

The Sultan and the Gauntlet of Fire

A Study in Early Franciscan Missionary Texts

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1 Introduction

At the height of fighting in the Fifth Crusade, St. Francis of Assisi, a destitute friar dressed in rags, crosses enemy lines from among the crusaders into the court of Maïk al-Kamil, the sultan of Egypt, with whom he wants to have a conversation. After witnessing the horror and futility of crusade combat firsthand, Francis goes with the intention of converting the sultan to Christianity once and for all or else to suffer holy martyrdom with the truth on his lips in the attempt. But by the time he departs from Egypt to further travels and virtuous acts after several days in the sultan's custody, God has granted neither wish to Francis. At the climax of their encounter, according to St. Bonaventure, Francis asks the sultan to light a great fire that he may walk into with the greatest scholars of Islam, that God might show the truer faith. This fire, however, is never lit, and the two champions part ways on uncertain terms.

This study draws from a variety of sources. First and foremost, I am interested in the early thirteenth-century accounts of the meeting, which may be divided between the hagiographic and historical. The hagiographic texts include “First Life” of Thomas of Celano, the “Major Life” of St. Bonaventure, and the Fioretti.¹ All of these have their origins within the early Franciscan Order and engage in contemporary debates within it. Among the historical I include the chronicles of Jacques de Vitry and Ernoul. Francis' own writings, particularly his Rules of 1221 and 1223, contribute to my discussion as well. Unfortunately there are no reliable accounts of the meeting from the court of al-Kamil, though there is mention of an incident with a monk on the epigraph of one of the sultan's counselors, the mystic Fakhr-al Farasi.²

By many means of measure, the encounter between St. Francis and Sultan Malik al-

¹These and other sources are from the collection which I will henceforth refer to as *Omnibus: St. Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies; English Omnibus of the Sources for the Life of St. Francis*, Ed. Marion A. Habig, 4th edition (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 1991)

²Fortini has also been a valuable resource throughout, collating the various historical and hagiographic accounts into a cohesive narrative. Because of its use of all the other texts, I have considered it more as a guide for my own reading than a primary source itself: Arnaldo Fortini, *Francis of Assisi (Nova Vita di San Francesco)*, trans. Helen Moak (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

Kamil at Damietta is a powerful focal point. As medieval Christians understood it, each is the great champion of his side in the clash of civilizations; al-Kamil stands at the apex of the heathen construct, while Francis is probably the most beloved saint in medieval Christendom. If any one Muslim must to be won over, surely it need be the sultan. And if any one Christian is to win him, Francis would be the choice. By their mediation of the limits of both argument and violent crusade, these understandings of the event were to serve as models for generations of Christian encounters with the non-Christian world. In this discussion I will follow several pivotal interpretations that construct what became the myth of St. Francis in Damietta and how they engage ongoing conversations of their time: martyrdom, persuasion, and dialogue. Rather than any one of these texts in particular, this discussion concerns the fact of the story itself as an abstract focal point for ongoing debate about the fact and nature of religious encounter. The accounts shall be taken as divergent projects drawing on a single legendary source-in-progress, each contributing to the complexity of its meaning. Ultimately, I argue, the creation of this story engages the sensation of futility in a stalemate between civilizations and the seeming insolubility of their logics. The ways in which divergent narratives have been built represent the mechanisms of separate projects with separate assumptions as they engage a single event.

2 The Siege at Damietta

2.1 Francis' Missionary Phase

Six years after his conversion to the life of poverty, and well into the burgeoning growth of his order of friars, St. Francis begins to feel struck by the call to mission. He travels to Syria as a stowaway on a ship, “sowing everywhere the seed of salvation and reaping an abundant harvest.”³ Then along with a group of followers he heads toward Morocco, but sickness prevents Francis from continuing farther than Spain. Finally, accompanied by

³“The Major Life of St. Francis,” in *Omnibus*, 702.

twelve hand-picked friars, he follows the armies of the crusade to Damietta and to the sultan.

Francis' missionary period, which is discretely bounded in accounts of his life amongst domestic adventures, had a pronounced effect on his Order and the idea of the Franciscan life. Along with the Black Friars of his contemporary St. Dominic, the Franciscans quickly dominated Latin missionary activity in Iberia, North Africa, the Holy Land, the Balkans, and the Far East. As such, however, methodologies of mission differed and sometimes conflicted. In his 1221 Rule for friars, Francis himself outlines two approaches to missionary work among the Saracens: "to avoid quarrels and disputes" in a more passive witness to the Christian life as a subject in the foreign land and "to proclaim the word of God openly," that hearers "may be baptized and become Christians."⁴ Francis does not explain when one method is to be used over the other, though the vigor of his language appears to emphasize the latter, more activist form.⁵ The later, revised Rule of 1223, however, suggests neither of these methods and prefers an emphasis on the need for papal legitimacy of missions.⁶ This change reflects the whole project of the second Rule, to clarify earlier ambiguity and emphasize submission to ecclesiastical authority. Nevertheless, the earlier version illustrates a diversity of understanding about the missionary life among Francis' early friars.

