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BOOK REVIEW: Ron Baxter, *The Royal Abbey of Reading*

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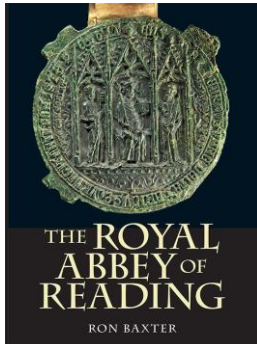


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Ron Baxter, *The Royal Abbey of Reading* (Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2016) 376 pages, 50 color plates, 143 black and white illustrations. ISBN – 878 1 78327 084 2.

By John McNeill, Hon. Secretary, British Archaeological Association, Oxford University

Patterns of survival for Romanesque building in England are very uneven. Not only is the geography and typology distorted. The chronology is off-balance – or at least we think it is. Cathedrals and established Benedictine abbeys tend to be early – mostly begun before 1100 -- while parish churches, along with Augustinian and Cistercian houses, are late. The result is that general surveys of English Romanesque architecture are front-loaded, and devote much more space to the period between *c.* 1070 and *c.* 1120 than they do to the following half century. Somewhere around the time those periods intersect, English Romanesque changes character, and a sculpturally enriched architecture of great rhythmic sophistication emerges. Reading Abbey is one of several sites at which this change of ornamental register took hold, and may have been crucial in creating an appetite for ever-more elaborate surface effects. Notwithstanding scholarly agreement that the architectural sculpture of Romanesque England underwent a revolution between *c.* 1120 and *c.* 1135, the nature of the transformation has never been clearly laid out. Exposure to contemporary work in Normandy and western France was demonstrably important, but what other factors were at play? Even on the narrow question of continental influence, were western French approaches to sculptural composition introduced over a very short period and then diffused from a

Figure 1 Matthew Paris, *Historia Anglorum* (1250-59). Each king holds a building with which he is associated. William I (top left) holds Battle Abbey, William II (top right) holds

Westminster Hall, Henry I (bottom left) holds Reading Abbey and Stephen (bottom right) holds Faversham Abbey. Photo: The British Library Board.



limited number of centers: Reading, Old Sarum, and Herefordshire, for example? The resulting novelties at each are different – so the continental points of contact are likely to have been different – meaning these may have been discrete episodes, initially unconnected, after each one of which new forms, constructional methods, and compositional principles were assimilated and independently developed, coalescing only gradually over the later 1130s and 1140s.

A monograph on Reading thus arrives with high expectations, enhanced by the author's reputation as Director of the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland (CRSBI) and as one of few scholars working on Romanesque sculpture who has the

European reach to be able to make sense of the fragmentary patterns of survival that afflict England. As Dr Baxter also explains in his preface, he started thinking about Reading twenty-five years ago. The abbey and its cloister have been in his sights for a long time. This brings the odd problem in its wake, but there are obvious benefits in prolonged reflection. Reading is a tantalizing historical prospect. It was founded by King Henry I in June 1121, less than a year after his only legitimate son was drowned in the White Ship, and was intended from the outset to act as Henry's mausoleum – well-sited on a popular royal route that connected Westminster and Windsor with Winchester, Clarendon, and Woodstock. There is a reasonable cartulary,¹ enough historical material to piece together something on how the monastery functioned, a few standing remains, some superb sculpture, and plenty of room for speculation.

The challenge is to recreate an abbey that was dissolved in 1539 and was for the most part dismantled over the following decade. Baxter is conscientious in presenting us with the fullest possible picture of the abbey and describes the processes of dissolution and dilapidation to bring the story up to the present, though the primary aim is to examine Reading as a functioning medieval monastery. The core of the book is the historical account of its foundation and medieval existence, and the analysis of the architectural fabric. Even then, Reading was never reinvigorated by renewed royal interest in the later Middle Ages (unlike, say, Gloucester), so although it received a late-medieval axial chapel and parts of the monastic precinct were subject to conversion into a royal residence following the Dissolution, the architectural survivals are almost entirely 12th century.

