

The ambivalent space: Where to bury a king?

Thomas Meier

Ringsted; Speyer; Westminster; rite de passage; kinship

humiliatio

King Pipin (+768), father of Charlemagne, was buried outside the doors of the abbey-church of St-Denis. According to abbot Suger (12th century) he does not lie on his back, but with his face downwards, because of the sins of his father Charles Martell. (Dierkens 1996, esp. 41–43). Basically this (representative) penance was a double degradation: The disgraceful burial face downwards and then the place of burial outside the church, which does not at all seem appropriate for a king. Pipin, twice and penitently damaging the honour of his social position, demonstrated utmost humility (*humilitas*) and thereby hoped to gain God's mercy.

Pipin was not the only one to ask for a dishonourable burial place: Richard Lionheart (+1199) likewise showed repentance on his deathbed and wanted to be buried at Fontevrault at the feet of his father Henry II, whom he had troubled so much during his lifetime (Matthaei Parisiensis *Chronica majora* ad a. 1199, 451: *Corpus vero suum apud Fontem Ebraudi, secus pedes patris sui, cujus proditorem se confitebatur, sepeliri iubens*). We may guess that Richard's idea was a symbolic tread (*calcatio*), as sign of total surrender to which the son humbly submits himself.

exaltatio

Archaeological sources by no way confirm the written records, which would tell us that the burial place outside the church portal was the site assigned to poor penitents. On the contrary, those rare cases where this area is excava-

ted sufficiently imply that the atrium and the proximity to the church doors was a privileged burial place: Here graves are concentrated, which are specified in various ways, by special elaboration or grave goods (e. g. Jäggi et al. 1993, 73–75). Arnold Angenendt has demonstrated that the burial in front of the church portal has its roots in the Augustinian topography of the other world, where the place in front of the gates of Celestial Jerusalem is attributed to the *non valde boni*. Here these not (yet) very good ones are waiting in happy certainty of their salvation, the purification of their sins and the final entry into the Celestial City. Therefore the place at the portal of the church, which was the earthly substitution of Celestial Jerusalem, may be acknowledged as a secure preparation to eternal happiness. And indeed, some of those buried there sooner or later entered paradise and accordingly their remains were transferred to the church altars (Angenendt 1994). With respect to this, the burial in front of the church portal loses a lot of its gesture of humility and penitence; quite to the contrary, it claims an even greater elevation (*exaltatio*) in consequence: The secure participation in the kingdom of heaven.

The same applies to the wish to be buried at the ancestor's feet: At Fontevrault the original position of the royal graves is not identified, but the Danish royal burial site of Ringsted offers a good example (fig. 1): At first Knud Lavard (+1131), who was slayed during a throne-quarrel and therefore regarded a martyr by his party, was accordingly buried in the sanctuary of the old church of Ringsted and soon (1146/69) raised as a saint. At the same time a new church was erected, in which Knud's original grave received a position in the

