Art and Sermons: Mendicants and Muslims in Florence

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This paper analyzes how the mendicant friars in Florence perceived of the Muslims, on the eve of the Reformation. I intend to focus on the encounter between the Christian and Islamic worlds as it appears in Florentine churches in both 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 the center of this paper. Crusading sympathy in Tuscany, particularly in Florence, had a long history and 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, when Florence openly voiced support for papal crusading efforts and Franciscan and Dominican preachers continued a tradition of mendicant crusade sermons. The mendicant movements developed special types of artwork, paintings as well as sculptures, in order to disseminate their religious ideals. The images here discussed include works by Giotto, Taddeo Gaddi, and Benedetto da Maiano from Santa Croce, and by Andrea da Firenze from Santa Maria Novella.

Recently, much attention has been drawn by scholars of history, religion, and literature to Western medieval and early modern conceptions of non-Christian groups.1 A 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-medieval spiritual and secular authorities strove to unite Christian society by identifying and humiliating groups considered

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enemies of the church.² Art historians have also contributed in this area, mostly examining Christian representations of Jews and Judaism. An important contribution to this growing field of literature is Debra Higgs Strickland, *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 depicted.³ A case in point is a study examining the way in which Christian society perceived Muslims and the effect of such views on their ideas regarding mission, conversion, and crusade. Leading studies were written by Richard W. Southern, Norman A. Randolph, Benjamin Z. Kedar, and more recently by John Tolan.⁴

In this short paper, only the beginning of a work in progress, I examine the encounter between the Christian and the Islamic worlds as can be seen in mendicant churches in Florence. I focus on the Franciscan Church Santa Croce and on the Dominican Church Santa Maria Novella, and explore images connected to the ideas of mission, conversion and crusade. I suggest that the two orders conceived the Saracens differently and used diverse visual vocabulary to picture them. 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 group.⁵

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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 (Figure 1). It is an octagonal structure of white gilded marble holding 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 background.6

Scholars disagree about the dates of the commissioning and construction of the pulpit. One possibility is the period 1472-1475 supported by Piero Morselli.7 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 churches.8 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.

The choice of a Franciscan cycle for the pulpit is hardly surprising,

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8 See Carl and Radke (above, n. 6).
Figure 1
Benedetto da Maiano, The Pulpit in Santa Croce, 1472-75 (photo: Alinari)
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 is depicted 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 pulpit. Another St. Francis narrative in Santa Croce is the Vita panel in the Bardi chapel, recently attributed to Coppo di Marcovaldo. The painted cycles of Giotto and Gaddi are the artistic source for many of the motifs shown on the pulpit. Giotto’s work was well known and came to be considered the iconographic prototype for many of the later cycles. Gaddi’s panels, the majority 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 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.

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 vast.


Studies dealing with Franciscan cycles, in particular that in Assisi and Giotto’s in Santa Croce, have emphasized the importance of the literary tradition. Two sources for the life of Francis and for Franciscan iconography, the first by St. Bonaventure and the second whose author is anonymous take prominence: *Legenda Maior* (1260-1263) and the *Fioretti di San Francesco* (1322-1328). These and other hagiographic sources are considered to have important links with the artistic tradition of the Franciscan narrative cycles. 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 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; the preacher would thus be speaking under the inspiration (both physical and spiritual) of Bernardino and his school. Bernardino initiated a cult centered on this emblem to which he dedicated entire sermons, followed by scenes of people kissing the emblem, weeping and hugging one another. 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

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13 As an example of this approach see B. Cole, ‘Another Look at Giotto’s Stigmatization of St. Francis’, *Connoisseur* 181 (1972), pp. 48-53.

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 in Morocco* (Fig. 3). The former emphasizes the role of the Franciscans as missionaries and the greatness of Francis, who impressed even the sultan. According to tradition, Francis followed the crusades to Damietta and had an interview with Al-Kamil, the sultan of Egypt. Bonaventura’s version, presented in the *Legenda Maior* in 1260, portrays Francis challenging the sultan and his imams to an ordeal by fire in order to establish which religion was more powerful. The Muslims refused and Francis proposed to undergo the ordeal himself. The story ends with Al-Kamil offering rich gifts to Francis, who declined them and left the Muslim court. Another version, emphasizing the merits and generosity of the sultan, was presented by the *fioretti* (the Little Flowers of the Life of St. Francis) and goes as follows:

> 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 fervor 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 wheresoever it might please them; and he also gave them a token, so that no man should do them hurt.

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Figure 2
Benedetto da Maiano, The Pulpit in Santa Croce, 1472-75 (photo: Alinari)
*The Trial of the Sultan*
Figure 3
Benedetto da Maiano, The Pulpit in Santa Croce, 1472-75 (photo: Alinari)
*The Martyrdom of the Franciscans in Morocco*
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 figures 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 Saracens.\(^{18}\) 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. Though the two groups are distinct, the Saracens having beards and moustaches, there is also some resemblance between them and even a sense of dialogue; for example, one of the Franciscans seems 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.\(^{19}\) 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


\(^{19}\) On positive images of Saracen rulers, see Strickland (above, n. 3), pp. 188-89.
and pragmatic, tried to convert the Great Turk to Christianity. \(^20\) 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 power." \(^21\)

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 portrayed 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 rather than the earlier martyrdom episodes in Morocco. \(^22\) In Santa Croce, although the scene of the martyrdom does not show up in Giotto’s Bardí chapel, it is found in Gaddi’s panel, probably the artistic source for Benedetto da Maiano’s relief.

