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Review of John Crook's *The Architectural Setting of the Cult of Saints in the Early Christian West, c. 300-1200* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)

As stated in the Introduction, the subject of this book is the influence of the cult of saints' relics on both the architecture of early medieval churches in the Latin West and on the later development of saints' shrines. The uniqueness of this study is its combined focus on the religious practice of the laity and reverential attitude of the ecclesiastic sector towards these holy remains and their role as activators and prompters for the physical transformations in architecture and shrines. By this thesis, John Crook employs the associated methodologies of macrocosmic and microcosmic investigation for locating and analyzing architectural environments, their designs, and the ultimate point of convergence of the cult of relics, the saints' shrines. The various components of churches such as crypts and churches proper (the macrocosmic settings) containing whole bodies of the saints accommodated the physical wishes of the devout while recognizing the need of the clergy to exercise control over their congregation's cultic practices. The creation of artistically suitable and "user-friendly" shrines (the microcosmic objects), likewise designed to serve the desires of the faithful, is also part of the material Crook provides in this study.

To most medievalists, the Early Christian West usually means roughly the second through the sixth centuries, but if we understand Crook's thinking and extend the notion of the cult of relics to the present day (he even includes such secular and humorous examples as vials labeled "Elvis' Sweat!"), we can then comprehend his title more clearly. His geographic limitation to Italy, the area of former Gaul (France, Germany, and Switzerland), and Britain no doubt made his study manageable, though the unfortunate exclusion of monuments from the Iberian Peninsula leaves one hungry for that material.¹

¹ Recently, several scholars of medieval Iberian art have begun to investigate this very same phenomenon, namely, the relationship between a shrine and its setting. See articles by Rocío Sánchez Ameijeiras, Daniel

Chapter I, *Aspects of Relic Cults*, introduces the subject of the cult of saints from a literary tradition citing the early Patristic writings of Augustine and Ambrose, Latin authors such as Tertullian and Paulinus of Nola, and even the caustic and highly critical sixteenth-century Reformers of England. Included in this chapter are a number of subheadings such as Burial *ad martyres* and *ad sanctos*, *Praesentia*, Translation and Fragmentation, and Thaumaturgical Power that indicate how relics, and belief in them, shaped practice. Crook argues that the cult of relics was an interactive affair that comprised such sensory activities as touching, kissing, and movement around and under shrines of saints, an idea recently explored by other scholars of medieval art.²

Crook continues to interweave an abundance of archaeological and literary material through the remainder of the chapters while disclosing his observations and examples in chronological order. Thus, Chapter II, *The Physical Setting of Relic Cults up to c. 750*, encompassing Rome, Merovingian Francia, and seventh-century Britain, includes such physical examples as the basilica of S. Alessandro in Rome together with its surviving epigraphic evidence, the crypt of St. Victor at Marseilles, and the cult of Etheldreda at Ely as well as such literary luminaries as Gregory of Tours and the Venerable Bede. Crook studies the remains of an early crypt-like structure at the Church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Rome that featured a window (*fenestella*) that allowed the faithful visual access to the graves of these fourth-century martyrs. Apparently there was reluctance on the part of Roman ecclesiastical authorities, at least up to the eighth century, to move the bodies of the saints from their original resting places; and so the *fenestella* was employed to keep everyone content. A similar arrangement was used at the Church of St. Peter in Rome.³ In Gaul, however, translations of saints' bodies took place as early as the sixth century. Gregory of Tours is highlighted for his rich trove of written evidence (*In gloria martyrum* and *In gloria confessorum*) on the cult of relics and the

Rico Camps & Francesca Español in Stephen Lamia and Elizabeth del Álamo, eds., *Decorations for the Holy Dead: Visual Embellishments on Tombs and Shrines of Saints* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Press, 2002).