The history isn't particularly difficult and the author narrates it well, with chapters devoted to the abbey's foundation and constitution, pilgrimage and relics (Reading famously claimed possession of the left hand of St James), death and burial, relations with the royal

¹ Published by Brian Kemp in 1986-1987 in the Camden Fourth Series, volumes 31 and 33.

court, and dissolution. The evidence presented shows that royal interest in Reading declines steeply after the reign of Henry III – a pattern reinforced by the list of lay burials. There were nineteen in the century after the burial of Henry I in 1136, but only four between *c.* 1250 and 1504, though, as the author points out, the suddenness of the decline after the 1234 burial of Isabella of Cornwall, an infant daughter of Henry III's brother, reflects nothing more ominous than the disappearance of the relevant records. The main criticism of the historical chapters is that more should have been made of the European parallels for Henry's success in creating a monastery with Cluniac monks without subjecting it to Cluny. His ancestors as dukes of Normandy did something like this with La Trinité at Fécamp, which really ought to have been mentioned, and Alfonso VI succeeded similarly with Sahagun. Furthermore, Henry's success in building a close relationship with Cluny at one remove, via Lewes Priory, was repeated by King Stephen at his new foundation of Faversham. This is the larger European dimension, and it is important in the sense that family connections matter. Was William II of Sicily conscious of Reading's precedent when he staffed his new monastic cathedral at Monreale with monks from La Cava (Campania) – itself another arms-length semi-Cluniac foundation? William II's wife was a great-granddaughter of Reading's founder, while Monreale's first archbishop, William, the likely planner of its mosaic program, had secured King Richard I's recommendation to succeed Baldwin as archbishop of Canterbury before he (William) died on Crusade. The monks at Monreale had contacts in English, as well as Sicilian, royal circles.

The second half of the book deals with the monument, dividing this between the monastic church and the cloister. The architecture of the church is notoriously slippery, and the author's discussion of the evidence is the most exacting yet. Most notably, he has produced a new colored plan, and helpfully assembled all the antiquarian evidence to enable

the reader to assess this alongside the surviving wall cores and archaeological plans. Baxter is able to show that the aisles were rib-vaulted, and that the vault profiles were highly varied.

