

## City and Cosmos: the Medieval World in Urban Form

**Review Number:** 906

**Publish date:** Friday, 30 April, 2010

**Author:** Keith Lilley

**ISBN:** 9781861894410

**Date of Publication:** 2009

**Price:** £25.00

**Pages:** 256pp.

**Publisher:** Reaktion Books

**Place of Publication:** London

**Reviewer:** Frances Andrews

Most medievalists would be able to cite an example of the close parallels in symbolic thinking about the city and world in the Middle Ages, whether along the lines of ideas of Rome as *caput mundi* or Augustine's *Two cities*. In *City and Cosmos*, Keith Lilley sets out to educate historians of medieval urbanism with a more detailed account of such medieval ideas on the city as macro- or microcosm and ends with a plea for the relevance of medieval Christian understandings of the city to modern inter-faith relations. On the way he argues that '[t]he cosmogenic parallels between founding a town and founding a world are ... plain, not only in the process of urban formation but also in the use made of geometry to fashion built form' (pp. 93–4). So the parallels evident in metaphor and moral or political treatises are here understood in terms of their potential practical implications. In place of a conventional analysis of the use of architectural allegory in literature he takes such analogies out of the text and suggests that the parallels reveal the kind of thinking which drove design (eg. P. 126).

A great deal of interdisciplinary work and knowledge is brought to bear. Lilley has read very widely – from studies of ritual to manuals of geometry, debates about liturgical processions to treatises on good government – though he is clearly most at home in the world of medieval urban planning. After a brief introduction to Plato's *Timaeus*, 'the foundation of medieval cosmology and microcosmism' (p. 7), Calcidius' translations, and 12th-century neoplatonists, part one explores the imagined city-cosmos, beginning, justifiably, with Jerusalem and with maps. The symmetry of the ways in which these portray the world and the holy city of Jerusalem (round or square) are outlined to demonstrate that 'they share a sacred geometry' (p. 35). In particular, the circles of *mappamundi* and the circular form of the city represent 'cosmological time as well as space' (p. 36) and are, he argues, closely related to each other.

Lilley is seeking to link mental maps with the streets of actual cities and towns. This works at its best with new towns, planned as markers of lordship or to house a burgeoning population. His discussion of the laying out of such settlements in part two (the section closest to his own earlier work) begins with a schematic account of the lengthy bureaucratic process, used as a means to argue that the central role belonged to the sovereign lord(s). This leads him to draw the parallel between this creative process and that of 'the Lord' in creating the world, like a city (p. 84). That this was a possible way of imagining the urban world in the Middle Ages seems uncontroversial, but the practical implications he draws from such a combination of sacred geographies are less persuasive. As he himself points out, 'written records made at the time are not

especially forthcoming on who was doing what, particularly so for those stages in the process lower down the chain of command which were concerned with the designing and surveying of the new town' (p. 85). Planning and policy depend on continuity of authority (an efficient bureaucracy) and reliable communications; both were possible in the late Middle Ages but neither was as constant as it became in the modern world. Some of the literary images cited as inspiration for the appropriate form of the physical city were probably intended in allegorical terms, often in reference to Heaven (undoubtedly often thought of as a city), or to the human population or a city, rather than the nature of the street plan, though of course it is reasonable to suppose that these ideas may have been mined for other reasons. Lilley wisely sidesteps these problems of intention/reception by turning to geometry, part of the *quadrivium* of the liberal arts, with long intellectual and practical traditions. Here he introduces the most compelling evidence for his thesis: the professionalisation of planning. He cites, for example, contemporary manuals providing instructions for tasks such as how 'to calculate the number of houses to be obtained from a known surface' (p. 88) and the use of surveyors tools such as the quadrant or the *groma* (a Roman cross-shaped tool used for establishing right angles and plotting lines). Where there is good written evidence – as ever Italy figures prominently (in particular the work on the Florentine new towns by David Friedman) – it is architectural professionals or advisors who are found at work. It is therefore no great leap to suggest that even where there is no such written record, the forms of towns themselves, especially those based on root-two geometry, may show that architects were responsible (p. 90) and if not architects then surveyors, either lay practitioners using ropes and walking the site to measure it or experts using geometrical techniques. He draws parallels with the planning of cathedrals, where, he states, root-two geometry was also used (but this sort of geometrical argument is not undisputed: see for example, reactions to Marvin Trachtenberg's *Dominion of the Eye. Urbanism, Art, and Power in Early Modern Florence* (1)). Even if the geometry works, the problem lies, as he acknowledges (p. 90), in proving that these architects and surveyors, if employed at all, had anything more than a contractual link with the lord(s) who employed them, or discussed these works in such a way that would make the lord(s) the 'creator(s)'. Parallels from the work of art historians might here add to the analysis of creative ties between such patrons and 'designers' or the *modo et forma* copying processes, where what was at stake for the lord(s) involved was equalling or surpassing an existing project (if not keeping up with the Joneses).

