The rationale of gestures in the West: third to thirteenth centuries

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The culture of the Middle Ages has sometimes been called a 'culture of gestures' or a 'gestural culture'. Such expressions have a double meaning: first the movements and attitudes of the human body played a crucial role in the social relationships of the past. Second, medieval culture itself thought about its own gestures, and indeed constructed a medieval theory of gestures.

**The importance of gestures**

According to some historians, the weakness of literacy explains the importance of gestures in the Middle Ages. Marc Bloch, for example, pointed out the ritualization of feudal society, the formalism that was expressed by gestures and words more than by written records.' We would scarcely imagine today that a simple gesture could possess legal power or could commit people more efficiently than a written form drawn up by a notary and signed by both parties. At least until the thirteenth century, however, when cities and commercial activities began to develop rapidly and when
growing state bureaucracies helped to spread literacy, gestures were much more powerful than such documents.

However, for two reasons I will not oppose 'gestural' culture and 'literate culture' schematically. First, the Middle Ages always knew both gestures and literacy (as we do today), although the balance between them changed from one century to the next and from one social group to the next. On the one hand, medieval culture gave writing and reading an even greater emphasis since they were rare and were used to spread God's Word, itself called 'Scripture'. For this reason literacy was for centuries monopolized by the Church, by the clerics who were accustomed to write in Latin. Second, we should not forget that writing too was a kind of gesture at a time when the only form of writing was writing by hand."

Indeed, very few people could write and therefore commitment had to be made through ritual gestures, formal words, and symbolic objects (a reliquary, the host, a sword, etc.). Gestures transmitted political and religious power; they made such transmission public, known by all, and they gave legal actions a living image, as for example when a lord received in his hand the homage of his vassals or when a bishop laid his hand on the head of a newly consecrated priest. Gestures bound together human wills and human bodies.

In fact, the human body was of greatest importance in medieval society and culture. The human being was thought of as double consisting of a soul and a body, an invisible inside and a visible outside linked by a dynamic relationship. Such a relationship was a fundamental feature of all the medieval ideas about mankind, space, social order, and cosmos. Gestures figured, or better, embodied the dialectic between intus and foris since they were supposed to express without the 'secret movements' of the soul within.

However, the body was ambivalent. On the one hand, it was thought of as the 'prison of the soul', the servant of sin, an obstacle on the way to salvation. That negative judgement did not spare gestures, especially when they seemed to transgress the proper limits imposed by ethics and social custom: those 'bad' gestures were termed 'gesticulations'.

On the other hand, salvation had to be reached through the
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body and especially by means of ritual gestures of charity, penance, and piety. For Christians (unlike dualist heretics), the body was a sort of necessary evil that could be used positively. The Bible, from Adam to Christ, illustrated and taught all manner of gestures – both sinful ones that bore the label of the Fall as well as virtuous gestures that permitted the redemption of mankind.

Society itself was metaphorically thought of as a 'body' whose 'members' – the head, the arms, the sides, the belly, the legs, the feet – represented the different social groups with their distinctive functions and values, languages, signs, coats of arms, and also their individual gestures. Lay people, monks and canons, knights and merchants, scholars, made up different 'gestural communities'. In such a society, there was little room for individuals: everyone belonged to an ordo, a word with a non-coincidental reference to the ritual ordines of liturgy. Thus, society was strongly ritualized; gestures permitted everyone to confirm his belonging to one particular group. They also expressed hierarchies between the social groups and, within each one, between different ranks and dignities. Thus, all gestures had their importance: not just the most solemn rituals (royal coronations, marriage, the mass), but all the small gestures of everyday life such as making the sign of the cross when entering a church, beginning to eat, or facing danger.

A person was never alone while performing gestures. Even the hermit in the desert (that is, the medieval forest) or the monk in his cell acted at least under God's omniscient 'eyes'. More commonly, gestures were always performed towards someone else – to speak or to fight with, to greet or to challenge. Between individuals, and between individuals and God, in order to communicate or to pray, people continually made gestures that involved both their bodies and their souls. They gave their gestures all the values of their faith (in the double meaning of the medieval fides, secular homage and religious belief), all the symbolic values of their social rank, and all the hopes of their life until and even after their death.

Therefore, we cannot doubt that the study of gestures, from the most solemn to the most ordinary and even unconscious, allows the historian to enter deeply into the functioning of medieval society, its symbolic values, its ways of life, and its modes of thought.

