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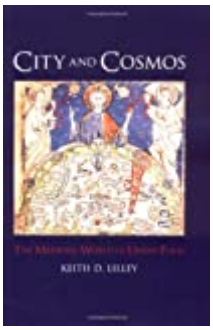

Keith D. Lilley. *City and Cosmos: The Medieval World in Urban Form.* London: Reaktion Books, 2009. 256 pp. $49.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-86189-441-0.

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Published on H-Urban (February, 2010)

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The Heavenly City of the Medieval Theologians

Medieval cities have customarily been studied from a functional, evolutionary perspective. The substantial literature ranges from monographs on a single city or a single aspect of the urbanization process to syntheses of greater or lesser complexity and sophistication. But while different scholars have emphasized the economic, social, central-place, political, legal, military, religious, or cultural function of the cities, virtually all agree that the cities were complex, evolving phenomena and that no single model can explain all cases. While broad similarities in city type and urban function occur, a comparative perspective is needed to explain the regional and chronological differences. Keith D. Lilley considers these approaches less appropriate than his own, which studies the medieval city from the perspective of cosmological abstraction.

The first four chapters of this book expound the thesis that the planned layouts of medieval cities were consciously derived from cosmic, specifically Christian-Neoplatonic, ideal forms. Lilley mentions street-straightening in Florence in the thirteenth century with a view to enhancing the cityâs beauty. He does not, however, consider the unplanned layouts of the older sectors of the organic cities. He has an informative section on how the later planned areas, i.e., French quarters of the English towns, quickly dominated the older English parts, but he does not discuss the importance of this issue for planning: for the later suburbs on the Continent as well as in England, in contrast to the earliest settled area, often showed elements of a planned layout, although they were not perfectly orthogonal.

Lilley begins with a discussion of the elements of cosmology found in the geometry curriculum, specifically Calcidiusâs translation of and commentary on Platoâs *Timaeus*. Some version of Jerusalem was the model for most medieval drawings of cities. He notes that most early medieval illuminations depict the idealized heavenly city in a circular form, but this changed from the thirteenth century, with some illuminations showing a rectangular Jerusalem, following the description given in Revelation. Contemporary descriptions of cities distort the actual street layout by making it more regular and

by idealizing it, giving it symbolic significance. Lilley sees a cosmic aspect in the very act of surveying for the Romans, citing as evidence their practice of laying out towns with *kardo maximus* intersecting *decumanus maximus*, which, according to Hygenus, were aligned with the axis of the earth and the course of the sun respectively. From this perspective Lilley considers medieval world maps, their geometric forms, and âhow geometry also provided a symbolic link between the city and world historyâ (p. 28). Since the square and particularly the circle âdominated in medieval conceptions of the cosmos,â âthrough a sacred geometry of circles and squares the imagined earthly and heavenly âcityâ became in the medieval mind an image of Godâs universe, both an image of its form (its cosmology) and its formation (its cosmogony)â (pp. 31, 40).

In chapter 2, âUrban Forms,â Lilley investigates the extent to which these cosmological ideas were reflected in actual town building. He finds circular geometrics and their symbolism harder to identify than rectilinear forms. He argues that the rectilinear plans of the new towns of the thirteenth century, notably the *bastides*, were part of a move toward seeing Jerusalem as a square. Yet he admits that many or even most town plantations before the twelfth century were roughly rectangular. Some places combined circular wall with rectangular plans, particularly in the late Middle Ages: âIt is as if each shape had its own special symbolic purpose: the circle to protect the town, the square to order itâ (p. 59). Typical of his approach is a passage on pages 59-60, in which he simply states, without providing documentation indicating that any of the planners of these towns were familiar with the iconography that he cited earlier, that the geometric similarity shows that they were trying to impose something cosmological. In a critical passage, Lilley rejects topography as an explanation of why some new towns had perfect orthogonal plans and others did not, arguing instead that the effort to create geometric perfection was too great for a purely utilitarian explanation to suffice, âbut rather [was] used to satisfy some symbolic purposeâ (p. 64).

