

Article

The Virgin Mary and Sainte-Foy: Chant and the Original Design of the West Façade at Conques

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Abstract: Using the evidence of Aquitanian chants, this article explores the possibility that a twelfth-century relief panel of the Annunciation today in the interior of Conques was originally designed for the West facade, where it completes the composition of the divine plan of Salvation. This hypothetic reconstruction also uncovers the important role of the patron saint, Sainte-Foy, and how she is promoted as second after Mary and efficacious intercessor.

Keywords: chant; responsory; sequence; Virgin Mary; Sainte-Foy at Conques; relief sculpture

1. Introduction

The monastery of Sainte-Foy at Conques emerges mystically from the soft clouds of the light fog spreading in the valley of the Ouche river in the early fall. The Romanesque building marks a site with a long history. The monastery was founded in the early ninth century; it was originally dedicated to Christ, the Virgin, and St. Peter (J. Bousquet 1992, pp. 273–345; Desjardins 1879, pp. 580–81, No. 1; Vergnolle et al. 2011). But when two monks stole the relic of Sainte-Foy from the city of Agen and brought them to Conques in 866, the site added a new patron: Santa Fides (Holy Faith) (J. Bousquet 1992, pp. 254, 277). The monastic community invested in the charisma of the recently acquired relics, displaying them in an innovative and provocative way (Taralone 1978, 1997; Dahl 1979; Fricke 2015, pp. 149–212; Hahn 2012, pp. 117–33; Dale 2019, pp. 95–103).

They placed the cranium in a seated figure, carved out of yew wood (Figure 1). For a head, the effigy sports a fifth-century male face made in repoussé gold; it could well have come from a pagan idol (Figure 2). The dissemblant bricolage thus shows the mature body of a ruler, with a face of a man, laying claims to be the authentic effigy of the thirteenth-year old virgin because it contains a piece of her body: the cranium. The relic is kept hidden and invisible in the recesses of the anthropomorphic container. A small compartment opens in the back, where the upper segment of the skull of Fides is placed, wrapped in a Byzantine silk and resting on a silk cushion (Figure 3) (Fricke 2015; Foletti 2018; Pentcheva 2021a, 2022).

The newly assembled statue is a Majesty: a figure seated on a backless throne. This is the earliest extant sculpture in the round in the Latin West. It offers a model for what would be produced in great numbers in the later centuries as the *Maestà* or *sedes sapientiae* statues of the Mother of God (Forsyth 1972). These visual associations between the female virgin-martyr and the Theotokos are not haphazard. The liturgy for the women saints is modelled after the Assumption of Mary, celebrating the saint as she rises and gets accepted in the celestial courts (Grier 2006, pp. 103–5; Pentcheva 2023). The *imitatio Mariae* is the principle at work in the fashioning the virgin-martyr. The chance survival of the Majesty of Sainte-Foy preserves concrete evidence of how images of female martyr saints emulate the enthroned Mary. The statue of Sainte-Foy predates these *sedes sapientiae*, but in its inspiration, it follows the sixth-century icons of the Theotokos as *Maria Regina*.



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Figure 1. The front side of wood core of the statue of Sainte-Foy, late ninth century, yew wood. Reproduced with permission of La Société des Lettres de l'Aveyron, Rodez, France.



Figure 2. Gilded statue-reliquary of Sainte-Foy, late ninth century, Photographs: Erich Lessing/Art Resource.



Figure 3. Back side of the wooden core of the statue of Sainte-Foy with a cavity for the deposition of the relic of the skull. Reproduced with permission of La Société des Lettres de l’Aveyron, Rodez.

A new wave of artistic activity spread at Conques in the last quarter of the tenth into the eleventh centuries. Sainte-Foy’s miraculous healing of the gouged eyes of Gilbert in 983 stimulated this development. The golden effigy acquired more gems and cameos, additional repoussé gold sheathing, and prominent filigreed frames. The throne expanded with an imposing high-back and arm rests. The crown was further embellished with filigree, enamels, pearls, and jewels. In the same period, the monastery began to consolidate its land possessions, and continued to grow, building a surplus that was used in the course of the eleventh century to construct a new church. The first phase was likely completed in the second quarter of the eleventh century. But the base, cut into the steep slope, was compromised; this instability damaged the arches and vaults. As a result, a complete overhaul became necessary. The church was rebuilt in 1075–1115 (Vergnolle et al. 2011, pp. 75–77; Barral i Altet 2018, pp. 19–33, 54–60).

While the monastery continued its dedication to the powerful trio of Christ, the Virgin and St. Peter, the site became increasingly identified with Santa Fides. Numerous miracles were attributed to her power that invested in her relics and in her golden *imago*.

The West façade greets the faithful coming to Conques. It is here that a new relief sculpture was unveiled 1105–1115 (Figure 4) (J. Bousquet 1997; Kendall 1989, 1998; Wirth 2004, pp. 199–202, 235–60; Williams 2008; Huang 2014; de Mondredon 2015; Castiñeiras 2018). The program of the tympanum features the Last Judgment, giving prominence to Christ. Mary and St. Peter approach from the left, leading the procession of the elect to heaven (Bonne 1984, pp. 226–56). Sainte-Foy appears on the left in a wedge between the middle and lower registers. This special segment of the composition functions like a corner stone, supporting the narrative edifice and in fact, initiating the dynamic of Salvation (Bonne 1984, pp. 243–51; Pentcheva 2023). Sainte-Foy’s prayer gives rise to a spiral; it starts with the rise of the dead from their tombs, the weighing of their good and evil actions, and the entry of some into paradise; and then the advance of the procession of the elect on the upper register led by Mary (Bonne 1984, pp. 226–28; Franze 2021; Pentcheva 2023). As

Sainte-Foy lifts from her throne and falls in proskynesis, she beseeches the Lord on behalf of her servants. Sainte-Foy is the beginning of this ascending spiral, the alpha, which connects with Mary as the omega at the end point of this ascent to the divine. So, although Sainte-Foy is relegated to a lower and side position, she holds an important role in engendering the spiral of salvation. Fides is presented at Conques as a partner and helper to the Theotokos.



Figure 4. Tympanum with the Last Judgment, west façade, Sainte-Foy at Conques, 1105–1115. Photo: Boris Missirkov for “EnChanted Images”.

This article explores the interaction between the Virgin and Sainte-Foy on another relief at Conques, the Annunciation. This panel is currently in the interior of the church (Figure 5). I will argue that its original location was on the exterior, set in the blank wall below the tympanum of the West façade, between the two doors. The analysis draws on new evidence coming from the chants sung for the major feasts of Mary at Conques. The inscription on the scroll of the Annunciation relief quotes a phrase used in several chants, thus it serves as a memory prompt asking the viewer to recall these songs. Chants have rarely been explored in connection with relief sculpture. What this article uncovers is how these songs give voice to the medieval images. They stage dialogues that develop the characters of the liturgy. Conques seems to have invested in these linkages between reliefs and chants. The tympanum on the West façade offers another example. The inscription *Hoc signum crucis erit in coelo cum* on the horizontal bar of the Cross is an excerpt from a responsory for the Feast of the Cross on 14 September (Bouché 2006; Pentcheva 2022).



