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**The Byzantine Legacy in the Manuscripts *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame*
by Gautier De Coinci**

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This article is an attempt to analyze the Byzantine legacy in the text and miniatures in one of the most important collections of miracles in the 13th century, *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame* by Gautier de Coinci. It isn't intended to be in agreement with medieval images, but the ideas that are deduced from his argument are visually interpreted, soon after, in a context highlighting scholastic theories, which systematized the inherited ideology of the Second Council of Nicaea. Thus, in the manuscripts written before 1300, we found the use of various iconographic resources, which aim to express the link between the prototype and its image. Of all the copies, the manuscript kept in Besançon (MS 551) shows more forcefully these changes that occurred throughout the 13th century; its illustrators most likely used double representations and excessive realism, such as the size and the attitudes that appear as an animated object, and become a surrogate of the Virgin herself.

Keywords: Gautier de Coinci, miracles, Marian images, illuminated manuscripts

Miracle collections are an important testimony to the worshipped image (*imago*) in the West during the Middle Ages.¹ On the one hand, they reflect increased devotion to them from the year 1000 and, on the other, they denote the inherent characteristics these images acquire depending on the figure represented.² In this way, Marian images are soon associated with their model's role of *mediatrix*. In their origin, the seated Virgin, called the Throne of Wisdom, served a liturgical purpose: to show the Incarnation of Christ and extol the spiritual maternity of the Virgin, but they did not always have the preserved condition of relics and they possessed a certain individual status just like the crucified Christ.³ To this status must be added the growing interest in Mary's intercession and the surge that her images experienced from the 11th century onwards, linking them closely with the miraculous. Within a short period of time, her sanctuaries and pilgrimage centres were presented as places where it was possible to see the supernatural, often through an image,⁴ and where the first collections, dedicated to the miracles worked by the Virgin would emerge.⁵ On the other hand, various Western authors turned their gaze towards Byzantine ideas, especially after the works of Saint John Damascene.⁶ Although the attitude against images became less strict as the Middle Ages wore on, there were gaps in the theoretical framework. Individuals such as Alain de Lille and Peter Lombard began to assimilate part of the Eastern arguments in order to construct a theory that was consistent with the Western Church; the correction of the error in translating the concepts of *latría* (adoration) and *dulia* (veneration), the acceptance of the *transitus* between the prototype and the image, and acknowledging the role of the senses and the material in knowing the unintelligible and divine.

With the new century, all these changes became more consolidated. There was a wide proliferation in miracle collections, which went from being simple compilations to a genre of devotional literature, among which those dedicated to the Virgin are particularly noteworthy.⁷ It is within this context that the figure of Gautier de Coinci (1177-1236) emerged and his work, *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame*,⁸ written with the aim of combining his personal fervour with the promotion of devotion to the Virgin Mary.⁹ The author includes images of Mary throughout the narration, where in addition to presenting them as agents of the miracle or instruments of mediation, he also recom-

mends they should be worshipped in order to honour the Mother of God.¹⁰ The collection spread widely from 1250 onwards, as can be seen in the 30 or so manuscripts preserved in the present day,¹¹ six of which were illuminated before the fourteenth century.¹² This dichotomy of text and image allows us to analyse the origin of the visual culture around the Christian image, as well as its possible relationship with Byzantine ideas and Western discussions.

Gautier de Coinci and the *imago*

In one of the last miracles in his collection, Gautier offers readers the following advice: "He who prays before the image of Our Lady nourishes his soul with rich delicacies. Always remember the nun, the holy woman, whose ardent faith made a miraculous liquid ooze from an icon".¹³ His recommendation reflects the tradition that emerged at pilgrimage centres but, by acknowledging the miraculous power of the image and its role within prayer, he also moves away from the postulates of Saint Augustine, which relegated it to merely didactic use.¹⁴ In another miracle, about the conversion of a Saracen, he offers this warning to clergy and laity alike: "Our Sweet Lady is happy when we serve her with all our heart and honour her image. We must behave well and honour her likeness as these unbelievers did. Clergy who do not clean her images and altars every morning commit a grave error. The Moor has more in his hands than the one who refuses to clean an altar. By my soul, may the spider wound the eyes of he who allows it to weave its web on an image of Our Lady [...] If we neither pray to nor honour the image of Our Lady and Her Son, why should a peasant do so, when he has never even heard tell of God? Wise men honour the Holy Church and her images. He who does not honour the Crucified Christ will never believe in God. He who takes my lady the Virgin Mary as his beloved must know that it does not please her when they come across her image and do not stop to greet her. He who honours her image cannot fall into dishonour, and whosoever has honoured Our Lady on earth will be rewarded in Paradise."¹⁵ In this reflection we find three of the Benedictine monk's ideas that speak of the sacred component of images. The first is to link them to Church tradition. Just as the Council of Arras (1025) and Rupert of Deutz decreed,¹⁶ Gautier de Coinci transforms them into symbols of faith and, moreover, defends them from their critics.¹⁷ Thus, in another tale, he tells how Julian the Apostate threatens the bishop of Caesarea with the destruction of the statue of the Virgin Mary located in the city, mocking it and punningly calling it *Marieta* or Little Mary.¹⁸ Here the emperor is the archetypal enemy of Christianity and its images,¹⁹ a characteristic traditionally associated with the Jews, who also appear in this collection.²⁰ In the same way, the wizard helping Theophilus to sign a pact with the Devil insists that he neither contemplates nor venerates depictions of Christ and His Mother.²¹ Both antagonists serve to place the images within Church tradition, at the same time as he presents them as sacred objects for the reader.

