s iek ein, und sprak he wer Keiser Frederich von stauff. he enver nicht gestorven sein der er wer ein wandelbroder gewesen. ome bistunden lantgreve Dlderik und Frederik, sin broder von Doringen und vele ander lude de he bedroch. he sand ok na dem hertogen van Brunswik."

26. Ibid.


29. Gottfried von Ensmigen, Mon Ger. His. SS. XVII, 125. "... concursus magnus a nobilibus Alemanie et civibus diversarum civitatum."


31. Gesta Henrici Archiepiscopi Treverensis, Mon. Ger. His. SS. XXIV, 462. "Opidani autem loci illius recep­erunt eum benigne, eidem largas expensa... administrantes; et in tantum ibidem exaltus est, ut nonulli nobilis et barones terre...."


36. See notes 28, 29, 30 above.

37. Meyer, op. cit., 38. Subsequent references to this work will be given parenthetically in the text.

38. Lacomblet, Niederrheinisches Urkundenbuch II, 478, n. 808. This document, dated Wetzlar, 7 July 1285 decrees death by fire for the pretender: "qui de falsitate convictus et heresi igne meruit concemari."