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The Power of Place: Rulers and Their Palaces, Landscapes, Cities and Holy Places

David Rollason

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The Power of Place: Rulers and Their Palaces, Landscapes, Cities, and Holy Places. By David Rollason. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-691-16762-6. xxi + 458 pp. $49.95.

This ambitious and pioneering book, which results from the author's three-year Leverhulme Trust major research fellowship held from 2010–2013, explores the nature of power through a wide range of European buildings, sites, and landscapes dating from the first century AD to the sixteenth century. The author declared that the project was "so risky that only on the verge of retirement could I have attempted it," since much of the subject matter lies outside his main areas of expertise (ix). In many ways, however, this was the point of the exercise, since the main motivation was Rollason's frustration with the barriers to wider knowledge caused by traditional temporal and geographical scholarly divides.

The book is impressive conceptually as well as contextually. As well as history *per se*, it draws upon recent research in archaeology, architectural history, art history, garden and landscape history, and liturgical studies. It will appeal to a wide audience, from academics to undergraduates, as well as general readers. Indeed, it is an ideal gateway to the study of high-status architecture and landscapes, since it has been conceived, in part, to give readers the tools to read the ways in which sites can yield information about the nature of the power of the rulers who created—or embellished—them. This aim is supported by the book's clear and consistent layout. Twelve chapters are spread over five parts: palaces, landscapes, cities, holy places, and inauguration and burial places. Each of these parts commences with an exploration of key terms and questions, and an introduction of what will be discussed, while each chapter ends with a conclusión summing up the main points. Moreover, at the end of the book, further "Research and Reading" is arranged by chapter, providing a highly user-friendly historiographical guide to the themes discussed, with sub-themes highlighted in the text in bold—for example "general ideas," "sixteenth-century gardens," and "royal saints." Following this, research and reading for an A–Z of key sites ranging from Aachen to Yeavering receives similar treatment, with each site pinpointed on the accompanying map of Europe (402–416).

Yet, *The Power of Place* is far more than a synthesis of previous endeavours. Rollason brings an early medievalist's eye to the sites he discusses—that is, he aims to exploit material evidence to the full even for well-documented periods, since written sources, he notes, can only reveal a partial picture, being either highly positioned or written at one remove. The main hypothesis is that key aspects of rulership visible in the sites—and thus the nature of rulers' power—were remarkably static across Europe over the millennium and a half in question. Thus, regarding palaces, Rollason concludes that the idea of the

ruler as a cosmic figure was as conspicuous in the Muslim palaces of the Alhambra in the fourteenth century as in Nero's Golden House in the first century AD. As for cities, their geometric design and the practice of enacting entries and triumphs are found in widely separated contexts, and in religious sites striking similarities existed even across different religions, such as the construction of domes meant to represent the heavens (388–389).

It is argued that such persistent messages highlight fundamental similarities in the nature and exercise of the power of rulers across space and time. Refreshingly, however, Rollason is prepared to see both sides, pointing out that some of the apparent similarities may have little significance because, after all, there were limits to the ways in which rulership could be presented. Indeed, the discussion is nuanced throughout. That buildings and sites associated with rulers simultaneously expressed—and were tools of—their power, as stated in the introduction, may seem an unremarkable contention. However, far from leaving it at that, which is sadly too often the case, Rollason employs a framework of types of power—bureaucratic and financial, personal, and finally ideological (the belief in the ruler's relationship with the divine)—so as to delve further into its nature, as well as explore more deeply the messages sent out by architecture and designed landscapes. The fact that these categories are not mutually exclusive is problematic, but taken into account. To take gardens and parks as an example: were they primarily designed to emphasise the divinity of rulers, or to allow them to consort with their inferiors and thus express their own personal power? Similarly, in the chapter on palaces, Rollason discusses the well-trodden question of stylistic imitation in architecture, although, instead of concluding merely that the ruler may have seen similar examples on their travels, he investigates posible reasons in some depth. For example, in chapter two, "The Power of Design," Pedro the Cruel's (1350–1369) Muslim-style Alcázar palace in Seville, which replaced an arguably more up-to-date Gothic construction, may have been either a triumphalist celebration of the victory of Christian monarchs over the Muslims; a statement of southern Spanish identity in opposition to the Gothic architecture of the north; or simply constructed in the only style with which the craftsmen available were familiar. Each interpretation is given credence before Rollason arrives at what he considers to be the most likely explanation.

My quibbles are mostly very minor. It is a shame about the book's yellowing paper and the greyscale images—although these will not have been the choice of the author, and many of the figures are repeated in resplendent colour among the plates in its centre. And although the "Research and Reading" section is meant to negate the need for references (the "references" at the end are in fact a bibliography) and Harvard is used for direct quotes, the lack of footnotes or endnotes often makes it hard to tell when the author is telling us something new or established—whether it is his own interpretations,

or those of others. Finally, little is done with gender, which, like "women," is missing from the index. However, these days there is a vast corpus of work on gender, power, and architecture, and one cannot expect to see everything covered in-depth in what is an already impressive undertaking.

Rollason need not have worried: any "risks" taken have paid off with dividends. Like Anthony Emery's *Seats of Power in Europe During the Hundred Years' War* (Oxbow Books, 2016), *The Power of Place* moves the study of elite sites from its often still-localised focus to achieve a level of cross-temporal and geographical analysis, which will enthuse anyone interested in high-status architecture. The publication of these works in the year of the Brexit vote in the UK is perhaps ironic, particularly since Rollason's intention is that readers should be empowered to "go on to consider sites that this book has not considered, and to press further the line of historical questioning that [it has] … sketched out" (4). Let us hope that future researchers will have the means—and the freedom of movement—to be able to take up his challenge.

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