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Reconsidering “Romanesque” Art Through the Pilgrim’s Body: The *Migrating Art Historians* Project Five Years Later*

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That which might usually appear only in exhibitions here draws in the reader along ancient paths. Moreover, being the result of a student initiative at the University of Brno, this is truly a model to emulate. May this volume find its way into the hands of those who aspire to experience a new form of scholarship.¹

(Hans Belting, 2019)

During the spring semester 2017, a group of twelve pilgrims – students and teachers from Masaryk University of Brno – walked together from Lausanne in Switzerland to Mont-Saint-Michel in France. Their 1540-kilometer journey took more than sixty days of walking, but the whole project was much longer. The walk itself – divided in three sections – was alternated with moments of scholarly research and workshops in major places of medieval art and culture: Conques, Saint-Benoît-sur-

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¹ Original: *Was sonst in Ausstellungen gezeigt wird, zieht hier den Leser auf den alten Wanderwegen in seinen Bann. Außerdem ist es das Resultat einer studentischen Initiative an der Universität Brünn, die ein Modell für Nachahmung darstellt. Man wünscht sich den Band in jedermanns Hände, der eine neue Form von Wissenschaft miterleben will.* Comment of Hans Belting on a leaflet promoting the book *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways* in 2019.

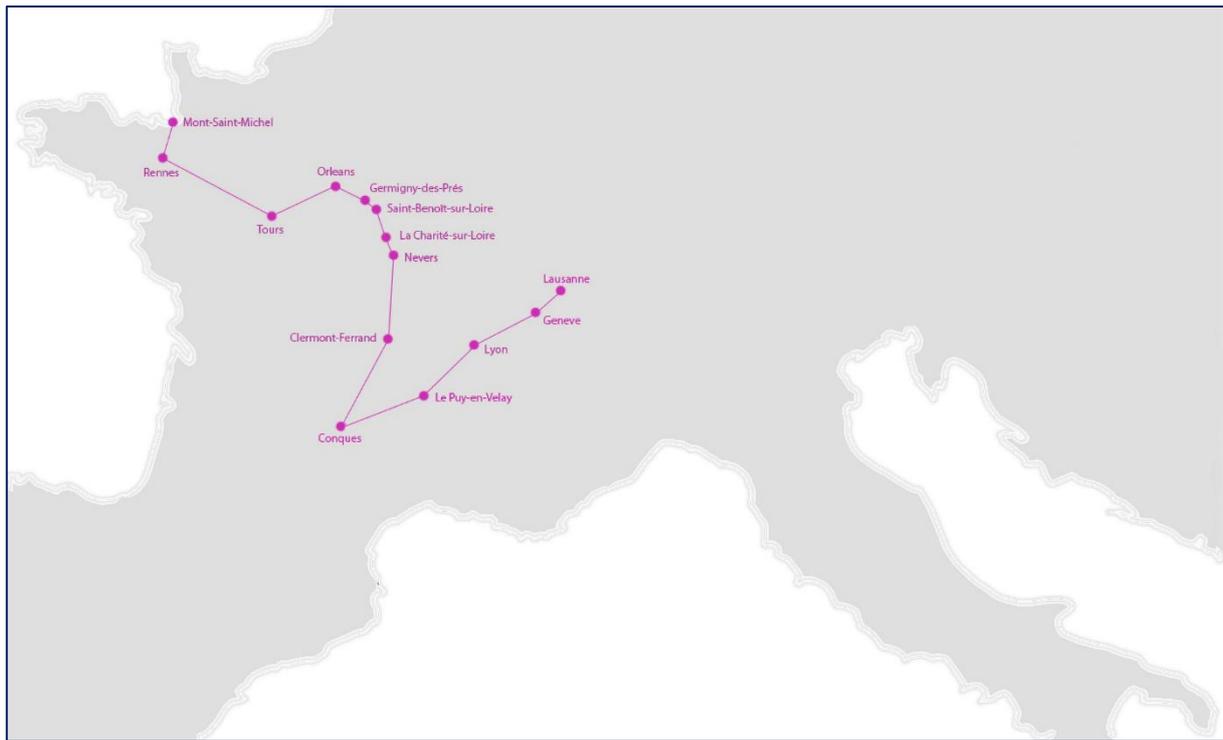


Figure 1 The map of the *Migrating Art Historians* project, 2016. Map: Anna Kelblová, Centre for Early Medieval Studies.

Loire, and Mont-Saint-Michel. (**Fig. 1**) Three workshops were attended by scholars such as Michele Bacci, Hans Belting, Sible de Blaauw, Stefano D'Ovidio, Francesco Gangemi, Cynthia Hahn, Tanja Michalsky, Éric Palazzo, Martin Treml, and Cécile Voyer.²

The project had two major objectives. First, it attempted to empirically verify whether interactions with pre-modern material cultures would be transformed by

² For the project, see e.g. Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, "The Experimental Project Migrating Art Historians," *ICMA News* 3 (2017), pp. 7-10; Ivan Foletti, "Vivre le pèlerinage (médiéval): une expérience corporelle," *Convivium* 5:2 (2018), pp. 137-150; Martin F. Lešák, "Migrating Art Historians and Walking as an Art Historical Method," part of "Walking Art/Walking Aesthetics," <<https://walkingart.interartive.org/2018/12/migrating-art-historians>> © Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio, Stella Sylaiou, Yannis Ziogas 2018; and Ivan Foletti, Katarína Kravčíková, Adrien Palladino, Sabina Rosenbergová, eds., *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways* (Brno, 2018).



