

400-2104

M I L L S C O L L E G E
O A K L A N D · C A L I F O R N I A

Oakland 13

3 June 1944

Dear Ray:

I am delighted that Berkeley is reconsidering the status of Ernst Kantorowicz. As a professional mediaevalist and an ardent native Californian, I have naturally been troubled that Berkeley has made no permanent appointment to maintain the tradition of scholarship so firmly established there by Paetow and Thompson. Kantorowicz would be an ornament to any historical faculty in the world, and I very much hope that he may settle in our community permanently.

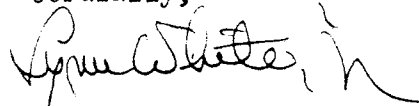
I like the man so much personally that there is a danger that ~~my~~ professional judgment may be prejudiced in his favor, but I can honestly say that I greatly admired his work long before we met. His biography of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen remains, and doubtless will remain for some time to come, the only thing worth bothering about on the subject. When it first appeared, it was widely criticized as being "too subjective" and "impressionistic", by which I suspect the historical guild meant that it committed the unforgivable sin of being readable and interesting. But I remember Haskins' remark in 1929 that "while other people were talking about writing a biography of Frederick, Kantorowicz wrote one". When, in 1931, the Ergänzungsband was published in Berlin containing the notes which had been omitted from the original, it was evident that this biography rested upon a prodigious scholarship, and even the dullest of pedants was convinced of Kantorowicz's technical capacity.

There is no evidence that his powers are in any way declining, or even that he has yet reached his peak. He has a happy facility for starting an article with some apparently inconsequential item and then letting the implications of it fan out until, at the end, not only is one convinced that he has established the fact which he starts out to establish but also one's understanding of the Middle Ages as a whole has been expanded. His most recently published article from the technical standpoint was a tour de force: in studying the autobiography of a thirteenth-century professor at the University of Bologna, Kantorowicz ran across a couple of pages which were unintelligible. By plucking evidence from the most disparate and unlikely sources, he showed that this jargon was the university slang of the period and explained the meaning of the pages. The actual elucidation of the meaning of the few sentences is naturally of little importance, but through this study one gets, I think, a more lively sense of the informal side of mediaeval university life than can be got anywhere outside the Carmina Burana; and this, at a time when the neo-Thomists are giving us such a ponderous view of mediaeval thought and such a fantastically idealized conception of the mediaeval university, is not unimportant.

Another example of the sort of thing Kantorowicz does so well is a little article in the journal of the Warburg Institute. It was a slick job of antiquarian detective work as beautifully put together as a good string quartet, but in itself apparently not a matter of great importance: all he purported to be proving was that the subject of a portrait by Roger Van der Weyden of a member of the House of d'Este had been wrongly identified as one d'Este instead of another. Then suddenly, at the end of the article, he pulled the rabbit out of the hat: he showed that, since the actual subject of this portrait lived for a considerable period at the Court of Burgundy (about which, incidentally, Kantorowicz knows a whopping lot), this revision of identification destroys the last shred of evidence that Van der Weyden ever visited Italy and consequently knocks the chief prop out from under the theory that Flemish painting had a major influence on Italian painting in the fifteenth century. It is a rare scholar who can lick the antiquarians at their own game and then use the minute fact established to generalize on a problem as vast as the inter-relation between the Northern and Southern Renaissance.

I could ramble on considerably about Kantorowicz, but I think I've said enough to indicate that, in my none too humble estimation, Berkeley would be committing a major blunder to let him go.

Cordially,



Lynn White, jr.
President

Dr. Raymond J. Sontag
Department of History
University of California
Berkeley, California