

The Study of Medieval Political Thought and the Image. Typology in the Mural Cycle in Longthorpe Tower

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1. Introduction

Numerous images were produced and presented during the Middle Ages. Miniatures in the medieval manuscripts, sculptures embellishing the facades and the inner space of the churches and other countless occasions testify of the love of images in the Middle Ages. There is an agreement among the scholars that those images provide prominent illustrations of the theological, ethical and political ideas of the time. The images are predominantly studied by the medieval historians, not the least by the historians of political thought, for illuminating the ideas contained in the texts.

However, the value of the images belongs to the longstanding questions of the medieval studies. Scholars have become increasingly sceptical about the claim that the study of the images may decisively help the study of the medieval tradition of political thought acquire an entirely new discovery. The ground for the scepticism is simple. We inevitably turn to the textual information to interpret the images, that is, the images alone cannot tell us much.

Acknowledging the auxiliary nature of the study of the images to the study of the texts, in this essay, I will change the question and ask what kind of assistance we may expect from the study of the images in our preoccupation with the texts. My contention is that the study of the images can eventually lead to a deeper and richer understanding of the concrete ways the political ideas worked.

In the following, I will try to sketch my contention with an example: the typological ideas incorporated in the mural circle of Longthorpe Tower. My discussion will take three steps. First, I will briefly discuss the concept of typology in the medieval tradition of political thought. Second, I will introduce the mural circle of Longthorpe Tower and discuss how the mural circle expresses the typological concept. In the concluding remark, I will return to the original question about the value of the images for the historians of medieval political thought.

2. Medieval Concept of Typology

The concept of typology derives from the tradition of biblical exegeses since antiquity. It denotes a notion that the Old Testament is a prefiguration of the New Testament, and that both

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Testaments prefigure the end of time and salvation.¹ According to this notion, a figure or an event in the Old Testament anticipates a figure or an event in the New Testament. This notion evolved into a general historiographical theory and influenced even the ethical and political view of the Middle Ages. Already in the exegetical tradition, King David was regarded as a prefiguration of Christ. This thinking soon developed into an idea that the earthly rulers whose office was understood as given by God should imitate both. The next phase of its development was to view the great rulers in history as the embodiment of virtues incorporated by King David and Christ. From this identification of the great rulers as a 'typus' a moral imperative is derived, namely, that the earthly rulers should also imitate the great kings of the previous time. By such an act of imitation the earthly rulers align themselves to the divine plan for salvation, that is, they participate in the history leading to the end of history and recovery of the relationship of humans to their creator. The demand we frequently encounter in the medieval mirror-of-princes that a prince should imitate a great ruler of the previous ages contains much more than a general appraisal of the virtues they embodied. It was stressed that a prince needs to study concrete judgment and strategy of action by an ideal ruler of the previous time and imitate them faithfully. In the *Kaiserchronik*, for instance, Charles the Great is described as a revived Caesar, and the problems and events the head of the Frankish Empire faced and the actions he took look as if duplicating the moments in the biography of the great ruler of ancient Rome, who was frequently described as the first emperor of Rome.²

3. Typology in the Mural Circle of Longthorpe Tower

In my previous studies on the images of the murals in the Great Chamber of Longthorpe Tower, I proposed their decisive relationship to state theory in the high and later Middle Ages.³ I also indicated the political upheaval in the twenties and the thirties of the fourteenth century in

¹ Erich Auerbach, 'Figura', *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*, trans. R. Manheim, New York, 1959, 1-77; P. Bloch, 'Typologie', in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. Engelbert Kirschbaum, 8 vols., Freiburg, 1972, 4: 395-404; James W. Earl, 'Typology and Iconographic Style in Early Medieval Hagiography', *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 8-1, 1975, 15-46; Hugh T. Keenan ed., *Typology and English Medieval Literature*, New York, NY, 1992; Bernd Mohnhaupt, *Beziehungsgeflechte. Typologische Kunst des Mittelalters*, Frankfurt a. M., 2000; Marek Thue Kretschmer ed., *La typologie biblique comme forme de pensée dans l'historiographie médiévale*, Turnhout, 2014.