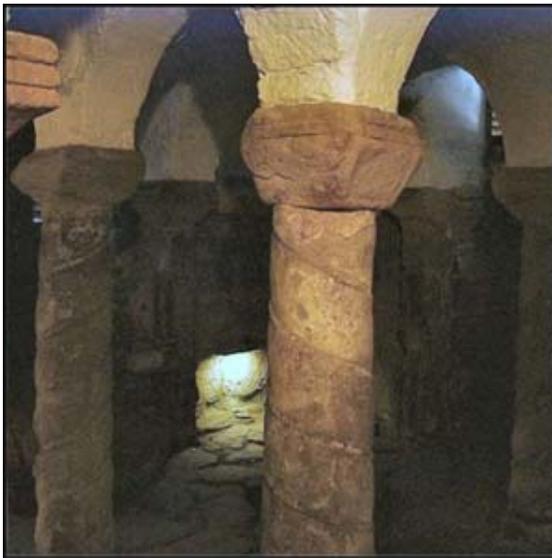
² Several articles in the above-mentioned volume deal with these practices; see also Stephen Lamia, "Souvenir, Synaesthesia, and the *sepulcrum Domini*," in *Memory and the Medieval Tomb*, ed. by Elizabeth Valdez del Álamo with Carol Pendergast (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 19 - 41.

³ Jocelyn Toynbee and J. Ward Perkins, *The Shrine of St. Peter and the Vatican Excavations* (London: Longmans Green, 1956), pp. 212 - 213.

architectural structures, mainly crypts, which housed them. Gregory also describes the relationship between altar and relic – especially since the fragmentation of saints' bodies became more widespread. In some examples, the relic was imbedded within the altar itself, while in other cases it was housed in opulent reliquaries situated atop the altar, and thus given visual prominence. Finally, our Merovingian reporter discusses how the elevation of relics, not necessarily underground but at the main level of the church itself, had an impact on the manner of their display. This novel treatment of holy remains, prompted by the now-burgeoning popularity of relic veneration and the demand for more convenient means of access other than subterranean crypts, led to the erection of a superstructure on the sarcophagus; *sepulchrum* is the word that Gregory uses. Those of St. Denis and St. Martin of Tours are among the most famous and important examples Crook cites. Some were actually positioned behind the high altar of a church thereby increasing their visibility from afar; many were wondrously embellished making their appearance even more compelling. Crook also, and very cleverly, mines the *Vita Eligii episcopi Noviomagensis* for documentary evidence that this patron saint of goldsmiths fashioned a number of magnificent gold, silver, and bejeweled shrines during the first half of the seventh century. He concludes this chapter with British material, noting that patterns there paralleled those of Merovingian Francia.

The development of crypt architecture both north and south of the Alps during the Carolingian Renaissance is the subject of Chapter III, *The Physical Setting of Relic Cults: Rome and the Architecture of the Carolingian Renaissance*. Crook demonstrates that, for most examples, Roman models, especially those dating to the time of Pope Gregory the Great, were employed: this in keeping with the Carolingian concept of *renovatio Romanorum christianorum imperii*. In order to understand the evolution of crypt designs in the domains of Charlemagne, Crook first presents the Roman evidence upon which they depended, specifically ring-crypts such as St. Peter's and corridor crypts such as S. Valentino. Both of these shaped spaces, according to our author, were a direct response to the cult of relics – in the former case, the anneal plan allowed pilgrims to walk behind the grave of the first bishop of Rome and in the latter, the transverse passage gave access to the site containing the saint's relics. In addition to providing Carolingian examples that depended upon Roman designs, Crook also furnishes the reader with evidence from

England thus extending Rome's influence across the Channel. For much of this material, as elsewhere, Crook depends most frequently on evidence from documentary and archaeological excavations, since so many of the monuments he cites are either in ruinous state or barely extant. Crook gives two main reasons for the popularity of subterranean crypts in Carolingian Gaul: first, the axial relationship between the altar above and the relic-containing space below, and second, the preservation of the sanctity of the altar area and the reconfiguration of spatial access for relic veneration. He employs a typological approach dividing his monuments into classifications based on design of crypt, although he cautions that "the distinction between ring crypts, corridor crypts, hall crypts, and outer crypts is often blurred."⁴ This admonition, unfortunately, undermines his otherwise exhaustive research. Among the Carolingian and English ring crypts Crook examines are those of Saint-Maurice d'Agaune, St.-Denis (where he offers a different reading of the plan than previously rendered by Sumner Crosby and Jules Formigé), St. Liudger at



