

Alexandra Lucia TEODORESCU\*

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE MEDIEVAL CONCEPT OF TIME IN WESTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

### Abstract

*This essay will analyze the concept of time from a cultural and social point of view. Our purpose is to briefly describe the transformation of the concept of time throughout ten centuries in Western Europe, precisely during medieval times. We shall take into account the arrival and extension of the Christian cult as a factor of this transformation, the emergence of the urban mentality, the creation of mechanical tools for the measurement of time and other elements contributing to the change described. We shall discuss the ways in which gothic architecture developed in Western societies in the period analysed is relevant for the new social perception of time.*

**Keywords:** time, gothic, urban, Christianity, mechanical tools, divine, pagan

**Motto:**

**"Time is the number of movement."<sup>1</sup>**

**Aristotle**

**"Time goes to the eternity that will abolish it."<sup>2</sup>**

**Jacques Le Goff**

### INTRODUCTION

This essay will analyze the concept of time from a cultural point of view, thus leaving aside physical theories and scientific discoveries. They shall not be ignored, but time as a component of a cultural mentality shall be emphasized.

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\* Lector, "Dunărea de Jos" University of Galați, Romania

<sup>1</sup>ARISTOTLE, in Jacques LE GOFF, *Pentru un alt Ev Mediu*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1986, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques LE GOFF and Jean-Claude SCHMITT, *Dicționar tematic al Evului Mediu occidental*, Polirom, Iași, 2002, p. 767.

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Our purpose is to briefly describe the transformation of the concept of time throughout ten centuries in Western Europe, precisely during medieval times. We shall take into account the arrival and extension of the Christian cult as a factor of this transformation, the emergence of the urban mentality, the creation of mechanical tools for the measurement of time and other elements contributing to the change described.

After describing this shift in the medieval mentality concerning time, we shall focus on the artistic reflections of this evolution, as they are the subtlest images of society in a certain age. Art is the "message in a bottle" sent to us from our past: it tells stories about the way people lived, thought, acted. Consequently, it is this artistic element that should be analyzed if we are searching for cultural heritage. This research will insist on the birth of the gothic style (especially in the building of cathedrals), as an expression of time related mentalities in the societies of the Middle Ages.

The sources of this research will be focused on two main interest points: the concept of time and its evolution, and we shall analyze the ideas of Jacques Le Goff, Philippe Aries, Jacques Paul and the artistic expression of the gothic style in the studies of Erwin Panofsky, Elie Faure etc.

The conclusions will be drawn after understanding the medieval mentality of time and its place in the cultural history of Western Europe.

## I. TIME AS A CULTURAL ELEMENT

The two quotations in the motto have been chosen to illustrate the theme of this essay because of their importance in the definition of the concept of time. The first one, belonging to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, sees time as only a variable of another essential concept, movement. In Aristotle's world, that exists without and outside the concept of God, in this eternal world, time is nothing else than the number of movement. The Greek concept of time was traditionally opposed to the Christian one. The Greeks thought that history was not heading towards a purpose and finality, that only the individual's destiny was the field of action of one person. Thus, in such a world, time was ignored and only spatial elements were regarded as important.

On the other hand, the other quotation, coming from the great researcher of Western medieval mentality, Jacques Le Goff points out to the fact that Christian tradition presents time as a straight line that will end, at some point. The arrival of Jesus Christ on earth gave history its turning point

and represents the beginning of history. This history will, nevertheless, end and the eternity of the after-world will follow.

It becomes more and more obvious to us now how such an abstract concept as that of time can influence day-to-day habits and create life patterns in all social contexts. It is here that we shall look for the cultural meaning of time: people live in close relation to their external environment and there are elements of this environment that become internalized by a psychological process of appropriation.

Medieval people guided their everyday lives according to their beliefs of time, just as we do nowadays. Even if we accept that time is just a relative component of our universe, we still live in it and our actions reflect this interiority.

