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Abstract – “Romanesque” Conques as a Neo-Carolingian Project

Begun in 2021, the first team encounter of the project “Conques in the Global World” generated an innovative reinterpretation of the site. Departing from the nineteenth- and twentieth-century explication of Conques as the ideal image of the Romanesque Middle Ages, the site is here envisaged as a space of memorialization of the past for the present. This memorialization, we argue, began in fact at the church’s conception, with the founders’ decision to reflect the character and significance of Carolingian antecedents. This Carolingian echo is evident in the material and epigraphic culture created at Conques around 1100, from the portal inscriptions to the reliquaries held below ground in the treasure. What is postulated here, and proposed for future research, is the understanding that Conques has been a memory space since it was conceived the eleventh century – a space in which a specific memory of an authoritative past is reinvented for the *longue durée* to confer legitimacy to a place and its religious community.

Keywords – Abbey Church of Sainte-Foy at Conques, Carolingian, past, Catholic identity, *longue durée*, medievalism, memory space

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In June 2021, the first major event organized as a part of the Conques in the Global World project, financed by the European Research Council under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Rise program, took place¹. The goal of this four-year endeavor bringing together scholarly institutions from across the United States, Germany, France, Italy, and the Czech Republic has been to offer a comprehensive analysis of the medieval town of Conques and its monuments². The main objective of this shared research is to envisage, through the transfer of knowledge between consortium members, a new narrative for the remarkable objects and monuments preserved in this unique site of European and world heritage.

To better understand this place which went through an impressive development especially from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, the team decided to start by investigating other key moments when it flourished, namely its nineteenth-century “reinvention” and its twentieth-century “musealisation”. The next step for the project will be a transdisciplinary gathering of archaeometric data, both on the main buildings of the city and the objects preserved in its unique treasury which, among other objects, includes the famous reliquary statue of Sainte Foy. Starting from archeological, archaeometric, epigraphical, and archival data, the long-term goal is to propose a new comprehensive understanding of the site.

During the first summer school held on June 15–19, 2021 the consortium gathered for the first time, inviting two more specialists to participate

in the project as well, namely Lei Huang and Vincent Debiais. Lei Huang is the author of the latest comprehensive investigation systematically merging the archaeology of the built environment with art history and historiography³. Vincent Debiais, on the other hand, is a leading specialist in the interaction between epigraphy and images during the Middle Ages⁴.

