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Dr. Marc Morris

Edward I and the Knights of the Round Table

Scientific testing and modern historical scholarship have helped narrow down the answers to many of the questions surrounding that most mysterious artefact from the English past, the Winchester Round Table. Dendrochronology demonstrated that the wood dates from the thirteenth century. Most historians have therefore agreed that the Table was most probably made for Edward I. Martin Biddle, the leading expert on the Table's history, has gone further and proposed that it was produced to mark Edward's visit to Winchester in April 1290. This is now the orthodox view. Marc Morris, Edward I's latest biographer, disagrees. He prefers to date it to 1285. Most impressively, given the general paucity of documents for that period, he does so on the basis of new evidence. That evidence confirms that Edward held a major knighting ceremony at Winchester on 8 September 1285. It is even possible to identify some of the men, such as Hugh Despenser the elder, who were knighted on that occasion. Morris went on to link the knighting of these men to the completion of the conquest of Wales and to the ongoing controversy arising from Edward's use of the distraint of knighthood. He also speculated that the leading individual knighted in 1285 might have been the king's nephew and nearest adult male relative, John of Brittany. Morris thus concluded that the 1285 ceremony was larger, more public and more politically significant than the 1290 visit favoured by Biddle. In other words, just the sort of occasion for which such a culturally-charged piece of furniture might have been commissioned. During the discussion Simon Thurley asked about links with the re-exhumation of the bodies of 'Arthur' and 'Guinevere' at Glastonbury in 1278. Morris responded by suggesting that Edward had been keen to prove to the Welsh that Arthur really was dead and, just as more importantly, that he would remain so.

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