
Reviewed by Costanza Beltrami (University of Stockholm)

Published on H-Sci-Med-Tech (February, 2024)

Commissioned by Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

Karl Kinsella’s book opens with an imaginary walk along the Seine, and the metaphor of walking extends from the first page to the more detailed exploration of *In visionem Ezekielis* presented in the volume's central chapters. “On Ezekiel’s vision” is an unfinished biblical commentary written by Richard of Saint Victor (d. 1173) at the renowned French abbey of Saint Victor. Richard’s text proposes a literal exegesis of the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of a temple complex, contained in the Old Testament (Richard analyzes Ezekiel 40–48). Richard was the first to attempt a detailed study of the prophet’s complex visionary account. Kinsella's book is explicitly structured as a walkthrough of Richard's analysis. Richard’s work itself retraces step-by-step the progress of the prophet’s vision, just as, in the biblical text, Ezekiel follows a man with a “brazen complexion” and a measuring rod through the temple complex (Ezekiel 40:3). “God’s own language” thus structured Ezekiel’s experience and its medieval commentaries, just as it organizes Kinsella’s resonating, multilayered analysis. Metaphors of movement are particularly fitting for this slender and engaging volume in which every word seems accurately calibrated to drive the “plot” forward.

Kinsella’s volume focuses on the illustrations included in Richard’s commentary, and specifically the recourse to plans, sections, and elevations to visualize the elements of the temple complex. This is an exceptional feature of the medieval text. According to most modern scholarly accounts, architectural drawing did not exist in the twelfth century. However, drawings of the temple consistently appear in surviving manuscripts of Richard’s work, even though one twelfth-century critic, Peter Chanter, complained about the excessive effort needed to create them. Their significance has similarly been misunderstood by modern scholars. Kinsella’s intriguing volume forges new paths for interpretation and demonstrates the drawings’ importance to histories of architectural representation and information visualization.

The book is divided into seven chapters, followed by an afterword. At the start of chapter 1,
readers join Richard’s “teacher” Hugh of Saint Victor (d. 1141) on a riverside promenade. Hugh’s exegesis of the structure of Noah’s ark was informed by the ships he encountered in contemporary Paris. His writings include instructions for drawing the biblical vessel (even if a drawing may never have existed). The vivid anecdote of Hugh of Saint Victor’s walk introduces some of the central themes of Kinsella’s book: the importance of the abbey of Saint Victor as a laboratory for architectural visualization; the Victorine commitment to the literal exegesis of biblical structures, which were understood as a manifestation of God’s mind; and the absence of an established visual language of architectural representation in the twelfth century. This absence demands a more expansive definition of early architectural drawings at the crossroads of text and image, building and biblical exegesis.

Chapter 2 begins by sketching Richard’s life and intellectual context at the abbey of Saint Victor, where Hugh had also lived. The legacy of the older theologian was still felt at the abbey, although it is unclear whether Richard knew him personally. Both Hugh and Richard were important figures in the monastery’s school. Victorine teaching emphasized the visual, and students used diagrams to analyze, as well as memorize, new information. More broadly, the community was at the center of intellectual life in twelfth-century Paris, suggesting that its ideas may have circulated more widely, informing and responding to intellectual discussions at nearby Notre-Dame, the nascent University of Paris, and elsewhere. The earliest surviving manuscript of *In visionem Ezekielis* was produced in this effervescent cultural environment, likely during Richard’s lifetime and presumably under his direct supervision. That manuscript is MS Lat. 14516, now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. This “object to be studied, existing on the surface of leathery parchment that has suffered scuffs and other damage over time” is the focus of most of Kinsella’s analysis (p. 43).

The book’s linear structure echoes the author’s argument that Richard’s illustrations are meant to be read sequentially, and that they at once visualize the temple and teach viewers to understand architectural representation. Indeed, the early drawings are (apparently) “simple and rather anticlimactic” (p. 47). In particular, the first ground plans, analyzed in chapter 3, translate the structure of the temple complex into an arrangement of colored squares and rectangles, one in which gates and doorways are omitted for the sake of simplicity. While these diagrams stand out from the surrounding text, only their textual labels make them readable as architecture. Later illustrations are closer to the expectations of modern readers. This is especially the case with the gatehouse elevations discussed in chapter 4. Painted doors, arcades, and crenellations make the structures clearly identifiable as buildings. However, these are hybrid visualizations which defy modern categories. Kinsella’s analysis reveals that they combine multiple viewpoints, with elements seen in plan, section, or elevation in the same drawing, revealing the complexity—and ultimately the uncanniness—of early architectural representations.

