Conflicting Interpretations of Holiness and Heterodoxy in Late Medieval Italy

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Abstract

In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy, there are a number of examples of people that local communities perceived as holy, but who ran afoul of inquisitors. Two of the more lesser-known, but extremely polarizing local saints — and accused heretics— were Meco del Sacco and Tomassuccio of Nocera. In both cases, the impetus for the accusations seemed to be jealousy from other members of the clerical elite. In addition, local politics played an enormous part in the championing, or defaming, of their sanctity. In both cases, the accused successfully challenged the charges of heresy. The histories of Meco del Sacco and Tomassuccio of Nocera demonstrate how accused individuals could contest inquisitorial authority, and exemplify how the thin line between sanctity and heresy could give rise to separate realities, creating a liminal space within which a single individual could co-exist.

Keywords: heresy, inquisition, saint's cults, Papal States, antifraternalism

Introduction

In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy, there were a number of people that local communities perceived as holy, but who ran afoul of inquisitors. Two of the lesser-known, but extremely polarizing local saints — and accused heretics — were Meco del Sacco and Tomassuccio of Nocera. Meco was a holy man in Ascoli who had obtained, through his charitable and spiritual endeavors, the backing of the bishop, Rainaldo IV, the support of the Augustinian convent, and the veneration of a large segment of the local population. Yet between 1334 and 1344 Meco was condemned as a heretic three times by the Franciscan inquisitors of the March of Ancona. Inquisitors similarly accused Tomassuccio of Nocera, a friar, three times, imprisoning him even though his superiors and citizens believed he was a holy man and a prophet. In both cases, the impetus for the accusations seemed to be jealousy from other members of the clerical elite. In addition, local church politics played an enormous part in the championing, or defaming, of these men's sanctity. In both cases, the accused successfully challenged the heresy charges. Their ability to do so suggests that there were multiple understandings of orthodoxy in the late Middle Ages, bringing up for debate the accepted dichotomy of "orthodoxy" and "heterodoxy," and the usefulness of those terms. The histories of Meco del Sacco and Tomassuccio of Nocera also exemplify how the blurred line between sanctity and heresy can be added to other examples of blurring, such as literary and political figures, which led to two separate but simultaneous identities. These

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realities created a liminal space within which a single individual could exist.

Meco's life has to be pieced together somewhat more than usual for late medieval saints, dubious or otherwise. There is no canonization inquiry, no *vita* or list of miracles, and even his inquisitorial sentences are no longer extant. What we do have are papal documents regarding his appeals to his condemnations, which provide an unusual perspective but rather limited information about the events in his life. It seems that Meco went through a conversion experience similar to that of Valdes or St. Francis. He had two sons, Angelo and Peter, and was married to a woman named Clarella.[1] In 1344 his son Angelo became the rector of a church and a hospital he had built, so the assumption is he was born circa 1300, but where, and into what type of household, is unknown. Sometime before 1334 he became a *converso*, a layperson dedicated to a penitential life yet not affiliated with a particular institutional order or bound by formal vows.[2] Apparently Meco began to disseminate treatises that, according to the inquisitor who charged him with heresy in 1334, contained radical concepts.[3] Meco abjured heresy, was absolved, and his treatises burned.

The bishop of Ascoli seemingly did not consider this inquiry a grave matter, since on August 1 of the same year he granted Meco permission to build an oratory, called Santissima Ascensione, on nearby Monte Polesio.[4] It is possible that the bishop favored Meco because of a potentially wealthy or aristocratic background. The fact that Meco wrote treatises, one supposedly in French and one in the local dialect (or could at least read or retain someone to transcribe his thoughts), is suggestive of a somewhat privileged upbringing.[5] Regardless of the reasons for the bishop's support, between 1334 and 1337 other *conversi* joined Meco on Monte Polesio. His renown for holiness grew after he embarked on charitable endeavors, for instance, building a hospital around 1337 in town that catered to pilgrims. The Augustinians, whose convent was located near to the hospital, became closely involved with Meco, to the extent of becoming the overseers of that establishment during Meco's absences.[6]

Meco's burgeoning following did not allow him to remain under the inquisitorial radar for long. In 1337 inquisitors questioned him a second time, condemned him as a heretic, and imprisoned him. He

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[1] A. DeSantis, *Meco del Sacco, inquisizione e processi per eresia*. *Ascoli-Avignone 1320-1346* (Ascoli Piceno: A. DeSantis, 1982 [1980]), 187. All the extant documents are transcribed in his appendices, except for one, which is edited by Sara Benedini ("Un processo ascolano tra sospetti d'eresia ed abusi inquisitoriali," Picenum Seraphicum n.s., anno XIX (2000): 171-207). Lea incorrectly identifies 1337 as the year of his conversion. This date is impossible, as inquisitors already had questioned him in 1334 (H.C. Lea, *A History of the Inquisition*, III [New York: Cosimo, 2005 (1888)], 124).

