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Meredith Cohen, *The Sainte-Chapelle and the Construction of Sacral Monarchy: Royal Architecture in Thirteenth-Century Paris*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xi + 293 pp. Maps, tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-1-107-02557-8.

Review by Robert Bork, The University of Iowa.

In this valuable and stimulating book, Meredith Cohen sets out to “offer a novel perspective on one of the most important monuments of French Gothic architecture, the Sainte-Chapelle” (p. i). To this end, she situates the chapel within its urban and political contexts, arguing for its singular role in the construction of sacral monarchy by King Louis IX and his associates. Her richly multi-faceted discussion thus occupies a space between narrowly focused building monographs, on the one hand, and broadly synthetic accounts of stylistic development or royal patronage, on the other. By engaging not only with the jewel-like chapel, but also with its setting, Cohen creates a concise but compelling narrative of architectural development in thirteenth-century Paris.

In her introduction, Cohen explains the rationale for her contextual approach to the Sainte-Chapelle and its social meanings. She notes that “over the past one hundred years, studies of the thirteenth-century chapel have focused almost exclusively on issues of style and iconography” (p. 2). Cohen acknowledges the importance of Louis Grodecki’s short 1963 monograph, which synthesized much of the previous scholarship on the building and its stained glass program, but she devotes more attention to Robert Branner’s 1965 book on Saint Louis and the “Court Style,” which made two particularly provocative arguments: it accorded Louis IX and his court a central role in catalyzing the invention of the style that most scholars now call Rayonnant Gothic; and it argued that this highly refined style subsequently spread throughout Europe in large part because of the prestige of the French monarchy.[1] Subsequent scholars have questioned and even rejected many parts of Branner’s account, but its legacy continues to strongly inflect discussion of thirteenth-century architecture. Cohen, who has written previously and eloquently about the “anxiety of influence” that has beset scholars attempting to engage with this material in the post-Branner era, clearly sees her own work as exemplifying a return to the Parisian center of his argument.[2] More specifically, Cohen’s book effectively complements recent studies of the Sainte-Chapelle published by Beat Brenk, Daniel Weiss, and Alyce Jordan, offering a newly nuanced gloss on the chapel’s political meaning, one informed by analysis of the chapel’s architectural fabric, its liturgical traditions, and its urban context.[3]

Cohen’s first chapter, “The Making of a Royal City,” considers the Parisian architecture sponsored by king Philip Augustus, who reigned from 1180 to 1223. Some readers may wonder why the story does not go back to the middle of the twelfth century, which witnessed the invention of the Gothic style, the construction of Abbot Suger’s pioneering Saint-Denis abbey, and the start of work on the Parisian cathedral of Notre-Dame. These projects, however, were not royally sponsored, even if Suger served as regent of France, and even if his abbey served as the burial site for the Capetian kings. Cohen argues, moreover, that “at the end of the twelfth century Paris was comparable to number of other towns in northern France” (p. 14), and that it was really the thirteenth century that catapulted the city to its preeminent position in France, and in Christendom more largely. Be that as it may, this early passage

suggests the challenges Cohen faced as she worked to construct an interpretive frame around the Sainte-Chapelle that would be broad enough to create a sense of context, but not so broad as to become superficial. Fortunately, Cohen's chapter succeeds in making a fundamental and very interesting point; namely, that Philip Augustus's architectural patronage throughout his realm had a strongly martial and secular flavor, emphasizing his role as defender of the kingdom. In Paris, in particular, Philip sponsored the paving of streets and the construction of new city walls, strengthened by fortifications including the Louvre and the Châtelet, both destroyed but well known through surviving depictions. This discussion provides both a foundation and a foil for the later discussion of royal architecture in the reign of Philip's grandson Louis IX, who defined his personal "brand" in a very different fashion. To put this later royal architecture into context, the final part of the chapter surveys the religious architecture of Paris and its environs in the first decades of Louis's reign, introducing early local exemplars of the Rayonnant style, including those portions of Notre-Dame and Saint-Denis built in the first half of the thirteenth century, and many smaller and humbler churches, most of them now destroyed, that attest to the creative vibrancy of that period in the city's history.