Figure 2 Traveling through a screen, 2017 Photo: © Katarína Kravčíková, Centre for Early Medieval Studies.

the experience of prolonged walking. **(Fig. 2)** Second, the project wished to open up to a larger audience who are sometimes rather closed off from scholarly debates, on both the local and global scale. It is furthermore fundamental to recall that all the participants of the project were also actively investigating – within the frame of their M.A. and Ph.D. theses – concrete monuments on the pilgrimage route. Thus, while the overarching ambition was to attempt to sketch a new framework for the analysis of mainly “Romanesque” monuments, the declared ambition of the project was also to drive forward the state of the art of knowledge of concrete artworks. Moreover, the *Migrating Art Historians* project wished and hoped that new theoretical

Figure 3 The group on the way to Le Puy-en-Velay, 2017. Photo: © Katarína Kravčíková, Centre for Early Medieval Studies.



frameworks for art history would emerge.³ The group carrying out the experiment was transdisciplinary: art historians, who formed the majority, were balanced by the presence of one teatrologist and one historian. Two members also had dual training in Art History and Medieval Literature, and one of the pilgrims was working, since the beginning of the project, at the borders between Art History and Geography, focusing on the notion of medieval “landscape.”

This project did not in any way intend to reenact medieval life. **(Fig. 3)** Despite significant discoveries in experimental archeology in recent years, such an endeavor would ultimately prove impossible for medieval pilgrimage art. The project was conceived from with perfect awareness that the present-day streets have

³ On the relation between theory and material investigation within the project see e.g. Ivan Foletti, *et al.*, “Body as Medium, Artwork as Epicentre, Theory as Instrument: A Response to the Review of Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways by Mateusz Kapustka,” *Umění* 68:4 (2020), pp. 229-232.

little in common with medieval ones. The participants of the project wore contemporary clothing and shoes. No monastic communities were expected to welcome the group on daily basis as would happen in the Middle Ages and, of course, all the artistic monuments and spaces have been dramatically transformed by time. Why even start walking, rather than driving a car, as Arthur Kingsley Porter did when he visited France during his seminal research on the same monuments?⁴ The main answer to this rhetorical question is that the starting hypothesis of the project was that prolonged walking – the epicenter of premodern pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela – cannot be understood theoretically, but only by experience.

Main Conclusions and Outputs

Selected medieval monuments were investigated in a monographic way within the frame of the university theses discussed by the students. Most of them were published as chapters in the final monograph of the project in December 2018 – *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways*.⁵ (**Fig. 4**) We believe that each of these case studies went beyond the current state of the art of the monuments in question. For example, an original interpretation of the church portal at La Charité-sur-Loire was introduced by Tereza Kučerová, who convincingly explained its specific

⁴ See Arthur K. Porter, *Romanesque Sculpture of the Pilgrimage Roads*, 10 vols., (Boston, 1923). On his experience see Kathryn Brush, *Motorized Romanesque. Arthur Kingsley Porter's Pilgrimage to Medieval Europe, 1900–1933* (forthcoming).

⁵ See Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*.

