Architecture, Festival and Time in the Medieval European City

The Legacy of Sacred and Secular Processional Order from the Middle Ages

Christian Frost

In this paper I will argue that church processions and civic parades of the medieval period were understood as an opportunity to reveal a broad spectrum of spatial and temporal experience that linked real places with their tropelogical, allegorical and anagogical partners;[1] as well as the time of origins with lived time; and the end of time with eternity within which everything else is enfolded. Jacques Le Goff writing in the 1970s explained this continuity of place and time evident in the medieval period by saying: 'the Middle Ages not only confused heaven and earth – or, rather, treated them as a spatial continuity – but they treated time as merely a moment of eternity. There was thus temporal continuity analogous to that of space. Time belonged only to God and could only be lived out'.[2] And, because of these ambiguities, he argued, 'the vital impulses characteristic of the Middle Ages culminate in the Medieval Festival.'[3]

The continuation of these liturgical – and perhaps even sacramental – traditions within later European culture (and even to the present) was facilitated during the Renaissance when the emerging civic culture of the period – including new and modified buildings and spaces of the medieval city – adapted various ceremonial traditions from this 'darker' medieval past. Processions, parades, festivals and performances, some of which had survived the ravages of barbarian occupation and could trace their origins to the classical past (such as the events on St Marks Day),[4] were brought into the city streetscapes and together began to structure the

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[1] The allegorical reading of scripture, along with the literal, tropelogical and anagogical levels of meaning, had been widely accepted since John Cassian's (*circa* 360–*circa* 435) *Conlationes,* originally conceived as a guide to monastic Bible study. He linked these four ways to interpret a text with Jerusalem. John Cassian, 'Conlationes', in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers Vol. XI*, trans. H. Wace and P. Schaff (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1894), 438

[2] J. Le Goff, *Medieval Civilisation* (2001), 165. '…reality was not that the heavenly world was as real as the earthly world, it was that they formed one world, in an inextricable mixture which caught men in the toils of a living supernatural'

[3] Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 14.

[4] On St Mark's Day, 25 April, a procession with the Major Litany had been a part of the annual cycle of festal celebrations throughout Europe since the second council of Aachen in the ninth century. It had been adapted from a Roman fertility feast of the same date. The Christian processional ceremonies of St Mark's Day came primarily from Rome where the Roman feast of Robigo also involved prayers to protect the crops. T. Bailey, *The Processions of Sarum and The Western Church* (1971), 94. See also J.D. Chambers, *Divine Worship in England in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries Contrasted with that of the Nineteenth* (London: Pickering, 1877), 209.

emerging civic culture – albeit now in a Christian milieu. Such urban festivals and their architecture, therefore, offer an opportunity to recover and imagine the civic experiences of the Middle-Ages which, although often masked by political, social and religious conflict, fashioned opportunities for the medieval burghers to discover communities and identities beyond normal, mundane temporal boundaries,[5] and revealed the 'time out of time' experiences that characterise such acts of civic belonging. Take for example the Rogation processions of Salisbury which were a significant part of the city's liturgical calendar during the thirteenth Century.

Salisbury Rogation Processions[6]

Among the complete festive calendar for Salisbury, the processions for the three Rogation Days, and the one for Ascension Day[7] which immediately followed, were described (like the earlier rural feasts) cardinally, as well as in terms of leaving, returning, and stops for Masses. From these instructions, and the surviving medieval layout of the city their paths can be relatively clearly discerned alongside some the rules for processional order.

In Salisbury it appears that each of the days involved a journey to one of the three city parish churches for a mass, and then a return journey to the cathedral through the commercial and civic activity of the marketplace, finally passing the detached clocktower in the Close so that by the end of the third day, the whole of Salisbury had been mapped out and blessed. As well as revealing a symbolic order centred on an untamed dragon (representing nature), and the Lion (referencing the Gospel of St Mark)[8] these three processions echoed the medieval consecration

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[5] Medieval towns we also places of liberty. For example, in medieval Germany, any serf who had run away from his lord and lived in a city for a year and a day was considered free – 'Stadtluft macht frei nach Jahr und Tag'.

[6] The reconstructions of medieval Salisbury I will discuss here emerged from research published in *Time, Space and Order: The Making of Medieval Salisbury* (2009) and were based upon interpretations of contemporary liturgical documents and the material legacy evident in the surviving buildings and city spaces.

[7] Ascension Day is a moveable feast celebrating the Ascension of Jesus into Heaven and is traditionally celebrated on a Thursday, the fortieth day of Easter, preceded by the three Rogation days.

