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The Notion of Liminality and the Medieval Sacred Space

edited by
Klára Doležalová & **Ivan Foletti**

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THE NOTION OF LIMINALITY AND THE MEDIEVAL SACRED SPACE

Liminality and Medieval Art From Space to Rituals and to the Imagination

Klára Doležalová & Ivan Foletti

The notion of liminality seems to be a very challenging and topical concept, used in recent years not only in anthropology, but permeating art history as well. In our field, however, the meaning of this term is extremely varied. It can be a spatial category, an imaginary category, or even a way of defining imaginary processes. It is not by chance that the next *Verband österreichischer Kunsthistorikerinnen und Kunsthistoriker*, organized in October 2019 in Vienna, is entitled *An der Schwelle: Liminalität in Theorie und kunsthistorischer Praxis*[1].

The goal of this introduction is to clarify the intellectual structure in the background of this volume: it is a question of the *limen*, the threshold in medieval culture, mainly

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1   Call for papers and short description available at: https://bit.ly/2Nv7zx0 (accessed on 29 August 2019).

as a spatial, ritual, and temporal category. In order to understand its complexity, we would like to start by presenting briefly the anthropological roots of this conception. We will then continue with an introduction of the material evidence of such a phenomenon in the medieval sacred space and beyond. Finally, we would like to show the key importance of contemporary rituals in the construction of the medieval sacred space. We would also like to introduce a brief reflection about the role of the human body crossing the diverse spaces and experiencing liminality – both in materiality and in the imagination.

Theory of the liminality, from anthropology to art history

The notion of liminality was introduced in 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep, an eminent Belgian anthropologist[2]. In his seminal research on *rites de passage*, Van Gennep presented and classified the rituals of inclusion into three steps – calling them pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal – permitting the individual to cross a physical or a metaphorical border. For Van Gennep, even birth and death can be seen as a liminal passage. However, what is more important for this book is that, in order to explain his theory, he uses spatial and material examples, such as the threshold of a house or a border between two modern states. For Van Gennep, ritual and space are thus indissociable: to cross a threshold, even a micro-ritual is needed[3].

In the 1970s, Van Gennep's theories were applied in a systematic way to the medieval world in the research of the British anthropologist Victor Turner[4]. In his first fundamental research, from 1967, Turner focuses more on the temporary dimension of liminality. More important is the monograph he cowrote in 1978 with Edith Turner[5]. In this latter case, the two authors apply the concept of the *rite de passage* to medieval pilgrimage, presenting all the pilgrim's experiences as liminal. For these authors, the state of the pilgrim while he is performing his pilgrimage is precisely a liminal one; the moments preceding the pilgrimage and those following would then be seen as pre-liminal and post-liminal. Thus, all three phases together must have been accompanied by rituals and have had a transformative effect on the individuals involved. The Turners' theories were later debated and relativized[6]. More recent scholarship agrees, however, on one essential point: pilgrimage must be seen within the medieval culture as a social space that lies in-between, with very specific social conditions, such as unusual freedom, and thus, deeply intertwined with the notion of liminality[7].

However, this notion entered the field of art history in a significant way, with the seminal book by Michael Camille, *Image of the Edge*, published in the early 1990s[8]. The book is dedicated to margins in medieval art, and Camille constructs a social and visual category of the margins in both physical and metaphorical sense as essential for the medieval world in general.

In the last ten years, the question of threshold and borders in the medieval (and especially sacred) space has become a crucial topic. In 2014, Tina Bawden introduced a book entitled *Die Schwelle im Mittelalter*, which provides a very useful general reflection on the concept of liminality in the medieval world and space; the author later investigated the question of decorated doors from the late Middle Ages[9]. Shortly afterwards, in 2015, Ivan Foletti and Manuela Gianandrea published a monograph – *Zona liminare* – dedicated to the narthex of Santa Sabina in Rome and its decorations[10]. The monograph proposes the notion that the space was conceived precisely for pre-liminal rituals. Finally, in 2018, Emilie Van Opstall edited a collective volume, aptly entitled *Sacred Thresholds*[11]. Beside the collective dimension of this effort, Van Opstall proposes an overview of both the theory

