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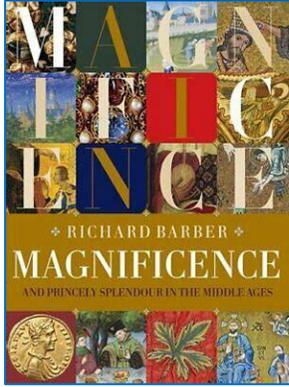
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Review Richard Barber, *Magnificence and Princely Splendour in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020)

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Questions of what it means to both look and act like a king are central to Richard Barber's most recent work, *Magnificence and Princely Splendour in the Middle Ages*. Published in 2020 by Boydell Press, a company co-founded by Barber himself, the book tackles the expansive topic of the optics of medieval kingship. Over the course of 15 chapters, Barber presents a series of case studies on the various manifestations of splendor. The studies, focused on primary sources and extant objects, provide an accessible introduction to medieval politics. The text is accompanied by more than 100 high-quality images that are further enhanced by the physical size of the volume. Although the subject is vast and at times complicated, the clear prose and straightforward structure makes this work approachable for a general non-scholarly but interested audience.

As Barber states in the preface, magnificence is an expansive concept, with a history that encompasses a wide geographical and temporal range. Therefore, he limits the scope of his study to Western Europe, with special focus on the wealthy kingdom of France, from the 12th to the 16th century (xiv). With these parameters in mind, *Magnificence* should be approached as a

general overview of the topic rather than a close analysis of how royal splendor was expressed or understood in any specific area. A short reference section following the preface introduces the rulers of Europe from 1100-1500, along with their respective kingdoms spanning Western Europe from England to Sicily. These short summaries are a useful guide, particularly for readers unfamiliar with the world of medieval politics. Throughout this section, the most important names are written in bold red type, although reign dates are given inconsistently. This extensive litany of information may seem overwhelming, but the structure of the book itself makes the information presented here manageable for a general audience.

Many of the most important people—Frederick II, Edward III, and Charles the Bold, to name a few—recur throughout the book along with reminders of their role and significance. As a result, they become a familiar cast of characters that exemplify the concept of medieval splendor. This list is dominated by men, with a few notable exceptions, such as Joanna I of Naples. Although women do serve as the topic for a chapter 6, they appear primarily as extensions of the majesty of their male counterparts. Such displays of royal luxury are exemplified by Isabeau of Bavaria's lavish, but ultimately ill-fated, entrance into Paris in 1389, as depicted in a manuscript copy of Jean Froissart's *Chronicles* (97-100), (**Fig. 1**). Yet, Barber is clear in limiting the scope of true royal splendor to kings and princes. He notes that this is a function of limited sources, primarily slim documentation and a lack of women who served as rulers in their own right (xiv). He later reiterates this stance, arguing that the philosophical notion of magnificence is an essentially male concept (93). While an in-depth examination of how women engaged with magnificence is beyond the scope of this book, consideration of the role of female patrons of the arts would not have been out of place, particularly in Barber's



Figure 1 Jean Froissart, *Chroniques*, “Isabeau of Bavaria Enters Paris,” Belgium (Bruges), c. 1470-1472, The British Library, Harley MS 4379, fol. 3r. Photo: http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley_ms_4379_fs001r

discussion of luxury goods. Hopefully, this gap might inspire the curious reader to look further into the ways in which magnificence was manifest in the lives of royal medieval women.

The preliminary reference section ends with a brief discussion of naming conventions and coinage as well as two color-coded maps showing European kingdoms in the 14th century and the division of the lands of Burgundy (xxii-xxiii). Helpful guides appear throughout the body of the book and each chapter begins with a list of bullet points that outlines the major topics that will be covered. In addition to summarizing the contents of the chapter, these lists help lead the reading itself and make finding a specific topic easy. Readers are further assisted by marginal notes that indicate the primary topic of most paragraphs. Together, these serve as useful tools to orient readers amid a vast sea of names and, at times, far ranging dates and locations.

With these various points of reference in place, Barber moves on to the introduction, which elucidates on the groundwork of his study. Here, he provides a rough sketch of how magnificence and splendor were understood in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. Although he later returns to refine the philosophical notion of “magnificence” in the fourth chapter, this section establishes the narrative that magnificence was, above all, “the visual expression of the king’s right to rule over his subjects” (2). Similarly, he identifies splendor as the physical manifestation of magnificence itself: “people expected the prince to be splendid” (7). In discussing how these concepts were expressed in relation to royalty, Barber highlights Giles of Rome’s *On the Government of Princes*, excerpts of which are reproduced in the first appendix (2, 306). More importantly, Barber underscores that this is essentially a book about powerful fictions: the various constructs that reiterate and reinforce the structures of kingship for both rulers and their subjects (3).



