

Eikón Imago

ISSN-e: 2254-8718

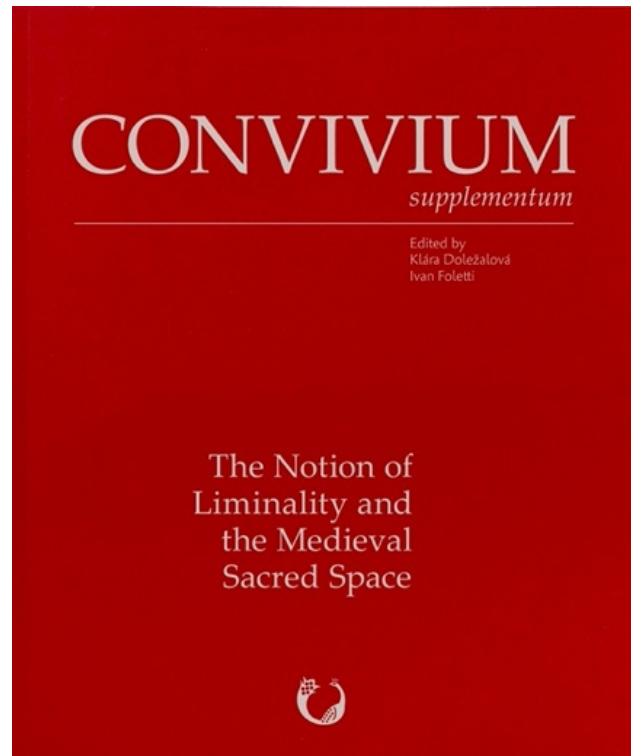
<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/eiko.74168> EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

Foletti, Ivan and Klára, Doležalová, eds. *The Notion of Liminality and the Medieval Sacred Space*. República Checa: Masarykova univerzita, 2020 [ISBN: 978-80-210-9453-6].

This handsome volume, containing six articles mostly co-authored, interrogates the relationship between liminality as analytical category and Christian sacred spaces in the Middle Ages. Although liminality has been studied in art history since the 1990s, the editors revisit this important term in relation to sacred spaces. Focusing on the various liminal boundaries within churches, all of the authors ask how this term can serve as a lens to rethink ritual, architecture, and experience in the medieval church.

The introduction by the books' editors, Ivan Foletti and Klára Doležalová. ("Liminality and Medieval Art. From Space to Rituals and to the Imagination") offers a brief overview of the history of the term liminality, defining it broadly as a spatial, ritual, and a temporal category of crossing a threshold. Offering a useful overview of the development of the term, the authors trace its origins to the anthropological studies of Arnold van Gennep who introduced it in 1909 and then in art history, which began dealing with questions of liminality and marginal zones in the early 1990s. A swift discussion of some important art historical writings follows, to which one might add Jacqueline Young's seminal article "Beyond the Barrier: The Unifying Role of the Choir Screen in Gothic Churches" (*Art Bulletin*, 82:4, 2000), published at the height of art historical interest in questions of liminality. The authors then turn to the other topic in the volume, sacred spaces, suggesting parallels between churches and the borders of nations and cities. They argue that city-walls are similarly sacred as churches and that churches and city walls had apotropaic functions, creating a border against "the places where the devil was at work" (p. 14). The authors dedicate a large section of the introduction to the discussion of baptisteries, which they argue acted as a metaphorical threshold (initiation) into the Church. Next, the authors state that the barriers inside churches served to create different layers of sacrality. It is commonly believed that the sanctuary and the Eucharist are the most sacred aspects of churches. In contrast, the authors argue that relics are, in fact, the apex of sacrality within a church. A last section is dedicated to the users and the experience of crossing thresholds into the church. This, the authors argue, was only possible for the un-baptized Christians (neophytes) after many years of waiting.

