Fallen idols and risen saints: western attitudes towards the worship of images and the ‗cultura veterum deorum‘

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The Second Commandment forbids the creation and veneration of graven images, and for much of the Early Middle Ages devotional images and sculpture were absent in the West, with the exception of the city of Rome.1 However, images – and more specifically sculpture in the round – experienced a dramatic revival in western medieval art from the late ninth century onwards.2 To date, scholars have had difficulty explaining such a fundamental change in using and creating Christian images.3 Though monumental sculpture never appears in the East, it emerged in the West after the debates about the Second Council of Nicaea, and the Imperial court’s reactions to that council, the Libri Carolini and the so-called iconoclasm in Byzantium.4 As westerners were called upon to articulate their position towards appropriate forms of image veneration and the true nature of an image of God, they started to reconsider their own image culture.5 The revival of monumental sculpture can be seen as one of the consequences of the western reaction to Byzantine iconoclasm, an invitation to rethinking their own usage of images in the religious cult.6 In negating Byzantium’s rigorous position, western theologians re-examined their own traditions of venerated religious objects such as relics, the cross and the equating of images with the sacrament, the latter a misunderstanding of the text of the second Council of Nicaea on the part of the writer of the Libri Carolini.7 By the ninth century a crucial difference between West and East was abandoned. While in Byzantium sacred bodies were dissected and their fragments and particles were spread as relics,8 it appears that in the West such practices continued to be a sacrilege until the late ninth century.9 In Byzantium all parts, even minuscule and unsightly relics of the saint’s body, were considered to possess the same power as the intact corpse and the saint himself. Conversely, in the West, it was the one sacred site, the tomb of the saint, that mattered. Tiny fragments, contact relics and the like could not compare with an intact body, the corpus incorruptum of a saint. The impact of
these profoundly differing premises for the genesis of sacredness and the use of imagery should not be underestimated. After the ninth century an increasing number of infringements against the idea of the corpus incorruptum and a growing number of furtac sacrat, sacred thefts, were documented. The Franks based their cultural and political supremacy in the prologue of the Lex Salica § 4 on the fact that they did not feed the bodies of martyrs to wild animals nor dissect the corpses. Rather they adorned and embellished the martyrs’ remains. This argument was due to their eagerness to legitimize the numerous instances of translatio of relics during the first half of the ninth century within the context of an initiatio romae – an imitation of Rome.

In this process, an essential reconsideration of a distinct western image culture took place, and westerners first became conscious of the different paths taken by the two cultural inheritors of Roman Antiquity. By recalling an earlier period of their own iconoclasm, the destruction of antique statues, westerners articulated their own position in the debate on Christian images, specifically in saints’ lives. I will argue in the following that this conscious grasp of the past contributed to the western negation and negotiation of Byzantine accusations of idolatry. The destruction of idols was recounted from this slant in western iconoclastic history, for instance in hagiography. The essential difference between the western and the eastern Christian images was the apparent absence of icons or any cultic venerated Christian figurative image in the western medieval culture of Gallia and the Carolingian territories. The only images that were considered to have supernatural, magic or divine powers in western culture were idols. For the purposes of this essay I will apply the term ‘idol’ to all statues of pagan gods and goddesses that were venerated in cults, the only kinds of images that were explicitly considered ‘forbidden’ by western authors of the Carolingian period. These remains of pagan cults form the arena in which it was discussed what a Christian image should be and which aspects of images should be rejected. Descriptions of idol destruction became a recurrent literary topos as early as the writings of Gregory the Great, but the present analysis will weigh previously neglected early medieval sources (mainly c. AD 600–900) that articulate western attitudes towards idols in Gallia in a sophisticated way. After scrutinizing these written sources describing idols and their destruction I will compare the results with pictorial sources such as illuminated manuscripts. Tracing the negation of pagan images in depictions of idolatry alongside written representations reveals a peculiar fact: while written legends develop a particular ‘pictorial’ language (for example by invention of a metaphorical scene) to reject images, depicted idols are often used as an iconic formula ‘literally’ enriching the depiction with a speaking sign to indicate former pagan culture and its error. The reader as well as the beholder allays the suspicion of his own cultic practices involving images.

The contemporary Christian rituals, including after a short period monumental images, were purified by negating the past practices of image veneration and rejecting them as idolatry even though those practices were almost identical. Even if the idols seem occasionally to stand on the margins of the depicted event or narrated story, their role as anti-images still demonstrates what were held to be the ‘right’ attitudes toward the ‘wrong’ image. In other words, by exploring anathema, we may understand how early medieval Christians differentiated their images from those used to honour Roman gods or the deities of Gaul, how their demonic inhabitants were sensed and recognized, how divine and demonic forces could be differentiated, and exactly how Christian imagery was rooted in antique tradition. In rejecting and negating the idol, Christianity absorbed, acculturated and incorporated into western medieval culture the antique idea of an image. By doing so, western Christianity preserved the antique image culture, by the very destruction of its images.

