

CONVIVIUM

Exchanges and Interactions in the Arts of Medieval
Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean
Seminarium Kondakovianum, Series Nova



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Europe, Byzantium, and the Mediterranean

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**Contextualizing
Conques**
Imaginaries, Narratives
& Geographies

edited by
Ivan Foletti, Cynthia Hahn,
Kris N. Racaniello, Cécile Voyer
& Adrien Palladino

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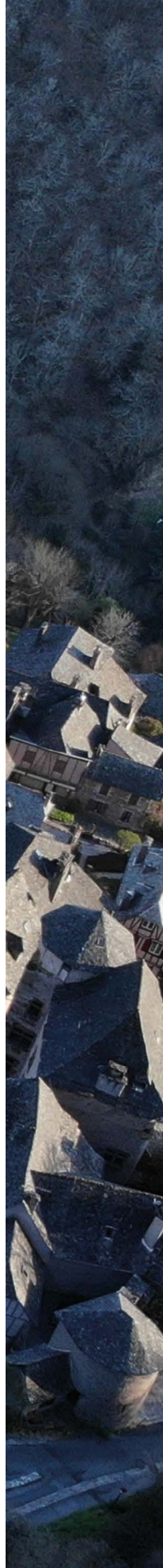
Contextualizing Conques, an Introduction

Ivan Foletti, Cynthia Hahn, Kris N. Racaniello, Cécile Voyer & Adrien Palladino

Located in Southern France, Conques is a unique site of cultural heritage. It has preserved both outstanding artworks and traces of ritual and material culture from the ninth through the twenty-first century. It is this unique character, and the need to better integrate the site into cultural histories, which motivated the creation of the international project “Conques in the Global World. Transferring Knowledge: from Material to Immaterial Heritage”, funded under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research and Innovation Staff Exchange (H2020-MSCA-RISE-2020) scheme.

The articles in this volume are the result of the conference and workshops held in New York City in the summer of 2022 under the auspices of this project. This meeting was the second major encounter between international project team members, with the first being our 2021 summer meeting on “Exploring Materiality of a Sacred Space: Field Research, Data Collecting, Landscape Exploration”; a fruitful site visit to Conques which also contributed to the formation of many of the articles included in this volume.

It may seem surprising to gather in midtown Manhattan to discuss an impactful premodern site located in contemporary France. No two things seem more different or distant than the small museumified “medieval” village of Conques and the 15th Floor of the Modernist, Public Works Administration funded building built in the 1940s for Hunter College, where





1/ Drone view of Conques, 2021

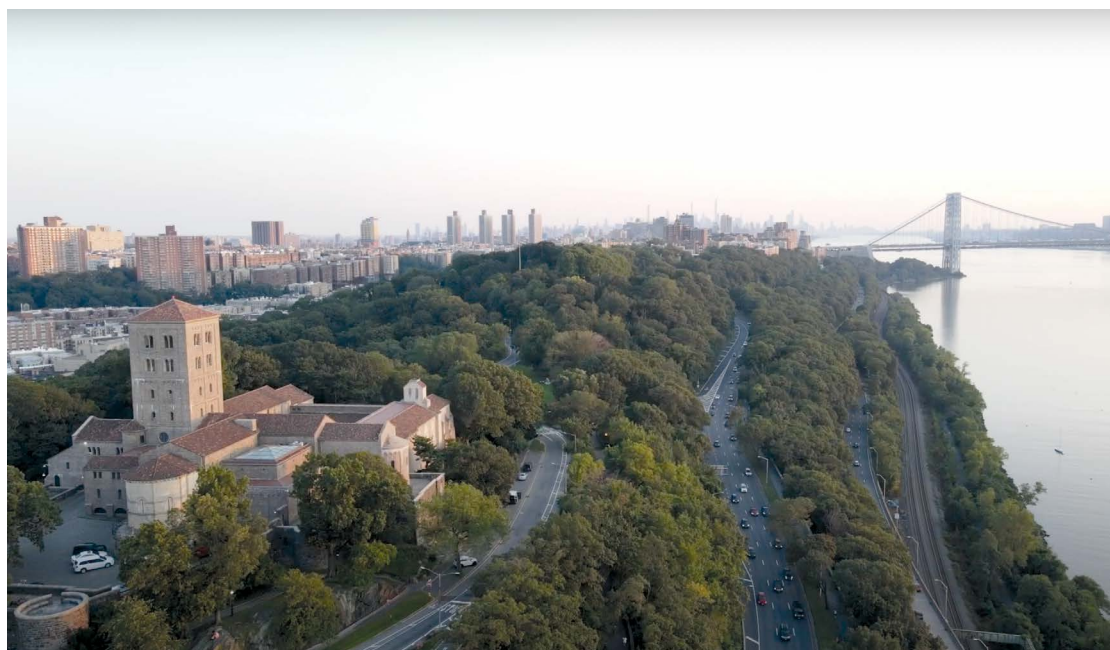
2/ View of Hunter College West from the corner of Lexington Avenue and 68th Street

