

Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide and Stefan Brink (eds), *Sacred Sites and Holy Places: Exploring the Sacralization of Landscape through Time and Space*. Studies in the Early Middle Ages 11. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013. 281pp. €80. ISBN: 978-2-503-54100-6

This volume has its origins in a 2007 conference in Bergen on sacralisation of landscapes organized by the religion team of the Nordic Centre for Medieval Studies. Its purpose is to merge two important veins of research in Scandinavia and the Baltic region, namely, the Christianisation process and landscape studies, using various methodologies arising from archaeology, philology, history of religion, theology, history, classical studies, and art history. The chapters cover a wide geographical and temporal span reaching from the far north of Scandinavia to Greece and from antiquity to the eighteenth century. The common thread running through the book and tying these varied themes together is sacred landscapes and the various methodological and theoretical approaches involved in studying them.

The Introduction by Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide gives an overview into interpreting sacred space and time, touching also briefly on the problems involved in identifying the sacred in the landscape and distinguishing between the sacred and the profane in a culture in which religion is an integral part of everyday life. The collection opens with Veikko Anttonen's theory-oriented piece on Finnish vernacular labels *pyhä* and *hiisi* as landscape-markers of sites set aside as sacred. Anttonen's theory, which he has outlined in several previous books and articles, is based on the fundamental cognitive property in sacred-making behaviour, that is, the human tendency to invest special referential value and inferential potential to temporal, corporeal and territorial boundaries. Anttonen uses place-name evidence to illustrate the ways in which *pyhä*- and *hiisi*-initial toponyms can be used as evidence of early forms of sacralising the landscapes in Finland.

In the next chapter, Stefan Brink demonstrates how the past (both mythical and historical) is embedded in the landscape in his discussion of the metaphysically charged landscape of our ancestors where there is no division between the sacred and the profane. Brink postulates a fundamental difference between the earlier ‘more primitive’ religions with earthbound deities and fertility cults and Christianity, with its omnipotent and omniscient sky god. According to Brink, this difference has fundamental repercussions on man’s relationship with the environment. In Christianity, the environment is not possessed any more by gods and spirit and thereby it is free to be used by man. When seen in this light, the ancient Scandinavian religion would have had more in common with ancient Greek or Polynesian religions than with Christianity. Brink’s clear-cut typology of religions can, however, be questioned since also many so-called ‘primitive’ religions had sky gods, while also in Christianity the whole world can be seen as God’s creation and thus as having numinous value.

These two theoretically-oriented discussions are followed by an extensive contribution from Charlotte Fabech and Ulf Næssman on ritual landscapes and sacral places in South Scandinavia in the first millennium AD. Fabech and Næssman argue for a multidisciplinary approach when studying archaeological evidence, and they underline the need to understand the sites also from a ritual and not only an economic point of view. They bring to the fore too the problem of distinguishing between sacral and ‘normal’ sites. Fabech and Næssman set the developments in Scandinavia in a wider European context, stressing the influence of contact with Rome and thus highlighting the integration of the ‘old’ North into the developing West European culture. They argue that pure Scandinavian paganism never existed as a homogenous whole (except maybe before any Roman or Christian influence) but that the heathendom of the North consisted rather of regional cult practices

which were changing over time. They also remind us that conversion from heathendom to Christianity was not a simple process of transferring from one religious allegiance to another but that there was a lot of room in the middle ground. Fabech and Nässman claim that one important step in the Europeanisation of Scandinavia is the diminishing role of natural sites in the practice of religion and the development of the new central complexes, including the hall. Fabech and Nässman argue for profound changes in the heathen landscape already before the conversion due to the increasing contacts with the Mediterranean world, thus resulting in similar spatial concepts as those adopted by Christianity. They therefore suggest that ‘the early medieval heathen landscape was more different from the sacral landscapes of the centuries BC and more similar to the high medieval Christian landscapes’ (97) thus arriving at somewhat contrary conclusion than Brink in the previous article.

Asgeir Svestad brings the temporal span of the book up to the eighteenth century in discussing a much later example of conversion, namely the Christianisation of the Sámi people in Lapland. He agrees with the writers of the previous chapter in stressing the flexibility and variations of the Sámi religion, thus reminding readers of the need to be cautious of the common view of Sámi unity in space and time, which in reality is partly created by sources written by outsiders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Svestad focuses on Sámi burial practices, and comes to the conclusion that in the archaeological evidence there is no visible break in the conversion period. On the contrary, there are many continuities long after the conversion period up to the nineteenth century and the different features of Christian graves should be seen as the continuation of a general development which began in early medieval times, long before the Christianisation of Scandinavia. Svestad explains this by the ritualised, practical and

flexible nature of the Sámi religion which can be best understood by using Paul Connerton's concept of 'incorporating practice' whereby the past is remembered in collective rituals through 're-enactment' or physical repetition of actions and the conceptions of belief are embedded in materiality.

The chapter which follows broadens the geographical boundaries of the collection in turn. Gullög Norquist's article discusses the relationship between the mental and mythical landscape and the physical one in ancient Greece. Norquist stresses the connections between landscape and the thoughts, ideas and feelings of the humans living in it. She presents a review of mythical places in Greece listing examples of physical places connected with mythical or heroic tales, leaving the reader to await a more theoretical discussion of the relationship between the two.

Bente Kiilerich continues with ancient Greek evidence, presenting a more focused study of the transformation of Athenian temples into churches in late antiquity and the early middle ages. She highlights the problem of dating the changes involved in the possible destruction of pagan statues and iconography. Kurt Villads Jensen's chapter on the medieval sense of landscape in the crusading period resumes the theme of the Mediterranean world. He takes 'sense' here in a very literal way discussing the sounds of the landscape and its visual representations, also briefly touching upon the senses of smell and taste.

Torstein Jørgensen returns to Scandinavia in a contribution which focuses on medieval provincial laws in Norway, tracing the new Christian understanding of the land as seen in the legal sources. Jørgensen highlights the ways in which the expressions of the territorial dimensions of the expansion of Christianity in theological terms reflect Old Testament ideas concerning the creation of the Kingdom of God, realised in the chosen people in covenant with God. However, his focus is more

on the drawing of the boundaries of a Christian society in terms of acceptable behaviour than in the actual sacralisation of the landscape, probably due to the nature of his source materials.

The concluding chapter, by Zoë Opačić, addresses medieval urbanisation in an examination of the sacred topography of high-medieval Prague. She illustrates the ways in which architecture was used as a medium of expression by rulers, and discusses the ritual of traversing between the monuments as a way of mentally transporting the Christians to eternity.

The contributors the book explore the sacralisation of the landscape from various different perspectives, thus giving a useful introduction to the various methodologies and theories involved. From this point of view the wide geographical and temporal span represented here is justified, but nevertheless it would have benefited from a more focused concentration on the Nordic world. The chapters on the Greek cases and on Prague stand out from the whole, and one might question whether the wide time-span reaching up to the eighteenth century in the Sámi case is useful. One way of overcoming this problem of incoherence would have been to arrange the chapters thematically into separate sections, thus having the Nordic cases as a unity. Nevertheless, the publication includes some very fine discussions on the relationship between religion and landscape and offers new perspectives into understanding this highly relevant and interesting theme.

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