

## **RITUALS IN THE MIDDLE AGES: AT THE CROSSROADS OF LAY CULTURE AND OFFICIAL DOCTRINE IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE AND THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**

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This collection of articles was inspired by the colloquium *Ritual in the Middle Ages*, when we gathered at the kind invitation of Martin Aurell at the Centre d'Études Supérieures de Civilisation Médiévale, Université de Poitiers, in June 2022 to discuss the multiple manifestations and meanings of medieval rituals and to map the interdisciplinary interface between medieval history, literature, and law from the twelfth to the fifteenth century.

Our reflections result in this cluster, which discusses rituals, beliefs, and lived religion in the medieval West, Scandinavia, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Our focus of interest has been to observe how local traditions and lay culture developed in different areas of Latin Christendom in parallel with the increasing efforts of the Catholic Church toward more universal and integrated principles of networking from the late eleventh century onward, and how regional customs and social (power) structures adapted to the change. Notwithstanding the mutual recognition between the various layers of ecclesiastical, aristocratic, and royal superstructures, friction between partially overlapping and mutually competing hierarchies and conventions was, from time to time, difficult to avoid.

The articles address two main themes: the redivision of authority and the re-framing of devotional practices. The collection begins with Iris Shagrir's article on renegotiating the use of public ritual space in Latin Jerusalem after the crusader conquest and continues with Mia Korpiola's survey of the amalgamation of regional legal tradition and canon law in thirteenth-century Sweden. The next two studies, by Martin Aurell and Sini Kangas, observe the interplay and competition between lay and ecclesiastical practices in the twelfth-century rituals of the combatant aristocracy. They are followed by Vladimir Agrigoroaei's examination of the decorative use of ritual text in medieval psalters. The concluding article by Katherine Zieman explores the concept of attention in devotional literature from late medieval England.

In medieval Latin Christendom, as in all human societies, rituals were ever-present in both daily and festive interaction. The medieval period was characterized by deep religiosity, and rituals associated with Christianity were prevalent, including the mass, performance of sacraments, processions, and various

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liturgical ceremonies. These actions were characterized by public, performative behaviors maintaining and supporting the cohesion of the communities of believers and functioning as a form of self-representation.<sup>1</sup> For the participants, rituals were understood as a means of symbolic communication confirming the established norms and traditions of their society.<sup>2</sup>

Rituals played a significant role in maintaining hierarchies and social structures by legitimizing specific actions, statuses, and relationships.<sup>3</sup> While being performed and witnessed in public as a sequence of reciprocal communications and actions, the different roles of active participants and passive observers was clearcut.<sup>4</sup> The performance was expected to involve both performers and audience, but the anticipated role of the latter was to tacitly support the course of events toward the desired outcome.

The variation in ritual behavior is enormous. While examining historical rituals, researchers inevitably end up struggling with the difficulty of defining the concept of ritual. Whereas the practices, functions, and goals related to a performance are usually relatively clear, the meaning attached to “ritual” is often anything but clear.<sup>5</sup> The one thing the authors contributing to the rich research tradition on medieval rituals agree on is the diversity of contexts, meanings, and forms associated with the term. In the absence of any uniform definition, there is no scholarly consensus on the concept of ritual.

In the *Dangers of Ritual*, Philippe Buc has questioned the existence of any valid definition for the word “ritual.” Buc raises pertinent questions about historical consciousness, the relation between medieval author and modern reader, and the supposed semblance between medieval practice and our contemporary understanding of ritual ceremony. Emphasizing the plurality of medieval cultures, he has pointed out that rituals as depicted in medieval texts might have been distanced from their actual performance, leaving us in an uncomfortable position of creating possibly anachronistic interpretations of stylized literary