and applications of the notion of liminality in the field of art history and beyond[12]. In the same year a collective monograph – *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways. Reconsidering Medieval French Art through the Pilgrim's Body* – was published and dedicated to the experience of medieval beholder in front of coeval monuments. The notion of liminality was fundamental for all this research: the entire experimental project at the base of this publication followed the Turners' reflections; moreover, a salient chapter of the book was dedicated precisely to the liminal spaces on the thresholds of sacred buildings[13].

In this context, the present volume wishes to enter into discussion with a slight difference: we understand the threshold as a fundamental category, mainly in a spatial sense, covering all the sacred spaces of medieval churches. We believe that imagination is a part of the embodied experience of a medieval viewer; however, our focus will mainly lie on real spatial barriers rather than on metaphorical images. In this sense, our reflection will not follow the path of the excellent research of Klaus Krüger[14].

Space, reality, and imagination

The structure of this book will try to follow the path of any visitor entering the sacred space in the medieval period. Before entering sacred buildings, it is worth remembering that the very structure of urbanized spaces already involved with liminality. Van Gennep wrote about borders between modern nations; in the pre-modern world, borders of cities, castles or villages would materialize the experience of the *limen* in a highly tangible way. It is important to note that it is not by chance that at the entrances to cities, their walls and towers were sacralized by images, chapels, small churches etc. Crossing the walls of a medieval city, was thus also a ritual movement, linked with the experience of the sacred. Chapels or churches along the wall were perceived as apotropaic tools for both natives and visitors, while images on doors and porches would "stimulate" ritual acts (e.g. the sign of cross, a visual interaction etc.)[15]. Churches close to gates – from the Late Antique martyria to the late medieval mendicant churches – were part of a ritualized entrance to the city and, at the same time, to a spiritual protection[16]. It is not by chance

2   Arnold Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage. Étude systématique des rites de la porte et du seuil, de l'hospitalité de ʟ'adoption, de la grossesse et de ʟ'accouchement, de la naissance, de ʟ'enfance, de la puberté, de ʟ'initiation, de ʟ'ordination, du couronnement, des fiançailles et du mariage, des funérailles, des saisons, etc.*, Paris 1969 [1909].
3   Thierry Goguel d'Allondans, *Rites de Passage, rites d'initiation. Lecture d'Arnold Van Gennep*, Québec 2002.
4   Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage", in *idem*, *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, ɴʏ 1967, pp. 93–111.
5   Victor Turner, Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, New York 1978.
6   *Contesting the Sacred. The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, John Eade, Michael Sallnow eds, London 1991; Simon Coleman, John Elsner, "Contesting Pilgrimage: Current Views and Future Directions", *Cambridge Anthropology*, xv (1991), pp. 63–73.
7   Anne E. Bailey, "Modern and Medieval Approaches to Pilgrimage, Gender and Sacred Space", *History and Anthropology*, xxɪv/4 (2013), pp. 493–512.
8   Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge. The Margins of Medieval Art*, London 1992.
9   Tina Bawden, *Die Schwelle im Mittelalter: Bildmotiv und Bildort*, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna 2014.
10 Ivan Foletti, Manuela Gianandrea, *Zona liminare. Il nartece di Santa Sabina a Roma, la sua porta e l'iniziazione cristiana*, Rome 2015.
11 *Sacred Tresholds. The Door to the Sanctuary in Late Antiquity*, Emilie M. van Opstall ed., Leiden/Boston 2018.
12 Emilie M. van Opstall, "General Introduction", in *Sacred Tresholds* (n. 12), pp. 1–30.
13 *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways. Reconsidering Medieval French Art through the Pilgrim's Body*, Ivan Foletti, Katarína Kravčíková, Sabina Rosenbergová, Adrien Palladino eds, Brno/Rome 2018, sp. pp. 109–202.
14 Klaus Krüger, *Bildpräsenz – Heilspräsenz. Ästhetik der Liminalität*, Göttingen 2018.
15 See for example in general *Rituals and Walls. The Architecture of Sacred Space*, Pier Vittorio Aureli *et al.* eds, London 2016; for cultic spaces in the west see Martin F. Lešák, "Prayers and Protection: The Tower at Torba Reconsidered", *Arte lombarda*, 182/183, 1/2 (2018), pp. 5–19, 163.
16 For Late Antiquity see for example Richard Krautheimer, *Three Christian Capitals: Topography and Politics*, Berkeley / Los Angeles 1983; Beat Brenk, "Il Culto delle reliquie e la politica urbanistico-architettonica di Milano ai tempi del vescovo Ambrogio", in *387 d.c. Ambrogio e Agostino. Le sorgenti dell'Europa*, catalogue of the exhibition (Milan, Museo Diocesano 2003–2004), Paolo Pasini ed., Milan 2003, pp. 56–60.