The emphasis of the accounts of Francis' life, however, is placed differently. All of the early hagiographic texts describe his missions initially as motivated by an ambition to the death of a martyr. Bonaventure writes, "the prize of martyrdom still attracted him so strongly that the thought of dying for Christ meant more to him than any merit he might earn by the practice of virtue."⁷ The passive witness and persuasive preaching that Francis calls for in his Rule are placed second to a persistent, even tortured need for a martyr's death in the hagiographies. Two forces act upon his early literary character: a burning desire for martyrdom and the frustrating circumstances of God's will that protect Francis, "reserving

⁴"The Rule of 1221," in *Omnibus*, 43.

⁵Some contemporary scholarship differs; see section 3.3.

⁶"The Rule of 1223," in *omnibus*, 64.

⁷"The Major Life of St. Francis," in *Omnibus*, 701.

for him the prerogative of a singular grace.”⁸ This language reframes Francis’ missionary ambition in an important way, redefining the parameters of success and failure not in terms of the hearers’ actual conversion but instead by the missionary’s spiritual sacrifice of self even against futility.

Understandings that would emerge of St. Francis’ encounter with the sultan reflect these plural interpretations of the missionary life. The dispute is deeply tied both to an internal conversation within the Franciscan order and a larger cultural conversation about the possibility and purpose of exchange work among Muslims. After exploring further the narrative, I will return to these among other interpretations at work in the construction of a concept of the event.

2.2 The Circumstances of the Crusade

Francis arrives at Damietta, Egypt during the summer of 1219 and joins the Christian army’s camp outside the city. Several independent, contemporary historical accounts of the crusade describe the arrival of St. Francis at Damietta, including the *Chronicle of Ernoul* and the *Historia Orientalis* of James de Vitry. “We saw the founder and head of this Order,” writes de Vitry, “a simple and ignorant man, but loved of God and of men, by name Brother Francis.”⁹ Both physically and mythically, he is located by the chroniclers amidst one of the most dramatic battles of his time and at the ideological center of medieval Christendom. The battle for Damietta was understood as a step toward the perennial dream of the recovery of the Holy Land. As such, the attention of Christendom was turned to the crusade. Pope Innocent III had been gathering support for it beginning in 1213 and continued through the decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. The city had been under siege since the summer of 1218, and since then was the scene of ferocious combat. With Greek fire and extensive fortifications the sultan’s armies maintained an imposing defense. Oliver of

⁸“The First Life of St. Francis,” in *Omnibus*, 277.

⁹Quoted from: John R. H. Moorman, B.D., *The Sources for the Life of S. Francis of Assisi* (Manchester University Press, 1940), 56.

Paderborn's account conveys the sense of futility that the Christian forces experienced:

And the more often they made an attack afterward, so much more were the walls strengthened by wooden towers and palisades; the defenders resisted the oncomers even more vigorously and effaciously, . . . and the attempt was fruitless. And so it was truly understood that by divine power alone would Damietta be delivered into the hands of the Christians.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the defenses finally fell to the attackers. In early November, Damietta was taken for a time by Christian forces, and the Muslims army, along with the sultan, retreated to a camp outside of the city. As Fortini points out, Francis surely witnessed the horrors of the capture.¹¹ Paderborn reports, "The soldiers of Christ, attacking Damietta, found its streets strewn with the bodies of the dead, wasting away from pestilence and famine."¹² In the gruesome waste of the siege, the crusaders took to gathering Damietta's valuables, transforming the mosques into churches, and recovering lost Christian relics plundered from the Muslim recapture of Jerusalem. It was in the midst of this that Francis asks the papal prelate Cardinal Pelagius for permission to travel directly to the sultan with his companion. This point of ecclesiastical approval is passed over in most of the accounts, but the *Chronicle of Ernoul* emphasizes it. At first Pelagius does not want them to go, fearing for their safety. By this telling, Francis makes a distinction between simply being allowed to go and actually being sent.¹³ Because, Francis argues, the prelate has no need to send them but merely to allow their departure, he is freed of all responsibility for them. On these terms, and after their continued insistence, he finally permits them to set off on their way.

Such an interest of Ernoul's may be significant in light of the point of contention that emerges between the 1221 and 1223 editions of Francis' Rule, which indicate that there was

¹⁰Oliver of Paderborn, "The Capture of Damietta," in *Christian Society and the Crusades 1198-1229*, ed. Edward Peters, trans. John J. Gavigan (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 81

¹¹That Francis' journey to the sultan occurred after the capture of the city is in some dispute; for this position I draw on: Fortini, 427. See especially note *n*.

