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Research Article

# PERDURANCE OF ANCIENT THEATRE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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**Abstract**

It is commonly said that the theatrical genre perished after the fall of the Western Roman Empire and that it did not emerge again up until at least the eleventh century. This idea served to deepen the European Enlightenment's provided image of the Middle Ages as a period dominated by religion in which the values of the classical world had been completely lost. However, this is not a totally accurate image. Theatrical plays in the classical style would be performed until the end of the second century, but after this historical period most of them started to disappear from the stage and to be confined to the libraries of intellectuals and specialists, thus being substituted by rough comedies of rather vulgar or even obscene content, albeit much to the audience's liking. This is the theatre that would decline and disappear for several reasons. Nevertheless, there was also another type of theatrical representations of an itinerant character bringing a diverse range of artists together which focused not so much on their literary quality as on everyday occurrences that would indeed survive despite the pressure exerted by the Church throughout the centuries. It is quite possible that the custom of attending such plays, the techniques used for developing the street performances and the actors who interpreted them collaborated to some extent, even if only indirectly, in the emergence of the first plays of a fundamentally religious character that appeared in the European Middle Ages, i.e., the liturgical dramas.

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## Erken Orta Çağ'da Antik Tiyatronun Hayatta Kalması

**Öz**

Tiyatro türünün Batı Roma İmparatorluğu'nun yıkılmasıyla öldüğü ve en az 11. yüzyıla kadar yeniden ortaya çıkmadığı, yaygın olarak söylenir. Bu fikir; aydınlanmış Avrupalıların klasik dünyanın değerlerinin tamamen kaybolduğu, dinin hâkim olduğu Orta Çağ için sunduğu "karanlık" imajının derinleşmesine hizmet etmiştir. Ancak, bu tamamen doğru bir imaj değildir. İkinci yüzyılın sonlarına kadar İmparatorluğun her yerinde klasik tarzda oyunlar oynanmaya devam etmiş; ancak, daha sonra çoğu, entelektüellerin ve uzmanların kütüphaneleriyle sınırlı kalarak sahneden kaybolmuş ve bunların yerini, halkın beğenisine çok uygun olmasına rağmen, oldukça bayağı ve hatta müstehcen içeriğe sahip kaba komediler almıştır. Çeşitli nedenlerden dolayı gerileyen ve yok olan bu tiyatrodur. Bunun yanı sıra, yüzyıllar boyunca Kilise'nin uyguladığı güçlü baskıya rağmen hayatta kalmayı başaran, edebi niteliğe daha az önem verip günlük olaylara odaklanan ve çok çeşitli sanatçıları bir araya getiren gezici tiyatro temsilleri de görülmektedir. Bu oyunlara katılma alışkanlığının, sokakta sergilenen gösterileri geliştirmek için kullanılan tekniklerin ve bunlarda rol yapan oyuncuların, Avrupa Ortaçağı'nda dinsel drama adıyla anılan ilk dini oyunların -dolaylı olarak da olsa- ortaya çıkmasına büyük olasılıkla katkıda bulunduğu söylenebilir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Orta çağ, Avrupa, tiyatro, teatrallik, dinsel drama.



Was there, properly speaking, a *theatre* in the Middle Ages? And, if that was the case, was it a totally new type of spectacle, emerging in that period, or was it rather a phenomenon continuing a previous tradition which had never fully disappeared? Which were the causes bringing it about? And, above all, was it only one more sample of the profound medieval religiosity or did it encompass other cultural aspects that tend to be forgotten?

