

A MENDED  
*and* BROKEN HEART



*The Life and Love of Francis of Assisi*

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A MEMBER OF THE PERSEUS BOOKS GROUP  
NEW YORK

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## Preface



“Both fairies and journalists are slaves to duty,” the writer G. K. Chesterton remarked, and never was that statement truer than in the researching and writing of this book. For me, it has meant sitting in caves, standing on precipices, slogging through wheat fields, and squeezing through hidden passageways. To “get the interview” I’ve eaten meals in unheated homes in the dead of winter, sipping wine and whiskey by firelight; I’ve whispered in dimly lit libraries with elderly friars hunched over ancient manuscripts; I’ve spoken with nuns behind iron grills; and I’ve sung vespers in Latin. I’ve waited for appointments in church officials’ private chapels, where on one occasion I sat on a kneeler while a nun prayed at the altar on the floor. I too sat on floors—in libraries—and also on stools and ladders, scouring stacks for something, anything. Writing this book has meant resurrecting the *qui quae quod* of classical Latin that I studied for three years as a sometimes-clueless high school student. And this only to discover that medieval Latin involves the loss of declension endings, the extended use of auxiliary

verbs, and (as one linguist put it) “anarchy in uses of the subjunctive and indicative.” It has meant studying documents in French, Portuguese, Italian, and (thank God) English. It has meant chatting with friars in cafés, chasing down tour guides on the streets of Assisi, climbing watchtowers of ancient fortresses, lowering myself on ladders into subterranean ancient Roman ruins below semi-ancient medieval ones, and being yelled at by an Italian film director. (No project in Italy is complete without having been yelled at by an Italian film director.) I wrote this book with my legs.

In chasing down the story of Saint Francis of Assisi, I spoke with hundreds of people—scholars, theologians, priests, friars, nuns, bishops, artists, lawyers, maids, scientists, historians, archaeologists, café owners, writers, professors, actors, and, yes, a movie director. They were Italians mostly. Others were Dutch, French, German, Irish, Scottish, Latino, Asian, and even American. Everyone I spoke with knew something of Francis, and often what one knew contradicted what another one knew. I adopted the principle *No one can tell you everything, but everyone can tell you something*. That something—that one thing I hadn’t heard before—added a piece to the improbable picture of the life of Francis of Assisi that I submit in this book. It is a story of a complicated man, a true Italian among Italians, a poet, a warrior, a knight, a lover, a madman, and a saint. It is a story about human love by lovers of God—“both at once,” as Chesterton said, “both thoroughly.”

A knowledgeable Franciscan told me that if you don't understand Francis of Assisi as a mystery, then you have to conclude he was mad. Another Franciscan told me he *was* mad—but in a way that did not bind, that instead set him free. Still another said, “He is an ocean.” How does one approach a mystery? A madman? An ocean?

The task is daunting. Finding dates and documentation relating to Francis is the heartbreak of serious researchers, since most early texts about Francis were destroyed in the decades following his death in deference to what was then deemed the only “official” biography (to be discussed).

An archaeologist friend of mine applies principles in his field research that require digging for evidence, finding it, scrutinizing it, consolidating it, and interpreting it. When speaking of his discoveries, he frequently says, “and so the implication is. . . .” I have followed the parameters of the archaeologist. Pieces of the story of Saint Francis do remain, and I have dug through them. These pieces include an understanding of the setting of the story (that is, the Middle Ages), the stage of its unfolding (the Italian peninsula generally and Assisi specifically), and the script as written by early biographers in the century after Francis' death, along with the writings of both Francis and Clare. I have scrutinized, consolidated, and interpreted these pieces in a way that has enabled me to capture at least a slice of the story of the life of this astonishing figure. I have asked reasonable questions. I have said to myself, “and so the implication is. . . .”

When brought together in logical unity, the pieces of Francis' story have, to my mind, rendered a subtext to the larger narrative that has been generally dismissed among scholars and historians as sentimental, modern, and implausible—that is, that Francis of Assisi's unique and irrepressible relationship with the extraordinary Clare Favorone of Assisi was initially rooted in love. This love, in turn, evolved into mutual renunciation as each pursued their individual life as a penitent religious. This book asserts that their renounced physical love ultimately defined the inner landscape of their devotional lives.

In his biography of Saint Francis, Chesterton challenges this supposition, asserting that modern people cannot conceive that the relationship between Francis and Clare was at every point wholly pure and transcendent and beyond the flesh, because, says Chesterton, they—modern people—“want love.”<sup>1</sup> In my way of seeing it, the modern thinker might have more difficulty imagining the possibility that these two individuals did indeed love each other, then renounced that love for higher obligations, and stayed true to their vows—though it broke their hearts. Skeptics of this possibility say that neither Francis nor Clare was sentimental and so would not have capitulated to love in the first place. To be sure, neither Francis nor Clare was sentimental. Therefore, it seems to me entirely logical that as their spiritual lives awakened, any amorous inclinations they may have entertained would have been renounced in deference to the higher call they were hearing. My research

has compelled me to conclude that this scenario is indeed plausible and rational and warrants honest exploration. True love truly transformed so as to remain truly pure is virtue in its most heroic sense. To rob Francis and Clare of the integrity of this aspect of their religious vows shrivels their virtue and diminishes their humanness.

