The Secret Language of Sacred Spaces
Jon Cannon
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**FOUNDRING FATHERS**

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<th>Founding Father</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Image Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abraham</td>
<td>Father of the Patriarchs</td>
<td>Canaan</td>
<td>Abraham was prevented by God from sacrificing his son Isaac, as sculpted on the central portal of the north transept of this great Gothic cathedral. Abraham is viewed as a founding figure by Jews, Christians and Muslims; next to him is Melchizedek (left, wearing a hat), the first priest mentioned in the Bible. Abraham was a Hebrew patriarch. He was the father of Isaac and the founder of the Hebrew nation. His story can be found in the Old Testament of the Bible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus</td>
<td>Founder of Christianity</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
<td>Jesus was the son of Mary and Joseph. He was a preacher and teacher who founded a new religion known as Christianity. He was crucified on the cross, and his resurrection is celebrated as Easter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddha</td>
<td>Founder of Buddhism</td>
<td>Kushinagar, India</td>
<td>Buddha was a religious teacher who founded Buddhism. He was born in Lumbini, Nepal, and his teachings were transmitted to other countries like India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**SHRINES IN A SACRED LANDSCAPE**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Landmark</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Image Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forbidden City</td>
<td>Beijing, China</td>
<td>Forbidden City</td>
<td>This is the Imperial City of Beijing, China. It was the center of Chinese imperial power for 500 years. It is a unesco world Heritage site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Colosseum</td>
<td>Rome, Italy</td>
<td>The Colosseum</td>
<td>This is a Roman amphitheater located in the center of Rome. It is one of the most iconic landmarks in Rome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Great Wall of China</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>The Great Wall of China</td>
<td>This is a series of fortifications made of stone, brick, tamped earth, wood, and other materials on the southern border of China to protect the Chinese states and empires.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**OTHER PICTURE CREDITS**

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<tr>
<td>An image of the pyramids</td>
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<td>An image of a mosque</td>
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*The Secret Language of Sacred Spaces* by Jon Cannon, first published in the UK and USA in 2013 by Osprey Publishing Limited. This book explores the themes of the sacred, architecture of sacredness, people & sacred space, and the ages of faith. It includes an introduction and two parts: one on the themes of the sacred and the other on architecture & the ages of faith. The book covers various religious and cultural landmarks, showcasing their architectural significance and their role in religious and cultural practices. It uses high-quality images and detailed descriptions to enhance the understanding of these sacred spaces.
RITUAL & PERFORMANCE

It is the prime function of most religious buildings to provide a venue for acts of worship. Indeed, their very construction has a ritual element, for in many faiths the selection of the site, the laying of the foundation stone or the consecration upon completion were liturgical events. Religious rituals in general can differ enormously. In a mosque, they are comparatively simple: the coordinated rise and fall of a large congregation, led by an imam, speaking in unison, five times a day, with important prayers accompanied by a sermon on Fridays. The architecture creates a large space in which worshippers can gather and it ensures that the imam is visible from most parts of the building.

Sacred theatricality

By contrast, the Catholic Church historically had a full liturgy that took up eight or nine hours a day, which was performed whether or not any lay devotees were present. The Eucharist had to be performed daily at the high altar and also at any side chapels – of which there might be a dozen or more – and every performance of this rite involved the presence of the priests as they approached the sanctuary. The elaborate liturgies of the Christian church, by contrast, simply an empty niche that acts as a focus for prayer. Here, few other fittings are necessary, though an elaborate maqsura, or royal pew, may stand nearby. The elaborate liturgies of the Christian church, by contrast, filled the sanctuary with a constantly developing panoply of fittings: elaborate screens such as the Greek Orthodox iconostasis might render activities at the altar almost invisible; special seats were used by those officiating at the mass, such as the stone sedilia seen in many churches in England. The consecrated bread and wine used for the Eucharist was especially sacred and was set aside or “reserved” in a special structure often called a tabernacle, after the tent of early Judaism where the presence of God himself resided. In the Greek Orthodox tradition these are often small metal structures sometimes flanked by statues of Neolithic Europe, and the standing stones which line the approach to the great monolith Kailasa) in Tibet. Although places of worship may be located along such routes, and be clustered around the ultimate destination, the form of these buildings is not usually in itself very different from that of other such buildings. Exceptions include the K'tiba at Mecca (see page 144), a unique structure that is the central focal point of all Islamic worship.

