

## ABSTRACT

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SACRED MEANING IN THE CHIOSTRO  
GRANDE OF MONTE OLIVETO  
MAGGIORE, TUSCANY

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The 1498-1508 cloister frescoes by Luca Signorelli and Sodoma at the monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore outside Siena, Italy, have been noted for their bright colors, ingenious compositions and playful character. Scholars have given little attention, however, to the inclusion of numerous animals into the religious scenes of the life of St. Benedict. This thesis explores the use of those animals and argues through a discussion of the history of animals in Christian theology and Christian art that the cycle's animals have important symbolic, historical and hagiographic purposes that underline and enhance Benedict's role as saint and exemplar for the Monte Oliveto monastic community. It furthermore contends that early modern notions of animals as metaphysical beings capable of supernatural senses and of animals as important signs of moral and theological truths underscore the frescoes and their message. Their inclusion ultimately elevates and intensifies Benedict's saintly efficacy for his order.

CREATURELY VISION: ANIMALS AND SACRED MEANING IN THE  
CHIOSTRO GRANDE OF MONTE OLIVETO MAGGIORE, TUSCANY

By

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Illustrations.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Monte Oliveto and Tuscan Benedictine Cycles.....	11
St. Bernardo Tolomei and the Origins of the Olivetan Order.....	12
Art in the Monastic Cloister.....	17
Tuscan Benedictine Fresco Cycles.....	20
Summary.....	22
Chapter 2: Animals in the Chiostro Grande.....	24
Animals in Christian Tradition.....	25
Animals and the Saints.....	32
Animals in the Chiostro Grande.....	37
Summary.....	45
Conclusion.....	47
Bibliography.....	50

## List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Monte Oliveto (Monteoliveto) Maggiore, Aerial view, Outside Chiusure, (Siena, Tuscany), Italy; founded 1313.

Figure 2: View of the Chiostro Grande with frescoes by Il Sodoma and Luca Signorelli, Monte Oliveto Maggiore; cloister constructed c. 1426-74; Signorelli frescoes 1498-1500; Sodoma frescoes 1505-8.

Figure 3: Sodoma, *Benedict Leaves Home for Rome*, 1505-1508, East wall, Cloister of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, Chiusure, Italy, fresco (photo by the author).

Figure 4: Sodoma, *Benedict Receives Maurus and Placidus into the Order*, South wall.

Figure 5: Sodoma, *Benedict Mends the Broken Tray*, East wall.

Figure 6: Sodoma, *Benedict Instructs Peasants in Sacred Doctrine*, East wall.

Figure 7: Sodoma, *Fiorenzo Tries to Poison Benedict*, South wall.

Figures 8 and 9: Spinello Aretino, *Scenes from the Life of St. Benedict*, 1387-88, North and south walls, Sacristy, San Miniato al Monte, Florence, fresco.

Figure 10: Spinello Aretino, *Benedict Miraculously Retrieves a Sickle*, North wall.

Figure 11: Chiostro degli Aranci, Florentine Badia, built c. 1428-1436 under the direction of Bernardo Rossellino, frescoed c. 1435-39 by the workshop of Fra Angelico, Florence, Italy (photo by the author).

Figure 12: Workshop of Fra Angelico, *Romanus Brings Benedict Food and Benedict Receives the Hermit's Habit*, c. 1435-9, fresco, Chiostro degli Aranci, Badia, Florence, Italy (photo by the author).

Figure 13: Detail of fig. 12 (photo by the author).

Figure 14: Workshop of Fra Angelico, *Benedict Exorcises a Monk* (photo by the author).

Figure 15: Workshop of Fra Angelico, *Fiorenzo Tries to Poison Benedict* (photo by the author).

Figure 16: Detail of fig. 15 (photo by the author).

Figure 17: Vittore Carpaccio, *St. Augustine in his Study*, c. 1506, Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, Venice, Italy, oil on canvas.

Figure 18: Detail of fig. 17.

Figure 19: Bartolommeo Neri, called Il Riccio, *Benedict Sends Maurus and Placidus to Sicily*, 1534, West wall, Chiostro Grande, Monte Oliveto Maggiore, fresco (photo by the author).

Figure 20: Luca Signorelli, *Benedict Recognizes and Receives Totila*, West wall.

Figure 21: Sodoma, *Benedict Predicts the Destruction of Monte Cassino*, West wall.

Figure 22: Sodoma, *Benedict Releases a Peasant*, North wall.

Figure 23: Detail of fig. 4.

Figure 24: Detail of fig. 6.

Figure 25: Sodoma, *Fiorenzo Sends Prostitutes to the Monastery*, South wall.

Figure 26: Detail of fig. 25.

Figure 27: Luca Signorelli, *Benedict Reproves Two Monks Who Eat Outside the Monastery*, West wall.

Figure 28: Sodoma, *Benedict Miraculously Obtains Flour for the Monks*, North wall.

Figure 29: Detail of fig. 28.

Figure 30: Sodoma, *Benedict Obtains Water from a Mountain*, South wall.

Figure 31: Detail of fig. 5.

Figure 32: Detail of fig. 5.

Figure 33: Sodoma, *Benedict Directs Maurus to Save Placidus*, South wall.



## Introduction:

Perched on top of a dramatic promontory with views across cypress and pine groves, undulating wheat fields and acres of vineyards just south of Siena, the monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore is one of Tuscany's most important and well-preserved monastic communities (Figure 1). Monte Oliveto Maggiore is the mother-house of the Olivetans of the Benedictine Order. Founded in 1313 by the Sienese nobleman and former law professor, St. Bernardo Tolomei (1272-1348), the monastery possesses land that originally belonged to Tolomei and that was nicknamed "the desert of Accona" for its remoteness and desolation in the twelfth century.<sup>1</sup> A popular destination for visitors both spiritual and secular since the fifteenth century, the monastery today consists of a fifteenth-century abbey church, two cloisters, a refectory, dormitories, a celebrated library and even a wine cellar and herbalist shop among various other buildings. Since large-scale construction began in the late-fourteenth century, the monastic complex has been the site of numerous artistic and architectural projects.<sup>2</sup> The most notable of these artistic undertakings is undoubtedly the "Chiostro Grande," or large cloister, with its fresco cycle of the life of St. Benedict (c. 480-547) by Renaissance masters Luca Signorelli (c. 1441-1523) and Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, known as Il Sodoma (1477-1549) (Figure 2). Consisting of thirty-six scenes painted between 1498 and 1508, the cycle includes images of Benedict's time as a hermit in the wilderness, his founding of

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<sup>1</sup> "La nostra storia," *Congregazione Benedettina Olivetana Abbazia di Monte Oliveto Maggiore*, accessed September 17, 2010, <http://www.monteolivetomaggiore.it/nostrast.html>.

<sup>2</sup> These include works by the Lorenzetti brothers, Taddeo di Bartoli, Giovanni di Paolo and the celebrated sixteenth-century intarsia choir stalls by Giovanni da Verona. See the Lorenzetti and Taddeo entries in Giorgio Vasari, *Le opere di Giorgio Vasari*, 9 vols. (Florence: Casa Editrice le Lettere, 1998); and Kurt J. Sundstrom, "The Chiostro Grande of Monte Oliveto Maggiore and the Olivetan Reform Movement" (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2000), 28-30.

monasteries dedicated to work and prayer in cloistered community, his work as a conscientious and able abbot and his various miracles and prophecies. Characterized by a rich color palette and carefully delineated architectural and landscape backgrounds, the frescoes of the Chiostro Grande overall seek to show Benedict as an ideal exemplar for Monte Oliveto's resident cenobites, or members of a religious order living in community.

While visitors to the Chiostro Grande today may comment on the multiplicity of white-robed monks in the frescoes and the seemingly endless number of times Benedict must miraculously help one of his charges out of a monastic scrape, one of the most striking features of the cycle is its numerous animals. In addition to the saint's white horse and his nurse's mule, there is a small, snarling dog seeming to bite Benedict's younger sister, Scholastica, in the first scene of *Benedict Leaves for Rome* (Figure 3). On the very right edge of *Benedict Receives Maurus and Placidus* is a collared and leashed brown ape (Figure 4). In *Benedict Mends the Broken Tray*, Sodoma depicts himself with two ravens and two badgers. There is also a small white swan in the background of the scene and two other black birds next to Benedict on the left (Figure 5). *Benedict Instructs the Peasants* has a sitting, light tan dog with a studded red collar on the right edge of the picture; a beautiful peasant boy pats his head (Figure 6). The fresco of *Fiorenzo Tries to Poison Benedict* contains another raven, as well as a cat and a peacock on the center pediment in the background (Figure 7). There are more dogs and swooping birds in many of the other frescoes in the cycle.

Numerous scholars and historians have commented on the inclusion of animals in Signorelli's and Sodoma's frescoes. Giorgio Vasari, for instance, mentions that the badgers and ravens in the scene of Benedict mending the broken tray are Sodoma's own

pets from his celebrated menagerie.<sup>3</sup> Robert Cust, in his seminal study of Sodoma of 1906, calls them “among [Sodoma’s] most successful portrayals of animal life.”<sup>4</sup> Writing a few years later, in 1912, Henri Hauvette writes that the frescoes “are an indisputable testimony of the love with which Bazzi [Sodoma] painted various animals.”<sup>5</sup> The most current mention of the animals at Monte Oliveto is in Harvard English professor Robert Kiely’s *Blessed and Beautiful: Picturing the Saints*. While discussing Sodoma’s various “signatures” in the cycle and contrasting his ostentatious personality with that of the unassuming and pious Benedict, Kiely writes of the artist’s “unruly zoo” and “menagerie of favorite pets” that come alive in the frescoes.<sup>6</sup>

No scholar, however, has considered the cycle’s animals as anything more than narrative, naturalistic or exotic detail, and they are mentioned only in passing. In fact, even though the cycle is extensive and authored by two prominent Renaissance artists, Monte Oliveto and the frescoes of the Chiostro Grande have received little art historical attention. Vasari mentions the frescoes briefly in his life of Signorelli<sup>7</sup> and spends more time discussing Sodoma’s “eccentric and beastly” life in the company of “beardless

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<sup>3</sup> Vasari, *Le opere di Giorgio Vasari*, 6: 384. The original Italian reads, in reference to the fresco of *Benedict Mends the Broken Tray*, that “...ed a piè del ritratto vi fece il corbo, una betuccia, ed altri suoi animali.”

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Hobart Cust, *Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, Hitherto Usually Styled “Sodoma”: The Man and Painter, 1477-1549* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1906), 100.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Hauvette, *Le Sodoma* (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1912), 37. My translation. The original French reads: “les fresques elles-mêmes sont un témoignage indiscutable de l’amour avec lequel Bazzi peignait les animaux les plus variés.”

<sup>6</sup> Robert Kiely, *Blessed and Beautiful: Picturing the Saints* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), 202.

