

Contextualising and Visualising Saints in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

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The aim of this contribution is to examine the ways how to look at medieval saints' cults in connection with place attachment. The conceptual framework is drawing back, on the one hand, to the anthropological and social disciplines and, on the other hand, to visual studies' critique of perception, especially the critique of the "reality effect", appropriated by R. Barthes, K. Moxey, and G. Jaritz.¹ With this theoretical background, the meeting points between the contemporary concepts of "sense of place" and historical representations will be discussed. Whilst keeping in mind the specific nature of visual language, I will look at possible ways how to connect the spheres of emotions, historical places and visual narratives about them by analysing saints and their images with special focus on the saints' role as mediators of regional attachment. I will not consider such essential factors as time and cult development or continuing reassessment of the relationship between the saint and the place. Instead, I will suggest a possible reading of medieval saints' images within the current discourse of "place". The paper aims at evaluating the applicability of this concept for medieval visual representations, using selected examples mainly from late medieval Central Europe.

Saints' cults as factors in the meaning of a place

For a number of recent studies, place attachment is more than emotional and cognitive experience; it "is a symbolic relationship formed by people giving

¹ Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 11-17; Keith Moxey, "Reading the Reality Effect," in *Pictura quasi fictura. Die Rolle des Bildes in der Erforschung von Alltag und Sachkultur des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Gerhard Jaritz (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 15-21; Gerhard Jaritz, "Et est ymago ficta non veritas. Sachkultur und Bilder des späten Mittelalters," in *ibidem*, 9-13.

culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece of land.”² There are three aspects of place attachment:

1. ties between people and places;
2. the processes through which they are forged;
3. the role of places in the development of identity.

It has already been assumed that place attachment contributes to individual, group, and cultural self-definition and is therefore a strong factor in identity construction.³ Within this process, place is significant: “... the development of self-identity is not restricted to making distinctions [or – in relation to the saints – creating a positive link⁴] between oneself and significant others, but extends with no less importance to objects and things, and the very spaces in which they are found.”

Studies of place attachment have brought to attention aspects such as the idea of collective quality of it,⁵ culturally shared meanings and social relationships to a place, and the participation in ritual as vehicles in forming and formulating place attachment. Place attachment shared by a community increases in correlation with a *longue durée* common residence in one place, shared memory and social involvements, which are all aspects to be found in medieval town and village communities. Environmental psychologists added the religious dimension⁶ as a significant factor in forming relationship to a place. Places, as well as objects are imbued with sacred meaning,⁷ with a specific role played by natural landscapes settings, sacred cities (such as Jerusalem), religious architecture and homes. Immediately, one can observe a clear correlation between the environmental psychology categorisation and the visual construction of settings in late medieval religious images, where the sacred action is located in a city or with a city in the background (figs. 1 and 1a), inside or near a church or chapel (fig. 2), in the landscape (fig. 3), or in domestic settings. Each of these medieval settings points towards a different reading: landscape is often associated with wilderness, distance and human capacity to master it, city is related to organised human presence – a community, church is associated with the transcendental that has descended to earth, and home expresses seclusion, privacy and intensity of human interaction and relationships. Even with such different implications, all these places are appropriate for manifestations of saintly power. Although medieval

² Setha M. Low, “Symbolic Ties That Bind: Place Attachments in the Plaza,” in *Place Attachment*, ed. Irwin Altman and Setha M. Low (New York: Plenum Press 1992), 165.

³ Setha M. Low and Irwin Altman, “Place Attachment: A Conceptual Inquiry (An Introduction),” in *ibidem*, 4, 11.

⁴ My addition.

⁵ Low and Altman, “Place Attachment: A Conceptual Inquiry,” 6; David Hummon, “Community Attachment: Local Sentiment and Sense of Place,” in *Place Attachment*, ed. Altman and Low, 253-77, esp. 256-8.

⁶ Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, “Sacred Space and Place Attachment,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 13/3 (1993): 231-42; *idem*, “Religion and Place Attachment,” *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 24/3 (2004): 385-97.

