

BEYOND THE TEXT:
FRANCISCAN ART
AND THE CONSTRUCTION
OF RELIGION

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BONAVENTURE, BESSARION AND THE FRANCISCAN COAT OF ARMS

Irving Lavin

To Servus Gieben, O.F.M. Cap., in admiration and appreciation



In a brief appendix to an essay on Pisanello's portrait medal commemorating the visit to Florence of the Byzantine Emperor John VIII Paleologus, I recounted the story, reported in a sixteenth century biography of St. Bonaventure, of his having adopted an unorthodox coat of arms when he was made cardinal in 1273 by Gregory X, to serve as the pope's representative at the second Council of Lyon in 1272-74.¹ Bonaventure was a chief exponent of the purpose of the Council, to bring about the reconciliation and union of the Latin and Greek churches. Although it proved to be short-lived, the reunion was achieved, and it may be said to have been emblemized by the coat of arms Bonaventure adopted: not a gentilitia bearing, but an image of

his personal mission in the form of two hands crossed and joined by the wound of a nail of the Cross (Fig. 1).² The biographer added that Bonaventure's escutcheon was the origin of the familiar blazon of the Franciscan order. Particularly interesting in this context is one of the early examples of the latter found in the friary church at San Francesco del Deserto, Venice, which clearly reflects Bonaventure's device—eminently appropriate because it was Bonaventure who in his *Legenda maior* recorded Francis's visit to the island to take refuge from a storm (Fig. 2).³ The biographer's story has received confirmation in subsequent studies of the subject by Servus Gieben, but the problem remains as to how and when this institutional extrapolation took place.⁴ There is no record of an official adoption of the seal, and no examples

¹ "Pisanello and the Invention of the Renaissance Medal," in Joachim Poeschke, ed., *Italianische Frührenaissance und nordeuropäisches Mittelalter. Kunst der frühen Neuzeit im europäischen Zusammenhang* (Munich: Hirmer, 1993), 67-84.

² The earliest depictions of St. Bonaventure with the motif appear in the late fifteenth century (Servus Gieben, *Lo stemma francescano. Origine e sviluppo* [Rome: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 2009], 10, 14f). The motif is singularly like the crossed hands of the bust-length *Imago Pietatis* that were just then coming into vogue. The shift from the chest-length to the bust-length *Imago Pietatis* including crossed hands may be discerned in the comprehensive survey by Catherine Puglisi and William Barcham, "Gli esordi del Cristo passo nell'arte veneziana e la pala feriale di Paolo Veneziano," in Francesca Cavazzana Romane et al., eds., *"Cose nuove e cose antiche": Scritti per Monsignor Antonio Niero e Don Bruno Bertoli* (Venice: Biblioteca nazionale marciana, 2006), 403-30.

³ St. Francis on the island is the main theme of Marilyn Aronberg Lavin's study in this volume, "The Joy of St. Francis: Bellini's Panel in the Frick Collection." The slab in which the device is carved, which includes an inscribed date 1499, is reproduced in Francesco Ferrari, O.F.M., *Il francescanesimo nel Veneto dalle origini ai reperti di S. Francesco nel Deserto: appunti per una storia della provincia veneta dei frati minori* (Bologna: Documentazione scientifica editrice, 1990), 398, pl. LXVI.

⁴ S. Gieben, *Lo stemma francescano*, with earlier bibliography, especially idem, "S. Bonaventura e l'origine dello stemma francescano," *Doctor Seraphicus* 55 (2008): 67-80.



Fig 1. St. Bonaventure. Late Fifteenth Century. Museo Storico Francescano, Rome



Fig 2. Coat of Arms. San Francesco del Deserto, Venice

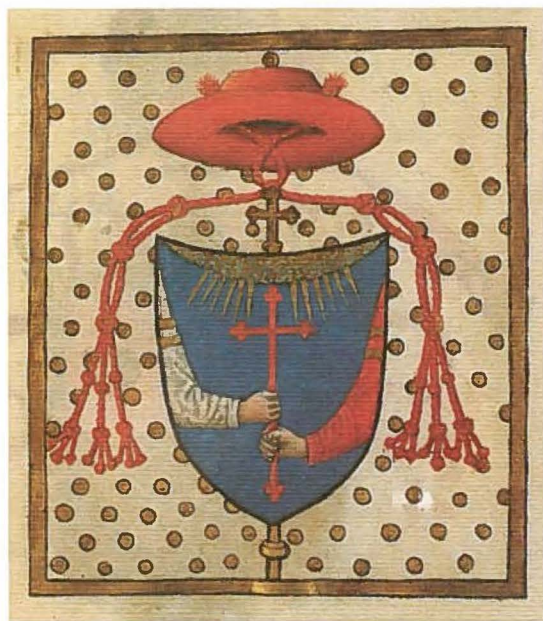


Fig 3. Bessarion's Coat of Arms. Cod. Marc. It. VII 2700 (=12998), fol. 2v. Biblioteca Marciana, Venice