that in the first half of the eighth century, the churches around Milan are seen as the presence of the local martyrs themselves protecting the city[17].

Once present inside the city walls, the first step in approaching sacred spaces or holy places was necessarily crossing their door, or more generally speaking, their entrance spaces. They represent the barrier between the profane and the sacred but also between the reign of God and places where the devil was at work[18]. For this reason, during the period investigated, the doors were covered – both in an institutional and spontaneous way – with apotropaic signs and images[19]. Doors not only provided, but also prevented, visual and physical access to the building. The research of Katarína Kravčíková and Ivan Foletti therefore takes into consideration not only their potential for creating a passageway but precisely their function as an enclosed barrier, providing to the viewers' imagination – be they pilgrims or neophytes – the possibility to virtually experience the sacred. Standing in front of the closed doors therefore meant encountering the sacrality of the space, although it was still physically inaccessible.

Mainly in the Late Antique context, it was never easy to definitively cross the doors of the church – both metaphorically and physically. To do so, a fundamental initiatory ritual was required – baptism[20]. Special spaces were therefore conceived to facilitate the full integration of the Christian community: the baptisteries [Fig. 1][21]. In these buildings, used only few times a year in Late Antiquity, a lifechanging experience awaited

1/Interior of the Orthodox Baptistery, Ravenna, ca 450–473

2/ Baptismal font, Baptistery of the Basilica of St Vitalis, Sbeitla (Tunisia), 6th century

the neophyte[22]. Before accessing the space, he or she had to have been prepared both intellectually and bodily: pre-baptismal catecheses were combined with fasting, exorcisms, and a series of ritual practices. Once in the baptistery – according to Van Gennep the liminal space *par excellence* – the naked bodies of the neophytes were anointed and immersed in warm water where they would, according to the long exegetical tradition starting with St Paul, die in the water and be resurrected in the footsteps of Christ[23]. The following step was their full integration into the Christian community marked

17   "*Nulla potest reperire urbs in hac prouincia / ubi tanta requiescunt sanctorum cadauera / electorum reuelata, quanta ibi excubant. / O quam felix et beata Mediolanum ciuitas / que habere tales sanctos defensores meruit / precibus inuicta quorum pèrmanet et fertilis*". See *Versus de Verona; Versum de Mediolano civitate, edizione critica e commento*, Giovanni Battista Pighi ed., Bologna 1960.