In order to respond to these questions, it is necessary to narrow down the meaning of the term "theatre". Its inventors, the Ancient Greeks, used the word *θέατρον* (*theatrón*), derived from the noun *θέα* (*thea*: vision) [related to the verb *θεάομαι* (*théaomai*: to contemplate, to consider, to be a spectator)] and the suffix "-tro" meaning "means for contemplation". Therefore, the term referred to "a place for contemplating". In fact, ancient Greeks never spoke about "theatre" as a literary genre but rather about "drama", "tragedy" or "comedy". The Romans

picked both the word and the idea and thus appeared the Latin term "*theatrum*" to designate the place (space or building) "where one observes". Over time, the word came to mean "gathering place" and later it was also used to speak about the observing spectators and the observed show (whichever type it was), values that the term would keep throughout the Middle Ages and that would pass into the Romance languages. But what we should not forget is that the use of "theatre" as a literary genre is something relatively recent that never appeared in the different Roman poetics nor in the medieval texts"[1].

What we nowadays understand as theatre is in fact an amalgamation of at least three different concepts. Firstly, the Latin verb *spectare*, which means "to observe", "to have one's eyes fixated on"; that is, it does not imply seeing in a normal way, but looking with interest or attention. Hence the words "spectator" and "spectacle", both applied to theatre and to other entertainments[2]. Secondly, the lexicon derived from the Latin root word **lud-*, which was related to all the ritual practices — public and private — that required the use of gestures. The plural noun *ludi* was used in Latin to refer to such practices, but also to name the feast days (like the *Ludi Romani*, the *Ludi Plebei* or the *Ludi Apollinares*) in which varied spectacles[3] including theatrical performances were displayed. And, lastly, the noun *scena* or *scaena* (related to the Greek *σκηνή* [*skenḗ*]), which designated the delimited zone where the actors carried out their work. At first, before the existence of real theatres or by the time these were still too basic and generally ephemeral, it consisted of a simple backdrop curtain or a wall. The scene was the only element that really served to identify the place where a representation would be performed. And this word, together with the former, gave way to the term *ludi scaenici*, which the Romans used to designate all the dramatical representations, independently from their being tragedies, comedies, Atellan farces, mimes or pantomime[4].



All these reasons have led some scholars to consider that we should not speak about "theatre" in ancient times, but rather about "theatricality", a phenomenon that existed not only among ancient Greeks and Romans, but also in many other cultures. Following this idea, Luigi Allegri[5] proposed, for instance, to confront theatricality with spectacularity (a concept that would include other non-strictly theatrical spectacles) and established two opposing binomials: *strong theatricality-weak spectacularity* on the one hand and *weak theatricality-strong spectacularity* on the other, between which there would be a wide range of combinations. The

1 Castro Caridad, Eva, *Introducción al teatro latino medieval*, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Santiago, 1996, pp. 9-10.

2 Ibid., p. 10.

3 Ibid., p. 10.

4 Ibid., pp. 10-11.

5 Allegri, Luigi, *Teatro e spettacolo nel Medioevo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1988.

first binomial was the model followed by the classical Greeks, since their theatre had a strong ritual dimension with a great cultural-communitarian load and an important literary value. The second was the Roman model, with a great secular dimension, a scarce representation of communal values but that paid more attention to the staging; a theatre where the important thing was the ability to improvise, to distract and to maintain the audience's attention. In sum, a theatre of famous actors, mimes and pantomimists whose target was pure entertainment. In which of these models would early medieval "theatre" fit? If we take a closer look at liturgical dramas, the first medieval "theatre" considered as such, we could say that these dramas contained, just as Greek tragedies, a high percentage of rituality and also that they would serve as well to express the communal ideals, even though they minimised (at least in their first stages) the literary dimension in favour of the theological message and the staging. However, if we think about the street theatre performances that existed not only at the time of the Roman Empire but also throughout the Middle Ages, we must conclude without a doubt that they were the direct heirs of the Roman theatre and that improvisation, entertainment and social criticism overshadowed any other value in such events.

Other scholars, like Jorge Dubatti[6], believe that to properly understand the difference between the current meaning of "theatre" and what this phenomenon entailed in Antiquity it is important to distinguish between the historical use of the word (which has evolved according to the time and place) and its conceptual use, since theatre is a phenomenon lasting for centuries but encompassing a variety of expressions. For Dubatti, theatre is a cultural manifestation structured at least on three subevents: the *convivio* (the confluence of actors, audience and authors with recreational aims), the *poíesis* (creativity) and the spectatorship. However, theatricality is an effect, a phenomenon whose presence is nearly as old as that of human existence, whereas theatre itself would have been impossible without such existence. From this point of view, theatre would be limited to providing the existing theatricality with a creative use and then "theatre" is as much a Greek tragedy as a pantomime, a liturgical drama or a simple improvisation.



