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# PEREGRINATIONS

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## **Additional thoughts on the Coucy *donjon* tympanum and Table of Homage**

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A 1576 engraving by Jacques Androuet du Cerceau (1510–1585) offers the earliest pictorial witness to the 13<sup>th</sup>-century relief tympanum that once adorned the entry to the colossal *donjon* of Coucy-le-château (Picardy, modern Aisne). The same engraving includes the first evidence of the castle’s “Table of Homage,” a reputedly medieval work, and alludes to legends associated with both monuments by the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. This essay revisits earlier investigations of these monuments and their legends, with a particular focus on the undue influence exercised by Du Cerceau’s engraving. It is suggested that the stylistic liberties taken by Du Cerceau effectively obscured an important 13<sup>th</sup>-century valence of the tympanum relief as well as the true origins of the Table of Homage in a 14<sup>th</sup>-century tomb chest.

## **The Legend of the Coucy Lion Combat in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries**

When Charles, Duke of Orléans (1394–1465), returned to France after his long (1415-1440) captivity in England, for the first time in years, he visited Coucy-le-château, property his father acquired in 1397 upon the death of Enguerrand VII of Coucy (1340-1397), last lord of the medieval Coucy dynasty. In honor of Charles’ return, his secretary Antonio d’Asti (Antonius Astesanus, Antonio Astesano, 1412–1463) composed a poetic

description of the castle and its decorations.<sup>1</sup> There was much to praise. The fortress, constructed in the 1220s by Enguerrand III of Coucy (d. 1242) and modified by Enguerrand VII, was renowned for its immense size and beauty. Particularly impressive was the soaring 13<sup>th</sup>-century *donjon*, which in its day surpassed the height of many of the great cathedrals. Above the entrance to this tower was a sculpted relief tympanum that depicted a knight in combat with a rampant lion, the whole surrounded by two archivolts, of which the inner was populated by a series of figures in the voussoirs. This relief has an extraordinarily complex history, a problem exacerbated by its ultimate destruction in 1917.<sup>2</sup> Today it exists in extremely fragmentary form.<sup>3</sup> D’Asti’s poem of c. 1440, the earliest witness to the tympanum’s existence, reveals how its imagery was understood in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century:

It should not go unsaid, I believe, that above the door of the tower was carved  
the image of the illustrious prince who was the first builder of the castle. /  
He was the same man who, with bravery and with the greatest skill of arms, in  
a memorable battle struck down a tawny lion that was devastating that land by  
killing many, and with a savage blow cut it in half. /

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I am grateful to *Peregrinations* editor Sarah Blick and the anonymous reader for their helpful comments and suggestions. As ever, I thank Pierre-Emmanuel Sautereau for his help with images. François Brosse kindly secured permission to reproduce his excellent reconstruction of the courtyard of Coucy-le-château. This article is dedicated with admiration and friendship to Michèle Tranchart, who first introduced me to Coucy-le-château.

<sup>1</sup> For D’Asti’s poem see Antoine Le Roux de Lincy and Lazare-Maurice Tisserand, eds., *Paris et ses historiens aux XIV<sup>e</sup> et XV<sup>e</sup> siècles: Documents et écrits originaux* (Paris, 1867), 552–563; and Ernest de Buchères de l’Épinois, *Histoire de la ville et des sires de Coucy* (Paris, 1859), 354–367.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard A. Leson, “‘Partout la figure du lion’: Thomas of Marle and the Enduring Legacy of the Coucy Donjon Tympanum.” *Speculum* 93:1 (January 2018): 27–71, with bibliography. The *Lineage of Coucy, Dreux, Bourbon, and Courtenay*, a work completed in May 1303, reports that it was Enguerrand III “qui restora le Chastil de Coucy & fit faire la belle tour.” The original manuscript of the *Lineage* is lost but a transcription survives in BNF Ms. Du Chesne 48 (here at 32v).

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Gaspard Kools for facilitating examination of these fragments at Coucy-le-château in January 2019.

Then the prince founded a monastery, and gave to it the everlasting name of the defeated monster. /

As a second monument of this victory, I saw the hero's sword; it is so long that I could encompass it with my extended arms, and the blade is rather broad: it is the sword that felled the lion, it is said, struck by the right hand of the prince. On account of this, the image of the conqueror with the conquered lion was carved in hard stone above the door of the tower. /

Therefore our age is able to rejoice to have seen the conqueror of the lion, just as the age of Hercules rejoiced at his conquering of the Nemean lion.<sup>4</sup>

D'Asti's reference to the defeated *monstro* (the lion) is a fictional etymology for the Latin name of the nearby abbey of *Pratum monstratum*, or Prémontré, the motherhouse of the Norbertine order, which was located on the lands of the former Coucy barony. *Pratum Monstratum* in fact meant something akin to "designated field," or "revealed clearing," and probably referred to that place in the forest cleared by the monks for the monastery's construction in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century with the permission of the lords of

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<sup>4</sup> Le Roux de Lincy and Tisserand, *Paris*, 552–556, esp. 554, 556 :

Non reticendum hic est, puto, quod super ostia turris  
 Sculpta est effigies illustris principis ejus  
 Qui primus fuerat castris fundator, et idem  
 Qui, cum magnanimus, cum praestantissimus armis  
 Esset vir, fulvum memoranda in bella leonem,  
 Vastantem patriam non paucis caedibus illam,  
 Perculerat saevo mediumque ceciderat ictu.  
 Unde monasterium princeps fundavit, et illi  
 Aeterna a domito posuit cognomina monstro.  
 Cujus adhuc palmae monimentum vidimus ensem,  
 Tam longum quantum potui complectier ulnis  
 Extensis, cujus satis est quoque lamina lata,  
 Quo perhibent ejus dextra cecidisse leonem.  
 Hinc est victoris victique leonis imago  
 Caelata in dura turris super ostia petra.  
 Nostra aetas igitur sese vidisse leonis  
 Victorem gaudere potest, velut Herculis aetas  
 Gavisa est ab eo Nemeaea mole subacta.

(Turris major, lines 445–463)

Coucy. Already in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, well before construction of the Coucy *donjon*, we know that the monks were delighted that *Pratum monstratum* rhymed with *praedestinatum* (predestined). In d’Asti’s description of the tympanum we find a seemingly related game, one in which the verbal valence of *monstro* (“designated” or “revealed”) is replaced with that of the identical noun (“monster”).<sup>5</sup>

The tympanum legend reported by d’Asti proved resilient. It is alluded to on an engraving of 1576 by the designer and architect Jacques Androuet du Cerceau (1510–1585).<sup>6</sup> (**Fig. 1**) Du Cerceau’s attention was drawn to two of the decorations in the castle’s courtyard, the tympanum relief, and a curious object near the tower’s entrance usually referred to as the “Table of Homage.” His engraving includes the earliest depictions of the two monuments in existence. Beneath his image of the tympanum an inscription reads “This figure with the lion is in stone relief above the portal to the great tower for the memory of the lord of Coucy who killed a lion on the land of Prémontré.”<sup>7</sup> Clearly Du Cerceau knew d’Asti’s poem or the later, vernacular iteration of the legend discussed below. At any rate, his identification of the lion battle with Prémontré confirms that the “monastery” founded by d’Asti’s hero was indeed the Norbertine mother house.