That is why we consider that this change in the perception of time is one of the most important evolutions of the human mind and mentality, one with consequences as important as penicillin or the atomic bomb. What may be difficult for contemporary people to grasp is the fact that a society may exist in absence of a concept of unified time<sup>3</sup>. That is, in fact, the case with the medieval concept of time: there are several times that interconnect, but which exist independently. There is the time of God, the time of agricultural activities, the time of the senior and of the vassal, the time of cities and of merchants. All these coexist but are not yet unified by any directing principle. Man does not feel as if he was the master of all these converging times, but all he tries to do is to adapt his activities and feelings and rhythms to the cycles of natural time.

The warrior lives for the time of the fight, spring and summer, the farmer for the right moment of the cropping, the monk for the hours of praying and so on. So we see that there is a certain variety of times, working together and sometimes separately, but we cannot speak of TIME as an essential element. One major event will bring together these different temporal realities and will change the face of the European culture forever and that is Christianity.

## II. THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION OF TIME

One of the most important contributions brought about by the arrival of Christianity was the existence of one God instead of a multitude of deities. From this point on, the road is clear for a great change in mentalities. A

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<sup>3</sup>Jacques LE GOFF and Jean-Claude SCHMITT, *op.cit*, p. 765.

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remarkable Christian thinker was Saint Augustine; in his "Confessions" he affirms that it is the divine time that must coordinate the earthly time. As a Christian, man can encounter divinity in a concentration of time called moment or at the end of times, in eternity. Thus there exists a temporal continuity between the moment lived and the eternity promised, just as the spatial continuity is achieved by the angels that connect heaven and earth<sup>4</sup>.

The main difference then between the divine time and the pagan time is that the first one is continuous and linear while the latter is circular permitting the eternal return.

However, this Christian time brings about an element of unity that is the birth of Christ, but it does not finally unify all the other times. In fact, as Le Goff points it out, it contains three types of time:<sup>5</sup> the circular time of the liturgy that celebrates different moments in the life of the savior (birth at Christmas, Resurrection, etc.), the time of the body and of its sexuality, connected with the liturgical time (there are times when sexual relations are forbidden by the church, for example during Lent) and the sacred, oriented time, that arises from a double divine event, the Birth and the Embodiment of Christ.

Consequently, Christianity is a historical religion that defines itself starting from the historic moment of the apparition of Christ. A very interesting aspect of Christian medieval time is an idea that there are six ages of humankind and that the one they were living then was the last one: *Mundus senescit* (the world is growing old). This theory slowly disappears, leaving room for a more optimistic view on time and history.

In relation to this Christian concept of time, two main heresies appeared during the Middle Ages: the catharic heresy and the millennium heresy. The first one claimed, in full contradiction of the Church, that time was doomed along with the whole creation, thus time meant nothing but fatal Hell. The only solution would be the refuge in a primitive time, whose main character is to be mythical.

The second heresy is the one stating that the apocalypse should bring about an age of a thousand years of earthly rule of Christ and the right ones. This idea, born in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, will be greatly fought against by the Church.

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<sup>4</sup>Jacques LE GOFF, *Civilizația occidentului medieval*, Editura Științifică, Bucharest, 1970, p. 231.

<sup>5</sup>Jacques LE GOFF and Jean-Claude SCHMITT, *op.cit*, p. 766.

*The Annals of Dunărea de Jos University of Galați*, Fasc. XX, Sociology, n<sup>o</sup>. 10, 2015, 91-101.

The influence of the Christian tradition on time does not stop here, on an ideological level, but pushes the evolution further. Once time is defined as directing towards an end and a purpose, how could we measure it? The stakes of the measurement of time are very high and the implications very deep. In fact, if one could measure time, one could tame it by organizing it. It is in the monasteries that the measurement of time becomes a clear preoccupation for the medieval man. Two innovations are to be noted: the bells, starting with the VII<sup>th</sup> century, and the canonical hours, the departure point for every future schedule.