The first article written by Ivan Foletti and Katarína Kravčíková ("Closed Doors as Bearers and Construc-



tors of Images. Santa Sabina in Rome and Notre Dame du Puy") continues the debate around baptism and the experience of sacred spaces by neophytes and pilgrims. The authors set out to analyze the atrium of churches. While these spaces had several functions, they argue for the importance of them as spaces for the neophytes and pilgrims, claiming that the images visible outside the church – particularly on doors – were conceived particularly for adult neophytes. That the congregation—of both the both baptized and unbaptized—sembled before the liturgical entrance in the East, as discussed by Thomas Mathews and others, is not addressed. Nor do the authors address the fact that, surely, any neophyte would have entered a church hundreds of times by the time he or she was baptized. The authors shine spotlights on two examples of medieval doors, first the doors of S. Sabina in Rome and the cathedral of Le-Puy-en-Velay, two congregational churches from the fifth and twelfth centuries. The authors explain the images on the doors as direct results of historical or theological events; the Roman door, they argue, is the illustration of "contemporary preaching about initiation" (p. 31). Fo-

letti has already published these theses elsewhere (Ivan Foletti/Manuela Gianandrea, *Zona liminare: Il nartice di Santa Sabina, le sue porte e l'iniziazione cristiana*, Rome 2015), but in this volume the reader is unfortunately deprived of the exact reasons that lead to this conclusion and distinguishes the images in question from other similar ones. The authors further argue that the doors' hollowness – they consist of two layers of wood – would have amplified the sound from within. Their hypotheses largely rest on the assumptions that the doors had been continually closed. The authors particularly stress the presence of theophanic imagery in addition to the biblical motifs (Old and New Testament) on these doors. Taking these as a point of departure, the article concludes by arguing that sacred spaces were perceived as an image of heaven, employing the well-known literary trope of the church as a metaphor for heaven found in many late antique and medieval texts. A discussion of what these literary metaphors signify when we do not just take them at face value, but analyze them critically and question their phenomenological implications appears to be a fruitful next step, one taken in recent years by the author of this review and others (Miriam Czock, *Gottes Haus. Untersuchungen zur Kirche als heiligem Raum von der Spätantike bis ins Frühmittelalter*, 2012; Armin F. Bergmeier, *Visionserwartung: Visualisierung und Präsenzerfahrung des Göttlichen in der Spätantike*, 2017). Another possible avenue of future investigation might be to study the afterlife of late antique theophanic images in narthices; this would reveal fascinating parallels in monuments such as the Hagia Sophia in Trabzon and the Panagia Peribleptos in Ohrid, whose narthex frescoes address pertinent questions of the holiness of space in tandem with theophanic presence.

The following, meticulously argued article by Klára Doležalová and Sible de Blaauw (“Constructing Liminal Space? Curtains in Late Antique and Early Medieval Churches”) focuses on textiles as dividers in sacred spaces, pointing out the parallels between veiling and divine epiphany. The authors emphasize the centrality of the Eucharist for experiencing divine presence. Two illuminations from the Ashburnham Pentateuch (5–7th century?) showing the Tabernacle of Moses illustrate the intimate connection between curtains and beholding divine presence. Curtains were installed in the apse, below the conch, on templa, and ciboria and in intercolumniations. Two lists from Popes Leo IV (847–855) and Paschal I (817–824) in the *Liber Pontificalis* record the various types of textiles hung in Roman churches. These created a visual liminality, as the different sacred zones were not actually crossed by members of the congregation, but by their gaze. The authors convincingly argue that curtains installed on ciboria and templa were closed when the sanctuary was not in use, but opened during mass and particularly during the Eucharist, as reported by John Chrysostom and as shown in the Ashburnham Pentateuch and the Pola casket. Thus, in contrast to the late Middle Ages, when the sanctuaries were continuously closed off by solid choir screens, early medieval viewers were able to behold the entire space and its decoration. It was merely the liturgical celebration of the

Eucharist that the unbaptized were unable to see, as described in the last section of this contribution.

The next article expands on the discussion of chancel screens and is a veritable gem within this volume. Vlad Bedros and Elisbetta Scirocco (“Liturgical Screens, East and West. Liminality and Spiritual Experience”) discuss the evolution of chancel screens in Byzantium and in the West alongside each other. This is an extremely promising approach, since Byzantine and Western screens are usually discussed independently. The authors convincingly demonstrate that the East resisted the desire to visually and physically close off the sanctuary much longer than the West, where the nearly impermeable masonry screens appeared during the Romanesque period. In Byzantium, templa with colonnettes and epistyles seem to have been erected beginning only in the thirteenth century. These were still very open and transparent, visually cutting off the sanctuary from the space of the congregants only in the post-Byzantine period. In Byzantium the closing off of the sanctuary seems to have been foreshadowed by developments in monastic circles. Bedros highlights how Niketas Stethatos, the abbot of the Stoudios Monastery (d. 1090), described just such an installation and the fact that the senses of the laity are closed like doors, thereby leaving room for imagination. In the West, the abbey of Montecassino adopted the Byzantine templon with low plutei and colonnettes in 1071, but by the year 1200, high screens that prevented communication between both spheres were common in the West. This article critically challenges the use of the notion of liminality to study these objects, noting that liminality requires the actual passage from one place to another or from one state to another. Chancel screens, however, were built in order *not* to be crossed by members of the congregation. While the Byzantine examples could at least be transgressed by the gaze, even this “visual liminality” was upended in the West, where choir screens became much less permeable.

