Virtuous Franciscans vs. Immoral, Idolatrous Saracens: The messages embodied in the statuettes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Martyrdom of the Franciscans

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Virtuous Franciscans vs. Immoral, Idolatrous Saracens:¹

The messages embodied in the statuettes of Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Martyrdom of the Franciscans

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Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s fresco, The Martyrdom of the Franciscans [at Ceuta] (Fig. 1),² painted for the Minor Friars’ Chapter House of Siena (c. 1343) was

¹ According to Suzanne Conklin Akbari, Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 155, in the medieval mind, Saracen was used as both an ethnic and religious designation.

originally part of a large series of didactic scenes\(^3\) painted by Ambrogio (active c. 1317; d. before May 1348),\(^4\) and his brother, Pietro (active c. 1306-45). Recently, S. Maureen Burke convincingly argued that this historical scene captures Mongol Khan Ali’s 1339\(^5\) slaughter of six friars and their companions from the friary of Almalyq, a capital city in Central Asia.\(^6\) In the fresco, Ambrogio placed his narrative in a loggia-like, three-bayed palace capped by a tripartite roof. Each gable and sperone (spur) supports a large statuette. Over each side bay, an armored figure occupies the higher gable, while a toga-clad female stands on

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\(^5\) Burke, 475. Based on Burke’s identification of the location, I will use Khan (the Great Tartar), a title of rulers and officials of central Asia and other Muslim countries.

\(^6\) Also called Olmaliq, Almalyk, Almaligh, or Armalech, currently located in eastern Uzbekistan. Burke, 478-483, Europeans called this vast Asian region Tartary.
each of the flanking lower spurs. An ornamental border now covers the highest figure on the central gable allowing only the ankles and feet to be seen; however, the other six statuettes are fully visible. Although each complete statuette has distinct iconographic symbols, to date, scholars have not been able to agree upon their identification and, as a result, their function within the image of this specific event.

In Images-within-Images in Italian Painting (1250-1350), Peter Bokody discusses an emerging artistic phenomenon in which artists, who were striving for more realism in their works, adopted image-within-image motifs. Ambrogio’s visually significant and inventive figures can “complement, repeat, or paraphrase the principle narrative” in which they appear, according to Bokody. With this essay, I will establish that, as a pictorial innovator, Ambrogio included the statuettes to provide explicit and supplantal commentary about the specific events unfolding beneath their feet.

7 According to Rowley, 79: “In 1857, after having been discovered in the chapter house of San Francisco under a saving coat of whitewash, they were removed to the Cappella Bandini Piccolomini. In the process they were slightly cut down…” Frugoni, 61, writes that the figure is “now covered by an ornamental border,” and Burke, 489 states “the remaining figure…truncated by the upper border…” Neither indicates if the border is original or if it was added after the frescoes were cut down. Shapiro, 376 notes that the figure “is invisible.”


9 Bokody, 7.
Michael Grillo explains in *Symbolic Structures: The Role of Composition in Signaling Meaning in Italian Medieval Art*, that artists structure their compositions for formal emphasis.\(^{10}\) Thus, a consideration of Ambriogio’s emulation, compositional innovations and visual strategy is required before identifying and discussing the statuettes. In this hierarchically scaled scene, Ambrogio rendered the decapitation of the Franciscan friars before the enthroned and elevated Khan who supervises from his octagonal palace. One step lower and flanking their ruler are smaller-scaled figures: armed soldiers and court dignitaries. In the foreground and on the lowest level are balanced groups of standing witnesses. To the left of center, three Franciscans kneel with their hands tied behind them as they stoically await execution. To the right of center (where there is substantial surface loss), at least two brothers lie on the ground with three decapitated heads before them. The executioner on the far left is about to deal a deathblow with his large sword. On the extreme right, an unkempt compatriot, whose scruffy and wild appearance reflects ideas about barbarism and the Other, prepares to sheath his sword having finished his work.

As Burke and others have documented, Ambrogio’s immediate predecessor for the scheme of the martyrdom was Giotto’s mid-1320’s *The Ordeal*

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by Fire before the Sultan of Egypt (Fig. 2) for the Bardi Chapel in S. Croce in Florence.\footnote{Burke, 471, and note 64. Additionally, Ambrogio included rock-throwing children at the base of his Khan’s throne, a motif that he emulated from Giotto’s Renunciation of Worldly Goods also in the Bardi Chapel.} In the fresco, Giotto depicted a well-known episode from St. Francis’ sojourn to Egypt during which he challenged the Sultan Malik al-Kamil and other Saracen priests to join him and Friar Illuminato in entering a bonfire as a test of faith.\footnote{See Paul Moses, The Saint and the Sultan: the Crusades, Isalm and Francis of Assiss’s mission of peace (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 105-155.} Both compositions recall triptychs with three distinct
compositional units, and both artists use architectural elements to delineate these modules. In their central sections, each artist placed a hierarchically scaled, and elevated Saracen leader dominating the composition. In the symmetrically flanking modules, each artist placed vignettes of dramatic importance: Giotto depicted fleeing Saracen priests to the left and a large fire with the two friars on the right, whereas Ambriogio placed locals and friars on both sides. Then, each artist placed classically inspired elements atop the ruler’s building.¹³

