

The Meaning and Usages of Medieval Territory

Dominique Iogna-Prat

In *L'évêque et le territoire*, Florian Mazel offers a profound reflection on the meaning and usages of territory as a “spatial construct” in a period which, as is commonly recognized, did not yet possess the word with which to conceptualize the object.¹ Considered here as a broad chronological span, in what way did the Middle Ages and their territorial practices enable the transition to space in the “modern”—homogeneous, isotropic—meaning of the term? This question is examined at two scales, moving from the local (loosely Provence and Anjou-Maine) to a global vision allowing an appreciation of the overall impact of the phenomenon as an institutional construction. At the center of this process was the bishop, a member of the *Ecclesia*; he held an authority whose power of order was distinct from the power of jurisdiction that had the potential to produce spatialized power, that is, territory.

This article was translated from the French by Rodney Coward and edited by Chloe Morgan and Nicolas Barreyre.

1. Florian Mazel, *L'évêque et le territoire. L'invention médiévale de l'espace (v^e–XIII^e siècle)* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2016); page numbers in parentheses in the present article refer to this edition. This reflection, whose title could be translated as “Bishop and Territory: The Medieval Invention of Space,” represents a synthesis initially formulated in an unpublished postdoctoral habilitation thesis defended in 2009, and is inseparable from a rich collection of articles edited by the same author: Mazel, ed., *L'espace du diocèse. Genèse d'un territoire dans l'Occident médiéval (v^e–XIII^e siècle)* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008).

From Pole to Territory

Mazel's approach is inscribed within the history of the relationship between societies and space, an active and dynamic area of study—sometimes referred to as the “spatial turn”—which is in sharp contrast with the disinterest evinced by the masters of the *Annales* school “for a question [space not as a *given*, but as a *construct*] which in their eyes probably belonged to an outdated, overly political or juridical approach to history” (19). Within this collective historiographical dynamic, associated with certain well-known specialists (including Alain Guerreau, Michel Lauwers, and Didier Méhu), it is important to underscore the special place occupied by Mazel in the renewal of scholarly interest, from the perspective of spatialization, in the topic of *dominium*. This term, proposed by Guerreau, characterizes a relationship of “sole domination over land and people,” giving rise to a territorial form that he calls *encellulement*, in the sense that the dominated populations were tied to the land within a framework of ad hoc controlling “cells”—village, cemetery, parish—themselves dependencies of the “poles” of domination represented by castle and church.² *Dominium* determined four types of socially structuring relationships: seigneurial dependencies, the segregation of the nobility, the domination of town over country, and hierarchical interpersonal relationships within the context of vassaldom. While Mazel remains heir to this “polar” conception of feudal spatiality and the social relations that it engenders, he offers a reflection on a different scale, that of territory as a homogeneous space enabling the expression of political sovereignty. To this end, he concentrates more particularly upon two types of phenomena: the formation of territory (using the term in the precise sense it is given in Max Weber's historical sociology, as an institution's space of projection³), and social practices of space. Both are examined through the prism of the ecclesial institution, that is, the territory of the diocese and episcopal practices of space. He thus contributes to the study of a socio-ecclesiological organization which, following Lauwers, can be termed *inecclesiamento*, and through which the *Ecclesia* generated territorialized social relations at two scales: the micro scale, with the constitution of the cells that formed the basic ecclesial structures (church, cemetery, parish), and the macro scale, with its global reference to Christendom as a geopolitical entity overseen by Rome.⁴ One of the most interesting aspects of this work on the diocese lies in its examination of an intermediate territorial scale that makes sense within the context of an

2. Alain Guerreau, *Le féodalisme. Un horizon théorique* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1980), 201–10; Guerreau, *L'avenir d'un passé incertain. Quelle histoire du Moyen Âge au XXI^e siècle?* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 2001), 28–31.

3. Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation” [1919], in *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, trans. Gordon C. Wells, ed. John Dreijmanis (New York: Algora, 2008), 155–208, here p. 160.