When historians today speak of medieval gestures, they cannot
avoid comparing them to gestures of their own. Like ethnologists working within other cultures, historians face societies different from their own and realize that they have grown up and live in a different 'gestural society'. Although we usually think that we are using fewer or more moderate gestures than our ancestors or our neighbours (the Italians as viewed by the French, the French by the Americans), in our own culture gestures fulfil crucial ideological and practical functions. They serve obvious public and private rituals and they are means of non-verbal communication. We make more gestures than we realize.

However, gestures change from one place to another and from one time to another. Some gestures may even disappear through history and others may emerge. Some metaphorical expressions such as 'to throw down the gauntlet' or 'to take off one's hat' remind us of past gestures that would no longer actually be performed. For instance, we use the expression that the administration is 'making a gesture' toward another country or toward workers on strike, with the hope that a limited concession may have the same result as a more substantial (military or financial) action. The expression is quite ambiguous. It shows that real gestures no longer resolve social or diplomatic conflicts, but it also indicates that we identify 'gesture' with almost nothing that is material, just what we call a 'symbolic' act. Nevertheless, we notice that such a symbolic act does produce something, that it has real efficacy.

Thus, even when there is no real gesture we remember and underline the power of gestures, and not just the technical efficacy of gestures of work or 'body techniques' (the techniques du corps studied by Marcel Mauss in his pioneering study)" but the symbolic power of many gestures and rituals. And this is especially true for medieval culture.

**HOW TO RECONSTRUCT MEDIEVAL GESTURES?**

Gestures, like words, belong to an ephemeral world. Usually they do not leave any traces for historians. There are only a few exceptions. For example, by studying the shape or ductus of a letter, paleographers can reconstruct the movement of the hand
that drew it centuries earlier. Some sculptures or paintings also disclose the technical gestures of the artists, the movements and pressure of the hand. Bone deformations permit archaeologists to understand ancient modes of crouching. But usually historians do not grasp anything but textual or iconographic representations of gestures. These representations are of differing kinds.

Some texts simply mention isolated gestures but do not describe them. We might know that King Arthur and his knights met to eat, but we do not know how they ate, how they held their knives or moved their heads or their feet. Sometimes, we get better descriptions. We know for instance how Charlemagne expressed grief by pulling his heard and crying with an abundance of tears. Occasionally we even find a moral or aesthetic judgement or an abstract thought about the meanings and social values of such gestures.

However, unlike the anthropologist who can observe them directly, in all such cases – from the merest mention to the most elaborate description – we can never reach the gestures themselves. This means that we have to take into account all of the biases, the weight of vocabulary, and the ideologies that intrude between the gestures, the texts, and ourselves.

This interference is equally present when we observe images. Medieval art was essentially anthropomorphic. The human figure was depicted everywhere, and invisible beings (God, the devil, the angels) were likewise given a human figure. So there are countless images of gestures. But such representations of gestures depend at least as much on the specific rules of figuration in medieval art as on direct observation of gestures by the artists. To begin with, the fixity of medieval images creates a huge problem. All the gestures that were mere movement (for example blessing while making the sign of the cross) had to be frozen by the artist. But at what point? The artist could choose to emphasize the hand held up rather than down, but he could not suggest the movement itself, its direction, or its speed.

Dealing with literary or legal texts and with images, some historians have attempted to build up typologies of medieval gestures according to the parts of the body with which they were concerned (gestures of the head, of the arms, of the hands, etc.) or according to the possible meanings of gestures (gestures of grief or
joy, of greeting, meeting, or leaving; gestures of respect, prayer, homage, blessing, etc.). Many studies are more limited, referring to a single illuminated manuscript (for example, Eike von Repgow's Sachsenspiegel), one kind of gesture (gestures of prayer, gestures of despair), or to the work of one single artist (Giotto).

My own purpose is neither to trace the history of one particular gesture nor to limit myself to one particular piece of literary or iconographic evidence, nor even to construct a typology or dictionary of medieval gestures. I ask a more general question: what actually constituted 'making a gesture' in the Middle Ages? How and by whom were gestures not only performed but also thought about, classified, and figured? What cultural patterns, what attitudes towards persons and the body, what social relationships were expressed in all of these judgements? Was there a medieval theory of gestures?

**Medieval ideas about gestures**

A large and diverse body of evidence including theological, legal, literary, pedagogical, and medical texts; monastic rules and customaries; liturgical ordines, vision narratives, treatises on prayer and preaching, liturgical dramas; and mirrors of princes, among others, may help answer such broad questions. As for images, particularly helpful are series of pictures showing different aspects of the same gesture which attempt to suggest movement, and, more generally speaking, express an attempt to think of gestures figuratively.

