



Late Medieval Pilgrimage Architecture in Northern Europe, c.1250-1520: A Summary of Recent Research and New Perspectives

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In a recent study on altarpieces and devotion, Beth Williamson began her article by stating that, “In recent years medievalists in many disciplines have been considering the culture of religious observance as a physical and spatial phenomenon, as well as an intellectual, devotional and visual one. The architecture of the medieval church is now likely to be considered as a matrix of sacred space, and of liturgical and devotional action, rather than simply as a designed object, to be fitted in somewhere on a developmental scale from Romanesque to Renaissance.”¹

To my mind, this statement sums up not only the ideas presented in the 2004 Society of Architectural Historians session, *Late Medieval Pilgrimage Architecture in Northern Europe, c.1250-1520: New Perspectives* (and in this issue of *Peregrinations*), but the current trend in scholarship on medieval architecture in general. The formal interpretation of a structure has its limitations. If the totality of a space is to be fully understood, it must be considered as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – with several, if not all, of the varied aspects of the building taken into consideration, including form, function, liturgy, movement, decoration, and furnishings.

The evolving historiography of medieval architecture, particularly pilgrimage architecture, is an interesting and telling one (and, surprisingly, one often distinct from the scholarship on pilgrimage in general). Arthur Kingsley Porter, for instance, long ago identified for us the formal characteristics and trends in a specific set of pilgrimage-type buildings.² Richard Krautheimer then showed us that architecture can have meaning, specifically as a copy, however broadly one wishes to define the term.³ More recently,

¹ Beth Williamson, “Altarpieces, Liturgy and Devotion,” *Speculum* 79 (2004): 341.

² Arthur Kingsley Porter, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads* (Boston: Marshall Jones Co., 1923) 10 volumes.

³ Richard Krautheimer, “Introduction to an ‘Iconography of Architecture,’” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942) 1-33. See also, Günter Bandmann, *Early Medieval Architecture as Bearer of Meaning*, K. Wallis, trans. (New York, 2005) (I thank Gerhard Lutz for this reference). For responses to this idea, see: Paul Crossley, “Medieval Architecture and Meaning: the Limits of Iconography,” *Burlington Magazine* 130 (1998): 116-121; Robert Ousterhout, “The Church of S. Stefano: A ‘Jerusalem’ in Bologna,” *Gesta* 20 (1981): 311-321; Ousterhout, “Flexible Geography and Transportable Topography,” *Jewish Art* 23/24 (1997/1998): 393-404;

the essays published in *Artistic Integration in Gothic Buildings*, though somewhat outside the scope of pilgrimage architecture *per se*, revealed the importance of studying the building from various perspectives and as an interactive and multifaceted space.⁴ Other studies have considered specific furnishings and functional aspects which affect the dynamic of the architectural space, such as the addition of choir screens, the display of relics and specific liturgical needs.⁵ Finally, the three papers by Mitchell Merback, Gerhard Weilandt, and Andreas Förderer presented at both the SAH session and in this issue of *Peregrinations* have continued and expanded upon this trend by examining buildings in terms of their form, as assimilated copies, as functional and functioning spaces, and to some degree as centers of economic activity. By focusing on later northern shrines, these papers show that pilgrimage was a viable and thriving industry outside the traditionally established canon of pilgrimage centers, such as Rome, Canterbury and the shrines of the *Camino de Santiago*.

In his discussion of the pilgrimage church of St. Salvator, Merback takes Krautheimer's idea of the iconography of a building to the next level by considering *several* important symbolic functions of the building – as a copy, as a political statement, and as an anagogically divided space through which movement is, to some degree, choreographed. As a copy of the Holy Sepulchre, the mortuary aspect of the building is symbolically described; thus, its symbolism supports its function. Of equal importance was the situation of the structure over the former synagogue, again creating a symbolic (and political) link between past and present which also reinforces yet another function of the building – that of a shrine for a bleeding host. This link appears to be further reinforced by the specific use of a six-pointed Star of David vault over the space.

Förderer's essay on the church of Saint-Nicolas-de-Port is also particularly interesting in its investigation of the function of a space which is not necessarily contingent on its form. Nevertheless, the divergent function and form were integral parts of the structure. In this case, the building serves as both a clerical and pilgrimage space, though it utilizes the symbolic form of a cathedral. The church was intended as a pilgrimage church, but designed for political and economic purposes to look like a

Ousterhout, "Loca Sancta and the Architectural Response to Pilgrimage," *Blessings of Pilgrimage*, Robert Ousterhout, ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990): 108-124.