In part 2, Lilley considers the actual built environment, but here too he loses sight of the terrestrial world. In chapters 3 and 4, âFounding a City, Founding a Worldâ and âMeasures of Meaning,â he examines the actual process of creating the new town plans, arguing that âthe parallel between creating cities and creating the world actually had a firm Biblical basisâ (p. 78). He then tries to link the practicalities of measuring the earth with cosmic measurement through the *Practical Geometry* of Hugh of St. Victor, which defined practical geometry as studying space by using instruments. Some of his passages that are most interesting for students of urban history concern urban design, architectural practice, and geometrical knowledge. Lilley gives a very informative discussion of the âmeasurersâ who laid out the town area using the writings of Roman *agrimensores* and the gnomon, quadrant, and astrolabe. They, rather than trained architects, seem to have been more important for town layouts. Some sort of measurement was necessary, even in the less-than-perfectly-orthogonal plans. He admits that the difference between the perfect and imperfect plans may reflect the extent to which the person doing the layout had formal training in geometry; but given how few town plans were perfectly orthogonal, this admission defeats the central thesis of his book.

In part 3, âCity-Cosmos Lived,â Lilley discusses the references in late medieval political literature, urban panegyrics, and statutes to the city as a âbody,â with different functions assigned to various members. He discusses the developing civic consciousness in the late Middle Ages, reflected in ceremonies. A chapter section on ruling bodies and divine orders is based on political writings about the city, mainly Aquinas and Marsiglio, rather than actual statutes. The mayor, representing the king in endowing the city with âa perceived divine basis ... [ruled] the city using laws modeled on those that governed the universe, and to instill in the city a divine order that mirrored that of the whole cosmosâ (p. 143). He discusses separately urban laws and how townspeople were âordered.â Statutes, given on authority from charters granted by âa monarch,â fixed the place of the citizens in the cosmos; but his discussion centers on a very specific category of urban law, those marginalizing âoutsiders,â specifically the ethnically disfavored, lepers, and prostitutes, disregarding the many other areas in which city councils legislated (p. 143). Lepers were moved outside the walls, beyond the confines of the celestial city, creating a âmoral topographyâ (p. 156). Yet he does not extend this argument to occupational segregation, which many city governments imposed on those whose trades involved danger of fire or sanitation without excluding them from the urban community.

The final chapter, âPerforming Bodies,â discusses how the well-known processions and other civic ceremonials of the late medieval cities fit into Lilleyâs cosmic scheme. The âgeographies of performanceâ were not surprising: the processions went through the wealthier parts of town and stopped at the major churches, in some cases diverting from a direct route to form a cross within a cir-

cle. Yet even in this, his least controversial chapter, Lilley undercuts his argument by admitting that some of the play cycles were performed outside the city walls, âbecause of [their] suitability as a place of performance for the playsâ staging, in particular the proximity to the city wall and gatesâ (p. 182). In other words, when they had a job to do, the citizens did it in an unconsecrated place where they had room.

Thus we have the heavenly city of the medieval theologians. Unfortunately, like all utopian constructs, its reification required the intervention of the world of flesh, sin, and sod, and the results were usually an unsystematic mess. Lilley complains of historians who have presented medieval urbanism âas one of economic and political progress, rather than a philosophical and cultural phenomenon,â mentioning in note 17 as leading perpetrators of such misguided notions Henri Pirenne, Fritz RÃ¶rig, Edith Ennen, and Rodney Hilton (p. 12). He regrets that the plans of the French *bastides* have been interpreted âfrom a âfunctionalâ perspective by historiansâ (p. 46). The villain in this case is Maurice Beresford, whose still-valuable book on town plantation in Britain (*New Towns of the Middle Ages: Town Plantation in England, Wales* [1967]) is refuted by the view of a distinguished art historian that âall forms are endowed with spirit.â[1]

