Privileged Places;
How Relics Built and Strengthened Communities in Southern Medieval France

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In 855, Saint Foy’s body lay in her tomb in Agen, while north of her in Conques, a group of monks discussed their own survival. A well-meaning king had granted them a new monastery building further up the river in Figeac, but the mother house and the priory did not get along well. With another monastery to support, the local donors around the monasteries would never be able to pay for everything that they needed. And if the new monastery split, Figeac would become much more popular because they were right on the river while Conques was in a very steep valley. The monks decided that the best thing to do was to find a miracle worker, a saint who would put Conques on the map, and secure their existence. In the Middle Ages, a powerful relic would ensure pilgrims and donations, as well as cause an overall increase in the awareness of the spirit of God. The monks at Conques would have a miracle on their hands, and the community would be stronger than ever.

In 856 the fate of the child martyr Foy in Agen and the monks at Conques intersected when the monks stole her remains from her tomb and brought them to their monastery. In her new home, St. Foy was happy and active; she granted healing, visions, and other types of aid to those who beseeched her. With each miracle that St. Foy produced, the belief that she wanted to be in Conques grew in the minds of pilgrims. The
monks at Conques were blessed, and so was their monastery. Because of Saint Foy’s popularity, the rivalry with their priory faded into the distance.

Stories like that of Saint Foy and Conques were not uncommon occurrences in the South of France in the Medieval Period between the year 550 and 1100. The cult of the saint in the European Middle Ages was a powerful phenomenon that touched all areas of life. Central to the cult of the saints was the relic- the body, body part, or item once close to the saint. The central theme of this paper is to question how the relics of saints were used to foster and strengthen the communities that possessed them in the face of adversity. The work of Radegund to bring the Holy Cross to her monastery in Poitiers, the theft of the body of the child martyr Foy by the monks of Conques, and the discovery, or invention, of the body of Mary Magdalene by the monks of Vézelay, all aimed to provide these monasteries with stability and honor after some sort of dishonor had been brought upon them. Although these three cases vary in historical and geographical context, the reaction to adversity reflected in each is extraordinarily similar.

The role of the cult of saints in these three areas provides a unique perspective on the institutionalization of religion in the Middle Ages. My take on relics is based primarily on the work of Patrick Geary and Peter Brown. In this paper I intend to apply their theories onto the monasteries in Poitiers, Conques, and Vézelay in southern France during the Medieval Period. All three monasteries sought relics to provide themselves with stability and honor, after difficult times that brought some kind of dishonor onto those monastic communities. While the relics in question were represented as bringers of salvation to the populace, they in fact proved more useful in preserving the institutions that held them. These institutions saw a marked rise in monetary well-being and social
renown after acquiring their relics. Grand feast days and processions in honor of the saints brought wealth to the surrounding towns and communities. Because of the relic’s power to bring in money, and its connection to God, the abbot or abbess gained a great amount of economic, political, and spiritual power over the surrounding community.

Saints within Christian Belief

The popularity of relic cults in southern France was representative of a broad phenomenon within Early Medieval Christianity. Central to this was the belief in saintly mediation in everyday affairs. According to Patrick Geary, the religious and devotional practices of the Franks involved dealing closely with local saints, ascribing both good and bad events to them instead of fate or chance.¹ Due to the saints’ direct involvement in the lives of the Early Christians, the Frankish warlords entered into Christianity through the celebration of the saint’s feast days. According to Brown, the Franks placed a great amount of emphasis on feeling connected to the rest of the Christian world.² This was true too in the time of Radegund, in the sixth century. An example from Gaul in the fifth century comes from the writing of Maximus of Turin. In a sermon to the local people, Maximus pointed out local martyrs, for they were part of Christ’s story and, by extension, so was the entire town. According to Brown,

At a time when in Maximus’s estimation, no one important seemed to notice the town, when the great landowners hunted all spring far from the city and coldly abandoned the region to its fate at the first rumor of barbarian invasion, the

intimate link between the Christian community and its humble dead was no small matter.³

Without the saints to give the community strength, the community may have fallen apart. For Maximus, as well as the three monasteries in this study, the presence of a relic linked the community to the larger group of Christians everywhere. This allowed the group a feeling of greater belonging, and a trust in God.

How could the bones of a dead body be considered alive and sentient? If the representation of the saint, or in the case of the Holy Cross, Jesus himself, is only something that once touched the holy person, how could the Medieval Christians see it as a living being? According to Patrick Geary, in the Middle Ages, these relics could be understood to be alive in an almost literal sense. The theory of the living relic explains why saints could become so involved in worldly affairs, although they were in Heaven.⁴ As Peter Brown has demonstrated, the saint in Heaven was believed to be present at his tomb on earth,⁵ and therefore the place to receive holy blessings and miracles became the grave.

The social functions of relics

Due to the relic’s connection with God, they were used to combat all the problems that arose in day-to-day life. Relics were brought in to help social ills and brought continuity and stability into a changing local environment by created a strong tie to the

³ Brown, 61.
⁴ Geary, Furta sacra, 124-125.
⁵ Brown, 3.
rest of the Christian world.\textsuperscript{6} When there was no judge or local government, the saints stood in the seat of judgment on their local affairs. When there was the threat of possessions, the saint exorcized any demons. And when there was anything physically wrong with the devotee, the saint would heal them.\textsuperscript{7}

Charlemagne’s biographer Einhard and religious advisor was an avid relic collector and, under his guidance, the governance of the Carolingian Empire capitalized on the sanctity of the relic cult. Charlemagne and his successors aimed to strengthen and expand the place of relics in Frankish life. As Patrick Geary has said, Charlemagne used the relic tradition to bring marginal Christians into a deeper faith. To promote the prominence of relics, in 801 and again in 813, canons requiring all altars to contain relics were promulgated. One of the other ways in which Charlemagne promoted relics was to require them for oaths; this was easy for the Frankish people to do, since they were accustomed to swearing on many different things, including relics.\textsuperscript{8}

Oath swearing was prominent in peace-keeping in Gaul.\textsuperscript{9} When saints became instrumental in oath swearing in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the peacemaking function of saints became more prominent. Peace talks usually occurred in the presence of the relics of a particular saint. These saints were used by the Peace of God movement that the church leaders mobilized to support the church’s claims to land as well as protect

\textsuperscript{6} Geary, \textit{Furta sacra}, 18.

\textsuperscript{7} Brown, 105.

\textsuperscript{8} Geary, \textit{Furta sacra}, 37-38.

those without armies. This was a powerful system; any Frankish lord would feel that he had to keep a promise if a saint knew about it.

Along with protection, and oath guarantees, saints’ relics were also used to heal sickness and demonic possession. Yitzhak Hen focused specifically on healing when he wrote about the use of relics in his book *Culture and Religion in Merovingian Gaul*. Hen’s take on the relic is a functionalist approach, interested more in the social implications of the relic cult than the subjective relationship of individuals to relics.\(^\text{10}\) According to Hen, in a healing miracle some contact with the saint was the first step in healing, no matter what the form of contact came in. Touching the relics, drinking or washing with water from the saint’s fountain, touching dust from the tomb, or any part of the shrine created a physical connection with the saint. Sometimes healing was spontaneous; at other times a vision leading to the cure would be imparted when the sick slept in the shrine.\(^\text{11}\)

According to the work of Bernard Töpfer, a Marxist historian, the cult of relics was an instrumental tool in the way leaders of the Church controlled the populace. While this may not be true to such an extreme extent, much of his article on relic cults addresses how the church leaders intentionally fostered community spirit using the pull of the saint. He believes that when mass cures were needed, such as after a small plague or flood, people from all strata of society could congregate around the shrine which held the relics, to beseech the saint for a cure. This great throng of people would cause a temporary camp in and around the monastery. It was in this area that groups would sing hymns and listen


\(^{11}\) Hen, 112-113.
to the singing of the hours. In this way the watchful presence of the saint brought the laity, clergy, and monks together in piety. Töpfer concludes that there is no shortage of evidence indicating that monks and clergy anticipated large amounts of lay people would flock to the shrine of an active relic. Given the planning that went into public translations of saints’ relics, it seems likely that the clergy in charge were trying to bring the laity into their churches. As Töpfer concludes, “However primitive such events may sound to us, they were obviously very effective in mobilizing large numbers of people.”

The Cast of Characters

The relics I will be dealing with are not all bodies of saints. One, sought by the Queen of the Franks, Radegund, was a piece of the Holy Cross. One of Radegund’s biographers, Baudonivia, wrote about her relic petitions. Radegund was also a saint herself; her cult sprang up soon after her death, but was promoted more vigorously after forty nuns in the monastery rebelled and stormed out of their cloistered walls. Her efforts to bring such a renowned relic into her war-torn country led women to flock to Radegund’s tomb to petition her for peace during World War II, thinking that her amazing efforts in late antiquity made her the most capable saint to protect their homeland.

The second relic that will be introduced is that of Saint Foy, or Faith. Foy was a young female martyr brought into the monastery at Conques by monks in a bitter rivalry

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13 Töpfer, 45.
with a brother house up the river in Figeac. The rival monastery was in a better location and threatened to push Conques out of commission, until the monks decided to enlist the help of a saint. The monks tried to steal a saint by the name of Saint Vincent of Saragossa but were thwarted. In their next attempt to collect a saint, they went to Agen in 854, where they stole a different Saint Vincent, as well as the miracle-working Saint Foy. Centuries later, Saint Foy’s reputation eclipsed Vincent’s and his relics vanished into obscurity.\textsuperscript{14}

The third case study that I will write about is the discovery of Mary Magdalene at the abbey of Vézelay. Vézelay was a monastery with a great amount of power, derived directly from the pope; this position undermined the control of the local bishop, as well as of any secular authority. In the first half of the eleventh century, a group of monks from the reform center of Cluny forcibly took over Vézelay, ousting the monks and their abbot. The initial rebellion died down and the abbot was reinstated, but as soon as he died, the Cluniacs installed their own abbot, Geoffrey, into Vézelay. It was Geoffrey who introduced Mary Magdalene to the roster of patron saints at Vézelay. When her relics were miraculously found in nearby Aix, Vézelay became one of the most powerful pilgrimage sites in Southern France.

