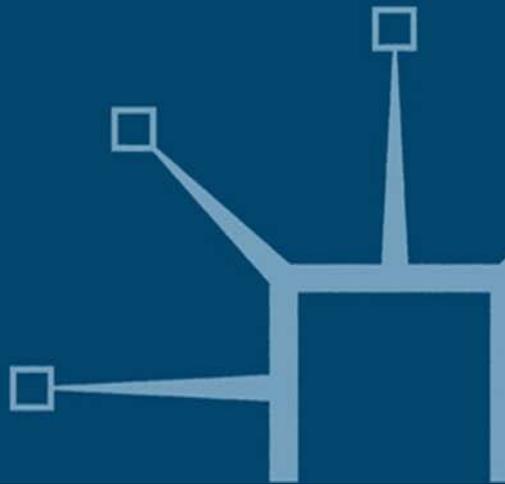


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Imprisonment in the  
Medieval Religious  
Imagination, c. 1150–1400

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Megan Cassidy-Welch



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*Also by Megan Cassidy-Welch*

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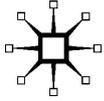
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# Imprisonment in the Medieval Religious Imagination, c. 1150–1400

Megan Cassidy-Welch  
*Australian Research Council Future Fellow,  
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*For Steve, Robert and Timothy*



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Finally, I thank my parents and sisters for being interested in this book, and I especially thank my husband and dear boys for reminding me that there is more to life than medieval prisons.



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# Introduction

A late thirteenth/early fourteenth-century French book of hours includes a scene of the incarceration of St Margaret of Antioch. This saint was one of the more popular virgin martyrs and the elements of her particular story were very typical of the medieval female *vitae* contained in such texts as the *Legenda Aurea*. St Margaret of Antioch was incarcerated by a thwarted suitor, who had her periodically taken out of the prison for lurid and distressing torture sessions. Within the prison space itself, Margaret found both consolation and confrontation. According to some versions of her *vita*, light surrounded her in prison, as a sort of protective reminder of the presence of Christ. But the prison space was also where Margaret confronted the devil, first in the form of a dragon and then in the form of a black man. By making the sign of the cross Margaret overcame the dragon who attempted to swallow her – in some versions she was expelled from the monster’s gut – and she stood on the head of the man-devil to subdue him. The image from Troyes (Figure I.1) represents the moment of Margaret’s imprisonment. It is an image that stresses the spatial confinement of the prison building: it is smaller than the individuals who push Margaret into it, there is no aperture other than the door through which the saint is being bundled, and there is no redeeming light within the small, stone building which might hint at anything other than enclosure as the prison’s defining characteristic.

Almost 200 years later, a different image uses a more popular iconography of St Margaret to represent the saint in prison (Figure I.2). Unlike the Troyes book, this Parisian book of hours (now held in the Bibliothèque municipale, Chambéry) emphasises the permeability of the prison space. The saint is already benumbed. She holds a cross, the sign of which was said to have released her from the jaws of the dragon,



Figure 1.1 The imprisonment of St Margaret (Book of Hours, the *Life of St Margaret*, c. 1300. Troyes, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 1905, fol. 163)

and the monster within the prison is itself gruesome and large, but docile. The prison structure is made of open spaces. The viewer may engage with the saint through a barred but highly accessible window, the shape of which almost replicates the architectonic frame of the whole image. Another smaller window draws the viewer's gaze through to the blue distance and a bucolic aspect meanders to the horizon behind the prison. This is a recognisable prison, but it is a prison punctured by openings, visible and invisible: the prayer of the saint liberates her from the confinement of the world, while the open spaces in the walls and background encourage the viewer to look beyond the limits of space to the promise of freedom beyond.

These images contain two foundational elements of imprisonment in the medieval religious imagination. The first image focuses on the spatial confinement of the prison through an emphatic depiction of forced enclosure. The second shows imprisonment as a porous or permeable state, both through the open material of the prison walls and



Figure 1.2 The imprisonment of St Margaret (Book of Hours, Paris, c. 1470. Chambéry, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 0001, fol. 203)

through the representation of transcendence embodied in the figure of the saint within. Both these aspects of imprisonment – confinement and the promise of freedom – may be traced in a number of textual and visual representations of imprisonment throughout the Middle Ages. Together, the images also invite broader questions about the meaning of imprisonment in medieval Christian culture. How was imprisonment represented and understood in religious discourses? How important were ideas of imprisonment in different types of ecclesiastical text? How did ideas around spatial confinement give expression to and mirror wider ideas around Christian understandings and practices of space? These questions are at the heart of this book.