¹²Paderborn, 88.

¹³*Chronique D'Ernoul* (Paris: Librairie de la Société de L'Histoire de France, 1871), 431-432. Translated with the kind help of Dr. Barbara Croissant.

disagreement in the Order about whether a papal blessing would be necessary for missionary activity. While the earlier Rule grants significant liberty to a friar so inclined, the final version demands more stringency and care in obtaining permission, “so that we may be utterly subject and submissive to the Church.”¹⁴ Ernoul’s interest in the permission of the prelate may have represented a position within this debate on the side of care, though the semantic hair-splitting that ultimately occurs leaves a degree of ambiguity that better resembles the earlier, more flexible Rule.

2.3 The Gauntlet of Fire

As Francis passes into enemy territory with his companion Illuminatus, the accounts generally speak of grave danger. Bonaventure writes,

At that time fierce fighting was taking place between the Christians and the Moslems, and the two armies were drawn up opposite each other at close quarters in the field, so that there was no means of passing safely from one to the other. The sultan decreed that anyone who brought him the head of a Christian should be rewarded with a Byzantine gold piece.¹⁵

Francis’ peril while approaching the sultan is marked in significance by reference to moments in the life of Christ. Recalling the garden of Gethsemane, the two friars are captured along the way “like wolves upon sheep”¹⁶ by the hostile army. They are held in custody and tortured, as Christ was in anticipation of the Passion. Throughout Francis demands of his captors to be brought before the sultan, and finally they deliver the friars to the court of Malik al-Kamil.

By all accounts, the sultan treats Francis with great kindness. According to the *Historia Orientalis*, “the sultan, that cruel beast, became sweetness itself.”¹⁷ Thomas of

¹⁴“The Rule of 1221,” in *Omnibus*, 43; “The Rule of 1223,” in *Omnibus*, 64.

¹⁵“The Major Life of St. Francis,” in *Omnibus*, 702-703.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 703.

¹⁷Jacques de Vitry, *Historia Orientalis*, in *Omnibus*, 1612.

Celano contrasts his honorable behavior to that of his subjects. Francis' preaching pleases al-Kamil greatly, and the sultan grows in "great devotion for him both because of the unshakable conviction of his faith and because of his contempt for the world."¹⁸ More than the doctrines that are preached, the sultan's delight appears to be in Francis himself. The power of Francis' presence is a common motif throughout the stories of his life; again and again people are moved to unexpected devotion and renunciation upon meeting him. The sultan asks Francis to stay with him, and in several accounts the friars accept his generous hospitality for several days at least. According to the Fioretti, they are given an even more unexpected welcome to travel about and preach throughout the sultan's empire, though this adventure bears few fruits of conversion and he returns once again to al-Kamil.¹⁹

During the time that he remains in the court, Francis continues to preach to the sultan, who "was deeply moved by his words and . . . listened to him very willingly."²⁰ However, al-Kamil is not converted by arguments as the early accounts suggest Francis would have liked. Generally, the reason given for his failure to convert lies not with the efficacy of Francis' preaching but by the influence of his subjects. This goes two ways. According to the *Historia Orientalis* of Jacques de Vitry, the sultan grows fearful that "some of his people should be converted to the Lord by the power of his words," and feels forced to end the conversation.²¹ On the other hand, in Bonaventure and the Fioretti, the sultan fears for himself, that if he converted as perhaps he might like, the Saracens would rise up and depose him. By these accounts, the failure of Francis' mission is understood to be external. Such an interpretation falls in line with what Jessalynn Bird has identified as a key assumption in the chronicles of Oliver of Paderborn and Jacques de Vitry, who were present at Damietta during St. Francis' time there. These texts, which together helped to form the corpus of European self-understanding about the Crusades, insisted that armed crusade was necessary for the

¹⁸"Little Flowers of St. Francis," in *Omnibus*, 1354.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 1355.

²⁰"The First Life of St. Francis," in *Omnibus*, 277.

