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Francis, France, the French. Was French culture in fact central to St. Francis of Assisi?

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Abstract: This article explores Francis of Assisi's relationship with France, starting with his name, and concluding that the importance of courtly culture for his personal development is generally overestimated in scholarship. In some hagiographic sources, it is indeed said that Francis used to praise God in French, but the contexts make it clear that this ability is instilled by the Holy Spirit and is therefore a glossolalic ('divinely inspired speech') phenomenon. Other references to French culture appear only in hagiographic legends, never in the writings of Francis, and are mainly attributable to the cultural climate of the period in which these later works were written.

Keywords: Saint Francis of Assisi, courtly culture, glossolalia, hagiographic legends, writings of Francis

1 Francis

St. Francis of Assisi's (1181 or 1182–1226) connection with France is evident from his name. He was baptized John at his birth, while Peter of Bernardone was away on business across the Alps. Once his father returned home, however, he decided to call him Francis, as we are informed by the *Legenda trium sociorum*, a collection of

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stories about his life that is attributed to three disciples of the saint, written in the years 1246–1247:¹

Franciscus de civitate Assisii oriundus quae in finibus Spoletanae vallis est sita, *Iohannes* prius est vocatus a matre, a patre vero tunc redeunte *de Francia* in cuius absentia natus erat, *Franciscus* est postmodum nominatus (*Legenda Trium Sociorum, Fontes*, 2, 1, 1375).²

1.1 First attestations of the name

Franciscus is an ethnic adjective derived from the Germanic **frankisk*, used to indicate initially an affiliation with the Frankish people, and subsequently the French.³ More generally, it signals French origin (the ‘country inhabited by the Franks’), or some relationship with it. In the 7th century Isidore of Seville mentioned the axes used as weapons by the Franks, the *secures franciscas* (“*Secures signa sunt quae ante consules ferebantur, quas et Hispani ab usu Francorum per derivationem Franciscas vocant*”, *Etymol.* XVIII, VI, 9, ed. Cantó Llorca 2007, 88). *Francisca* (also known as the *via Francigena* or *Francorum*)⁴ was the name of the road that ran from France to Rome, all the way down to Apulia, where there were the ports of embarkation for pilgrims and crusaders travelling to the Holy Land. In 884, forty ‘French’ *solidi* (*solidos XL franciscos*) appeared in Farfa, while in 1058, also in Farfa, there lived a *Iohannes Franciscus Rambaldi* whose appellative can be regarded as perhaps one of the first instances of the adjective being used as an epithet.⁵ Du Cange also records

1 The *Legenda trium sociorum* is largely traced on the *De inceptione vel fundamento Ordinis* of Brother John, who around 1240–1241 collected in Perugia the memories of his companions Egidio from Assisi and Brother Bernardo from Quintavalle, organizing them in a work later published as by an anonymous from Perugia. I quote all the texts from the 1995 edition *Fontes Franciscani*. The English translation is Armstrong/Hellmann/Short (1999–2001), also published online on the website of the Commission on the Franciscan Intellectual-Spiritual Tradition, cf. <<https://franciscantradition.org>>. For other editions consulted for this article, please refer to the final bibliography. A French translation with useful introductions to these texts is published in Dalarun (2010). I do not think that the *Vita breviar* of Thomas of Celano, recently discovered by Jacques Dalarun (cf. Dalarun 2015), adds anything new to the perspective taken in this article, and I have therefore preferred not to take it into consideration for the time being.

2 *The Legend of the Three Companions*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short (2000), vol. 2, 2, 68: “Francis was raised in the city of Assisi, which is located in the boundaries of the valley of Spoleto. His mother at first called him John; but when his father, who had been away when he was born, returned from France, he later named him Francis”.

3 Cf. De Felice (1978, 175); DI 2, 101–102 s.v. *Francia* and 135–136.

4 Cf. Bihl (1926, 494–495), with the indication of the first documents in which the *via* is indicated.

5 Cf. Brattö (1953, 127).

the medieval Latin *franciscus* as ‘relative to the Franks’ from the end of the 11th century (“Franciscus appellatus primum videtur, quicumque Francos frequentabat, dehinc nomen proprium esse coepit”, vol. III, 592b). It is present as a name in a Latin Perugian document from 1036, which mentions two witnesses referred to in the following terms: “et Francisco et duobus filii sui”. Holding an ethnic value, *franciscus* / *francesco* was used as a nickname and name from the 11th to the middle of the 13th century: it appears as a nickname in Tuscan documents in 1126 in Florence, in 1133 in Lucca and in 1158 in Pisa.⁶ In the *ritmo laurenziano* (1188–1198) indicates someone ‘who was born in France, who comes from France’: “Né latino né tedesco, | né lombardo né francesco | suo mellior re no ’nvestisco, | tant’è di bontade fresco”.⁷ It also appears later in the vernacular in Sieneese documents from the 1230s (“Ugho fratello del maestro Francesco”, Doc. sen. XIII pm., 176.22; “Francescho e Fidança” Doc. sen. 1235, 136.14, “Franciescho Machari” Doc. sen. 1235 85.2, etc.).⁸ It was only towards the end of the 13th century and especially from the 14th century onwards that it became a religious name for the prestige and cult of Francis, canonized in 1228.⁹

On the other hand, it should be added that *Francus* and *Franciscus* carry the additional etymological meaning of a ‘man of free condition’, since in the early Middle Ages in countries dominated by the Franks only the later enjoyed the full rights of free citizens. In medieval Latin the adjectives / names *Francus* and *Franciscus* were therefore also a determinant of political-social condition which indicated ‘the condition of being free’ (cf. TLF s.v. *franc*³).

1.2 The explanation of the name *Francis* in Franciscan sources

From what we read in the *Legenda Trium Sociorum*, therefore, it seems that the father gave his son John the nickname “Francis” after his baptism, either because he was born while his father was in France, or, we can suppose, as a tribute to the country to which the family fortune was owed.¹⁰

6 Cf. Brattö (1953, 127). The similar *Francus* in these years is still a nickname: cf. Brattö (1953, 38).

7 Cf. Castellani (1986, 192).

8 I take these texts from the OVI database, to which I also refer the relevant bibliography; for other examples, cf. also *francésco* in DI 2, 103–107. For documents from 1036 and 1058, cf. Bihl (1926, 503).

9 Cf. Brattö 1953 (13 e 38); 127: “All’epoca del Libro di Montaperti [n.r. 1260] Franciscus, nome proprio, è sempre connesso con *francesco*, nome comune, che vale *francese*, come ancora in Dante”; *ibid.*, 128: “Prima del 1200 *Franciscus* è molto raro nei documenti toscani. Nel Duecento si fa meno raro, probabilmente sotto l’influsso delle relazioni intensificate con la Francia”. For the rapid dissemination of the name *Francesco* in 14th-century Tuscany, cf. De La Roncière (1975, 27–103).

10 Bihl (1926, 507) recalls the habit of calling children after the land where their fathers traded, and for this reason, refers to a 19th-century source (Davidsohn 1896, 791); however, this statement is not

The information relating to the life of Francis comes largely from the hagiographic sources available to us.¹¹ Pope Gregory IX entrusted a friar minor from Abruzzo, Thomas of Celano, with the composition of the legend, which was written in the period between the canonization ceremony of July 1228 and the beginning of 1229 (*Vita beati Francisci*, commonly called *Vita prima*). Julian of Speyer composed a *Legenda ad usum chori* around 1230, which relied heavily on the *Vita prima*, for the liturgical needs of the friars.¹² In response to the subsequent proliferation of unverifiable accounts in the fifteen years following the *Vita prima*, the General Chapter of Friars Minor gathered in Genoa in 1244, under the Minister General Crescentius of Jesi, to promote a compilation of memoirs relating to the deeds and miracles of the saint of Assisi. The “memoirs” of Brother Leo, Francis’ constant companion in the later years of his life, included a large part of the materials collected between 1246 and 1247, which later became part of a manuscript produced between 1310 and 1312 at the Sacred Convent of Assisi. It was published several times, known above all under the title *Compilatio assisiensis* or *Legenda antiqua perusina*. Another collection, datable to 1317 and called *Speculum perfectionis*, seems to rely on the same materials.¹³ On the basis of the testimonies gathered between 1246 and 1247, friar Thomas of Celano wrote a new hagiographic legend in the same two-year period, entitled *Memoriale de gestis et verbis sanctissimi patris nostri Francisci*, but commonly referred to as *Vita secunda* (also known as *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul* from the incipit *memoriale in desiderio animae*); then, between 1250 and 1254, he composed a collection of *Miracula beati Francisci*, called *Tractatus de miraculis*.¹⁴

Drawing on the biblical model (“Vir erat in terra Hus, nomine Job” Job 1, 1), Thomas of Celano’s *Vita prima* begins with the laconic declaration that a man named Francis lived in Assisi (I, 1, 1 “Vir erat in civitate Assisii, quae in finibus vallis Spoletanae sita est, nomine Franciscus”, ‘In the city of Assisi, which is located at the edge of the Spoleto valley, there was a man named Francis’). At the beginning of the third part, which is dedicated to his canonization and miracles, Thomas returns to the name, explaining its profound reason and emphasizing its etymological meaning: Francis’s name could well derive from the fact that his heart was noble and ‘frank’, his soul ‘free’ and liberal, safe, and fearless, full of every virtue:

supported by other examples except that of Francis, and is therefore more like a hypothesis. The volume n. L of the *Acta sanctorum*, 559 dwells on the question of the imposition of the name.

11 A good summary description of these sources is in Rusconi (1997).

12 According to recent studies, the author of the *Legenda ad usum chori* is Julian of Speyer and not, as previously believed, Thomas of Celano, cf. Rava/Sedda (2011, 107–175).

13 Cf. Dalarun (2011, 29–48).

14 Thomas is also the author of the *Legenda sanctae Clarae virginis*, while the *Dies irae*, which was attributed to him, is probably a century earlier.

Quanta nempe in sola *Francia Franciscus* mirabilia patrat, ubi ad deosculandum et adorandum capitale, quo sanctus Franciscus in infirmitate fuerat usus, Francorum rex et regina et universi magnates accurrunt? Ubi etiam sapientes orbis et litteratissimi viri, quorum copiam super omnem terram *Parisius* maximam ex more producit, Franciscum virum idiotam et verae simplicitatis totiusque sinceritatis amicum, humiliter et devotissime venerantur, admirantur et colunt. *Et vere Franciscus, qui super omnes cor francum et nobile gessit.* Norunt quippe qui magnanimitatem eius experti sunt, *quam liber, quam liberalis* in omnibus fuit, *quam securus et impavidus* in omnibus existitit, *quanta virtute*, quanto fervore animi cuncta saecularia conculcavit (Thomas de Celano, *Vita Prima, Fontes*, 120, 5–7, 400).¹⁵

In the case of Francis, in short, it really seemed that the meaning of the Latin phrase used to express the concept, much considered throughout the Middle Ages, of the augural value attributed to the name (*nomen omen* ‘the name as an omen’) had come true. It should also be noted that, out of all the regions that are graced by Francis’ intercessions, the only one mentioned in this passage is France. This – it has been said – can be seen as a homage to the country that is home to the famous University of Paris, and therefore an homage to learning from an uneducated man.¹⁶

In Thomas of Celano’s *Vita secunda*, the choice of the name *Franciscus* even becomes the work of Providence, so that the nature of his apostolate would be more quickly recognized by the world through that singular and unusual name, a consideration that confirms that, at the time, the name was anything but widespread:

Franciscus, servus et amicus Altissimi, cui divina providentia hoc vocabulum indidit, ut ex singulari et insueto nomine opinio ministerii eius toti citius innotesceret orbi, a matre propria Ioannes vocatus fuit, cum de filio irae, ex aqua et Spiritu Sancto renascens, gratiae filius est effectus (Thomas de Celano, *Vita secunda Sancti Francisci, Fontes*, 3, 1, 445).¹⁷

¹⁵ “Just in France, Francis has worked so many miracles in France alone that the Frankish king and queen and all the nobility hasten to kiss and venerate the pillow that Saint Francis used during his illness; where also the wise and most literate men in the world, whom Paris usually produces more abundantly than anywhere else, humbly and devotedly venerate, admire, and revere Francis, an uneducated man, a friend of true simplicity and whole-hearted sincerity. He is truly *France-ish* whose heart was so frank and free. Those who experienced the greatness of his soul know well how free and freeing he was in everything, how intrepid and fearless in all circumstances. With great strength and bravery he trampled upon every worldly thing” (Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, 120, 290).

¹⁶ This is the opinion expressed by Dalarun (1996, 86).

¹⁷ “*Francis* was the name of this servant and friend of the Most High. Divine Providence gave him this name, unique and unusual, that the fame of his ministry should spread even more rapidly throughout the whole world. He was named *John* by his own mother when, being, *born again through water and the Holy Spirit* he was changed from a *child of wrath* into a *child of grace*” (Thomas of Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 3, 241).

Compared to the *Vita prima*, Thomas emphasizes here that the child is touched by grace from the beginning. In this way, the first baptismal name, Ioannes, becomes more significant, because it immediately identifies him as a prophet. This is why in his *Minor Legend* (1260–1262) St. Bonaventure specifies that Francis never abandoned the meaning of the name given to him by his mother:

Hic nimirum de vallis Spoletanae partibus, civitate Assisii, trahens originem, primumque Ioannes vocatus a matre, dehinc Franciscus a patre, nominationis quidem paternae vocabulum tenuit, sed et *rem materni nominis non reliquit* (Bonaventura de Balneoregio, *Legenda Minor, Fontes*, 1, 3, 965).¹⁸

An extensive onomasiological note would be developed some thirty years later in the *Legenda sanctorum* (1260–1298) by the Dominican Jacopo de Voragine, which explains how ‘John’ was called ‘Francis’ primarily to highlight the miracle of his having learned the French language from God: when he was filled with the ardor of the Holy Spirit, he always professed words of fire, speaking miraculously in French.¹⁹

Franciscus prius dictus est *Johannes*, sed postmodum mutato nomine *Franciscus* uocatus est. Cujus mutationis multiplex causa fuisse uidetur. Primo ratione miraculi connotandi; *linguam enim gallicam miraculose a Deo recepisse cognoscitur*, unde dicitur in legenda sua quia semper cum *ardore sancti spiritus repletur ardentia uerba foris eructans gallice loquebatur* (Jacopo de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, Maggioni 1998, vol. 2, CXLV, 1–4, 1016).²⁰

Even the Apostles, gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, were *filled with the Holy Spirit* and began to *speak in other tongues* as the Spirit gave them the

¹⁸ “Francis was born in the city of Assisi in the regions of the Spoleto valley. First called *John* by his mother, and then Francis by his father, he held on to the name his father gave him but *did not abandon the meaning of the name given by his mother*” (Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, *The Minor Legend*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, I, 684).