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford UP, 1991), 270. The original Italian, from *Le opere di Giorgio Vasari*, reads, “A Chiusuri, in quel di Siena, luogo principale de’ monaci di Monte Oliveto, dipinse in una banda del chiostro undici storie della vita e fatti di San Benedetto,” (3:689).

youths” than he does his frescoes.<sup>8</sup> Italian scholars since then have largely focused on the history of the Olivetans as a monastic, reformed Benedictine Order and less on the Order’s artistic patronage at the mother house.<sup>9</sup> Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Italian, French and English-speaking art historians have rightly studied the Monte Oliveto frescoes as important early milestones in the careers of Signorelli and Sodoma.<sup>10</sup> Besides their attention to attribution, however, they have not deeply considered the frescoes for their form, content and meaning.

More recently, two studies have shed new light on the frescoes, their commission, their overall meaning and Signorelli’s and Sodoma’s work on them. The 1982 Florentine exhibition and its accompanying catalog, *Iconografia di San Benedetto nella pittura della Toscana: immagini e aspetti culturali fino al XVI secolo* (Iconography of St. Benedict in Tuscan Painting: Images and Cultural Aspects to the Sixteenth Century), beautifully chronicled and illustrated the history of Tuscan Benedictine painting from roughly the ninth to the sixteenth centuries. Included in this survey was a large section on Monte Oliveto, its frescoes and the Olivetans’ role as influential reformed Benedictines in late

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<sup>8</sup> Vasari, *Le opere di Giorgio Vasari*, 6: 380. The original Italian reads, “Era oltre ciò uomo allegro, licenzioso, e teneva altrui in piacere e spasso con vivere poco onestamente: nel che fare, però che aveva sempre attorno fanciulli e giovani sbarbati, i quali amava fuor di modo...”

<sup>9</sup> Important historical works in Italian on Monte Oliveto and the Olivetans include Modesto Scarpini, *I monaci benedettini di Monte Oliveto* (Alexandria: Edizione l’ulvio, 1952) and Enzo Carli, *L’abbazia di Monteoliveto* (Milan: Monte dei Paschi di Siena, 1961).

<sup>10</sup> Such works, largely catalogue raisonnés and monographic in style, include: Cust, *Giovanni Antonio Bazzi*; Hauvett, *Le Sodoma*; Andrée Hayum, *Giovanni Antonio Bazzi – “Il Sodoma”* (New York: Garland, 1976); Tom Henry and Laurence Kanter, *Luca Signorelli: The Complete Paintings* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002); Pietro Scarpellini, *Luca Signorelli* (Milan: Edizioni per il club del libro, 1964); Charles Terrasse, *Sodoma* (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan, 1925); Daniele Radini Tedeschi, *Sodoma* (Rome, 2008); and Adolfo Venturi, *Luca Signorelli* (Florence: Alinari, 1922).

medieval and early modern Tuscany.<sup>11</sup> *Iconografia di San Benedetto* also includes essays and entries on other Tuscan Benedictine fresco cycles; these studies are extremely useful when looking at Monte Oliveto's frescoes and their place within Benedictine iconography. Nevertheless, while the catalog is an indispensable introduction for any study of Benedictine art in Tuscany, it is necessarily brief given the exhibition's more general and historical nature.

The latest attempt to rectify the scant scholarship on Monte Oliveto's frescoes is Kurt Sundstrom's unpublished doctoral dissertation of 2000.<sup>12</sup> Entitled "The 'Chiostro Grande' of Monte Oliveto Maggiore and the Olivetan Reform Movement," Sundstrom's careful and well-researched work is the only study of the frescoes to truly consider them from a modern art historical perspective. In addition to giving a thorough history of the commission of the frescoes and of Monte Oliveto itself, Sundstrom's overall argument is that the frescoes reference fifteenth-century Olivetan reforms that sought to bring the Order back to a more true and pure form of the Benedictine Rule. As Sundstrom himself writes, "Signorelli and Sodoma, drawing inspiration from their Renaissance predecessors, labored to create an all-encompassing and intellectual body of work directed towards the establishment of a permanent monastic discourse on Olivetan monastic life."<sup>13</sup>

The strength of Sundstrom's dissertation lies in its comprehensiveness and its groundbreaking consideration of the frescoes as not just a pure narration of Benedict's life. Rather, Sundstrom convincingly argues that the frescoes were imbued with subtle

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<sup>11</sup> *Iconografia di San Benedetto nella pittura della Toscana: immagini e aspetti culturali fino al XVI secolo* (Florence: Centro d'incontro della Certosa di Firenze, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Kurt J. Sundstrom, "The 'Chiostro Grande' of Monte Oliveto Maggiore," (PhD diss., Florida State University, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

messages that spoke of the Olivetan's reformed Benedictine rule. Nonetheless, given the pioneering nature of Sundstrom's study in seeking to further "our present elementary understanding of the frescoes,"<sup>14</sup> important motifs in the frescoes, and particularly some of the most striking details relative to the animals, are largely ignored or treated perfunctorily in favor of overarching and general conclusions with respect to Olivetan reform.<sup>15</sup> And while Sundstrom persuasively discusses the importance of the cloister as the site for the frescoes, his research does not include more nuanced theological considerations of monastic visual culture in early modern Italy.

This study aims to contribute to the art historical scholarship on the Chiostro Grande and to add to it by way of a careful consideration of the animal details in the cycle. I will argue that rather than simply serving naturalistic or narrative functions, or comprising quaint and interesting details, the cycle's animals have important symbolic, historical and hagiographic purposes that underline and enhance Benedict's role as saint and exemplar for the Monte Oliveto monastic community. I contend that early modern notions of animals as metaphysical beings capable of supernatural senses and of animals as important signs of moral and theological truths underscore the frescoes and their message. Their inclusion ultimately elevates and intensifies Benedict's saintly efficacy for his order.

A careful viewer at Monte Oliveto will note that in addition to the many animals in the cycle, there are also many demons. Of the thirty-six scenes, in fact, nine include at least one image of demons or devil-like figures. Signorelli's demons are particularly

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Sundstrom sees the animals as representing nothing more than an interest in naturalism on the part of the artists; see 107-109 and 256-257.

vivid, with black, bat-like wings, hairy tails, lizard-like legs and twisted horns. In certain ways, it would seem that the cycle's animals and demons would naturally go together: both are "creatures" in the broadest sense of the term; both, and particularly the demons, are important actors in the narrative and hagiography of Benedict's life; and both are details that have been over-looked by scholars as merely interesting genre motifs. In many ways, too, the multiplicity of demons in the Chioostro Grande enhances Signorelli's and Sodoma's vision of Benedict's life in a similar way to the proliferation of animals. They emphasize the numerous temptations and travails the saint and his fellow monks fought against and endured. As such, the demons remind the original monastic viewer of the constant danger of the Devil and his minions and the necessity of cenobitical discipline in combating such foes. They also show Benedict's power as a saintly exemplar in being able to overcome temptation.

Demons, however, are entirely different ontological beings than animals. Since they are not "real" in the strict, natural-world sense of the word, they are quite different from animals. Though animals may indicate supernatural phenomena or symbolic truths, they are living creatures that can be seen, heard and touched within the sphere of physical, sensate existence. Demons, on the other hand, may be seen and heard by certain people, but they are not, regardless of one's beliefs, of this world. Because of these clear distinctions, as well as the fact that a nuanced and complete discussion of them is outside the realm of this study, demons will not be addressed in this thesis. The contrast between the naturalistically-depicted and "real" animals and the fantastical, other-worldly demons in the cycle further suggests that the artists are using the two motifs in different ways but perhaps with a common purpose. The verism of the animals in the context of Benedict's

life enhances the veracity of his saintly deeds and their place within the real sphere of human life. The supernatural demons, on the other hand, emphasize Benedict's power to both see and to conquer realms outside ordinary human understanding. And, as Paul Barolsky has eloquently shown with the medieval frescoes at Assisi, naturalism can be a conduit toward a higher understanding of the sacred and the supernatural as it invites the viewer to participate in the divine scene itself.<sup>16</sup> In the Chiostro Grande, the animals thus not only elevate the sanctity of Benedict and his acts, but in contrast with the demons, they also underscore the very real threat of the supernatural.

At this juncture, the reader may be asking him or herself, and quite rightly so, why such details – whether animals or demons – matter in the larger scheme of an extensive pictorial cycle. Are we to conclude by the statements above that, by looking at something as seemingly insignificant as a black bird swooping through the sky in the background of a painting, the entire meaning of the image may be completely turned on its head? Are the details to supersede the analysis of larger narrative, religious and social themes? Should art historians mire themselves in minutiae and particulars instead of looking at the whole picture? The answer is, of course, a resounding “no.” Details are details and should not be mistaken for substitutions for the larger, holistic meaning of a pictorial cycle. Nonetheless, to dismiss such details as mere genre or as the whim of the artist is to deny the distinctive visual culture of the late medieval and early modern periods. What may seem to us as simply a cute, fluffy white dog may have conjured far more complex moral, literary, historical and theological references for an early modern viewer, particularly a monk trained in certain modes of spiritual apprehension, that is, in

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Barolsky, “Naturalism and the Visionary Art of the Early Renaissance,” in *Franciscanism, the Papacy, and Art in the Age of Giotto*, ed. Andrew Ladis (New York: Garland, 1998): 317-323, 317-318.



certain ways of “looking.” William Hood, for instance, has shown that the ostensibly irrelevant hand gestures of Fra Angelico’s frescoed saints on the walls of the cells of the friars of San Marco are not in fact simply random hand positions but, rather, that they have specific meanings for Dominican modes of prayer and meditation.<sup>17</sup> The research of literary historian Mary Carruthers in her classic texts on medieval memory and thought, *The Book of Memory* and *The Craft of Thought*, has also shown how monastic modes of thinking, meditation and vision were entirely based on a careful “looking” at text and image that involved every little detail.<sup>18</sup>

My larger point here is that particulars, especially in the case of the frescoes of Monte Oliveto with their striking details of animals, are not to be overlooked just because they may seem insignificant to modern eyes. These particulars had meaning for the original viewers and, as I will argue, they can in fact enhance the message and meaning of the images through their inclusion. A careful case study of Monte Oliveto’s animals therefore builds upon previous scholarship that discusses the fresco cycle as a whole, but such a study also enhances and extends these contributions by showing that Signorelli’s and Sodoma’s details have greater meaning. Such a study may also be relevant for other Renaissance fresco cycles of saints and holy figures in showing that animal motifs had more complex connotations for their original viewers. I anticipate that this study will have far-reaching implications with respect to animals in the Renaissance, beyond an immediate resonance for the Chiostro Grande itself.

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<sup>17</sup> William Hood, “Saint Dominic’s Manners of Praying: Gestures in Fra Angelico’s Cell Frescoes at San Marco,” *Art Bulletin* 68 (June 1986): 195-206.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1998) and *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1990).

My thesis will begin with the history of Monte Oliveto, the Olivetan Order, the commission of the Chiostro Grande cycle, the history of art in monastic cloisters and the cycle's relationship to earlier images of the life of Benedict. This background will show how the particular form of the Benedictine Rule at Monte Oliveto affected the subject matter and nature of the fresco cycle; it will reveal how Signorelli and Sodoma built upon and ultimately superseded earlier examples. Chapter Two will then discuss the cycle's animals and their multivalent functions as moral and hagiographic symbols, their identity as historical and literary signs and their role as sacred witnesses. Special attention will be paid to the act of beholding in the monastic cloister and to the way the inclusion of the animal motif elevates and augments Benedict's life and his saintly nature. A focus on the connections among animals and the early Christian Desert Fathers will also be stressed. The varied meanings and purposes of animals in the cycle – symbolic, literary, hagiographical and theological – will show that Sodoma's and Signorelli's creatures are far from just mere detail, but are rather important pictorial facets in their unique vision of Benedict's life.