Departing from these definitions, it should not come as a surprise that there are more and more voices defending the idea that theatre did not disappear at the beginnings of the Middle Ages, even though this has been generally thought to be the case. It is true that during the Late Roman Empire the number of troupes and performances started to drastically decrease to the point of virtual extinction as a

6 Dubatti, Jorge, "Coordenadas para el estudio del teatro en la Edad Media: unidad historiográfica, pertinencia epistemológica, periodización y pensamiento antiteatral", *La revista del CCC*, Enero/Abril de 2013, n° 17, n. pag. Online: http://www.centrocultural.coop/revista/articulo/383/ (retrieved: 05/28/2024).

public spectacle in the way it had been performed thus far.[7] This is due to three main reasons. Firstly, because the state stopped supporting many public entertainments and several private sponsors refused to fund them as a consequence of the economic crisis that started on the mid-third century. Secondly, because the pressure of the Church, especially after the proclamation of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire and the prohibition of polytheistic religions made it increasingly difficult for the troupes to work.[8] Lastly, because the different western provinces of the Empire were gradually conquered by the so-called "Barbarian peoples", who lacked that cultural tradition, and their definitive establishment as the new political hegemony favoured the loss of this practice. Nonetheless, and in spite all those drawbacks, some actors continued to perform privately or turned themselves into jesters or bards for noblemen and prelates, joining the "fashion" imported by the Germanic princes.[9] Some other more popular theatrical expressions (acrobats, *graciosos*, mimes or pantomime actors, etc.) continued to be performed in the streets and squares on feast and market days with relative freedom, despite the Church's efforts to put an end to their practices. Many of these groups could not even be classified as "troupes": they rather were itinerant puppeteers who, among their numerous spectacles (storytelling, acrobatics, songs, dances, etc.), could sometimes include short performances. It is true that we have no detailed written record of any of them, but indirect references abound.[10] Both those working for noblemen as much as the itinerant ones were capable of gathering together a considerable audience before whom they would carry out spectacles based more on gestures, images and sounds than on a prearranged script, which however contained a great deal of theatrical elements that were easily understood by people from different social strata.



As for the preservation of theatrical pieces as such, once they stopped being staged, editors renounced to produce copies of both Greek and Latin plays and consequently there came about a drastic decline in their purchase (even for a personal or private reading). On the other hand, many of the copies that had been preserved were either destroyed by religious radicals or ended up disappearing as

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7 Brockett, Oscar G., *Tiyatro Tarihi* (ed. & trans. by İnönü Bayramoğlu), t. I, Mitos Boyut Yayınları-Dost Kitabevi, İstanbul, 2017, p. 98.

8 The Church Fathers, and the members of the clergy in general, did not only condemn theatre as a source of immorality for its being a spectacle closely related to paganism from its very origins and for the strong criticism against the new religion often included in the plays (Brockett, op. cit., p. 81), but also issued numerous regulations prohibiting the baptism of actors and theatrical performances at Christian religious festivals and threatening actors, directors, patrons and audiences with the penalty of excommunication.

9 Dámaso Alonso believed that the recitations of epic poetry carried out by the bards must have been something halfway between narrative and drama (*Ensayos sobre poesía española*, Buenos Aires, Revista de Occidente, 1944, p. 70).