Sacred journeys, or pilgrimages, are major features of many faiths, from the Muslim hajj to Buddhist and Hindu journeys to such holy mountains as Mount Kailash (Kaila in Tibet). Although places of worship may be located along such routes, and be clustered around the ultimate destination, the form of these buildings is not usually in itself very different from that of other such buildings. Exceptions include the K’tiba at Mecca (see page 144), a unique structure that is the central focal point of all Islamic worship.

The more organized liturgical practice of procession is effectively a subset of such pilgrimages. It is found in many traditions, and the requirement to make space for it and to aggrandize or sacralize its paths has had a major impact on sacred architecture. Procession was often a way in which ordinary people could participate in intensely communal religious experiences. It is especially true of those processes which were held outdoors. Holy imagery is carried through the streets in Hindu, Shinto and Christian festival processions of this kind. Permanent way stations for the idols, such as the barque chapels of ancient Egypt or freestanding Hindu mandapa, may be positioned along the route. Ancient Egyptian processions, like those of ancient China and Buddhist Cambodia, were more exclusive affairs, although some were witnessed by large crowds. In these places the processional route was sometimes flanked by avenues of stone creatures – an idea echoed in the uncavelled standing stones which line the approach to the great monuments of Neolithic Europe, and the sacral (“white ways”) that led to temples in Mayan cities. The events which passed along such routes could be dramatic: when 100 sheep and cows were driven by Athenians down the Via Sacra of the ancient city appears to have been designed at least partly as the setting for an annual procession by the emperor, an event of the highest significance (see box, page 73). Even more structured and exclusive liturgical processions might take place within places of worship, marking out an exclusive kind of route inside and around the work...
A SERMON IN STONE

The west front of Wells cathedral was completed in the early thirteenth century, perhaps as a design by a stonemason called Adam Lock (who died in 1229), and it holds the biggest display of medieval statuary in Europe: 127 out of an original 176 figures survive, many larger than life-size. Most were once brightly painted, with even the patterns on their clothing picked out. The vividness of this gathering must have been an extraordinary sight.

This stone screen dominates the approach to the cathedral, but its form bears little relation to that of the church behind, and it may not have been designed for the towers (added in c.1332 and c.1425–1436). Although some statues were destroyed in Iconoclasms of the 1540s and 1650s, most remain in place.

When Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem is celebrated on Palm Sunday, a concealed choir would have replied with the hymn “Gloria, laus et honor”, making the angels seem to come to life: “The company of the angels are praising Thee on high…”.

West Front

The colourful sculpture on the 30m-high (99ft) west front turned the church into an earthly embodiment of the Heavenly Jerusalem. The façade consists of a series of zones: a lower horizontal register containing e; the quatrefoils of the Old Testament and f; the quatrefoils of the New Testament; a central horizontal register g; that was a grand gathering of sacred and royal figures, including many who were either English or particularly relevant to Wells, which brought the story up to the present and made it local; and an upper area h; where of the west time, the day of judgment and the general resurrection is topped by a Christ in Majesty. Beginning beneath, and rising vertically through the centre, is a zone i; that marks Christ’s rule, and that of his mother, Mary, in uniting humanity with the divine and history with eternity. Their magnificent architectural setting ensured the church appeared like the biblical “new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Revelation 21:2).

The figures in the gable depict the eternal heaven. The worthy include the apostles. Andrew, to whom Wells is dedicated, holds the sabre cross on which he was martyred. Beneath are angels and portolos for trumpet blown. The gable’s proportions are a scaled-down version of the front as a whole.

West Front

c.1220–c.1240, Wells Cathedral, Somerset, England

The central door of the west front was only opened for major events, including visits by the bishop or the king and the Palm Sunday ritual. On this day a procession of churchmen formed up in the graveyard outside the front and then approached the door carrying a consecrated Eucharistic host, symbolizing Christ. Upon reaching the door, they requested entry to the church. Absurd the door is a (once brightly painted) statue of the Virgin Mary holding Christ; gilt-bronze stars, now lost, were set into the stonework. Directly above this is a statue of the Virgin Mary being crowned Queen of Heaven by Christ; originally both figures had glistening metal halos above their heads and suns and moons were positioned around them.

