

## SACRED PLACE AGAIN

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### RESUMEN

En los últimos veinte años, el tema del lugar sagrado ha ocupado de manera importante las mentes de los estudiosos de la antigüedad Tardía. El tema de los lugares sagrados o de la sacralización de los lugares ha sido un catalizador en el estudio del desarrollo de la arquitectura cristiana durante los siglos IV al VI. El acceso a los lugares sagrados y el control de los mismos constituyó una importante señal de identidad para cristianos, judíos y paganos, durante la Antigüedad Tardía. El paradigma de Ritschl y Harnack, que suponía que el su esencia (Wesen) el Cristianismo era una forma de religiosidad opuesta a la sacralización de los lugares es poco más que un fleco antihistórico, desgajado de la amplia túnica de la polémica del siglo XVI. La mayor parte de los investigadores del siglo XX, que han trabajado sobre arte, arqueología, historia y religión, han ignorado tal paradigma, en el modo como operaba – solamente la investigación germana lo ha mantenido vivo. Pero en la última década del siglo XX, el paradigma ha pasado a tener carta de ciudadanía en la investigación anglófona, con consecuencias nada satisfactorias.

### ABSTRACT

In the last 20 years, sacred place has been much on the minds of scholars interested in late antiquity. Sacralized place was the catalyst for the development of early Christian architecture during the 4<sup>th</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup>. Century, Access to and control of sacred place was an important marker of identity in late antiquity, for Christians, Jews and pagans. The Ritschl-Harnack paradigm, arguing that in its essence (Wesen) Christianity was a form of religiosity opposed to the sacralization of place, is little more than an anti-historical screed, torn from the larger cloth of 16<sup>th</sup> century polemics. Most 20<sup>th</sup> century students of late antique art, archaeology, history and religion have ignored the paradigm, as is fitting – only German scholarship has kept it alive. But in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the paradigm was carried over into Anglophone scholarship, with unfortunate results.

## INTRODUCTION

In their relentless drive to construct a distinct identity, the early Christians exploited τόπος/locus — this became a key marker of Christian identity in the years 300 to 600. Interest in this subject during the past 20 years has grown— several important historical studies have appeared. Among the book-length studies those of Hunt, Taylor, Walker and Wilken (see Bibliography, *infra*) are noteworthy. It is clear that the major drivers in the production of this new literature are martyr cults and pilgrimage piety. There is still no reliable synthesis evaluating the whole development from the first through the sixth centuries. No doubt this will come in due course. In the meantime there are still loose ends. Conspicuous under this latter rubric is the pre-Constantinian evidence which (on the examples of Taylor’s book and especially Markus’ 1990 and 1994 publications) is often misunderstood and misrepresented. It is useful to get this subject right, since our evaluation of later developments is directly affected by our grasp of the earlier period.

Based on Markus’ work in particular, it is clear that the Ritschl/Harnack paradigm has finally made its mark in Anglophone scholarship. To remind readers, this interpretative paradigm rests on a premise of discontinuity between pre- and post-Constantinian Christianity. In the specific example at hand, before Constantine Christians are said to have opposed the hallowing of place, whereas during and after Constantine’s rule, prompted by Imperial largesse and the taste of secular power, the new religionists did an about-face, reversing three centuries of principled opposition to the sacralization of space and place. This is an old paradigm. Its modern roots are found in Reformation (Calvinist) historiography. A familiar component of this paradigm is the idealization of a primitivist essence which Germans like to call *Urchristentum* — the latter takes numerous shapes depending on who is at the helm, but one of the most familiar fantasies is of early Christianity as a spiritually pure, aniconic-iconophobic form of religiosity— Thümmel has recently revived this old saw. The latter is noteworthy in the present context because rejection of pictures and of sacred place are obverse and reverse of the same Ritschl/Harnack coin.

If what we think about Christianity before Constantine affects our evaluation of developments after Constantine, then no doubt this includes our evaluation of archaeological materials, the subject area in which our *honorandus* has distinguished himself. I offer this little note in the hope it might help in some small way to clarify a subject that bears directly on the architectural history of late antiquity, especially the history of churches, baptisteries, martyr sites and pilgrimage sanctuaries.