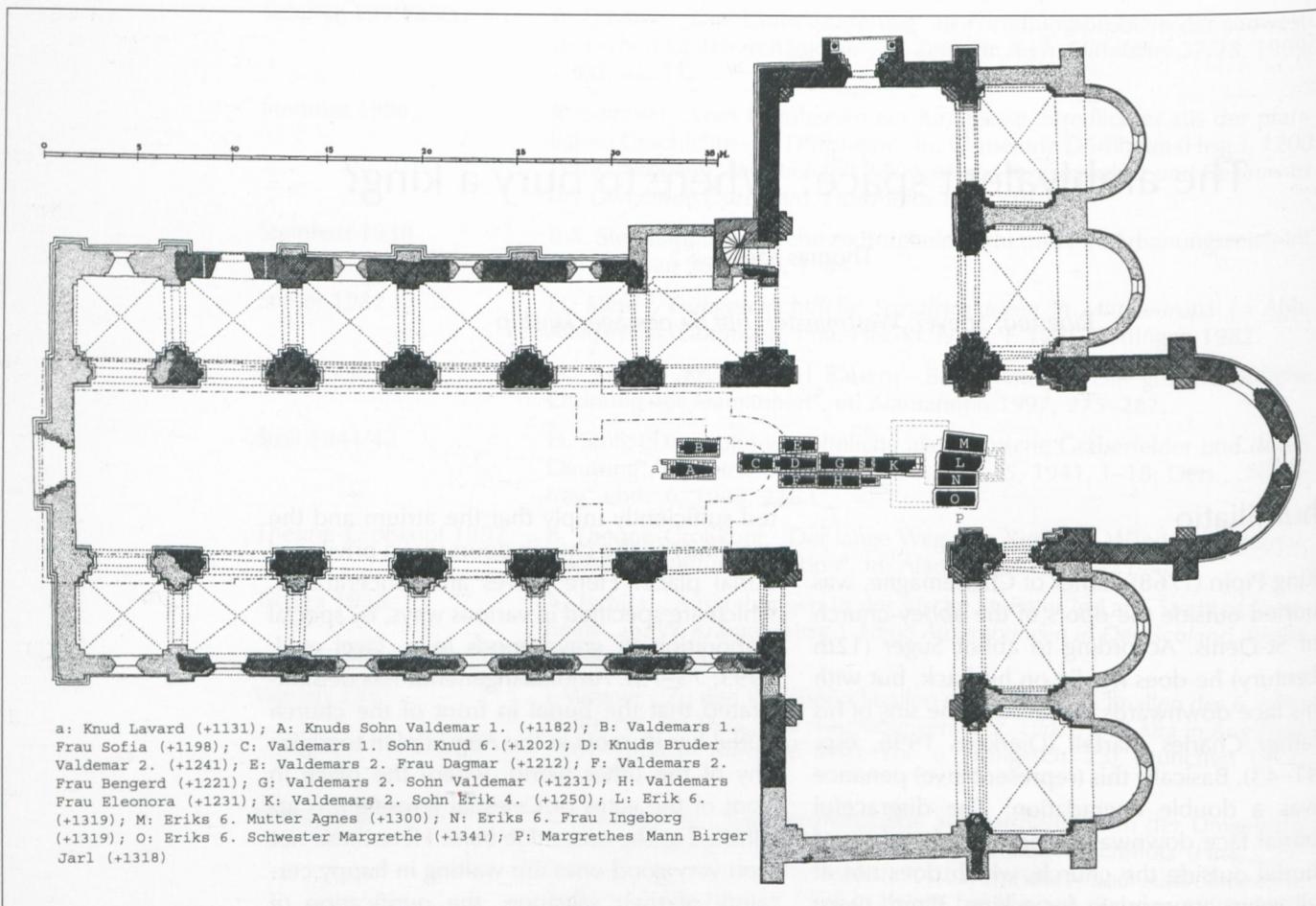


Fig. 1: Ringsted, burial site of Danish kings (after Hermansen/Nørlund 1936, 117; 162).

easternmost bay of the new nave. To the east of this grave six rows of burials of Knud's issues, who then had happily conquered the throne, are following *ad pedes* straight to the steps of the new sanctuary, where now the shrine of the holy predecessor was positioned (Hermansen/Nørlund 1936, 109; 162–168): The continuing custom of burials at the ancestors' feet caused a considerable progression of the graves to the east in direction of the altar, the sacral centre of the church.

This position of graves at the eastern end of the nave and in front of the sanctuary was the supreme place a layman could acquire for his burial in the High Middle Ages; therefore it is the appropriate and normal site for royal graves. The same position is occupied e.g. by the royal graves in Speyer cathedral. They particularly reveal tremendous exaltation of the dead: Speyer is one of those very few medieval towns with a linear street-axis, passing the town like a *via triumphalis* for almost 700 metres and aiming at the cathedral (fig. 2). The entrance representing the portal of Celestial Jerusalem is emphasised by a tremendous

westwork, which prolongs the iconography of an antique triumphal arch. Inside the cathedral the town-axis is straightly continued through the nave as a *via sacra* (Bandmann 1994, 89; Ehlers 1996, 82) and stops just in front of the crossing, where the floor abruptly rises by 3.5 metres plus the height of the chancel screen. Here, where the view is violently blocked, the royal graves were placed right in front of the altar of the Holy Rood and underneath a huge triumphal cross (fig. 3) (Haas/Kubach 1972, 27, Nr. 51; 839–919; Meier 1998). So the position at the feet gains a completely new meaning, which is no longer a gesture of earthly surrender: Here the buried are resting at the feet of God, just as in the apocalypse, where the 24 seniors are sitting at the feet of the Celestial Throne (Apc 4,4: *et in circuitu sedis sedilia viginti quattuor et super thronos viginti quattuor seniores sedentes*). Additionally, they evoke the souls of the martyrs resting underneath the altar in front of God's throne on the opening of the 5th seal (Apc 6,9: *vidi subtus altare animas interfectorum propter verbum Dei et propter testimo-*