## Chapter 1: Monte Oliveto and Tuscan Benedictine Cycles

In the waning months of summer, or at the beginning of autumn 1462, Pope Pius II Piccolomini (r. 1458-64) visited Monte Oliveto Maggiore. He describes the monastery as situated high on a hill and shaped almost like a “chestnut leaf” in its orientation:

Thus [we] came to the monastery of Monte Oliveto, which is not far from the village of Chiusure, where the Tuscans think the cheese is among the best in the world... There is a high hill of tufa and clay about a stade in length and much narrower to the west. If you ask its shape, it is like a chestnut leaf... It is crossed by a bridge and when this is raised no approach to the monastery is possible. The hill is steep and halfway up is the celebrated church and the usual refectories, ambulatories, and porticoes for the monks besides the various service quarters which they think necessary. There is nothing that is not of the best, nothing that is not elegant and that you would not behold with envy. The monks of that place regard the Piccolomini as their founders as much as the original Tolommei (sic), though no one doubts that the original founder was a Tolommei (sic). The rule of the Order is almost the same as that of the Benedictine Observantists. In their dress you would observe a difference. The dress of the Benedictines is black, that of these monks is an immaculate white. The eating of the flesh is forbidden to both alike unless illness requires it. In their ritual you would find a number of differences, but they have

substantially the same rule of life and up to now these monks have lived blameless.<sup>19</sup>

Pius II's words are extraordinary not only for the rare glimpse they give us of fifteenth-century Monte Oliveto, but also for the way they describe the monastery and the Olivetan Order itself. In Pius's words, we see, in fact, a distillation of the Olivetan way of life: an ascetic life – here in the pope's mention that the monks abstain from eating meat – spent in community. Pius's description of the Olivetans as being like the “Benedictine Observantists” also shows the Order to be one dedicated to a stricter, more pure form of Benedict's Rule.<sup>20</sup> Pius's statement that the monastery contained only “the best” also alludes to the sumptuousness and beauty of the entire complex.

*St. Bernardo Tolomei and the Origins of the Olivetan Order*

In 1462, Monte Oliveto was, nonetheless, vastly different from its original foundation as an isolated wilderness retreat for the Sienese nobleman St. Bernardo Tolomei. Born on May 10, 1292 as Giovanni Tolomei, the young man came of age in a Siena at its height following its defeat of the Florentines in 1260 at the Battle of Montaperti.<sup>21</sup> The Tolomei family was an ancient, noble and extensive merchant family in the city; Tolomei's father often traveled to France for business, and he expected his

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<sup>19</sup> Pope Pius II, *Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope: The Commentaries of Pius II*, trans. Florence A. Gragg, ed. Leona C. Garbel (New York: Capricorn, 1962), 293-4. The newest edition of Pius's *Commentaries*, edited by Margaret Meserve and Marcello Simonetta, is only currently in two volumes (books I-IV of the *Commentaries*) at the time of my writing; since the Monte Oliveto entry is in book X, I could not utilize this latest edition. See Pius II, *Commentaries*, eds. Margaret Meserve and Marcello Simonetta, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2003 and 2007).

<sup>20</sup> The Observant movement of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was defined by an effort on the part of many religious orders to move back to a more “observant” form of their original rule. This usually involved stricter controls on interaction with the lay community, stronger ascetic practices and a more determined effort on the part of the religious to lead a life of prayer. See William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), 17.

<sup>21</sup> Scarpini, *I monaci benedettini di Monte Oliveto*, 18.

son to continue in the family line of work.<sup>22</sup> Educated at the Dominican convent of San Domenico in Camporegio, Tolomei, however, showed an early tendency toward asceticism and piety rather than mercantile zeal; he joined a confraternity at a young age, and was known for intense fasting, mortification of the flesh and prayer.<sup>23</sup>

In his late teens and early twenties, Tolomei followed very much in his father's footsteps by working as a merchant in Siena.<sup>24</sup> He even went as far as to become "*capitano del popolo*," or one of the town's government leaders, in 1312.<sup>25</sup> The stress and pressure of the job took its toll on Tolomei, however, and in 1313, he suffered a terrible eye infection that temporarily blinded him. At the height of the infection, Tolomei prayed fervently to the Virgin Mary, asking her to cure him in exchange for his leaving Siena and dedicating his life solely to God in the wilderness. Needless to say, his prayer was answered and, in 1313, Tolomei abandoned secular life in Siena for the "dessert of Accona."<sup>26</sup>

Tolomei, along with his companions Ambrogio Piccolomini and Patrizio Patrizi, hoped to live an eremitic life in the vein of the Desert Fathers. But just like their desert

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 19-20.

<sup>24</sup> Tolomei's early life and conversion are strikingly similar to those of his fellow Italian saint, Francis of Assisi. Like Tolomei, Francis's father was also a prominent merchant who often traveled to France for business, and Francis also worked with his father in his youth. Additionally, both saints "converted" to a more pious life dedicated exclusively to God following illness. Francis's illness, however, seems to have been brought on more by his imprisonment in Perugia following a battle. For Francis's life, see Rosalind B. Brooke, trans., *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli, Sociorum S. Francisci* (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon, 1970), 95-283, in Mary-Ann Stouck, ed. *Medieval Saints: A Reader* (Toronto: Broadview, 1999), 488-503.

<sup>25</sup> Scarpini, *I monaci benedettini*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 21.

predecessors, they found that their simple and holy life drew fervent followers.<sup>27</sup> They were also so ardent in their austerities that, in 1319, they were accused of heresy. Tolomei traveled to Avignon to defend himself and his companions before Pope John XXII (r. 1316-1334). While the pope cleared him of all charges, he required that Tolomei formally organize his movement under the auspices of the Church. Tolomei thus agreed to found a Benedictine Order with a special devotion to the Virgin Mary. The order was approved, and the bishop of Arezzo, Guido Tarlati, came to supervise them. Pope Clement VI (r. 1342-1352) confirmed the order in 1344. Around this time, Tolomei began calling himself “Bernardo” after his hero, St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The order at its inception therefore had a strongly Cistercian leaning.<sup>28</sup>

Life as fourteenth and fifteenth-century Olivetans was truly ascetical in its character. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* details their life thus:

St. Bernard Ptolomei’s [sic] idea of monastic reform was that which had inspired every founder of an order or congregation since the days of St. Benedict – a return to the primitive life of solitude and austerity. Severe corporal mortifications were ordained by rule and inflicted in public. The usual ecclesiastical and conventual fasts were largely increased and the daily food was bread and water. The monks slept on a straw mattress

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<sup>27</sup> “*La nostra storia.*”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. The Olivetans wore white robes, instead of the traditional Benedictine black, to honor both their order’s dedication to the pure Virgin Mary and to show their admiration for the white-robed and reformed Benedictine Cistercians. The Cistercians, founded in 1098 by a group of disgruntled monks who left their life at the opulent monastery of Cluny, Burgundy to lead a stricter, cenobitic existence, found their greatest expression in St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). Bernard’s ascetic-minded writings and belief in a strict interpretation of Benedict’s Rule inspired numerous reform movements from the twelfth century on. See M. Kilian Hufgard, *Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, A Theory of Art Formulated from his Writings and Illustrated in Twelfth-Century Works of Art* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1989) for an introduction to Bernard and his views on monastic life.

without bed-coverings, and did not lie down after the midnight Office, but continued in prayer until Prime. They wore wooden sandals and habits of the coarsest stuff. They were also fanatical total abstainers; not only was St. Benedict's kindly concession of a hemina of wine rejected, but the vineyards were rooted up and the wine-presses and vessels destroyed.<sup>29</sup>

The Olivetans were also dedicated to a strict interpretation of Benedict's Rule in keeping with their founder's desire to have a reform-minded, observant Benedictine community. As such, outside contact with the community was extremely limited, and meticulous following of the Divine Office, a series of hourly prayers, along with ascetic practices, were required of all monks.<sup>30</sup>

While the monks at Monte Oliveto certainly led a simple and austere life, they were also great patrons of art and architecture who saw art as having three primary purposes: to glorify God; to help teach the monks about important religious stories, and thus increase their spiritual knowledge and faith; and to aid in meditation, prayer and devotion.<sup>31</sup> According to P. Goffredo Viti, art for the Olivetans articulated and visualized the ideals of Benedict and the other saints who had followed him.<sup>32</sup> Though the construction of the monastic buildings at the site began around 1320, large-scale

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<sup>29</sup> J.C. Almond, "Olivetans," *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913), accessed September 17, 2010, [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic\\_Encyclopedia\\_\(1913\)/Olivetans](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/Olivetans). The newest edition of the Catholic Encyclopedia also contains an entry on the Olivetans, but focuses more on contemporary Olivetan monasticism. See "Benedictines, Olivetan," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 274.

<sup>30</sup> Monte Oliveto and other Olivetan communities were not loyal to any neighboring communes, nor were there privately-sponsored artistic and architectural projects at Olivetan monasteries. See Sundstrom, "The 'Chiostr Grande' of Monte Oliveto Maggiore," 153-154.

<sup>31</sup> P. Goffredo Viti, "Il monachesimo benedettino in Toscana," *Iconografia di San Benedetto*, 21-29, 27-29.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 29: "Per i monaci, entrambe le realizzazioni, avevano lo scopo di visualizzare gli ideali di cui Benedetto era stato il portatore e che gli altri santi avevano perseguito."

architectural initiatives took place only after Tolomei's death from the plague in 1348.<sup>33</sup>

Much of this construction occurred in the fifteenth century, when the church and campanile, sacristy, guest house, refectory, choir, library, cloisters, stables, chapter house and dormitories were built.<sup>34</sup>

The Chiostro Grande was built between 1426 and 1443. The interior piers were frescoed by Mariano di Matteo di Roma in 1474 with images of the Desert Fathers and hermit saints.<sup>35</sup> In 1497, Abbot Domenico Airoidi da Lecco commissioned Signorelli to paint the life of St. Benedict on the cloister's walls. Though Signorelli completed nine scenes on the west wall of the cloister, he abandoned the project when he was called away to Orvieto to paint the Chapel of San Brizio.<sup>36</sup> In 1505, Airoidi subsequently commissioned Sodoma to complete the project. Sodoma was an ideal choice as he had just completed a group of frescoes in the Olivetan monastery of Sant'Anna in Camprena a few miles away, and just the year before.<sup>37</sup> Unlike Signorelli, Sodoma began the cycle chronologically, with the scene of Benedict leaving for Rome on the east wall.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Paola Grifoni, "Monte Oliveto Maggiore," *Iconografia di San Benedetto*, 481-490, 481.