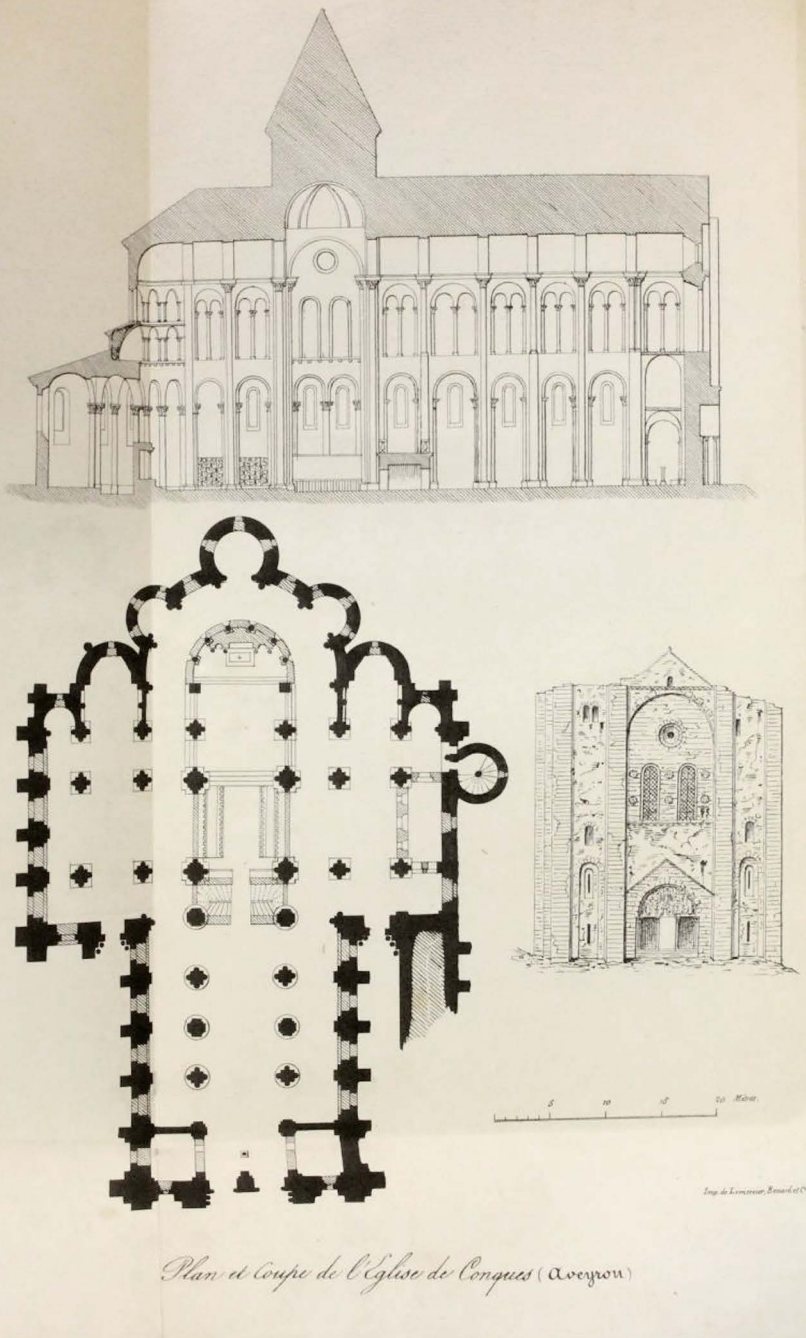
In the following pages, we would like to share the early results of our shared consideration with the readers of *Convivium*. In the first part, we will focus on the main stages in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century “invention” of what Conques is today at material and historiographical levels. In the second part, we will suggest a new perspective on the abbey church that stems from an attentive analysis of the architecture understood in the light of both the decorations and the epigraphical data. This new understanding will be supported by a systematized reflection on the construction of Conques’ treasury as a “memory space”.

From Romantic to “Romanesque”, and to French Catholic identity

Conques, an extremely important site on the pilgrimage route to Santiago in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, progressively lost its radiance during the early modern period. Thus, when French intellectuals were rediscovering their medieval Christian roots at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in the moment following the second Restauration, Conques quickly attracted their attention. The most famous agent of this rediscovery was, beyond any doubt, Prosper Mérimée (1803–1870), a writer and later general inspector of the historical monuments, who reached Conques in 1837⁵. He was beguiled by the place but also alarmed by the tragic state of preservation of the abbey church: there had been no monastic community since the French Revolution, the building was suffering from extreme humidity because of its window sealing, and the whole structure was unstable. Mérimée raised awareness about the monument in Paris and inspired a restoration campaign which would, in various phases, last until the end of the nineteenth century⁶. The extensive restorations

– notably analyzed by Xavier Barral i Altet and Lei Huang – must be understood within a much larger framework of rewriting the French national past⁷. In the years of the Restauration, followed by the Second Empire and the Third Republic, France’s use of the past had a decisive impact on the shape and understanding of Conques’ monuments, and on the notion of the “Romanesque” invented in the same years⁸. In this sense, Conques