The official record is, of course, fragmented and full of irregularities. We must therefore abandon hope for clear answers. We must also dispel the notion that Francis' short vaulting career from Assisi's troubadour playboy to the town's most prodigious religious can be tracked chronologically. Certain points can be. Many cannot. It is beside the point. Francis didn't operate on a linear plane. He blew apart in every direction at once. It is the *core* of the person that is under discussion, the matter that became antimatter. The "matter" is Francis the man; the "antimatter" is Francis the saint. If we know him only as the man, then he might as well be known, to borrow from Chesterton, as the world's "one quite sincere democrat." If we know him only as the saint, then he is a ghost who inhabits a spirit world beyond the reach of ordinary people. If Francis was anything, he was real. He was hopelessly anchored to real life.

Chesterton notes elsewhere that dual forces pull a human being in opposing directions, one toward God and another toward the flesh, "both burning . . . both things at once and both things thoroughly."<sup>2</sup> This captures the force of the transaction that forged Francis the man (matter) into Francis the saint (antimatter). Antimatter comes from its core,



the same mass with the opposite electric charge. How does one discern matter from antimatter? The scientist says, "Measure the electric charge!" Based upon the criteria noted above, the case will be made that the electric charge that ultimately propelled Francis' conversion was his love for Clare. The man, true Francis, was a complete man, aflame with love for life and flesh and also for spirit and God—both at once and both thoroughly. A transaction occurred. In spite of the man, she harnessed and changed him. The outcome was the saint.

To become a saint means being raised to the full honors of the altar. It involves intense scrutiny of the person's life, writings, reputation for holiness, and associated miracles. Canonization demands, among other things, "virtue to a heroic degree." And yet Francis' profligate early life was well known by those who knew him—and by just about everybody else in Assisi. He was widely remembered as a young stallion roaming the streets at night, leading the pack of Assisi's wild youth in parties and song. Francis himself never recoiled from recalling those years of folly. Even after his prolonged conversion, he fought inside himself the continual battle of the temptation of the flesh. When his life was nearing its end and rumors of canonization were afoot, he told his brothers: "Don't canonize me too quickly. I am perfectly capable of fathering a child."<sup>3</sup>

Regardless, the canonization took place in a hasty process and the written histories of the saint began.<sup>4</sup> A multiplicity

of narratives emerged, crafted by a diverse company of biographers. Depending upon their respective agendas, some glossed over his well-known, pre-conversion, amorous behavior toward women. The portrait of the saint as the second Christ arose and flowered in the aftermath of his death. As the story evolved, the presence of Clare as an intimate companion devolved.<sup>5</sup>

If tracking Francis is difficult, finding extant documents about the life of Clare is an even more vexing and despairing proposition. “Not a few were destroyed; others disappeared,” notes Franciscan scholar Paschal Robinson. “As far as dates go, only one—the date of her canonization—is given.” No early source renders a verifiable year of Clare’s birth. “Save for a few fragments of pious legend,” Robinson concludes, “we are without any exact knowledge of the life of Saint Clare down to 1212.”<sup>6</sup>

So the creation of the saint and the separation of his story from Clare’s began with Francis’ canonization in 1228, two years after his death. At the time, Francis’ personal friend and one-time guardian of the order, Bishop Ugolino of Ostia, was seated as Pope Gregory IX. Gregory was facing ongoing antagonism from the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II just when the Church was already weakened by internal bickering, turf wars, and corruption. Frederick had incited a rebellion in Rome against the papacy that had forced Gregory to take refuge in Spoleto, a town just south of Assisi. The pope addressed these challenges to his authority in many ways, but

I highlight only one of his strategies: the veneration of saints. It helped Gregory's cause to beatify this local champion.

Less than two years after Francis' death, during the spring of 1228, Gregory implemented plans for his canonization. He issued a letter granting indulgence to any who made a contribution toward the construction of a basilica where Francis' mortal remains would take their final rest. Assisi's western slope, the *collis inferni*, had been the common burial ground for thieves, murderers, and lepers, and Francis had requested burial there. Gregory secured the land within days of Frederick's rebellion in Rome, and he himself, not the Franciscans, initiated the canonization process. On July 16, 1228, Francis was confirmed a saint. He emerged then as he remains today—among the Catholic tradition's most popular saints, connected as he was to the poor and common people.

