Church of Sainte-Foy, Conques

TERRIER ALIFERIS, Laurence

Reference

The name Conques derives from the Latin word *concha* (shell). A hermit named Dadon isolated himself there at the beginning of the ninth century. Rapidly, other monks gathered around him and they built a church dedicated to the Holy Savior. In 866, the monks of Conques tried to get a holy relic and stole the body of St. Foy (*Fides*) of Agen, martyred at the age of twelve under the emperor Maximilian (286-305). At first, the monks had tried to steal the holy relic of St Vincent but without success. Consequently, St Foy became the patron of Conques and the prosperity of the abbey increased thanks to donations coming from the entire region. In the tenth century, because of the miracle of a certain blind man Gerbert, who recovered his sight after praying to St Foy, a new Carolingian church was erected in order to receive the growing number of pilgrims.

The donations became more and more numerous. The magnificent reliquary statue of the saint made at the end of the tenth century supports a head dating from the Bas-Empire period, majestically welcomed the believers, sometimes coming from distant regions. Between the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, five texts were written in Conques to spread the renown of St Foy: the story of her martyrdom (whose primitive version existed in the tenth century), the story of her relics *translatio*, the *Liber miraculorum*, the *Song of St. Foy*, and finally the Conques Chronicle. The abbey's most glorious phase was in the eleventh century; its renown spread across the borders and St Foy was venerated in all Christendom.

Besides the cult of St Foy attached to her miracles, the reliquary-statue and the narratives written by the monks, another major event increased the prestige of Conques. At the beginning of the eleventh century, the abbey was chosen to be a stopover town on one of the three roads in France on the way to Santiago de Compostela. At this time, the fame of the abbey was at its height thanks to the development of the cult of St Foy on the one hand and the transit of pilgrims to Compostela on the other.
The church became too small and had to be rebuilt to welcome the pilgrims. Abbot Begon III (r. 1087 to 1107), pursued the expansion begun by his predecessors Odolric (1031-1035) and Étienne (1065-1087). The dates of this rebuilding are given by the Chronicle. The cross-shaped form of basilica with its three aisles, wide transept arms, and the large ambulatory with apsidal chapels is characteristic of pilgrimage churches, since it was able to welcome many believers. Due to its geographic situation on the mountainside, the dimensions of the floor are modest. The height of the building and the tribunes compensate for this loss of space.

The cloister and the tympanum of the west façade were commissioned by Begon III. The tympanum must have made a large impression on the pilgrims arriving at Conques, with its Last Judgment represented in detail, especially the depiction of the damned. In the line of the chosen ones, behind the Virgin and St Peter, we find Dadon, followed by an abbot (probably Begon) hand in hand with Charlemagne accompanied by a woman and two monks, holding a reliquary and a diptych. In fact, the emperor was the legendary benefactor and founder of the abbey since the eleventh century. Several pieces of the treasury and texts attest to this fact. Tradition asserts that the "reliquary of Pepin" and the "A of Charlemagne" were given by him, although these works date to the eleventh or the twelfth centuries. At this time, especially thanks to Begon III, many metalwork objects were made for the treasury of Conques. The "A of Charlemagne" was made to give credit to the written tradition claiming that Charlemagne had founded 24 monasteries, each assigned a letter of the alphabet and had given the "A" to Conques, since it was the first to be founded. The abbey of Conques constantly aimed to increase its prestige in order to attract donations. In this way it did everything possible in the eleventh century to create a legend around Charlemagne, fabricating metalwork objects and writing narratives to prove this legend and to impress believers. Conques seems to be the first abbey doing this at this period, though many abbeys afterwards did the same. These traditions are thought to be an effort to 'seduce' pilgrims, taking part in a kind of 'pilgrimage competition' among the monasteries.

Laurence Terrier Aliferis

Bibliography

Durliat, Marcel, La Sculpture Romane de la Route de Saint-Jacques (Mont-de-Marson, 1990)

Fau, Jean-Claude, Conques (La Pierre-qui-Vire, 1973)

Gaillard, Georges, et al. eds., Rouergue Roman (La Pierre-qui-Vire, 1974)