- 1 The research for this article has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101007770 – CONQUES: “Conques in the Global World. Transferring Knowledge: From Material to Immaterial Heritage”. For additional information on the project and its events, visit <https://conques.eu/> [last accessed 09.09.2021]
- 2 Participants include the Université de Poitiers – Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, the Center for Early Medieval Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte Paris – Max Weber Stiftung, the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max-Planck-Institut für Kunstgeschichte in Rome, The City University of New York as well as Rutgers University. Two non-scholarly partners, Viella Libreria Editrice and the Centre Européen – Association pour le Développement Economique et Culturel de Conques are also part of the project.
- 3 Lei Huang, *L’abbatiale Sainte-Foy de Conques (XIe–XIIe siècles)*, PhD dissertation, Université Paris Panthéon Sorbonne, 2018.
- 4 See, for instance, Vincent Debiais, “Espaces libérés du sens et de l’imagination. Quelques éléments de réflexion dans les inscriptions médiévales (VIIIe–XIVe siècle)”, *Mélanges de l’École Française de Rome*, CXXIII/1 (2020), pp. 65–75.
- 5 Before Mérimée’s arrival, see also Justin Taylor, Charles Nodier, Alphonse de Cailleux, *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l’ancienne France. Languedoc*, vol. I, part II, Paris 1834. On the rediscovery of medieval monuments and the double romantic and national feeling presiding over them, see *Le « Gothique » retrouvé: avant Viollet-le-Duc*, (Exhibition catalogue, Paris, Hôtel de Sully, 31 October 1979 – 17 February 1980), Louis Grodecki ed., Paris 1979.
- 6 See Prosper Mérimée, “Extrait d’un rapport adressé au Ministre de l’Intérieur, sur l’abbaye de Conques”, *Bulletin monumental*, IV (1838), pp. 225–242 and *idem*, *Notes d’un voyage en Auvergne*, Paris 1838, pp. 169–192. On Mérimée, see André Fermigier, “Mérimée et l’inspection des monuments historiques”, in *Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. II/2: *La Nation*, Pierre Nora ed., Paris 1986, pp. 593–611.
- 7 For the main stages of the restoration, see Louis Causse, “Conques: chronique d’une restauration”, *Vivre en Rouergue*, I (1986), pp. 11–19; Éliane Vergnolle, Henri Pradalier, Nelly Pousthomis-Dalle, “Conques, Sainte-Foy: l’abbatiale romane”, *Congrès archéologique de France, CLXVII session tenue dans l’Aveyron en 2009*, (2011), pp. 71–160, sp. pp. 77–85. See also Huang, *L’abbatiale Sainte-Foy* (n. 3), pp. 31–39; 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, pp. 40–47.
- 8 On the notion of the “Romanesque” from a broad historiographical perspective, see Xavier Barral i Altet, *Contre l’art roman? Essai sur un passé réinventé*, Paris 2006 and Jean Nayrolle, *L’invention de l’art roman à l’époque moderne (XVIIIe–XIXe siècles)*, Rennes 2005.



Plan et coupe de l'Église de Conques (Auvergne)

1/ Ground plan, elevation, and drawing of the façade of the abbey-church of Sainte Foy, Conques, folding plate in frontispiece, from Prosper Mérimée, *Notes d'un voyage en Auvergne*, Paris 1838

must be included within a much larger European context of restoration, re-historicization of buildings, and nation-building constructed around historical monuments⁹.

A crucial moment that has been partially neglected by historiography certainly took place in the 1870s, when the monastic community of the Premonstratensians was installed in Conques. This coincides with the impressive re-discovery of lost relics of Sainte Foy, and a systematic local promotion of the cult of this fourth-century saint¹⁰.

Such an endeavor must be understood within the context of the self-definition of the Catholic Church that followed the crisis caused by the loss of its temporal power in Central Italy. After the unification of Italy, indeed, Catholic authorities promoted a strong revival of late antique and medieval piety intended to justify their moral authority throughout history. This attitude was formulated based on the self-reflection fostered during the First Vatican Council. This council preceded the inclusion of the Pontifical States in Italy by only a few months, although this event had been expected since 1861. In this global context, the situation in Conques should be seen as an integral part of the reflection promoted by the French Catholic Church¹¹.

With this context in mind, it is not surprising that the man at the origins of the revival of Conques' cultic activities and the re-installation of the monastic community was Ernest Bourret (1827–1896), the charismatic and energetic bishop of Rodez¹². This figure, who belonged to intellectual circles close to the Vatican Council, was ordained a bishop shortly after its conclusion in 1871 and later received the cardinal vestments in 1893. Within the above-mentioned framework, Bourret understood the importance of re-awakening the local cult of both a late antique saint and a medieval pilgrimage. In the light of these dynamics, research on the treasury and reliquaries of Conques, as well as on its cultic history, cannot be dissociated from a systematic reflection on French and European Catholic identity.

The restorations, which radically transformed the premodern abbey church, should also be understood in this context. The idea of the "pure" Middle Ages promoted by figures such as Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814–1879) was given its form in Conques by a young architect Jean-Camille Formigé (1845–1926)¹³. A very romantic vision of the premodern past is here joined by the historiographical idea of what the typology of "Romanesque art" should look like. It also becomes a tendency in this period to see Conques as a major object of attention within the narrative on the development of "Romanesque" churches on the way to Santiago¹⁴. The most visible result of such a vision is certainly the radical transformation of the profile of the

church's western façade, the roof of which was, at the time, in a state of ruin or had never been completed, with the addition of two bell towers on its upper part. This was supposed to emulate the very model of a pilgrimage church and to give the building a silhouette synonymous with a harmonious façade in France [Figs 1–2]¹⁵.

