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*H-France Review* Vol. 15 (September 2015), No. 130

Meredith Cohen and Fanny Madeline, eds., *Space in the Medieval West: Places, Territories, and Imagined Geographies*. Farnham, Surrey, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. xvi, 245; 17 black-and-white figures, 15 maps, and 4 tables. \$119.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-1-4724-0237-0.

Review by Daniel K. Connolly, Alma College.

The essays in this collection, which were initially written for a symposium organized by the International Medieval Society of Paris and the Laboratoire de Médiévistique Occidentale de Paris, are a mixed bag, as heterogeneous as the medieval approaches are to space (as the editors themselves note). Two central problems, both stemming from the title (likely chosen by the publishers for purposes of marketing), plague the publication. First, the collection is not about the medieval west, but rather every essay focuses on France. Second, “space” is a nebulous topic to work with, which makes it difficult to use as the organizing principle for a collection of essays. “Medieval space in the West,” note the editors, “was shaped by the shared experience of the slow collapse and transition of the Roman Empire, even if other major cultural distinctions existed among the different societies within this group. Rather, with the selection of international, multidisciplinary authors, we hoped to delineate a topography of medieval space from the broadly heterogeneous discourse that has arisen in recent years” (p. 2). Unfortunately, no such topography was delineated and what the reader is presented with remains, indeed, a heterogeneous discourse and one only loosely related to “space.”

The editors crafted a very fine introductory essay on the historiography of medieval space, which is admirable in its clarity and breadth. Yet this reader continued to wonder what, exactly, is the definition of space with which they are working. Having researched medieval maps and different ideas of pilgrimage, I tend to think of space from an experiential viewpoint. How did a person’s (or society’s) interaction with the topic at hand (itinerary maps, labyrinths, the mechanics of manuscript manipulation) change or inflect their appreciation of the space depicted in front of them or that physically surrounded them? Given this phenomenological sense, I found the marked emphasis on ideational approaches to space to be confusing. I don’t get the impression that the general medieval population, or even the intellectual elite, thought in terms of “space,” but rather in terms of place. In fact, the modern notion of space as an emptiness between things, as “a boundless, three-dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction,” seems to be the underlying concept that supports the disparate selection of essays.[1] Such a definition strikes me as anachronistic, mostly because it stems from a post-Newtonian understanding of the physical realm. A medieval sense of space would have been far more experiential, so that this neutral sense of space as three-dimensional extent provides little to no hermeneutic purchase when it comes to medieval materials. When we speak of a medieval sense of space, we should really think of it as place. And while the historiographic essay does an admirable job of introducing the practices of place as a “critical turn” in the literature, phenomenological approaches still find only brief mention in the essay (Heidegger, but not the work of Yi-fu Tuan). Yet the authors do discuss a variety of scholars who look at the medieval practices that turned space into place. And indeed, the strongest essays in the ensuing collection are those that explore medieval space for precisely how it was first and foremost about place.

That said, the editors grouped these disparate submissions into three workable themes: physical space, social space, and cartographic space, all of which, they note, address the issue of scale. Problems arise, however, when you read the individual submissions; they are uneven in their treatment of their subject, some clearly more thoroughly reworked from their instantiations as conference talks than others. Moreover, and perhaps more critically, they are not always about “space,” at least, that is, they do not turn upon the investigation of space in particular, but are often only circumstantially about space. But even then that circumstance often happens in a contrived way. There are some fine essays that nicely elucidate different ideas and practices of space, but often the essayist simply begins with a brief disquisition about how his or her topic fits in some way into the parameters of the publication, usually with some reference to the work of Henri Lefebvre, and then will turn to the topic at hand—the geometrical constructions of Gothic facades, the shift in language describing dioceses between the ninth and twelfth centuries, or the image of France in the Beatus Map of Saint-Sever—and so never really delve into issues of how people used or interacted with medieval space per se. Still, there are some fine essays that do address very specifically medieval understandings of the situations of significant entities (real or conceptual), and rather than dwell on shortcomings, this reviewer finds it more profitable to put into relief those essays that achieve a coherence despite the book’s conceptual shortcomings. Those interested in an iteration of the subjects of the individual essays can easily access the table of contents at the publisher’s website.

In part 1 of the collection, David Ross Winter presents a finely crafted, critically aware essay that explores both the historical development of Utrecht’s medieval cross of churches (the *kerkenkruis*), and the historiographic tension that accompanies, and to some extent, coordinates that development. The *kerkenkruis* is an alignment of churches, developed over the course of several centuries, that eventually took the shape of cross. With no medieval records to verify an intention of imposing a cross of churches on the layout of the city, scholars have debated the extent to which we can speak historically of this cross arrangement. And this is where Winter’s work gets interesting, precisely because it deals with the medieval ideas of spatiality, the emergence of the design, and the space it occupies. That design, if not necessarily deliberate, still would have “shaped, keyed, and stimulated the imaginations of those who interacted with them” (p. 80). The essay turns then less on evidence of the intent as upon the various contexts in which a cross-shaped alignment of churches across the layout of Utrecht would find meaningful reception. And there are plenty of contexts: models of scriptural exegesis, glosses on cartographic commentary, as well as the different possible political and ecclesiastical offices that might exploit a space so shaped by the authority of the cross. By essay’s end, the thorough embedding of the *kerkenkruis* into a rich array of different contexts brings a nice satisfaction. Still, it would have been good to see some sense of the changing layout of Utrecht as the churches were built, to see in what way streets or thoroughfares might have aligned with or reinforced the associations that Winters seeks to establish, or if practices of city-wide stational liturgies may have taken advantage of so significant an alignment. Other essays within this section certainly worked with notions of medieval space, particularly Emanuele Lugli’s on the sources of *Ad Quadratum* geometry in Roman survey techniques. While convincing—one could accept that ancient Roman practices of spatial management continued to operate in later eleventh- and twelfth-century Lombard church construction—the author does not explore the implications of why architects would choose so obscure and long out-of-use methods. Why would the ancient Roman surveying of farmlands be the means by which to determine both the position and proportions of Christian churches? Wouldn’t architects look to more proximate contexts, like previous architectural practices of measurement and alignment?

