Reliquary of Pepin

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Reference


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Reliquary of Pepin

The reliquary of Pepin, kept in the treasury of the basilica Ste-Foy of Conques, has had this name since the nineteenth century because it was considered a gift of Pepin the Short (715-768) or Pepin II, the King of Aquitaine (839-852), to the abbey. Before this era, it was known as the Reliquary of the Circumcision because of a legendary tradition according to which Charlemagne gave the relics of the foreskin and the umbilicus of Christ in a capsa magna. This legend appeared at the beginning of the eleventh century as attested by the Liber miraculorum Sancte Fidis of Bernard d'Angers, appearing again a century later in the prologue of the Chronicon monasterii Conchensis. No known Carolingian source mentions this gift. There is only one diploma dated 801 in which we find that the abbey of Conques was in possession of some relics of the Savior. While the pilgrim cult here centered on Saint Foy, these others were attractive features for pilgrimage as well.

The Pepin reliquary has a rectangular shape with a four-pitched trapezoidal form. On the front panel is a representation of a Crucifixion in gold repoussé. A bearded Christ, with eyes open, is affixed to the cross with four nails. He's draped with a perizonium and has a nimbus adorned by four precious stones. The titulus, HIS NAZ/ARENUS/REX IUDEORUM, is in filigree. Mary and John stand at his sides. On the roof, the sun and the moon complete the composition. Under the arms of the cross are two rectangular windows covered in gold plate on which green enamel is applied. The rest of the surface is decorated with a filigree pattern. The panel is framed by a succession of cabochons. On the back of the reliquary, there's also a filigree pattern and a similar frame. On the roof are two eagles in gold repoussé. Their wings, enameled on a mottled background, are separated by a filigreed band set with precious stones. Below these eagles we find three false windows arched by a cabochon band and separated by two filigreed columns, with enamel capitals identical to those in the windows of the other
side. The windows of the back also contain green enamel shapes. On the middle top, an antique carnelian intaglio represents Apollo. The smaller sides of the reliquary are decorated with filigree.

This shrine is thought to be the work of various periods. The restoration in 1954 showed that the Crucifixion has been cut from a previous work and then adapted to the wooden core of the reliquary. Further evidence is seen in the disproportional size of the figures in comparison with the dimension of the object, as well as the fact that Mary and John are at the same level as Christ. Moreover, fragments of an eighth-century crucifixion were found inside the shrine and the general shape corresponds to the eighth and ninth centuries. Consequently it seems that a reliquary was fabricated in the eighth century representing the crucifixion and was subsequently reworked, presumably in the first half of the eleventh century. The scene as we see it today can be dated to around the year 1000, although some authors have situated it in the Carolingian period. The filigree around the Crucifixion is from the first half of the eleventh century. This moment seems to be the date of the first assemblage. The birds and their cloisonné-enamel wings date from this moment. However, the green and red enamel on both sides also probably date from Carolingian period. Several modifications were made in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and certain filigree must have been added in the sixteenth century.

In conclusion, this reliquary originated in the Merovingian period and was totally reworked in the first half of the eleventh century. During this era, the abbey profited from the great expansion of the devotion to Ste-Foy. Apparently, to reinforce its prestige and to attract even more pilgrims, the abbey tried to acquire an even more spectacular reputation by fabricating pieces that would fascinate visitors. Moreover, to accompany these pieces, the abbey may have invented the legend of Charlemagne's donations of relics and this reliquary. In order to further fortify this tradition, Charlemagne was represented on the tympanum of the west façade among the saved. Two personages escort him, one holding a diptych and the other carrying a reliquary. The reliquary of Pepin is only one among several reliquaries that were considered as gifts of Charlemagne at this period.

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