Ambrogio retained Giotto’s underlying pictorial order of three distinct zones demarcating connected events.¹⁴ He added visual complexity to Giotto’s simple scheme by transforming an interior room into an open pavilion in which his figures are distributed on multiple levels including the ground and a step of the structure. Then, Ambrogio enhanced Giotto’s straightforward narrative scheme. In Ambrogio’s Martyrdom, the Khan serves as an axis point representing armed power and judgment,¹⁵ with two compartmentalized Franciscan episodes flanking the throne. On the left is a scene of anticipation and contemplation, while on the right is a vignette of fatality. According to Burke, Ambrogio

¹³ Burke, 471 n.65. See also Andrew Peter, “Giotto and Ambrogio Lorenzetti” Burlington Magazine 76/442 (Jan., 1940), 3-9.

¹⁴ Shapiro, 367 also recognized Ambrogio’s scheme, by noting that Ambrogio organized the figures into balanced groups and balanced contrasts.

¹⁵ Rowley, 81.
arrested “the action at midpoint, permitting a sequential meditation on death and on the imminence of death.”

Reinforcing his tripartite scheme, Ambrogio topped each module with a gable that he embellished with statuettes. Ambrogio’s figures are visually more significant than the four smaller classical ornaments that adorn the architectural elements of Giotto’s throne room in his earlier The Ordeal by Fire. According to Bokoky, Giotto placed bearded recumbant figures in ancient garb holding cornucopias atop dwarf-pillars to indicate the wealth of the Saracen leader. Moreover, Bokoky claims that, with these same elements, Giotto underscored Francis’ renunciation of material wealth, some of which had been offered to him by the Egyptian Sultan, in order to focus on his spiritual wellbeing. As I will demonstrate, with his sculptural embellishments in the Martyrdom, Ambrogio expanded Giotto’s idea of creating an appropriate setting for an adversarial ruler, while also commenting on the rival protagonists in the scene below.


17 Rowley, 81-83.
On the roof in Ambrogio’s Martyrdom (Fig. 3), beginning on the far left sperone is a woman with extended arms holding a pan or platter in each hand while balancing a candle on her head. A dog sits at her feet. Next, on a higher gable, a helmeted figure in full armor with a shield shares a pedestal with a lion. The third female figure, again on a lower spur, grasps a jar in each hand and gazes at the bear seated by her feet. On the other side of the roof (Fig. 4), the fourth female on a sperone wears a helmet and holds a severed head in her lowered hand and an unsheathed dagger in her other upraised hand; a wolf shares her base. Then, again on a higher gable, a fully armored man holds a shield and arrow as a horse sits near his feet. On the far right on a spur, a draped
female crowned with a laurel wreath holds a bow and arrows as a much smaller winged figure embraces her leg.

George Rowley, in a 1958 monograph on Ambrogio, interpreted these figures as prophets and Christian virtues. Specifically, from left to right Rowley identified Justice, Joshua, Temperance, Minerva, Moses, and Chastity. Additionally, Rowley postulated that the warrior on the central gable with only his feet that remain, would have represented Good Government and that these figures appeared on the heathen ruler’s roof as models of civic virtues in

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18 Rowley, 82. I find this interpretation unconvincing. For one, the identification of the male warrior figure on the right gable as the Old Testament prophet Moses is forced and problematic. There is neither a visual iconographic precedent for showing a fully armed Moses with a horse, nor is there a written source for such attributes. His other identifications are also curious and Shapiro, 368 notes: “All this seems to me completely unconvincing.”
opposition to the evil sultan and his wicked rule. However, as Chiara Frugoni, questioned: “How could the Virtues be shining brightly at precisely the moment when so much cruelty is being perpetrated?”

In opposition to Rowley’s interpretation, in 1964 Shapiro identified the statues as the seven Capital Vices based on a variety of textual sources. Shapiro identifies the visible figures from let to right as Avarice, Pride, Gluttony, Bellona, Mars, and Venus. For Shapiro the warrior standing on the main pediment must have been Envy. Yet, these singular renditions of the seven Deadly Sins do not correspond to any iconographic tradition.

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19 Frugoni, 60. Shapiro, 368 states “That the pagan sultan should deliver his wicked commands from a pavillion of Christian virtues would be cynical.”