[2] A. Vauchez, "Pénitents au Moyen Âge," in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité ascétique et mystique: doctrine et histoire*, 17 vols. (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1984), XII, cols. 1010-23.

[3] The early modern historian F.A. Marcucci claimed that Meco's books were "uno in francese spori i Salmi, e due in volgare intorno al Vangelo e all'Apocalisse" (*Saggio di Cose Ascolane e de' vescovi di Ascoli nel Piceno* (Bologna: A. Forni, 1984 [1766]), cited in DeSantis, *Meco*, 162).

[4] DeSantis, *Meco*, appendix X.

[5] Ibid., 162.

[6] Meco's oratory also became the property of the Augustinians after his death until its Napoleonic suppression (ibid., 36).

was let out on bail, a surprising event in itself. Since he had already abjured heresy once, this charge branded him as a relapsed heretic, a title that often resulted in capital punishment for contumacy. After leaving prison, Meco fled to Avignon to appeal his sentence to the pope. The fact that he obtained his release, and secured the funds for travel and a procurator, strongly suggests that the Augustinians and the bishop pressured the Franciscan inquisitor, and helped arrange his defence strategy. The foundation of his appeal was that the Franciscans, who were in charge of the inquisitorial office in the region, had falsely accused him. Meco claimed

> The superior and brothers of the Order of Friars Minor in Ascoli were moved by jealousy and hatred against him, and because his said hospital and church were more frequented by the faithful of Christ and His mother than their [own] place.
>
> "Guardianus et Fratri loci Ordin. Minorum Esculanensium odio et invidia moti pro e quod dictum hospitale e Ecclesia erat magis quam ipsorum locus per fideles Christi et Matris ejus frequentata."[7]

Pope Benedict XII consequently absolved him of all charges. This result is another startling element to the story. Ascoli was under interdict during the time of these events for rebelling against their terrestrial lord — the pope, as part of the Papal States — and one would assume the pope would not be particularly sympathetic to the appeals of a previously-condemned heretic from a disobedient town exiled from the Church. The success of Meco's appeal suggests that the charges were in fact specious.

While Meco was at the papal residence, however, armed clergy and parishioners from the parish church of St. Mary Among the Vineyards invaded Meco's buildings, confiscated the valuables, destroyed what they couldn't take, like the church's altar, and profaned the Eucharist.[8] The Augustinians, acting on Meco's behalf, successfully sued the clerics and won reparations. Meco's success at drawing pilgrims and spiritual penitents to his establishments clearly did engender jealousy and greed in rival institutions. The bishop granted Meco license to rebuild his church and hospital, and named him and his heirs patrons of the hospital for perpetuity, at which point Meco's son Angelo took over as rector.[9] Meco's orthodoxy was re-established, yet was soon to be challenged for a third time.

A bull of Pope Clement VI dated August 1344 indicates that a new inquisitor, Pietro da Penno S. Giovanni, condemned Meco for heresy once again. The inquisitor sentenced him to a fine of sixty gold florins and two years of exile in Rome. Again, this sentence is unusual, considering his first condemnation still stood, making him a contumacious heretic. It suggests that the inquisitor had concerns regarding making the charges stick, procedural issues, or ruffling the feathers of other members of the clerical elite, or his superior, the pope.

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[7] Ibid., appendix IV.
[8] Ibid., 193-4.
[9] Ibid., appendix V.

In response, Meco again appealed this sentence, on the same grounds as before. Pope Clement VI ordered the bishop of Ascoli to examine the sentence. The bishop ordered the inquisitor to take no further action while the case was being examined. Friar Pietro ignored this order, and excommunicated Meco. He then led an armed following to confiscate Meco's goods as a relapsed heretic. These actions prompted the pope to convene a special investigatory commission, which in 1345 ordered that Meco be given restitution for his property.[10] In 1346 the commission absolved Meco of all charges and reinstated him in the church, although he seems to have been deceased by that point as he disappeared from all records. Some historians have suggested he was burned as a relapsed heretic in 1344 or 1345, before the council handed down their final decree absolving him of all charges; others, like A. Pastori, have argued vociferously against this conclusion.[11] It is possible that he died of natural causes before the council acquitted him in 1346. A near-contemporary chronicle of Ascoli provides a list of all the people burned for heresy in the region at the time, but Meco is not mentioned in that list.[12]

The dramatic events of Meco del Sacco's history brings into sharp relief the enormous part that jealousy and vying for popular patronage could play in constructing a perceived saint into a simultaneous heretic.[13] Meco's success at drawing recruits to his penitential lifestyle meant that he had become a powerful figure, and his foundations wealthy establishments. The bishop and the Augustinians supported Meco's endeavors due to admiration for his piety, but perhaps also to monetarily benefit from an association with this popular holy man. In contrast, the Franciscans and at least one local parish church used the charges of heresy to justify the confiscation of his property. The accusations neutralized a rival who's popularity affected their prestige, and hence their financial standing. His popularity and the greed it engendered was a catalyst for the raids on his buildings, and perhaps also for the condemnations by the Franciscan inquisitors. In the same year that Meco ultimately was vindicated, the inquisitor of the March of Ancona who last condemned Meco del Sacco and led the last raid on his establishments, was charged with extortion, and sentenced to a fine of 500 florins.[14]

