COMPARATIVE APPROACHES TO THE RITUAL WORLD OF THE MEDIEVAL MEDITERRANEAN

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Pleased to meet you
Hope you guess my name
But what's puzzling you
Is the nature of my game

(M. Jagger/K. Richards, Sympathy for the Devil)

Modern ritual studies, a very young discipline going back to the late 1970s, define their research subject very broadly as “all kinds of symbolic acts.”¹ In contrast to older concepts which usually regarded rituals as secondary phenomena of specific social and psychological contexts, recent empiric and theoretical approaches examine them as entities sui generis embedded in a great variety of cultural milieux and social subsystems, such as politics, law, science, art, education, economics, and religion.² They are by no means merely ornamental ingredients of social relations, but very essential modes of human expression creating and confirming cultural meaning. Consequently, they are nowadays viewed in close connection with the notion of performance, which in this context refers to the conscious projection or ritualization of social acts.³ A second key aspect in the study of ritual behaviour is its relevance for human communication, a perspective that resulted from the so-called linguistic turn in humanities and social sciences. A case in point is what is known as performative speech, i.e., strictly formalized forms of speech, as occur in greetings, oaths, formulas of investiture, prayers and so on and serve as tools to display concepts of order and to create social relations.⁴ All in all, we may speak of rituals as culturally standardized and repetitive forms of action of symbolic character, which aim at exerting influence on human affairs and allow a better understanding of man’s position in the universe. In

² Ibid., pp. 8–9.
³ Ibid., pp. 9–17.
this sense they fulfil an essential function in creating or securing emo-
tional and symbolic coherence, harmony, identity, and memory among
members of a community, they mark ruptures and thresholds in a com-
munity's social structure, they provide mechanisms for overcoming crises,
and, not least, they help people communicate with a transcendent sphere
of supernatural forces.

Of crucial significance for all topics discussed in the contributions of
the present volume is the question as to what role rituals play in political
life. On the basis of a broad and disparate set of cases extending from the
seventeenth to the twentieth century, the anthropologist David I. Kertzer
laid the theoretical foundation for understanding rituals as mechanisms
producing and maintaining solidarity through a constant process of
renewal engendered by people acting together. On a functional level, he
argues, rituals serve as symbolic tools enabling individuals to identify with
political regimes and supporting rulers to legitimate themselves and to
maintain their grasp on power. Ritual, therefore, because of its neutrality
regarding political ideologies, is a very efficient resource and weapon in
political struggles.5 Another direction in modern sociology and political
sciences applies theories of semiotics to the analysis of modern politi-
cal systems by focusing on language as a form of political action and on
the way political institutions and processes are organized as spectacles
through dramaturgical elements and highly stylized and schematic forms
of communication.6

It is well known that, in the framework of a general trend towards anthro-
pological approaches and a re-interpretation of political mechanisms and
practices,7 from the 1980s onwards the role and function of rituals in pre-
modern societies has become a very prominent research topic among
medievalists, producing an impressive range of studies related to aspects
of verbal and non-verbal symbolic modes of expression and ritual forms
of action during the Middle Ages. An early attempt to bring historians

5 D. I. Kertzer, Rituals, Politics, and Power (New Haven, 1988); see also the review of
6 See, for example, M. Edelman, Politik als Ritual: Die symbolische Funktion staatlicher
Institutionen und politischen Handelns, trans. H. Fliessbach, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt, 2005),
pp. vii–xviii.
7 For especially influential anthropological approaches, see, for instance, V. Turner,
The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967); idem, The Ritual Pro-
cess: Structure and Anti-structure (Berlin, 1969); C. Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: 
Selected Essays (New York, 1973); R. A. Rappaport, Ritual and Religion in the Making of
Humanity (Cambridge, 1999).