20 Shapiro, 368; Frugoni, 60 agrees with Shapiro’s identifications. Shapiro 368-371: first is Avarice, from Boethius’ Consolatio philosophiae in which the “love of possession burns more furiously than the fires of Etna,” here symbolized by the candle flame on her head. The accompanying dog is the greedy canine from Aesop’s fable. Next is Pride, the warrior of Alexander the Great who was described by Seneca as “a man swollen with a superhuman and measureless pride.” The lion is Satan “[b]ecause your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” Satan, the lion, fell because of pride (I Timothy 3.6). Next, Gluttony pours out the contents of two jars wasting as long as she can satisfy her insatiable appetite while Aristotle implied that her bear had an immoderate appetite for honey. Then, Bellona holds the Gorgon’s severed head; she represents Wrath, always ready to bring discord and death. Mars, represents Lust with his consort Venus. His horse is the equus luxurians mentioned by Virgil in the Aeneid. Venus represents Sloth since Ovid writes in his Remedia amoris “…obey my counsels and first of all shun leisure. That makes you love…Take away leisure and Cupid’s bow is broken…” Shapiro argued that the warrior standing on the main pediment must have been Envy. Levy wrote: “Things at a moderate height are untouched by Envy; she generally aims for the top.” According to the Book of Wisdom (2.24) death was introduced to the world as a result of the devil’s envy.

21 Shapiro, 371.

22 Burke, 486 noted that the Virtues got their “most popular definition in” Lorens d’Orleans Somma le roi, written in 1279 for Philippe III.
In 2002, Burke interpreted the figures as Gift Virtues, who are the remedies for the seven Cardinal Sins represented by the accompanying animals. On the far left, Equité stands with the dog of Wrath. Next is Mercy who overcomes the lion of Avarice. Then, Sobriety is with the bear of Gluttony. On the other gable, Humility beheads Pride. Joshua is Fortitude defeating Sloth the horse, while the goddess Diana represents Chastity who overcomes Lechery, personified by Cupid. The central figure may be Love who overcomes the Vice of Envy who is embodied not by an animal, but by the sultan below. For, Burke, the Virtue/Vice pairings reflect a “conceptual resemblance” to early illustrations in the Somme le roi, in which Virtues trample their related Vices underfoot, but she neglects to explain why the Vices are now placed beside the Virtues rather than beneath them, which appears to be a significant change in the iconography and meaning. Further, she argues that her Virtue/Vice structure is similar to

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23 Burke, 486-491. On the far left, Equité stands with the dog of Wrath. In the center is Mercy possibly depicted as Alexander the Great, overcoming the lion of Avarice. The last figure on the left is Sobriety, with the bear Gluttony. Next, is Humility who beheads Pride, represented by a fox-wolf. Then, Joshua is the Virtue of Fortitude who defeats Sloth. Last, is the goddess Diana who represents Chastity, who overcomes Lechery as personified by Cupid. The central figure, Burke postulates may be Love, who overcomes the Vice of Envy as embodied not by an animal, but by the sultan below. Burke then suggests that the statue may represent Christ as the perfect exemplar of Love, visually conquering the strongest embodiment of the greatest of vices, Envy, the Khan below.

24 Burke, 486.

25 Burke, 491. Why would a friary with a singular audience of mendicant Franciscans turn to a Dominican text as the source of inspiration for statuettes with a labyrinthine iconographic
their treatment in contemporary sermons which required “a knowledge of motifs and sources that were culled from classical and theological sources, combined with exempla and figuræ, and reinvented pictorially to express quite specific mendicant ideals.”

Notably, for any of these three previous schemes to work the statuettes would comprise a bizarre combination of personages: personifications, historical luminaries, Old and New Testament figures, as well as classical divinities. Further, while these theories are ingenious and learned, the individual depictions of many of these personages are esoteric, reinvented, or unprecedented. Although Ambrogio was compositionally innovative, his patrons and audience would need to recognize the statuettes to understand their meaning. Because none of these proposals is satisfactory, a new interpretation of these statuettes is required.

In the aforementioned iconographic schemes, the authors propose that all seven of the statuettes represent a single, homogenous group. For Rowley they are Christian Virtues, for Shapiro they are Capital Vices, whereas for Burke they

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26 Shapiro, 368 claimed that Rowley’s “statues do not follow the iconography of these virtues.”

represent the Gift Virtues. As previously noted, though, Grillo postulated that artists such as Ambrogio provided compositional cues for understanding his iconographic plan.\(^{28}\) I would suggest that, based on the triptych format of the building with its three discrete units, Ambrogio established three iconographically distinct statuette groups, one over each side module, as well as a singular figure over the central section.

Erwin Panofsky also recognized that the statuettes over the side bays as compriseing two diverse clusters. Nonetheless, he mentioned Ambrogio’s fresco only in passing in his *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*,\(^{29}\) neither explaining the meaning nor fully analyzing Ambrogio’s work. He wrote that Lorenzetti’s *Martyrdom* was “staged in a kind of loggia the crowning statuary of which opposes Minerva, Mars and Venus to their Christian counterparts, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance.”\(^{30}\) Panofsky merely observed that there were three Virtues with their pagan adversaries, while he did not mention the partially hidden figure at the apex. I purpose, that with one minor

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\(^{29}\) Panofsky, 141.

exception, Panofsky’s designations are correct because first and foremost, his identification of each statuette is anchored in recognized iconography.