This is not a book, therefore, about the ‘rise’ of the medieval prison, or the relationship of the medieval prison to modern (or medieval) penological practices. Rather, I seek to explore how imprisonment as a set of ideas was given cultural meaning, particularly in a variety of religious contexts. Thus, this book has two principal aims. The first is to provide a fresh synthesis of medieval religious imaginings of imprisonment. The second is to argue that, although recent work on medieval prisons has done much to flesh out the political and social contexts in which the widespread use of imprisonment came about, there is still a need to recognise the significant and enduring impact of religious thinking on imprisonment during the same period. In particular, the ‘long’ thirteenth century, with its emphasis on religious reform, prosecution of heresy, delineation of the boundaries of the community of the faithful and the defence of Christendom, was also a period that saw the production of a range of texts in which ideas of imprisonment were central. Such texts show that imprisonment constituted an important set of concepts which provided potent and meaningful ways for medieval people to describe the spaces they inhabited, the secular and divine structures that governed them and ordered their lives, the ways in which they related to those familiar to them and to strangers, and their own subjective positions in community, region and cosmos. Imprisonment was a set of discourses which was deployed to express a range of subjective and collective ideals.

Unpacking these ideas provides insights into what I describe as a particularly medieval spatial *mentalité*: that is, a conception of the relationship between confinement in all its forms (imagined or actual, forced or voluntary, bodily or spiritual) and the promise of eternal liberation through participation in the Christian devotional economy. I suggest that the tension between material, physical space and abstract, imagined space was articulated, tested and resolved (at

least in part) through the metaphorical, comparative and ideological deployment of imprisonment. At this juncture, it is important to specify what I mean by imprisonment throughout this book. Part of my argument is that imprisonment as it was expressed in ecclesiastical texts was a multivalent concept, and deliberately so. The texts I shall discuss in the following chapters include notions of captivity, enclosure, bondage and sometimes even exile. These notions are grouped under the general rubric of imprisonment because they share a common spatial vocabulary which exposes the dichotomy I have illustrated above: the tension between containment and liberation. The reasons vary as to *why* individual texts emphasise one over another, but, as a whole, the host of ideas which go to construct the discursive phenomenon of imprisonment have significant and consistent elements in common.

### Imprisonment

This book draws on suggestions made by Jean Dunbabin and Guy Geltner – that for medieval people imprisonment was certainly more than the judicial punishment of crime and that ‘premodern prisons are better studied without recourse to modern penological concepts’.<sup>1</sup> Although the concern of this book is not to chart or account for the increased use of the prison itself, it nonetheless draws on the newer literature around the importance of wider cultural aspects of imprisonment as a historical phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> Until very recently, historical studies of medieval imprisonment had tended to focus on the place of the medieval prison in the longer trajectory of penological development leading to the ‘birth’ of the modern prison.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the *function* of imprisonment was integral to a number of these studies. For historians like Ralph Pugh, who extended Gotthold Bohne’s notion that there were three main categories of medieval imprisonment, custodial, punitive and coercive forms of incarceration were dominant in the various types of medieval English prison.<sup>4</sup> More recently, the rigidity of such categories has been questioned. Richard Ireland and Jean Dunbabin, to name just two, have shown that (in Dunbabin’s words), the categories ‘automatically’ used by sociologists (and we might add, historians) to describe different types of imprisonment in the modern world – punishment, coercion and custody – ‘would have meant little to the inhabitants of western Europe in 1000’ and it was only by about 1300 that the links between imprisonment and criminal law were more coherently established.<sup>5</sup>

