

Ring Road Village Site Layout:

Using Event Design to Increase Medieval Experience

Throughout the Middle Ages, the remnants of Roman ring road cities and towns had lasting influence on the municipal design of towns and cities across Europe. A kingdom event in An Tir created a site layout based on the ring road village to enhance the medieval experience of the populace.

Back in A.S. XXXV (2000), when I was co-autocrat of a July Coronation in An Tir together with Lord Valdermar and His Lordship Justin de Leon, we hit on the idea of using concentric circular roads rather than the usual grid pattern so taken for granted by twentieth century urban sensibilities.

Based on the circle road idea, I researched and created a detailed ring road layout using the aesthetic of medieval round villages. Our ring road design was based both on practical event functioning and Medieval philosophy and semiotics, and in addition to two events in the Shire of Shittimwoode (2000 and 2002), variations have been used since occasionally by other branches.

We had distant visions, when we developed the design, of creating a medieval town that could be set down on any reasonably proportionate field, and which might become a familiar map, even as the actual ground beneath it shifted. The populace might begin to learn the street names, develop traditional camping locations (e.g. “we’re usually near the intersection of *Mercurius* and *Terra*”), regional encampments could be placed roughly analogous to their actual locations (in An Tir, that would mean Tir Righ on the Northern Road and Summits to the South). Event locations like a bardic fire on *Ignis* way or the *Aqua* road oriented toward the water point could become identified traditionally and easily by road name.

In practical terms, the ring road layout has some definite advantages for site organization from a modern perspective:

First, it is easy to measure out and mark (get a long rope, tie knots every 100 feet or so, and get people to walk around the circle with stakes—be sure to put your fastest walker out at the end).

Second, it is almost impossible to get truly lost in (if in doubt, continue around the circle and you will eventually get to your crossroad, also, “All Roads Lead to Rome,”—or in this case, the *Circus Maximus* or center arena for fighting).

Third, the market surrounds the town center (just as it would have in period), with a fair distribution of merchants—no spots are closer or farther from the erics and everyone must pass through market to get to their camps (merchants tend to be sticklers for fairness since their livelihoods depend upon it). As for merchant frontage, the large second ring has enough space so that even a large An Tirian kingdom event does not fill it up.

There is also a sneaky surprise benefit to the round shape which is that facing the eric, everyone’s frontage reservations get wider as they go back, so that if someone underestimates or finds they have a surprise reservation-mate to squeeze in, all they have to do is move back a few feet to increase their frontage proportionally.

As for the innermost circle, the jury is out as to whether pie-shaped erics or a more grid-like pattern is preferred by fighters. The triangular shape is tricky for fighters to gauge, but square erics fit awkwardly, leaving

Ring Road Villages Dot Europe



The Modern village shown in the image above has changed very little in the millennium and a half since it was laid out by its Roman designers. Long after those consummate planners had receded from the furthest reaches of their conquest and settlement, their enduring designs and engineering left a permanent mark on the face of Europe, shaping the municipal organization of European cultures for centuries to come.

unused space. Whatever the shape of the individual erics, however, there is nothing like dropping the eric division ropes for a final round in a great large circular arena.

On a period re-creation front, the ring road layout also has some subtler advantages for helping attendees slip into a medieval mindset without even realizing the shift.

First of all, the road names get everyone talking in Medieval Latin for one of the most basic functions of an event—giving locations and directions.

Second, going in circles for the weekend gets people used to thinking about medieval concepts like the spheres of the heavens and the basic elements of all matter, and what those symbols meant in the every day lives of Europeans during the periods we study.

Finally, in our modern mechanized world of squares and grids, we often fail to appreciate how much more irregular and cyclical the Medieval mindset was—though Romans were known for their planned cities and straight roads cutting across the countryside, the idea of grand wide city boulevards would be more appropriate to the French Revolution than the Medieval village. The town centers which survived beyond the Roman era as centers of population did so because they worked for their inhabitants. Some aspects of experimental archeology are better understood when lived, and we would submit that ring road villages are one of them.

The ring road layout is clearly not appropriate for all events (e.g. wars which need much more fighting space), or for all locations (a long narrow site, or one with multiple natural obstacles). However, as outlined above, there are many advantages, and I share this design and the symbolic commentary below, in the hopes that more branches will feel free to adopt and adapt this layout for their own uses.