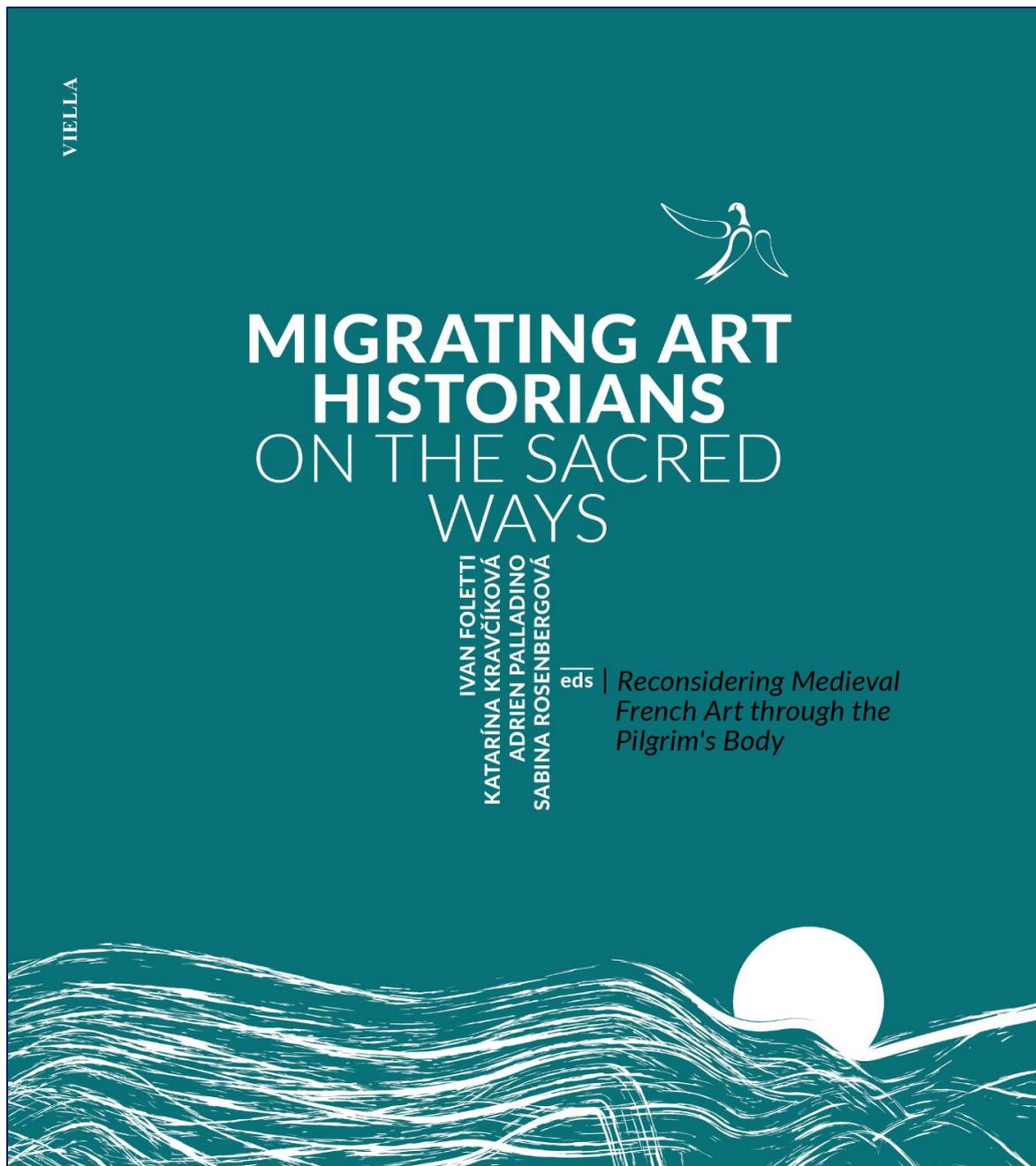


Figure 4 Front cover of *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways*, 2018. Photo: © Petr M. Vronský, Centre for Early Medieval Studies.

features through the coeval liturgical drama.⁶ (**Fig. 5**) The medieval cityscape of Nevers was reconstructed by Pavla Tichá by analyzing urban liturgical performances

⁶ See Tereza Kučerová, “The Cult of the Virgin in Charité-sur-Loire” in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 317-333.

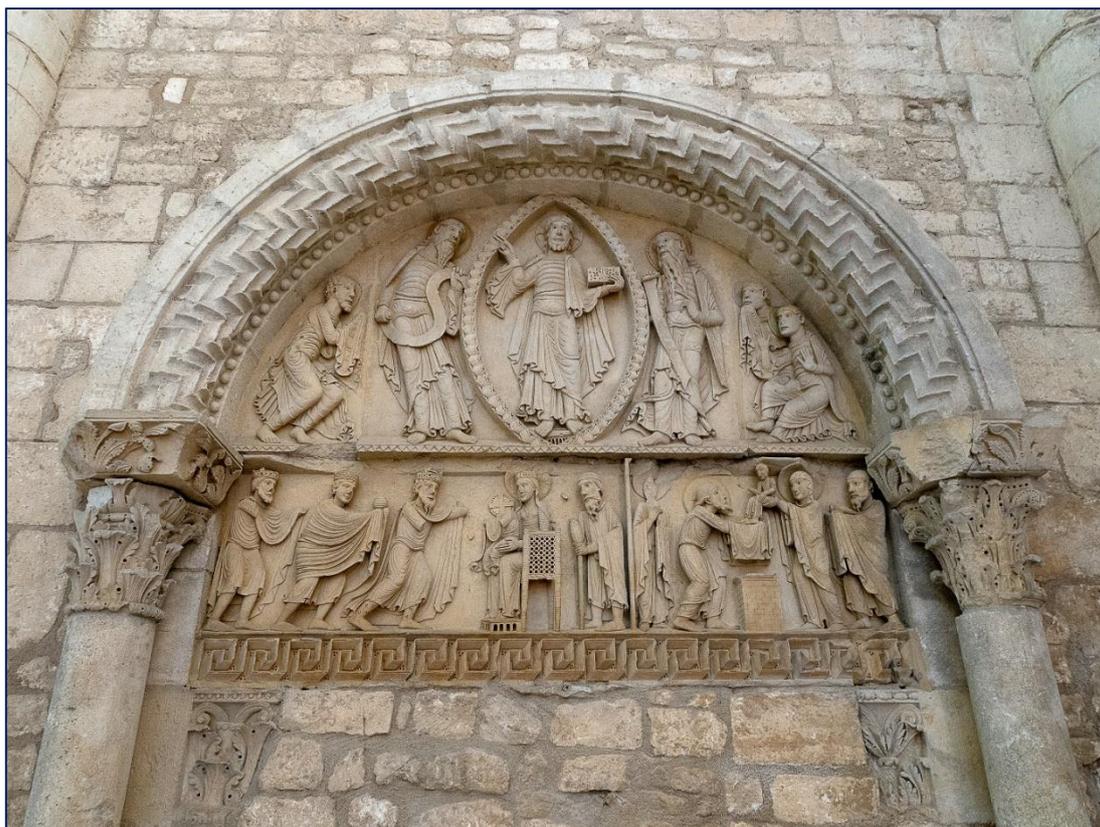


Figure 5 The tympanum of the Transfiguration, priory church of Notre-Dame, La Charité-sur-Loire, first half of the 12th century. Photo: © Katarína Kravčíková, Centre for Early Medieval Studies.

