

Article

The Medieval Chants for Ste Foy Considered through the Prism of Their Nocturnal Performance

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Abstract: The medieval cult of Ste Foy inspired several sets of liturgical chants, or *historiae*, including at least two that were probably made for use at Conques in the early eleventh century. Whilst it is widely understood that *historia* chants belonged within the liturgy of the Divine Office, this article explores the significance of two lesser-known parameters in their performance: their use during the nocturnal hours, above all during the lengthy service known as the Night Office, and their use alongside various modes of sensory augmentation that were employed on major feast days. By exploring these parameters as they might have applied to the medieval Abbey of Conques in the context of Ste Foy's feast—using sources from Fleury and Saint-Bénigne, Dijon, wherever local evidence is lacking—the article draws attention to the ways in which *historiae* intersected with non-verbal modes of creativity within the performative frame of the Office liturgy. Ultimately, it argues for a more consciously multidisciplinary approach to this historically 'musical' genre.

Keywords: medieval music; chant; liturgy; Divine Office; cult of saints; night; drama



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1. Introduction

Among many attractive formulations to emerge from Bissera Pentcheva's 'Enchanted Images' project is the concept of the 'aural envelope': the dynamic sensory frame that was generated by the daily cycles of liturgical prayer, shaping the reception of medieval art and architecture in ways that were vivid and yet unseen (Pentcheva n.d.; Pentcheva 2021, pp. 2–3; Pentcheva 2022a, 2023a). The value of such an intervention is self-evident in a discipline more traditionally concerned with the material and concrete—to adapt Pentcheva's formulation—than with the volatile and ephemeral. But it is no less valuable for the medieval musicologist, for whom the disciplinary parameters are effectively reversed. Here, the aural dimension has long been a central preoccupation, to the extent that such an ephemeral experience can be studied, but less so its material, visual, and sensory surroundings. No one studying the liturgical chants of the medieval Latin West would deny that the surviving repertoires were deeply integrated into, and inseparable from, the forms of worship, spaces, and communities in which they were conceived and enacted. Nevertheless, the 'Enchanted Images' project and its crowning concert, exhibition, and symposium in February 2023 offered a rare chance to reflect further on the porosity of these creative and interpretative boundaries, with specific attention to the Abbey of Conques, its gold statue-reliquary, and several iterations of liturgical chants composed in honour of Ste Foy (Pentcheva 2023a, 2023b).

This article is concerned with the related clusters of chant compositions known as Offices, or *historiae*, which were an increasingly important component of the cult of saints in Europe from the tenth century onwards (Jonsson 1968). The basic purpose of a *historia* was to furnish a special repertory of music for a particular saint's feast, usually one of particular local importance, which could then be sung in place of the generic 'common' chants that otherwise serviced the Divine Office liturgy on such an occasion. Several *historiae* were composed for the medieval cult of Ste Foy, in several locations, over the course of several

centuries. Two mid-eleventh-century manuscripts preserve two of the earliest known examples: a *historia* of 26 antiphons and 13 responsories that was designed to be performed on Ste Foy's main feast on 6 October (henceforth referred to as the 'main *historia*') (Bouillet and Servières 1900, pp. 644–48; Paris, BnF, Lat. 1240, ff. 185r–188r; Paris, BnF, NAL 443, ff. 1r–10v), only cursorily studied prior to the 'Enchanting Images' project (Huglo 1988, pp. 70–73; Huglo 1995, pp. 34–35; Pentcheva 2022b, 2023c); and a secondary *historia* for Ste Foy's translation feast on 14 January (henceforth the 'translation *historia*'), comprising 2 antiphons, 12 responsories, and a musically embellished Benedicamus chant (Bouillet and Servières 1900, pp. 648–49; Paris, BnF, NAL 443, ff. 11r–15r). These two *historiae* were both probably written for use at Conques, where some of the chants remained in liturgical use until the seventeenth century (Bouillet and Servières 1900, pp. 635–37). A later *historia* of the twelfth or thirteenth century, comprising 22 antiphons and 14 responsories, was known at the monastery of Ste Foy in Sélestat (AH 45, no. 78; Sélestat, Bibliothèque Humaniste, Ms. 22 (olim 95), ff. 2r–3v). At least two further *historiae* were known in connection with her late medieval cult, each also provided with two dozen or more chants (AH 18, no. 23; AH 26, no. 9).

Unlike in earlier layers of Romano-Frankish chants—the musical *lingua franca* of the Latin church from the Carolingians on—saints' *historiae* tended to be very clearly demarcated as compositional wholes. This quality derived in the first instance from their textual content, which characteristically came from a single piece of literature, and thus allowed the chants to tell some kind of cumulative story (Jonsson 1968; Jacobsson and Haug 2001). The main *historia* conforms to this definition, for it is derived principally from the oldest *Passio* of Ste Foy and her companions (BHL 2930; Bouillet and Servières 1900, pp. 394–404; Sheingorn 1995, pp. 33–38). Its texts are structured in such a way that each successive antiphon plots a linear path through the *Passio* narrative from the saint's birth, youth, and adulthood to her death and posthumous acts, as does each successive responsory. This version of the *Passio* must have been known in Conques, and it was very probably used as the source of lessons for the Divine Office on Ste Foy's main feast, where it would have been heard in dialogue with the main *historia*.¹ Compositional integrity was also afforded by two further techniques, both unknown in earlier Romano-Frankish chants: first, the patterned arrangement of chants according to their melodic category, a technique better known as modal order, and second, the consistent use of rhyme and versification to adorn the texts. Both techniques appear in the compositions for Ste Foy: whilst the main *historia* has its chants arranged in ascending modal order, the Sélestat *historia* is both modally ordered and textually unified by its choice of poetic metre (trochaic septenarius) and use of rhyme.