**Interactions of paganism with Christianity in the conversion of Gaul**

From Late Antiquity onwards, broken idols, or antique effigies of pagan gods, litter saints’ lives, missionary accounts, ecclesiastical histories and chronicles of Gaul. However, it is still unclear how widely and how long pagan cults survived in Christianized Gaul because these sources are mostly written from a Christian viewpoint. Almost no pagan voice informs us about this period in Gaul, and only recently have doubts been raised over whether the Christianization of northern Europe was rather less complete than normally assumed. Despite the widespread opinion that the Christianization of Gaul was completed by the end of the fourth century, western hagiographies suggest a much later date. At least as late as c. AD 600 pagan rituals and cults, as well as religious artifacts, must have been alive and flourishing in Gaul if Gregory of Tours can mention an image of Berecynthia (the Gaulish mother-goddess or magna mater) that was carted from field to field and vineyard to vineyard to guarantee the harvest. Indeed, as Jean Hani has persuasively argued, the magna mater cults of Isis and Ceres probably metamorphosed seamlessly into the army of ‘black’ Madonnas that still populate churches all over central France. Gregory the Great had, in fact, advocated a strategy of ‘absorption’ in a contemporary letter to Augustine (AD 599/600). In this letter, he advised missionaries to choose the sites of destroyed pagan temples as the locations for their new Christian churches. Whatever the case, clerical censure was visited not only upon public rituals like the Berecynthia procession, but also upon the many breeds of private devotion. Thus, Gregory also reports that Gallus torched an
entire pagan sanctuary (probably the present Saint Gereon in Cologne) after witnessing the donation of wooden ex-votos of affected body parts – in spite of the fact that the Synod of Auerre (AD 580) had only just forbidden this practice (the creation and ritual use of figurative ex-voto) – not to mention vast pagan banquets on the premises. When Gallus burned the temple and its idols, he was following in the footsteps of Roman predecessors like Pope Symmachus (AD 498–514) whose struggle against Manichaeanism culminated in the public immolation of their texts and idols in front of the Constantinian basilicas (‘ante fores basilicae Constantinianae ... omnia simulacra vel codices ... incendio concremavit’ (all idols and manuscripts were burned in a fire outside the Constantinian basilicas)), and then their definitive exile.\(^3\)

Obviously, if pagan belief survived in such well-connected and flourishing cities as Cologne, then it must have thrived in rural areas that lay far off the main traffic routes and beyond the direct control of clerical authorities.\(^3\) It is probably for this reason that local priests in rural Gaul were entrusted with battling all forms of heresy, but particularly pagan cults. As late as the early eleventh century, Bernhard of Angers mentions that idols were intensively venerated and pagan customs still widespread throughout the Auvergne.\(^1\)

How to distinguish a false idol: the characteristics of idols in descriptions of their destruction

Although several early texts describe idols in detail and characterize their material and spiritual qualities, by the ninth century, toppled antique statues no longer receive particularly detailed description. We read simply idolum contrivit (idol smashed) or simulacrum destructit (idol destroyed) in saints’ lives, and the sources centre more on their heretical usage. But there was no need to describe idols in detail because for ninth-century writers the crucial fact was that idols were artifacts of human appearance. As Hrabanus Maurus states in his De diis gentium (c. AD 844): ‘idolum autem est simulacrum quod humana effigie factum et consecratum est’ (The statue was an idol made with a human appearance and consecrated).\(^2\) The definition is significant because, in Hrabanus’ eyes, an idol compounds two chief errors in its creation and its veneration, in that it is made by human hands and resembles a human. This was not a new idea, for Tertullian (d. AD 225) had first defined the intimate connection between idols, sin and idolatry, articulating a Christian platform against a background of the Jewish tradition that linked idolatry with polytheism and sexual sinfulness.\(^24\) He was followed by Optatus, who crystallized this position at the end of the fourth century:

idols, unless they are made, cannot exist ... nor can an idol come to be without artifice. In idols there is no natural power; but it is joined and entwined with it by human error; a power is reckoned in idols, which was not born there ... an idol is nothing of itself and, while it is worshipped, is nothing.\(^25\)

The most influential ideas about the true nature of the false gods or demons were spread by Martin of Braga (d. AD 579). His explanations about the historical origin and the nature of idols are recorded in his widely read De correctione rusticorum, which amounts to a short history of paganism. The fallen angels after turning into demons used the people’s fading memory of their creator and thus started a campaign of forgery. The devil and his demons appeared in various shapes, talked to the people and were subsequently venerated by them. They abused the names of sinful humans, such as Jupiter and Mars; one of them pretended to be Saturn and another claimed to be Venus. This ‘history’ of the origin of paganism combines at first some elements of the interpretation of euhemerism and demonic thought as well as the common separation of idolatry from worship of natural creatures such as trees, springs, winds and the like (see Harmening, 1979, pp. 280–84). Martin of Braga’s interpretation and use of the pagan past for the Christian present represents quite an early example of Christian historical misrepresentation (Geschichtsflitterung). It will form the model for later receptions of the past modelled and redesigned according to contemporary needs in Christian images. Furthermore, according to the euhemeristic explanation of Isidore of Seville (d. AD 638) the so-called ‘gods’ had originally been humans who had simply acquired divine status because their effigies had received such intense veneration; with the cult of fame they first acquired immortal memory, and thence divinity.

All Christian writers agree that idols are vain, mute, deaf objects made by human hands. All these topoi, in fact, convene in the Vita of Sixtus II:

But they must be led again to the temple of Mars: and they must sacrifice. Indeed, if they refuse to implore and sacrifice in this place, they must be beheaded. After being guided outside the walls through the Appian Gate, Sixtus began to say: Here are the vain, mute, deaf idols made of stone: before them the miserable (pagans) kneel down so that they lose eternal life. And he spoke to the temple of Mars: Christ, the Son of the living God, will destroy you: and after the blessed Sixtus had said this, all Christians answered: amen. And at once a part of the temple collapsed and was destroyed. (my emphasis)\(^26\)

The motifs in this source were so widely diffused in the later saints’ lives that often the site itself became a metonymy for the event. An army of later saints will destroy the self-same idol of Mars, in the same sanctuary right outside the Porta San Sebastiano, again and again.\(^27\) To sharp eyes it was always obvious that the idol of Mars was vain, mute, deaf and made of stone, but disbelief is in the eye of the beholder, and it is the very veneration of such artifacts that enables demonic forces to colonize their empty shells, and thence enjoy supernatural powers.
In the ninth century, a priest, saint or divine sign was required to decide whether the effects were diabolical or heaven-sent when Christian statues started effecting miracles. Thus, one newly created Christian statue was visited first by a swarm of devilish wasps and then by divine bees, who ‘certified’ this object of veneration. Divine signs were necessary because even saints could make mistakes. Saint Martin, for example, went to the extent of magically (and temporarily) halting a funeral when he mistook a corpse for an idol. On other occasions the forces of nature ratified a saint’s actions. When Saint Zeno had annihilated all idols in Verona, and established Christian sanctuaries throughout, the city flooded but the waters, miraculously, entered no church.