Local politics also played a part in the makeup of clerical factions in Ascoli. The Augustinians and the Franciscans were in a long-standing feud, one that could be traced back to 1259. In that year Pope Alexander IV prohibited the Augustinians from building their church and convent in the same place where the Franciscans were intending

[10] Ibid., appendix XI.
[11] Ibid., 52-3 and appendices XII and XIII.
[12] Ascoli Piceno, Biblioteca comunale do Ascoli Piceno, ms. 99, cc. 9-10.
[13] Janine Larmon Peterson, *Suspect Saints and Holy Heretics: Disputed Sanctity and Communal Identity in Late Medieval Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 119-168.
[14] Città del Vaticano, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Collectoriae, 384, f. 1r-12r; a transcription and discussion is in M. d'Alatri, "Un processo dell'inverno 1346-1347 contro gli inquisitori delle Marche," in d'Alatri, *Eretici e inquisitori in Italia: Studi e documenti*, vol. 2 (Rome: Istituto storico del Cappuccini, 1987), 77-107; DeSantis, *Meco*, 138.

to settle.[15] The Augustinians, losing out to the Franciscans, had to move the site of their foundation. The continuing hostility between the orders became manifest in the dispute over the orthodoxy of Meco del Sacco. The battle lines that divided the clerical authorities in town, and branded Meco simultaneously as both a saint and a heretic, paralleled this partisan division.

Meco was somewhat of a pawn, trapped between the concerns of local clerical internecine rivalry, and caught in the snare of conflicting interpretations. How Meco lived and what actually he believed is shrouded in mystery. The only surviving evidence is found in the documents dealing with his third condemnation, which outline what heterodox ideas inquisitors previously had ascribed to him. They are a very eclectic mix, including stock accusations as well as ones specific to a variety of particular heretical sects. One charge, for instance, was that Meco believed usury was not a sin, which was a standard identifier of heresy. Thirteenth- and fourteenth-century inquisitorial manuals routinely advised inquisitors to question deponents on just this point.[16] Other accusations were more unique although still based on common premises, such as improper sexual relations between men and women. Inquisitors claimed that Meco taught that wives were only required to have sex with their husbands once a year, and sexual contact up until the point of orgasm was not a sin. The first charge limited the concept of the conjugal debt, while the second overturned the premise of sex solely for procreation. Under the prevalent Galenic medical theory, procreation occurred only when both partners reached orgasm.[17] Teaching that sexual contact without completion was okay effectively justified sex for solely physical pleasure.

Other charges were specific to particular heresies. Meco and his followers supposedly thought that babies who died without baptism would still be saved through the faith of their parents, and that laypeople could absolve others of sin. There is a marked Donatist strain in the suggestion that worthy laypersons were as valid receivers of God's sacramental grace and powers to dispense it as clerics. In addition, an accusation that Meco believed that women could be publicly naked if flagellating themselves associated him with the flagellant movement, which would soon be condemned in 1349.[18] The specific reference to female participation — and their lack of dress — during the performance of the discipline assured its heretical nature even in 1344, before the movement's official suppression. The

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[15] Bull of Alexander IV, 26 Aug. 1259, Archivio di Stato di Ascoli Piceno, perg. 34, noted in DeSantis, *Meco*, 12, n. 31. He had granted the Friars Minor permission to build a church in Ascoli only two years prior (Bull of Alexander IV, 13 Dec. 1257, in *Bullarium Franciscanum Romanorum Pontificum*, II, ed. G. Giacinto Sbaraglia [Santa Maria degli Angeli: Edizioni Porziuncola, 1983 (1759)], 269).

[16] For instance, Bernard Gui's manual suggests that inquisitors should inquire into usury for suspected Cathars (Bernard Gui, *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis*, ed. C. Douais [Paris: Picard, 1886]).

[17] According to the Galenic model, which was prevalent throughout the Middle Ages, conception was achieved only through the orgasm of both participants (T. Laqueur, "Orgasm, Generation, and the Politics of Reproductive Biology," *Representations* 14 [1986], esp. 1-12). On the lack of Aristotle in the medieval medical arts, see I. MacLean, "The Notion of Woman in Medicine, Anatomy, and Physiology," in *Feminism and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Lorna Hutson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 129.

