

# THE SIMIOTS OF CATALAN FOLKLORE: NEITHER ARE REMINISCENCES SO OLD, NOR ARE THEY SO STRANGE BEINGS

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**Abstract:** The simiot is a creature in the Catalan Pyrenean mythology. The term can be translated as “a kind of ape” or “similar to an ape”. According to a medieval legend, around the tenth century, these wild beasts terrorized Arles, a Catalan village in the Vallespir region. Up until now, the number of scholarly studies dealing in depth with these beings is very small. Books and papers by several twentieth-century folklorists, such as Joan Amades, have not contributed to clarifying their origin. By and large, authors propose that simiots are remnants of an ancient and pagan religion, perhaps linked to canid cults or forest deities. However, considering their probable etymology, their origin can be traced to the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries.

**Keywords:** belief narratives, Catalan folklore, Catalan folklorists, Catalan medieval history, Catalonia, folk beliefs, hagiographic legends, supernatural folklore

## INTRODUCTION

Simiots are creatures of the Catalan Pyrenean mythology. First, naturally, a clarification of the meaning of the non-English term *simiot* (plural *simiots*) is necessary.

The translation of the word *simiot* is not immediate, because of the presence of the suffix -ot –from latin *ottus-*, together with the term *simi* (ape). Nevertheless, although this suffix provides different meanings to the matrix term, *simiot* can be translated as “a kind of ape” or “similar to an ape”.

According to a legend, around about the tenth century, simiots terrorized Arles, a Catalan village in the Vallespir region, currently under French rule. A reference to the simiots appears in the legend of the translation or transfer of the relics of the saints Abdon (Abdó, in Catalan) and Sennen (Senen) from

Rome to Arles. But as descriptions offered by tradition are not detailed, beyond what the term evokes, it leaves us a very large margin to the imagination.

Saint Abdon and Saint Sennen were twin brothers, princes and natives of Persia, adopted by the Church of the West as a result of their martyrdom in Rome in 254. In the days of Constantine, at the beginning of the fourth century, they appeared to the emperor and told him where they were buried. The Christians exhumed their bodies and moved them to the Pontian cemetery, where they did many favors for the population.

Since the fourth century their feast has been commemorated on July 30 and a basilica was dedicated in their honor, which became a pilgrimage center. The chronicles of the two saints were written mostly by the Dominican Jacobus da Varagine in his *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*).

According to Roman tradition, their bodies were moved to the Basilica of St. Mark the Evangelist of Rome in 1474, as is testified by a scroll found in a sixteenth-century chest under the main altar in 1948. From Rome their cult expanded and several towns such as Florence, Soissons, and Arles are presumed to host their relics, although there is no historical proof of their existence, so they are no longer included in the Roman Catholic calendar of liturgical saints, even though the worship is allowed in places where it is traditional.

In the Catalan Countries – Catalan-speaking territories – they are also known as patron saints of farmers, gardeners and peasants, Saint Nin and Saint Non, Saint Non and Saint Nen, or Saint No and Saint Ne, the saints of the stone and the storm. The variety of names received is a consequence of the great popularity that these saints enjoyed, which was still notable in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period from which we have had several *goigs* (*gosos* or *goccius*, devotional and paraliturgical songs), as well as a short theatrical play. However, little by little it was displaced by new devotions introduced by the religious policy emanated from the Council of Trento, such as Saint Isidore the Laborer, which the Spanish absolute monarchy strongly favored because of their interest in imposing centralizing Castilian cults and culture.

It is necessary to point out that the number of scholarly studies dealing in depth – not a simple mention or reference – with simiots is very small. Chronologically speaking, the first text is a paper by Rossend Serra i Pagés (1927) about the forgetfulness of the simiot in the mythological Catalan memory. We need to wait until 1995 in order to find a communication by Jean-Louis Olive, who proposes that simiots are remnants of an ancient religion. Other authors, for instance Martí Gelabertó Vilagran (2003, 2011), who deal with the issue in passing, also observe remains of paganism. More recently, the etymological proposal offered by Olivier Rimbault (2014) to *Demond et Merveilles du Canigou* which, in fact, was already pointed out by Joan Coromines in his etymological

dictionary (*Diccionari Etimològic i Complementari de la Llengua Catalana* (DECat) 1980–1991).

The reasons for this scarcity of further studies are a consequence of various factors. Firstly, as will be seen, the mentions of simiots are extraordinarily concise. On the other hand, these beings are located in a very small area of Catalonia. Finally, the Catalan tradition had almost forgotten them, at least until the arrival in the twentieth century of Joan Amades, an autodidact folklorist adopting non-scholarly procedures, who reactivated popular interest in folklore but was not careful enough in collecting and publishing field data. The influence of this author has been decisive in the contemporary recreation of these beings, which cryptozoology has related to wild men and bigfoots (Eberhart 2002; Gil 2010). On the other hand, cryptozoology has revitalized the transmission of narratives about simiots.