Medieval personifications of Virtues were not fixed, systematic, or consistent, yet the three Virtues identified by Panofsky, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance, had their standard attributes by the Carolingian Period. Justice, who here is represented as a balance, was shown throughout the Middle Ages with the scales, a symbol gleaned from scripture: “You have ordered all things with measure, number and weight.” (Wisdom 11.20) Fortitude is armed with a sword or spear and holds a shield, while over time she gained a cuirass, and either a lion on the shield or a lion skin as a symbol of courage. According to Adolf Katzenellenbogen, she became the only Virtue to be depicted in full armor. The Carolingians gave Temperance a torch and a vessel of water, but in the 11th century, two vessels, with which she diluted wine with water, replaced her earlier attributes. By using water to weaken the wine, Temperance reminded the faithful to moderate their words and actions.

31 Katzenellenbogen, 54.

32 Katzenellenbogen, 55; and O’Reilly, 113.

33 A more likely scenario is that the mendicant patrons, whose founder St. Francis referred to animals as his brothers and sister. Edward A. Armstrong, Saint Francis: Nature Mystic. The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 213-214. Armstrong translating Bovaventura (56:6) “When he bethought him of the first beginnings of all things…and would call the dumb animals, however small, by the names of brother and sister.” The Rule of the Third Order, trans. Benen Fahy, O. F. M.,
Lorenzetti enhanced the traditional attributes of these virtues, by adding tame and docile creatures to share their bases. For Fortitude, the lion is a traditional iconographic symbol of courage. Based on Fortitude as well as the other statuettes on the right bay (to be addressed shortly), in this fresco the statuettes’ accompanying creatures are not, as Burke argued, corresponding Vices, but instead are beings that Ambrogio added to visually bolster the identity of the figurative statues. Yet, the dog paired with Justice and bear paired with Temperance are iconographically curious. They may be part of Ambrogio’s artistic inventiveness since he needed to visually balance the classical divinities above the right bay, each of whom is accompanied by an animal/human attribute that is essential for proper identification of the deity. As Katzenellenbogen noted, in the Middle Ages a specific animal could represent a Virtue or a Vice, but a particular animal was not usually associated with Justice or Temperance. So, while the exact motive for the appearance of the dog and the bear and their

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As Katzenellenbogen, 61-62 notes, a particular animal could represent a Virtue or a Vice, and that during this time animalous qualities or animal parts could also carry moral elucidation.

Robert Bast, ed. Franciscan Virtue: Spiritual Growth and the Virtues in Franciscan Literature and Instruction of the Thirteenth Century (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 4 n.14. In Francis’ Earlier Rule 1,1 The Rule and life of these brothers is this, namely: “to live in obedience in chastity, and without anything of their own.” The Virtues: obedientia, castitas, sine proprio/paupertas which Bast notes will become the Virtue of Poverty.
explicit meanings within this image may be nebulous, the identity of the Virtues remains intact.

Franciscans did not have a fixed scheme for Virtues, beyond their Order’s vows of Poverty, Obedience, and Chastity, the three virtues that one might expect to find personified in a fresco for a friary. Robert J. Bast argued that St. Francis and members of his Order based their spiritual well-being on the practice of virtues which served as a moral code of conduct. Friars and lay practitioners were to meditate upon, practice, develop, and apply numerous virtues, which were the building blocks of a Christ-inspired moral code of behavior, that once perfected, could lead to a union with God. In the thirteenth century, St. Francis (c. 1181-1226), St. Bonaventure (c. 1217-1274), and David of Augsburg (c. 1200-1272), compiled numerous texts and preached sermons in which virtues were a dominant theme. In medieval art, over one hundred different Virtues appeared,

36 Bast, 25.
37 Bast, 25.
38 Bast, 4. Francis produced 28 writings (opuscula), and some opuscula dictata.
39 St. Bonaventure mentioned virtues throughout his writings in addition to writing two specific books on virtues: Opusulum de Quatuor Virtutibus Cardinalibus (Minor Work on the Four Cardinal Virtues) and Formula Aurea de Gradibus Virtutum (Golden Formula about the Degrees of Virtue).
40 Bast, 7. De exterioris et interioris hominis compositione secundum triplicem statum incipientium, proficientium et perfectorum libri tres.
including a subset of the Four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude.\footnote{Jennifer O‘Reilly, Studies in the Iconography of the Virtues and Vices in the Middle Ages (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), 131. Ambrose first used the term ‘cardinal’ with the Platonic virtues. Cardinal virtues derived their original authority from classical rather than Biblical sources; they are found in Cicero’s De natura deorum (3:15) and De officiis (1:43) and ultimately go back to Plato (Republic 4:435) who viewed them as necessary traits of the ideal citizen. See Bast, 26-27 & 31.} The Cardinal Virtues were aimed at the perfection of human nature, and were acquired by education and repetition. They were so important to the brethren, that Bonaventure wrote a treatise on them: \textit{Minor Work on the Four Cardinal Virtues}.\footnote{“…reddat laudem Deo, gloriain, honorem et benedictionem (cfr. Apoc 5, 13) quia ipse est virtus et fortitudo nostra, qui est solus bonus, solus altissimus, solus omnipotens, admirabilis, gloriosus et solus sanctus…” Epistola ad fideles (recensio posterior) trans. Bast, 222.}