18   Jean-Michel Spieser, "Réflexion sur le décor et fonctions des portes monumentales", in *Le porte del paradiso. Arte e tecnologia tra Italia e Mediterraneo*, Antonio Iacobini ed., Rome 2009, pp. 65–79. See also the important study by Martin Wallraff, "*Ego sum ostium*. Kirchenportale und andere Türen im antiken Christentum", *Theologische Zeitschrift*, LXII/2 (2006), pp. 321–337.
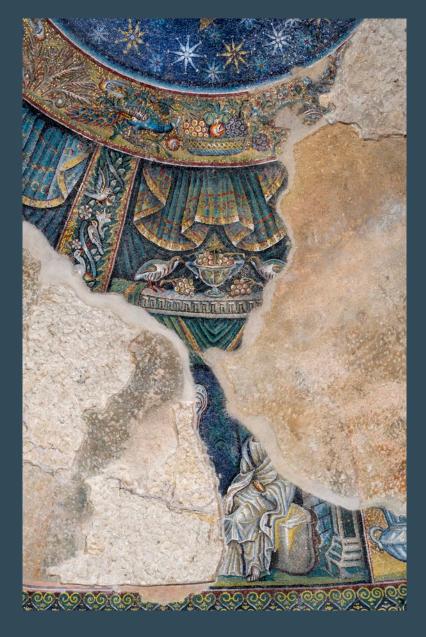
19   Anxo Fernández Ocampo, "Devins sur le pas de la porte: notes pour une anthropologie visuelle du seuil en Galice", *Conserveries mémorielles*, VII (2010), http://cm.revues.org/435 (accessed on 29 August 2019).

20   For the rituals see the synthesis by Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation*, New York 1978; Victor Saxer, *Les rites d'initiation chrétienne du IIe au VIe siècle. Esquisse historique et signification d'après leurs principaux témoins*, Spoleto 1988; Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*, Aldershot/Burlington 2006; Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation (Revised and Expanded Edition)*, Collegeville 2007; Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*, Grand Rapids, MI 2009; *Ablution, Initiation, and Baptism. Late Antiquity, Early Judaism, and Early Christianity*, 3 vols, David Hellholm ed., Berlin 2011.

21   In the abundant bibliography on baptisteries see for example: Armen Khatchatrian, *Les Baptistères paléochrétiens: Plans, notices et bibliographie*, Paris 1962; *idem, Origine et typologie des baptistères paléochrétiens*, Mulhouse 1982; Sebastian Ristow, *Frühchristliche Baptisterien*, Münster 1998; *L'edificio battesimale in Italia. Aspetti e problemi*, Daniela Gandolfi ed., Bordighera 2001; *Fons Vitae. Baptême, Baptistères et rites d'initiation (IIe–VIe siècle)*, Ivan Foletti, Serena Romano eds, Rome 2009; Olof Brandt, *Battisteri oltre la pianta: gli alzati di nove battisteri paleocristiani in Italia*, Vatican City 2012.

22   Saxer, *Les rites d'initiation* (n. 20), pp. 575–576.

23   For the bodily experience of the ritual see Veronika Tvrzníková, *Ritual, Hierotopy and a Cognitive Perspective on a Late Antique Baptistery*, M.A. thesis, (Masaryk University, supervisor: Ivan Foletti), Brno 2016. For practical issues with warm water etc. see Marina Falla Castelfranchi, "L'edificio battesimale: architettura, ritualità, sistemi idraulici", *Settimane di Marina studio della Fondazione Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo*, LV/2 (2008), pp. 1173–1236.

3/ Women at the tomb, dome mosaic, Baptistery of San Giovanni in Fonte, Naples, 5th century

4/ Women at the tomb, wooden doors, Basilica of Santa Sabina, Rome, ca 421–440

5/ Trivulzio ivory with the Women at the tomb, ivory bas-relief, Rome (?), ca 400 / Museo delle Arti Decorative, Castello Sforzesco (Milan), inv. Avori 90

6/ Pyx with the Women at the tomb, ivory, 6th century / Musée d'histoire du Valais (Sion), inv. MV 152

by Eucharist, sometimes accompanied by receiving milk and honey – the archetypes of a paradisiacal experience – and the entrance in the sacred space of the church[24]. As is well known, catechumens were able to access sacred buildings before being baptized but only for a limited period[25]. It is only by becoming full Christians that neophytes were integrated both in the space of the church and in its social community. Moreover, it is worth remembering that in North Africa, some baptismal fonts, such as the Sbeitla Baptistery, had a form of a vagina [**Fig. 2**][26]. Thus, the liminal experience of Christianization is mirrored in the liminality of birth.