⁷ Mazumdar and Mazumdar, “Sacred Space,” 232-3.

Christian cults are rarely viewed in the context of sacralisation of a landscape (this we hear more for other religions: Hindu, Buddhists, Shinto or Muslims), it may be useful to look how sacralisation and emotional attachment to the sacred could imprint in late medieval representations of saints.



Fig. 1: Hans Egkel, Beheading of St. Catherine (with the view of Passau), panel of an altarpiece, after 1490. Stiftsmuseum Melk (Lower Austria)



Fig. 1a: Hans Egkel, Beheading of St. Catherine,
detail: the town of Passau in the background

Medieval saints are involved in activities that contribute to the collective sharing of memory and identity construction. Many of these activities take place in a church or in proximity to a church or shrine. For the community, the local church is an emotionally charged place, where all kinds of sacred messages are communicated through symbols, relics, and images. As the church is also a place, where community gathers, it is the best space where to express emotions of the community's attachment to the saintly patrons, as well as where the community can demonstrate their closeness to the "sacred" by representing it as residing in their own place.

This relationship works into another direction as well: Saints' images in churches communicate their attachment to the local/regional contexts as well as present universal Christian concepts. By representing a saint in a particular place, the place is made sacred through the saint's presence. If the represented place is at the same time the "local" place, the members of the community this way articulate an emotional attachment to their own habitat. Thus, communication about the attachment of the community to the saint runs in two directions, and in both through a local place as mediator: A local place and everything it contains – that is also the community – is made sacred by being in contact with

the saint; and, vice versa, by presenting the saint in a local place the community expresses a special attachment to the saint.



Fig. 2: Master of Mariapfarr, Betrothal of the Virgin, panel of an altarpiece, c. 1500.
Mariapfarr (Salzburg), parish church

When representing a topographically identifiable local place, this place is a sign that stands for the community itself. Thus, what Barthes calls the “insignificant notation”, that is, the narrative background details in medieval images, creating the “reality effect,” are far from being insignificant. They are not the expressions of the creative mind of the artist, they fulfil other tasks: illustrating the legend, carrying “sub-messages” to the main theme, or following a certain pictorial tradition.



Fig. 3: Panel of an altarpiece with scenes of the legend of St. Corbinian.
Thal (Tyrol), St. Corbinian church, 1480-1490

In medieval visual imagery, both “place” and “space” are defined by socio-cultural activities and physical limits, or by a lack of them. “Place” should be understood as individualised geographically as well as culturally, whereas space is more typified, follows generic models and is often defined by its limits or by social action.⁸ It is fair to say that the images in question sometimes do not represent just “space”, but a “place”, that is, an individualised space that was “given meaning through personal, group or cultural processes”.⁹

Closeness in the represented place

Late medieval saints are depicted in a variety of environments. Some are generic, some are individualised by including “local” references. The more “familiar” the background of the image is to the viewers, the more emotionally close they feel whilst contemplating the image. In the late Middle Ages, religious images still have bi-polar effects: the capacity to making things and relationships “real” and present, and to communicate between the faithful and their intercessors. The images are thus visualisations of good effects and models that the saints represent and expressions of “real” contact, close or distant, between the community and its saints. Often overlooked by art historians, an important role in communicating the closeness is played by the background of the scene.

⁸ Michael R. Curry, “Discursive Displacement and the Seminal Ambiguity of Space and Place,” in *The Handbook of New Media*, ed. Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (London: Sage, 2002), 513-5.

⁹ Low and Altmann, “Place Attachment,” 5.