These different forms of compositional artifice were routinely acknowledged and praised by contemporaries, and it was not uncommon for named individuals to receive credit (Page 2010, pp. 429–41; Kelly 2006). To take one example among many, the Anglo-Norman chronicler Orderic Vitalis reported that Arnulf, an eleventh-century cantor of Chartres Cathedral, was commissioned to write a *historia* of St-Évroul; when a monk called Guitmund later added some extra chants, he was considered to have 'perfected' the *historia*, which was now multiply authored but still singly construed (Page 2010, p. 434: 'Hic hystoriam sancti patris Ebrulfi abbatis . . . perfecit . . . Ipsam nimirum hystoriam Arnulfus cantor Carnotensis . . . iam ediderat'). Many *historia* composers were also the authors of saints' *vitae*, and from their biographies we learn that these kinds of creativity were sometimes considered to have equivalence. Famously, Letald of Micy prefaced his early eleventh-century *Vita* of St Julian with a note about the compositional design of its accompanying liturgical *historia*, referring probably to its use of mode: 'we arranged the order of the responsories and antiphons in a rational way, as you required' (Hiley 2000, p. 444: 'Sane responsorium et antiphonarum, ut petistis, digessimus ordinem'). That these compositions were valued as wholes is communicated, finally, by their propensity to be transmitted within hagiographic dossiers, both functional and luxurious, where their inclusion alongside *vitae*, miracle collections, sermons, illustrations, and other forms of cultic creativity implies an equivalent

artistic and ontological status (Hahn 2001, pp. 18–28). In addition to the Conques and Sélestat collections mentioned so far, comparable French examples equipped with *historiae* include compilations for Saints Bertin, Vedast, and Winnoc (Huglo 1988, p. 73).

However, much of this compositional integrity was attenuated, if not dissolved, by various aspects of the *historia*'s delivery in performance. Two aspects of this point are well known. First, chants that on paper appear to be neighbours were liable to be separated in a liturgical context, normally by the singing of at least one psalm or scriptural text, but in certain instances by a break of several hours between successive Divine Office services. The musical result is thus a far cry from that which we see on the medieval page, and quite different from the artwork as often conceptualised today in critical editions, recordings, or concert performances (for further reflections see Grier 2014). Second, the written records of medieval music were never more than the distant cousins of the acoustic and artistic realities of their performance. Even in cases where the chants have been notated with decipherable pitches—the two early *historiae* of Ste Foy sit just on the right side on that historical threshold—we are still none the wiser about almost every other aspect of the musical practice, including matters of vocal technique, pacing, pitch standards, or rhythmic realisation, to mention but a few (Livljanić and Bagby 2018; Taruskin 1995). Nor, in any case, do we know the nature of the original contract between performer and written text (Treitler 2003). Pentcheva and Abel have stirred this cauldron provocatively with their auralisation experiments (Pentcheva and Abel 2017), and in their live performance of Ste Foy chants at Stanford University on 10 February 2023 they demonstrated how a *historia* can take on a radically different hue, both experientially and interpretatively, when considered within the specific architectural environment of Conques.

In this contribution I wish to offer a third point of argument about the historical environments of medieval *historia* compositions, one which simultaneously embraces these uncertainties and takes us even further into the methodological shadows of performance history. Beyond the immediate questions of how to realise a *historia* musically, and even beyond the straightforward pragmatics of how it worked within the framework of the Divine Office liturgy, there were many other dimensions to the performance of this ritual, richly documented yet infrequently acknowledged, that also impinge significantly upon our understanding of the creativity before us. The further we extrapolate out into these layers, I argue, the more clearly we see what we always knew: that the *historia* was not actually the main event. It was rather a dependent component of a much larger creative happening, which might be considered closer to theatre, for want of a better word, than to music *tout court*. The following discussion is structured around two particular layers of supra-textual context that probably accompanied the festal performance of a *historia* in a Benedictine foundation such as that of Ste Foy at Conques: first, the very distinctive temporal and environmental affordances of the particular Divine Office services in which *historia* chants appeared, whose effects are greatly magnified when viewed through a pre-modern lens; and second, the colourful liturgical transformations that were typically wrought in these services on major feasts—calling to mind the light that is split through a prism—such that *historia* chants were delivered within a complex simultaneity of different media and sensory stimuli, including but not limited to the physical presence of relics, such as those of Ste Foy in her famous golden statue-reliquary. Thus, my argument is in part a complementary inversion of the 'Enchanted Images' project and the concept of the 'aural envelope', as befits a musicological vantage point, and in part a challenge to an even more integrated approach to medieval religious creativity and the all-encompassing nature of its experience.