In the preserved monumental decorations of Late Antique baptisteries, we find many images [**Fig. 3**][27]. Some of them can be seen in dialogue with rituals, other recall the paradise promised to those who will cross the waters[28]. Finally, some show the vision of God, the final goal of any Christian life, as well as the memorial of the resurrection[29]. The same imagery can be found on the doors of Santa Sabina [**Fig. 4**], probably directed mainly to the catechumens, but also on small objects, possibly linked with the baptismal rites, such as diptychs, pyxides, or, as recently discovered, combs [**Figs 5–7**][30]. More interestingly, the same iconographical compositions can be found also in the decorations

24 See for example Ambrose of Milan, *Esposizione del Vangelo secondo Luca*, VI, 71, Giovanni Coppa ed., Milan/Rome 1978, pp. 60–61 and more in general Antoine Salles, *Trois antiques rituels du baptême*, Paris 1958.

25 For the descriptions of catechumens leaving the church see *Les Consitutions Apostoliques*, VIII, 6, 1–13; 7, 4–9; 8, 1–6, Marcel Metzger ed., Paris 1985, pp. 151–157, 158–159, 161.

26 Nathan S. Dennis, *Performing Paradise in the Early Christian Baptistery: Art, Liturgy, and the Transformation of Vision*, PhD thesis, (Johns Hopkins University, supervisor: Herbert L. Kessler), Baltimore 2016, sp. pp. 198–199.
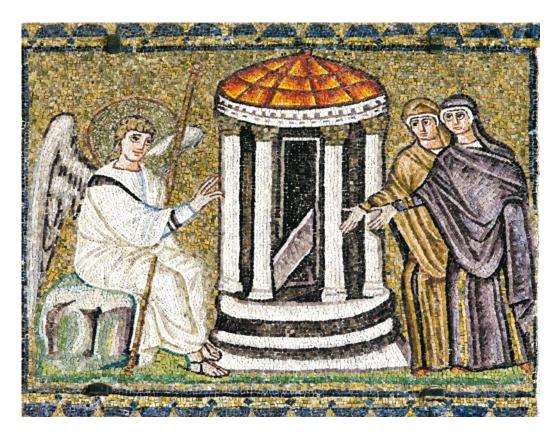
27 On baptismal imagery in general see Robin M. Jensen, *Living Water: Images, Symbols, and Settings of Early Christian Baptism*, Leiden 2011.

28 For the dialogue between images and rituals inside the baptisteries see for example Annabel J. Wharton, "Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna", in *The Art Bulletin*, LXIX (1987), pp. 158–175; Katia Gandolfi, "Les mosaïques du baptistère de Naples. Programme iconographique et liturgie", in *Il Duomo di Napoli dal paleocristiano all'età angioina*, Serena Romano, Nicolas Bock eds, Naples 2002, pp. 21–34; Ivan Foletti, "Saint Ambroise et le Baptistère des Orthodoxes de Ravenne: autour du 'Lavement des pieds' dans la liturgie baptismale", in *Fons Vitae* (n. 21), pp. 121–155; Chiara Croci, "Dal trionfo nei giochi alla 'corona incorrupta'. Una nota sui santi del tamburo del Battistero di Napoli", in *Survivals, Revivals, Rinascenze*, Nicolas Bock, Ivan Foletti, Michele Tomasi eds, Rome 2017, pp. 295–303.

