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Architectural Representation in Medieval England

Edited by

Hannah Bailey, Karl Kinsella, and Daniel Thomas

Editorial assistant
Alaric Hall

Leeds Studies in English

<www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>
School of English
University of Leeds
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Introduction to Architectural Representation in Medieval England

Hannah Bailey, Karl Kinsella, and Daniel Thomas

Architecture is a special and important category of evidence for our understanding of medieval England; it is not only one of the most tangible categories of evidence for the period, but also one of the most accessible. The architectural remnants of the Middle Ages — from castles and cathedrals to village churches — provide many people's first and most lasting point of contact with the medieval period and its culture. Such concrete survivals provide a direct link to the material experiences of medieval people, as well as to the ideologies and social or cultural practices which framed their lives.

The study of medieval architecture is, however, about more than these impressive and obvious material survivals. Such study must not only acknowledge these structures as cultural artefacts, but also recognize the myriad intersections that link these remnants to other aspects of the creative and intellectual life of medieval England. Physical architecture depends upon technological accomplishment, but it also reveals something of the values of the people that produce it. As technologies of architecture develop over time, so too do fashions and styles. In this way, architecture connects in a very direct way physical experience and social ideologies. As part of our daily experience, it is a familiar necessity of human life, but it can also make powerful cultural and political statements. Architecture tells us about the world, both reflecting cultural experience and also constructing it. And it does so in ways that are simultaneously closely connected to specific historical moments and also of continuing relevance as part of a diachronic discourse that reaches into both the past and the future.

At the same time, the physical structures of architecture also intersect with structures of thought and mental experience. Architectural structures, whether existing in the real world, in plans and diagrams, or in the imagined spaces of art and literature, can form a focus of memory and shared identity. The inherent role of architecture in organizing, dividing, and framing space provides a model for thinking about and representing more abstract ideas of categorization and division. Whilst architecture can itself signify allegorically and symbolically, the shared experience of architectural forms also provides a fertile source of allegory, metaphor, and imagery for theologians, artists, poets, and historians. In these and other ways, architectural expression is fundamentally interconnected with the cultural, intellectual, and imaginative achievements of a society or culture.

This interconnectedness is the focus of this special issue, which considers both the representation *of* architecture — whether material, visual, or textual — and the ways in

which values and ideas are represented *through* architecture. Its contributors explore the various ways in which aspects of construction and design were conceived of, lived with, and imbued with significance in England in the period c. 650–1350. In so doing, the essays contained within draw upon a wide range of different sources and types of evidence, including archaeological excavations, material survivals of medieval buildings, architectural drawings, and imaginative representations of architecture in contemporary visual and textual sources. The subject matter of the essays ranges from matters of profound theological significance to the expression of immediate social relationships evident in the design of ordinary single-family dwellings. As such, the collection as whole draws attention to the pervasive importance of architectural representation in the medieval world.

This special issue also brings together multiple disciplinary perspectives. The collection has its origins in an on-going collaborative research project which aims to bring into contact individuals working with and on medieval architecture from a range of different scholarly backgrounds. Although architectural representation often forms a key part of work undertaken by, for example, archaeologists, historians, theologians, art historians, and literary scholars, such work has too often been carried on along rigid disciplinary lines, and in comparative isolation. As a result, the breadth and depth of the involvement of architectural representation in medieval culture has been largely underappreciated. In response to this situation, the Medieval Architectural Representation project set out to facilitate cross-disciplinary conversations and to explore inter-disciplinary methods of study.[1]

The particular value of this special issue, therefore, is that, whilst the assembled articles contribute directly to particular fields of scholarship, they also, through their collective weight, indicate the potential for (and fruitfulness of) a new way of thinking about architectural representation that partly divorces it from traditional disciplinary boundaries. Part of this goal involves thinking about architectural representation in ways not defined purely in terms of teleological, historical narratives. The articles collected here focus specifically upon evidence from medieval England, with a chronological range that runs from the late fifth century to the early fourteenth, transcending traditional boundaries such as the Conversion and the Conquest. This span allows us to look beyond rigid historical periodization and to focus on the continuing significance of architectural representation across and within a broad period.