Emphasis on the function of the prison also innately envisaged the medieval prison in legal and political terms, as part of the history of crime and punishment. In the late twentieth century, the history of prisons and imprisonment was also marshalled to indicate deeper historical attitudes towards deviance and the maintenance of social order. Sociologists such as Erving Goffman, whose work on 'total institutions' showed parallels between prisons, psychiatric hospitals, army boot camps and so on, was one non-historian whose integration of the prison into studies of social discipline was highly influential in historical studies of the prison.<sup>6</sup> Another was Michel Foucault. In his *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, Foucault located the 'birth' of the prison within the context of modernisation.<sup>7</sup> As is well known, Foucault postulated that the modern prison (that is, the prison from the eighteenth century) could be equated with a particularly disciplinary society, in which power is not wielded from above, but is produced within each individual who consents to be part of modernity's disciplining regimes. For Foucault, premodern systems of punishment had been primarily spectacles aimed at the public shaming of the accused's body. Modernity's systems of punishment and social control, he argued, transformed public punishments into private and individual events while a prisoner's body was made 'docile' through being hidden, surveyed and taught to be self-monitoring. Foucault's arguments have long been challenged by those who tested his historical generalisations about premodern punishments and found more nuanced ways of talking about sixteenth and seventeenth-century punitive and penal systems.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, *Surveiller et punir* stands as something of a watershed in the history of writing about the prisons of the past, not only because the book politicised the process and the meanings of imprisonment, but also because Foucault rightly insisted that a history of the prison could reveal profound and compelling truths about a society's systems of punishment and social values.<sup>9</sup>

For those like Foucault seeking to find the 'birth' of the modern prison, the medieval world reveals a chaos of uneven developments in penal theory and practice. For Foucault, the 'rational' project of prison reform and the creation of the Panopticon (Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century model prison where inmates were unable to discern when they were being surveyed) was the means by which modernity's political programmes of control and uniformity were expressed. Such programmes were characteristic of the modern state – the lack of a single prison system in the European Middle Ages simply emphasises the rupture between the premodern and the modern worlds, the so-called

'epistemic shift' which for Foucault at least was the marker of deeper historical and political change. Others may not agree with Foucault's overall historical paradigm but nonetheless continue to establish a historical trajectory between the messy medieval past and the orderly modern present by reading the history of imprisonment as a narrative of penological destiny. The deeper post-Enlightenment assumptions on which such studies are based are quite transparent. The notion that the prison is an institution which developed from immature origins to a rational system (whatever its faults) in modernity is an intellectual position founded on a progressivist and essentially positivist apprehension of historical change.

Guy Geltner's work on Italian urban prisons has done much to update the ways in which we must now consider the place of the prison in medieval and modern contexts.<sup>10</sup> In *The Medieval Prison: A Social History*, Geltner shows that prisons in towns such as Florence, Bologne and Venice functioned as important elements in the construction of civic and political identities. Moreover, Geltner argues that 'the birth of the prison was more than a legal development...[r]ather, it was a complex and contingent creation in which politics engaged architecture, religious imagination fused with penal practices, and an ancient legal tradition that abhorred punitive incarceration yielded to the reorganization of urban space according to new attitudes toward social marginals'. Geltner's careful reading of what he calls 'documents of practice' as his primary instruments of analysis provides significant empirical advances in our knowledge of the operation and nature of these Italian prisons. And Geltner offers the historian of the prison a broader perspective from which to view the meaning of the prison in a medieval – especially urban – environment. Although still primarily interested in the advent and function of the prison, Geltner's work is an important advance in seeking to integrate society and culture into a history of the medieval prison.<sup>11</sup> This will not seem unusual for scholars of the modern prison, who have established a significant historiography on this very point.<sup>12</sup>

A smaller literature on the use of the prison in monastic and inquisitorial contexts is more pertinent to the subject of this book. Such studies have ranged from investigations of the role of the Church in the consolidation of imprisonment as an effective and meaningful form of punishment to the use of imprisonment in monastic and inquisitorial milieux. Scholars like Jean Leclercq have also teased out some of the connections that might be made between monastic enclosure and imprisonment in general, finding that, although the language of the prison could be applied to the solitude, withdrawal and the spatial