The calendar is another form of organizing time. C. Carozzi<sup>6</sup> emphasizes the connection between the medieval calendar and the Apocalypse of John and he states that this connection has made a great contribution to the religious dramatization of history to our days. There are two causes for this dramatization: first, the conviction that history has a definitive end and the idea that individual history along with collective one are heading in the same direction. Carozzi does not suggest that this dramatization has been a negative one, but, on the contrary, it brought about self-consciousness and it brought to life the individual as an actor, not just a spectator of history and the passage of time.

### III. URBAN TIME (MERCHANT'S TIME)

Christian tradition of time was not, in any case, the only theory that existed in medieval times in Western Europe. The development of cities, the extension of work and the evolution of mechanics are the premises of a new perception of time that contradicts in many ways the Church's point of view.

Jacques Le Goff is the one who makes the clear distinction between the Church's time and the merchant's time. In fact, he places a lot of the responsibility of the changing perspective on time on the shoulders of this profession more and more powerful in those days. The conflict between the two arose first of all from the issue of the possession of time: the Church stated that time was God's and God's only and that all that man could do with it was to live it as well as he could. The merchant, however, used time to his own profit, meaning that he invented the practice of credit and interest. Merchandise paid on the spot was cheaper than one paid a month after the moment of buying. If one wanted to "buy time" he had to pay the merchant

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<sup>6</sup>C. CAROZZI, *Eschatologie et au-delà. Recherches sur l'Apocalypse de Paul*, Aix-en-Provence, 1994.

*The Annals of Dunărea de Jos University of Galați*, Fasc. XX, Sociology, n<sup>o</sup>. 10, 2015, 91-101.

for it. Of course, the business was growing, capital was accumulated and the merchant became richer and richer.

The threat to the Church's institution was that these people may end up undermining its authority by gaining more power. It is needless to say that between the V<sup>th</sup> and the XV<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Church did not limit its exertion of power on the souls, but fought the State for political and economical power.

So, one of the things the Church criticized and punished when it came to merchants was the fact that they were mortgaging time, on which they had no right, because it was rightfully God's.

A general lector of the Franciscan's Order writes at the beginning of the XIV<sup>th</sup> century:

"Question: do merchants have the right to ask, for the same commercial good, greater sums from those that cannot pay up than from those who do? The right answer is: no, because that way they would sell time and would make usury selling what does not belong to them"<sup>7</sup>.

So we see that this conflict between the Church's time and the merchant's time arises around the middle of the medieval period and defines itself as a major event of the history of mentalities. Even though the Christian doctrine brings a definite fresher image of time, it still sets limits on the way ordinary people perceived it. However, time is still of essence: for Christians, eternity is the infinite extension of time, not the absence of it. One of the few attempts to deny time during the Middle Ages was the saga, in which historical elements are only used without any kind of historicity, that is using expressions like: "that morning", "one sunny day", etc.

The merchant's time is very much like the peasant's time in that it is very dependent on the cycle of seasons: the transport of goods on sea was very difficult during winter or in the rainy seasons. Just like the peasant who is interested in when to plant the seeds, the merchant has to wait for the right moment to sell his product.

Of course, when several merchants are organized in a guild, time becomes a resource that can and has to be measured.

"The field of change, at the time when the aristocracy of dealers follows that of those who coin money in the Middle Ages, announces the time of the stock market, where minutes and seconds make and unmake fortunes"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>Jacques Le Goff, *Pentru un alt Ev Mediu*, Editura Meridiane, Bucharest, 1986, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100.

**The Annals of Dunărea de Jos University of Galați, Fasc. XX, Sociology, n<sup>o</sup>. 10, 2015, 91-101.**

It is only during the Renaissance, that man becomes and feels master of his own time: the one having enough material resources can afford to *spend* his time however he wants, not being forced to sell it for a salary.

Merchants are a social category that contributed immensely to the building of the first cities. Regarded from a temporal point of view, the city makes time more secular: the bells are not only calling men to pray, but, most of all, they are the signal for the moment of the beginning of work. Time becomes a social matter: work time in the XIV<sup>th</sup> century is the object of social conflicts.