Although “places” in images are imagined, they are also “selected”¹⁰ to represent an appropriate space for a saint. With the aim of communicating certain types of space or specific places fit for a saint to act and move in, landscape (mountain, river, city), architectural or interior elements are depicted in the background, sometimes rendering a local place or interior more or less topographically correct. These key place references complement and support the meaning of the main narrative and, at the same time, they are “identifiers” pointing to objects and spaces/places, which the viewer associates with existing local places known to her or him, even when they do not necessarily imitate their real form. By introducing recognisable landscape elements, the image is able to communicate proximity (“closeness”) and “attachment” to a local place, even in the case of considerable divergence of the depiction from reality. Thus, actions of Christ, the Virgin and the apostles can take place in familiar Central European landscape, for instance, with the Danube River (fig. 4), in a Tyrolean village (figs. 5, 5a, and 5b) or in front of the gates of the Eastern Bohemian city of Čáslav (fig. 6)

In the late medieval representation of space, the beholder stands “outside” and views the structure or space from an outside point of view, able to get the general idea of the space and comprehend its overall quality, nature and composition.¹¹ This is an inherent value to the visually represented medieval place/space – when viewed this way, it is a place, which the viewer conceives at one sight as a united and structured whole.¹² Thus, already with the development of multifocal late medieval space and before the birth of unifocal Renaissance perspective, there is a sense of structured unity and coherence in rendering of a place/space that communicate the place as “close” and comprehensible as possible. (Such type of visual communication takes place only if there is any representation of an articulated space/place in the background, that is, if the background is not abstract.) This comprehensive capacity and the sense of “known” are important qualities of a place when it is communicated to the viewer through depiction.

¹⁰ Jaritz, “Et est imago ficta,” 11-2.

¹¹ Ibidem, 12.

¹² As in the views on Lüneburg: Hansjörg Rümelin, “Das Einzelne im Ganzen. Das Bild der Hansestadt Lüneburg auf den Altartafeln des Hans Bornemann von 1446/47,” in *Rathäuser und andere kommunale Bauten, Jahrbuch für Hausforschung* 60 (Marburg: Jonas Verlag 2010), 40.



Fig. 4: Rueland Frueauf the Younger, Sermon of St. John the Baptist (with a view of the Danube river valley), panel painting, 1498. Stiftsgalerie Klosterneuburg (Lower Austria)



Fig. 5: St. Elisabeth of a Visitation of the Virgin, panel painting, 1460-70.
Innsbruck, Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum



Fig. 5a: St. Elisabeth of a Visitation of the Virgin,
detail: peasant house and windmill



Fig. 5b: St. Elisabeth of a Visitation of the Virgin,
detail: barns



Fig. 6: Čáslav Antiphonary, after 1472. Vienna, Austrian National Library, Mus. Hs. 15.502, initial on fol. 1r with the Entry to Jerusalem, detail: church tower of Čáslav (Bohemia)

The example of a landscape

Landscape in the fifteenth century is not a record of reality, but composed from characteristic elements in the backgrounds of images, which are accentuated and together form a coherent structured unity, as in the viewing “window”. The landscape is presented in an all-encompassing way as seen from a small hill opening towards us, presenting the plot without hiding anything or shielding it from our view. The point of such representation is to “reveal” the landscape in the most comprehensible way possible. The single elements in the structure, such as city, mountain, forest, river, lake or building bear a (general) reference to a particular type of environment (urban, rural, mining, wilderness, river valley, mountainous, etc.) and help to construct an additional, side-meaning of the image. In the case of the famous Miraculous Fishing by Conrad Witz the peaceful countryside teaches about *buon governo*, the good government by the bishop in the land around Lake Geneva (fig. 7).¹³ The patron and painter of the image

¹³ Conrad Witz, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, Geneva, Musée d’Art et Historie, 1444. Florens Deuchler, “Warum malte Konrad Witz die Erste Landschaft? „Hic et nunc“ im Genfer Altar von 1444,” *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 3 (1984): 39-49.

selected those landscape elements that were important for the communication of intended meaning concerning the environment in which the action takes place.