[18] M. D. Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 243.

identification of Meco with the flagellants perhaps holds a germ of truth, as both his emphasis on penitence and his name suggests. Meco's given name was Domenico Savi but his popular pseudonym, "del Sacco," or "of the bag," also referred in Italy to the white tunics that flagellants would wear during their public processions of ritual discipline.[19] Meco's followers also came to be known as the "Sacconi." The most inflammatory accusation was the charge that Meco maintained that he was the son of God (*filium Dei se nominat*), suffered as Christ through his death and resurrection, possessed the stigmata, and could expel demons and produce miracles.[20] Similar to St. Francis of Assisi, Meco possessed an identity as *alter Christus*; unlike Francis, Meco was charged with believing himself to be the incarnation of Christ, which in fact is quite unusual. There are few similar cases, and interestingly it was women who were most often accused of such beliefs, such as Na Prous Boneta (d. 1328) and Guglielma of Milan (d. 1279).[21] The result was that Meco became labeled a heresiarch, or a heterodox leader who was guilty of "deceiving and seducing the people in various ways."[22]

There is no way to ascertain if most of these accusations were true. The treatises he wrote were burned after his first condemnation when Meco admitted and abjured heresy, but unlike Marguerite of Porete's (d. 1310) treatise, the *Mirror of Simple Souls*, no copies seem to have survived to determine the legitimacy of the charges.[23] Leaving aside the charge that Meco believed he was Jesus, there is a loose unifying theme to the accusations: all Christians can achieve salvation without the sacraments or clerical intercession, whether through strength of faith, embrace of penance, or God's divine grace. There is also an anti-sacerdotal element. If Meco had in fact espoused such an ideology as portrayed, it is not surprising that it resonated with the citizens of Ascoli. Although the bishop apparently maintained administrative duties, the interdict under which all the citizens suffered during Meco's lifetime meant that they were deprived of the sacraments, and excluded from the spiritual consolation that priests could provide.

For many people of Ascoli, including both ecclesiastical and monastic authorities, Meco was an exemplar of comportment and a model of piety and charity in a city that, according to the Church, was denied God's favor. In 1889 the town of Ascoli renamed the Via Lucio Manlio Torquato after him in honor of his role as "a writer and reformer of the fourteenth century" (*Letterato e riformatore del XIV*

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[19] A. Thompson, O.P., *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes 1125-1325* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 99.
[20] DeSantis, Meco, 105-8.
[21] L. A. Burnham, "The Visionary Authority of Na Prous Boneta," in *Pierre de Jean Olivi (1248-1298)*, eds. Alain Boureau and Sylvain Piron (Paris: Vrin, 1999), 319-339; J. Larmon Peterson, "Social Roles, Gender Inversion, and the Heretical Sect: The Case of the Guglielmites," *Viator: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 35 (2004): 203-19.
[22] "Populum decepit multipliciter & seduxit" (DeSantis, *Meco*, appendix XI).
[23] Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. E. Colledge, J.C. Marler, and J. Grant (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999); for discussion see S. L. Field, *The Beguine, the Angel, and the Inquisitor: The Trials of Marguerite Porete and Guiard of Cressonessart* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

secolo).[24] The street was in a section of the city known as "Cecco d'Ascoli." The reference is to another local citizen, a famous astrologer, who was burned as a relapsed heretic in Florence in 1327 for continuing to ccirculate his treatises that inqusitors deemed to verge on sorcery. Nineteenth-century city officials clearly were making a statement regarding local prestige and power, by linking and championing these two men. In addition, the tiny town of Furore in Campania, perched high in the mountains overlooking the Amalfi coast, maintains its own link and claim to fame through Meco. Websites mentioning the history of Furore claim that it was the refuge for Meco's followers, the "Sacconi," who supposedly fled there in 1348 after they became subjects of inquisitorial scrutiny.[25]

Yet it is easy to lose sight of Meco's history as a saint in the midst of the drama of his interaction with inquisitors. Unfortunately, many scholars of medieval sanctity have surrendered his story to their colleagues working on medieval heresy. Not even André Vauchez's exhaustive discussion of sainthood — in which he discussed a number of contested saints — noted Meco del Sacco.[26] Thus his legacy in academic scholarship has not fared as well as it has on the ground, so to speak. Although Meco functioned as a "living saint" even within the orthodox and clerical circles of Ascoli, historically he is firmly placed in the category of obdurate heretic instead of holy reformer.[27]

The inability to firmly situate Meco within the confines of "a" heresy has meant that even discussions of him within studies of heterodoxy or the inquisition is scarce. The nineteenth-century historians H.C. Lea and Cesare Cantù gave him thorough treatment, but their characterizations of him, as a member of the Free Spirit and as a Spiritual Franciscan, respectively, are erroneous. Lea claimed Meco was a member of the Free Spirit, a group who supposedly believed in a mystical union with Christ that would result in the annihilation of one's soul. It is possible that the accusations that Meco believed he was Christ led Lea to interpret this as a misunderstanding of Free Spirit ideas of the mystical union with God.[28] The existence of the Free Spirit as a cohesive sect with a distinct ideology has been called into question, most notably by Robert Lerner.[29] The bull Ad nostrum, from the Council of Vienne (1311-12) condemns beguines and beghards, who have been associated with the Free Spirit movement, as was Marguerite Porete. Lerner claims that there is no

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[24] DeSantis, *Meco*, 30. The naming was done under the direction of the "commission in charge of the affairs of the syndic of Ascoli Piceno" (*Commissione incaricata dal Sindaco di Ascoli Piceno*) (ibid., 29).