Figure 2 Imperial Crown of the Holy Roman Empire, *c.* late 10th-early 11th century, gold, enamel, gemstones, and pearls, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, SK XIII.1. Photo: <https://www.khm.at/en/objectdb/detail/100430/?offset=21&lv=list>

The main body of the book is divided into three thematic sections. The first, “Princely Splendour,” broadly explains the basics of medieval kingship. Comprised of two short chapters, it sets the format for the rest of the book: a particular aspect of royal magnificence is presented, then explored through a series of short case studies and historical anecdotes. In the first chapter of this section, “Dynasties, Kings and Courts,” Barber discusses the status of the king himself, focusing particularly on the structure and significance of the royal court. Here, material objects such as the crown of the Holy Roman Empire appear for the first time as visual signifiers of royalty (10-22), (**Fig. 2**). Following this, Barber examines “The Culture of Kingship,” further emphasizing the importance of public statements of wealth and power through a study of architecture ranging from Palermo to London (23-42).

Having established what kingliness looked like from a broad perspective, Barber moves on to the second and longest part of the book. This section, “Magnificence,” consisting of eight chapters. The first, “Defining Magnificence,” returns to the question of how magnificence was understood in the Middle Ages. Barber traces the roots of the medieval concept to the writings of Aristotle, specifically *Nicomachean Ethics* which defines magnificence as one of the four cardinal virtues (52). This discussion establishes a dichotomy between the philosophical concept of magnificence and its material expression that reappears throughout Barber’s argument. The following seven chapters focus on a particular expression of splendor, ranging from livery and knighthood to civic entries and other ceremonies that established the image of the king in the public imagination. Although each of these chapters covers specific aspects of royal luxury, there are frequent overlaps in content. Architecture, clothing, and festivals appear as repeated topics throughout the book. Every reiteration of a topic is treated with a slightly different focus, shifting attention to the various elements that comprise a particular aspect of magnificence. Barber

dedicates a considerable portion of the chapter “Magnificent Extravagances,” for example, to food and feasting (234-252), yet a more focused discussion of the cooks who planned and prepared these meals appears in the next chapter, “Devising the Festival” (253-278). Although, at times, this repetition can become dry, it also allows the individual chapters to stand alone. Even the most casual reader could dip into the text as needed and follow the general argument of any particular section. This structure makes *Magnificence* a good option to accompany an introductory course on medieval culture or politics.

The final thematic section, “The Management of Magnificence” focuses on the many moving parts that were the true driving force behind royal extravagance. Over the three chapters, Barber elaborates on the ceremonies and festivals that formed the core of the king’s public persona (234-289). The book ends with a short epilogue that presents a final case study on what Barber considers to be the “end of medieval magnificence” (290). This section revolves around “The Twelve Magnificences of Charles the Bold,” written before the duke’s death in 1477 (291). Barber analyzes the various aspects of magnificence presented in this list, focusing specifically on the dual roles of power and display (293-298). He ultimately concludes by returning to the notion of magnificence as a form of royal propaganda intended to establish that “who seems most kingly, is the king” (305). This line, a callback to the epigram, summarizes the book’s underlying theme: the manifold fictions that work to make appearance into reality (305).

An emphasis on the various physical manifestations of splendor is central to the theme of *Magnificence*. As Barber notes in the introduction, the world of kingship is one in which “material appearance is everything.” (3) Visually, the book lives up to its title; it is replete with beautiful, high-quality images that give its readers an immediate sense of being in the presence of royal splendor. Unfortunately, limited engagement with these images discourages readers

from fully experiencing them. As a result of the lack of in-text figure numbers, it is at times unclear when a specific image is being referenced. Occasionally, the marginal notes will signal that an image is reproduced several pages away, but most often readers are left to their own devices. This becomes a problem when Barber describes an image that is not included at all. For casual readers unfamiliar with medieval iconography, this creates a barrier against participation, and the images—although beautiful—are ultimately limited to acting as detached illustrations rather than allowed to stand as representatives of magnificence in their own right.

Magnificence and Princely Splendour in the Middle Ages is a sweeping work that brings its audience into contact with a wide breadth of texts and objects. Although this extensive amount of information can be overwhelming, Barber compiles his sources into a clearly written work that is accessible to a non-scholarly audience. The structure of the book itself, with its many beautiful images and convenient organizational guides, similarly makes *Magnificence* an appealing introduction to the splendid world of medieval politics and kingly luxury. 🐉