

# ESSAYS ON LAY AND ECCLESIASTICAL COMMUNITIES IN AND AROUND THE MEDIEVAL URBAN PARISH

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## EPILOGUE

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**Abstract:** This chapter reflects on four aspects pertaining to the principal themes of this project: the distinct merits of parish studies as a field, historiographical priorities pursued thus far, insights gleaned from the preceding essays, and areas for future development. In order to broaden the spatial scope, the supporting materials primarily draw from Anglophone contexts and recent works on the British Isles. It serves as an afterword to this international essay collection on medieval urban parish communities.

**Resumo:** Este capítulo acrescenta várias reflexões sobre quatro aspetos relacionados com os principais temas deste projeto: os méritos distintos dos estudos paroquiais enquanto campo, as prioridades historiográficas seguidas até agora, as ideias recolhidas dos ensaios anteriores e as áreas para desenvolvimento futuro. A fim de alargar o âmbito espacial, os materiais de apoio provêm principalmente de contextos anglófonos e de trabalhos recentes sobre as Ilhas Britânicas. Ao fazê-lo, este texto serve de epílogo a esta obra coletiva e internacional sobre comunidades paroquiais urbanas medievais.

First and foremost, the editor of this volume, Maria Amélia Campos, the 'Research in Medieval Studies' meeting series (co-organized by members of the Universities of Coimbra, NOVA of Lisbon and Porto) and Coimbra's *Centro de História de Sociedade e da Cultura* deserve to be congratulated for assembling such an international and complementary range of scholars, first for the 'Urban Parish Communities in Medieval Europe' conference held at Coimbra in December 2021 and now its proceedings published under the title of *Essays on Lay and Ecclesiastical Communities in and Around the Medieval Urban Parish*. Drawing on my own address to the participants, I would like to add some reflections on four aspects relating to the main themes of this project: the distinctive merits of parish studies as a field, historiographical priorities pursued to date, insights gained from the preceding essays and areas of future development. To expand the spatial horizon, the supporting materials derive mainly from Anglophone contexts and recent works on the British Isles.

For researchers working on princely courts, social elites and central institutions, parish studies may appear 'parochial' by comparison. Here, the scale is reduced to a microhistorical level, the focus shifts to peripheral communities consisting of largely illiterate members, the sources document mundane activities of unknown individuals, surviving evidence of art / architecture appears of modest quality and mentalities tend towards the introspective rather than progressive. Some contributions to the genre, it is true, restrict themselves to compiling lists of incumbents, patrons, building works and events of purely local interest. Such accounts might understandably be termed 'antiquarian' or descriptive. Others though, including those contained in this volume, pursue more ambitious and instructive agendas. Parishes, for a start, can be found throughout Latin Christianity, providing a (rare) universal basis for robust regional, national and even Continent-wide comparison. As an early form of territorial rather than personal organization, they include representatives of *all* social, gender and age groups, in both town and countryside, allowing a more comprehensive approach to given societies than

associations or units limited by more restricted criteria of belonging.<sup>1</sup> It is only here at grass-roots level, furthermore, that historians can really assess the *impact* of major liturgical / artistic movements (like the Renaissance), central directives (such as those of the Fourth Lateran Council) or fundamental transformations (especially the various European Reformations), i.e. to grasp the extent to which grand ideas and policy decisions actually changed lives on the ground. Rather than uniform obedience or implementation, any such attempt will reveal much negotiation, variation and differences in both timescale and intensity.<sup>2</sup> It also sharpens our awareness of developments and impulses which reflected bottom-up rather than top-down initiatives, for example growing lay influence on parochial administration during the late Middle Ages or new cultural customs such as Robin Hood celebrations which emerged in English villages rather than big urban centres.<sup>3</sup> In the same country, consideration of the vast number of ‘humble’ men who exercised key local government functions – as churchwardens, overseers of the poor, surveyors of highways – during the early modern period, suggests that a degree of ‘republican’ participation characterized even a strong monarchy like that of the Tudors.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pioneering comparative collections include Convegno di storia della Chiesa in Italia (ed.), *Pievi e parrocchie in Italia nel basso medioevo* (Roma: Herder, 1984); Nathalie Kruppa (ed.), *Pfarreien im Mittelalter: Deutschland, Polen, Tschechien und Ungarn im Vergleich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); Michele Ferrari and Beat Kümin (eds), *Pfarreien in der Vormoderne: Identität und Kultur im Niederkirchenwesen Europas* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2017). With co-editor Arnd Reitemeier, the author is currently preparing *A Companion to the Parish in Medieval and Early Modern Latin Christianity* (Brill: Leiden, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Andrew Pettegree (ed.), *The Reformation of the Parishes: The Ministry and the Reformation in Town and Country* (Manchester: University Press, 1993) and the fascinating microhistory in Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Drew, *Early Parochial Organisation in England: The Origins of the Office of Churchwarden* (London: St. Anthony's Press, 1954); ‘Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford: University Press, 1994), esp. ch. 1, n. 79-84.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Goldie, ‘The Unacknowledged Republic: Officeholding in Early Modern England’, in *The Politics of the Excluded 1500-1850*, ed. Tim Harris (London: Palgrave, 2001), 153-194.

