

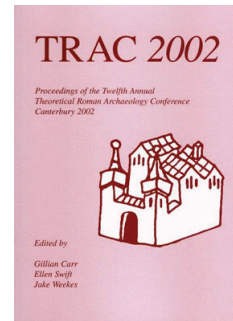
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Deconstructing the Frampton pavements: gnostic dialectic in Roman Britain?

Dominic Perring

The quest

This paper explores some possible connections between the systems of understanding that inspired the design of a Romano-British mosaic pavement and those that can be brought to bear in its contemporary interpretation.

The point that I wish to illustrate is that some of the theoretical constructs employed in our explanation of the Roman past are embedded within the same intellectual discourse that engaged the attention of élite society in late antiquity. The philosophies of the ancient world provide a rich and stimulating theoretical environment that remain central to many areas of modern thinking, but have been little exploited in giving academic direction to Romano-British studies.

I base my argument on an individual and speculative reading of a single artefact: a mid-fourth century mosaic pavement found over two hundred years ago at a site near Frampton in Dorset (Lysons 1817; Henig 1984). In preparing the results of a doctoral thesis for publication I decided that this mosaic would make an attractive illustration to a technical chapter on the different types of floor used in Roman houses (Perring 2002, fig. 52). I therefore came to the evidence with no immediate interest in the meaning of the images deployed, beyond the need to provide a caption that did justice to a complicated and confusing array of images (Figure 1).

I was, however, predisposed to believe that the pavement had been structured with meaning in mind. Shortly before engaging with the detail of the Frampton mosaics my attention had been drawn to Lefebvre's work on the production of space (1991). This encouraged me to think in terms of the ways in which interpretations of space might describe aspects of social relations. Lefebvre's emphasis on a "trialectics of spatiality" – in which distinctions can be drawn between perceived, conceived and lived space – suggested different ways of understanding the spatial configurations encountered within the Roman house (see also Soja 1996: 63–6). I was, therefore, inclined to find an interior design that might have "enriched the temporal dimension of space", generating something that might be described as "a theatrical space of hints and declarations" (Lefebvre 1991: 186–9; Perring 2002: 139).

In trying to relate the interior design to the ways in which the space might have been used, I have found it necessary to give most of my attention to the ideas that might have inspired the particular deployment of the images found at Frampton. This paper, therefore, is mostly concerned with the issue of 'conceived space' and the ideological intentions of those who designed the room in question. It is only peripherally concerned with the transformation which may be brought about through different uses and perceptions of space.

Decorative schemes found in the aristocratic houses of the ancient world were sometimes contrived to emphasise the spatial hierarchies involved in the 'ascent of privilege' described by Wallace-Hadrill (1994). This was an exaggerated feature of late antiquity, which witnessed an increasingly processional and revelatory approach to the design of both private and public architecture (Brown 1971).