A still more common topos is the actual, divine destruction of an idol. An exceptional instance of this motif may be found in the Life of Wulfilaic by Gregory of Tours. Gregory recounts Wulfilaic’s destruction of a statue of Diana on a mountain in the Ardennes (close to Cardignan). Wulfilaic, with all the zeal of the quite recently converted (he was of Longobard origins), narrates how he became a stylite in order to convert the pagans and topple their idol. The gimmick helped Wulfilaic avoid fame, and all its attendant perils (‘vnam tota intentione cupiens gloriom evitare’ (with the intention to avoid the greed for fame)), and become a living saint by spending months squatting atop an empty column opposite one dedicated to Diana:

I found here a statue of Diana, which these impious people worshipped like a god. I also erected a column, on which I stood with great suffering as I had no protection for my feet. And since winter had already arrived as usual, I was so tormented by the chill that its extreme rigour very often froze the nails from my feet, and ice hung from my beard like guttered wax. ... When we eagerly asked him what he had eaten and drunk there, and how he had toppled the idols of that mountain, he said: My food and drink were a husk of bread, vegetables, and a little water. When a crowd from the nearby villages began to come to me, I (constantly) taught them that Diana was nothing, the idols were nothing; and that the worship that they thought her due was nothing; and also the songs, which they sang in the course of their excessive banquets, were shameful; but instead they should make a sacrifice of praise to the Almighty God, who made heaven and earth. I also often prayed that God might deign to drive the people away from that error after the idol had been destroyed. The mercy of God convinced those simple minds to bend their ears to the words from my mouth, in order that they might follow God after abandoning the idols. Then, after muttering some of them, with their help I eventually had the strength to destroy that huge idol, which I could not smash by myself; and I had already scattered the rest of the small statues, which were easier to break. After gathering at that statue of Diana many tried to haul it down with ropes, but all their labour was in vain. I approached the church, and kneaded down and tearfully begged divine mercy, so that what human labour was not able to topple divine power might destroy. As I came out after the prayer, I approached the workers and grasped the rope, and as soon as we started to pull, the idol immediately crashed to the ground at the first attempt, and by smashing it with iron hammers I reduced it to dust.

As was the case in the life of Sixtus II, the deadness of the idol is contrasted with that living Christian God who can destroy all artefacts: ‘Christ, son of the living God, will destroy you.’ The dusty remains of the toppled pagan deity are buried according to the Christian funeral ceremony for terrestrial corpses: ‘Dust to dust ... as God said to Adam, “Dust you are and to dust you shall return”’ (Genesis 3:19). The saint remains present, almost like an animated (literary) image of a saint on a column in the written account of his life. The written account paves the way for installing pictorial representations and even free-standing images of the saint to recall him and his celestial powers before Christian eyes.

How living Christian saints competed with dead pagan deities

The story of Wulfilaic is the only record in western Europe of the chiefly Syrian phenomenon of Stylitism. We are obviously meant to understand that the living saint, Wulfilaic, the instrument of divine will, confronts the dead relic of paganism, but at the same time the episode is supremely ambivalent, because to do so he must become a living corpse himself. Wulfilaic must have been the exception that proved the rule, for his totemistic impulse was vehemently opposed by the local bishop, a fact not mentioned in his hagiography. Wulfilaic clinched the parallel between living icon and extinct idol by gambling on the symmetry of columns, and his pregnant words hit home: ‘jugiter nihil esse Dianam, nihil simulacra, nihilque quae eis videbatur exerceri cultura’ (again and again, Diana was nothing, the idols were nothing, and that the worship that they thought her due was nothing). In other words, Wulfilaic monumentalizes Diana’s perpetual (jugiter) ignominy.

With the job of conversion done, through the mercy of God, Wulfilaic is not simply content to topple the statue of Diana. Although most pagan statues in Germanic and Gaulish cities were recycled as the building blocks in fountains or town walls, Wulfilaic felt he had to hammer the statue of Diana to smithereens. After all, it was devoid of inner life.

The agenda of destroying idols to convert pagans eventually became so well-travelled that saints even dreamed it:

On the next night the priest himself saw in a dream those idols, which were worshipped by the pagans, smashed by the divine Godhead and strewn on the ground, after being reduced to dust ... The people ran to the priest’s cell, and an entire crowd of the pagans kneeled down before him, and by crying and weeping, all of them implored the mercy of the Lord, and promised the priest that they needed the Martyr as their patron, and that they would completely convert to God after abandoning their idols, if the hail stopped ... the pagans, after being baptised in the name of the trinity, destroyed the statues, which they worshipped, and threw them into the lake near the village and the river. Since then in that place both the Catholic faith and the virtue of the Martyr were proclaimed even more.
Both cases show that not only was it necessary for saints to compete with idols, but that the public adoration of saints eventually supplanted the multitude of pagan demi-gods. The next step was to start venerating an image of these saints. At first these were painted – several are mentioned from Late Antiquity on – but the oldest preserved statue dates only from the last quarter of the ninth century, namely the statue of the Ste Foy at Conques. For the image, whether painted or sculpted, to be seen as effective, the faithful clung to the idea of animation. In fact, Bernhard of Angers records that petitioners could tell by the miraculous expression on the face of the statue of St Gerald (on the altar in Aurillac), whether their requests had been denied or accepted. The contrast between the static and brilliant, gilded head of Ste Foy (which began life as the portrait of a late antique emperor) and her mesmerising gaze could only further engender this impression. For enamel orbs with dark inserts seem to endow this mask with sight, a technique that had been standard practice in classical sculpture and occasionally, albeit rarely, in medieval statues like the golden Madonna of Essen or the (destroyed) Crucifix of Benna, at Mayence. Since saints were regarded as human beings that had already achieved eternal life, but whose *numina* still haunted the mortal remains preserved below altars, or in reliquaries, it was a short step to believing that the windows of their souls, their eyes, could be so brilliant. It is in this way that, in the popular imagination, Christian automata met head on the challenge from pagan idols inhabited by nociferous demons.