²¹Quoted from: Moorman, 56.

success of Christian evangelism in the Muslim world.²² The political and military structures that only a crusade could combat would presumably, as in the case of the sultan, frustrate any success in preaching that might occur. For both chroniclers, the stanchness of Muslim rulers to conversion justified their forceful removal. In this way, such an understanding of the encounter at Damietta serves to bolster the crusade effort. Bird notes also that the texts of Jacques de Vitry and Oliver of Paderborn encouraged attempts to convert other Muslim rulers with letters and missionaries.²³

Of all the early sources, St. Bonaventure gives perhaps the most unusual story of their conversations together. By his telling, Francis asks the sultan to test the truth of his message in flames. “If you are afraid to abandon the law of Mahomet for Christ’s sake,” he begins, “then light a big fire and I will go into it with your priests. That will show you which faith is more sure and more holy.”²⁴ The sultan resists Francis’ proposal, fearing that the priests would never agree to such a test. Indeed, he notices one “old and highly esteemed man” among them slip out for the room upon hearing the idea. But Francis persists, and describes his own uncertainty about entering the fire, suggesting hope that a miracle will occur to carry his point:

Then Francis continued, “If you are prepared to promise me that you and your people will embrace the Christian religion, if I come out of the fire unharmed, I will enter it alone. But if I am burned, you must attribute it to my sins; on the other hand, if God saves me by his power, you must acknowledge, ‘Christ the power of God, Christ the wisdom of God’ as true God, the Savior of all.”²⁵

Unsupported by any of the other contemporary accounts, Bonaventure’s gauntlet of fire has been since dismissed by many as certainly ahistorical. Nevertheless, the status of the Bonaventure text, which was the official “Life” of Francis after 1266, and Giotto’s famous

²²Jessalynn Bird, “Crusade and Conversion after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215): Oliver of Paderborn’s and James of Vitry’s Missions to Muslims Reconsidered,” *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 21 (2004), 6.

²³Ibid., 29.

²⁴“The Major Life of St. Francis,” in *Omnibus*, 704.

²⁵Ibid.

depiction of it in the Basilica di Santa Croce in Florence, contribute to the influence of the imagery of the fire. Nevertheless, so far as can be told from Bonaventure, the sultan never agrees to light it.

St. Francis' decision to abandon reasoned debate and pass through a fire is a significant one and, I argue, is deeply suggestive of the larger predicament of intercivilizational encounter that the meeting at Damietta represents. Giulio Basetti-Sani, a 20th century Canadian Franciscan, understands the need for the fire as expressive of a failure of human reason in the void of recognizable authority. Because the belief systems of Francis and the sultan fail to recognize one another as valid, a need arises for miraculous signs.²⁶ This sensation is not limited to Bonaventure and his fire. By the account of Jacques de Vitry, the sultan makes such a plea to divine aid that can transcend the conflict of traditional human authorities, asking of Francis, "Pray for me that God may reveal to me that law and that faith which is to him most pleasing."²⁷

The common tendency of the accounts, though, is to leave whatever appreciation that the al-Kamil and St. Francis might have had for one another ultimately unresolved at the end of their meeting. However, they vary significantly in their final opinions of the sultan. After proposing the gauntlet of fire, Bonaventure's Francis seems to lose hope in him entirely. "Francis," the text explains, even after al-Kamil offers to give gifts to Christian churches and the poor, "could see no sign of a genuinely religious spirit in the sultan, and so he refused to agree."²⁸ Deferring continually to the fear of his subjects, Bonaventure paints a picture of the sultan that is sympathetic yet disapproving, as a sinner who "did not dare" to risk death for truth. The Fioretti, alternatively, gives a much stranger conclusion to the encounter. In it, al-Kamil actually agrees to be converted to Christianity, while admitting that he cannot do so then and there "because these Saracens, if they heard about it, would

²⁶Giulio Basetti-Sani, O.F.M., *Mohammed et Saint François* (Ottawa: Commissariat de Terre-Sainte, 1959), 176.

²⁷Quoted from: Moorman, 56.

²⁸"The Major Life of St. Francis," in *Omnibus*, 705.

immediately kill me and you, with all your companions.”²⁹ Recognizing the seriousness of the sultan’s desire for salvation, Francis promises that as the ruler’s death approaches, two friars will be sent to baptize him. The account goes on to say that, some years even after Francis’ death, this is just what happens. Two friars arrive at al-Kamil’s deathbed and “his soul was saved through the merits of St. Francis.” Given the legendary status of the story of two returning friars, the Fioretti’s explanation is an interesting twist on the facts; it admits the undeniable historical circumstance that the sultan was not visibly converted by Francis while at the same time granting the saint success in rescuing the sultan’s soul.

In many of the narratives, the sultan offers Francis great gifts of money and comfort upon his departure, which proves problematic. There is a tension in his offer as described in the texts between a spirit of generosity and diabolism, and different accounts locate themselves differently between the two. The early Franciscan tradition in particular understood wealth to be a corrupting force, and Francis’ Rule prohibits friars to accept money of any kind.³⁰ Poverty was an essential and distinguishing feature of the Order, and to the end of his life Francis was careful to prevent any transgression from it. The account of Thomas of Celano is probably the most harsh toward the al-Kamil. Through the gifts offered to Francis, Celano condemns the figure of the sultan, fitting him into an archetype shared with the biblical Tempter. The sultan “tried to bend Francis’ mind toward the riches of the world.”³¹ These passages bear close resemblance for the Christian ear to the temptation of Christ in the desert:

And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.”³²

²⁹ “Little Flowers of St. Francis,” in *Omnibus*, 1355.