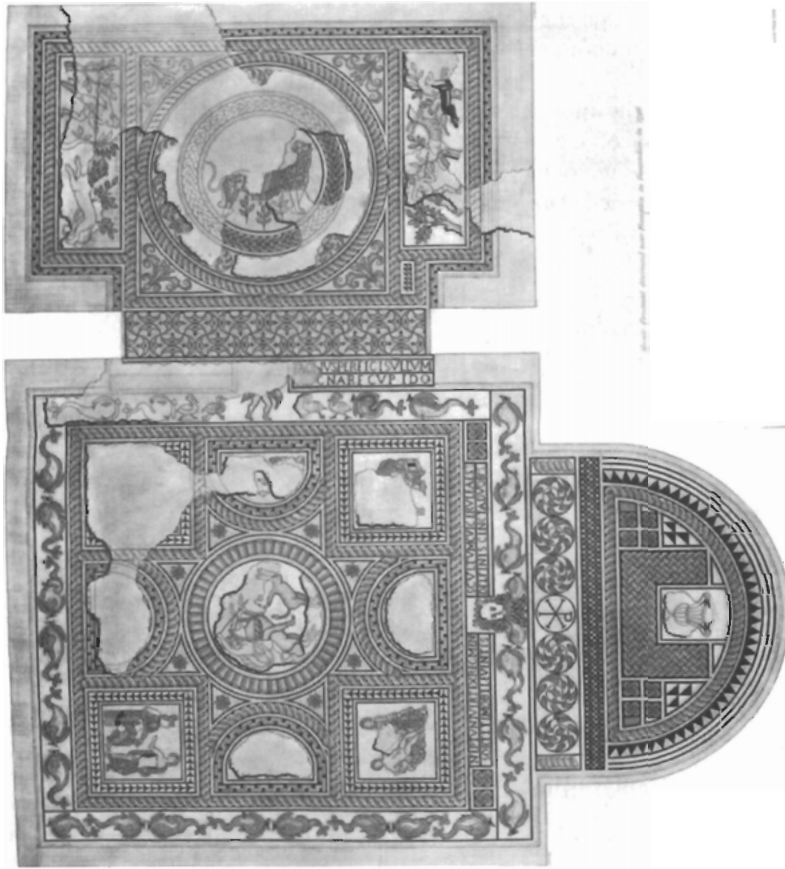


Figure 1. The mosaic pavements within the tri-partite room at Frampton, Dorset (from a coloured engraving by S. Lysons)

Such arguments can readily be applied to the evidence of Romano-British domestic architecture in general, and perhaps also to the building at Frampton in particular. The pavement at Frampton was set at one end of the building, and was reached along a portico-corridor decorated with geometric designs (for a more detailed discussion of the architecture of this building see Perring forthcoming). The Romano-British portico-corridor façade was likely to have operated in a similar fashion to the peristyle courtyard commonly found attached to the houses of Roman Italy and from which it was arguably derived (Perring 2002: 159). These colonnaded passages paid architectural homage to the stoa and gymnasia of the Hellenistic world, and established a suitable setting for the *ambulatio* or promenade with its attendant philosophical discourse (for a review of both the architectural evidence and written sources on the subject see Dickmann 1997: 123–5). The public architecture to which these domestic settings refer was also, at least in some instances, designed against the needs of civic ritual and religious procession (Bejor 1999). These architectural references to philosophical debate and religious procession need not have been very relevant by the time that the buildings at

Frampton were erected, when the portico façade was commonplace. But the very ubiquity of this feature attests to the importance of structured movement within the Roman houses of this period.

The arrangement of the mosaic images in the main room at Frampton suggests that this floor, like several others of the period, was designed to be seen from a series of different positions (Witts 2000). The room was divided into three separate areas, each with its own scheme of figurative mosaics. The spaces were separated one from the other by wide, almost certainly arched, openings where curtains may have hung. Motifs within the mosaics gave emphasis to the thresholds, defining the liminal nature of the boundaries found here but also providing conceptual links between the schemes deployed. The decoration of the different spaces marked out a dynamic pathway of images leading from the room's entrance to its innermost 'sanctum'. On one reading, therefore, these mosaics defined a processional and climactic use of the space: a closely argued three-part narrative, with a beginning, middle and an end.

The images chosen to mark the entrance to the room may have announced just such a narrative structure. The hunt scenes placed here marked the threshold and directed the visitor towards the more powerful images beyond. The hunt served as a metaphor for the quest for truth in late antique philosophy (e.g. Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* 1.2; Henig 1995: 155–6). In trying to account for the choices of images drawn upon in the decoration of the Frampton building this concept of a quest becomes an attractive one. The pavements contained frequent allegorical references to the mortality of the human soul, and the focal point of the entire decorative scheme appears to have contained a Christian message. A *chi-rho* monogram, a symbol of Christ occupied the chord of the apse. Although this motif might alternatively have been used here because of its association with post-Constantinian imperial power (as Henig 1995: 154–6), the other scenes and motifs found in this room suggest that the pavement was concerned with the salvation of the soul. In this context it is more likely that the *chi-rho* was used conventionally to represent the Christian saviour (as was also the case in the sister mosaic to Frampton at Hinton St Mary), rather than to describe temporal power. In either case most of the images in the room were orientated to be viewed from this cardinal point. This suggests that the images presented in this room could have been read in different ways from different perspectives. Visitors advancing into the room were given less information, and were in a position of comparative inferiority, to those already in occupancy of the room. The full range of information contained within the decorative scheme was not universally accessible. Knowledge, and by implication power, was structured hierarchically. The principal image that lay beyond this focal point, the conclusion of the narrative described in these mosaics, was the Bacchic chalice or *cantharus*. What could be more appropriate than a grail at the end of the quest!

