

Sacred space, architecture of wonder Le Mont Saint Michel

Andreea Popescu^{1*}

ABSTRACT

*In the Middle Ages the pilgrimage to Le Mont Saint Michel was perceived as one of the most important journeys of faith underwent by the medieval man. Due to the difficulty of the road and the unique position of the sanctuary in the middle of the sea, it became a major test of penitence and sacrifice for the medieval pilgrim. The **miquelots** or the pilgrims to Saint Michael spread the word of God and the joy of having achieved the goal of meeting the Archangel in the sanctuary beaten by the tides of the sea.*

Keywords: sanctuary, pilgrimage, abbey, sacred, gothic, architecture, St. Michael.

In the book entitled *The Sacred and the Profane* Mircea Eliade considers that these two spatial dimensions are two complementary versions of the same image of the world, depending on the choice that the medieval man has about them. Man can transcend the limited sphere of the profane and he can have direct access to the sacred. The latter is the predilect space in which the divinity unfolds itself. The condition that man has to fulfil in order to have the revelation is to prove his faith in meeting with the divinity. Once the rules of the sacred are adopted man can remain in the divine dimension on condition that he is a true *homo religiosus*. Sacred space is usually surrounded by certain limits and it is the place in which man imitates the divinity *in bono* and *in*

^{1*} Lect. univ. dr. la Universitatea din București, Facultatea de Limbi Străine, Catedra de Limba Engleză.

malo. The sacred is the combination between the extremes of life, the place where man discovers himself, identifying himself both with his positive and with his negative sides. Man becomes aware of the existence of the sacred because of its difference from the profane. "The sacred and the profane are two means of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man along his history." (Eliade, 16). There is a difference between the two spaces regarding their constitutive elements. The sacred space, which is favourable to initiation and to spiritual fulfilment, is characterized by specific signs which show to the one exploring it that he is in another dimension. Entering sacred space is possible due to the crossing of the limit and of some obstacles that separate this space from the common world. Profane space is "homogeneous and neutre; there is no breaking which can create differences of quality between its constitutive parts." (Eliade, 22). One last feature linked to the concept of space as a place of initiation is represented by the religious experience. Consacration is the way in which the believer discovers that he is in another dimension due to the distinctive signs which he reads around him. The signs differentiating between sacred space and profane space are linked to the spiritual illumination man finds during his initiatic journey.

Medieval pilgrimages carried the same religious connotation as the traveller accomplished a journey delimited by distinctive signs (e.g. churches, inns, monasteries). A pilgrimage allowed for the medieval man to leave behind his daily existence and to start a journey which brought him as close as possible to a divine state. During the Middle Ages France was an important country since it sheltered the unique sanctuary of Le Mont Saint Michel.

Medieval France knew two types of pilgrimages: the one accomplished on the roads leading to Compostella or to Rome when the travellers only crossed the country; and the ones accomplished to the national sanctuaries dedicated to the local saints. In the first case the pilgrims benefited from the help of the monastic orders which protected them during their voyage

on the French territory. Such an order is the one of Cluny. The benedictine abbey of Cluny knew a great reputation in the Middle Ages as it depended only on the papal authority. The order was founded in 910 and its purpose was to help the papacy in its effort to reform the church. In time it organized the grand routes of pilgrimage by building asylums and hospitals. In 1184 the abbey of Cluny already had several monasteries all around France. Such a monastic empire often encountered difficulties in respecting the rules of poverty imposed by saint Benedict. The decay of the abbey of Cluny started in the 12th century, but it had already contributed to the creation and organization of the grand routes of pilgrimage and it also reinforced the power of the Catholic church.

France had sanctuaries and religious establishments which were independent from the abbey of Cluny. *Le Mont Saint Michel* is a unique pilgrimage place in western Europe. It is dedicated to Michael the Archangel. The position of the sanctuary is also very special. Initially the whole Norman area was covered by woods and sometimes it was invaded by the sea. Three huge rocks of granite and other types of stone detached themselves from the landscape: mount Tombe, mount Tombelaine and mount Dol. The first would become Mont Saint Michel. The name Tombe could derive either from the Celtic word *tun* which meant *height*, or from the Latin word *tumba* which meant barrow or grave. Legend says that on these places stood a huge stone dolmen which would confirm the second hypothesis.

