

## Sacralizing the Environment: Ecosystems, Bodies, and Iconic Presences

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*In memoriam Alexei M. Lidov*

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, “eco-anxiety” had surged to the forefront of public, political, and academic consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The “Fridays for Future” movement, propelled by Greta Thunberg, transformed ecological urgency into a generational rallying cry and intensified debates on the Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup> This momentum resonated across academia, where ecocritical scholarship flourished,<sup>3</sup> and into policy, driving ambitious initiatives such as the European Green Deal. The global lockdowns of 2020 briefly offered a tangible glimpse into the environmental recovery these movements advocated for, when, as human activity slowed, birds, fish, and other animals returned to their habitats, allowing ecosystems to flourish and pollution levels to drop across the globe.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite this evident proof, in the past five years, it seems that the urgency of climate change has been overshadowed. In mass media and political arenas today, the environmental momentum is frequently eclipsed by a cascade of other acute crises deemed more pressing: the global rise of populism and the devastating conflicts in Ukraine, Palestine, and Iran. Undeniably, these humanitarian catastrophes also inflict a profound toll on natural environments and ecosystems, an ecological cost that remains difficult to fully quantify in the fractured immediacy of the present.

Unsurprisingly, the crisis of ecology – one of our times greatest and most urgent challenges – has also reverberated within art history.<sup>5</sup> In this frame, today’s pressing questions were projected onto the past. The conception of this special issue of *Eikón/Imago* too was impacted by such pressing concerns. Yet it would be misleading to interpret the volume solely through the lens of ecocritical theory. The editors have indeed been engaged in exploring more broadly the intersections of visual culture, environment, and performativity.<sup>6</sup> In re-

<sup>1</sup> Hailie Brophie, Joanne Olson, Pauline Paul, “Eco-anxiety in youth: An integrative literature review,” *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* 32, no. 3 (2023).

<sup>2</sup> See Viktoria Spaiser, Nicole Nisbett, Cristina G. Stefan, “How dare you? – The normative challenge posed by Fridays for Future,” *PLOS Climate* 1, no. 10. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pclm.0000053>.

<sup>3</sup> For statistics on the enormous rise of ecocriticism in scholarship since the 1990s, see Chesta Yadav, Jyotsna Sinha, “Exploring the evolution of ecocriticism: A bibliometric study and literature review,” *Bibliometric research* 7, no. 12 (2024). <https://10.0.124.149/multirev.2024304>.

<sup>4</sup> The subject itself was one of scholarly debates: Luis-Alberto Casado Aranda, Juan Sánchez-Fernández, and María I Viedma-del-Jesús estimated ca. 440 articles on “COVID-19 and the environment” indexed in large databases such Web of Science / Scopus between December 2019 and September 2020 (see “Analysis of the Scientific Production of the Effect of COVID-19 on the Environment: A Bibliometric Study,” *Environmental Research* 193 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2020.110416>) but already by 2021, this number had risen, with often diverging results, see Muhammad Usman and Yuh-Shan Ho, “COVID-19 and the Emerging Research Trends in Environmental Studies: A Bibliometric Evaluation,” *Environmental Science and Pollution Research* 28 (2021): 16913–24. Since, the number of articles can be counted by the thousands.