nium quod habebant). At the opening of the 7th seal and by the sound of the seven trumpets an angel offers incense at this altar while all the saints are praying, the incense of the prayers rises to the throne of God (Apc 8,3f.: *et alius angelus venit et stetit ante altare habens turibulum aureum et data sunt illi incensa multa ut daret orationibus sanctorum omnium super altare aureum quod est ante thronum et ascendit fumus incensorum de orationibus sanctorum de manu angeli coram Deo*). By the opening of the seals of the apocalyptic book by the slaughtered lamb, the sacrificed Christ, a further important connection between the altar of the Holy Rood/the triumphal cross and the apocalyptic altar is established. So the way of the Speyer kings leads along the earthly triumphal street directly into the Celestial Jerusalem of the church and at the altar in front of God's throne: The earthly rule is leading to a participation of heavenly power.

stirps

At Speyer two rows of royal graves are surrounding Konrad II. (†1039). He, who was to become the forefather of all those kings buried here during four dynasties and nearly three hundred years, occupies the central position of the eastern row. After the Salians and Staufians even the first Habsburgians and Luxemburgians closed up. When Rudolf I. of Habsburg (†1291) was buried directly west of Konrad II., the first Salian rested *ad pedes* of the first Habsburgian, a fact which excludes a degrading interpretation of this arrangement. At Ringsted the royal burial site is structured due to the *ad pedes*-principle practised rather consequently: One row corresponds approximately with one generation. The groundplan therefore resembles a genealogical table, above all stressing the succession of the family buried here. The eastward proceeding of graves at Ringsted signals a general development, which transgresses the steps of the choir and results in burials within the sanctuary in the later Middle Ages. Most striking examples are provided in Pisa, Naples and Westminster, where the tombs of emperor Heinrich VII. (†1313), Roberto il Sabio (†1343) and Henry V (1422) were positioned at the central end of the chancel, a place normally fitting for the

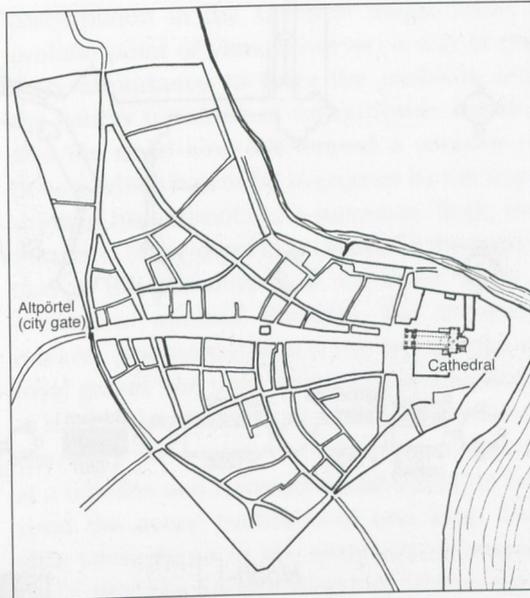


Fig. 2: Speyer, plan of the medieval town, showing the street axis between the city gate and the cathedral.

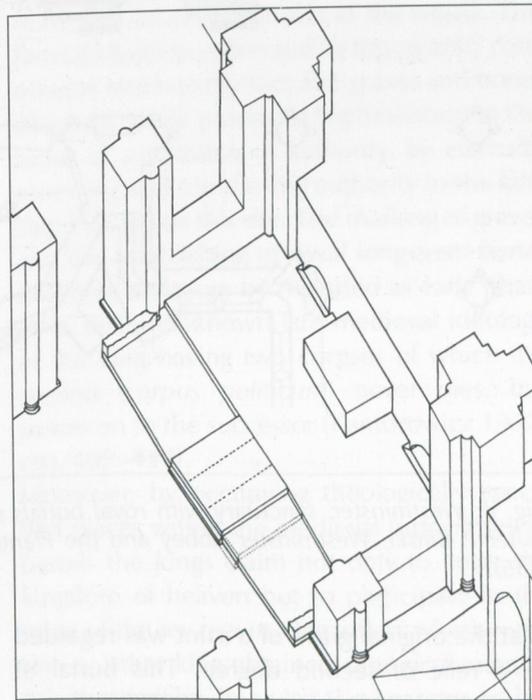


Fig. 3: Speyer, isometric reconstruction of the royal burial site at ca. 1060/90.