confinement of the monastic enterprise, a direct equivalent between imprisonment and the monastic life is to be resisted, given the voluntary nature of the latter.<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Lusset has more recently traced the practical application of imprisonment to criminal religious, also finding that enforced solitude was meant not only to separate, but also to serve as a particular form of penance.<sup>14</sup> Others have considered the notion that the state of imprisonment was a state of purgation in medieval religious thought, and that the penitential quality of incarceration was foundational to early religious literature describing the value and meaning of imprisonment. Recent work by Julia Hillner, for instance, has connected the more widespread use of monastic imprisonment as penance in Merovingian contexts, with the production of contemporaneous saints' lives that emphasise repentance.<sup>15</sup> These and other studies of the use of imprisonment in religious (primary monastic) environments have built up a useful picture of the prison's practical use in medieval Christian experience. The use of imprisonment by the early inquisitorial tribunals, especially in the Languedoc, has also attracted some more recent attention. In particular, the work of James Given has shown how central the prison was to the production of inquisitorial knowledge about heresy and the gradual dismantling of heretical communities and networks from the mid-thirteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

This book expands on such literature by shifting attention away from the links between religious writing and the practical application of incarceration, to look at how ideas around imprisonment could describe participation, belonging, exclusion and alienation from the Christian community more generally. It was not only members of religious houses, those who came into contact with the *inquisitio heretice pravitatis* or those who were subject to the practice of *detrusio* – penal cloistering – who encountered religious ideas around imprisonment during the thirteenth century. All medieval Christians who belonged to the community of the faithful could benefit from the sermons, miracle stories, hagiographies and exempla which used images of imprisonment to convey fundamental messages about inclusion in the temporal and eschatological landscapes of Christian space and time. The means by which these messages were articulated and the contexts in which they were voiced are the focus of this book.

## Space

I have stated that the argument of this book is that we can trace a particular spatial mentality in medieval religious thinking through a

study of the idea of imprisonment. The creation and meaning of space and its practice in social, ecclesiastical, political, ritual and other contexts is a rapidly growing historiographical field, and one with which this study most directly intersects.<sup>17</sup> Recent works have particularly examined the ways in which space was not only a material/territorial reality, or bounded place, but was also imagined through word and image, text and practice. Such studies have mostly grown from older theoretical work on the conceptual qualities of space. Henri Lefebvre's work has been particularly influential for historians, as he attempted to track larger historical changes through the organising category of space.<sup>18</sup> Lefebvre argued broadly that the advent and growth of capitalist society was predicated on lived acts of spatial practice, the representation of space and the performance of space (in ritual, for instance). For Lefebvre, space was the driving force behind historical change, and might be mapped or described by articulating a symbiotic relationship between its material and abstract dimensions. That is, he argued that space was a productive force, not a void to be filled or a signifier of absence. Medieval space was for Lefebvre the precursor of significant historical change, especially urban space, where he found the genesis of the abstract space of capitalism. Lefebvre's overarching claims for space as the driving force behind the triumph of capitalism have been criticised. Nonetheless, his categorisation of forms of historical space and his delineation of modes of spatial thinking continue to provide the theoretical basis for much of the modern scholarly literature on this theme. This book does not deal with Lefebvre's claims for medieval urban space, but draws on his idea that space is productive, historical and discursive as much as it is material.

It is worth noting that similar ideas have driven the more recent work of social geographers such as Doreen Massey, who have drawn out the constitutive dimensions of social space. For Massey, space is a continual process made by connections, thus signifying multiple meanings.<sup>19</sup> Specifically, Massey imagines space as a 'simultaneity of stories-so-far', generated and reflected by social interactions, plural and infinite.<sup>20</sup> Massey's work looks for the political promise of space in a global context. Yet, for a historian of the Middle Ages, her thinking signals some intriguing possibilities. To what extent would a spatial approach to the medieval past add to our understanding of the social relations of medieval people? To what extent was spatial thinking embedded in medieval ideas of self, society and cosmos? The dynamic and conceptual quality of space as outlined by Massey and others, who are not medievalists, seems to me to offer great promise

in unravelling the discursive web of social and self-imaginings of the premodern past.