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Bell, introduction to *Medieval and Early Modern Ritual: Formalized Behavior in Europe, China and Japan*, ed. Joëlle Rollo-Koster (Leiden: Brill 2021), 1–4. In his classic work of the sociology of religion, Émile Durkheim divides the practice of religion between the spheres of faith (“les croyances, états de l’opinion”) and rituals or ceremonies (“les rites, modes d’action déterminés”). These practices give the participants a sense of being part of a cohesive collective action, part of a whole. Émile Durkheim *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse, le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1925), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Dusan Zupka, *Ritual and Symbolic Communication in Medieval Hungary under the Árpád Dynasty (1000–1301)* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 3, 14, 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power, in *Rites of Power: Symbolism, Ritual and Politics Since the Middle Ages*, ed. Sean Wilentz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 13–40.

<sup>5</sup> Bell, introduction to *Medieval and Early Modern Ritual*.

representations.<sup>6</sup> Buc is correct to argue that sources were usually compiled after the events they depict had been completed, and that the quills that created the descriptions of ceremonies mostly belonged to clerics writing for the benefit of their institutions and patrons. These factors inevitably shaped the authorial interpretation.

Peter Dinzeltacher has adopted a similarly critical approach to the study of rituals. He has reminded scholars of the danger of seeing rituals everywhere and denied the existence of rituals in sources that do not include any depictions of their presence. Unlike Buc, Dinzeltacher recognizes the importance of studying medieval rituals, even if there can be no universal definitions of ritual and ceremony. He has rejected Buc's criticism by pointing out that the debate per se takes place between contemporary scholars, not between medieval authors and their modern researchers.<sup>7</sup>

Other scholars have acknowledged the distance between medieval concepts and modern scholarship, but have been less skeptical about the use of the term "ritual." Zbigniew Dalewski and Dusan Zupka have emphasized that it is not necessary or even possible to draw precise definitions between the concepts of ritual, rite, tradition, ceremony, or custom, yet these phenomena can and should be studied. A single act can be interpreted using one or more of these terms.<sup>8</sup>

Gerd Althoff has replied to Buc's criticism by saying that similar limitations and dangers of anachronism are related to the research of most medieval texts and may be tackled by careful—and critical—analysis of the sources. Even if we cannot grasp the essence of rituals in certain medieval contexts, we can still study depictions of their reception and meaning for various medieval audiences. More important than defining the term itself is formulating why and for what purposes rituals were needed in medieval communities. In terms of their performative significance, rituals were unambiguous, because their main function was to provide a clear, reliable and sufficient means of consolidating social decisions. According to Althoff, the public communication of the ruling elites involved continuous sequences of ritual behaviors designed to ensure that everyone accepted the existing hierarchies and their role within them. Vice versa, the disruption of ritual was a means of avoiding or altering the consequence of action. The performance of a ritual thereby contained the risk of failure.<sup>9</sup> Buc

<sup>6</sup> Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 2, 8–9, 247.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Dinzeltacher, *Warum weint der König? Eine Kritik des mediävistischen Panritualismus* (Badenweiler: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Bachmann, 2009), 8–9, 14–15, 79–81, 89.

<sup>8</sup> Zbigniew Dalewski, *Ritual and Politics: Writing the History of a Dynastic Conflict in Medieval Poland* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 38–39; and Zupka, *Ritual and Symbolic Communication*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Gerd Althoff, *Rules and Rituals in Medieval Power Games* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 11, 110, 162; and Gerd Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale: Symbolik und Herrschaft im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Primus, 2003), 12–13, 200.

divides rituals into “good,” which worked to achieve the intended ends, and “bad,” which were manipulated or failed. In the latter case in particular, the value of the sources may remain limited.<sup>10</sup>

Patrick Geary adds a very important insight into the oral function of medieval texts, which were often intended to be recited and read aloud to an audience rather than simply read by individuals. Even if the bidirectional transformation of a written record into an oral performance inevitably causes major challenges for research, the fact remains that medieval texts are the main tool for the study of medieval oral culture.<sup>11</sup> If the sources are to be believed, medieval rituals often stimulated several senses. We cannot reach all these levels, but we can begin with the visual evidence.