[25] E.g., "Furore," *La MescoLanza*, 8 July 2019 (https://www.lamescolanza.com/2019/07/08/furore/), accessed 4 June 2023.

[26] A. Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[27] Gabriella Zarri, "Living Saints: A Typology of Female Sanctity in the Early Sixteenth Century," in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 219-303.

[28] Lea, *Inquisition*, III, 125; Lea described his beliefs based on a late medieval text purporting to describe the tenets of the sect, not on Meco's surviving documents. The text that Lea summarizes survives in Roma, Bibl. Casanatense, A. IV, 49 (Lea, *Inquisition*, III, p. 124). This document decribes the supposed beliefs of the Italian Free Spirits, but has no connection with Meco himself.

[29] R. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

evidence for this association. His study is focused on northern Europe, however, which has little similarity to the situation in the Italian peninsula. There is some evidence that perhaps there was a more unified group operating under that name in Italy, a region that Lerner did not examine in his study. Whether such a group as the "Free Spirit" actually existed in fourteenth-century Italy is unclear, although several contemporary chroniclers mention those who call themselves *spiritus libertatis*.[30] Cantù, in contrast, described Meco as a Spiritual Franciscan, a group condemned by John XXII in 1323 because they refused to accept that Christ and his apostles ever owned any property.[31] The evidence supports this identification even less, even though the region was known as a hideout for Spiritual Franciscans.[32]

Since the nineteenth century, only two scholars have examined Meco. Mariano D'Alatri mentions him briefly in his investigation of fourteenth-century inquisitorial corruption. Antonio DeSantis wrote a monograph on Meco, the only modern scholar to do so, and his text is accompanied by an edition of the extant documents.[33] DeSantis was solely concerned with "redeeming" Meco by trying to prove that he died of natural causes, and was not burned by inquisitors. Moreover, much of his argument derives from the thesis of an eighteenth-century scholar and Augustinian monk, Luigi Pastori. Pastori, writing before the Napoleonic wars, was a member of the very convent in Ascoli that had been the patrons and heirs of Meco's oratory and hospital, and thus was not a disinterested party.

Altogether, there is not a lot of secondary literature on an individual whose story is so complex and bristles with interesting angles. Perhaps the different and confusing names by which he is referred, either Meco del Sacco or Domenico Savi (or, in one case in the extant records, Marco di Ascoli Piceno), has contributed to the lack of modern scholarship about his case. Essentially, though, the problem seems to be that no one knows what to "do" with Meco. He is not a compelling example of a late medieval lay saint, since there is little evidence of a surviving public cult. His expressions of piety do not conform to the model of many other saintly contemporaries, like mystics, whose extraordinary behavior marked them out as holy. Conversely, he does not instruct us about the growth of local heretical movements. Since Meco was absolved of all heresy by the pope himself — twice — he cannot be lumped into the category of heresiarch, as the fourteenth-century inquisitors tried to do. He existed in two realities for separate constituencies for years during his life, and even after death, occupying a liminal space. It is a space above and beyond the normal bounds of social roles and expectations, a space that he progressed to through a rite of passage — his conversion experience —

[30] R. Guarnieri, "Il Movimenti del Libero Spirito: Testi e Documenti," in *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà* 4 (1954), 353-708.
[31] C. Cantù, *Gli eretici d'Italia: discorsi storici* (Torino: Unione Tipografico-Editrice, 1886), 133. There is some suggestion of a connection between the Free Spirits and the Spiritual Franciscans; for instance pope Clement V inquired into this matter in 1310 (Burr, D. *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After Saint Francis*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2001, 113-16).
[32] Lea, *Inquisition*, III, 165.
[33] D'Alatri, "Un processo dell'inverno." 78-80; DeSantis, *Meco.*

and in which he existed outside of the normal social structure.[34] His story is one of contrasts: considered both saint and heretic, holy and damned, he simultaneously inhabited the dichotomous spheres of "true" and "false" saint.