The second idea is the existence of the *transitus* towards the prototype. This link was one of the fundamental pillars of the iconophiles arguments. Saint Basil and, later, Saint John Damascene justified the worship of icons because the holy figure was venerated through them.²² Although many Western theologians, especially the Carolingians,²³ rejected this proposal, the translation of Byzantine works at the end of the 12th century had a considerable impact on its acceptance. Peter Lombard (1100-1160) and Alain de Lille (1128?-1202) draw the same distinction between *latria* and *dulia* as the Greek theologians: "A Christian in no way adores the image of any things, but rather pays homage to the sacred images and paintings of the saints".²⁴ These Western authors reached the same conclusion as their Byzantine counterparts: the image is venerated, not adored, in order thus to honour the sacred prototype. The same affirmation can be seen in Gautier de Coinci's text, albeit inserted within a devotional discourse. In the above-mentioned miracle of the Saracen, where he indicates "He who honours her image cannot fall into dishonour, and whosoever has honoured Our Lady on earth will be rewarded in Paradise", de Coinci is using terms that avoid the confusion with *adoratio* and establishing a *transitus* between the Virgin and her representations. He even places in the Virgin's mouth the recommendation to honour her images, as we see in another narrative where she saves the soul of a monk who has drowned: "How dare you lay your hands on one who has served me so well, day and night, and has knelt so often before my image with a good heart?".²⁵

The Byzantine theses make it possible to explain the mediating power of Marian images and why they must be venerated. Following this thread, among the different miracles he includes devotional practices known before the Iconoclasm,²⁶ among which he singles out prayer, genuflection and offerings:²⁷ "Lamps are put to good use when they are placed before her image. Everyone must understand that they must take large numbers of candles to the image of Our Lady, like the poor woman who took beautiful fat candles to Her so that She would give her back her son."²⁸

The third idea is that this worship should not only seek the Virgin's intervention, but also seek spiritual rapprochement. This is how he explains it in the tale of the Saydnaya icon: "We clergy have no excuse not to bow down in prayer before her image. If we bow down and kneel before her image, with devotion and a sincere heart, all the evil in our thoughts will dissipate. When the body is prostrate, our thoughts go towards God. When we kneel on the ground, our heart runs towards God. He who kneels before the holy image of the Mother of God has good attitudes and will live a long life."²⁹ In this interesting fragment, Gautier de Coinci is referring to the sanctifying role of the images and the value of aesthetic contemplation, an idea deriving from Eastern Neo-Platonism that spread through the West from the end of the twelfth century onwards.³⁰ This material and spiritual benefit does not appear in other collections from the same period, like Caesarius of Heisterbach's *Dialogum Miraculorum*.³¹ Although he recognizes their ability to work miracles,³² there is not such an explicit reference to devotion and worship as in *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame*.

It cannot be said that the French collection is a treatise on the *imago*, since we do not find reflection like that of Alain de Lille or the Nicene Fathers. But this lack of organization does not detract from the ideas that appear in the dialogues, arguments and conclusions of his narratives. Gautier de Coinci lived under the influence of the one of the most important centres of Marian pilgrimage in France, and he was aware of the association between images and the supernatural, which transformed them into an instrument of mediation used by the Virgin herself. This tradition is explained in precise terms, very similar to those that were used further?? to the Western translation and interpretation of the Byzantine texts. The second book of miracles ends with the history of an image kept in Constantinople:³³ "According to Greek custom, which is beautiful and courtly, in the chapel there was a beautiful image of Our Lady."³⁴ The use of the expression "Greek custom" to refer to the worship of icons may indicate that this Benedictine author may have been thoroughly versed in the ideas inherited from the Second Council of Nicaea.