<sup>5</sup> See, amongst a growing body of texts, Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecocritical Art History* (Manchester University Press, 2020); Karl Kusserow, ed., *Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective* (Princeton University Press, 2021); Peter J. Schneemann, “Der ökologische Imperativ als Paradigma einer engagierten Kunstgeschichte,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 85, no. 4 (2022): 433–9; Alan C. Braddock, *Implication: An Ecocritical Dictionary for Art History* (Yale University Press, 2023), accessed September 22, 2025, <https://aaeportal.com/?id=-23295>. With focus on the medieval period, we can also cite the book series, such as the series *Nature and Environment in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017-) as well as the volume Ivan Foletti, Martin Lešák, and Adrien Palladino, eds., *Dynamics of Medieval Landscape: The Cultural Shaping of the Environment*, *Convivium* 9, no. 1 (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Zuzana Frantová, “Longing for Repetition: Recurring Images of Christ on French Pilgrimage Routes,” in *Repenser l’histoire de l’art médiéval en 2023: Recueil d’études offertes à Xavier Barral i Altet*, ed. Miljenko Jurković, Elisabetta Scirocco, and Arnaud Timbert (Zagreb, 2023), 503–14; Ivan Foletti and Martin Lešák, “Reconsidering ‘Romanesque’ Art Through the Pilgrim’s Body: The Migrating Art Historians Project Five Years Later,” *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 8, no. 2 (2022): 43–67; Ivan Foletti, “Spaces for Miracles: Constructing Sacred Space through the Body, from Conques to the Mediterranean, and Beyond,” in *Dynamics of Medieval Landscape: The Cultural Shaping of the Environment*, *Convivium* 9, no. 1 (2022): 168–85; Ivan Foletti, “Santi-

cent years, work focused notably on the “Romanesque” site of Conques and on the medieval cultures of the Southern Caucasus, underscoring to what extent the life of images and architecture cannot be disentangled from their natural settings.<sup>7</sup>

First, the very materials from which images, objects, and buildings are fashioned – pigments and dyes, stones and marbles, wood, metals, clay, glass, textiles – are all drawn from nature, their substance inseparably bound to the landscapes and ecosystems of their extraction.<sup>8</sup> Each carries with it the memory of origin, a memory that can be sometimes revealed through modern technologies of archaeometry.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, things are deeply anchored to the geographies that produced them. Beyond this material grounding, images and objects constantly circulate between ecosystems: icons, reliquaries, manuscripts, gems, jewelry, and prints travel across regions, carried by merchants, pilgrims, or armies, and sometimes, in doing so, reshape the cultural geographies through which they pass. Architecture, by contrast, is anchored in place, altering the landscape more directly and immediately: mountains are crowned by monasteries, river valleys marked by bridges and shrines, urban space structured by churches, mosques, or synagogues, each accompanied by their own visual and performative language (Fig. 1). Built forms do not merely inhabit their environments but reconfigure them, becoming landmarks of sacralization. Finally, humans themselves must also be understood as performative images in motion within the environment. Whether in ritual processions, pilgrimage, or gestures of daily devotion, bodies animate and activate images, setting them into motion.



Fig. 1. The Monastery of Horomos, Kars region (Turkey), 10th-13th century (© Katarína Kravčíková, 2017)

It is precisely these multiple perspectives that we wish to set out in our introduction by tracing three principal axes of reflection. First, we address the notion of cultural environment, a concept that emerged as a central category in the last decades of research. Second, we consider the role of repeating images, often inscribed on or integrated into architecture, as landmarks that structure, sacralize, and transform natural environment. Finally, we turn to the interaction between mobile images of devotion and the environments they traverse, examining the sacred potential generated through their movements. At all stages, such images are never inert: they are continually animated by human actors – travelers, pilgrims, merchants, soldiers, migrants – whose movements, sounds, and gestures transform them into dynamic agents, weaving together the material, the visual, and the environmental into living ecosystems of devotion.

### From Sacred Topoi to Cultural Environments

In the last two decades, the interaction between culture, environment, and religion has become one of the most prominent areas of inquiry, particularly within studies of medieval and cultural geography,

ficando uomini e campagne: Santa Fede di Conques in processione,” in *Reliquie in processione nell’Europa medievale*, ed. Vinni Lucherini (Rome: Viella, 2018), 63–78.

<sup>7</sup> See Ivan Foletti and Adrien Palladino, eds., *Conques Across Time: Inventions and Reinventions (9th–21st Centuries)* (Viella, 2025); Ivan Foletti and Adrien Palladino, “An Introduction. Late Antiquity and Armenia. From Marginalized Region to Creative Force,” in *Re-thinking Late Antique Armenia: Historiography, Material Culture, and Heritage*, ed. Adrien Palladino et al., *Convivium Supplementum* (Brepols, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Ann-Sophie Lehmann, “How Materials Make Meaning,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 62 (2012): 6–27.