³⁰ “The Rule of 1223,” in *Omnibus*, 60.

³¹ “The First Life of St. Francis,” in *Omnibus*, 277.

³² Luke 4:5-6, RSV.

Like Christ, Francis refuses the offer, despising “all these things as so much dung.”³³ Couched in the echoes of mythology, this account refers the figure of the sultan, and the frustrating problem that he represents, to clear, preexisting categories.

After the failure of the gauntlet of fire and his refusal to accept the sultan’s offer of riches, Bonaventure’s Francis decides “that there was no hope of converting the Moslems and that he could not win the crown of martyrdom.”³⁴ It is this problem, the continued failure of all available means to convert the Muslim world to Christianity, that the early writers are faced with in the encounter between Francis and Malik al-Kamil. Materially, the final prognosis of the encounter between the sultan of Egypt and the Christendom’s great champion did not prove fortuitous, and each text provides a different answer for an orthodox understanding of the ambiguities that arise in the intercivilizational encounter. The gauntlet of fire proves a useful expression of this problem. It signifies a sense of fatigue about the stalemate and the discursive process, a hope that in a great show of force, God will make clear once and for all who is in possession of the truth.

3 Constructing a Myth

3.1 The Paradigm of Martyrdom

The first Franciscan martyrs met their fate in Morocco precisely during the period that St. Francis was in Egypt. St. Berard of Carbio and four companions were among those sent to Iberia by Francis himself in 1219.³⁵ Supported by the court of Portugal, they traveled to Seville, where they were arrested for preaching in the main mosque. The friars were sent to Morocco for judgement, and all the while, they preached from their cell. Accounts tell that throughout, Berard and his companions denounce Muhammad, which medieval Christians

³³Thomas of Celano, “The First Life of St. Francis,” 277.

³⁴“The Major Life of St. Francis,” in *Omnibus*, 705.

³⁵James D. Ryan, “Missionary Saints of the High Middle Ages: Martyrdom, Popular Veneration, and Canonization,” *The Catholic Historical Review*, 15 (2004), 8-9.

understood to unleash the viciousness of Muslims. Jacques de Vitry explains that “Saracens gladly listened” to Christian preaching up until “their preaching attacked Mohammed and openly condemned him as a liar and traitor.”³⁶ In such case, “these ungodly men heaped blows upon them and chased them from their cities.” Finally, the accounts tell that the ruler of Morocco himself executes Berard and his friars with a scimitar in January, 1220.³⁷ St. Francis is said to have celebrated their heroic sacrifice. Berard was finally canonized, however, only in the fifteenth century, supported by a popular cult in Portugal with royal patronage.

The Church’s official recognition of Berard, however, was an exception. The rarity of martyrs actually canonized in the thirteenth century contrasted harshly their tremendous status as cult figures and popular icons. Even as they dominated the feasts of the liturgical calendar, Church leaders balked at openly supporting many of these cults, recognizing in them a potential for doctrinal heresy and the relocation of spiritual authority.³⁸ Nevertheless, the rapidly growing Franciscan and Dominican communities preserved the memory of their martyrs within their own traditions, and this contributed to the orders’ popular appeal. It also left a deep impression on the understanding of missionary work that developed especially among them. Jessalynn Bird writes that “many early Franciscan missionaries seemed more interested in earning martyrdom by attacking Mohammed’s claim to prophecy than in garnering accurate information on Islam.”³⁹ Francis’ chroniclers place him well within this tradition. Rather than learning, mutual exchange, or even conversion itself, the main thirteenth century Franciscan hagiographers understand his motivation to be above all the “sublime purpose of attaining martyrdom.”⁴⁰

The paradigm of martyrdom provides a framework through which to understand the intercivilizational encounter that Francis’ meeting with the sultan exemplifies. It draws clear

³⁶Jacques de Vitry, *Historia Orientalis*, in *Omnibus*, 1612-1613.

³⁷Ryan, 9-10.

³⁸Ryan, 1-2.

³⁹Bird, “Crusade and Conversion,” 30.