Permission granted to use the site design as well as the commentary with credit to the author. (If you use the below commentary as part of your site copy, feel free to edit so references are appropriate for your site). Below you will find a slightly edited version of the original site handout commentary the first ring road village in Shittimwoode at July Coronation XXXV (2000).

--[Mistress Ariel de Courtenay](#), O.L. An Tir, May 22, XLVIII (2013)

A Medieval Cosmology in the Fields

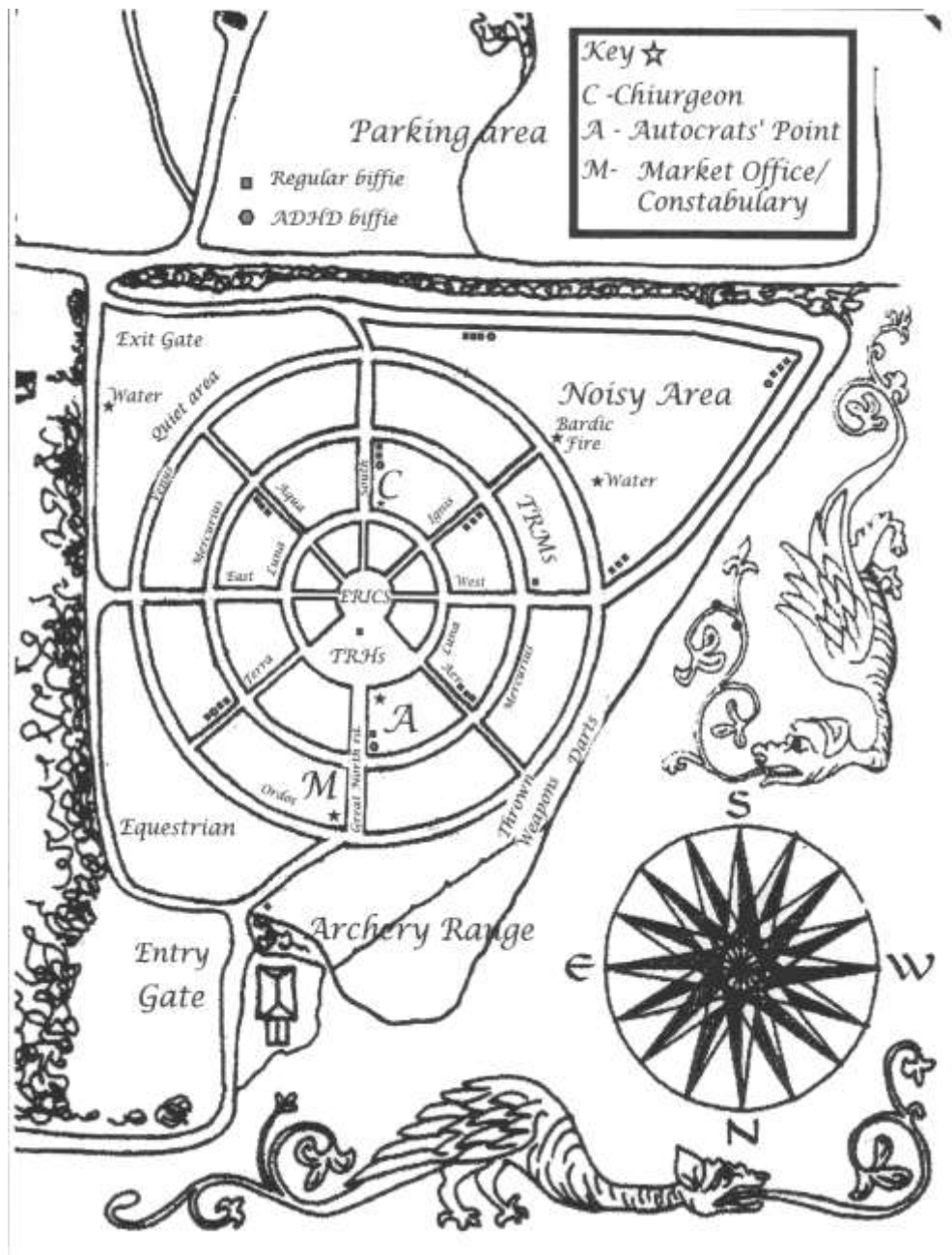
From site handout commentary, July Coronation XXXV (2000).