Cohen's second chapter focuses on the Sainte-Chapelle, in the context of "Parisian Rayonnant and the New Royal Architecture" (p. 66). The opening section briefly describes the building and its aesthetic effects, salting the discussion with precise measurements from Cohen's own survey of the fabric. Most readers will be at least superficially familiar with the building's lower chapel, upper chapel, and porch; some may question Cohen's emphasis on the "broad interior spaces" of the lower chapel (p. 69), or her claim that "the aesthetics of the lower chapel also govern the upper chapel" (p. 70), but the many more objective portions of her description together paint a vivid and evocative picture of the monument. The second section of the chapter considers the proportions and dimensions of the Sainte-Chapelle. Unfortunately, the quality of the visual documentation in this section does not do justice to the quality of Cohen's survey data. The relevant ground plans are small, and no elevation or cross section views are provided. This makes it all but impossible to interpret the verbal descriptions of proportion in the main text, or to make use of the dimensions tabulated in appendix four. Cohen makes many interesting observations about the bay proportions of the lower chapel, about the standardization of dimensions in the responds, and about the discovery of blocked doors on the north side of the chapel, but these passages go by rather rapidly.

The same comment applies to the next section, which considers the sculpted decoration of the Sainte-Chapelle, emphasizing its richly carved capitals. In such cases, one misses the kind of detailed follow-through traditionally found in building monographs, even though Cohen's more contextual approach offers many rewards of its own. The next sections of the chapter consider the relationship of the chapel to the traditions of Rayonnant architecture in general, and to the workshop of Amiens Cathedral, in particular. Cohen prudently resists the temptation to attribute the design of the Sainte-Chapelle to any of the particular masters who have been proposed, but her observations together demonstrate two complementary theses: first, that the ingredients of the chapel design were well established in the architecture of the region around the capital; and second, that the chapel nevertheless brought these elements together in a way that was singular in its local context.

In her third chapter, on "The Architecture of Sacral Kingship," Cohen adopts a more distant point of view, offering typological and iconographical arguments about possible prototypes for the Sainte-Chapelle and its ideological program. A first section on "Distant Kin" discusses royal and imperial chapels, starting with the eighth-century Sacra Capella of Constantinople, which was home to relics, including the crown of thorns, that Louis IX would eventually purchase for his Parisian chapel (p. 115). Cohen argues that the small size of the Sainte-Chapelle, and its inclusion of a porch, may have been inspired by this Byzantine prototype. She then goes on to consider other more or less distant antecedents for the Sainte-Chapelle, including most notably the centralized double-story palace chapel at Aachen, and the longitudinally planned Camara Santa of Oviedo, the chapel of Saint John the Evangelist from the Tower of London, and the Capella Palatina in Palermo. A second chapter section

considers earlier Capetian palatine chapels and the sanctuaries on the Palais de la Cité, while a third considers the palace chapel of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a strikingly skeletal Gothic structure built at the behest of Louis IX just a few years before the start of work on the Sainte-Chapelle. In a fourth section, building on the work of Inge Hacker-Suck, Cohen argues that the Sainte-Chapelle embodied a royal appropriation of the format seen in French Gothic bishops' chapels, creating a particularly striking pendant to the bishop's chapel at the nearby cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris.^[4] Here, too, Cohen invokes the work of Alyce Jordan and Daniel Weiss, who have shown that the narratives depicted in the stained glass of the Sainte-Chapelle were designed to assert royal authority by depicting Louis IX both as the rightful successor to Old Testament kings, and as the rightful possessor of the crown of thorns.^[5] As Cohen notes in a final section, the career of Louis IX marked a new era in which the monarch himself, rather than the churchmen of the realm, took the lead in promoting the idea of sacral kingship.

Cohen's fourth chapter, "Public, Private, and the Promotion of the Cult of Kings," in many ways constitutes the heart of her book. Pulling together the evidence from her three previous chapters, she observes that the construction of the Sainte-Chapelle marked a dramatic pivot away from the more martial public architecture of Philip Augustus's reign, and she argues compellingly that Louis IX and his associates were deliberately using the project to express a newly sacral view of kingship, one that made good sense in raising the king above the querulous barons who troubled him early in his reign. In seeking to demonstrate the public accessibility of the chapel interior, however, Cohen must occasionally rely on evidence from far beyond her usual chronological framework. In discussing the overall design of the Palais de la Cité, for example, she describes a staircase that "led from the south side of the chapel directly to the upper level of the porch" (p. 150), thus providing access to the upper chapel from the palace's main courtyard. This now-destroyed staircase is first recorded in a manuscript illustration from circa 1410, however, and its awkward placement with respect to the chapel argues strongly against its having been part of the original design as conceived around 1240. Cohen argues that the stair must have been in place at least before the construction of a nearby wall in 1318, but the visual evidence for this claim is not conclusive. When discussing the liturgy of the Sainte-Chapelle, similarly, Cohen has to rely heavily on two manuscripts that well post-date the reign of Louis IX: BnF MS lat. 1435, from the late fourteenth century, and Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal MS 114, from 1470. Both texts use the term "populus" to refer to people attending the mass, suggesting to Cohen that access to the chapel interior was open to a broader cross-section of the public than has usually been supposed; Beat Brenk, by contrast, had imagined the upper chapel, especially, as the private realm of the king, his closest courtiers, and the chapel's own canons.^[6]