¹⁹ This idea, along with some others by Jacopo de Voragine, is taken up by an anonymous poet from the end of the 13th century: “Fertur ob hoc tandem *Francisci* nomen adeptus, | quod sibi Francorum sit *caelitus* indita lingua; | qua fervens in laude Dei consueverat uti; | sicque *Dei nutu* magis est a patre vocatus, | nominis ut fieret *novitate* celebrior orbi. | Vere Franciscus, qui convertens pereuntes, | Francos de servis peccati fecit, et in se | cor mirabiliter francum seu nobile gessit”, addition to Henricus Abrincensis, *Legenda S. Francisci versificata, Fontes*, I, 5, 1212.

²⁰ “Francis was first named John, but later was called Francis. It seems that there were many reasons for this change. First, it was to call attention to a miracle, because it is known that he miraculously received from God [the ability to speak] the French language. For in his Legend it is related that whenever he was filled with the ardor of the Holy Spirit, he would burst out with ardent words in French” (Jacopo de Voragine, *Dominican Hagiography and Sermons*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, I, 790).

power to express themselves. And the words of fire in the *Legenda (ardentia ... verba)* cannot help but recall the tongues of fire that appeared to Jesus' disciples on that occasion, dividing and descending upon them ("dispertitae linguae tamquam ignis", *Acts of the Apostles*, cha 2, 3). The importance of this source in relation to the interpretation of the saint's linguistic ability will be examined in more detail below.

The Legend continues by adding three arguments already encountered in the Thomas of Celano's *Vita secunda*: that it was divine Providence that imposed this appellation on him, the fame of his ministry spread more rapidly throughout the world due to his singular and unusual name; that he was 'free' from sin and would have freed many slaves to sin, which refers back to the etymological meaning of the Germanic **frankisk*; and to indicate his greatness of heart. The Franks, in fact, derive their name from pride, because pride and greatness of heart is naturally inherent in them:

Secundo ratione officii diuulgandi; unde dicitur in legenda quia diuina prouidentia sibi hoc uocabulum indidit ut ex singulari et insueto nomine opinio ministerii eius toti citius innotesceret orbi. Tertio ratione effectus consequendi, ut scilicet per hoc daretur intelligi quod ipse per se et per filios suos multos seruos peccati et dyaboli debebat francos et liberos facere. Quarto ratione magnanimitatis in corde; nam franci a *feritate* sunt dicti, quia eis inest naturalis *feritas* et magnanimitas animorum (Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, Maggioni 1998, vol. 2, CXLV, 5–9, 1016).²¹

The fifth reason given is the aforementioned *securae franciscas* of Isidore of Seville (*Etymol.* XVIII, VI, 9): the power of his word was so great that it would smash vices like an axe. Two other reasons are required to reach the symbolic number of seven: the sixth is that he was called Francis for the terror he aroused in demons, when he practiced exorcisms, and the seventh is the security that comes from his virtue and his irreproachable conduct; 'franciscas', in fact, was the name of the axe-shaped insignia that were brought before the Roman consuls to incite terror and ensure safety:

²¹ "The second reason was to make manifest to all Francis's purpose in life. For his Legend says that divine Providence caused this name to be given to him, so that by means of such a distinctive and unusual name the report of his ministry would more quickly become known to the whole world. The third reason was to indicate the effects that would follow, for by this name all would understand that through his own ministry and that of his many sons he would set free and enfranchise many slaves of sin and of the devil. The fourth reason was to indicate his magnanimity of heart. For the Franks get their name from the Latin *feritas*, or fierceness, because in the French there is a natural *fierceness* and greatness of soul" (Jacopo de Voragine, *Dominican Hagiography and Sermons*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 1, 790–791). I amend the English translation which shows *ferocitas* for *feritas* and *truthfulness* for *fierceness* (against a Latin text with *ferocitate* and *veritas*).

Quinto ratione uirtuositatis in sermone, quia eius sermo instar securis uitia incidebat. Sexto ratione terroris in demonum fugatione. Septimo ratione securitatis ex uirtute et operum perfectione; aiunt enim francisca dici signa quedam instar securium que Rome ante consules ferebantur, que erant in terrorem et in securitatem (Jacopo de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, Maggioni 1998, vol. 2, CXLV, 10–13, 1016–1017).²²

1.3 The dissemination of the name *Francis*

When did the child first go by the name of Francis? According to Thomas of Celano, it was immediately after his father's return from France. Jacopo de Voragine's first reason – that he was called 'Francis' because he spoke 'French' – would not apply in this case, because infants cannot speak. According to the *Chronico pontificum et imperatorum* by Matinus Oppaviensis (who died in 1278) this name was adopted only after his conversion, "qui Franciscus ante suam conversionem vocabatur Iohannes" (*Mon. Germ. Hist. Scriptores*, XXII, 438). Some modern scholars believe that the name may instead have been given to him by his fellow citizens, since he visited France and "played the Frenchman" while helping his father with his business.²³ We could continue to speculate, but it is impossible to know for certain.

In any case, the anecdote about the name change has aroused suspicion among scholars, considering the fact that it has been loaded it with meaning by some hagiographers in order to present Francis as a new Saint John the Baptist, who comes into this world to prepare the ways for the Lord. Even if there are no documents to support the name change with incontrovertible data, and the only thing that can be verified is that he was always called Francis, the existence of the aforementioned *Iohannes franciscus* from Farfa in 1058 nevertheless lends plausibility to it.

22 "The fifth reason was because of his skill in speech, for his preaching, like a battle ax, would cut into vices. Sixth, by reason of their fear when he would put the demons to flight. Seventh, by reason of his security in virtue, the perfection of his works, and his honorable dealings with others. For it is said that the term *franciscæ* is used for the ax-shaped insignia which at Rome was carried before the consuls, and which generated terror and a sense of security and honor" (Jacopo de Voragine, *Dominican Hagiography and Sermons*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 1, 791).

23 Cf. Gobry (1959, 16). Le Goff (1999, 39) is also of this opinion: "Des trois principales hypothèses qui ont été avancées: le changement de prénom par le père à son retour du pays dont il aurait donné le nom au nouveau-né, l'hommage rendu plus tard à la mère qui aurait été française – ce qui n'est pas du tout prouvé –, la persistance d'un surnom qui lui aurait été donné dans sa jeunesse à cause de son engouement pour la langue française, la dernière paraît la plus vraisemblable. Le français qu'il apprit avant sa conversion, parce qu'il était la langue par excellence de la poésie et des sentiments chevaleresques, continua à être la langue de ses effusions intimes."

Giovanni was one of the most common religious names in Italy around 1182, with very ancient origins, while Francesco, as Jacopo de Voragine already noted, was quite rare. It is therefore likely that the child was baptized with a classical name, and subsequently gained a nickname (*agnomen*) which had a meaning in his family context. Since this nickname was not very common, we can imagine that it was used so frequently that it eventually displaced the first name. After all, it was precisely in those years, between the 12th and 13th centuries, that a turning point in customs of naming was taking place; people were beginning to combine the first name with a second name, which was a form of nickname from which surnames would eventually derive.²⁴ Single names gradually withdrew in favour of complex names of various origins: patronymic relations, professions, geographical origins, nicknames derived from physical or moral particularities, and so on. The sequence of names in *Johannes Franciscus* from the *Legenda sanctorum* makes sense in this context. In our case, then, *Franciscus* was also probably used as a nickname alongside the religious name *Johannes* and referred to ‘France’ and / or the etymological meaning of ‘free’, to be interpreted in a more or less metaphorical way. *Franciscus* could have become a surname, as was in fact the case for the variants that are attested in Italy *Franceschi*, *De Franceschi*, *De Francesco*, *De Francisci*, *De Franciscis*, *Di Francesco*, in addition to the derivations *Franceschelli*, *Franceschetti*, *Franceschetto*, *Franceschet*, *Franceschini*, *Franceschin*, *Franceschinel*, *Francescotti*, *Francesconi*, *Francescon*, *Francescato*, and the abbreviated *Cecchi*, *Ceschi*, *Checchi*, *Chini*, *Cicco*.²⁵ Due to the prestige and the cult of the saint of Assisi, however, Francis spread throughout Italy mainly as a religious name from the 13th century onwards, until it became one of the most common. In the *Book of Montaperti* studied by Olaf Bråtto and dated 1260, *Iohannes* was the second most popular name after *Jacob*, with *Franciscus* already in 17th place out of 203 names.²⁶

2 The French

But did Francis indeed speak French, as we read in Jacopo de Voragine? The first hagiographers also mention this detail; they often recount the same episodes and insist upon the saint’s possession of this linguistic competence.

²⁴ Cf. Bortolami (1996, 457), with other bibliography.

²⁵ See all the variants listed by De Felice (1978, 127–128) and Sestito (2016, 27–31, 41–59).

²⁶ Cf. Bråtto (1953, 1–12).

2.1 First attestations of Francis's language skills

The *Legenda sancti Francisci versificata*, written by the cleric Henri of Avranches at the beginning of 1229, is the oldest of the handed down Lives on Francis of Assisi.²⁷ In this version, the bandits hear Francis' song in the *lingua Francorum* resounding in the forest, and it is this that prompts them to ambush him:

Inde resultandi tot agens in pectore causas, Franciscus *lingua Francorum psallere coepit*. Silva sonum geminans latronum perculit aures; exsiliunt inopemque vident; spes excidit, et se illos reputant indignanterque requirunt: "Tu quis es?". Ille refert: "Christi sum praeco; quid ad vos?" (Henricus Abrincensis, *Legenda sancti Francisci versificata*, *Fontes*, IV, 26–33, 1152).²⁸

Thomas of Celano recounts in the *Vita prima* that, while singing God's praises in the *lingua Francigena*, Francis was attacked by some bandits who threw him into a ditch full of snow. He immediately got up and continued unperturbed:

Iam enim cum semicinctiis involutus pergeret, qui quondam *scarulaticis* utebatur, et per quamdam silvam laudes Domino *lingua francigena* decantaret, latrones super eum subito irruerunt. Quibus ferali animo eum quis esset, interrogantibus, confidenter vir Dei plena voce respondit dicens: "Praeco sum magni Regis! Quid ad vos?". At illi percipientes eum, in defosso loco pleno magnis nivibus proiecerunt dicentes: "Iace, rustice praeco Dei!". Ipse vero se huc atque illuc revolvens, nive a se discussa, illis recedentibus, se fovea exsilivit, et magno exhilaratus gaudio, coepit alta voce per nemora laudes Creatori omnium personare (Thomas de Celano, *Vita prima*, *Fontes*, 16, 1–4, 291).²⁹

The same episode is taken up by other hagiographers dependent on Thomas of Celano, who also record that he spoke this language fluently. In his versification of a

²⁷ Concerning the questions of the sources and the dating, Bösch (2017, 5–37) comes to the conclusion that the main source of the *Legenda versificata* is not the *Vita beati Francisci* of Thomas of Celano, as traditionally assumed, but an unknown preform of it, which he calls in accordance with Zefferino Lazzeri the "Legenda prima".

²⁸ "So many reasons for rejoicing transacting within his breast, Francis opens up in song in the language of the French. It resounds through the woods and reaches the ears of some robbers. They leap forth and see a fellow with nothing. Their hopes disappointed, they think they've been fooled, and they throw out their query: – Who are you? – . And he replies: – The herald of Christ, why ask? –" (Henri of Avranches, *The Versified Life of Saint Francis*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, 25–30, 453).

²⁹ "He who once enjoyed wearing scarlet robes now traveled about half-clothed. Once while he was singing praises to the Lord in French in a certain forest, thieves suddenly attacked him. When they savagely demanded who he was, the man of God answered confidently and forcefully: – I am the herald of the great King! What is it to you? – They beat him and threw him into a ditch filled with deep snow, saying: – Lie there, you stupid herald of God! – After they left, he rolled about to and fro, shook the snow off himself and jumped out of the ditch. Exhilarated with great joy, he began in a loud voice to make the woods resound with praises to the Creator of all" (Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, 16, 194).

rhythmic office (*Officium Sancti Francisci*, 1232–1235) that was written alongside texts derived from the Thomas’ *Life* to be used for recitation in the Minorite breviary, the German Friar Minor Julian of Speyer recites:

R – *Responsoria*

R. Dum *seminudo* corpore

Laudes decantat *gallice*

Zelator novae legis,

Latronibus in nemore

Respondet sic propheticè:

“Praeco sum magni Regis”.

V. Audit, in nivis frigore

Proiectus: “Iace, rustice”,

Futurus pastor gregis (*Juliani de Spira Officium Sancti Francisci, Fontes*, 1112).³⁰

Brother Julian also takes up this episode in the *Vita sancti Francisci*, which was written in Paris. It follows Celano’s *Vita* very closely, often to the letter, as can be seen here in the saint’s question (“Praeco sum magni Regis! Quid ad vos?”) and in the brigands’ answer (“Iace, rustice praeco Dei!”). Francis wanders in the forest half-naked and sings the praises of God *in gallica lingua*:

Postquam ergo beatus Franciscus immanitatem paternae persecutionis evaserat, accidit die quadam ut ipse novae legis zelator in quodam nemore *seminudus* incederet, et sic Domino *laudes in gallica lingua decantans*, subito in latrones incideret. Quibus ferali modo quisnam esset quaerentibus, nil trepidans propheticè sic respondit: “Praeco sum magni Regis! Quid ad vos?”. At illi indignantes servum Dei in foveam nivibus plenam post verbera proiecerunt, et futuro dominici gregis pastori taliter insultando dixerunt: “Iace, rustice praeco Dei!”. Ipse vero, recedentibus illis nefariis, de fovea laetus exsiliit, et omnium Creatori laudes alacriore voce personuit (*Juliani de Spira Vita Sancti Francisci, Fontes*, II 10, 1–4, 1033–1034).³¹

30 “14. *Responsories* IV R. The rags upon his back were few, | As songs of praise in French he sang, | Championing a charter new. | Thieves, accosting him in woods, | Are answered in prophetic tones: | – The Great King’s herald am I. – | V. Thrown into freezing snow, he heard, | The future shepherd of his flock, | – Lie down there, you rustic boor! –” (Julian of Speyer, *The Divine Office of Saint Francis*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, 334).

