



Space

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



Report on proceedings by Steven Watts

On a brisk and bright Saturday morning in St Andrews, over forty participants gathered together for the first of three workshops on ‘The Mediterranean City’. Jointly organized by SSMLL and the British School of Rome, the workshop sought to facilitate discussion between historians on the nature of space as it pertains to Mediterranean cities and towns from Classical antiquity to the Later Medieval Ages. Thanks to six thought-provoking papers and the participants’ readiness to engage in spirited dialogue, the workshop proved to be a successful start to a worthwhile enterprise.

The first session was entitled ‘Concepts of Urban Space’ and featured papers by Louise Revell and Paul Magdalino. As one might expect from their respective academic vocations as an archaeologist and a historian, their approaches differed significantly. Louise Revell discussed the plan of a Roman town in Spain, focusing on the use of monuments in order to gain a sense of their ‘emblematic’ function and how they might have made a town ‘Roman’. Paul Magdalino drew our attention to Constantinople, providing a variety of literary sources, including a fascinating reflection on the socio-economic role of porticoes, to tease out evidence for systematic urban planning.

The following discussion was most lively when it centred on the relationship between the design of a space and its use. Of particular interest was the acknowledgement that public buildings made of stone—unlike those built from organic materials—had the potential to outlast their initial purposes. This raised the question of how one could use future renovation as an indicator of change in use. In ascertaining the purposes behind planning and the significance of space, we were also given the helpful reminder that the ‘bird’s eye view’ is not necessarily a beneficial perspective. As Magdalino’s presentation of modern ‘mapping’ suggested, we must be careful of imposing abstract concepts ‘from above’ without taking into account the view at ‘street level’.

‘Seats of Power’, the second session, was led by papers from Hugh Kennedy and Trevor Dean. If the first two papers were principally concerned with monuments and literary sources, respectively, then these two papers focused, by and large, on economic practice and contemporary theory. Hugh Kennedy looked at the role of money in the formation and regulation of cities by sultans in the early Islamic world. In particular, he focused on the establishment of market spaces for the purposes of revenue creation. Trevor Dean presented a sketch of contemporary theoretical approaches to urban space, providing Lorenzetti’s *The Good Government* (1338-40), Mantegna’s *camera picta* (1465-74), and the *Palazzo Vecchio* in Florence as case studies for a thought experiment on the differences between being-in-the-city and being-in-the-court.

Interestingly, this session provided occasion for some (good-natured) debate. What about the creation of marginal spaces for illicit behaviour? Could a marginal space be officially designated as being for ‘illicit’ behaviour in the first place? And, while we are at it, is it illicit for an art historian to

marginalize a historian's theoretical approach to ubiquitous works of medieval Italian art? Ironically, perhaps, these live issues were followed by a discussion on 'dead' space and wall building. Depopulation resulting from plague, for instance, might leave large swathes of a city empty. However, this does not mean the space was left unused. One recalls Vespasiano da Bisticci's description of fifteenth-century Rome as a 'cow pasture'. But space could also be re-imagined and integrated in other ways. Wall building provides an interesting example of how new space might be brought into a city. Suburban neighbourhoods, for instance, could be transformed into urban communities. Thus, wall building and the space it integrates—and marginalizes—can be linked to the development of urban citizenship. This presents an interesting contrast to the creation and use of open space in the heart of a city for similar political purposes.

The third session, 'Ritual and Contention in the City', provided the final two papers of the day. Jo van Steenbergen directed our attention to Mamluk Cairo and the evolution of the Bayn al-Qasrayn as a *lieu de memoire*. Drawing from literary sources and city plans, he showed how the Mamluks appropriated a Fatimid district and plaza—as well as a church portal from Acre—for their own dynastic ends. Furthermore, van Steenbergen highlighted the plaza—through the disapproving eye of Ibn Sa'id (1213-1286)—as a case study for how Cairo transformed culturally through the growth of commercial activity. Returning back to the ever-contentious Italian city-states, Patrick Lantschner's paper treated revolt in late fourteenth-century Verona, Florence, and Bologna in order to articulate the complexities of political power in urban environments. Using a similar array of sources as van Steenbergen, Lantschner aptly demonstrated that political space was not necessarily territorial and that networks of political organization were available to dissidents outside normative governmental structures.

Although reference was often made to Italian cities, the theme of the discussion continually returned to Cairo's dusty streets. The image of an immobilized wagon upsetting a dynastic procession brought to mind the difficulties of limiting excess in the face of population growth and commercial diversification. The narrow winding passages—some open, some closed—suggested a reappraisal of what constitutes public and private space in large urban centres. But these spatial dynamics can also be found in an Italian context. Population growth, commercial dynamism, and the creation of 'private' spaces by semi-closed communities, all seem to have played significant roles in the guild-based political organization of Florentine wool-workers.

Christopher Smith chaired the fourth session and provided a helpful summary of the workshop up to that point. He also offered a number of particularly insightful observations. He noted that cities, despite their apparent 'triumph', are fragile things. Some cities have fragmentary chronologies and some fall into ruin, never to rise again. Other cities flourish for centuries, even as the memories evoked by their monuments ebb and flow with changing cultural tides. But why 'cities' in the first place? Are they evolutionary nodes in transnational networks? Are they a kind of demographic 'lumpiness' that results under certain favourable environmental, economic, and social conditions? Or better yet—to draw in a Mediterranean analogy—should the ancient remains of cities be understood more like that prized red coral: intricate and highly structured, but only vaguely suggestive of the once-living bounty of dynamic, colourful, and interrelated organisms that initially produced and inhabited it?

In addition to voicing existential concerns of this kind, the discussion also dealt with questions pertaining to mental topography, proximity, citizenship, and temporality. Can a city form an inhabitant's identity, and can that identity reshape perceptions of the city over time? Is there a certain

kind of proximity particular to life in a city? To what extent does citizenship require open public space? And, continuing in the vein of Louise Revell's discussion of stone monuments, can a city develop its own sense of time? It should be clear to the reader that many more questions were raised than were answered.

The workshop, it should be stressed, was not about synthesizing conclusions, but raising helpful questions that might shed further light on different subjects within different disciplines. Over its course, we were led to consider the relationship between city and space from archaeological, literary, economic, theoretical, and political perspectives. But this is not to say that the workshop lacked confluences of opinion or similarities in approach. For instance, as I have mentioned, there is much that a study of Cairo's social transformation might contribute to a study of late fourteenth-century Florence.

Nevertheless, there is still more ground to cover. Private space and religious space were hardly touched upon. The impact of the Mediterranean basin received little attention other than as a thematic rubric. Furthermore, there is much to be said for the greater development and application of the theoretical models proposed by Trevor Dean. But perhaps that is the nature of the subject at hand. The more cities are established as unified entities—'Rome'; 'Cairo'; 'Constantinople'—the more heterogeneous they actually become. There are so many voices, and it is difficult to discern them all behind the normative political structures that have previously directed studies on 'the City'. However, this first workshop, in facilitating discussion and encouraging varying methodological perspectives, certainly provides an illuminating step in the right direction. Next stop, Rome.

Steven E. Watts

sew8@st-andrews.ac.uk

Mediaeval History, University of St Andrews