⁴⁰“The First Life of St. Francis,” in *Omnibus*, 276.

lines and establishes plainly the role that each character is to play. Furthermore, material failure is understood to be spiritual success; the martyr achieves victory not by defeating armies or converting peoples, but by actually failing to do so. Giving one's life in the face of futility becomes heroic self-sacrifice. The 1221 Rule of St. Francis concludes with a long string of scriptural references in the section about missions that link the suffering of preachers among the unbelievers to the spiritual imitation of Christ's Passion:

*Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice's sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 8:35). . . . I say to you, my friends: Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do (Lk. 12:4). . . . He who has persevered to the end will be saved (Mt. 10:22).*⁴¹

The scriptural canon on martyrdom, applied to the popular veneration of contemporary missionaries and crusaders killed especially in Muslim lands, was a language by which the whole phenomenon of crusade was experienced in Christendom. This reading was therefore available to be extended to conceptualize the strange encounter between Francis and the Sultan in Damietta.

By applying the language of martyrdom to the event, the characters and events can be neatly arranged and understood. The sultan, for instance, is nearly divested of autonomy in the narrative; he is merely the false face of the conflict. In the account of Bonaventure, for instance, al-Kamil is unwilling to let what he knows is right defeat what is understood to be falsehood. As a result he is merely a vessel of exterior forces. Instead, St. Francis' true opponent becomes the falsehood itself, against which he is called to testify until the end. When martyrdom evades Francis, these accounts understand God to be interceding, saving him for other things. Such an interpretation transforms the interreligious encounter itself into a secondary event, a mere outward figure for a truer exchange between the saint and God. The problem and frustration that this event represents, therefore, is subsumed beneath a clearer arrangement of values.

⁴¹ "The Rule of 1221," in *Omnibus*, 44.

The lens of martyrdom is particularly present, again, in those texts that are located within the early tradition of the Franciscan order. Primarily these are the accounts of Thomas of Celano and St. Bonaventure, who were both Franciscans themselves, and to a lesser extent the Fioretti, which was compiled from many sources. As mainly religious documents, they draw mainly on the traditions of hagiographic literature, which has its roots in early martyr texts. Historical accounts, such as those of James de Vitry and Ernoul, tend to emphasize elements of martyrdom far less, drawing on instead on other mechanisms, both polemical and aesthetic.

3.2 Conversion and Argument in the Thirteenth Century

Even when the project is shrouded in the language of martyrdom, as well as in other accounts where it is not, conversion is always the ostensible reason for St. Francis' journey to see the sultan. Despite the expectation of death, Bonaventure explains that "they [Francis and Illuminatus] had been sent by God, not by man, to show him [the sultan] and his subjects the way of salvation and proclaim the truth of the Gospel message."⁴² In this and even other hagiographic texts that also deal with the paradigm of martyrdom, conversion is the stated goal. Implicit in this is a notion of rational argument, by which the truth of one law and one belief can be demonstrated to be above the other. Bonaventure next cites the passage from Luke 21: "I will give you such eloquence and such wisdom as all your adversaries shall not be able to withstand, or to confute."⁴³ Nevertheless I would argue that the gauntlet of fire, which represents the abandonment of reasoned debate, is the exception that proves the rule; it expresses a sensation that what faith was had in arguments has somehow failed and more drastic means are necessary.

The crusades persisted with a notion of conversion in mind.⁴⁴ St. Bernard of Clair-

⁴²"The Major Life of St. Francis," in *Omnibus*, 703.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 704.

⁴⁴This entire discussion draws heavily on Burns' very useful article: Robert I. Burns, S.J., "Christian-Islamic Confrontation in the West: The Thirteenth-Century Dream of Conversion," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 76, No. 5 (1971), 1386-1434.

vaux, Jacques de Vitry, and numerous crusading popes all preached as achievable the ultimate goal of converting the Muslims.⁴⁵ It was furthermore understood that, though military adventures were necessary to accomplishing this goal, a crusade must also rely upon “an army of learned men” who could preach to the human reason of the infidels.⁴⁶ Alongside the structures of crusade, martyrdom, and other more visceral expressions of faith, the period in which Francis lived was also one that saw great development in the *doctrinal* answer to Islam. Lessons learned Muslim and reconquered areas of Spain were especially instructive; Peter the Venerable’s visit there in 1139 led him to commission the first translation of the Qur’an into Latin.⁴⁷ In Spanish cities, the mendicant orders established schools and missionary centers in the thirteenth century that carried on a learned conversation with Muslim philosophy. From such exchanges came profit to the philosophical traditions of both sides, including works such as Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, which was written at the request of the Spanish Dominican St. Raymond of Peñafort.⁴⁸ An approach of reasoned engagement was developing in the same Franciscan tradition from which the early narratives emerged.

