

BOOK REVIEWS

Julian Luxford (ed.), Adrian Ailes, and Susan Powell, *The Founders' Book – A medieval history of Tewkesbury Abbey*, Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2021. vii + 216pp inc. 72 colour pages. Hardcover. ISBN 978-1-907730-89-4. £35.

# THE FOUNDERS' BOOK

A Medieval History of Tewkesbury Abbey



A Facsimile of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Top. Glouc. d. 2

EDITED BY JULIAN LUXFORD

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY  
ADRIAN AILES AND SUSAN POWELL

This handsome and erudite book is a full-size facsimile of Bodleian Library MS Top. Glouc. D. 2. The editor, Professor Julian Luxford and the other two contributors, Dr

## THE COAT OF ARMS

Adrian Ailes and Professor Susan Powell are leading academics in their specialist fields. Luxford is Professor of Art History at the University of St Andrews, and specialises in medieval monastic art and architecture, Ailes is a leading expert in medieval heraldry, former Head of Early Modern Records at the National Archives and a Vice-President of the Heraldry Society, and Powell a specialist in Middle English and medieval Latin at the University of Salford.

The Founders' Book was written and illustrated by the monks of Tewkesbury Abbey in the late-fifteenth century. The work, in Latin, records the beginnings and history of the abbey through the lives of its benefactors from its foundation in 1102 by Robert Fitzhamon, to the battle of Tewkesbury in 1471. In the tenth century Tewkesbury was a Benedictine priory subordinate to Cranborne Abbey in Dorset. William the Conqueror gave the estate of Cranborne to Robert Fitzhamon, who was later also granted the lordship of Tewkesbury. He rebuilt the priory as an abbey, after which Cranborne came under the new and revitalised Tewkesbury Abbey.

Professor Luxford expertly discusses the dating of the manuscript, together with its provenance, the purpose for its creation, its artistry, and the physical composition of the original Founders' Book. The history of the volume is described in some detail – its construction, its nineteenth century rebinding, and its history from the Dissolution of the Monasteries to the present day. It is noted to be the work of several scribes, but is seen as a single entity. Also discussed is the purpose of the drawings and the text that accompanies them. The book is essentially a catalogue of the royal and noble benefactors of the abbey, and each entry is accompanied by a full coloured image of the individual(s) together with their coat of arms, real or attributed. It was completed by the mid-1490s, as the styles of costume and armour in the illustrations make clear. The original artists paid little attention to the niceties of the historical accuracy of the armour and dress of the early benefactors, which is not unusual for the time, and does not detract from the naive charm of the illustrations. Luxford analyses each of the illustrations and explains some of the hidden meanings behind them, for example the image of Gilbert de Clare III (killed at the battle of Bannockburn, 1314) and an inverted torch to signify the extinction of his noble line.

Dr Ailes provides an excellent analysis of the heraldry. His introduction and overview are incisive and comprehensive. They are followed by a catalogue which contains biographical details of all the people illustrated and blazons of their arms. He makes the very valid point that the Founders' Book is not just a list of benefactors, but it is also effectively a roll of arms. His section ends with a glossary of heraldic terms used in the text. Each founder's entry starts with a biographical note, a brief description of their image and any arms worn, followed by the blazon and identification of any accompanying arms painted in the margin. There is also a list of secondary sources with abbreviations used as references. The heraldry is, in typical medieval fashion, displayed on shields, surcoats, and ladies' mantles.

The book commences with the foundation of the Tewkesbury monastery attributed to Oddo and Doddo in 715; they are shown bearing the arms of Tewkesbury Abbey (*Gules a Tewkesbury cross or*) [Figure 1]. These and later benefactors are nearly all bedecked in splendid heraldic surcoats or mantles [Figure 2]. Most illustrated pages contain more than one shield of arms, many quartered, and there is also a touching deathbed scene of Isabella Despenser. Ailes draws attention to the almost contemporary



*Figure 1:* the founders Oddo and Doddo. © Bodleian Libraries

Rous Roll which was compiled by John Rous (died 1491), a chantry priest of Guy's Cliff in Warwick, which must have been a major source and reference for the Founders' Book. The third section comprises Professor Powell's transcriptions and translations of the Latin text of the manuscript and is an impressive work. She commences by describing her editorial approach and noting that the original Latin is reliant upon abbreviations which she has expanded in the text. The transcription of the Latin text is given on one page and the opposite page contains the translation, making it easy to read and study. For those of us whose Latin is basic, Powell's translation makes (thankfully) easy, instructive, and enjoyable reading.

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This edition of the Founders' Book is an extremely valuable addition to the bookshelves of any student of late medieval English monastic and heraldic manuscripts. It is in full colour, and the vibrancy of the images, despite their amateur quality, bring it to life. The original artwork is not of the highest standard, and certainly not of the level found in such manuscripts as the Luttrell Psalter, the Macclesfield Psalter, or the Beauchamp Pageant. It is a much more basic work but it does have a great sense of charm.

*Robert S Harrison*



*Figure 2: the elaborate heraldic display of Thomas Despenser II, K.G. (killed in 1400). © Bodleian Libraries.*