The following stages of the story would be less invasive but no less impactful. After the separation of the church and state at the beginning of the twentieth century, a very complex series of interactions between church and political authorities began¹⁶. In French context during the First World War, the “Romanesque” heritage was, to a certain extent, less stressed than the “Gothic” one¹⁷. The reasons for this reduced interest were linked to the destruction caused by conflict in the Northern parts of the country, but must also be understood as a national question¹⁸. More interestingly, it is precisely after the 1914–1918 war that Conques was canonized within international discussions on pilgrimage art promoted chiefly by Arthur Kingsley Porter (1883–1933)¹⁹.



- 9 See Arlette Auduc, *Quand les monuments construisaient la nation. Le service des monuments historiques de 1830 à 1940*, Paris 2008.
- 10 Most recently, see the overview in Kathleen Ashley, *The Cults of Sainte Foy and the Cultural Work of Saints*, London / New York 2021, pp. 22–26, with further bibliography. For the rediscovery of the relics, see Joseph-Christian-Ernest Bourret, *Procès-verbaux des authentiques et autres pièces concernant la reconnaissance des reliques de sainte Foy*, Rodez 1880.
- 11 On the roots of such movements within French Catholic circles, Austin Gough, *Paris and Rome: The Gallican Church and the Ultramontane Campaign, 1848–1853*, Oxford 1986; see also Joseph F. Byrnes, *Catholic and French Forever: Religious and National Identity in Modern France*, University Park, PA 2005.
- 12 Jean-Claude Fau, “Le cardinal Ernest Bourret, évêque de Rodez et de Vabres, 1871–1896”, *Études aveyronnaises. Recueil des travaux de la Société des lettres, sciences et arts de l’Aveyron*, (2017), pp. 355–382.
- 13 On Viollet-le-Duc, see the essays in *Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc: contribute per una rilettura degli scritti e delle opere (1814–2014)*, Emanuele Romeo ed., Rome 2019.
- 14 Already in Auguste Bouillet, “Sainte-Foy de Conques, Saint-Sernin de Toulouse, Saint-Jacques de Compostelle”, *Mémoires de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France*, LIII (1893), pp. 117–128; in the early twentieth century followed mainly by Émile Mâle, *L’art religieux du XIIe siècle en France: études sur les origines de l’iconographie du Moyen Âge*, Paris 1922, pp. 297–303.
- 15 Lei Huang, “Pour une histoire de la restauration et de la conservation: un autre regard sur le portail occidental de Sainte-Foy de Conques”, in *Portails romans et gothiques menacés par les intempéries. Le relevé laser au service du patrimoine*,

- Juliette Rollier, Ambre Vilain eds, Bordeaux 2016, pp. 39–47.
- 16 Within a broader perspective, Byrnes, *Catholic and French Forever* (n. 11).
- 17 Especially around the “Gothic cathedral”, see the historiographical reflections of Roland Recht, *Le croire et le voir. L’art des cathédrales (XIIe–XVe siècles)*, Paris 1999, pp. 19–66 and the brief overview by Michela Passini, “La cathédrale, une ‘création française’. L’art gothique et la construction d’une identité nationale 1870–1918”, in *Cathédrales 1789–1914: Un mythe moderne*, Sylvain Amic, Ségolène Le Men, Marie-Claude Coudert eds, Paris 2014, pp. 42–47.
- 18 For a broader overview, Conrad Rudolph, “Introduction: A Sense of Loss: An Overview of the Historiography of Romanesque and Gothic Art”, in *A Companion to Medieval Art: Romanesque and Gothic in Northern Europe*, Conrad Rudolph ed., Malden, MA 2006, pp. 1–43.
- 19 Arthur Kingsley Porter, “Pilgrimage Sculpture”, *American Journal of Archaeology*, XXVI (1922), pp. 1–53; *idem*, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*, 10 vols, Boston 1923, for Conques, vol. I, pp. 228–239. On Porter, see Kathryn Brush, “Arthur Kingsley Porter’s first trip to Northern Spain (1920)”, *Ad limina*, IX (2018), pp. 225–245 and her forthcoming book *Motorized Romanesque. Arthur Kingsley Porter’s Pilgrimage to Medieval Europe, 1900–1933* (preliminary title).

