

VISUAL RHETORIC: IMAGES OF SARACENS IN FLORENTINE CHURCHES¹

RETÓRICA VISUAL: IMÁGENES DE SARRACENOS EN IGLESIAS FLORENTINAS

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the encounter between the Christian and the Islamic worlds as it appears in Florentine churches. It explores images of Muslims connected to the ideas of mission, conversion and crusade as they appear in the oral and visual traditions. Crusading sympathy in Tuscany, particularly in Florence, had a long history, going back to the twelfth century. The role of the mendicant orders, established in the great convents of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella, was crucial in winning sympathy for the crusades. This tradition continued in the fifteenth century, after the fall of Constantinople, when Florence openly voiced support for papal crusading efforts and participated in fund-raising for the crusade. The main supporters of crusade propaganda in Florence were the Franciscan and Dominican preachers, who acted as virtual papal envoys, continuing a tradition of mendicant crusade sermons. These movements also developed special types of artworks, either painting or sculptures in order to disseminate their religious ideals. The usage of rhetoric and preaching, the interrelations between word and image, the artistic and literary traditions, artworks and sermons will be a central focus of essay.

Resumen: Este artículo se centra en el encuentro entre el mundo cristiano y el musulmán tal y como se representa en las iglesias florentinas. Analiza las imágenes de musulmanes relacionadas con los conceptos de misión, conversión y cruzada según su tratamiento en las tradiciones visuales y orales. Existía una larga tradición de simpatía hacia las Cruzadas en la Toscana, sobre todo en Florencia, que se remonta hasta el siglo XII. El papel ejercido por las órdenes mendicantes establecidas en los grandes conventos de Santa Croce y de Santa María Novella, fue crucial para fomentar la simpatía hacia las cruzadas. Esta tradición continuó durante el siglo XV, después de la caída de Constantinopla, cuando Florencia articuló explícitamente su apoyo a los esfuerzos papales en las cruzadas y participó en la recaudación de fondos para las mismas. Los principales partidarios de la propaganda para las cruzadas en Florencia fueron los predicadores franciscanos y dominicos, quienes actuaban efectivamente como enviados papales, continuando una tradición de sermones mendicantes sobre las cruzadas. Asimismo, estos movimientos desarrollaron su propio estilo de producciones artísticas, o bien en la pintura o bien en la escultura, para divulgar sus ideales religiosos. Este artículo se centrará en el uso de la retórica y la predicación y en las relaciones entre la palabra y la imagen, entre las tradiciones artística y literaria, y entre las producciones artísticas y los sermones.

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Keywords: Santa Maria Novella; Santa Croce; Saracens; crusade propaganda; Benedetto da Maiano; Andrea da Firenze; preaching; art.

Palabras clave: Santa Maria Novella; Santa Croce; sarracenos; propaganda para las cruzadas; Benedetto da Maiano; Andrea da Firenze; predicación; arte.

SUMMARY

1. Introduction.— 2. Santa Croce.— 3. Santa Maria Novella.— 4. Conclusion.— 5. Bibliography.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Florentine merchant Luca Landucci (1460-1516), an enthusiastic supporter of Girolamo Savonarola, provides an interesting testimony to the ambivalence of the Florentines towards the Saracens. In his diary, Luca was often enthusiastic about crusade efforts in Florence; in 1478, for example, he explained that fund raising for the crusades was carried out in several churches in Florence, most notably in the church of Santa Croce where *everyone had to lend aid, at the said churches, to the forces sent against the Turks*². He often expressed hope that Florence would join forces against the infidels and unbelievers and condemned the cruelty of the Turks who were *putting all the villages to fire and flame, carrying off the girls and women and selling Christians into slavery*³. Elsewhere in his diary, however, he praised the generosity of the Turkish ambassador to Florence for making a gift of exotic animals to the city, and described approvingly the festivities and celebrations to honor him upon his arrival:

The ambassador of the sultan presented to the *Signoria* the giraffe, lion and other beasts; and he sat in the midst of the *Signoria*, on the *ringhiera*, he speaking and they thanking him by means of an interpreter. A great crowd had collected in the *piazza* that morning to see this. The *ringhiera* was decorated with *spalliere* and carpets, and all the principal citizens had taken their places upon it. This ambassador remained here several months and was maintained at our cost and presented with many gifts⁴.

This duality was typical of the Florentine public opinion.

The following paper analyzes the ambivalent perceptions of Saracens by the mendicant friars in Florence and focuses on the encounter between the Christian and Muslim worlds as it appears in Florentine churches in the oral and visual traditions. The usage of rhetoric and preaching, the interrelations between word and image, the artistic and literary traditions, works of art and sermons are at its center. The intention is to examine representations of Saracens in a particular context, that of Italian urban society in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and especially in the context of mendicant activity by studying both sermons and art.

The Crusade idea was very much a part of mendicant tradition. Friars preached fire and brimstone while collecting for the Crusade. St. Giovanni da Capestrano, for example, a Friar Minor, led an army of untrained Crusaders to

² L. Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, pp. 32-33.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 26, 183.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

successfully relieve Belgrade in 1456. From the second half of the fifteenth century, the Turkish threat generated much interest in crusading. Historically –as far back as the twelfth century– Italy was sympathetic to the Crusades, and the mendicant orders were crucial in arousing that sympathy. Franciscan and Dominican preachers continued the tradition of mendicant Crusade sermons in the fifteenth century when papal crusading efforts were thriving. The mendicant movements developed special types of artwork, including paintings, sculptures and drawings to disseminate their religious ideals⁵.

