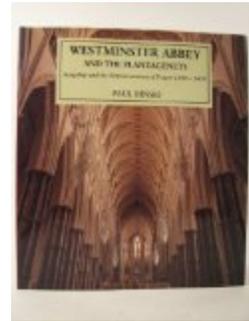


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul Binski. *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets: Kingship and the Representation of Power, 1200-1400*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995. viii + 241 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-05980-9.

Reviewed by Eileen Moore (University of Alabama at Birmingham)
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On July 6, 1245, Henry III commissioned the total rebuilding of the church of St. Peter at Westminster originally built by Edward the Confessor, whose shrine lay within its walls. Published in conjunction with the 750th anniversary of Westminster Abbey is Paul Binski's *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets*, which focuses on how the Abbey is a reflection of the Plantagenet kings, especially Henry III, their power, prestige, and patronage.

The religious devotional aspects are overshadowed by the larger more complex political issues. Westminster is not simply a church but a "political building" reflecting Henry's affinity to the cult of St. Edward as well as the "embodiment of various ideologies" that symbolize the political beliefs and principles of the Plantagenets. Binski takes our perception of the Abbey beyond its being just a place of worship to its real purpose, as coronation site for the English monarchy and shrine to the memory of St. Edward. The author goes into almost minute detail about the architectural styles, construction methods, and placement and style of the various tombs, then neatly places all the pieces within their political, ideological, artistic, and spiritual framework.

In order to show how the pieces interconnect, Binski poses various questions drawing on history, art, political theory, and theology to answer them: who were the architects, what were their motives? How did the cathedrals at Rheims and St. Denis influence the style of Westminster? Finally, what really lay behind Henry's desire to honor St. Edward—personal belief or political expediency? Given the political uncertainties of the time, the building of a church served a dual purpose, glorifying God while projecting the power of the Plantagenet

kings.

The book is divided into six chapters, each of which explores a specific topic. The first three chapters look at why the Abbey was built, the cult of St. Edward, and the style and placement of the royal tombs. How the change from an oral to literate society affected the nature of government and that the Abbey can be considered the repository of historical and ritual memory are examined in chapter four. The last two focus on the religious devotional aspects as a means to denote power and court patronage and how by 1307 the function of the Abbey as a royal mausoleum and coronation site was firmly established.

Another work, *Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England, 1200-1400*, edited by Binski, is an excellent companion to this book and serves as further illustration of how the Plantagenet kings were the center of political and religious life, as well as how England and the Continent were linked by religious beliefs and by artistic and architectural styles. English gothic art becomes not just the proverbial country cousin of French gothic but a vital and creative aspect of it. Binski draws on a wide range of sources both primary and secondary that run the gamut from the chronicles of Matthew Paris to Gibbs' *Complete Peerage*, producing a masterful blend of art, history, and architecture that shows how the Abbey is a reflection of the power, prestige, and patronage of the Plantagenet kings.

At times, the narrative gets bogged down in the complex terminology used by architects, and a glossary would have helped readers unfamiliar with these terms. Aside from this minor problem, Binski has written an elegant and stunning work that should be required reading

for all students of English history.

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