[8] All though there was some discrepancy across the ages, each of the four gospels was represented by a different image culled from Ezekiel 1:10 and Revelation 4:7. In the medieval period in England The Gospel of St Matthew was represented by a man because it was though that it exemplified the sympathetic and humble actions of Christ, St Mark was represented by the Lion because it focussed the lion roaring in the wilderness and on the Resurrection. St Luke, concentrating on Christ's Sacrifice was represented by a bull, and St John, an eagle, represented the soaring and confident nature of the Christ as word – the *logos*.

rites of a church[9] – that also included a triple circumnavigation – which were believed to enact the birth and transfiguration of Christ, as well as the soul's first infusion of Grace.[10] Thus the architecture of the city accommodated the burghers' experience of a distinct 'time out of time' created by the event itself that was both repetitive and new, and circular and linear. Gadamer describes this type of festival time thus:

> It is in the nature, at least of periodic festivals, to be repeated. We call that the return of the festival. But the returning festival is neither another, nor the mere remembrance of the one that was originally celebrated. The originally sacral character of all festivals obviously excludes the kind of distinction that we know in the time-experience of the present, memory and expectation. The time experience of the festival is rather its celebration, a present time *sui generis*.[11]

Therefore, in the context of Salisbury's Christian setting, Rogation's threefold processional order linked the original foundation rites of the church and the city, the Trinity, and the three most familiar aspects of time – past (memory), present, and future (expectation). This, more ontological understanding of time in relation to experience was known in the Middle-Ages through the works of St Augustine (354–430), particularly in his *Confessiones* which, as it shaped the perception of the landscape of time throughout the period, now needs to be discussed in a little more detail.

Augustine's discourse on time and its relevance to processions

Augustine argues that understanding the meaning and purpose of Creation (and hence time) is not universally accessible but depends on degrees of enlightenment – i.e. although eternity preceded and enfolded the creation of world time (which was coeval with the creation of the world),[12] and thus the essence of things-in-the-world were dependent upon these eternal

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[9] Abbot Suger's final prayer at the end of the consecration ceremony for St Denis reveals this temporal significance of the consecration of the church. 'By these and similar visible blessings, Thou invisibly restorest and miraculously transformest the present into the Heavenly Kingdom. Thus, when Thou "shalt have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father" (I Corinthians 15:24), mayest Thou powerfully and mercifully make us and the nature of the angels, Heaven and earth, into one republic …'. Abbot Suger of St Denis, *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St. Denis and its Art Treasures*, trans. and ed. E. Panofsky (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), *De Consecratione*, VII.

[10] L. Bowen, 'The Tropology of Medieval Dedication Rites' in *Speculum*, Vol. XVI (1941), 473.

[11] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (Sheed and Ward, 1979), 110.

[12] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 162.

principles, comprehension of these principles was not open to all, indeed, some aspects of this understanding would never be accessible to mortals.

In the *Confessions* Augustine attempts to describe this temporal hierarchy in terms of his own experience. In book eleven he links the God of eternity – the first person of the Trinity – with his own *past* struggles within worldly time; in book twelve he links the God of the Word (Logos) – the second person of the Trinity – with the desire to come closer to the Logos in the *present*; and in book thirteen, he links God who acts through the church – the third person of the Trinity – with humanity 'acting out its redemption in the church' under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the *future*, so that together, these three books represented the three aspects of time: past, present and future. However, Augustine also realised that in terms of worldly experience, both past and future time could never be 'present' existentially, and therefore, he continues, 'we cannot say rightly that time *is* except by reason of its impending state of *not being*',[13] and out of such a statement emerges a problem. How could qualities be assigned to time if it has no presence in being? Duration (*spatium*) was a quality of time 'yet to be' or that 'already has been' but the only aspect of time which was 'present', had no quality or duration, 'For if [time's] duration were to be prolonged, it could be divided into past and future, however, when it is present, it has no duration.'[14] Therefore, Augustine concluded that time must be in the mind or soul (*in animo*) and so began to see it in terms of relationships rather than absolutes; *praesens de praeteritis* – the present of past things was memory (*memoria*), *praesens de praesentibus* – the present of present things was direct perception (*contuitus*) and *praesens de futuris* – the present of future things was expectation (*expectatio*). Thus, in time, the mind is stretched in three directions that moves from the present – *praesens intentio* through an *affectio* – an image or sign in the mind – towards what Augustine describes as a *distentio animi*,[15] a distension of the soul.

Already in this brief exploration of Augustine's treatise it is possible to see how the time of festivals – linking origins, repetition, fulfilment, and place within the liminal horizon described in

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[13] St Augustine, *Confessiones* 11.14:17. ut scilicet non vere dicamus tempus esse, nisi quia tendit non esse?
[14] St Augustine, *Confessiones* 11.15:20. nam si [tempus] extenditur, dividitur in praeteritum et futurum; praesens autum nullum habet spatium.
[15] St Augustine, *Confessiones*, 11.26:33.

relation to Salisbury's Rogation days could contribute to the participation – if not total understanding – of such ideas. Even if the whole exercise was enacted in some species of real time and was fraught with imperfections fashioned by a limited perceptual horizon, the processions, moving through time and the architecture of the city, participated in the time-out-of-time shifting from *intentio* to *affectio* leaving an impression on the mind of the participant, as well as a trace on the city, all revealed through an action which reinforced links with God and eternity. The whole festival can be thus understood as a primary means of revealing man's orientation towards God and the good and just city – literally, anagogically and temporally – hence Le Goff's argument for the significance of Medieval festival for the era's 'vital impulses'.