By the early sixteenth century an enormous body of printed material –prophesies, warnings, sermons– was in circulation that informed popular opinion about the Turks. As the Ottoman Empire advanced westward, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, humanists responded on a grand scale, leaving behind a large body of fascinating yet understudied works. These works included Crusade orations and histories; ethnographic, historical and religious studies of the Turks; epic poetry; and even tracts on converting the Turks to Christianity. Nancy Bisaha and Margaret Meserve have recently offered an in-depth look at the body of Renaissance humanist works focusing on the Ottoman Empire, Islam and the Crusades. Throughout, these authors probe the texts to reveal the significant role Renaissance writers played in shaping Western views of self and other. Medieval concepts of Islam, in which Muslims were depicted as enemies of the faith, were generally informed and constrained by religious attitudes and rhetoric. While humanist thinkers of the Renaissance were never able to progress beyond this stance, these works testify that their understanding, of secular and cultural issues was remarkably highly complex and marked a watershed between medieval and modern. Humanist histories of the Turks were sharply polemical, portraying the Ottomans as a rogue power. But writings on other Muslim polities include some of the first positive appraisals of Muslim statecraft in the European tradition. Another challenge of the present paper is to locate the mendicant images within the context of changing attitudes and the multi-faceted perception of the Ottomans⁶.

Scholars of history, religion and literature have recently focused a great deal of attention on medieval and Early Modern conceptions of non-Christian groups. The source of inspiration for many of these works was Robert Ian Moore's *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, which argues that High Middle Ages spiritual and secular authorities strove to unite Christian society by identifying and humiliating groups considered enemies of the Church⁷. Art historians have also contributed to this area of study. An important contribution to this growing field of literature is Debra Higgs Strickland's *Saracens, Demons and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art*, which offers a systematic and comparative overview of the way in which various non-Christian populations were represented in medieval art. Two other examples are Dana E. Katz's studies on images of the Jews in the ducal courts of northern Italy and Sarah Lipton's monograph on representations of Jews in the *Bible moralisée*⁸.

This paper shall focus on the Franciscan Church of Santa Croce and on the Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella, and shall explore images connected to the

⁵ R.W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam*; N. Daniel, *Islam and the West*; B.Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission*; J.V. Tolan, *Medieval Christian Perceptions*; J.V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam*; E.W. Said, *Orientalism*; V. Cantarino, *Dante and Islam*.

⁶ N. Bisaha, *Creating East and West*; M. Meserve, *Empires of Islam*.

⁷ R.I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*.

⁸ R. Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness*; S. Lipton, *Images of Intolerance*; S. Lipton, *Where are the Gothic*, pp. 139-177; D.H. Strickland, *Saracens, Demons*; D. Glass, *Portals, Pilgrimage*; G. Ligato, *L'ordalia della fede*; G. Curzi, *Stereotipi, metafore*, pp. 534-545.

ideas of mission, conversion and crusade. The images discussed include works by Giotto, Taddeo Gaddi, and Benedetto da Maiano from Santa Croce, and by Andrea da Firenze from Santa Maria Novella. The themes touched upon are stereotypes and imagination, racial difference and religious intolerance, and visual and rhetorical propaganda. I will be using the term “Saracens”, common in the period, which carries a negative association typical of that time, rather than the neutral “Muslims”, defining a religious group⁹.

My working assumption is that visual images inspired preaching and vice-versa and that the images reflected general ideas and attitudes that the sermons shared, elaborated upon, or departed from. I suggest that there was reciprocal influence and interchange between the verbal and the visual images. A related issue might be the differences and similarities in their imaging. In tandem with the visual tradition, there was a homiletic tradition. I look at the way in which visual images shaped the imagination and the distinct pictorial language they employed. I underscore the importance of images as a way of transmitting messages to various audiences in diverse physical and historical contexts. My assumption is that visual images of the period reached a wide range of audiences and made a major impression on the viewer. One must be aware of the nature of the audience of any particular work of art: was it viewed in a closed community of friars or in a major church accessible to the laity; was it reproduced in small prints for personal use or was it a celebrated large-scale altarpiece. The genre of a work of art sometimes dictated its content and message.

2. SANTA CROCE

Turning to Santa Croce, the monument under discussion is a preaching pulpit, created by the celebrated Florentine sculptor Benedetto da Maiano, located on the south side of the church in the third pier of the central nave (fig. 1). It is an octagonal structure of white gilded marble that includes five narrative reliefs between elegant fluted colonettes. The narrative panels depict: *The Confirmation of the Franciscan Order*, *Saint Francis before the Sultan*, *The Stigmatization of Saint Francis*, *The Funeral of Saint Francis*, and *The Martyrdom of the Franciscans in Morocco*. Below the narratives are finely carved consoles with small niches containing statues of the Virtues: Faith, Hope, Charity, Temperance, and Justice. A base with ornamental motifs and the emblem of the donor, Pietro Mellini, completes the structure. An octagonal wooden canopy, under which the preacher would have stood, includes a carved emblem of the Franciscan preacher, San Bernardino set on a blue background¹⁰.

Scholars disagree about the dates of the commissioning and construction of the pulpit. One possibility is the period 1472-1475 supported by Piero Morselli¹¹. The most recent suggestion proposed by both Doris Carl and Gary Radke, argues for dating the pulpit to around 1485 on the basis of contracts regarding the tombs of the Mellinis in the church of Santa Croce and in other churches¹². In any case there is no definitive evidence regarding the exact dates; the design, construction, and final installation of this exquisite monument might have spanned the entire period suggested by the scholars, from 1472 to 1487. The length of time is not unreasonable, given the high costs and artistic complexity of the monument.

⁹ J.J. Cohen, *On Saracens Enjoyment*, pp. 113-142.

