

10-2022

A Hierophany of Nature in the Early Franciscans' Wood-Panel Paintings

Rebecca Rupp
Loyola University Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal>



Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation

Rupp, Rebecca. "A Hierophany of Nature in the Early Franciscans' Wood-Panel Paintings."
Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture 8, 2 (2022): 149-169. <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol8/iss2/5>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art History at Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.

PEREGRINATIONS

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE
VOLUME VIII, NUMBER 2 (AUTUMN 2022)

A Hierophany of Nature in Duecento Franciscan Vita Dossals

REBECCA RUPPAR
Loyola University Chicago



In the 13th century, the Order of Friars Minor emerged as one of the most prolific patrons of the arts, creating images of Francis of Assisi to cultivate devotion among the Christian laity. These artworks often took the form of *vita dossals* which present a centered, frontal image of the saint flanked by smaller narrative scenes of Francis' life and posthumous miracles. The constituent elements of these wood-panel paintings exemplify the traditional practice of icon production, using organic supplies common to the age: wooden boards, animal glue, linen, linseed oil, and egg tempera paints.¹ But for the early Friars Minor, the process of transforming natural materials into

Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer who so carefully and knowledgeably made suggestions for this piece and to Sarah Blick of *Peregrinations* for her generous and dedicated work. I am grateful to the *John D. Bies International Travel Scholarship* and the *Edzard Baumann Memorial Travel Award* for their support of my research in Italy and France.

¹ A comprehensive look at near-period artisan technique (c. 1400) would be Cennino D'Andrea Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte*, (*The Craftsman's Handbook*, Cennini and Daniel V. Thompson, New York: Dover Publications, 1960). Modern studies can be found in Susan L. Caroselli's *Italian Panel Painting of the Early Renaissance: In the Collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with the University of Washington Press, 1994; and in *The Structural Conservation of Panel Paintings: Proceedings of a Symposium at the J. Paul Getty Museum, 24-28 April 1995*; edited by Kathleen Dardes and Andrea

sacred artwork conceivably held a richer meaning derived from their founder's nature-imbued charism that exalted God's earthly creation.

In his seminal volume, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, Michael Baxandall touches on the animistic spirituality that may have laid the deep underpinning for Francis' ecological leanings. When discussing the limetrees, or linden, sourced for sacred sculpture in Germany, Baxandall claims that this wood:

...had a more elusive distinction of a kind one cannot either measure or entirely ignore. In Germany the lime, like some other trees, was an object of magico-religious interest. This is reflected in a certain ambiguity in the word *Linde* in Early New High German: it is used for holy grove as well as 'limetree' ... There are reports of holy limetrees hung with votive tablets against the plague; of many limegroves visited as places of pilgrimage... Limewood was no base material but one to be respected: a way to see the carver's treatment of it is as active respect.²

In the same way the limetree was understood at a roughly contemporary time, Francis' own significant relationship to a sacred grove and the wood-panel paintings created by the Friars Minor may be understood as exhibiting a kind of "active respect" for nature.

The grove in this case consists mainly of holm-oak trees, the species *Quercus ilex* (*lecci* in Italian). The common English name is believed to be drawn from the Anglo-Saxon word for "holy." The 4.6 square kilometer grove still stands on the site of

Rothe (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2013), particularly Luca Uzielli's chapter, "Historical Overview of Panel-Making Techniques in Central Italy."

² Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany, 1475-1525: Images and Circumstances* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 31.



Montelucio, southeast of the town of Spoleto. Today the area is preserved by the European Commission as a conservation zone. During Roman times, the forest was consecrated to the god Jupiter. It contains the earliest known environmental law, the *Lex Lucis Spoletina*, carved on a third-century BCE stele that forbids the harvesting of holm-oaks. The punishment for cutting a tree requires a sacrifice of an ox to Jupiter (**Fig. 1**).³

Figure 1 *Lex Lucis Spoletina*, reproduction of the third century BCE environmental law stele *in situ* at Montelucio, Italy. Original stele is now stored in the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale*, Spoleto, Italy. Photo: author.