What has been of primary interest to parish scholars so far? Naturally, the emergence and differentiation of local ecclesiastical networks, processes which (depending on the regional setting) started around the first millennium and stretched to the thirteenth century, in some areas (like the Italian peninsula) well into the early modern period. Canon law frameworks, not least the transition from churches under strong proprietor control to the patronage system, where presentations to benefices and spiritualities came under closer diocesan supervision, have also received much attention, as have changes in doctrine (e.g. regarding pathways to salvation, be it the growth of Purgatory in the late Middle Ages or of Protestant denominations from the sixteenth century) as well as their – by no means straightforward – reflection in popular piety (where magical and convivial elements remained causes of concern for clerical hierarchies well beyond the period examined here). Historians have also scrutinized the social background, training and education of members of the lower clergy;<sup>5</sup> their sometimes harmonious – and at other points highly conflictual – relations with the laity (often under the somewhat anachronistic label of ‘anticlericalism’); the delicate co-existence with ‘rivalling’ associations like guilds,<sup>6</sup> and the manifold economic dimensions of parish affairs (linked to tithes, customary dues and the generation / allocation of fabric funds). Gender roles, ‘political’ dimensions (such as the election and accountability of officeholders), local government activities (esp. with respect to poor relief / education), demographic trends (extracted from parish registers) and musical /

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<sup>5</sup> For the British Isles, see esp. <https://theclergydatabase.org.uk/> (‘The Church of England Clergy Database’; all urls cited in this postsript were last accessed on 31/5/2023) and Chris Langley, Catherine E. McMillan and Russell Newton (eds), *The Clergy in Early Modern Scotland* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Gervase Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England 1250-1550* (Oxford, 2015).

/ ceremonial life represent further priorities, at least in certain European regions.<sup>7</sup>

Moving to findings contained in this volume, its main themes and summaries of all essays can be found in the editor's introduction, so my thoughts will be more personal and selective. Starting with the 'big picture', perhaps the greatest merit is the encouragement of a more sustained dialogue between researchers of the Iberian / Italian peninsulas and those whose research focuses on northern and central parts of Europe. Belonging to the latter group, I have learnt a great deal about – to give just a few examples – mutually supportive (rather than antagonistic) parish-fraternity relations in a city like Coimbra (contribution by Rocha), the prominent role of collegiate churches & cathedral chapters in Portuguese scholarship more generally (as evidenced by Fernandes, Morujão and Rêpas Farelo) and the loss of much valuable evidence stored in central archives during the Lisbon earthquake of 1755. For Spain, in contrast, Lincoln adduces remarkably detailed *fueros* (municipal law codes) to illuminate urban life under episcopal lordship in Castile and León, albeit at a time (twelfth century) which may be just a little too early for full parish coverage. Moving to Italy, Cissello and Corniolo highlight intriguing varieties in diocesan-local relations, with two parish altars in the Alpine city of Aosta actually located within the episcopal church, while the cathedral altar at Vercelli served pastoral functions itself. Three essays shed welcome light on processes of inclusion and exclusion in more northern parts of Europe, particularly with regard to the 'Lombards' who offered financial services in numerous merchant communities (Pia) and the fate of Jewish minorities in French and German cities. In Banoun's sample, parish network differentiation

