

Meredith Cohen

*The Sainte-Chapelle and the Construction of Sacral Monarchy: Royal Architecture in Thirteenth-Century Paris*  
Cambridge University Press, 2015

Cohen's contextual study of the Sainte-Chapelle, the palatine reliquary chapel erected by Louis IX in the Palais de la Cité of Paris, moves beyond established stylistic and iconographic interpretations to argue that this religious monument was equally a political instrument meant to make public a notion of sacral kingship and royal sovereignty. Both the chapel and the reign of Louis IX are identified as important steps towards the ideological construction of absolute monarchy in France. At the same time, Cohen demonstrates how the chapel's architecture contributed to the urban identification of Paris as the royal capital of France marked by an array of buildings in the Gothic Rayonnant style, from churches to charitable institutions. Attuned to contemporary issues in art historical criticism, Cohen considers both the production and reception of the Sainte Chapelle as a monument "integrated into a network of discourses" and makes apt disciplinary use of history, literature, musicology (and liturgy), anthropology and sociology, along with architectural and urban history, to bring a fresh methodological perspective to her medieval subject. This attention to methodological issues is complemented by her empirical use of a wide range of archival sources and material evidence, including meticulous descriptive and comparative analyses of the chapel's form and possible sources. Given the fragmentary survival of 13<sup>th</sup>-century buildings and written records, as well as the Sainte-Chapelle's complete reconstruction in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Cohen's persistence in recovering the medieval past of Paris is admirable. Constructing a solid case for her thesis, Cohen brings together architectural, urban, and political history to explain how buildings—and the Sainte Chapelle in particular—have the capacity to shape a city's physical form, social space, and political identity.

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