Chiara Croci’s contribution (“The Depiction of the Acta Martyrum During the Early Middle Ages: Hints from a Liminal Space, the Transept of Santa Prassede in Rome, 817–824”) describes the frescoes depicting martyr’s scenes in the southern arm of the transept of S. Prassede in Rome. They have been painted in the higher zones of this annex space that people might have walked through on their way to the crypt. This is the only article in this volume that is not co-authored and is also the only contribution that does not critically or otherwise engage with the theme of liminality despite claims to the contrary in the title.

In the following contribution, Jan Klípa & Eliška Poláčeková (“Tabulae cum portis, vela, cortinae and sudaria. Remarks on the Liminal Zones in the Liturgical and Para-Liturgical Contexts in the Late Middle Ages”) define the Eucharist itself as a rite of passage and therefore a liminal moment, dividing it into three parts: “the separation part (the initial ceremonies and the sacrament of penance), the liminal part (the Eucharist), and incorporation, the postliminal part” (p. 114). The authors then go on to argue that instead of opening the retable wings during mass, the altar retables were activated “in the su-

perposition with the true Corpus Christi” (p. 114). The article closes with a discussion of the liturgical activation of medieval models of the Holy Sepulcher in the West.

Finally, John Mitchell and Nicholas Pickwoad discuss depictions of books as liminal points of passage (“Blessed Are the Eyes Which See Divine Spirit Through the Letter’s Veil”). They argue that images of Gospel books represented “liminal screens” and “ways to salvation” (p. 136). The article’s valuable contribution lies in the comparison of depictions of books with the actual material objects that have not survived. The authors mention a fascinating detail about the fresco depicting two books in the arcosolium of Cerula in the catacomb of San Gennaro in Naples: the books show stab-sown threads that reproduce actual book binding techniques of the fifth century. They further identify thongs, strips of animal skin, that have been used to tie books and were frequently depicted. The authors interpret books that are shown closed as visualizations of concealment and revelation because the content of the codices and *volumina* cannot be seen or read.

This publication is a useful tool for scholars and the interested public. Its beautiful layout makes it easy to verify the arguments in the images, usually placed on the same page and printed in a very good quality. Some of the articles would have benefited from more attentive editing, with grammar and usage problems sometimes obscuring the authors’ arguments. While some articles lack crucial literature, this is usually made up for by another article that cites otherwise missing scholarly works. All in all, the topics of the six articles complement each other well. Many contributions in this volume implicitly or explicitly raise the question of the analyti-

cal merit of liminality and its hermeneutic potential. In their contribution, Elisabetta Scirocco and Vlad Bedros critically challenge the notion of liminality as a tool for art historical inquiry, shifting the discussion away from liminality and initiation towards the phenomenological and “corporal experience of the sacred” (p. 70). For in order to be liminal, a threshold needs to be crossed, one which marks a passage from a before to an after. This happens when anybody crosses from the profane world to the sacred space of churches and is true for initiated, uninitiated, and even members of other religious groups (Suliman Bashear, “Qibla, Musharriqa, and Early Muslim Prayer in Churches”, *The Muslim World* 83, 1991). The articles in this volume, however, concentrate on movement within sacred spaces, many of them focusing on baptism. But very few lines are being crossed inside the churches, and those that are crossed, such as the doors, were crossed by initiated and uninitiated members of a congregation hundreds of times. Sacred spaces, as this volume shows, are defined by boundaries between the space of the congregation and the holier sanctuary. Since the beginning of church building in Late Antiquity the purpose of this *limen* was to prevent movement across this line, a trend that has, if anything, increased throughout the Middle Ages. This ability to question its own categories of analysis is an admirable aspect of this book, which shines a spotlight on liminality, but also recognizes and interrogates the limits of this category.

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