4. Michel Lauwers, “De *l'incastellamento* à *l'inecclesiamento*. Monachisme et logiques spatiales du féodalisme,” in *Cluny. Les moines et la société au premier âge féodal*, ed. Dominique Iogna-Prat et al. (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013), 315–38.

overall hierarchical dynamic of ecclesial spatialization, extending from top to bottom, and from the local to the universal.

The starting point for Mazel's reflection is the contradiction between, on the one hand, a set of certainties deeply rooted in the historiographical soil—an "ecclesial fable" that sees the medieval diocese as the direct heir to the city of antiquity,* just as the Church was heir to *Romanitas*—and, on the other hand, recent developments in the archaeology of ancient territories and new approaches to medieval ecclesial space. This contradiction springs from something that is untheorized: if the thesis of territorial continuity from antique city to diocese asserts with such certainty the survival of previous territorial forms, it is because it is predicated on the implicit assumption that the Church's relationship with the world has always been, so to speak, of an "administrative" nature. It thus completely evades the question of the meaning and usages of territory, which Mazel chooses to place at the heart of his approach.

His first conclusion is that the extent of the Roman legacy needs to be reevaluated, thus going against both traditional historical geography and the historiography of the last thirty years, inclined to hold that the heritage of the ancient world lasted well into the early Middle Ages (sometimes as late as the year 1000). Indeed, it is hard to credit the idea that the *civitas* survived as a territory beyond the sixth century in the form of the episcopal parish. Between the seventh and the tenth centuries, the Roman legacy consisted mainly in the persistence of most of the former city capitals as centers of power and poles of urban existence, through the implantation of episcopal sees. Beyond the town and its surrounding area, the ancient territory of the *civitas* traced the outline of the episcopal parish, but this horizon had little in common with what Roman law and political-administrative practices or, much later, canon law, considered as a territory. Rather, it constituted what geographers today call a "territorial envelope," a porous entity with variable margins. For several long centuries, the bishop's power, like all other forms of authority, was exercised not over a clearly defined, homogeneous spatial area, but over a virtual area of domination, through more or less loose ties that linked him with other actors (priests, monks, the faithful) and with places (altars and baptismal churches). This early, profound, and lasting disintegration of former city territories had three main causes. First, the bishops did not take over, either for their own benefit or for that of the king, the essential function of the Roman city, taxation. Second, elites in general, and foremost among them the bishops, gradually distanced themselves from the territorial paradigms of *Romanitas*, which were largely unnecessary for the exercise of their episcopal ministry. Finally, the bishops' power was thwarted, at an early date, by competing centers of power that came between them and the churches, and between them and the priesthood: powerful aristocrats, as early as the sixth century, and monks, from the seventh century onward.

Mazel's second conclusion concerns the "reterritorialization" of the diocese, resulting in the classic institutional and territorial situation in which the church

*In this context, "city" refers to the ancient meaning of the word: a political entity comprising an urban center and the surrounding territories under its political control.—*Les Annales*.