Pope Gregory commissioned Thomas of Celano, a follower of Francis, to write the first biography of Francis (called a legend). Published in 1229, the legend known as Celano's *First Life* "created a tempest," a leading Franciscan told me, because the biographer minced no words about Francis' troublesome youth and placed some blame on his parents, one of whom (his mother) was still living. In 1247 Celano published a rewrite, the *Second Life*, then called *Remembrances*. In this version, hinting of satire, Francis is transformed into a Christ prototype and his mother into the paragon of virtue. Other legends were also in the making in these years. All of them told of heretofore unheard of elements of Francis' saintly activities.



The small town of Assisi as it would have looked when Francis lived. The *collis inferni* (“hill of hell”) to the left is where Francis requested to be buried. The Basilica of San Francesco exists there today. (By Francesco Providone, seventeenth century.)

In order to consolidate and organize these versions into a coherent presentation of the saint, in 1260 Pope Alexander IV commissioned Bonaventure, then minister general of the Franciscans, to write the one and only “official” biography of Saint Francis. Bonaventure, who had been elected minister general of the order in 1257,<sup>7</sup> set about a meticulous reordering and consolidating of the decisions and records of all previous ministers general, the result being the “definitive” biography of Francis, titled *The Major Life*. Though he was the first hagiographer who did not know Francis personally, Bonaventure was revered for

his accomplishment by being designated “second founder” of the Franciscan Order. *The Major Life* smoothed inconsistencies in earlier legends and highlighted Francis’ life only with episodes that emphasized his sanctity. Bonaventure’s legend was approved in 1263. Three years later, in an unprecedented action, the general chapter of Paris (a gathering of representatives from the order worldwide) ordered all previous legends of Francis destroyed in deference to Bonaventure’s.

Fortunately for historians and lovers of Francis, not all obeyed the decree. Rare copies of books and writings survived the purge, including Celano’s *First and Second Life* (along with his *Treatise on Miracles*), liturgical texts, and some material thought to be from the hand of Francis’ close companion Brother Leo.<sup>8</sup> Some writings were hidden and tucked away in walls, in the folds of dead peoples’ robes, and in back pages of ancient volumes. Optimists still hope more unknown documents may yet emerge. In any case, by the end of the fourteenth century Francis of Assisi was firmly positioned as a “second Christ.” But this was only after several rewrites, evolution of texts, and censorship of the earliest documents.



From the end of the fourteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, the Franciscan movement was consumed with internal factionalism and the evolution of its respective branches. So examination of the life of Francis himself was

limited to a few studies, and these were written, in part, in response to the ongoing debates between the fracturing parties.<sup>9</sup>

The discovery of Francis' mortal remains in 1818, as well as Clare's in 1850, brought to light new information and reinvigorated the study of both lives, spawning a new outpouring of original research. The renaissance of scrutiny and appropriation of newly discovered source material lent researchers more tools, enabling them to explore wider themes behind the story. While the light of new research has not compromised Francis' unchallenged standing among the most beloved of Catholic saints, the new research has nevertheless demanded that he continue to be confronted as "the most problematic."<sup>10</sup>

Scholarship about Francis flourished in the late nineteenth century and has not dissipated. The rigorous and painstaking work of contemporary scholars has rendered greater clarity in all the realms of Francis' story relating to setting (history), stage (local custom), and the script (various early sources). Paul Sabatier, a French Protestant, was the first scholar to probe vigorously the history of Francis outside constraints of Catholic authority. Sabatier scoured libraries all over Italy and uncovered heretofore unknown original documents buried in pages of medieval volumes. He undertook a meticulous comparison of texts to track the evolution of the story in light of the history and culture of the time. His pioneering biography, *Vie de S. François d'Assise*, came out (in French) in 1894.<sup>11</sup> It was an instant best seller. Protestants and Catholics alike hailed it as a pioneering magnum opus of scholarly

examination of Francis—though the Catholic Church was destined to consign the work to the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, books not sanctioned by the pope.

Sabatier's book was followed closely by Arnaldo Fortini's weighty *Nova Vita di San Francesco d'Assisi* (1926), in which the author, Assisi's mayor for many years, grounded his research in civic archival material in Assisi.<sup>12</sup> Fortini noted: "They who are guided by sources to study the life and work of St. Francis of Assisi immediately notice the void which manifests itself in the narration of the early biographers. . . . [T]he gaps can be filled by the study of documents contemporary to that era. The archives of the City of Assisi offer us a conspicuous source of study on the epoch of the Saint. The greatest part of this material has remained unknown to scholars until now."<sup>13</sup>

An honest exploration of Francis' life demands scrutiny of all available sources that have arisen in the historical and cultural context. It is my close examination of this context and these sources that has enabled me to cobble together a picture of Clare's rightful place in Francis' life. My early chapters therefore build upon historical material gleaned from knowledge of the times—the setting and the stage. The later chapters examine how the life of Francis unfolded within this context, which, of necessity, demands interaction with early writings (delineated in detail in the notes). When all the pieces are laid out and considered in logical unity, footprints appear. These would belong to Clare.