<sup>9</sup> For example, applied to famous manuscripts such as the Vienna Genesis, see Christa Hofmann, ed., *The Vienna Genesis: Material Analysis and Conservation of a Late Antique Illuminated Manuscript on Purple Parchment* (Böhlau Verlag, 2020).

art history, and visual culture.<sup>10</sup> An important milestone in this turn was Veronica Della Dora's volume *Landscape, nature, and the sacred in Byzantium*, which applied the tools of cultural geography to medieval environments.<sup>11</sup> Her analysis underscored how perceptions of landscape and environment were shaped by inherited beliefs and cultural topoi, producing a constant negotiation between material reality and human imagination. Equally transformative was the pioneering work of the late Alexei Lidov (1959–2025), who reshaped our understanding of sacred space and environment. His concept of hierotopy addressed phenomena ranging from holy mountains, trees, and forests to bodies of water, fire, light, air, and the heavens.<sup>12</sup> For Lidov, natural elements could never be separated from their cultural and religious meanings; conversely, spaces within churches and other man-made structures were to be seen as extensions or echoes of the natural environment. Hierotopy thus wove human beings, their creativity, and the natural world into a single, indivisible whole. Building on these foundations, Michele Bacci has explored the porous boundary between the animate and the inanimate: in his reflections, wooden fragments become speaking images, while stones and trees are transformed by premodern imagination and narrative into sacred foci.<sup>13</sup> More recent scholarship, in the wake of these theoretical advances, has further examined how natural materials, sites, and ecosystems, when refracted through images, myths, and texts, become charged with holiness. Over the past twenty years, scholars have also explored how medieval sacred space was defined by both religion and the law. This strain links the conception of space in imagination and religious belief with legal issues of property, definition of burial spaces, or the protection of those seeking ecclesiastical asylum. The cultural dimension of environment, defined between natural and religious elements, must therefore also be interpreted in the light of legal evidence that had to establish with demonstrable certainty in court the legal boundaries of sacred space.<sup>14</sup> By turning the environment into a series of legally defined zones, these boundaries also committed what many thinkers, from Thomas More to Rousseau and to Karl Marx, described as a form of “original sin” of modern civilization: they replaced a shared natural world with a system of exclusive ownership, effectively marking the rise of a capitalism that survives by carving up the earth.

In this introduction, we wish to suggest that these various lines of reflection taken together form coherent systems that can be understood as “sacred ecosystems.” By this term, we mean that premodern<sup>15</sup> interactions between humans, their imagination and creativity, legal elements and boundaries, as well as the environment, naturally gave rise to networks of interrelated structures in which all actors were mutually implicated and co-responsible. We do not wish to suggest naively, that premodern societies were free of environmental exploitation – the traces of deforestation, mining, and resource extraction are still visible today – but rather to argue that industrial modernity and processes of globalization profoundly disrupted earlier bonds between humans and ecosystems, whether economic, religious, or cultural.

### Landmarks, Repetition, and the Moving Body

One of the most immediate forms of interaction between the natural environment and human culture lies in the humanization of landscapes through visible landmarks. These markers may be natural features invested with meaning and emphasized by human action – sacred caves, trees, mountains, or standing stones – or they may be entirely constructed, such as sanctuaries, fortifications, bridges, stelae, and monumental crosses. At times, natural and built landmarks intersect. A striking example can be found for example in the early thirteenth century at Hovhannavank, where the church was positioned at the edge of a canyon that also functioned as trade route (Fig. 2). Its eastern façade carries a monumental cross carved to be seen from afar, fusing natural topography with a human sign of faith. Similarly, on the city walls of Ani, the Bagratid capital around the year 1000, crosses were integrated into the masonry, serving both as proclamations of belief and as apotropaic devices, thought to shield the inhabitants from external threats.<sup>16</sup> Similar strategies can be observed thousands of kilometers away, on the Via Francigena, which leads to Rome.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For an overview, see Adrien Palladino, “Dynamics of Medieval Landscape: Measure, Environment, Conversion,” *Convivium* 9, no. 1 (2022): 13–26, with further bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> Veronica Della Dora, *Landscape, Nature, and the Sacred in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> The term was iterated in 2001 but first formally formulated in Alexei M. Lidov, “Ierotopija: Issledovanie sakral'nykh prostranstv,” in *Ierotopija: Issledovanie sakral'nykh prostranstv: Materialy mezhdunarodnogo simpoziuma*, ed. Alexei M. Lidov (Indrik, 2004), 15–31, with short English version in the same volume as “Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Space as a Form of Creativity and Subject of Cultural History,” 32–3. Since, see Jelena Bogdanović, ed., *Icons of Space: Advances in Hierotopy* (Routledge, 2021), with extensive bibliography.