² Hans-Henning Kortüm, 'Zur Typologie der Herrscheranekdote in der mittelalterlichen Geschichtsschreibung', *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 105, 1997, 1-29; Alexander Rubel, 'Caesar und Karl der Große in der Kaiserchronik. Typologische Struktur und die translatio imperii ad Francos', *Antike und Abendland* 47, 2001, 146-163; Udo Friedrich, 'Topik und Narration. Zur rhetorischen und poetischen Funktion exemplarischen Erzählens in der Kaiserchronik', *Poetica* 47-1, 2015, 1-24;

England around the deposition of Edward II as the political background behind these depictions.

On the basis of my findings in the previous studies, we can reconstruct the mural program of Longthorpe Tower as a whole (Fig. 1). The Longthorpe murals are composed largely of three motifs.

1. Religious motifs: The scene of St. Antony's encounter with an angel on the recess of the west wall; the scene of Nativity above the window arch of the north wall featuring the Virgin, Joseph and Christ in a stall; paired descriptions of Apostles from the Creed which begins with St. Peter in the west window-recess, going round the north wall and ends up in the east window-recess; a symbol of Ecclesia in the fifth pair on the north wall; St. Paul on the narrow south splay of the west wall; the symbols of the Evangelists and other music-playing figures which originally decorated the vault of which David, one claw of the eagle of St. John, a scroll with his name over the north wall and a fragment of the ox of St. Luke over the south wall still remain to be seen.
2. Cosmological motifs: The Labours of the Twelve Months on the arch of the west wall of which January, February, March, April and December are discernable; the Seven Ages of Man with the Infant, the Boy, Youth, Manhood, Middle Age, Old Age and Decrepitude above the Nativity on the north wall.
3. Political-moral motifs: Aristotle and Alexander in dialogue on the west wall; the Wheel of ideal state and kingship and the depiction of the episode of the Indian prince on the east wall; the dialogue scene between Edward III and Edmund Woodstock and the bonacon beneath it on the south wall. We must add to the last the Three Living and Three Dead which is painted on the east and south side of the east window embrasure – a classical theme which teaches the worthlessness of worldly glory and riches and encourages the cultivation of virtues.⁴

At first glance, the murals of Longthorpe Tower look to be a rather casual arrangement of the usual themes and motifs characteristic of medieval wall painting. The Nativity, the Apostles, the

³ Bee Yun, 'A Visual Mirror of Princes: The Wheel on the Mural of Longthorpe Tower', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 70, 2007, pp. 1-32; Bee Yun, 'The Representation of an Indian Prince in the Great Chamber of Longthorpe Tower and the Intercultural Transfer of Political Ideas in the Middle Ages', *Source – Notes in the History of Art* 34-3, 2015, 1-6.

⁴ A shield and a series of banners of arms largely of the tenants in the Peterborough Barony on the soffit of the west wall's arch and other plants and birds mainly on the west and north walls seem to be pure decorations. Only an unidentified animal over the shield arouses interest as to its meaning, although its poor condition does not allow any further discussion.

