

The role of Ecclesiastical Stairs, Galleries and Upper Spaces in Medieval ‘Bad Behaviour’

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Abstract

In the course of the author’s research documenting the known uses of medieval ecclesiastical stairs, galleries and upper chambers, normal activities were typically encountered. However, there were occasions when ‘bad behaviour’ took place in these contexts. The article explores some of these instances.

These include the unwelcome intrusion of men-at-arms in a gallery at Glastonbury Abbey shortly after the Conquest; the use of galleries for refuge by a thief at Durham Cathedral in the twelfth century and an assassination in front of a gallery altar at Bruges in the thirteenth century. There are also instances concerning novice monks: some at Ramsey in the tenth century cracked a bell, another, it was claimed, slept off bouts of drunkenness in a gallery space. Some boys investigating a staircase at Beverley Minster in the thirteenth century provided the context for a miracle – though in this case their behaviour was not bad in itself but rather precipitated by a heavy-handed response from the minster authorities. To add to these cases, there are instances where ‘good behaviour’ was retrospectively seen as bad, such as in the case of a tightrope walker at Durham Cathedral who, in contrast to a similar act at Notre-Dame, Paris in the 1380s, fell from the rope to his death – much like the accident which befell Eilmer, the monk at Glastonbury, who was left unable to walk properly after his investigations into experimental flight.

The article considers, as well as other ideas, the questions how typical bad behaviour in these spaces was in overall terms and whether instances of it were, perhaps, disproportionately well-recorded.

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