31 “After Francis had escaped the inhuman persecution of his father, it happened that one day this zealot of the new law was walking along half-naked in a forest, singing the praises of the Lord in French, when he suddenly *fell among robbers*. When they asked him gruffly who in the world he was, he responded prophetically without fear: – I am the herald *of the great King!* What is that to you? –. But they indignantly whipped the servant of God, threw him into a snow-filled ditch, and insulted the future shepherd of the Lord’s flock saying, – Lie there, stupid herald of God! –. When the brigands departed, he jumped out of the ditch joyfully, and more energetically sang praises to the Creator of all.” (Julian of Speyer, *The Life of Saint Francis*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, 10, 376).

Having become Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor in 1257, after having served as Master of Theology in Paris, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio was commissioned by the General Chapter held in Narbonne in 1260 to draw up a new *legend* of an official nature, which was approved by the General Chapter of Pisa in 1263. The General Chapter of the Order, which met in Paris in 1266, also ordered the destruction of all previous Franciscan *legends*, to promote the exclusive dissemination of the biographical and hagiographic reconstruction offered by the *Vita beati Francisci* (usually called *Legenda Maior*, to distinguish it from Bonaventure's *Minor Vita* or *Legenda Minor*, which was a summary of the *Legenda Maior* designed for liturgical use). Bonaventure's *Life* was a skilful reworking of Thomas of Celano's previous biographies on a religious and political-ecclesiastical level, and it also had a great influence on artistic representations of the saint and his stories. Although another Minorite General Chapter, convened in Padua in 1276, revoked the drastic disposition to destroy the previous Franciscan *legendae*, Bonaventure's writing came to represent an effective filter for the image of St Francis in the following centuries.

The episode of the brigands was not censored by Bonaventure in the *Legenda maior*, which retains the episode of Francis walking in the forest and joyfully reciting the praises of God in the *lingua Francorum*:

Dumque per silvam quamdam iter faciens, laudes Domino *lingua Francorum* vir Dei Franciscus decantaret cum iubilo, latrones super eum ex abditis irruerunt. Quibus ferali animo, quis esset, interrogantibus vir Dei, confidentia plenus, prophetica voce respondit: "Praeco sum", inquit, "magni Regis". At illi percutientes eum, in defossum locum plenum nivibus proiecerunt, dicentes: "Iace, rustice praeco Dei!". Ipse vero illis recedentibus exsiivit de fovea, magnoque exhilaratus gaudio, altiore coepit voce per nemora laudes Creatori omnium personare (Bonaventura de Balneoregio, *Legenda maior*, *Fontes*, II, 5, 2–5, 791).³²

Nor was it omitted from the *Legenda minor*:

Solutus exinde mundi contemptor a vinculis terrenarum cupidinum, dum, civitate relicta, securus et liber laudes Domino in medio nemorum *gallica lingua cantaret*, occurrentibus sibi latronibus, magni Regis praeco non timuit, nec a laude cessavit, utpote qui viator *seminudus*

32 "While Francis, the man of God, was making his way through a certain forest, singing with glee praises to the Lord in French, robbers suddenly rushed upon him from an ambush. When they asked who he was, the man of God, filled with confidence, replied in a prophetic voice: – I am the herald of the great King! –. But they beat him and threw him into a ditch filled with snow, saying: – Lie there, you stupid herald of God! –. After they left, he jumped out of the ditch, and exhilarated with great joy, he began in an even louder voice to make the woods resound with praises to the Creator of all" (Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, *The Life of Blessed Francis*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 5, 539).

et vacuus erat et apostolico more in tribulatione gaudebat (Bonaventura de Balneoregio, *Legenda Minor*, Fontes, I, 8, 1–2, 970–971).³³

The recurring detail of the protagonist's semi-nakedness makes the reference to biblical models more transparent, recalling the story of the pilgrim in Jericho as told by Luke.³⁴ In the Gospel parable, however, it is the thieves who stripped the unfortunate man, whereas in all the passages that I have quoted so far, Francis walks half-dressed in the forest even before meeting the robbers: in this case, it is a reference to his lifestyle of poverty, and evokes his rejection of rich clothes at the time of his conversion. He is represented as someone who is slightly feral and eccentric, walking in the forest and communing with nature, and expressing himself in a language that is not the language of everyday life. Francis wanders in the forest wearing rags while singing the praises of the lord full of joy (*magno exhilaratus gaudio, laetus, alacriore voce personuit, se gaudeat, magnoque exhilaratus gaudio, gaudebat*), a detail to which I will return shortly.

2.2 The role of French in the story

In the *Legenda trium sociorum* there is another interesting episode that does not appear in Thomas of Celano's *Vita prima*. Shortly after his conversion, Francis was working on the restoration of the church in San Damiano and, because he wanted the lamps in the church to be burning continuously, he went to the city to beg for oil. In one house he sees men gathered together to play a game, but at first he is ashamed to ask them for oil. Regretting this hesitation, however, he returned to the house, confessed his guilt and, with fervor of spirit, asked in French for the oil needed for the lamps in the church:

Cum autem laboraret assidue in opere ecclesiae memoratae, volens in ipsa ecclesia luminaria iugiter esse accensa, ibat per civitatem oleum mendicando. Sed, cum prope quamdam domum

³³ “Released now from the chains of all earthly desires, this scorner of the world left the town. While free and in a carefree mood, he was singing praises to the Lord in French in the middle of woods when robbers came upon him. As the herald of the great King, he was not afraid nor did he stop singing, inasmuch as a half-naked and penniless wayfarer he, like the apostles, *rejoiced in tribulation*” (Bonaventura of Bagnoregio, *The Minor Legend*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 5, 1, Eighth Lesson, 539–540).

³⁴ Cf. “Suscipiens autem Jesus, dixit: Homo quidam descendebat ab Jerusalem in Jericho, et incidit in latrones, qui etiam despoliaverunt eum: et plagis impositis abierunt semivivo relicto”, Luke 10, 30, “And Jesus answering, said: A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, who also stripped him, and having wounded him went away, leaving him half dead”.

venisset, videns ibi homines congregatos ad ludum, verecundatus coram eis eleemosynam petere, retrocessit. In seipsum vero conversus arguit se peccasse, currensque ad locum ubi ludus fiebat, dixit coram omnibus adstantibus culpam suam quod verecundatus fuerat petere eleemosynam propter eos. Et, *fervente spiritu* ad domum illam accedens, *gallice* petiit oleum amore Dei pro luminaribus ecclesiae supradictae (*Legenda Trium Sociorum, Fontes*, 24, 1–4, 1396–1397).³⁵

Out of all the texts in the hagiographic corpus, the *Legenda trium sociorum* is most closely associated with the town of Assisi, and, as Jacques Dalarun has observed, Francis' feeling of shame fits with the mental picture of a city where everyone knows each other. We do not know what those men were playing at, but we can imagine a group of friends, probably young, with whom Francis for a moment identified himself, remembering when he too attended these meetings. The use of French in this case seems functional, to overcome shame and to bring a different dimension to the exchange. Through the language of the romances of chivalry Francis is transformed, he is no longer the eccentric young man whom everyone knows, he is no longer a poor man begging for oil, but becomes a sort of knight errant engaged in his personal *quête* on the model of the *quête* par excellence, that of the Holy Grail. Through the use of French, the material *quête* is sublimated into a knightly *quête*.³⁶ As Franco Cardini rightly observed, moreover, the Latin *quaestus* ('charity') and the Old French *queste* / *quête* ("quest" – a key term used to describe the chivalric experience) are the same word in Romance languages.³⁷

The *Legenda trium sociorum* continues. Francis continues to work, note, in joy of spirit (*in gaudio spiritus*). While he carried buckets of lime, planks, and heavy stones on his shoulders, he kept asking passers-by loudly in French to help him restore the church of San Damiano, which would become the location of an Order for women around six years after his conversion:

Cum aliis autem laborantibus in opere praefato persistens, clamabat *alta voce in gaudio spiritus* ad habitantes et transeuntes iuxta ecclesiam, *dicens eis gallice*: "Venite et adiuvate me in

35 "While he was working steadily at restoring the church, he wanted to have a lamp burning continually in the church, so he went through the city begging for oil. But when he was approaching a certain house, he saw a group of men gathered for a game. Ashamed to beg in front of them, he backed away. Mulling it over, he accused himself of having sinned. Hurrying back to the place where they were playing, he told everyone standing around his fault, that he was ashamed to beg because of them. And, in fervor of spirit, he entered that house and, for the love of God, begged in French for oil for the lamps of that church" (*The Legend of the Three Companions*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, VIII, 24, 83).

36 Cf. Dalarun (1996, 54), which analyzes the succession of passages that transmit the episode of the search for oil.

37 Cf. Cardini (1983, 56).

opere ecclesiae Sancti Damiani quae futura est monasterium dominarum, quarum fama et vita in universali ecclesia glorificabitur Pater noster caelestis”.

Ecce quomodo, spiritu prophetiae repletus, vere futura praedixit. Hic est enim locus ille sacer in quo gloriosa religio et excellentissimus ordo pauperum dominarum virginumque sacrarum, a conversione beati Francisci fere sex annorum spatio consummato, per eundem beatum Franciscum felix sumpsit exordium [...] (*Legenda Trium Sociorum, Fontes, 24, 5–7, 1397*).³⁸

The second part of this episode, known as the prophecy of San Damiano, is based on the *Vita prima*:

Hic est locus ille beatus et sanctus, in quo gloriosa religio et excellentissimus ordo pauperum Dominarum et sanctarum virginum, a conversione beati Francisci fere sex annorum spatio iam elapso, per eundem beatum virum felix exordium sumpsit; in quo domina Clara, civitate Assisii oriunda, lapis pretiosissimus atque fortissimus caeterorum superpositorum lapidum exstitit fundamentum. Nam, cum post initiationem ordinis Fratrum, dicta domina sancti viri monitis ad Deum conversa fuisset, multis exstitit ad profectum et innumeris ad exemplum (Thomas de Celano, *Vita prima, Fontes, 18, 4–6, 294*).³⁹

However, it introduces three new elements: the detail of the words shouted in French, the idea of a prophecy, the nature of the prophecy itself. The words in French seem to come from a contamination with the first part of the passage: the author of the *Legenda Trium Sociorum* begins to follow the *Vita prima* but does not reject the information that he himself had previously incorporated.

The episode is repeated by Tomaso of Celano in the *Vita secunda*. This version differs from the first draft in that it adds the *questua* for the lamp oil that was missing in the *Vita prima*, the shame that follows, and the prophecy in French about the women’s monastery, albeit only briefly and using indirect speech. Thomas’s version of this passage is dependent, therefore, both on his *Vita prima* and the following

³⁸ “While laboring with others in that work, he used to cry to passers-by in a loud voice, filled with joy, saying in French: – Come and help me in the work of the church of San Damiano which, in the future, will be a monastery of ladies through whose fame and life our heavenly Father will be glorified throughout the church –. See how, filled with the spirit of prophecy, he truly foretold the future! For this is that sacred place where the glorious religion and most excellent Order of Poor Ladies and sacred virgins had its happy beginning about six years after the conversion of blessed Francis and through the same blessed Francis” (*The Legend of the Three Companions, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, VIII, 24, 83*).

³⁹ “This is the blessed and holy place where the glorious religion and most excellent Order of Poor Ladies and holy virgins had its happy beginning, about six years after the conversion of the blessed Francis and through that same blessed man. The Lady Clare, a native of the city of Assisi, the most precious and strongest stone of the whole structure, stands as the foundation for all the other stones. For after the beginning of the Order of Brothers, when this lady was converted to God through the counsel of the holy man, she lived for the good of many and as an example to countless others” (Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, I, VIII, 197*).

Legenda trium sociorum. The addition of new details and prophecy corresponds to the tendency of the *Vita secunda* to emphasise the prophetic elements, which can be attributed to displacement of the events in time and the inevitable mythification of the founder-figure:⁴⁰

Studet proinde pristinam consuetudinem delicatam ordine converso mutare, et ad naturae bonum iam lascivium reducere corpus suum. Ibat una die per Assisium homo Dei ut mendicaret oleum ad luminaria concinnanda in ecclesia Sancti Damiani, quam tunc temporis reparabat. Et videns hominum multitudinem ludentium ante domum consistere quam intrare volebat, rubore perfusus retraxit pedem. Sed illo suo nobili spiritu in caelum directo, propriam desidiam arguit et de semetipso sumit iudicium. Revertitur statim ad domum, et libera voce coram omnibus verecundiae causam exponens, *quasi spiritu ebrius lingua gallica* petit oleum et acquirit. Ferventissime ad opus illius ecclesiae animat omnes, et monasterium futurum esse ibidem sanctarum virginum Christi, audientibus cunctis, gallice loquens clara voce prophetat. Semper enim cum ipse *ardore Sancti Spiritus* repletur, *ardentia* verba foris eructans *gallice loquebatur*, se apud illam gentem praecipue honorandum praenosens, et reverentia speciali colendum (Thomas de Celano, *Vita secunda Sancti Francisci*, *Fontes*, VIII, 13, 1–7, 455).⁴¹

Note, however, that compared to the *Legenda trium sociorum*, Thomas emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiring his words. As in previous episodes, the use of French seems to involve a transfiguration. Francis speaks in ecstasy that takes him out of himself, drunk with the spirit, transformed, and altered.

Francis' prophecy about a women's order, expressed in French while he was restoring the church of Saint Damian shortly after his conversion, finally returns in the *Testamentum* (1253) of Saint Clare, again as a direct quote:

Ascendens enim tunc temporis super murum dictae ecclesiae, quibusdam pauperibus ibi iuxta morantibus, alta voce *lingua francigena* loquebatur: Venite et adiuuate me in opere monasterii Sancti Damiani, quoniam adhuc erunt dominae ibi, quarum famosa vita et conversatione sanc-

⁴⁰ The relationship between these texts is analyzed by Dalarun (1996, 55–56).