In Ambrogio’s image, only three of the Cardinal Virtues — Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance – appear above the friars who are about to be slaughtered. Here, elevated above Justice and Temperance, Fortitude is the characteristic virtue of a martyr. According to Francis, God was the source of Fortitude for humanity, and Bonaventure argued that the highest degree of this virtue was to conquer oneself, even to death in emulation of Christ.\footnote{“Altissimus, vincere seipsu, simpliciter et sponte usque ad mortem obediendo, sicut in omnibuts istis fuit Christus…” De Gradibus Virtutum, Opera Omnia, Quaracchi Ed.(Paris: Ludovicus Vives, 1868), 12:192. Trans. Dawn Cunningham.} Fortitude is also elevated, because as Bonaventure claimed that the most important daily
practice of Fortitude was laboring toward a union with God.\textsuperscript{45} In this image, virtuous friars now face death through martyrdom with the fortitude of Christ and this virtue takes her place above as it bolsters the friars’ souls on their spiritual and physical journey toward God.

Ambrogio placed Justice below and to the left of Fortitude. In a successful society, this virtue is necessary in order for moral, thoughtful leaders to determine appropriate consequences for actions. According to Francis, Christ was the greatest exemplar of Justice, as the Crucifixion embodied this virtue and would ultimately free the souls of the faithful.\textsuperscript{46} In his \textit{Regula non Bullata}, Francis included this virtue for friars on missionary trips to Muslim lands: “Blessed are those who suffer persecution for Justice’s sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 5:10).\textsuperscript{47} Moreover, as Bonaventure argued, the highest form of Justice was to replace good with evil, as Christ did when he submitted himself...

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{"...justitia vero rectificat omnes vires. Ipsa enim justitia apprehendit omnes virtutes ad proximum...Et ideo justitia dictur retinens omnes virtutes, quia non tantum est specialis, sed generalis virtus, comprehensens totius animi rectitudinem, cum ipsa dicatur rectitudo voluntatis," Opusculum de Quatuor Virtutibus Cardinalibus, Opera Omina, Quaracchi Ed. (Paris: Ludovicus Vives, 1886) 7:506-507. Trans. Dawn Cunningham.}


to Pontius Pilate and hence the Crucifixion.\textsuperscript{48} In this fresco, Justice appears to be ill-served by this particular earthly leader, the Khan, as the evil counterpart of Pilate who serves as the impetus for the death of the Christians. The Franciscan martyrs, by emulating Christ’s Passion with their suffering, will be rewarded for their faith in heaven by a virtuous and just leader.

To the right of Justice is Temperance, representing the qualities of self-restraint, self-rule, and moderation of excess. In his writings, Francis did not discuss Temperance much, but he did place it among other divine Virtues such as Fortitude, Justice, Faith, Humility, and Hope, as moral qualities embodied in God.\textsuperscript{49} For Bonaventure the proof of true Humility was through forbearance, restraint, and self-control, which are aspects of Temperance.\textsuperscript{50} Moreover, the highest degree of Temperance was to moderate one’s thoughts to remain centered on God.\textsuperscript{51} This last elucidation might offer insight into Ambrogio’s unorthodox representation of the Virtue who seems to be emptying the contents


\textsuperscript{51} Rega, 19.
of both vessels onto the ground rather than mixing their contents. Her unusual action would remind friars to disregard material, earthly comforts and concerns, and instead to concentrate on spiritual well-being. She is also the only statuette on the roof to gaze at the friars beneath her, perhaps willing the still-living brethren to remain focused only on God. In the fresco, the stoic friars are outwardly adorned only with tonsures -- signifying their religious devotion and humility -- and their modest brown habits made of rustic wool, of the sort typically worn by peasants. Here it has been cut and sewn into the shape of a cross, as a constant reminder of Christ.\footnote{Panofsky, 141.} The mendicants’ habits are cinched with a simple rope comprised of three knots, reminding them of their Order’s vows of Obedience, Chastity, and Poverty. In the fresco, the friars are visual embodiments of Temperance, outwardly modest and humble, as they inwardly labor to align their souls in perfect conformity with Christ.

Above the other bay Panofsky identified Minerva with the gorgon’s head, Mars with his sacred horse, and Venus with Cupid.\footnote{Shapiro, 370.} I accept Panofsky’s identification of each character, except in the case of Minerva who I suggest is actually Bellona. Shapiro also identified these three figures as Bellona, Mars, and

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52 Panofsky, 141.