‘Conversion’ of a heathen site

Two seventh-century sources record the destruction not just of idols, but of whole ensembles of them, as well as the ‘conversion’ of entire sacred sites previously frequented by pagans. I have already mentioned Gregory the Great’s decree that pagan temples in Gaul and England, or other pagan sites, be converted to Christian use, and Jonas of Susa reports in his *Vita Columbani* (c. AD 642), that Saint Columban erected his monastery at Annegray (Haute-Saône), where:

> there was a great and thick concentration of images of stone, that filled the woods, and in the old times the pagans honoured them with wretched worship and impious rituals, and dedicated their execrable ceremonies to them; only wild animals and beasts, a multitude of bears, buffaloes and wolves lived in those places."

The site was negative in just about every conceivable way: it was populated not only by a plethora of idols – that were venerated by the pagans, and no doubt possessed by demons – but also by wild animals of all types and sizes. These wild creatures as well as the power of demons animating cult-images were able to endanger the moral and physical health of Christians. The enchanted images possessed invisible powers to implant devilish desires in pure hearts, to hurt and to seduce upright souls to commit idolatry. Conversely, Christian images were only a medium to communicate with Christ or the Saints. The saint’s divine power had celestial origins and his or her image itself should never be the immediate subject of adoration in the West. Thus the account of a past action of a saint in former times destroying false images and converting the site to a Christian sacred place forms the *sine qua non* to introduce Christian imagery (for example an image depicting this particular saint) and its ritual use at the very same place, formerly ruled by enchanted, devilish images. In short, we appreciate the saint’s power to convert this hell-hole into a pleasant place of prayer by the scale of the challenge he confronted. While Jonas of Susa only says that the idols were made of stone, the early seventh-century hagiographer Warnhar describes a second destroyed ensemble in more detail. In the *Acta Tergeminorum* he writes that an image of Nemesis and the idols of 12 further temples were destroyed in Langres:

> The twin saints … ordered their servants to destroy the statue of Nemesis and to completely eliminate the twelve temples, which had been built on their estate, and then to scatter the statues of the idols far and wide after smashing them to bits; the servants fulfilled all that had been ordered by their masters."

This sort of orgy of idol destruction will remain a frequent *topos* until the eleventh century. Finally, we should note that Wettino’s scenario introduces yet another topos – namely that of buildings being turned to Christian worship. The colonization of pagan sanctuaries is recorded in multiple sources: in the life of Vigor of Bayeux, the saint is explicitly ceded such a site by King Childebert I, where he builds a church after first eradicating a large, stone, female idol (*effigies lapidea in specie mulieris*). The same story is repeated in the early seventh century *Fundatio monasterii Blandiniensis* and *Vita Bavonis*, both of which mention an ancient sanctuary of Mercury located on a mountain near Gent, whose idol Saint Amandes had to first destroy before founding a church dedicated to Saint Peter.

Idolatry depicted: the negated image venerated by the pagans

Although depictions of figures sacrificing to or venerating idols decorated the walls of late antique sanctuaries, tombs and religious objects, they are thereafter quite rare in western art until the Carolingian period.

The distant (to Christian eyes) relationship between pagan adorer and cherished idol is the subject of the illumination to Psalm 37:1 (Figure 4.1) in
out a different point, encapsulated in the words of Psalm 135:18: 'They that make them are like unto them: so is every one that trusteth in them.'

The prophet's words mean that humans are made in God's likeness, and the scene implicitly criticizes the psychological gulf between pagans and their exalted gods instead of the preferable Christian community in the Spirit. It follows that the semi-nude idols are surrounded by all the empty apparatus of worship — baldachin, twin hills and so on — but otherwise nothing in their visible appearance legitimizes their veneration.

Finally, and quite rarely, the manufacture of an idol, in this case the golden calf, is actually shown in the illumination to Psalm 106:19: 'They made [a calf] in Horeb, and worshipped the cast image' (Figure 4.4). The metal is shown being mined from the earth and then beaten on an anvil. This detail appears immediately below the breaking of the mosaic stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, the clear inference being that the idol's manufacture breaks the Law.

**Idols as spectators on the margins**

Although written sources are rife with destructions of idols, images of this blight cannot be found in western medieval art earlier than the eleventh century. On the other hand, intact and naked idols frequently figure as mute and marginal spectators from the ninth century onwards in Carolingian art, especially in Psalters and Bibles but also in illuminated manuscripts of writings by Prudentius.

It is hardly surprising that the Carolingians should illustrate Prudentius, for idolatry and its attributes play a decisive role in the formation of Christian virtue in his *Psychomachia*, precisely because they are the antithesis of collective Christian values. St Paul had first introduced idolatry into the canon of vices and in the hands of Tertullian, Prudentius and others helped define the new Christendom, again because it stood in diametrical opposition to the blind faith in an invisible God that was the foundation of the new religion.

The long neglected illuminations to the *Psychomachia* merit inspection for the visibility of their reception of ancient Roman values, and their subsequent transformation in Christian art, in particular representations of the clash between Faith and Idolatry. This clash is the first of seven between the vices and the virtues that will culminate in the coronation of martyrs by Faith and the construction of the Temple of Wisdom by victorious virtues.

