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**Article:**

Davison, Tracey (2020) Review: Richard Barber, Magnificence and Princely Splendour in the Middle Ages. *Aspectus* (2).

<https://doi.org/10.15124/yhtj-mq60>

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# ASPECTUS

A Journal of Visual Culture

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Review: Richard Barber, *Magnificence and Princely  
Splendour in the Middle Ages*

Issue 2 - 2020

ISSN 2732-561X

pp. 1-2

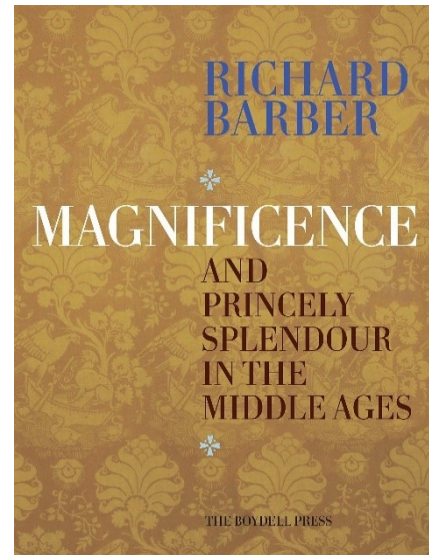
DOI: 10.15124/yhtj-mq60

University of York

Published: 14 October 2020



# **Richard Barber, *Magnificence and Princely Splendour in the Middle Ages***



**TRACEY DAVISON**

The latest offering from the influential historian Richard Barber tackles the question of magnificence in relation to the medieval court. He asks what we understand by magnificence, how we respond when confronted by it and what are our expectations of a person portraying themselves in that manner? The book is divided into three sections: 'Princely Splendour', 'Magnificence', and lastly, the 'Management of Magnificence'; the sub-headings within these sections order this multi-faceted topic into a navigable text. Barber introduces the twin concepts of splendour and magnificence by comparing an account of the coronation of the fictional King Arthur, written in 1135, to the Holy Roman Emperor's Festival at Mainz (1184); he proposes that the imagined extravagance of the former ceremony provided a template for future displays by royalty. At the start of part one he also provides an overview of the numerous ruling dynasties of Britain, Europe, and Sicily with their familial and marital connections. This is a valuable tool for the reader as it puts into context the necessity for kings to be visible and distinct from those rulers bordering their territories.

The section on splendour deals with the culture of kingship, the apparel, the ceremonies, the creation of courts, and the role they played in presenting the ruler as a magnificent figure who would be recognised as a king with a right to rule. Barber touches on the relationship between the king and the church, the earthly splendour of the king and gold/silver decoration in his churches, for example Roger II's Capella Palatina in Sicily; material brilliance equating to the True Light, securing the king's place in heaven.

The second part focuses on magnificence, making up the majority of the text, it explores the many aspects of the word and the objects that signified it. There is a wealth of information in these chapters which Barber has divided into broad topics such as textiles, architecture, and the arts, supporting his Aristotelian viewpoint that magnificence is a virtue of the wealthy manifested in honourable deeds and essentially a visual concept. In the process of addressing all the components of magnificence, there is a danger that it becomes no more than an inventory of possessions. However, the book has a narrative style that engages the reader despite the complexities of the subject. If we take 'Image' (Chapter 5) as an example, Barber

circumvents this by sub-dividing the sections into eleven different aspects of personal adornment, from portraiture to crowns. This allows him to expand on the purpose, appearance, and production of each group of objects. Throughout the text he is careful to connect the objects to their owners, making them part of that family's story; he also highlights the individual touches of the patrons and the network of merchants and artisans catering to the royal houses.

The link between luxury goods and the East runs throughout the book; Byzantine materials and designs already influenced the appearance of clerical vestments, and the author shows how this style was adopted by royalty, transferring that splendour to the court. This move created an expectation of magnificence which led to the modestly dressed Henry II being judged as a lesser king based solely on appearance.

An important aspect of the author's argument is the development of chivalry which we think of as integral to medieval rule and how that affected the royal court. Barber explains how the Aristotelian "virtue of deeds" directly translated to the King's ability to create and furnish his court.<sup>1</sup> The appearance of the court as a whole reflected on the king, showing that he had the wealth to provide and the strength to govern.

The book is richly illustrated and rigorously researched, placing magnificence and splendour in the context of the Middle Ages and revealing what that society understood by it. Essentially "Magnificence is propaganda", it is a show, an antidote to the harsh realities of life.<sup>2</sup> One of those realities was warfare and whilst there was undoubtedly spectacle in an army in full battle-dress with pennants flying, the magnificence displayed at court was, Barber argues, the splendour and celebration of peace achieved through the king's military supremacy. In summary, the book concludes that in order to rule a king must embody magnificence in appearance and actions; he has to be both visible to his audience but distinct from the ordinary man. The book dissects many of the accepted tenets and tools of kingship, giving an insight into the perception of nobility from both within and without the court. As shown by the fluctuating fortunes of the dynasties studied, maintaining power was clearly not as simple as living magnificently, but it was a crucial part of the challenge. In the words of Thomas Hardy:

"and who seems  
Most kingly is the king".

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<sup>1</sup> Robert C Bartlett and Susan D Collins, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Barber, *Magnificence: Princely Splendour In The Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, Incorporated, 2020), 305.