¹⁰ D. Carl, *Il pergamo di Benedetto*, pp. 158-167; idem, *Franziskanischer Martyrererkult*, pp. 69-91; idem *Benedetto da Maiano*; G.M. Radke, *Geometria e misura*, pp. 168-195.

¹¹ P. Morselli, *Corpus of Tuscan*, pp. 99-100.

¹² Cf. D. Carl, *Il pergamo di Benedetto*; G.M. Radke, *Geometria e misura*.



Fig. 1. Benedetto da Maiano, The Pulpit in Santa Croce, 1472-1475 (phot. Alinari).

The choice of a Franciscan cycle for the pulpit is hardly surprising, Francis being the founder of the monastic order that built Santa Croce as well as the second name of Pietro Mellini, the lay donor. It was customary for a rich Florentine patron to contribute a monument connected with at least one of his patron saints. For instance, Francesco Sassetti chose to decorate a chapel donated by him to the church of Santa Trinità in Florence with scenes from the life of his patron saint. In Santa Croce, the story of St. Francis appears in several different media: Giotto's frescoes in the Bardi chapel and Taddeo Gaddi's painted panels for a sacristy cupboard, both dating to the fourteenth century, and Benedetto da Maiano's marble reliefs for the pulpit¹³. Another St. Francis narrative in Santa Croce is the Vita panel in the Bardi chapel, recently attributed to Coppo di Marcovaldo¹⁴. The painted cycles of Giotto and Gaddi are the artistic source for many of the motifs shown on the pulpit. Giotto's cycle was well known and came to be considered the iconographic prototype for many of the later cycles. Gaddi's panels, the majority of which are found in the Accademia in Florence, are less prominent in the artistic tradition, but they greatly influenced some of the narrative details in Benedetto's

¹³ J. Stubblebine, *The Relation of the Assisi*, pp. 16-40; R. Goffen, *Spirituality in Conflict*; J. Long, *The Program of Giotto's*, pp. 85-133; L. Bourdua, *The Franciscans and Art*; W.R. Cook, *Giotto and the Figure*, pp. 135-156; A. Ladis, *Taddeo Gaddi*.

¹⁴ M. Boskovitz, *The Origins of Florentine*, p. 472.

scenes. In a sense, Gaddi's cycle was even more important for Benedetto than Giotto's because of the similarities of medium and scale: both the sacristy cupboard and the pulpit are types of church accessory, and both are on a much smaller scale than Giotto's frescoes.

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In other details of the pulpit narrative, Benedetto da Maiano was influenced by the Florentine school of painting dominant in the second half of the fifteenth century; for example, the executioner's classical pose and intensity of movement in the martyrdom scene is reminiscent of Luca Signorelli's forceful protagonists. A further influence of Florentine art of the period is evident in the careful setting, in particular, the introduction of fine examples of architecture in the scenes, based upon Florentine ecclesiastical architecture, notably the Brunelleschian motifs.

In addition to the artistic tradition, the pulpit's iconography draws on the historical context and on Franciscan preaching at the time. Scholarship on the image of Francis and the cycles of his life is vast¹⁵. Studies dealing with Franciscan cycles, in particular the cycle in Assisi and Giotto's cycle in Santa Croce, have emphasized the importance of the literary tradition. Two sources for the life of Francis and for Franciscan iconography, both by Bonaventure take prominence: *Legenda Maior* (1260-1263) and the *Fioretti di San Francesco* (1322-1328)¹⁶. These and other hagiographic sources have been seen as having important links with the artistic tradition of the Franciscan narrative cycles¹⁷. Regarding Benedetto da Maiano's fifteenth-century pulpit, it is useful to examine another contemporaneous literary source, namely, the sermons delivered by Franciscan preachers of the fifteenth century. A possible source of influence might be the sermons of San Bernardino da Siena (1380-1444), who preached in Santa Croce in 1424-25 and whose school of followers continued preaching there throughout the

¹⁵ R.W. Cook, *Images of St. Francis*; G. Kaftal, *St. Francis*; S. Romano, *La morte di Francesco*, pp. 339-368; S. Romano, *Le storie parallele*, pp. 63-81; A. Ladis, *Franciscanism, the Papacy*, vols. I-IV; C. Pirovano, *Francesco d'Assisi*.

¹⁶ J.R.H. Moorman, *The Sources*; C. Frugoni, *Francesco e l'invenzione*; R.B. Brook, *The Image of St. Francis*.

¹⁷ B. Cole, *Another Look*, pp. 48-53.

fifteenth century. The emblem of San Bernardino appears both on the entrance door and above the pulpit, hinting at the contribution of Bernardino's sermons and those of his successors to the pulpit's iconography. The emblem of Bernardino, located directly above the head of the preacher, features the letters IHS (Holy Name of Jesus) surrounded by rays of light against a blue background. The congregation facing the preacher would see the emblem in glittering colors; he would thus be speaking under the inspiration (both physical and spiritual) of Bernardino and his school. Bernardino initiated a cult centered on this emblem and dedicated entire sermons to it that were followed by scenes of people kissing the emblem, weeping and hugging one another¹⁸. Visual representations of the emblem were widely dispersed in Siena and can be found in many Franciscan institutions throughout Italy. Though removed during reconstruction in the nineteenth century, another representation of the emblem of San Bernardino was on the original façade of the church of Santa Croce; in 1437, Bernardino had organized a procession through Florence demanding that his emblem be put there to protect the city from the plague.

The encounter between the Christian and Muslim worlds is relevant in two scenes on the pulpit: *The Trial by Fire before the Sultan* (fig. 2) and *The Martyrdom of the Franciscans at Morocco* (fig. 3). The former emphasizes the role of the Franciscans as missionaries and the greatness of Francis, who impressed even the sultan¹⁹. John Tolan recently published *St. Francis's Trial by Fire before the Sultan* which is an innovative treatment of the evolution of the celebrated scene, in the artistic and literary tradition from its beginnings until modern times²⁰.