## LEGEND AND SOURCES

The legend places us in the tenth century at the village of Arles, which suffered the scourge of great storms, strong winds, and frequent hailstorms. The land was barren and provided no fruits. Wild beasts – bears, wolves, wild boars, and simiots – decimated the population. The latter frightened the villagers, attacked the peasants, and robbed their children to eat them. In order to placate the wrath of God on the population, numerous processions, fasting and abstinence were carried out with no positive results.

Abbot Arnulf<sup>1</sup> (or Arnulphus in Latin), a very pious man with a reputation for holiness, dwelt in Saint Mary's Abbey in Arles. Faced with this situation, he decided to go to Rome to seek the help of the Supreme Pontiff. After staying in the holy city several days and performing deep prayer, he suddenly had a vision that two Persian saints, Saint Abdon and Saint Sennen, until then ignored by the Christian world, could conjure the scourge that ruined their land.

At the same time, the exact place where their bodies were hidden was revealed. The Pope, admired for the heavenly revelation, granted the abbot the custody of the relics of these saints, who were transferred to Catalonia, on a journey full of miraculous events. The holy bones were deposited in the abbatial church of Arles and, almost instantly, the unclean beasts fled the region.

Once the legend has been summarized, let us see what the oldest sources tell us. The first text to which we need to refer is the *Narratio de translatione reliquiarum sanctorum Abdon et Senen ad monasterium Arulense*, a manuscript of the monastery of Santa María de Arles, which would confirm that the story of saints' relics was set in writing between the twelfth and fourteenth

centuries. According to Molina i Figueras (1996), the story is from the Lower Middle Ages, perhaps inspired by an earlier text, or in the oral tradition itself. However, this document is not preserved, and we only know the transcription by Pierre de Marca (1688).

This is the fragment about simiots:

*Insuper erat in dicto loco & valle alia non mediocriter aspera tempestats sive pestilentia; quoniam de die & nocte videbantur bestiae silvestres & feroces, & signanter cati & etiam simiae & multae aliae species bestiarum sylvestrium, quae non timentes faciem hominum per loca sita in dicta valle intrabant, & pueros rapiebant de cunabulis & suffocabant & etaim devorabant & comedebant non in modicum terrorem & horrorem omnium tam clericorum quam laicorum habitantium in dicta valle...*  
(Marca 1688: col. 1449–1450)

In addition, misfortunes and severe epidemics also occurred in the village and in the valley. Wild and fierce beasts appeared both day and night, such as, and this is true, wild cats and even apes, as well as many other species of wild animals that, not fearing human presence, penetrated through certain points of the valley and took the children from the cribs, suffocated them, and even devoured them and ate them, with great terror and horror of all the inhabitants of the valley, both the clergy and the laity.

The author uses the word *simia*, feminine, which in Latin can usually refer to primates with tails (monkeys), as well as larger ones without tails (e.g., chimpanzees), this instance rather as a second option. In Latin there is another word, *simius*, masculine, which usually refers only to large primates without tails, and is more anthropomorphic.

The oldest preserved documentary source dates to the fifteenth century. This is *Processus translationis SS. Abdon et Sennen* from the year 1428, which belonged to the brotherhood of gardeners of saints Abdon and Sennen, in Barcelona. The text is written in Latin, except for a final colophon, which is in Catalan, in which we are informed, among other things, that the story has been copied from a previous document. The text is very similar to that of Pierre de Marca, with some minor differences due to transcription errors, spelling, and the form of abbreviations, which would virtually prove the existence of an original document in the fourteenth century. The Latin text is transcribed here, but equivalent translation is avoided.

*Insuper erat in dicto loco 7 valle alia non mediocriter aspera tempestats sive pestilentia; quoniam de die et nocte videbantur bestiae silvestres 7 feroces, et singularit quati et etiam simye nec et multae alie speties bestiarum sylvestrium, quae non timentes faciem hominum per loca sita in dicta valle intrabant, et pueros rapiebant de cunabulis 7 suffocabant 7 etaim devorabant 7 comedebant non in modicum terrorem 7 horrorem omnium tam clericorum quam laicorum habitantium in dicta valle...*  
(Vida de Sant Abdó i Sant Senén 1428: 6v)

Two writings in Catalan of theologians of the sixteenth century confirm the remarkable roots of the two saints, Abdon and Sennen, in the Catalan Countries. The first one, by the Valencian priest Joan Baptista Anyes, *La vida, martyri y translacio dels gloriosos martyrs e reals princeps sant Abdon y Senem*<sup>2</sup> (1542), is a devotional book. The second one is a descriptive volume by Professor Miquel Llot de Ribera, at the University of Perpinyà, titled *Llibre de la traslació dels invencibles i gloriosos màrtirs de Jesuchrist Abdon i Senen* (1591). However, it is interesting that while Joan Baptista Anyes, who writes from an area far from Arles does not mention simiots, Miquel Llot, who writes from 40 kilometers away and has personally been to Arles, differentiates simiots from the mere enumeration of beasts or wild elements. With this action, he contributes to enlarge the importance of the myth of these beings.

