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Volume 6, 2014

Edited by Fabian Dorsch and Dan-Eugen Ratiu

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# ***Tensions in Hegelian Architectural Analysis — A Re-Conception of the Spatial Notions of the Sacred and Profane***

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ABSTRACT. In *The System of the Individual Arts* in his *Aesthetics*, Hegel presents an analysis of the history of architecture from ancient Greece to the modern age from the vantage point of his philosophy of religion and metaphysics of spirit. I argue that his analysis is flawed, to the detriment of Greek architecture, as it depends upon a false analogy in comparing (only) a part of the Greek sanctuary, the temple, with the whole of a Gothic cathedral. This false analogy is grounded in a view of sacred space that privileges a Christian paradigm, and this view overlooks a manifestly different understanding of the sacred and the profane in Greek religion and religious architecture. I offer an architectural analysis of the Greek *temenos* (the whole religious precinct), and show that it, no less than the Gothic cathedral, meets Hegel's own criteria for the manifestation of absolute spirit, what he believed was realizable only in the Gothic cathedral.

G. W. F. Hegel describes architecture as chronologically the first form of art and indicates that, “its task consists in so manipulating external inorganic nature that, as an external world conformable to art, it becomes cognate to spirit” (Hegel, *Aesthetics* vol. I, 2010: 83-84). He divides architectural history into three periods - the symbolic, the classical and the romantic - with this final phase a balanced synthesis of formal and functional elements. The chapter on architecture in *The System of The Individual Arts*, part III of his *Aesthetics*, which presents Hegel's comparative analysis of the classical Greek temple with the romantic Gothic cathedral, is problematic in many ways, and I argue that the root problem is Hegel's manifest misunderstanding of Greek notions of sacred space; more particularly, he presents a false analogy in comparing a part of the Greek sanctuary, the temple, to the whole of a Gothic cathedral, to the detriment

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of the former. Hegel misunderstands the role of the Greek temple within the context of the whole Greek sanctuary, namely that the temple itself is only one of many externalized (public) components that comprise the totality of the sanctuary. It simply cannot be compared by itself (on its own) to a Gothic cathedral. Further, I argue that Hegel bases his notions of sacred space on the paradigm with which he is most familiar, where sacred components are internalized (privatized) within the confines of the walls of a cathedral, a reflection of the interiority that is the grounds of Christian theology. This particular understanding of sacred space leads Hegel to a fundamental re-conception, and misconception, of spatial notions of the sacred and profane within the context of the ancient Greek religious worldview. The irony is that Hegel fails to realize that the very formal-functional synthesis he prizes in (post-classical, romantic) Gothic cathedrals is present in its own way in the Greek sanctuary. Unless the ‘complexity’ of the Greek religious sanctuary is carefully considered and presented, any cross-historical comparisons are premature at best.

In order to understand the Greek sanctuary in context, and to accurately compare it to the Gothic cathedral, a brief discussion of Greek religion and its influence on the components of the classical Greek sanctuary is warranted, and I present one in due course. It is my contention that by revealing the Greek sanctuary *in its entirety*, as the built environment of Greek religion, a synthesis of form and function that is productive of a sublime independence, which for Hegel is the crowning achievement of *romantic* Gothic cathedrals, can be found within the *classical* Greek sanctuary. The result of this analysis will be that, far from identifying sublime independence and absolute spirit primarily with Christianity (and its religious architecture)—which, as Hodgson points out, results in “the identity between Christianity and the concept of religion [being] established on the basis of definition [a priori]: the concept is what it is because Christianity is the fullest instantiation of it, and vice versa,” (Hodgson, 2005: 219)—a more pluralistic conception of absolute spirit emerges, which allows Greek religious architecture to be seen in its own historical context. The particularity of Greek religious experience, including its built environment, may be seen and properly evaluated on its own terms.

At the end of the introduction to the *Aesthetics*, Hegel says that, “*symbolic art* attains its most appropriate actuality and greatest application in