The almost desert region was meant to impress medieval imagination which considered the forest as a mythical place, symbolizing the endless labyrinth where the traveller could get lost because of his own fears. The forest Scissy, situated between land and sea, was a magical place where many hermits lived in poverty with what nature offered them. They led a life of meditation and contemplation, similar to the one lived by the English saints in the islands of Farne or Iona. The image that they had formed about the other world was of a God surrounded by angels, of which the archangels and the

seraphims were the most important. Among them Archangel Michael was most powerful both in the Hebrew and in the Christian tradition. He was the defender of the faithful at the Last Judgement, sitting before the throne of God. His name was invoked in the battle between the good angels and the bad angels in Heaven. An old Hebrew tradition said that Michael fought with the devil for the body of Moses after his death. In the Apocalypse he would lead the battle in Heaven against the enemy. Finding its sources in the Hebrew tradition, the Christian religion bestowed four distinct qualities to Archangel Michael: the fight against the devil; the saving of the believers' souls especially in the moment of death; the defense of the people of God, which transformed him in the patron saint of the church and the chivalric orders in the Middle Ages; the function of the divine messenger which brought the souls to judgement. He was called Archangel because he was above all the other angels in the celestial hierarchy.

The cult of the Archangel spread in many areas from Constantinople to Greece and Asia. Two sanctuaries were important for the medieval pilgrim: Monte Gargano in Italy and Le Mont Saint Michel in Normandy. In Rome the mausoleum of Emperor Hadrian, later called Castel Sant Angelo, received the statue of the angel on top. Legend says that in 950 the Archangel appeared above the imperial monument putting an end to the plague which devastated the city. Saint Michael had also the attributes of a healer specific for a medieval saint. In Monte Gargano he was venerated as a warrior saint meant to save the world from the enemy. In Le Mont Saint Michel the history of the place was identified with the belief in the salvation brought by the Archangel. In the beginning of the 8th century the church profited from the relative peace to bring order in a world which slowly recovered from the barbarian invasions. Not all the members of the church led a life of isolation like those on mount Tombe. Some of them controlled the cities, both spiritually and financially. Among them was Bishop Aubert of Avranches whose residence was near the forest which surrounded the mount. One night,

Aubert saw saint Michael in a dream who asked him to build a sanctuary on mount Tombe in his name. The bishop's dream had direct consequences which contributed to the decision to build a sanctuary as quickly as possible. A stolen bull was found safe and sound on top of the mountain. A miraculous rain avoided the circular area where the future abbey would stand. This legend was quite similar to the one surrounding the sanctuary of Monte Gargano in Italy. Like in the case of the Italian shrine, it was only at the third apparition of the saint that Aubert decided that the church should be built. A local legend also mentioned that the saint pierced the forehead of the bishop with one finger so that Aubert should realize that the demand was real. A statue placed in the first Carolingian church reminds of the event. Aubert built this church as a grotto, imitating the natural cave in which saint Michael had appeared in Italy. One could consider that Aubert transformed a pagan shrine into a Christian sanctuary. However, this hypothesis comes in contradiction with the fact that since the 6th century there had been two Christian oratories on the rock whose existence was attested in the oldest versions of the legend.

Aubert decided then to build the first establishment. He sent for relics of the saint in Italy, anticipating that the mount would become an important pilgrimage place. The messengers returned bringing a piece of cloth from the red mantle of the Archangel and a piece of marble carrying the mark of his foot. The moment when the church was about to be begun, nature provided the people with a great surprise. The sea engulfed the forest Scissy. Since then the sanctuary was going to be an island surrounded by water, practically invulnerable to all enemies. The first church was built in 708. Aubert settled there 12 monks dedicated to the cult of the Archangel, giving them lands from his own bishopric in order for them to survive, but also to show them that they depended on his authority. Aubert was buried in the chapel of saint Peter.