Tomassuccio of Nocera, the Suspect *Alter Christus*

Meco was not alone. Tomassuccio of Nocera (d. 1377) provides a similar example of the blurred boundaries between saint and heretic. Tomassuccio was a thorn in the side of many local clerical authorities who suspected him of heresy, yet who could not secure a conviction.[35] Although Tomassuccio was questioned and/or imprisoned three times for being a suspected heretic, none of the charges stuck. His subsequent cult nevertheless flourished in the towns of Nocera where he was born, and Foligno where he died. According to a fourteenth-century hagiography by Giusta della Rosa, a disciple of Tomassuccio, Tomassuccio was the fifth child of a poor farmer and a pious mother from the countryside of Valmacinaia outside Nocera.[36] An angel announced to his mother, named Madonna Bona, that she was pregnant with a son who would become a close friend of God. The angel dictated that upon his birth the child be named "Tomassuccio." Tomassuccio fulfilled his birthright, taking a vow of chastity at the age of twelve, and leaving his family at twenty-four to reside with a poor hermit named Brother Piero on nearby Monte Gualdo.[37]

After three years of living as an anchorite, God purportedly called on Tomassuccio to go to Tuscany and preach. Recluses based their spirituality on solo prayer, so this aspect of Tomassuccio's *Life* justifies all that he does after, as it is at the behest of God, and not his own will.[38] Since he did not want to leave his hermitage, God gave him a nudge: through the "permission and commandment of God," an anonymous friar who was close to Tomassuccio impugned his friend,

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[34] Miri Rubin, "Introduction," in Nicola F. McDonald and W.M. Ormrod, eds., *Rites of Passage: Cultures of Transition in the Fourteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), 10-12; Victor Turner, "Pilgrimages as Social Processes," in Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 202.

[35]His name is variably spelled Tommasuccio, and occasionally secondary literature refers to him as Tomasuccio of Foligno. In H.C. Lea's work he is called Tommasino di Foligno. His birthname may have been Tommaso Unzio, although M. Faloci Pulignani, who edited his *vita* and a collection of prophecies atrributed to him, claimed this was merely a misreading of his given name (M. Faloci Pulignani, ed., *La leggenda del beato Tomasuccio da Nocera* [Gubbio: Scuola Tipografia "Oderisi," 1932], 7).

[36] The vita exists in Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, cod. I.115 and is edited by Pulignani (*La leggenda*). For discussion see Lea, *Inquisition*, II, 281; M. D'Alatri, "Movimenti religiosi popolari umbri il Beato Tomasuccio e l'inquisizione," in d'Alatri, *Eretici e inquisitori in Italia. Studi e documenti*, 2 vols. (Rome: Istituto storico del Cappuccini, 1987) II, 219-32; the essays in *Il B. Tomasuccio da Foligno terziario francescano ed i movimenti religiosi popolari umbri nel Trecento*, ed. R. Pazzelli (Rome: Edizioni Commissione Storica, 1979); and Antonio Montefusco, "Indagine su un fraticello al di sopra di ogni sospetto: il caso di Muzio da Perugia (con osservazioni su Tomasuccio, frate Stoppa e i fraticelli di Firenze)," in *Pueden alzarse les gentiles palabras*, ed. Emma Scoles et. al, 259-280 (Rome: Bagatto Libri, 2013).

[37] The hermit is termed a "fraticello" in the manuscript, the Italian term for Spiritual Franciscans (G. Tognetti, *I fraticelli, il principio di povertà e i secolari*, Bullettino dell'Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo e Archivio Muratoriano 90 [1982-1983]: 77-145).

[38] Frances Andrews and Eleonora Rava, "Introduction: Approaches to Voluntary Reclusion in Medieval Europe (13-16th Centuries)," in *Quaderni di storia religiosa medievale*, 24/1 (2021): 7-30.

and informed the bishop of Nocera that Tomassuccio had not confessed for three years.[39] The result was the first investigation into Tomassuccio's behavior. His lifestyle was the focus of the investigation for displaying a "contempt for Christian morals and observance" by deviating from the injunction of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 that all Christians must confess at least once a year.[40] The bishop released Tomassuccio after his mentor and spiritual advisor, Brother Piero, attested that Tomassuccio confessed to him every month. The experience was enough for Tomassuccio to leave the area. Within the context of the *vita* this episode introduces a number of themes that concide with Meco's story: the implicit jealousy by members of the mendicant orders; attempts to ruin reputations by attacking their orthodoxy on the basis of anti-sacerdotal Christian behaviors; and the intervention of God's will by respected members of the clerical elite that results in the restoration of their reputations.

