

## Historein

Vol 16, No 1-2 (2017)

Greek Historiography in the 20th Century: Opening a Research Agenda



### Review of Jennifer Mara Desilva, ed., *The Sacralization of Space and Behavior in the Early Modern World: Studies and Sources*

*Androniki Dialeti*

doi: [10.12681/historein.9135](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.9135)

Copyright © 2017, Androniki Dialeti



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Dialeti, A. (2017). Review of Jennifer Mara Desilva, ed., *The Sacralization of Space and Behavior in the Early Modern World: Studies and Sources*. *Historein*, 16(1-2), 181–184. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.9135>

I imagine that he who'll rediscover life, in spite of so much paper, so many emotions, so many debates and so much teaching, will be someone like us, only with a slightly tougher memory. We ourselves can't help still remembering what we've given. He'll remember only what he's gained from each of his offerings. What can a flame remember? If it remembers a little less than necessary, it goes out; if it remembers a little more than necessary it goes out. If only it could teach us, while it burns, to remember correctly.<sup>2</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 For example, Gavin Lucas, *The archaeology of time* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- 2 From George Seferis, "Mr. Stratis Thalassinos describes a man: 5. Man," *Collected poems*, rev. ed., trans., ed. and intro. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 73–74.

**Jennifer Mara DeSilva, ed.**

***The Sacralization of Space and Behavior in the Early Modern World: Studies and Sources***

**Burlington: Ashgate, 2015. viii + 326 pp.**

**Androniki Dialeti**

University of Thessaly

Recently, the so-called spatial turn in the social sciences and humanities has prompted historians to rethink the past through its spatial signification. At the same time, scholarship has demonstrated that, as a social and cultural construction, space constantly, variously and dynamically interacted with social relations, identity formation, power politics, collective practices and group or individual tactics. The increasing interest in space as a category of historical analysis has only partially informed early modern studies, though.<sup>1</sup> Hence, this collection of essays, focusing on the sacralisation of space, makes an important contribution to that expanding field and raises crucial questions about space, its historicity and its intersections with discourses and practices about the sacred and the profane in the early modern world.

In this volume, sacred space is not taken as a stable and clearly demarcated category but as a mutable, ambiguous and often contested site over which the process of sacralisation (and/or desecration) was continuously underway. As the editor Jennifer Mara DeSilva aptly notes, the book explores how early modern sacred space "was created, used, described, reformed, and destroyed" (20). The authors of the volume do not define sacred space in narrow terms (churches, shrines, churchyards); they

also turn their attention to public spaces which were permanently or temporarily transformed into sites of religious expression or propagation. Instead of a clear delineation, most essays suggest a spatial overlap between the sacred and the profane. However, none of the essays discusses domestic space and its intersections with the sacred, a topic which would have enriched the volume and contributed to a fuller understanding of the spatial dimensions of the sacred in the early modern world.

The essays primarily discuss space in relation to the early modern confessional crisis sparked by the Reformation movements. Ranging over both the Catholic and Protestant worlds, the collection reveals a complex interplay between spatial organisation, social and religious discipline and the formation of confessional identity. Contributors explore theological debates and diverse dogmatic conceptualisations of the sacrality of space, the spatial policies employed by the church to cultivate communal spiritual renewal, the physical and ritual shaping of spaces as well as the spatial uses and abuses of the sacred. The essays rightly remind us that religious reform was also spatial reform. Diligent managing of space and sophisticated conceptualisations of the sacred, often embedded in local religious cultures, were brought into focus both in Catholic and Reformed Europe. Post-Tridentine Catholicism confidently reaffirmed the necessity of external physical stimuli for spiritual transcendence and the renewal of piety. De-Silva's essay explores the managing of sacred space of the parish church of Ss Celso and Giuliano by the papal master of ceremonies Paris de' Grassi in early sixteenth-century Rome. De' Grassi's initiatives and expectations aiming at the renewal of liturgical and devotional culture were grounded on the idea that Catholic spiritualism should be accomplished through both externals and interior contemplation.

On the other hand, Reformed churches insistently underscored piety and faith as interior spiritual spaces and denounced traditional sacred landscapes tightly intertwined with miraculous images, relics, liturgical furnishings and ritualised practices as idolatrous and superstitious remains of the old "corrupted" church, which had to be physically and symbolically cleansed. In an exemplary way Eric Nelson handles sacred space as a site of contest and multiple meanings during the French Wars of Religion (1562–98). He focuses on iconoclastic attacks by Huguenots on the basilica of St Martin in Tours in 1562 as an attempt to challenge Catholic conceptions of the sacred and on subsequent Catholic efforts to repair and reclaim the space by appropriating the Calvinist cremation of St Martin's remains and alternatively interpreting it as a new martyrdom of the saint. However, as Emily F. Winerock suggests, in her essay on the controversial use of church space for dancing in early modern England, the boundaries between Reformed and Catholic practices regarding the sacred presence in the landscape had more in common than dogmatic difference suggests. Although most Reformed theologians denounced the idea of spatial sacrality or holiness, in practice ecclesiastical administrators condemned socialising in certain places (such as churches or churchyards) as irreverent or sacrilegious.