Centuries after this Roman pronouncement, a 6th century Christian monk from Syria, later known as Isaac of Montelucio, sought refuge on the mountain, establishing a

³ The current stele is a replica, replacing the original that was moved to the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale*, Spoleto, Italy. *Rete Natura 2000 Il Progetto Siti Natura 2000 del Comune di Spoleto*, 2000. See also *Museo Archeologico Nazionale e Teatro Romano di Spoleto*, accessed 1/6/2022, <https://www.musei.umbria.beniculturali.it/musei/museo-archeologico-nazionale-teatro-romano-di-spoletto/?fbclid=IwAR0CGbnxkiGebtvQPCYhxz2TORpXxC7ufegb5wCN4eSsQ9NjIiRDdyHDMug>.

hermitage among the natural caves near Spoleto.⁴ The monastery of San Giuliano developed around his hermitage, following the rule of Benedict of Nursia. In 1218, the monks provided Francis and his itinerant brotherhood with the use of a small chapel, a water well, and several hermitage cells, one of which was also used by Anthony of Padua (all still extant). The site eventually was turned over to the Franciscan brothers who established what is known today as the *Sanctuary of Saint Francis*. Novices are still encouraged to live in the rustic property during their early years of formation.⁵ Lying about 50 kilometers south of Assisi, the grove of Monteluco was a favorite location for Francis to wander in the midst of nature. An escarpment that tradition says Francis would frequent near the legal stele provides a breath-taking view. A carving at the site provides a quote from the saint that reveals his love of the area: “*Nihil iucundius vidi*

⁴ The original eremitical settlement is believed to be related to this 6th-century holy man, also known as Isaac of Spoleto, who emigrated to Italy from Syria c. 532. Bert Roest, “The Franciscan Hermit: Seeker, Prisoner, Refugee.” *Church History and Religious Culture* 86, no. 1/4 (2006): 163–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23922515>, 165. “Chapter Fourteen: Of the Servant of God, Isaac, in Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* (1911) Book 3, pp. 105–174,” accessed 3/11/2021, http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/gregory_03_dialogues_book3.htm#C14. Local devotion to Isaac of Monteluco continued the long-held tradition that some of the earliest Christians in the Umbrian region emigrated from Syria. The *Legend of the Twelve Syrians* (dated to the second half of the 7th century and elaborated in the *Acta Sanctorum*, under the title “*Tractatus Praeliminaris*”) tells of priestly brothers who traveled to Rome from Syria either during the reign of Pope Urban I (d. 230) or during the persecutions of the Emperor Julian the Apostate (d. 363). Disbanding in Rome, the brothers settled in the Italian regions of Sabina, Valeria, and Umbria. See Francis Clark, *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 619.

⁵ *Rete Natura 2000 Il Progetto Siti Natura 2000 del Comune di Spoleto*, 2000. *Frati Minori Umbria*, accessed 1/6/2022, <https://www.assisi-ofm.it/san-francesco-monteluco-65-1.html>. The San Giuliano monastery was first a Cassianese foundation and subsequently a Cluniac abbey. Roest, 165. For more on the eremitical practices of the early brothers, see *Franciscan Solitude*, edited by André Cirino and Josef Raischl (St. Bonaventure, N.Y.: Franciscan Institute, St. Bonaventure University, 1995). Also see John Moorman’s *A History of the Franciscan Order: From Its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), for thorough general information about the early years of the Franciscan order.

valle mea spoletana [Never did I see anything more joyful than my Spoleto valley] (Fig. 2).”



Figure 2 View of the Spoleto Valley from Monteluco, Italy. June 2019. Photo: author.

The connection between the giant holm-oak species and Francis is also evidenced by a specific *Quercus ilex* in Lecchio delle Ripe, Tuscany, which is believed to have shaded the saint as he preached and rested from his travels. Pilgrims continue to venerate the area, ritually processing to the eight-century-old tree and decorating it with crosses and votives. To this day, holm-oaks are held in reverence by the Franciscan

order, and the establishment of friaries near ancient sacred groves has served to protect the species.⁶

Throughout history and across cultures, trees in general have been understood as bearers of spiritual properties. The historian of religion Mircea Eliade explains that often trees are held to be holy not as a matter of roots, trunk, branches, and leaves, but rather they are considered a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred. Eliade describes a hierophany as *ganz andere*: something completely different from the ordinary. He explains further: “By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu.”⁷ In the Christian paradigm, trees represented the original tree—the archetype of the tree—believed to be both the Tree of Knowledge from the Garden of Eden and the tree used for the Cross of Christ.⁸ Drawing from their natural state, the wood-panel