Figure 5. Relief panel of the Annunciation, 1105–1115, north arm of the transept in the interior of Sainte-Foy at Conques: Photo: Manuel Cohen.

2. The Annunciation Panel, the Inscription, and Medieval Chants

The efflorescence of Conques was short-lived from the end of the tenth century to 1115. By the second quarter of the twelfth century, the monastery fell out of favor with the leaders of the Reconquista and could never again pull itself out of the backwater (J. Bousquet 1992, pp. 313–16). The silver lining of this loss of status is that Conques never updated its look for lack of funds and thus preserved its Romanesque art. Its treasury was spared the ravages of the revolution. When in 1837 Prosper Mérimée visited the site in his capacity as General Inspector of the newly created bureau of Historical Monuments; he found the church fascinating but in disrepair and wrote a report to the Ministry of the Interior soliciting help for its restoration (Mérimée 1838). He also placed Conques on France’s first list of historic monuments. The government support rescued Conques subjecting it to a heavily restored state in the second half of the nineteenth century. Some sections were practically built anew like the towers of the West façade, which had remained unfinished since the Middle Ages (Barral i Altet 2018, pp. 40–49). A much more problematic part was the trumeau: the blank wall between the two doors (Figure 4). Even before Mérimée’s visit, this section had lost its original sculpture, replaced by a Gothic statue of Sainte-Foy (Figure 6). Conques has another relief panel featuring the Annunciation, which appears to be contemporary with the West tympanum of 1105–1115. The illustrated travelogue of Taylor, Nodier, and de Cailleux from 1835 shows this relief in the interior in the North cross-arm (Figure 7). The panel has remained there to this day (Figure 5) (Nodier et al. 1835, pp. 266, 268). Was this its original location? Can a chant from the Aquitanian repertoire help us uncover its mystery place within the original Romanesque program?

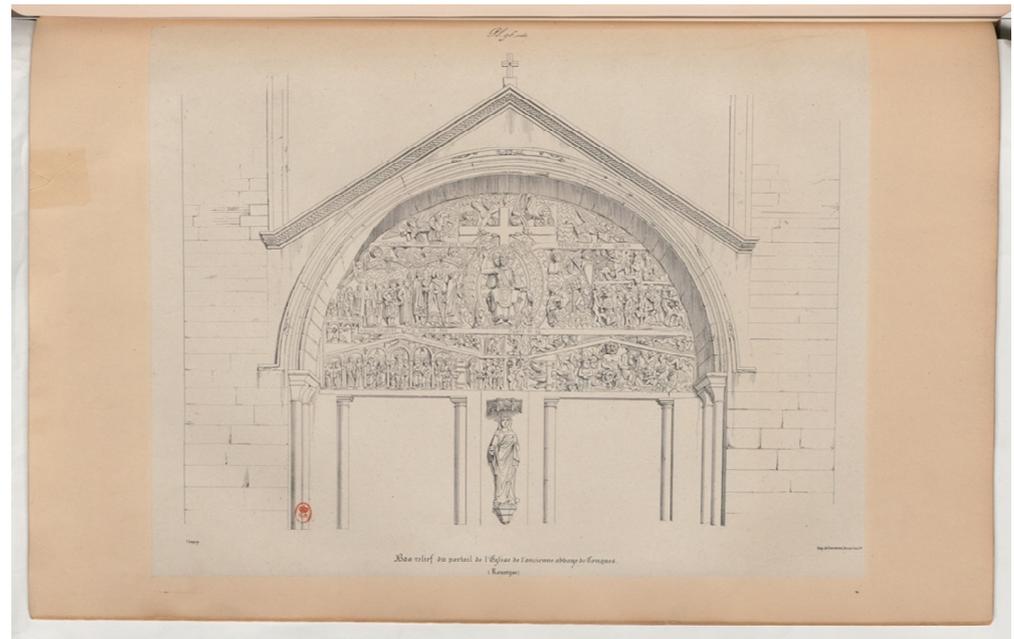


Figure 6. Sculpture on the West Façade at Conques, after Charles Nodier, Isidore-Justin-Séverin Taylor, and Alphonse de Cailleux, *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France. Languedoc*. Paris: P. Didot, 1835. vol. 1, part 2, p. 268.

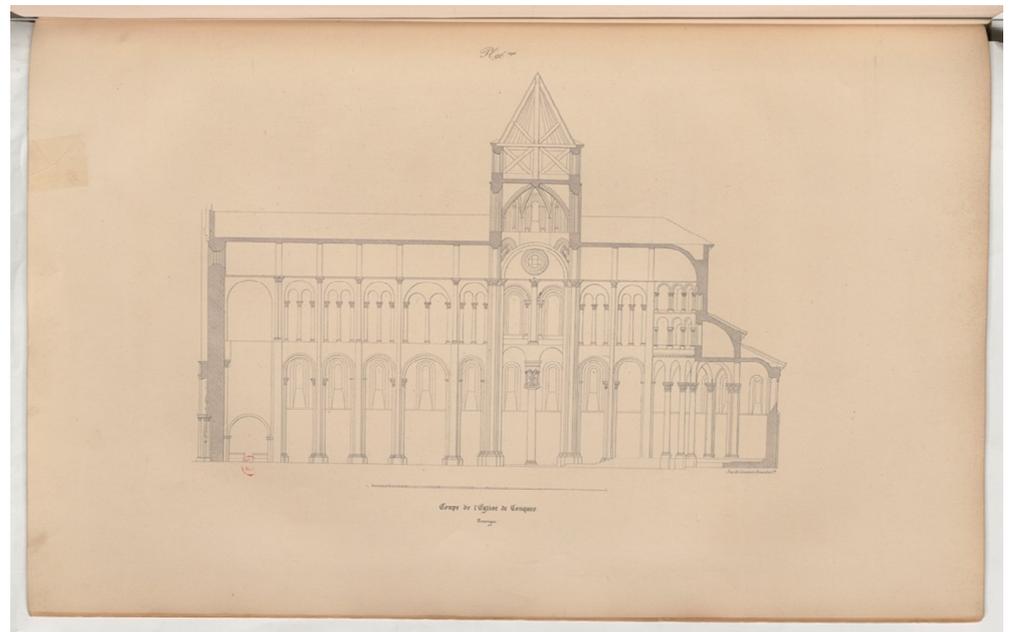


Figure 7. Cross-section of the interior at Conques; the Annunciation panel is in the northern cross-arm after Charles Nodier, Isidore-Justin-Séverin Taylor, and Alphonse de Cailleux, *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France. Languedoc*. Paris: P. Didot, 1835. vol. 1, p. 266.