found itself from the thirteenth century on. It is difficult to place this process in a precise chronology because it involves phenomena that are more complex than those linked to the decomposition of political and juridical *Romanitas*. The Carolingian moment, haunted by a dream of *Romanitas* and inhabited by a desire to oversee the *populus christianus* in a rigorous, systematic, and definitive way, represents a veritable reversal in comparison with the earliest medieval period and marks the early stages of this development, including through the increased control of holy places by bishops. But in reality its effects proved to be limited in both space and time. The model of the bishopric-city continued to hamper episcopal action, while the overlap between the political and the ecclesial, that is, between the *comitatus* and the *episcopatus*, compromised the emergence of a single ecclesiastical territoriality. This overlap increased during the era of principalities that followed the crisis of the Carolingian Empire in the late ninth century. It was only from the eleventh century that the process of diocesan reterritorialization truly acquired material form, more particularly in connection with the so-called Gregorian reform.⁵ While current French-language historiography tends to associate this term with a real social and cultural revolution, many historians continue to consider it simply as a crisis in the Church, or rather a series of crises as diverse in nature as the various power relationships between lay and ecclesiastical forces at the level of local societies. In contrast to this relativistic perspective, it can however be argued that, while the Gregorian moment was plural, the diversity of locally observable cases in no way obscures an overall trend conducive to the establishment and development of an all-embracing entity: the *Ecclesia* and its universal *dominium*, that is, the papacy considered as the supreme authority and structuring power of Christendom, whose geopolitical dynamic destined it to fill all the space of the Earth. At stake was nothing less than the jurisdiction of an institution aiming for the universality of a spiritual monarchy: a universality that implied spatial schemas at every level of a territorial hierarchy ranging from the local to the global, from the basic level of the church up to the crowning edifice of Christendom organized from Rome. The Gregorian reform defined the Church as the dominant authority because it produced separation. This separation established opposing pairs—clergy/laity, *spiritualia/temporalia*—although this division should not be exaggerated: it was balanced by a necessary articulation, which made sense within the logic of feudalism. Mazel quite rightly insists that the “two kinds of Christians” canonized by Gratian were not, or not simply, the outcome of a functional distinction, but the product of an *essential* and hence inviolable separation—one that was, as such, foundational of the *dominium* of the Church, and entailed a fundamental reconfiguration of powers and “the emergence of a social space peculiar to the

5. Florian Mazel, Michelle Fournié, and Daniel Le Blévec, eds., *La réforme “grégorienne” dans le Midi (milieu XI^e–début XIII^e siècle)* (Toulouse: Privat, 2013); the present remarks draw on part of my concluding essay to this volume, at pp. 603–17. As a historian of “feudalities,” Mazel has played a major part in the renewal of interest in the Gregorian reform, a term whose usage, especially in the singular, is not unanimously accepted.

ecclesial institution.”⁶ The aim of such separations was to impose a general model of control and a system of levies. Thus, multiple ideological practices resulted in exceptions, including the sacerdotal status which, after long and unresolved debates over Eucharistic realism, led to the imposition of a distinction between the power of order and the power of jurisdiction, between sacerdotal status and episcopal office.

The assertion of an autonomous ecclesiastical sphere, with its own laws and its own legitimacy, allowed bishops to intrude into the core of the seigneuries, which were obliged to recognize the specificity of their authority over churches and priests. Thus, the territorial diocese began to take shape with the creation of this rift within the seigneurie, and the establishment of a form of episcopal sovereignty superior to local (aristocratic or monastic) domination. This rupture also concerned the very nature of the relationship to space, as can be seen through developments in episcopal usages and practices. The multiplication of border disputes between neighboring bishops, the increasing intervention of the papacy and legates, and more frequent recourse to canon law enriched by Roman law led to the progressive restoration of a “state-like” territoriality. The diocese, which definitively acquired its name at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, thus came to be defined as an authentic territory, possessing inviolable limits, even though these might remain imprecise on the ground. Moreover, it was gradually subdivided into lower-level districts managed within a veritable administrative chain of command, whose main functions included the levying of dues, an operation which can legitimately be assimilated to a form of taxation.

Parishes and Monasteries

The history of the diocese is linked to that of the parish as it has been reconfigured in recent years.⁷ From the Carolingian period, the concentration of episcopal action on the control of churches and the ritual and narrative staging of this authority—through episcopal visitations, consecration ceremonies, or the translation of relics—maintained a close relationship with the sacralization of places of worship, and not simply altars, from the same era onward. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the construction of diocesan boundaries resulted principally from the merging of parochial territories that were still in the process of being defined. Even the role played by tithes (tithe taxation) in the territorial construction of the parish echoes the role of the episcopal *cens*, the visitation tax, and the synodal tax in the territorial construction of the diocese. Yet there were substantial differences. These were related, firstly, to the Roman legacy, which continued to resonate in the diocese, whereas the parish was a purely medieval creation. But they were above all due to the nature of the respective processes of territorialization. The parish united the faithful around a sacred, holy

