

A Tale of Two Monasteries: Westminster and Saint-Denis in the Thirteenth Century

Review Number:

836

Publish date:

Monday, 30 November, 2009

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ISBN:

9780691139012

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£24.95

Pages:

266pp.

Publisher:

Princeton University Press

Place of Publication:

Princeton, NJ

Reviewer:

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During the medieval period the Benedictine abbeys of Westminster and Saint-Denis were major centres of religion, politics and power, while serving as the site of royal shrines and burials. Established originally around 960 under Bishop Dunstan of London, the Collegiate Church of St Peter, Westminster received the support of Anglo-Saxon kings such as Edgar, and continued to be an important site through the Anglo-Norman period and beyond. Westminster has acted as the place of coronation since 1066 and gradually became the site of royal burials, a tradition greatly developed by Henry III during the 13th century with his own impressive tomb housed in the abbey church. The present church, with the shrine of St Edward the Confessor located at its core before the high altar, was started by King Henry in 1245, and became one of the most important Gothic buildings in England. Saint-Denis, near Paris, was founded by Dagobert I, king of the Franks in the 7th century at the burial site of Denis, a patron saint of France. The church itself became an object of pilgrimage and from the 10th century the mausoleum of the Carolingian, Capetian and Valois kings. Following the completion of the west front in 1140 by Abbot Suger the basilica of Saint-Denis, constructed in the French or Gothic form, became an architectural model for many great ecclesiastical institutions in northern France and England, including Chartres Cathedral.

Westminster Abbey and the monastery of Saint-Denis enjoyed a similar status in their individual countries. Each reported directly to the papacy, thus circumventing the authority of the local bishop and both had a special relationship to the Crown. During the 13th century the abbey communities were at the height of their ecclesiastical and political power, particularly under the leadership of Richard de Ware of Westminster (1258–83) and Mathieu de Vendôme of Saint-Denis (1258–86). Both abbots enjoyed parallel, yet differing

careers. Ware frequently travelled on diplomatic missions for Henry III and Edward I, so often that during his absence discipline became lax and he was forced to take action. Vendôme not only carried out necessary refurbishments of his abbey church, but aided Louis IX when he went on Crusade and functioned as treasurer for Louis's heir Philip III.

William Chester Jordan's book, *A Tale of Two Monasteries* offers a welcomed addition to the historiography of the ecclesiastical and political history of 13th-century England and France. An informed study of Anglo-French medieval royal power and patronage, it offers the first major study of the abbeys of Westminster and Saint-Denis in more than a generation. As such it adds to the wider topic, whilst informing and complimenting recent works, such as Sumner McKnight Crosby's architectural studies (including *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the time of Abbot Suger*), Paul Binski's useful *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets*, Malcolm Vale's study of medieval courtly culture of northwestern Europe, and Elizabeth Hallam's 1982 article 'Royal burial and the cult of kingship in France and England, 1060-1330'.⁽¹⁾

Generally speaking, Jordan's text is informative and engaging, providing beneficial reading for students of the Middle Ages and ecclesiastical historians more generally, while the detailed and highly relevant footnotes provide a high scholarly framework throughout. Yet although *A Tale of Two Monasteries* offers an accessible and wide-ranging survey of the histories of Westminster and Saint-Denis during the 13th century via the lives and careers of two leading abbots, the writer assumes that the reader is or should be already armed with a thorough background to the wider topic. This problem is emphasized in the book's structure. No introduction and conclusion (save for a short epilogue) are provided, meaning that the aims and layout of the study are not indicated. Moreover, the book's useful illustrations might benefit from a map or two. Similarly, at three pages the index is all too brief and an expanded version might have been more useful to the reader. It is also rather confusing in that it often includes the names of historians quoted in the text rather than the details of the text itself, which is not particularly helpful. This may have been the wishes of the publisher rather than the author, however. This said, the references are detailed and there is a wide-ranging and thorough bibliography which acts as a useful guide to the reader.