and processions between two major medieval buildings in the city – the church of Saint-Etienne and the cathedral of Saint-Cyr-et-Sainte-Julitte.⁷ Then Adrien Palladino’s interpretation of the porch of the Cathedral of Lausanne, using original historical sources, traced both medieval pilgrims’ performative experience and the liturgical use of the space by the local community.⁸ **(Fig. 6)** It is worth adding

⁷ See Pavla Tichá, “The Church of Saint-Etienne in Nevers: Pilgrimage Architecture Without Cult Object” in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 217-227; *eadem*, “A Turn Towards Inclusion in the Cathedral of Nevers” in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 265-277.

⁸ See Adrien Palladino, “Liminality and Encounter(s): The Case of Notre-Dame de Lausanne” in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 189-202. See also *idem*, “Captivated by Gaze: Sculpture as Witness at the Lausanne Cathedral’s Porch,” *Convivium* 6:1 (2019), pp. 88-107.



Figure 6 View of the tympanum, painted porch, Lausanne cathedral of Notre Dame, 1225–1235. Photo: Katarína Kravčíková, Centre for Early Medieval Studies

that the role of the scholars participating in the project as invited speakers on various workshops also added to the final monograph, with their original contributions.⁹

A further series of general conclusions emerged from the individual studies of the group. The traditional art-historical perspective sometimes does not suffice when approaching the perspective of the pilgrims. Indeed, while the monument is the epicenter of art-historical research, walking through the landscape drew the attention to the questions of the dialogue between the landscape and the medieval sacred

⁹ See e.g. Michele Bacci, “In a Liminal Space: the Staging of Site-Bound Holiness Along the Venetian Sea-Routes to the Holy Land” in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 351-353; Stefano D’Ovidio, “The Bronze Door of Monte Sant’ Angelo on Mount Gargano” in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 137-157; Cynthia J. Hahn, Adrien Palladino, “Relics, Reliquaries, Shrines” in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 281-293; and Cécile Voyer, “Relics, Pilgrimage, and Images in Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire” in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 247-263.

architecture.¹⁰ Furthermore, the various encounters with the sculpted theophanic images on the portals opened the query about the role of repetition of images and patterns, as a sort of refrain similar to rhythmic patterns.¹¹ Mainly, the project addressed the question of the body transformed by daily physical exercise. Apart from the endorphins and adrenaline regularly produced by the walking bodies, the long-lasting transformation could be seen and perceived by all the participants.

Physical, bodily fatigue brought a radically different perspective to the space and the objects inhabiting it. More concretely, active attention was suddenly paid to the benches in the porticos of diverse churches encountered on the way. With legs clocking up around 30 kilometers of walking each day, these benches became extremely inviting indeed. **(Fig. 7)** Sitting on them not only brought rest, but also the chance to discover completely new and unexpected perspectives on the visual culture surrounding them.¹²

These general ideas had a fundamental impact on the way in which the project's main output – the 2018 monograph – was conceived. The structure of the volume wished to correspond to the experience of the medieval pilgrim: long-lasting walking through the surrounding nature determined that the book began with the

¹⁰ See the first chapter in: *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 61-105. See also Martin F. Lešák, "Sacred Architecture and the Voice of Bells in the Medieval Landscape: With the Case Study of Mont-Saint-Michel," *Convivium* 6:1 (2019), pp. 48-67.

¹¹ Zuzana Frantová, "A Constant Vision of God: The Power of Repetition on French Pilgrimage Routes" in: Elisabetta Scirocco, ed., *Repenser l'art médiéval* (Turnhout, 2022; submitted).

¹² See Ivan Foletti, "Liminality: Space and Imagination" in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 109-117; *idem*, "Migrating Art Historians: Objects, Bodies, and Minds" in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 27-57.



Figure 7 The benches in Beaulieu-sur-Dordogne, 2017. Photo: Katarína Kravčíková, Centre for Early Medieval Studies.

chapter on the pre-modern landscape design and long-distance encounters medieval pilgrims had with sacred architecture. Following this, the book dealt with “liminal spaces” – i.e. porticos, porches, atria, and their relative decorations. They were considered as visual and spatial barriers structuring the experience of the sacred. At the same time, they also corresponded to the first possible resting point for the pilgrims because they controlled the access to the sanctuaries. The third chapter was devoted to the visual performative and sensual experiences of the sacred spaces, while the following chapter delved into the cultic *foci*, i.e. the objects or places materializing and containing the emanation of the sacred, especially reliquaries and more monumental contact relics. Chapter five was devoted to the idea of traveling to the holy sites. At first glance, the case studies – dealing mainly with travel to the Holy Land by boat and not on foot – appear to stand outside of the main frame of the

book. This is everything but true: Bacci and his research team were indeed able to collect the textual data impossible to gather from the evidence coming from “Romanesque” France. While belonging to the slightly different milieu and opening up a larger timeframe, these studies showed how individual experiences of the sacred validated, albeit indirectly, the conclusions of the preceding chapters. The volume’s final section was a broader reflection about the experience of the group in 2017. The aim of this last text went beyond the borders of art history and historiographical studies, opening instead a debate about the role of humanities and scholars as individuals within our society.¹³