After his death the Mount lost some of its importance. In the 9th century the relative Carolingian peace allowed for the

spreading of the cult of saint Michael and for the beginning of pilgrimages. Around the same period mount Tombe changed its name in Le Mont Saint Michel. Once the Normans came the situation of the abbey changed. The monks brought by Aubert were chased away and benedictine monks were brought in their place. Richard Ist, Duke of Normandy, considered that that they were leading a life of pleasure and that they were not doing their true duty towards the saint. In fact, the reason for their chasing away was a political one. The tight links which existed between the monks and the Breton lords worried him a lot. Then the Duke decided that the Mont should be populated by Norman monks faithful to his rule. He called benedictine monks with whom he was about to create a political, intellectual and spiritual Normandy. In 966, 12 monks led by abbot Maynard arrived at the Mont and transformed it into a great benedictine abbey. Thus, the Mont acquired special importance as it was located at the margins of the Norman dukedom, separating it from its powerful and dangerous enemies. The benedictine abbey of Cluny encouraged the spiritual and artistic flourishing of the Mont, combining manual and intellectual work according to the rule of saint Benedict. The monks led a life of chastity and poverty, consecrated to prayer, showing simplicity and generosity towards the others. The rule of saint Benedict asked the monks to live in a closed space, protected from worldly temptations. Thus new spaces were built: a refectory, a working room, a dormitory, a pantry situated in the tower of the Carolingian church. Like all the monks of the Middle Ages, the benedictines' task was to sing the glory of God and to depict in the liturgy the celestial Jerusalem. They considered themselves as the spiritual army of God who was fighting on earth under the rule of the abbot, just like saint Michael was fighting against Satan in Heaven. In order to accomplish this task the monks participated in eight divine services each day. The rest of the time was dedicated to working and the material tasks of life. The rule of saint Benedict was based on equilibrium and it was different from

others which were very strict with the monks. It also included the receiving of guests, a fact which did not transform the abbey into a monastic hospital. In Mont Saint Michel the importance given to the pilgrimage would explain the small number of monks which was never more than sixty. Donations from the rich pilgrims allowed the community to strengthen itself and to prosper. The oratory of saint Aubert, the canonized bishop, was replaced by a new church - Notre Dame sous Terre. The monks of the benedictine church prayed for themselves, for the whole society, for their protectors who were part of the personalities of the age. They solemnly received the noble pilgrims who in their turn did not hesitate to offer important gifts like domains or lands.

In time the prosperity of the abbey grew considerably, but this did not mean that the poor pilgrims were not accepted among the others. They were called *miquelots*, a name which identified them as pilgrims of saint Michael. Crossing the sea towards the abbey implied many dangers. Even if it did not have the amplitude of the pilgrimages to Rome or Compostella, the sanctuary had well defined roads. The crowds were sheltered in the monastery, but they also had to be fed and taken care of during the journey. The abbey had an important role in this context. Just like on the road to saint James in Compostella, the monks organized inns, asylums and hospitals for the ill or poor pilgrims. The travellers generally walked barefoot, staff in hand, the horn hanging from their belt, the bag with their few things on the back. The staff was used by the pilgrim to make sure that the path over the quick sands was safe or not. The horn served to call for help if the tide or the fog took them by surprise on the road. They headed to the wanted shore, to the place from where they could see the abbey, where they could shout *Montjoie*, the shout of joy uttered by all the medieval pilgrims who after months of suffering finally arrived at the sanctuary. The last obstacle was the most difficult: crossing the quick sands. The mount resisted to the sea very well, but not the pilgrims. Many died drowned. The Norman gulf, which is very large and flat, was flooded by

high waves. Many travellers crossed the bay in boats, but the waves often depassed 12 metres. The crossing was the most important proof of faith because it showed the lack of fear in front of natural calamities and the deep faith in God. Once arrived at the monastery, the pilgrims had survived the tide of quick sands, the fog which covered them by surprise and made them lose their way. They rested in the monastery, prayed, left their gifts for saint Michael who had saved them from death. Due to the Archangel they obtained healings, pardons and granted wishes. Before returning home, the pilgrim received the distinctive signs which proved that he was a pilgrim of saint Michael: small metal statues or shells which they attached to their clothes. The abbot himself had on his armouries shells together with lily flowers and the significative writing: *Tremor Imensi Oceani*.