shrines of saints (Meier 2002, 342 f.). The establishment of the burial site of Westminster was also initiated by devotion, since Henry III (†1272) had once submitted himself totally to the protection of saint Edward the Confessor, in whose original grave he wished to rest (Hope 1907, 526 f.). We must keep in mind

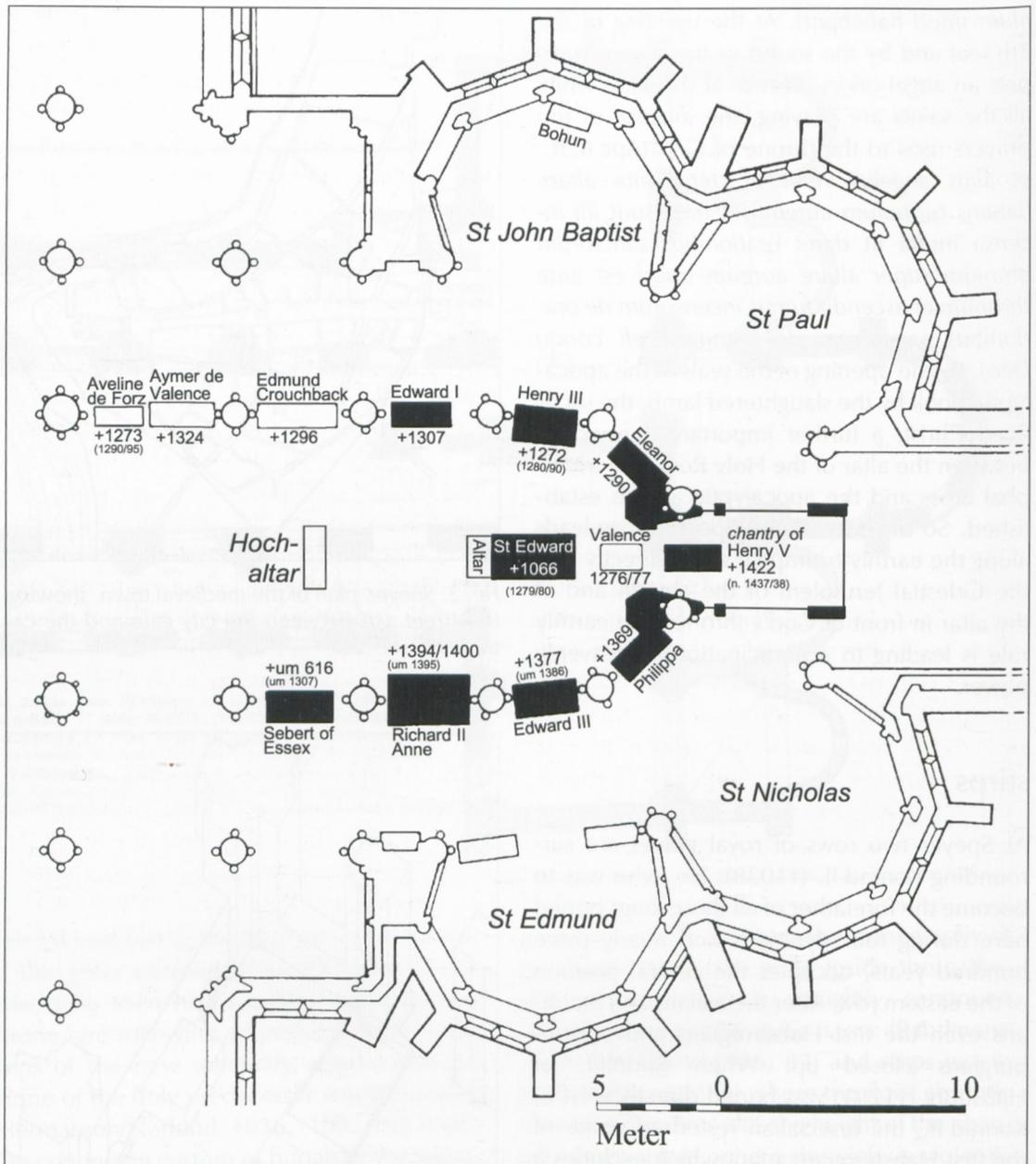


Fig. 4: Westminster, sanctuary with royal burials surrounding the shrine of St Edward the Confessor (after P. Binski, *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets* [New Haven/London 1995] fig. 132; 151; 255).