<sup>34</sup> Sundstrom, "The 'Chiostro Grande' of Monte Oliveto Maggiore," 24-25.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 32; see note 47 for the archival sources of this attribution. The connection between these earlier, hermit saints and the animals of the Chiostro Grande will be discussed in Chapters 2.

<sup>36</sup> Henry and Kanter, *Luca Signorelli*, 124. The authors suggest that Signorelli may have started on the west wall because of the condition of the wall, the amount of light that fell upon it or perhaps because Fra Airoidi wanted the west side finished first; see Henry and Kanter, *Luca Signorelli*, 128. A short pamphlet on the monastery asserts that there may have been additional frescoes by Mariano di Matteo that the friars at the time did not want covered up; see *Monte Oliveto Maggiore*, catalog and slides (Florence: Scala, 1993), 4.

<sup>37</sup> Hayum, *Giovanni Antonio Bazzi*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



### Art in the Monastic Cloister

The cloister is one of the most important spaces in any monastic complex. It is typically rectangular, in the manner of an open-air courtyard, surrounded on all sides by porticoes. It is a place of prayer, meditation, reading, quiet socializing and even of the teaching of novitiates.<sup>39</sup> The cloister also sometimes served as one of the few public spaces of a monastery. Some of the mendicant orders, such as the Dominicans, used the cloister as a place to meet with lay people, conduct business and exchange goods and information.<sup>40</sup> Given the strict form of Benedict's Rule at Monte Oliveto, however, no one besides the resident Olivetan monks was allowed to enter the Chiostro Grande. The Chiostro Grande was thus a space more for individual prayer and contemplation than for public interaction. Mary Carruthers has effectively argued that the architectural elements of the cloister served as "memory tools" that recalled Biblical and theological imagery for medieval and early modern religious communities. The square shape and the enclosed garden of the cloister recall the garden of Eden; the columns surrounding the site are like Eden's trees and the books of the Bible; and the openness of the cloister to the sky evokes "the atrium of priests" of the prophet Ezekiel's visionary city.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, in addition to being a place for general reflection and meditation, the monastic cloister was also an architecturally structured site that could foster or inspire spiritual visions. It was thus the place in the monastery where monks had the opportunity to make internalized, spiritual connections among their daily actions of reading, labor and prayer.

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<sup>39</sup> Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 272.

<sup>40</sup> Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 273, 275. The connection between the trees of the cloister and the books of the Bible lies in the Latin word "liber," which means both book and the 'inner bark [of a tree].' See Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 275.

Painting and sculpture in the cloister were subsequently important tools in aiding and augmenting such prayer and reflection. In the early Middle Ages, art in Italian cloisters was primarily sculptural, and it was typically limited to column and capital decoration. The apostles were popular subjects, as many monastic orders had long connected the cenobitic life with the apostolic one.<sup>42</sup> Many medieval cloisters were also popular burial sites for both the monastic and lay communities, and, as such, they contained decoration related to the deceased.<sup>43</sup> In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, frescoes became an important part of the decoration of the cloister at the same time as more orders sought reform and reinvention. As William Hood notes, “painted cloister decoration might record a community’s claims to institutional legitimacy and demonstrate the authenticity of the order’s unique mission to the Church at large...it strengthened the network of custom and myth that bound the community together.”<sup>44</sup> For the reformed Benedictines and other observant communities, the cloister thus became the site in the monastery for self-representation and self-aggrandizement.

For the Olivetans and other reformed orders, in particular, cloister decoration became an important tool for connecting a founder, such as Benedict, and his Rule with early Christian, eremitic foundations.<sup>45</sup> Thebaid imagery, or images of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, was especially utilized in this regard.<sup>46</sup> There are numerous examples of

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<sup>42</sup> Leon Pressouyvre, “St. Bernard to St. Francis: Monastic Ideals and Iconographic Programs in the Cloister,” *Gesta* 12 (1973): 74.

<sup>43</sup> Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 124.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 126.

<sup>46</sup> The term, “Thebaid,” refers to the name of the desert region in Egypt, near the city of Thebes, where many of the Desert Fathers and Mothers lived.

Thebaid programs in medieval and early modern cloisters in Tuscany. These include those at Santa Marta in Siena; at San Giorgio dello Spirito Santo in Florence; and at Sant'Andrea in Cercina between Prato and Florence.<sup>47</sup> One of the most extensive is the fifteenth-century cycle at the Augustinian hermitage of Lecceto, outside Siena. Featuring a monochrome palette, the Lecceto frescoes juxtapose images of the life of St. Augustine with those of the Desert Fathers.<sup>48</sup> Interestingly enough, the Thebaid imagery at Lecceto also includes numerous animals interacting with the Desert Fathers. For now, it is important to note that Thebaid and animal imagery often went hand-in-hand.

Thebaid imagery was also especially important for the Olivetans. In the cloister of the Olivetan foundation of San Miniato al Monte in Florence, eight images of the Desert Fathers, along with images of Benedict's life, were painted in the late 1440s by either Paolo Uccello or one of his followers.<sup>49</sup> The artist and his patrons thereby directly connected Benedict with his eremitic forebears through their cloister frescoes. A similar scheme was carried out at Monte Oliveto Maggiore in 1440 when a Sienese artist, perhaps Giovanni di Paolo, painted frescoes of the Desert Fathers on the north wall of the Chiostro Grande. In 1474, Mariano di Matteo also painted images of the Desert Fathers on the inside pilasters of the cloister.<sup>50</sup> For the ascetic and eremitical-minded Olivetans, such images would not only have reminded the monks of their ancient forebears, for they would also have recalled their own eremitic foundation by both St. Bernardo Tolomei and

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<sup>47</sup> *Iconografia di San Benedetto*, 495.

<sup>48</sup> *Lecceto e gli eremi agostiniani in terra di Siena*, ed. Corrado Fanti (Milan: Silvana, 1990), 97-116.

<sup>49</sup> Sundstrom, "The 'Chiostro Grande' of Monte Oliveto Maggiore," 66; see note 106 for the attribution and scholarship on these frescoes; see also Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 136-7.

<sup>50</sup> Sundstrom, "The 'Chiostro Grande' of Monte Oliveto Maggiore," 66-67.

St. Benedict. Though the Thebaid frescoes were eventually painted over by Sodoma, I will argue that both Sodoma and Signorelli included animals in the frescoes in order to allude to the Desert Fathers and the eremitic life they exemplify.

### *Tuscan Benedictine Fresco Cycles*

Though Signorelli and Sodoma did not have recourse to a specific example of an extensive, pictorial life of Benedict at Monte Oliveto itself, inspiration for the frescoes almost certainly came from two previous cycles in Tuscany. The first monumental images of Benedicts' life are Spinello Aretino's 1388 sacristy frescoes at the Florentine church of San Miniato al Monte (Figures 8 and 9).<sup>51</sup> Consisting of sixteen scenes arranged in the lunettes above the sacristy's wooden cabinets, Spinello's frescoes are based on Gregory the Great's life of the saint, and they are the definitive precedents for any Tuscan Benedictine cycle.<sup>52</sup> Signorelli's and Sodoma's frescoes at Monte Oliveto contain all the same scenes as Spinello's except that of Benedict's death.<sup>53</sup> They are also compositionally quite similar to Spinello's. The use of continuous narrative is additionally present in both the San Miniato and Monte Oliveto frescoes, suggesting not

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<sup>51</sup> *Iconografia di San Benedetto*, 135.

<sup>52</sup> Joachim Poeschke, *Italian Frescoes in the Age of Giotto 1280-1400* (New York: Abbeville, 2005), 392.

<sup>53</sup> The absence of Benedict's death at Monte Oliveto is curious, as a saint's death was almost always the last scene in any pictorial cycle and, in the case of Benedictine cycles in Tuscany, it is in both Spinello's and the later Filippo d'Antonio Filippelli's frescoes at Passignano. Sundstrom suggests that the reason for this may relate to the context of the frescoes at Monte Oliveto in the cloister; according to Sundstrom, the absence of Benedict's death "is perfectly consonant with the thesis that these cycles were not meant to glorify Benedict's life but to provide an exemplum to the monastic community.... The absence of such imagery in the cloister supports the idea that the life of Benedict was not intended to stimulate the devotion or adoration of the resident viewers." While I agree with Sundstrom in the sense that the purpose of Monte Oliveto's frescoes centers less on devotion to a single figure and more on exempla, I think that the absence of Benedict's death suggests that the Olivetans cared more for conveying a sense of Benedict's ongoing relevance into their own times.

only stylistic similarities, but also the idea that Benedict's life unfolds fluidly in pictorial time.

Most striking for our purposes is Spinello's use of animals. Besides the horses and donkeys that various personages use in the frescoes, in *Benedict Miraculously Retrieves a Sickie*, for example, he includes an owl, a jackal, a black dog chasing a hare, a sheep, a cow and ass, a second dog, a crane and what appear to be ducks and perhaps a peacock or other ornamental bird being chased by what looks like a ferret or polecat (Figure 10). Without investigating here the particulars with respect to these animals, as I will do in Chapter Two, it is important to note, in general, that animals were early and significant motifs in fresco cycles of St. Benedict. As I will argue, such inclusions supplied meaningful details for the monastic viewer and they magnified Benedict's sanctity and his efficacy.

More closely contemporaneous with Signorelli's and Sodoma's frescoes at Monte Oliveto is the work of Fra Angelico's workshop at the Chiostro degli Aranci at Florence's Badia, dating to around 1435-1439 (Figure 11). Although not an Olivetan community, the Benedictines at the Badia became an Observant congregation in the 1420s, after the election of the ambitious and reform-minded Abbot Gomezio di Giovanni.<sup>54</sup> Gomezio launched a large-scale renovation and rebuilding campaign at the Badia and, in 1435, he hired Fra Angelico and his workshop to fresco the cloister walls with scenes from the life

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<sup>54</sup> The abbey had for years been suffering from a lack of leadership, funds and members after being placed under a papal appointee in 1327. This papal system, known as *in commendam*, had devastating effects on numerous monasteries in Tuscany in the late Middle Ages as it allowed the control of the monastery to fall into essentially non-monastic hands. As Anne Leader writes, "Though originally intended to control the Badia and protect it from decadence, appointments *in commendam* led to great abuses of power, with the papal deputies usually more interested in enriching themselves than in ensuring the well-being and stability of the monastery." See Anne Leader, "Architectural Collaboration in the Early Renaissance: Reforming the Florentine Badia," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 64 (June 2005): 207-208.

of St. Benedict.<sup>55</sup> Consisting of thirteen scenes arranged in lunettes around the cloister, the frescoes include many of the same scenes as Spinello. They show Benedict overall as a strong abbot and as a monastic and saintly paragon.<sup>56</sup> Animals are again an important motif in these frescoes. The workshop focused particularly on birds in this cloister: there is a small sparrow perched on a cypress branch in *Benedict Receives the Hermit's Habit* (Figures 12 and 13); there is a falcon, hawk or pheasant in *Benedict Exorcises a Monk* (Figure 14); and a large raven is present in *Fiorenzo Tries to Poison Benedict* (Figures 15 and 16). While these creatures seem to have more of a narrative and genre function, they again show the predilections of medieval and Renaissance artists to include such motifs in Benedict's life.