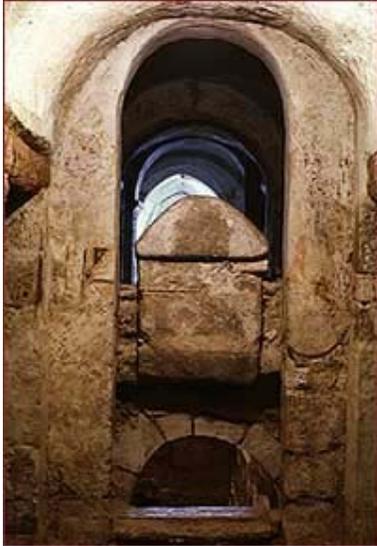
Crypt at Church of St. Wystan, Repton, Derbyshire

Werden, and Canterbury where, before the relics of the famous murdered archbishop Thomas Becket were venerated, the cult of St. Dunstan was revered. After a brief *excursus* on rectilinear ring crypts, Crook next turns his attention to corridor crypts with in-depth discussions, largely based on material from documents and excavations, of Saint-Medard, Soissons, St.-Quentin, and Bourges Cathedral with its relics of the protomartyr, Stephen. After including some hair-splitting subsections on variants of these crypts, Crook concludes this chapter with a section on hall crypts – simple quadratic spaces – with eastern and western *loculi* and cites St-Sylvain, Ahun, and St. Wystan's, Repton as examples.

Chapter IV, an amplification of material from Chapter III, focuses upon what Crook terms "the greater Carolingian shrine-crypts." Entitled *Architecture and the Cult of*

⁴ Crook, p. 95.

Saints from the Ninth to the Early Eleventh Century this part also includes a sprinkling of early Romanesque crypts that were intended to accommodate saints' cults. Featured here is the widely known St.-Gall plan. Despite the contention that it represents the "ideal" Carolingian monastery plan, Crook analyzes it as though it were a real structure following the inscriptions on the plan and other information provided in documents. He



Crypt, Saint-Germain, Auxerre

reads the east end as having the altar elevated on a platform, an above-ground crypt on the perimeter of this platform, and a chamber below this platform that contained the sarcophagus of the saint and a *fenestella* for visual and tactile access. Other important examples which Crook studies include St.-Philbert de Grandlieu with its chamber-crypt embedded into the apse area, St.-Germain at Auxerre with its polygonal rotunda, and St.-Pierre at Flavigny that is strikingly similar to Auxerre; all of these are extant. In the section titled "The Last Crypts Intended to Accommodate Saints' Cults," Crook concentrates on progressing from the ninth century to the eleventh century

while charting the differences from earlier examples. So, at St.-Aignan, Orléans, he identifies a triple-aisled crypt terminating in an apse and surrounded by an ambulatory with five radiating chapels – clearly an elaborate affair. In connection with this monument, our author identifies two phases of construction based on sculptural motifs such as foliate capitals. This section segues into the next: Crypts and the Origins of the Apsè-and-Ambulatory Plan in which Crook contends that the link between radiating chapels and the veneration of saints' relics is unproven. Instead, he proposes that there was a need to provide a greater number of altars in monastic cathedrals. However, if we concede that altars required relics for their sanctification, then we must query this proposal. He marshals evidence from the following sites as proof of his hypothesis: the mid-ninth century crypt at Chartres Cathedral, the early eleventh century crypts at St.-Pierre-le-Vif at Sens and St.-Philibert at Tournus, and the late eleventh century crypt at the Cathedral of Clermont-Ferrand. Crook does not elaborate on the Chartrain example; and for St.-Pierre-le-Vif, he simply states that there is no documentary evidence for relics

in the three radial chapels. For St.-Philibert, he contends that the relics of the saint were “more probably displayed at the main level” of the church and that the “main purpose of the crypt with its rectangular radiating chapels was to compensate for the steep eastward slope towards the Saône.”⁵ That seems to be quite an elaborate compensation to this reviewer. His most convincing example is Clermont-Ferrand where documentary evidence suggests that the relics of Sts. Agricola and Vitalis were displayed at the main level, thus emancipating crypts from the cult of relics that originally inspired them. However, he does not offer any opinion as to the function of the Clermont-Ferrand crypt. Because of the fundamental change in the physical location of saints’ bodies from “downstairs” to “upstairs,” that is from the subterranean crypt to the church proper, the architectural response was, according to Crook, less obvious than in the ninth and tenth centuries. Instead, the development of shrine-types becomes a more visually prominent construct, and although he gives this attention in the last chapter, he continues his investigation of architecture and the cult of saints in Chapters V & VI.

