

The precinct of St. John's is both spatially and textually a marginal location in Lucian's *De Laude Cestrie*. It is physically marginal as a divider of space between the church of St. John's and the secular world beyond and textually marginal because explicit reference to it is only made twice in the text's opening. Even on these rare occasions, Lucian avoids describing the topography of the location. However, despite its seeming unimportance, the precinct is central to the text's very existence. It is the place where Lucian's pontification on Chester begins, where the text's patron first 'explained to [Lucian] the three syllables of the city in three ways'.<sup>1</sup> The precinct, then, may be a marginal space, but it is also a site of significance.

In Lucian's exploration of the space of Chester, the precinct of St. John's is his first stop. He briefly mentions other locations such as 'the church of the Archangel Michael', where he hears mass, and the church of St. John itself, but he does not linger on these sites. The precinct is the first site at which Lucian tells us he 'briefly came to a stop'. This seems to be a counterintuitive first stop to make. A more logical starting point for Lucian's *urban encomium*, to introduce his reader to the city of Chester, would be at one of the city's four gates. However, Lucian writes as one who is personally pre-initiated into the city, so perhaps beginning within it is logical. Nevertheless, as a monk of St. Werburgh's who often interprets even secular sites through a monastic lens, we would expect Lucian's first stopping point to be one of greater spiritual importance: a church perhaps. Despite this, Lucian does not begin his text in a site of explicit Christian practice.

The precinct is a liminal setting in both a literal and symbolic sense. It physically and emotionally divides the space between the 'nuisance' of the castle and the 'consolation' of St. John's. It is also geographically liminal as the church of St. John's itself lies outside of the city walls, on the edge of Chester and wider Cheshire. Catherine Clarke argues that 'issues of liminality [...] are crucial aspects of the formation of local identities in the city' of Chester,<sup>2</sup> so perhaps this helps to explain why Lucian chose the precinct of St. John's as his first major stopping point. Although Lucian later implies that from its walls there is a viewpoint of the whole world, Chester, far towards the West of the known medieval world and part of what Robert Barrett calls 'England's key border zones' with Wales,<sup>3</sup> was very much a liminal city. As such, the precinct could be seen as a symbol for Chester or even England as a whole. Viewed as a site of such symbolic value, it becomes a more understandable starting point for Lucian's exploration of Chester.

The precinct's liminality also seems to resonate with the pseudo-theological conversation which occurs in it. The conversation between Lucian and his patron is not, from what we can interpret from the few details Lucian gives of it, rooted in genuine biblical scripture. In this sense, it is secular, belonging outside of the church to the city (and indeed it is about the city). It is a conversation with a 'man of learning', but that does not necessarily mean that the conversation is characterized by the 'literary illumination' the patron is filled

---

<sup>1</sup> Lucian, *De Laude Cestrie*, ed. by Mark Faulkner for *Mapping Medieval Chester* <<http://www.medievalchester.ac.uk/texts/facing/Lucian.html?page=2>> [accessed 07/02/14]. NOTE: This specific page will be quoted throughout. Subsequent references will remain unindicated.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine A. M. Clarke, 'Mapping Medieval Chester: Aims, Challenges, Outcomes, Futures', for *Mapping Medieval Chester* <<http://www.medievalchester.ac.uk/context/clarke.html>> [accessed 07/02/14].

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Barrett, *Against All England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), p. 1.

with. Having said that, their discourse is overlaid with spiritual interpretations of Chester. Lucian's patron imposes a religious explanation onto the etymology of its name. Its three syllables represent three different layers of Christian liturgical positions and relations, amongst other things. This exemplifies Mark Faulkner's idea that *De Laude Cestrie* derives 'spiritual lessons from Chester's urban environment'.<sup>4</sup> The conversation, then, is liminal like the precinct, as it negotiates between the secular city and the church. It takes place in an area that is not used for religious practice, but is owned by and closely associated with a space that is. Likewise, it is not grounded in Christian scripture, but skirts around pseudo-theological themes, so much so that Lucian believes he is being religiously 'instructed' by his patron, as he was when he first entered into the clergy.