While the stories of these relics may seem distinctive from one another, they share a specific characteristic. In each case, relics were brought in at a time of turmoil and loss to quell the anxiety of the nuns, monks, and other religious people. The stories of Conques and Vézelay are especially consonant because their relic petitions followed a very definable problem. In the case of Vézelay, the Abbot Geoffrey was brought in to

\textsuperscript{14} Geary, \textit{Furta Sacra}, 60-62.
save the monastery from peril, and he did through the invention of Mary Magdalene’s whole body. The monks at Conques knew that if they did not find a relic, they would be pushed into poverty by the new monastery in Figeac. I believe that in both of these situations the monks were well aware that their surest salvation lay in the hands of a dead saint.

The installation of the relics at Vézelay and Conques may appear to stand in opposition to that of the holy cross, because the relic was a gift, and did not follow any obvious direct upset in the order of the monastery. However, Radegund was the founder of a convent at Poitiers, and without a powerful relic, the institution was unstable. Also, as a girl she was captured in battle and raised to be the wife of King Chlothar. As the future queen, Radegund must have been taught to care for her people from early childhood. Baudonivia often portrays Radegund as the mother to the whole city of Poitiers. The world around Radegund was full of violence and hostile battles. The introduction of the holy cross was in direct opposition to the forces of war surrounding her. So though it may seem that the installation of the Holy Cross into Poitiers may not follow a direct threat, it follows my hypothesis that relics brought peace, stability, and monetary gain to areas torn by conflict.

The culture of relic veneration was present from the beginning of Christianity. However, the Middle Ages saw a marked rise in relic devotion due to a lack of social stability caused by the breakdown of social structures. In the centuries between Radegund’s efforts to bring a relic to her monastery in the mid-sixth century, and Geoffrey’s work to promote the cult of the Magdalene in the mid-eleventh century, much
in the world outside the Church of southern France changed, but the dependence upon relics was unwavering.

The Sources

For all the faith that the Medieval Christians put into relics, the relics themselves were in a very tenuous position. Without something to prove or state what the relic is the relic is useless. Reliquaries, inscriptions, and iconographic representations were therefore vital to keep the power of the relic from being lost. Relics often did lose their identities, especially when theft played a part in their acquisition. This was a problem for everyone involved; it was because of this fact that the translatio text- the record of the translation, or placement- of the relic in its new home, became important. The pomp and ceremony of relic translations were expanded upon over the centuries; in fact, the arrival and installation of relics was more important than the relic’s presence. The translation day was seen as the new birthday for the saint, and each year that day would be the cause for the feast.

The translatio, as a literary type, is a hybrid between histories, hagiographies, and local myths. Translatios were often written to cover up any sort of wrongdoing on the part of the relic-seeker by adding the grace of God as impetus for their behavior, as well as to prove the identity of the saintly relics. Although their actual historical validity is circumspect, they are valuable for giving us the historical circumstances for the events

15 Geary, Furta Sacra, 6.
16 Geary, Furta Sacra, 7.
17 Brown, 93: “As recognitions by God of the ‘manifest destiny’ of the new capital and its right to survive, translations of relics were carefully remembers in art and liturgy on the same footing as those blessed moments when God had brought to a halt the awesome rumble of earth tremors.”
18 Geary, Furta Sacra, 10.
that took place, as well as the historical situation in which the documents were being written, and provide insight into the history of the church.  

The *translatio* texts were often written years after the actual translation of the relic took place, giving the writers the context in which they would place the installation of the holy relics. In the *translatio*, much like in a hagiography, nothing happens of its own accord; each movement of each character is premeditated and guided by God. Peter Brown views the *translatio* as one of the most optimistic textual tropes in the Middle Ages. Brown seems to believe that God’s persona in the *translatio* was lighter and more benevolent than in other writings. This may be because writers were determined to make the *translatio* a powerful statement that their monastery was the most worthy and blessed, and as such, favored by God in conspicuous miracles.

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20 Brown, 91: “Nowhere did the silver lining of God’s amnesty shine more clearly from behind the black cloud of the late-antique sense of sin than in accounts of the discovery and translation of relics.”
The cross, on which Jesus was crucified, originally found by Constantine’s mother, Helen, in 326, was the most potent symbols of Christianity. The connections that the queen-turned-nun Radegund had to the secular royalty, in Gaul and elsewhere, made it possible for her to obtain a piece of the cross. There are many reasons why she could have wanted the Cross, not the least of which was for her own reputation as a Christian queen, and to forge diplomatic ties with the Emperor and Empress of Byzantium. Radegund also sought the relic to aid her kingdom in a time of distress. More importantly however, the installation of the Cross served to cement the substance of Radegund’s convent in the city of Poitiers. The presence of such an important relic inside her monastery made the institution a beacon of peace and prosperity for the nuns, as well as the laity; thus building a strong Christian community in the face of a violent and turbulent time.

This chapter will show how and why the Holy Cross came into Poitiers, and how it affected the monastery and surrounding community. First I will address the details of Radegund’s life, focusing upon her concern for both her nuns and the Frankish Kingdom as a whole, concerns that led her to seek a famous relic as well as to found her monastery. Then, I will go on to why the Holy Cross was the most valued relic for Radegund to obtain, taking into account the exemplified role of Saint Helen and relations with the
Byzantine Emperor and Empress, as well as the fashions of the time. Third, I will examine the role Radegund’s tumultuous relationship with Maroveus, the bishop of Poitiers, had on her desire to seek the cross. Finally I will reflect on the success that Radegund had in creating community with the Holy Cross in light of the rebellion staged soon after her death.

**Radegund’s life**

Radegund, a Thuringian princess was born in 520.¹ When Radegund was young, her uncle Harmanfred killed her father, King Bertechar, and raised Radegund as his daughter.² The Franks attacked the Thuringians when she was eleven, partially due to Hermanfred’s actions, which is omitted from Radegund’s hagiographies.³ When the Franks invaded in 531, she was captured by the Frankish King Clothar (sometimes referred to as Lothar) and raised to be Queen at Athies-sur-Somme.

It was in Athies that Radegund converted to Christianity and began an ascetic lifestyle. Her captor, the Frankish king Clothar, attempted to marry Radegund in 538, but she escaped in the night. However, she was recaptured and wedded to him later that year. During the span of her marriage, Radegund lived almost as a nun in her husband’s house; she would recite the divine office, sneaking out of the bed she shared with Clothar to

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¹ Venantius Fortunatus, *Life of Radegund* in *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, trans. Jo Ann McNamara, John E. Halborg, and Gordon Whatley (London: Duke, 1992), 70: What follows are the events that took place in Radegund’s life, taken from both of the *vitae* as well as Gregory of Tours.


pray.⁴ Baudonivia described Radegund’s lifestyle as follows: “For a brief while in that union she played the part of a wife only to serve Christ more devoutly acting as a model laywoman whom she herself might wish to imitate.”⁵ In 550, Clothar had Radegund’s brother assassinated, most likely to secure his political control. Radegund used this violence provided the means for the suspension of their marriage. They remained technically married, but she no longer had to live with him or share his bed. With this new-found freedom, Radegund went on pilgrimages, was consecrated as a deaconess, and lived for two years as a penitent in her home. In addition to these religious endeavors, Radegund was finally able to realize her true desire, the foundation of a monastery.

Sometime between the years 552 and 559, she founded the monastery at Poitiers, in which she would live out the rest of her life. The monastery was built at the expense of Clothar and its construction was aided by Bishop Pientius, the predecessor of Maroveus, in Poitiers, and Duke Austrapius, the bishop of Chantoceaux, a town in the diocese of Poitiers.⁶ Radegund adopted the rule of Caesarius of Arles for women around 558, a rule that required very strict cloistering and focused on education, which freed the monastery from supervision from the bishop by centralizing power within the monastery. She appointed a nun named Agnes, referred to as her spiritual daughter, as the abbess. These two began to establish a relationship with the Italian poet who later became bishop of

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⁴ Venantius Fortunatus, *Life*, 72 “the more secular power was bestowed upon her, the more humbly she bent her will-more than befitted her royal status.”


⁶ Baudonivia, 89.
Tours, Venantius Fortunatus. Radegund and Venantius had the relationship of a royal patron to a poet and not that of a nun to a bishop.  

Once her monastery was established, Radegund began to petition religious and political leaders for relics, and by 568, she had achieved the fruit of her efforts, a relic of the True Cross. Radegund, who had a history of almsgiving, would have seen her petition for the True Cross as a natural progression for the social welfare of her fellow citizens. Radegund had the church of St. Mary built outside the city walls to provide a place for the nuns of Sainte Croix to be buried. Later this became the site of the church of St. Radegund and the epicenter of her cult. She died on August 13, 587; her funeral was postponed because the local bishop Maroveus would not perform the service. However it was conducted by Gregory the bishop of Tours three days later.

Our knowledge of the events of Radegund’s life comes primarily from two vitae, or sacred biographies, written about her in the years following her death. Three years after Radegund’s death in 587, Venantius Fortunatus wrote a vita of the late queen. Fortunatus was born sometime in the 530s in northeastern Italy, and spent his youth amidst the turmoil of Justinian’s invasion and the occupation of the Ostrogothic Kingdom. He moved to France where he became a poet of the court. He was the successor to Gregory as bishop of Tours. His vita is based loosely off the life of Saint

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8 Venantius Fortunatus, Life, 3: “Fearing she would lose status with God as she advances in worldly rank at the side of a prince, she gave herself energetically to almsgiving.” Baudonivia described her as “profusely generous with alms to the needy.”
9 Brennen, 343.
10 Inspiration for what to include in this section taken from the translated timeline in: Joan M. Petersen, Handmaids of the Lord (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1996), 378.
Martin, and it follows the basic patterns of hagiography from that period. Baudonivia wrote her version of Radegund’s *Vita* sometime between the years 600-602, between ten and twelve years after Fortunatus wrote his, and possibly even after his death. Not much is known about her life, aside from her position as a nun at the monastery at the Holy Cross in Poitiers, and that she was educated by Radegund. Her *vita* is less traditional than that of Venantius and follows Radegund’s life work not only as a nun, but as a diplomatic queen.