In accordance with these aims, the ordering of the following articles is intended to reflect shared thematic interests or approaches, rather than chronology or disciplinary background. The collection starts, therefore, with two articles which both address what might be called the typological function of architectural representation. In the first of these articles, Conor O'Brien offers a comprehensive re-evaluation of the famous bifolium illustration found on fols II^{v}–III^{r} of the early eighth-century Codex Amiatinus — one of the earliest surviving examples of English architectural illustration. Interpretations of this elaborate diagram have variously concluded that it depicts either the Temple of Jerusalem or the Mosaic Tabernacle, but recent scholarship has favoured the view that it represents a non-literal, exegetical conflation of elements of both structures. In this article, however, O'Brien shows how the diagram can be best understood not as a composite image, nor as an abstraction intended to serve as a

[1] We would like to thank all those who have participated in this project, including, but not only, those whose contributions appear in this issue, as well as the Balliol Interdisciplinary Institute for supporting the project in its earliest incarnation and University College, Oxford for supporting its development into a research network with a broader membership and remit. Further information about the activities of the Medieval Architectural Representation research group can be found on our website: https://medievalarchitectureconf.wordpress.com.

focus for meditation, but as an attempt to depict literally the Tabernacle described in Exodus. O'Brien situates the divergences between the diagram and the biblical description of the Tabernacle in a precise historical moment. In so doing, he not only offers a convincing reading of the diagram, but illuminates the phases and processes by which Bede and the Wearmouth-Jarrow community developed their ideas about the Temple and the Tabernacle over time. The article also emphasizes that the fact that certain aspects of the depiction invite a typological understanding of the Tabernacle should not detract from our appreciation of the diagram as a piece of literal architectural representation, since, for the medieval exegete, both the literal and typological levels of meaning are inherently present within each architectural form.

The second article in this issue similarly insists upon the potential of architecture to express both literal and non-literal meaning. In her discussion of the surviving crypts constructed at Wilfrid's foundations of Ripon and Hexham in second half of the seventh century, Meg Boulton considers the representational power of physical architectural structures. Boulton draws on details of the crypts' design, reconstructions of their potential liturgical uses, and textual records to show how these structures function allusively within their cultural, liturgical, and theological contexts. Though physically present to those who experience them *in situ*, the crypts simultaneously represent other architectural constructions, bringing into conjunction physically disparate spaces, and taking on the symbolic resonances associated with the spaces thus re-presented. So, the crypts at Hexham and Ripon not only allude to the Church in Rome and England's Roman inheritance, but also re-present and could be experienced as the Holy Sepulchre and, by extension, the Heavenly Jerusalem. In demonstrating this, Boulton offers an original reading of the function of a curiously shaped lintel in the crypt at Ripon, understood to mark a movement from the earthly to the heavenly at the threshold of the central chamber. The intertextual relationship between architectural forms has been traditionally articulated in terms of iconography; however, by taking a phenomenological approach Boulton provides a new and valuable reading of relatively well known structures, drawing on the experience of moving through the crypts and the significance of transitional spaces.

Doorways and thresholds also feature prominently in the next two articles in this issue. Following on from Boulton's discussion of the threshold at Ripon, the signification of doors and doorways as liminal and transitional spaces is the focus of Karl Kinsella's article. Kinsella takes an iconographical approach to the study of doorways, focusing on a range of examples of significant doorways drawn from Anglo-Latin and Old English textual sources, as well as Anglo-Saxon manuscript illustration. His study of the representational force of such doorways draws attentions to the use of architectural features in both text and image to frame abstract notions such as narrative progression or the delineation of material and spiritual spaces. That this use can be traced in both literary and visual sources suggests the prevalence of an iconographic understanding of architecture in Anglo-Saxon thought. By giving equal weight to Anglo-Latin literature, Old English literature, and manuscript illustrations, resisting biases towards either textual or visual evidence, or Latin or vernacular source, Kinsella produces a truly interdisciplinary account of the iconography of doorways.