6. Florian Mazel, *Féodalités, 888–1180* (Paris: Belin, 2010), 237 and 257.

7. For an overview, see Dominique Iogna-Prat and Élisabeth Zadora-Rio, eds., “La paroisse, genèse d’une forme territoriale,” special issue, *Médiévales* 49 (2005).

place: the church with which a cemetery gradually came to be associated. The diocese, however, although centered on its city-capital, did not group the faithful around this focal point; to the contrary, it was conceptualized as transcending the seventh- and eighth-century bishopric-city, which at this time was reduced to the town and its *suburbium*. The diocese developed into a veritable territory between the eleventh and the thirteenth century, acting like a space of sovereignty, overarching local dominations, extending its influence right to the core of the seigneuries, and subdividing space into a network of districts, agents' circuits, and specific levies. In this context, the bishop's power of jurisdiction, by then precisely defined in canon law, began to weigh more heavily on episcopal usages of space than his power of order, which had dominated during the Carolingian and post-Carolingian eras.

The links with monasticism are harder to gauge, and warrant discussion in the light of recent historiography on *inecclesiamento*.⁸ As early as the seventh century, monasticism—at least of the Benedictine kind, as effectively established in the Carolingian era—stood as an obstacle or hindrance to the sacred authority of the bishop and, indirectly, to his control over space. But as long as the phenomenon was limited to the abbey precinct, it remained without real consequence. All this changed between the late tenth and the early twelfth century, with the development of a new relationship to space and the construction of veritable monastic territories, based on the acquisition of new kinds of privileges of immunity and exemption. The “sacred ban” of Cluny offers the most striking example. Claiming that their property holdings constituted a “holy land” because they were possessions of the Roman saints Peter and Paul, from the second half of the eleventh century the Cluniacs organized “the places and circles of their [seigneurial] domination.” This territorial policy, studied in detail by Méhu, initially involved the integration of very diverse types of property (land, churches, castles, mills) into a common ecclesial structure, through the establishment of a network of “obediences” (*obedientia*) or “deaneries” (*decania*): multifunctional places, at once foci of farming, centers of trade and business, hermitages, and pilgrimage churches. This network, centered on the abbey church and the high altar containing the remains of Peter and Paul, was subsequently organized into a sphere of domination within which “Cluniac sanctity imposed absolute inviolability.”⁹ The objective was to delimit on the ground the boundaries of the monastery's immunity; a task undertaken by, among others, Pope Urban II (a former grand prior of Cluny) in 1095, when he ritually defined the limits of Cluny's “sacred ban,” or the area under the jurisdiction of Saint Peter, physically manifested by tangible signs such as crosses and boundary markers connected by tracks. This marked a significant evolution in the concept of immunity, as the fluctuating spaces to which it had been applied in the early medieval period were circumscribed, defined, and limited, becoming immutable from the tenth and

8. Lauwers, “De l'incastellamento à l'inecclesiamento.”

9. Didier Méhu, *Paix et communautés autour de l'abbaye de Cluny, X^e-XV^e siècle* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2001), 151–65.

eleventh centuries. These gave rise to homogeneous, ecclesiastical, seigneurial spaces which doubtless had a direct and global influence on the spatialization of areas under castellan authority. It might be thought that this new production of territory by reforming monks influenced or even inspired the process of diocesan reterritorialization, particularly in terms of their control over churches or procedures for constructing limits. But Mazel has reservations as to the true significance of these spatial constructions, in particular because they remained seigneurial territories, whereas in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the diocese was clearly conceptualized as a supra-seigneurial territory.