The structure of the book revealed that the pilgrimage of 2017 focused the attention of the research group on the experience of the past pilgrims. Furthermore, following the fertile path of scholarly research initiated for example by scholars such as Herbert L. Kessler, Alexei Lidov, or Bissera V. Pentcheva, the attention to the sensuality of past pilgrimages was explored with renewed interest.¹⁴ In this sense, the landscape was no longer mere visual data – as the early-modern terminological invention supposes – but becomes a place of experience constructed by the synergy of diverse stimuli. Concretely, the pilgrim thus understood the presence of the sacred not only by seeing the belltower in the distance, but also by hearing the bells in a

¹³ See Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*.

¹⁴ See e.g. Herbert L. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God’s Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia, 2000); Alexei Lidov, *Hierotopy: Spatial icons and Image-Paradigms in Byzantine Culture* (Moscow, 2009); Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park, 2010).



Figure 8 Mont-Saint-Michel from distance. Photo: Anna Kelblová, Centre for Early Medieval Studies.

forest or a field.¹⁵ **(Fig. 8)** The pre-modern perception of such multisensorial understanding has been explored in diverse sources revealing a spiritual perception of the space. Hearing bells or seeing holy sites meant entering the sacred zone of protection. Another fundamental element which emerged was the question of the changing of the visual sensory and thermic conditions: to enter in an 11th- or 12th- century church meant to experience a change of luminosity (from the outside natural light to the artificially controlled illumination within the churches), smells (from

¹⁵ See Lešák, "Sacred Architecture and the Voice of Bells," with further bibliography. See also John Wylie, *Landscape* (New York/London, 2007); and John H. Arnold, Caroline Goodson, "Resounding Community: The History and Meaning of Medieval Church Bells," *Viator* 43:1 (2012), pp. 99 -130.

natural smells to artificial ones produced mainly by incense), and temperature. The latter was crucial since walking with naked feet from the warm exterior to the cold 11th- or 12th-century church and even colder space of the crypt made it possible to literally feel *on the skin* that one is slowly approaching the sacred.¹⁶ This sensual synergy, confirmed by sound, shifted what has been seen in the past scholarship mainly as a merely intellectual/spiritual experience into an embodied one. Xavier Barral i Altet noted well this aspect while commenting on the volume: “This book must be read with care, beyond the notion of travel which it conveys and the monographic results it offers, because it represents a substantial endeavor which makes a lot of sense in view of renewing the traditional approaches to medieval art history.”¹⁷

In 2019, the reflections of the *Migrating Art Historians* project continued with the publication of a supplementary issue of the journal *Convivium* entitled *Movement and the Experience of the Iconic Presence* edited by Belting and the authors of the present text.¹⁸ This volume focused mainly on two major concepts: the first was the role of prolonged movement within the phenomenon of “iconic presence.”

Migrating Art Historians established that a long physical walk to a holy site

¹⁶ See Pavla Tichá, “The Visitor’s Inner Experience” in: Foletti, eds., *Migrating Art Historians*, pp. 205-215. See also Sabina Rosenbergová, “Crossing a Threshold, Sensing the Sacred: The Body in Movement as a Vehicle for Encountering a Sacred Place” in: Martin F. Lešák, Sabina Rosenbergová, Veronika Tvrzníková, eds., *Step by Step Towards the Sacred: Ritual, Movement, and Visual Culture in the Middle Ages* (Rome, 2020), pp. 15-35.

¹⁷ Xavier Barral i Altet’s comment for a leaflet promoting the book of *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways* in 2019.

¹⁸ See Hans Belting, Ivan Foletti, Martin F. Lešák, “The Movement and the Experience of “Iconic Presence”: An Introduction,” *Convivium* 6:1 (2019), pp. 11-15.

transforms the perception of images and objects. What Belting has defined as “iconic presence” – i.e. the encounter with the represented – can thus potentially occur, as we postulated, more easily when the body is *activated*.¹⁹ The second element was a renewed focus on the notion of “sacred space” as a sort of fluid entity, going much beyond the walls of a concrete site, following the perspective already proposed by scholars of religious studies such as Mircea Eliade. At the same time, as demonstrated more recently by Bacci, the construction of a sacred space or even a holy site sometimes necessitated the invention of images or visual objects, i.e. of material cultic *foci*.²⁰

The last major output is a reflection by Ivan Foletti about the *temporality* of premodern pilgrimages. Based on a series of medieval sources from the 4th to the 12th century, this text attempts to demonstrate the impact of the pilgrims’ walking body on the perception of time itself. Prolonged by apparently monotonous daily activity and accelerated by expectations, this perspective argues that the time of pilgrimage is transformed both by the imagination and by biological reactions, in turn affecting the perception of material and visual culture.²¹

¹⁹ See Hans Belting, “Iconic Presence. Images in Religious Traditions,” *Material Religion* 12:2 (2016), pp. 235-237.

²⁰ See Michele Bacci, “Site-Worship and the Iconopoietic Power of Kinetic Devotions,” *Convivium* 6:1 (2019), pp. 20-47.

