Space in the Medieval West: Places, Territories, and Imagined Geographies

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Space in the Medieval West: Places, Territories, and Imagined Geographies, this anthology consists of 11 papers initially presented at a three-day international symposium in 2009. It is the third collection of essays to emerge from the annual symposiums of the International Medieval Society of Paris (IMS-Paris). As president for the society and co-editor of the previous two publications, Meredith Cohen (UCLA) shares editorial duties for this volume with Fanny Madeline of Laboratoire de Mediévistique Occidentale de Paris (LAMOP), Paris I-Sorbonne.

Addressing the theme of space in the Middle Ages, the editors are joined by Dominique Iogna-Prat in their introduction. As a keynote speaker at the original event his collaboration here further confirms the ongoing official association between IMS-Paris and LAMOP. Judging from the diversity evident in their string of publications, it seems that a lively and productive scholarly community has gathered around this Paris-based symposium.

However, the editors must be commended for recognising the ease with which exciting exchanges can quickly become internalised and here they cast a wide international net in terms of authorship. A range of researchers have been brought together under the broad geographical remit of the Medieval West and five essays have been translated from French to English. The editors state it was never their intention to constrain studies according to current conceptions of national boundaries, although they accept that the majority of papers still squarely address the geographical area of France. Rather, in relation to other recent publications on the theme of medieval space, this concentration turns out to be a particular strength of the essay collection.

The editors' introduction presents a succinct survey of spatial thinking in recent scholarly discourse. Recognising the national variations in approach, they summarize the key developments in Anglo-American, British, French and German theoretical and methodological practice. This broad consolidation underscores the now familiar trope: 'medieval space could not be contained within a single paradigm' (p. 17). Therefore the volume also supports the view that medieval space cannot be viewed through a single disciplinary prism if it is to be properly understood. Exposing its contingent nature, authors are drawn from departments of

history, art history, architectural history, geography and archaeology.

Whilst acknowledging a theoretical indebtedness to Lefebvre's conceptual triad ('spatial practices', 'representations of space' and 'representational space') (1), the introduction lays out a specific challenge to his hegemonic point of view. Foregrounding alternative social groups and cultural forces, the anthology seeks to complicate the theorist's story of power and space, particularly in relation to the Church. In this the editors are explicit in their aim for the volume writing that 'Power was divided among sacred and secular realms, and space was not produced exclusively within either sphere' (p. 17).

Another common conceit across the papers is the necessity of contextualizing conceptions of space in relation to previous practice. Resting upon Hanawalt and Kolbiaka's assertion that medieval space is defined by 'change and flux' (p. 13), the volume is particularly strong in recovering the interrelations between these pasts and their corresponding presents, sometimes working exceptionally within the boundaries of limited surviving evidence. Although she is not referenced, such an approach surely sits well with Doreen Massey's thesis that that 'Space is a process ... an ongoing product of interconnections'.(2)

Taken together, these essays should serve to refine the usage of prominent theoretical models in the historical study of space. In doing so the collection positions itself alongside a growing body of literature that very usefully endeavours to offer a more nuanced account of the medieval spatial world. For recent examples see *Cities, Texts and Social Networks, 400-1500* edited by Caroline Goodson, Anne E. Lester and Carol Symes (3), or *Ritual and Space in the Middle Ages* edited by Frances Andrews.(4) In this way *Space in the Medieval West* complements existing scholarship in medieval studies and contributes to an increasingly diverse range of responses to the spatial turn.

The essays are grouped under three headings, considering space at progressively enlarged scales.

The first section, 'Places, monuments, and cities', examines architectural motifs, individual buildings and specific urban situations. On the whole, the essays are concerned with the interpretation and construction of symbolic space, specifically unpicking the production and implications of geometric order in design. Emanuele Lugli deftly tackles the meanings of the Roman centuriation in the Modena and Cremona cathedrals, making sense of the surprising lack of corroboration with the *Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum* in contemporary textual sources. A pairing of Hugh of Saint-Victor's literary description of the biblical Noah's ark with the rib vaulting of Notre-Dame enables Stefan Van Liefferinge to develop a rich discussion about the construction of spatial and geometric knowledge. More broadly, Robert Bork extends his previous work on gothic 'blueprints', sifting three bi-planar drawings of the 13th century for evidence of spatial practice on the draftsman's drawing board. Contextualising the formation of Utrecht's *kerkenkruis*, David Winter Ross rounds up the section by considering the legibility of architectural symbolism to the medieval observer.

Each of the papers creatively deploys surviving material, carefully balancing close analysis with a suggestive engagement with broader historical claims. Additionally, each paper very utilises a host of visual material in order to substantiate their argument (because the subject is the singular "each paper"). However I wonder if the illustrations, particularly those produced by the authors themselves, could have been more unified in their format. Perhaps a stronger visual connection would encourage the reader to approach the essays as a holistic group, rather than as a series of independent papers.