⁶ Fabrizio Frascaroli, “Catholicism and Conservation: The Potential of Sacred Natural Sites for Biodiversity Management in Central Italy,” *Human Ecology* 41, no. 4 (2013): 594. Pope Francis, the current leader of the Roman Catholic Church, having chosen his name to honor and emulate the *poverello*, planted a holm-oak in the Vatican Gardens. This transplanting of a tree from Assisi commemorated the opening of the ecologically focused Synod of the Amazons in the Fall of 2019. Vatican News. “Pope Consecrates Synod for the Amazon to Saint Francis of Assisi,” October 4, 2019. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-10/pope-synod-amazon-saint-francis-vatican-gardens.html>.

⁷ Hierophany from the adjective *hieros* (Greek: ἱερός; sacred/holy) and the verb *phainein* (φαίνειν; to reveal/to bring to light. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 12.

⁸ Jacobus de Voragine *et al.*, *The Finding of the Holy Cross*, in *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 277–78, accessed 3/16/2021, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/luc/detail.action?docID=871891>. The Tree of Life, often conflated with the Tree of Knowledge, became a popular motif in art following Bonaventure’s meditation *Lignum Vitæ* (1257-1267). The depiction of this tree typically consists of a crucifix from which twelve branches sprout, ornamented with textual and visual reminders of Christ’s life and passion, and sometimes with representations of the prophets and apostles. See, for examples, Pacino di Bonaguida’s panel painting of the Tree of Life (c. 1320), *Galleria dell’Accademia*, Florence, and the fresco in the refectory of the Church of Santa Croce, Florence, by Taddeo Gaddi

paintings of the Franciscans served as a hierophany for the sacred Christian images they represented while at the same time retaining the ancient spiritual vitality of their organic and archetypal source. Although Francis did not emphasize living trees in his writings, both he and the early friars treated the “Wood of the Cross” of Jesus as a major topic in their texts and their later artwork. Materially, panel paintings commissioned by the order made use of the holm-oak that was so familiar to Francis, an *axis mundi* connecting the earth to the heavens.⁹ Visually, oak trees were often illustrated with a simple stylized trunk and languid twisting branches with bushy foliage, such as the example done in *grisaille* by Jean Pucelle for the November calendar page of the *Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux* (c. 1324–1328). (Fig. 3) A later depiction in a copy of Halaf Ibn-Abbas Al-Zahrawi’s *Tacuinum sanitatis* (c. 1380) presents highly detailed leaves and acorns, showing the specific variety of *Quercus ilex* that is found at Monteluco (Fig. 4). Although the acorns are fewer and more subtly defined, the same multi-lobed leaves are distinguished in Giotto’s rendition of *Francis Preaching to the Birds* on the predella of the

(c. 1350). Bonaventure and Ewert Cousins, *Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God; The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 119-175.

⁹ Few historical or modern records indicate the species of trees used for the duecento panel paintings. The choice of wood depended on the geography and climate of various regions. In Umbria and Tuscany, the wood most often used was that of the poplar tree, although boards were also regularly taken from the lime (linden), willow, or oak species. See John Fletcher, “Panel Examination and Dendrochronology,” *J. Paul Getty Museum Journal / J. Paul Getty Museum*, 1982, 39. For an explanation of the concept of the *axis mundi* in multiple cultures, see Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols*, 161–64.



Figure 3 Jean Pucelle, detail from Folio 11v, November Calendar Page from *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux*, c. 1324–1328. Grisaille and tempera on vellum; 8.9 x 6.2 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, 1954 (54.1.2). Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/70010733>

Stigmatization of Francis altarpiece found in the Louvre (1300-1325) (**Fig. 5**). In the earlier vita dossals, the trees are presented with the same sinuous trunks. While the tufted leaves are less realistically rendered than the trecento examples, their complex shapes anticipate the coming of greater attention to naturalistic detail (**Figs. 6-9**).