²¹ Ivan Foletti, “Experiencing the Present (and Past) through the Body: Pilgrimage as a Tool for Transforming Time, and the Migrating Art Historians Project” in: Armin Bergmeier, Andrew P. Griebeler, eds., *Time and Presence in Art: Moments of Encounter (200-1600 CE)* (Berlin, Boston, 2022), pp. 199-219.

Receptions and Reactions

Aimed at both the larger public and a scholarly audience, reactions to the project were unsurprisingly two-fold. On one hand, we should briefly recall the highly enthusiastic reactions of the larger audience. This was particularly visible on the public screening of the movie produced by the group which was attended by some 700 viewers.²² In the months following the return to the Czech Republic, the members of the group gave dozens of interviews to the national and international media.²³ Five years later the interest of the public has not faded away.²⁴ It is evident that becoming actors of their own research stimulated a larger public interest, while giving a platform to defend the values and ideas of the humanities in the public sphere.

²² See also short videos created during the project on the YouTube channel of the Center for Early Medieval Studies, Masaryk University, Brno:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKL0JgPYjP_w_DxkC5pPdrQ

²³ See e.g. Jakub Krásný, "Mniši se s námi skamarádili a dělají o nás výstavu." interview with Amálie Bulandrová and Ivan Foletti (07.08.2017) < <https://wave.rozhlas.cz/mnisi-se-s-nami-skamaradili-a-delaji-o-nas-vystavu-studenti-cely-semestr-5960675> > © Czech Radio 1997-2021; Côme Delanery, "Des étudiants tchèques sur les traces des pèlerins médiévaux," interview with Ivan Foletti (12.07.2017) < <https://francais.radio.cz/des-etudiants-tcheques-sur-les-traces-des-pelerins-medievaux-8187732> > © Radio Prague International 1997-2021.

²⁴ See e.g. Dominik Číž, "Pěší pouť studentů historie nezastavil ani koronavirus," (03.06.2020) < <https://zpravy.proglas.cz/udalosti/pesi-poutu-studentu-historie-nezastavil-ani-koronavirus/> > © Radio Proglas 2021; Mélinée Le Priol, "Des étudiants tchèques dans les pas des pèlerins médiévaux, entre Lausanne et le Mont-Saint-Michel," *La Croix* (22.06.2017) < <https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Catholicisme/Monde/etudiants-tcheques-pas-pelerins-medievaux-entre-Lausanne-Mont-Saint-Michel-2017-06-22-1200857250> > © La Croix Network 2021; Martin Veselovský, "Foletti: Jsme první blázní, kteří ušli 1500 kilometrů. Evropa se k nám chovala neuvěřitelně štědře," interview on DTV (25.8.2017) < <https://video.aktualne.cz/dtv/foletti-jsme-prvni-blazni-kteri-usli-1500-kilometru-evropa-s-r-a121469a897111e7867b002590604f2e/> > © Economia, as 1999-2021; Tereza Zavadilová, "Když se modlím, kopec nevidím," *Katolický týdeník* (27.07.2021) < <https://www.katyd.cz/tema/kdyz-se-modlim-kopec-nevidim.html> > © Katolický týdeník 2004-2021.

More interesting for this journal is the academic reaction which the project kindled. The volume *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways* received nine book reviews, most of them acknowledging with great interest the results of this experimental research. Among the most enthusiastic, was by Vincent Debiais, who devoted a lengthy reflection on both the methodological achievements and public outreach of the project.²⁵ A stimulating reaction was also published by Katharina Christa Schüppel, who appreciated the originality of the project, but also the importance of each of the contributions for the debate about the material in question.²⁶ It is worth remembering that a very positive reaction arrived also from the world of contemporary art by the Canadian scholar Catherine Parayre or from the field of history with the text by Christina Bruno.²⁷

On a more polemical note, we should remember the review by Rose Walker who appreciated the individual contributions, but asked if such experimental framework was necessary.²⁸ This framework was critically considered also by Élise

²⁵ Vincent Debiais, "Les moyens et les raisons de l'art," <<https://devisu.hypotheses.org/1151>> © OpenEdition 2021. *Idem*, "Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways, Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, Sabina Rosenbergova," *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 258 (2022), pp. 206-208.

²⁶ Katharina Ch. Schüppel, "Foletti, Ivan, Katarína Kravčíková, Adrien Palladino and Sabina Rosenbergová, eds. *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways*," *Eikón / Imago* 100 (2021), pp. 455-456 (23.09.2021) <<https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/EIKO/article/view/74169>>.

²⁷ Catherine Parayre, "Foletti, Ivan, Katarína Kravčíková, Adrien Palladino et Sabina Rosenbergová, dir. *Migrating Art Historians. On the Sacred Ways*," *Voix plurielles* 16:2 (2019), pp. 168-169 (23.09.2021) <https://journals.library.brocku.ca/index.php/voixplurielles/article/view/2320>; Christina Bruno, "Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways. Reconsidering Medieval French Art through the Pilgrim's Body, Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, Sabina Rosenbergova (eds.)," *Renaissance Quarterly* 74:2 (2021), pp. 577-578.

²⁸ Rose Walker, "Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways: Reconsidering Medieval French Art through the Pilgrim's Body," *The Burlington Magazine* 163 (2021), pp. 383-384.