The third source we have is the writings of Gregory of Tours, Venantius’ predecessor as bishop of Tours. Gregory knew Radegund and met with her when he visited Poitiers. He wrote about her life and convent both while she was alive and after her death in his *History of the Franks* and the *Glory of the Martyrs*. As Gregory was writing histories, and not spiritual biographies, there is a certain amount of traditional hagiographical material that was not a part of his description of Radegund or her life. He portrayed Radegund as a queen who was both a powerful diplomat, and a pious nun. He referred to her as “comparable to Helena in both merit and faith.” In fact all three of Radegund’s chroniclers likened her to Helen

*Imitatio Helenae?*

Helen was the original model for the saintly queen, or matriarch. After converting her son Constantine to Christianity in 312, she took a pilgrimage in 326 to the Holy Land. There she founded churches on sacred sites connected to Jesus’ life, thus bridging religious history with the success of the current Christian empire. She took care of

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consecrated virgins, kept Constantine’s name free of scandal, gave away much wealth, fed the poor, and freed criminals from death. According to Jo Ann McNamara, Helen turned the power that she received from her son into a feminine model of Christianity which was concerned with charity, mercy, and piety, royal qualities not present in the warlike aspects of masculine rule. It was on her pilgrimage to Jerusalem that Helen was said to discover the holy cross, buried by the Jews and hidden by the pagans under a temple of Venus, which she then brought back to Constantinople.

According to Jo Ann McNamara, early medieval women in positions of royal power developed active piety as an intentional division of royal duties with their warrior kings. Radegund was no different; as a Christian queen she followed the legacy that Helen had set. This can be seen most clearly in the following passage from the *Life of Radegund* composed by her friend and confident, Venantius Fortunatus:

> And how prudently she sought to devote everything possible to her salvation. If the girls attending her when she dressed praised a new veil of coarse linen ornamented with gold and gems in the barbarian fashion as particularly beautiful, she would judge herself unworthy to be draped in such fabric. Divesting herself of the dress immediately, she would send it to some holy place in the neighborhood where it could be laid as a cloth on the Lord’s altar.

> And if the king, according to custom, condemned a guilty criminal to death, wasn’t the most holy queen near dead with torment lest the culprit perish by the sword? How she would rush about among his trusty men, ministers and nobles, whose blandishments might soothe the prince’s temper until the king’s anger

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13 McNamara, “*Imitatio Helenae*,” 51-52: There were other powerful female figures besides Radegund who were proclaimed *nova Helenae*. Eudocia, who lived between the years 400 and 460, was, like Radegund, estranged from her husband, Theodosius II, and exiled from his court. With her freedom, and his wealth, she built monasteries, took care of the hermits in the desert, collected relics and went on pilgrimages; she was acclaimed as a *nova Helenae* by the populace. Eudocia’s rival in these endeavors was Pulcheria; she was the older sister of Emperor Theodosius II, and a virgin. She did many of the same things as Eudocia, but it was Pulcheria who was proclaimed the *nova Helenae* by clergy members.
ceased and the voice of salvation flowed where the sentence of death had issued before.\textsuperscript{14}

The concept of a charitable Christian queen to balance out the violent king may have even been intentional on the part of Radegund’s husband Clothar. Although Clothar was not monogamous and had at least five wives, he respected Radegund as his “public queen” and treated her so, even when they were estranged. She was his Christian wife balancing his violent and coercive kingship with her active piety.\textsuperscript{15} From Radegund’s own letters, we know that Clothar supported her generously in the years after their estrangement and allowed her a great deal of wealth for her religious pursuits.\textsuperscript{16}

In her three biographers’ works, Radegund is portrayed as the \textit{nova Helena}-or new Helen, in differing ways. However, the connection is made most obviously by Baudonivia: “Thus, like Saint Helena, imbued with wisdom, full of the fear of God, glorious with good works, she eagerly sought to salute the wood where the ransom of the world was hung for our salvation that we might be snatched from the power of the devil.”\textsuperscript{17} In Baudonivia’s \textit{vita}, relic collecting is a lifelong obsession for Radegund. As a young girl in Athies, she collected relics, most likely through a hired relic hunter or as gifts, which were lost, but miraculously returned to her collection in Saix just before she founded the monastery.\textsuperscript{18} Likewise, one of the most prevalent aspects in Baudonivia’s narrative is Radegund’s preoccupation with peace in her country. In conjunction with this, Radegund’s motivation in seeking to obtain a relic of the True Cross is portrayed as

\textsuperscript{14} Venantius Fortunatus, 9-10.
\textsuperscript{15} McNamara, “\textit{Imitatio Helenae},” 63-64, and McNamara, \textit{Sainted Women}, 61.
\textsuperscript{16} Jo Ann McNamara, \textit{Sainted Women}, 62.
\textsuperscript{17} Baudonivia,16.
\textsuperscript{18} Baudonivia, 94.
a concern for the well-being of the whole land of Gaul. In Baudonivia’s *vita*, the petition for and reception of the Cross is the central achievement of Radegund’s life.\(^{19}\) According to Brennen, Radegund’s installation of the Holy Cross into Poitiers was both a cause for civic pride and a new source of protection for the monastery after Radegund died.\(^{20}\)

**Maroveus vs. Radegund**

One of the distinct features of Radegund’s lifetime, which may have contributed to her notoriety, was the battle of wills that she engaged in with Maroveus, the local bishop of Poitiers. Maroveus of Poitiers came into the bishopric many years after Radegund had founded her monastery; she was already connected to important bishops all over Gaul, including the earlier bishops of Poitiers.\(^{21}\) However, Maroveus and Radegund had a very terse and fiery relationship. According to Gregory of Tours, Radegund often went to Maroveus for help, and he was never willing to aid her. Maroveus turned his back on Radegund and attempted to ignore the existence of the monastery altogether. Radegund and Agnes adopted Caesarius’ monastic rule for women, which gave the monastery autonomy from the local bishopric, to free themselves from reliance on Maroveus.\(^{22}\) This sort of conflict was common among bishops and the royal founders of monasteries; royal private religious institutions could be dangerous for the strength of the bishop in that area because of their connections to kings, and counts with some power to influence church leaders.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{19}\) Baudonivia, 16.  
\(^{20}\) Brennen, 350-351.  
\(^{21}\) Brennen, 345.  
\(^{22}\) Gregory of Tours, *History* IX,40.  
\(^{23}\) Brennen, 344.
In the year 569, Maroveus and Radegund had a very public disagreement regarding the reception of the Cross. In Gregory’s words:

the Queen asked Bishop Maroveus if he would deposit them in her nunnery with all due honor and a great ceremony of psalm-chanting. He refused point-bank: instead, he climbed on his horse and went off to visit one of his county estates. Then the Queen wrote a second time to Sigibert, begging him to order one of his bishops to deposit the relics in the nunnery with all the honor due to them, in compliance with her vow. Sigibert deputed Saint Eufronious, Bishop of Tours, (Gregory’s predecessor) to do what Radegund had asked. Eufronious came to Poitiers with his clergy. Maroveus deliberately stayed away…

This antagonism may well have been based on Maroveus’ displeasure at the leverage that Radegund had as queen and deaconess and the desire to keep her from attaining any more power than she had already established. Maroveus’ refusal to install the relic caused a scandal. Isabel Moreira, in her article “Provisatrix optima: St. Radegund of Poitiers’ relic petitions to the East,” speaks of this referencing mainly the writings of Baudonivia and Gregory of Tours. In her words, “Not only was the imperial gift snubbed on the doorstep of the very community that it was intended to adorn and protect, but the relic itself suffered humiliation.” By humiliating the cross, Maroveus may have been attempting to control it himself, making it a relic of his diocese, not that of Radegund’s monastery. However, his plan backfired as Radegund deftly sidestepped his authority and appealed to the king. Brennen has claimed that by remaining away from Poitiers during this pinnacle of religious life (the installation of the cross), Maroveus further pushed the devotional center of the city from the cathedral, or basilica, of Saint Hillary to Radegund’s Convent and the shrine of the Holy Cross. Because of Maroveus’s absence at

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24 Gregory of Tours, History, IX.40.


26 For an in-depth look on the tradition of humiliation of Relics Cf; Patrick Geary, “Humiliation of Saints,” in Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1994)
the translation of the relic the cult of the holy cross was associated with Radegund and her convent.\textsuperscript{27} This argument, however, is over-simplified. The holy cross would have inevitably drawn popular devotion away from the cathedral to the shrine at Holy Cross no matter what Maroveus’ actions had been. As was saw in the introduction, the location of the saint’s relic was the home of the saint himself; therefore the installation of the cross would no doubt trump all the other relics in the area and centralize popular devotion to Christ, not local saints. However, Maroveus’ absence also widened the gap between Radegund’s sphere of influence and the bishop’s. If Maroveus had stayed involved he could have asserted Episcopal control over the relic and its power and kept it associated with his own church (and with the Episcopal office). By acting heatedly, he allowed the relic to become a kind of “Free agent”, associated only with Radegund’s house. As a consequence, its power and renown rubbed off on the convent, helping the latter to overshadow the bishop’s own church.

The conflicts between Maroveus and Radegund did not end at the installation of the holy cross. Although there is only one other conflict that is mentioned in the same breath as Maroveus’ absence during the installation of the Holy Cross, and that is his absence at Radegund’s funeral. Baudonivia writes that Gregory of Tours arrived promptly, and the nuns “waited on the bishop of that place so that she might be interred with due honor.” After three days of delay, however, Gregory went ahead and officiated at Radegund’s funeral.\textsuperscript{28} Brennen believes that Maroveus’ absence was intentional, since Gregory was farther away than he at the time of Radegund’s death.\textsuperscript{29} This mirrors

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{27} Brennen, 346.
\item\textsuperscript{28} Baudonivia, 103.
\item\textsuperscript{29} Brennen, 346.
\end{itemize}
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Maroveus’ intentional absence during the installation of the cross; it seems that Maroveus kept himself as far apart from any display of Radegund’s position as a public figure as possible.