29 Vladimir Ivanovici, *Manipulating Theophany. Light in North-Adriatic Architecture and Ritual*, Berlin 2016.

30 For the uses of ivory diptychs during the baptismal liturgy see Blanka Španová, *Plačící ženy u hrobu a raně křesťanský svět* [Women at the Tomb and Early Christian World], B.A. thesis, (Masaryk University, supervisor: Ivan Foletti), Brno 2015 and Kristýna Navrátilová, *Milánský pašijový diptych* [The Milanese Passion Diptych], M.A. thesis, (Masaryk University, supervisor: Ivan Foletti), Brno 2016. Regarding the yet unpublished comb, see Morana Čaušević-Bully, Sébastien Bully, "Les sites ecclésiaux et monastiques de l'archipel du Kvarner (Croatie), campagne 2017: Mirine-*Fulfinum* (Omišalj, île de Krk)", *Chronique des activités archéologiques de l'École française de Rome*, https://journals.openedition.org/cefr/2185 (accessed on 29 August 2019). A full publication of the object and its archaeological context is in preparation by the two authors. We also take the opportunity to thank them for the possibility to publish a preliminary drawing. More general research on this topic is currently being prepared by Adrien Palladino and Alžběta Ž. Filipová. For the doors of Santa Sabina, with essential bibliography, see the article by Ivan Foletti and Katarína Kravčíková in this volume.

of the main naves of Western basilicas from the fourth to the sixth century, perhaps conceived for post-baptismal catechesis [**Fig. 8**][31]. The pre-liminal, the liminal, and the post-liminal phases thus occur through precise rituals and are followed by images constructing a visual unity, and which are transformed in the minds of the viewers by the rituals. It is thus the human body activated by touching, smells, chants, and feeling of temperatures which experiences liminality[32]. This aspect is then amplified by visual and spatial conditions.

In the later centuries, the baptism lost part of this evocative dimension – it was dedicated mainly to children – remaining however the necessary *rite de passage* to fully access the sacred space[33]. The interior of a church was, however, not united at all. Other thresholds were dividing the space in multiple functionary zones. To cross them, more or less important rituals were needed. It is the case of the veils and curtains dividing the men from the women, the clergy from the laity, the baptized from the non-baptized. In the article of Klára Doležalová and Sible de Blaauw, the nineteenth-century feeling of a united space in an early medieval basilica is completely deconstructed. We are facing a segmented aula with veils between the arcade, sanctuary or ciboria columns, largely modifying the visual experience. We do not have enough information about the ritual use of the curtains, but it is highly plausible that especially in the presbytery, they were regularly closed and opened. In this way, the veiling and revealing the rituals were on the one hand functioning as a *limen* for the eyes, and on the other, as a place for potentiating the imagination. In this context, two aspects should be emphasized: it is on one hand the question of sound, penetrating the space despite the textile furnishings. It is then possible to hear what cannot be seen. The second aspect is certainly the question of the images depicted on some of these veils.

A very similar function can be observed in the liturgical architectural furnishing: Late Antique *plutei* are followed especially from the twelfth century by high built-up walls cutting the *ecclesia laicorum* off from the *ecclesia clericorum.* This phenomenon can be observed in the Latin West as well as in the Orthodox realm with the iconostasis which has later become one of the most impressive identity-forming elements of Christian Orthodoxy. Comparative research on this topic is here proposed by Elisabetta Scirocco and Vlad Bedros. Their research can be also understood in a broader context. In eleventh- and twelfth-century Armenia, laypeople were divided from the clergy by means of a space adjacent to the church building – the *gavit*[34]. This large entrance space could be considered a narthex, but in fact it is not. Like the walls inside the church, this threshold could be crossed only by persons initiated to the clerical caste. Thus, we are facing two diverse liminalities: the first one is similar to baptism: being ordinated as a subdeacon, a deacon, a priest, or a bishop, it is possible to cross these thresholds. The only notable exception were pilgrims: men (or in exceptional cases, women) had the possibility to access the zone where the relics were held[35]. The ritual of ordination was in this way – using the vocabulary of Van Gennep – a sort of "passport" for crossing this frontier.

The second liminality, destined for all the laypeople in the church space, is exclusively mental. They would never physically cross this border but – thanks to the sound which they can freely hear, the images present on the barriers, and clerics regularly crossing the wall – in their imagination, they are of course participating in the mysteries carried out behind the barrier. Thus, the very sacred core of the church could have been accessed by crossing the walls both physically and mentally.

