



Space

Hosted by the Institute of Mediaeval Studies, University of St Andrews on 24th November 2012



Report on proceedings by Erin Maglaque

The Society for the Study of Modern Languages and Literature jointly organized a one-day workshop with the British School at Rome, hosted by the Institute of Mediaeval Studies at the University of St Andrews. The workshop, which focused on the space of the Mediterranean city, is the first of three planned to investigate different aspects of the urban history of the medieval Mediterranean; later workshops will explore urban religious histories, and the connectivity between cities across the Mediterranean world.

Presentations ranged across time, space, and disciplinary boundaries, from archaeological approaches to the baths and forum of a first-century Roman colonia in Spain, to the marketplaces of early Abbasid Baghdad, to political factionalism enacted in the piazze of late medieval Bologna. Two central questions emerged, however, from these diverse presentations. First, how can we understand the medieval experience of the Mediterranean city? And second, how can we understand the medieval urban experience as dynamic in time?

Each of the presenters offered interesting and often differing methodological approaches to researching the medieval experience of urban space. Dr. Revell, presenting her archaeological research on first- and second-century Colonia Clunia Sulpica, suggested that uncovering the relationship between materiality and performance was particularly important: how did the inhabitants of Clunia actively reproduce Roman imperial political ideology in the material fabric of their city? Similarly, Prof. Magdalino asked whether we could determine a level of Byzantine urban planning of Constantinople from a comparison between its physical environment - its central arteries, city gates, public monuments, and crossroads - and surviving literary descriptions of the city. Prof. van Steenberg focused on the physicality of the urban centre of Mamluk Cairo, looking at the continuous use of a plaza, the Bayna L-Qasrayn, and its physical relationship to the surrounding thoroughfares and alley. In each of these papers, the relationship between the physicality of the city and performance within it (whether ritual, political, or ceremonial) was a central question.

These questions about the urban built environment intersected with several other approaches. Dr. Revell, for example, was interested in situating the relationship between materiality and performance within larger questions about the place of the local within an imperial political and administrative network. Participants were particularly interested in the implications for the differentiation between public and private space in Islamic cities raised by Prof. van Steenberg's investigations into the winding, dark alleys of Cairo. This question of the differentiation between spaces within the city was integral to Prof. Kennedy's presentation, also focused on the Islamic world, in which he asked how urban governments made money from the commercial spaces of the city. Central to this question was the ways in which commercial and residential spaces within the city were differentiated, a process

which touched on the ways in which the public and the private were physically produced in the fabric of the city.

Particularly interesting was the methodological nexus between proximity and distance, and related to this, the experience of being inside vs. being outside the city, approaches which were raised in several papers and which were debated in the questions and roundtable session. The use of the proximity/distance approach to define the experience of urban space was suggested by Prof. Trevor Dean in his paper on the piazza and the court in medieval Italian cities. Dr. Patrick Lantschner, also taking the Italian city as his focus, looked at the relationship between territorial definitions of space and political and social organization, through factional disputes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; this led to questioning the role of territorial definition in urban history, and, in the discussion that followed, problematizing the inside/outside, city/suburb, and even city/state dialectics. Using the idea of proximity to investigate the differentiation of spaces within the city, and the relationship of the city to its suburbs, region, and state, became a highly suggestive possible approach in the roundtable.

Perhaps one of the most interesting strands of enquiry emerging from the workshop was that focusing on placing the medieval urban experience on a dynamic temporal scale. Dr. Revell initially suggested that the continuous history of Mediterranean cities could lead to ahistorical investigation, and suggested that a historicist, contextual approach to the lifespan of buildings - their reuse, development, and abandonment - was particularly important. The production of space over time also was central to several presentations, including Prof. Kennedy's research on the differentiation of commercial space by the state, Prof. Dean's paper on the ways in which choreographic, parade, and transactional spaces were produced and differentiated, and Prof. van Steenberg's look at the production of a political 'lieu de mémoire' that was built upon social memories of victory and dynasty across centuries. David Rundle suggested in the roundtable that perhaps 'the city's sense of time' was an equally appropriate theme for the workshop, and that the structuring of time within the city walls and the way that time could be spatially instantiated in an urban environment, were common questions throughout the presentations.

Each of these different and intersecting methodological approaches to understanding the medieval experience of urban space, and historicizing that experience across time, seemed to crystallize around the central problem of the relationship between identity - individual and communal - and the city. How does an individual form ideological commitments to differing political, social, economic, and imperial organizations? How do these organizations impact and map onto the physical environment of the city, and, recursively, how does the materiality of the city structure the organization of such groups? How does this change across time, both in cities with continuous histories and those which are highly fragmented or interrupted? And what happens when these cities are highly connected geographically around the Mediterranean? The methodological possibilities raised at this workshop certainly offer some very interesting perspectives from which to explore these questions, which will no doubt continue to be debated at later workshops.

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