Byzantine ideas and miraculous images in the visual culture of the 13th century

The status of Gothic images is due, in part, to the assimilation of the Byzantine arguments by Scholastic theologians, who also shared in the new way of seeing and perceiving the world. To the theoretical questions should be added the Church's attitude towards favouring a closer, more intimate religious experience. In the miniatures of the manuscripts of *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame*, we find traces of a new visual culture speaking to us of this new framework that legitimizes the sacred nature of the images and their worship.

One of the miracle tales narrates the story of a wife who prayed every day for her husband's lover to disappear.³⁵ The Mother of God, attentive to her pleas, asks her rival to change her attitude as both women are staunchly devoted to her. The decorative initial accompanying this text in the manuscript at the National Library of France (MS fr. 25532) shows the apparition of the Virgin and the meeting of the two protagonists (fig. 1). In the right-hand frame, we see the woman kneeling before the Virgin and her statue on an altar, both crowned with a halo and holding a fruit in her right hand. Although there is no explicit reference in the text, the artist chooses this double representation in order to explain the connection that links the image to its sacred prototype.

Images become even more prominent in the 13th century for two reasons: the Church's attitude after the Fourth Lateran Council and the intellectual work of the Scholastic theologians. The canons of this synod prompted the need to see in order to believe, and focused attention on miraculous objects,³⁶ just as had occurred with the Eucharist, whose liturgy and altars were adapted to display the transformation of the sacramental substances



1 *Miracle of two women*, National Library of France, MS fr. 25532, f. 96r.



2-3 *Apparition of the Virgin to Theophilus*, Library of Besançon, MS 551, ff. 13r and 14r.

to the believers.³⁷ This presumption, united with the struggle against heresies, turned the image into an object of devotion and a proof of the hegemony of the Church of Rome, as can be seen in the cults of the Veil of Veronica, promoted by Pope Innocent III,³⁸ or the icon of the Virgin placed in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore.³⁹

The miraculous properties served to establish these institutional uses, but they also consolidated the role of images in private worship. In this respect, the mendicant orders and lay confraternities used them for the purpose of presenting the divinity and sacred figures in their most human and empathetic facet.⁴⁰ If Mary was fundamental because of her role in the Incarnation of Christ, now she took on greater prominence when presented as mother and *mediatrix* close to sinners and the just. In this way, some of her miracles ceased being known just in written sources and went on to invade the visual space, as is the case of the Legend of Theophilus.⁴¹ In Gautier de Coinci's text, the narrative centres on the scenes of private devotion, where the Virgin's apparition is mediated by the image on the altar.⁴² This is what happens, for the first time, when the protagonist decides to pray for forty days: "I shall go to her holy church, and spend all my life begging day and night, with all my heart, in front of her image. I shall beg on bended knees that her beloved Son, who is so good, grant me peace and reconciliation through his great mercy".⁴³

One of the longest versions of the story is found in the Besançon manuscript MS 551. The two miniatures corresponding to this fragment show the sacred prototype and image together (figs. 2, 3) and, in exactly the same way, at the moment when the protagonist is given back her pact (figs. 4, 5). The illuminator uses this double representation with the same purpose that we have previously seen: to explain visually the relationship between the Virgin and her sculpture, since the Virgin appears after her statue has been prayed to.⁴⁴



4-5 *The Virgin returns the letter to Theophilus*, Library of Besançon, MS 551, ff. 15 v.



6 *The conversion of Saracen*, National Library of France, MS 22928, f. 113v.



8 *The icon desecrated*, National Library of France, MS 22928, f. 69r.



7 *The conversion of Saracen*, National Library of Russia, MS Fr. F. v. XIV. 9, f. 103v.