10 Brockett, op. cit., p. 99.

an effect of poor preservation or out of neglect. Let us not forget that parchment was an expensive and relatively delicate medium. Only the books that had their sales ensured were copied. Furthermore, if a book was not copied after some time in order to renew the copies that were in a poor condition it was doomed to disappear.[11] In other cases, some manuscripts were washed off to be reused (that which we nowadays call "palimpsest"); and, finally, many of them ceased to be read because the impoverishment of the educational system resulted in a loss of the knowledge needed to understand them.[12] Only a little number of works, and often only very expurgated fragments, those that the clergy considered "not dangerous" or texts written in a very neat Latin (like the works of Terence, used to teach how to read and write "good Latin"[13]), were preserved for posterity in the libraries of some monasteries or castles. This entailed not only a huge cultural loss but also undermined the position of theatre as the popular literary genre par excellence and was thus relegated to oblivion. For centuries no new piece would be produced and the audience forgot about its existence except for, perhaps, a few insightful intellectuals. But this neglect did not start with the Middle Ages but at the time when Christianity imposed its theological points of view on all the intellectual production, something that started happening at the beginnings of the fourth century.

Certainly, the situation at the beginnings of the Middle Ages was far distant from the buoyant activity that had been taking place throughout Antiquity. The Romans took over the baton from the great classical Greek theatre and combined it with their Etruscan heritage and also with their own ludic activities, thus creating a new, more prosaic style rather oriented towards amusement or at most towards social criticism. The love for any kind of spectacle was in the very essence of the Roman world, and this helped develop an important dramatic activity with powerful troupes and great actors who were profusely entertained like modern movie stars.[14] Although some Greek tragedies were translated into Latin, their political-religious meaning lost its essence and they were soon relegated to private representations or readings aimed at groups of intellectuals. On the contrary, the comedies would gain such a strength that they promptly gave rise to the creation of schools of writers and actors. It was thanks to this that a rather vulgar comic-satirical theatre became increasingly popular. The fashion of commemorative tragedies honouring heroes or victories would also prevail while at the same time



[11] Nixey, Catherine, *La Edad de la penunbra. Cómo el cristianismo destruyó el mundo clásico* (trans. by Ramón González Férriz), Taurus, Barcelona, 2018, p. 22 & p. 174-175.

[12] Ibid., p. 22.

[13] Castro Caridad, Eva, "Del tropo al drama litúrgico", Pedro Calahorra & Luis Prensa (coord..), *II Jornadas de Canto Gregoriano. Tropos, secuencias, teatro litúrgico medieval*, Institución Fernando *el Católico*, Zaragoza, 1998, p. 49.

[14] Ibid., p. 49.

some other comedies of a moralising character would appear. The latter would be the ones that survived in the long term. In any case, thanks to the Romans, theatre would remain the literary genre attracting more interest among the public.

All the large Roman cities had magnificent theatres built of stone and decorated with marvellous friezes and sculptures donated by great men who wished to earn the favour of the audience.[15] But we also know that there were many more wooden theatres of an ephemeral character in the peripheral neighbourhoods. And even street performances that lacked a fixed place given that they were staged on planks, carts, stairs of buildings or any moderately elevated place. In such performances, the itinerant troupes' performance was of a lower category but valuable either way. Such were the circumstances of the histrions[16], and also of mimes: lone actors who recited or represented stories often improvised and closely related to reality. The tradition had already existed in Greece, but it significantly grew with the Romans and ended up being associated with rough and provocative representations. Their performances used to be accompanied by some other artists (acrobats, singers, animal tamers, etc.) and were executed in the streets. The same happened with the pantomimists, who began to appear in Greece in the fifth century BC and who also performed solo, although they were accompanied by a group of musicians who interpreted storytelling dances (thence many see them as the oldest precedent of nowadays' ballets). How could such a deeply rooted and cherished tradition die; and which force was capable of vanquishing it?