According to Zupka, rituals are culturally construed physical and verbal acts, sanctioned by tradition and collectively shared in public by performers and audiences. Rituals differ from standard behavior, are intentional and repetitive, have symbolic meanings, and involve emotions. In essence, they serve as a means of social adaptation of perception.<sup>12</sup>

Althoff defines ritual in terms of verbal and nonverbal communication as a sequence of deliberate actions under specific circumstances and in a specific order. These actions have an explicit and particular meaning for the groups involved and they have the power to produce additional effects on the participants, the audience, and the society in which they exist. These acts are communicative in nature. They include not only speech and gestures but also the artefacts and space used to share the symbolic information associated with the context of performance. For Althoff, the ritual system represents a ubiquitous recurrent discourse omnipresent in medieval communication.<sup>13</sup>

“L’espace n’est pas ce milieu vague et indéterminé” (a space is not a vague, indeterminate setting), according to Émile Durkheim.<sup>14</sup> The material environment played an important role in the performance of medieval ceremonies. Spaces such as cathedrals, courts, and dining halls were created with regard to ritual use. Sacred sites symbolized and hosted a rich cluster of ritualized practices, including various religious feasts. In her article “Liturgy and Ritual Space

<sup>10</sup> Philippe Buc, “Ritual and Interpretation: The Early Medieval Case,” *Early Medieval Europe* 9 (2000): 186–201; and Philippe Buc, “Political Rituals and Political Imagination in the Medieval West From the Fourth Century to the Eleventh,” in *The Medieval World*, ed. Peter Linehan and Janet A. Nelson (London: Routledge, 2002), 189–213.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Geary, “Oblivion between Orality and Textuality in the Tenth Century,” in *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography*, ed. Gerd Althoff, Johannes Fried, and Patrick J. Geary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 111–22.

<sup>12</sup> Zupka, *Ritual and Symbolic Communication*, 18–20.

<sup>13</sup> Althoff, *Rules and Rituals*, 9–10; Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale*, 27–28; and Gerd Althoff, “The Variability of Rituals,” in Althoff, Fried, and Geary, *Medieval Concepts of the Past*, 71–88.

<sup>14</sup> Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires*, 15.

in Latin Jerusalem,” Iris Shagrir examines the interplay between religious and civic rituals in twelfth-century Jerusalem.

The urban space of the Holy City had been traditionally divided between different faiths and churches. After the crusader conquest, the sacred topography was reconstructed with a new liturgical program initiated by the Latin Church. The aim was to encourage increasing pilgrimage to holy sites and emphasize the prestige of the new capital of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. By 1149, the religious center of Christendom, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, had undergone a significant reconstruction project, including the erection of the tombs of the Latin Kings at the entrance to the holy place as a demonstration of Latin power.

The Latin liturgy of Jerusalem comprised some remarkably innovative characteristics, such as the establishment of the July 15 celebration to commemorate the conquest of 1099. Simultaneously with amalgamating European traditions with the preexisting sacred topography, a carefully planned ritual schedule introduced the primacy of the Latin rite in urban space.

The strength of a ritual is therefore not immutable but based on its adaptability to changing circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Rituals are deliberately used not only to establish and maintain the status quo but also to commit to new social rules and confirm future events.<sup>16</sup> Legal rituals were essentially designed to define the social and material relations between the parties involved. In addition to merely securing contracts, they were used to create bonds of kinship and collaboration.

Mia Korpiola’s article “Legal Rituals and the Church: Evolving Rituals in Swedish Provincial Laws, 1200–1350” investigates the influence of the Latin rite and canon law on the provincial laws of medieval Sweden. With the strengthening grip of the Church, new rituals were introduced into society and old ones were reformulated (and in some cases disappeared altogether). Legitimation by consequent marriage replaced the traditional adoption rituals for children born out of wedlock, and the marriage formula for giving away the bride was reworded.