3/ Workshop at the Morgan Library with curator Joshua O'Driscoll on July 13, 2022

4/ Aerial view of the Met Cloisters from the north

the conference took place [Figs 1–2].¹ The affair was one of (productively) colliding social and cultural spheres, both within the research presented and amongst colleagues. To complete the picture, one should recall one of the conference dinners, organized by Kris Racaniello in the open-space atelier of Saul Ostrow, a contemporary art critic and curator, during which the tension between the medieval past and contemporary issues in Europe and in the United States were at the core of the discussions. These informal conference discussions were further enriched by site visits, for example to the Morgan Library & Museum, where curator Dr. Joshua O'Driscoll presented manuscripts for the project members. This stimulated debates over material culture and image theory but also heritage, portability and provenance, and medievalism [Fig. 3]. The diversity between scholars gathered around the same table during these days, which may have accentuated a feeling of alienation, became sensorial for some: one of the aspects of cultural divergence surely concerned the use and intensity of air conditioning during hot summer days; a small, but fundamental issue in many conference settings. Although these may seem to be anecdotes, this is in fact exactly what we were looking for: gathering scholars from diverse backgrounds, the conference aimed to open the debate on the medieval site of Conques to a transatlantic audience. Academics and students from the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, the United States, and Switzerland experienced their historiographical diversity not only with regards to the local community of medieval studies, but also between each other. This aspect was particularly felt during the day spent at the Met Fifth Avenue and the Cloisters, where we were kindly hosted by C. Griffith Mann, the curator in charge of the medieval collection. For scholars used to visiting premodern cloisters in situ, the Rockefeller re-invention of the past on the banks of the Hudson River was a particularly fertile ground to reflect on the impact of the last two centuries on our divergent perceptions of the Middle Ages [Fig. 4].

Such a situation of displacement and work at a remove from the site under study, was anchored in the broader frame of the project at the origin of this volume, whose purpose is to propose a broad analysis of the site of Conques by crossing different disciplinary, scholarly, cultural, and nationalistic perspectives. Such an approach is in our view necessary



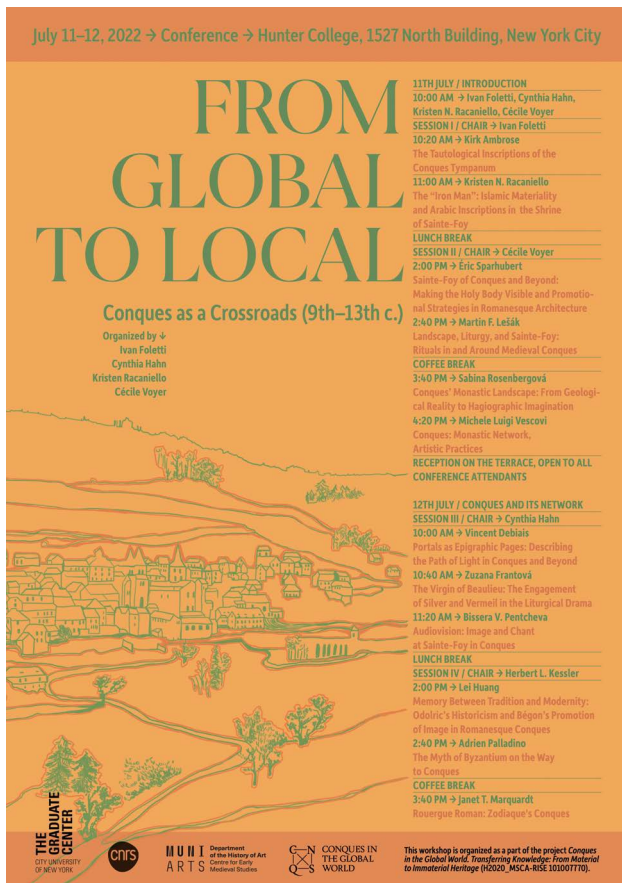
especially because of a fragmented historiographical tradition that often functioned in the past through what may be called watertight compartments limited by the strictures of linguistics and nationalism. Thus, there exists a tradition of Francophone research on various aspects of the site, which sometimes lacked necessary international reception². Even in Francophone research, one can trace a tangible tension between studies of local or regional scope, which can be of excellent quality but sometimes impossible to access, and national ones, which are much more visible and widespread. Conversely, studies written in English, German, Spanish or Italian have not always found the necessary echo in Francophone historiography³. When looking for knowledge on the specific site of Conques, we are thus often dealing with parallel narratives. Even terminology can become an obstacle. Thus, the title of the conference “From Local to Global” can be (and was) understood in a totally different way from post-colonial discourse in the us, exacerbated by the events of the last five years, or from a Central European perspective where these notions are much closer to their geographical meaning [Fig. 5]⁴. In this sense, this project directed by the Czech Republic but involving various European and us institutions would like to unite (and overpass) these historiographical paths.