2. The *Historiae* of Ste Foy in a Nocturnal Frame

It is seldom noted, even among those in the know, that the great majority of the 30,000 or more chants composed for the Divine Office liturgy during the Middle Ages were designed to be sung at night.² A small handful were made for the daylight hours of Prime, Terce, Sext, and None, plus the bedtime service of Compline, and large numbers were

written for the crepuscular services of Vespers and Lauds. But this creativity is dwarfed by those chants composed for the nocturnal prayer service known today as Matins, then as Vigils, Nocturns, or simply the Night Office (for an introduction see [Collamore 2000](#)). The main *historia* of Ste Foy has a typical distribution in both of its surviving copies: out of 39 proper chants sung at the October feast, 26 (two thirds) can be deduced to have been for the Night Office, including all but one of the great responsories; the remaining 13 were sung at Vespers and Lauds, with no proper chant assigned to Compline or the daylight hours. The early translation *historia* (13:1:0) and the thirteenth-century Sélestat *historia* (25:11:0) behave similarly.

The distribution can be explained in the first instance by the underlying structures of the daily Office liturgy ([Harper 1991](#), pp. 73–108). Even on weekdays, the principal unit of night prayer, known as a nocturn, required a greater volume of text to be delivered than at any other Office hour. In a Benedictine monastery such as Conques, the first nocturn on a ferial day had six psalms and between one and three readings, with a further six psalms in a second nocturn that followed. There were also two statutory psalms sung at the beginning of the service, and other devotions before and after depending on local custom. On Sundays and major feasts, that ritual template was expanded further. The two nocturns became three, such that the twelve psalms of the day were now accompanied by twelve readings, three canticles, and over two dozen antiphon and responsory chants. Whereas Vespers and Lauds never had more than one responsory each, the Night Office now had twelve, of the prolix (or ‘great’) variety that can last several minutes in performance. Thus, in its fullest extent the service easily overtook the Mass as the longest of the day, and it was potentially the most complex musically, too. But even with these structures in mind, the fact remains that musical creativity for the Divine Office was focussed on the hours of the night. This is clear to see from the two early *historiae* of Ste Foy, whose nocturnal chants were also the primary sites of musical floridity: of the six responsories for Ste Foy that were adorned with special verbal and melodic extensions known as prosulas and neumas, all but one were for use at the Night Office; the other was for Vespers ([Huglo 1988](#), p. 72; [Huglo 1995](#), pp. 34–35). The single responsory prosula in the Sélestat *historia* belongs at Lauds.

How might a nocturnal context change our view of the Ste Foy chants? Here, the size of the Night Office is less consequential than the simple fact that this was a cultural space that was wholly other, both from the medieval day and from our contemporary experience of the night ([Ekirch 2006](#)). Those of us living today in the industrialised, urbanised West learn from an early age to blur the boundaries of day and night, bypassing the cues both of our natural environments and of our circadian circuitry by means of electric light, mechanical clocks, blackout curtains, and chemical stimulants and depressants, among other available commodities. But it was not so in pre-modern life, let alone in the eleventh-century environs of a Benedictine house in the rural Rouergue. Here, following the injunction of St Benedict to rise ‘a little past the middle of the night’ (*RB* 8), the monks carved out a unique space for communal worship, for one to two hours each night, at a time when the world looked, felt, and sounded very different.

If worshipping by night meant one thing above all, it meant worshipping in the dark. Late medieval evidence reveals that very considerable resources were donated and set aside in order to illuminate the great European shrine churches, above all on feasts ([Nickson 2020](#); [Fouracre 2021](#)), though as Tom Nickson reminds us the light of a candle afforded but a fraction of the illumination provided by the modern incandescent lightbulb ([Nickson 2021](#), p. 162). But in this article we are concerned with a place and period where, by all accounts, the provision for lighting was considerably less extravagant. In the time of Prior Gimón (ca. 930–59), according to the *Liber miraculorum*, the monastery of Conques ‘was quite isolated, no throngs of pilgrims came there, and there wasn’t such a great abundance of lights—only one candle served the high altar’ ([Sheingorn 1995](#), p. 96). By the eleventh century, the abbey reportedly had a ‘brisk trade’ in selling candles to pilgrims, as well as a layperson whose job it was to watch over the candles at night ([Sheingorn 1995](#), pp. 91, 126). Yet, contemporary evidence from Fleury, a larger and much more eminent Benedictine foundation, reveals

that the readers at the Night Office normally discharged their duty with just a single candle (Davril 1984, p. 43). More detailed customs from thirteenth-century Fleury mention that on feast days two candles set in basins were to be lit for the nocturnal hours, rising to three on special occasions, though no such candles are mentioned for ordinary ferial days (Davril 1976, pp. 292–93). Most interestingly, on the nine most important occasions of the year there was extra provision specifically for the lectern (three extra candles) and the antiphoner or music book (one extra candle), as if there was a particular need for legibility on this day that was not felt on the other 346 days of the year (Davril 1976, p. 301). From what is not said in these documents, it seems reasonable to suppose that the visual experience of the Night Office was generally subdued, even on relatively major occasions.