Catholic tradition still upholds and defends the officially sanctioned biography written by Bonaventure in 1263. In it, Clare is honored in her own right for sanctity and devotion, but her role in Francis' life is diminished. When Bonaventure was commissioned to write his biography, the Church generally and Franciscans specifically were struggling for unity and stability. They needed their saints because saints kept faith alive in the hearts of the people. And saints must be heroically virtuous. Of the primary biographies, if Clare appears at all she is consigned to the background. Yet I believe that she was a clear and primary player in Francis' life and spiritual formation—both before and after his conversion—and that she remained so until the day he died.



I have tried to keep the body of the text unburdened with names and source titles. Citations, elaborations, and related information regarding source material can be found in the endnotes. The majority of the material from which I quote comes from original documents that remain within the realm of public domain. I have polished grammatical blemishes, made some portions more concise, and sometimes left out ellipses. All minor adjustments have remained true to and consistent with the original Latin. I have used secondary sources sparingly (these are listed in the selected bibliography at the back of the book). The exception is Arnaldo Fortini.



Fortini's book *Francis of Assisi*, abridged and translated into English by Helen Moak, has been indispensable.<sup>14</sup> I have drawn frequently upon his use of primary source material from Assisi's ancient civic archives that is otherwise unavailable to even the most vigilant researcher. "The mysticism of Francis unfolds against the dramatic, violent and vibrant background of a bloody world," Fortini said. Local history thus is the "prime matter of the great universal movement" that helped spawn Saint Francis.<sup>15</sup> In other words, one cannot understand the man without examining his context. Fortini's daughter, Gemma Fortini, an accomplished scholar in her own right, called her father an "impassioned researcher of ancient documents."<sup>16</sup> Arnaldo Fortini meticulously culled invaluable information from some six hundred previously unknown primary documents from Assisi's archives. Paul Sabatier wrote in a letter to him, "[Yours is] a work which makes you the author of a life of Saint Francis conceived in a totally new manner."<sup>17</sup> Fortini fills in critical gaps existing in the works of Francis' early biographers who neglected (Sabatier continues) "the essentially Assisian character of the Saint." In this regard I echo the sentiment expressed by Umberto Eco: "We are dwarfs, but dwarfs who stand on the shoulders of giants."

A few technical notes: I have used English translation of early sources, but have consulted the original Latin and in some cases Italian and Portuguese. I capitalize the "c" in the word "Church" to denote the significance of the Roman Catholic Church in the days in which our story

unfolds, the Middle Ages. For the same reason, I also make use of the male pronoun when referring to God, gender sensitivities notwithstanding.

“Francis of Assisi is not a man who can be calmly observed,” says the great scholar Jacques Dalarun. “He is a man who must be confronted, with sympathy and commitment.” Dalarun urges us: “Never give up on the quest for the historical Francis.”<sup>18</sup> Examining the life of Francis of Assisi and, of necessity, his relationship to Clare is like looking into a fog over a restless sea. A light shines somewhere, but it is best seen by fixing one’s gaze a little beyond it—and even then one never really knows if the light is within reach. Available information is obscure and inconsistent, so the best one can hope for is to capture a little light through a dense fog. That is my hope for this book—that it will cast a faint light. A leading friar and outstanding scholar in Assisi, whom I consulted regularly, said of Francis by way of parting words to me: “Don’t say we caught him.” We haven’t. But my fervent hope is that through this book he will have caught you.

*Wendy Murray*  
Assisi, Italy, 2007

## C H A P T E R

# Ο Π Ε

### Assisi's Son

*There was in that land a terrible dragon, which came out of the sea and went into the city and killed many persons and ate them. And one day all the people of the city armed themselves, the people and the knights, and went out after that dragon. And the dragon was so terrible to look at that the people began to run away. And the knights, more than two thousand of them, also ran away. The king, in order to appease the fury of the dragon, ordered that a maiden be given to him and that the choice of the maiden be made by lot. It happened that the lot fell to the daughter of the king, who was the most beautiful maiden of the time. And the king, held by his duty to the people, wept bitterly. But since there was nothing he could do, he had his daughter dressed nobly, like a bride, with a crown on her head, like*

*a queen. He pressed her to him, then with terrible sorrow and weeping he sent her to the island where the dragon that was to devour her could be found. Left alone, so adorned and so beautiful, she waited, trembling, for the dragon.*

*Then the blessed Giorgio appeared on his great horse. He was the handsomest young man to be found anywhere and wore beautifully decorated armor. He went to the princess, who was crying, and said to her: "Gentle maiden, why are you crying here all by yourself?" She replied, "O most noble young man, I am waiting for the dragon that is to devour me. I beg you in courtesy to go away at once, so that you do not have to die with me, because it is to me that this cruel fate has fallen." At this point the dragon came out of the water and hissed loudly and came toward her. Blessed Giorgio ran to meet him and gave him a blow with his lance that immediately knocked him down. Then he called the maiden and had her take off her girdle and put it on the neck of the dragon. Thus the young princess drew it along behind her, like a lamb, all the way to the city. All the people greatly marveled in seeing such courage and such wisdom in so young a knight.*