⁴¹ “He struggled to turn his earlier, luxurious way of life in a different direction, and to lead his unruly body back to its natural goodness. One day the *man of God* was going through Assisi begging oil to fill the lamps in the church of San Damiano, which he was then rebuilding. He saw a crowd carousing by the house he intended to enter. Turning bright red, he backed away. But then, turning his noble spirit toward heaven, he rebuked his cowardice and *called himself to account*. He went back immediately to the house, and frankly explained to all of them what had made him ashamed. Then, *as if drunk in the Spirit*, he spoke in French, and asked for oil, and he got it. He fervently encouraged everyone to help repair that church, and *in front of everyone* he cried out in French that some day that place would be a monastery of Christ's holy virgins. Whenever he was filled with *the fire of the Holy Spirit* he would speak in French, *bursting out in fiery words*, for he could foresee that he would be honored with special reverence by that people” (Thomas of Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, VIII, 13, 252).

ta glorificabitur Pater noster caelestis in universa Ecclesia sua sancta (Clara assisiensis, *Testamentum*, *Fontes*, 12–14, 2312).⁴²

The *Testamentum* depends on the two previous legends that reported such an important episode for the female community and follows most closely the *Legenda trium sociorum*, only in part the *Vita secunda*.

2.3 Other episodes in which Francis speaks French

Francis' ability to express himself in French is also mentioned regarding other circumstances. Again, in the *Legenda Trium Sociorum* Francis, after being mistreated by his father, stoically bears any mockery, including that of his brother, who sarcastically comments to his companion that Francis could sell him some of his sweat. Francis responds enthusiastically (*gaudio salutari perfusus, in fervore spiritus*) in French that he will certainly sell this sweat at a very high price, but to his Lord:

Praeterea multi deridentes eum videntesque ipsum sic derisum patienter omnia sustinere stupore nimio mirabantur. Unde, tempore hiemali cum orationi quodam mane insisteret contectus pauperculis indumentis, frater eius carnalis prope ipsum transiens cuidam suo concivi dixit ironice: "Dicas Francisco quod saltem unam nummatam de sudore vendat tibi". Quod audiens, vir Dei *gaudio salutari perfusus, in fervore spiritus gallice respondit*: "Ego, inquit, Domino meo care vendam sudorem istum" (*Legenda Trium Sociorum, Fontes*, 23, 6–8, 1396).⁴³

Also in the *Legenda Trium Sociorum*, Francis departs on pilgrimage to Rome and is struck by the paucity of the offerings that visitors placed before the tomb of St. Peter. He then decides to throw the entire contents of his bag full of tinkling coins over the altar grille. Then, once out of the church, he exchanged his clothes for the rags of a beggar he had just met and, taking his place, begins to ask for alms in

⁴² "Climbing the wall of that church, he shouted in French to some poor people who were standing nearby: – Come and help me in the work on the monastery of San Damiano, because there will as yet be ladies here who will glorify our heavenly Father throughout His holy, universal Church by their celebrated and holy manner of life –" (Clara of Assisi, *The Testament*, Armstrong 2006, 60).

⁴³ "Afterwards, many of those who mocked him and saw how patiently he endured every abuse marveled with great astonishment. One winter morning, while he was at prayer, dressed in poor clothes, his carnal brother was passing by, and remarked sarcastically to his companion: – You might tell Francis to sell you a penny's worth of his sweat. – When the man of God heard this, filled with a wholesome joy, he answered enthusiastically in French: – I will sell that sweat to my Lord at a high price –" (*The Legend of the Three Companions*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, VIII, 23, 82–83).

French,⁴⁴ because, as the text says, he spoke it spontaneously, though not very correctly:

Factum est autem ut tunc temporis Romam, causa peregrinationis, accederet. Et ingrediens ecclesiam Sancti Petri, consideravit oblationes quorundam quod essent modicae et ait intra se: “Cum princeps apostolorum sit magnifice honorandus, cur isti tam parvas oblationes faciunt in ecclesia ubi corpus eius quiescit?”. Sicque cum magno fervore manum ad bursam posuit et plenam denariis traxit eosque per fenestram altaris proiciens, tantum sonum fecit quod de tam magnifica oblatione omnes adstantes plurimum sunt mirati.

Exiens autem ante fores ecclesiae ubi multi pauperes aderant ad eleemosynas petendas, mutuo accepit secreto panniculos cuiusdam pauperuli hominis et suos deponens illos induit. Atque stans in gradibus ecclesiae cum aliis pauperibus *eleemosynam gallice postulabat*, quia *libenter lingua gallica loquebatur* licet ea recte loqui nesciret (*Legenda Trium Sociorum*, Fontes, 10, 2–6, 1382).⁴⁵

And again, the *Legenda Trium Sociorum* shows Francis and Brother Egidio on their way to Ancona, exulting in the Lord with enthusiasm as they walk. Only Francis sings in a loud and clear voice the praises of the Lord in French, blessing the goodness of the Most High. The two companions were as happy that it was as if they had found a treasure in the camp of Lady Poverty, for whose love they treated all earthly things with a disdain reserved for dung:

Beatus Franciscus assumens fratrem Egidium secum ivit in Marchiam Anconitanam, alii autem duo in regionem aliam perrexerunt. Euntes ergo in Marchiam exultabant vehementer in Domino, sed vir sanctus, alta et clara voce laudes Domini gallice cantans, benedicebat et glorificabat Altissimi bonitatem. Tanta vero erat in eis laetitia quasi magnum thesaurum invenissent in evangelico praedio dominae paupertatis, cuius amore omnia temporalia velut stercora contempserant liberaliter et libenter (*Legenda Trium Sociorum*, Fontes, 33, 1–3, 1405–1406).⁴⁶

⁴⁴ With a pragmatism that seems to me to risk trivializing the text, Vauchez (2010, 24) considers the fact of speaking in French as a strategy by Francis not to be understood or recognized.

⁴⁵ “At this time, he happened to go to Rome on pilgrimage. As he was entering the church of Saint Peter, he noticed the meager offerings made by some, and said to himself: – Since the Prince of the Apostles should be greatly honored, why do they make such meager offerings in the church where his body rests? – With great enthusiasm, he took a handful of coins from his money pouch, and threw them through a grating of the altar, making such a loud noise that all the bystanders were astonished at his generosity. As he was leaving and passed the doors of the church, where there were many poor people begging alms, he secretly exchanged clothes with one of those poor people and put them on. Standing on the steps of the church with the other poor, he begged for alms in French, because he would speak French spontaneously, although he did not do so correctly” (*The Legend of the Three Companions*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, III, 10, 73).

⁴⁶ “Blessed Francis, taking Brother Giles with him, went into the Marches of Ancona; the other two went into another area. While going to the Marches, they rejoiced enthusiastically in the Lord; the holy man, however, sang with a loud and clear voice, in French, the praises of the Lord, blessing and glorifying the goodness of the Most High. There was as much happiness in them as if they had found a great

The journey to Ancona with Egidio is resumed by the Anonymous of Perugia:

Dehinc assumpsit beatus Franciscus fratrem Aegidium et eum in Anconitanam Marchiam secum duxit, et duo alii remanserunt. Euntes autem in Domino non modicum exsultabant. Vir autem Dei Franciscus voce clarissima exsultavit, *gallice decantans*, laudans et benedicens Dominum (*Anonimus Perusinus, Fontes*, 15, 1–3, 1320–1321).⁴⁷

The *Compilatio Assisiensis* tells of how the sweet melody of the spirit that bubbled up inside him came out in the form of a French song, and how Francis, who improvised a viola with a stick and sang in French, ended up singing and dancing in ecstasy:

Nonnumquam [vero talia] faciebat. Dulcissima melodia spiritus intra ipsum ebulliens *exterius gallicum dabat sonum*, et vena divini susurrii, quam auris eius suscipiebat furtive, *gallicum* erumpebat in iubilum.

Lignum quandoque, ut oculis [vidi], colligebat ex terra, ipsumque sinistro brachio superponens arculum flexum tenebat in dextera, quem quasi super viellam trahens per lignum et ad hoc gestus presentans idoneos, *gallice* cantabat de Deo.

Terminabantur tota hec tripudia frequenter in lacrimas, et [in] passionis Christi compassionem hic iubilus solvebatur. Inde hic sanctus continua trahebat suspiria, et ingeminatis gemitibus, inferiorum que in manu erant oblitus, suspendebatur ad celum (*Compilatio Assisiensis, Fontes*, 38, 1–5, 1511).⁴⁸

Chiara Frugoni observes that the episodes where Francis expresses himself in a different linguistic register than usual are always special occasions, in which: “he uses the language of the paladins and knights when he needs their model, to overcome fear and shame in the name of generosity, loyalty and selfless courage”.⁴⁹

treasure in the evangelical field of Lady Poverty, for whose love they gladly and willingly disdained all worldly things as dung” (*The Legend of the Three Companions*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, IX, 33, 87).

47 “Blessed Francis then took Brother Giles with himself to the Marches of Ancona, while the other two remained behind. As they were going along, they rejoiced not a little in the Lord. Francis, the man of God, reveled in a very loud voice, singing out in French, praising and blessing the Lord” (*The Anonymous of Perugia*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, IV, 15, 40).

48 “Sometimes he used to do this: a sweet melody of the spirit bubbling up inside him would become on the outside a French tune; the *thread of a divine whisper* which *his ears heard secretly* would break out in a French song. Other times – as I saw with my own eyes – he would pick up a stick from the ground and put it over his left arm, while holding a bent bow in his right hand, drawing it over the stick as if it were a viola, performing all the right movements, and in French would sing] about God. All of this dancing often ended in tears, and the cry of joy dissolved into compassion for Christ’s suffering. Then the saint would sigh without stopping and sob without ceasing. Forgetful of lower things he had in hand, he was caught up to heaven” (*The Assisi Compilation*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 38, 142).

49 Cf. Frugoni (1995, 22).

2.4 The transformation of a motif over time

To summarise all the passages that have been mentioned, it seems that Francis was able to speak the idiom of secular songs and courtly literature, and he recited the praises of God in French when his soul was overflowing with joy. In the *Vita prima* by Thomas of Celano, and in the first hagiographers who took it as a source, Francis's ability to speak in French is described without too much emphasis. However, as time goes on, the authors elaborate on this talent by overloading it with allusions to the semantic and symbolic universe of the Bible, insisting more and more on the joy expressed by Francis as he expresses himself in another language, on his falling into a state of ecstasy and transformation. On several occasions the Holy Spirit is expressly mentioned as his source of inspiration, with the use of verbal sequences such as “fervente spiritu” and “spiritu prophetiae repletes” in the *Legenda Trium Sociorum*, “quasi spiritu ebrius” and “ardore Sancti Spiritus repleretur” in the *Vita secunda* by Thomas of Celano, and “cum ardore sancti spiritus repleretur” in the *Legenda sanctorum*. The knowledge of a language that was evidently considered foreign and incomprehensible to most people becomes the tangible manifestation of a supernatural relationship with the Holy Spirit, just as it happens in the Sacred Texts.

3 The gift of speaking tongues in biblical sources

The theme of linguistic multiplicity is recurrent in the Bible. The first book describes God's intervention among the men of Babel, who had planned to build a city and a tower in order to reach to heaven. The ambitious project did not receive the approval of God, who at one point decided to go down and confuse their language so that one did not understand the language of the other (Genesis 11:7):

Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other. (Genesis 11,7).⁵⁰

A people who were, until that day, united by a single language, believed to be a form of proto-Jewish Adamitic, is suddenly placed at the origin of different languages, a myth that embodies the human aspiration to understand and be understood by communities that use a communication system different from their own.

The biblical references continue in the Old Testament with Isaiah:

⁵⁰ For the Bible quotations in English I used the *New International Version*.

11 Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues God will speak to this people, 12 to whom he said, “This is the resting place, let the weary rest”; and, “This is the place of repose” — but they would not listen. (Prophecy of Isaiah, 28, 11–12)

In the New Testament, the ability to speak new languages is one of the signs of the believers in the Gospel of Mark:

17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; *they will speak in new tongues*; (Mark, 16, 17)

But it is in the second chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles* that – the evangelist Luke tells us – the gift is explicitly related to the Holy Spirit. The Apostles were gathered in Jerusalem in the Upper Room and, according to tradition, the Jews had flocked to Jerusalem in large numbers to celebrate Pentecost with the prescribed pilgrimage. As the day of Pentecost drew near, a sudden roar came from heaven, like a gale-force wind, and filled the whole house where they were. Tongues of fire appeared, which divided (“*dispertitae linguae tamquam ignis*” 3) and settled on each of them:

4 *et repleti sunt omnes Spiritu Sancto et coeperunt loqui aliis linguis*, prout Spiritus dabat eloqui illis. [...] *convenit multitudo et confusa est, quoniam audiebat unusquisque lingua sua illos loquentes.* 7 *Stupebant autem et mirabantur dicentes: “Nonne ecce omnes isti, qui loquuntur, Galilaei sunt?”* 8 *Et quomodo nos audimus unusquisque propria lingua nostra, in qua nati sumus?”* 9 Parthi et Medi et Elamitae et qui habitant Mesopotamiam, Iudaeam quoque et Cappadociam, Pontum et Asiam, 10 Phrygiam quoque et Pamphylia, Aegyptum et partes Libyae, quae est circa Cyrenem, et advenae Romani, 11 Iudaei quoque et proselyti, Cretes et Arabes, *audimus loquentes eos nostris linguis magnalia Dei.*

4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?” 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues! (Acts 2, 4–11).

It should also be noted that the scene repeats itself at Caesarea, where the gift of speaking tongues serves to glorify God:

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. 46 For they heard them *speaking in tongues* and praising God. (Acts 10, 44–46)

and at Ephesus:

² and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”³ So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied.⁴ Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.”⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.⁶ When Paul placed his hands on them, *the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues* and prophesied. (Acts, 19, 2–6)

The theme then punctuates the *First Letter to the Corinthians* (1 *Corinthians* 12, 8; 1 *Corinthians* 12, 30; 1 *Corinthians* 13, 1; 1 *Corinthians* 14, 1–40), in which the ability to speak tongues and the interpretation of tongues is listed several times among the divine gifts given by the Spirit for the benefit of the entire congregation:

¹⁸ I thank God that I speak *in tongues* more than all of you.¹⁹ But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.²⁰ Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.²¹ In the Law it is written:

With other tongues
and *through the lips of foreigners*
I will speak to this people,
but even then they will not listen to me,
says the Lord. (1 Corint. 14, 18–22)

And with this last quotation, which recalls the very passage of Isaiah from which we started (“But they would not listen”, Isaiah 28, 11), the circle is complete.