The panel stands six meters above the floor of the Northern transept arm. The masonry around it shows signs of disturbance just above the widow sills, suggesting that the upper portion of the pier, the arches, and the relief attached to this segment of the wall were brought together at a later stage. But the most recent survey of the architecture has insisted on the authenticity of this relief's location without offering more evidence. They just state that the relief fits nicely in the pilaster of the north wall of the transept and connects well with the corbel (Vergnolle et al. 2011, pp. 90–93, 127–29; Sauerländer 2004, pp. 402–3). But

any careful craftsman in charge of the relocation of the Annunciation to the interior would do their best to diminish the traces of such a displacement. Earlier studies have suggested another location. In 1942 Abbé Rascol proposed that the Annunciation originally graced the trumeau of the West façade, underneath the tympanum (Figure 8) (Rascol 1942–1945; A. L. Bousquet 1947). The measurements of the Annunciation panel are: 2.1 m height, 1.35 m width, and 0.35 m depth. The trumeau wall is 3.50 m height and 1.40 m width, a size that can comfortably shelter the Annunciation panel and elevate it a 1.40 m above the ground level (Rascol 1942–1945; Bernoulli 1956, pp. 54–55). I return to this older hypothesis because it offers a much richer semantic and experiential dynamic for viewing the narrative images on the West façade and a deeper anchoring of the reliefs in the architectural fabric, making Mary a true gate, while simultaneously catapulting Sainte-Foy to prominence. In the process of analysis, I bring to the fore new evidence from liturgical texts sung at Conques.

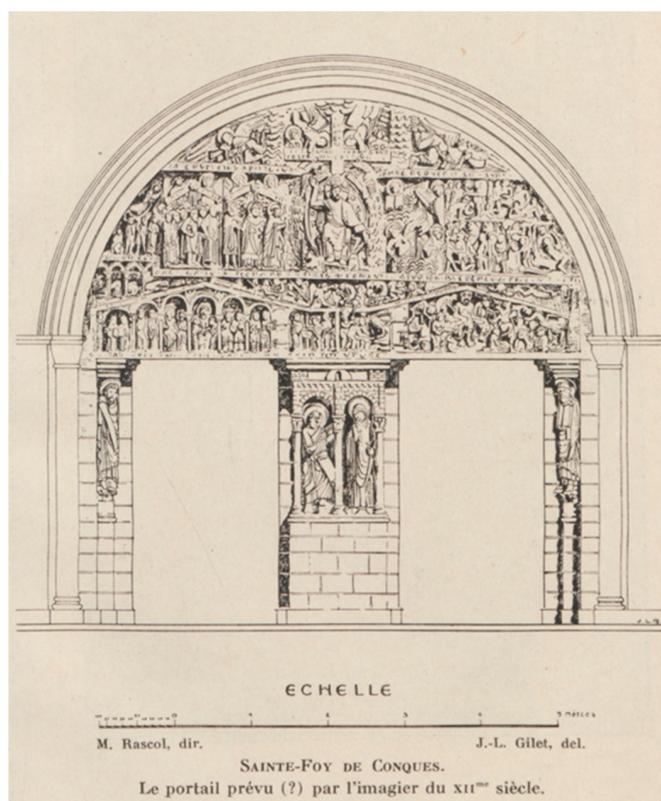


Figure 8. Abbé Rascol's Reconstruction of the West Façade after (Rascol 1942–1945, p. 460).

The Annunciation group is dated to the first quarter of the twelfth century based on the paleography of the lettering on the inscribed scroll carried by Gabriel (Favreau and Michaud 1984). The archangel and Mary are sheltered under the two arches of a beautiful Romanesque arcade (Figure 9). The celestial messenger's voice is exteriorized visually in the unrolling scroll inscribed with the words: "[missus] e[st] Gabriel angelus a D[eo]," "the angel Gabriel is sent by God" (Lk 1:26) (Favreau and Michaud 1984). Mary greets him with modesty and reserve: her palm held in front of her chest communicates a surprise, a halt, and a thought process that will eventually result in the question of how would this conception of the divine logos be possible when she knows no man? Her other hand holds a spindle: a symbol of her continuous pious work. She spins the temple curtain, a metaphor for the body of Christ, which will be rent apart at the Crucifixion (Constas 1995; Constas 2003). A subtle hierarchy is introduced, Mary is ever so slightly elevated, making the angel having to ascend to her. She is the figure that directs and arrests the movement. The lively composition combined with the large size of the figures grab the attention of the viewer.



Figure 9. Annunciation Panel, closeup, 1105–1115. Photo: Manuel Cohen.

3. The Responsoy *Missus est Angelus*

The inscription on the scroll of the angel [*missus*] e[st] *Gabriel angelus a [Deo]* is both a quote from Luke (Lk 1:26) and a phrase developed in several chants. My analysis will focus on two genres: a responsoy and a sequence. The phrase appears as an antiphon and responsoy that features in Aquitanian MSS and is sung for the first Sunday of Advent ([Cantus n.d.](#), chant ID Nos. 003792, 003794, 601975, 007170). I have selected the responsoy version in the gradual from the monastery of St. Gerald in Albi (Paris, BnF, MS Lat. 776, fols. 3rv, 1050–1075) (Figure 10) ([Cantus n.d.](#), chant ID. Nos. g03235, g03235a).



Figure 10. *Missus est angelus* responsoy in Paris, BnF MS Lat. 776, fols. 3rv, 1050–1075. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Although this is a variant attested only in this source, MS Lat. 776 contains a repertoire that is closely related to Conques; it is the only other place that lists the *prosa Candida tu quia* originally created for the vespers responsory of the Office of Sainte-Foy (Pentcheva 2021b). MS Lat. 776 thus helps us fill out an important lacuna about the music for the liturgy at Conques. The responsory *Missus est angelus Gabriel a Deo in civitatem Nazareth ad virginem Mariam* tells the story of the Annunciation and carries the words of Mary's acceptance:

[Respond]: *Missus est angelus Gabriel a deo in civitatem Nazareth ad virginem Mariam desponsatam Joseph et dixit ad eam: 'Spiritus sanctus superveniet in te et virtus altissimi obumbrabit tibi. Ideoque et quod nascetur ex te sanctum vocabitur filius dei dixit autem Maria:*

[Refrain] *'Ecce ancilla domini fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum alleluia.'*

[Verse]: *Novus mihi est sermo tuus quomodo intrasti ad me januis clausis Gabriel archangele quomodo virginis virum non cognosco et iudicis paries filium quomodo qui ante me fuit ex me procedit conturbat me vox tua interpreteris mysterium angelorum et dixit angelus sum prior Maria et missus sum de caelo ut annuntiem tibi verbum non dedigneris partum non me interrogas de secreto mihi est enim creditum quia paries filium dei redemptorem mundi.*

[Refrain] *'Ecce ancilla domini fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum alleluia.'*

[Respond] The angel Gabriel was sent by God to the city of Nazareth to the virgin Mary who was married to Joseph and he told her: "The Holy Spirit would come over you and the energy from the highest will overshadow you. Consequently, what would be born from you will be holy, and he will be called Son of God. Mary then said:

[Refrain] "Here is the servant of God, let it be to me according to your word, Alleluia."