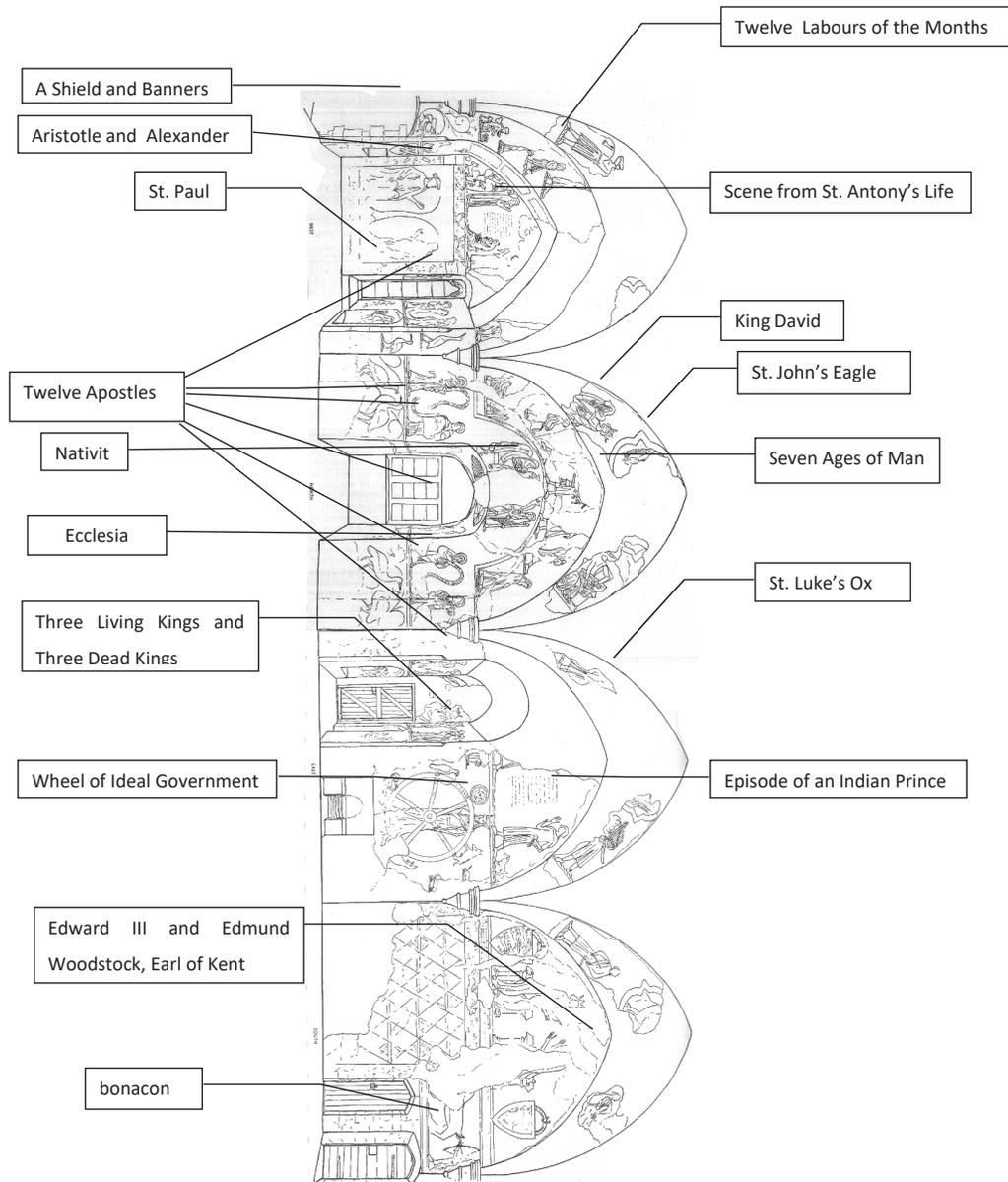


Fig.1 Reconstruction of Longthorpe murals

Seven Ages of Man or the Labours of the Twelve Months were often used to decorate the pillars, tympanum and arch of the church portals in the Middle Ages, as we classically observe at the West Portal of the cathedral of Chartres. David and the symbols of the Evangelists were also frequently painted on the vault of the church. Their locations in the Longthorpe murals do not show any trace of much deliberation and design. Seven Ages of Man on the arch, Nativity on the tympanum-comparable part of the wall and the symbols of the Evangelists on the vaults seem to

show that the painter arranged the motifs in convenient places.

Nevertheless, the murals of Longthorpe Tower do not wholly lack a scheme, that is, they are not merely a random arrangement of moral, natural, scientific and religious ideas that were taken from the medieval encyclopaedic tradition, as has been supposed since their discovery. The deliberate scheme determining the arrangement of the murals reveals itself, when the Longthorpe murals are restored to three dimensions (Fig. 2).