Fig. 7. Conrad Witz, Miraculous Draught of Fishes. Geneva, Musée d'Art et Histoire, 1444 [from: Florens Deuchler, "Warum malte Konrad Witz die Erste Landschaft? „Hic et nunc“ im Genfer Altar von 1444," *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* 3 (1984): 40, fig. 1]

The result is not a realistic landscape, but a new representation of the place identifiable through outstanding features of the setting, in which the sacred action in the foreground takes place. In the sense of symbolical depiction of good government and order, the represented landscape is therefore still a type. The topographically precise details however fix the saintly scene in the "local", which becomes a natural setting for the scene and, in turn, the saint becomes an inseparable part of the place and a guarantee of the rule of law as depicted. Even without the topographically precise references that help us to identify the historical place and even may let us draw conclusions on its real shape in the past, we would be able to decipher the meaning in a similar way. Any medieval representation of "a place" – depending on the artist's capacity – captures the intended character of the place by combining carefully selected landscape elements into a coherent whole depicting the legend of the saint and/or

responding to the intention of the local community or individuals to self-styled portraits of themselves. Thus, the representations in the background can provide both the ambient for the saints' narrative and a self-styled image of oneself and ones' community, rather than give accurate record of a place's topography or reality.¹⁴

The positive presence of sainthood

Fixing the saints' scene in an identified place "close to us" and adding meaning, such as visualising the absent community, belong among the new functions that are required from fifteenth-century images. Visual references to local places are getting more important and saints often act in these local contexts. Communities are only symbolically present in the image through their local places, towns, farms, typical works or objects. The saintly figure's background is used for communicating secondary messages related to the community, such as its appropriation of place, its desired qualities, its emotional relationships, and self-styled presentation. To portray themselves, the communities appropriate both generic Christian and local saints, defining the close mutual relation between the saint and the local community. In all images the saint is depicted in an assigned place inside or close to the community. To give an example, the miners of Rožnava put themselves under the protection of Saint Anne, the Virgin and Jesus, offer them direct participation in the community's effort and achievement, and at the same time provide them with their own "place" in the community (figs. 8, 8a and 8b).¹⁵

In Sv. Primož nad Kamnikom, nowadays Slovenia, former Carniola, a wall painting tells outspokenly about the social misery of the region and the community's sentiments towards that situation. The common quest for protection from war, plague, and misery is mediated through the presence of the saints: the Virgin of Protection, and saintly patrons popular in the region, St. Primus and Felicianus (figs. 9, 9a, 9b, 9c, and 9d).

¹⁴ Jaritz, "Et est imago ficta." 10-11.

¹⁵ Gerhard Jaritz, "Nähe und Distanz als Gebrauchsfunktion spätmittelalterlicher religiöser Bilder," in *Frömmigkeit im Mittelalter. Politisch-soziale Kontexte, visuelle Praxis, körperliche Ausdrucksformen*, ed. Klaus Schreiner and Marc Müntz (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002), 332-334.



Fig. 8: Master L. A., St. Anne, the Virgin Mary and Jesus (with a view of mining work), panel from an altarpiece, 1513. Rožňava (Slovakia), parish church