Altogether, it seems to me that medieval ideas about gestures, their functions, and their values may be summarized according to three notions. First, the notion of expressivity. Gestures were considered expressions of the inner movements of the soul, of feelings, of the moral values of individuals. In the West this notion belonged to a very old tradition. From one age to another it acquired different connotations: ethical ones in antiquity or in the Christian tradition, more psychological ones today when we enquire into the physical expression of feelings. In the Middle Ages, gestures seemed to be the outer expression of the 'movements
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of the soul', whereas the 'discipline' of gestures (drawn for instance from a monastic rule) was supposed to improve the soul.

A second axis consisted of what today we call non-verbal communication. It has slowly emerged from the old tradition of rhetoric inherited from pagan wisdom. But within Christianity, the symbolic values of the Word changed the balance between speech and gestures, whereas the social conditions of public communication were changing as well. Space and time shifted from the agora and the ancient theatre to the medieval pulpit. Also the principal actors gesturing on the social stage evolved from the rhetorician to the priest, the teacher, or even jugglers.

The third axis was concerned with efficacy, with its double meaning: the practical efficacy of technical gestures (sawing, moving, writing, etc.) and the symbolic efficacy of political or sacramental rituals.

Expression, communication, efficacy: such issues did not remain unchanged throughout the long Middle Ages. From late antiquity until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries gestures and their medieval interpretations had a complex history. This history was hardly linear, but showed successive attempts to give gestures new interpretations, new kinds of figurations, as well as to impose on them a tighter control. Such attempts were part of the elaboration of new ideas about the body, the individual, the interactions between social actors, and attitudes toward nature and the supernatural. In short, since gestures involved both the individual and society, the soul and the body, the human and the divine, the observation of gestures became a laboratory for the new forms of rationality that developed during the Middle Ages. This was especially true at three different periods: late antiquity, the 'Carolingian Renaissance', and above all during the revival of an urban civilization in the West during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Late antiquity was a period of reception and transformation of pagan representations of gestures and a time of important innovations. From antiquity, the Middle Ages inherited many gestures (for instance rhetorical gestures of declamatio, legal gestures of dextrarum iunctio, the orans gesture of prayer) as well as intellectual tools with which to think and speak about gestures. The words and notions of gestus, gesticulatio, motus, came from
antiquity along with their intellectual, moral, or scientific context: the ethics of social behaviour; the art of rhetoric (whose fifth and last part dealt with actio or pronuntiatio, the physical performance); the medical enquiry about the body and its movements; and the musical and mathematical notions of harmony that ought to rule all movements of the body as well as the entire universe. Christianity took up all of these notions, combining them with other patterns inherited from the Bible. Thus gestures had to fit new social and religious models. The orator was no longer a rhetor but a praying member of the faithful or a priest. After the Church was born, clerics sought to distinguish themselves from the laity. They wanted to benefit from gestures of allegiance partly borrowed from imperial ceremonial and they assumed that their new dignity reflected these marks of respect from their own persons onto God. Augustine played a key role for Christian understanding of gestures, while defining them as conventional signs making communication possible between all beings, human and supernatural, between man and God, the angels or the devil (tracing here a distinction between 'superstitious' gestures and legitimate gestures of prayer or sacramental gestures).

Typical of the Christian ethics of that time was the interiorization of the notions of sin and shame that led to a greater distrust of the body and, along with it, of gestures. Gestures were easily judged as expressions of the vices of pride (superbia) and lust (luxuria) that had to be contained and punished. Finally, monasticism developed as a completely new gestural institution with a large range of ascetic and penitential gestures and with new forms of collective prayer and liturgy.

The 'Carolingian Renaissance' partly revived these traditions from late antiquity. Within the framework of the liberal arts (rhetoric and music) Remigius of Auxerre was the first author to give gestures a definition. He opposed the gesture (gestus) of a single limb to the movement (motus) of the whole body. Simultaneously, liturgical gestures were codified in ordines and explained systematically by Amalarius of Metz. Iconography (such as that of the Utrecht Psalter or the Stuttgart Psalter) emphasized the central role of the hand of God as a pattern for human gestures and the main tool for ruling man and transforming the world.