Especially, I'd like to draw attention to the face-to-face relation between the dialogue scene and the Nativity (Fig. 3). The Nativity in Longthorpe Tower is certainly related to Edward's



Fig.2 The murals seen from the South



Fig.3 Nativity on the south wall of the Great Chamber in Longthorpe Tower, c. 1330

well-known personal devotion to the Virgin.⁵ A more significant point to be considered is that the Nativity concerned the virtue of humility that a king should exercise in his God-ordained rule. The Adoration of the Magi, which was repeatedly reproduced throughout the Middle Ages, teaches this lesson. The Magi's gestures, their kneeling or laying down the crown before the newly-born true king of the world signify the fear of God and humility. Only from this awed and humbled mind can good rule arise. "The prince is to fear the Lord and he is to profess his servility to Him by an evident humility of mind and by the performance of pious works. For indeed a lord is the lord of a servant. And so the prince serves the Lord provided that he faithfully serves his fellow servants, namely, his subjects," so wrote John of Salisbury in his *Policraticus*, an important source of political ideas which inspired the Longthorpe murals.⁶

This juxtaposition of the two motifs, the Nativity and the dialogue scene of Edward III expresses the idea of typology. By placing the dialogue scene between Edward and Edmund on the exact opposite side of the Nativity so that they face the newly born Christ, the painter of the Longthorpe murals made Edward symbolically present at the time and place of the true king of the world's birth, as the Magi were. He becomes a witness to the coming reign of the eternal king, and learns humility before his power. Furthermore, this confrontation stresses the duty of Edward III to endeavour for the cultivation of personal virtues and the good rule by following the Christian idea of good government – a message which must have been most urgent in the context of the political tumult of the time.

In fact, the murals of Longthorpe Tower are not the only representation of Edward's humility as a ruler through his fictive adoration of the Nativity. The same theme was depicted in the paintings on the north half of the altar-wall in St. Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, which was constructed under the patronage of Edward III (Fig. 4). The paintings which are known to us only through Richard Smirke's nineteenth-century copy after the deadly destruction in the fire of 1834 represent the theme of a ruler's humility even more clearly than the murals of Longthorpe Tower by simultaneously depicting the Adoration of the Magi (the upper register) and Edward III and his children being guided by St George to the Virgin and Child (the lower register).⁷ In a parallel to the Magi, the princely virtue of humility that Edward is supposed to realize by his rule gets directly thematised. Considering the expectation given to Edward's rule, which was established after a series of political upheavals, the emphasis on the king's humility is most

⁵ On Edward's personal devotion to the Virgin see W. M. Ormrod, 'The Personal Religion of Edward III', *Speculum* 64, 1989, pp. 847-77, especially pp. 857-58 and p. 876.

⁶ 'Timeat ergo princeps Dominum et se promta humilitate mentis et pia exhibitione operis seruum profiteatur. Dominus etenim serui dominus est. Seruit itaque Domino princeps, dum conseruis suis, subditis scilicet sibi, fideliter seruit.' John of Salisbury, *Policratici sive De nugis curialium et vestigiis philosophorum*, ed. C.C.I. Webb, 2 vols, Oxford 1909, IV. 7 (I. pp. 258); transl. C. Nederman, from his (partial) edition of John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*, Cambridge 1990, p. 47.