Despite Francis' rejection of material wealth and physical comfort, he was lovingly committed to nature. In his poem, *Canticle of the Creatures* (1224/1225), Francis calls on the anthropomorphized Brother Sun and Sister Moon who radiate in the

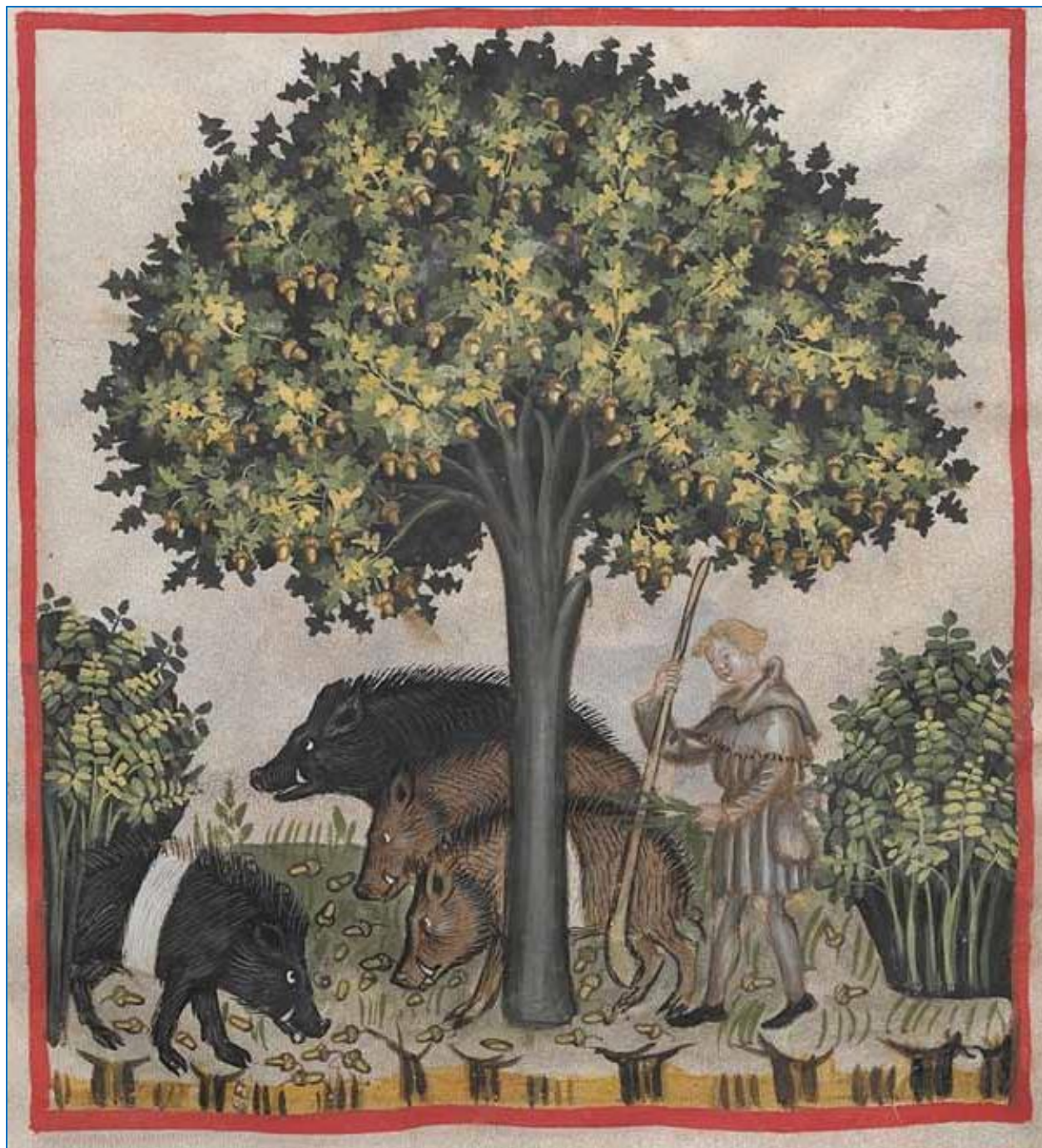


Figure 4 Detail from Halaf Ibn-Abbas Zahrawi, *Tacuinum sanitatis*, near Verona, Italy (1380) r. 15, 3.35 x 2.30 cm, paint on parchment, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Austria. Photo: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Austria, https://digital.onb.ac.at/RepViewer/viewer.faces?doc=DTL_3506830&order=1&view=SINGLE



