

HISTORY AND MEMORY:
THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN FRANCIS OF ASSISI
AND MALIK AL-KÂMIL

JOHN TOLAN

1. – It is a pleasure and an honor to come to Florence at the invitation of the Franciscans of Florence to participate in this workshop on ‘the Saint and the Sultan’. It is all the more an honor because I have recently written a book on this subject and some of the scholars whose work I found most useful and stimulating for my research are here today with me: in particular Chiara Frugoni and Anna Ajello. An honor and a pleasure, but also a challenge: how can I present my thoughts on the subject without simply repeating what has been said here by other colleagues or what I myself have said in a book that has now been published in English, French and Italian? ¹.

Another element that makes my task challenging is that I come with a very different perspective from many of the people here today. It has been a pleasure to meet not only Franciscan friars resident here in Florence and from elsewhere in Tuscany, but also those who have come from further afield, who reside in convents in Morocco and Turkey, and who are engaged there in service to the Christian community and in dialogue with Muslims. For some of these men, the meeting in 1219, in a tent in a military camp near the Nile, between a barefoot Umbrian ascetic and an Ayyubid sultan is more than a historical curiosity. It is perhaps an enigma, perhaps a shining example, but in any case an event

¹ J. TOLAN, *Le saint chez le sultan. La rencontre de François d’Assise et de l’islam. Huit siècles d’interprétation*, Seuil, Paris 2007; English translation: *St. Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian-Muslim Encounter*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009; Italian translation: *Il santo dal sultano. L’incontro di Francesco d’Assisi e l’islam*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2009.