Unlike Baudonivia, Venantius said nothing about the conflicts between Radegund and Maroveus in his vita. Moreira has much to say on this subject. According to her, Venantius kept silent about these conflicts because, due to his position as the bishop of Poitiers, he did not want to create more conflict. Since it would have been nearly impossible to mention Radegund’s petition and reception of the Holy Cross without mentioning the conflict over the installation of the cross, he simply left them out completely. According to Moreira, the active role that Venantius took during the translation of the cross, such as writing hymns in honor of the Cross and writing poems of praise to the imperial court at Constantinople, are sharply contrasted with his omission of this event in the vita. In the view of many scholars, Fortunatus tailored his vita after that of St. Martin, covering up her life with his, and thus sidestepping the problem. Moreira believes Fortunatus toyed with putting cross information into the vita and led up to it with Radegund’s homemade cross in childhood and the cross she burnt into her flesh. Fortunatus also makes a great show of Radegund’s longing for Christ to be physically with her.

How she would cling to the feet of Christ as though he were present with her and satiate her long hunger with tears as though she were gorging on delicacies! She had contempt for the food of the belly, for Christ was her only nourishment and all her hunger was for Christ.

30 Moreira, 299.
31 Moreira, 288.
32 Moreira, 299-300.
33 Venantius Fortunatus, 73.
Instead of stony silence, Baudonivia confronts Maroveus’ absence at the reception of the cross as the work of the devil preventing the reception and praises the joy of Radegund and Eufronious.\textsuperscript{34} It may well have been these additions and omissions that prompted Baudonivia to write her version of the \textit{Vita}. The nuns at Poitiers may have felt that they were largely excluded from Fortunatus’s \textit{vita} and wished to reclaim the story of their founder in the context of her life with them. On the other hand, the reasons for Baudonivia’s \textit{Vita} may be as simple as she portrays it in her prologue:

We do not repeat what the apostolic man, Bishop Fortunatus, has written in his life of the blessed lady, but only what he had passed over because he did not wish to prolong his narrative; as he indeed explains in his own book…\textsuperscript{35}

Indeed, Baudonivia’s \textit{vita} is referred to as book two of the manuscript, and the symbolism from both versions is often combined in manuscript art, such as early visions written about by Baudonivia combined with the ascetic practices described by Venantius in one image. This brings together Venantius’s and Baudonivia’s accounts of Radegund’s life, painting a unified picture of not only her personal trials, but also of the problems that she had with Bishop Maroveus.

\textbf{Success (or not)…the Revolt}

The importance of the cross is also highlighted in conjunction with a revolt that took place right after the death of Radegund.\textsuperscript{36} Venantius wrote about the life of

\textsuperscript{34} Baudonivia, 16.

\textsuperscript{35} Baudonivia, introduction.

\textsuperscript{36} Gregory of Tours, who writes about the nun’s rebellion in book nine of his History, was present for many of the events, and played a role in the reconciliation of the rebelling nuns. Gregory tells us that the founder of the revolt, Clotild, was referred to as one “who used to pretend that she was [king] Charibert’s daughter.” Gregory was insinuating that not only did she make up charges against the abbess; she may have invented her noble lineage as well. She was headstrong and believed she should be chosen to be abbess; however Leubevera, a lower class woman, was
Radegund during the rebellion and trial. Venantius wrote his *vita* to be a kind of guide to proper behavior for the rebellious nuns.\(^{37}\) A few years after the revolt, when Baudonivia was writing her *vita*, the cult of Radegund herself had been established. Baudonivia makes her pursuit of relics central to her sainthood. This may be because the popular idea of Radegund was as a *nova Helenae*.

**Conclusion**

Radegund’s quest for the Holy Cross did not occur in a vacuum. She herself was influenced by the image of the saintly queen and strove in many aspects to achieve this image. Along with the stability of her foundation, Radegund strove to protect her country. It could have been for this reason that she sought after the cross, more than any other relic. Positive connections between the Franks and the Emperor and the Empress in Byzantium would have been a vital asset for her stepson, the king Sigibert, as well as the whole of Francia.

There was also the trouble in Radegund’s own lifetime that lent an air of conflict to the reception of the cross. Bishop Maroveus was antagonistic to Radegund before she began to seek the cross. The placement of the cross in Radegund’s convent, away from

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\(^{37}\) This may have had something to do with Venantius’s responsibilities as a bishop.
the basilica in Poitiers, safeguarded her foundation from being dissolved by Maroveus after she died. Although there was an uprising following Radegund’s death, the sliver of the Holy Cross, served to safeguard her community from being destroyed by the rebellion just discussed.
The story of Conques and Saint Foy provides a clear example of how a saint could be brought in to shield a monastery from an outside threat. In the first half of the ninth century, the king granted the monks at Conques a new tract of land with a new building to allow the monastery to expand. Unlike many situations when the parent monastery controlled and benefited from the daughter house, Conques and the new monastery in Figeac never quite got along with one another. It was directly out of competition with Figeac that Conques sought the relics of a saint. The relic of the saint they obtained through *furtum sacrum*, holy theft, wound up being a very popular and active relic. The body of the girl-martyr, Saint Foy, saved Conques from being overshadowed by Figeac, both economically and in terms of importance to the religious community of the area. However, it was not only the power inherent in the saint that led to the greatness of Saint Foy’s cult, but also the way that the monks at Conques handled the power that the possession of her relics gave them through writings, pilgrimage, and processions. This chapter will deal with all of these aspects of Saint Foy’s story, starting with the history of Saint Foy herself, followed by the history and conflict between Conques and Figeac, a narration of the events of the theft, and finally an explanation of the way the monks of Conques and Bernard of Angers promoted the cult through writings and procession.
Conques vs. Figeac

Conques, a town in southern France, lies in a steep valley along the river Lot. The earliest documentation we have of a monastery at Conques is a charter from 801 recognizing it as a Benedictine monastery.¹ There are so many myths and forgeries related to the foundation of the monastery that it is almost impossible to separate the probable from the impossible. However, the original use of the land seems to have been the retreat a hermit named Dado. According to the foundation texts of Conques, Dado witnessed his mother’s gruesome death at the hands of Muslim invaders, when he refused to exchange his horse for her life. Stricken with grief, he converted and began to live as a hermit, later this story was expanded to paint him as the founder of the monastery.²

In 838, King Pepin I gave many gifts to the monastery at Conques, as well as the new monastery in the town of Figeac.³ Figeac was located much closer to the river to attract the laity; Pepin established Figeac because Conques’ location did not provide for expansion. While Pepin's charter placed Figeac under Conques’ abbot, its actual effect was to reduce Conques actual importance, by making it possible to move the institution's personnel and abbot over time to the new, "dependent" house.⁴ The purpose of this action was to place the monastery in a much better location without disrupting the day-to-day

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² Amy Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 56: Later, in the twelfth or thirteenth century, this story was elaborated and expanded to increase the clout of the monastery; this will be dealt with later in the chapter.
⁴ Remensnyder, 272.
lives of the monks and those that depended on the monastery (something that may have been detrimental to the monks in a sudden move.)\(^5\) A few of the monks were instructed to move to the new location but several of these monks did not want to move and refused to.\(^6\) Thus the rivalry began almost immediately. As Patrick Geary has noted, the “two monasteries’ relationship…was one of competition and animosity from the very foundation of Figeac.”\(^7\) Pepin had wanted to provide a better home for the monks and had not foreseen the problems that Figeac’s foundation would cause.

The monks at Conques wanted to be able to continue in the same location as they had before without being made to move. Unfortunately, the establishment of Figeac threatened their very existence. The monks were well aware that even if they retained control over Figeac, which was difficult, there would still be problems supporting both institutions. As Geary points out, the monastic communities were living on limited means in the ninth through eleventh centuries; most of Europe was rather impoverished and there was only so much patronage the local laity could provide. The threat of another institution was grave.\(^8\) Conques began to think of ways to combat this problem almost immediately after the donation of Figeac in the ninth century, this is when they began to look for a relic.

Saints and their relics were not the only way in which the monasteries of Figeac and Conques competed; there was also the importance of the foundation texts. The foundation text, like a *translatio*, assures the reader of the significance of the monastery, by

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\(^7\) Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 60.

\(^8\) Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 58.
expounding on the worth and celebrity of the monastery’s founders. Amy Remensnyder, who has done much work on the *Chronicles* of Conques, believes the work may be dated from 1100; however few passages suggest that the *Chronicles* may have been written in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century.\(^9\) Regardless of the date, Conques claimed that an entire colony of hermits was said to have lived in Conques as early as 371, eventually evolving into a small community of ascetic monks. They were wiped out by King Theudebert in 564; this is the point at which Conques is said to have been resettled by Dado. In this chronicler’s version of the story, however, Dado is not a hermit, but a great holy man able to assemble other men in under a monastic rule.\(^10\)

In the Prologue to the *Chronicles*, the monastic author claims that Conques was founded and re-founded by kings-- first Clovis, who founded the monastery, then Pepin the Short, who revived it and left it to his son Charlemagne. Next it was entrusted to Louis the Pious, and then passed to Pepin I of Aquitaine. According to Remensnyder, this text makes “Conques…appear as an abbey ‘cherished’ (*diligebant*) by the Frankish kings from their Christian beginnings.”\(^11\) This is significant because there was no mention of any king other than Charlemagne in earlier writings. Notably, Figeac in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, in an attempt to gain precedence over Conques, changed Pepin’s position from that of an original founder to a re-founder, and extended its legend back to Clovis.\(^12\) In this respect, the *Chronicles* can be seen as an effort to one-up Figeac’s claims. This one-upmanship continued; whereas Figeac claimed to be anointed

\(^9\) Remensnyder, 158.
\(^10\) Remensnyder, 56-57.
\(^11\) Remensnyder, 148.
\(^12\) Remensnyder, 117.
by a miracle cloud at its consecration, the writers of the *Chronicles* of Conques claimed Charlemagne gave it the holy foreskin and umbilical cord, as well as the statue of a large golden "A." 

The Theft

The reliance on Charlemagne as a founder continued in Conques, a legend pointed out to visitors, inspiring even more awe in the monastery. Although the foundation text could be powerful, there would have been no visitors, if not for the cult of Saint Foy. As Patrick Geary states in *Furta Sacra*, although the most effective defense against a rivalry varied, a new patron could be a very powerful tool in securing a monastery’s hold on lay devotion and charity. The added holiness of stealing a relic would only help to bring in more pilgrims. Conques acquisition of Saint Foy was such an example.