In fact, the sources provide evidence for the loss of the type of theatre based on a script or on an oral text memorised by a group of professional actors. But then again, the said loss did not take place in the Middle Ages, not even in the Late Roman Empire, but rather began in the last decades of the second century. From the next century onwards, the performances in the traditional style started to decline whereas at the same time there was a promotion of trivial and amusing plays, spontaneous performances in the style of stand-ups or adaptations of much modified earlier pieces to which new elements had been added. The decline was such that the very term "theatre" would increasingly lose its currency only to regain it well into the twelfth century.[17] The impact of Christianity on the genre's devaluation was undoubtedly decisive. The actors, mimes and histrions had from the very beginning criticised the new religion coming from the East and mocked its

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15 It is worth remembering that the first stationary theatre built in stone was the one sponsored by Pompeius the Great built in Rome in the year 55 BC. The theatres that are nowadays preserved started to be erected all over Greece and the Roman dominions later, since the previous ones had been either provisional or made of wood.

16 Actors were professionals who earned their living from the theatre and belonged to big troupes whereas histrions were itinerant actors.

17 Ibid., p. 49.

rites, devotees and leaders. They were thus joining the general stance of the Roman intellectuals, for whom Christianity was a religion "of the slaves", "of the poor"; something uncouth and without a pedigree and as such an object of mockery and derision. Many intellectuals also believed that the theological content of Christianity was much reduced and sometimes incongruous when compared to Greek philosophy or to other doctrines burgeoning within the Empire, and the fact that it announced a Paradise for everyone where they would all be equal seemed to them something extremely subversive. Hence, in the first centuries most of the converts were people belonging to a low or non-well-educated class, which served to deepen this stereotype. Only by the mid-fourth century the more literate Roman classes started to embrace the new religion. Most of them forced by the circumstances, although some were really convinced thanks to the profound theological work developed by the Church Fathers, which merged the Christian dogmas with many elements of Graeco-Roman philosophy. Yet long before the declaration of Christianity as the official religion by the Emperor Theodosius I in the year 380, the Roman spectacles —not only theatre but all of them— started to be incessantly attacked by the Church for being immoral and pagan. Nevertheless, such an opposition took a long time to achieve its aim: Theodosius himself paid the actors who were to participate in a theatrical festival from his own purse[18], thus contradicting the teachings of the religion that he had exalted, undoubtedly feeling more worried about earning the favour of the common people by means of entertainments to their taste. Many new Christians needed time to fully accept the concept of "monotheism": it was easier for them to combine Jesus with the rest of the divinities that they had worshipped until then, though giving him a certain prominence. This entailed that they did not see a clear contradiction in attending both the Christian rituals and the pagan festivals. These issues were indeed hard to dismiss and would last well into the Middle Ages, but contributed to the continuity of ceremonies, feasts, songs, etc. of a clearly pagan origin, so much so that once they saw the little effect that the bans had on the majority of the population, the very Church decided to Christianise many of them in the end. And among those practices we should include the theatrical phenomenon.



The overwhelming hostile propaganda and the numerous bans against theatre implemented by the ecclesiastical hierarchy could never put an end to the more popular theatrical manifestations. Many testimonies and ecclesiastical directives against it are preserved, starting from the texts of Tertullian in the second century to the Visigoth bishop Isidore of Seville in the seventh century, or the French bishop Atto of Vercelli in the tenth century, the abbess Herrad in the twelfth century, a law included in the first of the *Partidas* of Alfonso X of Castile (thirteenth century) or even some of the decisions of the council celebrated in

[18] Nixey, op. cit., p. 200

Santiago de Compostela in the year 1565.[19] It is evident that those decrees must not have been indeed effective, since they were assiduously reissued, which can be taken as a reliable token of the genre's continuity and of the audience's taste for it. Together with the fact that we do not have any written script of those improvised theatrical representations available, these bans came to reinforce the theory, repeated over again for years, that theatre had disappeared towards the fifth century to reappear, as if by magic, by the mid-Middle Ages. But let us remember that neither the theatrical manifestations taking place at the noble lord's courts nor the itinerant ones of a more popular character came to disappear. What is more, such manifestations must have largely remained in force and been developed to a high degree, both at the technical and literary level, which generally tends to be obliviated.[20] At this point, the question we should raise is not why or when did theatre die, but whether those manifestations had any relation with the awakening of theatre in Europe in the tenth century.