⁴ *Artistic Integration in Gothic Buildings*, eds. Virginia Chieffo Raguin, Kathryn Brush and Peter Draper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), see in particular the essays by Roger E. Reynolds, "Liturgy and Monument," 57-68 and Arnold Klukas, "Durham Cathedral in the Gothic Era: Liturgy, Design, Ornament," 69-83.

⁵ See for example the following studies: Jacqueline E. Jung, "Beyond the Barrier: The Unifying Role of the Choir Screen in Gothic Churches," *Art Bulletin* 82/4 (2000): 622-657 ; Ellen M. Shortell, "Dismembering Saint-Quentin: Gothic Architecture and the Display of Relics," *Gesta* 36/1 (1997): 32-47; Elizabeth C. Parker, "Architecture as Liturgical Setting," in *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter, eds. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001): 273-326, and Sible De Blaauw, "Architecture and Liturgy in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Trends in Modern Scholarship," *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 32 (1991): 1-34.

cathedral. This was a brilliant idea, as the economic ramifications of pilgrimage were central to the existence of both a shrine and a town, ergo the wealthier it appeared, the more important the shrine and the more money it brought in. The significance of movement within the space is also vital to our understanding of that space. In Förderer's example, he considers not only movement, but the furnishings as well. Furnishings, as much as the physical constraints of a given space, define movement and, by extension, the function of the space.

The evidence for the importance of movement and liturgical furnishings to the function of space and devotion can be clearly seen in the reading of pilgrims' accounts of their own experiences within a given space. In one of the earliest of these accounts, the *Pilgrimage of Egeria*, c.381-384, she describes the specific movements which take place during the Liturgy of Jerusalem at the Holy Sepulchre. She writes:

Now at the tenth hour [vespers] ... all the people assemble at the Anastasis ... and all the candles and tapers are lit. Now the light is not introduced from without, but it is brought forth from within the cave, that is from within the rails. ... Afterwards the bishop is conducted from the Anastasis to the Cross [with] hymns. ... Thereupon both the bishop and the whole multitude further proceed behind the Cross, where all that was done before the Cross is repeated, and [the people] approach the hand of the bishop behind the Cross as they did at the Anastasis and before the Cross. Moreover, there are hanging everywhere a vast number of great glass chandeliers, and there are also a vast number of *cereofala*, before the Anastasis, before the Cross and behind the Cross, for the whole does not end until darkness has set in.⁶

In Egeria's description we see the significance, to an eye-witness participant, of the movement between two entirely distinct spaces, the Anastasis and, presumably, the courtyard where the cross was displayed. In this description, we find repeated movements which are performed at specific symbolic locations, such as the tomb and the cross. It also reinforces the importance of some of the furnishings which defined that movement – the cave, the railings, the cross itself, and even the lighting. Physical movement and its interactions with liturgical space and furnishings, therefore, have been a defining element

⁶ *The Pilgrimage of Etheria*, M.L. McClure and C.L. Feltoe, ed. and trans. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919) 47-48. Even Margery Kempe, though limited in terms of location-specific description, mentions that pilgrims were led to specific places within the Holy Sepulchre, complete with “running commentary” from the friars who led them. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, John Skinner, trans. (New York: Image Books Doubleday, 1998) 105. Eusebius, in his descriptions of the basilica in his *Life of Constantine* was well intentioned, though in the end, he unfortunately decided, “. . . this is not the place for a detailed description of its craftsmanship, materials, dimensions, and decorations.” See translation in *Egeria's Travels*, John Wilkinson, trans. (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1999, 3rd edition rpt, 2002) 21-22.

in Christian pilgrimage architecture from its very inception. Specific things happen in specific places for specific reasons.⁷

Along this line, Förderer brings up another important and often-overlooked point, the transept arm as a unique space, separate in function from the rest of the building. In this case, the transept acts as an entrance and ambulatory to aid in the circulation of pilgrims to and from the relic altar. Not nearly enough scholarly attention has been paid to the space of the transept and its complicated relationship to the rest of the structure. Form and, more specifically, function, are also a focus of Weilandt's paper on the pilgrimage shrines of Nuremberg. In this paper, two vastly different spaces are considered, one designed for the public the other private, both with a distinct separation of space based on function – liturgical and devotional (or clerical and lay). Furnishings, ranging from the impermanent (wooden stalls, candlesticks, and tapestries) to the permanent (balustrades and grilles) are again shown to be an integral feature in the delineation of space, and presumably of motion as well. He has also shown that at St. Sebald, the transept once again plays an important role in the characterization of space and the definition of movement. Its portals act as the point of entrance to the building and access to the relic shrine via the ambulatory which was marked with imagery (in the form of stained glass, paintings, and sculpture) that further defined both the function of and behavior in that space.