Chapter V, *Relic Cults in Normandy and England in the 10th and 11th Centuries*, combines material from both Continental and Insular sources, a phenomenon the author underscores on more than one occasion. He states, “It is erroneous and misleading to consider Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical architecture as divorced from the rest of Christendom; yet the narrow band of water which separates England from the mainland has often led scholars to treat architectural developments in the British Isles as a case apart.”⁶ Crook begins this chapter with an overview of the architectural influence of saints’ cults in England between the tenth-century monastic reforms and the Norman Conquest. The cult of St. Swithun, created by Bishop Ethelwold at Winchester as an expression of that monastic reform during this time and later that of Ethelwold himself, leads this section that also includes St. Oswald of Worcester whose cult and sumptuous, portable reliquary are described by the chronicler Eadmer. The cult of Cuthbert of Durham whose relics were located behind the high altar of the church and then relocated in the new church is likewise considered, as with the previous monument, from the point of view of documentary evidence. The same problem exists for the Norman saints’ cults

⁵ Crook, p. 158.

⁶ Crook, p. 3.

as for England, the lack of both material evidence and adequate historical sources. This is compensated by such late-eleventh century authors as William of Jumièges and Orderic Vitalis. We must also bear in mind that the late ninth and early tenth centuries in Normandy were characterized by frequent attacks from the Vikings, and hence the active movement of saints' bodies for protection. Given such peripatetic conditions, crypt architecture was thus not an option. In general, relics were elevated into the body of the church, on or behind the high altar, and had little effect on church design. The Norman attitude towards English saints, initially negative, later turned positive once the Norman prelates recognized the advantages of promoting local cults, is a matter which Crook goes into at length, especially singling out Archbishop Lanfranc of Canterbury. Also included in this chapter is the impact of the Norman Conquest on the architecture of the cult of saints, a phenomenon that initially exerts little or no part in determining architectural form, but by the end of the eleventh century takes shape in the notion of local cults. The examples Crook employs here are some of the most widely known monuments of the Early Romanesque. All of these churches were rebuilt after the Conquest, and his discussion includes both the attitude towards relics and the architecture itself: Bury St. Edmunds, Ely, and Durham – the last two of which employ a form deriving from the apse-and-ambulatory tradition so as to provide easy access to the relics. The apsidally-planned crypt at Bury St. Edmunds, unknown until the 1950s, was constructed to raise up the eastern part of the church; it played no part in the cult of the saint. It mirrored the plan for the presbytery in the church proper where the shrine of St. Edmund was located behind the high altar – the predictable position for such shrines in Anglo-Norman churches. In the late eleventh century the tomb monument of St. Etheldreda, according to the *Liber Eliensis*, was elevated on the south side of the altar and that of her sister, St. Sexburga similarly enshrined on the north side. Unfortunately, the reconstruction in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries obliterated their later locations. Crook thoroughly presents the archaeological material necessary for understanding the massive undercroft beneath Durham Cathedral with its apse-en-echelon arrangement that was begun in the late eleventh century. The pavement of the feretory follows an apse design, with the flagstones arranged in a semicircular pattern. Crook deduces that the feretory platform itself can be dated to two different phases. The earlier of the two was a raised platform

constructed within the Romanesque apse and possibly before 1104, when the relics of St. Cuthbert were translated. The second took place during the thirteenth-century remodeling of the east end. Crook concludes this chapter by recapping the new interest in the cult of English saints at the end of the eleventh century both by the wealth of hagiographic literature on them and their role in the consecration of great churches built after the Conquest. At times our author appears to digress into either an effusion of historical material or a catalogue of “who’s who” among minor saints and which of them had bodies that were incorrupt, both of which become somewhat distracting to the main points he wants us to consider. There are the occasional sentence fragments as on p. 177: “Firstly, the literary evidence.” and again on p.179: “So, too, at the church of Saint-Étienne, Caen, to which Lanfranc was transferred in 1063.”