Resisting the many tempting speculations that such an observation suggests, the main point to make here is that it is possible to consider the Frampton images within a narrative framework, albeit one in which the full clarity of the argument was reserved until the end of its reading. The antechamber, decorated with the hunt scenes, was introductory; the main body of text was found in the larger room beyond; whilst the smaller apse brought the scheme to some form of conclusion. Given the presence of the Christian symbol and the allegorical content of most of the other images found here it seems legitimate to see this narrative structure as leading towards some form of philosophical observation. This, then, was my working hypothesis in trying to describe and account for the art chosen to decorate the rooms at Frampton. It is,

however, a much harder matter to tease out the detail of the arguments presented, and this must necessarily involve a considerable amount of conjecture.

The problem of the art of late antiquity is that it drew on an exceptionally rich iconographic vocabulary in making its 'hints and declarations' (Elsner 1998). The range of images deployed at Frampton – including representations of Bacchus, Bellerophon, Neptune and Cupid accompanied by a Latin epigram – place this pavement firmly within this classical tradition and show that the learning deployed here was of Graeco-Roman inspiration. This was a world where complex philosophies gave rise to intricate allegorical representations, drawing on a rich mythological and iconographic tradition. The allegorical interpretation of mythological texts was an important feature of the neo-Platonist thinking that dominated late antique philosophy and influenced the first Christian writers (Jonas 1958: 91). It can be argued that such ideas were inaccessible to an ill-informed rural Romano-British aristocracy that lived on the margins of the Roman world. For the purposes of this paper I take the contrary view, and assume that the proliferation of complex allegorical images found in late antique Romano-British art reflects on a mature intellectual engagement with the philosophical ideas that were then current. It was perhaps just such an intellectual environment that allowed Britain to subsequently produce Christian philosophers of the stature of Pelagius.

The eclectic nature of the images and the apparent lack of decorative coherence makes it possible to argue that the meanings of individual symbols and motifs at Frampton had somehow become subordinate, if not entirely lost, to their collective visual impact and a generalised message of erudite sophistication (Ling 1997). Alternatively, however, the complexity and sophistication of the iconographic vocabulary might reflect the arcane nature of the ideas expressed. The reading of images, the identification of the allusive arguments that give intellectual structure to the narratives that they present, relies on a range of shared understandings that are the product of both classical education and particular learning. This is not to deny the fact that different audiences would have engaged differently with the images and the ideas that they represented. It is unlikely that all visitors to the building at Frampton were intended to read and understand everything on display. In the ancient world, as in the modern, one of the purposes of a classical education was to elaborate a language of power that established rank and social boundaries. This language of learning formed cultural bonds that distinguished elite society from the lower orders, whilst defining gradations of taste and erudition within the elect. Our interest here is in the knowledge systems that operated amongst those competent to recognise and interpret the various layers of significance possessed by the images placed on the floors of this building. This, therefore, obliges us to turn to the religious and philosophical sources that might be referred to in pavements such as that at Frampton.

The mysterious object

There is not space here to do full justice to the pavements at Frampton. The building itself contained three main groups of rooms decorated with mosaics, each containing many individual images permitting a series of alternative interpretations.

Parallels can also be drawn with a wide range of other mosaic pavements, and with the iconographic choices found in other late antique art, especially the decorated silver found in the hoards of the period. Furthermore the interpretations of the evidence suggest several lines of inquiry into the nature of late Romano-British society. In particular it permits speculation on how

the philosophical and theological arguments of the third and fourth centuries may have affected the social cohesion of Roman Britain and contributed to the changes evident in the power structures of the late fourth century. Some of these issues I have already touched on elsewhere, others I discuss in fuller detail in a forthcoming paper (Perring 2002; Perring forthcoming).

Here a more focussed and rather summary treatment must suffice. The object is not to prove my argument but to selectively explore some of its implications, in order to make some broader points about the nature of our use of ideas in forming archaeological interpretations.

One of the most particular characteristics of the Frampton pavement is its unusual combination of Christian and pagan elements. The floors here were from the same school as the better known mosaic at Hinton St Mary. In both cases there has been some speculation as to the possible significance of the syncretic approach to pagan myth and Christian symbol (Toynbee 1968; Huskinson 1974; Black 1986; Henig 1986 and Scott 2000).