The personifications of Faith and 'Worship-of-the-old-gods' (*Cultura veterum deorum*) fight the first duel. The pictorial mode follows the text closely. For example *Cultura's* shoulders are naked and exposed (*nuda*
umeros), her hair untidy (intousa comas) and her arms raised (exerta lacertes). The internal effects of the attack are described even more fully in the text, though they are only discretely expressed by the facial expressions in the illumination. Thus, Faith shows mild consternation while ‘Worship-of-the-old-gods’ exudes aggression. Although the poem is silent about the appearance of Faith’s adversary, mentioning only the body parts struck in the fight, the illumination conveys the struggle with drama: an upright, defensive Faith staves off the assault of ‘Worship-of-the-old-gods’ (or ‘Idolatry’ as she will come to be called in the later manuscripts), whose entire body swerves into her first attack, axe brandished overhead and dishevelled hair streaming. The text itself gives no scenery – the entire poem exists in a sort of aspatial timelessness, which underpins its allegorical nature – but the illuminator of the Bern manuscript supplies the props of altar, idol and bull.

In the illumination of the next scene (Figure 4.5), the stance and heavy forms of the nude idol recall late antique boxers, and the representation of the idol is not at all a specific statue type of a god. In earlier representations, like the late antique Vatican Vergil, the cult-image would have been glimpsed through the columns of the temple Pronaos but in the new pictorial rhetoric of the ninth century, idolatry is reduced to its basic ingredients: a column and a statue. But these statues are not simply silent witnesses, aloof from terrestrial events (like gods), but rather the earthbound messengers of former times, when idols on columns were animated by the potential evils of man’s idolatry, not by any terrestrial powers of their own.

Intact idols regarding Christian martyrdoms and saints fragmented of former deities

The contrast between the unscathed idol, untouched by the cruelties perpetrated at his feet, and the suffering of crushed Idolatry points again to the inanity of the effigy. This second illumination (Figure 4.5) depicts Prudentius’ verses 30–35. Faith triumphs over ‘Worship-of-the-old-gods’. ‘She cuts her foe’s head down’ (illa hostile caput phalerataque tempora vittis labefactat), ‘lays in the dust that mouth that was sated with the blood of beasts’ (et ora cruore de pecudum satiata solo adplicat), ‘and tramples the eyes under foot’ (et pede calcat), ‘squeezing them out in death’ (elisos in morte oculos).

In sharp focus, we now watch Faith blinding her enemy with well-aimed blows. The dying vice spreads her hands and her body is convulsed by her death throes, finally succumbing to the strokes from the powerful limbs of victorious virtue. A young bull is also visible behind the altar, the sacrificial food of the beast-eating vice.

While ‘Worship-of-the-old-gods’ is annihilated, her attribute, the idol itself, remains intact on its perch. He therefore epitomizes pagan folly through his impotent irrelevance to the actual struggle. The point is driven home by a miniature in the same manuscript, though this time illustrating Prudentius’ Peristephanon, where an idol on a column reappears though it is not mentioned in the text nor required for the event represented.7 We begin to understand that this idol, in fact, serves both as a mnemonic to the past phenomenon of Christian persecution and to underscore the blindness of the educated students, who torture their former teacher with their styluses.8 In our manuscript Idolatry lies crushed and broken, because she alludes to the real smashing of idols. However, from the eleventh century onwards, when an actual destruction of an idol is depicted, the fragmentation of the cult-image into body fragments begins to occupy the foreground (as in Gregory the Great’s Vatican vita of Saint Benedict). After this time, the pattern of a destroyed idol, slashed into useless fragments by the powers of the saint, replaces the inactive but intact idol present in earlier depictions. This depiction recalls the former times of missionary activities and real destructions of idols. In later images, we see a parallel drawn between a saint’s destruction of an idol, and his own destruction in his martyrdom, for example in the fresco cycle of Sant’Urbano alla Caffarella, painted during the pontificate of Urban II (AD 1088–99).9

These kinds of analogies in narrative scenes refer to the enduring vividness of pagan elements in Christian culture, particularly present in the cult of saints and the veneration of their relics, their fragmented remains. The powerless and dead fragment of a former idol represents the counterpoint to Christian relics: the useless relic of vain and graven stone must give way for the reliquary instilled with true power from above. The same has to be considered in the role of the ‘new’ locally rooted saints as opposed to the ‘ancient’ gods, still venerated by pagans. The reliquary’s complex relationship between image and relic has been a topic of several studies, but in looking at contemporary discourse on these issues, the full complexity of a reliquary’s importance comes to light. The fragmented sacred remains needed to be incorporated into artful reliquaries whose figurative and imaginary form alluded to their former as well as their present – invisible – appearance. These two forms of representation, one might say a twofold mimesis, form a pivotal element of Christian image culture.

First, as we have seen, the depiction and description of an idol has been used since the Carolingian period as an iconic formula for paganism and false image-worship. Furthermore, the ‘iconic’ appearance of idols in narrative contexts in depicted scenes as well as written accounts underlines the reception of the other past by rejecting and negating formerly venerated images. The naked, mute, deaf and ‘untouched’ male idol on top of a column
turns into the sign of idolatry. Second, the newly venerated and installed local saints with their relics, statues, and the written accounts of their miracles replace the pagan gods. This acculturation of pagan culture negates images only at a first view. In fact, by negating the pagan image culture Christians conserved formerly pagan customs and adapted them according to their needs. Christian statuary could only emerge after most important Gaulish or Roman statues were bashed to pieces and their temple sites converted. The reuse of pagan imagery – mantled and incorporated in Christian imagery – is based on the rejection of the other, pagan traditions. The most obvious example for this practice is the statue of the Christian female martyr Ste Foy at Conques which incorporates a late antique golden head from a male emperor. The apparently paradoxical rebirth of life-size statues in the context of the negation of images venerated by former pagan culture seems peculiar only at first sight. As we have seen, the new use of monumental sculpture in western Christianity by the end of the ninth century is the fruit of the reconsiderations of western roots reaching back to the imagery of Late Antiquity and the extensive debates on idolatry. What has always been neglected in this context, probably because it seems to teeter on paradox, is the impact that pagan culture made on this supposedly exclusive, Christian phenomenon. Thus, hitherto the survival of antique statues of emperors and gods, especially Gaulish mother-earth types, has almost completely escaped detection as possible precedents. Nonetheless, to gauge their possible influence on the reinvention of monumental Christian sculpture in the ninth century one must first ascertain that pagan cults, and hence statue veneration, remained active in Gaul at least until the seventh century. Second, it has to be determined that their memory lingered in the Christian consciousness until the ninth century once paganization had actually become extinct. Most importantly, we must realize that we can best understand what a cult image represented to Christians by understanding what it was not, and what it must strenuously avoid becoming: an idol. In fact, the reasons given by western sources for the destruction of idols provide an astonishingly broad range of insights in the acculturation of the religious past during the period normally dubbed ‘the crisis of the image’. 