Saint Foy was a girl martyred south of Conques in Agen in the third century during the time of the Roman persecution. The details of her life are unclear. It is known, however, that Saint Foy was eleven or twelve in the third century when she was killed and placed in a tomb with other martyrs. There was no cult activity in Agen specifically directed to Foy. She was, however, mentioned in the Roman martyrrology and had a feast day on the sixth of October. There was most likely some devotion to the group of martyrs entombed together. Vincent, a saint we know shared a tomb with Foy was much better known, and in fact it was he, not Foy, who was the primary target of Conques’ theft.

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13 Remensnyder, 80.
14 Remensnyder, 180-181.
At the outset, the monks were interested in Saint Vincent of Saragossa. But when they attempted to steal his relics, they were somehow thwarted. A few years later, the monks heard of a Saint Vincent in Agen. In one swoop, they successfully stole the relics of Saint Vincent, as well as Saint Foy. As Saint Foy grew in renown though conspicuous miracles, her story overshadowed Vincent’s, and his legend and relics disappeared.\footnote{Geary, \textit{Furta Sacra}, 60-62.} There is much debate over when this occurred, but based on the accounts given in the various translation texts, Saint Foy’s theft may have happened January 14, 854 or 866.\footnote{Sheingorn, \textit{The Book of Saint Foy}, 10.} The theft must have taken place before 883, for by then lay donors had begun to honor Foy’s relics with donations.\footnote{Geary, \textit{Furta Sacra}, 59.}

In the years between 883 and 900, as devotion to Foy increased, the donations to and pilgrimage traffic increased as well. Between the years 940 and 980, the monks built a new church to take the relic’s shrine out of the monastery buildings so that the monks could continue living their contemplative lives. The greatest boon for the cult of Saint Foy, and the livelihood of the monastery at Conques, came in 983, when a man’s eyes were gouged out and then fully re-grown at the behest of Saint Foy—an event referred to by contemporaries as the “Great Miracle.” Word of this miracle, made famous by Bernard of Angers, spread throughout literate society, and increased traffic and pilgrimage to the site. After miracles like this one became widely known, gifts were even more abundant than before. The monks began to spruce up the shrine; one of the things they did was to create a golden altar.
With the influx of donor activity there was also a change in the demographic of the donors. Before 1065, the donors to Saint Foy were local folks, peasants and tenants, but after this year donors were people of power and authority.\textsuperscript{19} The year 1042 is the earliest date cited that the construction of the larger church of St Foy was begun, and it may have been completed as early as 1100.\textsuperscript{20} The peak of Conques’ wealth was the second half of the eleventh century, with donations and pilgrimage declining between 1107 and 1125.\textsuperscript{21} During the height of Saint Foy’s cult in the mid-eleventh century, the dispute over Conques’ authority over Figeac, which had been smoldering for centuries, was revived and given new vigor.\textsuperscript{22} The dispute over authority ended when the governance of the two monasteries was split at the Council of Nimes in 1096, but the rivalry continued.\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{Writings, Publicity, and Procession}

At the center of the rivalry between Conques and Figeac, as well as the promotion of the cult of Saint Foy, were various texts. In large part, the use and manipulation of texts was what made the monks at Conques so powerful. Key among these was the \textit{Translatio of Saint Foy}, written between the years 1020 and 1060, more than a century after the actual theft.\textsuperscript{24} Partially due to the late date of its composition, and the fact that there are

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{19} Sheingorn, \textit{The Book of Saint Foy}, 10.
\textsuperscript{21} Kendall, 164.
\textsuperscript{22} Geary, \textit{Furta Sacra}, 60-61.
\textsuperscript{23} Sheingorn, \textit{The Book of Saint Foy}, 8.
\textsuperscript{24} Sheingorn, \textit{The Book of Saint Foy}, 26.
\end{flushleft}
two different recensions of the text, there is a heated debate concerning the historical accuracy of the *Translatio*. There is uncertainty as to when the theft of Foy’s relics took place, if it ever did so at all; indeed, the clandestine nature of Foy’s acquisition helped her popularity, leading later versions of the *Translatio* to play up the theft more and more.25 The dramatic version of the translation that we have today is closely tied to the actions of the monastery at Figeac. In the tenth or early eleventh century, Figeac claimed it had the relics of Saint Bibanus, a Merovingian bishop. The theft of the bishop’s relics was allegedly carried out by the abbot Haigmar, who was very eager to obtain relics surreptitiously. The monks sacked the reliquaries just as the Normans were sacking the rest of the city of Saintes. This claim was made by Figeac shortly after the last translation of Saint Foy was written, more daring and covert than the original stories.26 It is clear that the two monasteries were trying to outdo each other in all aspects including the originality and drama of their holy thefts.

What follows is a close reading of the final draft of the *Translatio of Saint Foy* that was publicized by the monks of Conques. There are certain aspects of the story that give powerful insights into the beliefs and outlook informing Saint Foy’s cult. The story begins with a monk in Agen named Dulcidus, who knows somehow of the virgin’s importance; this sets her up as an active living relic. The author reports that “Dulcidus separated the bodies,”27 indicating that there were many martyrs in one tomb. Immediately Foy stands out at Agen just as she later did in Conques.

26 Geary, *Furta Sacra*, 62.
What is especially interesting is that the Translatio makes it seem that Foy was very important to Agen. Although in the text the people of Agen were devastated to hear their saint was gone, there is no mention or record of any miracle or cult activity occurring there.\textsuperscript{28} In later years Agen would occasionally try to reassert its claim to Foy, but eventually gave up.\textsuperscript{29} Throughout the Translatio it is apparent that the monks of Conques were attempting not only to stretch the cult of Foy back centuries before it ever became apparent, but also to make a show of the theft.

When the author begins to describe the miracles that Saint Foy performed, he immediately links her with giving sight to the blind, her most popular miracle. Later in the narrative, after the theft takes place, she once again is associated with protecting the eyes of her captors: When the people of Agen plan to blind Arinisdus and his companion for stealing Saint Foy, they are protected.

Arinisdus was the monk sent to Agen to capture Saint Foy’s remains. He masqueraded as a pilgrim, and slowly gained the trust of the monks and clerics of Agen and was finally placed a guardian to the church. Arinisdus continued to insinuate his way into the favor of the monks at Agen. Eventually, an opportunity presented itself while the other monks were feasting for the Lord’s Epiphany; he stole the relics and fled.\textsuperscript{30}

This trickery was the most sensational aspect of the translation. In one passage, the author describes not only how Arinisdus was secretive, but also how he remained


\textsuperscript{29} Geary, \textit{Furta Sacra}, 59-60.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{The Translation of Saint Foy}, 266-267.
deviant and deceptive, keeping his motives closer to his heart.\footnote{The Translation of Saint Foy, 267: “Thereafter he pursued this ecclesiastical duty in a proper and orderly manner and gave fitting attention to it. He continued and increased his activity as a doer of good works and a teacher of others. Nevertheless, his secret-the reason he was there- had outlasted both success and adversities; it had not vanished from the depths of his own heart. But because easy access to this desirable treasure-and therefore the means of acquiring it- was not given in a short period of time due to fear of adverse fortune, Arinisdus put the fulfillment of his vow into abeyance. He kept his place among the brothers, awaiting an opportune day.”} The following passage calls into question the sort of man Arinisdus was, while celebrating his actions: “meanwhile his anxious mind labored incessantly, and in the depths of his heart he was consumed with formulating a plan for gaining the access he needed to carry out such a difficult task.”\footnote{The Translation of Saint Foy, 267.}

The author refers to Saint Foy’s remains as a “divine gift,” although Arinisdus had to physically force the tomb open. The only sense of divine aid given to the mission seemed to be the fact that the pursuers from Agen lost Arinisdus’ trail, and later were unable to recognize Arinisdus and his companion, although they knew him well. Later, as Arinisdus was traveling, Foy heals a blind unnamed religious man. This is a tremendous miracle not only because it related to eyes (Foy’s forte), but because the man had been told in a vision that when the virgin Foy passed through his village he would be cured. Thus the predestination of Foy’s remains is assured at the same time as she is asserting her viability as a relic. It is also important to note that this miracle took place in Figeac, putting the town and the monastery within Foy’s power. The monks welcomed Saint Foy into Conques with a procession and set her up in a church with a “most diligent guard” knowing what they themselves had done.\footnote{The Translation of Saint Foy, 268-271.}

As was mentioned before, the Saint Foy cult reached its apogee due to the efforts not of the local community, but of a learned outsider. Bernard of Angers was a teacher
and scholar who was initially skeptical about Foy and her saintly reputation, but when he heard of the miracle of Guibert’s eyes and met the man himself, he was pushed into belief.\textsuperscript{34} He published the first book of what was to become the \textit{Liber miraculorum} or “Book of Miracles” in 986. He visited Conques for a second time between 1013 and 1020, to write up another group of miracles which became the second volume of the \textit{Liber}. In 1020 he visited Guibert, and recorded more miracles which were added to the second book.\textsuperscript{35} The monks of Conques, riding on the success they received from the first two books, petitioned Bernard to add another book to those he had already written. Bernard was pleased to add more miracles to his text, increasing his own work as a hagiographer, but in turn the monks at Conques were using him to promote their own importance as the guardians of Saint Foy.

The third and fourth books of the \textit{Liber miraculorum} were written after Bernard’s death by an anonymous monastic author, or group of authors due to the enormity of the project, who may have used Bernard’s notes to complete the work. The third book is dated between 1030 and shortly after 1035, while the fourth is most often dated to the mid-eleventh century.\textsuperscript{36} Despite the possible use of Bernard’s notes, Kathleen Ashley has argued that the author acts as a “spokesperson for the interests of the monastery at Conques” rather than a clerical compiler attending to Bernard’s legacy.\textsuperscript{37} It is evident that


\textsuperscript{35} Sheingorn, \textit{The Book of Saint Foy}, 25.

\textsuperscript{36} Ashley, \textit{Writing Faith}, 65-68 and Sheingorn, \textit{The Book of Saint Foy}, 25.