Tension and contention over space went beyond the Catholic–Protestant conflict, though. Ecclesiastical reforming notions about the proper use of space often diverged from the ways that local populations or parish clergy ordered and conceptualised the sacred and the profane. During the Reformation, space constantly became a site of conflict between ecclesiastical reform initiatives and deep-rooted communal or popular beliefs. As Celeste McNamara and Winerock argue for Padua and England, respectively, controversies over

space usually concerned spatial liminalities between the sacred and the profane. As such, the cemetery or the churchyard were claimed for either: as places of socialisation and even entertainment by the local population or as solemn, sacred and demarcated sites by ecclesiastical authorities. Usually popular conceptualisations of space were more nuanced than the quite rigid ecclesiastical view.

The collection also explores the complex interaction between ecclesiastical and secular authority over space. Rebecca Constabel examines the appropriation of the sacred by the French nobility to achieve its dynastic claims, by managing funerary monuments in sacred locations as personal memorial sites that sanctified the nobility's political virtue and Christian piety. John M. Hunt pays attention to the politics of space by emphasising the hazardous fluidity between the sacred and the profane in early modern Rome. He maps the tension between the papal government and Roman municipal authorities during the so-called periods of *sede vacante*, when the temporary political void opened the way for ritualised spatial subversion of the symbols of papal power. David Stiles focuses on the eighteenth-century extra-European world to examine the increasing tensions between the Jesuits and the Spanish crown over the "sacred" and "imperial" usage of space in the New World. In a period of gradual secularisation and intensifying imperial competition within Europe, the spiritual mission of the Jesuits in the Río de la Plata region of South America came into question from the Spanish government, which sought to designate the region exclusively as an economic and political space under imperial authority.

The interplay between the material and cultural world, physical and devotional space is variously addressed in the volume. In the introduction, DeSilva thoroughly presents the views of

Catholic and Reformed theologians (including Borromeo, Loyola, Calvin and Luther) on the significance of the presence of sacred objects – or the meaningful absence of them – in the making of the sacred and the formation of confessional identity. Constabel explores the usage and symbolic weight of noble sepulchres as artefacts of devotion and memorialisation in sixteenth-century France. Through the lens of art history Pamela A.V. Stewart examines Bernardino Luini's paintings in the Chapel of Corpus Christi at San Giorgio al Palazzo in Milan and traces their significance as devotional objects and reminders of the holy passion. From a different perspective, Nelson's aforementioned essay views the act of destroying the opponents' sacred materiality as a symbolic deconstruction of religious otherness.

Anthropological insights variously inform the collection. Abel A. Alves employs analytical tools from the anthropology of religion to inquire into the sanctification of nature and the supernatural role attributed to animals in Marian devotion in the Catalan rural environment. Ritual shaping of space is also addressed in an interesting way in the volume. In Hunt's essay Rome transforms from a most holy city into a ritual space of protest during the *sede vacante*, which gave Roman people the chance to temporarily appropriate space and criticise the political rule of deceased popes. From a different point of view, Annick Delfosse's stimulating essay investigates ritualisation of space for religious visual propaganda in the Jesuit phantasmagoric celebrations for the canonisation of Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier in the Southern Netherlands in 1622.

The volume also offers some interesting insights into the exploration of the emotional and sensorial strength and mnemonic dimension of space. Early moderns steadily believed that space and ritual could emotionally and spiri-

tually transform observers. This belief was particularly strong in post-Tridentine Catholicism, which systematically emphasised the material and ritual sacralisation of space in sophisticated ways to inspire piety and virtue in the faithful. Stewart discusses how Luini's pictorial imagery of the Passion cycle served to infuse an "emotional and sensorial engagement with Christ's body through Eucharistic devotion", which was central to the religious culture of the Catholic Reformation (137). Delfosse detects how Jesuit festive performances in the Southern Netherlands used advanced technology (lights, fireworks, fake blood pouring from a crucifix) to create a "celestial" landscape and inspire *sacer horror* to the faithful. The basilica of St Martin in Tours becomes a space of Calvinist protest and Catholic collective memory in Nelson's essay, whereas in Hunt's study the *popolo romano* destroys the memorial space of papacy's political power.

Even though not all essays are equally informed by theoretical and methodological insights, the collection as a whole is well documented, grounded in rich archival and printed material and, often, visual and archaeological evidence. Despite the broad spectrum of topics discussed, the essays are soundly organised and coherent. A major drawback is the absence of gender as an analytical category, although recent scholarship has aptly demonstrated that the construction of space and production of gender are tightly, though inconsistently, interrelated. I would also like to have read more about interreligious spatial dynamics and the sacred space of Jews, Muslims or the radical "sects" of Europe. Despite these shortcomings, the volume is an interesting contribution to the history of the European Reformation and its material and spiritual spatiality. It can stimulate further research and debate on the diversity and complexity of early

modern conceptions, uses, abuses and appropriations of space.

## NOTE

- 1 Some recent examples include Andrew Spicer, ed., *Sacred space in early modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Sarah Hamilton and Andrew Spicer, eds, *Defining the holy: sacred space in medieval and early modern Europe* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005); Amanda Flather, *Gender and space in early modern England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007); Angela Vanhaelen and Joseph P. Ward, *Making space public in early modern Europe: performance, geography, privacy* (New York: Routledge 2013).