Joan Baptista Anyes writes:

*Per les causes a Deu paleses y als homes secretes ... permite en aquells antichs anys, en dita vall hi vehins termens, que cascun estiu al temps de cegar-se se movien tants temporals, y ab trons y llamps y tanta pedra, que no solament tots los forments y grans y fruytes destruya, mas les vinyes de rayms fins els pampols despullava. Y no sola esta persecució cascun any sentien, mas tants y tan feroces llops, raboses y altres feren indòmites tots aquells termens vexaven, que no solament bestiars y altres domestichs animals, com son rocins, mules y bous de llauro mataven, mas los chichs mordien y sen portaven.* (Anyes 1987: 139)

For obvious causes to God and secret to human, ... He allowed in those old years, in this valley and neighboring places, that every summer when it was harvest time there were so many storms, with thunder and lightning and so much hailstone, which not only destroyed all the wheat, grain and fruits, but also the grapes from the vineyards and even the vine shoot. And not only did they feel this persecution every year, but fierce wolves, foxes, and other wild beasts harassed them in all those places, and not

only killed cattle and other domestic animals, such as horses, mules and plowing oxen, but they bit the children and took them.

Miquel Llot lengthens his description:

*La qual terra y vila d'aquesta manera edificada, castiga lo senyor, en tanta manera, que ya quasi estaven totalment perduts y destruïts los habitants de aquella terra. Perque eren tantes les tempestats, los trons y llamps que de les montanyes de Canigo, y altres del redador baxauen, que moltes vegades los aparexia que un moment tenien tots de preterir y acabar aniadint tanta pedra, aygues y altres tempestats amb tanta fúria, y impetut que quan hauien los pagesos llançat lo gra sobre la terra no havien fet res. Y si algun camp semblat algun tant prosperava y escapava de les ordinàries tempestats, ere tants los animals silvestres, los llops, ossos, porcs senglars y cervos i altres que ho devoraven y consumien. De tal manera que no y havia sperança que cosa alguna de fruit de la terra vingues a total perfecció. Pero era no res aço, en comparació de altre açot i castic, que lo senyor tenia ordenat y provehit, que era altra manera de animals silvestres, a manera de mones, que aparexian de nit y de dia los quals perdent lo temor y respecte als homens moltes vegades los mataven y menjaven. Y en particular entrave ab tanta destreza y primor a las casa, axi de Arles com circumveïnes a la montanya, que sens poder ser remediats, prenien los minyos petits y los ne aportaven al desert en lo qual los menjaven cosa que spanta, y jo nou creguera sinó estiguera contingut en lo procés de la translació dels invencibles Maetyrs SS Abdó y Senné. (Llot 1591: 20v–21r)*

That land and village built in this way, the Lord punished them, with such intensity that the inhabitants of that land were almost completely lost and destroyed. Because there were so many storms, thunders and lightnings coming down from the Canigo and other mountains around, that many times it seemed momentarily that they had to avoid the area, but finally they ended up dropping so much stone, water, and other storms with such fury and impetus that the sowing of the peasants was useless. And if any sown field prospered and escaped from ordinary storms, there were so many wild animals, wolves, bears, wild boars and deer and others that devoured and consumed everything. So, there was no hope that anything would bear fruit. But none of this is comparable to the other scourge and punishment, which the Lord had ordered and provided, which was another form of wild animals, like monkeys, which appeared night

and day, and, having lost fear and respect for men, these animals often killed and ate them. And, in particular, they entered the houses with such skill and delicacy, both in Arles and in the surrounding mountains, that without being able to remedy it, they took small children and carried them to the uninhabited lands where they ate them, which was scary. And I would not believe it except because it is contained in the process of the translation of the invincible Holy Martyrs Abdon and Sennen.

Llot recounts the journey of Abbot Arnulf to Rome and his return with the miraculous relics, a source of various wonders. After these passages, he writes again about the simiots, now apparently collecting oral tradition. It should be understood that Llot was personally in Arles, even locating the possible funeral slab of Abbot Arnulf (Llot 1591: 51). Therefore, he could access the document of the translation conserved in Arles, but also what was orally recounted.

*Aquest felicíssim si sonc y conclusió que lo omnipotent Deu dona al seu fervent lo Abat Arnulfo, per a reparo de la tormenta y tribulació tant gran de les tempestats y tronadices y de les besties salvatges en particular de las mones, vulgarment dites los symiots, que tants anys havia patit la terra y vall de Arles. De la qual tribulació totalment foren deslliurats per sempre, com los mateixos animals en los deserts ho senyalaren y significaren. Perque arribats que foren los sancts, los sentian hulular los de la vila, a grans veus despedint se de tal manera que may pus han aparegut. Per ha memòria dels quals ne feren gravar dos de pedra picada, a la porta de la yglesia dels monstir dels quals vuy en dia estan pintats ab unes criatures en les mans com qui las esta menjant. Y per lo discurs gran del temps, y per la pluja que sobre de ells cau han perdut ja de la ferocitat y braveza ab la qual los pintaren. Ab tot no deixen de admirar aquí considera el modo y manera de com estan pintats. (Llot 1591: 50v–50r)*

This is a very happy solution and conclusion that the omnipotent God gave to his servant, Abbot Arnulf, to end the tribulations so great of the storms and thunderstorms, and of the wild beasts, in particular of the monkeys, commonly called simiots, that for so many years the land and the valley of Arles had suffered. From this tribulation, they were totally liberated forever, as the animals themselves, from the uninhabited lands, pointed out and made it clear. Because when the saints arrived, the villagers heard them howling, due to their loudly farewell in such a way that they have never appeared. To remind them, they did engrave two stonework simiots on the door of the monastery church, which today are



portrayed with children in their hands as if the kids were being eaten. And because of the enormous passage of time, and because of the rain that falls on them, they have already lost the ferocity and fierceness with which they were painted. However, we do not stop admiring them here and consider the way and manner of how they are represented.