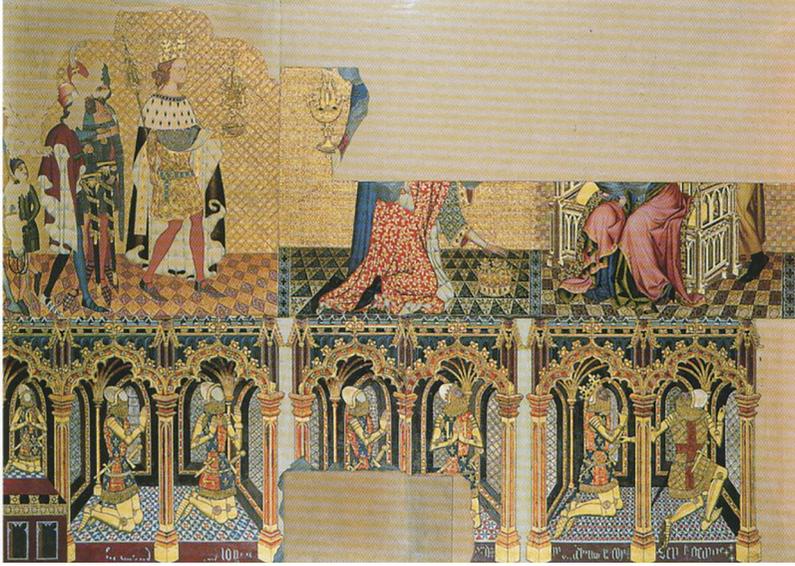


Fig.4 North side of the altar murals, St. Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, copied by Richard Smirke, c 1800-11, Society of Antiquaries of London

fitting.⁸

What deserves our special attention is the fact that this typological construction is overlapped by another similar construction, constituting a complex semantical network within the space of the Great Chamber of Longthorpe Tower. An aspect of the Longthorpe murals that is worthy of our special attention is its connection to the politico-ethical literature out of the Arabic world. As I argued in my previous studies, this mural cycle was decisively inspired by a pseudo-Aristotelian mirror-of-princes, the *Secretum secretorum*, which stemmed from the Arabic world in the tenth century. After its introduction to the Latin Christianity from the translations in the twelfth and thirteenth century, the *Secretum secretorum* became the most popular and influential text of its time, as the sheer number of its manuscripts amounting to several hundreds of copies testifies.⁹ It is Aristotle and Alexander who play the role as narrators of the ancient wisdom of just and successful rule in the *Secretum*. Aristotle's narration on the good rule is very extensive, encompassing such topics as the cosmological architecture and its principles, meteorological

⁷ J.J.G. Alexander, 'Painting and Manuscript Illumination for Royal Patrons in the Later Middle Ages', in *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. V.J. Scattergood and J.W. Sherborne, London 1983, pp. 141-62 (143-44, pl. 4); C. Riding and J. Riding, ed., *The Houses of Parliament. History, Art, Architecture*, London 2000, p. 57; E. Howe, 'Divine kingship and dynastic display: The altar wall murals of St Stephen's chapel', Westminster, *The Antiquaries Journal*, LXXXI, 2001, vol. 81, pp. 259-303 (pl.3 and 7).

⁸ Cf. Howe's interpretation of the altar paintings in which the self-promoting motivation for asserting the theocratic legitimacy of Edward's kingship through the identification of him with the Magi is picked up as their central message (Ibid., pp. 283-88).

rules, importance of astrology etc.

It does not seem to be wholly accidental that the painter allotted this famous king and his mentor to the lower part of the west wall which corresponds to the bottom left corner if the three walls are regarded as one space like a stone plate or a sheet of folio. In the paintings of vision scenes in the High Middle Ages, it was not unusual to place onlookers, recorders, and narrators of a vision at the bottom left corner. This decision seems to have had good reasons behind it: truth was revealed from heaven in numerous Biblical scenes. As was realized in the East-orientation of the altar in the medieval church, the truth was also thought to arise from the east. Accordingly, the location of a humble onlooker and recorder was frequently the bottom left corner. One such instance is the illustration in the Lucchese manuscript of the *Liber divinorum operum* of Hildegard of Bingen which was discussed in my previous essay.¹⁰ Hildegard sits at her desk here at the left bottom corner, looking up and recording the vision of the mysteries of God's creation. St. John's position in many illustrations of the Apocalypses also confirms our observation. Relevant to our discussion is the illustration of the Heavenly Jerusalem in the Trinity Apocalypses which was created around the second quarter of the thirteenth century in England (Fig. 5). John appears here from the bottom left corner, led by an Angel, facing Jerusalem descending from heaven.