9 Gautier de Coinci write his miracle collection, National Library of France, MS fr. 25532, f. 7r.



10 Miracle of Theophilus, National Library of France, MS fr. 22928, f. 42r.



11 The Clerk of Chartres, National Library of Russia, MS Fr. f. v. XIV. 9, f. 73v.



12 Miracle of the pregnant abbess, Library of Besançon, MS 551, f. 41r.



13 Miracle of the monk of five roses, Library of Besançon, MS 551, f. 46r.



14 Miracle of the excommunicated, Library of Besançon, MS 551, f. 66v.

The idea of the *transitus* became part of Western culture from the 13th century onwards thanks to the works of Scholastic philosophers, the most important of these being Saint Bonaventure (1218-1274) and Saint Thomas Aquinas (1224/1225-1274). The influence of the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius is obvious in Bonaventure's arguments,⁴⁵ but he also included the tradition of the *acheiropoieta* kept in Byzantium: "However, Saint John Damascene recalls two traditions regarding the image. The first is an anecdote about a painting that the Lord sent King Abgar with his image in the likeness of God. As he could not show it because of the radiance emanating from the face of the Lord, they put a cloth over the face and the image remained imprinted on it, and this met with Abgar's wishes. He also says that 'we have heard that Luke painted the Lord and his Mother', and he highlights that this has nothing to do with the images of invention but rather has to do with the divine traditions sanctified by the apostles".⁴⁶ The second, for its part, reflects even better the postulates of Saints Basil and John Damascene: "The movement towards the image is twofold: one refers to the image as an object or reality, and the other as the image of another thing. Therefore, we have to say that no veneration should be rendered to the image of Christ as an object, whether carved out of wood or painted; we only do so in respect of what it represents. Therefore, the same veneration must be rendered to Christ himself and to his image, if the former is owed a cult of *latría*, it is logical to do the same with the latter".⁴⁷

The Dominican saint interpreted the materiality of the image from a symbolic point of view, and even deemed it equivalent to its sacred prototype.⁴⁸ This also takes us back to the Fourth Lateran Council. The Dogma of Transubstantiation recognized the presence of the Son of God in the Eucharistic substances, a condition now applied to the images.⁴⁹ Following the formula of the Nicene postulates, they were granted a sacred character that was manifested in two directions: on the one hand, the believer could honour the figure depicted and, on the other hand, it allowed the figure to manifest itself. The dual representations that we see in the manuscripts of *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame* visually reinforce the Byzantine *transitus* and show the mediating power of the Marian images.⁵⁰

Another feature of the Gothic image is its material appearance and symbolic value. The humanization of the divine and the role of the senses, both present in the miracles, are now a way of accessing and knowing the divine. This condition has implications for the artistic forms which become more natural in order to favour spiritual proximity. If the Eucharist is transformed into the sacrament that joins matter with God, the same perspective turns the image into an irreplaceable object of devotion.⁵¹ This new individual status is more obvious when it involves miraculous deeds. In the group of manuscripts made in the Soissons region,⁵² the interpretation of the icon made by the artists does not correspond to Byzantine schemes, because they show the Virgin full length, but always place her on a pillar. The story narrating the conversion of the Saracen appears in the same way in the three codices (figs. 6, 7, 8), juxtaposing the scene where the protagonist is praying in front of the image with the scene of his baptism. We find an identical representation in the story of the icon profaned by a Jew (fig. 9). Placing them on a column reinforces their status as objects of devotion, since they are all examples of apotropaic images, either through producing oil with curative properties or because they ward off attacks from enemies. This arrangement not only refers us back to the vision of the monk Robert of Mozat, in which a sculpture-reliquary of the Virgin appears with an identical support,⁵³ but also to a process of supplantation made of the stereotype of pagan idols, commonly represented in this way.⁵⁴

Yet, we should not forget the preference for the human side of Mary over the spiritual.⁵⁵ The role of *mediatrix* is represented by a closer,⁵⁶ more empathetic Mother-Son connection, causing her images to acquire more realistic, natural forms.⁵⁷ In the illustration of the first prologue we find in a manuscript in the National Library of France (MS fr. 25532), Gautier de Coinci is writing his work in front of an altar carving, considerably bigger if we compare it with those appearing in the rest of the codex (fig. 10). The same thing happens in a miniature of the miracle of Theophilus in another copy (MS fr. 22928), where the protagonist first appears praying before a large-scale sculpture (fig. 11). In these two cases, both representations have halos and the altar has been reduced to a small pedestal on which the throne of the image is placed. As these two scenes depict the devotion of the protagonists, the figure of the Virgin breaks the static relationship and comes closer to the viewer.⁵⁸ Illustrations

like these blur the distinction with the sacred prototype, because the sculpture ceases to be a simple object on an altar. According to Gautier de Coinci's text, there was a cleric in Chartres who prayed every day in front of an image: "He had only one good quality: he would never pass in front of the image of Our Lady, even if lusting after a woman or in great need, without kneeling down in front of Her. He would greet Her on his knees with tears on his face, beating his chest in humility".⁵⁹