*The king could not express his joy, seeing that his daughter escaped from so cruel a death. When the dragon was before the king, blessed Giorgio killed it, and six pairs of oxen were required to drag it out of the city. Then he preached*

*the Christian faith to the king and to all the people. And through the miracle they had seen all believed perfectly in Christ. The king had churches built in honor of God and in reverence for the blessed knight San Giorgio. And when everyone had been taught how to serve and to love God, San Giorgio left the realm. Before leaving he gave to the poor the noble horse that he had been riding and his knight's armor, nobly and richly decorated, for the love of God.*

Arnaldo Fortini, *Francis of Assisi*;  
A Translation of *Nova Vita di San Francesco*

♦

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In the heart of a landlocked province of central Italy called Umbria, the small town of Assisi cascades down the western spur of Mount Subasio overlooking the alluvial plain of the Spoleto valley. This region of Umbria is strewn with feudal castles and fortified towers that dominate the region's rolling peaks. It is adorned with cypresses and elms, mulberries, ox-eye daisies and purple irises, and dense pine forests. Its limestone crags and hills boast the deepest cave system in Italy. Umbria's evening sunlight plays upon the land, lending olive groves an odd luminescence and transforming evening skies to fire and indigo. The region shines a magic that has seen a disproportionate emergence of saints and not a few rogues.

During the unsettling period when Francis lived, violence was engrained in the culture, and Assisi, as much as any medieval Italian hill town, was swept into the tumult of the

age. By the time of Francis' birth in 1182 Assisi had been conquered by Rome, the Byzantine Empire, the Ostrogoths, the Lombards, and the Franks. A friar from the thirteenth century wrote: "We found in the ancient writings of Assisi, [that it] was surrounded by the strongest of walls and towers, adorned with palaces and strong structures, well populated with many gallant, high-spirited people, defended by numerous brave warriors, [and] was occupied by a terrible and ferocious people who inflicted havoc on all the surrounding land."<sup>1</sup>

Francis and Clare lived during the Middle Ages—the period of more or less a thousand years between the fall of the Roman Empire (fifth century) and the start of the Renaissance (sixteenth century). It was an era marked by brutal civil wars, assaults from barbarians, famine, misery, and priestly decay. The backdrop of the times was religious conflict, as the holy sites in Jerusalem had fallen to the Saracens (Muslims), and priests and merchants became crusading knights and warriors. Meanwhile, a corrupt Mother Church was vying for power with the Holy Roman Empire. The Church, having by this time held forth for a thousand years, still faced corruption in its own ranks, squalor among the masses, political wars, and the rise of alien beliefs. "When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison," says the book of Revelation. By the turn of the millennium in A.D. 1000—nearly two hundred years before Francis' time—pilgrims and priests were envisioning the coming of the end of the world.<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Roman Empire is considered to have been founded in about the tenth century by German princes who assumed the title “Emperor” through successive dynasties almost continuously up to the nineteenth century. Likening their role to that of the Caesars, these German princes therefore called their empire the “Roman” Empire, and heirs to the throne of this evolving power center were called “King of the Romans.” The term “Holy” was added in the twelfth century.

In theory, in the early Middle Ages the emperor was to rule alongside the pope in a counterbalancing symbiosis: the pope was subject to the emperor politically, while the emperor bowed beneath the spiritual mantle of the pope, who crowned him. Around the turn of the millennium, as the world’s end seemed to draw near, this mutuality manifested itself in secular emperors utilizing holy offices of the Church as tentacles of power.

Predictably, the mixing of religious office and political power eroded the congeniality. Relations disintegrated. In the late eleventh century an indignant Pope Gregory VII undertook sweeping reforms that prohibited further use of Church offices as imperial vassals. The pope and the then soon-to-be-emperor, King Henry IV of Germany, exchanged hostile attacks in letters that were a portent of the disintegration of relations that would define Church and empire throughout the Middle Ages.

Henry, still king—not yet emperor at the time<sup>3</sup>—issued the first volley in a scathing letter denouncing Pope Gregory’s

prohibitions and condemning him as a usurper to Saint Peter's throne (January 24, 1076):

[From] Henry, king not through usurpation but through the holy ordination of God, to Hildebrand [the pope's family name], at present not pope but false monk; you have shunned to rise up against the royal power conferred upon us by God, daring to threaten to divest us of it. As if we had received our kingdom from you! As if the kingdom and the empire were in your and not in God's hand! I, Henry, king by the grace of God, do say unto you, together with all our bishops: Descend, descend, to be damned throughout the ages.<sup>4</sup>

Pope Gregory responded in turn (February 22, 1076):

O Saint Peter, chief of the apostles, incline to us, I beg, your holy ears, and hear me. For the honor and security of your church, in the name of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, I withdraw, through your power and authority, from Henry the king, son of Henry the emperor, who has risen against your church with unheard of insolence, the rule over the whole kingdom of the Germans and over Italy. And I absolve all Christians from the bonds of the oath which they have made or shall make to him; and I forbid any one to serve him as king. I bind him in your stead with the chain of the anathema.<sup>5</sup>



In time, Pope Gregory revoked King Henry's ban, but the damage was irreversible. The controversy positioned the Church as an independent entity in political maneuverings, propelling what would become a prolonged struggle between popes and emperors for control of Europe. And as we shall see, some of the key figures in this struggle had close ties to Assisi.