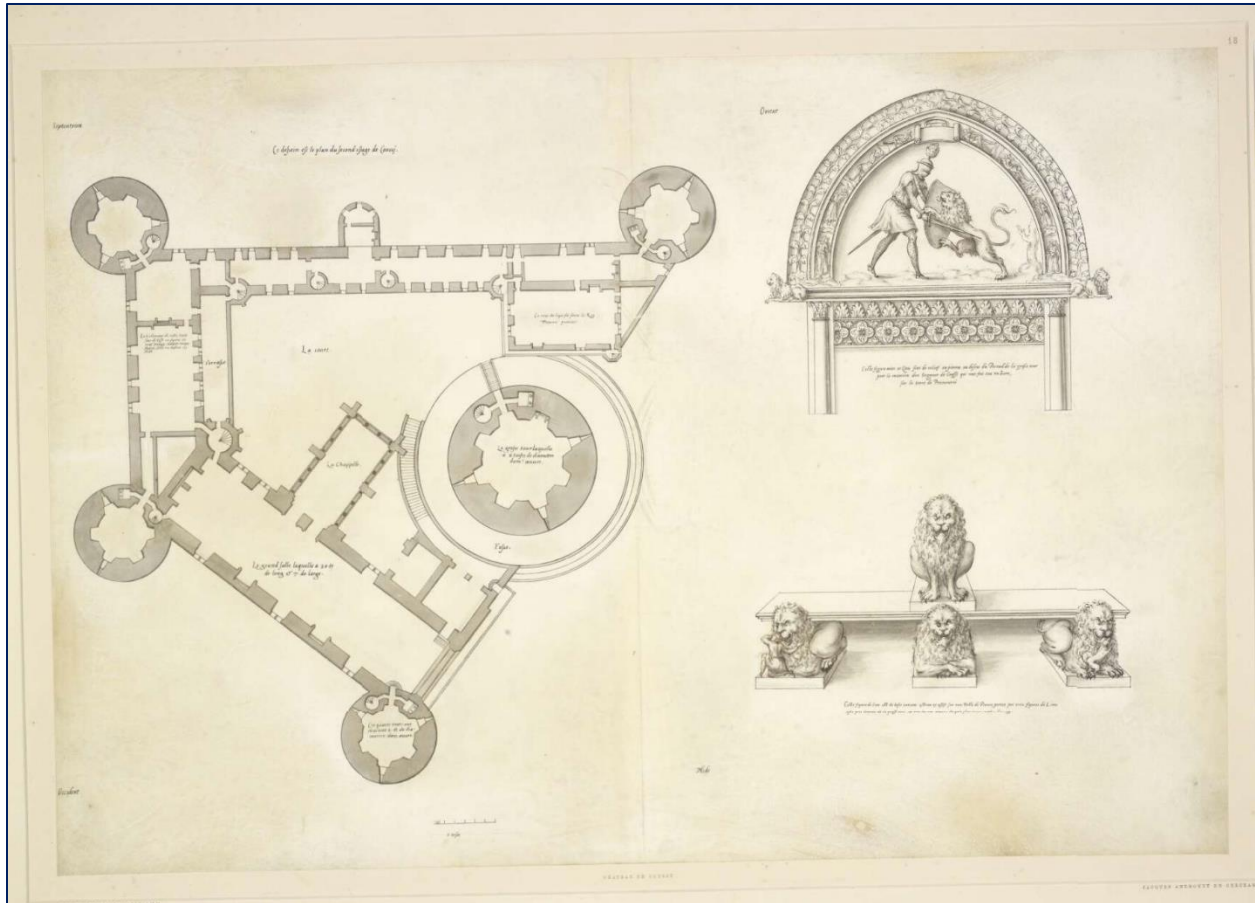
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<sup>5</sup> Leson, “Partout,” 33–34.

<sup>6</sup> See Jacques Androuet du Cerceau, *Les plus excellents bastiments de mémoire*, ed. François Boudon and Claude Mignot (Paris, 2010), 71, for a reproduction of London, British Museum, Prints and Drawings, inv. no. U.809.

<sup>7</sup> *Ceste figure avec ce lion sont de relief en pierres au dessus du portail en la grosse tour / pour la memoire dun seigneur de Coussi qui une fois tua un Lion / sur la terre de Premontré.*

Du Cerceau's inscription for the Table of Homage states "This figure of a lion is a sculpture seated on a table of stone borne by three figures of lions seated near the entry of the great tower [i.e. the *donjon*], where every year some people of the country are



**Figure 1** Jacques Androuet du Cerceau. Plan of Coucy-le-château with illustrations of the *donjon* tympanum and Table of Homage, 1576. London, The British Museum, Prints and Drawings inv. no. U.809. Photo: © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

required to make homage.”<sup>8</sup> This statement, however obliquely, reveals that by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the legend earlier reported by d’Asti had expanded to include a

<sup>8</sup> *Ceste figure de lion est de bosse entiere eslevee & assise sur une Table de Pierre portée par trois figures de Lions / assis pres l'entree de la grosse tour ou tous les ans aucuns du païs sont renus rendre hommage.*

second monument, the Table of Homage. One year after Du Cerceau's engravings appeared, the jurist François de l'Alouëte published a lengthy monograph devoted to the history of the Coucy dynasty. Here, the story of the lion combat and the legendary foundation of a monastery is described in detail, as is the homage ritual observed at the table to which Du Cerceau alluded the year before:

By his bold and beautiful feats of arms, this Enguerran[d] elevated the memory of his name so high that the title "Grand" was given to him (as I find written in the histories of Brabant) in Flanders and in Turkey; like his father, he did the duty of a brave and valiant knight, in every place where a good opportunity presented itself. He is the man who, by his prowess and virtue, mastered the boldness, power, and nobility of a lion. The story about this is very well known in our country, very solid and sure in this dynasty. That is to say, that [Enguerrand was] warned that in the woods and forests near the manor there were several strange wild beasts that were doing a great deal of damage and cruel deeds in the area. Among them was a large, powerful lion, that had long thick fur, a fierce and frightening gaze, hair sticking out in all directions; it had no fear of dogs or of the hunter's arrow. [Enguerrand] was moved, and his heart was filled with a burning desire to fight it. He had a guide take him to the place where it often went. There it was pointed out to him more abruptly than he expected, and, barely having time to get ready for the fight, he said these words to the guide: "You showed it to me from close up!" And by and by, with courage like Theseus, with strength and resolve like Hercules, with dexterity like Lysimachus, he attacked this furious beast so boldly and struck it at such close quarters that (after fighting face to face for a long time) finally he vanquished it and killed it. Everywhere he got such renown from this that the memory of his reputation will never die out. As a symbol and trophy of this memorable and signal victory, an image of this animal was made and sculpted in hard stone, according to the proportions of its height and breadth, with a collar with the Coucy coat of arms. It is still visible today at the aforementioned castle of Coucy. Additionally, joyous festivals and triumphant celebrations were established every year in the style of the Greeks. At these the abbot of Nogent (who belongs to the [abbey] founded by this dynasty) has to offer wine and rissoles to the lord of Coucy in the courtyard with the aforementioned lion [statue] in the presence of officials who make a document and record of it. And I believe that this is done in memory of the good that was done for the people, and the peace that they—even laborers—[derived] from the death of this cruel beast. But before making the aforementioned gifts and offerings, they continue the solemn practice that the

aforementioned abbot has to be dressed in the clothing of a laborer and planter, with a whip in his hand, and he has to ride into the courtyard of the castle dressed in this outfit, riding on a horse equipped in the same [rustic] way, with nothing missing, even down to the last nail. He rides around several times cracking his whip and making the sound ring out; otherwise he would lose his horse. And then people stop him and scrutinize him all over, and if his outfit and his horse are not missing anything, he is welcomed in to give the aforementioned gifts and homage. This is done and repeated three times a year, on Christmas, Easter, and Saint John's Day, as I have seen.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> English translation by Zan Kocher. François de l'Alouëte, *Traité des nobles et des vertus dont ils sont formés: . . . Avec une histoire & description généalogique de la très illustre & très ancienne Maison de Couci, & de ses alliances; Le tout distribué en quatre livres* (Paris, 1577), 112v–113r:

“Cét Enguerran a rendu la memoire de son nom si recommandable par ses beaus & hardis faits d’armes, que le titre de grand lui fut donné, comme ie trouue remarqué és histoires de Brabāt, aiant souuentesfois guerroié en la Flandre & en Turquie, comme son pere, & en tous lieux où s’ét presenté iuste occasion de faire deuoir d’un preus & vaillant Cheualier. // C’ét cetui-ci qui par sa prouesse & vertu a doté l’orgueil, force, & magnaminité du Lion, dont l’histoire est si notoire au païs, si certaine & veritable en cette maison. C’ét à sçauoir qu’étant aduertit qu’il auoit es bois & forests proches de la maison plusieurs bestes sauuages & etranges qui faisoient beaucoup de maus & de cruautéz aus enuiron: Entre lesquelles étoit vn grand & puissant Lion, qui auoit une épaisse & longue cheulure, vn regard fier & hideus, le poil herissé, ne redoutant le chien, ne le trait du chasseur, s’émeut & enfla le coeur d’vne ardeur & desir de le combater. Se fit guider au lieu où il hantoit: où lui étant montré plus soudainement qu’il ne cuidoit, & n’ayant presque loisir de se disposer au combat, Dit à la guide en ces mots: Tu me las de pres montré. Et quāt-&-quant d’vn courage de Theseus, d’vne force & resolution d’Hercules, & de la dexterité d’un Lysimachus, faillit saillit si hardiment sur cette beste furieuse, & la ferra de sip res [de si pres], que l’ayant longuement combatu cors à cors, en fin il la vainquit & fit mourir. Dont il acquit vn tel renom par tout, que la memoire de sa reputatió n’en peut être iamais esteinte. // Pour enseigne & Trophée de cette memorable & insigne victoire fut faite & taillée en pierre dure la figure de cét animal selon la proportion de sa grandeur & grosseur avec vn collier des Armes de Couci, lequel se void encores auiourd’hui au chasteau dudit Couci. Et furent en outre instituées festes de resiouissance & festins triomphans tous les ans à la mode des Grecs. Au lieu desquels l’Abbé de Nogent (qui est de la foundation de cette maison) est tenu d’offrir vin & Bissoles [sic] au Seigneur de Couci en la place où ledit Lion en la presence des officiers qui en font acte & registre. Et croi que cela se fait en memoire du bien & repos qu’a eu le people, & mesmement les laboureurs en la mort de cette cruelle beste. Mais auant que faire lesdits presens & offrandes, on garde cette solennité, que ledit Abbé doit être vestu d’vn habillement de laboureur & semeur le fouët en la main, & en cét habit entrer en la cour dudit chasteau môté sur vn cheual enharnaché de mesme, auquel il ne defaille riens, non pas iusques à vn clou: Fait plusieurs tours en maniant & faisant cliquer & sonner ledit fouët, autrement il perdrait le cheual. Et puis on l’arreste & visite de toutes parts, & s’il ne defaut riens en son equipage ou de son cheual, Il est receu à faire lesdits presens & hommage. Cela se fait & reitere tous les ans trois fois, au iour de Noel, à Pasques & à la saint Jean, comme i’ai veu.”





**Figure 2** André Girodie. Photograph c. 1927 of tapestry titled *Enguerrand II poursuivant le Lion de Prémontré*. Photo: © Ministère de la Culture, Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie, APBAO02362.

Curiously, L'Alouëte was silent about the *donjon* tympanum described by d'Asti. His version of the legend also seems to substitute the monastery of Nogent-sous-Coucy for Prémontré. The name of the latter monastery still figures in a pun, but now, in the

French vernacular, the joke turns not on the “monster” as much as its very sudden appearance to the hero (Tu me las de *pres montré*). According to L’Alouète, this history was also the inspiration for tapestries that hung at Coucy-le-château in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, works reportedly taken to Lorraine by a widow of one of the medieval lords.<sup>10</sup> An unpublished photograph of the 1920s now in the collections of the Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie may show the tapestry described by L’Alouète, a work titled *Enguerrand II poursuivant le Lion de Prémontré*.<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 2) It shows a work of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (rather than the 14<sup>th</sup>), one clearly indebted to the version of the legend reported by L’Alouète. It is charming, further proof of the transformation of the Coucy lion mythology and its continued popularity in the early modern period, but unfortunately of little help in resolving the mysteries of the medieval *donjon* tympanum or, indeed, the Table of Homage.

In summary, then, the fully developed Coucy lion mythos as known by the 16<sup>th</sup> century went something like this: in the distant past a lord of Coucy (judging from l’Alouète, a conflation of several of the historical lords) saved the peasantry from a rampaging lion that terrorized the countryside. A monastery was founded in honor of the lord’s victory at the place where the beast was slain. The tympanum of the Coucy *donjon* depicted the battle and a lion was carved and displayed in the round so that the Abbey of Nogent-sous-Coucy could ritually demonstrate eternal gratitude on behalf of the people.

Dominique Barthélemy, foremost historian of the Coucy dynasty, saw the various iterations of the Coucy lion legend as echoes of the family’s historical claims to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 113r; Leson, “Partout,” 63–64 and n105.

<sup>11</sup> According to the MPP database the tapestry belonged to “Mme Desclève,” who is also credited as its owner in a review of a 1927 exhibition. See André Girodie, “Les fêtes artistiques des amis de Blérancourt,” *L’Art Vivant* 66 (Sep. 1927): 725. As of yet I have not determined the tapestry’s current location. The photograph of the tapestry depicted in figure 2 is attributed to Girodie and was presumably taken at Blérancourt in 1927.

have “founded” the monasteries of Prémontré and Nogent-sous-Coucy.<sup>12</sup> In other words, there are kernels of truth in these stories. For example, while the punning association of the tympanum’s lion combat with *Pratum monstratum* is not supported by any 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup>-century documentation, it is true that Thomas of Marle, progenitor of the Coucy dynasty, and his son Enguerrand II of Coucy observed the foundation of Prémontré in 1120.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, though it includes no reference to the Table of Homage, a receiver’s account of 1387 records that the Abbot of Nogent-sous-Coucy made ceremonial payments to the castellan of Coucy on Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. That same document reveals that payment was rendered not in cash but *rissoles*, wine, and bread, and delivered by a servant of the abbot of Nogent who was to arrive appropriately attired on a pack horse.<sup>14</sup>

As Barthélemy indicated, the lion mythos as recorded in the late-medieval (d’Asti) and early modern (L’Alouëte) sources is a product of subsequent reception of medieval monuments. This is to say that such associations were not an intention of

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<sup>12</sup> Dominique Barthélemy, “Les sires Fondateurs: Enjeux impliqués dans les traditions et les recours au passé en Seigneurie de Coucy,” in *Temps, mémoire, tradition au Moyen Âge: Actes du XIIIe congrès de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l’enseignement supérieur public, Aix-en-Provence, 4–5 juin 1982* (Aix-en-Provence, 1983), 185–203.