53 Shapiro, 370.
Venus, but he interpreted them as Christian Vices rather than accepting them as a pagan god and goddesses.54

As the Roman goddess who used wisdom, intelligence and cunning to guide men in war and fights for just causes, Minerva’s sacred animal is an owl, a symbolizing of her wisdom and knowledge. If armed, she holds a spear.55 Here, Ambrogio’s iconography is incongruent with traditional depictions of Minerva, because this goddess holds a snake-haired decapitated head in her lowered hand, and a short knife in her upraised right. She also sports a large flame on top of her head and is accompanied by a wolf. It is more likely that this figure represents Bellona, a Roman goddess whose name was derived from, bellum (Latin for war), embodies disorganized violence, wrath, fury, and anger.56 She was the serpent-haired goddess, but in Ambrogio’s fresco, she hefts the


55 Shapiro, 369 also identified this figure as Bellona. David Brumble, Classical Myths and Legends in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: A Dictionary of Allegorical Meanings (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 56; Patricia Monaghan, The Book of Goddesses and Heroines (Library of Congress, 1981), 68; J. A. North, "Bellona" in Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth, ed., The Oxford Classical Dictionary, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 238. Latin poets such as Ovid, Seneca, and Statius, discussed her as a cult partner of Mars. Sources are inconclusive as to whether or not she is the sister, twin sister, wife, or follower of Mars.

56 Monaghan, 68.
decapitated snake-haired head of a Gorgon. Bellona, too, often holds a flaming firebrand, exemplifying her violence and unrestrained rage, but since both of her hands are occupied, Ambrogio placed a large flame atop her head. Further, this goddess shares her base with an attendant predator wolf, making Ambrogio’s depiction one that follows long-established elements, but rendered innovatively.

Next is Mars, whose name was based on the Latin word for death (mors). A warrior-god, Mars embodied for medieval artists and poets the ideas of wrath, violence, and destructive inclinations. He shares his base with his sacred horse. Finally, Venus is the goddess of sexual love, lust, and seduction. Although married, she had affairs with and bore children to both gods and mortals, and

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one of her offspring, Cupid, clings to her in this image. Among her divine lovers was Mars, also represented on the gable.\footnote{Virtues and their corresponding Vices were visually paired at Chartres Cathedral, Notre Dame in Paris, and in numerous other locations. Also commonly paired are Justice and Faithlessness, Fortitude and Cowardice or Inconsistency, as well as Temperance and Wrath, although other pairings are possible.}

According to Panofsky, the virtues are counterbalanced both in position and meaning by three Roman deities over the right bay.\footnote{This would not be a singular event in Ambrogio’s career. According to Joseph Polzer, “Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s War and Peace Murals Revisited: Contributions to the Meaning of the Good Government Allegory,” \textit{Artibus et Historiae} 23/45 (2002), 90, in his frescoes for the Room of the Nine in Siena’s Palazzo Pubblico (1338-9), Ambrogio created “a number of diverse arrangements...the virtues and vices are presented in form of contradistinctive pairs.” moreover, “… a number of virtues exist by whemselves without corresponding vices.”} Generally, artists in the Middle Ages, did not pair Virtues with Roman gods and goddesses, but would match them instead with appropriate personifications of Vices: this pairing would signify the spiritual conflict between good and evil. Yet Ambrogio paired each Virtue with a divinity that, curiously, does not embody the usual bad state of character that is generally remedied by its counterpart Virtue.\footnote{See Rollin Armour, Sr. \textit{Islam, Christianity and the West} (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 88-89; R. W. Southern, \textit{Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages} (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); Moses, 64; and Debra Higgs Strickland, \textit{Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art} (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 157.} Rather, just as Ambrogio used the Virtues to embody the friars’ positive characteristics, I propose that he also included the pagan gods to epitomize the negative aspects of the Saracens whom they symbolize.
In this era where, despite the many Christian pilgrims, crusaders, political and religious prisoners, merchants, and others came into direct contact with Saracens, often wrote, sang, and verbally conveyed false and fantastic depictions of the Saracens, casting the Islamic religion as evil, and its followers as sly beasts, infidels, heathens, heretics, ungodly, idol worshippers, and pagans who venerated many gods. For example, in the *Chanson de Roland*, Muslims are represented as fierce, belligerent polytheistic idolaters, who typically worship three gods: Tervagant (Tervagan), Apollo (Apolin), and Muhammed (Mahom).