\textsuperscript{37} Ashley, \textit{Writing Faith}, 65: Cf. Benedicta Ward's observation that, "While the influence of individual writers must be taken into account, these collections do reflect the needs and aspirations of the clientele of the shrines. They are, in the 'traditiona' period, concerned with the application of the power of the saint to local needs. They emphasize the religious, social, and economic interdependence of the saint and his people.(Ward, 36)"
this is the case, because in the text written by the monastic author, Saint Foy is portrayed as a much more celestial and holy individual than in Bernard’s writing. The monk or monks writing the third and fourth books subsumed Bernard’s own words, downplaying his own personality with not only two more books of miracles, but also by adding the Translatio and a passio, the story of her martyrdom.38

There are vital differences to note in the perspective of the monks versus Bernard. Bernard sees Conques as a pilgrimage site, one central to the cult, but marginal to the religiosity of northern France. For the monk continuator, however, Conques is the center of his universe.39 Bernard also encounters the cult of Saint Foy from a position of disbelief, possibly even condemnation. The reliquary statue of Saint Foy (Appendix A) was thought to be an idol by many foreigners, including Bernard and his colleagues before the Book of Miracles was written.40

It is perhaps because of these differences that the monk continuators felt that they needed to portray a very different type of saint than Bernard did. Although Bernard succeeded in promoting Foy, and universalizing her appeal to the educated public, he did not have a vested interest in Foy’s success. In Bernard’s text, when St Foy demands jewelry, embodying a trickster role, this could have been seen as Conques extorting all it could out of patrons. Therefore, this is downplayed in the monks’ text, which reformulated Saint Foy to make her more glorious than Bernard had portrayed her. The author entirely removed any mention of Saint Foy as a trickster-child, instead

38 Ashley, Writing Faith, 68-69.
39 Ashley, Writing Faith, 81.
40 Bernard of Angers, 1.13.
representing her as a “celestial virgin-martyr.” The monks’ Foy is a black and white character; either you support her and you are rewarded, or you take things that are rightfully hers and are punished.

Texts were not the only way that the monks of Conques promoted their patron. Without a more visual, stimulating display of power, the generally illiterate population would not have access to her. The most viable way they reached these people is through procession. Normally, common people would not be able to leave their land for days at a time. However, when the saint was on procession, such efforts were unnecessary. Moreover, after the processions went by, the places where the reliquary was set down were made holy themselves. To hold a procession, the monks at Conques would first make a public announcement that the procession would be held, followed by the procession itself. Two reliquaries were always brought on processions, the familiar wooden statue encased in gold with a piece of Saint Foy’s skull inside, and another wooden box encased in gold, said to have been given by Charlemagne, that probably held her other remains.

There were many symbolic and sacred routes that liturgical processions would follow; in Conques, however, the “main purpose was rather to transport a sacred center out of town to another location (usually a rural one) where the reliquary statue could act on behalf of the monastery,” an act meant to demonstrate the foundation’s power in

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41 Ashley, *Writing Faith*, 69.
42 Ashley, *Writing Faith*, 82.
dramatic terms. The saint’s powers of healing or punishment were more direct on procession than in the monastic setting. Long nights of vigils were replaced by spontaneous miracles. Foy’s relics went on procession to combat famine, secure property, and guarantee peace as part of the Peace of God movement. The Peace of God councils provided a new venue for relics to assert their power. A competition of sorts built up between local and visiting relics; whoever could work more miracles during the council gained renown and shamed the other relics. As Ashley notes, “Foy’s relics were not processed specifically to make her healing powers available, but her miracles were recorded in order to glorify those powers.”

Along with the benefits of procession, however, there were also great dangers. With the relics absent, the monastery was without protection, in turn; during processions, the relics were more open to theft from other churches. Aside from these issues, there were also more minimal risks which included a lack of recording and witnessing of miracles. Any miracles the saint performed would be less likely to result in a donation to the monastery. The saint could also be insulted or mocked. On another note, Ashley and Sheingorn point out that it was possible for the saint’s relics to be processed without the monks’ approval, thus completely bypassing and belittling their authority. Although there are no specific examples, a bull forbidding public procession of relics without the will of the brothers, issued by Pope Urban II in 1099, attests to the problem’s existence.

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Success

The arrival of “reformed” monasticism in the area around Conques, exemplified by the Cluniacs, led to a decline in the monastery at Conques’ standing.⁴⁹ Given Foy’s popularity, the monks of Conques did not see the need to join forces with Cluny.⁵⁰ Many of the local monasteries, however, chose to join the reform movements to enhance their power, a move that entailed replacing local patrons with the patron of the mother house.

At the same time, a new form of pilgrimage was evolving. During the course of the twelfth century, Conques lost its position as the chief destination of pilgrims, becoming instead a stop on the route to Compostella.⁵¹ This was not in itself a bad thing; as Geary has noted, “by the twelfth century the routes to Compostella were a primary source of income and prestige for those monasteries which, like Conques…were located on them.”⁵² Nevertheless, this development only intensified the competition for preeminence between Conques and Figeac, for they were fighting over who would benefit from the increase in pilgrims.

Conclusion

The theft and installation of Saint Foy’s remains was a direct response to the creation of Figeac and the immediate rivalry that ensued. Unlike the piece of the Holy Cross sought by Radegund or the body of Mary Magdalene, there was no guarantee that either Saint Foy or Saint Vincent would become a popular saint. That may have been the

⁴⁹ Sheingorn, The Book of Saint Foy, 12.
⁵⁰ Geary, Furta Sacra, 23.
⁵¹ Sheingorn, The Book of Saint Foy, 12.
⁵² Geary, Furta Sacra, 86.
reason that two relics were stolen by the monks of Conques from the tomb in Agen. As it was, Conques did not become a pilgrimage site until after Bernard of Angers chronicled the many miracles that the saint performed and circulated them around the literate population. After Bernard’s death, the monks of Conques continued to publicize the saint. The monastic authors continued Bernard’s *Liber miraculorum* and added a *passio*, and *translatio*; creating the *Book of Saint Foy*. In addition to writing, the monks often took the relics of Saint Foy out on procession to remind the local people both of her existence, and her power. Their plans succeeded; the monastery at Conques flourished under the auspices of Saint Foy, attesting to the power and reach that a saint could have in a community that was especially vulnerable to dissolution.
Vézelay, located north of Conques, was the first pilgrimage stop on the route to Compostella. The installation of Mary Magdalene at Vézelay, like that of Foy at Conques, followed an event that threatened the existence of the monastery. However, the relic of Mary Magdalene was discovered, or invented, not stolen. According to Geary, there may have even been some rivalry between Conques and Vézelay due to their preeminence as foci on the pilgrimage routes to Compostella.¹ However there is a vital difference in the way the two monasteries responded to the trajectory of the pilgrims. Vézelay used its location as a stop on the route to Compostella as a powerful tool in its success, while the importance of Compostella diminished the devotion to Saint Foy at Conques.

The monastic reform movement based out of Cluny, local bishops, and counts all attempted to take control of the monastery at one point or another, and they all succeeded in one way or another. The cult of the Magdalene, however, allowed a troubled monastery to remain powerful. An important aspect of Mary Magdalene’s relic cult at Vézelay was the deliberation with which the first Cluniac abbot brought the cult to fruition. The cult of the Magdalene, masterminded by Abbot Geoffrey in the mid-

eleventh century, was designed to rehabilitate Vézelay after a forcible Cluny takeover earlier that century, and was used throughout the next two centuries to assure prosperity while many parties vied for power over the monastery. This chapter will analyze the history of both Mary Magdalene and Vézelay to show that the invention of her relics was directly related to the Cluniac takeover of Vézelay in the mid-eleventh century. First, I will outline Mary Magdalene’s history and the myths of her body in western tradition. This will be followed by the narrative of Vézelay and the circumstances of the Cluniac takeover. Once this context is in place I will analyze the actions of Geoffrey and his invention of the Magdalene. Finally, I will discuss the success that Mary Magdalene’s relics brought to Vézelay and the downfall of her cult two centuries later will be discussed.

**History of Mary Magdalene**

Mary Magdalene is a very influential character in both modern religious and secular society. Many well-known aspects of the Mary Magdalene story were created during the central Middle Ages in conjunction with the rise of her cult at Vézelay. The monks at Vézelay were in a unique position to shape the Magdalene myth in the west, as Vézelay was the most popular site of her relics in Western Europe. Many of the changes to the myth that Vézelay created were used to verify and support Mary Magdalene’s presence.

Indeed, Vézelay was in a potentially tenuous position, because many sites claimed to have Mary Magdalene’s body.\(^2\) Mary Magdalene’s remains were widely accepted to

\(^2\) There are at least 5 whole bodies and numerous body parts of the Magdalene.
have been in Ephesus and pilgrims were visiting her sepulcher there as late as the twelfth century. There is also evidence that her body was in Constantinople by end of the ninth century. From Ephesus came the feast day of July 22, first mentioned in the west in the venerable Bede’s martyrology c.720. In turn, Mary Magdalene was claimed by other western parties besides Vézelay; part of the Constantinopolitan relics may have been brought to the West between 1201 and 1209 by Conrad de Krosik, bishop of Halberstadt, making them one of the earliest case of relics of Mary in the West that were not connected to Vézelay.3

There were so many disparate locations for the body of Mary Magdalene that an explanation of how her body arrived in the Burgundy region of southern France was of paramount importance. There are three prominent myths explaining how Mary Magdalene was transported to Vézelay that developed over the centuries. In the earliest record of Mary Magdalene at Vézelay, the author appears to have had no knowledge (or was willfully ignorant) of the claims that Mary Magdalene was located in other places. He stated that Vézelay’s claims must be true because “no other place has ever pretended to have the body.” This same account explains her presence with the often quoted “all things are possible to God.” However, this hardly qualifies as an explanation and at the same time as the first account was being written, a second, more informative story was also being composed.

The second myth is referred to as the story of the “Holy Monk Badilon” and deals specifically with the way the Magdalene ended up at Vézelay. In this tale, an unknown monk named Badilon the elder obtained Mary Magdalene’s body in the Holy Land. His

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son, Badilon the younger, donated the relics to Vézelay because he was a very close friend of the abbot. This story remained the translation myth, until in the late eleventh century, the characters of the story were replaced. Instead of the anonymous Badilon, the bishop of Autun and the brother of the original abbot, Odo, were said to have acquired the relics from the town of Arles during the reign of King Carloman (879-884).  