[Verse] This speech is new to me, how did you enter [my place] as the doors are locked, Gabriel Archangel? Since I am virgin and know no man, you somehow judge that I will give birth to a son, who had been before me [and] who would proceed from me? Your voice perturbs me, could you interpret the mystery of the angels! The angel said "Mary, I am a superior angel and was sent from heaven in order to make this announcement to you; do not reject the command; do not question the birth; you have to trust me about the secret for it is true that you will give birth to the Son and Redeemer of the World.

[Refrain] "Here is the servant of God, let it be to me according to your word, Alleluia."

The responsory captures the dialogue between the divine messenger and the Virgin. The angel never truly addresses the concerns of Mary. She asks him how she will preserve her virginity through motherhood and how she would give birth to a baby that precedes her. But Gabriel does not assuage her worries. He just warns her that she should not reject the command and should believe in what the word says. The refrain repeats Mary's utterance with which she accepts the command.

The music stresses the importance of accepting unquestioningly the divine command. The melody is composed in a G mode that combines the authentic and the plagal (Figure 11). So, the ambitus reaches to upper G and dips even a note below the usual limit of mode 8 to C. At the beginning both the angel and the Virgin are introduced with a dramatic leap. For Gabriel, the leap is of a fourth and is set between *est* and the beginning of *angelus*. For Mary, it is a leap of a fifth, G-d set at *ad [virginem]*. These leaps thus draw attention to the distance traveled and the surprise of the sudden divine message. The exalted status of Mary is marked by the high E [*ad virginem*], the first in the composition; it identifies the moment Gabriel finds himself before Mary. This high E is not reached again until Mary's words of acceptance, and more specifically the apex at E identifies the word 'servant'-*ancilla*.

The choice of high *E* on *ancilla* creates an inverted magnitude, that the lowest status of the servant is exalted, that humility leads to glorification. In the subsequent component (the verse of the responsory) the apex is reached (*g*) with the question Mary poses “how” *quomodo*. Her anxiety is communicated in the shrill, high pitch of this *g*. She is vexed for there is no logic of how she can preserve her virginity before God and still bear a child. Her anxiety unsettles the composure of the angel. The melody rises again to *g* when he attempts to answer her: *et dixit* “and he said.” But even more dramatic is the shrill *g* on the following ‘*non*.’ With this *non*, the Archangel introduces a series of commands to the Virgin to stop questioning. The excessively long melismatic, sustained *g* on *non* expresses a range of emotions: annoyance, impatience, vexation, warning, and soliciting. Gabriel pressures Mary to accept the will of God without further questioning.

Paris B.N. lat. 776, ff. 3r-v

Mi - sus est an - ge - lus Ga-bri-el a de - o

in ci - vi - ta - te Na - za - reth ad vir - gi - nem Ma - ri - um

de - spon - sa - tam Jo - seph di - xit ad e - am

Spi - ri - tus sanc - tus su - per - ve - ni - et in te

et vir - tus al - tis - si - mi o - bum - bra - bit ti - bi

l - de - o - que et quod na - sce - tur ex te sanc - tum vo - ca - bi - tur fi - li - us de - i

Dixit au - tem Ma - ri - a Ec - ce an - cil - la do - mi - ni fi - at mi - hi

se - cun - dum ver - bum tu - um

al - le - lu - ia

2

V

No - vus mi - hi est ser - mo tu - us

quo - mo - do in - tru - sti ad me ja - nu - is clau - sis

Ga - bri - el arch - an - ge - le quo - mo - do vir - gi - nis vi - ram non cog - no - sco

et ju - di - cis par - i - es fi - li - um quo - mo - do

qui an - te me fu - it ex me pro - ce - dit con - tur - bat me vox tu - a

in - ter prae - te - ris my - ste - ri - um an - ge - lo - rum

Et di - xit an - ge - lus sum pri - or Ma - ri - a

et mis - sus sum de cae - lo ut an - nun - ti - em ti - bi ver - bum

Non

de dig - ne - ris par - tum non me in - ter - ro - ges de se - cre - to mi - hi est e - nim cre - di - tum

D.S.

qui - a pa - ri - es fi - li - um de - i re - demp - to - rem mun - di

Figure 11. *Missus est angelus* responsory from Paris, BnF MS Lat. 776, fols 3rv. Transcription: Laura Steenberge.

The *missus est* responsory in MS Lat. 776 captures the anxiety and tension in the Annunciation. It ultimately suppresses these feelings with the way the refrain re-instates Mary’s unconditional submission to the divine order. That this responsory was performed at Conques is also attested by another Annunciation relief carved in the capital of a colonette in the Southern gallery of the nave (Figure 12) (Fau 1956). The archangel here also carries a scroll with the phrase *Sp[iritus] S[an]c[tus] [superveniet in] t[e]* (Lk 1:35), “The Holy Spirit will descend over you,” which is also featured in the *Missus est angelus Gabriel* responsory.¹ The consistency with which inscriptions are excerpts from chants suggests that the narrative reliefs at Conques are rooted in the liturgical songs and function as their visual re-sings (Fassler 2000, p. 423).



Figure 12. Historiated Capital of the Annunciation, Southern Gallery of the Nave at Conques: Photo: Miguel Novelo for “EnChanted Images”.

Moreover, the text of *Missus est angelus Gabriel* responsory plays with the image of the closed doors. When the poem presents the astonishment of Mary, she asks the divine messenger how he entered her house given that the doors were closed. The question relates both the physical doors of the house as well as the metaphorical doors of virginity. If we imagine the Annunciation relief back on the west façade, then the memory of the responsory would have juxtaposed the vision of the closed doors with the reality of the church façade and its double gates. The physical doors become an entry into the mysteries of the virginal motherhood of Mary and Salvation.

4. The Music of *Salve Porta* at Conques

Just like *missus est angelus Gabriel* responsory the second chant this analysis focuses on—the sequence *Salve porta*—also builds a possible linkage with the west façade (Cantus n.d., chant ID No. ah53108). A line of *Salve porta* is quoted on the scroll of the Archangel. It is assigned for the feasts of the Annunciation, Advent, and Purification (Presentation in the Temple) (Paris, BnF, MS Lat. 1118, fols. 167rv). Sequences are elaborate chants that introduce the readings from the New Testament in the liturgy. This genre expands the narrative of Scripture with new poetry. Sequences use as model melodies untexted melismatic alleluias. Thus, these chants translate divine visions chanted beyond the register of human language, marked by the angelic word alleluia into the intelligibility of human speech (Fassler 1993, pp. 38–57; Fassler 2019; Iversen 2007; Iversen 2010, pp. 127–59; Kelly 2011). The phrase [*missus*] e[st] *Gabriel angelus a [Deo]* forms the third line of the *Salve porta* sequence: *cui missus [est] Gabriel archangelus miram retulit a Deo*.