Chapter four tackles this issue by focusing on the already mentioned handbooks of geometry, to show that they linked the practical work of architects and surveyors with the divine work of the creator of the world (p. 95). It is in the discussions of the 12th-century Parisian canon and intellectual Hugh of St Victor's *practica geometriae* that the link between geometry and the cosmos/cosmography comes most evidently to the fore: geometry as planimetry, and altimetry is matched with cosmimetry, the measurement of the cosmos/the world. These ideas were present both in widely used handbooks and more academic works, so that Lilley concludes that 'those individuals who we know were creating new towns in the Middle Ages could not easily have overlooked the cosmological dimensions of geometrical knowledge which informed their thinking and their work' (p. 113). Yet, as he later accepts, there were 'different kinds of surveyors working on laying out the new towns' (p. 125), and not all of them could have been aware of (or would have cared about) these parallels. Lilley then turns to the medieval use of versions of Roman surveying manuals (the *corpus agrimensores*) to consider the cosmological symbolism of the principles, instruments and practices of surveyors. It would have made sense to put this earlier evidence before the discussion of the *practica* texts, though it is presumably placed here because it allows him to move straight to the Roman style instruments used. He suggests for example, that the 'cosmological and Christian symbolism' of the cross-shaped *groma* 'would surely have been apparent' (p. 124).

Part three turns to the city–cosmos binary as it was lived, exploring topographies and uses of space. This is presumably intended to allow Lilley to encompass the more complex urban landscapes of long established cities. Looking for analogies between city and macrocosmic order leads him to Lucian of Chester's description of his home city or Remigio de' Girolami's description of Florence (here, rather surprisingly, quoted from an anthology of translated sources). In both cases the city is imagined as a body symbolizing the cosmos. This chapter thus includes a discussion of territory familiar to most medievalists and not just to

historians of political thought: the equation of a city's political constitution with a 'body politic' and its connection to the spatial 'body' of the city through processions, used to legitimate political authority by the 'head'. The reader is taken swiftly through treatises on government, which are linked back to classical ideas of the body politic. There are slightly uncomfortable switches between the more autonomous signorial or communal urban worlds of Italy and the city in the context of a kingdom such as England (for example p. 143), though the reading in England of texts such as the Florentine Brunetto Latini's *Livre dou Tresor* perhaps justifies the transition. The chapter ends with two sections which are a still more rapid discussion of the way in which laws were used to establish social and spatial divisions in cities, as for example between the French and English in late 11th-century Hereford, or in the widespread exclusion of lepers and prostitutes, beyond the 'moral boundary' marking the edge of the body politic. He thus concludes that 'the body of the medieval city was a lived microcosm, functionally and hierarchically ordered and orchestrated by a ruling body politic whose instruction – it was believed – came from God' (pp. 156–7). The discussion of the symbolism of marginalising in the moral topography of a city is surprisingly bereft of secondary literature, in a field certainly not short of material. Lilley uses Bronislaw Geremek's *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris* (2), but could have refined his discussion by reference to the vast literature inspired by R.I. Moore's classic work *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (3), or Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common women: prostitution and sexuality in Medieval England* (4), or indeed, case-studies of particular contexts, such as – to take just one – David C. Mengel, 'From Venice to Jerusalem and Beyond: Milí? of Krom?ž? and the Topography of Prostitution in Fourteenth-Century Prague'.(5)