Figure 5 Saint Francis Preaching to the Birds, detail from the predella of *Saint Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, Giotto di Bondone, altarpiece 313 cm × 163 cm, tempera and gold on wood panel, 1300-1325, *Musee d’Louvre*. Photo: *Musee d’Louvre*, <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010064459>

likeness of Jesus; Brother Wind and Sister Water who give sustenance and purity; Brother Fire who is beautiful and strong; and Sister Mother Earth who “sustains and governs us.”¹⁰ Francis understood God as being praised through each of these creatures as well as by humanity who exists in cooperation with the elements.¹¹ With the belief that all things stem from the divine source and are united, Francis connected on a familial level to all living beings and non-living objects—whether a person, an animal, a plant, or a rock.¹² The eloquence of the natural world seems to have affected the holy man profoundly, both in its beauty and its most humble forms.¹³ Francis’ hagiographers describe his relationship with nature in great detail. Thomas of Celano, gathering eye-witness accounts within two years of Francis’ death in 1226, writes of the saint’s interactions with wolves, lambs, rabbits, worms, bees, trees, flowers, water, rocks, fire—

¹⁰ Francis’ original composition, one of the first works of literature written in the Italian vernacular, is also known as the *Canticle of the Sun*. Regis Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., notes 1225 for the date of composition in Francis of Assisi et al., *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 37–39. Other sources give 1224, for example, see Peter Franz Loewen. “Francis the Musician and the Mission of the ‘*Joculatores Domini*’ in the Medieval German Lands.” *Franciscan Studies*, vol. 60, no. 1, Franciscan Institute, 2002, accessed 1/15/2022, <https://doi.org/10.1353/frc.2002.0000>, 258.

¹¹ Regis J. Armstrong and Francis of Assisi, *St. Francis of Assisi: Writings for a Gospel Life*, Crossroad Spiritual Legacy Series (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 208.

¹² William Cook, “My Life with Francis,” in *The World of St. Francis of Assisi: Essays in Honor of William R. Cook*, edited by Bradley Franco and William Cook (Boston: Brill, 2015), 237.

¹³ L. J. Kiser, “The Garden of St. Francis: Plants, Landscape, and Economy in Thirteenth-Century Italy,” *Environmental History*, 8, no. 2 (2003): 237–38.

and many other earthly components—indicating that Francis’ treatment of them reflected respect and a belief that they possessed some level of sentience.¹⁴

Nature continued to influence the early Franciscan brothers as they created art to celebrate the *poverello’s* teachings. Of the eight extant monumental *vita dossals* commissioned by the friars in their first century, located in Pescia, Florence, Pistoia, Assisi, Orte, Rome, Pisa, and Siena, each one includes environmental elements such as mammals, birds, shrubbery, flowers, and trees.¹⁵ The rugged landscape of the Spoleto valley itself is reflected in the layered contours of mountains and hills. Although true atmospheric perspective is not presented, the iconographers often painted the ground layers as shifting in color to indicate distance, reminiscent of the vista from Monteluco (Figs. 2, 6-7, 10).

The illustration of Francis’ *Sermon to the Birds* is one of the most widespread images of the saint that also most clearly connects Francis to nature. Thomas of Celano tells this story in the first biography of the saint, the *Vita Prima* (1228), and Bonaventure includes it also in the *Legenda Maior* (1262-1263): As Francis and several companions traveled through the Spoleto valley near the town of Bevagna, they passed a place

¹⁴ Thomas of Celano *et al.*, *The Francis Trilogy of Thomas of Celano: The Life of Saint Francis, The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul, The Treatise on the Miracles of Saint Francis* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004); L. J. Kiser, “The Garden of St. Francis,” 231–32, 239. See Kiser for a list of example passages.

¹⁵ Dating for the *vita dossals* is as follows: Pescia (1235), Florence (c. 1245), Pistoia (c. 1250), Assisi (c. 1253-1260), Orte (c. 1260), Rome (c. 1255), Pisa (c. 1240-1260), and Siena (c. 1280). See William R. Cook’s *Images of St. Francis of Assisi: In Painting, Stone, and Glass: From the Earliest Images to ca. 1320 in Italy: A Catalogue* (Firenze; Perth: L.S. Olschki; 1999).