that the original grave of a saint was regarded as a relic of second degree. This burial of Henry III therefore means a participation in the holiness of the Anglo-Saxon ancestor of the Angevin kings. Consequently, his son later erected his father's tomb not only opposite saint Edward's shrine, but also copied the structure of the shrine, treating the king's corpse as an equivalent to the body of the saint (Meier 2002, 339–341). As in Ringsted and Speyer, the royal family at Westminster later clustered around the holy forefather in the sanctuary (fig. 4).

interpretatio

All in all, the positions of royal burials demonstrate as well a religious ideal of humility as a direct participation of the dead in the divine glory. Such different interpretations on the functions of the topography of burial sites are traceable to early Christian times: Theologians, discussing the *ad sanctos*-burials (e.g. Augustine, Gregory the Great), stressed that the vicinity of ordinary graves to the grave of a saint evokes supplementary prayers by pilgrims and is therefore beneficial to salvation. In the gen-

eral view, however, the close vicinity to the saint's grave and his close proximity to God, i. e. the topography itself sufficed to promote the salvation of the soul (Scholz 1998, 271–285). In the same way theologians were arguing about graves outside the church portal, which were meant to inspire those passing by to prayer (Angenendt 1994, 72 f.). All the same, mere topography – as demonstrated above – implied admission to Celestial Jerusalem. Similarly, kings buried at the eastern end of the nave may be interpreted as seniors at the feet of the Divine Majesty or as saints underneath the apocalyptic altar, but also as humiliate sinners, whose pitiful souls had to be consoled by prayers and masses. In a theological sense, as I would call it, topography could not promote salvation by itself, but only when it is transformed by religious acts (e. g. prayers), which were the only essentials for salvation. In another, let us call it a more laical – without implying non-religious – sense, topography itself is promoting salvation without any further rituals or ideological frames; the correspondence of earthly and heavenly topography is not regarded as an ideal but as reality.

ritus

How, then, were the different interpretations of topography dealt with? It should not be forgotten that the representatives of the divergent theological and laical conceptions of topography were members of one society and shared the same mental predispositions. Christianity, being one of these mental predispositions, offered one solution: In Christian ideology humility on earth was the necessary condition for elevation in heaven. The certainty that the dead conquered the Celestial Crown provoked a posthumous elevation on earth as well (veneration). By the idea of tradition this posthumous veneration has its influence on the present world – the coexistence of humiliation and elevation was well known to a Christian society.

What is more, the Christian model of humiliation and elevation embodies the characteristic features of a *rite de passage* (Bornscheuer 1968; Turner 1969, 166–203). Which transition is meant in the case of royal burials? From a religious point of view it is undoubtedly the transition to the kingdom of Heaven and the

participation in the Celestial Reign. From a profane point of view, however, it was of primary importance to solve the problem with the earthly transition of ruling power. Eventually, the dead king left behind a vacuum of power, which had to be overcome by the transition of his authority to a successor. Both, the transition of the dead to heaven and the transition of the authority to a successor, were a process of minimal duration. But by grave markers and memorial acts the topography of royal graves and their immanent ambivalence of humiliation and elevation was perpetuated. Therefore the transition expressed was to aim at a timeless and transindividual transition beyond the actual transition of one king. This idea takes shape in the great (trans)dynastic burial sites like Speyer, Ringsted, Westminster or St-Denis and Prague, where the sum of royal burials constitutes a total manifestation of a general transition of authority. In this eternal continuity of transition the individuality of the single king and his death dissolve and he exists from now on only as a part of the whole. The liminal situation expressed by topography contributes much to the fact that graves and burial sites as a whole produced legitimisation in the sense of a tradition of authority, by eternally renewing and transferring authority to the kinship burying on this site. The marking of graves and the establishing of royal long-term burial sites may therefore be regarded as early phases of that well-known late medieval ideology of the king having two corpses of which the second (*corpus politicum*) never dies, but passes on to the successor (Kantorowicz 1957, esp. 409–437).