*architecture*, where it holds sway in accordance with its whole conception and is not yet degraded to be the inorganic nature, as it were, dealt with by another art” (vol. I, 2010: 90). This statement foregrounds the necessity of ‘formal’ independence in architecture, or the built environment rising above mere functionality. In *The System of The Individual Arts* of the *Aesthetics*, where he devotes specific chapters to individual art forms, his further analysis of architecture consistently maintains that of all other art forms, architecture as a whole epitomizes the symbolic, and that it achieves its apex in the romantic stage. He considers romantic architecture, illustrated by the Gothic cathedral, as the epitome of architectural evolution, and states that, “no one thing completely exhausts a building like this; everything is lost in the greatness of the whole. It has and displays a definite purpose; but in its grandeur and sublime peace it is lifted above anything purely utilitarian into an infinity in itself...It is precisely where particularization, diversity, and variety gain the fullest scope, but without letting the whole fall apart into mere trifles and accidental details...and this length and breadth of varied details is gripped together unhindered into the most secure unity and clearest independence” (vol. II, 2010: 685). Hegel prizes the Gothic cathedral as the fusion of use and (material) functionality, and sees as “its business, so far as is architecturally possible, to make spiritual conviction shine through the shape and arrangement of the building and so determine the form both of its interior and exterior” (vol. II, 2010: 687). He explains further, “just as the Christian spirit concentrates itself in the inner life, so the building becomes the place shut in on every side for the assembly of the Christian congregation and the collection of its thought. The spatial enclosure corresponds to the concentration of mind within, and results from it. But the worship of the Christian heart is at the same time an elevation above the finite so that this elevation now determines the character of the house of God” (vol. II, 2010: 685). Hegel believes this synthesis of utility/religious worship and functionality/constructed space produces sacred space (the realm of spirit), and the supreme manifestation of sacred space is to be found manifest in the Gothic cathedral. By contrast, for Hegel, the foundation and nature of Greek religion do not manifest that kind of ‘internalized’ paradigm that is clear in Christianity, and so, because of its ‘exteriority,’ Greek religion, and religious space, is denied any potential for the mani-

festation of absolute spirit. But before we succumb to Hegel's conclusion, let us briefly consider the religious beliefs of the Greeks in the context of their own built environment. Let us consider whether the Greek sanctuary, its own sacred space, fits the explicit criteria that Hegel himself sets out as paradigmatic.

In the introduction of his *Aesthetics*, Hegel states that, "every work of art belongs to its own time, its own people, its own environment, and depends on particular historical and other ideas and purposes" (vol. I, 2010: 14). After this promising pluralistic assertion, Hegel reveals himself as insufficiently sensitive to the Greek model and its own correlations between religion and sacred space. If the Greek temple is placed within the context of the Greek sanctuary, and viewed in the context of the Greek religious worldview, the very same synthesis that Hegel recognizes and values in the Gothic cathedral becomes manifest in the Greek model. Let us then examine the religious beliefs and structures of the Greeks within the context of the communitarian 'exteriority' of Greek society.

Instead of monotheistic transcendence, Greek gods, personifications of natural forces, walked the earth; nature was their realm, and nature was everywhere. Humans dwelled within the land of the divine, among a multiplicity of gods, and performed rituals and sacrifices as a means to seek guidance, appease indiscretions and curry favor. Every aspect of ancient life was integrated within Greek religious practice, from the administration of state institutions to concerns of a more personal nature. "In Greece, where the cult belongs in the communal, public sphere...religious ritual is given as a collective institution; the individual participates within the framework of social communication, with the strongest motivating force being the need not to stand apart...its function lies in group formation, the creation of solidarity, or the negotiation of understanding among members of a species" (Burkert, 1985: 54-55). Greek religion is very much a public, not an introspective and private, affair, and on account of this Greek religious life and practice is communitarian in ways Christian religious culture is not. Greek sanctuary and temple design reflected this openness, unlike the introverted, self-reflective individuality emphasized in Christianity, where "engaging in heartfelt devotion and elevation of soul has...a variety of particular features and aspects which cannot be carried out in open halls or in front of temples" (vol. II, 2010: 687). Hegel himself describes the Greek

temple as “of simplicity and grandeur, but at the same time of cheerfulness, openness, and comfort, because the whole building is constructed for standing about in or strolling up and down in or coming and going rather than for assembling a collection of people and concentrating them there, shut in on every side and separated from the outside world,” but seems to miss the socio-cultural implications responsible for this alternative use of space (vol. II, 2010: 676). Where Christianity is focused on the interior, in both creation and use of space, consistent with one’s internal inner-being, and employs individualized, more passive worship strategies like personal prayer, Greek worship is performed on the communal level, where members engage in participatory activities that serve to bind and reaffirm their status as members not only of their respective communities, but as agents who dwell within the divine, which necessitates the exteriority that is a hallmark of Greek sanctuaries. Consistent with this exteriority, any allusion to one’s inner-being is conspicuously absent from Greek religious experience. Rather, *orthopraxy*, or correct and proper performance of religious activity is paramount in Greek religious experience, as opposed to *orthodoxy*, or correct belief, the hallmark of interiority found in Christianity. By incorporating places and acts of worship within the exteriorized natural world, Greek society embraces the fundamental tenets of their religious practice. Because Hegel views the Greek temple through spectacles tinted with the stained-glass windows of the Gothic cathedral, and employs the pure interiority of Christianity as his gauge for assessing the classical world, he fails to grasp the suitability of the form and functionality of the Greek sanctuary within the framework of Greek religious practice. By his own standards, namely that the “spiritual conviction shine through the shape and arrangement of the building and so determine the form both of its interior and exterior,” he ought not to fault the focus on exteriority found within the walls of the Greek sanctuary (vol. II, 2010: 687).

