

Pierre Colman & Berthe Lhoist-Colman: Les fonts baptismaux de Saint-Barthélemy à Liège. Chef-d'oeuvre sans pareil et noeud de controverses (*Académie Royale de Belgique, Mémoire de la Classe des Beaux-Arts, Collection in-8°, 3^e série, Tome XIX*); Bruxelles 2002; ISSN 0378-7923, ISBN 2-8031-0189-0; 341 pp., ill.; € 31,00

Without any doubt the most remarkable work of art in the Meuse Valley is the famous Liège font. For centuries it stood in the Notre-Dame-aux-Fonts, a small church adjacent to the cathedral of St Lambert, from which it was removed only in the 18th century. The font was then transferred to the church of St Bartholomew where it has remained to this day. In spite of its great fame, very little about it is known for certain.

The first documentary reference to the font is in the *Chronicon Rhythmicum Leodiense*, a work written in Liège and said to have been completed in 1119. The writer of the *Chronicon* devoted no less than 12 verses to the description of the font and from these we learn that abbot Hillinus of Notre-Dame-aux-Fonts had the font made: ‚fontes fecit opere fusili, fusos arte uix comparabili‘. This dates the work between 1107, in which year Hillinus' predecessor is last mentioned, and 1118, in which year Hillinus died. The name of its maker is not mentioned.

In the *Ly Miroir des historis*, written by Jean d'Outremeuse (born circa 1338, died circa 1399), the font is dated to 1113 and a great deal of additional information concerning its origins is presented. According to Jean, the would-be emperor Henry V gave Bishop Otbert of Liège 28 ‚biestes de metals, de demi piet de lonc, si com cherf, bisse, vaches, porc, braches, loyemier (limers)‘ as a reward for the latter's role in the siege of Milan in 1112. The animals were brought to Liège by cart and here Otbert presented or sold them to abbot Hillinus of Notre-Dame-aux-Fonts. Hillinus then called in Lambert Patras, a ‚bon ovriers‘ and a ‚batours‘ from Dinant, who used the animals for the base of the font he made.

A Liège chronicle of 1402, known only through a 16th-century copy, presents a rather different version of the origins of the font. According to this text, it was Bishop Adalbero II of Liège (1135–1145) who ordered the goldsmith Reinerus to make a ‚fontes eneos in Leodio [...] mirabili ymaginum varietate circumdatos, stantes super XII boves diversimode se habentes‘. In a charter dated 1125 a ‚Reinerus aurifaber‘ made a donation to one of the altars of the church of Notre Dame in Huy, and a ‚Reinerus aurifaber‘ is again mentioned in a necrology of the abbey of Neufmoustier near Huy of around 1150. So, in the environs of Liège a ‚Reinerus aurifaber‘ had obviously existed in the 12th century. In 1903 Godefroid Kurth therefore proclaimed this Reinerus of Huy to have been the maker of the Liège font, an attribution that has hardly been questioned since, in spite of the inaccurate chronology of this late, 15th-century source, and in spite of the unlikely supposition that it was a goldsmith who cast the font in one piece according to the ‚cire perdu‘ principle, a highly complicated and advanced technical procedure that requires very different skills from those of the goldsmith.

A variation on the Jean d'Outremeuse version was written down by Louis Abry

(1643–1720). According to him the Emperor Henry gave bishop Otbert ‚plusieurs grands thresors‘ as a reward for the successful siege of Milan. Abry continues that ‚Hellin de St Lambert ramenet le fond de batesme de Nostre-Dame aux fonds qui est de bronze qui se voit à présent‘.

Obviously, the only reliable information provided by these sources is the fact that the font was made for the church of Notre-Dame-aux-Fonts during the abbacy of Hillinus and that it was much admired from the start. The earliest source does not mention the name of its maker, nor is it to be found on the font itself. Later writers therefore have suggested names, but as their testimony is hardly contemporary, and as their accounts of the history of the font are confused, these suggestions should not be taken seriously. We will have to accept that the name of the artist is unknown to us. Considering the less than solid foundations on which Godefroid Kurth built his 1903 hypothesis that Reinerus of Huy was the author of the Liège font it is surprising that generations of art historians have accepted this attribution as absolute fact. An article published by Pierre Colman and Berthe Lhoist-Colman in the *Aachener Kunstblätter* of 1984 was the first to seriously attack the idea of Reinerus' authorship.