This is how it appears to us, anyway. But there are good arguments for seeing the nocturnal sensory experience in reverse, as one of paradoxical heightening. After all, if one's default expectation of night worship was of darkness, it follows that a glimmer of light was a source of vivid presence, or, to borrow a delightful turn of phrase from Henry of Avranches, via Tom Nickson, 'fire flashes more pleasingly in shadow' (Nickson 2020, p. 90). We know this to be true of candles, which are of course much more salient by night than by day. (The effect is compounded by the eye's ability to increase its sensitivity by orders of magnitude in low-light conditions.) But the basic point is extensible across the sensory domain, according to the rule of thumb that psychologists call Weber's law, which holds that the intensity of a stimulus is not experienced in absolute terms, but relative to whatever is already there. Thus, we could just as easily think about the sound of cockcrow that gains acoustic prominence from the fact that it breaks the silence of the early morning, or we could think about a lit fire or flame, whose smell cuts more strongly through the freshness of the night, just as the night's coolness makes us savour its heat. From a physiological vantage point, there is also an important sense in which absence begets presence. Scientists have shown that sensory deprivation in humans, including experiences of extreme darkness or quietness, leads relatively quickly to states of altered consciousness, as the mind compensates inwardly for the lack of activity outside (Ustinova 2009, pp. 33–41). The resulting experience of hallucinations or visions is itself a form of intense sensory experience, which religious communities the world over have often made—and continue to make—a feature of their spiritual practice.

It is also important to recognise that the pre-modern night brought its own forms of presence. Unlike the architectural darkness of a subterranean crypt or windowless shrine, and unlike the geological darkness of a deep cave, we are dealing here with the darkness of an inalienable cosmic reality. That reality is often obscured in today's industrialised and electrified world. But in the Middle Ages, the sun's disappearance each day could hardly be avoided, for even with artificial illumination it forced humans to change tack; and whenever the sky was clear, it heralded the re-emergence of the moon, stars, and planets into the celestial foreground, with an intensity that in unpolluted skies must have been several orders of magnitude greater, at least according to Weber's law. (Under a new moon and a cloudy sky, the opposite—true nocturnal darkness—must also have been a fact of medieval life.) Under this regime stargazing was no idle pastime, but a vital way of keeping time. Gregory of Tours wrote of the importance of using the night sky to coordinate night worship (McCluskey 1990), and practical evidence survives in a remarkable 'star timetable' from eleventh-century Fleury, in which the paths of different constellations were used to determine the moment when a monk should ring the Night Office bell (Constable 1975). For the very same reasons, we must remember that the night was not a static space but a slow progression, framed by the thresholds of dusk and dawn and experienced across many perceptible gradations.

To put it another way, even in its absence the sun defined the path of worship during the night hours. Its moments of threshold-crossing were solemnised in the liturgically symmetrical services of Vespers and Lauds, at or near dusk and dawn, and the cosmic dimension was written into its statutory texts. As Margot Fassler showed in relation to the latter, the counterpoint between the service's texts and the approach of first light afforded

‘a time to contemplate the transition between death and life, between temporal existence and eternity, and for heralding the coming of the Messiah into human flesh’ (Fassler 2003, p. 223). Within these two relatively joyous poles, the Night Office represented a time of watching and waiting, in the proximate sense of seeing out the night, in the symbolic sense of anticipating the dawn of the resurrection, and in the eschatological sense of awaiting the second coming (Taft 1986, esp. pp. 357–59). As the parable of the wise and foolish virgins told, Christians needed to remain attentive to the world around them, lest they be unprepared for the son of man when he comes (Matthew 25.1-13). And as we learn time and again from miracle stories such as those from medieval Conques, nocturnal vigilance did indeed seem to yield favourable results in the presence of Ste Foy, whether in the answering of prayers or the glimpse of a miraculous cure or reward.³

Thus, to bring us back to the medieval *historiae* for Ste Foy: it should be clear now that these musical compositions belonged within no ordinary form of worship, as we might know today from the Church’s predominantly diurnal existence, but within the bounds of an ancient arc of prayer that traced the sensorily deprived—yet also potentially highly sensuous—hours between the sun’s departure and its return. In Western Christian practice, the focal point of this progression was the lengthy, sleep-interrupting ritual of the Night Office, in which the creativity of *historiae* was concentrated and in which vigilance and sensory experience were in a sense doubly written into the liturgical fabric. Not only did the muted environment create a space that heightened and foregrounded the different stimuli, including those of light and sound. It was also in the nature of the very spiritual exercise that worshippers were incentivised to be attentive. For the purposes of this article, the value of this framing is not necessarily that it changes our view of the musical compositions themselves—although I believe that it does, in ways that deserve to be considered elsewhere—but that it primes us now to approach the nocturnal liturgical arena as an experiential whole.