These programmatic conclusions are drawn from a descriptive analysis of the form and correlative function of the Greek temple sanctuary. In what follows I offer this analysis and reiterate my conclusions. My conclusions do no more than present a tension in Hegel’s aesthetics. Further work may suggest a revision in Hegel’s grand historical narrative of the development of architecture from classical to romantic models.

## **A Descriptive Analysis of the Classical Greek Sanctuary and Comparative Spatial Analysis with the Romantic Gothic Cathedral**

Walter Burkert, in his seminal work *Greek Religion*, offers a comprehensive discussion of not only Greek religion, but the physical accoutrements necessary for instantiation of its practice. “The Greek sanctuary... is properly constituted only through the demarcation which sets it apart from the profane (*bebelon*). The land cut off and dedicated to the god or hero is known by the ancient term which really signifies any domain at all, *temenos*” (Burkert, 1985: 86). This has implications regarding the spatial notions of the sacred and profane within the Greek context. By defining *temenos* as both “land cut off and dedicated to the god” and also “the ancient term which really signifies any domain at all” Burkert alludes to explicit connections, indeed attenuations of the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. While all land may be understood as sacred, the holy dwelling site of the god has a heightened, proprietary significance. It is demarcated from the ordinary and signified as the property of the god through the creation of a *temenos*, which should be viewed as a correlate to the walls of the Gothic cathedral. Like the Gothic cathedral, special purification restrictions are placed upon those who enter. It is important to note that the analogy here is between an entire sacred space or precinct with the barrier walls of a sacred cathedral. It is just this juxtaposition that I believe Hegel overlooks.

The *temenos*, or boundary demarcating the sacred space of the Greek sanctuary, can be rendered in various ways, always with natural material, but usually by the hands of humans and not by pre-existing barriers of the physical environment. Hewn or unhewn rock walls can be employed, as can rows of trees or strips of forest. Burkert states that, “the tree...is even more important than the stone in marking the sanctuary...The shade-giving tree epitomizes both beauty and continuity across generations. Most sanctuaries have their special tree” (Burkert, 1985: 85). Indeed, most deities have specific trees associated with them, and this embodiment of nature reaches its high point in the temple of Hera at Samos, where the willow, the associated tree of Hera, is contained within the altar itself.

In water one sees also a fundamental element of sanctuary design. Its purposes are both profane and sacred. Temple livestock, to be used in

ritual sacrifice, as well as congregants of the sanctuary, must have access to drinking water, but water itself is used for sacred purification rituals for both congregants and for the sanctification that elevates the otherwise profane status of animals used in ritual sacrifice. Burkert alludes to the similarities between the use of sacred water in Greek and Christian worship when he states that, “vessels containing water, *perirranteria* are set up at the entrances to the sanctuaries, like the fountains of holy water in Roman Catholic churches” (Burkert, 1985: 77). Congregants must perform necessary ablutions to enter the sacred space, and also in preparation of participation in sanctuary events. In conjunction with water, fire is also cultivated in the sanctuary hearth, and completes the incorporation of natural elements within the complex. One can’t help but associate the sacred hearths of Greek sanctuaries, the fire source for all ritual activity, with votive candles found in Gothic cathedrals.

As is evidenced by the integration of the natural world within the *temenos* of the sanctuary, the fundamental focus of the Greek experience is nature - gods, personifications of nature, are everywhere, and humans dwell in the realm of the divine. Hence, there is a real conflation of the sacred and the profane. The Greek sanctuary precinct reflects this exteriority, and has as its focus an incorporation of the natural world. By contrast, Christianity, with its emphasis on individuality and pure interiority, both in ritual and architectural practice, constrains its sacred components within one interior space, and seeks the exclusion of nature from within its walls. Even natural light is excluded from the Gothic cathedral, and requires the mediation of stained-glass windows for entrance. Hegel says, “for here [in the cathedral] it is a day other than the day of nature that is to provide light” (vol. II, 2010: 690).