If the perception of time changes during these centuries, what is more interesting to notice is in what degree it changes due to the development of measuring instruments. If we have already noted that the use of bells is becoming more and more secularized, as simple instrument of signaling work time, we should pay attention to what happens with the clock. Its appearance in Florence in 1354 shook from the ground the foundation of the religious time tolled by the bells.

Gustav Bilfinger analyzes the fact that the passage from medieval time to modern time cannot be explained solely by the development of technique:

“Along with the point of view of the history of technique, we have to consider the point of view brought by the history of society, of the history of culture. It is not only the passage from the ancient hour to the modern one, but also the passage from an ecclesiastical division of time to a secularized division of time”<sup>9</sup>.

The urban development that meant economical evolution and new working conditions changed the structure of time: it began to be defined according to the moments that were considered appropriate for work. For example, night time work was considered some kind of urban heresy that was severely sanctioned, because the perception was that night time was a time that privileged crime, witchcraft and evil actions.

As we have already mentioned, the measuring of exact time was born in the XIV<sup>th</sup> century in the area of large urban dwellings: Northern Italy, France, Flandres, Germany, areas where rudimentary industry appeared.

Jacques Le Goff mentions that scientific scholastics is one field that generated a new concept of time, in that it stated that time was not an essence but just a conceptual form that served the spirit.

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<sup>9</sup>Gustav BILFINGER, in Jacques LE GOFF, *Pentru un alt Ev Mediu*, Editura Meridiane, Bucharest, 1986, p. 117.

*The Annals of Dunărea de Jos University of Galați*, Fasc. XX, Sociology, n<sup>o</sup>. 10, 2015, 91-101.

Thus, a new time appears: it belongs to men that can measure and dispose of it however they wish, not having to fear divine punishment for this.

#### IV. ARTISTIC REFLECTIONS OF TIME (THE GOTHIC STYLE)

Certainly, this whole passage from the Church's time and the urban secularized time paved the way to the new humanistic thinking and to the Renaissance man.

The influence that this drift has had on the history of culture and mentalities is best seen in the artistic field in general. The conquest of time gave man the confidence to approach the art of painting differently: perspective appears and so the classical painting can be born. When it comes to music, the measuring of time and the new clock of the XIV<sup>th</sup> century make way to the *ars nova*, whose measurable temporality enriches the harmony. Literature introduces a new time, the Romanesque time.

But one of the most faithful expressions of this new concept of time is the gothic style, especially in the architectural field of cathedrals. This style flourished in Europe in the medieval period and it was first called the "French style" (*Opus Francigenum*), while the term gothic was first used in the Reformation era as a stylistic insult, referring to a barbarian culture.

Abbot Suger is the one that can be called the pioneer of this style, with his abbey church of Saint Denis, near Paris. This cathedral has certain particularities that define the gothic style: one of them is the "rose" window that is based on the symbol of the wheel of fortune. Its high, elongated columns, its stained glass windows in the choir of this cathedral are characteristics of what will be consecrated as the gothic architectural style.

Erwin Panofsky notices the connection between the early scholastics and the gothic style initiated by the Saint Denis Church. The years 1270 mark the end of the classical scholastics and also the end of the classical gothic. These changes do not happen abruptly, but more like a slow and progressive decomposition of the existing system<sup>10</sup>. The diminished trust in the supreme power of reason, as it was preached by Saint Thomas of Aquino, becomes the premises of the development of new, more diffuse and less systematic expressions.

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<sup>10</sup>Erwin PANOFSKY, *Arhitectură gotică, gândire scolastică*, Editura Anastasia, Bucharest, 1999, p. 56.

*The Annals of Dunărea de Jos University of Galați*, Fasc. XX, Sociology, n°. 10, 2015, 91-101.



In correspondence to these changes, the classical gothic becomes more refined as can be seen in the arches shaped like harp cords of the cathedral in Strasbourg and the stone broiery of Freiburg.

