

Social Space and Religious Culture (1300-1800)
Workshop II of the Academic Network
'Social Sites – Öffentliche Räume – Lieux d'échanges'
30 November – 2 December 2006
Technical University of Dresden (Germany)

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Where the sisters, the poor and the orphans live: On the social construction of religious topography in 15th and 16th century Lübeck

If asked for the centres of religious life in the late medieval or early modern European city we think of the many parochial churches that form the image of urban devotion to this day. But if we look at the late medieval practice of donation, other spaces with religious connotations come into focus. City hospitals, almshouses or the homes of the *Beginen* often appear together with the churches and cloisters in the testaments. Donations for pious and charitable aims thus provide an important starting point for the reconstruction of the wider religious topography of the city.

Testaments have scarcely been used to analyse medieval perceptions of space. But, given their main objective to order the distribution of property, they exhibit an explicit spatial dimension. In the Middle Ages material values were to a large extent conceived in terms of spatial relations. People had their money and property at certain places or owned houses in certain streets. This opens a map of personal property, which was put into action by the testaments. The testaments can thus - to use the words of Michel de Certeau - be termed 'spatial stories' (*récits d'espace*). They focus on certain places and transform them into spaces. The donations transform 'dead' places, part of a stable order and signified only through *being there*, into religious spaces constituted first and foremost through *actions*. The discourse on space can be differentiated along two alternative narratives: *seeing* as the knowledge of an order of places and *going* as a spatializing action. The testamentary determinations mainly follow these two different modes that can be characterized in terms of the map and the itinerary.

On the one hand the donations to pious and charitable aims follow an easily recognised cartography. The 'mapping' testaments enumerate the distinguished places of religious topography on a step by step basis. On the other hand, we encounter testators who *walk* along the targets of their donations in their thoughts. They rest at one place or another and report their particular actions. But even in the cartographic narratives, which mostly contain donations for all the religious buildings of the city, the static order becomes a dynamic narrative. By explicitly directing their donations to the sites of church buildings they connect places which actions. The donations in favour of the poor and the sick of the city follow the rule of the itinerary. The donors transformed the different institutions into religious spaces through their narrative actions, characterized by different activities. For example, the donations to the Holy-Ghost-hospital were explicitly addressed to the poor, „lying on the beds". The charitable institutions were literally populated by the testamentary speeches. By the practice of donating directly 'to the hands of the people' living there these places were rendered as religious spaces. Donations to the poor that were lying on the *Burgfelde*, regularly mentioned in the testaments, show that these narrative spaces didn't even need a fixed physical frame of reference. The religious quality of these institutions owed much to a reciprocal relationship between the inhabitants of these spaces and their donors. By imagining the occupiers of these spaces and making them the focus of their donations they

were practically made a collecting point of the group, henceforth becoming the destination of donations. The donators placed and arranged the recipients of their donations in urban space according to differentiations in sex, needs or qualification. The religious character of these spaces therefore owed much to the interrelations of taking and giving. By putting an end to these reciprocal practices religious spaces would again become dead places of the city.

A comparison of the different narratives shows the extent to which they related to the social status of their narrators. Testators owning only small amounts of property mainly focused their donations on a single place. On the other hand, the urban elite were able to encompass the whole town within their donation strategies. In their testaments the members of this group mainly acted as cartographers of an urban space open to their mental dispositions. Finally, there are differences between the spatial stories told by male and female testators. While men are trying to 'map' the whole urban space women tend to concentrate on more individualised spatial storytelling.