### Summary

My aim in discussing the historical context of Monte Oliveto and the Olivetan Order, the use of art in monastic cloisters and the artistic precedents for the Monte Oliveto cycle, is two-fold. First, understanding the meaning of the animals in the Chiostro Grande as edifying details depends on knowledge of the character of the Benedictine Rule at Monte Oliveto. The Olivetan Order emphasized a strict, observant form of the Benedictine Rule, for they also saw their sacred founder as the ideal exemplar of monastic purity and behavior. The Olivetans used art for both didactic and meditational purposes; art for them not only gave glory to God, but also led the monks to a more contemplative spiritual existence. An awareness of the importance of art for the Order enhances a reading of the frescoes and their details because it shows that the monks had a

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<sup>55</sup> Leader, "Architectural Collaboration," 221.

<sup>56</sup> Anne Leader, "The Florentine Badia: Monastic Reform in Mural and Cloister" (PhD diss., New York University, 2000), 370.

primary aim of not just depicting Benedict's life, but also of helping to improve the lives of monastic viewers. The importance of painted imagery in the monastic cloister, particularly for reformed and reforming orders, furthers this idea, especially since the cloister was a space for the monastic "memory machine and encyclopedia," in the words of Mary Carruthers.<sup>57</sup> Second, a discussion of earlier Benedictine fresco cycles shows that animal details were not necessarily a new invention on the part of Signorelli and Sodoma. On one level, Sodoma and Signorelli are continuing the artistic tradition of showing Benedict's life with animals. On another level, a consideration of Spinello's frescoes at San Miniato and those of the workshop of Fra Angelico at the Florentine Badia ultimately also shows the remarkable artistic imagining of Benedict's life that occurred in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. This imagining of the saint among the abbots, monks and artists shows the early modern impulse to establish Benedict as both monastic exemplar and efficacious saint.

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<sup>57</sup> Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*, 272.

## Chapter 2: Animals in the Chiostro Grande

In his entry on Sodoma in his *Lives*, Vasari mentions that the badgers and raven in *Benedict Mends the Broken Tray* were pets in the artist's personal menagerie. Vasari writes:

[Sodoma] additionally delighted to have in [his] house many types of extraordinary animals; badgers, squirrels, apes, monkeys, miniature donkeys, horses, Barbary horses for running races, miniature horses from Elba, blue jays, small hens, Indian doves, and other similar animals, as many as he could get his hands on. But, besides all these beasts, he had a raven, which from him had learned to do imitations, that in many things it imitated the voice of Giovanni Antonio, and particularly in responding to anyone who knocked at the door, [doing this] so well that it seemed like Giovanni Antonio himself, as all the Sienese know very well. Similarly, the other animals were so domesticated that they were always around the house, playing the strangest, craziest jokes in the world, in such a manner that the man's house seemed like a real Noah's Ark.<sup>58</sup>

Vasari's assessment of Sodoma as a zany zookeeper and the painted animals in the Chiostro Grande as examples of his favorite pets has largely shaped art historians' interpretations of the fresco cycle. The sheer number of animals in the cycle and the

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<sup>58</sup> Vasari, *Le opere di Giorgio Vasari*, 6: 380-1. My translation. The original Italian reads, "Dilettosi, oltre ciò, d'aver per casa di più sorte stranvaganti animali; tassi, scoiattoli, bertuccie, gatti mammoni, asini nani, cavalli barbari da correr palj, cavallini piccoli dell'Elba, ghiandaie, galline nane, tortole indiane, ed altri sì fatti animali, quanti gliene potevano venire alle mane. Ma, oltre tutte queste bestiaccie, aveva un corbo, che da lui aveva così bene imparato a favelare, che contrafaceva in molte cose la voce di Giovannantonio, e particolarmente in rispondendo a chi picchiava la porta, tanto bene, che pareva Giovannantonio stesso, come benissimo fanno tutti i Sanesi. Similmente gli altri animali erano tanto domesticchi, che sempre stavano intorno a lui per casa, facendo i più strani giuochi ed i più pazzi versi del mondo; di maniera che la casa di costui pareva proprio l'arca di Noè."



attention paid to their accurate depiction by both Sodoma and Signorelli, however, necessitates a more nuanced discussion of them. Why did both artists, and especially Sodoma, choose to depict so many distinct animals in the Chiostro Grande? Why are there animals in certain scenes, particularly miraculous ones, and not in others? And what do the selection, poses and placement of the animals in the scenes tell us about their meaning? Through a discussion of the tradition of animals in Christian cultures; the importance of animals in the lives of the saints, particularly the Desert Fathers; and a careful consideration of the animals in the Chiostro Grande, I will show that the cycle's animals are, in fact, far from just random naturalistic intrusions. Instead, they are important details that magnify Benedict's sanctity and efficacy for the Olivetan Order.

### *Animals in Christian Tradition*

Though Christianity is primarily an anthropocentric faith, animals have long figured in Christian literature, theology and art. The Bible is full of animals. Classic examples include the gnats, frogs, flies and locusts of the Exodus plagues; the ravens that feed the prophet Elijah in the Book of Kings; the lions that miraculously leave the prophet Daniel unharmed; and the pigs that drown after Jesus sends a group of demons into them.<sup>59</sup> Animals in the Bible thus have multiple purposes. They can be agents of divine destruction, punishment or retribution, as in the plague insects. Alternatively, they may be like the ravens that feed Elijah, and thus agents of divine mercy and goodness.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See Exodus 8 and 10; 1 Kings 17; Daniel 6; and Matthew 8: 28-34.

<sup>60</sup> David Grummett, "Animals in Christian Theology," *Religion Compass* 5 (Oct. 2011): 581; Laura Hobgood-Oster, *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the Christian Tradition* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2008), 44.

The Church Fathers often commented on and questioned the purposes of animals and the possibility and potential of animal morality. St. Augustine (354-430) saw animals as signs that could communicate important truths about both theological concerns and human morality.<sup>61</sup> In his *On Christian Doctrine*, written between 397 and 426, Augustine cites the example of Abraham's ram in Genesis as an animal sign. In the Bible, Abraham sacrifices the ram to God instead of his son, Isaac, whom God, in a test of faith, had asked Abraham to kill. For Augustine, then, the ram is something more than an animal sacrifice; it becomes a sign of both Abraham's faith and God's mercy in sparing Isaac.<sup>62</sup>

Augustine also distinguishes between what he terms "natural" and "conventional" signs. Natural signs are those that, as the name suggests, seem natural and are based on experience. He gives the example of smoke as a natural sign for fire.<sup>63</sup> Conventional signs, on the other hand, are "those which living beings mutually exchange for the purpose of showing, as well as they can, the feelings of their minds, or their perceptions, or their thoughts."<sup>64</sup> Animals, for Augustine, have their own system of conventional signs. He cites the examples of a rooster calling to his mates when there is food and doves cooing to one another in distress or warning.<sup>65</sup> In other words, these animals use vocal signs to communicate their feelings, perceptions and thoughts to one another.

Though not stated explicitly, it would seem, then, that Augustine views animals as

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<sup>61</sup> Grummett, "Animals in Christian Theology," 585.

<sup>62</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 16, trans. J.F. Shaw (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 699-784, 704-5. This is a full, complete text of Augustine's writings published in a volume of the encyclopedia.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 717.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 718.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

capable of intelligent, sensitive thought. They are not only signs used to communicate important, divine truths, for they are also beings that have insightful perceptions as well as agency.

The Dominican and Doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), saw animals as containing both body and soul, and capable of sensitivity, imagination, memory, emotion and desire.<sup>66</sup> In his *Summa Theologica*, written between 1265 and 1274, Aquinas states that animals are important examples of God's creation; they show the order of God's plan in the universe through their inclusion within the six days of creation.<sup>67</sup> Aquinas writes that:

For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another.<sup>68</sup>

Aquinas thus suggests that the multiplicity of animal species is an important part of God's creation that helps God communicate "divine goodness" and divine truths to humankind. In general, Aquinas believes animals have living souls, and that they are blessed beings that can show humans, through their specific characteristics, significant moral and theological concepts. According to David Grummett, "Aquinas suggests that

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<sup>66</sup> John Berkman, "Towards a Thomistic Theology of Animality," in *Creaturely Theology: On God, Humans and Other Animals*, eds. Celia Deane-Drummond and David Clough (London: SCM, 2009), 21-40, 25-29.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, vol. 17, trans. Laurence Shapcote and Daniel J. Sullivan (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 248. Like Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine*, this is a full text version of the *Summa*.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

he views animals as reasoning beings with God-given purposes...Animals are...morally significant as moral patients, deserving of moral consideration by humans in consequence of their place in God's created order."<sup>69</sup>

In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the bestiary tradition was a popular and important method of connecting animals with theological truths. Bestiaries are collections of didactic texts on animals and they include the moral and religious lessons that can be derived from them. They essentially provide divinely-inspired lessons on animals for the edification of the Christian reader.<sup>70</sup> Each animal in a bestiary typically represents Christ, the Devil, a saint and/or specific types of human behavior.<sup>71</sup> Most bestiaries were produced in monasteries, and they include both painted images and text. For a monk, a bestiary was a helpful tool in learning and memorizing specific doctrines, using the mnemonic device of the animal. For the mendicant orders, which tended to interact with the laity to a greater degree than their monastic counterparts, bestiaries were treasure troves of easily-understood metaphors that could be used in preaching.<sup>72</sup>

The most popular bestiaries were copies of much older texts. The earliest bestiary, a copy in Latin of a fourth or fifth-century Greek text by a Coptic Christian writer known as Physiologus, appeared in the ninth century. The *Physiologus*, as it was known, contained between thirty-six and forty-nine chapters, each one devoted to a specific creature. Each animal was tied to a certain virtue or vice, with Biblical passages

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<sup>69</sup> Grummett, "Animals in Christian Theology," 582.

<sup>70</sup> Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1995), xv.

<sup>71</sup> Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, xvii.

<sup>72</sup> Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, 175.

or other relevant texts also included.<sup>73</sup> Other influential medieval bestiaries include Isidore de Seville's *Etymologiae* (from the seventh century) and Rabanus Maurus's *De Universo* (from the eighth century).<sup>74</sup> Both authors were Benedictines, and copies of their texts were almost certainly to be found in the large and celebrated library at Monte Oliveto. It is even tempting to imagine that the monks showed Sodoma and Signorelli their bestiaries. Both texts were encyclopedias on all known things, and they included definitions of the meanings of animals. As Lorenzo Gnocchi writes, the texts were "an intellectual guide, a *summa*, that placed all human and divine knowledge...at the comprehensive level of sacred Scripture."<sup>75</sup> Reading bestiaries for a monk was thus not only an important intellectual exercise, for it was also a spiritual one that connected God's creation to theological and doctrinal truths.

Though the popularity of bestiaries was at its height between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the texts continued to be used and consulted in the Renaissance. It is tempting in conventional assessments of the early modern period to assume that the new, rational, secular "Renaissance man" would have done away with such superstitious and fanciful literature. As the recent research of Simona Cohen has shown, however, bestiaries were not only popular in the Renaissance, they were also still considered vital spiritual texts that illuminated important aspects of the meaning and purpose of God's

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<sup>73</sup> Simona Cohen, *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art* (Boston: Brill, 2008), 4.