Notes

1 This article was written in Rome with the support of a grant from the Gerda-Henkel Foundation. I would like to thank Anne McLean and Jeffrey Johnson for offering me the opportunity to present this material, which is drawn from my doctoral thesis, ‘The Statue of Sainte-Foy in Conques and the Revival of Monumental Sculpture in Christian Art’. A special thanks for his constant, ever inspiring and constructive criticism goes to Gerhard Wol. Furthermore, I am grateful to Fabio P. Barry, Caroline J. Goodson, Robert Coates-Stephens, Tobias Kämpf and Tina Sesso for reading and commenting on the paper, as well as to Marco Conti for translating the Latin passages.

2 Among the vast literature disputing exactly what the second commandment does or does not prescribe and its impact on the artistic production I refer to the more recent studies of Gutmann (1996), Jung (1994), Richel (2001), and Keel (2002). For the western perspective the work of Reinhard Hoefs (1990) is extremely original and fruitful.

3 The oldest surviving medieval Christian statue of Ste Foy de Conques is conventionally dated to the late ninth century. Within a century there was a widespread revival of Christian statuary, much of it either of saints or of saints or of saints or of saints. In addition, numerous larger than life crucifixes (of the Cologne Gero-cross type) were produced in Germany and northern Italy around the year 1000. Scholars are baffled by the approximately four hundred year interval between explicitly Christian, late antique statues and the sudden reappearance of the Christian cult statue in the shape of Ste Foy. There are very few examples of preserved statues, for example Steinhach, Cividale or Mustair, their dating oscillates between the fifth and the sixteenth centuries. See Beutler (1964) and (1982) and Wirth (1995).

4 Almost every explanation has hinged on the relationship of sculpture to the cult of relics. The most popular argument remains that articulated in 1952 by Harald Keller. Keller claimed that because sculpture contravened the Mosaic prohibition against graven images, it could only have been reintroduced in its capacity as a reliquary. That is, the statue reinforced the often fragmented sanctity of the cult of relics suitable for veneration. Attractive as this king’s two bodies’ explanation seemed, Ilene H. Forsyth drew attention to the fact that very few of the Madonnas actually contained relics. A summary and a bibliography of the relevant contributions to this controversy can be found in Beest (2001), p. 129. The most influential studies are Keller (1952), Haering Forsyth (1972), pp. 121 f.; Beeling (1969), pp. 331–47; further elaborated by Feibehuen (1960), p. 57.


6 ‘An image can exercise no mystic function. Contrary to the western stand, that its value is not due to the virtue of the saint it depicts, Opus Caroli Regis (Libri Carolini) I, 17, in the following cited as OCR no sanctity resides in the common clay, wax, or wood out of which an image is made (OCR I 2). As Freeman elaborates further the implication in the remarks on images in the OCR is that the value of an image is determined by the success of the artist in fulfilling his intention, and by the acceptance accorded to the materials he has used. ... It is commonly assumed, he says, that a beautiful woman with an infant in her arms represents Virgin and Child, but how is even an artist to be sure that the two were not originally intended as Venus and Aeneas? (OCR IV 21). As he remarks [in the following Latin quotation from OCR IV 17] it is possible for a sculptor to carve and consecrate a statue where in the Virgins and Venus to be identical in everything but their inscriptions, and if these are lacking, or if the images have been pulled down from their proper places and allowed to remain in a fallen state, how is anyone to determine which one should be set up again and venerated as the Mother of God? (Offertar claudi eorum, quae imagines adornat, verba gratia corporis humani iussu, simulacrum deo sacrificat, massa iussu Dei generantis habet, ergitatur, honoratur, osculatur, illa, quae inscriptionem Veneris, Aenaea causam profugi genetrix, habet, decurrit, exprobratur, excerat. Pari utranque sunt figura, paribus coloribus, paribus costi materiae, simulacrum tangentio distant. Quod after) Opus Caroli Regis Contra Synodum (1999), p. 529, 1, p. 529, 1, 8. Translation taken from Freeman (1957), p. 697.

7 This thesis is further elaborated in my dissertation ‘Idolatry, image culture and gift exchange regarding the statue of the Ste Foy of Conques: Reflections upon the genealogy of sculpture’. The reactions and interactions of Byzantine and western theologians and their influence on the development in western positions towards image veneration will be studied in further detail by an analysis of the so-called acts of the councils of Frankfurt 789 and Paris 825.


11 ‘Sanctorum martyrum corpora, quem Romani igne cremaverunt vel ferro truncaverunt vel bestias lacerando proculocurum, Franci super eae aurum et lapides preciosos ornaverunt.’ (The bodies of saints and martyrs, which were burnt, cut into pieces or thrown in front of wild animals to be gorged, were adoreyed by the Franks with gold and precious stones). Quoted after Opus Caroli Regis Contra Synodum (1999), p. 2.
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See Friedman (1998), introduction to Opus Cantli Regis, p. 25 and p. 138, l. 24 ff. (OCR I), p. 2; 119, l. 9–10 (OCR I), p. 179; l. 21–21 (OCR I, 16) and p. 185, l. 14 ff. (OCR, l. 72). For the protest of the Libri Carolinian against the Greek attempts to equalize images with real holy things, see Chazelle (1986), pp. 154 f.