The argument that I present elsewhere is that the images at Frampton were carefully contrived to present a series of allegorical statements about the nature and destiny of the mortal soul, set out in a dialectical fashion (Perring forthcoming). The emphasis placed on antithetical contrasts, from which synthesis could be achieved, hints at dualistic belief. The dualistic idea that the immortal soul was held captive in corrupt flesh was central to the Orphic followers of Bacchus. Some archaeological finds from Roman-Britain are unambiguously Orphic (Arthur 1977; Henig 1977), and the widespread popularity of Bacchus in the province is most readily understood in terms of the diffusion of Orphism. Orphic teachings and mysteries were in part developed from those Dionysius-Bacchus, and the beliefs that inspired them were both influenced by and influential on the neo-Platonic philosophy of late antiquity. Orphic ideas were in turn an important influence in the development of a dualistic tradition within the early Christian church (Legge 1964; Guthrie 1966: 253–5; Eisler 1925). In the course of the second and third centuries these dualistic Christians – better known as gnostics – were identified as heretic, and their belief systems both described and condemned in the anti-heretical writings of Irenaeus and Hypollitus, amongst others (Williams 1999; Rudolph 1983). Gnostics also believed that the spirit was imprisoned in hostile matter, and that salvation involved liberating the soul from its mortal chains. Salvation was the accomplishment of mystical knowledge gained through erudite study and the interpretation of signs and symbols (*gnosis*). Followers of the cult had to master secrets that revealed the soul's path through the spheres of human existence to immortal life (Jonas 1958: 45).

Several previous studies have identified gnostic and Orphic elements within Romano-British mosaics (Stupperich 1980: 300; Thomas 1981: 104–5; Walters 1982; Walters 1984), and although the evidence is open to question, the case for identifying gnostic influences at Frampton seems a strong one. It offers a credible context for the particular combination of images found here. Although the available sources suggest that these ideas were most widely diffused in the east and at their most vigorous in the second and third centuries AD, this reflects on the biases in the evidence. We know little of the spread of such ideas in the more remote western provinces since we lack sources. The fact that some of the firmest and most detailed denunciations of gnostic heresy were written by Irenaeus, as Bishop of Lyons, leaves little doubt, however, that these ideas reached the west. Their survival into the fourth and fifth centuries is documented in Egypt by both the recorded experiences of Epiphanius of Salamis and the extraordinary hoard of gnostic texts buried at Nag Hammadi. In the west we have episodes such as the suppression of the Priscillianist heresy in Spain to remind us that it was only in the course of the fourth century that orthodoxy was imposed on a plurality of Christian thinking. Although gnostic-style dualism returned to be an influence in medieval Europe, most

famously amongst the Cathars, it is generally held that gnosticism in the west disappeared at the latest in the 6th century (Rudolph 1983: 367).

Regardless of the specific contributions made by Orphic, gnostic, Christian and neo-Platonic philosophies, my main purpose here is to suggest that the pavements were designed to present a dualistic proposition within a tri-partite division of space: involving quest, mystery and revelation. In order to do so it is first necessary to very briefly describe the pavement itself. The three schemes of decoration can be separately described as follows.

Antechamber. The hunt scenes at the threshold flanked a central roundel containing the standing figure of the ecstatic god Bacchus. Bacchus was a twice-born god, whose return from death presented a symbol of immortality.

The main room. The central panel showed Bellerophon riding Pegasus and slaying the Chimaera. Four subsidiary panels in the corners depicted paired gods and mortals: including Adonis and Venus, and perhaps Attis and Sagaritis. An outer border of dolphins linked two panels of Latin text set alongside the figures of Cupid and Neptune. Cupid occupied the place between the antechamber and the main room, whilst Neptune was set facing towards the apse. The text describes the relationship between these elements, apparently celebrating Cupid's superiority. The dolphin was widely used in Bacchic and Orphic iconography, and later in Christian representations, to represent the human soul in search of escape from the mortality represented by the sea. Cupid too represents the divine spirit. Bellerophon is instead the mortal hero who challenges mortality and rides the divine Pegasus, offspring of ocean, but eventually fails to ascend heavenward. Similarly the stories of Adonis and Attis both refer to mortality and the relationship between human and divine. The most important contrast was that drawn between ethereal spirit (Pegasus-Cupid) and the chains of matter (represented in various references to Neptune and the oceans).

The apse. A cantharus or chalice occupied the main part of the apse, with a chi-rho set facing the mask of Neptune referred to above.