3. Liturgical and Sensory Narratives across the Nocturnal Offices

The Night Office was a service that told a story, or, more precisely, it told several. As I noted earlier, the texts of the main Ste Foy *historia* were derived principally from the early *Passio sanctae Fidis* (BHL 2928/2930), whose narrative and turns of phrase they shadow closely. Thus, chants about Ste Foy’s birth are followed by chants about her youth, martyrdom, and the revelations thereof. The thirteenth-century *historia* from Sélestat is more independent from the *Passio* textually, but it tells exactly the same story in the same order. Both *historiae* are also typical insofar as they actually cover Ste Foy’s life story twice, once across a series of antiphons (Night Office and Lauds), and again across the series of responsories (Night Office only). On its own terms, this feature can induce scholarly head-scratching, but it is no anomaly in the wider context of medieval liturgy, in which texts and actions regularly unfolded in counterpoint. Indeed, the dual chant narratives must probably be understood as secondary to a third narrative thread, the Night Office’s extended readings, which occupied the ritual’s centre stage both figuratively and literally. Whereas biblical or patristic readings dominated in ordinary time, on major saints’ feasts it was customary for the monks to read from a saint’s *Vita*, if one pertained, such that the full story could be covered in a single sitting. In Benedictine monasteries this was accomplished across eight or twelve readings, divided across two or three nocturns of the Night Office, depending on local custom (Webber 2015, pp. 48–52). No evidence survives of the lection divisions that would have been used for Ste Foy at Conques, though we know from the Sélestat manuscript that the Sélestat monks read the *Passio* (BHL 2930) across eight lessons, with the remaining four lessons probably given over to a Gospel homily.

The length and extent of the Night Office lessons could theoretically be determined on the fly, without recourse to a lectionary or written authority. By contrast, as a rule *historiae* were much more conspicuously predetermined, not only in their content, but also in their liturgical positioning. From a medieval author’s perspective there were of course infinitely many ways to align a musical story to a pre-existing liturgical framework, so many

were the opportunities for musical creativity across the eight daily Divine Office services. But the surviving evidence reveals that composers nearly always situated their *historia* narratives within the Night Office and Lauds, and that they delighted in the threefold nocturn structure as a way of articulating the main episodes of their story. Authors seem to have been particularly drawn to a beginning–middle–end structure within the nocturns, whose archetype can be traced at least as far back as Aristotle, but was also loosely encouraged by the medieval liturgical commentators who interpreted the Night Office in terms of the larger epochal progression of Christian time (e.g., [Davril and Thibodeau 1995](#), vol. 2, pp. 51, 61–62, 67, 182–83). This framing was also encouraged by the service’s own robust bookends, musically akin to an introduction and coda: proceedings always began with the Venite, a lengthy exhortation to worship, and on Sundays and feasts they always ended with the Te Deum, an ancient and universally beloved hymn of praise and thanksgiving. The overall narrative shape is also clearly pre-empted by the very experience of the night’s passing, as just discussed, insofar as the return of the sun is and was always the eagerly anticipated endpoint of the night watch, replete with messages of revelation, catharsis, and fulfilment.

Let us see how this works in the early *historia* for the main feast of Ste Foy. On the face of it, a prospective author might logically have chosen to begin their narrative thread with the antiphons at First Vespers, the first proper chants of the feast. Instead, however, the author of this *historia* located the beginning of their story in the chants that begin the Night Office nocturns, shortly after the Venite. Thus the twelve Psalm antiphons (‘Sancta et venerabilis’ to ‘Poenis applicita’), sung across the first two nocturns, trace a narrative from Ste Foy’s birth and parentage to the arrival of her antagonist Dacian to the moment of her martyrdom; the twelfth Psalm antiphon that ends the second nocturn and the canticle antiphon that begins the third nocturn (‘Multi enim venientes’) then begin a new, posthumous chapter of her life by voicing the perspective of the bystanders who bore witness to her constancy ([Bouillet and Servières 1900](#), pp. 644–45). In this way, the *historia* enacts an ingenious and seamless transformation of perspective across the Night Office, moving from historical exemplarity in the first two nocturns to the role of the believer in the liturgical present in the third. This theme continues in the antiphons of Lauds.

A very similar trajectory is followed in the main *historia*’s responsories, which likewise begin their narrative not at Vespers, but in the Night Office (‘Beatissime virginis Fidis’ to ‘Iam nunc o venerabilis’) ([Bouillet and Servières 1900](#), pp. 645–47). After the early chants wax biographical, those of the third nocturn take us towards the liturgical present, narrating in turn the miracle of the dove seen above her head (which is the first intimation of her future/current sanctity), the ugly moment of her decapitation, and her resultant triumph in heaven, concluding with a prayer for her patronal protection on behalf of those who sing. By this point there is no question that the chanting belongs in the *hic et nunc* of the Benedictine monks who guarded Ste Foy’s relics. The point is hammered home by the final responsory chant, ‘Iam nunc o venerabilis’, whose prominent threefold refrain (the so-called *repetendum*) dwells not on Ste Foy but on the intercessory needs of her community: ‘we therefore pray that your protections will embrace us forever’ (‘ideoque tua rogamus patrocinia foveant nos in secula’). The verb ‘rogamus’ also cleverly pre-empted the ‘laudamus’ of the opening phrase of the Te Deum, which follows immediately, both verbs conjugated to express the feelings of the community at large. In the Sélestat *historia* we can see much the same taking place, including a comparable petition at the end of the final responsory chant, ‘O coruscans in superno’, which would also have been repeated several times in performance and was also voiced in the first person plural: ‘may your intercession with Christ come to our aid’ ([AH 45](#), p. 72: ‘tua nobis apud Christum adsit intercessio’).