Between the years 1098 and 1112, as tensions with the bishop of Autun grew, the author or authors once again, renamed the characters. Saint Badilon was brought back into the story, along with Vézelay’s founder Gerard, and the bishop was removed entirely. The location of the body was also different. Arles was changed to Aix, as the popular legend spread that Mary's final resting place had been in a tomb outside of the basilica of Saint-Maximin in Aix. This myth was known as the *vita apostolica*, which describes how Mary Magdalene, along with Martha and Lazarus, had fled after Jesus’ death and found their way to the shores of Gaul. It was these powerful figures who Christianized Provence (costal region of southern France).  

Another aspect of the myth that Vézelay perpetuated was that the Magdalene lived as a penitent in a cave outside of Aix. This story was adopted from the so-called *vita eremeta*, or “hermit's life,” which appeared in Southern-Italy and Provence in the ninth century. The aspect of the story in which Mary Magdalene secludes herself in a

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6 Cox, 344.
cave was a combination of her life with that of Mary of Egypt. However, this was not the most publicized feature of her legend until the monks of Vézelay began to exploit her “penance.”

The full extent of Mary Magdalene’s cult developed slowly. Feast days are found as early as the ninth century and full liturgical celebration, including offertory, introit, gradual, communion, and lessons does not occur until the eleventh or twelfth centuries. The seed of devotion to the Magdalene in southern France particularly, was planted by Odo of Cluny (926-944), who composed an honorary homily to her, sometimes referred to as the vita evangelica. The importance that Odo gave to Mary Magdalene cannot be overlooked. He credited her, not the virgin, with having redeemed women everywhere: in Haskin's words, “Through having been the herald of the resurrection she had removed the dishonor the female sex created by Eve.”

**History of Vézelay**

Forever tied to the history of Mary Magdalene, is the history of Vézelay itself. Today, Vézelay is a small town of around 500 people, 222 kilometers southeast of Paris. However, at its height in the twelfth century, the population may have been between 8,000 and 10,000 (not counting pilgrims and traveling merchants). In the ninth century,

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7 For more on Mary of Egypt see Ward, Harlots of the Desert, and Jansen, The Making of the Magdalen, 38.
8 Haskins, 111.
9 Jansen, The Making of the Magdalene, 35.
11 Haskins, 114.
12 Scott and Ward, The Vézelay Chronicle, 1.
Count Gerald of Roussillon and his wife Bertha granted buildings and lands for a new convent, and placed the convent foundation under the Apostolic See (in Rome) in the years just before 860. The decision to put the monastery under the direction of Rome was an interesting political move. Gerald donated the estates that created Vézelay after he had divested his allegiance from Charles the Bald after the Treaty of Verdun in 843. Instead, he supported the king’s brother, Lothar. He relinquished his countship in Paris and settled in Provence. This move weakened Gerald’s control of his Burgundian estates, because they were in Charles’s territory. Thus, the foundation assured that his land would not be taken forcibly, and its direct link to Rome assured that it would not fall prey to the local bishops who might have been supportive of the king.

There is an elaborate and extensive trail of charters due to the monastery’s close relationship with the pope. The second item in the cartulary was a letter written on March 2, 863 by Gerald to Pope Nicholas, asking him to assure apostolic rule of the monastery, a move clearly meant to block the diocesan bishop from having any control over Vézelay. The pope acceded to Gerald's request, asserting papal jurisdiction over the convent in a diploma in May 863. At some point the convent was re-founded as a male monastery. Hugh of Poitain, reiterating the rights of Vézelay in his 1167 Chronicle, wrote:

They ordained that no emperor, king, bishop, or person of any rank should, on any pretext, diminish or make off with, or apply to any use of their own, or alienate in any favor of any other pious interest that might serve as a mask for their own

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15 Scott and Ward, Cartulary, Charter 3.
avarice, the things legitimately conveyed to that same monastery by the count himself from his own possessions or by anyone else.\textsuperscript{16}

The \textit{Vézelay Chronicle} was written by Hugh of Pontain, a monk of Vézelay, in 1167. The narrative is one of constant attempts by various forces to gain control over the monastery, with little information on the cult of Mary herself. Along with the bishops of Autun, who, due to their early arguments, seemed to be constantly opposed to the autonomy of Vézelay. There were the monks of Cluny, or the “Cluniacs” members of a reformed monastic house that often took over failing or corrupted monasteries. And finally, the most vilified characters in the \textit{Chronicle} were the counts of Nevers, who in the words of the \textit{Chronicle's} translators “appear…to have been a typically roistering, rowdy, and flamboyant line of local leaders.”\textsuperscript{17} In spite of the later issues between the monastery and the bishops of Autun, the abbey and local bishops seem to have had an amicable relationship in the tenth century. It appears that the monks were deeply influenced by the bishop, accepting land gifts in 973, but they continued to petition Rome for confirmation of their autonomy.\textsuperscript{18} The first seeds of trouble for Vézelay came in 1026, when a group of Cluniac monks expelled the monks and abbot of Vézelay under the influence of the Count Landric of Nevers, but without the approval of the bishop of Autun. The bishop aimed to help the displaced monks, but they rejected his aid, leading to a feud with Autun that lasted for the next hundred and fifty years.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Hugh of Poitiers, \textit{The Vézelay Chronicle}, trans. John Scott and John Ward (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992), Book 2.5.
\textsuperscript{17} Scott, and Ward, \textit{The Vézelay Chronicle}, 5.
\textsuperscript{18} Scott, and Ward, \textit{The Vézelay Chronicle}, 16.
\textsuperscript{19} Scott, and Ward, \textit{The Vézelay Chronicle}; In addition, according to Hugh’s \textit{Chronicle} (1.2-1.3), sometime between the years 1140 and 1145, Humbert, the bishop of Autun, attempted to take control of Vézelay. The brother of Duke of Burgundy, successor to Humbert, also threatened the power of the monastery. In 1154 Peace was established between the Bishop of Autun and the Abbot of Vézelay, thus bringing an end to the feud (1.7).
One of the clearest references we have to the Cluniac takeover is a letter from William of Volpiano to Odilo, the abbot of Cluny in 1027. In it, William writes:

I notify your paternity that lord Odo, without consultation with the bishop of Autun, received the monastery of Vézelay, at the instigation of Count Landric after the monks and abbot of the place had been ignominiously driven out.\(^{20}\)

William of Volpiano (d. 1031) was a former monk of Cluny, an important church reformer, and abbot of St-Bénigne in Dijon. He identified himself as a monk of Cluny, which bolsters the case that the monks of Vézelay were not unjust in their claims that Cluny wrongfully took them over.\(^{21}\) Prior to the occupation, the abbey reportedly fell into some sort of disrepute. It is hard to locate any information as to what happened. It is possible this was only an excuse used by the Cluniacs to validate their actions against Vézelay.

Due to this invasion, the bishop of Autun was angry and threatened to confiscate the monastery of Mesvers, a Cluniac priory, or to put an interdict on all the Cluniac altars in his episcopate, disallowing them from giving communion.\(^{22}\) The Bishop excommunicated the offending Cluniacs and threatened many more. The Cluniacs ignored the warning and this angered the bishop further.\(^{23}\) According to William, the Cluniacs were losing the public’s support because, all who heard the story said: “it is not possible to remove any abbot whatever from his honor for any reason at all without canonical examination and the judgment of the bishop to whose diocese it [the honor] is


\(^{22}\) Volpiano “Letter,” 317.

known to pertain.” This Cluniac occupation was not permanent; the original abbot, Herman, and his monks were allowed to return to Vézelay, and the abbot remained in power until his death in 1037. At this point, Cluny made another attempt to exert control, placing one of their monks, Geoffrey, as abbot in Vézelay. After this they held Vézelay for the next hundred and thirty years; it was listed as a holding of Cluny by Gregory VII on Dec. 9, 1076 and Urban II on March 16, 1095. According to Cox’s research:

Monasteries that chose to adopt the customs of Cluny on their own could remain fully independent if they wished, but all houses founded or reorganized by Cluny were obliged to enter the order and accept subordinate status. By the end of the eleventh century all such houses were to be ranked as priories, even former abbeys of very ancient foundation, except for a dozen or so which were allowed to retain abbatial rank out of consideration for a prestigious past. In the bull issued by Pope Gregory VII which confirmed these arrangements, Vézelay was named among the houses affiliated with Cluny that enjoyed this distinction.

Invention of the Relics

It was directly after Cluny’s takeover of Vézelay, that Mary Magdalene was installed as a patron saint. Geoffrey, the abbot from Cluny placed at Vézelay, masterminded the installation of Mary Magdalene’s cult. Previous to Geoffrey, the monastery was under the patronage of the Virgin Mary, Peter, Paul and two martyrs, Andeus and Pontain. Geoffrey’s actions to establish the Magdalene at Vézelay were so conspicuous that Cox named them his “Mary Magdalene initiative.”

It appears that Geoffrey was not acting alone; there seems to have been a distinct push for Mary Magdalene’s presence as a patron saint in the mid-eleventh century. As

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25 Cox, 345.
26 Cox, 345.
27 Haskins, 113.
28 Cox, 344.
Haskins has pointed out, Geoffrey was present at the council of Reims that Pope Leo IX held in 1049. Following this council the bishops of Verdun and Besaçnon built sanctuaries in honor of Mary Magdalene that same year. The pope and Geoffrey also spent a great deal of time together six months prior to April 27, 1050, when the bull declaring Mary Magdalene the patron of the abbey at Vézelay was issued. According to Haskins, Geoffrey “sought to develop a suitable cult to renew the spiritual life of his brethren.”

The place of Mary Magdalene was solidified when, in 1058, Pope Stephen X, the cousin of the late Leo IX, issued a bull recognizing Mary Magdalene’s body, and interestingly enough, also granting the possession of Vézelay to Cluny. The fact that the monks of Vézelay, forever aware of their autonomous rights, became a holding of Cluny in the same bull that granted them possession of the body of the “apostle to the apostles” cannot be glossed over lightly. The monks could not call into question the pope’s decision on the Cluniac issue without simultaneously questioning the statement about Mary Magdalene’s relics. Since Geoffrey also had a close connection to the papacy, he probably enjoyed an influential position regarding the crafting of this bull. In this case we have an interesting example of how a saint could be used. At Vézelay, the relic was used not to protect the community against outside threats, but to enable the outside threat to succeed in taking over. However, the outside threat did not undermine the importance of the monastery, as in Conques and Poitiers, but instead connected the monks to a larger network of powerful monasteries.