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The Roman or Gregorian Reform, which was initiated by the popes after the tenth century and became much stronger in the eleventh, sought, among many other things, to unify the different rites and the sacred art of the Catholic Church. Such Reform was imposed — though not without opposition —thanks to the inestimable collaboration of the Cluniac monks. One of its main points was to restore ecclesiastical Latin for all the ceremonies, a language that had already begun to lose its strength in favour of the vernacular languages, more easily understood by the faithful and even by the priests themselves, as it is clear from the minutes from the Council of Tours celebrated in the year 813. From then on, the religious ceremonies started to be less participatory and were left almost entirely in the hands of the officiants, and so the audience lost a great deal of the prominence they had previously enjoyed. In exchange, the spectacular element gained importance: the number of parts of each ceremony as well as that of ceremonial elements increased; there were attempts to achieve a greater grandeur and symbolism (whether it was by means of architecture, sculpture or the paintings decorating the churches; or by means of the light, the music, the sacred vestments, etc.) and the priests' learning of Latin and improving their vocalisation, gestures, etc. was potentiated so that it served them to convey the divine message better. Indeed, all these elements had previously existed to a greater or lesser extent, but their increment was notable. And we should not forget that many of them had reached Christianity via classical Roman rhetoric (collected with nearly no variation by the Church Fathers), but it is an often-overlooked fact that many of these elements also constituted a part of the technique proper to the actors' profession.



19 Castro, 1998, op. cit. p. 50.

20 Regueiro, José Mª., "Rito y popularismo en el teatro antiguo español", *Romanische Forschungen*, 89, 1977, p. 8.

As a matter of fact, the writers of handbooks used for instructing the clerics on those arts insisted that all of this be done in moderation so as not to end up undesirably resembling mimes or histrions.[21] That is to say, the clerics themselves were aware that their way to proceed could easily be mistaken for theatrical procedures. This also means that, even if only indirectly, theatre must have been still alive in the imaginary of medieval people and therefore leads us to insist on the idea that theatrical manifestations had not fully disappeared.

Since the first theatre "plays" appearing in the medieval period were designed for being enacted in churches, some scholars claimed for some time that the theatricality inherited from the classical world had "taken refuge" in the Christian liturgy during the Middle Ages, hence the tendency to interpret such liturgy as a kind of "theatre". Nowadays this hypothesis has already been superseded[22], for, although it is evident that there is an enormous percentage of theatricality in every religious ritual, Christian rites are from no point of view a "theatre" in the modern sense of the word. Yet we cannot say the same with respect to liturgical dramas, which were the first novel theatrical manifestations produced in the Middle Ages: even if they were a part of the religious liturgy and complemented it, and although they were understood as one more religious element in that time, it is evident that the way they worked and evolved were the fundamental factors that helped to definitively recover the dramatic genre.



How did liturgical dramas start, when and why? The first liturgical dramas emerged as an addition at the end of the matins office on important feast days.[23] As a general rule, they were very short texts in ecclesiastical Latin, often in the form of little dialogues that, either sang or recited before the main altar by priests or monks, reproduced different passages of the Gospels. Just like religious art or sacred music, their aim was to bring the doctrinal message closer to the illiterate masses, to reinforce the teachings of that day's mass with little scenes, for which in their initial moments they formed a whole with the liturgy. However, together with this purpose there were others as well, such as the interest in adding solemnity and embellishing the liturgy in order to make it more impressive and agreeable to the faithful. The oldest ones have been dated to the mid-tenth century and, even though they follow the sacred books, they reinterpret and ornate them with elements coming from very diverse sources.[24] The oldest group receives the name of *Visitatio Sepulcri* ("Visit to the Tomb") or *Quen queretis?* ("Whom do you seek?", the first verse of the drama) and it was conceived to be performed in the morning of Easter Sunday. The texts portrayed the moment when three women (who tend to be identified with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the apostle and