Llop refers to the representations above the main door of the church of Saint Mary's Abbey, where two animals devour men. The monumental façade of this temple is one of the most archaic examples of Catalan Romanesque and is dated to the eleventh century. The sculptures look more like canines, felines, or even rodents, rather than apes. These beasts are most likely psychopomps, so that the devoured character enters the hereafter, where they are expected to be reborn into a new life. On the other hand, leonine figures that subjugate or devour animals which represent evil indicate the triumph of good over sin<sup>3</sup> (Benton 1992; Durliat & Ponsich 1993; Ponsich 1996).

A few years later, Dominican Antoni Vicenç Domenec, based on the text of Llot, mentions simiots in his book about saints and holy men of the Principality of Catalonia, published in Barcelona in 1602.<sup>4</sup> He does not add anything new.

Gerónimo Pujades, historian and jurist of Barcelona, also mentions simiots in his *Crònica universal del Principat de Catalunya* (Universal Chronicle of the Principality of Catalonia). The first part of the study was published in 1609. On the other hand, the second part remained unpublished until 1829–1832. And it is in this second part where he writes about Arles and the monsters of Vallespir. Pujades tells us the following, translated directly:

*The Lord punished intensely that land that they call Vallespir (already described in times of the great fire of the Pyrenees), so its inhabitants were almost lost, destroyed and about to leave the desolate land to move to other places; because in addition to the frequent shrill and fearsome thunder and furious storms, dreadful rays descended from the steep and unfortunate Canigó, so that seemed to have opened some mouth of the overwhelming hell, and that everybody had to perish with those scares and great terrors.*

*A plague never seen among those suffered by the Egyptians in their time was added to so many evils, since some wild animals had been born and ran through the face of the earth. These devoured the fields that had avoided hail, stone, water and storms. And having lost the fear of men, very often, by day or night, they entered the villages and killed and ate the children they could catch and carried them in the arms to the mountainous forest, in order to feed their offspring, and other similar beasts. This would seem incredible, unless explained by people who have truly seen the*



*process of translation of the bodies of the saints Abdon and Sennen; and for not having seen anything like that in the first part of this Chronicle, where we deal with the fierce beasts that, at that time, attacked throughout the [Iberian] Peninsula. But as there are testimonies and examples, we must believe that it was so. And those who write about this, they say that they were wild animals like apes or monkeys, and the evidence is given by certain figures of animals in relief or bulge that are on the door of the temple.*

*But I saw the same shapes on the occasion that I will explain further on,<sup>5</sup> and I have also seen some animals called cynocephalus, so I claim that, with the simiots, we are also dealing with cynocephalus. (Pujades 1829: 196–197)*

Pujades, unlike the previous authors, believes that he can identify simiots as cynocephali – literally, “dog-head” in Greek – a type of primate with an elongated nose head such as the mandrill, the baboon, or the monkey of Gibraltar. There are no historical records of apes in Vallespir, but we do know about their gluttony and ferocity.

The historian who explicitly cites Miquel Llot and Antoni Vicenç Domenech as sources, summarizes the journey of Abbot Arnulf and ends up explaining that with the arrival of the relics “the apes, monkeys or cynocephali” (Pujades 1829: 198) came out shrieking and fled forever.

Although much of Pujades’s chronicles remained unpublished for two centuries, Pierre de la Marca, among others, consulted the manuscript and made use of it for his *Marca Hispanica*, although he never cited this source (Villanueva 2004). I have already pointed out that *Marca Hispanica* – in fact completed and edited by Étienne Baluze – contains the transliteration of the manuscript from the abbey of Arles with the simiots’ reference. And at least, as far as simiots are concerned, we have also seen that this text corresponds perfectly with the manuscript of Barcelona that we keep from 1428.

In 1869, theologian Josep Tolrà de Bordas got back on track of the simiots issue in the *Histoire du martyre des saints Abdon et Sennen*. He cites Llot de Ribera and Pierre de la Marca and reproduces the text about the saints contained in *Marca Hispanica*. Tolrà de Bordas also mentions Pujades and takes seriously the hypothesis that simiots were some kind of cercopithecidae or old-world monkeys, although he sees the difficulty in making it compatible with their habitat.

In the second part of the nineteenth century and especially during the twentieth century, simiots appear briefly cited in various texts on art and archeology, in geographical and tourist guides, in books about traditions and customs, and

also of the paranormal and occultism; however, always without deepening or worrying about the possible living folklore.<sup>6</sup>

## FOLKLORIST AND SCHOLARLY APPROACHES

Regarding Catalan folklore, the most abundant and popular contribution has been made by Joan Amades. It has already been said previously that his procedures were not accurate enough. However, the large amount of data he collected cannot be neglected.