A very special pilgrimage was that of the children. The little shepherds, as they were called in the Middle Ages, underwent the pilgrimage for the first time in 1333 and they continued it until the French Revolution. The journey knew a climax at the end of the Middle Ages. In the beginning the children received a message from God who asked them to go to the Mont and to take with them their friends in order to pray together to saint Michael. They came from France, but also from Germany or Flanders. Sometimes they were sent by their own parents, little innocent messengers whose prayers were listened to by the Archangel. The children were eight to twelve years old and they left surrounded by the joy of a whole community which put in them all their hopes. The journey lasted many months during which they escaped the monotony of the daily routine. They carried the banners of the local lords or effigies of saint Michael. In winter they slept in stables, in summer in the open in the fields. Many could not endure the difficulty of the road and in an epoch in which mortality was high many did not return home. The courage of these children was an inspiration for all the travellers who started a journey towards the sanctuary surrounded by the sea.

The growing importance of the Mont made that the first church should be completed by other buildings which transformed the sanctuary in a genuine fortress. The 11th century was dedicated to the romanesque cathedral. The benedictine Guillaume de Volpiano, a monk of Cluny and a great reformer, was the one who established the plans of the new abbey and who brought some innovations. The building of the abbey church was one of the most daring achievements of the Middle Ages. In the beginning of the 11th century a new architecture was developing, essentially monastic, characterized by large buildings, stone vaults, and the plan of a cross. In Mont Saint Michel still existed the small Carolingian church. The flourishing of the pilgrimage and the prestige of the benedictine community made that the place should also have, like in other important abbeys, a church built in the new romanesque style. The financial means were supplied in 1022 by the Duke of Normandy Richard II. The main difficulty was a technical one: there was no horizontal place on top of the rock which could support a building higher than 70 metres. The most surprising innovation was the position of the transept cross on top of the mount. This choice would imply the building of many crypts and subterranean chapels in order to support the transept and the choir. A part of them burned in the fire of 1203 when the king of France, Phillippe Auguste, conquered Normandy. The influence of the sanctuary was so great that the king decided that another architectural monument should be built on the ruins of the old one. The new gothic cathedral would rightly receive the name of Wonder (*La Merveille*).

The construction of six elements on three levels is unique in the world. The constraints imposed by nature, the thickness of the rock, the respect for the benedictine organization, the genius of the artists united to create one of the medieval masterpieces. In the basement two strong halls supported the building: the cellar in the west, the asylum in the east where the poor pilgrims were sheltered and nourished. On the second level was the knights' hall where the monks copied manuscripts and took care of old texts. On the same level was the guest hall

which was another gothic style jewel. On the last level was the cloister which opened towards the sky and the sea through three arched windows. Though the rule of saint Benedict forbade any comfort, there were two fire places in the knights' hall which made the living of the monks more tolerable. This room carried the symbols of saint Michael. The refectory, lightened up by narrow and very tall windows, was the place where the monks dined, listening to the sacred texts read by one of them from the pulpit. The choir was a masterpiece of the decorated gothic. Its architecture was characterized by verticality and grace. It was the last medieval construction and it was finished after 1500. It thus fulfilled the dream of bishop Aubert who wanted the most beautiful sanctuary for saint Michael. The gothic wonder harmoniously mingled with the romanesque architecture, proving that Le Mont Saint Michel was not only one of the most important pilgrimage places in the west, but also a genuine lesson about the architectural styles.