As friars from Western Europe would likely not be familiar with these particular gods or images of them, Ambrogio and his patrons replaced the usual paired Vices (commonly Justice with Faithlessness, Fortitude with Cowardice or Inconsistency, and Temperance with Wrath), with statuettes of Roman divinities:

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64 The legend has it roots in the *Chanson de Roland, Oxford Version*, ed. and trans. T. Atkingson Jenkins, 2nd ed. (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1965). The earliest surviving redaction of the Roland was composed around the time of the first Crusade in 1095, and from that point onward, Muslims were uniformly viewed as idolaters. See also Strickland, 157. Dana Carleton Munro, “The Western Attitude Toward Islam During the Period of the Crusades,” *Speculum* 1 (1931), 331; Helen Adolf, “Christendom and Islam in the Middle Ages: New Light on ‘Grail Stone’ and ‘Hidden Host,’” *Speculum* 32 no.1 (Jan., 1957), 105 notes that one medieval German author counted 700 idols which Islamic people worshipped. Adolf citing H. Naumann, “Der wilde und der edle Heide (Versuch über die hofische Toleranz),” *Festgabe für G. Ehrismann: Vom Werden des deutschen Geistes* (1925), 83.

Mars, Bellona, and Venus, entities with local historic meaning, recognizable iconography, and complex cultural references with which many friars would be familiar.66

Ambrogio’s Franciscan audience would recognize his Roman “sculptural” divinities as idols, representations of gods and goddesses that were objects of worship.67 To the Christian faithful, Saracens were idolaters, a misconception popularized by medieval authors who consistently cast Muslims as pagan worshippers of false gods and idols.68 Michael Camille maintained that, within this cultural environment, artisans used idols to mark the lands and property of false faiths including Islam, Judaism, and Paganism.69 In Trecento art, intact idols

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Figure 5 Pietro Lorenzetti, detail of *Entry of Christ into Jerusalem*, Lower Church, San Francisco, Assisi. Photo: commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pietro_Lorenzetti_-_Entry_of_Christ_into_Jerusalem-(detail)-WGA13504.jpg accessed 11/30/19.

signified a town in which pagan citizens would dishonor and even martyr members of the true faith. Henk W. van Os wrote about the *Entry into Jerusalem* for the Lower Church of San Francesco in Assisi, c. 1320 (Fig. 5), in which Pietro Lorenzetti used a grisaille and golden scene to decorate the city gate. In this vignette, Pietro depicted an idol and its worshipper. For van Os, this seal of the city represents a community of pagan idol worshippers. Jerusalem’s Judaic citizens welcomed Christ into their city, but then these pagan and ungodly people brought about Christ’s humiliation and death. Thus, Ambrogio and his

70 Kromm, 186 citing Cartari and Lynche, unpaginated. Bellona...is “all bloudie strategems, massacres, surprises, executions and fatall meetings of the enemie whatsoever.” Monaghan, 68.
patrons adopted and adapted known symbols of intact pagan idols as markers of an infidel community willing to shame and martyr the faithful into a new narrative.

Like the Virtues over the left bay, Ambrogio created a tiered arrangement of pagan deities on the right side. Mars, atop the gable, stands above the other two goddesses. For the mendicants, in this fresco, Mars symbolizes war, wrath, and violence while his demeanor and example are closely allied with that of the Khan and his militant followers. Bellona also represents the war-mongering and bloodthirsty Saracens. Her fiery, furious brand of armed engagement included massacres and executions.71 Certainly, the infidels in the narrative embody her disposition as they viciously slaughter the Franciscan brethren.

Atop the far-right spur is Venus. In his Book of Heresies, John of Damascus (c. 675/6-749) rhetorically questions Saracens about their supposed religious practices. “How is it then, that you rub yourselves against that stone at your Ka’aba, and kiss and embrace it?”72 For John, the black stone in the Ka’aba was spolia from the antique pagan world that Muslims venerated. “This stone


72 Saint John of Damascus, 156. Camille, 140 indicates that the 9th-century Byzantine writer Nicetas was the first to write a tract in which Muslims’ veneration of the black stone in the Ka’aba was equated with the worship of a sculpted head of Aphrodite.
that they talk about is the head of Aphrodite [Venus] whom they used to worship…."73

Venus was also the embodiment of lust, who was an adulterer who had a carnal relationship with another adulterer, Mars. In western Christian Medieval popular culture, Muhammed and his followers were presented as sexually promiscuous. 74 For Christians, Muhammed, who had nine wives could not possibly be an authentic prophet. As Paul claimed (1 Corinthians 7.3-5), “even monogamy was at best an allowance for those humans who were incapable of containing their lust.” For celibate friars who lived lives of asceticism and extreme self-discipline, this Muslim sacred value of sexual excess and inhibition would have been immoral and repugnant.

In the Martyrdom, Ambrogio depicted two discrete and differing events unfolding, each involving friars and locals. On the left is a vignette of anticipation and inevitability, whereas on the right is a vignette of death and brutality. Situated between these two corresponding scenes is the originating factor, the Khan, who occupies the central module. The statuettes above the left bay are personifications of Virtues who are directly associated with the sacred practices of the live friars below them. Similarly, on the right side the armed

73 Southern, 30.

Bellona, Mars, and Venus embody the immoral traits of the armed Khan as well as the vengeful, sexually excessive Saracens below. On the far right, the shaggy-haired executioner, who sheaths his sword after killing the friars, personifies Saracen brutality and wrath. With his statuettes, Ambrogio contrasted Christian Virtues with pagan divinities to symbolize the struggle between Good and Evil. Specifically, for his mendicant audience, they visually reinforce the difference between Franciscans’ moral and Saracens’ depraved, ungodly behavior.

