

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

---

History Faculty Research and Publications

History, Department of

---

4-2021

**Review of *The Lateran Church in Rome and the Ark of the Covenant: Housing the Holy Relics of Jerusalem* by Eivor Andersen Oftestad**

Lezlie Knox

Marquette University, lezlie.knox@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://epublications.marquette.edu/hist\\_fac](https://epublications.marquette.edu/hist_fac)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Knox, Lezlie, "Review of *The Lateran Church in Rome and the Ark of the Covenant: Housing the Holy Relics of Jerusalem* by Eivor Andersen Oftestad" (2021). *History Faculty Research and Publications*. 299.  
[https://epublications.marquette.edu/hist\\_fac/299](https://epublications.marquette.edu/hist_fac/299)

EIVOR ANDERSEN OFTESTAD, *The Lateran Church in Rome and the Ark of the Covenant: Housing the Holy Relics of Jerusalem; with an Edition and Translation of the "Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae"* (BAV Reg. Lat. 712). (Studies in the History of Medieval Religion 48.) Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2019. Pp. xv, 257. \$120. ISBN: 978-1-7832-7388-1. doi:10.1086/713754

Early in the twelfth century, the canons at the Church of Saint John Lateran in Rome advanced the claim that the Ark of the Covenant was housed inside the high altar at the Lateran, along with other objects from the Temple in Jerusalem. This fascinating study examines why they made this assertion, as well as how the nature of their argument changed over time as it was presented in different contexts. While primarily an intellectual history of the canons' arguments and their chapter's liturgical practices at the Lateran, Eivor Andersen Oftestad's book also addresses debates over ecclesiastical authority and the impact of the First Crusade in Western Europe. Five chapters evaluate the different contexts in which the text circulated, with three useful appendices addressing the manuscript tradition, comparisons between different versions of the text, and finally an edition and English translation of one of the representative versions of the *Descriptio Lateranensis Ecclesiae*. This mutable text provides insights into how arguments for the reform papacy and sacerdotal authority developed over the long twelfth century.

Oftestad contends that the canons initially composed an account of their church and its relics c. 1100 in response to the crusaders' conquest of Jerusalem and the subsequent need to defend Rome as its successor. But which or whose Rome? Oftestad coins the term *translatio templi* (drawing on medieval theories of *translatio imperii*) to show how the canons claimed ownership of relics from the Temple in Jerusalem to assert the Lateran Church's primacy over other papal churches. While earlier scholars also identified rivalry in the origins of the text, especially between the Vatican and Lateran, her evaluation of the manuscript tradition shows distinct contexts for the development of the *Descriptio's* arguments in different versions.

For example, "Il Mallone" (MS A. 70 in the Lateran's archives) is a compilation containing three versions of the *Descriptio* composed over the course of the twelfth century, now bound together with different works regularly consulted by the canons. Oftestad argues that they used shorter versions of the text as a script to engage visitors to the church in their argument for the church's role in establishing papal primacy (chap. 3). She argues that this Roman context demonstrates how the canons were participating in debates concerning sacerdotal authority by grounding papal power in the Lateran and its relics, rather than traditions such as the Donation of Constantine. However, that Roman framework was only one piece of the text's circulation. Oftestad also identifies a northern monastic context in which versions of the *Descriptio* circulated in reform circles (chap. 4). These manuscripts tend to include the description among texts related to the Holy Land and the Crusades. These different versions of the text shared a focus on authenticating the Lateran relics, thus confirming Rome's replacement of Jerusalem.

The last three chapters evaluate how the *Descriptio* changed as the Lateran canons addressed the reality of Jerusalem under Christian rule (1099–1187), as well as the relationship between their claims and Jewish history and theology. Earlier versions used Jewish traditions to identify the Ark as a physical object that was transported to Rome. This claim asserted a link to the biblical past (chap. 5). But later versions of the text reflect how the canons shifted from claims to have the literal object to attention in their liturgical celebrations on the allegorical transfer of authority in which the Lateran and its chapter replaced the Old Testament Temple and its priesthood (chap. 6). By the middle of the twelfth century, however, the canons were increasingly concerned about using this Jewish heritage to argue for their primacy and toned down earlier attention (chap. 7). John the Deacon thus produced a new version of the *Descriptio* between 1159 and 1181, which he dedicated to Pope Alexander III. His version

of the text confirmed the authenticity and antiquity of the relics, arguing that their translation to Rome was both a literal event and a signpost in salvation history, with the Lateran now identified as the New Temple.

Oftestad's book deserves praise for its close study of the *Descriptio* and its contexts. Her discussion also raises questions deserving more attention. Her account of the reforming papacy relies mainly on older scholarship ("two sides" or pope/antipope) and it would be interesting to consider the various reforming parties within Rome, including lay visitors and the Roman commune, as well as other ecclesiastical reformers, since the *Descriptio* offers a decidedly non-Petrine view of sacerdotal authority in its identification of the Lateran canons as the special clergy of the New Temple. The crusading context also deserves more attention, especially in the light of newer research on apocalypticism and crusading, as well as the Crusades, objects, and memory. Oftestad has presented a compelling argument for redating the origin of this work to the aftermath of the First Crusade, showing how much was at stake for ecclesiastical reformers in multiple settings.

LEZLIE KNOX, Marquette University