<sup>13</sup> Michele Bacci, “Marian Shrines, Healing Practices, and Natural Landmarks in Early Modern Tuscany,” in *Visual Networks of Healing*, ed. Sandra Cardarelli and Valentina Živković (Brepols, 2026), in press.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Dominique Iogna-Prat, *La Maison Dieu: Une histoire monumentale de l'Église au Moyen Âge (v. 800 – v. 1200)* (Seuil, 2006); Michel Lauwers, “Sanctuaires, liturgie et rayonnement du sacré dans le bassin occidental de la Méditerranée au Moyen Âge,” in *Les sanctuaires et leur rayonnement dans le monde méditerranéen de l'antiquité à l'époque moderne*, ed. Juliette de La Genière, André Vauchez, and Jean Leclant (Éditions du CTHS, 2010), 359–72.

<sup>15</sup> For an attempt at defining premodern, including further bibliography, see Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, and Zuzana Frantová, “Premodern Popular Culture: Between Democratization and Marginalization,” *Eikón/Imago* 11, no. 1 (2022): 1–8.

<sup>16</sup> Annalisa Moraschi, “The Cross on the Gorge: A Sacralization of the Landscape in Thirteenth-Century Armenia?” in *Spaces, Landscapes and Social Lives of the Cross in Medieval Armenia and Georgia*, ed. Michele Bacci (Brill, 2026), forthcoming.

<sup>17</sup> Luca Capriotti, *Dal globale al locale: il pellegrinaggio medievale in Toscana. Il caso della Via Francigena* (PhD diss., Masaryk University and University of Bologna, 2021).



Fig. 2 St. Hovhannes Karapet (St. John the Baptist) Cathedral, Hovhannavank Monastery (Armenia), 1216–1221 (© Katarína Kravčíková, 2017)

The density of visual signs and images becomes particularly striking when we turn to trade routes and pilgrimage centers. In this regard, an interesting case study concerns the corpus of stelae presenting crosses that formed a broad network in the South Caucasus region, and likely played a role in the Christianization and identity-making dynamics at play in the region during Late Antiquity.<sup>18</sup> Such markers can be found in all regions of the medieval world, from Anglo-Saxon Britain to Ethiopia. Likewise, pilgrimage sites – stretching from Western Asia to the Iberian Peninsula, and from Scandinavia to North Africa – were often marked by monumental representations of venerated saints or Christ. These images, strategically placed on façades, gates, or along access routes, acted as beacons guiding pilgrims toward the holy site while simultaneously proclaiming its sanctity. A telling example can be traced among the sculpturally decorated tympana depicting Christ in Majesty (Fig. 3). These, present in a wide range of iconographic variations are striking features that, at first glance, link the churches along the pilgrimage routes to Santiago and to Rome.<sup>19</sup> These constantly recurring images of Christ – meaning the pilgrim’s repeated encounters with Christ – were originally polychromed and were, therefore, probably visible even from distance. For pilgrims, they served not only as orientation points that literally guided them in the right direction, but also as a means of shaping their own spiritual journey: forming a unified conception of God while providing a sense of certainty and familiarity on what was often a difficult and dangerous journey through an unknown landscape.<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 3 Notre-Dame of Lausanne (Switzerland), 13th century (© Katarína Kravčíková, 2017)

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Sipana Tchakerian, “Toward a Detailed Typology: Four-Sided Stelae in Early Christian South Caucasus,” in *The Medieval South Caucasus: Artistic Cultures of Albania, Armenia and Georgia* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 124–43.