In 1927 he wrote in a monographic article about Catalan fantastic beings:

*It is a difficult being to define. Its memory is quite erased from popular imagination. It was excessively hairy, and its vision is disgusting and frightening.*

*It seems that these kinds of apes, which could be taken for both a man and a beast, lived in trees of the forests of the high mountains of the Pyrenees, and did as much damage as they could; they caused strong storms, which came from the top of the Canigó, from which strong floods were derived, which devastated the crops. They stole small creatures. Faced with this scourge, the year 1072, a priest of Arles named Arnulf went to Rome in demand of protection from the Pope, against the misdeeds of those wild beings that devastated the country. (Amades 1927: 53)*

Amades continues to summarize the episode of the visit to Rome and the translation of the relics of the saints Abdon and Sennen to Saint Mary's Abbey in Arles. Once the bodies arrived, wild and fierce beasts fled scared, giving loud howls and bellows, leaving the forests where they had their lairs, and disappearing forever. As for the saints, they soon enjoyed a great reputation in the country, being chosen as patrons of gardeners. And the author continues describing the characteristics that had been collected about these beings:

*The few shepherds and forest dwellers who know how to give some information of the simiots speak as if their extinction was something relatively modern. There was no one to say that they had been, and to speak of them as a contemporary fact, but they all say that they have existed, without having a notion of time, and without realizing the eight centuries that have passed from the fact, according to what the legend transcribed.*

*Through this long period of time, although very blurred and half-erased, the representation of the elusive and fierce being stays alive, hairy from*

*head to toe, creepy and wild, difficult to define, that it could be both an ape and a man, and that it was the king of the forest, where people could not enter without fearing his fury; and that it could attract storms that ruined the country, and robbed creatures.* (Amades 1927: 54)

Amades (1949; 1950; 1953: vol. 1) collects several versions of a folktale on simiots, which would prove the greater intelligence and moral heights of the humans compared to simiots. However, this author makes a major mistake in his *Costumari Català* (Description of the Catalan traditions) when he says:

*The belief in simiots in the environs of Canigo must have been widespread in the Middle Ages; so much that one of the followers and imitators of Aesop's fables, Rinuccio d'Arezzo, and the Aragonese Jew Pere Anfos de Poggio dedicated a fable to them in the seventh book of Aesopic apologues. As it is known, this fable was written in the Middle Ages and added to Aesop's text as if it had been composed by the great Greek fabulist himself. It is assigned number 21 and is entitled "On the Satyr and the Walker"; in this fable such creatures located in a semilegendary land that was intensely cold and mountainous, towards the zone of Llíbia, in the mountains of Arles.* (Amades 1953, vol. IV: 644)

In fact, the satyr fable is situated between the inhabitants of Libya and the Atlas, in North Africa. As Eulàlia Miralles (2017) has pointed out, Amades reads in the Catalan version reproduced by Ramon Miquel Planas, who emphasizes Arles in italics and adds, in brackets, "Atlas". This error becomes providential for Amades, who uses Arles instead of the Atlas Mountains. However, Amades goes one step further and changes Libya to Llívia in the Catalan Pyrenees.

Another folklorist, Rossend Serra i Pagès, wrote in 1927 that "the simiots or semiots, as they are usually named, are the memory of the ancient Silvanians, that is, geniuses of the forest" (Serra i Pagès 1927: 81). We can observe that Serra i Pagès thinks that "semiot" is a vulgar expression that would stem from "simiot", the cult form.

Serra i Pagès (1927: 81) mentions the difficulties of finding informants on the subject: "We could not extract anything clear. Very few people who were asked knew what it was," and adds the scarce and uninformative testimonies of shepherds that he had collected.

The paper also summarizes the legend of Arnulf and the relics, and continues with references to the satyrs and fauns and the subsequent assimilation of the geniuses and other pagan figures to demons. The article ends by mentioning

the disappearance of these beliefs and being replaced by Christianity, and the impact of greater human colonization of the territory.

On the other hand, among the unpublished materials left by this folklorist, today in the Historical Archives of the City of Barcelona, there is a folktale from Perpinyà,<sup>7</sup> in which the protagonist is a simiot that enters and leaves a house through the chimney. Simiots show little intelligence and can easily be deceived.

Archaeologist Joan Abelanet, a good connoisseur of Catalan folklore from the north of the Pyrenees, also collected explicit references to the use of chimneys as an entry point in the Albera region. According to his notes, simiots are “a type of monkeys that penetrated houses like witches and, going down the chimney, ... they took the children and devoured them quietly in the forest.” (Abelanet 2008: 179)

The issue of chimneys should not be overlooked, because linguist Joan Coromines, a specialist in the etymology of Romance languages, clarifies that the origin of the term *simiot* is not from Catalan *simi* or Latin *simia*, but it is derived from *xemeneia* (chimney), through variants like *semeniot*, because the simiot appears precisely going down the chimney, from which the name was borrowed (Coromines 1987: 924).