Fig. 2. Benedetto da Maiano, The Pulpit in Santa Croce, 1472-1475: *The Trial of the Sultan* (phot. Alinari).

¹⁸ D. Arasse, *Entre dévotion*, pp. 118-139.

¹⁹ D.E. Randolph, *The Franciscan Concept*.

²⁰ J. Tolan, *Saint Francis and the Sultan*; J. Tolan, *Il Santo dal Sultano*; F. Cardini, *Nella presenza del soldan*.



Fig. 3. Benedetto da Maiano, The Pulpit in Santa Croce, 1472-1475:
The Martyrdom of the Franciscans in Morocco (phot. Alinari).

According to tradition, Francis followed the crusades to Damietta and had an interview with al-Kamil, the sultan of Egypt. Bonaventure's version, presented in the *Legenda Maior* in 1260, portrays Francis challenging the sultan and his imams to an ordeal by fire to establish which religion was more powerful. The Muslims refused and Francis offered to undergo the ordeal himself. The story ends with al-Kamil offering rich gifts to Francis, who declined them and left the Muslim court²¹. Another version, emphasizing the merits and generosity of the sultan, was offered by the *fioretti* (the Little Flowers of the Life of St. Francis) and goes as followed:

And standing before him, St. Francis, taught by the Holy Ghost, preached the faith of Christ so divinely that for his faith's sake he even would have entered the fire. Whereat the Sultan began feeling great devotion towards him, as much for the constancy of his faith as for his contempt of the world (for albeit he was very poor he would accept no gift), and also for the fervour of martyrdom he beheld in him. From that time forth the Sultan heard him gladly, and entreated him many times to come back, granting to him and to his companions freedom to preach where so ever it might please them; and he also gave them a token, so that no man should do them hurt²².

²¹ C.T. Maier, *Preaching the Crusades*; St. Bonaventura, *Opera Omnia*, pp. 579-580; J. Dalarun, *François d'Assise*; I.H. Donat, *Cultures italiennes*.

²² J.M. Dent, *The Little Flowers*.

This much favored version often appears in the popular preaching tradition, most evidently in the sermons of Bernardino da Siena. Francis's dramatic encounter with the sultan became central to the Franciscan legacy and, thanks to Giotto, a frequently depicted scene. In Santa Croce, it appears in both Giotto's and Gaddi's cycles.

In the pulpit relief *The Trial by Fire before the Sultan*, an arch draws attention to the sultan, seated at the centre. He wears a dignified gown and his hat is the focal point, as is typical when portraying Saracens²³. He approaches his four well-dressed imams, who are holding books. Whereas in Giotto's depiction, the attendants are moving away in shame, in Benedetto's version, they are conversing with the sultan. The Franciscan delegation is off to the side and St. Francis appears small and humble with a simple halo around his head. The two groups are distinct, the Saracens having beards and moustaches, but there is also some resemblance between them and even a sense of dialogue; for example, one of the Franciscans appears to be speaking with one of the sultan's attendants. This scene takes place in a fine architectural setting, based upon Florentine ecclesiastical architecture that includes Brunelleschian motifs, for example, the throne is fashioned in a Florentine shell niche. The familiar setting has the effect of reducing the distance between the Florentine spectators and the Saracens, who are not depicted as foreigners; two attractive balconies with intriguing spectators complete the setting.

This scene reflects an admiration towards the kind and wise Saracen ruler, a perception that appears in the Italian literary tradition: in the *Novellino*, in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and in *exempla* in Bernardino's sermons. Furthermore, the possibility of converting the Saracen ruler gains special significance in the historical context, since the idea of converting the Ottoman sultan as a solution to the Turkish threat was discussed among Franciscan circles in the fifteenth century, the most famous and intriguing example being the Franciscan Pope Pius II's, *Letter to Mehmet*, in which Pius by a variety of arguments, both religious and pragmatic, tried to convert the Great Turk to Christianity²⁴. The letter goes as follows:

It is a small thing, however, that can make you the greatest and most powerful and most famous man of your time. You ask what it is. It is not difficult to find. Nor have you far to seek. It is to be found all over the world— a little water with which you may be baptized, and turn to the Christian sacraments and believe the gospel. Do this, and there is no prince in the world who will exceed you in glory, or equal you in power²⁵.

The fifth scene on the pulpit, *The Martyrdom of the Franciscans in Morocco*, is highly original. According to tradition, Franciscan missionaries went to Morocco in the thirteenth century to convert the infidels, an initiative that ended in their being beheaded. The martyrdom in Morocco is a scene rarely found in art. One possibly related depiction is Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco (ca. 1331) in the church of San Francesco in Siena; but it has been argued convincingly that Lorenzetti's fresco represents the martyrdom of the six Franciscan missionaries at Almalyq in central Asia by the Mongol Khan Ali in 1339 and not the earlier martyrdom episodes in Morocco²⁶. In Santa Croce, although the scene of the martyrdom does not appear in Giotto's Bardi chapel, it does appear in Gaddi's panel, probably the artistic source for Benedetto da Maiano's relief.

²³ A. Contadini, *Artistic Contacts*, pp. 1-16.

²⁴ J. Hankins, *Renaissance Crusaders*, pp. 111-207.

²⁵ G. Toaff, *Pio II*, pp. 113-114.

²⁶ M.S. Burke, *The Martyrdom*, pp. 460-492.