Just like MS Lat. 776 for the *missus est* responsory, so too the *Salve porta* sequence needs to be analyzed in the version that was likely performed at Conques. While the office of Sainte-Foy composed at Conques has survived (Paris, MS Nouv. Acq. Lat. 443 and MS Lat. 1204), we do not possess other liturgical MSS from this monastery that record the annual liturgical cycle (Huglo 1971, 2009; Pentcheva 2021b, 2022, 2023). In order to understand how major feasts were celebrated at Conques, we need to draw on the examples from St. Martial at Limoges. Its collection gathers MSS representative of the liturgy in Aquitaine and the Marches; it even collected a *libellus* of the Office of Sainte-Foy. My analysis draws in particular from Paris, BnF MS Lat. 1118, dated to 987–996 from Sant Sadurni de Tavèrnoles (Figure 13) (Collamore 2006; Huglo 1971). MS Lat. 1118 has a rich collection of sequences,

which attracted the composer Adémar of Chabannes (989–1034) to this MS. Ademar worked at Saint-Martial in Limoges in 1028–1029, where he was tasked with the writing of a new liturgy celebrating the patron saint as an apostle. He found inspiration in the music of the sequence collection of MS Lat. 1118. So, when he left Saint Martial in 1029, he stole this MS and brought it with him to St. Cybar in Angoulême. He only returned it back to St. Martial in 1033 (Grier 2006).

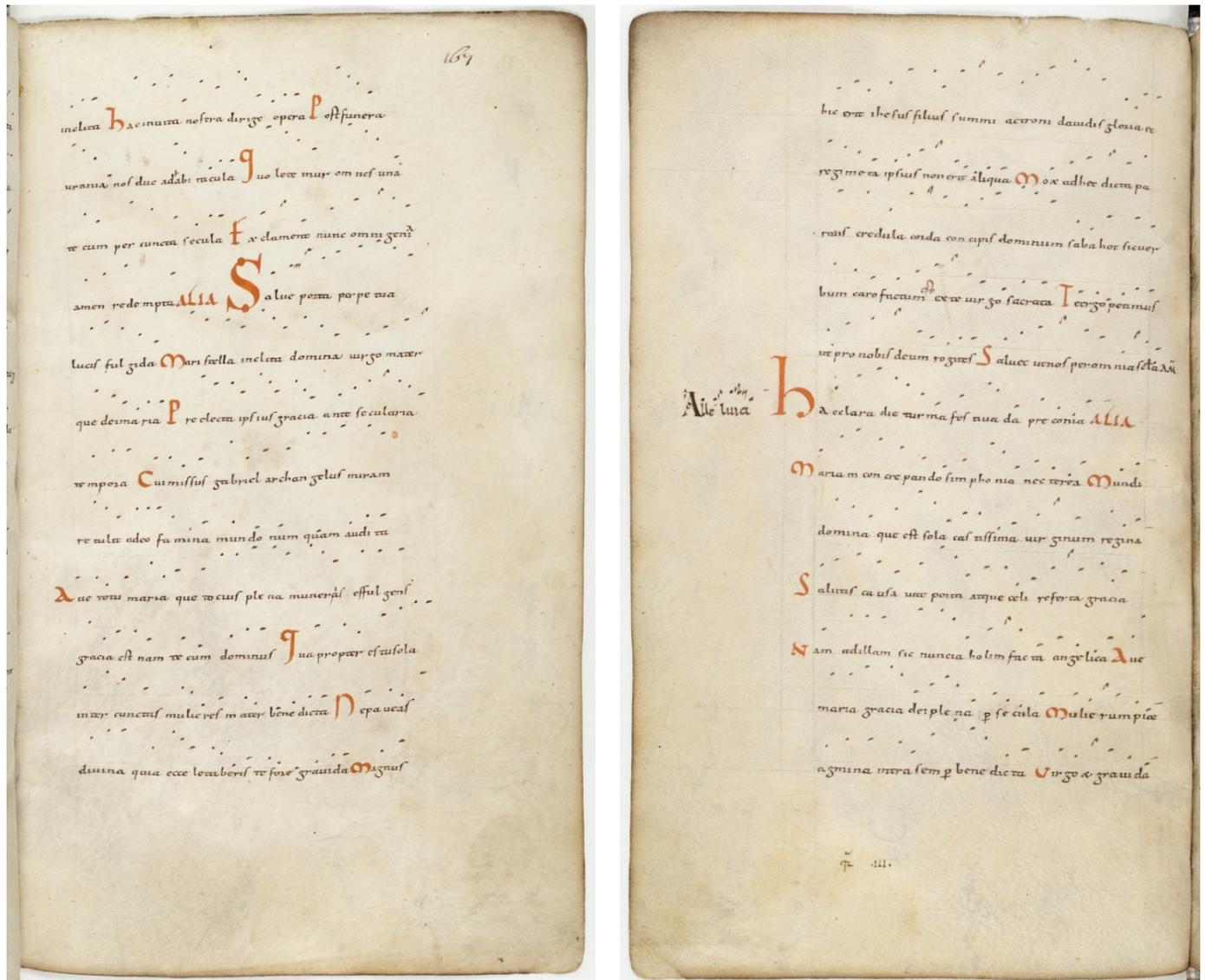


Figure 13. Salve porta sequence in Paris, BnF, MS Lat. 1118, fols. 167rv. Monastery of Sant Sadurni de Tavèrnoles, Catalonia, 987–996. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The sequence *Salve porta* appears on fols. 167rv; it takes the line from Luke’s gospel (Lk 1:26) and expands it into a mini-dialogue, teaching salvific economy. It finishes with a direct intercession to Mary to help humanity:

1. Salve porta perpetua lucis fulgida,
- 2a. mari stella inclita domina, virgo materque Dei Maria
- 2b. pre-electa ipsius gracia ante secularia tempora
- 3a. cui missus Gabriel archangelus miram retulit a deo femina mundo num quam audita.

3b. Aveto tu Maria quae totius plena muneris effulgeris gracia est nam te cum dominus

4a. qua propter es tu sola inter cunctas mulieres mater benedicta,

4b. ne paveas divina quia letaberis te fore gravida.

5a. Magnus hic erit Ihesus filius summi ac throni davidis gloria et regi meta ipsius non erit aliqua

5b. mox ad haec dicta parans credula corda concipis dominum sabaot sic verbum caro factum est ex te virgo sacrata.

6. Te ergo petimus ut pro nobis Deum rogetis/salve ut nos per omnia saecula, amen.

1 Greetings gleaming eternal gate of light,

2a star of the sea, renowned mistress, virgin and mother to God, Mary

2b you were pre-selected before the times for His [God's] grace.