In the first scene of the miniature, the cleric appears praying before the image (fig. 12). However, because it is not on an altar, it goes from being an inert figure to a figure that is almost alive. Michael Camille explains the humanized appearance of these images as proof of their mediating character and the spiritual access they provide within private devotion.⁶⁰ The Besançon codex (MS 551) is the one that makes most use of these representations, above all when the protagonist is represented. In the miracles of the pregnant abbess (fig. 13) and the monk of the five roses (fig. 14), both of them kneel before a haloed image bearing a flower in one hand.⁶¹ The naturalism applied by this artist not only allows him to make their appearance more familiar but also gives the impression that they have come to life, as in the history of the excommunicated man (fig. 15), where she appears in dialogue with the main character.⁶² The artists show the new condition acquired by miraculous images in collective and individual devotional practices,⁶³ thanks to the influence of the Byzantine ideas and the increased value placed on the senses.⁶⁴

Gautier de Coinci's discourse draws on the tradition that emerged in the centres of Marian pilgrimage, where miraculous images became the focus of attention because of the Virgin's role as *mediatrix*. Spending part of his life under the influence of the Soissons sanctuary, it is logical that he should systematically include them in his collection, given that it was a custom with which he was familiar. However, the arguments he uses to speak of her cult hark back to the Byzantine ideas present in Western discourses from the end of the twelfth century. The legacy of Nicaea is present in the author's three main ideas: the worship of the *imago* forms part of Church tradition, serving to honour the prototype represented (*transitus*) and bringing spiritual benefit. Shortly afterwards these ideas are interpreted visually, in a context dominated by Scholastic theories and Rome's institutional stance, which advocated a closer religious experience. Both factors configure the characteristics of the new Gothic image. Thus, the iconographic device of double representation is used to show the connection linking the sacred prototype and its depiction, placing them together in scenes where the protagonist's prayers are answered by the apparition of the Virgin.

In turn, the *imago* is a bidirectional nexus: it allows the faithful to approach the sacred person and it gives material form to divine power. This twofold function transforms it into an individualized object of devotion. The miniatures in the codices made in the Soissons region underline this condition by placing on a column those representations that whip up collective fervour due to their apotropaic virtues. However, this distance is broken in the case of private experiences in which the image is presented with a more naturalized appearance, losing its status as an altar object. The humanization that invades religious experience will use its visual component to achieve greater proximity. The illuminations, like that of the miracle of the cleric from Chartres, where the Virgin's appearance is almost that of a living object, reflect this function. Of all the extant copies, the one preserved in the Besançon Library is the one that demonstrates most convincingly the changes that took place over the course of the 13th century. All these iconographic devices form part of a new visual culture that showed Marian images as almost living objects, transforming them into a substitute for the Virgin herself.

Sources for Images:

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Figs. 7, 9, 11 From: I.P. MOKRETSOVA-V.L. ROMANOVA, *Les Manuscrits enluminés français du XIIIe siècle dans les collections soviétiques, 1270-1300*, Moscow, Isskustvo, 1984, pp. 102-147

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Bizantski utjecaj u rukopisima *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame* Gautiera De Coincija

Ovaj članak analizira prikaze Djevice Marije i druge teme u jednoj od najvažnijih rukopisnih zbirki čuda trinaestoga stoljeća, *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame*, koju je Gautier de Coinci napisao prije 1236. Autorovo je polazište zapadna tradicija i uloga koncepta Prijestolja Mudrosti u okviru promjena odnosa prema „slici“ i liturgijskog značaja posredničke uloge Majke Božje, a referira se na komentare bizantske ideje zapadnih teologa 12. stoljeća. To uključuje postavljanje „slike“ u tradiciju Crkve, napad na sve one koji se usude oskvrnuti ju ili uništiti, te upute o načinu poštivanja svetog prototipa kroz hvaljenje i žrtvu. *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame* vizualizira autorove ideje, koje su sistematizirale naslijeđeno učenje Drugog Nicejskog sabora, u oviru oblikovanja nove gotičke „slike“ i načina njenoga štovanja. Tako u rukopisu nalazimo dvostruke prikaze, koji ukazuju na povezanost slike i njezina prototipa, postavljajući ih u isto vrijeme i prostor. Navedena dvojnost odraz je materijaliziranog božanskog prisustva te individualne pobožnosti. Ilustracija, poput *Čuda svećenika u Chartresu*, u kojoj se glavni lik predstavlja kao stvaran, odražava značaj materijalnih i vizualnih komponenata na slikama u osobnoj pobožnosti. Marijanski prikazi imaju dodatnu vrijednost: njihov je model medijator *par excellence*, što daje veću snagu prikazu. Od svih kopija, rukopis čuvan u Besançonu najsnažnije prikazuje promjene nastale u trinaestom stoljeću: korištenje dvostrukih prikaza i naglašen realizam, s posebnim naglaskom na veličinu i „animiranost“ Marijinog lika.

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