To a certain degree, the specific historiography on medieval space, especially 'sacred' or religious space, has already implicitly accepted Lefebvre's and Massey's claims for productivity and dynamism. Historians who have looked at the spaces of spiritual and religious practice and discourse already claim that such spaces are multivalent. They might be material and visual (the church, the abbey, the image), textual (the sermon, the miracle book) or ritual (the procession, the sacrament).<sup>21</sup> One collection of essays that deals with such issues in early modern Europe has described sacred space as extremely fluid: spatial 'gradations of holiness' might emanate outwards from a holy site such as a monastery, making very unclear any marked division between sacred space and what Mircea Eliade long ago named 'the profane'.<sup>22</sup> However, the ways in which physical space was used to stabilise social and political hierarchies within religious contexts has also revealed the simultaneous anchoring of spatial meaning. The interdisciplinary approach taken by scholars such as Roberta Gilchrist has done much to reveal the tangibility of spatial demarcation in monastic and cathedral sites, for instance, and it is clear that, despite the many meanings that could be attached to particular ecclesiastical spaces such as the church, cloister or cathedral close, fixed and regulated uses and associations were central to their meaning too.<sup>23</sup> The means by which boundaries around such categories as 'the sacred' or 'the holy' were thus dissipated and reinforced provides historians of the Middle Ages with useful ways to navigate the worlds of sacrality that 'haunt' that past.<sup>24</sup>

Imprisonment is a particularly useful idea with which to examine those worlds of sacrality. This is because ideas of imprisonment stressed not just metaphorical links with otherworldly space such as purgatory, but also constitutive spatial elements of Christian individual and collective practice. Enclosure, inclusion, separation and the careful circumscribing of real and tangible boundaries worked with – not in opposition to – liberation of the spirit and broader forms of freedoms. Imprisonment also provided medieval people with ways of describing their place in the social and cosmological order of things. This is particularly true of ecclesiastical understandings of the prison, where both longer associations between physical confinement and spiritual freedom were expressed in narrated experience, didactic texts and actual practice. The monastic prison, for instance, was connected to Tertullian's description of incarcerated Christian martyrs' experiences

of a productive aloneness with God, while for commentators like St Bernard of Clairvaux, the monastery as prison allowed for deeper musings on the nature of confinement.<sup>25</sup> For the men, women and children who travelled to the shrine of St Leonard of Noblat, patron saint of prisoners, imprisonment might have been real and painful, but pilgrimage to the shrine reminded them that the Christian promise of freedom could truly work through the efficacious actions of the saint.<sup>26</sup> Even in the prisons of the medieval inquisitorial tribunals, prisoners were reminded of the promise of liberation should their testimonies prove productive: 'Why don't you say what will free you?' wondered the guards of the inquisitor Jean Galand's prison in the 1280s, as prisoners there failed to deliver the right sort of information.<sup>27</sup>

Some years ago Valerie Flint suggested that the early monastic practice of 'distancing as punishment ... may have developed as a result of some quite refined thought about the efficacy in general of space as a means of punishment'.<sup>28</sup> More recently, Laura L. Howes noted the 'heightened awareness of enclosed spaces, or locked towers, of small, private rooms, gardens or closets' in medieval narratives, wondering if the presence of such motifs 'suggests the noteworthy nature of isolation in medieval society'.<sup>29</sup> Punishment and isolation are certainly important elements in medieval mappings of enclosed space. But imprisonment, especially in medieval religious discourses, also seems to have been about the *value* of inclusion, the opportunities that could be provided by the state of captivity or incarceration, and the liberating propensities of faith. The spatial language with which these ideas were expressed may thus be connected to wider religious concerns.

## Sources

The sheer volume of sources in which medieval prisoners appear may well act as something of a deterrent to any historian of imprisonment in the later Middle Ages. Individual prisoners are mentioned sometimes incidentally in legal sources, such as the records of gaol delivery in England, or more fully in their own words in meditations on captivity by writers in prison like François Villon.<sup>30</sup> Administrative sources such as prison registers document the quotidian experience of imprisonment in prisons like the Châtelet in Paris or Le Stinche in Florence.<sup>31</sup> Prisoners are found in coroners' inquests into deaths in custody, and they are found in hagiographic writings on the trials of incarcerated saints.<sup>32</sup> They appear in historical texts, including chronicle reports of hostage-taking during times of war, and they appear constricted by the

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