

Time, Space and Order
THE MAKING OF
Medieval Salisbury

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Introduction

One morning in January 1999 during a birthday gathering in Salisbury, I entered the cathedral with my wife and two friends in the hope of creating some cultural memories from an otherwise hedonistic weekend. There in the north range of the cathedral cloister, we were confronted with a crude model of the city of Old Sarum. At the time I knew nothing of the history of Salisbury and its foundation in the thirteenth century but was struck by the topography of the model and by the unfamiliar name of ‘Old Sarum’. In most historical town models of this sort, you can normally make out some recognisable features of the landscape no matter how concealed they have become by the developments of successive generations. But in this model, the cathedral was clearly situated on a large mound – and we had not climbed a hill to get where we were. Equally, the model showed a large castle next to the cathedral that none of us could remember passing on the way in. On closer observation, it became clear that the model represented an older site somewhere north of the existing city and that at some time in the past the cathedral and the city had moved to where we were now standing, leaving the redundant buildings to crumble and rot. I was intrigued. Where was this old site? When were the old castle and cathedral built? Why were they so close together? Did they have a significant relationship to each other? Where was the rest of the city? And why had the clerics and the other citizens felt the need to abandon it? I was conscious that in the medieval period, it had been common for cathedral buildings to develop over time on the same site, enlarging and adjusting their amenities for the developing liturgy, as well as to accommodate the growing numbers of secular clergy who operated them. But I was less aware of the circumstances surrounding the building of brand new cathedrals in response to particular political and liturgical changes. And this did seem an extreme case. It appeared that there were two brand new cathedrals built by the same chapter within 150 years of each other less than 3 miles apart, both on sites where no religious building had existed before. Bearing in mind that these buildings took a lifetime to build, the appearance of two new cathedrals created *ex nihilo* on unconsecrated land in such a short period of time did seem rather extraordinary. I began by looking for descriptions and explanations of Old Sarum as this seemed to be the most interesting part of the puzzle – isolated, as it was, on what is now an uninhabited, windswept hill.

I quickly found out that from its foundation in 1075 to the beginning of its demise at the start of the thirteenth century, Old Sarum had occasionally been utilised for significant national events – such as the handing over of the Domesday Book to King William in 1086 – but that its ability to develop an urban stature commensurate with this political status was severely hampered by the cramped conditions on top of the hill. In addition to these spatial limitations, the chapter did not appear to consider the dominance of the royal castle over the city appropriate because it reduced the opportunities they had to influence the spatial attributes of the city beyond the boundaries of the cathedral. This was a problem for this particular chapter because many of the clerics were sympathetic to the twelfth-century reforming trends of the Church, which, grounded in the sacramentalism of the Victorines and Peter the Chanter, aspired to develop a radically different relationship between church ceremonial and secular life with a much reduced feudal influence. And so when, in the early part of the thirteenth century, the opportunity arose to move the cathedral away from the royal yoke, the chapter lost no time in organising the necessary permissions from the pope and, perhaps reluctantly, the king. Thus, the circumstances and layout of the chapter's first foundation at Old Sarum appeared reasonably straightforward whereas the situation surrounding the development of the new city became more intriguing, resulting in a completely new set of questions. Who were the men that organised the move? Why did they build the city in the valley on this particular site? How did they manage to move the whole city as well as the cathedral? Why was the city structured with such a clear geometrical section – the so-called 'gridiron' part of the plan – skewed from the orientation of the cathedral? Also, since the city and the cathedral were built on virgin soil, was there a significant spatial relationship between the two, and if so, what was it?