Part two, 'Spatial networks and territories', focusses on the communication and formation of space through words and texts. In a thoroughly researched essay, Anne Lunven convincingly argues that the 11th and 12th centuries saw a significant change in the spatial conception of ecclesiastical territory. On the basis of a detailed survey which traces the changing use of the words *plebs* and *parochia* across three Brittany dioceses, she stresses the continuity rather than the 'rupture' in the structuring of space around the Church. The next essay continues to work with the implicit spatial processes of communication in the 11th and 12th centuries. Looking in turn at the papacy, the Cistercians and the scholastic community, Thomas Wetzstein

contends that these three groups intentionally developed and maintained new epistolary communication networks for the purpose of spatial control. Continuing to probe these socio-spatial relationships, and theoretically reliant on Sarah Kay's concept of 'place of thought' (5), Ada-Maria Kuskowski uncovers what she calls 'invention' of a common legal and jurisdictional space in Northern France. She plots the extents of royal political power through a range of French *coutumiers*, and in doing so challenges the view that such legal documents are regionally insular in nature.

As a point of contact between all the papers, the editors observe that medieval space was 'rooted as much in the society of man as in the Heavenly Kingdom of Christianity' (p. 17). This section is especially effective in demonstrating that the Church was not the sole guardian of spatial knowledge in the Medieval West. Without minimising its obvious importance, the authors of these three papers make considerable headway in evaluating ecclesiastical practices in the light of a number of other critical contexts.

As the third and final section, 'Cartographies and imagined geographies' fittingly concludes the volume by expanding the field of vision once more, considering the geographical area of France through the widest lens.

The section begins with two fascinating essays. Both use maps as a means of explaining the changeable hierarchies that governed the representation of space. Sandra Saenz-Lopez Perez deciphers a particularly French identity in the Beatus Map of Saint-Sever, calling it the 'most eccentric' in this family of the Beatus maps. In a departure from the prevalent Hispanic-centralizing model, Perez considers the cultural agencies which spurned its 'local' character. Then, in tandem with Weitzstein's 'Masters of Space', Jean-Charles Ducene exposes the importance of transportation networks as a means of creating spatial knowledge. His essay foregrounds the textual and cartographical geographies of two 12th-century works by Al-Idrisi, produced for Roger II of Sicily. Ducene explores how the works were formulated as a result of what he terms 'spaces of circulation'. Next Nathalie Bouloux discusses the didactic nature of spatial representation in the Kingdom of France, calling for a greater understanding of the 'cultural milieus' implicit in a range of descriptive sources. Setting textual examples from scholarly and heraldic texts alongside the culture of map making in France, she argues for the inherent adaptability of Gallic space and its representation. The last essay of part three rounds off the collection. Here Catherine Nicolas moves further into the realm of 'mental space', tracking the development of the soul as a metaphorical space in the prose romances of the Holy Grail. Subtly interpreting *Perlesvaus* (*Haut Livre du Graal*) through the Augustinian paradigm of conversion, she unpicks the relationship between visible and invisible space in the Eucharist.

In summary, *Space in the Medieval West* serves to substantiate and complement existing studies whilst offering a number of fascinating new explorations into the iterative and contingent nature of space in the Middle Ages.

For those close to the field of spatial studies, this essay collection will no doubt prove a thought-provoking spur to continue to develop an increasingly diverse body of scholarship. The volume draws our attention to the importance of working out the implications of broader theories of space through detailed historical analysis. The editors have successfully brought together a group of essays which demonstrate the potential of alternative approaches and methodologies. In doing so the volume also offers a number of entry points into medieval constructions of space which will benefit those less familiar with work of this nature. The introduction is also particularly helpful in this respect. Frequently cited sources are collected together in an abridged bibliography that marks the conclusion of the volume.

Given the complementary nature of this group of essays and their carefully considered divisions, I would have perhaps liked to see more of an explicit dialogue develop between them. Only occasionally do internal references between authors surface. But this is a small consideration in the context of such an intriguing essay collection. I look forward to seeing how this expanding area of scholarship continues to evolve and of course anticipate further fruit from IMS symposiums in the coming years.

Notes

1. H. Lefebvre (trans. D. Nicholson-Smith), *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. D. B. Massey, *For Space* (London, 2005), p. 107.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Cities, Texts and Social Networks, 400-1500*, ed. C. Goodson, A. Lester and C. Symes (Farnham, 2010).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Ritual and Space in the Middle Ages: Proceedings of the 2009 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. F. Andrews (Donington, 2011).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. S. Kay, *The Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry* (Philadelphia, PA, 2007).[Back to \(5\)](#)

Both editors would like to acknowledge the review with appreciation for its very positive tenor.

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