The martyrdom of the Franciscans in Morocco is unique in the cycle as a whole in using the technique of continuous narrative, meaning that the same characters appear more than once in actions occurring at different moments and are presented together in a single unified space. The sculptor uses variations in depth to separate the various moments of action: on the left, the friars awaiting their martyrdom; then the martyrdom itself, with the friars in the background shown entering a church; and finally their assumption into heaven. The Franciscan narrative paintings of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, involved only monoscenic episodes, representing single moments in the life of Francis, as exemplified in the cycles in Assisi and in Giotto's cycle in the Bardi chapel. It was in the fifteenth century that the technique of continuous narrative was introduced into Franciscan cycles, a further example being Benozzo Gozzoli's frescoes in Montefalco (1452), where numerous episodes of the saint's life are presented in continuous form, yet with narrative clarity²⁷.

The artist has drawn attention to the Moroccan sultan and his court by placing a canopy above their heads; while the sultan, with an impressive hat, looks aside and talks with one of his attendants, another attendant evinces a gesture of horror at the scene. The focal point of this relief, however, is the figure of the executioner, who is dramatically beheading the friars. Instead of the benevolent sultan at the centre, as in the preceding relief, there is a brutal killer with a distorted body. The two half-naked spectators on the stairs resemble monkeys clinging to bars. Two distinct social classes among the Saracens are depicted: the common executioner and spectators versus the more cultured sultan and his attendants, who are nevertheless responsible for the vicious act. The architecture chosen for this scene is notably different and more Oriental, thus separating the action from the Florentine context.

There were two famous cases of martyrdom in Morocco in the thirteenth century: one involving five missionaries sent to Marrakesh in 1220, the other seven missionaries sent to Ceuta in 1227. Then, in 1227, Brother Elias sent seven friars from Tuscany to Morocco. They too preached to the Muslims, were arrested, imprisoned and finally martyred. Part of a letter written from prison to Hugo, a Genoese priest, has come down to us, which depicts their suffering as imitating the agonies of Christ. These missionaries were idealized in Franciscan legacy as being devoted to God, fervent in spirit and wanting with all their energies to convert the Muslims²⁸. The ideal of mission and crusade was central in Franciscan legacy. In the Morocco episode, five missionaries were sent to Marrakesh in 1220, traveling through Spain, Castile, Portugal, and Seville before finally reaching Marrakesh, where they were martyred because of their persistence in preaching Christianity. Upon seeing the bodies of the martyred friars, St. Anthony of Padua had a spiritual experience that caused him to join the Franciscans. The concept of martyrdom was also important for St. Francis. According to tradition, he followed the Crusades to Damietta and had an interview with al-Kamil, the sultan of Egypt. Bonaventure's version, presented in the *Legenda Maior* in 1260, portrays St. Francis as challenging the sultan and his imams to an ordeal by fire to establish which religion was more powerful. The Saracens refused but St. Francis underwent the ordeal himself and emerged unscathed from the flames. The story ends with al-Kamil offering the saint rich gifts, which he refused and he departed from the court. In fact, the stigmatization of St. Francis was considered by theologians such as St. Bonaventure as a type of martyrdom. Thomas of Celano noted

²⁷ L. Andrews, *Story and Space*, pp. 9-11; M. Fierro, *Decapitation of Christians*, pp. 137-164; I. Monteiro, *Une iconographie*, pp. 165-181; I. Monteiro, A. Munoz, F. Villaseñor, *Destierro físico*, pp. 129-142.

²⁸ D.E. Randolph, *The Franciscan*, pp. 37-54.

in his *Vita Prima* that St. Francis longed for martyrdom but was showered with gifts and sent back to the Christian side unharmed.

There is a debate as to which of these two cases is represented on the pulpit. According to a recent interpretation by Doris Carl, the scene represents the martyrdom of the earlier five missionaries in Marrakesh. Carl bases her claim on the hypothesis that the figure in the left corner is St. Anthony of Padua²⁹. She therefore connects the scene to the martyrdom of 1220, after which Anthony saw the relics of the martyrs and decided to abandon the Augustinian order and join the Franciscans. Carl, who dates the pulpit to around 1485, argues that in 1481 the Franciscan pope Sixtus IV had canonized the martyrs of Marrakesh and that this explains their appearance on the pulpit. She notes that the cult of the martyrs was first venerated by the Augustinian friars at Santa Cruz, Portugal, and that only with the rise of the Turkish threat and the massacre in Otranto in 1480, did the Franciscan pope Sixtus IV canonize these martyrs. In either case, whether it is the Marrakesh or the Ceuta martyrs we are dealing with, the pulpit's iconography should be placed in the context of mendicant crusade-preaching campaigns. The fact that two scenes out of the five deal with an encounter of Franciscans with the Muslim world, either as missionaries or as martyrs, also gains special significance in this historical context. The second half of the fifteenth century, after the fall of Constantinople, is characterized by a call for a crusade against the Turks. In 1443, an encyclical from Pope Eugene IV appealed to all prelates to pay a tenth of their income to support the war against the Turks. There were rhetorical calls by preachers such as Bernardino da Siena and writers advocating the crusades, without practical results. In 1453, Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, and Nicholas V issued a bull calling for a crusade against the Turks. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, who became pope in 1458, taking the name Pius II, initiated a meeting of the Christian powers in Mantua in 1459 where prospects for a new crusade were discussed. In 1464, Pius II was issuing additional plans for the crusade against the Turks. He set out for Ancona but died there before his plans for the crusade were realized. Pius successors, Paul II and Sixtus IV, were eager to carry on his endeavors, but no real progress was made. In 1471, the Franciscan pope Francesco della Rovere, who took the name Sixtus IV, published an encyclical letter urging the united action of Christendom against the common foe, condemning the Turks and calling for their destruction. This Christian propaganda for a new crusade met with little response in the West. In 1472, Sixtus IV corresponded with Lodovico II Gonzaga of Mantua about how to act against the sultan, and he began recruiting a fleet with the aim of starting a crusade against the Turks. He tried to raise support for various crusading plans but met with no success. In 1480 with the Turks invading Rhodes and also Otranto in Apulia, an atmosphere of fear prevailed in Italy and a league against the Turks that included Florence was established. In 1481, however, Mohammed II died and the Otranto was liberated, bringing temporary relief from the pressure³⁰.