Following his first questioning, Tomassuccio spoke to God. Like St. Francis before him, he expressed his desire to go overseas to preach to the Saracens and, if he was lucky, to be martyred there. God rejected his request, responding,

> I will have you well martyred in Tuscany; believe in me, return towards Tuscany to preach, as I have told you, and you shall foretell their tribulations and trials, and [be the] judge that they will reform their sins, [because] if they do not I will send them war, famine, and tribulation for their horrible sins that they continue to do and think without fear of me.
>
> "Io ti farò bene martirizare in Toscana; credi a me, torna in Toscana a predicare, come io t'ò detto, e annunziarai le tribolazioni e dolori, e giudizi che li verranno se non si emenderanno delli loro peccati, altrimente io le mandarò le guerre, fame e tribolazione per li loro orribili peccati, che di continuo fanno e pensano seza mio timore."[41]

Tomassuccio capitulated to God's will, and traveled the Tuscan countryside preaching and dispensing prophecies. His rhetorical skills garnered him a following, which included his hagiographer Giusto della Rosa. According to Giusto's text, in Arezzo Tomassuccio was even able to persuade a Jew to convert to Christianity. His renown increased as he forecasted the wrath of God, predicted destruction, and harangued specific clerics who he believed were corrupt. In Perugia he expounded on the sins of Gerald, abbot of Marmoutiers, and the papal vicar of the Papal States.[42] In the *Profezie*,

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[39] "Per permissione e comandamento di Dio" (*La leggenda*, ch. VII, 23).

[40] A. Murray, "Piety and Impiety in Thirteenth-Century Italy," *Studies in Church History* 8 (1972): 84; Fourth Lateran Council, 1215, canon 21, in Tanner, S.J., ed., *Disciplinary Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume 1: Nicaea I to Lateran V* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 259-60.

[41] *La leggenda*, ch. X, 26. There are obvious parallels between this scene and that of St Francis, who desired martyrdom and travelled to the Holy Land to preach amongst the Saracens, but also was thwarted by God (Thomas of Celano, "The First Life of St Francis," in *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies*, 4th rev. edn, ed. Marion A. Habig [Chicago: Franciscan Press, 1983], 277).

[42] *La leggenda*, ch. XV, 32. For the identification of the unnamed abbot with Gerald of Marmoutiers, see Luigi Bonazzi, *Storia di Perugia*, I, (Perugia, 1876), 485.

a collection of prophecies that Tomassuccio supposedly wrote (or dictated), he claimed to be God's messenger for divine justice. His mission was to purge the world of iniquity, and persuade the institutional Church to focus again on the pastoral care of souls.[43]

Unsurprisingly, his orations and prophetizing did not endear him to everyone. His successful predictions engendered reverence in some, but also a justification for eventual incarceration for others. In Siena, Tomassuccio preached God would punish unrepentant sinners by sending a devastating frost. When a terrible frost soon occurred, "malignant men" went to the Franciscan inquisitor and accused him of sorcery. He was imprisoned and tortured but ultimately released. It is unclear why he secured his freedom. It could simply have been that civic prisons in the late Middle Ages were for short stays only, since they were still costly to guard although prisoners were in charge of their own food source, etc.[44] His *vita*, however, claimed that an angel visited him in prison and promised that he would be released from physical suffering. Henry Charles Lea interpreted this passage as implying that inquisitors tortured Tomassuccio, but his wounds "miraculously" healed, which convinced inquisitors of his innocence.[45]

Afterwards, Tomassuccio moved to Florence, where he again attracted the attention of inquisitorial authorities. He was imprisoned for three days, and denied even bread and water. Once again, enigmatically, he survived. The surviving earliest Milanese manuscript copy of his *vita* claimed that the inquisitor pardoned him, without expounding on why. The 1510 incunabula edition from Vicenza, and Lodovico Iacobilli's 1626 edition of the text, both stated that some soldiers pressured the inquisitor to release him because he was just a "barefoot crazy person" (*pazzo scalzo*).[46] Persons deemed insane were not held responsible for their words or actions; thus, inquisitorial manuals often discussed how heretics would fake insanity in order to avoid condemnation.[47] It is possible that this explanation was added to the *vita* in order to place Tomassuccio within the "holy fool" tradition, and further emphasize the similarities between him and St. Francis.[48]

Like Meco del Sacco, Tomassuccio survived three interrogations, including two incarcerations, on suspicion of heterodoxy. Notwithstanding these serious challenges to his reputation as a prophet, his hagiographer and acolyte Giusto reiterated in his *vita* that Tomassuccio was a saint who God chose to be a martyr for dealing with people who were obstructive to his pious mission. Giusto claimed that in one of Tomassuccio's last visions an angel declared,

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[43] *La profezie del Beato Tommasuccio di Foligno*, ed. M. Faloci Pulignani (Foligno: Feliciano Campitelli, 1887), ch. 13.
[44] Guy Geltner, *The Medieval Prison: A Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
[45] Lea, *Inquisition*, II, 282.
[46] *La leggenda*, ch. 40, 59-60.
[47] For example, see Nicholas Eymerich, *Directorium inquisitorum* [Venice: Apud Marcum Antonium Zalterium, 1595].
[48] Consider the description of St. Francis as the "new fool" (*novellus pazzus*) (L. Lemmens, ed., *Documenta Antiqua. Franciscana*, I [Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1901], 104).