<sup>19</sup> Luca Capriotti, “The Activation of the Sacred: A Sculpture and an Ambulatory along the Via Francigena,” in *Step by Step towards the Sacred: Ritual, Movement, and Visual Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Martin F. Lešák, Sabina Rosenbergová, and Veronika Tvrzníková (Vienna, 2020), 37–57.

<sup>20</sup> Frantová, “Longing for Repetition,” 507.

By the early modern period, particularly in the Latin West, the marking of sacred centers took on an increasingly theatrical dimension. Landscapes were deliberately reshaped to heighten the pilgrim's experience: sacred mountains like the Sacro Monte di Varallo or series of Central European pilgrimage sites – to quote only some among the many examples – were transformed into scenographies where architecture, painted sculpture, and wall painting created an immersive sacred geography.<sup>21</sup> Here, the encounter with the holy was staged as a carefully orchestrated spectacle, guiding the pilgrim's movements and emotions. In all these cases, images, buildings, and landmarks acted as powerful instruments of communication. They conveyed the presence of the sacred with immediacy and clarity, embedding it in the terrain itself. The environment, in turn, was not merely the backdrop to devotion but transformed into a landscape dense with signs of divine presence.

A further element deserves emphasis in this context: the striking similarity of images within regional settings. On a purely practical (and typically art historical) level, this repetition can be explained by the limited number of ateliers or the circulation of shared models and patterns. Yet from the perspective of the beholders, another significant dimension comes into play. Repetition itself, like a refrain in music or liturgy, creates a dense and compact perception of the sacred. Encountering the same type of image over and over, pilgrims experienced not a dull redundancy but a cumulative reinforcement of meaning, a layering of presence that bound together the places they traversed. Pilgrimage art is highly repetitive not only through decorated tympana but also through other elements such as church towers, column capitals and their decoration, as well as the sound of bells.<sup>22</sup> The pilgrim's daily routine – walking itself and the continual repetition of everyday activities – also contributes to this recurring rhythm. The visual impact of repeated images could be further intensified through the repetition inherent in the liturgy. In this sense, the pilgrim's body becomes the medium through which scattered images are joined into a continuous sequence. The recurring motifs such as crosses, painted Madonnas in chapels, Christ's Majesty, sculpted images of saints, were not randomly distributed across the landscape. They were often deliberately positioned along roads and pathways leading to major sanctuaries and holy sites, guiding travelers physically while preparing them to the encounter with venerated images and relics. The rhythmical recurrence of such images transformed the journey itself into a performance, where landmarks, iconography, and environment converged into a coherent whole. Human beings in motion, with their memories and imaginations, acted as essential agents in this network: through their embodied experience, repetition was activated, and the sacred landscape came alive. Repeated images of Christ – or, more precisely, the unified image of Christ formed in the pilgrim's mind through constant repetition – served as an important, and, perhaps, the only, assurance that the pilgrim was on the right path, both physically and spiritually.<sup>23</sup> The natural setting only served to emphasize this phenomenon: while cultural elements served as a "refrain," nature was constantly changing: the weather, the landscape, the presence (or absence) of water constantly varied.

### Iconic Presence and Sacred Ecosystems

Another dimension of the interaction between art history and environment concerns the role of devotional images. Unlike fixed architecture and landmarks, mobile images possess an exceptional capacity to reshape environments through their motion. Their movement, whether cyclical, through ritualized processions, or singular, in response to moments of crisis, leave enduring imprints on the spaces they traverse (Fig. 4). To grasp the significance of these phenomena, we can recall Hans Belting's notion of iconic presence.<sup>24</sup> For Belting, an image is not merely a representation but, through its medium, can become a presence. This presence transforms an image into a locus of encounter, a place where the figure it depicts is understood to manifest. Thus, an icon, a bust reliquary, or even a modest printed sheet of a saint could, in the collective imagination, become a site of divine presence.