Among the few differences in the Sélestat *historia*, however, is the delaying of the dove miracle until the chants of Lauds. In Benedictine communities, Lauds followed the Night Office after a short *intervallum* for reflection or private prayer, such that this next service concluded at or near the coming of the new day. In many commentary traditions, Lauds was thus seen as an honorary fourth nocturn of Matins, since it brought with it the

cosmic and theological fulfilment to which the previous service had pointed. The sense of arrival would have been most obvious when, towards the end of Lauds, perhaps at the cusp of first light, all stood to sing the climactic Benedictus canticle (Luke 1.68-79), with its evocation as Christ the 'dayspring from on high', who has come 'to give light to them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace'. Through the placement of the dove miracle at Lauds, the community at Sélestat thus embraced a widely employed narrative set piece, commemorating the first signs of sanctity in a service that also celebrated the light and salvation of the world. For similar reasons, it can have been no coincidence that both the main *historia* and the Sélestat *historia* waited until Lauds to tell of St Caprasius, the faithful bystander who saw Ste Foy's torture, beheld the first miracle, and then spread the news of her martyrdom to Christians far and wide. The fact that the Benedictus antiphon of the translation *historia* ('Virgo prudentissima') celebrated Ste Foy as 'reddening intensely like the dawn' ('quasi aurora valde rutilans') and 'beautiful like the moon, elect like the sun' ('pulcra ut luna, electa ut sol') now needs no further gloss (Bouillet and Servières 1900, p. 649).

In these various ways it should be clear how the creativity of Ste Foy's *historiae*—as well as their capacity to generate meaning in performance—was inseparable from the overlapping liturgical and environmental templates in which they were conceived. But this is only the half of it. On feast days, the execution of nocturnal services, above all the Night Office, involved a very deliberate layer of sensory stimulation, delivered across a wide array of gestures, techniques, and props. This included attention to matters of decoration, illumination, incense, musical intensification, and variations in the number and disposition of participants. Such factors are easily dismissed as local atmospheric, or at least not meaningfully constitutive of the ritual. One might also suppose that this level of detail is impossible to analyse at such a distance. But there is actually a considerable amount of medieval evidence to the contrary, whose relative lack of scholarly exposure may be attributed to the fact that it resides not in conventional liturgical books, but in arm's-length institutional records, above all those known as customaries and ordinals (Hallinger 1980; Hänggi 1957). Surveying these sources teaches us that the nocturnal sensory experience was in fact tightly controlled, at least on paper, and that it was closely aligned to the kinds of musical and textual creativity we have been considering thus far (cf. the discussion of Vespers in Pentcheva 2023b, pp. 69–73).

In the absence of any such record from Conques itself, the observations that follow are built upon documents of custom from the French Benedictine abbeys of Fleury and Saint-Bénigne in Dijon from the eleventh century on (Davril 1984, pp. 42–46; Davril 1976, pp. 292–406; Chomton 1900, pp. 353–34). Although the bulk of the information comes from twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts, in each case there are good reasons to trust in a line of continuity back to the time of the early Conques *historiae* (Davril 1976, pp. xli–xlvi; Malone 2009, pp. 25, 208–14). Indeed, the root of these practices is arguably to be found neither in Fleury or Saint-Bénigne, nor in Conques, but in the Rule of Benedict, the sixth-century text that was common to more or less all monastic institutions of this period. The Rule afforded not only a general blueprint for performing the Divine Office throughout the year, but also a number of specific performance details that go beyond the realm of the textual: one is the expectation that the community stand for the final responsory at the end of each Night Office nocturn (*RB* 9.7, 11.3); another is the tradition of having the Night Office conclude with three key elements (*Te Deum*, Gospel, and *Te decet laus*) sung or begun by the abbot, that is, the most senior figure in the monastery (*RB* 11.8–10). As we shall now see, the liturgical customs at places such as Fleury and Dijon can be seen to take those principles and augment them in several dimensions, creating what we might term a 'sensory narrative' from one end of the Night Office to the other (cf. Oury 1971; Parkes 2021).

On the patronal feasts of St Benedict and St Bénigne, respectively, there were at least three ways in which the Night Office ritual was shaped and structured by such sensory events. First, the rubrics specify a number of actions that intensify the specific moment of

each nocturn's end. Benedict's Rule mentions standing for the concluding responsory chant. But in the documents of Fleury and Saint-Bénigne, this physical gesture was complemented by augmentations in amplitude and time: a third soloist was added to the two used to this point, and the responsory was repeated on completion (at Saint-Bénigne this was skipped in the first nocturn). At Fleury, the monks also required neumas, or melodic embellishments, to extend and adorn their singing, just as we find notated in the two early *historiae* of Ste Foy. At Saint-Bénigne, the soloists additionally donned copes, with an attendant visual heightening (one imagines) and perhaps an added haptic or proprioceptive effect for the singers wearing heavy garments faced with silk. Thirteenth-century directions from Fleury further specify that twelve extra candles were to be lit during the lesson preceding the last responsory of the first nocturn, with an attendant visual impact. These gestures were themselves preceded in both institutions by the visual and olfactory stimulation offered by incense, as a priest in a cope (two priests at Fleury) censured the community and their main altars.