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<sup>7</sup> Among the most comprehensive long-term national surveys touching on all these dimensions is N.G.J. Pounds, *A History of the English Parish from Augustine to Victoria* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000); for medieval France see Michel Aubrun, *La paroisse en France: des origines au XV e siècle* (Paris: Picard, 1986); for (early) modern Italy Paolo Cozzo, *Andate in pace: Parrocchie e parrocchie in Italia dal Concilio di Trento a papa Francesco* (Roma: Carocci, 2014).

prior to 1300 seems to have gone hand in hand with a deterioration of their position, culminating in numerous expulsions coinciding with fourteenth-century crises such as the Black Death. Looking more closely at the case studies of Fulda and Wittenberg, in turn, the keynote by Hess highlighted the often very sudden – and at times puzzling – shifts in how Jews were treated by their Christian neighbours: waves of settlement, expulsion and subsequent resettlement could follow each other in quick succession. Focusing on the Saxons in Transylvania, Dinca questions the conventionally sharp division between urban and rural contexts, demonstrating how priests educated at universities in (present-day) Austria, Czechia, Poland and Italy did not shy away from appointments to village posts, performed essential writing services for the laity there and thus fostered considerable cultural exchange between intellectual centres and periphery.

So where do we go from here? The startling advances in digital humanities surely open exciting new opportunities, for instance in mapping and visualizing data relating to parish communities.<sup>8</sup> Complementing rather than superseding more traditional pillars of scholarship like palaeography, diplomatics, chronology or source critique, online resources like ‘Deutsche Inschriften Online’ and ‘Records of Early English Drama Online’ (having started decades ago with long series of print volumes) now make all their evidence accessible from any device with an internet connection. The former aims to illustrate, transcribe and contextualize all pre-1650 inscriptions in present-day Austria, Germany and South Tyrol, many located in local churches; the latter collates traces of dramatic and mimetic activities in England prior to 1642, a great deal of which derive from parish sources like churchwardens’ accounts and inventories.<sup>9</sup> On a

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<sup>8</sup> A good illustration of the manifold possibilities is ‘Mapping the Scottish Reformation’ (<http://mappingthescottishreformation.org/>).

<sup>9</sup> Further information at <https://www.inschriften.net/> and <https://ereed.library.utoronto.ca/>. For a list of English and Welsh churchwardens accounts see <http://warwick.ac.uk/cwad/>; for an exemplary edition of medieval parish sources Clive Burgess (ed.), *The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints Church, Bristol*, 3 vols. (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 2000-2004).

more personal and organizational level, we should aspire to place exchanges between the various national, thematic and period-specific strands of parish-related expertise onto firmer foundations. This is the goal of the Warwick Network for Parish Research, an informal association of academics as well as independent scholars founded in 2003. It runs annual symposia and offers a virtual platform for bibliographic information on sources and literature in many languages, the publication of longer / shorter posts on related topic, the dissemination of news / events and the hosting of research projects in the field. ‘My-Parish’, though, depends on the active collaboration of its community – membership is free and we particularly welcome input relating to areas as yet under-represented on its pages, i.e. northern, eastern and Mediterranean parts of Europe.<sup>10</sup> In terms of ultimate ambitions, I guess, the buzzword has to be ‘connections’: between medievalists and (early) modernists, between those working on laity / clergy, spiritual / worldly issues, sub- / transparochial institutions, towns / villages, elite / popular culture, between specialists of the whole range of (written, visual, material) sources, between academics / / representatives of a wider public, and between scholars from different disciplines. Admittedly, these are difficult and long-term tasks, but initiatives like *Lay and Ecclesiastical Communities in and Around the Medieval Urban Parish* help to point us in the right direction. Let’s see how far we can get.

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<sup>10</sup> The ‘My-Parish’ platform can be found at <http://warwick.ac.uk/my-parish>.



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Série Investigação

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