Jean-Louis Olive, sociologist and anthropologist at the University of Perpignan Via Domitia in Perpinyà, presented a lecture focused entirely on simiots in 1995. The author argues that these beings are associated with water sources, citing the *Font dels simiots* (Fontain of simiots) located in the vicinity of La Roca d'Albera, in Rosselló, or *Santa Tomba* (the holy tomb) of Saint Mary's Abbey in Arles. According to the legend, when Arnulf brought the holy relics of the two saints from Rome, he put them into this sarcophagus. Since then, the tomb has been filling with water with miraculous properties, except in periods of severe drought, because the main origin of the fluid is rain.

On the other hand, Olive uses folklore references and toponymic aspects and makes some etymological conjectures – for example, a possible canicular origin for Mount Canigó – to propose that simiots are remnants of an ancient religion linked to the cult of the canids. In Olive's words:

*Therefore, the cult of the simiot, evangelized by father Arnulf in the 10th century, is most likely the mark of an ancient religion of which we already know other traces in Europe. They worshipped the bear, the deer, the wild boar and, of course, the dog, associated with the dog days [canicule] and the fountains in summer. The elimination of the simiots from Arles, which were banished,<sup>8</sup> may be a definitive clue to the possible old sacrifices of dogs in Vallespir. There is little information about the*

*dog days' rituals, a probable legacy of the Roman Lupercalia ...* (Olive 1995: 64–65)

This idea of the survival of ancient cults is also maintained by historian Gelabertó Vilagran (2003), who considers these mythological figures difficult to classify, but he links them with the evil spirits that inhabited European forests according to ancient beliefs and to which the Church ended attributing a demonic character.

The author places simiots within a group of Pyrenean beings described as tall, covered exhaustively with hair, and with a very atrocious appearance, something like relatives of the yetis. However, later, Gelabertó Vilagran (2011) observes the discrepancies in the moral nature of these creatures. While simiots are fierce beasts that caused great damage to the inhabitants of Arles, the other simian beings of the Pyrenees, such as the *basajaun* or *baxajaun*<sup>9</sup> and the *iretges*<sup>10</sup> or hairy men of Arièja (Ariège), are not negative characters; they are sometimes even protective, rather shy, and not very violent.

Naturally, in Arles, as also in other places, the proximity of the forests to the settlement favored the attacks of wild beasts, especially during periods of lack of food. Some authors, for example Reus Planells, have supposed that the predatory action of these animals could have given rise to the legend of the simiots (2012). In contrast, Ponsich (1996) considers that it could have originated from the monsters on the eastern facade of the church of Saint Mary's Abbey in Arles. Both are possible, but neither of them specifically explains the use of the term “simiot”, which does not appear anywhere else.

The point of view by Olivier Rimbault (2014) is very different. He establishes a certain equivalence between the simiot and the *pesanta* – a Catalan legendary being that oppresses people during sleep, as a nightmare – and the *breixos* (witches or sorceresses) of Arièja, since all of them can enter through a chimney; in fact, the only entrance of a house that was not closed.

Rimbault wonders about the etymology of the term “simiot” and considers that it must be derived from spoken language and the links with beliefs that have survived in this geographical area and its surroundings. Therefore, he thinks that the word was a deformation of the French term *cheminé*, which has given rise to *xemeneia* (chimney) in standard Catalan. In this sense, it is necessary to remember the presence of Catalan dialectal forms, such as *ximeneia*, *simeneia* or *simineia*, which show us the similarity with “simiot”. In the words of Rimbault, “the simiot or, rather, the ximiot, was simply the name given in Vallespir to the creature that enters or exits through the chimney” (Rimbault 2014: 178).

## THE FACTS

Legends are typically monoepisodic narratives that reflect on a more or less symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences, being therefore connected with social beliefs and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group within which they are generated (Tangherlini 1990; Dégh 2001).

Unlike folktales, legends are discursive narratives tied to external reality, making specific allusions to historical personages or real topographic landmarks. In fact, these mentions contribute to the believability of the narrative, which is highlighted by the supposed historicity of the account, despite the fact that the historic core of a legend is often hard to find, even if it exists (Hodne 1973; Tangherlini 1990).

The narrative that concerns us, at least in written form, seems to have appeared in the period of maximum strength of the monastery of Arles, between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when it received important economic contributions from the counts of Barcelona, coinciding roughly with the very long abbacy of Ramon II Desbac, between 1261 and 1303, as Ponsich (1996) and Molina i Figueras (1996) point out.

Its purpose would have been to maximize the prestige of the monastery, taking advantage of some relics stored in it, with the hope of strengthening pilgrimage, which should allow the coffers to be filled thanks to the contributions and other donations that the patients offered in order to recover, or as a later thanks for the miraculous intercession of the saints. The members of the Benedictine community themselves were the main beneficiaries of the increased devotion to Saint Abdon and Saint Sennen, and it must be assumed that they were responsible for compiling and recreating the translation. We would face one more case in which the drafting of the documents responded to the will to produce evidence to certify the relics preserved in the monastic church. In addition, it also served to demonstrate the thaumaturgical properties of the remains of the saints (Molina i Figueras 1996; Reus Planells 2012).