<sup>13</sup> For example, no reference to the Coucy lion legend is found in the monastery’s cartulary, for which see *The Cartulary of Prémontré*, eds. Yvonne Seale and Heather Wacha (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Barthélemy, “Fondateurs,” 197 and n 54; Leson, “Partout,” 68. The relevant document is Paris, Archives Nationales, ser. R/4/185 (1 January 1387). On the *rissoles* payment, see Leson, “Partout,” 69, and Maxime de Sars, *Le Laonnois féodal*, 5 vols. (Paris, 1924–1934), III: 266–267, and 267 n3. I have suggested that the *rissoles* payment arose as a result of the close relationship between Enguerrand VII of Coucy and the abbot and monks of Nogent, and that the Table of Homage could date from the late fourteenth century. The ritual components of the *rissoles* ceremony, particularly the emphasis on a decorated horse ridden around a monument, are clearly a playful, secular inversion of rural Saint Stephen’s Day celebrations in which farmers rode their horses three times around the church to ensure a fertile year. See Francis X. Weiser, S.J., *Holyday Book* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1956), 138. While the ritual of the *rissoles* is rooted in a 14<sup>th</sup>-century practice, I now believe the Table of Homage should be dated to the 15<sup>th</sup>-century, as discussed below.

medieval sculptors and that at some point the tympanum and the thematically related Table of Homage prompted clever Picards to fashion the legend of the lion combat and its associated puns.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Barthélemy was not the first to cast doubt on the historical veracity of the Coucy lion mythos. In 1728, Dom Toussaints Duplessis suggested that the relief symbolized Enguerrand III of Coucy's battle against heresy in the Albigensian Crusade.<sup>16</sup> In 1917, lamenting the destruction of the *donjon* by the retreating Germans, Emile Mâle remembered the relief as "a proud symbol of strength, a kind of metaphor of epic poetry translated into stone."<sup>17</sup> A decade later, Eugène Lefèvre-Pontalis saw the relief as an emblem of chivalric bravery and referred to the archivolt figures as "virtues."<sup>18</sup> More recently, Christian Corvisier described the tympanum as an emblem of brute strength, one which he read against the Coucy family's troubled relationship with the Capetians.<sup>19</sup> In my view, which mostly builds on Corvisier, the tympanum recalls a motif frequently found in crusade literature and romance, the lion combat, and alludes to contemporary Coucy family legends about Thomas of Marle, hero of the First Crusade and great grandfather of the tower's builder, Enguerrand III. Though all these

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<sup>15</sup> Picardy was evidently the cradle of such word games. See Jessica Brantley, "'In Things': The Rebus in Premodern Devotion," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 45:2 (May 2015): 287–321, esp. 290–291. In Leson, "Epic Sensibilities," 132, I suggested that the relief's lion slayer—a "tuer de lion"—might have been a visual pun on the words "tueur de lion," or "lion tower." Such wordplay, however conjectural, perhaps invited additional witticisms, for example the Prémontré pun.

<sup>16</sup> See Dom Toussaints Duplessis, *Histoire de la ville et des seigneurs de Coucy; avec des notes ou dissertations, & les pièces justificatives* (Paris, 1728), 61–63, n. xxxiii.

<sup>17</sup> Emile Mâle, "Le château de Coucy et l'architecture militaire du Moyen Âge," *Revue de Paris*, 15 October 1917: 673–99. Reprinted in Mâle, *L'art allemand et l'art français du Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1923), 285–286.

<sup>18</sup> Eugène Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Le Château de Coucy*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1928), 86.

<sup>19</sup> Christian Corvisier, *Coucy-le-Château, images et mémoire* (Soissons, 1999), 4–27, esp. 14.



**Figure 3** Daniel Ramée. The portal to the Coucy *donjon*, 1830. Photo: © Ministère de la Culture, Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie, AP06R00014.

positions are ultimately compatible, I now believe that those of Duplessis and especially Lefèvre-Pontalis deserve additional consideration.

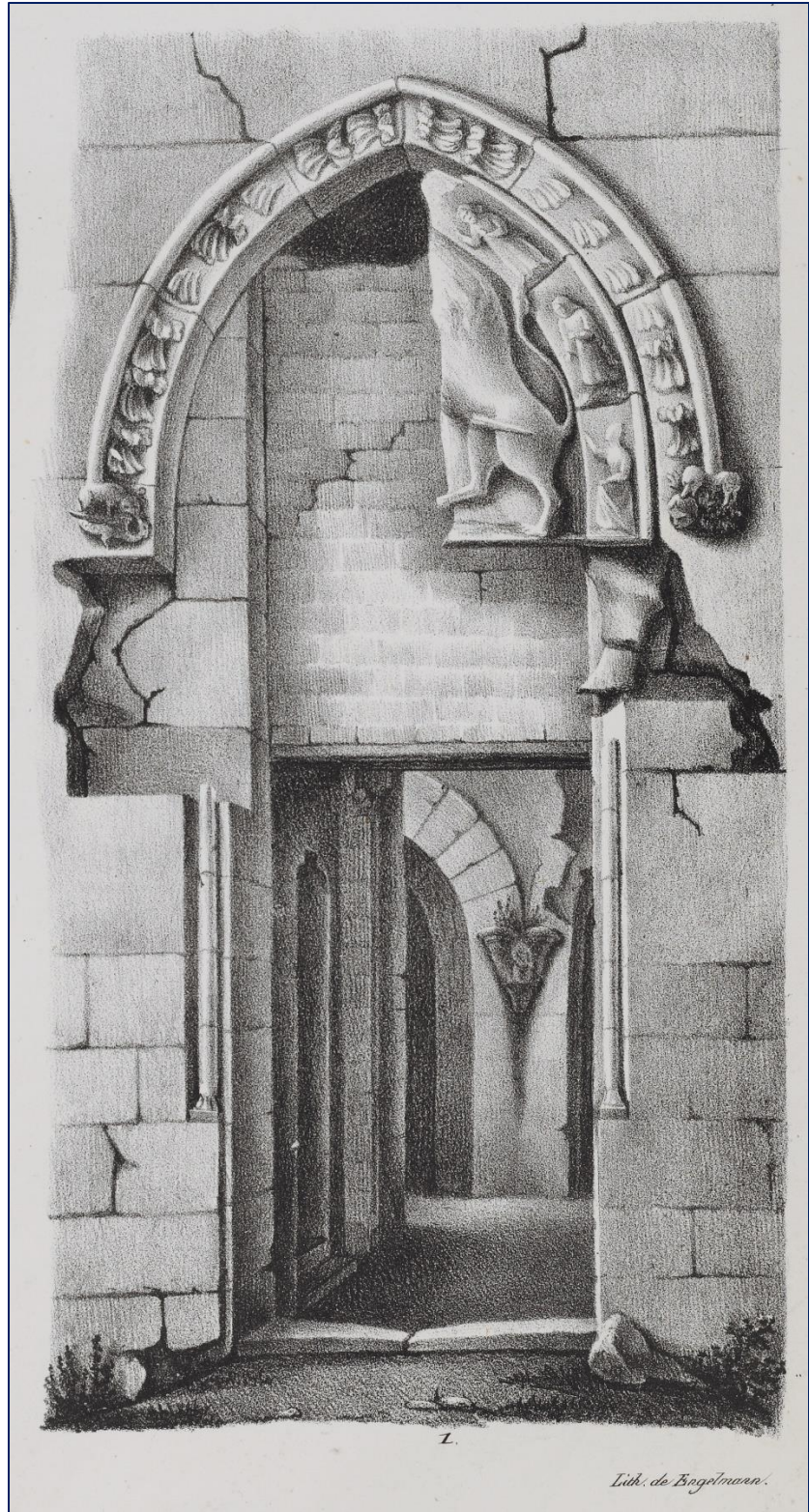
### **The Coucy *donjon* tympanum: A Personification of Fortitude?**