One of the most complex and ubiquitous endeavors of the scholars of the Middle Ages was the working out of extensive systems of symbology. While this symbolism is fascinating, it is also strangely foreign. We invite you now to enter the otherness that is the world we so regularly recreate...

The Medieval vision of the Universe and its many attributes (physical, spiritual, and symbolic) is so far beyond the modern conception of symbolism that we often look at examples of Medieval art or architecture with no inkling that we are viewing an allegory of good and evil, or a representation of the many nested spheres of existence, from basest earthly matter to the most rarified heavenly symmetry. These systems served not only as a way to make sense of the unknown, but also as a very practical guide to social organization, ordered living and moral action in Medieval cultures.

By putting these attributes into the concrete representation of our village, we as event stewards have attempted to recreate some of this symbolism in a practical, applied way. With a willing suspension of disbelief, the taped lines on a newly mown hayfield can transport our populace to a world where everything is more than it seems on the surface, and elegance of meaning is accentuated by economy of language and symbol.

The first thing that is obvious on entering the site is that the road layout is primarily based on circles. The circle, in the Medieval aesthetic, is the most perfect of shapes, as is amply demonstrated by the strength and ubiquity of vaulted arches, domes, and bridges. No space is wasted in a circular or spherical container, which, like the egg, represents, to the Medieval mind, Nature's perfection. A circle has no beginning and no end, and in a culture that abhors change as anathema to heavenly order, the circle represents the immutable, eternal, and ever repeating circles of fortune and re-creation. Another variation on this theme—the wheel of fortune, found worked in stained glass or painted into the stucco walls of European churches—reassured the average peasant that he whose fortune dipped down, would in due time, cycle round to be on top once again as part of the



natural and lawful order of the universe.

This emphasis on continuity as not just familiar but, in fact, morally *superior* to change, helps us as recreationists begin to grasp in some small way, how foreign such modern concepts as invention, improvement, progress, and social climbing would have seemed in pre-modern culture. Like Africans raised in round huts who do not perceive the classic arrow illusion (see link below), the circle as an organizing cultural structure shaped the Medieval mind to a level it is unlikely that we as technologically-immersed people can truly appreciate.

The circle can be found very prominently in the Medieval conception of the universe as a series of concentric spheres (as any high school reader of Dante's *Inferno* can doubtless affirm). Leaving aside hell, for our purposes, the medieval universe began in the center with the four elements, each as a consecutively larger sphere: first earth, then water, then air, and finally the fires of the outer atmosphere. "Fire was an extremely dry, bright air which sometimes appeared in the form of lighting" (Delort, 78). Beyond the spheres of the elements which formed the earth and its skies lay the orbits of the seven planets of the Ptolemaic Earth-centered universe—first the moon, then Mercury, Venus, The Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Beyond that, lay the spheres of the angels in all their various strata, and finally the throne of the Creator.

At the center of period symbolic maps one would find Jerusalem, throne of the heavenly rule on Earth, and in a medieval village, the church. For our miniature universe at this event, you will find the fighting erics and the Royal pavilion—the rarified abode of the Crown and the pinnacle of the martial combat our society reveres. Raying out from this center, like the four rivers that run out of Eden, the four cardinal direction roads quarter the city. Given the use of English Kingdom names in the SCA (e.g. West and East Kingdom), we have chosen to label these cardinal direction roads in modern English (West, North, East, South), however, they could as easily be called *Via Aquilonis* (Northern way), *Viam Australem* (Southern Way), *Viam Orientalem* (Eastern Way), and *Viam Occidentalem* (Western Way).

As a side note, you will no doubt have noticed that North is at the bottom of the map. This was this done for the very practical reason that the site handout map needs to be oriented according to the direction people are facing as they enter at gate, which on this site is South. More importantly, however, the convention of locating North at the top of maps was not universal in the Middle Ages, and many period examples can be found which place North at the bottom.