Emperor Frederick I—Frederick “Barbarossa,” who predated Francis by a generation—happened to live in a fortress above Assisi called La Rocca. In the aftermath of Gregory and Henry's antagonisms, Barbarossa saw it as his mission to assert the emperor's power over the ever-strengthening papacy. Among his many acts to this end, he added the term “holy” to the demarcation of the empire, forcefully asserting its “Holy Roman-ness.” He also established (among other things) Roman laws and a legal constitution, which, given the chaos of the age, had been alien concepts. Moreover, because of Pope Gregory VII's decree forbidding bishops to be vassals of the state, Emperor Barbarossa established a network of dukes to maintain local order in their stead. But his attempt to impose the “rule of law” was not altogether embraced by his dukes, who preferred autonomous rule over their respective dominions. Barbarossa thus added yet another arm of power to consolidate his authority, the *ministerialia*—former military men. He hoped these men would prove serviceable and more loyal than the unruly dukes. This new order of armed champions became the defining model of military prowess of the age—noble knighthood.

And so the stage was set that would define the world of Francis and Clare.



Assisi was well known as being feisty, of rushing riotously to arms at the first provocation. Like those of other fortress towns, citizens in Assisi celebrated weapons and carnage in a variety of city-sponsored festivities and religious festivals. A springtime celebration called *Calendimaggio* involved men from the upper part of town (the nobles) and those from the lower part (merchants) who would meet in the main piazza with blunted arms. After hurling insults and stones, a no-holds-barred melee broke out between the warring neighbors. Sometimes participants from surrounding towns joined in, elevating the games to outright battle. Young lads followed the lead of their older heroes to learn the art of combat. The games persisted until a dozen or more participants had been maimed or killed and one side finally conceded defeat. It was entertainment. Families could not exact revenge for the loss of life and limb.<sup>6</sup>

Ambition for war was also endemic in the culture, yet the power to orchestrate engagement lay with the overlords in the castles, the nobility. As Francis was growing up, however, a merchant class was rising and flourishing, and rumors abounded of uprisings in other localities. Assisi was strategically located along the primary route between Rome and France, the *Strada Francesca*. Tradesmen from Italy traveled this road endlessly, north to south, and Pietro

Bernadone, Francis' father, was numbered among the region's most prosperous; he regularly traveled to Champagne and Provence, where he bought and sold linens. Pietro and others returned home from France with colorful stories of wars and uprisings: working people in Picardy and Flanders were making war against the nobility. These actions were deemed treasonous acts of war by the emperor. And they were successful.

This marked the beginning of a trend that would sweep across the medieval landscape—the rise of the *comune* (commune), the portent of the demise of feudalism. The merchant class, or *mediani*, fueled the movement with aspirations of winning their share of the prize heretofore claimed exclusively by the nobility, the *maggiori*—that is, upward mobility. Their only means of asserting this claim was to make war. Furthermore, because of its association with knighthood, making war held out promise for the *mediani*—not only of achieving upward mobility but also of claiming rank by knighthood. Combat became a rite of passage and a test of moral grit. Aspirations for knighthood made war poetic.

About the time of Francis' birth, a coalition of the lower and merchant classes in Assisi had united to dismantle the system of government ruled by the nobles. They wanted a democratic arrangement that included governance by merchants, artisans, and workers of the field. Thus, the *mediani* challenged the *maggiori*, rebelling against heavy taxes and forced labor. In the second half of the twelfth century,

Italy experienced the decisive repulsion of imperial feudal entrenchment. Local towns waged self-contained class wars—Assisi's *sopra* (upper town) battled *il sotto* (lower town). At the same time, neighboring localities likewise waged wars between rival cities. Venice fought Genoa; Genoa fought Pisa; Pisa fought Lucca; Lodi fought Milan; Faenza fought Ravenna; Florence fought Siena; and Assisi fought Perugia. Francis and Clare would become improbable protagonists in their small town, which, as all small towns of the time, was inevitably drawn into the tumult of upheaval and revolution.