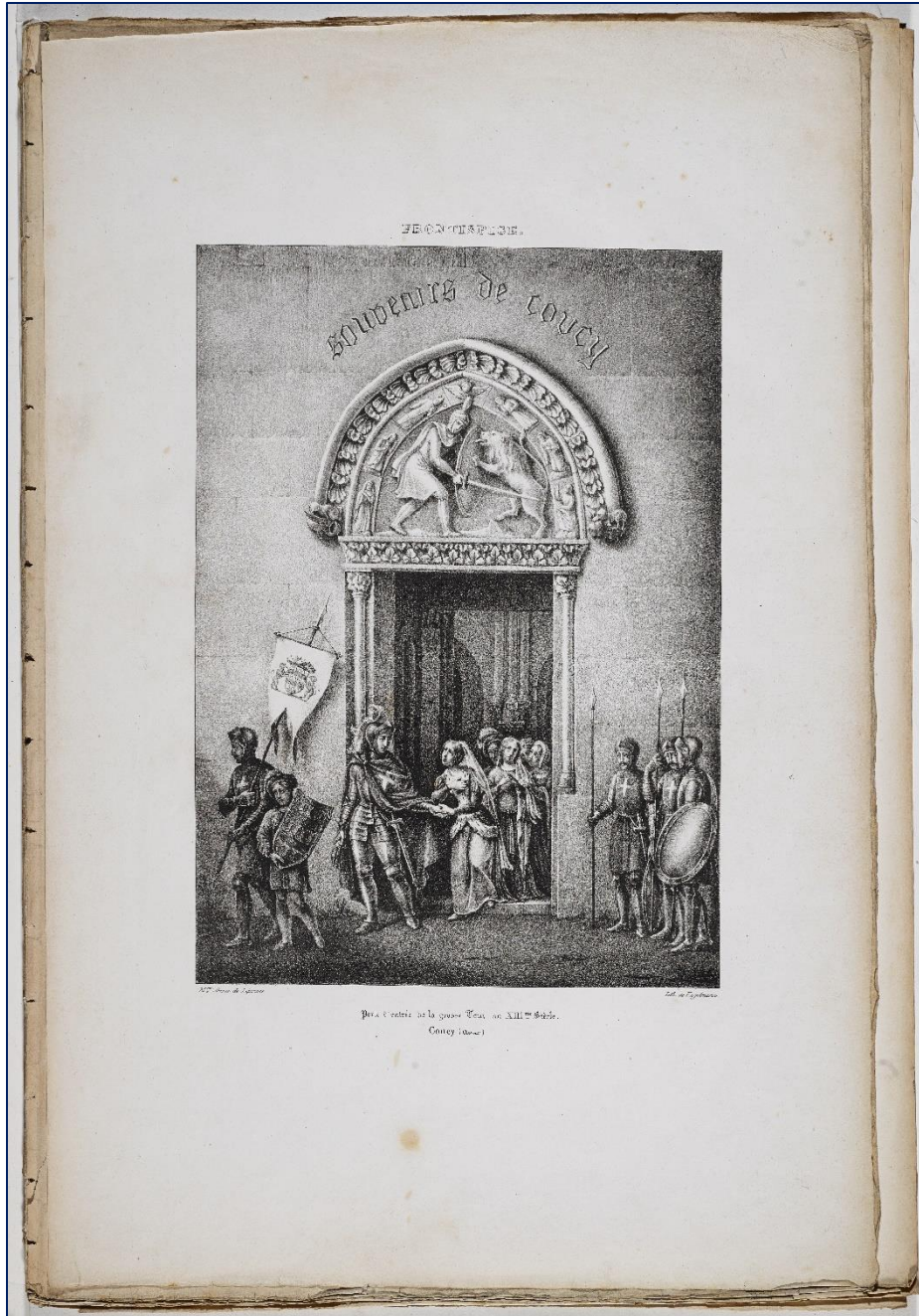
In 1652, during the French Civil War, the Coucy *donjon* tympanum was badly damaged. Its poor condition after that point is captured by two illustrations made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first is a charcoal and pastel drawing of the tower's portal done in 1830 by the architect Daniel Ramée (1806–1887). (**Fig. 3**) The second, made only four years later, is a lithograph by the artist Anna de l'Épinois (1804-1898) in a portfolio titled *Souvenirs de Coucy*.<sup>20</sup> (**Fig. 4**) Comparison of these works to Du Cerceau's engraving of 1576 suggests the many liberties taken by that master of French Renaissance design. It appears that he expanded the pictorial plane of the central relief, which change required the addition of two extra voussoirs at the apex of the inner archivolt, resulting in a total of eight rather than six figures in the framework that surrounded the lion combat. His voussoir figures are reclining, classicizing nudes. By contrast, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century illustrations of the combat—or what was left of it by that date—depict the action more tightly enclosed by the inner archivolt. In attitude and proportion, the relief figures as depicted by Ramée and l'Épinois are closer to later, pre-war photographs that captured what was left of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century work, and therefore more useful when imagining the appearance of the original relief. The romantic frontispiece to l'Épinois' portfolio, which includes her reconstruction of the relief, confirms that she reckoned the tympanum originally included six as opposed to eight figures. (**Fig. 5**)

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<sup>20</sup> The lithograph appears in Ernest de Buchères de l'Épinois, *Souvenirs de Coucy, dessins lithographiés accompagnés d'un texte historique et descriptif* (Coucy, 1834).

**Figure 4** Anna de l'Épinois.  
The portal to the Coucy  
*donjon*, c. 1834. Lithograph  
from Ernest de Buchères de  
l'Épinois, *Souvenirs de  
Coucy, dessins  
lithographiés accompagnés  
d'un texte historique et  
descriptif* (Coucy, 1834).  
Photo: Courtesy of Avery  
Architectural & Fine Arts  
Library, Columbia  
University.





**Figure 5** Frontispiece Anna de l'Épinois, Engraving of the Coucy donjon tympanum for the portfolio *Souvenirs de Coucy* (1834),

Not long after *Ramée* and *l'Épinois* studied the remains of the relief, the Coucy *donjon* and its tympanum were restored by Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879) and his frequent collaborator, the sculptor Geoffroy-Dechaume (1816-1892).<sup>21</sup> Numerous pre-war

<sup>21</sup> Marie-Claude Béthune, *De plâtre et d'or: Geoffroy-Dechaume, sculpteur romantique de Viollet-le-*





**Figure 6** Photograph of the restored tympanum of the Coucy donjon, c. 1900. Photo: Courtesy of Pierre-Emmanuel Sautereau.

photographs show the completed restoration with eight as opposed to six voussoirs, a strong indication that Viollet-le-Duc relied on Du Cerceau's engraving of 1576. **(Fig. 6)** From one of the pre-war photographs, a detail of the right side of the tympanum, it is easy to distinguish those portions of the medieval relief that remained visible to Ramée and l'Épinois in the 1830s. **(Fig. 7)**

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*Duc; L'Isle-Adam, Musée d'art et d'histoire Louis Senlecq, 15 novembre 1998–11 avril 1999; Château de La Roche-Guyon, an 2000 (Nesles-la-Vallée, 1998), 190–191.*

**Figure 7** Detail of the remaining 13th-century voussoirs, c. 1900.

Photo: Courtesy of Art Resource.



Clearly Geoffroy-Dechaume was able to incorporate those 13<sup>th</sup>-century remains into his restoration, but, nonetheless, under the

influence of Du Cerceau's 1576 engraving, determined to squeeze two additional voussoir figures near the apex of the archivolt. If the inner voussoir figures originally numbered six as suggested by l'Épinois in 1834, rather than eight proposed by Du Cerceau, then it is possible that, together with the central relief, seven virtues were originally represented. Lefèvre-Pontalis, describing the restored tympanum in 1928, may have suspected this:

Eight figurines stand out on the arch, but as the attributes of the three primitive statuettes are broken, it is difficult to identify them with this or that virtue.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Château de Coucy*, 86 : "Huit figurines se détachent sur la voussure, mais comme les attributs des trois statuettes primitives sont cassés, il est difficile de les identifier avec telle ou telle vertu.