The last chapter turns to the performance of the embodied city in ritual displays, focusing in particular on rituals staged for the feast of Corpus Christi. Lilley disarms potential critics, who might underscore the potential for conflict over the nature of the body, by arguing that ritual performances present an idealised and symbolic unification of the urban body (the point is most fully explicated in the notes on p. 226). He also suggests, rather surprisingly, that the 'routes and locales of medieval civic rituals' have not been studied and that the 'performed geographies of processions and their meaning have been ... overlooked' (p. 164) Yet here, for the first time, there is a strong sense of the historiographical context, provided by reference to debates about the common or divergent origins of processions and mystery plays and the patterning of routes onto the city landscape. He focuses on famous ritual processions, including those in Bruges or Würzburg, and equally well-known plays such as those performed in the cities of Beverley and York. He argues, in the case of York, for example, that the reason the particular routes were chosen 'must lie in the desire to keep the two routes as one – the civic pageant and the religious procession', avoiding the most direct route in the interests of reconstructing 'the shaft' (the body) and 'arms' of Christ's cross (p. 174). As he would perhaps admit, it might also be that the participants simply wished to process past the Minster, the largest and most significant building in the city, where relics were on view and indulgences obtainable, as a way to underline the grandeur of the occasion. Whatever the possible symbolic reading, dull pragmatism may also have played a now obscure role.

The argument for the practical implications of the analogy between city and cosmos is made by an accumulation of approaches – from maps, through surveying, to political and moral treatises – some of which, as has been suggested here, are more effective than others. The examples range across Latin Europe from Wales and Winchelsea to Italy, Poland and beyond. There are some wonderful illustrations and they are an important part of the argument. It is a pity therefore that they are often remote from the pertinent text. Sometimes this is down to the inevitable grouping of colour plates in one section, or because a figure is referred to more than once, but not always. There are also occasional signs that production was rushed: Hugh of St Victor's work is called *Practical Geometry* on pages 95, 121, 124 and *practica geometriae* on pages 96 and 115. Matthew Paris' famous image of king Offa directing the builders of St Albans abbey is included to underline the point that kings and lords were conceived as directors of works, but is here unhelpfully labelled simply as 'thirteenth-century miniature' (it is identified in the back of the volume photo acknowledgements as 'Trinity College Dublin MS 177 f 59v' but again without naming Matthew Paris).

The judgements about what to leave out are at times unsettling: a lack of contextual detail, for example, already evident in the introduction, has the potential to become frustrating. References to 'the Trier and

Cambrai manuscripts of the ninth century' (p. 16) or to authors such as Hyginus (p. 119), without further gloss, are examples of a tendency which will leave the reader unfamiliar with particular sources wondering about chronology and context (which Trier and Cambrai manuscripts? Are they the only ones? Does he know about the others...?). The whole piece also has awkward in-text cross-referencing, which could appropriately have been relegated to the footnotes, or sometimes have been avoided altogether by reordering the sequence of the discussion (putting the *corpus agrimensores* texts before the discussion of treatises on geometry, putting all the discussion of processions in one place).

Cosmological thinking is only one way of intellectualising townscapes. The inheritance of Rome was another (cities claiming to be the 'second Rome' abound). It is often tempting to dislodge such arguments about symbolic thinking by reference to pragmatism, though the result may be unnecessarily destructive. The problem here is that the parallels he proposes are possible, but not necessary. As he observes, 'most urban mapping was undertaken after the fact' (p. 89). Greater acknowledgment of the potential for alternatives, as of the limitations of the symbolic city-cosmos link would have made the central argument more convincing.

In his concluding pages, Lilley refers briefly to ways of thinking about the city in non-Christian cultures, some of which helped shape Christian ideas of the city (Judaism, Islam). As he says, 'these influences on how the city was understood in the Latin West deserve closer scrutiny' (p. 186). This is not because they 'still have a strong resonance even a millenium later' (p. 187). It is, after all, only about 700 years since many of his examples. Nor is it because they have the potential to provide a common ground between Abrahamic and other religions. Rather, they are worth studying, like much of the material here, because they would provide a fuller picture of thinking about the city and the cosmos in the medieval Latin west.

## Notes

1. Marvin Trachtenberg, *Dominion of the Eye. Urbanism, Art, and Power in Early Modern Florence* (Cambridge, 1997).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Bronislaw Geremek, *The Margins of Society in Late Medieval Paris* (Cambridge, 1987).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford, 1987).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1996).  
[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. David C. Mengel, 'From Venice to Jerusalem and beyond: Milí? of Krom??íže and the topography of prostitution in fourteenth-century Prague', *Speculum*, 79 (2004), 407–42.[Back to \(5\)](#)

### Other reviews:

h-net

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php> [2]

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/906>

### Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/4742>

[2] <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25839>