There is no doubt about the autochthonous origin of the translation legend to Arles, since it does not appear in the *Legenda Aurea* by Jacobus da Varagine, a collection of hagiographies compiled around the year 1260, or in any other previous hagiography.

Nor does it appear in the oldest Catalan adaptation of the *Legenda Aurea*, *Vides de sants rosselloneses* (Lives of saints from Rosselló), a work from the second part of the thirteenth century, which was written at a short distance from Arles. This fact probably establishes a very significant chronological limit when talking about the martyrs, because it says absolutely nothing about their translation to this area of Catalonia. This means that, at that time, the legend had not yet been generated. Therefore, it has been suggested that it is precisely



at the time of the reconstruction of the chapel of Arles, in the fourteenth century, when the story took shape and so it could not appear before in any versions of the *Legenda Aurea* (Yarza Luaces 1994).

However, simiots had to exist within the Catalan Pyrenean imaginary before or at the same time that the legend of the saints appeared. It is absolutely unlikely that the narration tries to prove the thaumaturgical powers of the relics by mentioning the ability to scare away some unknown monsters. The Christian miracle had to necessarily consist in putting an end to feared beasts well known to the inhabitants of Arles. Therefore, we can affirm that around the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries the simiots were present in the imaginary of that area of the Tet Valley. But we do not find them anywhere else. In this sense, we have to consider that sometimes one of the most difficult aspects of classifying legends is the abundance of specific allusions relevant or understandable locally or to only a relatively small group of people (Tillhagen 1969; Tangherlini 1990).

The first document in Catalan in which the term *simi* (simian) appears is *Fèlix or Fèlix o Llibre de meravelles* (Felix or Book of Wonders, 1288–1289) by Ramon Llull, although the term competed with *bujia* or *bogia* and the augmentative *boïgot* – the name of the animals that were embarked in the port of Bogia (Bejaïa) in Algeria – and, from about 1460, with *mona* (monkey), abbreviation of *mamona*, of the Arabic *maimun* (happy), linguistic forms much more popular. However, we have already seen that there are no monkeys in Vallespir and that from the point of view of both linguistics and folklore, the term *simiot* most likely derived from *ximiot* or from any other form closer to dialectal forms of *cheminee*, such as *ximeneia*, *simeneia* or *simineia*. The term would have become *simiot* at the time of writing it down in a manuscript from learned forms, which were the expressions used by the ecclesiastics.

But, according to Coromines (1991: vol 9: 496), the term *xemeneia* appears for the first time in a text in Catalan in 1409, from French, where it existed already in the twelfth century, in turn from late Latin, *caminata* (way). The French term was spread to numerous European languages along with the chimney, a construction technique from northern France that appeared in the eleventh century, and allowed better smoke management, replacing the central chimney without an outlet duct.

Nevertheless, the use of the chimneys did not really extend until the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries; they were first built in abbeys and castles, and then installed in big settlements and finally in villages and less populated areas (Napoléone 2003). Therefore, should the origin of the term *simiot* be related to the chimney, in the case of the mountainous and remote areas of the Pyrenees, it seems difficult to go back much further than the thirteenth or fourteenth century to claim a sufficient generalization of the term.



The openings of the houses were considered dangerous because they served as access whereby the evil could be introduced,<sup>11</sup> so they were related to the action of the spirits and witches and, as a result, they were protected by witch-scarers<sup>12</sup> and pairs of home utensils forming crosses. As is known, likewise, laurel, olive, and other plants were placed at the doors, as well as bouquets and palms blessed on Palm Sunday on the balconies, a habit meant to protect all the openings, which in rare occasions has even reached the present day.

## CONCLUSIONS

First, we need to consider that apart from Arles, no primary documentation has been found that relates a specific place to the simiots. On the other hand, within the scarce scholarly bibliography, some authors have opined that it is a sample of survival from pagan beliefs. Olive (1995) has been inclined to presume that it would be an old canine cult, while others, such as Martí Gelabertó (2011), argue that they are simian forms related to other mythological beings of the Pyrenees such as the *basajaun*.

This is related to the possible physical appearance of the simiots. There is no old text to describe them. What we have is, on the one hand, the tradition of having simiots on the imposing entrance of Saint Mary's Abbey in Arles and in other places, as we have already seen. In this case the appearance of the simiots has been assimilated to a feline or a canid. Another orientation is to give simiots a simian or ape aspect, inferred from the term with which they are identified, a trend that Pujades started up.

Even so, most authors have not paid much attention to the term *simiot* itself, thinking that the word roughly described the shape of the beings. However, the use of the term *simiot* invites us to think that its origin is a cult, an adaptation by an ecclesiastic made to a known term from a new and local expression. Related to this, Coromines (1987) and Rimbault (2014) opined that the etymology had to be sought in dialectal forms of *xemeneia* (chimney), from which the term would have evolved to *ximeneia*, *simeneia* or *simineia*, and finally *simiot*, when it was set in learned texts. The word would be an ontological metaphor of the fear that generated an open access of smoke outlet or chimney. The simiot would be nothing more than a zoomorphic representation of these fears.