1 The expansion of the museum concept into the historic city has been named differently by scholars, including the terms: musealization, *museification*, museumisation, and vernacular museumification. See Pinar Aykaç, “Musealization as an Urban Process: The Transformation of the Sultanahmet District in Istanbul’s Historic Peninsula”, *Journal of Urban History*, XLV/6 (2019), pp. 1246–1272, for an excellent overview of the scholarly history. The Hunter College North building was built by Shreve, Lamb, & Harman in 1940, with funding from the Public Works Administration (PWA), following a fire that destroyed the neo-gothic building on Park Avenue.

2 See, e.g., Élianne Vergnolle, Henri Pradalier, Nelly Pousthomis-Dalle, “Conques, Sainte-Foy: l’abbatiale romane”, *Congrès archéologique de France*, CLXVII (2011), pp. 71–160; Lei Huang, “Le chantier de Sainte-Foy de Conques: éléments de réflexion”, *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa*, XLV (2014), pp. 93–103; *Idem*, “Le Maître du tympan de l’abbatiale Sainte-Foy de Conques: état de la question et perspectives”, *Études aveyronnaises. Recueil des travaux de la société des lettres, sciences et arts de l’Aveyron* (2014), pp. 87–100; Bernard Berthod, Gaël Favier, *Conques, un trésor millénaire*, Paris 2019.

3 See e.g., in the last years Kirk Ambrose, “Attunement to the Damned of the Conques Tympanum”, *Gesta*, L (2014), pp. 1–17; Beate Fricke, *Ecce fides: die Statue von Conques, Götzendienst und Bildkultur im Westen*, Munich 2007; Xavier Barral i Altet, *Il cantiere romanico di Sainte-Foy de Conques: la ricchezza, i miracoli e le contingenze materiali, dalle fonti testuali alla storia dell’arte*, Zagreb 2018.

4 Geraldine Heng, *The Global Middle Ages: An Introduction*, Cambridge 2021.



5/ Poster of the conference, graphic design by Kristýna Smrčková

6/ Restored abbey church from the Rue Gonzague Florens, late nineteenth century

Our project is also intended to confront such differences directly and to address the broader role of national and international politics in academic studies. The difficulty emerging within academia of the last decades is a tangible divergence between the socially engaged positions emerging from monolingual UK/US research and publications, which are sometimes inseparable from their political and social context, and the research conceived and realized within the framework of European projects. These are on the one side built in a plurilingual environment, but with a totally different historical experience due particularly to the Iron Curtain and to the successive “Westernization” of former Eastern Europe, to which for example, the Czech Republic belongs. Far from the existence of a shared basis, international scholarship today has very different preoccupations when looking at the past and the present from the position of post-Trump New York, rural Conques-en-Rouergue, or post-Communist Brno. One of the major lessons of the 2022 New York conference was – in addition to the output of excellent scholarly research published here – the necessity of building new and unexpected bridges based on the capacity to really hear one another, even if at first glance the discourse of the other can appear hard to understand or even polemical.

That this volume opens with two essays devoted to the nineteenth century is thus a choice to respond to the historiographic and reflective nature of our project’s team. The following essays are devoted to the history of visual, architectural, material, and performative culture. Indeed, one of the keys to better understand the complex (and fundamental) history of studies on this exceptional site is to critically analyze its deep roots, an issue that had been addressed in the past by scholars such as Xavier Barral i Altet, Jean Nayrolles,