This article created quite a stir in Belgium, and in Liège in particular, and marked the beginning of a number of heated debates, for not only did the authors question Reinerus' authorship, they also translated Hillinus' ‚fecit‘ not as ‚fieri fecit‘, as most scholars had done, but as ‚donat‘ or ‚donavit‘. This slightly different translation opened a completely new set of perspectives, as the font could now have come from anywhere and could have been made in any period prior to 1118. To the Colmans, the 12th-century Meuse valley seemed a highly unlikely place for the production of such a font, as none of the more or less contemporary works of art attributed to this region are remotely similar in style, quality or workmanship. This holds true for the art of ivory, book illumination and metalwork. To this one may also add the art of sculpture; there is nothing comparable in the early years of the 12th century and when sculpture becomes more plentiful in the 1140s it is on the whole heavily influenced by that of northern Italy. In the past, most scholars have often remarked on the incredible precocity of the font's classical style. It is thus no more than good scholarly practice that Colman and Lhoist-Colman turned their attention to other lines of inquiry. Even in the Middle Ages patrons, artists and works of art proved to be very mobile. It is an illusion to think that works of art remain in their original context or were all produced locally. And here the accounts of Jean d'Outremeuse and Louis Abry provided an interesting possibility.

What if the font was looted from Milan during Henry V's campaign? The problem with this idea was that Henry looted Milan after Otbert's and Hillinus' lifetime, although he did plunder nearby Novara in 1112. Was there some truth in these accounts? Could the font have come from northern Italy?

The problem with the font is that it does not fit in easily anywhere. It is a unique work and really good art is often the most difficult art to date. Colman and Lhoist-Colman decided that the most likely place of production was Byzantium, during the Macedonian Renaissance, as the art from this period is known for its strong classiciz-

ing tendencies. In spite of its Byzantine workmanship, the font was, in their view, from the outset intended for a patron in the West. In the 10th and 11th centuries many Byzantine imports found their way to the West, among them large works such as portals. The inscriptions on the font were dated to the 12th century and were reckoned to have been added by abbot Hillinus.

It is these ideas that the authors have elaborated during the past twenty years and which have been brought together in the present volume: a compilation of 11 articles, 10 of which have already appeared in print before. These articles are prefaced by two introductions describing the academic careers of both authors in full detail. Article II is a reduced version of the 1984 article (article I) and literally reproduces huge chunks of the earlier article without adding new information. The same holds true for large sections of the other articles (especially articles VI and X). We read the same lines over and over again. The articles of the opponents are not included in the volume, which makes the presentation rather uneven, but if we take the Colmans at their word, there has been no discussion, just a reiteration of statements and previously-held views. The texts also indicate that over the years the authors have grown increasingly bitter over the controversy that was stirred up: „Dans le monde où nous avons la chance inappréciable de vivre, les historiens ne sont pas astreints à fournir vaille des aliments à la fierté patriotique. Ils peuvent, ou plutôt ils doivent se consacrer sans réserve à la recherche de la vérité. Ce faisant, ils ne courent que des risques bénins: celui de déplaire, voire de heurter, celui d'être taxés plus au moins sérieusement d'incivisme, voire celui d'être fielleusement calomniés“.

In spite of the many repetitions, various new facts and ideas are brought to the fore. Interesting is the study of the alloys of the font and its remaining ten bovine supporters. Apparently the lead in the alloy came from the western part of the Mediterranean. Only one of the supporting oxen has a different alloy.

As for the new ideas, Colman and Lhoist-Colman now claim that the font was made by order of Otto III for the Lateran baptistery in Rome. They also consider the inscriptions on the font to be Ottonian, rather than 12th century. In the Lateran the font was used for only a few years, for as soon as the unpopular emperor died, the font was removed. It was taken from Rome during the troubles of the Investiture Crisis by either Henry IV or V in the late 11th or early 12th century as the spoils of war, and in the early 12th century it arrived in Liège. In Liège, the provenance of the font was passed over in silence, as the robbery would have created an uproar, as the quarrels between the papal and imperial factions were also in full swing here.

What to make of all this?