3.1 French as a glossolalic phenomenon

In early Christianity, therefore, this so-called glossolalia (composed of *glosso-*, from the Greek γλῶσσα ‘language’, and *-lalia*, from λαλέω ‘chatting’, then ‘speaking’) consisted, on the one hand, of the ability to pray and praise God in an unusual and unknown language, comprehensible only to those who had the gift of interpretation (according to Saint Paul, whoever has the divine grace of languages “does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit.” 1 *Corinthians* 14, 2). On the other hand, it refers to the ability to express oneself in real human tongues miraculously learned, as the apostles who, filled with the Holy Spirit, were able to make themselves understood by men of all nations. In both senses of the term, the main characteristic of glossolalia is that it is a language that is divinely inspired. The persons experiencing glossolalia, like the prophets, do not speak of their own will, but it is instead the Holy Spirit who momentarily takes

possession of them and speaks through them. The prophet, etymologically ‘the one who carries the word’, is possessed by the Spirit of God, who forces him to say certain things or perform certain actions.⁵¹

In the aforementioned passages, we saw that Saint Francis, transfigured by joy, filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke in French and sang the praises of God in French. It seems to me, therefore, that his was more properly a case of xenoglossia (composed of *xeno-*, from the Greek ξένος ‘foreigner, host’, and *-glossia*), corresponding to that particular form of glossolalia which consists of the ability to speak a foreign language that really exists without having previously learned it. French becomes in this context the foreign language *par excellence*, understandable only to those in possession of the gift of interpretation, and it excludes, in principle, the fact that Francis had had the opportunity to learn it. Xenoglossia is, by definition, a spiritual gift that allows the believer to express himself in a language unknown to them.

In the New Testament, glossolalia is often associated with madness or drunkenness, which is explained by the fact that it occurs when someone is in an ecstatic condition. In the passages we read, Francis is not explicitly mad or drunk, but acts like a madman and behaves in a way that would normally be considered as eccentric. The desire to directly implement certain precepts of the Gospel makes his behaviour seem unreasonable in the eyes of others, such as when he is dragged naked by a friar with a rope around his neck through the streets of Assisi or attached to a column in the town square. He is a *novellus pazzus* ‘a new kind of fool’ (“Et dixit Dominus michi, quod volebat, quod ego essem *unus novellus pazzus* in mundo”, *Compilatio Assisiensis, Fontes*, 18, 6, 1498, “And the Lord told me what He wanted: He wanted me to be a new fool in the world” *The Assisi Compilation*).

When it is possible to understand the content of the glossolalic message, it usually translates into prayers of praise. It is a mystical experience. What the mystic wants to share with the community of the faithful goes beyond the sphere of rational thought and logic: what really matters is not the message, or the vision received, but the experience of contact with divinity. For this reason, mystical discourse, like glossolalic discourse, is often able to be traced back to a simple prayer of praise or thanksgiving. As is the case with all mystical and divinely-inspired languages, the content of the message is secondary to the act of enunciation. Similarly, Francis’s spirituality also fundamentally revolves around adoration. Before the Most High, he assumes the figure of those who adore and praise him. And what he sings in French are precisely songs of praise.

⁵¹ Lipparini’s (2012) book is dedicated to glossolalia, with examples ranging from the Bible to the present day. In 1900 the Pentecostal movement was inaugurated in Topeka (Kansas) by a glossolalic movement. In the same period the phenomenon became the object of study by dynamic psychology and linguistics, cf. Lipparini (2012, 12).

Some scholars have hypothesized that before his conversion, Francis had been in France several times with his father, who regarded his son as his successor and wanted to introduce him into the mercantile environment of the fairs. It was there that the young man would have learned French.⁵² Beyond the fact that these are mere hypotheses, the profound sense of the passages we have examined seems, to me, to exclude this possibility. Jacopo de Voragine was already pointing in the same direction when he affirmed that Francis spoke French ‘miraculously’ by the grace of God (“*linguam enim gallicam miraculose a Deo recepisse cognoscitur*”).

3.2 Other glossolic phenomena

Francis did not only speak French, but he preached to the Saracens, who are portrayed as peaceful and attentive listeners in the *Bardi Table* (1243–1245).⁵³ He also managed to communicate with the wolf that terrified the city of Gubbio,⁵⁴ spoke to the birds that gathered to listen to his words,⁵⁵ asked the ducks for help, and, before dying, he recited one last time the Cantic of the Creatures together with the larks. How can we think at this point that the ability to communicate with animals is anything more than a special form of xenoglossia? A myth reported by Philon of Alexandria in *De confusione linguarum*, which superimposes the myth of Babel onto beasts, demonstrates that there can be parallels between human and animal languages:

With regard to the uniqueness of the language of living beings, mythographers have recorded a story similar to this [the confusion of languages]. In fact, it is said that in ancient times all terrestrial animals, aquatic and winged, had the same voice (*homòphona én*); and as is the case today among men, that is that those who speak the same language (*homòglottoi*) talk to each other, Greeks with Greeks and barbarians with barbarians, so then everyone dealt with (spoke to?) everyone about the things that happened to be done or suffered: so that in misadventures they shared the sorrows, and, if something good happened, they all rejoiced together (cit. in Lippardini 2012, 33, the translation is mine).

⁵² Cf. Gobry (1959, 14); Casini (1980, 372), which refers to other sources.

⁵³ The *Bardi Table* is a Byzantine style painting preserved in the chapel of the Bardi family in the minor church of Santa Croce in Florence.

⁵⁴ The episode is evoked in general terms in some sermons of the late 13th century (figure as *exemplum* in a sermon preached in Paris on 8 October 1272 by an anonymous friar minor) and then narrated in *Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius* of Ugolino of Montegiorgio (1327–1337), cf. *Actus beati Francisci*, 23, 284–295.

⁵⁵ This is recounted by Thomas of Celano, who validates it by citing the saint and his companions as eyewitnesses (*Vita prima*, 58, 8), and is then taken up by later hagiographers, as, for example, in the *Fioretto* no. XVI or in a contemporary witness, Roger of Wendover, who wrote in the years 1230–1236, in his *Flores historiarum*, 36–39.

The idyllic state of homophony in this tale is ruined by an act of pride: the animals rebelled against the gods because the snake was the only one endowed with immortality. The punishment consisted, once again, of the confusion of languages, so that no one could understand each other.

In the lives of the saints, episodes of xenoglossia are narrated in relation to St. Pachomius, who was given the gift of speaking Latin after praying for two hours; St. Dominic, who always obtained the ability to speak German through prayer, and used it to instruct two fellow travellers; St. Anthony of Padua, whose speech in Rome is understood by all the listeners who came to the capital; and St. Joan of the Cross, who, speaking Arabic during one of her ecstasies, converted two Muslims.⁵⁶ In short, Saint Francis is in good company.

4 France

We cannot know if Francis ever really went to France. Richer of Senones, a Benedictine monk of the abbey of Senones in northern France, wrote a chronicle of his archdiocese (1255–1264), in which he describes the rise of the new mendicant orders. In his short biography he dwells on the name of the saint and adds that he often went with his father to France. However, this news seems to be his deduction from other information that we already know:

Franciscus igitur, quem superius primum ordinis fratrum Minorum esse diximus, de Assisia civitate vallis Spoletane oriundus fuit. Filius quidem cuiusdam divitis civis dicte civitatis extitit, qui eundem Franciscum causa mercimonii *ad partes Francie frequenter mittere solebat. Unde a Francia Franciscum nuncupatum fuisse referunt.* Qui Franciscus bone indolis juvenis existens et sapiens, sicut mos est mercatorum, ambitionem rerum secularium insectatus est; sed de mercimonio a patre sibi credito ecclesiis et pauperibus largissime erogabat. Contigit igitur, ipsum Franciscum ad partes suas quodam tempore redire, et a patre libenter receptus, paucis diebus cum ipso mansit. Quadam vero die cum pater eius quendam sollempnem ageret diem, Franciscus juvenis laudabilis quandam cameram intrans, vestibis suis omnibus exiit; quadam tunica, in qua caputium consutum erat, et tamen vilissimi panni, se induens, cordella nodata precingitur, et ita sine calceis et tonsoratus ad patrem exiit, et patri valedicens, asseruit, se potius Deo servire velle quam mammone (*Scriptores Gesta Senonensis Ecclesiae*, 306–307).⁵⁷

⁵⁶ For case studies and other bibliography, cf. Cooper-Rompato (2010, 12, 22–33); Lipparini (2012, 35).

⁵⁷ “Francis, the first of the Lesser Brothers of whom we spoke of earlier, was born in Assisi, a city in the valley of Spoleto. He was the son of a wealthy citizen of that city, who was accustomed to send Francis frequently to France for business purposes. In fact, it is reported that he was called Francis because of this connection with France. While exhibiting good native ability and wisdom as a young man, as merchants usually do, he pursued the quest of worldly things; yet he most liberally dispersed

In the *Vita Prima*, Thomas of Celano instead informs us that, not wanting to remain in Italy where he ran no risk, Francis decided to leave for France for his apostolate:

Cum enim tempore quodam dominus iste legatione, sicut saepe solebat, pro Sede Apostolica in Tuscia fungeretur, beatus Franciscus, non multos adhuc fratres habens et volens in Franciam ire, devenit Florentiam, ubi iam tunc dictus episcopus morabatur. Nondum alter alteri erat praecipua familiaritate coniunctus, sed sola fama beatæ vitæ mutua eos et affectuali iunxerat charitate (Thomas de Celano, *Vita Prima, Fontes*, 74, 10–11, 350).⁵⁸

Francis left for France after the General Chapter of 1217, but when he arrived in Florence he met Cardinal Ugolino, who prohibited him from continuing his journey (*Compilatio Assisiensis, Fontes*, 108, 37, 1660). He submitted to the will of the prelate and returned to Umbria, while a small group of friars reached Paris under the guidance of Brother Pacifico, who would become the minister of the new province of France:

Et admiratus est dominus episcopus in verbis suis, affirmans quod verum diceret. Et ita non dimisit ipsum ire in Franciam dominus episcopus; sed beatus Franciscus misit illum fratrem Pacificum cum aliis fratribus et ipse reversus est in vallem Spoletanam (*Compilatio Assisiensis, Fontes*, 108, 46–48, 1661–1662).⁵⁹

According to *Vita secunda*, Francis was particularly fond of France, which he considered to be a “friend of the Eucharist”, and wished to die in that land where sacred things were venerated with particular devotion:

to churches and the poor some of the merchandise entrusted to him by his father. It happened one time that Francis returned to his native place. Welcomed cheerfully by his father, he remained with him for a few days. But one day when his father was celebrating a feast day in great style, Francis, a truly praiseworthy young man, entered a room and completely undressed. Then he clothed himself with a tunic, made of cheap cloth, to which a capuche had been sewn, and he girt himself with a knotted cord. And so, barefoot and with his hair shorn, he went out to his father, and bidding his father farewell he asserted that he *wished to serve God rather than mammon*” (*Chronicles*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 3, 809).

58 “Once this lord was acting in Tuscany as legate of the Apostolic See, as he frequently did. Blessed Francis, not yet having many brothers and intending to go to France, reached Florence where the bishop was then staying. At that time the two of them were not yet joined by close friendship, but their shared reputation for holy living joined them in mutual and affectionate charity.” (Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, 74, 246).

59 “The Lord Bishop marveled at his words and admitted that he spoke the truth. But the Lord Bishop did not allow him to go to France. Instead blessed Francis sent Brother Pacifico there with other brothers, and he returned to the valley of Spoleto” (*The Assisi Compilation*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 108, 216).

Flagrabat erga sacramentum Dominici Corporis fervore omnium medullarum, stupori permaximo habens caram illam dignationem et dignantissimam caritatem. Missam vel unicum non audire quotidie, si vacaret, non parvum reputabat contemptum. Saepe communicabat, et tam devote ut alios devotos efficeret. Reverendum enim illud omni reverentia prosequens, membrorum omnium sacrificium offerebat, et agnum immolatum recipiens, illo igne qui in altari cordis semper ardebat, spiritum immolabat. – *Diligebat propterea Franciam* ut amicam Corporis Domini, atque in ea mori propter sacrorum reverentiam cupiebat (Thomas de Celano, *Vita secunda Sancti Francisci, Fontes*, LII, 201, 1–4, 618).⁶⁰

These arguments are understood by referring to Francis's intense Eucharistic piety and the particular place occupied by this devotion north of the Alps. Indeed, the bishop of Paris, Maurice de Sully, had prescribed the practice of genuflection before the consecrated host from the end of the 12th century. In the northern regions (Artois, Flanders, Brabant), moreover, Beguines such as Marie d'Oignies, who died in 1213, or Ida of Nivelles, who died in 1231, focused their spiritual life on the humanity of Christ and on the "real" presence in the species of bread and wine.⁶¹ The Trinitarian experience of the mystic Francis is also embodied in the Eucharist. According to him, in order to be reconciled with God the Christian needs two points of support on this earth: the word of God present in the Bible, and the Eucharist, which are the two main signs of God's presence in this world.

In the same source, finally, Francis donates the tunic he is wearing on his deathbed to the friar who wanted it, and it is worn as a relic in France:

In eodem fratre aliud sancti patris mirabile claruit. Nam tempore quo infirmus iacebat in palatio apud Assisium, dictus frater cogitavit apud se dicens: "En morti appropinquat pater, et quamplurimum consolaretur anima mea, si post mortem haberem tunicam patris mei". Quasi cordis desiderium oris petitio fuerit, post parum vocat eum beatus Franciscus dicens: "Tibi trado tunicam istam; accipe eam, ut tua de caetero sit; quam licet ipse feram dum victito, tibi tamen cedat in morte". Miratus de tanta patris profunditate, frater tunicam tandem consolatus accepit, eamque postmodum in Franciam devotio sancta transvexit (Thomas de Celano, *Vita secunda Sancti Francisci, Fontes*, XXI, 50, 1–6, 490–492).⁶²

⁶⁰ "Toward the sacrament of the Lord's Body, he burned with fervor to his very marrow, and with unbounded wonder of that loving condescension and condescending love. He considered it disrespectful not to hear, if time allowed, at least one Mass a day. He received Communion frequently and so devoutly that he made others devout. Following that which is so venerable with all reverence he offered the sacrifice of all his members and receiving *the Lamb that was slain* he slew his own spirit in the *fire* which *always burned upon the altar* of his heart. Because of this he loved France as a friend of the Body of the Lord, and even wished to die there, because of its reverence for sacred things" (Thomas of Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 201, 375).

⁶¹ Cf. Vauchez (2010, 87).