<sup>74</sup> Cohen, *Animals as Disguised Symbols*, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Lorenzo Gnocchi, "La cultura encyclopedica: Rabano Mauro ed Isidoro da Siviglia," *Iconografia di San Benedetto*, 373-376, 373. My translation. The original Italian reads: "...una guida intellettuale, un *summa* che funzionalizza tutto il sapere umano e divino, contemporaneo e passato, cristiano e pagano, tecnico, teologico, speculativo, alla comprensione della Sacra Scrittura, del mondo e della sua storia concepita solo e sempre come cristiana."

creation.<sup>76</sup> Renaissance artists and scientists, in particular, continued to utilize bestiaries as sources for accurate depictions and knowledge of animals.<sup>77</sup> Artists and scientists also produced new bestiaries in the Renaissance that combined the medieval allegorical tradition with greater attention to zoological and empirical detail.<sup>78</sup> Examples of such texts include the humanist Pier Candido Decembrio's 1460 *De animantium matures* and the twenty-two page bestiary by Leonardo da Vinci.<sup>79</sup> Even natural history texts contained animal allegories and symbols in addition to veterinarian, agricultural and empirical information. Conrad Gesner's *Historia animalium* of 1551, for instance, included animal myths, proverbs and symbols along with the geographical locations and eating and reproductive habits of animals.<sup>80</sup> Though naturalists did distinguish between empirical and symbolic interpretations in their texts, it is important to keep in mind that, in the words of Brian Ogilvie, "all naturalists accepted that God had created plants, animals, and minerals in the six days' work, and the notion that 'every plant shows the hand of God' is almost ubiquitous."<sup>81</sup>

Related to the bestiary, and in some ways more popular in the Renaissance, were the traditions of the emblem and the *impresa*. An emblem is essentially a symbolic combination of words and image, and it consists of three parts: a motto (*inscriptio*), an

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<sup>76</sup> Cohen, *Animals as Disguised Symbols*, xxxiii.

<sup>77</sup> Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, 180.

<sup>78</sup> Cohen, *Animals as Disguised Symbols*, 23.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 23-25. Leonardo's bestiary is preserved in the collection of his notebooks at the Institut de France, Paris.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>81</sup> Brian Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 16.

image (*pictura*) and an explanation of the connection between them in a short epigram (*subscriptio*).<sup>82</sup> Typically emblem imagery features animals, plants and mythological figures. The most important emblem books in the Renaissance were Andrea Alciati's *Emblematum libellus*, published in 1531, and Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, from 1593. While both of these texts are later than the paintings in the Chiostro Grande by Signorelli and Sodoma, they utilize earlier medieval and Renaissance texts that would most likely have been familiar to both artists, as well as to the Olivetan monks. Alciati, for instance, used both the *Hieroglyphics* of Horapollo, which was published in Venice in 1505 (though documented in Florence as early as 1419),<sup>83</sup> and the *Greek Anthology* of the medieval monk Maximus Planudes (c. 1255-1305).<sup>84</sup> While emblem books are not as useful to the present study since they often use more secular imagery, they are, nonetheless, evidence of the early modern predilection for connecting animals with greater moral truths. Emblem books also show that animals are not just creatures, but rather are important signs that communicate ideas on multiple levels.

An animal was thus not just a simple living creature to an early modern Christian, and particularly not to an early modern Benedictine monk. In canonical Christian texts, including the writings of the Church Fathers, as well as in the popular bestiary and natural historical and emblematic traditions, animals were instruments of divine agency, whether good or bad; creatures capable of understanding and sensitivity; and important symbols of spiritual, doctrinal and moral truths. Such ideas suggest that images of

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<sup>82</sup> Andrea Alciati, *A Book of Emblems: The Emblematum Liber in Latin and English*, trans. John F. Moffitt (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), 7; see also Jochen Becker, "Emblem book," in *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online*, accessed Nov. 17, 2011, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T025957>.

<sup>83</sup> Horapollo, *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo*, trans. George Boas (New York: Pantheon, 1950), 29.

<sup>84</sup> Alciati, *A Book of Emblems*, 11.

animals were underscored by a complex historical and theological framework that utilized the diversity of God's creation to show universal, Christian principles. Animals in religious art and literature might thus not only help the viewer/reader understand his or her own spiritual beliefs better, for they can also serve to reveal and strengthen images of the holy.

### Animals and the Saints

Animals have long had a prominent place in Christian hagiography and in art that depicts the saints. St. Jerome (c. 347-420), for instance, the foremost translator of the Bible into Latin, famously had a fearsome lion as a loyal and faithful companion. While scholars can now trace the legend to the transposition of the story from the life of the obscure St. Gerasimus, the association of Jerome with a lion found its greatest expression in *The Golden Legend* (c. 1260) by Jacobus de Voragine.<sup>85</sup> Voragine relates that one evening, while Jerome and his fellow monks were listening to a reading from Holy Scripture, a lion limped into the monastery. While the other monks fled from the animal in fright, Jerome welcomed him and instructed the monks to help him bandage the lion's wounded paw. The lion soon recovered, but stayed at the monastery to aid the monks in their duties, which included protecting the monastery's resident donkey.<sup>86</sup> Though the lion interacted with the other monks, Voragine is careful to show that it was Jerome alone who could understand and communicate with the creature.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Herbert Friedmann, *A Bestiary for St. Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1980), 19-20.

<sup>86</sup> Helen Waddell, trans., *Beasts and Saints* (London: Constable, 1949), 31-33; 149 (for the original sources).

<sup>87</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, 2 vols, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1993), 2: 213-215.



St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1226) was the most recent medieval saint to be celebrated for his association with animals. In Francis's case, rather than performing miracles that involved animals, he simply had a genuine love for them and treated them almost as equals. As outlined in the version of his life known as the "Legend of Perugia," Francis had a "love for all creatures."<sup>88</sup> He famously preached to birds; he tamed a cicada; he gave special meals to animals on Christmas Eve; and he is believed to be the first person to have organized a live Nativity scene.<sup>89</sup> Francis additionally tamed a bloodthirsty wolf that had been terrorizing the city of Gubbio by speaking to it calmly and deliberately.

Animals are most ubiquitous, however, in the lives of the so-called Desert Fathers. The Desert Fathers (and Mothers) are a group of eremitic saints living between the third through fifth centuries who left the secular world for the isolation and desolation of the Egyptian desert. Imitating Christ's own time in the wilderness,<sup>90</sup> these saints sought the deprivation of the desert as a way to truly live like Jesus.<sup>91</sup> The life of the most famous Desert Father, St. Antony the Great (c. 250-356), contains numerous animals. A raven, for instance, miraculously brings St. Antony and his companion, St. Paul the Hermit (died c. 341), a loaf of bread.<sup>92</sup> Later, at Paul's death, while Antony is wrapping up the body, two tame lions rush out to the saint. Roaring in their grief, they dig a

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<sup>88</sup> Brook, trans, *Scripta Leonis, Rufini et Angeli, Sociorum S. Francisci*, in Stouck, *Medieval Saints*, 488-496, 492.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 493, 495-496.

<sup>90</sup> See Matthew 4: 1-11; Mark 1: 12-13; and Luke 4: 1-13.

<sup>91</sup> Stouck, *Medieval Saints*, 55.

<sup>92</sup> St. Jerome, "Life of St. Paul," *Fathers of the Church: Early Christian Biographies*, ed. Roy J. Deferrari, trans. Marie Liguori Ewald (Washington: Catholic UP, 1952), 225-38, in Stouck, *Medieval Saints*, 87-96, 93.

shallow grave for Paul's body and then lick Antony's hands and feet in hopes of a blessing.<sup>93</sup> Numerous demons in the guise of animals – "lions, bears, leopards, bulls, serpents, asps, scorpions, [and] wolves"<sup>94</sup> – also terrorize Antony in his cave. The saint luckily resists all temptation by intense prayer, Scripture reading and meditation. Other desert saints who interacted with animals include: St. Macarius of Alexandria (c. 300-391), who cured the blindness of an infant hyena and then received a sheepskin from the mother hyena in thanks; St. Pachome (c. 292-348), who could cross a river unscathed on the back of crocodiles; and Abbot Helenus, who was helped by a group of donkeys after carrying a heavy load a great distance.<sup>95</sup>

Artists often depicted these saints with the animals associated with them. Images of Jerome, for instance, often show him with a lion or donkey. From the beginning of the fourteenth century, artists often showed Jerome not only with the lion, but also with many other animals, particularly in images of the saint in his study or in the wilderness.<sup>96</sup> Scholars have attributed this change in iconography to the "discovery" of a lost letter of Jerome's to his friend Eustochium in which the saint writes of having been visited by "scorpions and wild beasts" in the desert.<sup>97</sup> As Herbert Friedmann asserts, "to [artists] the statement that Jerome had had daily association with scorpions and wild beasts seems to have been an incentive to include in their paintings such of these animals as were deemed

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 94-95.

<sup>94</sup> Dom J.B. McLaughlin, trans., *St. Antony the Hermit, by St. Athanasius* (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1924), 1-122, in Stouck, *Medieval Saints*, 57-82, 62.

<sup>95</sup> Waddell, *Beasts and Saints*, 13-19; 149 (for the original sources Waddell translated).

<sup>96</sup> Friedmann, *A Bestiary for St. Jerome*, 24.

<sup>97</sup> Friedmann, *A Bestiary for St. Jerome*, 23.

symbolically proper and pertinent by their clerical advisers and their clients.”<sup>98</sup> Images of Francis and Antony often also included animals; birds or a wolf for Francis and a raven and/or two lions for Antony.

Animals in the lives and images of the saints have multiple purposes. Laura Hobgood-Oster defines them within four basic categories: as exemplars of piety; as sources of revelation; as saintly martyrs; and as the “primary intimate other in [a] relationship.”<sup>99</sup> Thus, Jerome’s lion, in addition to showing the saint’s divine powers in communicating with animals, is an “exemplar of piety” in his tender devotion to Jerome and his brothers. The raven that provides food for Antony and Paul the Hermit is not only an agent of divine mercy, for he is also a “source of revelation” as he reveals to the hermits that God always provides. The lions that lick Antony’s hands and feet in hopes of a blessing also show that animals can discern and understand the sacred; they see Antony as blessed and thus rightly ask for his benediction. Francis’s birds are not just simple birds, for they are, rather, beings that understand God’s Word and worship him accordingly.

In all of these cases, in addition to the narrative and symbolic functions of animals, it must also be asserted that animals enhance the visionary and supernatural qualities of the saints. The association of animals with Jerome, for instance, is almost always in images of him either in his study or in the wilderness.<sup>100</sup> In both places, Jerome received numerous visions from God. The placement of animals near him, while also

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Hobgood-Oster, *Holy Dogs and Asses*, 64.