Moreover, by occupying theologically specified places within the medieval topography of burials the kings claim not only to enter the kingdom of heaven but to participate in the reign of the *rex regum*. Regardless whether the one or other king obtained canonical sanctity, this topography, implying the ancestor to belong to the blissful, provided a religious fundament to the actual king by means of tradition (kinship).

The ambivalence of royal burials extends over humility and celestial elevation of the dead, over religious ideal and earthly transition of authority, over individual death and an abstract idea of power. As a whole, these burials form an arch, under which a medieval kingship could maintain and flourish in a Christian society.

gratitudo

My special thanks to T. Tepelmann for helping me with the English version of this paper.

Bibliography

- Angenendt 1994 A. Angenendt, "In porticu ecclesiae sepultus. Ein Beispiel von himmlisch-irdischer Spiegelung", in: H. Keller/N. Staubach (eds.), *Iconologia sacra. Mythos, Bildkunst und Dichtung in der Religions- und Sozialgeschichte Alt-europas*, Festschr. K. Hauck (= Arbeiten Frühmittelalterforsch. 23), Berlin/New York, 1994, 68–80.
- Bandmann 1994 G. Bandmann, *Mittelalterliche Architektur als Bedeutungsträger*, Berlin, 1994¹⁰.
- Bornscheuer 1968 L. Bornscheuer, *Miseriae regum. Untersuchungen zum Krisen- und Todesgedanken in den herrschaftstheologischen Vorstellungen der ottonisch-salischen Zeit* (= Arbeiten Frühmittelalterforsch. 4), Berlin, 1968.
- Dierkens 1996 A. Dierkens, "La mort, les funérailles et la tombe du roi Pépin le Bref (768)", in: *Médiévales* 31, 1996, 37–51.
- Ehlers 1996 C. Ehlers, *Metropolis Germaniae. Studien zur Bedeutung Speyers für das Königtum (751–1250)* (= Veröff. Max-Planck-Inst. Gesch. 125), Göttingen, 1996.
- Haas/Kubach 1972 W. Haas/H. E. Kubach, *Der Dom zu Speyer* (= Kunstdenkm. Rheinland-Pfalz 5), München, 1972.
- Hermansen/Nørlund 1936 V. Hermansen/P. Nørlund, *Sorø amt 1. Danmarks kirker*, København, 1936.
- St John Hope 1907 W. H. St John Hope, "On the funeral effigies of the kings and queens of England, with special interest to those in the abbey church of Westminster", in: *Archaeologia* 60, 1907, 517–570.
- Jäggi et al. 1993 C. Jäggi/H.-R. Meier/R. Windler/M. Illi, *Die Stadtkirche St. Laurentius in Winterthur. Ergebnisse der archäologischen und historischen Forschungen* (= Zürcher Denkmalpflege. Arch. Monogr. 14), Zürich/Egg, 1993.
- Kantorowicz 1957 E. H. Kantorowicz, *The king's two bodies. A study in mediaeval political theology*, Princeton N.Y., 1957².
- Matthaei Parisiensis *Matthaei Parisiensis, Monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica majora*; ed. H. R. Luard (= Rer. Brit. Medii Aevi Script. 57), London, 1874.
- Meier 1998 T. Meier, "Zwischen Stiftern und Heiligen – die Saliergräber im Speyerer Dom", in: *Beitr. Mittelalterarch. Österreich* 14, 1998, 37–48.
- Meier 2002 T. Meier, *Die Archäologie des mittelalterlichen Königsgrabes im christlichen Europa* (= Mittelalter-Forsch. 8), Stuttgart, 2002.
- Scholz 1998 S. Scholz, "Das Grab in der Kirche. Zu seinen theologischen und rechtlichen Hintergründen in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter", in: *Zeitschr. Savigny-Stift. Rechtsgesch., Kanon. Abt.* 84, 1998, 270–306.
- Turner 1969 V. W. Turner, *The ritual process. Structure and anti-structure*, Chicago, 1969.

Address

Thomas Meier
Institut für Vor- und Frühgeschichte und Provinzialrömische Archäologie
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität
Geschwister-Scholl-Platz 1, D-80539 München
thomas.meier@vfa.fak12.uni-muenchen.de