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Review of Helen E. Lunnon, East Anglian Church Porches and their Medieval Context.

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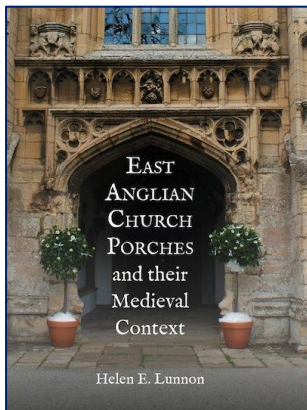
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Review of Helen E. Lunnon, *East Anglian Church Porches and their Medieval Context*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020. Pp. 315, 73 b/w, 1 line illus. \$95. ISBN 9781783275267.

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It may seem at first surprising that the church porch can be the subject of a hefty monograph, but Helen Lunnon's *East Anglian Church Porches and their Medieval Context* proves that there is plenty to say on this topic. This is the first book to consider the topic in over a century, since J.C. Wall's *Porches and Fonts* was published in 1912, and while Lunnon acknowledges the legacy of Wall's contributions throughout the book, *East Anglian Church Porches* is a very different type of project. While at the outset, the title suggests a study limited to only a particular region, the first two chapters, and much of the successive findings, are of relevance to English churches as a whole—one wonders whether the title does a disservice to this important book by suggesting such a limited sphere of relevance.

Lunnon's book challenges "the reductionist view that [porches] were little more than architectural preambles or convenient door coverings" (3), arguing instead that porches are "architectural introits, overtures or prologues, shaping our sense of the larger setting... implying what we are to think and how we should behave before and as we enter" (3). A porch, as Lunnon makes clear, is a building unto itself, akin to a gatehouse. That the porch is ontologically separate from the church itself is made clear in the example of Uffington (Oxfordshire) (**Fig. 1**), where the remains of exterior consecration crosses encompass the whole of the nave and chancel, but not the porch, implying that this space was not sanctified like the rest of the church. The text that follows is about much more than the stones that form porches, but the people who build them and the beliefs and behaviors they encourage. Lunnon's analysis is guided by phenomenology and sensory experience, a useful lens through which to help her reader understand these liminal spaces, neither indoor nor outdoor, both at one with the church building and separate. In spite of the seemingly narrow scope of the book's title, Lunnon's approach of emphasizing the interconnectedness between people and buildings (11) and



Figure 1 The south porch, the Church of St Mary, Uffington, Oxfordshire. Photo: CC BY-NC 2.0, [Michael Day](#).

methods for studying a church porch (14-17), offer valuable insights for approaching medieval buildings much more broadly.

East Anglian Church Porches comprises five chapters (plus introduction, conclusion, and appendix). The first two are broad, encompassing the precursors to the porch in Chapter 1, *The English Porticus* and Chapter 2, *Functions of Church Porches*. The remaining three chapters are dedicated to East Anglia, as promised in the title.

Chapter 1, *The English Porticus* provides a pre-history of the church porch, starting with Bede, who recorded that Augustine was buried in the north porticus of the church of Sts. Peter and Paul in Canterbury in 604. These pre-Conquest porticuses are contrasted with post-Conquest examples, which rather than being accessible only through the church itself, functioned as entrances (21). Lunnon acknowledges the sometimes-scant textual tradition that medieval art historians contend with, perceptively noting that the medieval people who left records for us were concerned with different questions and priorities than the ones that enthrall us modern viewers. One interesting way that Lunnon incorporates text into her inquiry about church porches is through an examination of medieval attitudes about King Solomon and his Temple, an archetype that, Lunnon argues, has a long shadow in thinking about buildings in the period. Influential in Europe when crusaders returned from the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099, Lunnon tells us that the Temple was an archetype, not a realistic model to follow (37). Therefore, by selecting key motifs to integrate was the mode for referencing Solomonic architecture in English churches, like the dimensions and moniker of the north porch at Salisbury Cathedral, called the *porta speciosa* (39-40).

The second chapter considers the function of church porches. Deploying varied evidence, Lunnon shows the diverse uses of church porches, including playing a role in the Palm Sunday procession, preparation for baptism, the churching of postpartum mothers, confession, marriage, judicial proceedings, education, burials, and the giving of alms. These activities are both sacramental and secular and find the porch at the heart of the functions of the church and the community.