3a The Archangel Gabriel, sent by God, surprised this chaste woman with what she now heard:

3b 'Hail, you Mary, who are filled with all gifts, and who shines with grace, for God is now with you.

4a You and only you among all women are now a blessed mother]

4b do not be afraid, for you will rejoice in being divinely pregnant

5a for your son will be the great Christ of the Davidic throne, there would be no one of such glory and authority after Him.

5b As the [Virgin] was presently taking heart in what he was saying, he added further: 'you would conceive the Lord Sabaoth, so the logos will become incarnate in your body, o hallowed virgin.'

6 You, indeed, we beseech so that you would intercede with the Lord on our behalf, save us, so that we [can live] in eternity!"

The holy event unfolds before the faithful as chanted lines, stirring the imagination to conjure up the conversation between the modest, resplendent Virgin and the ceaselessly moving divine messenger.

This sequence is composed in a G mode that combines both the authentic 7 and plagal 8 (Figure 14). And it relies on the pairing of melodic phrases, known as double cursus. For instance, lines 2ab share the same melody, and similar pairing appears in lines 3ab, 4ab, and 5ab. The first and the last line, framing this piece exist outside this symmetry. The double cursus is a characteristic feature of Aquitanian chant (Roederer 1974; Kelly 1974, 1977; Grier 2006, pp. 154–56). The phrase, inscribed on the scroll "*missus est Gabriel archangelus a Deo*" (line 3a) is a melody that is sung to both the verse about Gabriel being sent and to *Aveto tu Maria*. The shared melody pairs the Archangel and Mary, but also the angelic action with the speech. It is also here that the melody explores the lower range of the plagal mode, descending to *E*, literally inscribing descent of the divine in Mary. The music picks up and reaches the highest tones—*f g f*—an octave above at [*throni Davidis*] and at *Dominum [Sabaoth]*. Thus, marking the divinity and omnipotence of Christ as sonic brightness. The sequence finishes with a prayer for Mary's intercession.

Salve porta, Paris B.N. lat. 1118 ff. 167 r-v

1
Sal - ve por - ta per - pe - tu - a lu - cis ful - gi - da.

2a
Ma - ri stel - la in - cli - ta do - mi - na, vir - go ma - ter - que De - i Ma - ri - a.

2b
Pre - e - lec - ta ip - si - us gra - ci - a an - te se - cu - la - ri - a tem - po - ra.

3a
Cu - i mis - sus Ga - bri - el arch - an - ge - lus mi - ram re - tu - lit a de - o fa - mi - na mun - do num quam au - di - ta.

3b
A - ve - tu Ma - ri - a quae to - ti - us ple - na mu - ne - ris ef - ful - gens gra - ci - a est nam te - cum do - mi - nus.

4a
Qua prop - ter es tu so - la in - ter cunc - tas mu - li - e - res ma - ter be - ne - dic - ta.

4b
Ne pa - ve - as di - vi - na qui - a ec - ce le - ta - ba - ris te fo - re gra - vi - da.

5a
Mag - nus hic e - rit the - sus fi - li - us sum - mi ac thro - ni da - vi - dis glo - ri - a et re - gi - me - ta ip - si - us non e - rit a - li - qua.

5b
Mox ad haec dic - ta pa - rans cre - du - la cor - da con - ci - pis do - mi - num sa - ba - ot sic ver - bum ca - ro fac - tum ex te vir - go sa - cra - ta.

6
Te er - go pe - ti - mus ut pro no - bis De - um ro - gi - tes Sal - ve ut nos per om - ni - a sec - la.

Figure 14. *Salve Porta* sequence from Paris, BnF, MS Lat. 1118, fols. 167rv. Transcription: Laura Steenberge.

5. Hypothesis for Placing the Annunciation Panel at the West Facade

The weaving of melodic material acquires visual sharpness if we envision this panel on the West facade. The sequence opens with the greeting and the metaphor of the Virgin as a gate—*porta perpetua* where the melody rises to *e* at *perpetua*, communicating a sense of ascent, enabled by Mary. This height is not reached again until the incarnation of Christ: *filius summi*. So, Mary as the gate the *porta perpetua lucis fulgida* is brightness and Salvation introduced aurally.

The relief echoes this vision by setting the main protagonists at the center of the double arched doorway. Do the carved arches in the relief find a meaningful correspondence in its current interior location in the Northern transept (Figure 5)? The binary composition is repeated in the pair of windows below and above the sculpted group, but windows are not gates. Similarly, the crescendo built in the music at the *throni Davidis* and *dominum Sabaoth* becomes powerful and explicit only when the Annunciation relief re-joins the Christ in Majesty on the West façade (Figure 15). There, growing and blossoming above, the glory of the Lord becomes apparent.

If we imagine the relief of the Annunciation at the trumeau of the West façade, then the two open gates, framing the sculpted Annunciata Virgin, transform the poetry's metaphor into a reality and a lived experience. By walking through the doors of the church, the faithful can find Salvation in the body of Mary. Moreover, the Theotokos's figure in the trumeau communicates with the other representation of Mary in the tympanum above, where she leads the procession of the saved towards Christ in Majesty. The Virgin is thus the bridge and doorway to beatific life.

In addition to the *missus est* responsory and sequence, other music performed at Conques for the Marian feasts lends further support for uniting the Annunciation with the Christ in Majesty tympanum on the West façade (Huglo 1971, pp. 132–40). Another sequence *Clarissimae vocibus inclita* has lines that state: *caelicis terrea tu iungis divinis humana/paradisiaca per te nobis patet ianua*, “You join earthly things to heavenly, human to divine, through you the heavenly gates lie open to us” (Paris, BnF MS Lat. 1118, fol. 166v) (Fassler 2010, p. 391).² The unity in duality, of human and divine, achieved through Mary's incarnation of the logos, has blasted open the gates of paradise. The linkage of the Annunciation with the Last Judgment on Conques' façade offers the visual equivalent to this poetry.



Figure 15. Reconstruction of the West façade with the Annunciation relief on the trumeau and the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptist on the jambs. Photo: Manuel Cohen. Photoshop: Jessica Chen Lee.

The theological significance Mary as the gate to Salvation is played out visually on another contemporary facade. The *Porta Francigena* in Santiago de Compostela places the Annunciation in relation to both Christ the Judge and the Fall of Eve. The precise design of the composition is hard to reconstruct given the damages of time, but the overall structure suggests a ring: starting with Creation and humanity's fall to the Incarnation of the logos and from there to the Judge at the End of Time and a return of the blessed to paradise. Mary in the Annunciation forms the gate of Salvation (Prado-Vilar 2021).