Mazel has enabled a significant advance in the history of the spatial turn that has pervaded medieval studies over the last thirty years, moving from a problematic of places and poles—the matrices of a cellular, networked spatiality—to the invention of space in the full sense with the concept of territory. In the historiography on powers, which has substantially influenced our appreciation of the impact of the ecclesial sphere, it is a figure linked to the Church, the bishop, who is seen as creating territory, just as the *Ecclesia* had formerly created places and singled them out through consecration in the form of *inecclesiamento*. This invention of territory makes even more sense in the context of the emergence of an overarching hierarchy of ecclesial spatialization, extending from places of worship to the summit represented by Christendom. The geopolitical significance of this concept, of Carolingian origin, became fully apparent in the Gregorian era, as it came to encompass the intermediary levels of ecclesiastical metropolis, province, diocese, archdeaconry, and deanery. As regards territory, the Gregorian contribution was to provide the Church, at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with “an instrument for the theocratic administration of the world”¹⁰: the *Roman Provinciale*. This management tool set out, in the form of lists and tables, an administrative order establishing continuity with the center via concentric circles, like a “new empire, in which papal authority radiated outward, *urbi et orbi*, over all the provinces and bishoprics of Christendom.”¹¹ More importantly, in terms of the evolution of the Western state, the administrative order imposed by the *Roman Provinciale* marked the transition from offerings, corresponding to an earlier gift-based economy, to taxes and the logic of levying, which are the hallmark of the sovereignty of a modern state. Indeed, this was one of the most significant outcomes of the establishment of episcopal territories. Demonstrating an unexpected openness to the now somewhat dated reflections of Ernst Kantorowicz on the ecclesial genesis of the modern state,¹² Mazel demonstrates just how far the Church paved the way for the monarchical or princely state:

10. Fabrice Delivré, “Le domaine de l’apôtre. Droit de saint Pierre et cens de l’Église romaine dans les provinces d’Aix, Arles et Narbonne (milieu XI^e–fin XII^e siècle),” in Mazel, Fournié, and Le Blévec, *La réforme “grégorienne” dans le Midi*, 447–94.

11. *Ibid.*, 452. See the image on the cover of *L’évêque et le territoire*, which is taken from a manuscript of Gervase of Tilbury’s *Otia Imperialia*.

12. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957; repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

On the one hand, by placing at its disposal the men and the administrative framework necessary to implement the two practices that today can be seen as the principal means by which, over the late Middle Ages, it was able to rise to power: investigation and taxation; and on the other, by providing it more generally with a model of spatial domination of a territorial rather than a seigneurial kind, which obeyed not a feudal logic but one of sovereignty.¹³

Lastly, he proposes to “re-periodize” the Middle Ages. The study of space forces us to reconsider the traditional scansions (early Middle Ages, High Middle Ages, late Middle Ages), organized around the once-pivotal axis of the “revolution of the year 1000” (or the “feudal revolution”), through the prism of a tripartite chronology that parallels the main spatial configurations of the Middle Ages: a period of “deterritorialization” between the fifth and the eighth centuries; the spatial “false start” of the Carolingian era; and the true—Gregorian—start of the process of territorialization, between 1050 and 1250.

A Return to the City?

Mazel brilliantly retraces the history of the *civitas* from the central point of a city holding sway over a “territory” in the ancient and Roman sense of the term—“a delimited space within which magistrates possessed jurisdictional and coercive power” (22)—to the urban site of an episcopal see. He insists on the privileged relation that developed between the town and its bishop, who literally manufactured its sanctity by collecting together relics, by the foundation or construction of holy places, and through the presence of that other place in which his lasting presence was visibly displayed: the bishop’s palace. But, in a study of the diocese, that is, of the emergence of a territory from the initial pole of the bishopric-city, how could one not include a section devoted to the evolution of the city itself, from both a morphological and a political perspective?