Crusading sympathy in Tuscany, particularly in Florence, had a long history, going back to the twelfth century. Many Florentines throughout medieval times were active as crusaders, missionaries and pilgrims or at least sympathetic to the crusading movement. This tradition continued in the fifteenth century, when Florence openly voiced support for papal crusading efforts and participated in fund-raising for the

²⁹ S.B. McHam, *The Chapel of St. Anthony*.

³⁰ F. Cardini, *Europe and Islam*; K.M. Setton, *The Papacy*, vol. II, pp. 314-345; H.W. Hazard, *A History of the Crusades*, pp. 661-665.

crusade³¹. The main supporters of crusade propaganda in Florence were the Franciscan and Dominican preachers, who acted as virtual papal envoys, continuing a tradition of mendicant crusade sermons³². The genre of crusade sermons also intensified at this time. An example of mendicant crusade propaganda in the fifteenth century might be taken from the preaching of the Dominican Observant preacher Antoninus Pierozzi (1389-1459), archbishop of Florence. In his oration before Pope Calixtus III in 1455, Antoninus made an impassioned plea for the crusade against the Turks:

All the powers of Italy, thus united (and for this reason the more powerful), unanimous in word and purpose, would be able to move against the son of perdition, Mahomet, angel of Satan, most impudent dog, violator of all laws and customs, mystic anti-Christ who fights against everything Christian, in order to destroy his forces and crush his audacity, and to eliminate him from the frontiers of the faithful and to recover the territories seized by him and sacked, and especially that once glorious city of Constantinople now, however, unfortunately captured by him³³.

Bernardino da Siena might himself have been associated with crusade preaching³⁴, and his followers –among them Cherubino da Spoleto, Giacomo della Marca, Giovanni da Capestrano, Roberto da Lecce and Michele da Carcano– were all engaged in crusade-preaching campaigns, many of them conducted in Florence's Santa Croce. Cherubino da Spoleto delivered crusade sermons in Santa Croce in 1466 and 1482³⁵. In 1443, Giacomo della Marca was nominated by Eugene IV as an apostle for crusade preaching, along with Alberto da Sarteano, who in 1459 and again in 1463-1464 was active on behalf of Pius II in promoting the crusade³⁶. Giovanni da Capestrano, another crusade preacher, was active mainly in Tuscany in the 1450s and 1460s raising funds for the crusade; in art, he is represented with a banner of the crusade. Roberto da Lecce, according to Erasmus, during his sermons would strip off his habit to reveal the crusader's livery and armor underneath³⁷. Michele Carcano was a crusade preacher who in 1459 and 1463 gave sermons on behalf of Pius II and in 1481 on behalf of Sixtus IV. In Santa Croce he preached on the crusade cause in 1455, 1462, 1466, and 1467³⁸. The content of these militant sermons can be shown to inform the messages of Benedetto da Maiano's pulpit with its ideas of mission, as in Francis courageous encounter with the Egyptian sultan and especially regarding martyrdom, as in the heroic death of the Franciscans in Morocco.

In short, the Saracens are portrayed ambivalently on the pulpit: while there is admiration for the generous Egyptian sultan, combined with an interest in his and his courtiers' exotic appearance, the Saracens in the martyrdom scene are dehumanized and shown as animals. The central ideas conveyed by the pulpit iconography are a mixture of mission and martyrdom, conversion and crusade, typical of the Franciscan heritage and relevant to the political and religious climate following the Ottoman's conquest of Constantinople.

³¹ R. Black, *Benedetto Accolti*, pp. 270-276; F. Cardini, *Il Movimento Crociato*; idem, *Studi sulla storia*; idem, *Toscana e Terrasanta*.

³² C.T. Maier, *Preaching the Crusades*, pp. 111-160.

³³ Antoninus, *Summa Historialis*, f. 299; P. Howard, *Diversity in Discourse*, pp. 283-307.

³⁴ F. Donati, *San Bernardino*, pp. 130-136.

³⁵ R. Rusconi, *Cherubino da Spoleto*, pp. 446-453.

³⁶ C. Casagrande, *Giacomo della Marca*, pp. 214-221.

³⁷ M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, pp. 48-50.

³⁸ R. Rusconi, *Michele Carcano*, pp. 742-744.

3. SANTA MARIA NOVELLA

In the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella, on the other side of town, we are confronted with a wealth of images that reflect the complex way the Saracens were perceived by the Dominicans. The Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella had begun to assume its present form by the thirteenth century and, from 1311, a *studium* was established in the convent³⁹. We find Muhammad in hell (following Dante's conception) in Nardo di Cione fresco in the Strozzi Chapel; the threat of the Turks during the Council of Florence, portrayed in Paolo Uccello's fresco of the Flood, in the Green Cloister; and the cruelty of the Saracens, in Filippino Lippi's frescoes.

Dominican perceptions of the Saracens and of other minority groups, is most vividly expressed in Andrea da Firenze's series of frescoes in the church's chapter house, also known as the Spanish Chapel⁴⁰. The chapel had a dual function: it was the funerary chapel of the patron and his wife, who are buried there, as well as a chapter house for the Dominicans friars of Santa Maria Novella. The chapter house served various purposes in the life of the Dominicans in Santa Maria Novella. It was where the community met on a daily basis, where the Dominicans conducted their official ceremonies, where the prior was chosen and important visitors were received. Thus the frescoes were viewed by the friars on a daily basis, and they were also shown to distinguished guests on special occasions⁴¹.