## NOMENCLATURE AND DEFINITIONS

The first level of clarification concerns words and their applications — when we refer to sacred place, what are we talking about? Three words are critical to the understanding of this subject: ‘space’, ‘place’, ‘sacred’. On the first, throughout all of antiquity, ‘space’ (χώρα) was first and foremost a construct within the philosopher’s vocabulary — the principal formal properties of *chora* were quantity (ποσότης) and extension (διάστασις; Arist. *Physics* 193<sup>b</sup>24-35; *De Caelo* 299<sup>a</sup>15ff.; *De Anima* 403<sup>b</sup>14ff.; *Metaphysics* 1061<sup>b</sup>21ff.; cf. King, 91-96). Excepting the community of philosophers (notably Peripatetics, Stoics and Platonists), which was always small, most people in antiquity had little or no knowledge of philosophical *chora* — this was a metaphysical subject reserved for the very few. But everyone living in the real world had some kind of familiarity with *chora* in its economic-political-military-legal application (e.g. eparchy-province, polis-urbs) and in its less formal application as a marker of ethnicity (φύλον/γένος/tribus). Most early Christians did not concern themselves with *chora*. The two exceptions are the relatively

limited apologetic interest in ἀχώρητος (Finney, 210-17) as an epithet of divinity and the widespread interest in Palestine (esp. Judea) as sacred *chora* (Wilken, Index: ‘Holy Land’, s.v.). The latter subject was of immense importance to early Christians, as everyone knows.

‘Place’ (τόπος/locus) was a necessary construct in everyone’s vocabulary, early Christians included — it was invoked often in daily discourse within the multiple vernaculars circulating in the Empire and beyond its borders. *Topos* was basic to human communication. Philosophical *topos* (cf. Duhem) was also arguably a good deal more important than philosophical *chora*, because place played such a major role in real life on the ground. The principle formal property of philosophical place was understood as the opposite of *diastasis*, namely boundary and delimitation (ὄρος, τέλος); in other words, *topos* = *chora* delimited. *Topos* played a defining role in the construction of early Christian identity — this includes philosophical *topos*, rhetorical *topos* (Arist. *Rhet.* 1358<sup>a</sup>14) and real-life *topos* (sanctified by association with a *theios aner*, such as Jesus in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, or Apollonios in Tyana; cf. Bieler).

Ἱερόν/sacrum (sacred place, temple, holy thing) was understood on analogy with *topos*, but in the case of *hieron*, what was envisaged was delimitation by belonging, ownership, possession (προσῆκειν, κτήσις, κατάληψις) — the *hieron* belonged typically to a god or a *numen* or a *daimon*. *Hieron* was not a philosophical construct — it was the product instead of religious practice, and *hiera* were protected both by law and custom. ‘Sacred’ and its adjectival cognates (ὅσιος, ἅγιος, ἅγνός) were predicated mainly of the things (land, livestock, money and treasure, slaves, words, prayers, hymns, festivals and liturgies, sanctuaries, temples, statues) that belonged to a god. Anything located outside the sacred boundary was understood as βέβηλον/profanum — in English we use the word ‘secular’. A person could also be identified as *hieros*, although in the pre-Christian world this was less common. One of the major semantic changes that took place in the Roman world, no doubt encouraged (but not invented) by Christians, was the widespread application of *hieros* as an epithet of persons. When *hieros* is personalized, this can have consequences for *topos* — the example everyone knows is Jesus, whom the New Testament writers juxtapose over against the Jerusalem *hieron*, thereby turning Jesus into his own *hieros topos* (Finney, 197ff.). An aggregate of persons might also be denominated *hieros*; again the best-known examples are synagogue (Fine) and church (Finney, 203-04).

We are told repeatedly that the earliest Christians rejected sacred spaces and places. They opposed *hiera* (temples, statues, animal sacrifices and liturgies), and within their own sacred circles (their *ekklesiai*-churches) they would not admit Christianized versions of *hiera*. They were diligent in remaining faithful to their own ‘essence’ (Harnack’s portentous ‘Wesen’), despite the temptations to backslide into the comfortable and familiar precincts of pagan *hiera*. They resembled Israelite warriors fighting the blandishments of Canaanite idolatry. Then, after nearly three centuries of upholding their opposition to sacred spaces and places, under the influence of Constantine and his publicist Eusebius, a veritable *bouleversement* took place — Christians reverted, regressed to their pagan roots and commenced the veneration of *hiera*. What all of this means for the evaluation of later Christian sanctuaries (churches [martyr churches in particular], baptisteries, pilgrimage shrines) is that these later Christianized *hiera* must be viewed under a cloud of suspicion.