⁶² "Another wonder of our holy father was manifested for that same brother. When the saint lay sick in the palace at Assisi, that brother *thought to himself*: – Now our father is close to death, and *my soul*

5 Francis and French culture

But what do we know about Francis' relationship with French culture? The answer is actually very little. He was neither illiterate nor hostile to culture: he knew how to read and write and had acquired a good understanding of the Latin of biblical and liturgical texts. Drawing on the data available in the hagiographies (the name, the father who traded with France, the ability to express himself in French) many scholars have inferred that his secular education revolved around achieving chivalric ideals. The same religious choice would have been lived as a sort of *aventure*, in which the ideology of chivalry progressively diminished and courtly culture remained in the background.⁶³ Usually, however, scholars evoke the subject in a rather generic way, underlining the similarities between “the spirit of freedom and joy that informs the whole Franciscan witness and the somewhat similar tone of much chivalric literature, of much troubadour poetry”.⁶⁴

5.1 Francis and the ideals of chivalry in the current bibliography

An example of this widespread interpretation is the biography of André Vauchez published in Paris in 2009. It begins by noting that we must resign ourselves to not knowing much about Francis' youth. Francis himself never speaks of it in his writings. In the *Testament* he only says that he lived in sin (*cum essem in peccatis*) and his medieval biographers, in accordance with hagiographic traditions, did not pay much attention to his childhood years, since they placed more importance on his conversion and commitment to the Gospel life.

Despite this premise, Vauchez writes about the young man's development based on a series of somewhat impressionistic statements taken from the bibliography that preceded him: Francis had certainly not learned French by studying it in the school of his parish of San Giorgio. In Italy at that time, French was the language in which lyrical and musical culture was expressed, and it was particularly appreciated by young people who discovered it through songs and poems. Everything that

would be comforted so much if I could have the tunic of my father after his death –. As if that *desire of the heart* had been spoken with his lips, Saint Francis called him shortly after and said: – I am giving you this tunic. Take it. From now on it is yours. Even though I wear it while I still live, at my death it should be returned to you –. Amazed at his father's insight, the brother was consoled and accepted the tunic. Out of holy devotion, this tunic was carried to France” (Thomas of Celano, *The Remembrance of the Desire of a Soul*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, XXI, 50, 281).

⁶³ Cf. Rusconi (1997).

⁶⁴ Cf. Cardini (1976, 127).

came from beyond the Alps was perceived as fashionable, and the cultural influence of Philip Augustus' France was penetrating deeply into the urban elite of Italy. As with most western countries, between the 12th and 13th centuries, the literary expressions and ideals of chivalrous epic and courtly poetry had arrived in Umbria. Romances and *chansons de geste* were known by all. There is no need to imagine that his mother was of French origin to explain the fact that Francis often sang poems in French. It is entirely likely that he translated his intimate feelings or thoughts into the *langue d'oïl*, the language of the regions to the north of the Loire, where he dreamed of going, but where he never went. This heir from the commercial bourgeoisie aspired to live as a knight and to lead a nobleman's life. His ideal coincided with that which was exalted by the *chansons de geste* and courtly romances, and Francis must have been familiar with the most representative of these works: this was a warrior ideal, on the one hand, but one that took on an ethical and poetic dimension in the wake of Perceval, Lancelot and the Knights of the Round Table. Francis had rejected the bourgeois values of his father and made the courtly ideal his own, choosing to live in the manner of knights and not that of merchants. Once converted, Francis had begun to beg through the streets of Assisi, inviting – in French, the language of inner emotion and lyrical enthusiasm – his neighbours and passers-by to join him in the restoration of the churches. Until the end of his life, he would preserve the vocabulary of courtesy, the lyrical sense of happiness and the taste for conquering heroism. When speaking of God, Francis uses the same terms as the troubadours when they addressed the lady of their thoughts, and the words that flow from his pen adopt the same register of tenderness and joy. For Francis, the beauty of the spectacle of nature, the taste for things as they are and for what they mean can be attributed to the exuberant tenderness of God the Creator, and his universal love that surrounds the world and men: a fundamental reason for joy and exaltation in both courtly poetry and Franciscan spirituality.⁶⁵

5.2 The spread of French in Italy

If this were the case, however, the circumstance would be truly extraordinary, because Francis, born in 1181 or 1182, would be a very early witness to the spread of

⁶⁵ Cf. Vauchez (2010, 10, 19, 31, 32, 35, 274, 291, 343). Before him and in a similar tone, cf. Sabatier (1894, 4–7); Joergensen (1909, 16–17); Casini (1980, 371); Manselli (1980, 41); Cardini (1983, 53–64); Frugoni (1995, 5–18, 37); Dalarun (1996); Le Goff (1999, 12, 69, 159–161); Merlo (2009, 33): “Francis enjoyed elegant clothing, the beauty of song and the armony of dance, and was fascinated with the legends of King Arthur and the Holy Grail and epic poems from beyond the Alps, and embraced the contemporary custom of speaking French”.

French in Italy, probably even the first known to us. Let us try to establish some dates.⁶⁶ The troubadours arrived in the northern regions of the Peninsula only after his birth. Raimbaut de Vaqueiras was at the court of the Malaspina in 1185–1190, and of the Monferrato in 1197–1201. Peire Vidal arrived at the court of the Monferrato, and then that of the Saluzzo, in about 1195. The poetic activity of Italian authors in Provençal seems to begin with the *veilletz lombardtz* named *Cossen*, who was mocked in the literary satire of Peire d'Alvernhe (1161), but apart from that, the only other Italian author of Provençal poetry who was active before the 13th century was Peire de la Cavarana, author of a Sirventese written in 1194. The oldest surviving exemplar of a Provençal songbook from Italy is dated 1254 (Modena, Biblioteca Estense ms. a R.4.4, known as songbook D).

If we shift our attention from the *langue d'oc* to the *langue d'oïl*, the dates slide further. The first evidence of French literary activity and production in Italy by Italians began to be attested in the 1230s, with *Enanchet* (1226–1252). The earliest witnesses of the manuscript tradition date back to after 1200 and production only began to flourish around 1270. Even the Latin documents that are usually cited as proof of the spread of French in Italy are quite late in relation to the life of Francis: The Bolognese jurist Odofredo complained in 1265 about the “ioculatores qui ludent in publico causa mercedis” (‘jesters who perform publicly for a fee’) and “orbi qui vadunt in curia communis Bononie et cantant de domino Rolando et Oliviero” (‘blind people who go to the curia of Bologna and sing of Roland and Oliver’).⁶⁷ In Bologna the public ordinance against the stay of *cantatores francigenarum* dates back to 1288, which caused quite a few traffic problems in the streets of the city due to the crowds gathering to listen to them. Lovato Lovati’s letter to Bellino Bissolo in which he vividly describes a cantor of a *chanson de geste* randomly heard in Treviso and which contains some considerations on the barbarization of the French language used for the occasion dates back to 1287–1288.⁶⁸

Even the courts of northern Italy, which are usually mentioned in studies to demonstrate the pervasiveness of French culture during Francis’s lifetime, such as those of Mantua or Ferrara, are in fact only active in this sense from the late 13th century.

The only exceptions to this chronology are the indirect traces, some of which precede the birth of Francis. The *Porta della pescheria* of the Cathedral of Modena, sculpted between 1110 and 1120, is adorned with Arthurian reliefs that represent the first sculptural representation of the Breton cycle that has come down to us, and is

⁶⁶ Morlino (2010, 27–40) offers an overview.

⁶⁷ Cf. Holtus (1979, 12–15).

⁶⁸ Cf. Stocchi (1980, 201–217).

even earlier than the first written documents in French. In Nepi, a town not far from Viterbo, we find the oldest epigraphic evidence of the diffusion of the *Chanson de Roland* in Italy. In the atrium of the town's cathedral, a stone inscription dated 1131 was probably carved from a notarial deed. It records a civic pact between the *milites* and the *consuls*, which was solemnly formalized using moral values drawn from the *Chanson de Roland* as a guarantee of their alliance: for the transgressors of the oath, the punishment resembled the one imposed on Ganelon, the traitor of Roland. In Verona the statue of Orlando on the portal of the *prothyrum* of the Romanesque Cathedral of Santa Maria Matricolare, identified by the *durindarda* inscription on the sword, can be dated to the years 1139–1145. The floor mosaic of the Cathedral of Otranto with King Arthur riding a ram is dated 1163 (*rex Arturus*: note that the name is given in Latin). The floor mosaic of the Cathedral of Brindisi with scenes from the battle of Roncesvalles dates back to 1178.

The onomastic evidence dates back even further. The first archival testimony of the couple *Rolandus et Aulivero* in Italy can be found in a Bolognese act dating back to 1112.⁶⁹ The name Arthur appears for the first time in Lucca in 1114.

These traces, however, in addition to occasionally being of dubious date, only prove that themes and stories about Roland and King Arthur began to circulate in Italy very early; we know neither the language nor the form in which they circulated. The heroes of the *Chanson de Roland* – Charlemagne, Roland, Oliviero and other paladins – were known everywhere because Pseudo-Turpin had made them martyrs of the Christian faith in a crusading context in his hagiographic and romance composition in Latin, the *Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi*. This work, written around the middle of the 12th century, enjoyed immense success, as is attested by the 130 or so manuscripts in which it is transmitted. Arthur could have been known through the *Historia regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth (1135), of which over two hundred manuscripts are known. The widespread *jongleur* culture that circulated in the squares of the communal Italy at that time was nourished by these stories and it is possible that even the young Francis had happened to listen to them.

To infer that, based on this, Francis, born in 1181 or 1182, had been educated in the courtly system of values conveyed by French culture, seems to me, however, too great a gamble. We have seen that we do not know if the young man ever went to France with his father, while the evidence that his mother was called Pica and was of Picardy or Provençal origin is almost certainly spurious. This name is only found in a marginal branch of the manuscript tradition of the *Legenda Trium Sociorum* and in fact it does not appear in the critical editions of the text, because it is not

⁶⁹ For this data, I refer to the study by Palumbo (2013, 29–33) and Fassanelli (2014, 231–248) with other sources.

based on the most reliable witnesses.⁷⁰ Francis therefore did not speak French because he had learned it from his mother.

5.3 Possible references to French culture in the life of Francis

Certainly, some of the themes that emerge from the saint's life seem to refer to French culture. Scholars have observed that one of Francis' first aspirations was apparently to become a "knight". This is recounted by Thomas of Celano and other biographers,⁷¹ who tell us that, after a long illness, he left Assisi for Puglia (in 1205, between April-May and the end of July) following a nobleman who was recruiting knights (for Gauthier de Brienne, according to hypotheses), in order to be invested as a knight. According to the hagiographer's story, this decision was preceded by a dream in which splendid weapons appeared to him. Brother John's *De inceptione* (1240–1241) adds that, once Francis arrived in Spoleto, he heard a voice in his sleep and was led by it to return to Assisi to put himself at the service of the Lord. He then passed through Foligno, where he sold his horse and rich clothes, wearing poor clothes.⁷²

The episode, however, seems to be deliberately designed to set up its own reversal. Francis is destined to become new *miles* of Christ, as we are told when, near the church of San Damiano, he decides to give away the money he earned from selling his goods:

Ad quam *novus Christi miles* adveniens, pietate tantae necessitatis commotus, cum timore ac reverentia introivit (Thomas de Celano, *Fontes, Vita Prima*, IV, 9, 1, 284–285).⁷³

⁷⁰ Cf. Trexler (1989, 8 and 11), which, while citing a series of data that seem to contradict it, gives credence to the existence of a Pica mother of Francis. The French origin of Pica is claimed for the first time by Claude Frassen (1620–1711), Franciscan theologian author of *La règle du tiers-ordre de la Penitence* (published in 1680; on the web I managed to find a copy of 1692, so see 272), who claims to have seen among the ancient documents of the Bourlémont family an ancient manuscript in which it appears that "Picqua" belonged to that lineage. The statement can be explained as a way of ennobling the family of Luis D'Anglure de Bourlémont, bishop of the diocese of Fréjus-Toulon precisely in 1680, who would certainly have been pleased to discover that among his ancestors there was also the mother of Saint Francis. Bihl (1926, 472) identifies the manuscript cited by Frassen with the *Chronique de Grancey* of 1556 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, fr. 4945, available online), in which the fabulous genealogical history of the Bourlémont family even begins with Romulus and Remus. Rajna (1926, 386), hypothesizes that Pica could have been from Picardy.

⁷¹ Cf. Thomas de Celano, *Vita prima, Fontes*, 4, 1–6, 280.

⁷² Cf. Anonimus Perusinus, *De inceptione vel fundamento ordinis, Fontes*, 6–7, 1313–1314.

⁷³ "Arriving at this church, the new *soldier of Christ*, aroused by piety at such a great need, entered it with awe and reverence" (Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, IV, 9, 189).

The same expression, (*novus*) *Christi miles*, returns several times in other passages and in the work of other hagiographers. It is not necessary, however, to go seeking this term in Arthurian literature,⁷⁴ because the expression can already be found in the New Testament (see “*Labora sicut bonus miles Christi Jesu*”, 2 Letter to Timothy 2, 3, ‘Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus.’). It is also used to designate monks in the 10th–11th centuries and becomes a traditional model in hagiography before being applied to Crusaders.

Pietro of Bernardone’s son was a point of contact between two social circles. By birth, he belonged to the *popolo*, immersed in business and craftsmanship during those years. However, he aspired to rise above his own condition, and was supported in this by his father. His wealth allowed him to associate with young aristocrats, the *boni homines* or *maiores*. Francis, the hagiographers tell us, was inferior to them in the nobility of his birth, but superior in magnanimity, poorer in material wealth but greater in generosity. And perhaps the values of *magnanimitas* and *largitas*, as has been suggested, are not typical of the courtly world?

5.4 Possible references to chivalric literature

Francis even seems to know some of the themes of chivalric literature. For example, he compares himself and the other Friars Minor to the knights of the round table in the *Compilatio Assisiensis* (1310–1312):

Isti sunt fratres *mei milites tabule rotunde*, qui latitant in desertis et in remotis locis, ut diligentius vacent orationi et meditationi, sua et aliorum peccata plorantes, quorum sanctitas a Deo cognoscitur, aliquando a fratribus et ab hominibus ignoratur (*Compilatio Assisiensis, Fontes*, 103, 13, 1643).⁷⁵

Francis apparently also uses the term ‘minstrels’ of God, a provocative expression that associates two concepts – minstrels and God – that represent two cultural universes that would have been alien to one another in the social and cultural context of the time:

Nam volebat et dicebat, quod prius aliquis illorum predicaret populo, qui sciret predicare, et post predicationem cantarent Laudes Domini tamquam *iculatores Domini*. Finitis Laudibus,

⁷⁴ Cardini (1976, 127–165) deals with the question of Francis as a “knight” in its entirety, and he lists further sources on this subject on p. 128.