Returning to our tour, let us consider further consider the symbolism of the cardinal directions. The roads bearing the names of some of our oldest Kingdoms in the SCA (East and West), lead to the Royal and Princely encampments respectively, as a sign that our reverence for our rulers is deeply rooted in our history. The road to the South (in period maps, the direction of the continent of Africa and regions of unknown savagery) leads to the site egress, off the field, and to the mundane world of parking and the public park (Hovander Homestead Park is, by the way, a very interesting historical landmark and well worth a visit—don't miss the peacocks).

These four cardinal roads, firmly anchored at the four "corners" of the event represent the "four corners of the earth" which is to say in metaphorical terms--all known peoples and the stability and permanence of ordered society. These four corners, taken together with the *omphalos* (center) add up to five, symbolizing the completed universe in which heaven, earth, space, time, and eternity are all united in perfect balance.

The secondary cardinal roads on our map are named for the four basic elements of which all matter is derived. The Latin terms—*terra* (earth), *aer* (air), *aqua* (water), and *ignis* (fire), link us to the Medieval Latin tradition as well as to the more mystical traditions adopted by non-Christian European cultures such as the Celts. Our road names serve a more literal meaning as well: *Aqua* leads to the park water source, *Ignis* to the bardic fire, *Aer* to archery, and *Terra* to well...parking.

But let us return to the series of concentric circles that are the most prominent feature of our village. The innermost circle housing the central fighting erics is the *Circus Maximus* or "great circle." This familiar name is already associated with the gladiatorial combat of the Roman Empire. With the Society emphasis on martial victory rather than church sanction as a way to anoint our rulers, the *Circus Maximus* serves as a good SCA analog to the centrality of the church in a period village.

One quarter of the central circle is reserved for an open town square called *The Forum*. Here you will find conversation, public shade, and in the evening after the tournament, a dramatic presentation for the enjoyment of the populace (as might have been staged on the steps of the church in Medieval times). All villagers are invited to participate in what is indeed, a public forum.

The road surrounding the *Circus Maximus* and the first of the nested orbits of our site, bears the name of the innermost of the planets in the Medieval cosmology: *Luna* (the moon). In Medieval symbolism, each of the seven planets was associated with one of the seven known metals and the seven vital organs (these attributes are beyond the scope of this commentary) as well as with one of the seven major colors (as codified for heraldic usage). Each color (of course) has its own symbolism. The color of *Luna* is *Argent* (white)—the color of purity, honesty, integrity, and sincerity. The *Luna* Road encompasses the realm of the white belts—Knights and Royals—where honorable combat and purity of purpose on the field burn like a flame to light the ideals of our society.

The next ring road is removed from the first by a distance of approximately twenty Roman paces (a Roman pace = approximately 5 modern feet—a double step or two military paces—about 100 modern feet or 30 meters). This road bears the name *Mercurious* (Mercury), associated with the color *pourpre* (violet), the color of royalty and honor. *Mercurious* is also associated with mercantilism and trade, and here you will find the merchants in a marketplace surrounding and supporting the activities of the inner circle. The God Mercury is associated with messages and eloquence, ruling over boundaries and transitions, moving freely between the worlds of the mortal and the divine. The *Mercurious* circle road marks the transition from the idealized world of the tourney field to the more ordinary arenas of sleeping, eating, and socializing in the camping areas beyond.

Another twenty paces out from the *Circus Maximus* brings us to the next orbit—the camping ring, bearing the name of *Venus*, associated with the color *Vert* (green), for hope. *Venus* is also, of course, the goddess of love and beauty, (and we leave it to you to decide just exactly what the symbolic possibilities of that might be).

This brings us to the edge of our limited universe as laid out on this site. The next orbit would be that of *Sol*—the sun. The sun is associated with *Or* (yellow), a symbol for the intelligence and judgment (which abounds in the Society). *Mars* would be next, bearing the color *Gules* (red)—the emblem of both victory and charity. Then comes *Jupiter*—*Azure* (blue), evoking the heavens, and finally *Saturn*—*Sable* (black) conveying sorrow and a ruthless, steadfast will. The spheres of the seraphim and cherubim would bring us finally to the far-flung equestrian camp North of the main field.

Thus completing our tour, we have visited all the corners of the Earth, and all the humors of the mind and body. We hope that this background enriches your stay and brings a kind of permanence to our ephemeral city in the fields.

Delort, R. *Life in the Middle Ages*. Universe Books: New York, 1973.