Part 2 explores spatial networks and territories and has the most consistent approach to space, probably because the essays deal with a larger sense of scale and so the mechanics operating tended to rely upon that modern notion of space as extension. Ada-Maria Kuskowski’s essay, “Inventing Legal Space: From Regional Custom to Common Law in the *Coutumiers* of Medieval France,” came closest to exploring the lived experience of those shifting legal realities. (Though, to be fair, Thomas Wetzstein’s work on communication networks also engaged the very practical issues of the efficiencies of the exchange of

information and the travel involved, but it notes only in passing that these networks were an assertion of a new “mastery of space,” without any substantial explanation.) Kuskowski argues for a reassessment of the spatial divisions in which different types of law were applied. The historical reality, she argues, is far less cleanly demarcated than the reification of those divisions as seen in different expository maps. The production of various *coutumiers* (private writings that set the legal customs and uses of a specified region) began to proliferate in the thirteenth century, and are part of a shift toward the “territoriality of law,” creating a “juridical space that made custom mobile, extra-regional, and a vehicle toward legal harmonization and toward a “common” place of thought” (p. 137). The incorporation of practices from different regions, as well as those associated with the royal domain suggests “that the concept of space expressed by these texts is not simply the region of the comital court, it is a space above that reconciles the particular place within a larger “place of thought,” a juridical space where custom can be detached from one specific locality” (p. 141). The result, Kuskowski concludes, is the creation of “common law” where one had not existed before.

Essays on cartography and imagined geography comprise the last section of the collection. Here we learn less about space than you might imagine. Maps of landforms would seem to be necessarily about space, but there are different strategies to investigate maps, most of which in this part of the collection have little to do with an investigation of the spaces depicted, as they do with the particular depiction. In Sandra Sáens-López Pérez’s essay, for example, stylistic and iconographic analyses of the Beatus map of Saint-Sever reveal that the emphasis given to the toponyms and other features of France are likely a result of the map being produced in that French monastery. And while Jean-Charles Ducène’s work on Al-Idrīsī’s twelfth-century maps of France shows more willingness to engage the performative possibilities of Al-Idrīsī’s sources in the lived experiences of itinerary recordings, the essay is very much a search for origins in an analysis of place names. On the other hand, Nathalie Bouloux’s excellent essay on the shift of *mentalités* in geographic texts from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries “examines geographic space as a form of cultural expression” (p. 197). That shift is recorded in the tensions that arise as the more politically weighted term, “Francia,” slowly, and rather indirectly, comes to replace the more geographically descriptive word, “Gallia.” Those tensions result from the contest of different epistemologies of medieval geography (the naturally made vs. the politically induced).

There are some excellent essays in this collection, and I have cherry-picked my favorites, but overall the publication is marred by the lack of a definition of its central topic and the heterogeneity that results.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Meredith Cohen, Fanny Madeline and Dominique Iogna-Prat, “Introduction”

### Part 1: Places, Monuments, and Cities

Emanuele Lugli, “Squarely built: an inquiry into the sources of ad quadratum geometry in Lombard architecture between the 11th and the 12th centuries”

Stefaan Van Liefferinge, “The geometry of rib vaulting at Notre-Dame of Paris: architectural or exegetical space?”

Robert Bork, “Gothic drawing and the shaping of space”

David Ross Winter, “Marking the city for Christ: spatiality and the invention of Utrecht’s medieval cross of churches”

### Part 2: Spatial Networks and Territories

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Anne Lunven, "From plebs to *parochia*: the perceptions of the church in space from the 9th to 12th century (dioceses of Rennes, Dol, and Saint-Malo)"

Thomas Wetzstein, "New masters of space: the creation of communication networks in the West (11th-12th centuries)"

Ada-Maria Kuskowski, "Inventing legal space: from regional custom to common law in the *coutumiers* of medieval France"

### Part 3: Cartography and Imagined Geographies

Sandra Sáenz-López Pérez, "The image of France in the Beatus map of Saint-Sever"

Jean-Charles Ducène, "France in the two geographical works of Al-Idrīsī (Sicily, 12th century)"

Nathalie Bouloux, "From Gaul to the kingdom of France: representations of French space in geographical texts of the Middle Ages (12th-15th centuries)"

Catherine Nicolas, "The definition and boundaries of Eucharistic space in the Grail Prose Romances: focalization and dissemination"

### NOTES

[1] *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "space," accessed August 03, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/science/space-physics-and-metaphysics>

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