The fresco decoration was paid for by the Florentine merchant Buonamico di Lapo Guidalotti. He was a friend of Fra Jacopo Passavanti (1300-1357), the Dominican writer and preacher sometimes credited with having been chiefly responsible for the iconographic program of the frescoes. Passavanti was prior of Santa Maria Novella during the period 1354-1355 and the author of an influential devotional treatise, *Lo specchio della vera penitenza* (The mirror of true repentance). It has been suggested that the treatise anticipated many of the fresco's details, especially the *Via Veritatis* fresco because in the prologue Passavanti explains that his text is based principally on his Lenten preaching of the previous year in Florence. There has even been speculation that Passavanti's portrait is to be found in the figure of the friar listening to a penitent in the *Via Veritatis* fresco⁴². However, the commission was actually assigned, by a later prior, Zanobi Guasconi, eight years after the death of Passavanti. Thus the program was probably devised in the theological school attached to the convent, if not directly by Passavanti.

The central theme of the series is twofold: first, to commemorate Christ's death on the Cross and his subsequent Resurrection and Ascension to heaven; second, to glorify the Dominican order, mark key activities of the order, and celebrate such saints as Peter the Martyr. Accordingly, one of the entrance walls has scenes from the *Life of Saint Peter the Martyr*, with the *Road to Calvary*, the *Crucifixion* and the *Descent into Limbo* opposite. Within the chapter house, the *Triumph of Saint Thomas Aquinas* appears on the left and on the right the *Church Militant* and the *Church Triumphant*, otherwise known together as the *Via Veritatis*.

³⁹ R.A. Turner, *Renaissance Florence*, pp. 79-82; E.H. Welch, *Art and Society*, pp. 182-184; M. Mulchahey, *First the Bow*.

⁴⁰ L. Marcucci, *Andrea di Bonaiuto*, pp. 83-85.

⁴¹ E. Borsook, *The Mural Painters*, pp. 51-55; J. Gardner, *Andrea di Bonaiuto*, pp. 107-138; M. Meiss, *Painting in Florence*, pp. 94-104; J. Polzer, *Andrea di Bonaiuto's*, pp. 262-289; S. Romano, *Due affreschi del cappellone*, pp. 181-213.

⁴² E. Corbari, *Vernacular Theology*.

Scenes of the *Pentecost*, the *Navicella*, the *Resurrection* and the *Ascension* decorate the vault⁴³.

The Spanish Chapel frescoes include hundreds of figures. What is striking is that many of them have a foreign appearance. Numerous figures wear Oriental or Mongol costume, are dark-skinned or have Oriental eyes, have bearded faces and are wearing turbans or Jewish hats. The intention seems to be to define the identity of the Christians, and particularly the mission of the Dominican order, in juxtaposition to other nationalities and religions. The infidels serve a vital role in bringing out their differences from the Christians and illuminating the superiority of Christianity. The New Testament scenes on the walls of the chapel, such as the *Road to Calvary* and the *Crucifixion*, exhibit Oriental-looking or bearded characters with Jewish hats mocking Christ. These figures are the most prominent among Christ's persecutors. There seems to be a clear distinction between the European-looking figures shown as the supporters of Christ and the Oriental or Jewish protagonists shown as his opponents. The external differences highlight the moral distinction between the pious Christians and the wicked infidels.

The most celebrated fresco in the cycle and the one that offers the most complex perception of the Jews is the *Via Veritatis* (fig. 4). Focusing our attention for a moment on the lower part of the fresco, we see the black and white dogs, the *domini canes* racing to the right, urged on by St. Dominic, who represents the zeal of the Inquisition. In another group, twelve heretics are having their errors spelled out by St. Peter Martyr counting them off, point by point, on his fingers. The ability of Peter Martyr to convert heretics was an admired cult among the Dominicans. An example to the widespread adoration of the Martyr's persuasive talents is an intriguing tale, taken from one of his *vitae*. It describes the preaching of St. Peter Martyr directed to a group of heretics in the town of Melano⁴⁴. The leader of the heretics, mocking Peter Martyr, is disrupting the sermon, demanding that the preacher create a cloud to protect the congregation from the heat of the sun, which is very bothersome. Peter Martyr takes on the challenge. He makes the sign of the cross from the high pulpit on which he is standing and immediately a cloud appears, sent by the Lord, and provides shade for the audience until Peter Martyr has completed his sermon, bringing joy to the believers and much shame to the heretics.

Whereas Peter uses the power of speech and expressive gestures, St. Thomas uses the written word as his means of persuasion. Pointing to the text of his opened book, he is preaching to the disbelievers, including Saracens and Jews (fig. 5). They respond in various ways, some calmly and reflectively, others with active discourse. Two kneel submissively before him in prayer, while others seem deeply affected by his arguments, one ripping his heretical book to shreds. Others, however, are rejecting his teaching; one man is even covering his ears so as not to hear the truth. His text: *Veritatem meditabitur guttur meum et labia mea detestabuntur impium* (*My mouth shall meditate truth; and my lips shall hate wickedness*) is taken from Aquinas' *Summa contra gentiles*, which borrows from Proverbs (8,7). Here Thomas' writings seem more persuasive than Peter's speech, since none appears to be converted by the latter, whereas of the men addressed by Thomas some respond in a positive way and convert. As is typical of medieval iconography, it is rather difficult to distinguish clearly between the Muslims and the Jews in Thomas' crowd of unbelievers. Perhaps a

⁴³ D. Norman, *The Art of Knowledge*, pp. 217-242; G. Leoncini, *La pittura del Trecento*, pp. 79-103; R. Salvini, *Il cappellone*, pp. 89-125; F. Antal, *Florentine Painting*, pp. 247-251.

