An Iconography of Tolerance or Hostility: St. Francis in the Court of the Sultan

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The paper analyses an unusual meeting point of two traditions: the representation of the Saracen "other" and the representation of the "ruler." In themselves both traditions are established parts of the Western pictorial canon. By representing the Saracens the Christian world was able to construct its identity based on the difference between "us" and "them," between "Christian believers" and "pagan unbelievers." Thus, the representation of the Saracens functioned as a distinctive cultural marker which contributed to the self-maintenance of a closed society. On the other hand, by representing a (usually Christian) ruler, this Christian world reflected on the nature of earthly power and its relation to the heavenly sphere. In this sense representing the ruler or the representation of kingship served as an inner stabilizer and clarifier of the same closed society by showing the functioning of the *saeculum.*

What was to be done, then, when the ruler turns out to be the sultan of the Saracens? Which tradition was stronger? As a Saracen, is he eligible or not for a positive depiction of a ruler or does being a ruler necessarily overwrite the negative perception arising from being the "other?" This general question sets the basic problem of the representation of the "ruler of the others," who is seen here as the sultan of the Saracens. What can be done with him? He belongs legitimately to both traditions. This paper focuses on a particular manifestation of this general question: the early textual and visual representation of the visit of St. Francis in the court of the sultan of Egypt, Malik-al-Kamil. This particular event immediately caught the imagination of contemporaries and it became a constant part of the different *vitae* dedicated to St. Francis. Furthermore, on a general level it was closely connected to

the problem of the mission among the infidels and the deliberate seeking of martyrdom. After 1290, in the *Legend of St. Francis* at Assisi, this event was sumptuously depicted and this fresco became the reference for every subsequent pictorial representation of the topic.

There are five tiny details on this fresco which encompass the problem of being a ruler or being an infidel. On the top of the building on the left, sitting on dwarf pillars, five statues of winged, naked creatures (idols, pagan *putti* or Victories?) can be seen. Panofsky conceived of these statues as idols which were depicted in order to express that the court of the sultan is an anti-Christian and evil milieu. In his interpretation the sultan clearly appears as a negative figure and the "idols" created an appropriate – anti-Christian and evil – setting for his negativity.

A close reading of the textual testimonies, however, shows that al-Kamil clearly appeared as a positive figure, unlike the Christian Crusaders, who laughed at Francis, the pagan ruler listened carefully to him. The story of their encounter was enriched and developed into a nice scene, where the sultan is an equal partner of Francis and pays due attention to him. This attentiveness is seen as a sign of a wise ruler. Strikingly enough, his throne in the Assisi fresco is decorated with gilt reliefs depicting lions, and this decoration refers back to the throne of Solomon, the prototype of every wise ruler.

Therefore, there are some arguments in favor of a positive depiction of the pagan ruler. Because of this it is legitimate to reconsider again the role of the statues on the top of the building. It can be that their unilateral interpretation, seeing them as signs of idolatry and evilness, has somehow obscured appreciation for other possible propositions explanations?. Following Benton, I argue that the statues can be conceived of as derivations of late antique wall painting, thus establishing a pictorial

affiliation. Following Seiler, I add that this pictorial affiliation is not necessarily used to express evilness, as is also not the case in the *Child Jesus Teaching in the Temple* of Duccio's *Maestà*. I propose the neglected and forgotten decoration of the *Palatium of Theoderic* on the mosaic of the San Apollinare Nuovo as a possible source. This proposition, unlike the general correspondences detected by Benton, can explain not only the pictorial affiliation but also the iconographic function of the statues: They are part of the representation of the "palace" of the ruler.

This means that although it is tempting to see these statues on the palace of the sultan as an intentional expression of evilness and idolatry, this tempting hypothesis should be complemented with some cautions: 1) the narrative situation does not support the negative presentation of the ruler; 2) the lions on his throne emphasize his wisdom; 3) the statues can well be derivates of a late antique palace representation. A close look at this example thus shows that the iconography of the ruler is not necessarily and automatically overwritten by the iconography of the other; the sultan can very well be a great man in the first place and then a Saracen.