Cohen effectively buttresses her case for the public character of the Sainte-Chapelle by noting its importance along traditional processional routes, and by citing indulgences for visitors to the chapel that were issued in 1244, 1246, and 1265. Since the chapel was only dedicated in 1248, however, shortly before Louis IX departed on Crusade, one may justifiably ask whether these first indulgenced visitors could really have enjoyed full access to the completed shrine; visits confined to the lower level seem more plausible. The sacred scenography of the chapel evidently evolved over the course of Louis IX's reign, since the large micro-architectural tabernacle holding the crown of thorns seems to have been installed only following his return from Crusade in 1254. It is tempting to imagine that the construction of the stair along the south flank of the chapel may have been undertaken at around the same time, since Cohen clearly demonstrates in her final chapter that the king's architectural patronage took on a newly humble and public flavor in the later years of his reign.

Cohen's final chapter deals with "Louis' Later Patronage in Paris." This chapter thus complements the first chapter on the patronage of Philip Augustus, since the two effectively serve as bookends to the discussion of the years that produced the Sainte-Chapelle. Cohen observes that "Louis' later patronage constructed a different image of the king than that of his early reign. Unlike the Sainte-Chapelle, which was an exclusively royal foundation standing within the very center of Paris in the Palais de la Cité,

Louis' later patronage was broader both socially and spatially" (p. 172). Cohen's archival work reveals that the number of royal charitable initiatives increased dramatically after 1254, and that they predominantly benefited mendicant groups and the urban unfortunate. Cohen also shows that the churches, hospices, and schools whose construction the king helped to sponsor were spread across all of the city's parishes, and near its gates. This spatial mapping of endowments, which constitutes a valuable contribution in and of itself, leads Cohen to believe that the crown was making a concerted effort to bring royal influence into every quarter of the city, to all of its people, and to visitors. Based on her survey of the textual and visual evidence, Cohen demonstrates that these buildings were decidedly more modest than the Sainte-Chapelle in architectural terms, but she concludes that their messages would have complemented those of the royal chapel, by underscoring the humility and piety of a king whose sacral authority and majesty the chapel so effectively advertised.

Cohen's conclusion briefly recapitulates the main points of her book, persuasively arguing for the very public role of Louis IX's architecture, and of the Sainte-Chapelle in particular, in promoting the idea of sacred monarchy. A first appendix considers the possible roles of Louis's circle in defining the program of the chapel, a second lists the donjons of Philip Augustus, a third reproduces documents related to the foundation and visitation of the chapel, and a fourth lists many of its dimensions. In terms of formatting, the use of endnotes rather than footnotes may be regretted by some readers, and in terms of production, the proofreaders missed a number of errors, some of which blur the meaning of the sentences in question. These small cavils aside, Cohen's book reads beautifully, and it certainly achieves her stated goal of providing a novel perspective on the Sainte-Chapelle.

By situating the production of the chapel in its urban and political contexts, and by juxtaposing its construction both with the martial architecture of Philip Augustus and with the humble architecture of Louis IX's later reign, Cohen effectively demonstrates the special character of the chapel project, and its singular role in the construction of sacral monarchy. By adopting this framing, moreover, Cohen has produced an innovative book that seems likely to provoke new dialog about the larger questions that have swirled around the history of Rayonnant architecture more generally, especially since the publication of Branner's book on the "Court Style" half a century earlier. Her well-researched and well-written book should thus be welcomed enthusiastically by historians of European medieval architecture, as well as by historians of French culture and society.

NOTES

[1] Louis Grodecki, *La Sainte-Chapelle* (Paris: Caisse national des monuments historiques et des sites, 1963); Robert Branner, *Saint Louis and the Court Style in Gothic Architecture* (London: Zwemmer, 1965).

[2] Meredith Cohen, "Robert Branner and the Anxiety of Influence," in J. Marquardt and A. Jordan, eds., *Medieval Art and Architecture after the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Scholars Press, 2009), pp. 218-45.

[3] For Brenk, Weiss, and Jordan, see full citations below.

[4] Inge Hacker-Suck, "Les Saintes-Chapelles de Paris et les chapelles palatines du Moyen-Âge en France," *Cahiers archéologiques* 13 (1962): 218-57.

[5] Alyce Jordan, *Visualizing Kingship in the Windows of the Sainte-Chapelle* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002). Daniel Weiss, *Art and Crusade in the Age of Saint Louis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[6] Beat Brenk, "La Sainte-Chapelle as Capetian Political Program," in K. Brush, P. Draper, and V.C. Raguin, eds., *Artistic Integration in Gothic Buildings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), pp. 195-213.

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