Chapter VI, *Relic Cults in England in the Twelfth Century*, focuses upon these now flourishing cults, but concentrates exclusively, as the title suggests, on Insular monuments. The skepticism of the first generation of Norman ecclesiastics now gives way to an all-out enthusiasm for local saints and their cults. Our author very succinctly states his methodology for this chapter at the beginning: “In this chapter, I examine the physical setting of a number of individual English saints’ cults, analysing the documentary evidence and, where possible, any surviving physical evidence for alterations made in response to the new interest in the cult of relics in the twelfth century.”⁷ Agreed this has been his methodology all along, though here he deals often with buildings that have already been erected such as Ely, Hexham, St. Paul’s of London, Westminster, Winchester, and Worcester. There are, however, instances wherein Crook presents new cults, such as those of Remigius of Lincoln and William of Norwich. This chapter is less about architectural response and more about relic cults themselves with the notable exceptions of Norwich, Winchester, and St. Peter-in-the-East at Oxford. Here, Crook furnishes us with most interesting nuggets of information: the reliquary niche under the bishop’s throne at Norwich, the “Holy Hole” of Winchester, and the retrospective hall crypt at Oxford.

In Chapter VII it is the development of shrines that receives the author’s attention, in particular, how they were created to accommodate the cultic practices of the faithful

⁷ Crook, p. 210

for display and for access. In doing so, Crook not only harkens back to his original focus in Chapter I, which is the wishes of the congregation to interact physically with the holy dead, but also acknowledges the contrast between the evolutionary dynamism of architectural forms and the conservative, unchanging beliefs and requirements of the faithful. Aptly titled *The Development of Shrines*, Crook here studies shrines themselves as relic containers, unlike in the previous chapters wherein he considered the larger, architectural context for holy remains. After discussing the various vocabulary words used to denote this object with a presentation of their nuanced meanings (words such as *arca*, *feretrum*, *sepulchrum*, etc.) our author takes us back in time to Merovingian Francia, then to the Carolingian renaissance, and finally to surviving Romanesque shrines at both Insular and Continental locales. In this historical excursion Crook covers such material as Merovingian whole-body elevations and their superimposed monuments, Carolingian shrine-crypts, raised structures of the Romanesque period that supported the relics usually elevated behind the high altar, and raised reliquaries supported by columns or a more elaborate base incorporating niches or apertures for pilgrims to ensconce themselves in order to reap the *beneficia* of the saint's *potentia*. Some of the earlier material in this chapter is a recap from previous chapters though Crook does add new



Tomb-shrine of St. Candida at Whitchurch Canonorum, Dorset

monuments to his ever-growing catalogue. The fresher material may be found in the Romanesque section on tomb-shrines, for it is here that Crook presents a brief examination of the tomb of Christ at Jerusalem as the archetype for tombs outfitted with what he calls “portholes”; he even lists several examples of the iconography of this tomb as it appears in western European art.⁸ He then presents several examples of Insular and Continental tomb-shrines similarly outfitted with these *fenestellae*, among which I cite that of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury, St. Candida at Whitchurch Canonorum, and St. Omer at his eponymous town. He concludes this chapter with examples of tombs raised on pillars citing, among others, that of St. Radegonde at Poitiers and what he terms “integrated monuments” which are comprised of a base and a



St. Candida at Whitchurch Canoniconum, Dorset

coffin attached to an altar, giving the shrine of St. Sylvanus at his eponymous church in Ahun as one example.

The illustrations that accompany the text consist of black-and white photographs, architectural plans, and cross sections. In the former instance, most are clear, some grainy, others even dramatic in their vantage point, especially figures 75 and 83 – bird’s -eye-views of the feretory platforms at Durham and Winchester Cathedrals respectively. The diagrams are often helpful, though sometimes one wishes for more specific information such as in figure 84: it is difficult to locate the feretory of St. Swithin when

the plan of the east arm of the church is superimposed onto that of the crypt. The prose itself is dry, declarative, and often sprinkled with numerical measurements that tend to distract and confuse the non-archaeologist. Are they all actually relevant to the thesis? His bibliography is exemplary for the amount of material he covers. Crook thoroughly mines original sources, demonstrates command of recent literature on his subject, and integrates his archaeological sleuthing with hagiography and architectural history. This is a useful volume, if somewhat difficult to read from cover to cover. Its merits are based on his overview of the subject and the information he brings to so many monuments. 🍷

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⁸ For a full discussion of this iconography see Stephen Lamia, “*Sepulcrum Domini: The Iconography of the Holed tomb of Christ in Romanesque and Gothic Art*,” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto, 1982).