Abstract of the Project

If sociology has highlighted how the leader’s body performs a fundamental stabilizing function within the complex political and social order characteristic of the relationship between the group and its head, making the very formation of the group somehow possible, it is easy to understand how for the holder of power managing the visibility of his body within society (its public manifestation) is an element of utmost importance. While at times it may be expressed in a direct form (through real participation in public ceremonies and rituals), at others it can be manifested in an indirect way: namely through a series of symbolic, allegorical and fictitious depictions of the ruler. Royal bodily representation can fit among these perfectly since, from the viewpoint of historical, historical-artistic, anthropological and semiotic investigation, it represents a substitute for the monarch which can mark out space, legitimize power and mediate between sovereign and subjects in order to consolidate the union under the crown. In other words, owing to its intrinsic capacity to indirectly persuade, convince, attract and co-opt, this representation constitutes a fundamental element of power.

An animated scientific debate has been sparked in recent years (especially in the German sphere and in terms of historiographical research) in connection with the function that can be attributed to representation of the king within medieval society, in some cases calling into question what had previously been deemed to be indisputably written into the historiography. The project “Royal Epiphanies. The King’s Body as Image and Its Mise-en-scène in the Medieval Mediterranean (12th-14th centuries)” sets out to revive the traditional debate on royal portraiture and its function within Mediterranean society during the mid and late Middle Ages by examining it from an absolutely innovative point of view, namely by analysing it as an integral part of a much wider context of the sovereign’s mise-en-scène of his body. In other words, the aim is to place greater attention on royal bodily representation as a means of communication within a general communication strategy and to study how the public rendering of the royal body and its iconographic representation interact and condition each other.

By concentrating on the specific contexts of six kingdoms which cover the whole Mediterranean area from west to east (Aragon, Naples, Sicily, Cyprus, Jerusalem and Armenian Cilicia), the objective is to answer the following questions in particular: how much and how did the king show himself to his subjects? In what forms? Where? When? To whom? For what ends and for what reasons? How much was his image influenced and, in turn, did it influence the way in which the sovereign presented himself to the public? For the Middle Ages, can we speak of the artistic image as a surrogate of the king’s body able to mediate his presence? Did it have a more juridical, eulogistic/celebrative, political/propagandistic or religious/devotional function?

Through a typically comparative approach and by making a so-to-speak dynamic comparison between the visual and the material and textual sources, the project sets out to connect the artistic product with the overall context of its creation, function and reception. All of this will enable a better understanding of how the royal image was used as a means of symbolically presenting the sovereign’s bodily figure within society, and ascertain how he could have potentially used his iconographic representation as a political tool and means of power. Hence, in these terms, there is no doubt as to the utility and necessity of this type of study by art historians.