The idea of the font having come to Liège as part of the booty of war makes sense. If one takes into account the political situation in and around Liège in the early years of the 12th century it is obvious that the font could hardly have been made here. Bishop Otbert's reign has not gone down in the books as a very happy one. He came to the episcopal throne in 1091 with the help of Henry IV and was one of the latter's most solid supporters. Having committed simony, he was not accepted by all the clergy within the diocese. In 1099 various nobles in the diocese decided to join the

Crusade and in order to finance the undertaking, they sold their castles and estates. Bishop Otbert was only too happy to jump at the opportunity of extending his territories and in order to obtain the necessary funds he did not shrink from plundering the treasuries and churches in his diocese, especially those of institutions that had opposed him. To buy the castle of Bouillon Otbert despoiled the silver shrine of St Lambert from the cathedral and from the abbey of St Hubert his agents took the gold altar frontal and three crosses of pure gold, one of which was of particular beauty and richness. The previous bishop, Henry of Verdun, had taken precaution against such future deeds by placing anyone who would set his hands on this cross under an interdict, but this obviously did not bother Otbert. Considering that Otbert went as far as robbing the shrine of Liège's most principal saint, i. e. that of St Lambert in his own cathedral, it is almost out of the question that Hillinus of Notre-Dame-aux-Fonts, which formed part of the cathedral complex of St Lambert, can have disposed over sufficient funds to have the Liège font made. The font itself can only have come to Liège as the spoils of war. It is thus not surprising that in Liège, the font stands, from a stylistic point of view, in splendid isolation.

The Macedonian Renaissance in Byzantine art did produce works that are characterized by strong classicizing tendencies, but this style is apparent only in book illuminations and ivories. Also, many features of the font clearly have Byzantine origins. However, there are no grand scale works like the Liège font. Of course, Byzantium received its fair share of disaster throughout the ages, but neither the Iconoclastic controversy, which was earlier, nor the Ottoman conquest, can explain the disappearance of all comparative material. The Crusaders who plundered Byzantium in 1204 took with them various works of art which have survived the ages, even works from a far more distant past. Thus we still have the horses from the Hippodrome. But then the Colmans claim (p. 261) that the Liège font was a unique piece at any rate and that there were no comparable works: „Loin de nous l'idée que Byzance a vu s'en créer d'autres, plus au moins semblables à ceux de Liège, même en nombre restreint. C'est d'un unicum qu'il s'agit". So, even in Byzantine art of the Macedonian Renaissance the font would have stood out in splendid isolation. I wonder ...

The iconography of the font is apparent only from the inscriptions, which most scholars have dated to the 12th century. Colman and Lhoist-Colman also held the inscriptions to be of 12th century date until their most recent article written in 2003, in which they attempt to date them to the Ottonian era. The point is a significant one. Without the inscriptions we see people being baptized and preached to. The only easily identifiable scene is that of the baptism of Christ. Had the inscriptions been added in the 12th century, they must have had meaning for the Liège audience, and that is exactly what the Colmans deny. What meaning could the baptism of the obscure philosopher Craton have held for the people of Liège, and what the baptism of the centurion Cornelius? Why do the inscriptions not refer to specific Liège issues? For instance, why not identify specific saints on the font as St Lambert or St Remaculus? Had the inscriptions been added in the 12th century, this could easily have been done.

However, I harbour serious doubts as to the idea that the lettering is Ottonian. The inscriptions on the 12th-century capitals of Our Lady's in Maastricht and other works of the 'Maastricht'-atelier are in fact very similar. If this is so, the iconography as described by the inscriptions must have had a meaning in 12th-century Liège. The font has four scenes depicting baptisms: the central scene illustrates the baptism of Christ, the scene on the left shows St John the Baptist baptizing and preaching to a group of people identified as 'publicani' and the scenes on the right show St Peter baptizing the centurion Cornelius and St John the Evangelist baptizing Craton the Philosopher. St John the Baptist of course would make sense on any font; the suggestion that the baptism of Craton by St John the Evangelist was included because the Lateran baptistery also had a chapel dedicated to St John the Evangelist, seems weak. Of course, both St Johns were venerated at the Lateran and a chapel dedicated to the Evangelist does exist, but in addition there were other chapels and of all these chapels that of St John the Evangelist was undoubtedly the smallest. It all depends on what was more important for the patron: the person baptizing or the person being baptized, and whether Craton and Cornelius were chosen as representatives of the Greek and Roman worlds, or for their specific qualities as a philosopher and a soldier. In the latter instance one could argue that these baptisms stand for the submission of philosophy, of the ordinary citizens and of the military forces to the power of Christianity, and that would have been a message suitable for any baptismal font, for, whether the inscriptions date to circa 1000 or to the beginning of the 12th century, messages such as these serve a purpose in troubled times, and both periods can undoubtedly be characterized as such. From at least 1129 and quite possibly from the outset the church of Notre-Dame-aux-Fonts housed the so-called 'Tribunal de la Paix', instituted in 1081 by Bishop Henry of Verdun in his desire to stop the bloody warfare in the Liège region. Could not the iconography of the font refer to this? Such an idea has already been put forward by Jean-Louis Kupper, but was dismissed by the Colmans as it was based on a supposition.