<sup>100</sup> Friedmann, *A Bestiary for St. Jerome*, 24.

serving identification, narrative and symbolic purposes, furthers the notion of the saint's visionary experience, as the animal(s) now serve as witnesses to those visions.<sup>101</sup>

Carpaccio's *St. Augustine in his Study* (c. 1506) is a sovereign example of an animal – in this case a dog – serving visionary and prophetic powers at once. The painting depicts the moment in his study when Augustine receives a vision of Jerome through the light of the window (Figure 17). To the saint's left, towards the center of the composition, a white, fluffy dog obediently sits (Figure 18). As Patrik Reuterswärd has shown, dogs were often symbols of sagacity, wisdom and prophecy in the early modern period.<sup>102</sup> Augustine's dog, with its straight pose directed toward the lighted window, shows us that a miracle is occurring in the painting, for this is no ordinary image of a saint in his study.<sup>103</sup> Such ideas marry nicely with the perspectives of both Augustine himself and Aquinas that animals not only communicate theological truths for, since they are also highly sensitive, they can also serve as perceptive witnesses of the divine. Animals in hagiographic tradition therefore hardly supply only insignificant or legendary detail. Instead, they possess important revelatory purposes in demonstrating and witnessing the sacred. And, ultimately, all animals in the lives of the saints strengthen the power and efficacy of the saint by demonstrating that individual's unique abilities and special favor with God.

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<sup>101</sup> For particularly apt artistic examples of this point, see Jacopo Bellini's *St. Jerome in the Wilderness* (c. 1430-49) in Verona's Museo di Castelvecchio; Lazzaro Bastiani's *St. Jerome in the Wilderness* at the Brera; and Desiderio da Settignano's *St. Jerome in Penitence* (c. 1455-60) at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Giovanni Bellini's *St. Francis in the Desert* (1480) at the Frick may also allude to this idea.

<sup>102</sup> Patrik Reuterswärd, *The Visible and Invisible in Art: Essays in the History of Art* (Vienna: Irsa, 1991), 213, 217.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

### Animals in the Chiostro Grande

The animals in the Chiostro Grande can be read on multiple levels. Overall, they fall into three main categories: as symbols that enhance the narrative; as sources of revelation; and as sacred witnesses. It is important to keep in mind that animal imagery may be multivalent, and that the animals in the cycle can have at once symbolic, revelatory and narrative functions. On the other hand, one must be careful not to over-analyze every single animal in the Chiostro Grande. Most of the birds that fly overhead in various scenes are less about animal symbolism or witness than they are about the stylistic influence of the Umbrian masters Perugino and Pinturicchio.<sup>104</sup> And some of the animals, of course, simply serve as details of the narrative. The white horse and the mule that Benedict and his nurse ride in *Benedict Leaves Home for Rome*, for instance, are the logical means of transportation from Benedict's hometown of Norcia.

Many of the animals in the cycle first and foremost enhance and strengthen the narrative of Benedict's life through symbolic values that may be connected to bestiaries and other medieval and Renaissance texts. The cycle's horses seem, at first glance, to be merely narrative details. They appear with the lay people in *Benedict Receives Maurus and Placidus* (Figure 4) and *Benedict Sends Maurus and Placidus to France* (Figure 19);<sup>105</sup> with Totila and his men in *Benedict Receives Totila* (Figure 20); with the marauding warriors in *Benedict Predicts the Destruction of Monte Cassino* (Figure 21);

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<sup>104</sup> Sundstrom discusses the similarities between the Chiostro Grande and the nearby Piccolomini Library in Siena, frescoed by Pinturicchio from 1502-7. See Sundstrom, "The 'Chiostro Grande' of Monte Oliveto Maggiore," 108-109, 128.

<sup>105</sup> This fresco, an anomaly in the cycle, was frescoed by Bartolommeo Neri, called il Riccio, in 1534. The monks had walled up the entrance to the refectory and widened the south wall of the Chiostro Grande in a renovation project, and thus now had space for a new fresco. See Sundstrom, "The 'Chiostro Grande' of Monte Oliveto Maggiore," 246.

and with a young peasant boy in *Benedict Releases a Peasant* (Figure 22). In all of these scenes, Benedict and his monks are never pictured riding or engaging with the horses. This may be related to the fact that the monks most likely did not ride horses in their capacity as cenobites. Horses, however, also often symbolized vanity and luxury in the bestiary tradition.<sup>106</sup> Isidore of Seville characterizes horses as lively, emotional and war-like in his *Etymologies*.<sup>107</sup> Most of Alciati's emblems show horses in a negative light: as arrogant purebreds similar to proud rulers; as companions to feckless charioteers; with the vainglorious Phaeton; and with the evil and lustful Circe.<sup>108</sup> Since, in the cycle, the horses accompany negatively perceived secular characters – common laypeople, Gothic vandals and rude peasants – such negative readings make sense. Here, the horses magnify the contrast between the saintly Benedict and his monastic followers and the vain, secular world.

Sodoma and Signorelli's depictions of secular persons in outlandish, exotic costumes, with darker skin and swarthy complexions, together with their African servants, strengthens this idea even further. Non-Europeans, in this case both the barbaric Totila and his men and the exotic bystanders in such scenes, were typically seen in the Renaissance as sinful, infidel "others." The small, collared and chained monkey held by one of these figures in *Benedict Receives Maurus and Placidus* adds a further level of

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<sup>106</sup> Mirella Levi d'Ancona, *Lo zoo del Rinascimento: il significato degli animali nella pittura italiana dal XIV al XVI secolo* (Lucca: M. Paccini Fazzi, 2001), 83. The scholarship of Levi d'Ancona has been questioned at times for its accuracy. I have, however, found that her study (excluding the case studies by the author herself) provides a helpful compendium of animals and their attributes in medieval and Renaissance texts. A typical entry includes a list of quotations linked to a given creature, as well as primary texts.

<sup>107</sup> Isidore of Seville. *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, eds. Stephen Barney, Jennifer Breach and Oliver Berghof (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 2002), 249.

<sup>108</sup> Alciati, *A Book of Emblems*, 53, 74-75, 95.

symbolic contrast between Benedict and these figures (Figure 23). Apes, as exotic creatures from Africa and the East, were associated with sin and pleasure in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.<sup>109</sup> In the *Physiologus*, an ape took on the form of the devil, and in Horapollo's *Hieroglyphics*, an ape is associated with anger and irritable behavior.<sup>110</sup> By the later medieval period, monkeys also became general symbols of sinful abandonment and avarice.<sup>111</sup> Sodoma's monkey here, then, while perhaps drawn from life, enhances the beholder's sense of Benedict's efficacy as abbot and monastic leader. The small ape shows the contrast between the secular life Maurus and Placidus are leaving behind and the pious monastic life they are about to enter. The monkey with the African figure becomes an emblem of the vain, frenzied and sinful world. For the Olivetan monks who would view this fresco, this contrast is a reminder of the spiritual safety and peace of the monastery as compared to the chaos of the outside world.

The dogs in the cycle also play different symbolic roles depending on their context. Dogs could at once symbolize baseness and sin or fidelity and loyalty.<sup>112</sup> As the discussion of the dog in Augustine's study showed, dogs could also demonstrate intuition, sagacity and prophecy. This is furthered within the Benedictine bestiary tradition since Isidore of Seville notes that dogs are the smartest creatures and the most sensitive.<sup>113</sup> Sodoma and Signorelli, while certainly delighting in depicting dogs of

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 194-5; see also Joan Barclay Lloyd, *African Animals in Renaissance Literature and Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).

<sup>110</sup> Cohen, *Animals as Disguised Symbols*, 218; Horapollo, *Hieroglyphics*, 66-67.

<sup>111</sup> Cohen, *Animals as Disguised Symbols*, 219.

<sup>112</sup> Levi d'Ancona, *Lo zoo del Rinascimento*, 72-76.

<sup>113</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, 253.

various kinds in the cycle, seem to have placed them strategically given the narrative of the scene. The little dog nipping Scholastica in *Benedict Leaves for Rome*, for example, may indicate that Benedict's pious little sister will be loyal to him and his ways all her life; the intuitive dog may also nip at her to indicate that he knows that she will become a saintly person (Figure 3). In *Benedict Instructs the Peasants in Sacred Doctrine*, Sodoma shows a seated, collared dog on the right with the peasants (Figures 6 and 24). The placement of this Alsatian dog with the peasants may allude to the uneducated and profane status of these persons. On the other hand, since this dog is also present in the midst of Benedict's preaching, he may allude, as an animal associated with intuition and wise understanding, to the wisdom of Benedict's teaching.

Dogs seem to convey sin in the symbolism of *Fiorenzo Sends Prostitutes to Tempt the Monks* (Figure 25). A small, fluffy white dog separates the monks from the beautifully-dressed prostitutes in the very center of the painting (Figure 26). As Simona Cohen has shown with her discussion of Carpaccio's *Venetian Ladies* (c. 1495), a dog with a courtesan may symbolize human frivolity, carnal lust and sinfulness.<sup>114</sup> The white dog in Sodoma's fresco, as it looks happily up at the monks, seems to invite them to consort with the prostitutes; it thus magnifies the sinful nature of the human/female protagonists and reveals their lower capacities and depravity. Signorelli's little white dog standing next to the lusty waitress in *Benedict Admonishes Two Monks who Eat Outside the Monastery* has a similar function (Figure 27). The artists seem, furthermore, to have embedded such symbolic values in their choice of dogs. Small, fluffy lap dogs that have

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<sup>114</sup> See Cohen 95-134.



no purpose other than pleasure characterize the wayward, tempting women while a larger, more robust dog evokes the hard-working but ignorant peasants.

More spiritual values are at play in the snarling dog and cat in *Benedict Miraculously Obtains Flour for the Monks* (Figures 28 and 29). Here, a black cat with an arched back and a brown dog with barred teeth growl at each other in front of the table where the monks share their meal. Dogs and cats both had conflicting meanings – cats symbolize both the Virgin Mary and betrayal, for example – and when they are put together, their varying meanings are conflated to represent the fight between good and evil.<sup>115</sup> This symbolism makes sense in the context of the narrative, as Benedict's miracle is predicated on the disbelief of the monks that he will save them from starvation. The addition of the dog and cat thus intensifies for the viewer the power of Benedict's miracle in obtaining flour despite the monk's incredulity. It also reminds the Olivetan beholder of Benedict's sanctity and his goodness as an abbot in providing for his charges.

Other animals in the cycle serve as sources of revelation for Benedict and/or his monks. The raven in *Fiorenzo Tries to Poison Benedict* is a sacred messenger that saves Benedict from Fiorenzo's evil ways (Figure 7). According to Gregory, Benedict often fed a raven with leftovers after supper. One day, the evil monk, Fiorenzo, who was jealous of Benedict and his holiness, attempted to kill the saint with a loaf of poisoned bread. When Benedict received the bread, he immediately sensed Fiorenzo's treachery. He thus set the loaf outside for the raven, and told the raven, "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, take this bread and carry it to a place where no one will be able to find it."<sup>116</sup> After hesitating a

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<sup>115</sup> Levi D'Ancona 137-138, 72-76.