However, adapting or creating festivals that manifested these temporal horizons – such as Salisbury's modification of the earlier rural Rogation rites – was not always possible. In some towns and cities local traditions, established familial or religious rivalries, as well as the existing built fabric, meant that such innovative practices were often impractical. In such cases other candidates for festive adaptations were targeted such as in Coventry, for example – which had existed as a town since the Viking era. Here the feast of Corpus Christi, with associated processions, parades and performances was developed and then, after the Reformation, fragments of its iconography used by the Tudors to link their status as royalty – politically and temporally – to the celestial hierarchy.

(This will be discussed further in the main paper)

Conclusion

It is clear that the significance of medieval festivals – and the architecture that accommodated them – remained valid during the Renaissance and that, as a result, it can be fairly argued that the Renaissance understanding of representation within art as well as in architecture and festivals was never limited 'pictorial perspective' that has often been characterised as epitomising the time, but participated in more nuanced ideas related to *perspectiva naturalis*[16] or 'natural perspective' that had originated in medieval developments in light, optics,

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[16] Also known as *construzione legittima*

movement and being. Indeed, it can be argued that in the experience of festival, even today such ideas are still accessible in similar ways.

However, the obscuring of such inherited depth of understanding in this, and other aspects of culture following the Renaissance, was in part due to the desire of many contemporary thinkers to separate themselves from their immediate intellectual forebears. But it also emerged from the conviction that the newly emerging civic (or city) cultures of Europe (excepting, perhaps, their festivities) had more in common with Greece and Rome – evidenced in the classical texts resurfacing across Europe at the time – than with the more recent traditions and the architecture inherited from existing, predominantly feudal, town culture. Hence, new 'modern' ideas of architectural, spatial and temporal order were often syncretically grafted onto these medieval – and paradoxically sometimes classically derived – traditions in such a way that the Renaissance was able to take full credit their genesis and, sometime inadvertently, play a part in their dilution or loss altogether. Thus, the obfuscation of this cultural heritage has assisted in the perpetuation of the myth of a backward age, positioned somewhere between the golden age of the classical world and a new enlightened time of thought, science and discovery in the growing urban communes of Europe rather than as a vibrant period that developed temporal and spatial urban experiences that addressed ontological ideas of belonging that remain relevant today.

While the festival still offers the same spatial and temporal release from rationality, in the modern world, recognition of this is more difficult. We remain, in modern society, cornered by the certainty of scientific knowledge, and discussions of power and politics in which descriptions of the soul are limited to poetic representations that do not, or cannot, offer an edifying balance between the past and the future which, as St Augustine argues, in themselves are never present, and so have no being.[17] In such a vacuum formed by scientific certainty, time – limited by the narrow experience of mortality – can become a form of terminal illness – for both us and the environment in which we live. It offers no succour to the ever-changing processes of civilisation or any hope beyond the beating of our hearts, and ultimately defies any vision of eternity that reaches beyond knowledge *'in'* the world (existence) that might extend to

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[17] St Augustine, *Confessiones*, 11.14:17: 'ut scilicet non vere dicamus tempus esse, nisi quia tendit non esse?'

knowledge '*of*' the world (being) – or indeed ignorance of it. The opportunity to experience a break from this is this gift that the festival offers everyman. Its temporality as a 'time out of time', its familiarity and its peculiarity, its uniqueness coupled with its repetition, reveals aspects of being that transcend doctrine and existence. That such activities are linked to the familiar spaces of the city and in their enactment is critical to understanding the possibility of the urban landscape and its capacity to contribute to such relief.

The medieval mind had no such problem. Salvation was possible and therefore the world as lived and eternity were linked together in 'a living supernatural', articulated by St Augustine in his *Confessiones* where he argued that 'time exists in the soul',[18] and that because the soul was eternal, so was time – even though it could not be experienced as such by mortals. Given the complexity of such ideas and the difficulties that would emerge in explaining them to the average burgher – particularly those who most needed the solace of the church – the church developed the traditions of the classical world using its processional, ceremonial and ritual practice to offer direct experiences rather than explanations. Festival praxis was not something reflective that demanded afterthought, but a series of events that left 'impressions', thus allowing the populace at large to benefit from the consolation of God's grace. That such events were structured with a temporal as well as spatial rigour is often overlooked, but when viewed in this light, such a recognition offers a better understanding of the way in which Christian ideas of time were brought into the emerging Medieval city and offered their praxis to the Renaissance world that inherited them and ultimately passed them along to us.

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[18] *in animo*.