A clue to the reading of these images can be found in the contrasts drawn between elements that signify matter and mortality, and those of transcendent divine power. The space can be read as a dialectic argument (Figure 2), in which antithetical arguments were presented in a quest for a victory over death. The key feature is the *cantharus* that was found in the place of honour framed beneath the celestial apse in the innermost, third, space. This chalice could only be reached by passing through Christ, as represented by the chi-rho monogram. The *cantharus* was widely used as a symbol of the Orphic eucharist, the grail in which wine and water were mixed in a ritual practice inspired by the Graeco-Roman *symposium* (Slofstra 1995: 89). The very point of the later Christian eucharist was to bring about a miraculous transubstantiation through admixture. Participation in an early form of this sacrament may have been the main concern of the Frampton pavement, in which case the room was perhaps designed around the celebration of the gnostic eucharist.

Our best source on such practice is the *Gospel of Philip*, as found amongst the Nag Hammadi texts (NHC II, 3: 75, 15–24). This describes how the eucharistic chalice of water and wine contained the Holy Spirit, and that to drink it makes the perfect man. Although the eucharist may not have formed part of contemporary orthodox liturgical practice in the western church, it was already an important feature in Syrian church ceremony (Frend 1984–5: 149). Parallels can also be drawn between Syrian liturgical vessels and items found in late Romano-British hoards (de Bhaldraithe 1991; Perring forthcoming). The eucharist can be described as a

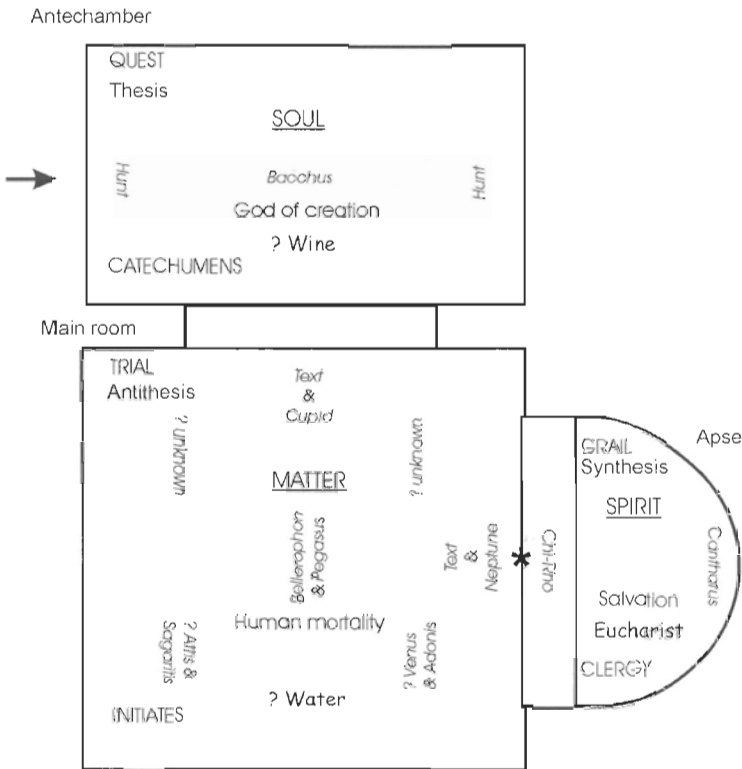


Figure 2. A summary of some of the themes and ideas that might be represented in the mosaic illustrated in figure 1.

mythic ritualization of the cycle of creation, death and resurrection, in which earthly substances were alchemically transmuted into divine (Jung 1979: 314).

If this room had been designed around eucharistic practice then, following the ritual practices that applied at the time, the antechamber would have served as a place for the catechumens in waiting, whilst the initiates participated in the ceremonies in the main room beyond. These ceremonies were in turn conducted by an elect clergy, stationed in the apse. The rituals assumed a hierarchy in which the bishops and clergy came first, ahead of the faithful (segregated according to their state of grace), and those uninitiated (Brown 1998: 40). This did not necessarily preclude alternative uses, and this room might have started life as a villa dining room where the patron also invited friends, clients and dependants to celebrate mass (Perring 2002: 169).