or by Lei Huang looking mainly at architectural history and restoration, and in recent months in the joint studies of Ivan Foletti and Adrien Palladino⁵. These two essays by Adrien Palladino and Martin F. Lešák, however, go decisively beyond this state of studies by addressing the founding myths of art historiography during the nineteenth century. Palladino seeks to analyze the way politics, aesthetics, and literature transform architectural “restoration” in nineteenth-century France. His essay demonstrates how intellectual rewriting of the past leads to its reconstruction (and sometimes destruction) in material reality. This essay begins with a case study of the preparatory drawings of Jean-Camille Formigé – the architect who restored and indeed rebuilt the Neo-Romanesque abbey-church in the second half of the nineteenth century [Fig. 6] – and the various imaginaries of the dome of Conques and the orientalist, colonialist, and imperialist ideology espoused by the myths of Neo-Byzantine architecture more broadly. Martin F. Lešák for his part focuses on a case study of Conques in 1878, showing how much the Romantic-religious rewriting of this site has transformed its perception (and thus reality) through the reinvention of a local liturgical corpus at this time. The article swirls around the newly re-formed social ecology at Conques and the return of the reliquaries after their long absence due to their restoration in Paris [Fig. 7]. Both interventions are thus a reflection on the role played by romanticized ideas of the past in all phases of the restoration and reconstruction of medieval heritage (material and performative) in nineteenth-century France. However, it is also about probing the transformation of the perception of the pre-modern world by broad social groups such as the nineteenth-century nation-states were, but also much more local realities which wish to present their own narratives on the past, such as that of Occitania.

The second part of this volume is devoted to some of the pre-modern elements preserved to date from the Conques site. Lei Huang, who has previously devoted his doctoral thesis to the architecture of the abbey church of Conques, addresses in his essay a new interpretation of the visual conception of the church as it was developed in the early years of this project⁶. The underlying thesis is that the building, reconceived and rebuilt during the eleventh century, was made in an intentionally revivalist-style. This analysis came, in part, out of discussions at the Conques 2021 meeting of our project, which resulted in an early collective publication. This notion is developed here by Lei Huang, who posits a “Carolingian” model, i.e. a rationalized allusion to ninth-century monuments within the eleventh-century project of the Conques abbey church and its decoration⁷. Such a choice is framed as a selective “prestige” history, linked to the desire and need on the abbey’s community at Conques’s part, during a time of deep political turmoil, to claim deep foundational roots through the context of reforms, as has been studied systematically by Sébastien Fray⁸. It is also in this second section covering architectural history that one of the most recognizable elements of Conques, the great

5 Xavier Barral i Altet, “La restauration de la façade de Sainte-Foy de Conques”, *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France*, x (1995), p. 378–379; Lei Huang, *L’abbatiale Sainte-Foy de Conques (XIe–XIIe siècles)*, (Ph.D. dissertation), Université Paris Panthéon Sorbonne 2018; Xavier Barral i Altet, Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, “Vynálezání ‘románského’ Conques: národní dědictví, nebo oslava pravé víry?” [Inventing ‘Romanesque’ Conques: National Heritage or Celebration of True Faith?], in *Infrastruktury (dějin) umění. Sborník ze VII. sjezdu historiků a historiček umění*, Anežka Bartlová, Hanna Buddeus eds, Ústí nad Labem 2022, pp. 401–412; 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. 849–860.

6 Huang, *L’abbatiale Sainte-Foy* (n. 5).

7 Ivan Foletti et al., “Romanesque’ Conques as a Neo-Carolingian Project”, *Convivium*, VIII/2 (2021), pp. 168–174.

8 Sébastien Fray, “Les *gesta abbatum* de Conques et l’historiographie monastique conquoise du début du XIIe siècle”, *Études aveyronnaises. Recueil des travaux de la Société des lettres, sciences et arts de l’Aveyron*, (2014), pp. 352–364.



7/ Jean-Camille Formigé, watercolor of the Majesty of Sainte Foy, between 1874 and 1876

tympanum carved around 1100, is addressed⁹. In his paper, Kirk Ambrose questions the iconological conception of the portico, focusing on the compositional emphasis on the evocation of materials on the tympanum, and namely on the question of the “real” and “counterfeit” materials, from false coins to passion relics. In this second section, the iconic Conques monument is significantly revisited in the cultural context of the first decades of the new millennium. The past was used to build prestige for the monastic community during the eleventh century, its economic peak. The presentation of the passion relics on the tympanum must be viewed in the same sense: it is a way of emphasizing the prestige of the local community. The need to promote these relics, however, opens a further question: in the design of the tympanum these relics occupy significantly more space than the presentation of Sainte Foy, the martyr saint who appears to be at the origin of Conques’ incredible success. The other relics at Conques are often, and easily, forgotten by the many art historians who have worked on the site and focused on the enchanting *Majesty of Sainte Foy* and the attendant miracle stories. Thus, the tympanum design could be read – perhaps in the context of the rivalry with Figeac – as a sign that Conques sought to vary its cultic points of attraction. Finally, the neo-Carolingian dimension of the building constitutes an interesting (and unexpected) point of union with the nineteenth-century situation.