⁷⁵ “These brothers of mine are my knights of the round table, the brothers who hide in deserted and remote places, to devote themselves more diligently to prayer and meditation, weeping over their sins and those of others, whose holiness is known to God, and is sometimes ignored by the brothers and people” (*The Assisi Compilation*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 103, 208).

volebat ut predicator populo diceret: “Nos sumus *ioculatores Domini* et in hiis volumus a vobis remunerari, scilicet ut stetis in vera penitentia” (*Compilatio Assisiensis, Fontes*, 83, 26–27, 1598).⁷⁶

He also recalls Charlemagne, Roland, Oliviero and the paladins as defenders of the Christian faith:

Cui beatus Franciscus tale responsum dedit dicens: “*Carolus imperator, Rolandus et Oliverius et omnes paladini* et robusti viri, qui potentes fuerunt in prelio, persequentes infideles cum multo sudore et labore usque ad mortem habuerunt de illis gloriosam et memorialem victoriam et ad ultimum ipsi sancti martyres mortui sunt pro fide Christi in certamine; et multi sunt qui sola narratione eorum, que illi fecerunt, volunt recipere honorem et humanam laudem” (*Compilatio Assisiensis, Fontes*, 103, 23–24, 1645).⁷⁷

It is surprising to imagine Francis referencing the Round Table. The expression first appears in the *Roman de Brut* (c. 1155) by the Norman cleric Robert Wace, who translated the *Historia regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth (1135). It then spread to France via Chrétien de Troyes’s tales of adventure and romance in the last quarter of the 12th century, which practically coincided with Francis’ youth.

However, Boncompagno of Signa (about 1170–1250), one of the first witnesses of the spread of French culture in Italy, offers us a different track. In his *Cedrus* (1201), which deals with legal matters (“generalia statute”) for the preparation of notarial practice, he reports on the existence in Italy of numerous companies of young men, some of which had taken the name ‘company of the roundtable’ (*de tabula rotunda societas*):

“Fiunt etiam in multis partibus Ytalie quedam *iuvenum societates*. quarum aliqua falconum, aliqua leonum, aliqua *de tabula rotunda societas* nominatur. et sic diversi nomina diversa societatum super imponunt. et licet ista consuetudo sit per universas partes Ytalie, multo fortius in Tuscia viget, quia vix reperirentur in aliqua civitate iuvenes qui non sint adstricti alicui societati vinculo iuramenti. huiusmodi quippe societates quedam faciunt fieri per man-

76 “He said that he wanted one of them who knew how to preach, first to preach to the people. After the sermon, they were to sing the *Praises of the Lord* as minstrels of the Lord. After the praises, he wanted the preacher to tell the people: “We are minstrels of the Lord, and this is what we want as payment: that you live in true penance” (*The Assisi Compilation*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 103, 208).

77 “Blessed Francis gave him this sort of response: – The Emperor Charles, Roland, and Oliver, and all the paladins and valiant knights who were mighty in battle, pursuing unbelievers with great toil and fatigue even to death, had a glorious and memorable victory for themselves, and, finally, died in battle fighting as holy martyrs for the faith in Christ. And there are many who want to receive honor and praise by only relating what they did –” (*The Assisi Compilation*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 2000, vol. 2, 103, 208).

um publicam statuta, que vulgo brevia nominantur. unde dicitur: iste iuravit ad nostrum breve, seu iuravit ad breve nostrum.”

It is therefore possible that the expression of Saint Francis did not have a direct literary background but referred to these forms of aggregation among the young people of his time.

5.5 The role of joy in Francis and the *joi* of Trobadours

The studies that I mentioned repeatedly make links between ‘joy’ as the dominant mode of Francis’ behaviour and the *joi* of Trobadours origins, which, nevertheless, seems substantially different to me. In the system of courtly values, *joi* is the state of ecstasy, the dreamy abandonment of the lover (*cosir*), which alternates with pain and sorrow; in love, the lover is annulled and lost. Love is the source of *joi* as a vitalistic impulse, a joy of the soul or euphoria, and an exaltation of the individual’s faculties, perceptive, and emotional potential. From *joi* is also born the will to ‘sing’, that is to say, to compose poetry.

Francis’ joy takes us into a different world, which is instead dominated by the words of Christ as reported in the Gospel of Matthew, and his exhortation not to look gloomy when fasting, like the hypocrites who make themselves look ill so that men will notice their fasting, but to instead give the appearance of good spirits (“Cum autem jejunatis, nolite fieri sicut hypocritæ, tristes. Exterminant enim facies suas, ut appareant hominibus jejunantes. Amen dico vobis, quia receperunt mercedem suam. Tu autem, cum jejunas, unge caput tuum, et faciem tuam lava”, Matthew, 6, 16–17, “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face”). For Francis, this becomes a normative precept of life introduced by the *Regula non bullata* of 1221, where it is recommended to be joyful, cheerful, and pleasant in the Lord:

Et caveant sibi, quod non se ostendant tristes extrinsecus et nubilosos hypocritas; sed ostendant se gaudentes in Domino et hilares et convenienter gratiosos (*Regula non bullata*, Fontes, 7, 16, 192).⁷⁸

⁷⁸ “Let them be careful not to appear outwardly as sad and gloomy hypocrites but show themselves joyful, cheerful and consistently gracious in the Lord” (*The Earlier Rule*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, 7, 16, 69).

This passage also recalls the *Letter to the Philippians* 4, 4: “Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico Gaudete”. (“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”).

We also saw that the use of French is often a means of expression for Francis’ exuberant joy as he sings the praises of God or prays. I believe that even this association between joy and the use of French is not an indication of the presence of literary romance motives in Franciscan legends, as has been stated.⁷⁹ Joy, in this case, connotes the mystical experience. The mystic feels a unifying communion with the world of the divine, in which he finds full self-satisfaction. According to different religious traditions the mystic arrives in God and finds complete satisfaction in Him, an experience from which an inebriating joy springs forth.⁸⁰

A possible point of contact between Francis and courtly literature lies in the fact that even troubadours sometimes draw on mystical and religious models to describe their erotic experience, but this contact is mainly due to the pervasiveness of religious culture in the medieval world. Francis’ outbursts of joy are instead inspired by the bible, not by love lyrics or Arthurian romances, whose formulaic expressions or idiosyncratic tone are never found in his writings. I believe, in short, that the joy resulting from Francis’ “losing himself in God” has a profoundly different essence to that of the Troubadours *joï*, and that the juxtaposition between the two worlds is based on superficial elements that are not well documented.

When Francis himself clarifies what he means by this joy, as he does in *De vera et perfecta laetitia*, the distance seems even greater. One day Francis calls Brother Leo and asks him to write down what true joy is. Then he begins to explain. Imagine a messenger were to arrive and announce that all the teachers of Paris (that is, the professors of the University) have entered the Order, and then all the prelates of Europe, and the kings of France and England, and that the Friars Minor have converted all the infidels, and that he, Francis, has received from God so much grace to heal all the sick and to perform any miracle, even in all of this, there would not be true joy. And so where is true joy? asks Brother Leo. Francis offers up another scenario: he is coming back from Perugia in the middle of the night; it is muddy, and so cold that icicles are forming on the edges of his cassock and hurting his legs. He arrives at the door and knocks, but instead of opening the door, the friars chase him away rudely. If, he says, he has patience and refrains from getting upset, then this will be true joy:

⁷⁹ Cf. Dalarun (2009a, 152).

⁸⁰ On the mystical language of St Francis, cf. Paolazzi (2002, 54–55, 60–62). On the possible definitions of the medieval mystical dimension, cf. Poirel (2021).

Dico tibi quod si patientiam habuero et non fuero motus, quod in hoc est vera laetitia et vera virtus et salus animae (*De vera et perfecta laetitia*, Fontes, VIII, 15, 242).⁸¹

Indeed, Francis' motto is *paupertas cum laetitia* 'poverty with joy' (*Admonitiones*, Fontes, 36).

5.6 Francis and "Lady" Poverty

The tradition of Brother Leo and an anonymous allegorical text, the *Sacrum commercium sancti Francisci cum domina paupertate*, presents other episodes that seem emblematic. The *Sacrum commercium* is an allegory of Minorite poverty, composed around the middle of the 13th century by an unknown author. This text, which develops biographical themes that are also present in Celano and Saint Bonaventure, is not a biography of Francis, but the story of an encounter between Francis and Poverty, the bride of Christ, for whom he languished in love. The story, according to some scholars, is presented in a courtly mode. The term *commercium* used in the title has distant juridical and erotic origins (it means 'exchange', 'contract', 'relationship'), and it comes to the text loaded with biblical, liturgical, and religious implications. At the beginning the author describes his passionate search for Lady Poverty, who represents spoliation and social choice, in terms that evoke the search for the Grail. The text insists on the existence of a feudal bond between Francis and his companions on the one hand, and Lady Poverty on the other, as it appears in the episode of the oath.⁸² The encounter between Francis and Poverty on the summit of the mountain, the exchange of gifts and promises, the mutual commitment of love and fidelity recall patterns that have been compared to those of courtly literature, so much so that Pio Rajna was able to write that Poverty appeared to Francis "prima come la dama de' suoi pensieri; non diversamente di quel che fosse Ginevra per Lancilotto" ("initially as the lady of his imagination; not unlike what Guinevere was for Lancelot").⁸³

Despite the way in which this text has been interpreted, and the iconography surrounding it, Francis does not consider Lady Poverty as his beloved, but instead as the bride of Christ; nor did he attempt to marry her, but rather to follow her. It is not a question, therefore, of mystical marriages, as has often been incorrectly sta-

⁸¹ "I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, true joy, as well as true virtue and the salvation of my soul, would consist in this" (*True and Perfect Joy*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, 15, 167).

⁸² Cf. Battais (1997, 147).

⁸³ Cf. Rajna (1926, 393).

ted, but instead of an economic contract between two partners, metaphorically transposed into the sphere of religious life.⁸⁴ And in any case, even if we do sometimes find love for evangelical poverty and “courtly” themes in the *Commercium*, I believe these are less significant than is often claimed. I think that the circumstance can be attributed, above all, to the cultural climate of the period in which the text was composed, the middle of the 13th century.

5.7 Odo of Cheriton’s courtly “conte”

In his collection of Sunday sermons, the *Sermones super Evangelia dominicalia*, completed in Paris in 1219 and then revised in the following years, the English monk, Odo of Cheriton, recounts an exemplum to Brother Francis concerning the events of the friars. This exemplum is formulated in the manner of a courtly *conte*. Had Odo heard this story from the first friars who had reached France? We cannot know, but since he refers to Francis as a *frater* ‘brother’, he probably wrote it before Francis’ canonization:

Frater Franciscus, requisitus quis pasceret fratres suos, quia indifferenter omnes recepit, respondit: “Quidem rex impregnavit quandam in nemore; que peperit. Quem cum per aliquod tempus nutrierat, venit ad portam regis, ut filium suum de caetero pasceret. Quod cum nuntiatum esset regi, respondit: ‘Tot pravi et inutiles in curia mea comedunt cibum; iustum est, ut filius meus inter eos sustentetur.’ Quod exponens, dixit se esse mulierem quam Dominus verbo suo impregnavit, qui filios spirituales genuit. Ex quo Dominus tot iniustos pascit, non est mirandum, si filios proprios inter alios sustentet” (Odo of Cheriton, *S. Francisci parabola*, 585).⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Cf. Vauchez (2010, 233).

⁸⁵ “Brother Francis, asked who was going to take care of his brothers, since he received all [who came to him] indifferently, answered: – A certain king made love to a woman who lived in the woods and she bore a son. After she had raised him for a time, she came to the gate of the king, so that he might take care of her son from then on. When this was announced to the king, he said: ‘So many evil and useless men eat food at my court; isn’t it only right that my own son should be fed among them?’. After he told this story, Francis said that he was the woman whom the Lord had impregnated with his word, and that he had borne these spiritual sons. – And so, if the Lord provides for so many unjust people, you should not wonder how he is going to supply nourishment for his own children along with the others” (Odo of Cheriton, *Other Chronicles and References*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, 591).

5.8 The value of generosity

Another episode that is often cited as proof of the saint's 'courtesy' is that of Francis' refusal to give alms to a beggar. After initially chasing a beggar away, Francis repents and then proceeds to give him alms liberally. If the poor man had asked him for something in the name of a great count or baron, he would have been generous; he must, in that case, be all the more generous when he is asked in the name of the King of Kings:

Nam cum die una, praeter morem suum, quia curialissimus erat, cuidam pauperi postulanti ab eo eleemosynam exprobrasset, statim poenitentia ductus, coepit dicere intra se, magni vituperii fore magnique dedecoris petenti pro nomine tanti Regis subtrahere postulata (Thomas de Celano, *Fontes, Vita Prima*, 17, 7, 292–293).⁸⁶

This episode, which is taken up and amplified by the other hagiographers, affirms the secular and courtly value of *largesse*. It demonstrates that even after his conversion, he would continue to be profoundly affected by the secular mental structures of the aristocratic-citizen milieu in which he had been immersed during his early years. His charity is manifested in courteous behaviour; knightly largesse is directed towards the poor in the name of a generously feudal God, who reciprocates gifts as any good lord would do for a good and faithful vassal.⁸⁷

It is true that generosity is central to the system of courtly values. However, it is an important and valued virtue that is not exclusive to courtliness, and I do not believe that there are any textual or formal indications that confirm this interpretation beyond doubt in any of the texts cited in support of this thesis.

5.9 Francis knight

The *Legenda trium sociorum* describes the young Francis as *naturaliter curialis* ("Erat tamen quasi *naturaliter curialis* in moribus et in verbis, iuxta cordis sui propositum nemini dicens verbum iniuriosum vel turpe, immo, cum sic esset iuvenis iocosus et lascivus, proposuit turpia sibi dicentibus minime respondere", *Legenda Trium Sociorum, Fontes*, I, 3, 1, 1375, "He was naturally courteous in manner and speech and, following his heart's intent, never uttered a rude or offensive word to

⁸⁶ "One day, contrary to his custom (since he was very polite), he rebuked a poor person seeking alms from him, and he was immediately led to penance. He began to say to himself that to refuse what was asked by someone begging in the name of such a great King would be both a shame and a disgrace" (Thomas de Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, Armstrong/Hellmann/Short 1999, vol. 1, 17, 195).

