



*The King's Body: Burial and
Succession in Late Anglo-Saxon
England,*

Nicole Marafioti

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The King's Body: Burial and Succession in Late Anglo-Saxon England. By Nicole Marafioti. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 978-1-4426-4758-9. 297 pp. £44.95.

This book explores royal burial in the later Anglo-Saxon period as a “central component of the political process” (248), in which royal corpses were deliberately manipulated by the new ruler and his circle. In effect, Marafioti’s study sees the burial ritual as well as any other movement of the body (removal, translation, disappearance, and desecration) as an important political instrument, manipulated by kings in order to promote their own legitimacy. Taking care of the previous king’s body was the first act a new king needed to navigate, and it is convincingly shown in Marafioti’s book to be a consistent part of the king or government’s political programme, helping to construct the political narrative that the king wished to promulgate. Working with a large body of primarily narrative source material, including historical and literary texts, Marafioti uses both lay and religious documents as evidence for her arguments as well as outsiders’ views on royal burials, both contemporary and later. Her excellent translations convincingly stack together a large body of evidence to strengthen her arguments, which often revolve around exploring possible scenarios under which such burials or desecrations would have been likely. It turns out there is a great deal of evidence about royal burial in the later Anglo-Saxon period.

The book begins with an exploration of two royal mausoleum foundations: New Minster in Winchester and Westminster in London. These foundations also provide the approximate time frame explored in this book, which begins with the death of King Alfred in 899 and ends with William the Conqueror, who depicted himself as the successor of Edward the Confessor. As a site of royal burial, the church itself was enriched, with royal graves in some ways incorporating the trappings and prestige of saints’ graves. Equally, the importance of the structures themselves is highlighted, as both churches were built along continental lines, and promoted royal authority through their impressive architecture as well as their contents.

The next two chapters explore transition between tenth- and eleventh-century kings respectively. Alfred’s burial in New Minster, a new foundation by either his son King Edward or by Alfred himself, was part of a general move during Edward’s reign to legitimise himself over his cousin Æthelwold. Thereafter, as Wessex grew to encompass Mercia, kings’ bodies were interred in a variety of places, providing royal *loci* throughout the country. In the third chapter, Marafioti emphasises the close connection between the funeral of one king and coronation of the next, and demonstrates how these rituals were aligned to show continuity. While there is much more evidence for the

eleventh century, Marafioti's conclusions are consistent and logical, and form the basis for the next four chapters, which function as case studies.

The first case studies focus on how a royal body could be (mis-)treated not for legitimisation, but rather to distance the new king from the previous king, or even to posthumously condemn his actions. Both of Cnut's sons Harold Harefoot and Harthacnut had considerably more difficulty depicting themselves as legitimate kings of England than Cnut had had, and this can be seen reflected in the errors they made in 'executing' other royal bodies. Harold's unceremonious dumping of the murdered Ætheling Alfred into a bog aimed to destroy his rival's claim, while Harthacnut's disinterment and posthumous execution of his brother Harold also aimed to show Harthacnut as the better candidate. Their attempts to de-legitimise their predecessors were unsuccessful perhaps because they so deviated from acceptable ritual. Marafioti concludes that these desecrations are ultimately what confirmed them both as "bad" kings (160).

Chapter Five explores the immediate aftermath of Edward the Martyr's murder, and how the disappearance of his corpse was "integral to the construction of his posthumous identity" (164). The lack of body and ritual after Edward's murder reflects an attempt to "obliterate" his body and *memoria*, which allowed the perpetrators time to reposition themselves and escape the consequences of regicide. Sanctity, in Marafioti's argument, was a response to the attempted obliteration, beginning as early as 978, and may have provoked the subsequent 'discovery' and burial of the body. While Harold Harefoot's and Harthacnut's posthumous executions turned opinion against them, the lack of a body in the case of Edward is probably what prevented him from being forgotten.

The rest of the book focuses on conquerors and their methods in appropriating Anglo-Saxon burial practice in order to confirm their own legitimacy. Cnut's treatment of various royal and saintly bodies can be seen as part of his general policy of depicting himself as an English king. These efforts can be seen in the burials of his father Swein in 1015, of his co-king, Edmund Ironside, and also in how he took over patronage of the royal saints Edward the Martyr and Edith of Wilton, Æthelred II's siblings, and his patronage of the saints' cults. By inserting himself into existing traditions as a good Christian king, Cnut strengthened his own legitimacy and increased the likelihood of his sons' successions. As chapter four demonstrated, they may not have made good on this opportunity, but it was nonetheless provided as a result of Cnut's careful orchestration. The argumentation is so compelling and consistent that by the end of the book, the reader expects certain actions be taken with royal bodies. It is no surprise therefore in the final chapter when we discover that William the Conqueror did not provide Harald Godwineson with a burial. To support his claim that Harald was not a legitimate

king, it was important for the body to disappear so that it could not become a focus of resistance.

This book alludes to the role of women, and particularly the agency of wives and concubines, in determining a king's burial, but does not really explore this topic where we might have expected more female agency. While Alfred's wife Ealhswith founded Nunnaminster in Winchester, she was buried beside her husband in New Minster, legitimising him. Marafioti emphasises that all of Alfred's children pursued the goal of using royal mausolea to bolster their own standing (68), but does not go into detail on Æthelflæd, who founded a church at Gloucester with her husband Ealdorman Æthelred, where both were interred. As high-status coffins from her period have been found, Æthelflæd's agency would have been an exciting avenue to explore. Marafioti suggests that Swein's widow, Ælfgifu of Northumbria, was instrumental in his removal to Denmark in 1015 (203), but she does not explore the agency of other women thereafter. The source *Encomium Emmae* is used a great deal and with sensitivity, but more to show kings' desires in the promotion of royal burials than Emma's.

Many of Marafioti's conclusions seem obvious; the desecration of the previous king's body cannot be interpreted as the reigning king's wish to encourage his predecessor's memory, and elevation of one's father's relics suggests legitimisation of one's own line. However, by placing each of these cases in connection with one another, royal burial emerges as a deliberately manipulated tool, often mirroring policies later promulgated by these kings or a possible early indication of the priorities in a given king's reign. A thorough and engaging study of memory, this book will encourage further study of burial – politics by other means.

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