Fig 4. Copy after Gentile Bellini, Bessarion holding his relic of the True Cross. Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice

of its use are known before the latter half of the fifteenth century.⁵

The purpose of this note is to suggest that the emblem of the order did not in fact arise until nearly two centuries after the Lyon conference, under virtually the same circumstances that had led St. Bonaventure to invent his personal device. I speak of course of the Ecumenical Council held at Florence, 1439-1445, under the auspices of Pope Eugenius IV. As an ecclesiastical leader passionately devoted to the reconciliation of the churches St. Bonaventure had an almost exact counterpart in Cardinal Bessarion (1403-72), who was no doubt intimately familiar with the history of the earlier council and, one can only assume, with the story of Bonaventure's coat of arms. When Eugenius named him cardinal in 1439 to represent the Catholic Church at the council, Bessarion also adopted a coat of arms markedly analogous to Bonaventure's, except that the two hands are now arms, conjoined by virtue of supporting the Cross (Fig. 3). The arms wear liturgical garb, one white, one red, each marked by two brocaded bands, again in reference to the Greek and Latin churches.⁶ As a Greek, the two arms in Bessarion's escutcheon embrace the cross in a personal, as well as ecclesiastical way. These themes were surely reflected in the portrait of Bessarion by Gentile Bellini, preserved in an early copy, in which he is shown holding with both hands the famous relic of the True Cross which he bequeathed to the Scuola di Santa Maria della Carità in Venice, in 1472 (Fig. 4). Bessarion's device also ingeniously refers to an ancient tradition, primarily in his native Byzantium, but common also in the west, in which two lofty personages, Constantine and

Helena, emperor and spouse, emperor and son, together display the cross, in reference to the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.⁷ This motif was a major theme in Byzantine coinage, where pairs of rulers jointly sustain a cruciform staff (Fig. 5). Finally, in the scene of the Exaltation in his frescoed cycle of the story of the True Cross in Santa Croce, Agnolo Gaddi showed Heraclius holding the cross in his two veiled hands as he returns the relic to Jerusalem after recovering it in his victory over Chosroes (he actually returned only half the cross, the other he brought back to Constantinople) (Fig. 6). Bessarion must have known the cycle well from his time in Florence. Bessarion was named protector of the Franciscan order in 1458, and was thus in a unique position of personal and official authority to encourage and even influence the concept and design of a symbol of the order. The development was no doubt further encouraged by Sixtus IV's canonization of Bonaventure in 1482.

In its descent from Bonaventure, the emblem of the order, in which Christ's arm crosses with that of St. Francis, continued to reflect the major role the Order played in the history of efforts to reunite the main branches of Christianity, while also expressing the community's devotion to Francis's imitation of Christ and the indissoluble fraternal bond between the members of the order. Bessarion's reprise of the idea and basic scheme of Bonaventure's emblem helped to inspire the underlying theme of the device and inaugurate its ubiquitous adoption in the succeeding years: the spiritual consanguinity of all humans engendered by Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.

⁵ For a recent survey of the earliest, i.e., late fifteenth-century, examples, see Cesare Tinelli, "Überlegungen zum Franziskanischen Wappen," in *800 Jahre Franz von Assisi. Franziskanische Kunst und Kultur des Mittelalters*, exhib. cat. (Vienna: Amt der NÖ Landesmuseums, 1982), 376-81. None can be dated before Bessarion's cardinalcy.

⁶ See Raimondo Leonertz, in *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, 12 vols (Vatican City: Ente per l'Enciclopedia Cattolica e per il Libro Cattolico, 1949-54), II, cols. 1497-8.

⁷ On this gesture in relation to the liturgy, see Barbara Baert, *A Heritage of Holy Wood: The Legend of the True Cross in Text and Image* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 124-32.



Fig 5. *Michael VII Doukas and Maria of Alania, Phillip D. Whitting, Byzantine Coins. (New York: Putnam, 1973), No. 457.*

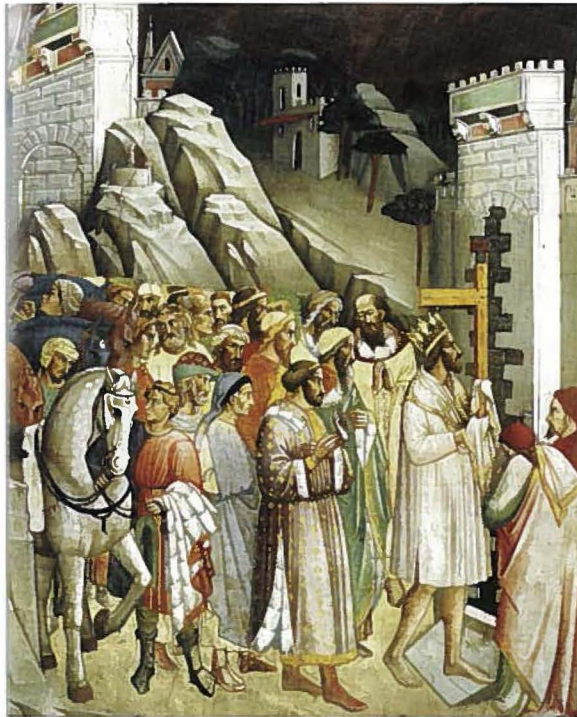


Fig 6.