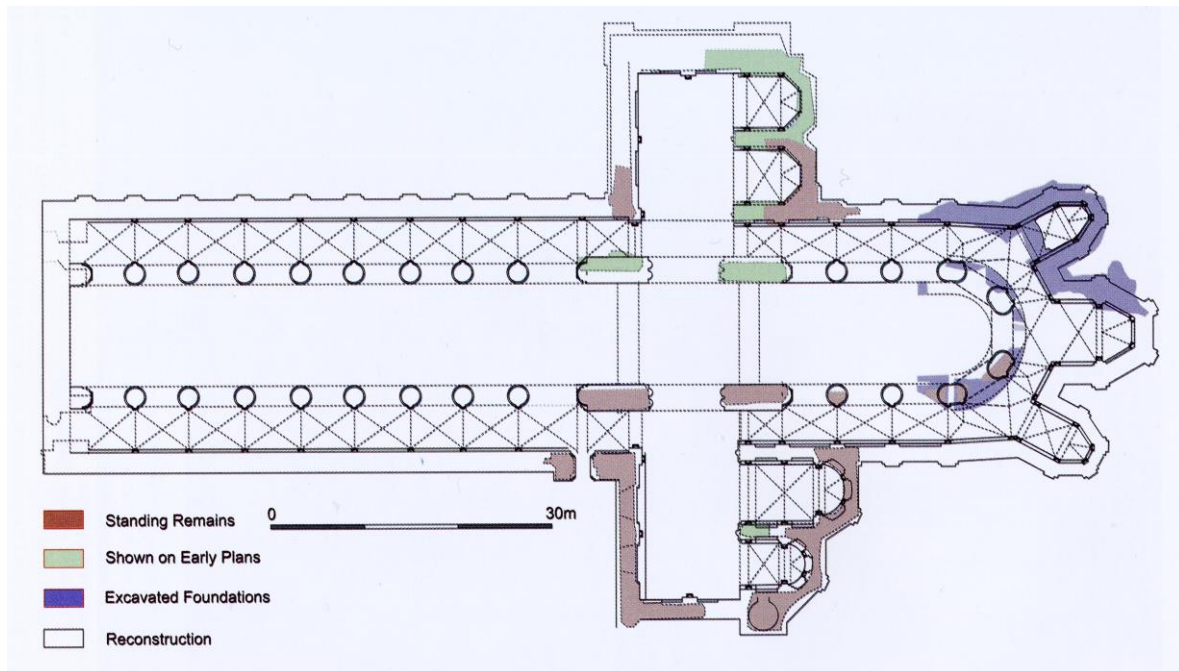


Figure 2 Plan of Reading Abbey. Drawing: Stuart Harrison.

He also demonstrates that the west wall of the south transept probably supported a giant order. But there just isn't the evidence to reconstruct the main elevation, of either presbytery or nave, so Reading's candidature as a church with a full giant order that ran alongside the partial elevations at Tewkesbury, Jedburgh, and Romsey, and fuller scheme at Oxford, remains unresolved – the stuff of dreams. The plan is a different matter, however. That can be reconstructed, and the outline plan that Baxter produced with Stuart Harrison is curious in one respect. The ambulatory is shown with intermediate bays between the chapels that are defined by pairs of arches sprung from single apse piers (**fig. 2**). Presumably this was based on Cecil's Slade's 1971-1973 excavations, though neither the feature, nor the reasoning, are explained in the text. Slade uncovered a half-oval-shaped area of mortared flint that formed part of the core of the south-east apse arcade pier, suggesting the apse piers were elongated to follow the curve of the apse. There are other reasons why apse piers might be elongated, but

doing so to make them capable of receiving two arches is a very good reason indeed. It's something one finds in a select group of late-11th-century ambulatories in southern Italy, though it is most unlikely to have originated there. The plan is almost certainly derived from Gloucester Cathedral. Carolyn Heighway and Richard Bryant recently reconstructed Gloucester with elongated apse piers on the basis of the surviving apse chord markers, and it is their plan that underlies the reconstruction of Reading's east end. The problem is that the radiating chapels are more tightly grouped at Reading, leading to extremely angled western ambulatory bays - a feature that looks improbable in a building otherwise very well laid out. It's a detail for which one would like to see eventual archaeological confirmation.

The great prize is the cloister and the volume rightly devotes two chapters to this. There is nothing in the chapter devoted to the architecture of the cloister that differs from the reconstruction Baxter first proposed in the *British Archaeological Association Conference Transactions* volume for Windsor and the Thames Valley,² though that simply reflects how expert and satisfying the earlier reconstruction was. The treatment in this volume is fuller – and the discussion of the parallels more engaging. Moreover, a short section on “Reading Cloister in its English Context” has been added. Equally, there is not a great deal in the chapter on the cloister sculpture that one cannot find on the CRSBI website entries, but the text is easier to follow and contains short essays on the fragmentary Coronation of the Virgin capital and origins of beakhead. Most importantly, Baxter sees connections between Reading's cloister and the priory of La Lande-du-Goult, in a part of southern Normandy where Henry I had substantial land holdings. The implication is that sculptors from southern Normandy may have been active at Reading, and that the agency was the patronage of Henry I, though the author does not spell this out and the reader is at liberty to make what they will of the parallels. The cloister at Reading was clearly important. In a European context, it was

² Eds., L. Keen and E. Scarff – Maney's, Leeds, 2002.

Figure 3 Capital from Reading Cloister. Photo: Angelo Hornak



a showpiece in an era of virtuosic cloisters, and given its links with Lewes, and on to Cluny, it is likely to have been well known. In the Anglo-Norman world, it gave birth to a particular type of cloister -- a line of descent that includes Hyde and Westminster Abbeys. It also seems to have been fundamental in giving a new voice to a long-standing Anglo-Norman interest in alternation and aesthetic variety, by showing how rhythmic variation works profitably on a small scale. A monograph on such a building is to be warmly welcomed. 🐼