The central area is flanked by Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The Old Testament couple became emblematic of the union of Christ and his Church – an anointed one and those who submit to the Monarch. Her visit foretold the adoration of the magi.

In the upper register in the centre depicts the resurrection of the dead, which will take place at the end of time, when Christ will return. Medieval observers would have noticed that this would occur immediately in front of the façade, an area set aside as a graveyard.

Arow of angels stretches along the lowest level of the west front. Hidden behind many of them are porthole-like openings, which can be accessed through a passage in the interior. When the procession of churchmen requested entry, a concealed door would have metamorphosed into the hymn “Gloria, laus et honor”, making the angels seem to come to life: “The company of angels are praising Thee on high…”.

Above the angels is a series of scenes depicting the key events from the beginning of the world – such as God’s creation of Adam, the first man – to the resurrection and the ascension of Christ into heaven.

At the top is a robed Christ in Majesty, with angels known as Seraphim either side of him. (Angels are arranged into three groups of thrones, the closest to God are Cherubim, Seraphim and Thrones.) Although part of the original image survives, a new one – sculpted by David Wynne – was installed in 1985.
The Muslim holy book, the Quran ("Recitation"), was revealed word for word to a man from Mecca named Muhammad, considered in Islam ("submission") to be the last and greatest of a series of prophets sent by God. In 622CE, Muhammad and his followers were forced to move from Mecca; they sought shelter in Yathrib (later renamed Medina), an event known as the hijra ("migration"). This is taken by Muslims as marking the foundation of their community of believers, the umma. Mosque design has its origins in these events, and is thus caught up in the birth of the faith itself.

The Prophet is said to have built a house in Medina that had a large courtyard, one wall of which was covered with a roof of mud-covered palm leaves, creating a partially shaded area. This wall marked the direction, or qibla, that his followers should face when praying. Originally, Muhammad taught his followers to pray facing Jerusalem, but soon after their arrival in Medina he announced that prayer should be towards Mecca, where an ancient shrine known as the Ka’ba stood. His
called an *amalaka*, perhaps evoking the amla fruit, which had purifying qualities. In the Dravidian tradition, these towers are called *vimana*; they rise upwards in emphatic steps, resulting in a pyramidal profile, with each step a platform for sculpture. The uppermost storey of these towers is the only part to be called a *sikhara*, the design of which is often like that of a small domed, or chaitya arch-ended, pavilion. In the north, any *mandapas*, or porches, are covered by a small *sikhara* too, so that the building looks like a mountain range whose highest peak rises above the sanctuary. In the south, *mandapa* may have a flat roof because the *garbhagriha* is the only part of the building that must be covered by a *vimana*. Surface detailing is less busy and rather more regular in the south, with images arranged neatly between columns and entablatures in a manner reminiscent of Western classical architecture; intervening columns have a restrained and standardized form, a kind of “Dravidian order”. Dravidian buildings tend to have regular, orthogonal plans, whereas Nagaran ones feature arrays of offset squares and corners.

**Magnificent Khajuraho**

For many, the most perfect Hindu buildings are a group of temples constructed in the Nagaran tradition from the ninth century onwards in the capital of the Chandelas, a relatively minor dynasty that ruled a part of north-central India from the ninth to thirteenth centuries. Today, they stand, in various states of preservation, in fields around the village of Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh. Most of these twenty-five buildings were erected to house Hindu deities, although some honoured Jain sages. The settlement’s other structures were made of perishable materials and have been lost.

The greatest of these survivors is the Khajuraho Mahadeva temple built at a point, early in the eleventh century, when the Chandelas had become the most important kings in northern India. Its upward-sweeping energy and poise is so well judged that the dense cascade of sculpted architectural motifs and figures in which it is draped – some 646 figures have been counted on the exterior alone, some of them engaged in gymnastic sexual activity – seems almost to lighten its presence. In spite of all this the building manages a monumental impact far greater than that suggested by its 31m-tall (*102ft*) *sikhara*.

Asceticism is widely practised, but it is by no means the only spiritual discipline: there are many others, particularly in the esoteric traditions known as the *Tantra*, which indulge the senses, or flout convention, with the aim of spiritual liberation. Fulfilment of bodily pleasure or sensuous experiences are thus not inherently sinful; rather, they are the product of innate energies that, when tamed or disciplined, can be directed so as to bring spiritual benefits to the practitioner.