The reception of images is another critical area of inquiry for pilgrimage studies. For instance, how was the decoration of a building received?⁸ Who were the spectators, and what might the decoration have meant to them?⁹ In some cases, such as at St. Sebald, images functioned in direct relation with a specific space. They can also work as a visual link between building and spectator, communicating to the spectator the function of the building. Images were, for the most part, designed to be seen, and as such, play an

⁷ This emphasis on defining movement in the totality of a space is succinctly summarized by Parker who sees, “. . . the architecture of a church, its furnishings and decoration, as a vibrant vehicle for the processional journey in sacred time through sacred space, a solemn pilgrimage, the goal of which is the eucharistic celebration at the altar . . .” “Architecture as Liturgical Setting,” 274-275.

⁸ See for example, *The Romanesque Frieze and its Spectator: The Lincoln Symposium Papers*, Deborah Kahn, et al., eds, (London: H. Miller Publishers, 1992), in particular, Walter Cahn, “Romanesque Sculpture and its Spectator,” 44-60.

⁹ In my own work, I have looked at the reception of marginal imagery on the west portal of Chartres and its role in visually communicating the multi-functional aspect of the building – cathedral, cathedral school and place of pilgrimage. See, “Engaging the Spectator: Nature as Catalyst in the Royal Portal of Chartres,” in *Arte y Ciencia XXIV Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte*, ed. P. Krieger (Mexico, 2002): 531-548, and forthcoming, “Through the Eyes of the King, the Count, the Cleric and the Pilgrim: Meaning in the Margins and the Reception of the West Portal of Chartres.”

integral role in the spectator's experience of a space.¹⁰ Images communicate, they were intended to be read, and they cannot be divorced from the spaces they inhabit.

Another important area of consideration which has been addressed to some degree in two of the papers (Weilandt and Förderer), is the economics of pilgrimage. Although the association between the two has been debated, it appears to me, again based on primary sources, that medieval pilgrimage and economics were closely related. For instance, in his text on pilgrimage, Sumption makes reference to a parish priest of Bollezeel in Flanders who mentioned to a visiting pilgrim that, "all this [meaning the church] was paid out of the offerings of pilgrims who appeared in droves, receiving consolation from our Blessed Lady and buying badges at the door."¹¹ Monies from pilgrims, in the form of alms or purchases of indulgences and/or pilgrim souvenirs were an important source of income which contributed to the construction of shrines. Not only was money from pilgrimage important for the financial support of a given church, but also for the town, as discussed by Weilandt in the story of the stone at the tomb of St. Sebald – an obvious reminder to the pious to purchase a very large cheese in the market on their way to the church, thereby directly supporting the town's economy.¹²

Economics, the reception of images and space, the function of space and its furnishings, as well as politics, history and liturgy, are all critical facets in our understanding of pilgrimage architecture as functioning spaces. The papers presented in this issue have given us much to consider, and I believe will lead not only to some stimulating discussion, but hopefully to a more integrated approach to the topic of pilgrimage architecture as a whole. As we have seen in this brief summary, the study of medieval pilgrimage architecture, whether early or late, northern or southern, local, regional, or distant, can be highly multifaceted when consideration is broadened beyond the simple, formal characteristics of a building and placed within a larger context. In our approach to the study of medieval pilgrimage architecture, we have traveled our own distinct journey in which we have gone from the formal identification of building types and regional styles (Porter), to the iconographic in terms of the building as a bearer of meaning (Krautheimer and Bandmann), to the integrative or interdisciplinary which examines the building as a complex and multi-functional space, as we find with the papers presented in this issue of *Peregrinations*. This journey has ultimately led us to the question with which I would like conclude: what is the next logical step in our investigation of medieval pilgrimage architecture, and where might it eventually lead us? ●

¹⁰ For instance, Karen Rose Mathews, "Reading Romanesque Sculpture: the Iconography and Reception of the South Portal Sculpture at Santiago de Compostela," *Gesta* 39/1 (2000): 3-12.

¹¹ Jonathan Sumption, *Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion* (Totowa, NJ: Rowan and Littlefield, 1975): 161.

¹² The relationship of pilgrimage, architecture, and economics continues still to this day, as evidenced by the many weary pilgrims seeking enlightenment at conferences, such as the one in Providence, contributing to the local economy by way of food, drink and lodging, and purchasing their badges at the door.