The double arch containing the angel and Mary on the relief mirrored in the two gates on the West facade show paired forms. These twins lead to the vision of union in Christ in the tympanum above (Figure 15). The spiral showing the ascent of the blessed to Christ in the tympanum at Conques has a parallel in another line of the same sequence *Clariss vocibus inclita* sequence (Figure 4). The line reads: *post funera uranica nos duc ad habitacula/ quo laetemur omnes una tecum per cuncta saecula*, "After death, lead us to heavenly dwellings/ where we all will be glad to be one with you through all ages" (Paris, BnF MS Lat 1118, fol. 167r). Salvation is imagined as an ascent, where all players become one with the leader: Christ. Mary leads the faithful to him. She is the *porta caeli* because she had given birth to the Savior. And through her humility she has been glorified and transformed in the greatest intercessor for humanity. The Virgin is envisioned as a ladder to heaven (Dell'Acqua 2020, pp. 278–80). If we place back the Annunciation relief on the West façade at Conques, then Mary of the Annunciation will serve as the door and the first step of the ladder to heaven.

6. The Prophets Isaiah and John the Baptist

The same Auvergne master who carved the Annunciation and the tympanum, also did the two figures of the prophets Isaiah and John the Baptist, which appear today in the jambs of the Northern wall of the transept (Figure 5). Isaiah carries an open scroll with the words: *Dixit Isaias virga de radice Jesse* (Is. 11:1) “Isaiah said a shoot from the root of Jesse” (Favreau and Michaud 1984, pp. 28–29, No. 13). It prophesies about the birth of Christ from the royal and priestly Davidic and Abrahamian roots (Fassler 2000; Fassler 2010, pp. 26–27, 392–93). This message is further solidified by the sprouting staff he carries in his hand. He introduces the beginning of the salvific economy. John the Baptist, standing at the opposite end, closes the narrative arc by foretelling the Crucifixion: *Johannes ait: Ecce Agnus Dei*, “John said ‘This is the lamb of God.’” (Jn 1:29) (Favreau and Michaud 1984, pp. 29–30, No. 14). The reference here is to the Passion of Christ, whose willing sacrifice wipes out the past sins of humanity. Both inscriptions were sung during the feasts of the Virgin (Nativity and Purification) and Advent and Epiphany of Christ, thus through the inscribed words, the images become fully embedded in the annual festal performances (Cantus n.d., chant ID nos. 602492 and 006575).

The Annunciation and the two prophets become the mise-en-scene for the celebration of the Savior’s coming into the world and His taking on a human body. These images introduce the beginning of the Salvific economy. If we imagine them back on the West façade, then the tympanum above offered the concluding vision at the end of time. This semantic completeness is a compelling reason to re-unite the tympanum with the Annunciation grouping. This sense of fulfillment is also announced visually by the facial similarity between John the Baptist and Christ (Rascol 1942–1945, p. 457). The prophet, if brought back to the façade would have stood on the jamb on the right. His face mirrors that of Christ in the tympanum above. The visual linkage articulates that one voice—the Lord’s—speaks through all the prophets, and all these inspired utterances ultimately result in the vision of the Majesty of Christ (Pentcheva 2020; Kessler 1994). John the Baptist is thus a *persona Christi*. Set closer to the faithful the right jamb, he enables them to recognize the face of Christ in his own countenance.

7. The Female Figure behind Mary and the Sainte-Foy the Patron Saint at Conques

The third figure behind Mary at the Annunciation is another important reason for reuniting the Annunciation group with the tympanum on the West façade. So far scholars have identified it as a servant (Figure 16) (Deschamps 1941, p. 178; Rascol 1942–1945, p. 455). She is almost impossible to see well in her current location in the North transept, as the panel is too high up on the wall. Her facial features mirror those of Sainte-Foy in proskynesis in the tympanum (Figure 17). At the Annunciation, Fides is slipping a gift—a ball of incense—into Mary’s hand, so that her intercession for the sinful-but-repentant humanity could receive the Virgin’s support and bring about Christ’s blessing. If we envision the Annunciation on the trumeau of the West façade, then Sainte-Foy acquires her rightful place at the entry to her sanctuary, spelling out her special intercessory power. Her prayer, which can bend Christ’s ear, is the true magnet attracting the faithful from distant lands to come to her charismatic sanctuary. And her role is carefully coached, never to compete or exceed that of Mary, but to be a helper in the Virgin’s plea for humanity.



Figure 16. The Annunciation with the third figure, identified here as Sainte-Foy, showing at the back, 1105–1115. Photo: Manuel Cohen.



Figure 17. Tympanum of the West Façade at Conques, 1105–1115. Detail showing Sainte-Foy in prayer. Photo: Boris Missirkov.

As mentioned earlier, Mary leads the *choros* of saints to Christ in the tympanum of the West façade (Figure 4). What is the place of Sainte-Foy in this dance/chant of Salvation? Her gift to Mary in the trumeau secures the Virgin’s favor. And all faithful passing through the gates into the church would see her special gesture. But it is in the tympanum above that her *fideles* would recognize the power of their patron’s prayer (Figure 16). She is in proskynesis before God. The Lord’s blessing hand shows the pardon she can obtain from Him. This episode initiates the grand spiral of the Resurrection and Salvation. As the spiral climbs, the narrative of the saved picks up in the middle register. Here the saved rise up from their squatting positions; the second figure from the left is likely Sainte-Foy, pivoting to join the procession towards the Savior, led by Mary (Bonne 1984, pp. 226–28; Pentcheva 2023). Sainte-Foy is at the beginning of the spiral, closest to the mortals lying in their tombs. She is the first spiritual force that ensures their entry into the right path towards salvation. Mary leads the blessed, but it is Sainte-Foy, who begins the faithful’s spiral ascent into eternal life.

Santa Fides’ prominent role in Salvation is also marked in the portable altar given by Pons, the bishop of Roda-Barbastro to abbot Begon III in 1100 (Garland 2006). The Deesis

shows Christ in the center, Mary at his right and Ste. Fides rather than the usual John the Baptist on His left. Sainte-Foy re-shapes the intercessory dynamics, directly occupying the side of Christ and mirroring what the Virgin does. Sainte-Foy is the local magnet, she appears as the reciprocal partner to the Theotokos, and like her, she is sharing in the intimacy of Christ's love.

8. Conclusions

Conques develops a subtle hierarchy that could only be fully appreciated if we restore the Annunciation panel back to the West façade (Figure 15). The monastery preserves its original dedication to the trio of Christ, Mary, and the apostle Peter, but it elevates Sainte-Foy to a position second after the Virgin. Thus, the site becomes a place of Deesis, where the local Sancta Fides joins Mary as the second intercessor. The female saint draws inspiration from the Virgin, but never overshadows the Mother of God. The same prudence is exhibited in the tympanum on the West façade (Figure 4). Sainte-Foy initiates the spiral of Salvation, but Mary heads the procession returning to Christ. Similarly, in the large Annunciation panel, the Mother of God is the main protagonist; she interrogates the Angel. Sainte-Foy stands in the shadows, behind the Theotokos (Figure 16). But she secures the most important prize: the salvation of her servants purchased with the precious gift of a ball of incense.