The Wonder, called by Victor Hugo "the most beautiful building in the west", was largely the work of the Plantagenet dynasty. Since 1066 the Duke of Normandy had become king of England too. Henry II had married Alienor d'Aquitaine and had thus added huge territories to his kingdom. During his reign the abbey flourished, despite the conflicts which opposed him to the king of France and the Duke of Bretagne. After the king of France Philippe Auguste finally conquered Normandy, he ordered the reconstruction of the abbey which had been seriously damaged. Thus in 17 years, from 1211 to 1228, two of the three gothic buildings were achieved. They represented the gothic wonder. This daring project was possible because the new French style had already been developing in several parts of western Europe. Facing the difficulties that the creation of such a building presupposed on the edge of the rock, the medieval artist found technical solutions which brought to life various forms which represented the best the diverse aspects of monastic life. The six halls of *La Merveille*, which put together form an almost ideal monastery, teach thus an exceptional architectural lesson. The third building which

had to be made never saw the light. The 13th century was a turning point in the spiritual history of the Middle Ages. Following the example of saint Francis of Assisi, the most important monks turned towards the mendicant orders and chose to preach in towns to the poor people. In the benedictine monasteries the habitual, regular life started to decline. The abandoning of the construction site in Mont Saint Michel was a proof of this decadence.

An important event which affected the life of the monks of Saint Michel was the Hundred Years' War. At the end of the 13th century the abbey seemed to have survived all the difficult moments of the past. The closing of the construction site, the abandoning of the chapter house in favour of the abbatial halls accompanied the monastic habits which had become more material than spiritual. In the middle of the 14th century and the war which broke out between England and France the crisis reached its climax. At the end of the 14th century many battlements and defensive walls were built. Even if the enemy had been able to enter the village surrounding the abbey, the strong battlements prevented him from conquering the sanctuary of saint Michael, the patron saint of France. Indeed, the veneration of the people for the saint was so deep that during the Hundred Years' War his name was shouted on the battlefields in order to obtain his protection and victory in war. The Norman sanctuary had never been conquered by the English though many attempts had been made. Yet, after the disaster of Azincourt (1415), a great victory for the English, the war rendered them masters of Normandy as well, a fact stipulated in the treaty of Troyes (1420). As a sign that France had lost its divine protection, the vaults of the abbey church fell. Yet, the final victory of the French brought by the heroic example of Joan of Arc was considered to be due also to the help provided by saint Michael to whose sanctuary many people went to pray for peace and deliverance from the English. It should be mentioned that among the voices which spoke to Joan was also saint Michael. He had already become the patron saint of France as he represented the warrior saint who was fighting against the Enemy. The Norman sanctuary was also

famous as it was never conquered by the English, no matter how many times they besieged it during the war. It served as shelter and last refuge for the people running away from the invaders. The wish of saint Michael expressed to Aubert to build a sanctuary that should protect the faithful was thus accomplished.

The sanctuary of Mont Saint Michel continued to have great importance in the modern age too. Much of the medieval enthusiasm has survived in the numerous groups of travellers who still go to the Norman abbey. Even if the situation has changed, as gradually the land will cover the sea and this unique characteristic of the Mont will disappear, the joy to arrive at the abbey of saint Michael still prevails. As the modern man climbs the numerous stairs to the top of the Wonder he recreates symbolically the journey of the medieval pilgrim who in fascination and amazement to the place where God spoke to man through his messenger, the Archangel Michael.

Works Cited

BÉNOIT, Jean - Paul, *Le Mont Saint Michel*, Paris, Editions Jean Paul Gisserot, 2003.

Dicționar Enciclopedic al Bibliei, P. M. Bogaert (ed.), București, Editura Humanitas, 1998.

ELIADE, Mircea, *Sacru și profanul*, București, Editura Humanitas, 1995.

La Regola di San Benedetto, Anselmo Lentini (ed.), Montecassino, 1979.

MORGAN, Kenneth O., *The Oxford History of Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988.

SIMMONET, Nicolas, *Mont Saint Michel*, Florența, Editura Bonechi, 2008.

POPESCU, Andreea, *Pelerinii luminii. Sacru și literar în Evul Mediu Occidental*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2007.