The third, largest, and final part of the volume is devoted to Conques in a broader context. The starting point for this reflection bridges the second and third parts of the volume, a study by Kris Racaniello which is an extended consideration of the tympanum and architecture through a focus on an important but often vanished material: iron. This material entered the shrine at Conques, at least in narrative form, through the iron shackles given to Sainte Foy by prisoners from across the region and Eurasia more broadly as votive offerings in thanks for their miraculous freedom. This study explores the intersection of the material archive with stories about Muslims at Conques and the historical voids left by voiceless presence. Iron arrived physically but also narratively in Conques through the *Liber Miraculorum*, the set of miracle stories initiated by Bernard of Angers: miracles and material thus help promote the fame of the local saint. The miracles of Sainte Foy, described in the *Liber Miraculorum*, are also at the heart of Sabina Rosenbergová’s research, which seeks to reflect on the success of her cult in the regions surrounding Conques. Her research shows how much the “documented” success of the patron saint of Conques is clearly linked to the communication routes leading to Conques but also how much the miraculous power of the saint expands in Bernard’s accounts. Miracles multiply as people approach Conques, resulting in a geographic miracle density around the site¹⁰. This geographic panorama is then continued by Michele Luigi Vescovi’s essay

9 The tympanum is certainly one of the most studied elements of the whole edifice, at the latest since Jean-Claude Bonne, *L’art roman de face et de profil: le tympan de Conques*, Paris 1984; see, e.g., also several contributions in *Enfer et paradis: l’au-delà dans l’art et la littérature en Europe*, conference proceedings (Centre Européen d’Art et de Civilisation Médiévale, Conques, April 22–23, 1994), Pierre Riom, Robert Taussat eds, Conques 1995; Alain Erlande-Brandenburg, “L’abbatiale de Conques: plans, aménagements liturgiques et tympan”, *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France*, (2009), pp. 235–245; Manuel Castiñeiras, “Da Conques a Compostella: retorica e performance nell’era dei portali parlanti”, in *Medioevo: immagine e memoria*, Arturo Carlo Quintavalle ed, Milan 2009, pp. 233–251; Kirk Ambrose, “Attunement to the damned of the Conques tympanum”, *Gesta*, 1/1 (2011), pp. 1–17; Manuel Castiñeiras, “The Romanesque Portal as Performance”, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, CLXVIII (2015), pp. 1–33; Cécile Voyer, “L’acte d’image ou le regard de l’image (XI–XIII siècles): réflexions à partir du Christ sculpté du tympan de l’abbatiale Sainte-Foy de Conques”, *Textimage. Revue d’étude du dialogue texte-image* (2023) [online: <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04009503/document>].

10 In this context, on Conques, see also Martin F. Lešák, “Transforming a Desert, Claiming the Domain: The Early Medieval Landscape of Conques”, *Convivium*, IX/1 (2022), pp. 148–167; Ivan Foletti, “Spaces for Miracles. Constructing Sacred Space through the Body, from Conques to the Mediterranean, and Beyond”, *Convivium*, IX/1 (2022), pp. 168–185.

presenting the saint's successful spread through monastic networks in Eurasia. His careful research proves first and convincingly that the cult of Foy, or "Fides", has exceptional popularity in the central centuries of the Middle Ages. Vescovi, however, also reflects on the relationship between cult diffusion and forms of cultural transfer, coming to very interesting and convincing conclusions. This last section of the volume is concluded by Zuzana Frantová's study of an exceptional work, which enriches the dense panorama of the region formed by these final three essays. Almost three days' march from Conques, in the abbey of Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne, a second statue covered with precious metals, that of the Virgin dated to the twelfth century, forms the focus of Frantová's study. She analyses the performative life of this extraordinary object – which most likely participated in the very popular liturgical drama *Officium stellae*. Although later than the *Majesty of Sainte Foy*, this object and its analysis reminds us how much the Conques phenomenon must be read from within an extended local context. This was a region where – as already recounted by Bernard of Angers and masterfully analyzed by Hans Belting – each major religious community possessed its own personality, its own identifying, portable statue¹¹.

With this first scholarly volume, the "Conques in the Global World" project thus launches the series of studies that should culminate next year with the publication of a monograph devoted to Conques as a phenomenon from the ninth to the twenty-first century. With this first collection of essays, we hope to have paved the way for new disciplinary approaches and debates that rethink and elevate this exceptional site.

11 Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult*, Munich 1990, pp. 335–336.