21 Castro, 1998, op. cit., p. 48.

22 Ibid, p. 49.

23 Ibid., p. 39.

24 Ibid., pp. 42-45.

Mary Salome) upon their visit to the sepulchre where Jesus had been buried, are surprised to find it empty and are informed by an angel of his resurrection.[25] Later on, some more examples began to appear: *Depositio Crucis* (or entombment of the cross, which commemorated the burial of Jesus on Holy Friday), the *Peregrinus* (which rememorates the apparition of the risen Jesus to some of his disciples in Emmaus), the *Officium Pastorum* (which speaks about the annunciation of the birth of Jesus to some shepherds in Bethlem), the *Ordo Stellae* (which reminisces the adoration of Jesus by some magi coming from the east) or the *Ordo Prophetarum* (which was interpreted on the feast of the circumcision of Jesus).

Quite possibly, all these liturgical dramas consisted of barely a few lines in origin, but the documents extant to us often also include prolix instructions (at least they were so for the time in question) regarding the characters' garments, the ways in which the action should take place and even the gestures and scenography to be used. This is due to the fact that the said documents almost certainly date from after the true appearance of liturgical dramas: they belong to a phase in which they already had been consolidated and augmented as per their extension and scenography, which implies that the dramas had actually been born much earlier. On the other hand, most of those instructions seemed to carry a precise symbolic meaning.[26] Even so, what we should really keep in mind is that for the new Roman rite it was not obligatory to include the liturgical dramas in those festivities' ceremonies: we find communities or monasteries that did so and some others that did not; and sometimes even within the same community there were periods when they were performed and others when they were not. In sum, dramas were not a necessary part of the Roman rite, but rather an optional extension/explanation of it. Nonetheless, for a long time it was thought that its birth had been intimately bound to the said rite, and thus scholars did not find it strange that the first dramas were also present in those countries where the Roman rite had been first introduced and where the Cluniac order had had more influence.[27] As Young[28] explained, when transferred to a secular context, this addition to the liturgy evolved independently from the religious context for which it had been created in the beginning, and it was at that time when the first simple forms of what we would now properly call "theatre" appeared.[29]



25 Ibid., pp. 39-41.

26 For instance, the priests interpreting the angel in the *Visitatio Sepulcri* were dressed in white tunics as a symbol of purity and of celebration; all of the actors used elements proper to religious ceremonies (the censers represented the vessels with ointment that the women had brought to anoint the dead; the cloths for celebrating the mass, the shroud; and the altar itself reminisces of the tomb and the sepulchre) and they recited their lines facing the community as the disciples of Jesus (Castro, 1998, op. cit., p. 42).

27 Ibid., p. 48.

28 Young, Karl, *The Drama of Medieval Church*. T. I, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967, pp. 231-238.

29 Regueiro, op. cit., p. 3.

However, Donovan[30] observed that some of the discovered liturgical dramas could be dated to the times before the arrival of the Roman rite. Likewise, he remarked the fact that several of them could have originated directly in the Romance languages and not in Latin, something that would not make much sense if we take into account that one of the pillars of the papal reform was the establishment of Latin as the ritual language par excellence. That lead Hardison[31] to put forward the idea that the origin of liturgical dramas was not related to the papal reform but to a series of little dialogues spontaneously created by the priests who oversaw the education of the catechumens. This would also help explain why many of them contain elements that could be easily related to itinerant popular theatre, that they appeared in the vernacular languages, as well as the fact that they were, in the beginning, predominantly oral in nature.[32] They could even have appeared simultaneously in different areas of Europe. Departing from this premise, we could say that the dialogues that gave rise to the liturgical dramas originated much earlier than it had been thought and that, even if their union with the Roman rite helped their consolidation and spread, originally they were a manifestation to some extent derived from the popular theatrical practice which until then had remained in the streets and had been reluctantly tolerated by the ecclesiastical hierarchy.[33] This is what Montilla seems to have in mind when he states that the taste for theatre among the people had such a strength that it finally found a way to reveal itself through religious ceremonies.[34] What is indeed evident is that those dialogues could not have appeared out of nowhere: according to Hardison, the priests had picked up on a very old tradition despite the bans of the hierarchy because it turned out to be valid for their purposes given that it was understood by everyone and also since it was still in force; and with it they would have elaborated a system that made their message understood by the recent converts or by those who were to be so soon. Liturgical dramas emerged out of a religious need, and they served to narrate a mystery beyond time and space, but the portrayal of the characters, the scenic movement, the way to lay out the acts, to perform them, etc., were taken from the profane theatre[35] that had remained alive among the peoples of the Middle Ages.