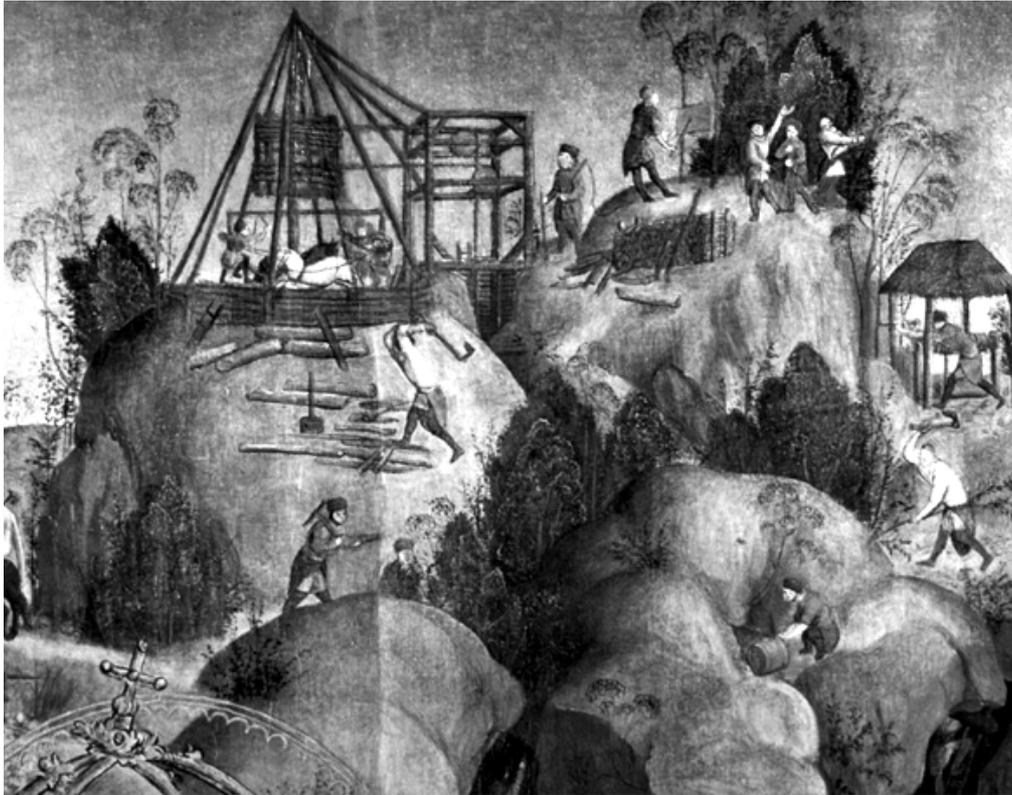


Fig. 8a: Master L. A., St. Anne, the Virgin Mary and Jesus,
detail: the mining site



Fig. 8b: Master L. A., St. Anne, the Virgin Mary and Jesus,
detail: the mining site



Fig. 9: Virgin Mary of Protection with St. Primus and Felicianus, wall painting, 1504.
 Sv. Primož nad Kamnikom (Slovenia),
 church of St. Primus and Felicianus, northern wall of the main nave

In the image, dated 1504,¹⁶ the threatened community directly addresses the Virgin and Saint Primus and Felicianus for help. The saints are placed within a familiar countryside but, unlike as in the case of Witz's positively-charged landscape, this time, it is shown as negative and threatening the order. One sees the threats unfold: dead and hungry animals, locusts, hailstorm, attacks on people, rapes of women, dead and abandoned children lying on the ground, people suffering from plague, as well as burning churches and houses. In order to balance the negative message, the saints stand for the positive side: They are the powerful counterbalance to the evil, the real fighters for the battered region and for the depicted community. The community is not the local one; the figures hiding under the mantle represent the political structure. On the left side, one recognises the German Emperor Maximilian I among lay people of rank, on the right the Pope with other high church officials (figs. 9c, and 9d). The community is constructed as a clear projection of political ideas communicated again through the depiction of a place. The hills and valleys in the Sv. Primož image

¹⁶ Ferdinand Šerbelj, *Sv. Primož nad Kamnikom* (Kamnik: M. Šuštar, 1995), 181.

stand as a sign for the whole threatened region, to which the Virgin, St. Primus and Felicianus are called.



Fig. 9a: Virgin Mary of Protection with St. Primus and Felicianus, detail: animal disease and crosses on dress and skin



Fig. 9b: Virgin Mary of Protection with St. Primus and Felicianus, detail: war, rape of women



Fig. 9c: Virgin Mary of Protection with St. Primus and Felicianus,
detail: the Virgin of Protection



Fig. 9d: Virgin Mary of Protection with St. Primus and Felicianus,
detail: Emperor Maximilian I as one of the protected persons

* * *

To sum up: One knows that saints are fully capable of miraculously choosing their place of effect. The localised saints' images should therefore be read as the communities' strategy to attach the saint to their place. The generic saint is often appropriated to become the patron of a particular local community which is depicted through the representation of its piece of land. The image of closeness is the communities' attempt to create a direct, functional, and mutual bond between themselves and their patron, regardless of the topographical relevance of the representation of the community's place or of the saint's legend's narrative. The emotional attachment to the saint is expressed through the depiction of familiar environment where saints exercised their power, and it is through the same representation that one's own place is re-conceptualised, made sacral, and emotionally reassessed.