While established traditions that were widely known did not need to be explained, the case of new rituals was different. Swedish medieval provincial laws did not specify any rituals other than the newly introduced sacrament of baptism. The sacramental status of the rite required a precise form and order of performance, and where there remained doubt that the performer might not have been sufficiently familiar with the content of the rite, it was necessary to explain it in detail in the law. To a lesser extent, the same conclusion applied to the performance of oaths. The custom of oath-taking was ancient and there was no need to describe it in the provincial laws, but the new requirement to take an oath on

<sup>15</sup> Althoff, *Rules and Rituals*, 9–10; and Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> Zupka, *Ritual and Symbolic Communication*, 29.

a book (presumably the Bible) instead of a weapon or oath-rings had to be documented.

From the perspective of collective history, rituals embodied discourses of social relations channeling both the repetition and renewal of cultural forms and ideas. While expressing tradition and accepted rules, the performers also added their personal significances to the context. The effect was bidirectional: rites of passage in particular were related to the building of the identity of the performer.<sup>17</sup> Rituals, however difficult to define in themselves, functioned as an organizing principle for the participants and audiences involved.

The tie between secular and ecclesiastical lords and their vassals was strengthened by rituals of honor. In homage ceremonies vassals pledged loyalty to their lord and were granted land or titles in public. Aristocratic males were initiated among their peers by ritually dubbing them to knighthood. Dubbing as an important rite of passage contributed to the creation of a knightly identity: the ritual act not only represented social inclusion among peers, but was in itself a genuine means of transformation.<sup>18</sup>

In the Carolingian period the Church had not been involved in the ceremonies where young noblemen were invested with weapons and ritually integrated in the peer group.<sup>19</sup> By the twelfth century, the situation had altered. In his article “From Episcopal Dubbing to Sacrament of Confirmation (Twelfth–Fourteenth Centuries),” Martin Aurell explores the developing episcopal role in the ritual of dubbing. In most cases, bishops were depicted in an ancillary role, blessing the sword and other weapons, whereas the handing over of the sword was reserved to senior secular aristocracy. There were, however, some exceptional cases in which the bishops seem to have performed the ritual, including handing over the sword and giving the *colée*, or stroke.

By the late thirteenth century, the sacrament of confirmation had borrowed the *colée* from the rite of entry into chivalry. From the mid-fourteenth century onward, popes were depicted ceremonially presenting honorary swords to members of the royalty. These ceremonies did not so much bear witness to papal efforts to interfere in the sphere of the secular aristocracy, as to novel forms of collaboration between lay and ecclesiastical rulership.

Ritual is a social concept, involving reciprocal communications and actions between the participants. However, they did not all necessarily require human

<sup>17</sup> Gerd Althoff, Johannes Fried, Patrick J. Geary, introduction to *Medieval Concepts of the Past*, 1–18; and Althoff, “The Variability of Rituals.”

<sup>18</sup> Frans Theuws, “Introduction: Rituals in Transforming Societies,” in *Rituals of Power: From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Frans Theuws and Janet L. Nelson (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 1–13; and Bell, introduction to *Medieval and Early Modern Ritual*.

<sup>19</sup> Régine Le Jan, “Frankish Giving of Arms and Rituals of Power: Continuity and Change in the Carolingian Period,” in Theuws and Nelson, *Rituals of Power*, 281–309.

beings tangibly present at the event. According to Christian practice, prayer is a particularly flexible ritual that may vary significantly both in form and in practice. To implore protection and wellbeing, ward off evil, and prepare the supplicant for eventual death, medieval people prayed frequently. According to the sources, their ritual observances were far from monotonous and did not invariably conform to the recommendations of the Church. Through rituals, medieval individuals manifested their position; ritual practice also constituted a ground for competition for authority and power, both as means of consolidating authority and asserting control. Royal, seignorial, and clerical authority was justified and reinforced by rituals. Conversely, for the subjects, the same rituals affirmed the boundaries of submission. Usurpation of power involved ritual gestures and words in front of an audience, imagined or real.