30 Donovan, Richard B., *The Liturgical Drama in Medieval Spain*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, 1958.

31 Hardison, Osborne B., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1965.

32 Ibid., pp. 198-199.

33 Horta, María Jesús, "¿Por qué un auto sobre los Reyes Magos? Génesis y objetivos del auto teatral más antiguo en castellano", Rafael Carpintero Ortega et al. (ed.), *Estudios de Lengua y Literatura Hispánicas. II*, Hiperyayın, İstanbul, 2023, pp. 187-188.

34 Montilla Benítez, Manuel, *Orígenes del teatro español*, Castro, Madrid, 1944, p. 28.

35 Regueiro, op. cit., pp. 7-8; Banús, Enrique, "Literatura y espectáculo en la Edad Media: las razones del teatro profano medieval", Rafael Alemany Ferrer & Francisco Chico Rico (ed.),

The number of dramas increased swiftly and, as they spread through all the western Christian world, they started diversifying from their first appearance until the thirteenth century, although it is true that there were areas where they were better accepted than others. At the same time, more scenes where inserted (some were sung with music; some recited) and there came the first texts fully written in prose. Little by little, there started to abound those that were in different local languages, many of them Romance, as it could not be otherwise in a world that was more and more detached from Latin, at least among the popular classes. The very oral character that differentiated them originally and the versatility which is typical of medieval literature have served to preserve numerous versions, both in Latin and in vernacular languages, of the same work.[36] Even so, the only drama that truly had a general acceptance in every country was the *Visitatio Sepulcri*, from which we can find versions all over Europe and in numerous languages, and which continued to be performed until the eighteenth century. The rest had a short life and were not as widespread, if we restrain ourselves to the number of preserved copies.[37]

Still, to which extent can a liturgical drama be considered "theatre"? At the time they appeared they could not be considered so: their aim was not ludic but pedagogical and moralising. Even nowadays it is evident that they are not just a spectacle, as they carry an important religious load which is, in addition, essential for the action. The liturgical drama is a symbolic representation of the divine word, whereas theatre is a representation of reality (whether existent or fictional).[38] Nevertheless, the courtly performances in which the bards narrated the deeds of the warriors and the foundational myths of the peoples in a theatrical manner; or where the jesters told anecdotes in the style of the ancient comic actors; and also the street performances aimed at a more popular audience were indeed theatre, even if they lacked play scripts and a clear layout. If, as everything seems to point out, all these performances were the ones that truly influenced the clerics who educated the neophytes leading them to devise an easy and enjoyable way to explain the sacred dogmas, we could say that actually theatre not only did not disappear in the early Middle Ages, but also served to create new forms of theatricality. Over time, the development of cities and the bourgeoisie from the thirteenth century onwards made the primitive liturgical dramas evolve and acquire a dramatic awareness that they had not previously held, bringing about the increasingly more numerous inclusions of truly dramatic scenes in liturgical dramas which, eventually, would give way to profane theatre. In short, theatre did not



*Literatura i espectacle = Literatura y espectáculo*, Universidad de Alicante & SELGYC [Sociedad Española de Literatura General y Comparada], Alicante, 2012, pp. 67-68.

36 Castro, 1998, op. cit., p. 45.

37 Ibid., p. 47.

38 Ibid, p. 50.

"die" with the Empire nor with the arrival of the Middle Ages: it reinvented itself to survive.

Trans. by Pilar Herráiz Oliva

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