29 Haskins, 114-115.
30 Cox, 344 n.4.
Promotion and Success

One of the reasons for Vézelay’s great popularity was its location along the route to Compostella. As we have seen in the case of Conques, to be along the route to Compostella provided the monastery with a steady supply of pilgrims who would stop at every shrine along the way, no matter who the saint happened to be. Cox does point out that “Vézelay itself had originally been founded in honor of the Virgin Mary, so believers with a bent for female divinities had presumably already been attracted to the sanctuary there even before the arrival of Mary Magdalene.”31 Vézelay was the starting point of one of the four routes to Compostella, so a great many people began their journeys there. From this particular route St. Martin of Tours and Conques were easy side-trips.32 With the influx of money and people, a new church was begun in 1096, and completed by the mid-twelfth century.33 Also, Cluny would have publicized the cult of Mary Magdalene for its own benefit, because the cult would cement Cluniac power.34 Eventually the monastery from which the monks at Vézelay claimed to have gotten Mary Magdalene’s relics, reasserted their ownership of them and in the thirteenth century, the cult was moved south to Aix.35

31 Cox, 341-342.
33 Haskins, 98,
34 Cox, 344.
35 Cf. Katherine Jansen, “Mary Magdalen and the Mendicants; the Preaching of Penance in the late Middle Ages.” Journal of Medieval History 21 (1995): 1-25: From the start of Vézelay’s success with Mary Magdalene, the monks of Saint-Maximin in Aix attempted to reclaim her relics. Saint-Maximin finally won precedence over Vézelay in 1279. Charles of Salerno had a vision that Mary Magdalene was not the body in Vézelay but was instead entombed in a crypt of the church of Saint-Maximin. On December 18, 1279, a group of prelates came together to authenticate the body. And on May 5, 1280, the relics were exhumed before a crowd of the prince, clergy, and laity. A cartellus inside a piece of wood said the body was that of Mary Magdalene. The church at Aix promoted the idea that Vézelay had accidentally stolen the body of St. Sidon, not Mary Magdalene. In 1281 the relics were translated into an opulent reliquary and in 1283 the skull was
Conclusion

Although the period in which the Magdalene was believed to rest in Vézelay was less than three centuries, the alleged installation of the relic still achieved its desired end. Any upset that Cluniac reform may have brought was overshadowed by the translation of Mary Magdalene’s whole body into Vézelay. In this case the relic tightened the control that the Cluniacs had on the community at Vézelay, making their takeover possible. The abbey became a powerful pilgrimage site and continued to be strong as it moved in and out of Cluny’s control and dealt with the persistent attempts of the Count of Nevers, and Bishop of Autun to exert its control over the monastery's rights.

placed in its own separate reliquary, and crowned with an Angvin diadem from Italy. Vézelay’s fate was sealed when Boniface VIII gave papal approbation the site of Aix in 1295.
Conclusion

Amid the widespread social change of the Middle Ages, the relic cult stood out to people as a beacon of God’s love here on earth. The body of a saint, whose soul was present in Heaven, was a powerful presence for any church to contain. What set the relics in these three monasteries apart from the rest was their popularity. There seems to be a natural progression from desiring a relic, to obtaining one, to publicizing it. The popularity of the relics is only as good as their publicity, so it would seem the most well known relics were obtained quite deliberately. For all three of the monasteries studied, the outcome was positive. Radegund’s monastery is still active today, and the Holy Cross continues to hang from the abbess’s neck. Conques won its battle with Figeac and became quite prosperous. Vézelay was the center of the Magdalene cult for three centuries, and gained prestige in the face of various power plays.

Medieval life was centered on the Church, and the Church was centered on relics. There is no question that relics were vital to the governance and working of medieval culture. In view of the many practical uses for relics, such as oath taking and medicine, as well as the more abstract effects, such as peace and faith that such bones and objects instilled, relics were widely sought after. Because of the variation of uses and treatment of relics, it is important to look into all aspects of relic veneration. The central idea of this paper was to look at relics specifically as community builders. Through these three case
studies we have seen that the residents, or single resident, of a monastery would seek a relic to repair the prestige of their cloister after some sort of trouble befell them. Due to longstanding tradition, all of the viable churches already had some sort of relic within the altar; so the quest to bring new relics into the monastery went above and beyond what was necessary. The idea of relics as community forming is well documented in larger works on relics, such as the work of Patrick Geary. What is not usually discussed is that community solidarity and support may have been the main intent of the relic hunter.

If we are to accept the intent of the relic hunter to be to protect and bolster the community, then, naturally, we have to look at the role that these relics played within the community. There is no question they brought fame and money. These were just the two most visible ways in which the relic improved the monasteries’ communities. The relics brought followers, and these pilgrims brought a great deal of monetary wealth. Local landowners, eager to have themselves associated with the saints, would donate tracts of land to the monastery, increasing the monastery’s wealth even more. The renown that the monasteries gained from these saints was a great boon. Laity from around the region, and throughout Christian Europe, knew of the miracle working relics that lay in Poitiers, Conques, and Vézelay. Important figures in the church were also aware of these relics; the monastery would then have powerful allies.

Less visible, and possibly more vital to the community, was the peace of mind and assurance of prosperity that the relic brought into the monastery, the whole region, and even the country. The belief that the saint was present both in his relic and in heaven assured laity and religious alike that God was aware of their personal plight, however small or large it may be. This is where the larger, more important themes of this study
come out. This faith in the relic and reassurance that God was brought closer by these remains and objects, serves the use of relics as community builders.

Radegund’s life, troubled by murder starting in early childhood, was also marked by her profound belief in relics, a belief that remained with her until death. The strong desire to possess relics near her was transferred onto the whole city of Poitiers. This same deep belief comes out also in the story of Conques. The monks and pilgrims believed St. Foy had chosen Conques as her resting place, the location from which to work her miracles. To them it was a conscious decision by both God and Foy to single out Conques as a truly worthy place. Vézelay, too, strongly displays the faith that the people had in saintly bodies. They faithfully believed that the body of a woman, who lived in Jerusalem, had miraculously appeared in Burgundy. There were stories attempting to explain Mary Magdalene’s presence, but even without them, people believed in her presence.

Communities often have a central commonality or cause that brings them together, such as location, interest, or circumstance. Without a specific location of a relic, the cult of a saint is a community of religious interest. This community is brought together by the concept, or spiritual idea of venerating a beloved child of God. Once the relic of a saint is located in a physical location, the community based solely on devotion to that saint, finds a home in the monastery, thus creating a much stronger joint community. In this sense, the piece of Jesus’ cross and the body of Mary Magdalene were especially strong relics. Pilgrims and townspeople alike, felt a kinship and devotion to these remains, as they were items of particularly widespread devotion. Saint Foy had a lesser appeal, because she was unknown before appearing in Conques; that is why the
writings of Bernard of Angers, and the monks themselves, were vital in making her a more widespread cult.

The three monasteries went about their relic hunt in three distinctly different ways, for different reasons, and were publicized differently. The remarkable thing about these situations is that the effects of the relic remained so similar.

Radegund’s manner of bringing a piece of the holy cross to Poitiers reflected her queenship. She petitioned for the cross in well written letters, transported by emissaries to the Emperor and Empress of Constantinople, using her status as currency in a high profile exchange. The monks of Conques clandestinely stole the relics of the girl martyr Foy from her resting place in Agen. Geoffrey created the cult of the Magdalene at the monastery at Vézelay, inventing a body without any evidence for its presence.

The motives for these three cults to be created varied in circumstance, but not spirit. Radegund saw her city of Poitiers overwrought with clan war, and her monastery was unstable. To bring a symbol of peace into the walls of her convent, and the center of her town, was a powerful aid in the stability of the monastery and her country. The newly formed priory of Figeac, and the power struggles that followed, threatened the existence of the monks from the monastery at Conques. In attempts to assert their position among the laity, and to secure the donations of needed resources, the monks of Conques produced the cult of St Foy. The Cluniac takeover of Vézelay, combined with the continued struggles with the Count of Nevers, threatened the monastery’s stability. The addition of St. Mary Magdalene, to their list of patrons, and the success of her shrine as a pilgrimage site, carried the monastery through these problematic times without damage to their reputation or wealth.
Finally, the ways and mediums in which the cults were publicized were as varied as the saints themselves. Radegund celebrated the translation of the true cross into Poitiers with much pomp and circumstance. The Empress and Emperor of Byzantium, kings, bishops of neighboring towns, clergy, and laity attended this great feast. The poet of the court, Venantius Fortunatus, created an honorary poem praising Radegund, the Empress, and the Cross. The monks of Conques saw their popularity increase when Bernard of Angers published the first two volumes of miracles performed by St. Foy. After this occurrence, the monks were very skillful in manipulating the texts concerning their saint. The Cluniac occupation of Vézelay immediately provided the establishment of a strong network of monasteries providing word of mouth advertisement of the presence of Mary Magdalene’s relics. The connection with the pope also supported the Magdalene’s notoriety, as there would be remissions of sins granted to those who visited the monastery.

The separation of time and location add to the list of differences between the cases. Although the three are located in southern France, and these three took place in the central medieval era, there are vast differences in the religious, social, economic, and physical landscape. Poitiers is a southern city, at the time torn by warring factions and invading tribes. Conques is a steep valley out of the way even for modern standards. Vézelay is located only 222 kilometers south of Paris, still within reach of the central powers of France.

The Middle Ages was a powerful time for the church and the people who chose to exploit it. Geoffrey, the monks at Conques, and Radegund were well aware that the relic of a powerful saint would save their monastery from the myriad of problems facing them.
Monastic rebellions, rivalries, and trouble with local authorities were all situations in which monks might look to obtaining help from saints. In the three case studies the monasteries gained enough renown to exist generations after the efforts of the relic hunter, and are still discussed to this day.
Appendix A

Reliquary statue of Saint Foy; Conques, France, gold and gemstones over a wood
10th-11th century
Works Consulted