<sup>116</sup> Gregory the Great, *St. Gregory the Great: Dialogues*, trans. Odo John Zimmerman (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), 3-6, 55-110 in Stouck, *Medieval Saints*, 167-203, 180.

bit, the raven took the bread, flew away and then returned to Benedict hours later having successfully completed his mission. The story shows the saint's sixth sense for evil, his supernatural ability to communicate with animals and his overall gift of prophecy. The raven in the fresco thus not only serves the narrative, for he is also a source of revelation in that he miraculously takes away the poisoned bread, acting as an agent of divine assistance.

In *Benedict Obtains Water for the Monastery from a Mountain*, a white, polecat-like animal with two smaller babies behind it drinks from the river behind Benedict and his monks (Figure 30). Benedict's miracle of bringing water down from the mountain to the monastery thus serves not only his monks, but also the natural realm around them. The polecat family reveals Benedict's power as a miracle-worker and provider. Like dogs, polecats were also associated with intuition and prophecy in the Renaissance.<sup>117</sup> Here, the presence of the polecat drinking while the monks look on in humble disbelief shows that it is the polecat who has understood Benedict's miracle. The creature thus shows that a miracle has occurred and his inclusion strengthens the impact of the message of the miracle. Sodoma's decision to show a polecat family also reinforces the potency of the miracle in that Benedict is not just providing for himself, nor even only for his monastic community, but also for all creatures.

As witnesses to Benedict's miracles, animals in the cycle not only attest to the veracity of these wonders, for they also enhance the status of Benedict's sanctity. In *Benedict Mends the Broken Tray*, Sodoma includes two badgers, two ravens, a swan and two pheasant-like birds (Figures 5, 31 and 32). While the placement of such animals in

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<sup>117</sup> Reuterswärd, *The Visible and Invisible in Art*, 219.

the scene itself suggests their role as witnesses, their poses show them to be actively involved in beholding Benedict's miracle. The pheasants peck at the broken tray that Benedict miraculously mends, drawing the viewer's attention to its cracked state. One badger and one raven look toward Benedict and the repaired tray, suggesting that they understand and see Benedict's miracle (Figure 31).<sup>118</sup> The swan sits in the middle ground of the fresco, just below the church from which the inhabitants hung the miraculous tray for all to bear witness to the miracle (Figure 32). The swan, a symbol of good fortune,<sup>119</sup> thus not only alerts the viewer to the mended tray on the top of the church, for it also suggests itself as a witness to Benedict's deed. The sense of witness in this scene is further enhanced by the human figures on the right side of the fresco who gesture up toward the hanging tray in stunned disbelief.

A swooping bird in *Benedict Directs Maurus to Save Placidus* also furthers the notion of animals as witnesses in the cycle (Figure 33). While there are numerous flying birds in the background of many scenes, most are quite small and do not seem to serve a greater purpose beyond anecdotal detail. The flying bird in *Benedict Directs Maurus*, however, is quite large, particularly when compared to the almost miniscule flock of black birds to the right and behind it. This bird, which due to damage is impossible to identify, is also striking for its exaggerated dive toward Benedict and Maurus. Because of its large size and exaggerated movement, I believe that this bird also serves as another kind of witness to Benedict's miracle. In Gregory's life of the saint, Benedict has a

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<sup>118</sup> The ravens and badgers stand next to a figure in red tights and a gold cape that scholars have long identified as a portrait of Sodoma. Given Vasari's claim that Sodoma had pet badgers and a talking raven, we may also assume that these animals further identify the artist. Sodoma's raised hand seems to invite the viewer to contemplate both the miracle of the scene and the artist's ability and virtuosity in painting it.

<sup>119</sup> Levi d'Ancona, *Lo zoo del Rinascimento*, 97; Ripa, *Iconologia*, 38.

sudden vision that Placidus, who had gone down to the monastery's lake to draw water, is drowning. He quickly calls to Maurus and tells him to run down and save Placidus. After receiving the saint's blessing, Maurus hurries down to the lake where he miraculously walks on water and saves Placidus. Gregory asserts that while Benedict is too humble to attribute the miracle to his own doing, Placidus insists that he saw Benedict's cloak drawing him out of the water.<sup>120</sup> The miracle here is thus less about the rescue of Placidus than it is about Benedict's ability to see into the future. The pose of the large bird, drawing the viewer through its body and gaze to look to Benedict and Maurus, instructively indicates that this is where the miracle is taking place. The bird is capable of witnessing and understanding Benedict's miracle.

In addition to the various roles the animals play in the cycle as symbols, sources of revelation and witnesses, they associate Benedict with the Desert Fathers and other saints. Benedict's raven is certainly an obvious example of this as ravens play a prominent role in the life of Sts. Antony and Paul the Hermit. The cycle's numerous birds, particularly the swooping bird in *Benedict Directs Maurus*, recall the notion that birds command a special understanding of the sacred; in this way, Francis was able to preach to them. And while lions do not feature in Benedict's life, nor in the frescoes of his life in the Chiostro Grande, the companionship and divine help from Benedict's raven are similar to the ways in which Jerome interacted with his lion. Without being too literal in identifying all the connections among the animals in the Chiostro Grande and the lives of the saints, it cannot be denied that the inclusion of so many different animals in the cycle recalls the iconography of a number of saints. This is particularly true in the cases of images of Jerome with his menagerie and of St. Antony with his raven. It seems that

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<sup>120</sup> Gregory the Great, *St. Gregory the Great: Dialogues* in Stouck, *Medieval Saints*, 179.

the artists' intentions were not only to use the animals as symbols and observers, but also to employ them as signs connecting Benedict, even by association, with other powerful saints. In this way, Sodoma and Signorelli use animals to make a typological connection between Benedict and other saints, particularly the Desert Fathers. This typology is especially apt. First, it underscores the fact that the Olivetans were an ascetical order who emphasized isolation; second, it reiterates the intention of their founder, St. Bernardo Tolomei, to be a hermit in the "desert" of Accona; and third, the iconography supports the hypothesis that the Chiostro Grande itself had been frescoed with images of the Desert Fathers prior to Signorelli's and Sodoma's program. The connections between animals and the Desert Fathers, and animals within Thebaid imagery, further this, as it suggests that animals were both important indicators of eremitic saints and significant agents that added to the sanctity of the saints depicted.

### Summary

The animals in the Chiostro Grande are far from simply naturalistic, charming details. Rather, they serve important symbolic, revelatory and metaphysical purposes that enhance the narrative of Benedict's life and his sanctity for the Olivetan order. Christian tradition had long embraced the concept that animals are capable of sensitivity, understanding and agency, and in both the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers. Bestiaries – didactic texts that drew parallels among animals and moral and spiritual lessons – furthered these ideas by showing animals to be important symbols of moral and theological truths. These themes were often to be found, as well, in natural historical works and in emblem books. The long-standing historical connection between animals with saints, particularly in the case of the ascetical Desert Fathers, Jerome and Francis,

indicates that animals were significant touchstones for indicating sanctity and that their presence in the lives of the saints magnified the saint's power and efficacy. Sodoma's and Signorelli's use of animals in the cycle intensifies and heightens the narrative of Benedict's life and his saintly potency for the Olivetan order. The artists' careful choices of animals, their placement, poses and attitudes within the scenes, as well as their use of animals that recall the lives of other saints, elevate the story of Benedict's life and his power for the Olivetan Order.

## Conclusion

The Chiostro Grande of Monte Oliveto Maggiore is one of the most extensive fresco cycles from Renaissance Tuscany. Painted between 1498 and 1508 by Luca Signorelli and il Sodoma, the cycle consists of thirty-six scenes from the life of St. Benedict. As the founder of western monasticism as well as of the Benedictine Order, Benedict was an exemplar for the reformed Benedictine branch of the Olivetans. The frescoes of his life in the cloister of the Olivetan mother-house thus served an overarching didactic and paradigmatic purpose, showing Benedict to be an ideal hermit, monastic leader, miracle worker and prophet. Such a fresco program was especially important for these reformed Benedictines, as the Olivetans were eager to show their origins by way of a purer, more observant form of Benedict's Rule.

While the narrative of Benedict's life alone emphasizes the saint's power and holiness, Signorelli and Sodoma, with the guidance of their monastic patrons, included numerous animals in the cycle as further testimony of Benedict's potency and efficacy. At first glance, these animals may seem to be merely genre elements in the cycle, or, as numerous scholars have concluded, real-life examples from Sodoma's celebrated menagerie. A consideration of animals in Christian tradition and in medieval and early modern art, as well as a closer inspection of the animals in the cycle itself, reveals, however, that these animals are far from random insertions of naturalistic detail. From the Bible to Thomas Aquinas, from medieval bestiaries to Renaissance emblem books, animals had long been seen as intelligent, highly sensitive beings that could serve as important symbols for moral and theological truths. In the lives of the saints from the early Christian Desert Fathers to St. Francis, animals play important roles as companions,

helpers, signs of revelation and agents of divine retribution and mercy. Including animals in a pictorial depiction of Benedict's life not only magnifies the saint's authority and holiness, but it also connects him to other saints and their powers.

Such multivalent roles of animals in Renaissance religious culture indicate their important status in works of art. The typological and anagogical connection of animals with theological concepts and sacred figures intensifies their importance even more. In the Chiostro Grande this is especially true in the context of the life of St. Benedict. While animals had been used in small numbers in previous fresco cycles of the saint, notably in the sacristy of San Miniato al Monte and the cloister of the Florentine Badia, Signorelli and Sodoma elevated and expanded the number of animals in their life of St. Benedict to magnify the exemplarity of Benedict's life for the Olivetan Order. The animals in the Chiostro Grande are at once symbols of moral and theological virtues and vices, sources of revelation and sacred witnesses to the sanctity of Benedict's life. The animals enhance the narrative of Benedict's life, the power of his miracles and prophecies and his potency as a saintly paradigm for the Olivetan monks. Particularly in the context of a monastic cloister, where meditation, memory work and prayer occurred, one can easily imagine the original Olivetan viewers reflecting on the example of Benedict's life through the details of the animals and the complex theological, historical and hagiographic cues they called to mind.

A study of the animals in the Chiostro Grande of Monte Oliveto Maggiore is thus important for not only explaining the ubiquity of animals within the cycle itself, but also for its larger implications for the study of animals in other religious imagery of the period. What to modern eyes may seem like random intrusions of the secular are, in fact,



details that have far greater spiritual, moral and historical connotations. A reexamination of Renaissance renderings of animals may reveal modes of theological and artistic expression that give new and greater meaning to their compositions. The leopards, monkeys, large grey dog and horses in Gentile da Fabriano's *Adoration of the Magi* (1423) may thus be more than simply exotic creatures in the Eastern retinue of the Magi. The seated cat and large peacock in Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Last Supper* fresco for the refectory of San Marco (c. 1486) are hardly just random, meaningless visitors to the sacred scene. And certainly the work of Vittore Carpaccio, with its almost endless number of animals, deserves reconsideration in light of the various roles animals play within Renaissance art. The animals in the Chiostro Grande thus not only enhance and intensify the vitality of Benedict's life for the Olivetans, but they also show the ways in which Renaissance artists and patrons utilized animals to imbue works of art with greater symbolic, historical and theological meaning and value.

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