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 diverse 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 to 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 in the Bardi chapel. It was only in the fifteenth century that the technique of continuous narrative was introduced into Franciscan cycles, a point in case being Benozzo Gozzoli’s frescoes in Montefalco (1452), where numerous episodes of the saint’s life are presented in continuous form, yet with narrative clarity.23

The artist has drawn attention to the Moroccan sultan and his court by placing a canopy above their heads; while the sultan, wearing 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 possessing 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. The route of the five Franciscans included Spain, Castile, Portugal, Seville and finally Marrakesh, where they were martyred because of their persistence in preaching Christianity. St. Anthony of Padua, after seeing the bodies of the martyred friars, had a spiritual experience and decided to join the Franciscans. 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; in it they view 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 Muslims.24

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 Padua.25 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.26 While I find Carl’s main line of argument connecting the martyrdom scene with the Ottoman threat plausible, I am less convinced regarding her identification of the scene as that of the earlier, Marrakesh incident. First, seven missionaries are found in the scene, not five, which seems to indicate that the representation is of the later case, the martyrdom of the seven Franciscans at Ceuta. The figure that Carl identifies as St. Anthony of Padua seems to me to be simply one of the missionaries waiting for his turn to be beheaded. With regard to the historical context, the martyrs of Ceuta were Tuscan friars and it thus makes sense that in a Florentine institution such as Santa Croce, Tuscan martyrs would be represented.

In either case, whether it is the Marrakesh or the Ceuta martyrs with whom we are dealing, 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 where he died 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 pressure.

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 into the fifteenth century, when Florence openly voiced support for papal crusading efforts and participated in fund-

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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. 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 him.

Bernardino da Siena might himself have been associated with crusade preaching, 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 1482.


29 On the traditional role of the mendicants in advocating the crusade cause, see Maier (above, n. 16), pp. 111-60.


31 On Bernardino’s activity as a crusade preacher, see F. Donati, ‘San Bernardino predicatore delle indulgenze per la crociata’, Bolletino senese di storia patria 2 (1895), pp. 130-36.

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 crusade. 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 carrying 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 underneath. 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 1467. 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 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 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, characteristic of the Franciscan heritage and relevant to the political and religious climate following the Ottoman’s conquest of Constantinople.

I would suggest that this conception of the Saracens was typical of Florentine sentiments at that time. The Florentine merchant Luca Landucci (1460-1516) provides an interesting testimony to this ambivalence. 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’. 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. 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 honoring 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 gifts.

Thus the ambivalence towards the Saracens during that period was felt by the Franciscans as well as by their audiences.

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. We find: Muhammad in hell (following Dante’s conception) in Nardo di Cione’s 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. I hope to explore this intriguing web of images in the near future. Here I will only allude to a few brief examples found in Andrea da Firenze’s series of frescoes in the church’s chapter house, particularly in the fresco known as the Via Veritatis (1365-67).

37 *A Florentine Diary*, pp. 26, 183.
38 *A Florentine Diary*, p. 44.
39 On Andrea di Bonaiuto’s *Via Veritatis* murals in the Spanish Chapel of Santa Maria Novella (1365-67) see E. Borsook, *The Mural Painters of Tuscany: From
central theme of the series is the glorification of the Dominican order. 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, on the right there are the *Church Militant* and the *Church Triumphant*, otherwise known as the *Via Veritatis* (Fig. 4).40

Focusing our attention for a moment on the lower part of the fresco, the *Via Veritatis*, 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 false heretics are having their mistakes proven by St. Peter Martyr counting off point after point on his fingers; the next group shows St. Thomas Aquinas holding the *Summa contra Gentiles* and preaching to the disbelievers, including Saracens. They respond in various ways, some calmly and reflective, others by active discourse. Two kneel submissively before him in prayer and others seem deeply affected by his arguments, one ripping his heretical book to shreds. Other characters, however, ignore Thomas’s teaching, one man covering his ears so as not to hear the truth he utters.

The fresco, *The Triumph of Thomas* (Fig. 5), emphasizes the glory of Dominican wisdom as personified in Thomas Aquinas, the dominant figure at the center who is seated on a throne, surrounded by the sacred and profane sciences, by the cardinal virtues and by various prophets and apostles. On the base beneath him are the crouching tiny figures of the heretics: Sabellius, Averroes and Arius. These figures seem to be intruding into the real space of the chapter house thus

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reminding us that they are excluded from the intellectual community of the Christians. The theme of the overthrow of Averroes by St. Thomas is illustrated in other 14th century images, 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 or to Lippo Memmi.

![Glorification of St. Thomas Aquinas](image)

**Figure 4**

Andrea da Firenze, *Via Vertatis*, Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Alinari)
Figure 5
Andrea da Firenze, *The Triumph of Thomas*, Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (photo: Alinari)
Conclusion

Based on this partial evidence, some preliminary suggestions are offered here. Both the Dominicans and the Franciscans depicted the Saracens in a 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, for centuries maintaining direct contact with Muslim communities in the East; in their pictorial imagery, they presented two options: a positive experience involving a kind Saracen ruler or a violent clash resulting in martyrdom; the Dominicans, being 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.