⁴⁴ R. Rusconi, *Predicazione e vita*, p. 147.

clue to their identity could be their headgear: those wearing an Oriental-looking head scarf, turban or *kaffiyeh* could be Muslims, while the bearded figures with the yellow canonical or the wide-brimmed hats could be considered Jews. Yet the distinction is not clear-cut⁴⁵.



Fig. 4. Andrea da Firenze, *Via Veritatis*, Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (phot. Alinari).



Fig. 5. Andrea da Firenze, *Via Veritatis*: Detail, Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (phot. N. Debby).

⁴⁵ I. D. Kalmar, *Jesus Did Not Wear*, pp. 3-11

The representation of Thomas Aquinas in the Spanish Chapel conveys the ideas of mission, and conversion as an option for Muslims and Jews. It especially highlights the role of the Dominicans as missionaries. Although, modern research throws doubt on the innovative nature of the Dominican missionary endeavors and the utility of the *Summa contra gentiles* as a preaching manual, the fresco celebrates the ideal. Thomas is depicted in accordance with the legend that Raymond of Penyafort, the head of the Dominicans, had asked Thomas *to compose a work against the errors of the infidels, by which both the cloud of darkness might be dispelled and the teaching of the true Sun made manifest*. Thomas famously says in the prologue to the *Summa contra gentiles* that when debating with the Jews one can use the Old Testament as a basis of understanding. However, with Muslims and pagans there is no use turning to a common authoritative text and one must then *have recourse to natural reason, to which all men are forced to give their assent* (Book I, Chapter 2). The *Summa contra gentiles*, then, was written to expound to unbelievers certain philosophically compelling arguments, arguments with which all are forced to agree, thus preparing the way for their assent to the Christian faith. The painted image, then, shows Thomas as a missionary using the written manual.

The next fresco, *The Triumph of Thomas*, emphasizes the glory of Dominican wisdom as personified by Thomas Aquinas, the dominant figure at the center, who is seated on a throne surrounded by the sacred and profane sciences, the cardinal virtues, and various prophets and apostles (fig. 6). Aquinas appears at the center of a complex figural scheme. He is seated upon an elaborate throne at the apex of which appears a fictive roundel that depicts a half-length female figure representing Wisdom. He is holding an open book which features a text from the Book of Wisdom. On the base beneath him crouch the tiny figures of the heretic Muslim and pagan philosophers: Sabellius, Averroes and Arius, three writers whose teachings were decisively rejected by the Church. They present a striking antithesis to the triumphant demeanor of the other figures in the painting, and they appear as intruders in the real space of the chapter house, reminding us that they are excluded from the intellectual community of Christians (fig. 7). The overthrow of Averroes by St. Thomas is illustrated in other fourteenth-century works, of which the most famous is the *Glorification of St. Thomas Aquinas* in Santa Caterina in Pisa, attributed either to a follower of Simone Martini. This iconography was conceived with a specifically didactic message: to celebrate Saint Thomas Aquinas as a theologian and teacher and, more specifically, to promote the claim that his writings were divinely inspired and superior to those of non-Christian authors.

The fresco on the vault illustrates the scene of the *Pentecost*, when the apostles received the Holy Spirit and were thus able to disseminate their message in different languages, an apt foreshadowing of the Dominican commitment to teaching. This scene shows the triumph of Christianity over the heretics. On the balcony are the Virgin, Christ and the apostles, surrounded by light, with the Holy Dove above them representing the Holy Spirit; on the ground, in darkness, in front of the closed door, are gathered the humiliated figures of the heretics, the Muslims and the Jews. Additional figures are wearing Oriental costume, Eastern Asian headgear or traditional Jewish hats. In the *Ascension of Christ*, a similar group of heretics lies sprawled on the ground with closed eyes, a sign of their blindness to the miracle occurring in the upper part of the scene. They represent a variety of Oriental figures one wears a turban, another Mongol hat; and there is a bearded figure wearing a Jewish hat⁴⁶.

⁴⁶ D.H. Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*, pp. 174-175.



Fig. 6. Andrea da Firenze, *The Triumph of Thomas*, Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (phot. Alinari).



Fig. 7. Andrea da Firenze, *The Triumph of Thomas: Detail*, Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (phot. N. Debby).

On the whole, the frescoes deliver similar messages: the willfully unseeing heretics serve to highlight the truth of Christianity. The Christian reigns triumphant while the Saracen is subjugated and humiliated. The Saracens are lumped together with other heretics such as the Jews. Nevertheless, hope exists for their conversion in Thomas' missionary activity. The frescoes adopt a theological and intellectual stance. Thomas wins over Muslim philosophy, but he succeeds only partially in converting the infidels, including the Muslims.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, both the Dominicans and the Franciscans depicted the Saracens in degrading manner in order to illustrate the superiority of their orders. Yet their histories, ideologies and pictorial codes are distinct. The Franciscans were a missionary order with direct contact with Muslim communities in the East for centuries; in their pictorial imagery, they offered two options: a positive experience with a kind Saracen ruler or a violent clash resulting in martyrdom; the Dominicans as devoted servants of the papacy visualized the encounter as a religious debate and a rivalry between philosophers. The Franciscans as a popular order closer to the masses of believers emphasized the fantastic –the trial by fire, the exotic– the figure of the Sultan, and the violent, the savage death of the missionaries. The Dominicans as an intellectual elite highlighted their ability to convert the Saracens through theological arguments and the superiority of scholastic theology over Muslim philosophy. The meeting between flesh and blood depicted by the Franciscan legacy became that of ideas in the Dominican heritage.

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