The contrast of Christian good and pagan ill in later medieval thought is summed up in the statement “Pagans are wrong and Christians are right,” which was repeated twice in the Song of Roland, a popular epic tale of triumph of the Christian forces over their well-armed and militarily superior enemies, the pagans: Spanish Muslims. In Ambrogio’s image, the non-Christian, pagan Roman divinities, like Christian Vices, refer to the negative motivations and dispositions that lead to wrong actions and therefore are representative of the Khan and his compatriots, who won their victories and rule their lands by military force. These Muslim-pagans also worshipped false gods and idols, a misconception that was reinforced by their prescribed pilgrimage to Mecca.

where Christians believed that the pagan goddess of love’s head was kept in the Ka’aba. Moreover, when the Crusaders took Jerusalem in 1099, they reported finding and destroying an enormous silver statue, an idol, of “the pristine Antichrist, depraved Muhammed, pernicious Muhammed.”

For the Martyrdom’s audience, the statuettes would reinforce their understanding of the two faiths. Both grew out of the pagan past, but while Christians abandoned the practice of idol worship, in the Christian view Saracens still clung to their idol-worshipping past. Thus, Ambrogio’s figures can be understood as exempla of two alternative paths of life: the virtuous, represented by personifications of moral ideas versus the corrupt, represented by weapon-wielding pagan gods and goddesses, or idols.

The central figure currently covered by a decorative border and who may have been lost when the frescos were slightly cut down in the relocation process, is virtually impossible to identify through an iconographic analysis. Still, considering its placement atop a gable and its visible feet which are not covered by a long toga-like garment, this figure must be a military figure who is not

76 Akbari, 227.

77 The chimera on the columns appear to be dog’s heads. According to Strickland, 160 “Saracens are actually transformed into dogs in epic and romance literature. In the Song of Roland, the Saracens of Argoille yelp like dogs.” She provides other examples as well. These dog-heads would reinforce the idea that this is a palace appropriate for a Khan. Burke 483, writes that tradition links dogs to Christ’s tormentors from Psalm 21, “Many dogs have encompassed me,” and “Deliver, O God, my soul from the sword: my only one from the hand of the dog.”
sharing its base with an animal. Based on the aforementioned mirroring relationships between the left and right statuettes with the figures beneath them, the figure on the highest gable would accentuate the character of the Khan in the center of the palace. Not only is the Khan outside the Christian fold, he is an Muslim leader, a representative of earthly power that Francis viewed as an evil, such that he dissuaded his followers from becoming bishops. The fresco furthermore reflects a Khan who has compelled his followers to attack and murder the friars, contrasting with Francis, who with first-hand knowledge of warfare, understood that violence unleashed the worst in men’s hearts. As the Khan in this fresco serves as an embodiment of evil and of the very-real physical threat of militant Muslims to apostolic friars and all of Christianity. Following the theme of the other statuettes, the figure above him should emphasize and potentially mirror this role. Thus, a logical entity for this prominent location would be the Prophet Muhammed, the founder and leader of the Saracens, as well as a warrior who was understood to spread his faith by the sword. Medieval Christians viewed Saracens as worshippers of Muhammed, and they did not believe that Muhammed was a prophet, but rather understood him to be an idol. As mentioned, Muhammed reportedly created an enormous silver idol of himself for the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, Ambrogio’s military male, who may have never been intended to be fully visible, and who serves as a reminder of the
best known idol/statue of Muhammed, dominating the palace roof of a ruler who continued his depraved behaviors would be *apropos*.

In the *Martyrdom*, Ambrogio reimagined a historical Franciscan incident by placing it in a tryptich-like loggia with unambiguous crowning statuary. Classically inspired stone figures on the roof, which mark the building as one fit for a Muslim ruler, cap each of the three modules. Over each side bay is a distinct hierarchical group of three individuals, while a single booted statuette marks the apex of the central unit. With his capping statuettes, Ambrogio utilized the new image-within-image motif to emphasize the ethical characteristics of the rival protagonists below them. Moreover, the two opposing statue groups embody a popular recurring theme that Christians were in the right (underscored by their appearance on the right side of the khan) and Pagans were in the wrong, while buttressing the principle narrative of the *Martyrdom*. In the fresco, virtuous personifications represent precise moral qualities of the spiritual Franciscan martyrs, while the pagan idols signify combatant and lustful Saracen non-believers led by their evil Khan, following in the footsteps of his faith’s founder. Thus, through the use of effective iconographic details, Ambrogio added multifaceted commentary on a Franciscan martyrdom by including the prevailing contemporary, but long-held Franciscans’ views of an aggressive
false-faith, idolatrous Saracens that posed a significant threat to the peace-loving, humble friars, and all members of the true faith, Christianity.
Frequently Cited Sources: