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Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of the Premodern World

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in the Arts of the Premodern World
Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova

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ENTANGLED HISTORIES AT CONQUES

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on
a Unique Site of Medieval Heritage

edited by
Adrien Palladino
with the collaboration of
Katarína Kravčíková

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INTRODUCTION

OBJECTS EVADING INTERPRETATION

Conques and Sainte Foy



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ADRIEN PALLADINO

The Golden Majesty of St Foy at Conques is, without doubt, an object that might be described as “inevitable”. It features in virtually every art history textbook and has become the face of a site that, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has evolved into a prominent tourist destination [fig. 1]. The statue-reliquary has captivated scholars’ attention, even when other prominent reliquaries are present within the treasure. Most notably those containing relics of Christ, allegedly gifted by the legendary founder of the monastery, Charlemagne, were certainly more significant in the past, as other studies have argued.¹ However, the enigmatic statue of St Foy holds an even greater power to captivate. This fascination proved inescapable – even for seasoned professionals in art history – throughout the four-year MSCA–RISE project, “Conques in the Global World,” and during the October 2023 conference in Conques, which serves as the foundation for this second volume of *Convivium*

* Research for this article was carried out in the frame of the Horizon Europe MSCA No. 101007770 – CONQUES: “Conques in the Global World”

1 See notably Philippe Cordez, “Vers un catalogue raisonné des ‘objets légendaires’ de Charlemagne. Le cas de Conques (xie–xiiie siècles)”, in *Charlemagne et les objets. Des thésaurisations carolingiennes aux constructions mémorielles*, Idem ed., Bern 2012, pp. 135–167, with further bibliography on the reliquaries; forthcoming transl. and updated version as “Charlemagne in Conques: Objects and Narratives”, in *Conques Across Time. Inventions and Reinventions (9th–21st century)*, Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino eds, Brno/Rome 2025.



[fig. 1] Postcard “L’Aveyron”, with photograph of the golden Majesty of St Foy, early 20th century / private collection

dedicated to the site.² In this compendium, the statue of St Foy occupies a central role in contributions by William Diebold, Kris Racaniello, and Erik Thunø, while the narratives surrounding the saint are explored from literary perspectives by Sébastien Fray and Valérie Fasseur. For decades, the statue of St Foy and her associated cult have inspired enduring scholarly debate and analysis. While it is easy to understand the lasting enchantment with St Foy's presence in Conques, a few introductory reflections are warranted, as her statue exemplifies the importance of interdisciplinary approaches for reimagining such iconic sites. Despite the considerable scholarship surrounding the statue, this enigmatic figure — described by André Malraux (1901–1976) as having seemingly “emerged from the barbaric night” — continues to elude scholarly understanding.³ Why is this so?

The face of the golden statue is certainly part of the answer: in this volume, Kris Racaniello addresses the peculiarities of the statue's visage, questioning its relationship to gendered dynamics that have been projected onto it throughout its long history. Indeed, the Late Antique mask used for St Foy's visage represents a genuine anomaly.⁴ Gender-bending mechanisms of spoliation involving various types of faces have been widely explored and can be found on a range of artifacts — for example, the heads of Bacchus adorning the reliquary of St Servatius in Quedlinburg, or the Codex Lebuinus or Bernulphus, and the visage of Medusa repurposed as the head of David from the Basel Münster.⁵ Yet at Conques, the preservation of such a large, Late Antique, entirely golden face — not formed of stone as in these previous examples — in the creation of a Christian reliquary is entirely unique.⁶ This distinctiveness resisted conventional interpretative methods, contributing to the statue's enduring enigma within art historical scholarship.⁷

2 Following the first supplementary volume: *Contextualizing Conques: Imaginaries, Narratives & Geographies*, Ivan Foletti et al. eds = *Convivium Supplementum*, 3 (2023).

3 “La Sainte Foy de Conques criblée de cabochons semble sortir de la nuit barbare.” André Malraux, *Le musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale : Le monde chrétien*, Paris 1954, p. 51.

4 Most thoroughly on the golden face, see the restoration by Jean Taralon in the 1950s: Jean Taralon, Dominique Taralon-Carlini, “La Majesté d’or du trésor de Sainte-Foy de Conques”, *Bulletin Monumental*, 155/1 (1997), pp. 11–73. More recently on this typology of faces, Anne de Pury-Gysel, *Die Goldbüste des Septimius Severus: Gold- und Silberbüsten römischer Kaiser*, Basel 2017, sp. pp. 126–135 for the golden head of St Foy.

5 On the Quedlinburg reliquary, recently Eliza Garrison, Evan A. Gatti, “A Reliquary Revisited: The *Reliquary of St. Servatius* and Its Contexts”, in *A Companion to the Abbey of Quedlinburg in the Middle Ages*, Karen Blough ed., Leiden/Boston 2022, pp. 308–363; for the decorated Gospel covers with reused heads broadly, see David Ganz, “Exzess der Materialität. Prachteinbände im Mittelalter”, in *Codex und Material*, Patrizia Carmassi, Gia Toussaint eds, Wiesbaden 2018, pp. 179–214; on the David statuette from Basel, see Philippe Cordez, “¿El arrepentimiento de un mago? Los camafeos de la estatua del rey David en la catedral de Basilea (hacia 1310–1320)”, *Codex aquilarensis*, 33 (2017), pp. 127–136.

6 See again De-Pury Gysel, *Die Goldbüste* (n. 4), pp. 126–135. See also François Braemer, “Sculptures en métal battu et repoussé de la Gaule romaine et des régions limitrophes (première partie)”, *Revue archéologique*, Nouvelle Série, 2 (1968), pp. 327–354 and the second part in *Ibidem*, 1 (1969), pp. 81–102. Pavla Tichá returns to the issue of St Foy's visage within late Roman and early medieval Gallia in a forthcoming book chapter, “From Emperor's Portrait to Saint's Head”, in *Conques Across Time* (n. 1).

7 For an interpretation of the statue's performative qualities, see Ivan Foletti, “Dancing with Sainte Foy: Movement and the Iconic Presence”, *Convivium*, 6/1 (2019), pp. 70–87.

If we move beyond the object, the fascination surrounding the gilded statue of the saint is nearly inseparable from the textual artistry of a unique source well-known to art historians: the *Liber miraculorum Sancte Fidis*.⁸ The first part, written in the early eleventh century by Bernard of Angers, recounts his personal journey from northern to southern France, where, much like the reader, he encounters the Rouergue region firsthand, and notably observes the customs of erecting and venerating statues of saints. This sense of proximity, combined with the text's rich rhetorical elements, extensively examined in this volume by Sébastien Fray, situates the work within both established literary topoi — such as Bernard's use of passages borrowed from Vergil to describe the landscape he traverses — and distinct local realities. Far from being merely a “trickster” figure, St Foy's actions and interactions, as Fray argues, must be understood within the region's embedded social dynamics.⁹ The literary qualities of the *Liber miraculorum* have undoubtedly greatly contributed to the golden statue's elevated status in scholarship, particularly given the text's wide accessibility, notably through Pamela Sheingorn's English translation.¹⁰ Art historians' interpretations of the *Liber miraculorum* have generated significant scholarly debate, particularly regarding the complex relationships between cult images, relics, and statuary — a discourse perhaps ignited by Hans Belting's inclusion of the text and the statue in *Bild und Kult*.¹¹ This perspective, reflected for example in Erik Thunø's contribution to this volume, prompted a cross-cultural approach, examining St Foy's place within a broader tradition of images that shape sacred spaces around them.

A related issue that has captivated research is the question of the legitimacy of cult images within the medieval Christian world. In a well-known passage, Bernard, upon first encountering the statue of St Géraud of Aurillac — likely of similar typology to that of St Foy, adorned with gold and jewels and inlaid eyes — is overcome with astonishment. Turning to his companion, and speaking in Latin to avoid being overheard, he asks, “What do you think, brother, of this idol? Would Jupiter or Mars deem themselves unworthy of such a statue?”¹² Initially, Bernard feels as though he is standing before a pagan idol. However, upon encountering the statue of St Foy, he gradually reevaluates

8 For the most complete edition of the text, see Bernard of Angers, *Liber miraculorum sancte Fidis. Il racconto dei prodigi di una santa bambina*, Luca Robertini transl. and critical ed., Luigi G. G. Ricci ed., Florence 2010.

9 In this context, Fray's article is impacted by Amy Remensnyder's seminal work on the matter, see Amy G. Remensnyder, “Un problème de cultures ou de culture? La statue-reliquaire et les *joca* de sainte Foy de Conques dans le *Liber miraculorum* de Bernard d'Angers”, *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 33 (1990), pp. 351–379.

10 Bernard of Angers, *The Book of Sainte Foy's Miracles*, Pamela Sheingorn transl., Philadelphia 1995.

11 Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult. Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst*, Munich 1990; English as *Like-ness and Presence: A History of the Images before the Era of Art*, Edmund Jephcott transl., Chicago/London 1994, pp. 300–301, 536–537. Belting writes: “The head, which enclosed the actual relic, had the most powerful impact, because it too – and not just the relic – was spoil from the early days of the church, which increased the desired authenticity. Perhaps it is a Late Antique or Celtic head of the kind (gold foil over a wooden core) that was to have a lasting influence, both technically and aesthetically, on medieval sculpture.” *Ibidem*, p. 301.

12 “*Quid tibi, frater, de ydolo? An Iuppiter sive Mars tali statua se indignos estimassent?*” Bernard of Angers, *Liber miraculorum* (n. 8), I, 13, 7.

this impression. Through cataloging, describing, and witnessing numerous miracles, he comes to recognize that this precious simulacrum serves as a vessel for the saint's potent relics.

This passage, along with others in which Bernard reflects on the nature of images, has unsurprisingly attracted significant scholarly attention — addressed in this volume by William Diebold and previously most notably by Beate Fricke in her 2007 book *Ecce Fides*, whose 2015 English translation further accentuates the thematic contrast between “Fallen Idol” and “Risen Saints”.¹³ Fricke's work addresses not only the statue of St Foy but also the broader theme of idolatry as depicted in texts primarily from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. The enduring presence of the statue in Conques, coupled with these sources, raises questions as diverse as the allegorical use of idolatry and the persistence of the visibility of ancient images in the Middle Ages.¹⁴ More broadly, it also interrogates how the notion of idolatry was used to denigrate heretics or other religions. St Foy's story is particularly fitting for this discussion, not only because of Bernard's evocative account, but also due to the ninth-century *Passio Sanctae Fidis*, which recounts the saint's martyrdom for refusing to sacrifice to pagan idols.

Perhaps above all, we must not underestimate the impact of later construction in our understanding of the site. In fact, the myth of St Foy was truly solidified only in the 1870s, when Bishop Ernest Bourret (1827–1896) successfully endeavored to rekindle devotion to Foy, against the backdrop of France trying to revive the cult of Late Antique and medieval saints within the anticlerical Third Republic.¹⁵ Upon the discovery and recognition of the martyr's relics, both within the high altar in 1878 and inside the statue, Bourret designated and constructed Foy as one of the principal saints of Gallia. Likened to Agnes of Rome and other Late Antique Christian martyrs, St Foy became the focal point of a renewed pilgrimage and devotion at Conques. Despite her enduring presence across the centuries — evident in her depiction on the tympanum and various representations of the saint over time — her significance and

13 Beate Fricke, *Ecce fides. Die Statue von Conques, Götzendienst und Bildkultur im Westen*, Munich 2007; *Eadem, Fallen Idols, Risen Saints. Sainte Foy of Conques and the Revival of Monumental Sculpture in Medieval Art*, Turnhout 2015; see also the important Martin Büchsel, “The Status of Sculpture in the Early Middle Ages: Liturgy and Paraliturgie in the *Liber miraculorum sancte Fidis*”, in *Current Directions in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Sculpture Studies*, Robert A. Maxwell, Kirk Ambrose eds, Turnhout 2010, pp. 47–59.

14 The theme is already addressed in Jean Hubert, Marie-Clothilde Hubert, “Piété chrétienne ou paganisme? Les statues-reliquaires de l'Europe carolingienne”, in *Cristianizzazione ed organizzazione ecclesiastica delle campagne nell'alto Medioevo: espansione e resistenze*, conference proceedings (10–16 aprile 1980, Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo, Spoleto) 1982, vol. 1, pp. 237–275; Büchsel, “The Status of Sculpture” (n. 13); Remensnyder, “Un problème de cultures” (n. 9).