2/ West façade, abbey-church of Sainte Foy, Conques



3/Detail of the sculpted portal with inscriptions, west façade, abbey-church of Sainte Foy, Conques, ca 1100

A real revival of interest in Conques heritage, especially its treasure, can also be identified in the first decades after the Second World War. This is, of course, due to the groundbreaking analysis by Jean Taralon (1909–1996) performed in this period²⁰. But this interest should also be understood within another context: the reclaiming of interest in Catholic heritage and ethics on a European scale. In reaction to the horrors of the Second World War and the Nazis' misuse of the past, the shared Christian medieval heritage of Europe suddenly appeared to have a burning relevance. It is also within this framework notably promoted by Christian intellectuals, that the idea of a united Europe was constructed based on its Christian roots²¹. The interest in one of the most impressive medieval treasures surviving until today in France should thus be understood against the backdrop of a newly-constructed European unity. It is not surprising that, decades later, the already-established European Union would choose the Santiago pilgrimage roads

– although with a much-laicized significance – as one of the pilasters of its identity.

Obviously, this story is much more complex and deserves more detailed research to be conducted over the course of the next three years. Already in the beginning of our project we would, however, like to point out that the site of Conques should be interpreted within the context of an intense search for French and European roots promoted throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It seems to us that, in order to understand the medieval heritage of Conques, a systematic investigation of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century writings must go hand in hand with the exploration of the broader political, social, and religious frameworks.

Rewriting the Carolingian past

A series of observations arose from the workshop and the systematic analysis of the architectural elements of the current-day basilica. First,

there is the question of the façade of the church. Specific analysis of the building's intention and the actual realization of the church have shown that its builders wanted, without any doubt, to erect a church with a "westwork". This sort of building tradition was, according to the traditional art-historical narrative, very "old-fashioned" during the eleventh century. However, it is evident that the workshops active in Conques were very up-to-date when it came to their aptitude. Why, thus, such a strange decision?

The second element we should mention are the impressive galleries of the abbey church. Their first evident function is static. Furthermore, there has been discussion on whether they may have served practical purposes, such as the sheltering of pilgrims who wanted to spend a night in the proximity of relics. The access to this space was, as far as we know, problematic in the eleventh century, which opens the question of the reasons for such a monumental decor. When comparing this visual layout to other coeval churches, Toulouse first comes to mind, alongside Saint-Martin at Tours and Limoges. However, a more detailed analysis has shown that these architectural features can also be found in the ninth- and early tenth-century architecture all around the Holy Roman Empire²². This has always been viewed as a peculiar element of French Romanesque architecture, especially of the great pilgrimage churches. However, this modern technical element could be taken, once again, as a meaningful choice referring to the past and to a prestigious genealogy.

The portal of the abbey church, with its sculpted tympanum, is currently dated, without any doubt, to the years around 1100. The Last Judgment that it represents will certainly be one of the focuses of our future investigation. In this context, we would, however, like to mention another aspect: the inscriptions included [Fig. 3]²³. Jean-Claude Bonne's seminal work on the *tituli* of the portal can be used as an intellectual backbone for further stylistic and literary explorations of the inscriptions, in order to understand how the visual and textual discourse merges at the scale of the tympanum, and to highlight the dynamics of Conques' written culture around 1100²⁴.



Such a thorough analysis of the very rich epigraphic material from Conques – which should be studied in its entirety – could lead to powerful insights to strengthen the "Carolingian" tone of the works produced during the years of Abbot Begon. On a stylistic and epigraphic level, several inscriptions on reliquaries [Fig. 4] and the two preserved lintels can be compared to poetic compositions written to be inscribed on buildings or liturgical objects during the ninth century²⁵. From a general perspective, the overall analysis of Conques inscriptions should also be fully integrated into the project to understand the complex relationships between ancient artifacts and present heritage.