Well explored examples illustrate the force of this idea. The *Salus Populi Romani* in Rome, carried in processions during epidemics and wars, continues to attract devotion today.<sup>25</sup> The gilded reliquary-statue of Sainte Foy at Conques was not only the focal point of local cult but also a magnet for pilgrims from across Europe, its power confirmed by countless miracle stories.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, icons of the Virgin were widely venerated in medieval Rus', with some venerable examples such as the twelfth-century image of the Virgin of

<sup>21</sup> Michela Cometti, *Iconografia del Sacro Monte di Varallo: Disegni, dipinti e incisioni dal XVI al XX secolo* (Piemonte Assessorato alla Cultura, 1984); Ondřej Jakubec, "Poutní místa, poutě a milostné obrazy v mecenátu a politice olomouckých biskupů raného novověku: Několik poznámek k poznání konfesionalizačních praktik na předbélhorské Moravě," in *Pielgrzymowanie i sztuka: Góra Świętej Anny i inne miejsca pielgrzymkowe na Śląsku*, ed. Joanna Lubos-Kozielec and Jerzy Gorzelik (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2005), 307–21.

<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Ivan Foletti and Martin F. Lešák, "Reconsidering 'Romanesque' Art through the Pilgrim's Body: Migrating Art Historians Project Five Years Later," *Peregrinations* 8, no. 2 (2022): 43–67.

<sup>23</sup> Ivan Foletti, "Migrating Art Historians: Objects, Bodies, and Minds," in *Migrating Art Historians: On the Sacred Ways*, ed. Ivan Foletti et al. (Masaryk University Press, 2018), 44.

<sup>24</sup> Hans Belting, Ivan Foletti, and Martin F. Lešák, "The Movement and the Experience of 'Iconic Presence': An Introduction," *Convivium* 6, no. 1 (2019): 11–15.

<sup>25</sup> Gerhard Wolf, *Salus Populi Romani: Die Geschichte römischer Kultbilder im Mittelalter* (VCH, 1990); Martin Deutsch, "Salus Populi Romani: The Roman 'Palladium' of the Jesuit Church in Brno," in *Jesuit Art and Czech Lands, 1556–1729*, ed. Kateřina Horníčková and Michal Šroněk (London: Routledge, 2023), 193–232; Antonio De Caro, "(Re-)Producing Conversion from Rome to Beijing: Stories Related to Replicas of the 'Salus Populi Romani' in the Late Sixteenth Century," *Convivium* 8, no. 2 (2021): 148–65.

<sup>26</sup> Amy G. Remensnyder, "Un problème de cultures ou de culture? La statue-reliquaire et les joca de sainte Foy de Conques dans le *Liber miraculorum* de Bernard d'Angers," *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 33, no. 132 (1990): 351–79; Jean Taralon and Dominique Taralon-Carlini, "La Majesté d'or du trésor de Sainte-Foy de Conques," *Bulletin Monumental* 155, no. 1 (1997): 11–73; Beate Fricke,

Vladimir (Vladimirskaja), credited with saving Moscow from the Mongols.<sup>27</sup> To these we might add the Black Madonnas, whose features and miraculous reputations made them objects of fervent pilgrimage in sites such as Montserrat, Loreto, or Częstochowa.<sup>28</sup> All these “special” images were not inert objects but living presences, devotional foci whose efficacy was confirmed, again and again, through miracles recorded over centuries.<sup>29</sup> Their longevity and enduring popularity testify to the remarkable ability of mobile devotional images to bind communities together and to inscribe sacred meaning into the environments they inhabited and traversed.