12 Criticism against the common misuse of Gregory the Great's comments on the use of Christian imagery is articulated by Chazelle (1996).

13 ‘The same laws which govern two systems as both alive and interacting to a much later point in time than anyone would have said until recently’; MacMullen (1997), p. 2. See also Polya (1988), particularly pp. 412-415; Dierckx (1956); Hillgarth (1980); Fletcher (1997); van Oort and Wynwaet (2001); and Vytzihl (2004).

14 Unfortunately, there are hardly any recent critical editions of most of the sources cited here. Even dates cannot always be given with reliable arguments. If no recent edition is available, unless otherwise specified, all citations are from Migne, Patrologia Latina (PL), Monumenta Germaniae (MGH) or the Acta Sanctorum.

15 Gregory of Tours, De gloria confessorum, c. 79, for an English translation, see Gregory of Tours (1988). Glory of the Confessors, trans. Raymond Van Dam, Liverpool. The name Benericatha is derived from the personal dignity endowed by the Phrygian tribe of the Berythum, also the name of a Phrygian chief.

16 Hain's study also provides a depiction of a statue of a Gaulish mother-goddess that is preserved in the museum of Pronay-le-Gillon. Hain (1963), p. 95. It is important to note in this context that several cult statues, most notably that which Augustus installed on the Palatine, had heads of black stone.

17 Gregory the Great, Regestum, MGH Scriptores XI, pp. 37 and 39. My thanks to Robert Coates-Stephens for bringing this source to my attention.

18 Vitae patrum 6, 2: MGH Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum I, 683: ‘Tradit autem ibi fanum quodam diversis ornamentis retortum, in quo barbories proxima libraeincubae exquisque ad vombinum suis et potu replebatur; ibique et simulacra ut deum adorans, membree secundum quod umque dolor atigisset, sculptebat in ligno. Quod ubi sanctus Gallus audisset, statim illuc cum uno tantum clarico praeceps sumebatur, cum Gallus ex stipitis paganae adserit, et simulacrum Tiburinum condidisset’ (There was a sanctuary full of different ornaments, in which the barbarians living nearby performed their libations and so crammed themselves with food and drink that they vomited: there they also carved from wood statues, which they worshipped like gods, and members of the body, according to the one who related the story, was affected. When saint Gall heard this, he immediately went there with one cleric, and after lighting a fire, since none of those foolish pagans was present, he set fire to the sanctuary and burned it). Concelle of Auvergne, cap. 3: ‘Non licet... sculptulphat aut pedem aut hominem ligno facere’ (It is forbidden... to carve sculptures from wood, and either a foot or a man from wood). The same account was repeated by Primin in Scapulivs c. 22: ‘Membrs in ligno facta in trivios et arboreus vel alio notifice nacque mittere, qua nula sanitate vobis possunt praeestat’ (Do not make or place members of wood in public roads, on trees or other places, because they cannot give you any healing).

19 Liber Pontificalis 5, 5: cap. 5 ed. L. Duchesne (1866), vol. 1, p. 281, l. 8–9. Interestingly, in the Liber Pontificalis the same pattern repeats itself during the pontificates of Hilarius, Gelasius and Hormisdas – but in those cases, statues are not mentioned.

20 See Brown (1979) and Angenendt (1994).

21 For example, at the seventh-century Council of Chichy the local priest's obligation is articulated as: ‘Et quando Deo iubente fides catholicaiam ubique in Gallis perseverat, si quem tamen bonos ac occulte heretici esse suspicatur, a pastoribus ecclesiae sollicite reprimatur...’ (And since, according to God's command, the Catholic faith is well established in all places, if someone is suspected to be followers of Bonos or to be heretics in disguise, they must be eagerly summoned by the pastors of the church and... must be led back to Catholic faith with the intercession of God). Can. 5: ‘Sed etiamque cum hiernas tempus solito adscriptum fuerit, ut in longa pedes meorum saepius vis rigoris exspectet et in barbis meis aqua gelo conixa candelarum more dependeret. ... Sed cum sollicite interrogeremus, quis ei cybus aut potu esset, vel quidam simulacra montes illius subverseret...’ (It is permitted even when there has been a long period of time, that they should be commonly expected to be infested with a candle, but... let us diligently examine them, who their sustenance was, and who had destroyed these images...). (For the biblical text, see Bensch (1986), p. 203; English translation taken from SeverusPulchrius (1847)).

22 ‘His ha gestis petit beatisissimo Zeno, ut e licenicia tribueretur, omnia idola destruendi, et basilicas in Christo nostri baptizamenti’. Vita Zosimi, AS April 1, 1675, pp. 70–71, eighteenth century.

23 Gregory of Tours, Historia Frborum 8, 15: ‘Repperi tamen hic Deianeiram simulacrum, qua populus hic incredulorum quasi dem deum adorabat. Colunnaria etiam statua, in qua cum gradii crucifixa utile pecunias vel pedem pulsabat tognime. Itaque cum haec illa in mundum spectaretur, dixit quod dominus simulacrum sanctum destruat, et tingere pedes meorum saepius vis rigoris exspectet et in barbis meis aqua gelo conixa candelarum more dependeret. ... Sed cum sollicite interrogeremus, quis ei cybus aut potu esset, vel quidam simulacra montes illius subverseret, ut potu esset, vel quidam simulacra montes illius...’ (We discovered this image of Deianeira, by which the pagans of this place seemed to worship their gods. And also a column, in which sticks were piled on the body, and he said: the simulacrum should be destroyed, and let us expect the blood to flow on my feet...). For the biblical text, see Bensch (1986), p. 203; English translation taken from SeverusPulchrius (1847).