Research over the last thirty years has shown the extent to which the Church, through its monumental realizations (places of worship or monasteries), was an essential factor in urban resurgence at the turn of the 1100s, representing an essential force for morphological renewal in the history of Western urbanism. The pioneering book by Gaëtan Desmarais on the morphogenesis of Paris comes to mind, as does the collection of studies on the dynamics of urban morphology edited by Bernard Gauthiez, Élisabeth Zadora-Rio, and Henri Galinié.¹⁴ At another level of analysis, mention must of course be made of the question of “public space,” a topic that medievalists have been reexamining in recent years in the

13. Mazel, *L'évêque et le territoire*, 373.

14. Gaëtan Desmarais, *La morphogénèse de Paris. Des origines à la Révolution* (Paris/Québec: L'Harmattan/CELAT, 1995); Bernard Gauthiez, Élisabeth Zadora-Rio, and Henri Galinié, eds., *Village et ville au Moyen Âge. Les dynamiques morphologiques* (Tours: Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2003).

context of a critical return to the work of Jürgen Habermas.¹⁵ Whether as the sphere of proclamations by public authorities—commune, prince, or Church—or as the theater of a ceremonial of power that has left its imprint on the social landscape in the form of emblematic places (municipal palace, palace and castle, cathedral church), the episcopal city of the second half of the Middle Ages was constantly the scene of displays of majesty in common or public space. “Public space” can be defined, following Habermas, as a setting for “the staging of the publicity involved in representation.”¹⁶ It should be pointed out that, in this context, “representation” refers to a conception of the urban which allowed civil and ecclesiastical powers to shape at will the town in which they were present, as though the route taken by such “staging” (the chosen streets and halts) endowed the town-city with an exemplary form. Cathedral ceremonies, in the long tradition of stationary liturgy, powerfully contributed to the shaping of urban space and served as a wellspring of expressions of civic order through festivities such as the mid-thirteenth-century Corpus Christi celebrations, when the urban community paraded in a hierarchically ordered procession that was at once ecclesial and civic.¹⁷ From the perspective of the “representation” and staging of forms of power, the episcopal city thus offers numerous avenues of study, as Mazel’s book abundantly demonstrates. This is equally true of episcopal ordination ceremonies and the great rituals of penance which left their symbolic imprint on the public space of towns, or of the organization of the cathedral close (the cathedral church itself, the bishop’s palace, and the canons’ quarter) that formed a “center” whose mutations were intimately linked to the construction of the diocesan territory.

From a “political” perspective, it should be stressed that the invention of the diocese as a territory was strictly synchronous with the emergence of the Western city as a *polis*, a civic community based on the model of the commune. In this sense, our respective books intersect over the question of the ecclesial genesis of the modern state.¹⁸ We agree in recognizing that the Church paved the way for the state through a series of transfers—which were firstly transfers of sacrality. But in this genesis, a return to the concept of the city (with all the forms of

15. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1962], trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). For a detailed discussion of Habermas’s theses, their reception, and the historiographical debates to which they have given rise, see Massimo Rospoche, “Beyond the Public Sphere: A Historiographical Transition,” in *Beyond the Public Sphere: Opinions, Publics, Spaces in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Massimo Rospoche (Bologna/Berlin: Il Mulino/Duncker und Humblot, 2012), 9–28. For discussion of this notion from the medievalist’s perspective, see Patrick Boucheron and Nicolas Offenstadt, eds., *L’espace public au Moyen Âge. Débats autour de Jürgen Habermas* (Paris: Press universitaires de France, 2011).

16. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 8.

17. Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

18. Mazel, *L’évêque et le territoire*, Dominique Iogna-Prat, *Cité de Dieu, cité des hommes. L’Église et l’architecture de la société, 1200–1500* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2016).

instrumentalization offered by the ancient notion of the *polis*, adapted to the Christian horizon by the Scholastic masters) also makes it possible to show how far the Church itself was transformed as a result of these transfers affecting the overall architecture of society. At this scale of analysis, we abandon, so to speak, the terrain of territory, and turn to the macroscopic realities of what Michel Foucault would no doubt have termed “pastoral space,” following the logic of “pastoral government.”¹⁹ Mazel’s study does not address the architecture of society, but examines the evolution of the territorial structures of medieval premodernity. For my part, I propose a move away from the historiography of feudal space, of which *L’évêque et le territoire* is an outstanding example, toward the study of political “formalizations”—with all the possible implications of this term regarding categories or forms of government, which themselves are more productive of societal architectures than of territory in the strict sense.

Dominique Iogna-Prat
EHESS