⁸⁷ Cf. in particular Cardini (1983, 56).

anyone. Moreover, since he was such a light-hearted and undisciplined youth, he proposed to answer back those speaking to him rarely in a brusque manner”, *The Legend of the Three Companions*).⁸⁸ His parents reproached him for the fact that his lifestyle far exceeded theirs, so much so that he behaved more like the son of a prince (“Propter quod multotiens arguebatur a parentibus dicentibus ei quod tam magnas expensas in se et in aliis faceret, ut non eorum filius sed cuiusdam *magni principis* videretur”, *Legenda Trium Sociorum*, *Fontes*, I, 2, 4, 1375, “Because of this his parents often reprimanded him, telling him that he spent so much money on himself and others that he seemed to be the son of some great prince rather than their son.”, *The Legend of the Three Companions*). Also according to the *Legend of the Three Companions*, Francis participated in the battle of Collestrada in 1202, where the military forces of his city were defeated by those of Perugia, who were supported by exiled nobles from Assisi. After being taken prisoner while fighting – it should be noted – on horseback, Francis was forced to remain in a dingy prison in Perugia for about a year, until his father paid a ransom for his release. It seems that he contracted many illnesses during his stay in prison, which would leave him vulnerable and cause him health problems later on. What is of interest, however, is that he was imprisoned with the nobles because of his noble manners and customs (“[...] captus est Franciscus cum multis suis concivibus et Perusii captivatus, tamen, quia nobilis erat moribus, cum militibus captivus est positus”, *Legenda Trium Sociorum* *Fontes*, *Fontes*, II, 4, 1, 1376–1377, “Together with many of his fellow citizens, Francis was captured and confined in Perugia, yet, because of his noble manners, he was imprisoned with the knights.”, *The Legend of the Three Companions*).

The author of the *Legenda trium sociorum* is steeped in courtly culture,⁸⁹ and the passage quoted above on the almsgiving in Saint Peter’s (par. 2.3) suggests that, unlike Francis himself, this author had a thorough command of French. This *Legend* is closely based on a source that was written twenty years after Francis’ death, and therefore bears witness to early interest in the saint’s life. This source contains a series of unedited details and anecdotes, and there is no reason to doubt the veracity of stories such as that of the saint’s shame over begging for oil. Nevertheless, this text is also clearly influenced by the cultural and temporal context in which it was written, in the years between 1246 and 1247. Some elements, for example, come together to develop the prophetic dimension of Francis, such as the commentary on the name John given to him by his mother. The same is true, in my opinion, for the “courtly” aspects, which seem to me to be less clearly attributable to Francis himself

⁸⁸ *Minime respondere* is, however, better translated as ‘not to answer at all’.

⁸⁹ Cf. Dalarun (2009b, 114), which refers to paragraphs 2, 6, 10, 16, 19–21, 25, 29, 32–33, 35, 37, 41–43, 46–54, 56–57, 59–66 and 71–73.

than to to the world in which the author of the *Legend* was writing, and the mental categories and forms of expression that were common in this context.

5.10 A possible allusion to love poetry

Finally, an episode found only in the *Delle sacre sante istimate di santo Francesco* shows Francis on his way to Romagna with Brother Leo in “1224” (but this is an error for 1213). They stop at the court at the castle of San Leo to celebrate a young man’s investiture as a knight. The man belongs to the family of the Counts of Montefeltro. Having arrived in the castle courtyard, Francis climbs “on a wall” “in fervour of spirit” in order to draw attention to himself, and he begins to preach. He proposes as theme of his sermon these words in the vernacular: “Tanto è quel bene ch’io aspetto che ogni pena mi è diletto” (“The goodness that I am waiting for is so great that every punishment is delightful to me”).⁹⁰ In short, Francis chose to begin his sermon on the expectation of heavenly rewards with an erotic theme that could have been that of a love lyric. A noble lord, Orlando of Chiusi, was among the participants that day; struck by those words, he decided to donate and grant the Mount of La Verna unreservedly to Francis, where he would receive the stigmata about ten years later.

However, the value of this testimony is somewhat suspect. The *Delle sacre sante istimate* comes at the end of the collection of the *Fioretti di messer santo Francesco e d’alquanti suoi santi compagni*, which presents itself as a bunch of ‘small flowers’ (*fioretti*), that is, exemplary episodes and stories that follow one another without logical connection. This rather late work, which translates the *Actus beati Francisci et sociorum eius* of Ugolino of Montegiorgio (1327–1337) into Italian vernacular (between 1370 and 1390) and which had an extraordinarily widespread diffusion, tends to significantly elaborate on the marvellous elements in relation to earlier hagiographic writings.

6 The intercession of the Holy Spirit

In this article, we have been able to recognize that Francis’ use of French as reported by hagiographic sources, a detail relied upon by scholars, can also be interpreted to indicate the complete opposite; rather than providing evidence that Francis knew the language, it could suggest that he was instead able to speak it through the intercession of the Holy Spirit.

⁹⁰ Cf. *Delle sacre sante istimate di santo Francesco*, in *Fonti Francescane*, 1897, 1234.

6.1 The writings of Francis as sources

A further argument makes the case even more directly. The more attentive reader may have noticed that until now, I have not mentioned any of the works written by Francis himself: the themes that evoke courtliness are only present in the hagiographers' accounts, and any attempt to find evidence of it in the saint's own words would be in vain.⁹¹

The term *Scritti* 'Writings' refers to a set of diverse texts which are often of uncertain destination and date, and different from each other in scope. They include a corpus of moral exhortations and spiritual counsel (*Admonitiones*), a dozen letters or notes addressed to friars or lay faithful, various prayers, praises or blessings, a religious office, some normative texts and the *Testament*. In all, twenty-nine texts are attributed to Francis, two in Italian vernacular, all the others in Latin. The best known is the *Canticle of the Sun* or *Laudes Creaturarum*, which are more recent (1225–1226); the second text in the vernacular is a prayer and an exhortation to the Sisters of San Damiano. Kajetan Esser proposed a critical edition of this corpus based on a vast census and collation of the manuscripts in 1976 and 1989.⁹²

Francis probably wrote other letters in addition to those that have been preserved and can be attributed to him with certainty, as well as other prayers and probably other texts. These other writings, however, bear no relation to the words that are attributed to Francis in later literature. If Francis' pronouncements were to be extracted from his biographies, as well as his *loghia* (words or speeches taken out of context), parables, and the stories he is supposed to have told, they would certainly make for an interesting collection; however, these words can only be attributed to the hagiographers, not to Francis himself. Obtaining Francis' own words from chronicles would be a similarly futile endeavour.⁹³

Anyone who reads the saint's writings will instantly recognise the quality of his words, full of theological and spiritual inventiveness, surprising for their human simplicity and mystical depth, and often accompanied by unexpected and surprising gestures: "He speaks with the immediacy of images, without the shadow of uncertainty, with a clarity and transparency that have a divine quality. Sometimes he writes only using the words of the Bible, that is, the words that he considered to be

⁹¹ Cf. Battais (1997, 146), too. The absence of the theme in the writings must be pointed out, but the argument is not absolute: Francis never speaks of animals in his writings, whereas the legends make it possible to establish with certainty the specific interest that he took in them.

⁹² Francesco's works, translated and commented on in Italian, can be read in Leonardi (2004, 3–229). On the spirituality of saint Francis based on reading and interpreting his "writings", cf. Armstrong/Hellmann/Short (1999, 33–167); Paolazzi (2002).

⁹³ Cf. Leonardi (2004, LVI).

inspired by God, as if he had understood, in the abyss of his life in God, that he could not turn to God except by using His own Word".⁹⁴

Francis had a basic education; he knew how to write and count. He cultivated his own knowledge on this basis, and perhaps learned more through listening than direct reading. Listening to the Mass and reading the Divine Office allowed him to establish frequent contact with the Bible, and in particular with the Gospels. It can be said that the Bible became central to his way of expressing himself, both in speaking and writing. Like other mystics, he was struck by individual words and phrases, on which he fixated himself with intensity, assimilating them spiritually and intellectually. He composes prayers and meditations from scriptural passages that had attracted his attention and had become fixed in his memory. Different passages of the Bible are associated so as to form scriptural chains. Francis speaks the language of the Bible in the sense that his writings, with the exception of the more personal *Canticle of Brother Sun* and the *Testament*, are predominantly made up of words and phrases taken from the sacred texts and recomposed.

It is therefore the intrinsic substance and form of these Writings that make them unsuccessful from a documentary point of view. It may be objected that these works were composed in the final years of his life (1220–1226), when his possible “courtly” youth was long over, but nevertheless, they provide no hint of “courtliness”.

6.2 Characteristics of hagiographic sources

At this point, it is no surprise that the main sources surrounding Francis are hagiographic texts, given that he was considered a living saint and canonised less than two years after his death. In the Middle Ages, every man or woman recognised as a saint by the Church was given a *Life* in Latin, which celebrated their virtues and narrated their actions, with the addition of a list of miracles attributed to their intercession. The *Life* was intended to be ‘read’ (hence the term *legend*, whose etymological origin is to be found in the Latin for ‘to be read’) on the feast day of the saint during the office that was recited or sung by clerics. Hagiographic texts are distinguished from biographies in that they are written not simply to recount a man or woman’s *lifestory*, but to incite their listeners or readers to lead a better life by

⁹⁴ Leonardi (2004, XXXI): “Egli parla con immediatezza di immagini, senza ombra di oscillazioni, con una limpidezza e trasparenza che hanno qualcosa di divino. Talvolta scrive solo con le parole della Bibbia, cioè della parola che riteneva ispirata da Dio, come se avesse capito, nell’abisso della sua vita in Dio, di non poter rivolgersi a Dio se non con la sua stessa parola.” (the translation from Italian is mine).

presenting a model of Christian perfection. The medieval legend is closer, in this sense, to the epic or song of deeds than to the chronicle. The extraordinary or miraculous episodes described do not necessarily have to be considered as factual and objective realities, because they represent a way of making God's presence and intervention in a human existence clear. The legendary is not unreal, but it is hyper-real.⁹⁵

To account for this higher reality, the legend uses plausible schemes and stories for its intended audience. Hagiographers also used courtly literature and the values it conveyed to speak to the people of their time, using a language and cultural references that would be accessible to them. About these sources Giovanni Miccoli said that any relations between Francis and courtly culture “attest rather, and this is where their importance lies, his ability to manifest and express himself in current language, through images and references that were known to all, outside of the traditional channels and mediations of religious and edifying literature”.⁹⁶ Hagiographers express themselves using the vocabulary of secular culture and secular literature of the time.

Hagiographic texts, therefore, are not literally true in the modern sense of the term, which is why the events are rarely placed in relation to each other or dated. The hagiographic story responds to a different textual philosophy, and for this reason, it often acquires a literary character. For the hagiographer, the guarantee of the narrative's truthfulness lies in the repetition of actions, words, and circumstances that have been codified by tradition. On a stylistic level, this tendency is translated into the wide use of intertextuality. The works of Thomas of Celano contain numerous borrowings from earlier hagiographic texts, such as the *Life of Saint Anthony* by Athanasius of Alexandria, the *Life of Saint Martin* by Sulpicius Severus or the *Lives of the Desert Fathers*. By referencing these texts, he is implicitly indicating that Francis was equal to the greatest Christian saints and belonged in the same league.

Further proof that hagiographers played an important role in filtering the information and determining perspective can be seen in the fact that later legends omit certain details, including the very courtly elements discussed here. In his *Legenda maior* Bonaventure reduces the emphasis on Francis as an individual, suppressing a whole series of elements from the sources that preceded him. These details are ones that no longer have historical relevance in relation to current events, such as the references to Cardinal Ugolino (who became pope in the meantime) and

95 For these interesting considerations on the value of hagiographic sources, cf. (Vauchez 2010, 202–203); furthermore, Uribe (2002, 34–53).

96 Cf. Miccoli (1974, 736) (the translation is mine).

his death. Also omitted are the prophecies that predict a breakdown of the Order, as well as ones that detail historical contrasts. Thomas of Celano's personal memories are omitted, as are Elijah's interventions. Francis' original name, John, is not mentioned; Bonaventure wants to present Francis as more than a prophet, or a second Elijah. Francis' "courtliness", which has a significant presence in the *Legenda trium sociorum*, is absent from the *Legenda maior*, as is the evocation of France. As the town of Assisi fades into the background, the colours of courtly culture and chivalric ideology recede with it, as they appear to be less relevant to an Order of novices, from 1220, and of priests, from 1239. Francis' dream about weapons is adapted and loses the details that could lend themselves to chivalric or Arthurian overtones. The saint's toughness and fragility both disappear, as well as everything that shows his imagination, his lightness, but also his real simplicity. Francis' youth is erased, along with his original sins, doubts and hesitations, his sermons as a jester before Honorius III, and much of his love for creatures.⁹⁷

7 Conclusion

Of course, not all the sources I used have the same evidential value. It is known that the most reliable are the *Vita prima* and the *Compilatio Assiensis*. The *De inceptione*, the *Legenda trium sociorum* and the *Memoriale* must be read critically to ascertain whether they have historical value or not. The *Legenda versificata* brings nothing new to the *Vita prima*, Jacopo de Voragine's *Legenda* is notoriously fanciful, and Bonaventure offer no first-hand information.⁹⁸ However, all these texts contribute to add a few pieces to the general argument I have addressed. If one compares the episode of St. Peter's Basilica in the *Legenda trium sociorum* with the similar one that appears for the first time in the *Vita brevior*, it becomes clear that the use of French is a literary embellishment and this only confirms the hypothesis I tried to prove.

In conclusion, I believe that Francis's personal development took place precisely at the time when French culture was beginning to spread in Italy and, therefore, it could not have played too central a role for him. In Umbria, among other things, the *langue d'oïl* was certainly not as well known as in northern Italy, also because the local dialect did not have the affinities with it that were found in the vernaculars of the North. These were the years in which French did begin to circulate, but Umbria was a somewhat isolated, and behind other regions in this respect.

⁹⁷ Cf. Cardini (1980, 24–25); Dalarun (1996, 167, 170–173).

⁹⁸ Cf. Uribe (2002, 82–85, 113–116, 123–125, 152–153, 165–166, 192–193, 227–228, 261–269, 304–307, 362–365, 405, 509–511).

The *langue d'oïl* was still little known in the world of Francis, although knowledge of this prestigious language was probably beginning to be coveted, and, precisely for this reason, could take on the role of foreign language *par excellence* in hagiographic sources.

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