Sacrality in the Christian church, however, reaches its apex around what Luigi Canetti has called "fragments of eternity" – the relics[36]. Access to these was exclusive and complicated. Most probably from the time of Gregory the Great, in St Peter's Basilica in Rome, an annular crypt was constructed, permitting pilgrims to approach the relics of the holy apostle as closely as possible[37]. Similarly, some centuries later in Canterbury, it was necessary to use the ambulatory to view the relics of St Thomas Becket[38]. The movement of pilgrims was strongly regulated, creating thus once more a series of micro-rituals necessary for the direct access. It is precisely what Chiara Croci investigates in her article. While discussing the case of Santa Prassede in Rome, one of the revolutionary projects of the cult of relics promoted by Pope Paschal I, Croci describes the most plausible steps which preceded entering its crypt. The believer was entering the space of the transept where special images presenting the narratives of martyrdom are depicted. Croci postulates that it is also this very space where the reading of the acts of martyrs were performed. Only once they had seen the images and heard the stories, were the visitors allowed to enter the presence of the sacred bodies. Once more, it was necessary to go through a pre-liminal ritual in order to access the sacred.

31 Klára Doležalová, "Příběhy, které mění svět: Křesťanská iniciace a kostel Sant'Apollinare Nuovo v Ravenně" [Stories which Change the World: Christian Initiation and the Church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo], *Forum Brunense*, 2018, pp. 67–80.

32 Tvrzníková, *Ritual, Hierotopy and a Cognitive Perspective* (n. 20).

33 For this very debated topic see for example David F. Wright, *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collective Studies*, Milton Keynes 2007.

34 Paul Mylonas, "Gavits arméniens et Litae byzantines. Observations nouvelles sur le complexe de Saint-Luc en Phocide", *Cahiers Archéologiques*, XXXVIII (1990), pp. 99–122.

35 Bailey, "Modern and Medieval Approaches" (n. 7).

36 Luigi Canetti, *Frammenti di eternità: corpi e reliquie tra antichità e Medioevo*, Rome 2002.

37 See for example Paolo Liverani, "San Pietro in Vaticano", in *La visita alle Sette Chiese*, Letizia Pani Ermini ed., Rome 2000, pp. 21–45; Paolo Liverani, Giandomenico Spinola, *Vatican. La Nécropole et le Tombeau de Saint Pierre*, Paris 2010, p. 47.

38 Bailey, "Modern and Medieval Approaches" (n. 7).

Another threshold was presented for the double initiated – members of the clergy and privileged aristocrats – at the end of the Middle Ages. That was the altar. Having a form of a box with double wings, the very shape of this construction instantly calls to mind a door. The images placed on it heighten the illusion of a possible access to the heavenly vision often depicted in the central part. This aspect is discussed in the paper of Jan Klípa and Eliška Poláčková. Just as in the case of iconostasis, this threshold cannot be crossed by the lay people, except mystically. However, the rituals involved show how important it is to create the expectation for such an act. The spiritual gaze activated by the liturgy allows the viewer to cross even this final barrier and to imaginarily experience the vision of the divine. What is fundamental is the theatrical dimension of these rituals: it is precisely the movement of the performers which seems to facilitate the experience of the divine presence.

According to John Mitchell and Nicholas Pickwoad, the last threshold was the liturgical books. A closed book must be seen as a sort of closed passage while opening it corresponds to an imaginary access to the divine. This aspect seems to be proven, according to the scholars, by the use of the images of open books in funerary contexts. The books themselves would therefore indicate the *limen* between life and death, between earth and heaven. This idea is even more complex if we recall the covers of the liturgical books from the early Middle Ages onwards: they look like reliquaries. The word of God is then preserved and treated in the same way as relics, and the book must be similarly seen as a connecting point between earth and heaven[39].