In terms of content, chapter one allows the author to provide a straightforward survey of the political and dynastic climate of England and France during the 13th century. The emergence of Westminster and Saint-Denis as major centres of power-politics, authority, culture and national character are dealt with in chapter two in relation to the rise of the careers of the respective abbots, Richard de Ware and Mathieu de Vendôme. This theme re-emerges later in the book and is fundamental to Jordan's thesis. Chapter three covers the political and ecclesiastical significance of the Treaty of Paris of 1259, especially in terms of claims over French territories by Henry III and his brother-in-law Louis IX. In the next chapter the author tackles the fortunes of the rival abbeys set against the backdrop of Anglo-French problems, in particular, the major political and administrative reforms, rebellion and civil war in mid 13th-century England, and also the rapid deterioration of the relationships between the monks of Saint-Denis and the throne of France. The issue of mounting rivalry between Westminster Abbey and Saint-Denis as royal and ecclesiastical power-houses is explored at length in chapter five, while chapter six examines the comparative problems faced by England and France in the wake of the demise and death of Henry III, and the late crusading activity and passing of King Louis.

Chapter seven considers the experiences of the two sites under the new regimes of Edward I and Philip III respectively. As Jordan shows, Abbot Mathieu experienced a difficult transition to the new rule of Louis IX's son, but he emerged eventually in the game of power-politics not only as a significant councillor and diplomat, but as co-regent of France in 1285 during a further unsuccessful crusade. During this period the abbey of Saint-Denis enjoyed unprecedented political influence and wealth. In the English case, the author asserts that Westminster's fortunes, including those of Richard de Ware, became more strained with Edward I, who initially strove to promote the role of his father in relation to Westminster and a possible sanctification, but his efforts waned and any focus on a shrine to Henry III failed to get off the ground. The final chapter, 'Diplomacy and Governance', returns to the central theme of the book, that is, the ecclesiastical and political careers of Abbots Richard de Ware and Mathieu de Vendôme. The epilogue briefly summarizes the main points already made, especially in the previous section, but it is largely

ineffective as a conclusion.

There are some notable concerns with Chester Jordan's study. The introduction, or preface as it is referred to here, is rather brief, and does not sufficiently explain the motivations behind the work. It seems that the initial aim may have been a broader analysis of the two monasteries, but he concludes the opening section by stating that the work is 'the story of two great abbeys and the two men who headed them in a time of enormous change'. While the comparison is an interesting and stimulating one, more could have been said of the two monasteries in the period before and after their respective headships, as at present the narrower parameters of this study leave unanswered questions, such as whether the abbacies of Richard de Ware and Mathieu de Vendôme are comparable with any of their predecessors. Furthermore, the relationships between the thrones of France and England with other abbeys and cathedrals with royal credentials, like Chartres, Reims and Winchester, barely rate a mention. This is a pity as it would have added more depth to the overall study.

The comparison of England and France is an interesting one as often historians are knowledgeable about one area, but less familiar with another; the decision to compare and contrast St Denis and Westminster takes it for granted that the readership is equally aware of the political developments in France as it is in England, and thus at times some of the points being made in the book are not entirely clear. Though the work is intended to study the 13th century, much of the chronological scope of its contents focuses on the period after 1258. While this is undoubtedly a reflection of the author's decision to concentrate on the careers of the abbots of Westminster and Saint-Denis, it does mean that the context for such themes as royal mausoleums, for example, so ably discussed by Malcolm Vale and Paul Binski in their discussions of Westminster, is thin and the comparison rather insubstantial.

One of the areas which could have strengthened the arguments put forward in this book would have been the inclusion of information regarding other monastic foundations patronised by the crown in both England and France.

