Circulation as a Factor of Cultural Aggregation: an Introduction

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The multinational, multilingual, and multicultural experience of Convivium opens with the proceedings of a conference that took place in Moravia in May 2014. Meeting in the former Jesuit college that today is the University Centre Telč of Masaryk University in Brno, the colloquium convened scholars from many countries. The theme of the conference – and now, of Convivium – was both unitary and polymorphous: the circulation of ideas, objects, relics, and persons in the Middle Ages. This multifaceted perspective was chosen to enable an understanding of the dynamics that move and shape a culture, which, in a broad sense, is still in part our own: we can recognize the structures and the Middle Ages’ hidden lexicon.

Interest in movement as an element of the medieval world is obviously at odds with the stereotypical vision of medieval society as closed and static. The accepted view is of small, isolated, and inward-looking communities, in which people sought safety from the material world. They focus only on the immaterial realm and the supernatural, avoiding contact with the outside world, in which they perceived danger in the streets and on the seas.

Convivium treats the Middle Ages as an open world of diversity, with various but common roots deep in the Mediterranean area, a realm in which people travelled both physically and in the imagination, and where certain horizons were perhaps less remote than they are today. Jacques Le Goff, in his famous book, Saint Louis, about King Louis IX, recalled the ways in which thirteenth-century Constantinople was much closer and more familiar to Europeans than is today’s Istanbul. Remembering fabulous holy cities, evoking Rome or Byzantium, and seeking their presence in Prague or Germigny-de-Près, was a natural experience in the Middle Ages. Those presences did not suffer from the revisions and simplifications that inevitably involved prototypes and symbols; on the contrary, they kept them alive in a constant and radical creative transformation.

This special, first issue of Convivium opens with an essay by Alessandro Taddei focused on the Constantinopolitan scenario, which created nominal and symbolic bonds with such other important urban realities of the Late Antique and medieval era as Rome, Ravenna, Naples. The study by Ivan Foletti of the chapel of Germigny-des-Près, now overlooked in the French countryside, revives possible connections with Byzantine, Carolingian, and Venetian models. The essay of Klára Benešovská, devoted to the virtual relocations of places, concludes the first part of this issue. Focused on the construction of Mount Sion (Zion) in Prague, the current Strahov monastery conceived by Bishop Zdík, it demonstrates that the monastery created a spiritual nucleus of attraction and, at the same time, also gave substance to the Bishop’s personal experience of the Holy Land.
The movement of relics, perhaps the most mobile and polymorphous materials of the western Middle Ages, is a major theme. The essays of Alžběta Ž. Filipová, Clario Di Fabio, Vinni Lucherini and Denise Zaru offer case studies of the phenomenon in different contexts, in the Milanese, to the French, the Ligurian, the Lombard, and the Bohemian contexts. These essays show how the movement of relics became a cultural vector, disseminating images and ideas. Furthermore, they show how the preservation and circulation of saints’ body parts played an active role in the construction of a political realm, or how a relic and its cult could move in the figurative discourse, and how the image substituted for the absent object, thus creating a virtual movement.

Another group of contributions focuses on the circulation of ideas and images. Valentine Giesser studies the presence of the images of popes and Dalmatian martyrs in San Venanzio at the Lateran Baptistery in Rome. Kateřina Kubínová considers the movement of Carolingian manuscripts, sent to Prague as a means for relations and political alliances. Xavier Barral i Altet rediscovers the cancelled and forgotten Romanesque phase of the cathedral of Naples. Francesco Lovino sheds new light on Norman Sicily, where cultures and visual experiences crossed frenetically. Ilaria Molteni examines the crossroads between literature and illustrations in chivalric novels. Manlio Mezzacasa focuses on the movement of goldsmiths and their production in the Adriatic space. Michele Bacci deals with Crete of the Venetian period, showing how such typically occidental ideas as the monogram of Christ by Bernardino da Siena can be included in an orthodox vocabulary and practice. And finally, Monika Brenišínová takes Convivium across the Atlantic to focus on the atria of Franciscan churches in the New World – true liminal spaces, conceived as a meeting place of the diverse indigenous and foreign (European) cultures and religions.

These are just a sample of the many possibilities and research directions in which Convivium’s main theme – movement, circulation, and exchange in the Middle Ages – will, we hope, expand further in the years ahead. This diversity of viewpoints, approaches, and themes are already here in this first number of Convivium, thanks to the scholars who participated in the Telč conference and are now contributors to this inaugural issue, and to the students who attended the several days of intense discussions with lively interest.

We are also particularly grateful to Ondřej Jakubec, head of the Department of Art History of the Masaryk University in Brno, and to François Rosset, dean of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Lausanne. This seminal conference could not have taken place without their financial, as well as spiritual and intellectual, support.

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