Thus, in addition to the old pattern of a moderate gestus, as
opposed to the *demonic gesticulatio* of those who were possessed by the devil, there was another kind of 'holy gesticulation' inspired by God. It was illustrated in the Bible by the sacred dance of David, jumping naked before the ark, and it was carried out by liturgical procession, collective psalmody of monks, or even dancing in churches. I would call such behaviour *gesta* or 'la geste' (as in 'la chanson de gestes') rather than *gestus*, 'le geste', a word that became much rarer during the same period. Actually, the idea prevailed that men could not control all of their gestures, that supernatural powers ruled their bodies and movements (as we can see in many images of the Psalmist or of the Evangelists). These powers were ruling their fate on earth as well: history too was termed *yeustn*.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries brought radical changes. First, we can see in the texts of this period how the question of gestures was reformulated while at the same time the word *gestus* once more became common. One of the main reasons for this revival was the diversification of society and the resulting necessity for everyone and for each group to distinguish themselves from the others by showing, among all kinds of signs, different gestures and attitudes (laity v. clerics, knights v. peasants, Cluniacs v. Cistercians, etc.).

In this context, the pedagogy of gestures became a necessity – above all in monasteries that became reluctant to accept children as oblates and took older novices instead. The later they entered, the more secular gestures novices had to forget before they could become monks. Teaching novices the right behaviour gave birth to numerous prescriptions in the customaries and specific treatises of pedagogy. The best example was Hugh of Saint-Victor's *Institutio novitiorum*, which provided the most elaborate theory of gestures of the entire Middle Ages. Gestures (*gestus*) were defined as a movement (*motus*) of the whole body and a *figuratio*.

The external expression of the movements of the soul had to make up a 'figure', a symbolic image of the body in the eyes of God and man. Hugh also underlined the different modes (*modi*) or modalities of gestures and classified them in order to show how virtuous gestures held the middle ground between opposing bad gestures which neutralized each other. Finally, following the famous metaphor developed at the same time by John of Salisbury, Hugh
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compared the discipline of gestures to the government of the kingdom and the human body to the body politic. In fact, Hugh's theory of gestures was part of the broader ethical, political and aesthetic ideology that emerged in the Parisian schools of the twelfth century.

From that time on, the pressure of lay society made itself increasingly felt. On the one hand, chivalric romances, books of manières and contenances de table were developing similar notions of moderate gestures, but with some other ideological goals: at stake were the self-identification of aristocracy and the definition of specific rules for young knights, for women (as for example in the Roman de la rose), for their children, and for the king (in the mirror of the prince).

Gestures of ordinary people also merited greater attention. Typical for them were gestures of work that were now described and depicted in a less symbolic manner. Manuscript miniatures pointed out the effective combination of physical energy, technical use of tools, and professional skills.

Other questions were now raised about the 'language of gestures', especially the ability of gestures to replace or match speech. The oldest lists of monastic sign language, the development of liturgical dramas, the rise of preaching, and finally the birth of an urban secular rhetoric aided such questioning.

Religious life, which was undergoing profound changes during this period, was one of the fields for these experiments. Kneeling and holding both hands together became the most typical gesture of Christian prayer. There was also a growing interest in distinguishing all the possible modes of prayer and their attitudes and gestures in terms of different occasions and intentions. The Parisian theologian Peter the Chanter first provided such a list of gestures at the end of the twelfth century. It consisted of seven modes of prayer, each of them depicted in a single miniature. Some years later the Nine modes of prayer of Saint Dominic consisted of a remarkable series of textual descriptions and images, teaching people how to behave and how to move while praying, from the most common mode of prayer to the most extraordinary mystical ecstasies.

Eventually, the great question of symbolic efficacy also arose. Some gestures seemed able to transform living beings or material
things. For example, making the sign of the cross was supposed to repel the devil or death. Gestures used for ecclesiastical sacraments (baptism, eucharist, and marriage) were especially discussed. Some theologians wondered whether sacramental words alone played a role in transubstantiation, although some precise gestures (crossing the host and elevating it) also had to be performed by the priest in order to complete the ritual.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen all too briefly, there was no linear evolution reducing the role of gestures, submitting them to explicit rules and to the constraints of rationality. On the one side, the enforcement of ethics, the development of literacy, and the growing complexity of social encounters limited the scope of gestures in the context of other modes of communication and submitted them to more stringent control. On the other side, the development of figurative arts, the diversification of rituals, the forms of public speech, the scholastic explanations of religious gestures, and the new patterns of behaviour inspired by late medieval mysticism drew the question of gestures to the very centre of ideological debate.

Gestures and the human body have a long history. In suggesting its complexity and pointing out some of its main turning-points in the course of a thousand years, I have simply tried to unveil some of the historical problems with which we are still deeply concerned.

**NOTES**