Throughout the book, Jordan emphasizes that Henry III of England and Louis IX of France possessed much in common: kingship, a high level of personal religiosity, a vow to participate in the crusades (even though Louis was the only one to carry this out), and were brothers-in-law. Yet both men were often at odds in political terms and their nations officially at war with each other for much of their reigns. Henry and Louis regarded Westminster and Saint-Denis respectively as important symbols of their personal devotion, while the author asserts that 'the abbeys were showcases of what some historians would be willing to call an emerging nation spirit'. The latter, the somewhat problematic nature of identifying notions of emerging 'national identities' during the Middle Ages, might have been expanded upon further by addressing the fortunes of the military campaigns between each country and reminding the reader that this would not crystallize to any meaningful extent itself until the Anglo-French wars of the 14th century. King Henry III generously, though not exclusively, lavished gifts and benefits on Westminster Abbey with the main intention of constructing a suitable shrine and fostering a cult-centre for Edward the Confessor. Louis IX may have been distracted by the building of Sainte Chapelle as a fitting location for the relic, the Crown of Thorns. Nevertheless, his heir worked hard to ensure that his saintly father's tomb in the abbey church of Saint-Denis was ready for the intercessory prayers of visitors and the site of miracles.

A Tale of Two Monasteries further explores the concerns of both monastic houses in maintaining their authority, properties and sources of income, particularly through royal benefaction. Conversely, the direct relationship between the abbeys and Rome at times created friction with the ecclesiastical authorities in a diocesan sense. Abbot Vendôme barred entry into Saint-Denis to his local bishops when the churchman appeared in vestments indicating superior authority to him. Moreover, at Westminster Richard de Ware as abbot and treasurer of England clashed with the Franciscan archbishop of Canterbury, John Pecham, over the rights and jurisdiction of his abbey, and the monk's independence. Such features are good reminders of the growing difficulties encountered by Richard and Mathieu in a wider ecclesiastical context, and the determination of both men to protect their respective privileges, authority and ultimately, rising careers.

Although it is the intention of the author to concentrate on the competing careers of Richard de Ware and Mathieu de Vendôme, to some extent Jordan's book reads more like a dual biography than a textbook. Thus, the framework of the royal, political and ecclesiastical climate of the thirteenth century sometimes acts as a backdrop to the main story. As previously noted, the lack of a detailed introduction and a convincing climax to the book make it difficult at points to identify the writer's principle argument and points. In the epilogue, Jordan proposes that the essential theme throughout the careers of Richard and Mathieu was 'competition, always competition'. This is witnessed in the actions of their monarchs, Henry III and Louis IX, who contended with each other to act as champions of the papacy against its German adversaries, the Hohenstaufen emperors. Jordan argues that during the regimes brought about by the heirs of Henry and Louis the complexion of any rivalry altered. The author also points to something of a competition between the rulers of England and France to emphasise Westminster and Saint-Denis as cult-centres for 'national' saints and concepts of 'national identity'. Here, the particular careers of the abbots are paralleled with each other in order to act as a barometer for royal, ecclesiastical and political forms of power during the 13th century. To a degree, Jordan's book enables the reader to form an understanding of the intricate connections between Abbots Richard and Mathieu and their contending abbeys during a period of immense upheavals and rivalries between their respective countries. The ongoing political, dynastic and military differences between the thrones of England and her French neighbour, that would come together in a far more violent and economically dynamic fashion from the 1320s onwards, are clearly observable in Jordan's work. As such, they were major features of the development of European society during the later Middle Ages.

The author has declined to comment on this review.

Notes

1. Sumner McKnight Crosby, *The Royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the time of Abbot Suger (1122-1151)* (New York, c1981); Paul Binski, *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets: Kingship and the Representation of Power 1200-1400* (New Haven, CT, 1995); Malcolm Vale, *The Princely Court. Medieval Courts and Culture in North-West Europe, 1270-1380* (Oxford, 2001); Elizabeth Hallam, 'Royal burial and the cult of kingship in France and England, 1060-1330', *Journal of Medieval History*, 8 (1982), 201-14. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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