The presence of Edward and Edmund, or the readers of this Mirror-of-Princes painted on the

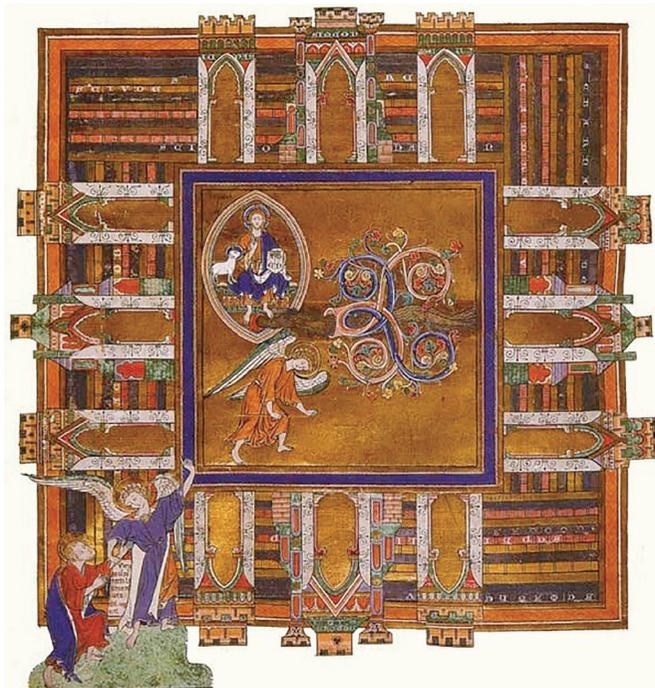


Fig.5 Heavenly Jerusalem, in *Trinity College Apocalypse*, Cambridge Trinity College MS R 16 2, Fol.25^v, London?, around the second quarter of the 13th century.

south walls gives Longthorpe murals a unique composition. It builds a parallel to the scene of Edward III's dialogue with Edmund Woodstock on the southern wall. Here, the concept of typology is clearly discernible. The young king and his loyal advisor listen to and talk about the ancient wisdom of governing which is narrated by a legendary master and his equally legendary pupil, Aristotle and Alexander, through the images on the three walls that they are facing. In their roles Edward resembles Alexander, while Edmund resembles Aristotle.

4. Conclusion

The expectation of reform with the help of ancient wisdom was now concentrated on Edward's reign which was established after long political turmoil. The Longthorpe murals actually represented a wish that Edward would bring peace, prosperity and glory to England through the learning and practise of wisdom.

The overlapping typological constructions in the mural cycle inform us of the complexity of the imagination. There is a parallel between the great ancient philosopher and the king on the one hand, and the young king and his mentor on the other. This parallel concentrates on the scene of the Nativity. This unique composition succinctly visualizes a sense of time which conceptualizes the flow of events or history in terms of successive repetition of the same patterns. This sense of time in which the distinction of the past, present, future melts away, and the history is understood as the manifestation of one eternal truth is indeed underlying the medieval political literature but is hardly thematized and discussed. Fundamental presuppositions of medieval political discourse become thus visible in the Longthorpe murals.

I believe that this insight provided by the study of the Longthorpe murals exemplifies the kind of benefit we may expect from an engagement with the images in the research on the medieval political thought. Generations of scholars have studied a variety of images and deepened and enriched our understanding of the medieval political discourse. Most of them used them as an illustration of the ideas of the text they already analysed. But I want to draw attention to the fact that the relations between our engagement with the images and that with the texts may sometimes become reversed, that is, the images may serve to illuminate and highlight a concept or idea that scarcely surfaces from the bottom in the general study of the political literature.

⁹ *Opera hactenus inedita Rogeri Baconi. Fasc. V: Secretum secretorum cum glossis et notulis. Tractatus brevis et utilis ad declarandum quedam obscuredicta Fratris Rogeri*, ed. by Robert Steele (Oxford: Clarendon, 1920). Cf. Steven J. Williams, *The Secret of Secrets. The Scholarly Career of a Pseudo-Aristotelian Text in the Latin Middle Ages*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 2003. See also Regula Forster, *Das Geheimnis der Geheimnisse. Die arabischen und deutschen Fassungen des pseudo-aristotelischen Sira al-asrar/Secretum secretorum*, Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2006).

¹⁰ B. Yun, 'A Visual Mirror of Princes' (as in n. 1), fig. 9.