"Take yourself to Foligno and remain there until your death. Therefore, God wishes that your relics, that is your bones, ought to remain there."[49] While a hagiographer's panegyric is not unusual, there is solid evidence that Tomassuccio was venerated outside his inner circle of followers. The communities of Nocera and Foligno publicly venerated him as a saint. Nocera adopted Tomassuccio as their "advocate" (*avvocato*), or patron and intercessor. There was even an unsuccessful attempt at opening a canonization inquiry.[50] In addition, in Siena's Biblioteca Comunale, there survives an anonymous letter from circa 1400 that expressed a concern that the text of Tomassuccio's prophecies, the *Profezie*, had been corrupted in its transmission.[51] The letter demonstrates continued reverance for Tomassuccio, and belief in his prophetic powers, a quarter century after his death.

Conclusions

Local authorities accepted the enduring adulation, and even veneration, of both Meco and Tomassuccio, both thrice-suspected heretics, because of the inquisitors' inability to secure condemnations. Meco del Sacco and Tomassuccio of Nocera had been anchorites who purportedly became the targets of jealous mendicants: the Franciscans. The pope assigned the Papal States to Franciscan inquisitors in 1254, when he divided the duties between them and the Dominicans.[52] Since the Franciscans began in, and retained their home base in Assisi, also part of the area that the pope ruled as a terrestrial lord, this decision was logical. It also could have heightened Franciscan inquisitorial zeal to anyone who challenged their popularity and influence in this region. Meco's popularity in Ascoli clearly threatened that of the Franciscans. Similarly, a "friar" first brought Tomassuccio to the attention of inquisitors. He existed within a prophetic tradition associated with the Franciscans rather than the Dominicans, thanks to the legacy of writers such as Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) and Gerardo Borgo san Donnino (d. 1276) who influenced the more mystical wing of the Spiritual Franciscans, or the *fraticelli* as they were known in the Italian peninsula.[53] The Spirituals had been condemned decades before Tomassuccio. There were many who adhered to their beliefs well after, however, gaining both respect from

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[49] "Vattene a Foligno, e lì statene in fine a la tua morte. Imperciòche Dio vuole che le tue reliquie, cioè le tue ossa, debbano restare lì" (*La leggenda*, ch. 41).

[50] According to Lodovico Iacobilli's late seventeenth-century description of his cult, "santo Tommasuccio beatissimo vostro cittadino, et avvocato singolare della vostra città da Nocera" (transcribed in *Profezie*, 23).

[51] Ibid., 25-6.

[52] M. D'Alatri, *L'inquisizione francescana nell'Italia Centrale del Duecento: con il testo del "Liber inquisitionis" di Orvieto trascritto da Egidio Bonanno* (Rome: Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1996), 17-18.

[53] M. Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism*, rev. edn. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993); Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, includes a discussion of Pope John XXII's condemnation, 196–9.

some quarters and prosecution from others, such as Angelo Clareno (d. 1337) and the condemned heretic Michele Berti da Calci (d. 1389).[54]

Meco del Sacco and Tomassuccio of Nocera became simultaneous saints and heretics due to the diverging views of many local inhabitants (lay and clerical) and Franciscan inquisitors. They were men who disdained the current manifestation and vision of the Franciscans, and opted to lead a solitary life in what might be seen as the original Franciscan tradition. They gained prestige, notoriety, and wealth because of it. The connecting theme is that Franciscans became jealous of their popularity in the region that "belonged" to them and their order, and used their role as inquisitors to target them. Both Meco and Tomassuccio were stained with the taint of heresy, making them a target for papal agents, at least for a time. The very fact that there were two opposing opinions of these men produced overt contestation over their identity: were they saints or heretics? Inquisitorial expectations were such that where heresy was alleged, heresy existed, and it would be proven so through their procedure. In Meco's case, the *inquisitio* "failed," largely on procedural grounds due to the overstepping of authority of the inquisitors involved. Both a pope and a separate papal commission absolved Meco of all charges of heterodoxy, while specifically upholding his claim that envy and greed was the Franciscan inquisitors' motivations. Individual inquisitors were censured. In Tomassuccio's case, his inquisitors could not ascertain from their questioning that he held any heterodox ideas, and his behavior was assumed to be in accordance with Fourth Lateran Council's decrees. Even the possible use of torture did not produce persuasive enough evidence to justify a condemnation. The inability of authorities to force their views of spiritual merit and institutional conformity resulted in amorphous, rather than rigid, binary categories between saints and heretics.

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[54] For Clareno, see his history of the Franciscans, Angelo Clareno, *Liber chronicarum, sive, tribulationum ordinis minorum*, ed. and trans. Giovanni M. Boccali, [Perugia: Porziuncola, 1998]. For Calci, see Andrea Piazza, "La passione di frate Michele: Un testo in volgare di fine Trecento," *Revue Mabillon* n.s. 10, 71 (1999): 231-56; his sentence and process is transcribed by A. D'Ancona, *Varietà storiche e letterarie*, I (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1883), 345-55.

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