Haddad and by Mateusz Kapustka.²⁹ The former was not convinced by the idea of transforming a pedagogical project into a scholarly endeavor, arguing that the pedagogical part was more successful than the scholarly outputs. Haddad also strongly criticized that Jean Vanier (1928-2019) – a French-Canadian philosopher and theologian – was quoted in the introduction, while in 2020 – posthumously – he was convicted of sexual abuse. Her text opened obviously the question of legitimacy of using a text by an author who adopted an unacceptable moral attitude. Such a question goes far beyond the space of this text, and we can only acknowledge the complexity of the problem. From our side, it is however important to precise the chronology: the book was published in December 2018 before Vanier’s reprehensible acts were revealed in February 2020.³⁰ More problematic is the way in which the text of Kapustka questions the use of the human body as an instrument to approach the Middle Ages. The author is convinced that in the pre-Modern era, and especially during the Middle Ages, bodily self-perception was negative. Any attempt at analyzing that era through the lens of bodily experience would thus go against contemporary culture. The text of Kapustka pushed the editors of the volume to an extensive written reaction, of which the main argument was that Kapustka was

²⁹ Élise Haddad, “Rezenion von: Ivan Foletti / Katarína Kravčíková / Sabina Rosenbergová: (eds.) *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways*. Reconsidering Medieval French Art through the Pilgrim’s Body,” *Kunstform* 21:7 (2020) <<https://www.arthistoricum.net/kunstform/rezenion/ausgabe/2020/7/33429>>; Mateusz Kapustka, “Ivan Foletti, Katarína Kravčíková, Adrien Palladino, and Sabina Rosenbergová (eds), *Migrating Art Historians: on the Sacred Ways*,” *Umění* 68:2 (2020), pp. 229-232.

³⁰ L’arche internationale, “Rapport de synthèse” [archive]: <https://www.larche.org/>

manifestly projecting early-Modern cultural patterns – the topic of his own research – onto the pre-Modern past.³¹

On the very contrary, Marian Bleeke very much appreciated the general framework and the idea of the volume, but was disappointed because its innovative methodology was present mainly in the introduction and less in some individual case studies.³²

To sum up, the project and its main outputs provoked a wide debate and even wider scale of reactions – including those from the larger public. Within academia, the project continues to divide opinions. This is not at all surprising considering its experimental nature.

Present Bodies, Past Experiences

Apart from the printed reactions, it is evident from conversations we had with the colleagues and friends with art-historical background that their major concern is the following: is it truly possible to use our present body to approach the medieval experience? The answer to this question is complex. The main methodological conviction starts from the physiological perspective that the human body did not dramatically change in the last thousand years. While on the cultural level, we are indeed completely different from our ancestors, the project was based on the

³¹ Foletti, *et al.*, “Body as medium.”

³² Marian Bleeke, “Ivan Foletti, Katarína Kravčíková, Adrien Palladino, and Sabina Rosenbergová, eds., *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways: Reconsidering Medieval French Art through the Pilgrim’s Body*,” *Speculum* 97:1 (2022), pp. 181-182.

analyses of some of the pre-cultural reactions of the human body. It is not easy to distinguish between the two categories, but we nonetheless acknowledge that the field of art history works on similar suppositions. For example, it is a matter of evidence that art historians work with how the human eye saw images in an almost identical way physiologically speaking. The “period eye” defined by Michael Baxandall should be understood as a cultural re-elaboration of fundamental physiological reactions.³³ In the same manner, the intense and repeated presence of adrenalin and endorphins should necessarily affect the perception of the surrounding world. The pilgrimage is in this sense a very special physiological environment structured by the regular and almost addictive presence of the adrenalin and endorphins enriched by what has been defined already in the 1970s by the progressive synchronization of mind and body.³⁴ The prolonged walk – as experienced by the participants of the project and as was already measured in the past century – affected the mind of each pilgrim who lived through the prolonged physical effort day by day. **(Fig. 9)** The project never supposed a cultural resemblance between the 21st- and 12th-century pilgrims. On the other side, all

³³ See Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 29-108. See also Allan Langdale, “Aspects of the Critical Reception and Intellectual History of Baxandall’s Concept of the Period Eye,” *Art History* 21 (1998), pp. 479-497; and Peter Mack, Robert Williams, eds., *Michael Baxandall. Vision and the Work of Words* (Farnham, 2015).

³⁴ Eugene D’Aquili, Charles Laughlin, and John McManus, *The Spectrum of Ritual: A Biogenetic Structural Analysis* (New York, 1979). This volume is still today considered fundamental in anthropological and performative studies; see Tatjana Schnell and Sarah Pali, “Pilgrimage Today: The Meaning-making Potential of Ritual,” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 16:9 (2013), pp. 887-902; 892; Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York, 2017), p. 60.



Figure 9 Conques from distance. Photo: Anna Kelblová, Centre for Early Medieval Studies.

physiological investigations show that bodies in the past and today are affected in a similar manner by walking. Medieval people were used to the physical exertion more than we are today. The idea of the prolonged walk was however to them probably an unusual task, just as it is for us.