However, as chimneys appear in the eleventh century, and are not popularized in northern Catalonia at least until two or three centuries later, the concept should have appeared at that time, around the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries.

We know that the Catalan legend of Saint Abdon and Saint Sennen must be at least contemporary with the Catalan version of the *Llegenda Aurea* from the

second part of the thirteenth century, and been written near Arles, since when it comes to our saints there is no reference to the transfer of relics to Catalonia. That is to say, the narration is approximately contemporary with the time of reconstruction of the chapel of Santa María de Arlés, in the fourteenth century, being most likely fixed in written form during the same period, coinciding with the maximum splendor of the monastery.

Therefore, if the etymology of *simiot* must be sought in *simineia* – a Catalan dialectal form for chimney – the simiots, as preternatural beings, appear almost at the same time that the hagiographic legend of the transfer of the relics is created. We would not be facing a surviving element of ancient cults, but of a contemporary element from Arles, from where it extended further south along with the legend of the saints. All the characteristics that have been attributed to the simiots later would be loans inspired either by the various sculpted forms of lions from Arles, in which people believed to see simiots, or ape-like forms derived from what evokes the term *simiot*.

Naturally, the *simineies* – plural of *simineia* in Catalan – “dwelt” also in other areas near the Pyrenees. The term would be replaced over time by *simiot*, although the witches ended up being the main “users” of the chimneys.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The existence of Abbot Arnulf is documented in the year 963 and there is a funeral tombstone that could be his, which, by epigraphy, cannot be later than the eleventh century (Tolrà de Bordas 1869: 63; Ponsich 1996: 82).
- <sup>2</sup> Juan Bautista Anyés, *La vida, martyri y translació dels gloriosos martyrs e reals Princesps sant Abdon y Senem: e la vida del gloriós bisbe e martyr sant Ponç advocats dels llauradors contra la pedra y tempestad*, València: Joan Navarro, 1542. The manuscript has been published in a trade edition by Max Cahner (Anyes 1987).
- <sup>3</sup> If we refer to the iconography, it is necessary to mention the closet of Saint Mary’s church, in the Arles abbey, where the supposed relics of the couple of saints are guarded. In one of the sixteenth-century friezes there is a painting depicting a simiot, apparently inspired by the figures at the church entrance. Two elements on the facade of the church of Sant Andreu de Sureda, in Rosselló, have also been popularly considered representations of the simiots, although we have not known since when. In this case the lion form is quite clear.
- <sup>4</sup> *Historia general de los santos y varones ilustres en santidad del Principado de Cataluña compuesta por el R.P.F. Antonio Vicente Domenec Theologo, y Predicador de la Orden del Padre Santo Domingo, Catalán de nacion, natural de San Gabriel de Grions en el Obispado de Gerona, y hijo de habito del convento de Santa Catherina martyr de Barcelona*. Barcelona: Empreanta de Gabriel Graells y Giraldo Dotil. There is a second posthumous edition published in Girona in 1630 by the printer and bookseller Gaspar Garrich.
- <sup>5</sup> Pujades (1829: 201) let us know that he visited Arles in July 1607, probably on the 30th, in coincidence with the feast of the saints Abdon and Sennen, according to a specific reference.

- <sup>6</sup> References are always related to Arles, with one exception that places the simiots in Santa Pau, in the Comarca (region) of Garrotxa. Francesc Caula i Vegas mentions in his book *Parròquies i comuns de Santa Eulàlia de Begudà I Sant Joan les Fonts* (1930) the existence of a fifteenth-century document citing the simiots. This document (ACGAX, Notarials, Santa Pau, Pere Mas, Manual 1416-1417 [reg. 125], f. 37v-39r (13-VII-1417) is currently kept in the Garrotxa Comarcal Archive. It is a notarial protocol related to the construction of a chapel of Saint Abdon and Saint Sennen and in which the simiots – named *somiots* by Caula – apparently do not appear (Fumanal et al. 2008).
- <sup>7</sup> Document AHCB 5D.61-25/C8-60.
- <sup>8</sup> Olive refers to the “cimiots desterrats” (banished simiots) that appear in the devotional *Goigs en alabança dels gloriosos martyrs S. Abdon, y S. Sennen, las Relíquies dels quals se veneren en lo noble Monestir de Nostra Senyora de la Vila de Arles, Ordre de Sant Benet, Terra de Vallespir del Comtat de Rosselló*, Perpinyà: Casa de Joseph Francisco Reynier, 1778.
- <sup>9</sup> Literally, “the lord of the woods” of Basque country, also known as Basaharau, Bonharau or Bosnerau in the Aragonese Pyrenees.
- <sup>10</sup> Occitan term derived from the time of the Cathar “heresy”.
- <sup>11</sup> In fact, this is the motif G249.3, “witch enters and leaves house by chimney”, in the classification by Stith Thompson (1966: 296).
- <sup>12</sup> *Esfuriabruixes*, in Catalan. They are carved figures with a roughly human face. Placing them at the top of the house, they were a way to protect them from attacks of witches, demons, and spirits. It is a type of apotropaic protection typical of the Pyrenees and the rest of the north of the Iberian Peninsula.

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