Where Kinsella's article takes a broad view, exploring the significance of doorways in the works of several authors or illustrators, Daniel Thomas focuses more narrowly on the thematic use of doorways in a single, relatively short Old English text. Thomas explores the prominent imagery of the gates and keys in a little-known Old English homily featuring dramatic scenes at the gates of hell at the harrowing and judgement day. He traces the particular combination of details and motifs central to the homily's presentation of this architectural feature to a

range of sources and analogues and demonstrates that the text's thematic unity and didactic force both arise from the homilist's exploration of the potential for multiple signification of doors and doorways. In so doing, Thomas' analysis demonstrates how meaningful architectural representation can be even in relatively unimportant and unsophisticated texts. His analysis of the polysemy of doors and the depiction of hell as a bound space not only contributes to the growing study of Anglo-Saxon conceptions of place and space but also offers a sustained literary analysis of a much-neglected harrowing homily which deserves more attention both as a point in the nexus of Anglo-Saxon depictions of the harrowing of hell and also for its own curious humour and pathos.

From the locked doors of hell, Helen Appleton's article moves the discussion to the 'doorless house' of the grave. This article and the one that follows focus upon the imaginative construction or allegorical representation of whole buildings, whether domestic or ecclesiastical. Appleton establishes the importance of architectural imagery in the *contemptus mundi* discourses of early Middle English death lyrics. Focusing on the grave-as-house motif found in vernacular texts from the Anglo-Saxon period onwards, she shows how architectural vocabulary and imagery is routinely applied to and used to define this essentially non-architectural space. This figurative equation of the grave with the dwellings of the living acquired and carried powerful resonances associated with ideas of contemplation, contrition, and judgement in the developing lyrical traditions of the tenth to thirteenth centuries. So pervasive was this motif that later authors were able to deploy it in their work with striking concision. Appleton also demonstrates the longevity of the motif, showing how, over the centuries, successive authors adapted the architectural representation of the grave in order to develop more specific, contemporary cultural resonances. The article thus presents a striking example of both the continuity and the adaptability of this architectural motif across a period in literature often characterized by substantial change and discontinuity.

The representation of ecclesiastical architecture (as well as more mundane structures) forms the focus of Laura Varnam's article. Taking as her focus Robert Mannyng's early fourteenth-century penitential handbook *Handlyng Synne* (in which the churchyard is figured as a 'long house', possibly reflecting the motif of the grave as 'long home' in the lyrics discussed by Appleton), Varnam shows how architectural imagery and language functions both at a micro level within individual textual narratives and exempla and at a macro level as a structuring device for the text as a whole. She relates the prominence of architectural representations in Mannyng's work both to Geoffrey of Vinsauf's influential analogy of the poet as architect, and to a tradition of pastoral literature that draws upon the church building for its imagery and symbolism. Using Mannyng's 'Dancers of Colbek' exemplum as her primary case study, she shows how Mannyng's architectural imagery functions on multiple levels: the responsiveness of walls, roofs, and tombs to misbehaviour facilitates Mannyng's teaching on sin at a simple didactic level, but the architecture of the church also offers a concrete image to which abstract ideas about sin can be anchored. At the same time, the language of construction and framing also provides a method for thinking about poetic composition and the organisation of the text.

Rituals associated with the consecration of ecclesiastical buildings feature significantly in Varnam's analysis of Mannyng's architectural interests. In the penultimate article in the issue, Clifford Sofield demonstrates the importance of rituals associated with non-ecclesiastical architecture, particularly at the end of a building's lifecycle. Here, attention returns to the literal, physical architecture of early medieval England, as Sofield explores the archaeological

record of fifth- to ninth-century secular (mainly domestic) architecture. Sofield considers what social values are facilitated or reinforced by the form and function of architectural structures, and interprets those ritual activities associated with them of which traces have survived. He shows that formalized or ritualized treatment of buildings may be thought to reflect the mechanisms by which people constructed society in Anglo-Saxon England. The symmetry of early dwellings might reveal details about familial structures, while the later great hall complexes physically manifested the social processes that contributed to royal authority. Sofield also considers the implications of the (still later) practice of incorporating burials of ancestors and the 'young dead' into the architecture of farmsteads. Finally, he discusses the formalized or ritualized practices associated with the destruction of buildings in the fifth to seventh centuries as a potential source of evidence for how the human lifespan was conceived. Sofield's suggestion that the destruction and rebuilding of great hall complexes may have served to mark succession or regime change in early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms throws new light upon literary descriptions of high-status buildings such as the account of the construction of Heorot in *Beowulf* and the poet's references to its future destruction by fire. More immediately, however, the article also demonstrates how analysis of the forms of buildings and the rituals associated with their use can yield valuable information about the construction of households and communities in the Anglo-Saxon period.