Sini Kangas raises the question of *furta ritu* by crusader knights in “Prayers by the Crusader Knights: Ritual Observation and Literary Adaptations in the Narratives of the First Crusade.” In the chronicles of the crusades by ecclesiastical authors, prayer is depicted as a collective worship performed in public under the supervision of the clergy. Whereas the vernacular chansons of the crusades maintain the same concept of prayer, they also add fictional scenes of crusader knights praying and performing sacraments without clerical guidance. In addition to using the epic prayer as a method of relieving noble fear, the depictions also hint at individual crusaders experimenting with spiritual authority and taking the role of the clergy.

That rituals were often deeply embedded in collective memory and performed orally explain why their documentation often lacks detail. Had a medieval reader incidentally come across a notion of ritual, it would likely have evoked connotations of familiarity and recognition.<sup>20</sup> In such a case, the reference to ritual need not necessarily have had any specific meaning other than to confer prestige on a particular work as part of a respectable textual tradition.

As part of the text, rituals inspired awe. Vladimir Agrigoroaei observes in “The Appearance of Ritual: Old French as an Outline Language of the Latin Texts of the Winchester Psalter” the decorative use of ritual text in the bilingual presentation of the Psalms, Old Canticles, and prayers in the double columns of the Winchester Psalter. In this case, the role of the Old French translations seems to have been primarily ornamental. The scribe had added the text without any deeper meaning, apparently inspired by an Old English tradition.

One function of rituals is to balance and maintain the wellbeing of an individual by performing stability through the codification of repetitive modes of

<sup>20</sup> This is because ritual not only is anchored in the collective memory, but also shapes it. Althoff, “The Variability of Rituals.”

behavior.<sup>21</sup> The demarcation between ritual and nonritual, ordinary action nevertheless remains uncontested.

In “‘Good saure and deuocyon’: Attention in Devotional Ritual,” Katherine Zieman approaches the concept of attention in devotional practice in late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. Attention as a means to effect change in spiritual life was a focal point of the ritual achievement—ultimately the efficacy of prayer depended on it. Attention was depicted as a sensation of sweetness reached when the devout subject was completely and pleasantly focusing on God. It was a fragile state of mind, easily lost by distraction, and could only be achieved by determined direction of thoughts. The purpose of ritual here was to help direct and sustain attention toward harmonious peacefulness of contemplation. To quote Zieman, “attention was the one thing the devout could offer to God.”

To conclude, the term “ritual” covers a broad field of medieval activities, referring to repetitive and often formal behavior combining cognitive processes and physical actions. Whether they were carried out in private or in public, medieval rituals invariably had a social function; they were performed for and in interaction with audiences, both human and superhuman. The performative aspect involved a shared experience of visible, audible, and sensory practices that gave form to the ritual behavior.

In addition to thinking and doing, the rituals evoked emotional reactions in the participants. They reinforced a sense of inclusion and belonging and provided protection from harm. Such deep undercurrents underlined the importance of rituals in sacred and daily life, as well as in moments of transition and danger.

While contextual factors initiated and influenced ceremonial behavior, making it far from stagnant, the content of rituals could never be entirely spontaneous. Their dual nature, capable of both preserving and transforming traditions, invites multifaceted interpretations. In the words of Arnold van Gennep, rituals are polysemous. There is always more than one possible explanation for a ritual; at the same time, one interpretation may apply to various forms of rituals.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Nils Holger Petersen et al., introduction to *The Appearances of Medieval Rituals: The Play of Construction and Modification*, ed. Nils Holger Petersen et al. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 1–12.

<sup>22</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage* (Paris: E. Nourry, 1909), 11–27.

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