24 ‘Hic ha gestis petit beatisissimo Zeno, ut e licenicia tribueretur, omnia idola destruendi, et basilicas in Christo nostri baptizamenti’

25 Vita Zosimi, AS April 1, 1675, pp. 70–71, eighteenth century.
*See Knoop-Aneichik (1922), no. 472, early seventh century: 'contriv ergo idolum, subvertit aram, sanctae loci sancta, dum spes undique fluxerat' in honor principis apostolorum Petri, cui Blandinum dicavit in hac capitula [St-Pierre-au-mont-Blandin] indidit vocabulum' (Therefore he smashed the idol, overturned the altar, cut down the woods that were holy [the pagans], and dedicated that place in the honour of Petri, the prince of the apostles, and gave it the name of Blandinum). Cf. no. 508. See also Greiffenhagen, in *Die Vita Bunsia*, the first version of this story, that the first three letters of the name of the ninth century, the author talks of idole 'simulacra et idola'. Ch. 4. 4. Knoop, SS Reb. Mer. IV, 137. 'In eodem etiam castro [Gen] indicerat olim antiquas simulacrum nefanda et idola, quae pro deo ille a populare celebrabant. Ebem vero consistit praesument de porfittis [Amanadeus] primo nomine Christi, et de 'Venerabilissimo sanctissimo Christo et sanctam sanctissimi omnis reversioni possessoris Basilicam autem ibi in honore beati Petri apostoli fecit constitut.' (In the same place [Gen], the ancient inhabitants had once placed impious statues and idols, which were worshipped by the pagans for the god). Since the passage is written before [Amanadeus] lived there, he destroyed all the sanctuaries in the name of Christ, smashed the idols and brought everybody forth to the holy Christian faith. He also had a church built there in honour of the blessed Peter.')

See, for example, the mid-third century fresco fragment of a worshipper of Hercules from the necropolis of Arezzo preserved in the magazine of the Museo Archeologico, Olt. Antica. Inv. nr 153. See Tata (2000).

Wettenspiaggia: *Landsbibliothek Stuttgart, Stuttgarter Psalter, fol. 425.*

All English Bible quotations are taken from the *King James Version*. The numbering of the psalms follows the citation of the Vulgata. *Origines* (PG 12: 1220 ff) had the following passages from Dt. 32. 11. See Eschweiler et al. (1968), p. 85. Cf. Tertianus *Idol. 1*, p. 112, as well as Vulg. Sup. 13–15.

Wettenspiaggia: *Landsbibliothek, fol. 497*. The Latin text of the psalm is as follows: 'Et in ira...conversatorius custum in collibus suis et in sculptulis suis ad aemulationem eorum provocaverunt.'

Chludon, London and Barberini Psalters. In these psalters the idol is positioned on top of the hill. See Eschweiler et al. (1968), p. 114.

 Fol. 122r, Latin text: 'Et effuderunt...sanguinem filiorum suorum et filiarum suarum, quas aedificaverant ad ima Dei.'

 Fol. 150v, Ps. 115: 18: 'Similes illis fiant qui faciant ea et omnes qui confessi in eis.'

 Fol. 124r, A. Confrat. '19' Et fecerunt in Chonae et adoraverunt sculpta', cf. Ex 32. Below the calf on front of the altar it is written: 'Hic vitrum quem fecerunt ludens e au xer auro et adoraverunt eum pro deo.' Cf. psalms illumination to the psalters of Chludon, Paris grec 20, London, Barberini, Bristol and Munich. Ms. slav. 4.

 An early example is depicted in the manuscript of the vita of Saint Benedict in the Vatican Library Ms. lat. 1202 (showing the destruction of an idol of Apollo or the eleventh or twelfth century fresco of St. Urban in the church of Sant’Urbano alla Caffarella in Rome. In antiquity there are examples showing the fall of the idol of Nebukadnezzer or the destruction of Dagon’s idol by the Ark of the Covenant, for example in the frescoes of Dura Europos. The frescoes are the least known that depict authentically destroyed statues of Baal; see Himmelmann (1986). P. 5. The action itself is depicted on the drawing in the Roman catacomb of Via Latina, see Stewart (1999). In Byzantium the depiction of toppled idols appears earlier, for example in the Menologion of Basil I, v. 913. fol. 125, where St Cornelius topples an idol, or in the Roman drawing in the anonymous hypogeum of the Piazza Risolfi, Rome; fig. 82, in Stewart (1999).

The selection of manuscripts in this essay form only a small part of the material which will be the subject of a future essay. See Psalms, and more pragmatically, Prudentius composed the *Psychomachia* (Struggle for Man’s soul), an epic poem about the virtues and vices between 405 and his death in 410. The quotations and translations are from Prudentius (1982).

The illuminated manuscripts of the Psychomachia of Prudentius have been studied thoroughly by Woodrow in 1929 and Katzenellenbogen in 1933, after the corpus of Stettiner in 1895. Yet the Psychomachia is the first Christian epic poem and one of the most widely discussed texts of the Middle Ages. For an overview of the history of the text from the ninth century until the thirteenth century alone are known. See Stettiner (1895 and 1915). Woodrow (1930) and Katzenellenbogen (1933).

Vatican Vergil, fol. 435 depicts the Temple of Apollo with his image and in fol. 331 Dido sacrificing, 4. Lib. Aeneis, l. 28-64, depicting in Wright's *Vergil*, pp. 36 and 40. Another example may be found in the Utrecht Psalter, at the illumination to Ps 28.

Bern manuscript of the Psychomachia on fol. 357, Burgerbibliothek Bern, Cod. 264.

The ensemble of sacrificial altar and bull represents a continuous tradition from antiquity, as the example of the Vatican Vergil underscores. Or as this image from the Carolingian era, Harley Psalter, ninth century, London, detail to Ps 27, fol. 157.
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