By recognizing the origins of the inscriptions in the signature chants sung for major feasts of Mary such as the responsory and sequence using the phrase "*missus est angelus Gabriel a Deo*," this analysis uncovers the deeper nuances of the Annunciation. The responsory *Missus est angelus* skillfully uses mode 7 to probe into the disturbing and paradoxical divine order given to Mary. She initially hesitates and questions the validity of virginal motherhood. Her doubts vex the angel, pushing him to burst out in a high-pitched extremely melismatic *non*, warning Mary to stop interrogating and to submit to the divine will. The responsory thus probes a hitherto little discussed aspects of the Annunciation: that of Mary's doubt and of its disquieting effect on the celestial messenger.

The *missus est Gabriel angelus a Deo* also features in the sequence *Salve porta*. The latter opens the possibilities of envisioning the relief panel on the exterior, West façade (Figure 15). The song gives prominence to the seduction in the divine message. The archangel paints the glorious vision of the son Mary will conceive; he will be elevated on the Davidic throne. Composed again in a G mode, this chant explores the higher range to amplify the splendor of the prophetic vision. The brilliance of the future quells Mary's mind. The coordination of the apex of the composition with the throne of David and the conception of Christ finds visual confirmation and fulfillment in the tympanum of the West façade. Here the awe-inspiring Ruler of All has come in glory to judge the world. The Annunciation longs to belong to the West façade, there it will anchor the beginning of divine economy and serve as the gate leading to Salvation. In addition, it will also remind visitors of the patron Sainte-Foy, working tirelessly in the shadows of Mary to procure the salvation of her faithful servants.

This subtle hierarchy placing Sainte-Foy immediately after Mary can also be read in a prayer to Fides recorded in the Winchester psalter (London, British Library, MS Lat. Cotton MS Nero C. IV, 1150, fol. 138v) (Haney 2015).

Prayer of Sainte-Foy

Holy and blessed Fides, precious virgin, glorious martyr, honor of the heavens, ornament of paradise, pearl of celestial Jerusalem, bride of Christ, sweet and lovely friend of God, who renounced corporeal pleasures, because you desired, thirsted after, and longed for Christ so much that you did not stop at anything until through your martyrdom you discovered him as grace, so now you have, hold, and see the one you desire, and draw joy in effortlessly communing [with him] face to face. You have found pleasure in him, and have embraced him, and [have found] a throne under the shadow of the one you desire, and his fruit ['benefit,' but also 'pleasure'] on your sweet neck. He has your delicate voice

and your pretty face as his ornament. He commands you as a servant, exalts you as a queen, protects you as a daughter, and crowns you as friend, certain as death, pleasure became yours. And in whatever ways, you would always exchange it reciprocally for the souls [i.e., you will rely on your strong bond with the Lord in order to save souls], and therefore on account of the indissoluble bond [with Christ] your selfless love (charity) is a more complete happiness, exuding the odor of eternal life. Therefore, we pray to you, glorious and celestial lady Fides, who among the virgin saints is [second] only to the incomparable and divine Mother of God Maria, marked with almost as many signs of miracles. Extend a helping hand over us, sinners, in our present life, and obtain forgiveness of our sins [through prayer] before the most pious Savior, whom in your earthly life you strove to please and in whom you place your desire for comprehension now that you are forever among the angels [in heaven]. And in the Last Judgment when the Judge will come, appease his anger with your holy prayers, so that we are deemed worthy to be liberated from the fires of Gehenna and linked to the fellowship of saints (Bolland 1866).³

The efficacy of Sainte-Foy issues from her intimacy with Christ, she is paradoxically His lover, servant, queen, and daughter. Now in the heavenly courts, she stands face to face with Christ, and this direct access bestows power to her intercession. She is second to the Mother of God, having performed almost as many miracles as the Theotokos. Sainte-Foy is also described here as exuding the scent of salvation; her perfume recalls the ball of incense she gives to Mary. The fragrance of salvation is a metaphor of sacrifice, for just like incense produces scent by the burning of its material body (the resin), so too the physical corpus of the saint is destroyed in order for divine *virtus* to begin flowing in the relics (Harvey 2006; Pentcheva 2010; Nees 2016; Robinson 2020; Cox-Miller 2009, 2015).

Prayer is another medium through which medieval art announces its audiovisual mode of communication. The monumental sculptures were never silent. The inscriptions they carried were quotes from the liturgy, which jolted the memory of the viewers to recall chants and prayers. The images became ensouled in these remembered songs. By uncovering this hitherto overlooked bond between monumental sculpture and liturgical chant, I suggest that music legitimized these images. If pagan idols were silent, Christian images purposefully drew on liturgical chants to ensure a continuous voice. These medieval songs not only developed the liturgical characters of sacred history, but they demanded from the viewer to lend their breath to the images. In this synergy between audio-spectator and images the inscriptions became voiced, reanimating sacred history in repeated ephemeral re-sings.

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Notes

¹ I thank Vincent Debiais who in email correspondence confirmed this deciphering of the Latin text. This inscription is not in (Favreau and Michaud 1984).

² For the content of the chants in Paris, BnF MS Lat. 1118, see <https://cantus.uwaterloo.ca/source/123795> (accessed on 14 December 2022).

³ Sancta et benedicta Fides, virgo preciosa et martyr gloriosa, honor caeli, decus paradisi, caelestis Hierusalem margarita, Christi sponsa, dulcis ac dilecta Dei amica, quae postpositis saecularium voluptatum illecebris, Christum tantum concupisti, sitisti, desiderasti, nec unquam desiisti, donec per martyrii gratiam ipsum invenisti, nunc habes, nunc tenes, nunc vides, quem desiderasti, visoque sine fastidio satiariis. In illo delectaris, illum amplexaris, sub umbra illius, quem desiderasti, sedes, et fructus ejus dulcis gutturi tuo, illi vox tua dulcis et facies tua decora. Ipse tibi imperat ut ancillae, sublimat ut reginam, fovet ut filiam,

coronat ut amicam, valida ut mors, vestra fuit dilectio. Et quomodo majorem hac dilectionem haberetis, quam ut pro invicem animas poneretis, et ideo indissolubili modo nexa, totiusque felicitas plena vestra est caritas, spirans odorem aeternae vitae. Oramus ergo te, inclita et caelestis femina Fides, quam post incomparabilem et deificam Dei Genetricis Mariam pene omnibus sanctis virginibus miraculorum praeferunt insignia, ut nobis peccatoribus in presenti vita subvenias, atque apud piissimum Redemptorem tuum, cui in hac vita placere studuisti, et in quem nunc et semper inter angelos cernere cupis, peccatorum nostrorum veniam impetres, et in supremo iudicii die venturi Iudicis iram tuis sanctis precibus in maximam lenitatem ac bonitatem contra nos miseros convertas. Quatenus ab aeternis gehennae incendiis liberati, et Beatorum consortio conjuncti tecum faeliciter aeternare mereamur in caelis. Amen (Bolland 1866).

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