Attaching this level of symbolism to the text may be deceptive. Although Mark Faulkner suggests that *De Laude Cestrie* deliberately tries to give 'a deceptively narrow picture of Chester which emphasizes its Christian heritage',<sup>5</sup> the precinct, as an opening location, may not be deliberately for these aims. This section is delivered as an anecdote, recounting occurrences from 'some months ago'. Grounded firmly in first person experience, but directed at an obvious audience (the 'you' who seems to be Lucian's patron), this passage seems to be a communicative and functional piece of text. Where preceding sections had been theoretical and contrived, this is very much more tangible. It could even tentatively be argued that this section is autobiographical. If this were the case then any symbolic meaning found between the cross-over of the liminality of both Chester and the precinct would seem co-incidental.

When we look at how the precinct is positioned not just in space, but in time, the idea that Lucian is trying to present a faithful piece of autobiography becomes problematized. Lucian suggests that 'the precinct of the Forerunner of God fully soothed' the metaphorical wounds that the castle of the earl inflicted upon him. However, if his earlier testimony is to be believed, Lucian was only 'about to visit the earl's residence' when he entered into the precinct. He retrospectively gives a confusing view of time here. He is either trying to show the anticipative comfort of the precinct, or is exposing the fallibility of his own memory by ordering and then reordering events, using his time in the precinct as a temporal pivot point. In light of this, it is difficult to read Lucian's text as one without at least some fabrication. This re-opens the possibility that the precinct could serve as a symbolic setting. This idea is made all the more promising as Lucian reveals himself to have a tendency to use places symbolically: within the space of one sentence he characterizes St. John's and its precinct as healing and soothing, but the castle as damaging.

The precinct is significant as it is temporally liminal. Within it Lucian can '[compare] present circumstances with those past'. This is in fact what causes Lucian to stop here. The 'familiar', unchanging, although undescribed, topography of the precinct triggers memory for him. He tells us that 'as a boy I had once learnt my letters there', presumably referring to St. John's itself. Interestingly, by doing this, Lucian makes spatial connections. The choice of 'there', or 'ibi' in the Latin, seems to separate St. John's from its precinct which would logically be 'here' or 'hic'. He makes distinctions between the two spaces, yet he obviously associates them as his external view of St. John's from the precinct is what triggers his memory. However, his reflection upon time is more prevalent here. Although Lucian's view has not changed, he notes that 'human affairs' are 'fickle' and that, as a consequence, the

---

<sup>4</sup> Mark Faulkner, 'The Spatial Hermeneutics of Lucian's *De Laude Cestrie*', in *Mapping the Medieval City*, ed. by Catherine A. M. Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 78-98, (p. 84).

<sup>5</sup> Faulkner, p. 94.

historical context and society around the view has. The area is temporally liminal, then, as it occupies two ontologically different moments in history through its 'familiar' appearance.

Although barely present in the text, the precinct of St. John's is a highly interesting, significant setting. It is a symbolic space in which the reader is first invited into the microcosm of Chester. We know little about the appearance of the space itself, but from its constancy we can make inferences about Chester's past and present, whilst also taking spiritual comfort from its nearness to the holy site of St John's.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary Source**

Lucian, *De Laude Cestrie*, ed. by Mark Faulkner for *Mapping Medieval Chester* <<http://www.medievalchester.ac.uk/texts/facing/Lucian.html?page=2>> [accessed 07/02/14]

### **Secondary Source**

Barrett, Robert W., *Against All England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009)

Clarke, Catherine A. M., 'Mapping Medieval Chester: Aims, Challenges, Outcomes, Futures', for *Mapping Medieval Chester* <<http://www.medievalchester.ac.uk/context/clarke.html>> [accessed 07/02/14]

Faulkner, Mark, 'The Spatial Hermeneutics of Lucian's *De Laude Cestrie*', in *Mapping the Medieval City*, ed. by Catherine A. M. Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), pp. 78-98