The third chapter begins the zoomed in look at East Anglia, and discusses “how meaning was embedded in [porch] design” (100). Broadly, it is in this long chapter that Lunnon shows what porches looked like, accounting for changes of design from the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries, and the ways they were decorated and why. Lunnon shows the contrast between the porches at West Walton (**Fig. 2**) and Great Massingham, the two earliest East Anglian porches, both built in the 13th century. The former (modified to be made shorter after a south aisle extension in the 14th century), is solid-walled and contained, while the latter is open, with big lancets forming apertures between the interior and the elements on two sides, and a tall, open arch on the south. As different as these two examples appear formally, both utilize design motifs reminiscent of King Solomon’s “porch of pillars,” and Lunnon argues that this Solomonic motif was intentional on the part of



Figure 2 The south porch, the Church of St Mary, West Walton, Norfolk, England.
Photo: CC BY-SA 2.0, [Spencer Means](#).

designers and patrons (105). One wonders to what extent that users of the porch would have recognized this lofty association with porch spaces. While the West Walton and Great Massingham porches are shown to be tours de force of the genre, Lunnon shows that by the 14th century, porches had become more common, and were no longer only high-status buildings (107). The porches of the early 14th century had little exterior decoration; around the middle of the century, Lunnon identifies a trend toward greater elaboration, for instance with the glazing on the east and west walls at Besthorpe (unfortunately unillustrated). Variation is found in a handful of western porches, lateral tower porches, and timber porches. The latter were common to Suffolk due to the dearth of good building stone that causes the churches to be overwhelmingly built of flint. From about 1380 to the Reformation, Lunnon identifies another shift in East Anglian church porches, one which moves away from simplicity and towards a decorative richness exemplified by the likes of North Walsham, Lynn St Nicholas, and Fressingfield which are characterized by heraldry, statue niches for religious figures, and decorative combinations of ashlar and flint. In an extended section, Lunnon considers stone-vaulted porches and their relationship

with burial; she notes that vaults mark significance both symbolically and financially, and shows a correlation between vaulted porches and porch burials, such as in the case of Norwich St Laurence (137).

In chapter 4, Lunnon addresses the documentation of church porches. She begins by establishing the corpus and historiography of documentation of porches, which follows the typical pattern of medieval parish church architecture documentation in England—fairly limited and erratic in quality, with few documents accounting for very much of a porch building at all. While the general evidence is limited, Lunnon shows throughout the chapter that much can be gleaned from case studies of individual churches, and a combination of documentary, heraldic, antiquarian, and physical evidence of the fabric. Lunnon paints a picture of East Anglia as an economically prosperous region, though one not blessed with building stone besides the region's quintessential flint, which renders the architecture of medieval East Anglia recognizable and characteristic of its place. Statistical analysis of some of the most common features of church porches enables Lunnon to make a series of useful comparisons, which reveal that size and elaboration are not necessarily congruent. An emphasis is made throughout that porches are not considered "a poor relation to other parts of the church" (214), but "architecture of [their] own merit" (210).

Finally, chapter 5 evaluates the roles of the people involved in parish church commissioning and building through the documentary evidence of churchwarden's accounts and wills, and through the marks left on the buildings in the form of sculpture, flintwork inscriptions, heraldry, rebuses, and other motifs. Lunnon strays from East Anglia proper to the Essex town of Saffron Walden (**Fig. 3**), to consider churchwarden's accounts from the 15th century that discuss donations left for porch building. Through this example, Lunnon shows that the two patrons whose donations were used for building the porch did not have oversight over the design, and that the cost of the entire building project was considerably larger than two donations, therefore buy-in from the parish more broadly was necessary to execute such a project—a wish for a porch in a testament, as further examples show, was not a guarantee that it would be built. Lunnon's discussion of donors throughout this chapter complicates the way art history has typically viewed patronage, assuming agency of the single donor figure whose name is known, or whose heraldry is inscribed on a building, when the reality of the situation may be more complicated. In the case of parish church porches, it was the corporate parish that would decide what projects were executed, not the donors.

This is a thoughtful, clearly written book on a topic worthy of such careful attention. While it is generally well-illustrated with clear black and white photos, there are a few instances of significant examples from the text that are disappointingly unillustrated. Special mention should be made of the appendix, which collates written evidence for parish church porches in East Anglia from numerous sources. This is an invaluable resource for those interested in the parish church porch, and funding more generally, as well as providing a tremendous amount of information



Figure 3 The south porch, the Church of St Mary, Saffron Walden, Essex. Photo: CC BY 2.0 [Jim Linwood](#).

about who was commissioning church architecture in East Anglia and when. This appendix should serve as a model for books about the late medieval parish church, for which documentation exists in fragmented ways, often in archives, antiquarian sources, or seldom-accessible county archaeological journals.

Lunnon's book takes what seems at the outset to be a fairly narrow subject—the church porch—and makes a much broader point about the built environment, summed up thusly: “buildings are not neutral spaces, they are imbued with power and meaning of historic and contemporary making” (59). In this wide-ranging study that takes us from the porches of the Solomonic Temple to late medieval East Anglia, Lunnon shows us the layers of meaning that exist simultaneously in the “thick” social and architectural environment of the church porch. While the title of this book reflects that the historiography of English churches has, in a large part, been the purview of local historians, this undersells the impact of Lunnon's book, which offers insights for the study of buildings beyond East Anglia, and incorporates the church building past the threshold of the porch. 🐼