In some ways, the unconventional nature of Richard’s illustrations should not come as a surprise. At different points, Kinsella delves into the repertoire of medieval images of architecture, comparing Richard’s work to a fifth-century mosaic of the Holy Sepulcher, the ninth-century plan of Saint Gallen, and Villard de Honnecourt’s early thirteenth-century portfolio, among other examples. The chronological range is vast, since “the twelfth century is nothing more than an empty space” in the history of architectural draftsmanship (p. 10). In this context, Richard’s illustrations, and the vocabulary he uses to describe them, stand out as innovatively complex. More than chronological primacy is at stake, however. Richard’s work challenges modern definitions and histories of architectural drawing. Kinsella notes that the Middle Ages has often been “removed”
from that history, which traditionally fast-forwards from Vitruvius to the late medieval period (p. 19). Surviving works are generally interpreted through the Renaissance eyes of Leon Battista Alberti. In this view, architectural drawings emerge directly from the craft of building and the profession of the architect. Richard may have known Vitruvius's work and overseen construction work at Saint Victor, but his commentary was conceived in a wholly different context. Acknowledging his importance, therefore, requires the idea of “architectural drawing” itself to be redefined.

The illustrations of Richard's commentary demonstrate that the history of architectural drawing is grounded not only in the noise of the worksite, but also in the silence of the scriptorium. But why should literate audiences turn to such images when they already had access to advanced systems for compiling and communicating information? As is well known, contemporary mnemonic technics often invoked architectural metaphors. More importantly, Kinsella argues, “architecture and memory share in the language of geometry” (p. 85). Geometry is discussed in chapter 5, at the physical and conceptual center of the book. Here Kinsella focuses on an apparently unremarkable diagram representing the slope of Ezekiel's mountain as a triangle inscribed in a circle. With this figure, Richard attempts to correlate the plans and elevations of the temple complex and confronts the thorny problem of describing a three-dimensional building in two dimensions. Here, the shapes of geometry help Richard explain architecture, just as its words fill the gaps of architecture's Latin vocabulary. Visually and textually, the well-respected language of geometry contributed to the “reality effect” of Richard's drawings, lending credibility to his analysis of the Bible (p. 119).

In chapter 6, Kinsella explores the illustrations of the temple precinct featured toward the end of Richard's commentary. Unlike the gatehouses described in earlier sections of the work, the inner temple and its altar were familiar structures to medieval Christians. As revealed by the drawings, Richard and his contemporaries “saw” them in the light of contemporary architecture. Kinsella eschews simple comparisons between real and imaginary buildings, turning to broader epistemological questions on the functions of history in exegesis. Richard believed the res (objects) of the world to be the tangible manifestation of God's creation. By clothing the “form” of these things in an accessible contemporary appearance, the theologian helped his readers understand their invisible “nature,” enabling them to tune in to the language of God. Familiarity also strengthened the impression that these structures may actually have existed, buttressing Richard's analysis.

Since some of the drawings of MS Lat. 14516 were left unfinished, the analysis zooms out to consider other manuscripts. This exploration reveals that Richard's illustrations were sometimes misunderstood by later copyists, confirming both their novelty and the importance attributed to their inclusion. Surprisingly, eleven surviving manuscripts include a diagram that does not appear in the early Paris manuscript: a map of the Promised Land with the location of the Israelite tribes. This map was not invented by Richard, but rather derives from a Jewish commentary on Ezekiel's vision. Indeed, illustrations appear in earlier Jewish biblical commentaries, for example the works of Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (known as Rashi, d. 1105). Such texts were studied by twelfth-century Victorine scholars, and Richard, who did not read Hebrew, would have focused primarily on the drawings. Richard crossed religious boundaries in his pursuit of historical exegesis, something unexpected at a time of growing anti-Semitic violence. Richard's images connect worlds, even if linking them to the practical world of building is difficult—and perhaps beside the point.

Kinsella's book is a compelling contribution to the study of medieval architecture and its representation. By nuancing the definition of architec-
tural drawing, it reveals a rich twelfth-century repertoire where no examples were previously thought to exist. Fittingly, images have the last word in this cleverly designed volume. On the last printed page, the drawing of a gate bids farewell to the reader. It is a detail from a large-scale map of the temple gatehouses (found in BnF, MS Lat. 2165). With its round arch and carefully delineated masonry breaks, the gatehouse engages both the biblical past and the twelfth-century present. It also speaks to the bodily experience of reading the book as a physical object. The medieval image has been subtly altered to suggest that the temple complex is being exited, rather than entered. Like Ezekiel and Richard, we move through imaginary architectural spaces, vividly described before our eyes.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech


**URL:** [https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59702](https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59702)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.