His mother was a Frenchwoman named Pica (from Picardy). Giving birth to her firstborn son while his father, Pietro, was on business in France, she named him Giovanni, after John the Baptist. But the boy's father returned and promptly rejected the religious association of the name in deference to one that held out a more promising destiny: he called him Francesco, "the French one." France was where Pietro had made his fortune. The name bestowed to the son all the dreams and optimism a father could bequeath to his firstborn. Pietro and Pica also had a second son, Francis' younger brother, Angelo.

The family home was nestled between two churches, the church of San Nicolo and the church of San Paolo, on the western tip of Assisi's main plaza, the Piazza del Comune. The piazza laid a line of demarcation between Assisi's landed nobility, who lived in the upper part of the town, and the rising merchant class, who dwelled on the lower

end. The Bernadones lived in *il sotto*, while Clare's family, the noble Favorones of the house of Offreduccio, by contrast, lived in *la sopra* near the piazza of San Rufino. This was the exclusive section of town claimed by the nobility because of its proximity to the city's imperial fortress. Clare was born several years after Francis. So in the early years of Francis' youth, Clare would have been a toddler.

A town's main piazza was a festive place, boasting merchant fairs, public games, and jousts. Merchants who had traveled afar and who had returned with tales of extraordinary events would linger in the shops and the square telling their stories. This transformed the piazza into a gathering place and a conduit for the dissemination of local news, stories from faraway places, and exposure to differing cultures. Pietro Bernadone's shop faced Via Portica, a primary corridor for shoppers and merchants, while the family home faced the opposite direction opening to Via San Paolo. Since Via Portica and the Piazza del Comune were at the heartbeat of the din, the Bernadones were well positioned in the middle of town brawls, stories, and gossip.

Francis' childhood school was across town, toward the east, in a small church called San Giorgio. (Today the present-day Basilica of Santa Chiara subsumes it.) San Giorgio was a primary school for boys under the tutelage of the resident priest, and Francis would have attended between the ages of seven and ten (from about 1189 to 1192). This seems to have been the extent of his formal education. He learned Latin well enough to recite the

Lord's Prayer and say the Creed.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise, he is known to have used a bastardized mix of Latin and Umbrian (a precursor to Italian). He was an average student, and wrote poor Latin up to the day he died.

But he loved French, the native language of his mother. He spoke it often and sang it just as much, since as a young man he loved the French troubadours.<sup>8</sup> Troubadours traveled the countryside singing poems about brave knights and lady lovers. "He kisses her many times, saying, 'Oh sweet rose, what shall I do? For the light is coming and night is going away.'"<sup>9</sup> Francis likely learned these songs while traveling to France with his father on business. Around Assisi he became well known for singing the songs of the troubadours. Through these songs and stories, he became steeped in the grand tales of the champions they praised. The school he attended had in fact been named for one such hero, the legendary knight San Giorgio, whose devotion and valor in slaying the dragon was hailed throughout the Christianized world.<sup>10</sup>

The origins of the story of San Giorgio remain uncertain. He is thought to have been a British soldier named George who was put to death in April A.D. 303, under Diocletian. According to the fifth-century *Apocryphal Acts of Saint George*, he held the rank of tribune in the Roman army and was beheaded by Diocletian for protesting the emperor's persecution of Christians. George rapidly became venerated as an example of bravery and military prowess and thus was adopted as the patron saint of soldiers. In time it began to

be reported during the Crusades that George appeared and aided the Christians in battle. Inevitably, George's reputation took on epic proportions and became the stuff of troubadour songs. His noble and courageous deeds, as noted by the poets, evolved to include his intervention on behalf of the helpless princess who had been destined to be sacrificed to a voracious dragon. The phantasmal elements of Saint George's story were first recorded in the late sixth century and seem to allude to the persecution of Diocletian, who in ancient texts was sometimes referred to as "the dragon." Some say the story became a Christianized version of the Greek legend of Perseus, who was said to have rescued the virgin Andromeda from a sea monster.<sup>11</sup>

Francis' childhood notions of heroism and devotion would have been shaped by this story. And not just this story, but also that of another hero who, like San Giorgio, lived in the third century and faced the hostility of the Roman Empire. He is Assisi's "other" saint, San Rufino, numbered among the many early converts to the unruly sect of people calling themselves Christians. Rufino had traveled throughout Italy converting many, until he settled in Assisi, where he became the town's first bishop. (There are no known records about the date of his coming.) By that time, however, he had provoked the hostility of the emperor, who demanded that his religious activities cease.<sup>12</sup> In support of the emperor, Assisi's proconsul ordered Rufino tortured with fire and threatened him with execution. Rufino is said to have responded, "I fear neither you nor

your emperors!”<sup>13</sup> The proconsul thus ordered a millstone tied around his neck and had him thrown in the River Chigio just west of Assisi. San Rufino was martyred sometime between 236 and 239.