It is tempting to imagine that Lefèvre-Pontalis's suspicions about the identity of the voussoir figures were correct. In his examination of the pre-war photographs, he clearly recognized the "three primitive statuettes," (the three surviving 13<sup>th</sup>-century voussoir figures), but hesitated to identify them due to their poor state of preservation. Suppose, however, that these figures once possessed attributes like those carried by so many personifications of virtues in medieval art. Could they not, then, have represented Prudence, Justice, Temperance, Faith, Hope, and Charity? Were this the case, the knight of the lion combat was a personification of Fortitude, like others that appeared battling a lion, holding a lion, or bearing a disc or shield emblazoned with the beast's image.<sup>23</sup> The tympanum, then, was a metaphor for the strength of the mighty Coucy *donjon* itself and expression of its chief virtue. This reading agrees in spirit with another poem dedicated to Coucy and its environs, this one by Eustache Deschamps (1346–1406), contemporary and friend of Enguerrand VII:

And how great is the value of the strength / Of the tower of Coucy / And of its castle, which is such a fine place?<sup>24</sup>

I do not think this reading of the *donjon* tympanum's iconography precludes the possibility of other, intended associations with Enguerrand III of Coucy or his ancestors, the innate beneficiaries of this message of virtuous strength. Such images were mutable, like those of the great cathedrals. Indeed, in view of the tower's colossal scale and the stylistic similarities of its sculptures to those of the cathedral of Noyon,

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L'archivolte, garnie de crochets, retombe sur deux consoles ornées d'une chimère et de deux aigles becquetant des masques."

<sup>23</sup> See *inter alia* the examples catalogued in *Virtue and Vice, The Personifications in the Index of Christian Art*, ed. Colum Hourhiane (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 205–209.

<sup>24</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 840, fol. 32rb: "Eaues aussi, et que vault la puissance / De la tour de Coucioys / Et du chastel, qui tant est lieux adrois?"

Denis Hayot likened the *donjon* to a “secular temple,” a comparison that invites us to imagine its decorations subject to contemporary exegetical frameworks like those art historians have applied to the iconography of the great Gothic cathedrals.<sup>25</sup> This is simply to assert that the lion combat relief was, like so many other medieval images, multivalent. As such, the knight’s battle with a lion belongs to a chain of associated subjects that includes the biblical lion-fighters Samson and David, as well as heroes of chivalric romance like Gawain.<sup>26</sup> Samson slaying the lion enjoyed a particular association with FORTIS (strength) and VIRTUS (courage) in mid-13<sup>th</sup>-century visual culture. The same terms surround the medallion of Samson killing the lion in Amanda Luyster’s recent reconstruction of the Chertsey Abbey tiles.<sup>27</sup> There, the biblical hero’s lion combat appeared alongside similar imagery including the famous image of Richard Lionheart defeating Saladin in single combat. As Luyster has shown, the motifs of the tile medallions—biblical, metaphorical, and historical—were mutually informative and together offered a romanticized image of England’s crusader past. Among them was a knight battling a lion, the same motif found on the Coucy *donjon* tympanum.<sup>28</sup>

Encounters between historical crusaders and lions also abound in crusader chronicles.

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<sup>25</sup> Denis Hayot, “Der Bau der Burg Coucy als baukünstlerischer Höhepunkt des 13. Jahrhunderts vor dem Hintergrund der Kathedralen von Reims und Amiens,” in *Der Naumburger Meister: Bildhauer und Architekt im Europa der Kathedralen; Naumburg, 29. Juni 2011 bis 02. November 2011*, ed. Guido Siebert, Hartmut Krohm, and Holger Kunde, 3 vols. (Petersberg, 2011–12), 1:521–530, esp. 529–530; on biblical exegesis and art see *inter alia* *The Four Modes of Seeing: Approaches to Medieval Imagery in Honor of Madeline Harrison Caviness*, eds. Evelyn Staudinger Lane, Elizabeth Carson Pastan, and Ellen M. Shortell (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Leson, “Partout,” 42 and n. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Amanda Luyster, “The Chertsey Tiles: Reassembling Fragments of Meaning,” in Luyster, ed. *Bringing the Holy Land Home: The Crusades, Chertsey Abbey, and the Reconstruction of a Medieval Masterpiece* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 29–80, here at 62, “VIRTUS / SAMSONIS / FOR/TIS/ FRE/git/ORA/LEONIS.”

<sup>28</sup> Luyster, “Reassembling,” 54–62.



**Figure 8** Impression (reverse) of the seal of Saher IV de Quincy (d. 1219). Magdalen College Archives, Brackley A2. Photo: Reproduced by permission of the President and Fellows of Magdalen College Oxford.

And in England, the knight-lion combat appeared on early-13<sup>th</sup> century seal matrices of several important noble families with ties to the crusades, where the motif was emblematic of the seal owner's innate strength and, it has been argued, crusader heritage.<sup>29</sup> (**Fig. 8**) Though he did not adopt the iconography on his seal, it is

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 51–56, with discussion of the seals of the Quincy family. On the English lion-combat seals see also the insightful study by Gordon Reynolds, "Battling the Lion: Visual Commemorations of Crusade in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Seals from the British Isles," *The Antiquaries Journal*, Vol. 103 (October 2023): 240–262. I am grateful to Gordon Reynolds for an opportunity to read this study before publication.

conceivable that similar, crusader valences of the knight-lion combat were known to Enguerrand III of Coucy (who, incidentally, cultivated political ties in Scotland and England throughout his career) and somehow informed selection of the tympanum iconography.

As Duplessis knew, Enguerrand III could boast his own crusader *bona fides*, having fought alongside Louis VIII in the Albigensian Crusades. He was also heir to a significant crusader legacy, one that included his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. The last of these was Thomas of Marle (1073-1130), progenitor of the Coucy family and hero of the First Crusade. In the early 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Chanson de Jérusalem*, a work in which Thomas figures heavily, the hero carries a shield emblazoned with a lion in battle against the Saracen Cornicas.<sup>30</sup> If the tympanum knight originally bore a shield (as Du Cerceau's engraving suggests), it might have depicted a lion, like shields carried by some sculpted personifications of Fortitude found elsewhere, facilitating association with the legendary Thomas. **(Fig. 9)** If the shield were painted with a heraldic charge other than a lion, it was probably that of the lords of Coucy themselves, heraldry anachronistically borne by Thomas in at least two 13<sup>th</sup>-century miniatures painted in northern France.<sup>31</sup> The evidence is circumstantial, but Thomas was very much on the mind of Enguerrand III around the time that work on the *donjon* commenced, and remembered far more favorably by his descendants than others. In

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<sup>30</sup> Carol Sweetenham, trans., *The "Chanson des Chétifs" and "Chanson de Jérusalem," Completing the Central Trilogy of the Old French Crusade Cycle* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2016), 331: "He struck Thomas of Marle on his shield with a device of a lion."

<sup>31</sup> Richard A. Leson, "Epic Sensibilities in French Art of the Crusader Period," in Luyster, ed. *Bringing the Holy Land Home: The Crusades, Chertsey Abbey, and the Reconstruction of a Medieval Masterpiece* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 127–148, here at 140–142, figs. 56 & 57. Close examination of Du Cerceau's illustration reveals that he attempted to depict the Coucy arms on the shield. Whether he actually saw the arms painted there or added them in accordance with the lion legend is unclear.



**Figure 9** Personification of Fortitude, c. 1220. Amiens Cathedral, west façade, central portal, southern dado.

1219, the lord of Coucy oversaw the translation of the remains of his great-grandfather, “that happy man of noble memory,” to a new tomb in the recently renovated choir of



**Figure 10** Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, c. 1250. The Death of Enguerrand III of Coucy. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College Library MS 16II fol. 178v. Photo: Courtesy of the Masters and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

Abbey of Nogent-sous-Coucy, a project that utilized stone quarried from the same Soissons source used for the castle's *donjon*.<sup>32</sup>

If the Coucy *donjon* tympanum fused a personification of Fortitude with the lord of Coucy and his crusading forefathers, Enguerrand III's contemporary Matthew Paris

<sup>32</sup> Leson, "Partout," 53 and n 76; Anne Prache and Dominique Barthélémy, "Notre-Dame de Nogent-sous-Coucy, une abbaye bénédictine disparue," *Bulletin Monumental* 140, n° 1 (1982) : 7–14, esp. 7.



conflated the lord of Coucy with another personification: Superbia. (Fig. 10) Matthew's c. 1250 illustration of Enguerrand's death in 1242 depicts the lord of Coucy's fatal fall from his horse, a motif typically utilized for the depiction of Pride. According to Matthew, "while living [Enguerrand] was a zealous builder in material matters but in spiritual matters a sad dissipator."<sup>33</sup> It is tempting to imagine that Matthew possessed detailed knowledge of Enguerrand's castle and that his illustration was in some sense a response to the "Fortitude" of the Coucy *donjon*.