All images, except fig. 7: Institut für Realienkunde, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Krems/Donau (Austria).

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

Vorwort	4
Angelika Kölbl, Frauen im Allgemeinen und Ehefrauen im Besonderen. Zur frauendidaktischen Relevanz der Lehrdichtung des „Seifried Helbling“	6
Kateřina Horničková, Contextualising and Visualising Saints in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries	21
Susanne Rischpler, <i>Memoria</i> Mittelalter – aktiv, passiv oder manipuliert? Rezensionsartikel zu Lucie Doleřalová (Hg.), <i>The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages</i> (Leiden und Boston: Brill, 2010)	40
Buchbesprechungen	54
Anschriften der AutorInnen	62

Vorwort

Das vorliegende Heft von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* beinhaltet zwei Schwerpunktartikel, welche sich einerseits auf die Analyse literarischer und andererseits auf die Untersuchung visueller Quellen beziehen. Die Germanistin Angelika Kölbl widmet sich der Lehrdichtung des sogenannten „Seifried Helbling“ und seinen genderspezifischen Inhalten, die bis dato in der Forschung interessanterweise erst wenig Beachtung gefunden haben. Sie kann dabei feststellen, dass sich die Didaxe dabei hauptsächlich auf verheiratete Frauen bezieht.

Der zweite Beitrag ist ein erstes Ergebnis im Rahmen einer internationalen und interdisziplinären Forschungsk Kooperation im EUROCORECODE-Programm („European Comparisons in Regional Cohesion, Dynamics and Expressions) des EUROCORES-Schemas („European Collaborative Research“) der European Science Foundation. Drei EUROCORECODE-Projekte beschäftigen sich hierbei mit der Rolle von Regionen und regionalen Entwicklungen in der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart Europas:

- Das „Unfamiliarity“-Projekt („Unfamiliarity as signs of European times: scrutinising historical representations of otherness and contemporary daily practices in border regions“) konzentriert sich auf die Analyse von Alltagspraktiken der Bewohner von Grenzregionen innerhalb der Europäischen Union.
- Das „Cuius Regio“-Projekt („Cuius Regio. An analysis of the cohesive and disruptive forces destining the attachment of groups of persons to and the cohesion within regions as a historical phenomenon“) zielt auf die komparative Analyse einer Gruppe von europäischen Regionen über sieben Jahrhunderte in Bezug auf deren kohäsive und disruptive Dynamiken.
- Das Projekt „Symbols that bind and break communities: Saints’ cults as stimuli and expressions of local, regional, national and universalist identities“ setzt sich mit der mittelalterlichen Heiligenverehrung und ihren modernen Aneignungen auseinander, um damit den Wandel kultureller und sozialer Werte in unterschiedlichen Regionen Europas (im Besonderen Zentraleuropas und Nordeuropas) festzustellen. Forschungsinstitutionen in Dänemark, Estland, Norwegen, Österreich und Ungarn kooperieren in diesem Projektverbund. Das Kremser Institut für Realienkunde der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften beschäftigt sich dabei vor al-

lem mit der visuellen Repräsentation von Heiligen und deren regionalen Spezifika und Entwicklungen.

In jenem Kremser Forschungszentrum entstand der Beitrag der Projektmitarbeiterin Kateřina Horníčková. Er setzt sich mit den regionalen Kontextualisierungen und Unterschieden von spätmittelalterlichen Heiligendarstellungen in Österreich und Böhmen auseinander.

Gerhard Jaritz