Several gnostic sects, in particular the Sethians, recognised three primal principles: those of human soul, earthly matter and divine spirit (Rudolph 1983: 90–2). Hippolytus describes how the soul, the human element of divine spirit, was believed to have been caught between darkness below, described as a formidable water, and light above (the contrast drawn between Cupid and

Neptune in the Frampton pavement may have made a similar point). This human spirit was a spark of divinity that had been caught and trapped in matter by the violence of wind on water (*Refutation of all Heresies* 5,14). The Orphics described this condition through reference to the fabrication of the human species from the ashy remnants of the Titans, destroyed by Jupiter, that had consumed Bacchus/Zagreus in his first emanation. In Valentinian cosmographies, humanity took its soul from the demiurge (the known god responsible for the creation of the world) and its flesh from matter. This awareness of the 'three-in-oneness' of existence inspired the use of antithetical contrasts as a means of achieving the ideal of synthesis.

The tripartite division of space at Frampton may therefore represent the division of existence into the three essential components referred to above. If this were the case the antechamber was not only the starting place in the quest for salvation, where catechumens waited on enlightenment, but was also the place of the soul. The soul here was ruled over by the demiurgic god of creation, personified as Bacchus. The first narrative declaration, therefore, was that of creation.

In this reading, the main room would therefore have been the place of matter, dedicated to the captive soul seeking blessed release (as represented by Bellerophon, the dolphins, Attis and Adonis). These captive souls were the initiates of the sect, aware of their unfortunate condition and awaiting revelation. The images in this area were the product of creation: man made mortal, destined to die but in search of divine release. The spark searching upwards. The texts in the border to the room were placed in prophylactic fashion, marking potent boundaries between the three conditions of existence represented by the three spaces.

The third and final chamber, the apse, was therefore reserved for the spirit. This was the place of the elect who through their knowledge (*gnosis*) of Christ and the celebration of his secret rites had achieved the necessary synthesis of sensual and material (the gnostic *pneumatic*). This spatial dialectic is that described in the ritual of the Eucharist, where wine and water became one. Indeed it is also possible to equate the outer room with wine (Bacchus), the main chamber with water (Neptune), and the apse with their mixing (the *cantharus*). In this reading the apse was the place where the main ritual uses of the room took place, the place where activities gave meaning to the architectural setting. There is an attractive coincidental symmetry to the way in which this third space can, with only gentle abuse of the ideas represented, be termed a 'thirdspace' of the imagined and enacted found in the social theories of Lefebvre (1991) and Soja (1996).

I suggest that the goal of the quest described on the floor at Frampton was symbolised by the eucharistic chalice, which here took on the attributes of a holy grail. Eternal life – the release of spirit – was the reward of this synthesis between soul and matter, divine and mortal, wine and water.

The grail

In this paper I have described two quests for enlightenment. The first quest I described was my own: my attempt to read the archaeological evidence represented by the pavements at Frampton. The second quest is the one that I attribute to the people who designed and studied these mosaics in the middle of the fourth century. These images were perhaps intended to describe a path to eternal life. The arguments drew on sophisticated cosmographies that were the result of centuries of philosophical study and reflection. It is important to remember that some of mythological scenes found at Frampton referred to legends that were already more

than one thousand years old when the floors were designed. This ancient scholarship was the product of an interest in the past no less intense than that represented by the archaeological papers found in this volume, and a concern with theory that surely far exceeded our own. Theoretical Roman archaeology is no new thing.

Both of the quests described here can be presented within the context of a dialectical argument: involving quest, mystery and revelation. It should occasion no surprise that this Hegelian structure of thesis, antithesis and synthesis can be applied to both the present research and that represented in the design of the rooms at Frampton. Hegel's studies of the philosophy of religion, as described in his lectures of 1824, drew on the same neo-Platonist ideas that were subsumed within gnostic cosmographies (Hegel 1985). His description of the perfection of spirit, or 'geist', would have been readily understood by a gnostic audience, as would the emphasis he places on a 'triune' god. Hegel describes distinctions that can be drawn between matter, idea and spirit/god. Having tentatively established some points of contact between Hegelian and neo-Platonist philosophy, it is a much easier matter to assert Hegel's influence on Marx, and in turn the Marxist character of Lefebvre's attempt to define a spatial trialectic.

In sum we can trace elements of a common intellectual approach in both the design of the Frampton pavements and in the interpretative agenda that I first brought to its study. Post-Enlightenment philosophy has, of course, taken us in very different directions in our quest for truth and understanding. But the fact of the quest itself is a shared one, and the language we use has common roots in the philosophy of late antiquity.

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