The questions seemed innocent enough and so I concluded that there must be a book somewhere that could answer these simple propositions. However, I soon found out that there was no such book because there is no clear evidence in any one field that could establish the accuracy of any particular hypothesis. Therefore, anyone wishing to propose a theory would have had to address many different areas of study – from architecture to urban design, art history to liturgy, geography to history, philology to Medieval Latin, and theology to philosophy. In addition, my own interest in the *praxis* of the undertaking – i.e. an understanding of the city from idea, through its planning to its ultimate completion – meant that the reasons behind the choices made by the chapter were, I believe, as significant to an understanding of the city as the physical evidence itself. And the

methods necessary to understand these and other questions do not fit well within the current paradigms of academic research where distinctions are made between material and visual culture as well as between history and theory.

However, even given all of these difficulties, I felt that it was a worthwhile project and after several years of research, I believe that the discoveries that I have made during my investigations are worth presenting to architects, local historians and medieval scholars as well as to architectural students who have little knowledge of the period.

Overall, in the research, a picture emerged linking the new city to the festal calendar of the cathedral as well as to the previous site of Old Sarum. This continuity appears to have been primarily articulated through the use of the church processions, which regularly left the cathedral Close and moved through the city, but was also reinforced by the general arrangement and design of some of the cathedral chapter's buildings. These processions are illustrated in the book with the help of plans and reconstructed views based on the surviving texts and on the evidence embodied within the layout of the town itself. But what is perhaps more important to understand from this enquiry is why these processions were used to structure the city in the first place. It is only from this question that the implications of the findings can be properly evaluated.

The methodology I have utilised in this discourse is grounded in modern hermeneutics in that I have attempted to situate the topic in question within the 'horizon' of meaning that was accepted in the medieval period. In practical terms, this means that the investigation attempts to ground the things being studied within the context of the culture and tradition of the period, as well as explore the ideas with respect to the mentalities of the people of the time. This method is common in some disciplines working on the medieval period but is relatively underdeveloped within the fields of architectural and urban history. The deficiency is, in part, due to the relatively small numbers of surviving contemporary texts covering the medieval urban condition, making any interpretation of spatial form quite difficult. But it is also due to the prevalence of other, more positivistic methods – particularly those that extract theoretical knowledge from fragments of culture without reference to the overall picture, and then attempt to reapply these findings into a 'passive' world. In contrast, the holistic approach used here tries to address these difficulties by assessing the subject in its proper intellectual and political context – hence the use of the term 'horizon' describing the perceived limits of the world within which many of these decisions were made. There is a risk of over-interpretation in this type of research but, taking a lead from

M.D. Chenu writing on twelfth-century theology, it is my belief that ‘it is a risk worth running’¹ because it is only as a result of utilising the hermeneutical approach in this study that something new about the organisation of the city of Salisbury was revealed in the first place. It is easy to take issue with my descriptions of the inherent meanings of these manifestations of culture but more difficult to deny that their existence is clearly indicated within the structure of the city.

What has emerged from writing the book is that when the various elements of the city are viewed within a wider context and in relation to each other, they do present a picture of medieval urban planning, which, in this example, is wholly coherent. However, I do not wish to suggest that, beyond my conviction that the city is underpinned by a processional order, all the other propositions within the book are undisputable. Rather, that a discussion of these other elements in relation to the primary processional order offers the possibility to consider new insights into the way the medieval world was conceived and made by a broadening of view rather than by an empirical search for truth. In this scenario, it is more important to consider whether the propositions offered here are impossible rather than whether they are ultimately true or not because this book is based on the premise that they represent just one of many interpretations considered prevalent at the time.