Figure 6 Sermon to the Birds, detail from *San Francesco e Quattro Scene*, c. 1260, dorsal 180 x 80 cm, tempera and gold on wood panel (possibly chestnut), *Museo d'Arte Sacra di Orte*, Orte, Italy. Photo: author.

where there was a large congregation of various birds. The text describes these as doves, crows, and monaclae (a kind of shiny blackbird with purplish wings similar to a magpie).¹⁶ Bonaventure does not name the species but instead comments on their

¹⁶ Thomas *et al.*, *Francis Trilogy*, 74. Contemporaneous to Thomas of Celano, Bonaventure, and the artwork under discussion is the encyclopedic writing of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, a member of the Franciscan order who authored *De proprietatibus rerum* (*On the Properties of Things* (c.1240), in which he describes the traits of



Figure 7 Sermon to the Birds, detail from *San Francesco e Storie della sua Vita*, c. 1280, dossal 237 x 113 cm, tempera and gold on wood panel, *Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena*, Siena, Italy. Photo: author.

placement—some in trees and others on the earth.¹⁷ Four dossals render this scene, highlighting the birds in a variety of ways. The dossals held in Orte (c. 1260) and Siena

these and other birds. See his sections on *crow* (monoclae/magpie are also part of the corvid family) and *culvour* (dove) in Anglicus Bartholomaeus *et al.*, *Mediaeval Lore from Bartholomaeus Anglicus*, trans. John Trevisa, (London, Chatto and Windus; Boston, J. W. Luce, 1907), 124–26, accessed 1/5/2022, <http://archive.org/details/mediaevallorefr00bartgoog>.

¹⁷ Bonaventure and Ewert Cousins, *Bonaventure*, 294–95.

(c. 1280) show flocks resting on hilly ground (**Figs. 6 & 7**). Orte's avians appear undifferentiated, while Siena's show the greatest mixture of size and plumage. Both scenes are positioned as the uppermost narrative illustrations, Siena's topping the left side and Orte's the right. In the dossals in Pescia (the earliest, dated 1235) and Florence (c. 1245) (**Figs. 8 & 9**), two companions travel with their leader in tableaux placed in the middle of each painting's left hand column. The friars witness a variety of birds spread over the trees and on the ground. Pescia's flock is arranged at random, while the birds of the Florentine panel are regimented into five horizontal rows stacked without perspective, but with highly detailed plants and grasses sprouting between the birds.

In this hagiographic story, Thomas of Celano explains Francis' compassion "even toward lesser, irrational creatures." Francis enthusiastically approaches the flock and is surprised that they do not fly away. He asks them to listen as he evangelizes, saying,

My brother birds, you should greatly praise your Creator, and love Him always. He gave you feathers to wear, wings to fly, and whatever you need. God made you noble among His creatures and gave you a home in the purity of the air, so that, though you neither sow nor reap, He nevertheless protects and governs you without your least care.¹⁸

The birds responded by stretching their wings and opening their beaks and allowed Francis to walk among them, his tunic brushing against their bodies and heads.

¹⁸ Bonaventure and Cousins, *Bonaventure*, 294–95.

He completed his sermon by blessing the birds with the sign of the cross and giving them permission to fly away. The brothers continued “along their way rejoicing and giving thanks to God, Whom all creatures revere by their devout confession.”¹⁹

Recognizing he had been inattentive to their catechesis prior to then, Francis called on all creatures: mammals, birds, reptiles, and inanimate nature to praise their creator from that point forward. The early friars’ frequent commissioning of this scene in their artwork confirmed and promoted Francis’ acceptance of the natural world as having a divine origin and therefore being inherently good.²⁰ Beyond birds, the paintings depict animals in five more narrative scenes. These are most often livestock including oxen, donkeys, sheep, goats, and pigs. In one section of the dossal in Florence, Francis holds a lamb, which has been interpreted as a symbol of a soul rescued by Francis’ preaching (**Fig. 10**). It is lifted from amongst the other animals a farmer is herding—the damned goats and unclean pigs.²¹ In the next section below, Francis offers his cloak to purchase two lambs that hang from a farmer’s yoke on their way to market (**Fig. 11**). The friars

¹⁹ Thomas of Celano and Commission on the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition, “Vita Prima”; See also Thomas *et al.*, *Francis Trilogy*, 74; Bonaventure and Cousins, *Bonaventure*, 294–95.