Insofar as Lilley deals with actual habitation rather than cosmology, he concentrates in the first four chapters on a few places whose street layouts display planning. His focus is on âbuilt towns,â which proceeded from a deliberate act of foundation, although he occasionally adduces evidence from ânuclearâ (he does not, however, use that word) towns, such as Bruges. He argues that in establishing new towns, the founders had abstract notions of urbanization and divine order in mind. âThe most curious and symbolically telling of all proportions used in town designs in the Middle Ages is based on root two. At the moment it is difficult to say how geographically commonplace its use was,â but he is able to adduce only five examples from the thousands of planned towns that support his thesis without modification; of course, as he shows, numerous others display some planning, but not absolute proportionality (pp. 67-68). Only two of the five ever attracted much settlement beyond their planned centers, but of course this is a âfunctionalâ issue.

No one disputes that the city surveyors who laid out street plans, divided tenement plots, and settled boundary disputes knew practical geometry. But if Lilley is to prove that their work was guided by a transcendent notion, gained from their formal study of geometry in the quadrivium, that they were recreating a heavenly Jerusalem on earth, he needs more than five examples. Furthermore, he cannot omit the oldest and many of the largest cities of Europe, most of which had at least one or two central districts that grew organically without planning, often around parish churches that were foci of religious consciousness.

Further, by the thirteenth century there were plenty of other (read: functional) town foundations that could have been the model of the street plans of the plantations. Lilley notes âhidden squaresâ in the street plans of some and admits that the squares are sometimes difficult to discern; I do not know what this proves other than that medieval surveyors knew what they were doing. With no evidence that the cosmological texts were used by anyone on the ground or who had ordered the foundations, he assumes that they had Neoplatonic cosmology in mind. This is simply impermissible. One wonders whether he thinks the irregular street plans of the older urban nuclei makes them less perfectly urban.

The fundamental problem with this book is that Lilley does not consider the town as a center of human habitation except in his final two chapters, which are the most derived from the work of other scholars. People live in a city for some reason or reasons. Not a single surviving source suggests that people migrated into a city, or stayed in one where they were born, because they thought they were living in a terrestrial recreation of the heavenly Jerusalem. People lived in the city of Babylon. The fact that a notion of the ideal city existed in the minds of some planners is interesting but ultimately of only minor significance even for the study of town planning, and of minimal importance in the larger history of medieval urbanization.

Totally apart from the omissions, which are inevitable in a short book, Lilley has a predilection for subjective âmayâ and âcould haveâ constructions that become the basis for subsequent statements of fact. He assumes without further proof that the simplest exercises in geometry were understood to have cosmic significance. âTo begin with here the focus is on the presence of rectilinear and curvilinear layouts in medieval urban landscapes, and their square and circular forms. These geometric shapes, it is argued, were chosen deliberately by those creating new urban landscapes, but not simply for pragmatic or utilitarian reasons, rather to convey a symbolic form that was itself rooted in sacred geometries common to both

city and cosmosâ (p. 41). Carried to its logical conclusion, this statement says that anything in a medieval town wall trace or street plan that is either curved or straight reflects Christian/Neoplatonic cosmological notions. Yet all lines in space are ultimately rectilinear or curvilinear! I do not find this kind of reasoning profound or enlightening.

Lilley cannot replace the economic, âfunctional,â and legal definitions of the town as general hypotheses with an argument whose proof includes impermissible leaps of logic and improbable connections, while excluding from consideration the overwhelming majority of towns on the continent and virtually all of the older nuclear ones that became major cities. âIt [this book] offers a new perspective on medieval urbanism, attempting to understand the city as a cultural as well as a material construct, and to see it more from the point of view of those who knew it and experienced it first handâ (p. 12). He has indeed portrayed the city as a cultural construct, but the rest of this statement is negated by what he actually writes, which is based on what highly educated people thought it should be, not what it actually was. Persons interested in how the city was imagined will find much of interest in this book; those concerned with how it was lived must look elsewhere.

Note

[1]. Ãmile MÃ¢le, *Religious Art in France: The Thirteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 16.