In sum, the medieval church seems to be constructed through a series of barriers of different kinds: visual, acoustic, social, spiritual, or spatial. To overcome them, various sorts of rituals were conceived. Their function seems, however, to be very coherent. Their main purpose was to create the different layers of sacrality. Each step towards sacrality required both a frontier and a ritual to cross it. It is not important whether this movement was real or imaginary.

Collective and individual rituals, and the senses

Liminality is thus constructed primarily in a spatial way. The other fundamental issue is time: to cross some barriers, few minutes are needed, for others, such as the Early Christian initiation, years of preparation are required. The moving body of any sort of viewers – from the humbler laymen to the most sophisticated ecclesiastical patron – experiences the diverse spaces thanks to rituals. However, the time spent in waiting, imagining, and dreaming transformed this simple mechanical act in a radical way. In analyzing baptism as a one-time bath, the experience of the rite itself may appear unexceptional. But how different the same ceremony must have been after three years of preparation, forty days of fasting, and seven exorcisms? Thus, time is undoubtedly a great player in constructing liminality.

This last aspect must also be connected with the real social transformation linked to some of the evoked thresholds: from pagan to Christian, from laymen to cleric, from sedentary to pilgrim. A ritual crossing of a border inside the Christian sacred spaces can therefore be a lifechanging experience not only from the point of view of belief, but crucially also of social status. Spaces and rituals thus play a key role in the creation and recreation of diverse social bodies. From a space, and its images and rituals, we are suddenly facing the transformation of an entire society according to the inner order of the *ecclesia*.

With this book, we would therefore like to show how fundamental the segmentation of sacred space was for the construction of medieval societies and cultures. The realities would have been much more complex than what we present in these pages. Our wish is, however, to show that more than one hundred years after Arnold Van Gennep, the notion of the *limen* seems to be fundamental for creating a protocol for a better understanding of the visual, ritual, and social reality of the Middle Ages. We are aware of the limits of such an approach that is deeply dependent on the dialogue between art history and anthropology[40]. On the other hand, we wish these pages to kindle a debate about the very notion of sacred space which lies at the heart of medieval studies.

A final element should be mentioned: it is the question of the "user" (neophyte, pilgrim, layman, or cleric) and his body. There is clear evidence that the physical senses are crucial to experiencing the diverse thresholds and thus, the layers of sacred. It is, however, impossible to dissociate the sensorial experience from the intellectual and the imaginary one. For a better understanding of Middle Ages, it is thus hard to consider the artistic production in the Cartesian dichotomy between body and mind. In a very phenomenological way, they are simply united, and it is only in a strong dialogue between these two aspects that, as we believe, the Middle Ages can be seen in a slightly different way.

We would like to conclude this introduction by expressing our gratitude to all the authors who accepted the challenge of a cowritten text. Moreover, in certain cases, two specialists from two different fields were in dialogue, in this way taking part in a truly transdisciplinary project. Even if this experience was not always simple, we are extremely grateful to them for accepting this challenge which is in our view extremely fruitful. The only exception is represented by the article of Chiara Croci, which came to the editorial board of *Convivium* unexpectedly, but while reading it, we were immediately seduced by the topic and convinced it deserves to be included in this volume.

We would also like to express our immense gratitude to the former vice rector of the Masaryk University, Petr Dvořák, who conceived the program GAMU H. It is in the context of this grant, that it was possible to carry out the two workshops at the base of this volume with an incredible freedom. Petr Dvořák is a visionary promoting free research and we hope that with this volume, we are paying at least a partial homage to the impressive work he did as vice rector.

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39 Dorota Vahančíková, *The Jeweled Manuscripts. Carolingian Treasure Bindings and Their Role in the Christian Liturgy*, M.A. thesis, (Masaryk University, supervisor: Ivan Foletti), Brno 2019.

40 For the discussion of the notion of *rite de passage*, see Janet Wilson, Daria Tunca, "Postcolonial Thresholds: Gateways and Borders", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, LI/1 (2015), pp. 1–6.