The making of St. Louis: kingship, sanctity, and crusade in the later Middle Ages. By M. Cecilia Gaposchkin. (London: Cornell University Press, 2008. Cloth cover $45.00)

M. Cecilia Gaposchkin explicitly states the purpose of her work is to trace “the process by which Louis was turned from a king into a saint” (4). Subsequently, in an engaging work that is neither a biography nor a chronological progression, she utilizes mainly the liturgical outcroppings of his canonization (hagiographies, sermons, and offices) in order to demonstrate the establishment of the most important dynastic cult of the Middle Ages. Furthermore, she supplements her already extensive research into liturgy through contextualization with other sources such as images, letters, and Joinville’s biography of the king. While at the outset this ambitious project may appear daunting to the lay reader, it is remarkably accessible through a crisp, clear and constant delineation of the arguments that are to follow. Chapters are systematically arranged giving background and then delving into primary sources. Moreover, subheadings are found throughout in order to further signpost the work for the reader. Finally each chapter is beautifully summarized in a conclusion that also functions seamlessly to transition to the next topic.

The text itself begins with a historical context that outlines the work of the papacy, French nobility, and clerical orders in order to achieve King Louis IX’s canonization in 1297. Gaposchkin does not assume that one is versed in the process of medieval canonization so she provides digressions in order to contextualize the proceedings. However, perhaps digression is too pejorative for even though it diverts from the intended goal, the explication it provides the reader unquestionably enhances the work. For instance, after discussing the coming together of factions to recognize a saint, she then refracts the work to mirror the separation of interests in how to utilize the newly minted saint based upon different ideological lenses on piety: the nobility focused on sacral kingship; the Cistercians on personal Christ-like affective piety; and the Franciscans on crusade utilizing an image of St. Francis as an exemplar. Yet these assertions create questions that through asides, the author skillfully anticipates. With respect to sacral kingship, she cites Kantorowicz’s work on the king’s two bodies in order to infuse significance with the nobility’s actions. Moreover, in a section on St. Francis and a second on Christ-like kingship, she forestalls a claim that the friars just plagiarised previous texts through a section on the medieval concept of imitatio. In both cases, the author definitively demonstrates that rather than copying, medieval writers were melting the images by adapting the style. Thus one of the St. Louis hagiographies examined has not only the same framework of St. Francis but also the stigmata of the latter was to be paralleled through Louis being signed by the cross twice for his crusades. Finally, the author continues to make the work accessible to the reader through the organization by dividing the work in two with an insert on the structure of the liturgical offices. A wonderful concise summary that prepares any reader to be able to follow the sophisticated arguments that followed on liturgy of St. Louis. Therefore, in these instances as well as many others throughout the book, Gaposchkin weaves in extra material without losing the overall focus.

Overall, if one wants to read a biography of St. Louis, one should turn to the works of Jean Richard or Jacques Le Goff. However, if one is looking for a clear and engaging analysis of the formation of the cult of St. Louis that beyond the already sophisticated primary argument, encompasses and crystallizes many intellectual theories of middle ages, then I would gladly entreat the reader to find a copy of The Making of St. Louis: kingship, sanctity and crusade in the later middle ages by M. Cecilia Gaposchkin.

Edward Holt
Duke University