15 See Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, “La réinvention de Conques ‘romane’: patrimoine national ou exaltation de la vraie foi?”, in *Repenser l'histoire de l'art médiéval en 2023. Recueil d'études offertes à Xavier Barral i Altet*, Miljenko Jurković, Elisabetta Scirocco, Arnaud Timbert eds, Zagreb 2023, pp. 849–859; Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, “Reviving Gallia Christiana, Restoring the Church (1870s)”, in *Conques Across Time* (n. 1), [forthcoming]. See also Martin F. Lešák, “The ‘Glorious Traveler’. St Foy's Triumphant March from Rodez to Conques or the Liturgical Afterlife of Two Medieval Reliquaries”, in *Contextualizing Conques. Imaginaries, Narratives & Geographies = Convivium Supplementum* (2023), Ivan Foletti, Cynthia Hahn, Kris N. Racaniello, Cécile Voyer, Adrien Palladino eds, Turnhout/Brno 2023, pp. 42–63.

iconography wavered in importance throughout the ensuing centuries. It is thus, perhaps, this nineteenth-century revival that most profoundly shaped our contemporary perception of her cult and of the site more broadly.

Despite a wealth of evidence, and despite art historian's enduring fascination with St Foy, the discipline still struggles to account for our perception of the gilded Majesty. Perhaps the articles represented in this volume indicate how to break out of the discipline's narrow set of problems and questions through interdisciplinary approaches. This brief excursus shows that our fascination is shaped by a confluence of circumstances — key moments in the statue's long history — that must be examined from anthropological, literary, historiographical, historical, and performative perspectives. This is why this volume bears the potential to become a precious addition to the large bibliography on the site: here, the site of Conques is explored through at least five additional lenses, all of which intersect with the centrifugal force of the Majesty within art history, as outlined above. Xavier Barral i Altet contributes to the volume with an expert analysis of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century restorations of the abbey church — coinciding with the revival of Foy's cult — focusing on previously overlooked aspects of the restoration, such as the stained-glass windows and paving. Benoît-Michel Tock delves into the abbey's "official" documents, offering new and compelling insights into the interactions between laypeople and the abbey and effectively demonstrating the dynamic mutual interdependence between these two worlds. Two contributions, not presented at Conques in 2023 but deriving from the ongoing research of the team are included in the volume. These further enrich this compendium's social and architectural explorations: Martin Naraschewski offers a complex reading of the interactions between Conques and the constructions sponsored by the Hohenstaufen dynasty, employing a systematic comparison of architectural decorative elements inspired by digital humanities. Éric Sparhubert provides a suggestive interpretation of the church's chevet, viewing it as a space that materializes Conques' stature and constructed ancient roots, even in the absence of a prestigious saintly tomb. Finally, Valérie Fasseur reflects on the current challenges of translation, and specifically her work on the eleventh-century Occitan *Canczo* of St Foy, reinterpreted for a contemporary audience. The chronicles section publishes the first results of the MSCA-RISE project's initial interventions into the newly popular, collaborative field bringing sound engineering into dialogue with art history and musicology. There, Kris Racaniello publishes data from acoustic measurements conducted at Conques Abbey Church in 2021, advocating for new approaches in acoustic reconstructions that account for both climatic conditions and the presence of textiles within sacred spaces.

I am confident that these perspectives on Conques will enrich the ongoing scholarly discourse surrounding this medieval site, whose intricate history

continues to captivate researchers worldwide. A truly comprehensive approach — one that combines the expertise of specialists in medieval material and object culture, rigorous textual analysis on the saint and the site, their various discursive frameworks, and a nuanced examination of the site's complex, multilayered restorations, both physical and conceptual — is essential to generate the intellectual friction necessary for re-evaluating sites and objects profoundly shaped by modern historiography. Conques, in this regard, serves as a model for methodological inquiry. Significant interdisciplinary challenges remain: for instance, the remarkable textiles from the Conques Treasure, recently restored at the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, will soon be the focus of a publication by the Abegg-Stiftung team. Numerous objects at the site still await dedicated research, including the votive offerings, small bone boxes, and intricate pentagonal and hexagonal reliquaries that continue to guard their secrets, as well as other topics raised in this volume that warrant further investigation, such as the abbey church's paving and its relationship to liturgical spatial organization. Meanwhile, it is my sincere hope that this special issue of *Convivium*, together with the extensive monographic volume on Conques — the culmination of a four-year interdisciplinary project — will significantly advance our understanding of this inevitable site of European heritage.