Not only are external boundaries conceived differently, but internal use of space differs between the classical and romantic paradigms as well. The Greek sanctuary represents exteriority, and its various components are distributed across an open and natural, albeit clearly demarcated, sacred area in which the congregants move freely about. The Gothic cathedral, as a space of pure interiority, tightly incorporates its components within the framework of its enclosure. Yet, even within the confines of the Gothic cathedral, additional barriers are erected to further delineate space. Piers divide the space of the nave, creating side aisles in which

the congregants move to access their designated area for worship, the pews contained within. Screens cordon off the chancel, further restricting the flow of movement, both physical and visual. In contrast to this, the Greek sanctuary is an example of pure exteriority, and displays a symmetry of the public-spirited openness and communitarianism of Greek society. While “theatre-like terracing which could make the ceremonies visible to a greater number of people” is a common feature near the main altar, there is greater potential for freedom of movement within the *temenos* of the Greek sanctuary (Burkert, 1985: 87).

When viewed in its entirety, the Greek sanctuary precinct exhibits many of the same institutional features as the Gothic cathedral. The religious structures of the Greek sanctuary and the Gothic cathedral are similar in many ways. First and foremost, each is an edifice of religion and worship, and contains within it the structures necessary for its respective rituals. Each has a congregation, who, upon entry to either, is expected to perform ritual ablutions with water to achieve the purity necessary to partake in the succeeding rituals. Both contain symbols of their deities, the statue of the god or gods to whom the sanctuary is dedicated in the Greek example, and the cross and representations of Jesus in the cathedral. Both have altars.

Analogous to the way that the *temenos* of the Greek sanctuary must be viewed in relation to the walls of the Gothic cathedral, the Greek temple must be seen as analogous to the cathedral chancel. As the chancel is one component of the inner sanctuary of the Gothic cathedral, so the Greek temple is one aspect of the sanctuary proper. Like their exterior counterparts, the Greek temple and Gothic chancel have features in common. Both have similar spatial orientation, serve similar functions and share varying hierarchical restrictions of space. The temple and chancel are spaces of elevation. This elevation takes the form of literal elevation, i.e., occurring higher than surrounding areas, and symbolic elevation, i.e., containing the holy relics in Christianity or cult statue in Greece. Their elevated status distinguishes them from public areas, and indicates, literally and symbolically, that this space is different from others around it. Each represents the holiest areas of their respective structures. The Greek temple contains the cella, an interior room where the statue of the god is located, while the Gothic chancel contains the high altar of the cathedral.

Because they house the holiest accoutrements of their religion, the Greek temple and Gothic chancel have hierarchically restricted access and limitations on the use of space. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Greek temple has less rigidly restricted access than does the Gothic chancel. As Burkert notes, “Greek religion might almost be called a religion without priests: there is no priestly caste as a closed group with fixed tradition, education, initiation and hierarchy...in Greece the priesthood is not a way of life, but a part-time and honorary office” (Burkert, 1985: 95-97). The (relative) egalitarianism found in Greek religious practice, which is another example of its fundamental exteriority, is in direct contrast to that of Christianity. The Gothic chancel is reserved for the church hierarchy alone. “The high altar, this real centre of worship, is placed in the chancel which is thus the place devoted to the clergy in contrast to the congregation which has its place, along with the pulpit, in the nave” (vol.II, 2010: 691). Unlike the exteriority and openness of the Greek temple, where, while physical access may be restricted to priests and temple staff, visual access is not, the Gothic chancel is always enclosed by an elaborate screen that serves not only to demarcate and restrict physical access to the space, but also to visually obscure the holiest area from the nearby congregation. This space is reserved for the clergy alone, who devote their lives to the service of their god, and who alone possess the knowledge and rituals of that service.

When viewed within its historical and cultural context, the whole Greek sanctuary precinct exhibits the same synthesis of utility and functionality of purpose that Hegel prizes in the romantic Gothic cathedral. Hegel values the quiet, contemplative cathedral as the ultimate expression of absolute spirit because he interprets its form as being in complete balance with its function, thereby creating a space of solitude that allows its congregation to commune most effectively with their god. He views the Greek temple, and its cult statue, by reference to the Christian standard, even though the paradigm of worship does not remain the same for these two religious cultures. The Greek sanctuary, with its orientation within nature, reflects the religious orthopraxy and spatial conceptions of its own time and place, and by evaluating it by comparison to an orthodox Christian standard, Hegel misses the form-function synthesis that is the glory of Greek religious architecture. The Greek sanctuary should be evaluated according to its own normative standards. By employing Greek concep-

tions of the sacred and profane, and by understanding that this very dichotomy is less pronounced in Greek religious culture than in Christianity, the Greek sanctuary emerges as a synthesis of form and function, no less than the Gothic cathedral, and exhibits the potential for a manifestation of absolute spirit.

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