The town's primary cathedral, which was dedicated to his memory, was completed in the mid-eleventh century, and Rufino became Assisi's patron saint. (Francis would eventually become the patron saint of Italy.) At the cathedral's dedication the people sang a battle song: *The martyr fights valiantly, like the lion; he does not know the meaning of defeat.*<sup>14</sup> Francis would have heard this song as a boy, and probably would have sung it many times. Assisi's patron saint Rufino conferred communal identity that rallied the devotion of the townspeople. He was their martyred hometown hero.

Other champions also fired the imagination of the impressionable young Francis. One was the archangel Michael, who, like Saint George, is said to have fought with a dragon and won, as noted in the book of the Apocalypse.<sup>15</sup> Michael's great battles with "his angels" brought him the stature of "commander of angels." After Francis' conversion, he accorded special devotion to Saint Michael the archangel, choosing his feast day (September 29) as one of the two times a year his order would convene. He regularly observed a forty-day fast that culminated on the feast day of Saint Michael.

But perhaps no heroic tale captured Francis' imagination as much as the tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.<sup>16</sup> Francis' father's mobility would



have enabled Pietro Bernadone to return with fabulous stories that he would hear during his travels to France, where Arthurian romance was flourishing. This is credited to the French writer Chrétien de Troyes, who wrote in the latter half of the twelfth century and is considered the inventor of Arthurian legend and courtly love.<sup>17</sup> No storyteller or -hearer could escape de Troyes' influence in southern France from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries.

Arthur's greatest knight was Sir Lancelot, who stood out among all the Knights of the Round Table as the bravest in combat, truest to duty, and most devoted in service to his king. He also serves, for de Troyes, as the culminating expression of chivalry in service to courtly love. In the tale titled "The Knight of the Cart," Queen Guinevere, Arthur's wife and Lancelot's lover, was taken captive in a distant land. She could gain her freedom only if a knight from Arthur's court won her freedom through battle. Arthur himself took up the challenge and went in pursuit of his queen, but Lancelot had gone before him. By the time Arthur caught up to Lancelot, it was clear to Arthur that the knight had already done battle along the way, as he was wounded and without his horse, yet fully dressed in armor. Still searching for Guinevere, and unaware of the king's presence behind him, the wounded and horseless Lancelot saw a cart approach. In those days carts were used to put criminals, traitors, murderers, and thieves on public display. Great shame was associated with riding in a cart. The saying arose: "Whenever you see a cart and cross

its path, make the sign of the cross and remember God, so that evil will not befall you.”<sup>18</sup>

King Arthur watched as Lancelot, laboring on foot, hurried after the cart and spoke to the dwarf who sat upon it. “Dwarf,” he said, “in the name of God, tell me if you have seen my lady the queen pass by this way?”

The vile, low-born dwarf would give him no information; instead he said: “If you want to get into this cart I’m driving, by tomorrow you’ll know what has become of the queen.”

The dwarf immediately continued on his way, without slowing down even an instant for the knight, who hesitated but two steps before climbing in. . . .

Reason, who does not follow Love’s command, told [the knight] to beware of getting in, and admonished and counseled him not to do anything for which he might incur disgrace or reproach. Reason, who dared tell him this, spoke from the lips, not from the heart; but Love, who held sway within his heart, urged and commanded him to climb into the cart at once. Because Love ordered and wished it, he jumped in; since Love ruled his action, the disgrace did not matter.<sup>19</sup>

Lancelot proceeded at great personal risk and exposure to save the queen. Reaching her ahead of Arthur, he battled her captors fiercely for her and won. The moment finally had come when he could claim his love. Seeing him, however, the queen turned her glance away and did not receive him.

Crushed in spirit, Lancelot assumed she had heard that he had jumped into a cart, bringing shame to his colors. He went to her a second time, and on this occasion she received him. He inquired if her rebuff had been due to his having ridden in a cart. The queen answered: "By delaying two steps you showed great unwillingness to climb into it. That, to tell the truth, is why I didn't wish to see you or speak with you."<sup>20</sup>

Courtly love, *amour courtois*, was idealized in the writings of Chrétien de Troyes and in the poetry of the twelfth-century French troubadours, who upheld love as all-subsuming devotion, overruling personal morality and even loyalty to the king. Lancelot was the queen's lover, and as a knight his heart "no longer belonged to him; rather it was promised to another, so he could not bestow it elsewhere. His heart was kept fixed on a single object by Love."<sup>21</sup>

Courtly love marked a revolution in attitudes about gender and sexuality. The lady was cherished as a poetic and personal inspiration, and no longer reduced to a disposable pawn in the manipulation of arranged marriages. The culture of knighthood, as glorified by the troubadour poets Francis emulated, elevated women as objects of love and duty whose favor was won only after the suitor (a knight) had courted her through vassalage—even if it meant personal and public shame.

So the themes of Francis' boyhood emerged. The fearless San Giorgio, the devoted San Rufino of Assisi, the faithful and romantic Lancelot—all manifested the ideals of medieval knighthood that shaped Francis' dreams and would fire his imagination to the end of his days.