Fig. 4 Procession on the Feast of Saint Fides, Conques (France), 6 October 2023 (© Gajane Achverdjanová, 2023)

We argue that one of the principal reasons for the immense and long-lasting popularity of the examples mentioned above (and of many others) lies precisely in their mobility. These images never travelled in isolation. They moved in the company of processions and relics, accompanied by crowds of believers and enveloped in multisensorial stimuli: chants and prayers, the burning of incense, the taste of food and drink, the rhythms of music and dancing.<sup>30</sup> Their presence was thus continually reinforced, both by the structure of organized ritual and by the intensity of popular devotion.<sup>31</sup> What is crucial for our argument is that the interaction of these images with their environment was never incidental. Their movements typically followed established routes, often repeated on an annual basis, in order to protect a city, to mark boundaries, or to sacralize the perimeter of a territory. At times they served as witnesses and even as judges in legal disputes, especially in cases involving contested land or territorial claims. In moments of acute crisis – pandemics, sieges, wars, or natural disasters – these images were exceptionally mobilized to intercede, protect, or restore order.<sup>32</sup>

Through these repeated actions, “special” images thus became embedded in the collective consciousness as enduring presences, inscribing themselves in the memory of lived environments. Their passage, whether frequent or rare, left durable marks: even where an image appeared only once, its memory lingered, cherished by those who witnessed the event and carried forward in oral traditions. Over generations, such memories coalesced into stories and legends, ensuring that the echo of the image reverberated long after its physical presence had departed. A striking modern example of this dynamic unfolded in 2020, during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when Pope Francis displayed the devotional panel of the *Salus Populi Romani* in an otherwise deserted St. Peter’s Square. Though the image was physically present for only a few hours, its power was magnified by the emptiness of the setting and by its global mediation through television and digital screens. For many, this short exhibition became one of the strong visual memories of the pandemic: an iconic presence that reactivated centuries of devotion while inscribing itself anew into the sacred and collective imagination of our time.

An example that crystallizes the three aspects we have been tracing can be found in the devotional practices of Upper Svaneti in present-day Georgia. This region, geographically isolated in the Caucasus

*Fallen Idols, Risen Saints: Sainte Foy of Conques and the Revival of Monumental Sculpture in Medieval Art* (Brepols, 2015 [2007]); Ivan Foletti, “Sainte Foy as Sacred Focus,” in *Conques Across Time: Inventions and Reinventions*, 108–22 (Viella, 2025).

<sup>27</sup> On the invention and political role of this icon, see David B. Miller, “Legends of the Icon of Our Lady of Vladimir: A Study of the Development of Muscovite National Consciousness,” *Speculum* 43, no. 4 (1968): 657–670.

<sup>28</sup> Jude Morton, “Sacred Shadows: The Significance of Black Madonnas,” *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 2, no. 2 (2013): 103–12.

<sup>29</sup> Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (Beck, 1990); Ivan Foletti, “Obraz a kult: Představení legendy [Image and Cult: Introducing a Legend],” in *Hans Belting, Obraz a Kult*, 9–30 (Masaryk University Press, 2026).

<sup>30</sup> See e.g. Alexei M. Lidov, ed., *Hierotopy: The Creation of Sacred Space as a Form of Creativity and Subject of Cultural History / Иеротопия: Создание сакральных пространств как вид творчества и предмет исторического исследования* (Progress-Tradition, 2006); Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (Penn State University Press, 2010); Éric Palazzo, *L’invention chrétienne des cinq sens dans la liturgie et l’art au Moyen Âge* (Éditions du Cerf, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Foletti, Frantová, and Palladino, “Premodern Popular Culture.”

<sup>32</sup> Foletti, Palladino, and Lešák, *Dynamics of Medieval Landscape*.