More importantly, from the beginning of the project, it was decided to use a very strict protocol to verify the empirical data emerging from the experiment: each element repeatedly present within the group was verified within the medieval

sources. To give just one example: the combination of the adrenalin and endorphins elicited by the uphill climb towards a sacred site which the group experienced, is precisely described by the Egeria ascension of Mount Sinai in the 4th century.³⁵ In other words, the experimental part of the project became a tool to ask new questions regarding monuments and sources from the past and to understand them better.

The Afterlife of the Project

As has been mentioned, some of the members of the research group are continuing to investigate questions and objects opened by the experimental project. In addition, from 2017, the core of the group rejoined for walking another 1000 kilometers together in four smaller pilgrimages in Austria, Italy, and France. The roads, while shorter, often proved to be even more physically demanding due to the mountain regions crossed. The decision to take these paths was partially because the research team envisioned going a step further within the interest in the pre-cultural reactions of the body. Indeed, in 2020 a conversation begun with the research group of the physiologist Julie Dobrovolná at the Faculty of Science at the Masaryk University of Brno led to a submission of an MSCA–RISE project. Devoted to the medieval city of Conques, as the epicenter of pilgrims' devotion, this project brought together seven scholarly and cultural institution from Europe and the United States of America. Its main objective is to study the site from a *longue durée* perspective

³⁵ See *Itinerarium Egeriae*, pars. 1, chap. 3, § 2-8.

combining historiographical tools with material analyzes and experimental approaches.³⁶ The project was successful, and the research started in 2021 with the first campaign of the material analysis. More importantly for this text, in collaboration with Dobrovolná's team, a protocol of measurement of embodied reactions has been launched. Recently, the first set of data has been collected on physiological responses to medieval visual culture within the framework of a prolonged physical activity. The data is still being processed, but it is already possible to argue that the empiric aspects described within the *Migrating Art Historians* project will have hard data to confirm some of its conclusions.

Another aspect which began to develop in 2021 is the question of the medieval pilgrim as an image. The investigation led by Martin Drlíček – this time dealing with experimental archeology – is trying to reconstruct both the appearance and reception of the pilgrims' clothing in the 11th and 12th centuries. By reconstructing physically the original clothing and accessories of past pilgrims this research attempts to pinpoint the real physical effort required by, for instance, the weight of these accessories. The first results indicate that paradoxically backpacks in the pre-modern era were much lighter than today. Because of the lighter baggage the daily distance walked by the medieval pilgrims could have been even longer, the importance of the very act of prolonged walking thus becomes even more important.

³⁶ For the project *CONQUES IN THE GLOBAL WORLD Transferring Knowledge: From Material to Immaterial Heritage* see its website: <https://conques.eu/> (23.09.2021).

To Conclude: Beyond the Ivory Tower

It is evident that *Migrating Art Historians* project was a challenging one. It provoked a strong reaction from a non-academic audience while stimulating a vivid discussion – both printed and informal – within academia itself. Starting with the academic debates it is worthwhile to admit that the project was – as well as its outputs – rather nonconformist. It was unprecedented in the field of Art History, which is not always accustomed to the experimental collecting of data. Furthermore, its hierarchical structure challenged the habitus of academia, when masters students were invited to participate in the same scholarly event and publication as established scholars such as Belting, Bacci, de Blaauw, and Hahn. At first glance, the project may have been misunderstood as an attempt to create an event of “living history.” In the world where a book is reduced to an introduction, abstract, keywords, or even just the title appearing on social media, such a misunderstanding can easily be made. Looking closer, it is clear that this was never the intention nor the outcome of the project. (Fig. 10)

The support that the project received from academia itself was more tangible than the critical voices. This started already before the experiment itself, because the major part of its financial expenses was covered by a crowdfunding campaign largely supported by colleagues from around the world. Belting, Debais, Pentcheva, and Voyer supported the project openly with short videos. The final monograph was then promoted by many other including Barral i Altet, Yves Gallet, Kessler, and Michalsky. This seems to indicate, we believe, that the concept and realization of



Figure 10 The tympanum depicting the Last Judgement, abbey church of Sainte-Foy, Conques, c. 1100. Photo: Anna Kelblová, Centre for Early Medieval Studies.

Migrating Art Historians was able to touch some of the most challenging questions in the field. At the same time, it opened a new transdisciplinary dialogue between Art History, cultural studies, and biomedical research. It is not by chance that the project inspired research at the border between fields and disciplines. No less important, from our perspective, is the enthusiasm of students and young colleagues in supporting the whole endeavor. In this context we could quote Pentcheva's words on the 2018 monograph: "The book is also a model for training young art historians and

encouraging them to seek new ways for communicating the excitement in encountering the past."³⁷

Both authors of this essay participated in the conception of the project, its realization, implementation, and are now active members of the research group of the MSCA-RISE CONQUES project. We both also experienced the vivid interest of mainly Czech audience before, during, and after the *Migrating Art Historians* project. Should this be the only output – and we believe this text has shown the contrary – this would have already been an accomplishment. On the one hand, this demonstrated to us the importance of going beyond the ivory tower of academia towards public outreach. On the other, this was and still is one of the main proofs of the fact that Art History is relevant for the society we live in. The project has clearly shown that we should challenge our traditional approaches, and open new horizons in order to make this relevance visible. 🐼

³⁷ See Bissera V. Pentcheva's comment for a leaflet promoting the book of *Migrating Art Historians on the Sacred Ways* in 2019.