4/ Detail of the inscriptions on one of the jambs of the "A of Charlemagne" reliquary, gilded silver, early 12th century

To sum up, we are dealing with a church that has been for decades seen as the avant-garde of the stylistic evolution leading to the definition of "Romanesque" art. Upon closer inspection, however, we suddenly discover a building with

20 See Jean Taralon, "Le trésor de Conques", *Bulletin de la Société nationale des Antiquaires de France*, (1957), pp. 47–54 and much later *idem*, Jean Taralon, "La majesté d'or de Sainte-Foy de Conques", *Bulletin monumental*, CLV (1997), pp. 11–73.

21 See notably Jacques Le Goff, *L'Europe est-elle née au Moyen Âge?*, Paris 2003; on figures such as Adenauer, Schuman, or De Gasperi and the roots of their thoughts, see also François Saint-Ouen, *Les grandes figures de la construction européenne*, Geneva 1997, p. 14: "The 'Fathers of Europe' mostly originate from the former Lotharingia, an intermediate kingdom on the border of the Latin and Germanic worlds, born of the dismemberment of the Carolingian empire, where the cities symbolic of European construction are located: Strasbourg, Brussels and Luxembourg". [author's translation].

22 For a preliminary reflection, see the remarks of Jean-Pierre Cailliet, "Le mythe du renouveau architectural roman", *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, XLIII (2000), pp. 341–369.

23 *Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale. Tome 9: Aveyron, Lot, Tarn*, Paris 1984, pp. 17–25.

24 Jean-Claude Bonne, *L'art roman de face et de profil. Le tympan de Conques*, Paris 1985.

25 See, for example, Francesco Stella, "Epigrafia letteraria dei monasteri carolingi", in *Le scritture dei monasteri altomedievali*, Flavia De Rubeis, Heikki Solin eds, Rome 2003, pp. 123–144.

visual, textual, and epigraphic hints referring to an “old-fashioned” past. How can we then explain such a discrepancy? We believe that the key element in this regard may be a desire that can also be traced in the treasury. It was radically transformed during the years of the Abbott Begon, which reflected a desire to face the ambitions of the monastery at Figeac. Begon’s motivation was to build on the prestige of Conques settled on the supposed initiative of Charlemagne himself. In this regard, suddenly, all its above mentioned elements, which were part of Conques’ most prestigious monument starting in the 1030s, appear much more logical. We are not dealing with an “old-fashioned” building project, but, on the contrary, an original solution to show the prestige and exceptional lineage, full of Carolingian references, of the Conques monastic community and city. From this perspective, the “westwork”, galleries, literary culture... all become references, visual and architectural manifestations, and exaltations of a Carolingian past. Its historiographical prestige is then settled – to expand the prestige of the local community – by a complex remodeling of the most prestigious part of Conques’ heritage: the container of the holy relics itself. In this way, a history is invented to confer legitimacy to the place and to the community that guards the relics, while honoring these at the same time.

The beginning of a long path

The history of Conques thus creates a space for constant writing and rewriting: with our project, we wish to deconstruct a few of the mythological layers and propose a new, challenging and nuanced, story of this marvelous site. We are perfectly aware of the fact that, in doing so, we are contributing to yet another layer of historiography, still, we firmly believe that a truly transdisciplinary approach, which is at the heart of this project, together with the systematic use of new technologies can allow us to fill in at least some of the gaps that history has created.

summary

Neokarlovský projekt pro románské Conques?

Tato kronika sdílí úvahy vzešlé z prvního setkání týmu pracujícího na projektu *Conques in the Global World*, který byl spuštěn v roce 2021. Počíná je znovuobjevením Conques jako ideálního obrazu románského středověku v devatenáctém a dvacátém století je toto místo interpretováno jako prostor zvěčnění minulosti pro potřeby přítomnosti. Domníváme se, že toto zvěčnění se událo již v době, kdy byl kostel založen, aby zrcadlil prestižní karlovské vzory. Tento karlovský „tón“ opakovaně rozpoznáváme v materiální a epigrafické kultuře Conques kolem roku 1100 – ať už jde o nápisy na portálu nebo relikviáře v pokladnici kostela. Do budoucna předpokládáme, že se výzkum bude ubírat směrem k pochopení Conques jako pamětního prostoru *par excellence*, a to již od jedenáctého století, prostoru, v němž je památka autoritativní minulosti znovuobjevena, ve smyslu *longue durée*, za účelem legitimizace určitého místa a komunity.