mountains (the first asphalt road reached it only in 2013), preserves one of the densest concentrations of medieval devotional images anywhere in the world, most of them hammered metal panels depicting saints. More than roughly 700 such images are still preserved in local churches – to take an example, in the sanctuary of Lagurka alone, there are 84 devotional panels dating from the medieval period (Fig. 5). This extraordinary survival can be explained pragmatically: Svaneti’s remoteness made it a safe haven for sacred objects in times of upheaval, from the Mongol invasions to Soviet anti-religious campaigns. Yet what matters most for our discussion is not simply preservation, but the continuous life of these images across nearly a millennium. They are not inert survivals, but active participants in the religious and ecological fabric of the region, still carrying significance today.<sup>33</sup> Through these images, saints are imagined as inhabiting and protecting the valleys and mountains. The image of Saint George preserved in Nakipari, for instance, has been venerated since the eleventh century as the official protector of the commune of Iprari, which the image visits annually “in person” during ritual processions (Fig. 6).<sup>34</sup> A similar role is played by Saints Quiricus and Julitta at Lagurka, whose holiness extends beyond the church walls to permeate the hill itself: the trees and grasses that grow on and around the sanctuary are regarded as imbued with sanctity.<sup>35</sup> In this way, the images transform the very essence of local ecosystems. Nature is not a neutral backdrop but becomes, in the collective imagination, imbued with sacred presence. The density of this network in Svaneti is particularly remarkable: each valley, commune, and mountain is linked to a saint embodied in a devotional panel, housed in a church or shrine. The effect is a sacred web mapped onto the natural landscape, in which human, material, and ecological elements are woven together. This network is further reinforced by architecture, as towers, churches, and chapels punctuate the valleys, many of them mutually visible across ridges and slopes, echoing and amplifying the sanctity of the terrain. In this sense, the landscape of Svaneti emerges as a true constellation of holy places, exemplifying what this introduction seeks to convey: a lived sacred ecosystem in which images, natural features, and human practices converge, transforming mountains and valleys into “safe places” under the protection of the saints.



Fig. 5 The Church of Saints Cyricus and Julitta, interior, Lagurka (Georgia), Early 12th century © Thomas Kaffenberger, 2022

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. Manuela Studer-Karlen, Michele Bacci, and Natalia Chitishvili, eds., *Medieval Svaneti: Objects, Images, and Bodies in Dialogue with Built and Natural Spaces* (Masaryk University Press / Viella, 2023), *Convivium*, Supplementum 12; Ivan Foletti, “Decolonizing the Premodern South Caucasus: Historiography, Images, and Experiences,” *The Art Bulletin* 107, no. 2 (2025): 8–25.

<sup>34</sup> Georgi Čubinašvili, *Gruzinskoe čekannoe iskusstvo* [Georgian Embossed Art] (Tbilisi: Metsniereba, 1959), 355–73; Antony Eastmond, “Icons, Saints, and Society in Svaneti,” in *Medieval Svaneti: Objects, Images, and Bodies*, 166; Ivan Foletti and Kateřina Jůzlová, “The Triumph of the 3D. The Nakipari Devotional Images and the Power of Light,” in *Sulla Scultura. Studi in Onore di Clario Di Fabio*, ed. Gianluca Ameri, Francesca Girelli, Margherita Orsero, and Serena Romano, 37–44 (Sagep, 2025); Antony Eastmond, “Georgian Icons,” in *The Icon*, ed. Charles Barber and Maria Vassilaki (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2027).

<sup>35</sup> Marina Kevkhishvili, “Das ikonographische Programm von Lagurka: Überlegungen zu der symbolischen Verbindung der dargestellten Szenen,” *Arte medievale* 4, no. 3 (2013): 9–24 Stéphane Voell, “Oath of Memory: The Taking of Oaths on Icons in Svan Villages of Southern Georgia,” *Iran and the Caucasus* 17, no. 2 (2013): 153–69.



Fig. 6 St. George, embossed silver, Church of Saint George, Nakipari (Georgia), 11th century  
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## Conclusion

A cultural ecosystem presupposes a close dialogue between nature and culture. Of course, the relationship between human beings and their environment varies in time and space. Humans constantly seek to transform their environment – here, in particular, to sanctify space – while nature itself is never static, continually reshaped by climate, seismic activity, the migration of animals and plants, and the slow force of erosion. Across the centuries examined in this volume, this interaction produces different moments: periods of equilibrium, others in which nature violently disrupts the human world, and still others – those explored in the following pages – in which human activity profoundly and sometimes irreversibly transforms the environment. At times this transformation stems from the desire to create imagined paradises, often incompatible with their ecological context. At others, it results from exploitation of natural resources or even from the destructive impact of war.

The paradox is that as historians and art historians, we largely study precisely these cultural transformations of nature. We therefore conclude with a wish: that the study of past cultural ecosystems may offer not only new perspectives for our discipline, but perhaps also reflections relevant to the future of humanity itself.

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