²⁰ Rosalind B. Brooke, *The Image of St Francis: Responses to Sainthood in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 171.

²¹ William Cook, “New Sources, New Insights: The Bardi Dossal of the Life of St. Francis of Assisi,” *Studi Francescani. Firenze* 93 (1996), 328–29; William Cook, “Fraternal and Lay Images of St. Francis in the Thirteenth Century,” in *Popes, Teachers, and Canon Law in the Middle Ages*, eds. James Ross Sweeney and Stanley Chodorow (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 285–86; Thomas of Celano and Commission on the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition, “Vita Prima”; Thomas *et al.*, *Francis Trilogy*, 88–89.



Figure 8 Sermon to the Birds, detail from *San Francesco e Storie della sua Vita*, Bonaventura Berlinghieri, 1235, dorsal 160x 123 cm, tempera and gold on wood panel (possibly poplar), *Chiesa di San Francesco*, Pescia, Italy. Photo: author

who witness these events are painted raising their hands in amazement.²² In these allegorical illustrations, Francis is shown to have the power to save souls not only through the Gospel he preaches, but also through the charitable and reverential actions he takes on behalf of all creatures. In this manner, Francis connects to a long hagiographic tradition of holy people being able to communicate with and control

²² Cook, "New Sources," 330.



Figure 9 Sermon to the Birds, detail from *San Francesco e Venti Storie della sua Vita*, c. 1245, dorsal 230 x 123 cm, tempera and gold on wood panel, *Basilica di Santa Croce, Cappella Bardi*, Florence, Italy. Photo: author.

animals as a testament to their ascetic purity. Francis' power over nature and concern for its creatures also envisioned a return to the prelapsarian state—when humans served as compassionate stewards toward all creation in the mythic Garden of Eden.²³

²³ Earlier saints such as the hermits Anthony of Egypt and Jerome of Stridon had similar encounters with wildlife. See Roger Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature: Tradition and Innovation in Western Christian Attitudes toward the Environment* (Milton Keynes: Lightning Source, 2010), 401; Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1207, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203>; and Kiser, "Garden of St. Francis," 124.



Figure 10 Francis Ransoms the Lambs from Among the Goats, detail from *San Francesco e Venti Storie della sua Vita*, c. 1245, dorsal 230 x 123 cm, tempera and gold on wood panel, *Basilica di Santa Croce, Cappella Bardi*, Florence, Italy. Photo: author.

For Francis of Assisi, the material austerity of his chosen lifestyle was continually balanced by his appreciation for created reality. The early friars incorporated the *poverello's* love of nature into artwork that iconographically emphasized their founder's cooperation with creation. Beneath the surface, each natural element of the friars' wood-panel paintings participates as a hierophany, offering a deeply spiritual meaning embodied in its materiality. Each component of the visible and tangible craft



Figure 11 Francis Exchanges his Cloak for Two Lambs a Shepherd is Carrying to Slaughter, detail from *San Francesco e Venti Storie della sua Vita*, c. 1245, dorsal 230 x 123 cm, tempera and gold on wood panel, *Basilica di Santa Croce, Cappella Bardi*, Florence, Italy. Photo: author.

participates in the endeavor. For example, the egg used to mix tempera paint symbolized fertility and rebirth for centuries before Christianity. The mineral- and plant-sourced pigments add their color and brightness to represent the earthly works of the Creator. The linen that wraps the wooden boards to provide a substrate for gesso is made from the fiber of flax stems and also serves as a reminder of the shroud that covered Jesus' body in the tomb. The plant-based linseed oil has connotations of

anointing, rich in scriptural and sacramental usage. Each physical component serves as a locus of contemplation for the iconographer, who fasts and prays for the duration of the icon's creation.²⁴ Finally, the cherished wood supports the sacred painting at its deepest level. Representing the same substance as the trees of Eden and the cross of Christ, the wood offers the believer an ancient, yet timeless connection between heaven and earth—a symbol of paradise lost and regained. 🕊️

²⁴ Information in this section is drawn from conversations with master iconographer, Rev. Paul Czerwonka, American College, Katholieke Universiteit, Leuven, Belgium. April 2010; For further information regarding the religious dimensions of icons, see Léonide Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999); Henri Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2007).