## THE EARLIEST EVIDENCE

Under this heading, virtually everything that survives (excepting the Dura house church) is literary invention shaped by theological-philosophical subject matter. Judged by the rules of

historical evidence, none of the earliest Christian written sources on *topos* can be classified as history. As for genres within which *topos* comes up for discussion, paraenesis, catechesis, homily and apology provide the primary literary settings. The implied historical context in most surviving examples is either missionary preaching or apologetic disputation, but in both of these examples real external connectors which would allow for historical corroboration are either weak or non-existent.

Among the earliest sources, a major theme is ‘spiritualization of cult’ (Finney, 196-201). The most important gospel pericope is *John* 4.4-42, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The passage, which is addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience, teaches that Jewish *hiera* had been superseded and thus rendered obsolete. The famous saying at vss. 23-24 (...God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth...) has multiple Qumran parallels — the *realia* of Jerusalem cult (temple, priesthood, sacrifice) must now yield to a new form of spiritual worship (Finney, 199). The Johannine perspective (like that of Qumran) does not call for flight from the world or abandonment of real-world worship — it bespeaks neither an anti-materialist nor a rationalist manifesto. What is envisaged here is the spiritualization of cult, not its elimination, and there is no statement here of principled opposition to *hiera* or sacred *topos*.

The two other most important New Testament testimonies follow the Johannine pericope. Luke makes Stephen speak against the Jerusalem temple (*Acts* 6.8-8.1), asserting that God does not live in ‘temples made by hands’, implying that the Jerusalem temple was a place of idolatry. And the same author puts Paul in Athens (*Acts* 17.15ff.), speaking to an audience of philosophers and politicians, attacking their religious concepts and practices. In the Areopagus speech, Luke turns Paul into a spokesperson for a Stoicized form of Platonism in which God is defined by a string of positive and negative epithets. Under the latter, Paul’s God (like Stephen’s) is he «who does not live in sanctuaries made by hands» (*Acts* 17.24b). Paul takes aim at Athenian pagans and their cult practices with the same ammunition that Stephen had used against fellow Jews. Once again, however, there is no principled rejection of cult and *hiera* — the issue here is conversion and reform, not the elimination of traditional religion. Having said that, it is also true that the place-related reforms envisaged in the New Testament literature, not just in *John* and *Acts*, but also in the Pauline and deutero-Pauline traditions, point to a person-centered *hieron*, a messiah who becomes the primary *topos* of the holy.

The themes enunciated in the New Testament were carried over in second and third century literature. The primary vehicle of transmission was early Christian apology, an aggressive genre, part defensive, part offensive. The Christian apologists were engaged in a heated debate with contemporaneous paganism, and much of what they said in their defense of the new religion was prompted by their adversaries — this is a detail of great importance in evaluating place-related (and other) apologetic claims. Commentators often overlook this detail and take the claims made by the early Christian apologists at face value. The truth is that everything the apologists wrote needs to be sifted through a critical lens separating fact from fiction. In the pre-Constantinian period the two giants of the apologetic genre were Clement in the second century and Origen in the third.

In all of pre-Constantinian Christian literature, the single strongest statement of a person-centered *topos hieros* appears near the end of Clement’s *Stromateis* 7.5.28,1-7.6.30,1. The *Stromateis* is the last installment of Clement’s monumental trilogy that begins with an apology (*Protreptikos*) and continues in a sequel (*Paidagogos*) that has a paraenetic, didactic and moralistic tone. Overall, the trilogy charts a progressivist course, and the concluding *Stromateis*,

addressed to Christian gnostics, targets those who made the greatest progress on the road to perfection. The sequence just cited (7.5.28,1ff.) consists in an extended listing of God's positive and negative attributes. The gnostic Christian is God-like, a kind of sacramental presence in the world, a temple, a divine image, a dwelling place of God — at one and the same time the gnostic Christian is (like God) beyond *topos* and in *topos*. Clement's discussion of the gnostic Christian as sacred *topos* and *metatopos* borders on mystification and is as close as pre-Constantinian Christianity comes to principled rejection of *topos hieros*, understood as a real-world place on the ground. The effect that Clement's teaching had on real sacred places cannot be determined.

As for material evidence or documentary evidence attesting real places or real people frequenting holy places, there is so little of this that the subject can be very briefly summarized. In a passage (*HE* 4.26.3-4) that is perhaps historical, Eusebius says Melito visited Palestine to confirm events described in the Bible, and in his *Commentary on John* 1.28 Origen writes that he went to Palestine to «trace the footsteps of Jesus». These two passages suggest an early interest in *topos*, well before the growth of fourth century pilgrimage spirituality. In the epigraphic realm we have the graffito at Peter's grave in the Vatican necropolis, attesting veneration of this *topos hieros* ca. AD 160 (Finney, 221).

And in the archaeological realm we have the very valuable evidence of the Dura house church dating from the mid-third century. We have no epigraphy confirming that this church building with an enclosed baptistery was viewed as a *topos hieros* at the time of its earliest use, however what took place in the Dura building (namely the conversion of a private house into a public church with extensive retrofitting) resembles an architectural process that is paralleled dozens of times over in the fourth through sixth centuries: an already standing building is divested of one set of functions and invested with another. The new functions are predicated on new liturgical requirements, typically baptism or the eucharist, or both. What this amounts to, functionally speaking, is the sacralization, the consecration of an old space under the aegis of a new divinity.

This brief overview leads to certain conclusions. First, it is clear that the earliest Christian evidence on *topos* is fragmentary, consisting in bits and pieces of almost exclusively literary evidence. This evidence seems to stem from the confrontation of Christianity with contemporaneous Judaism and Greco-Roman paganism. There is a conspicuous apologetic element in place-related discussions from the very beginning of the tradition, an element of defense against unflattering stereotypes and of criticism (at first implied, later openly articulated) directed at traditional piety (both Jewish and Pagan).

There are two main literary *topoi*. The first is the personalization of place (the messiah=*topos hieros*) which provides the context for the development of a spiritualization of cult (with its multiple Qumran parallels) and which lays the groundwork for the *theios aner* ideology that plays such a conspicuous role in the years 300 to 600 (Brown).

The second literary *topos* is the appropriation of place-space metaphors as epithets and attributes of divinity. This provides the occasion for the early Christian exploitation of traditional Greek alpha-privatives and hence the application of philosophical-theological language to the God of the Christians. This functions as a major construct within the apologetic arguments advanced during the second and third centuries. And it is an argument that never goes away — Eusebius, Theodoret and Augustine (among later apologists) all subscribe the lineaments of this argument in prosecuting their common cause. The early Christian exploitation of space-place metaphors served various strategic purposes. It served, for example, as a familiar and effective

counter to the negative caricatures of Christianity as a religion of superstition and gross ignorance. Against such caricatures the apologists were able to bask in the reflected spiritual and philosophical light of metatopic epithets — and thereby they gave the lie to their detractors. But what these person-centered and metatopic themes of early Christian literature tell us about life on the ground, the real cult practices of Christians in the real world, is not very much. One can infer that the early Christians were seeking to correct traditional (Jewish and pagan) deficiencies, but this too is dangerous territory, because it builds on negative stereotypes of the enemy and hence has minimal probative value.

Of one thing we can be sure: over time Christian attitudes and practices changed. The main catalyst was Constantinian patronage — for the first time in their short history, Christians found themselves controlling real places in the real world, and this provided a theatre featuring an explosion of place-centered piety. The Ritschl/Harnack paradigm assumes what we do not know, namely that before Constantine Christians opposed such piety — the sources simply do not support this argument from silence. We might just as well assume the opposite, namely that the earliest Christians supported traditional *hiera*, but under marginalized conditions, and that Constantine opened the flood gates of a suppressed piety, thus mainstreaming a version of place-centered early Christian piety that had been rooted from the beginning in traditional Jewish and pagan models. This alternative assumption has exactly the same evidentiary value as the Ritschl/Harnack paradigm, namely a value of zero.

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