Second, the rubrics describe actions that create a sense of progression from one nocturn to the next, by heightening or otherwise increasing the level of stimulus. Thus, Benedict's rubrics about the abbot performing at the end of the service were anticipated at Fleury by a hierarchical sequence of readers and singers across all three nocturns, creating multiple, perceptible progressions from young to old and from inexperienced to experienced. At Fleury, further candles were lit at the end of the second nocturn, when one further singer was added to the number of soloists. At Saint-Bénigne, further candles were lit in advance of the readings of the third nocturn. In both institutions censuring took place once per nocturn, which clearly would have had a cumulative effect on the church space. Third, the rubrics pay particular attention to the moment of arrival at the end of the third nocturn, when the final responsory was completed and the *Te Deum* begun and when, according to Benedict's Rule, the abbot assumed liturgical responsibility. At Fleury, the final responsories of the final nocturn were sung by singers in saffron or green copes, implicitly a change from what had come before, after which the two tower bells were rung to accompany the ecstatic strains of the *Te Deum*. When it came to the reading of the Gospel at the end, a procession was formed with two candelabras, creating more light and a new point of focus, and the abbot donned a white chasuble that had been prepared for the purpose.

Thus far we have been considering the general dynamics of the Night Office on patronal feasts, but it is important to understand that certain aspects of this experience continued into Lauds, as if aligned to the *historiae* narratives that customarily continued to unfurl within this honorary fourth nocturn. The liturgical rubrics from both Fleury and Saint-Bénigne ask for the lights to remain lit, which can be seen in purely pragmatic terms, though with a gap between the services and with the dawn approaching this might also be seen as an unnecessary indulgence—and thus a gesture of potentially symbolic intent. Most interestingly, the Fleury practice on the December (*illatio*) feast of St Benedict was to stage a kind of gradual denuding of the altar throughout the Night Office and Lauds. Forty pieces of cloth (*pallia*), laid down in advance, were then removed one by one in close coordination with the liturgical action, until the final one was removed at the singing of the Benedictus canticle that ended Lauds (Davril 1976, p 264; cf. Davril 1984, p. 44). The meanings of this practice require considerably more thought, but they probably had something to do with the relics of St Benedict, which resided in close proximity to the high altar. For at least part of the Middle Ages the patron's body resided in a richly jewelled reliquary on or behind that altar (Davril 1976, pp. liii–liv). Thus, it seems reasonable to suppose that the purpose here was to uncover Benedict's holy remains slowly during the course of the night, such that his casket was finally glimpsed—and its spiritual presence felt—in the splendour of the morning light. Although we are now well into the realms of hypothesis, it is not at all hard to imagine a similar practice being employed for Ste Foy at Conques, for the famous statue-reliquary would seem almost tailor-made for such a ritual. Assuming similar rubrics, it is possible to imagine its form and colour slowly materialising over the course of several hours, as the monks ceremoniously removed each successive drape—such

that the metaphorical darkness of her death gave way to the miraculous light and presence of her main October feast.

4. Conclusions

What I hope to have shown in this article is that the medieval *historia* existed in a performative space in which many expressive parameters collided. On the highest feasts at the Abbey of Conques, we may reasonably infer that one or other of the *historiae* was sung by the monks in honour of Ste Foy, not on its own, but within a richly variegated liturgical framework that also included lessons from the saint's *Passio*, within an acoustic and architectural space that (per Pentcheva and Abel) could summon untold meanings and experiences, and within a largely nocturnal arena that created all kinds of unique experiential affordance, with a potency that was potentially greatly augmented in a pre-modern environment. The entirety of this experience was then overlaid with layers of sensory play, richly documented and thus evidently a matter of great deliberation, though still infrequently acknowledged as such in musical or liturgical discussions today. To a large extent, these different parameters must be considered as parallel strands that existed only in a loose counterpoint, with ample capacity to generate meaning in the moment, yet without the kind of conscious, top-down design that would permit a modern scholar to reconstruct it. We are therefore relatively constrained in what we can say of this overarching experience, forced to speculate in the subjunctive about what it might mean *were* a musical life-to-death narrative to have coincided with a particular set of lessons, framed within a climactic three- or fourfold ritual shape, superimposed onto a cosmic trajectory, and/or adorned with sights, sounds, and smells that contrive to create a purposeful sensory journey.

Yet, it is important to appreciate that, from time to time, active coordination across these different media *is* a feature of the liturgical records we have been considering. That is to say, there is evidence that medieval authors were indeed thinking about how the musical dimensions aligned with the visual, or about how a moment to change posture or volume was also the moment for a narrative high point, and so on (cf. [Pentcheva 2023a, 2023b, 2023c](#)). Instinct says that this ought to be so, given that decorated festal Offices were a weekly occurrence at a minimum, and elements of these performance practices can be traced back to no less than the founding document of Benedictine monasticism, long before the first known saint's *historia*. For a more concrete form of confirmation, we can consider the textile ritual just mentioned. Although the rubrics reveal little of the purpose of this practice at Fleury, the wording implies that the majority of actions were cued by successive antiphons and responsories, which is to say, by the matrix of compositions otherwise known as a *historia*. Indeed, the coordination goes deeper, for the rubrics distinguish between the ordinary cloths and the 'more precious' ones ('*pallia pretiosiora*') that were to be removed and displayed during each of the three nocturn-ending responsories ([Davril 1976](#), p 264). From that we learn that this was an exquisitely planned piece of choreography, for it required the sacristan to pre-prepare forty cloths, of differing quality, in the precise reverse order of their use. We may also observe, very simply, that the consequence of these rubrics is the coordination of liturgical sound and liturgical action.

