

Ron Baxter, *The Royal Abbey of Reading*

Boydell Studies in Medieval Architecture

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Reading Abbey was founded nearly 900 years ago by Henry I, to be his place of burial. A royal Abbey from its inception, it was founded and endowed on a lavish scale and remained under royal patronage until its dissolution in 1539, when it was one of the ten wealthiest monastic foundations in England, with a mitred Abbot who sat in the House of Lords. The last Abbot, Hugh Cook Faringdon, officiated in the funeral service for Queen Jane Seymour in 1537. Two years later he refused to surrender the Abbey to the king and was executed in front of the Abbey gate for treason.

The Abbey was one of the leading Benedictine houses in Europe, and its possession from early days of the hand of St James the Great linked it into the continental pilgrimage routes leading to Santiago de Compostela. The Abbey also held the lordship of Reading, and had a significant impact on the social, economic and spatial development of the town, which is still evident in the street pattern of the town centre.

Today alas there are few standing remains of this once famous monastic house. The Abbey has not been the subject of major archaeological excavation since the late eighteenth century, and parts of the church and monastic site have never been excavated. A significant part of the monastic site has been, and still is, occupied by Reading gaol.

Ron Baxter's study is a very welcome reminder of the Romanesque jewel that Reading, and England, has lost. The first half of the book considers chronologically and systematically the history of the Abbey from its foundation to its dissolution. The author explains the Abbey's foundation and operation, including sources of funding. This links directly into the 230 or so relics that were in the Abbey's possession in addition to the hand of St James, which are usefully listed in an appendix.

Strategically placed on major communication routes linking London and Windsor to the south and west, the abbey was visited regularly throughout its 400 year life by the King, and hosted Parliaments, royal weddings and other significant events. Baxter explores this special link between the Abbey and the crown, using royal itineraries to show how often different kings were at the Abbey, and for how long, and for what purposes. This informs the book's title: throughout the Middle Ages and early Tudor period, Reading was emphatically a royal Abbey, visited by all crowned kings (except Richard I) from Henry I up to and including Henry VIII. This connection continued even after its dissolution, when the Abbey was taken into the hands of the crown and monastic buildings were converted into a Royal Palace and used as such up to the Civil War.

Ron Baxter is a first and foremost a historian of art and architecture, and Research Director of the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture based at King's College London. Not surprisingly, therefore, his chapters on the architecture and sculpture of the Abbey Church and Cloister, which form the second half of the book, are very impressive for their depth of knowledge and description. Reading Abbey was predominantly a Romanesque building, completed in the Norman style in 1164, with only a Gothic Lady Chapel added subsequently (1314). In line with its Royal foundation, its size, structure and architecture were on a lavish and elaborate scale:

its nave, at 200 feet long, exceeded that of Durham cathedral (131 feet); the Abbey church was faced in Taynton stone, from Oxfordshire, the stone that was later used for Blenheim Palace. It is a challenge today to imagine the view from the Rivers Thames and Kennet of the enormous church building, faced in honey-coloured stone, glinting in the sun as it towered over and dominated the Saxon market town of Reading.

Reading Borough Council, in Reading Museum, now possesses one of the best collections of Romanesque capitals in the country, and Baxter examines all of the surviving stones in detail in the chapters on the architecture and sculpture of the cloister. He also explains their provenance, which is fascinating. The capitals and other carved stones in the Museum's collection were found elsewhere in the Reading area, in Sonning and Shiplake, during the twentieth century, to where they had been moved, presumably by river, in earlier days to form garden ornaments. This is itself in a fascinating story of archaeological detection.

The stones are then used to form the basis of analysis to reconstruct the cloister, the decoration of the cloister arcades, and the arcade design. The book places the reconstructed Reading cloister within its English and French context for the twelfth century, whilst observing that for sheer size, Reading Abbey equalled the greatest abbeys and cathedral priories of the country; and that no other foundation has as many loose twelfth-century Romanesque cloister stones as Reading. The book observes that we know more about the design of the Reading Abbey cloister than any other early twelfth-century cloister in England: it was similar in design and decoration to that of Westminster Abbey, but differed significantly from French, Cluniac, contemporaries.

The Royal Abbey of Reading is a very readable book, and follows a clear order by chronology and theme. It is thorough in its research of records, and fully footnoted, providing a clear narrative history and description of the building. This makes the book a valuable source of reference which gives answers to all those questions about the Abbey's history and importance which come to mind.

It has a relevance far beyond Reading, not only in terms of its analysis of how the king and court used a major abbey, but especially its architectural and sculptural analysis. It brings to life how this major Abbey would have looked, and been used. It is an important book of reference for anybody interested in the history and archaeology of medieval Abbeys in England, and how they permeated Royal life and activity. It is also very generously illustrated, both in black-and-white and colour.

At £60 it may seem expensive, even for a hard-back illustrated volume, but it is worth the investment, and it is a book that can and should be treasured. The publishers, Boydell, have come to an arrangement with the Friends of Reading Abbey to offer the book to Friends at a discounted rate of £45, subject to quoting a reference number: joining details of the Friends can be found through the website www.readingabbey.org.uk.

John Painter

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