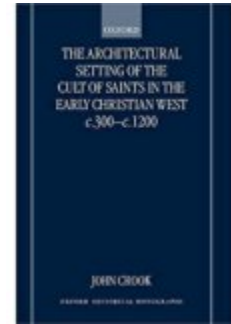


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Crook. *The Architectural Setting of the Cult of Saints in the Early Christian West c.300-c.1200*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. xxv + 308 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820794-8.

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Published on H-Catholic (September, 2000)



Holy Bones and Ecclesiastical Architecture

Holy Bones and Ecclesiastical Architecture

The interested general reader as well as the specialized historian will find this a fascinating and very worthwhile book. John Crook explores the ways in which church architecture has been shaped by holy bones – the relics of those whom the church venerated as saints – from the earliest centuries of Christianity. The church's holy dead continued to exercise an influence on the living from beyond the grave; and their physical remains provided a focus for prayer. *Memoriae*, house churches, crypts in early Christian Rome, elaborate monuments containing the bodies of bishops in Merovingian Gaul, ring-crypts in the Carolingian empire, as well as crypts, tomb-shrines, and high shrines in medieval England all demonstrate how the presence of a holy body within a church influenced its architecture.

Crook, who is an architectural historian, archeological consultant for Winchester Cathedral, and a senior research fellow at the University of Reading, begins his study with the relics of St. Polycarp in the mid second century and concludes with Thomas Becket's in the twelfth. He demonstrates very convincingly how the cult of relics played a significant role in determining the architecture and internal arrangement of churches in the early medieval West. Previous researchers have generally ignored the cult of relics and focused instead on the effect of liturgy on church design. Crook's book is also the first complete modern study of this hitherto somewhat neglected aspect of medieval church architecture in western Europe. Previously, the standard work had

been Andre Grabar's *Martyrium* (published in two volumes between 1943 and 1946). Grabar's study, however, was concerned primarily with Byzantine art and architecture.

The first chapter introduces the subject of the cult of relics, demonstrating that the cult of the saints was a very physical affair which involved touching and kissing holy bones; crawling beneath body shrines; creating contact relics; later fragmentation of saintly bodies; and burials near the body of the holy one. The remainder of the book consists of a chronological description, analysis, and discussion of these physical manifestations: the physical setting of relic cults up to c.750 (chapter two), the physical setting of relic cults in Rome and the architecture of the Carolingian Renaissance (chapter three), the architecture and cult of saints from the ninth to the early eleventh century (chapter four), relic cults in Normandy and England in the tenth and eleventh centuries (chapter five), relic cults in England in the twelfth century (chapter six), and the development of shrines (chapter seven). Crook draws heavily on contemporary literature as well as archeological and historical discoveries. His well-documented use of primary source material is impressive, along with his use of equally well-documented studies of primary source materials. More than a hundred illustrations provide concrete examples of his observations; and an extensive bibliography and well-constructed index make the book a helpful tool for the reader's continued exploration.

Precision and specialization are the forte of this book;

but also its shortcoming. After reading the book, one is left with the impression that the veneration of relics was the end-all and be-all of early medieval Christian life. The reader here, drawing from his or her own understanding of medieval Christianity, must supply the balance. Nevertheless, I strongly recommend this well-researched

and, in many respects, unique book.

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Citation: John A. Dick. Review of Crook, John, *The Architectural Setting of the Cult of Saints in the Early Christian West c.300-c.1200*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. September, 2000.

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