The issue concludes with Hannah Bailey's discussion of the trope of architecture-as-reader — a patristic motif reflected in the Old English poems *Andreas* and *Christ III*. In this final article, Bailey turns again to consider the imaginative and symbolic force of architectural depiction in literary contexts. Like Varnam, she writes about the responsiveness of architectural features; Bailey's reading shows how such architectural features can not only be understood as the focus of exegetical interpretation, but can also function within literary narratives as authoritative exponents of exegetical processes of reading and uncovering meaning. As such, architectural features, in their innate understanding of divine mysteries, model an ideal human response — an ideal from which, as Bailey shows, their human counterparts frequently fall short. Bailey also shows how the shared use of the trope of architecture-as-reader in these two poems indicates, if not direct influence, at least that both text draw upon a very similar literary tradition. In this way, the article uncovers aspects of each poem's engagement with the allegorical and didactic functions of architectural representation and also contributes significantly to our critical understanding of the poetic and intellectual contexts in which such texts originated.

As will be apparent from these summaries — and as has been indicated above — the term 'architectural representation' has been interpreted in a variety of different ways in the essays in this special issue. This multiplicity is deliberate, encompassing both representations of architecture and architecture's capacity as a representational medium. As such, the physical architectural structures of medieval England are understood as symbolic expressions of familial and societal values, as well as deliberate statements of identifiable religious meanings. Architectural drawing is considered as a means of representing pictorially structures that have or had an external reality, but also as a way of expressing the figural significance inherent within such building. At the same time, the essays also emphasize the potential for architectural features within manuscript illustration to contribute in visual medium to a combined narrative of text and image. A number of the essays illustrate the various ways in which architectural language and imagery in texts functions as narrative frame, as symbolic expression, and as vehicle for conveying doctrinal and allegorical teachings.

The openness of the term 'architectural representation' reflects the inclusive and interdisciplinary goals of the Medieval Architectural Representation project. The articles within this special issue contribute in various ways to individual fields of scholarship, but the collaboration as a whole also benefits from identifying questions to be asked of textual and material sources that do not immediately present themselves within a mono-disciplinary approach. It benefits also from a specifically cross-period focus. What comes out of the collection of essays in particular is a demonstration of the lasting and pervasive importance of architectural representation across medieval culture. By taking a long view, this special issue not only highlights variety in the ways in which architecture signified, but also continuity. So, the responsiveness of architecture is a motif discussed by Varnam in relation to an early fourteenth-century penitential handbook and by Bailey in relation to much earlier Old English didactic verse. Similarly, Appleton's contribution demonstrates the ongoing importance of the grave-as-house motif in pre- and post-Conquest literature, while her discussion also highlights the continued interest in bounded space revealed in the discussions of Anglo-Saxon literature and illustration by Kinsella and Thomas. And while Boulton and O'Brien both demonstrate how important architectural representation was to the self-conception of the early Anglo-Saxon Church, Sofield's corpus of archaeological evidence spans the period of conversion and Christianisation and serves as a reminder of how the bias in written records can obscure the fact that architectural signification in medieval England was never solely a concern of the Church.

Ultimately, the intention behind this special issue has been to highlight the fact that medieval architecture is always representational, existing always in relation to other things, places, and people, never static, and always open to varied understanding. It is our hope that the issue will encourage further work, particularly of a cross-disciplinary, cross-period kind, into the place and function of architecture in the intellectual, social, and cultural life of the medieval world.

A note on quotations from edited texts

In quotations from Old English texts, the ampersand has been used to represent the Tironian note for *ond*/*and* when this appears in the original edition. Diacritical markers are routinely omitted and editorial emendations marked as such in the text have been silently accepted.

The text of the Vulgate is cited throughout from *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Versionem*, ed. by Robert Weber and Roger Gryson, 5th edn (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2007), following the version *iuxta septuaginta* of the Psalms; translations follow the Douay-Rheims text contained in *The Holy Bible: Douay version, translated from the Latin Vulgate (Douay, A.D. 1609: Rheims, A.D. 1582)*, ed. by Bernard Griffin and Richard Challoner (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1956). Translations from other texts are the authors' own except where stated.

The abbreviation *PL* stands for *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina*, ed. by Jacques-Paul Migne, 221 vols (Paris: Migne, 1844–64).