But what of Otto III and his supposed donation of the splendid font to the Lateran? Would such a wonderful object really have been done away with just because its donor was not to the liking of the Roman clergy? It was after all a high quality work of art. Can any other art works be connected to Otto's brief rule in Rome? Do they show up a similar style?

There are indeed a few relics of Otto's reign in Rome. To start of with, there is the 'vera di pozzo' in the church of S. Bartolomeo all'Isola. It has nothing in common with the Liège font. The same holds true for the paintings in the church of San Sebastiano in Pallara on the Palatine that have been dated to the last quarter of the tenth century. It was in this church that Otto ordered a synod in 1001. Also, it was on the Palatine that Otto took up residence during his stay in Rome, as the Roman emperors had done before him. It is likely therefore that the frescoes in the San Sebastiano represent the style fashionable at Otto's court. And if we move away from Rome, to other centres of Ottonian art, there is again precious little that compares with the Liège font. In an Ottonian context too, at least as we know it today, the font stands out in splendid isolation.

The Liège font was obviously suitable for infant baptism only; one can hardly imagine a full-grown man stepping into it. In fact, there are very few such baptismal fonts from the 10th century; fonts for infant baptism start appearing in great numbers only from the 12th century onwards. The Colmans are aware of the problem but do not confront this question. All that is said on the matter is the following (p. 260): „Entre l'époque où les cuves se subsituent aux piscines pour l'administration du baptême et celle où Hillin est abbé de Notre-Dame, les capacités à la fois diverses et éminentes requises pour créer les fonts qu'il a donnés à son église ne se trouvent presque jamais réunies. Elles le sont aux alentours de l'an mille dans l'entourage de l'empereur d'Orient Basile II le Bulgaroctone, nous le maintenons fermement“.

As for the idea that the font was presented to the Lateran baptistery by Otto III, this is pure conjecture. There is no evidence whatsoever to support this hypothesis.

The present-day font in the Lateran baptistery is Roman, is made of green basalt and was put there in the 16th century by Pope Gregory XIII. It replaced the ‚concha‘ of porphyry in which Cola di Rienzo was baptized in 1347, and which, according to tradition, was the font in which Constantine had been baptized by Pope Silvester I. According to the Colmans, the porphyry ‚concha‘ is unlikely to have been that old, as surely, the original baptismal font from the time of Constantine would not have been done away with so readily. However, the original font was indeed a porphyry font, even though there was a little bit more to it than just that. The Constantinian font is described in the Life of St Silvester in the Liber Pontificalis and was a highly decorated affair. The piscina at this time was round and made of red porphyry. It stood within an octagonal enclosure. On one of the eight corners stood a golden lamb, from the mouth of which water spouted into the font. This lamb was flanked by man-high representations of Christ and St John the Baptist. The other seven corners had silver deer, which also played a role in the supply of water to the font that was brought there by means of an aqueduct. In the centre of the font there was a channel through which the water could flow away. It was masked by a porphyry column on top of which was a bowl for perfumes. Although the gold and silver decorations disappeared a long time ago, it is quite possible that the porphyry font stayed in place.