To the extent that St. Francis used preaching and persuasion in his conversation with the sultan, he is consistently able to have at least some effect. Even in the most terse of texts, Malik al-Kamil shows an appreciation of the friar’s wisdom, which he recognizes with gratitude and offers of gifts. The outstanding example is of course the case of the Fioretti, in which the sultan promises his deferred conversion as a result of Francis’ teachings. In the context of meaningful exchange, the character of the sultan is all-important. It is his reaction to Francis’ reasoning that declares the texts’ verdict on the possibility or impossibility of persuasion. His reactions may be understood for their value as signals to a crusade-era audience, and especially within the missionary discourse of the Order. In this framework,

⁴⁵This entire discussion draws heavily on Burns’ very useful article: Robert I. Burns, S.J., “Christian-Islamic Confrontation in the West: The Thirteenth-Century Dream of Conversion,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 76, No. 5 (1971), 1386-1434.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 1391.

⁴⁷*Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Blessed Peter of Montboissier,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10525b.htm> (3 May 2005).

⁴⁸*Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “St. Thomas Aquinas,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14663b.htm> (3 May 2005).

however, rather less hinges upon Francis' performance. The texts assume his skill and subtlety as a preacher, though they never go very far in explicitly laying out his arguments. Bonaventure reports only that he "proclaimed the triune God and Jesus Christ, the Savior of all,"⁴⁹ and the account of Thomas of Celano passes over Francis' preaching entirely. Ernoul's Francis is probably the most discursive of all and challenges the priests of the sultan to debate, promising that if he somehow fails to convince them by his reason they may cut off his head.⁵⁰ As with Bonaventure's fire, the sultan calls off the challenge, refusing to come between Francis and his wise men who want to avoid it. This conflict is significant. In both Bonaventure and Ernoul, the reaction of al-Kamil is set significantly apart from that of his clerics. If there is to be an effective debate, seemingly, it should take place somewhat *apart* from the main centers of religious learning and authority. This position perhaps also helps to explain the precarious relationship between mission and ecclesiastical recognition, both in Francis' Rule and his conversations with the prelate Pelagius in Ernoul as he prepares to depart for the sultan's court.

That the exchange took place at all, and that the sultan even welcomed St. Francis' presence, surely represented for contemporary audiences a cause for hope in the persuasive missionary project. The failure appears to lie, not in the reason or logic of debate, but simply in the external circumstances and powers that could only be done away with by armies. Francis and the sultan, between whom persuasion succeeds, are separated from the clerics, for whom it does not. Such a hope led to the prosperity of a whole growth of scholarship and dialogue in Spain, orchestrated in large part by members of Francis' order and fueled by a belief in the efficacy of refutation.

3.3 "Interreligious Dialogue"?

Present-day interpreters often have come to understand St. Francis' meeting with Malik al-Kamil as a precursor and a symbol for a positive, constructive, intercivilizational dialogue.

⁴⁹"The Major Life of St. Francis," in *Omnibus*, 703.

⁵⁰*Chronique D'Ernoul*, 433.

The conversation of reconciliation among religious traditions has invoked the examples of both participants at Damietta. In general, such a reading appears rather distant from the original texts, grounded as they are in the ideology of the crusade. Nevertheless, it is from these accounts that modern readers learn about the story in the first place. By readings and rewritings of them, contemporary advocates of interreligious dialogue create a new framework through which the story continues to be constructed. These accounts accept generally the same series of facts and events as their predecessors agree on, but the tendency is to understand Francis and the sultan as peacefully recognizing and respecting one another's beliefs. In doing, they abandon the notions of conquest and even conversion by the experience of meeting and mutual understanding. Certainly it is a hopeful interpretation, placed on an encounter composed of doctrines that overtly excluded one another. But by the indications of interest that Francis and the sultan seem to have shown each other, it is one that their story nevertheless suggests.

As with the earlier frameworks, this reading grounded in dialogue is put forth largely by those who follow in the tradition of Francis' Order, those who commit to the imitation of his life. The Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis, for instance, formally oppose military intervention in Iraq "In the spirit of St. Francis, who subjected himself to the Sultan when all were claiming the Saracens as evil."⁵¹ The story was similarly recognized as inspiration on Pope John Paul II's Day of Prayer for Peace at Assisi, Italy in 2002.⁵² A horn at Assisi that is said to have been a gift from the sultan provided a symbol of continuity in dialogue to the participants. These and other generally casual references to the meeting as precursor to peaceful, mutualist dialogue suggest that a shift has occurred in the pervading understanding of the event.

Franciscan writer Giulio Basetti-Sani, in his readings of the early accounts, attempts to rescue Francis from what he considers to be the invasive influence of the authors' "*espirit*

⁵¹"Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis Oppose Military Intervention in Iraq," http://www.ssj-tosf.org/Social_Justice_Current.asp (4 May 2005).