The structure of the book is basically chronological, beginning with a discussion of the relationship between the development of the built forms at Old Sarum and the unfolding political events of the twelfth century leading up to the chapter’s decision to relocate the city. This is followed by Chapter 2, comprising a detailed description of Salisbury as it would have been seen in the thirteenth century. Chapter 3 begins to place the unfolding discourse within its current historiographical context, comparing Salisbury with other medieval town foundations as well as revealing the various ways in which the people of the medieval period chose to represent themselves and the urban realm. Broadly speaking, this involved three possible modes of representation: representation in text and illustration; representation through symbolic geometry and form; and representation through processions and pageants. All of these aspects of representation are introduced

¹ ‘One always runs the risk of a subjective interpretation which imputes unverifiable and possibly imaginary relationships to the reality being described. But this is a risk worth running if it is true that the task of the historian is to construct and not simply to recover. Nor can his task be anything else.’ M.D. Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society in the 12th Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Medieval Academy of America, 1997, originally published 1957), xix.

and discussed before the detailed description of thirteenth-century Salisbury begins in Chapter 4. This chapter comprises an examination of the architecture of the cathedral in relation to contemporary religious practices and describes the various ceremonies that heralded its construction and consecration. Chapter 5 then moves onto an analysis of the churchyard and Close before the wider city is covered in Chapter 6, where the processional structure of the city is discussed in relation to the urban experience of the clerics and burghers.

Because each chapter reveals a different aspect of the overall investigation, the clarity of the whole treatise may not become apparent until the reader has completed the book. If, following this point, the ideas still remain unclear, I hope that the frequent footnotes referring the reader to studies that reinforce the interpretations I have made will clarify the situation sufficiently. However, perhaps even more importantly, it should be noted that it was these interpretations that led to the disclosure of the processional order of the city in the first place. I did not randomly decide to look at the routes of the processions through the city but realised, after much investigation, that it was in the processions that the key relationships were most likely to appear. *Post facto* this may seem obvious, but given that for the past eight hundred years or so this relationship has remained concealed, it seems appropriate to me that some value should be placed on how these relationships were recovered. The results could have been presented simply as a description of relevant events, regardless of the method used, but this would have bypassed other important findings of this study such as the realisation that urban structure can emerge from the interplay between people and places (in this case, the unfolding processions) as well as from formal expressions of order. This particular point has often been missed in post-Enlightenment thought because representations have often been understood aesthetically rather than in the ontological way they were viewed during the medieval period.² Even the language used to explain historical realities often contrives to confuse the subject in question by describing concepts such as particular attitudes to *space*, the essence of the *ideal* and the concept of the *state* in a manner the educated medieval mind would not have understood.

Therefore, I have tried to explain why the clerics should have structured the city through the use of processions in part implicitly within the structure of the book as well as more particularly in specific sub-sections of the chapters. But even

² D. Vesely, 'The nature of the modern fragment and the sense of wholeness' in B. Bergdoll and W. Oechslin (eds), *Fragments-Architecture and the Unfinished: Essays presented to Robin Middleton* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), 52.

in these frequent theoretical asides, I have consistently referred the reader back to the evidence supplied in the other parts of the book. For example, it seemed apposite to build an understanding of the meaning of various places throughout the city by beginning with the cathedral, which, since Panofsky's publication of Abbot Suger's twelfth-century treatise on the building of St Denis, has been well appreciated. That is to say that now no one would deny that the manifestation of geometry within the cathedrals of the medieval period had symbolic significance, irrespective of who was responsible for its implementation. Moving beyond the cathedral, it would also have been impossible to explain fully the relationship between the medieval understanding of nature and the city without first describing the symbolic meaning of the cloister and its temporal ambiguity within this setting. Finally, it would have been extremely difficult to understand the various thresholds set up within the cathedral, Close and city without understanding something of medieval temporality and its relation to eternity. These relationships between the urban spaces, the people who inhabited them and the way they were used were all related to significant contemporary theological ideas that informed the everyday lives of the burghers of Salisbury – whether they understood them explicitly or not – and hence played an important role in the ordering of the city from the outset.

In the end, I hope that this book is able to make a reasonably good case that the primary ordering of Salisbury was organised around the cathedral processions. Additionally, I hope that in the future, in order to reveal more about this enigmatic period, further such studies will be undertaken of Salisbury and other places. For, as Hannah Arendt says in *The Human Condition*, '... only when things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear'.³

³ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998, originally published 1958), 57.