### **The Table of Homage as *spolia***

Thanks to d'Asti's c.1440 poem, we know that the tympanum knight was associated with a semi-historical lord of Coucy—"the first builder of the castle." Some association between the knight and the lords of Coucy was surely intended by the relief's makers. But at what point did the punning association with the abbey of Prémontré emerge? It may be, as I proposed elsewhere, that the Latinate version of the pun invoked by d'Asti emerged as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, prompted somehow by competition between Prémontré and Nogent-sous-Coucy for the favors of the Coucy family.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, 13<sup>th</sup>-century origins cannot hold for the Table of Homage or its associated pun, a monument and narrative from which the *donjon* tympanum should at last be disentangled. The table, which does not feature in d'Asti's poem, is first referenced by Du Cerceau in 1576. Du Cerceau indicated that it was located next to the *donjon*, in the castle's courtyard. Unlike the tympanum, the Table of Homage remains

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<sup>33</sup> Suzanne Lewis, *The Art of Matthew Paris in the "Chronica Majora"* (Berkeley, 1987), 239–241. Matthew, the only contemporary chronicler to comment on the death of Enguerrand III, might well have invented the circumstances of the lord's demise. One wonders if the partisan Matthew invented the story of Enguerrand's fall in order to conflate the lord of Coucy with the vice of Pride.

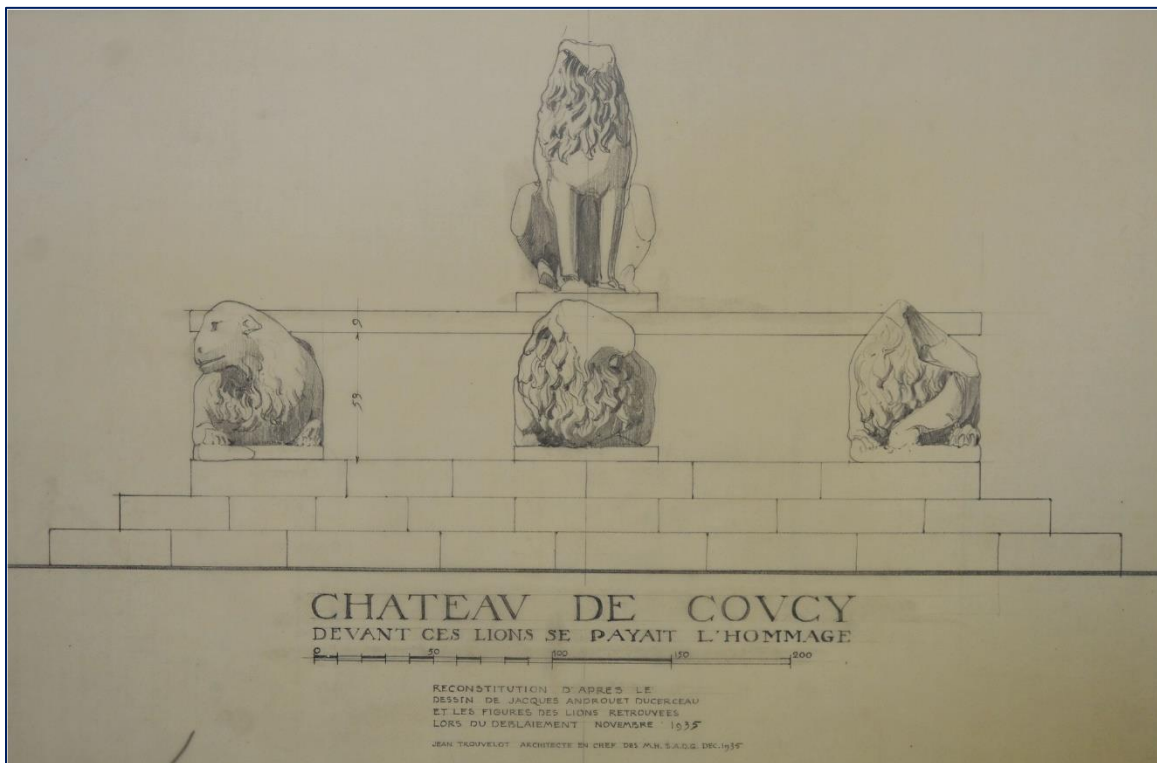
<sup>34</sup> Leson, "Partout," 54–55.



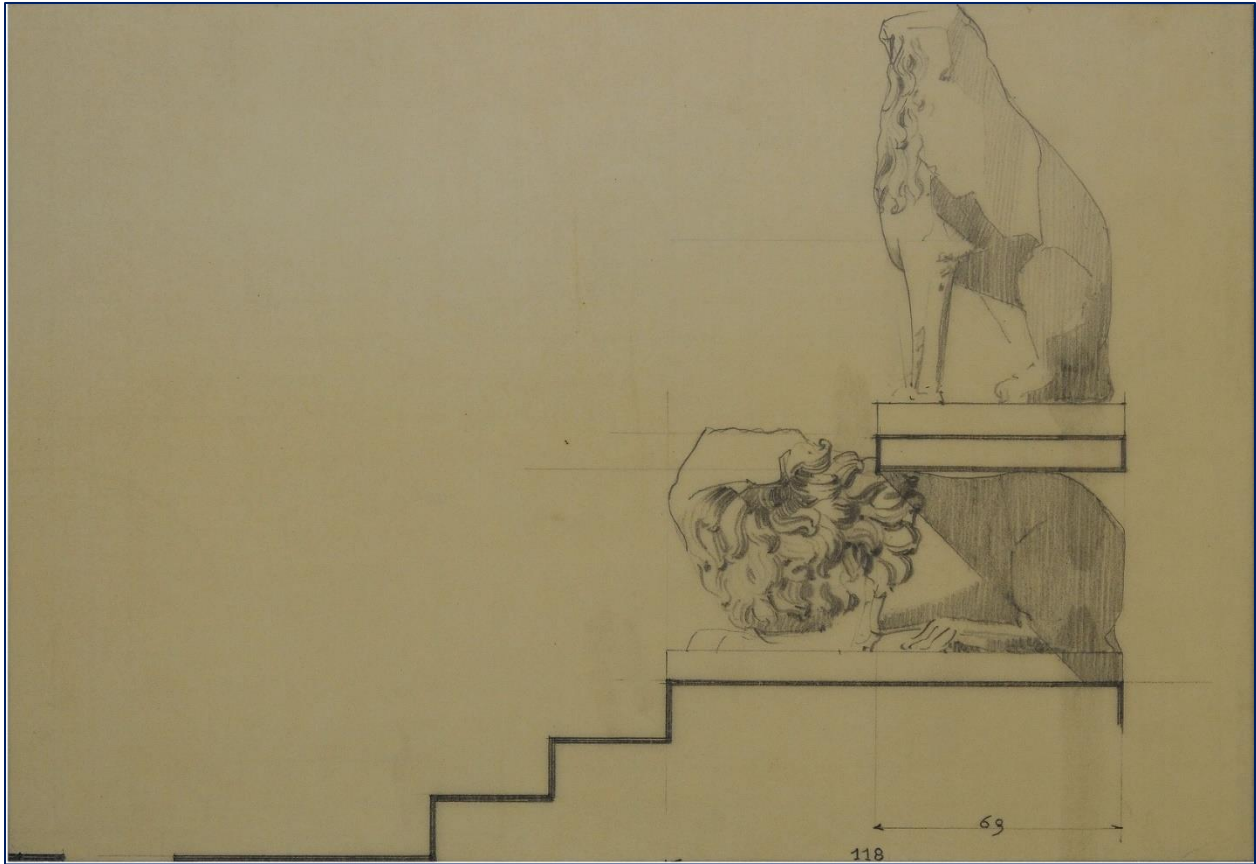
somewhat intact. Currently it is nestled under one of the ground-level vaults that once supported a wing of the castle's residential apartments. **(Fig. 11)** It comprises a rectangular concrete slab some 200 cm in length supported by three recumbent lions. On its top a fourth lion sits on its haunches. The four beasts were likely symbolically decapitated during the Revolution. We can be relatively certain that they incurred further damage in the 1917 explosion that destroyed the castle's towers. In 1935 the architect Jean Trouvelot described the lions as "found during the clearing" of the castle's debris.<sup>35</sup> At that time, he began to reassemble the monument. He planned a new

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<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Pierre-Emmanuel Sautereau of the Association de Mise en Valeur du Château de Coucy (AMVCC) for drawing my attention to the work of Trouvelot.