⁵²"The Foundation for Healing Among Nations - Day of Prayer for Peace, Assisi," <http://www.healingamongnations.org/Programs/assisi.htm> (4 May 2005).

anti-musulman du moyen âge."⁵³ He emphasizes the mutual respect for the beliefs of the other that Francis and al-Kamil experience. The refusal of the gauntlet of fire, Basetti-Sani argues, represents the sultan's recognition of the divinity of Christianity. Furthermore, Bonaventure's account, in contrast to the mistaken understanding of Celano, rightly makes of the sultan "un chrétien de coeur," which Basetti-Sani claims the Franciscan tradition as a whole has upheld.⁵⁴ A more recent book published by a Franciscan press, written by a veteran of interfaith dialogue in Pakistan, rereads the missionary sections of Francis' Rule similarly in the context of meaningful exchange. He draws out an interpretation by which Francis encourages living among unbelievers for the purpose of developing a deeper respect and love for them.⁵⁵ With the same texts that my discussion has already understood through entirely different frameworks, modern interpreters have applied a paradigm of constructive conversation that speaks to the methods and language of contemporary dialogue.

Within this framework of dialogue, Francis and the sultan are positioned generally as equals. As I described in the previous section, they are set aside from their respective doctrinal establishments. This apartness is crucial. Amidst so much history of what modern dialogists do not want to repeat, these characters must be extracted from the surrounding conflict and made into kindred spirits to a more constructive climate. Mutualism is emphasized; the actions that both sides take in recognition and respect to one another model the expectations of modern exchange. They are celebrated for their deference and the willingness to sacrifice the condemnation one tradition might have for the other. For this Basetti-Sani offers Francis the martyrdom he sought after all, even while his life is preserved for other acts by the sultan's mercy.⁵⁶

The early text that I find comes closest to these readings is actually Ernoul, which Basetti-Sani rejects for its somewhat aggressive portrayal of Francis. In it, both characters

⁵³Basetti-Sani, 170.

⁵⁴Ibid., 177.

⁵⁵I refer to J. Hoeberichts' *Francis and Islam*: "Francis and Islam: Franciscan Press of Quincy University," <http://www.franciscanpress.com/books.php/9> (4 May 2005).

⁵⁶Basetti-Sani, 181.

carefully remove themselves from their respective establishments to participate in the exchange. Francis, as I have discussed, carefully receives permission to leave from the papal prelate while still maintaining a separation from his authority. Al-Kamil correspondingly rejects the advice of his wise men and priests to have Francis immediately executed. More explicitly than in any other account, the sultan is moved by Francis' concern for the state of his soul.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, I find it a stretch to place any of the early texts within the framework that has been adopted nearly by consensus among modern Franciscan interpreters. Perhaps they need not be; probably these writers have just as much license to such constructions of the Damietta mythology as any of their predecessors.

4 Conclusion

Among the divergent understandings of the encounter at Damietta, I have hoped to show the capacity of the story, and even the texts themselves that construct it, to carry many layers of meaning simultaneously and through time. To address all of the interpretations as representing a bizarre composite reflects the complexity of the whole event. At bottom, the meeting strikes chords both of frustration and of contact, resonating with circumstances of the moment. In St. Francis' time, his journey was understood for better or worse in terms of the crusade that surrounded and framed it. Engaging the paradigms of Christian martyr literature and thirteenth century doctrinal debate, Francis' biographers, and Francis himself in his Rules, manage different degrees of balance.

Each account has its distinctive features, and each interpretation has its taxonomic peculiarities. Narratives that draw on the martyr genre, especially that of Celano and Bonaventure, tend to dismiss the sultan's agency to the background as mere archetype and instead focus on the spiritual persistence within the character of Francis himself. This kind of reading participates in a larger dialectic of martyrdom within the early Franciscan movement as a spiritual modus for missionary work. Ambitions to conversion were present as well and

⁵⁷ *Chronique D'Ernouf*, 434.

in many of the same texts where martyr motifs can be found. These similarly draw on a dialectic within the missionary movements of the time. However, an interpretation that favors conversion focuses most intently on the response to Francis of the sultan. His answer serves to state a position on the possibility of rational religious persuasion. Last among these readings, most especially chronologically, is that of meaningful exchange. This has emerged most visibly in Franciscan interpretation only in twentieth century texts, and continues to inform interreligious peace efforts both within and outside the Franciscan orders. Here Francis and al-Kamil are read as equals in the conversation, highlighting the kind gestures and sacrifices each pays to the other in the interest of peace and reconciliation.

Textually, I have criticism for all projects. If the early accounts are taken to be authoritative, probably none of these understandings can hold *exclusive* weight. However, there is little reason to consider them so. Francis himself never wrote on the event so far as we know, and neither did Malik al-Kamil. What accounts we have are products of scattered sources themselves and subject to major disagreements. The story has long left the realm of fact. It has been absorbed into the larger mythology of St. Francis, preserved by his Order and those who otherwise look to him for guidance. His encounter with the sultan remains as complex as the sensations and justifications that people expect from it.