Subjectivism is a new trait of the new scholastics of William of Ockham, whose expression in gothic art is the interpretation of perspective by artists like Giotto or Duccio. Now, not only what is shown in the paintings is important, but how it is shown.

Cathedrals appear in urban centers and one of the causes of this is the fact that intellectual education moves from monastic institutions to urban schools. What Panofsky states is that the architect itself is, because of his work of building stone ideologies, a kind of scholastic.

Panofsky suggests that "the gothic cathedral does not propose itself to express the truths that are the object of faith and theological reflection, like the Byzantine church embodies in architecture the dogma of orthodox theology, but only to illustrate in stone the way people have reflected about these extramundane, revealed truths"<sup>11</sup>.

Another art historian that founds the development of the gothic cathedral on urban explosion is Elie Faure. In his book, "The history of medieval art"<sup>12</sup>, Faure describes the movement of the cities and the birth of the republic of Florence and the universities of Salerno, Bologna and Paris and makes a connection between these events and the unitary art that is born now. Some characteristics of this unitary art are the great cathedrals, the battlement towers that express the conqueror's right.

"The cathedral was born along with the city, grew and covered itself, in its mature age, with statues and grand stained glasses, dried off and stopped growing when they faded away and died"<sup>13</sup>.

The church of the priests becomes too tight and dark for the new educated people; architecturally, the short vault disappears and leaves place for the light, full of sound church. The huge nave finds itself an important place in the structure of the gothic cathedral. The mason of these cathedrals was a man of his time, as he understood the need for the entire city to fit in such a construction. An element of definitive gothic inspiration and that is very present mostly in French gothic is the pointed arch. The Cathedral of Chartres, the Notre Dame de Paris, and the Cathedral in Amiens are all shaped by the crossing of pointed arches hidden in the high shadows of the nave.

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<sup>11</sup>Sorin DUMITRESCU, in Erwin PANOFSKY, *op.cit*, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup>Elie FAURE, *Istoria artei medievale*, Meridiane, Bucharest, 1990.

<sup>13</sup>Elie FAURE, *op.cit*, p. 92.

**The Annals of Dunărea de Jos University of Galați, Fasc. XX, Sociology, n<sup>o</sup>. 10, 2015, 91-101.**

When it comes to the center of weight of such a construction, we notice that the gothic does away with the vertical weight crushing everything inside. Everything irradiates from the pointed arch and from their diagonals, that do not annul the pressure, but that transmit it indirectly. This pointed arch appears in 1115 in Morienvall.

The stained glass window is another key element in gothic architecture. It was used to emphasize the light, by a filter of color. It was inspired by the Islamic habit of hanging colorful carpets in their mosques; these architects innovated by obtaining almost the same effect of translucide painting on the cathedral walls by these stained glass windows.

In the gothic cathedral, the sculptures are usually on the outside and the vault is nude. The capitol of the columns is much elaborated so that the ensemble gives a feeling of simple and refined altogether.

### CONCLUSION

Medieval man as a typology was a man full of contradictions: caught up in the traditions of his time, fighting to evolve and trying to resist the temptations of this evolution, he was the creator of a wonderful cultural heritage born exactly from these contradictions.

In his childhood, he thought that time was of divine essence and that God was the only one who could dispose of it. In his adolescence, he dared to imply that time was just a mental structure of himself. Adult age made him take time in his own hands and control it, by taming it and measuring it. And finally, in his old age he understood that this new status of time was one making him fully responsible for his use of it; making him his own, he subjected himself to it again.

In fact, gothic architecture speaks volumes about the medieval man: no longer wanting to spend his time in a dark, small church, he launches himself in grand architectural projects that promise him a closer encounter with the divine light. The pointed arch is the leap towards a new time, the stained glass is a new way of perceiving reality, and the rose window is the consciousness of the human destiny.

Many have compared gothic cathedrals to sand castles: the elegant, yet slim figure, the elaborate exterior workings, the broidery of the walls. It is easy to find similitude between the two; the difference is what defines the gothic and the man that created it: no sea could sweep it away, not even that of cultural and historical change.

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