Approaching the matter from another direction, knowledge of the kinds of sensory trajectory in operation in the festal Night Office allows us to detect sensorily infused language, of the sort that might once have evaded our notice. The translation *historia* for Ste Foy has two good examples among many that could be cited: there is the nocturn-ending responsory 'Ecce tu pulcra es', performed at the end of the night in a thrice-censed space, whose text obsesses about smell ('odor' is in its refrain, and it ends with a prosula that rhymes 'spiceo', 'cinnaméo', and 'balsamo') (cf. [Pentcheva 2023b](#), pp. 69–73), and there is the previously encountered Benedictus antiphon 'Virgo prudentissima', for the end of Lauds, in which the saint is imagined as glowing red like the incipient dawn. In such instances, we can glimpse a palpable three-dimensionality to the festal Divine Office, where the cumulative effect of music, text, delivery, and framing veer much more closely towards that which we might call 'drama' than to liturgical prayer as conventionally

defined—though it will require another article to work through the implications of such a claim.

What the drama parallel does allow us to do here, though, is to work against the perceived autonomy of medieval *historiae* as instances of predominantly musical creativity. At the beginning of this article, I was careful to introduce the *historia* as kind of musical substitution into the liturgy, which is to say, as an enrichment of something that already existed as a valid religious expression. I also explained how these clusters of chants were transmitted in ways that emphasised their singularity and compositional integrity and were feted in their own time for these same qualities. But that does not mean that we are seeing the whole artistic picture. To offer an obvious but potentially helpful modern parallel, a film soundtrack may be considered artistically self-sufficient by its critics, it may be attributed widely to the labour of a single individual, and it is likely to have a successful life of its own in the form of an audio recording or sheet music. Yet, most would still recognise that its fullest interpretation is contingent upon the fullest consideration of the artistic whole. Indeed, without that larger context certain features may not be explicable, or they may invite explanations that cannot be sustained when further evidence is admitted. The same can be said for *historiae*. Considered on their own terms, certain features of these compositions have a tendency to perplex or divide their musicological audiences, above all the use of modal order and the manner in which different chant genres tend to sustain conflicting narrative threads. Without offering any immediate answers here, I am convinced that a more capacious framing of their creativity points the way towards resolution (cf. Parkes 2021, pp. 51–52). The ‘Enchanted Images’ project teaches us a similar lesson in respect of the visual and acoustic artefacts of medieval Conques.

A more holistic perspective on the *historia* also helps put certain intractable problems of historical performance in a more comfortable perspective. Some of the research for this article has brought attention to under-publicised rubrics about extra chant repeats, added melodic flourishes, and the number and type of performers, all of which could be fed into another historically informed performance or critical edition. To reach beyond the muteness of the score in this way is no less than the pre-requisite for approaching its historical acoustic imprint. But in the same breath, I would argue that to approach a sense of the embodied, actualised experience of a medieval *historia* in its liturgical delivery, we must avoid becoming stuck inside the aural envelope—to misuse Pentcheva’s formulation—and instead embrace the discomfiting uncertainties of the many performance parameters that lie beyond the verbal and the vocal. In closing, however, I must also acknowledge that at Conques, as at so many other interesting centres of medieval creativity, we have almost no first-hand evidence of how the Night Office really worked. And so, whilst the *historiae* of Ste Foy are destined to live on, their posterity assured by the legible notations of their surviving manuscripts, their performative existence remains irritatingly hard to discern, hidden among shadows both methodological and real.

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Abbreviations

- AH* Blume, Clemens, Guido Maria Dreves, and Henry Marriott Bannister (eds.). 1886–1922. *Analecta hymnica medii aevi*. 55 vols. Leipzig: O. R. Reisland.
- BHL* Bollandists (eds.). 1898. *Bibliotheca hagiographica latina antiquae et mediae aetatis*. 2 vols. Brussels: Société des Bollandistes.
- RB* Fry, Timothy (ed.). 1981. *RB 1980: The Rule of St Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Notes

- ¹ Although we have no direct evidence of the readings used at Conques, the *Passio* was used for this purpose at Saint-Martial in Limoges (Paris, BnF, Lat. 5301, ff. 328r–329v) and Sélestat (Sélestat, Bibliothèque Humaniste, Ms. 22 (olim 95), ff. 5v–7v).
- ² Andrew Hughes recorded around 28900 ‘poems’ in a database of some 1260 surviving Offices (Hughes 2012, vol. 1, pp. 13, 21–22), though this must now be considered an underestimate.
- ³ Lay participation is described throughout the *Liber miraculorum*, but above all in the ‘miracle of the double doors’, which turns on the commotion caused by the sheer number of pilgrims expecting to attend the Night Office (Sheingorn 1995, pp. 137–39).

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