To my mind, Colman and Colman-Lhoist have presented some very interesting ideas that should, however, be further pursued, as the last word on the Liège font has by no means been spoken. Only a full-scale and systematic investigation, with contributions from scholars from various disciplines, can do justice to this admirable work of art. Such a study should include a serious historiography on the font, a full description of all medieval sources, a description of the font, a technical survey of the font, a transcription of the inscriptions on the font with photographs, a study of the epigraphy, a study of the arts in the Meuse Valley in the early years of the 12th century including manuscript illumination, metalwork, ivories and sculpture; a study of the political situation in Liège in the 12th century and an account of the exploits of Henry IV and V in Italy; a study concerning the various iconographic aspects of the font; a study concerning the development of the baptismal font from the 10th to the 12th century; as well as studies of the Byzantine and Italian art in the given period, of Ottonian

art and Ottonian Rome, and so on. Of course, many of these aspects have been dealt with by the Colmans, but their latest book is a compilation of articles, not a monograph, and it therefore has too many repetitions and the information is scattered. Moreover, the book suffers from an inevitable one-sidedness and from the authors wanting to prove too much. However, the questions they have raised are valid and deserve attention. All in all, their book has made abundantly clear that there is still a lot to learn about this remarkable work of art.

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Gerhard Schmidt: Malerei der Gotik. Fixpunkte und Ausblicke, hrsg. von Martin Roland; Bd. 1: Malerei der Gotik in Mitteleuropa; Bd. 2: Malerei der Gotik in Süd- und Westeuropa. Studien zum Herrscherporträt; Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt 2005; zus. XVIII und 874 S., 60 Farbtaf., über 900 SW-Abb.; ISBN 3-201-01846-5; € 120,-

Dieser Doppelband ist zusammen mit der bereits 1992 erschienenen zweibändigen Aufsatzsammlung „Gotische Bildwerke und ihre Meister“¹ die Summe des Lebenswerkes eines der Großen unseres Faches, ein Monument, das er sich und seiner Auffassung von Kunstgeschichte gesetzt hat. So mächtig diese beiden Bände wirken, sie erfassen keineswegs alles, was Gerhard Schmidt geschrieben hat: Es wurde auf den Wiederabdruck seiner Bücher ebenso verzichtet wie auf buchartige Beiträge, wie den immer noch wichtigsten deutschsprachigen Text zur böhmischen Malerei unter den Herrschern der Luxemburger Dynastie². Begreiflich ist, daß fast alle Beiträge zu Faksimile-Kommentaren ausgelassen wurden. Insgesamt sind nur 49 von 237 Titeln abgedruckt, dazu 14 im Sammelband zur Skulptur. Diese beiden Folianten sind das Ergebnis einer thematischen Einengung der Auswahl auf Buch- und Tafelmalerei der Zeit zwischen 1270 und 1450. Es fehlen deshalb viele wichtige Arbeiten zur Skulptur³, fast alle Rezensionen, aber auch die frühen Studien zur modernen Kunst, seine Beiträge zur Fachhistorie, erst recht die Ergebnisse seines Engagements in der Bürgerbewegung gegen den wuchernden Wiener Straßenbau⁴. Sie sind jedoch dann zu beach-

1 Hrsg. von Michaela Krieger; Wien u. a. 1992.

2 Die Armenbibeln des XIV. Jahrhunderts; Graz u. Köln 1959. – Die Malerschule von St. Florian. Beiträge zur süddeutschen Malerei zu Ende des 13. und im 14. Jahrhundert; Graz u. Köln 1962. – Malerei bis 1450. Tafelmalerei, Wandmalerei, Buchmalerei, in: Karl M. Swoboda (Hrsg.): Gotik in Böhmen; München 1969, S. 167–321 u. 423–444.

3 Besonders bedauere ich das Fehlen von: Patrozinium und Andachtsbild, in: *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung* 64, 1956, S. 277–290. – Beiträge zum Erminoldmeister, in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstwissenschaft* 11, 1957, S. 141–174. – Der ‚Ritter‘ von St. Florian und der Manierismus in der gotischen Plastik, in: *Festschrift für Karl M. Swoboda*; Wien 1959, S. 249–263. – Vesperbilder und der ‚Meister der Schönen Madonnen‘, in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Kunst und Denkmalpflege* 31, 1977, S. 94–114.

4 Nur als Beispiele seien genannt: Neue Malerei in Österreich, Wien 1956. – Die internationalen Kon-