**Figures 12-13** Jean Trouvelot. Drawing of the Table of Homage (after Du Cerceau) and Preparatory drawing for restoration of Table of Homage 1935; Photo: © Ministère de la Culture, Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie, G/82/02/1010.



**Figure 14** Jean Trouvelot. Preparatory drawing for restoration of Table of Homage, 1935. Photo: © Ministère de la Culture, Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie, G/82/02/10

stepped platform and tabletop cast from concrete, to which the damaged lions were sutured with mortar. (**Figs. 12–14**) For better or for worse, Trouvelot relied upon the earliest pictorial witness to the Table of Homage, Du Cerceau’s 1576 engraving. In doing so, he ensured the table would continue to enjoy its traditional role in the castle’s mythology, as it does to this day.

Stylistic examination, however, reveals that the seated lion atop the platform does not belong to the same pride as his colleagues below, against Du Cerceau’s engraving. (**Fig. 15**) The lion’s broken legs were mortared to a new support after 1935. Now he is affixed to his own separate base that overhangs the platform below. Despite Du Cerceau’s rendering, it is clear that he is the work of another sculptor. It is possible,



Figure 15 Detail of the Table of Homage. Photo: Courtesy of Pierre-Emmanuel Sautereau.



**Figure 16** Tomb of Ermengol X, Count of Urgell, c. 1300–1350. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Cloisters).

but by no means certain, that this lion alone was created at some point for the homage ritual, in agreement with l'Alouëte's 1577 claim that "an image of this animal was made and sculpted in hard stone." For their part, the chief lion's fuller-maned fellows support

on their backs a flat platform with a depth of some 63 cm. In light of these dimensions, my suggestion is that the recumbent lions of the Table of Homage are far better suited for the task of supporting a medieval tomb chest and are in fact spolia. Surviving medieval tomb chests supported by analogous lions depict the beasts holding prey in their mouths or interacting with symbolic figures; clearly that was also the case with these lions. **(Fig. 16)** On these grounds it seems reasonable to assume that they once supported a 14<sup>th</sup>-century tomb chest.

Where was this tomb located? The most obvious answer is the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Gothic chapel that once stood beyond the *donjon* and adjacent to the baronial residence. **(Fig. 17)** Here again we may turn to d'Asti's poem of 1440 for clues. After his description of the *donjon* relief and its legend, d'Asti lamented damage suffered by the chapel during the Armagnac-Burgundian Civil War, when in 1411 John the Fearless (r. 1404–1419), murderer of the previous Duke of Orléans (Louis, father of Duke Charles), laid siege and captured Coucy-le-château. Subsequently, d'Asti observed, John, Duke of Berry made off with many of the castle's decorations, including the stained glass of the chapel.<sup>36</sup> But d'Asti made no mention of the Table of Homage, from which we may infer that around 1440 our tomb chest and its lions lay in a state of ruin, either somewhere within the castle's chapel or its courtyard, and that sometime after 1440 the tomb's leonine supports were repurposed to serve a new iteration of the legend of the lion combat story already associated with the tympanum relief.<sup>37</sup> This new version conflated the traditional ceremonial payment made by the monks of Nogent-sous-Coucy to their landlords (the practice noticed in 1387) with the relief's story of the Coucy lion combat

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<sup>36</sup> Le Roux de Lincy and Tisserand, *Paris*, 556–557; Meredith Parsons Lillich, "The Arms of Coucy in Thirteenth-Century Stained Glass," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 19–20 (1984–85): 17–24.

<sup>37</sup> I recently considered the possibility that the entirety of the platform was created for the purpose of the ritual, an interpretation I qualify here, hopefully as the last of a long line of Coucy enthusiasts who have fallen under the spell of the table and its charming legend.

and the legendary foundation of a monastery reported by d’Asti, the whole now performatively commemorated around a newly constituted monument, the Table of



**Figure 17** François Brosse. Hypothetical reconstruction of the elevation of buildings on court side, Coucy-le-château, *circa* 1387. Photo: © Centre des Monuments

Homage. This conflation explains why, in L’Alouète’s report of 1577, it was the abbot of Nogent-sous-Coucy who performed the homage ritual, even though the earlier, Latinate iteration of the tale celebrated the foundation of the mother house of another order, that of Prémontré. The popular context of the ritual observed at the Table of Homage might also explain the shift in linguistic register from the Latinate pun invoked by d’Asti to the vernacular version recorded by L’Alouète (*Tu me las de pres montré*). Behind the latter we might even hear an echo of face-to-face encounters between attendees of the ritual and the seated lion of the Table “made and sculpted in



hard stone.” Indeed, it may be that the “creation” of the Table of Homage and its ritual generated or somehow gave rise to the vernacular version of the pun.

## **Conclusion**

Exactly when the Coucy *donjon* tympanum became subject to the Prémontré legend first reported by d’Asti remains uncertain. Evidently, at some point in the life of the relief, it was judged necessary or attractive to frame it in these terms. Later, the remains of a tomb monument were co-opted in service of a related version of the lion combat story. Following Barthélemy, these stories were echoes of the historical role of the lords as “founders” of local monastic institutions. What might have motivated someone to reassert that past in association with these images? At the core of both the story of the Prémontré lion combat and the Table of Homage ritual is the rather straightforward theme of feudal obligation. The death of Enguerrand VII of Coucy on crusade in 1397, the inheritance of the castle by the embattled Dukes of Orléans, the damage suffered by the fortress during the Armagnac-Burgundian Civil War, the long absence of the exiled Charles d’Orléans and the final absorption of Coucy-le-château to the crown in 1465 with the accession of Charles’ son as Louis XI: these events surely disrupted the old and familiar feudal relationships between the medieval lords of the Coucy dynasty and their monastic neighbors. Again, it is possible, but far from certain, that creation of the Latinate version of the Coucy lion legend and its associated pun predated these tumultuous events. The monks of *Pratum monstratum* were given to such verbal play already in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and it is conceivable that their game extended to the Coucy *donjon* tympanum after creation of the relief in the 1220s. But the vernacular version of the legend, first recorded in the late sixteenth century in connection with the Table of Homage, is a consequence of a much later period of destabilization, as is the table itself. The cobbling together of that monument from the fragments of an earlier tomb chest most likely occurred in the later 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, after the absorption of

Coucy to the crown. In that context the Table of Homage and its ritual could function as mechanisms for shoring up traditional bonds of a local socio-political network transformed or destabilized by warfare and the changing ownership of the barony. For this reason, the lion legend merged with the old *rissoles* payment, a carnivalesque homage ritual observed at the castle in the days of the medieval dynasty. Enmeshed with the *rissoles*, the fully mature lion legend ironically subsumed remnants of a tomb of a member or high-ranking associate of the Coucy dynasty. Finally, the Renaissance flourishes of Du Cerceau ensured that the true origins of the Table of Homage remained hidden for centuries to come. 🐉