Crusades, Blood Libels, and Popular Violence

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When Jews in Northern Europe heard the hoofbeats of horses pounding the ground and signaling the advance of crusaders headed to Jerusalem, they were terrified. Jews rounded up their families, buried their valuables, and raced to safety in the nearest fortification or lord’s castle*. The arrival of armed Christian pilgrims often spelled disaster for Jews as crusaders rushed through towns searching for coins, metal, treasures, anything that could be carried off or exchanged for necessary equipment, clothing, supplies and food to venture across continental Europe toward the Holy Land. Inflamed by eloquent preachers, crusaders were a brotherhood of sworn compatriots energized by their families and neighbors. Conscious of the serious commitment they were making and the costs it entailed, these armed bands charged across the landscape. Jewish communities in Northern Europe were often their first target.

Crusaders knew that many Jews were urban dwellers, moneylenders and coin dealers who kept pawned objects, cash and valuable merchandise in their houses. Crusader attacks on Jewish homes were pragmatic because they thought “that’s where the money is.” But it was not mere practicality or the heightened emotions of the time and place that drew them to assault Jews, offer them the choice of baptism at the point of a sword or hack them to death without waiting for a response.¹ Many of those who had taken vows and were “signed by the cross” (crucesignatus) were also inspired by stories they heard of Jewish treachery. As well as seeking valuable loot, crusaders were aroused to violence against Jews by religious tales and horrific rumors about Jews that first began to circulate precisely in this era. The worldly benefits they received, the

¹ The author would like to thank Joshua Franklin, Jordan Goldson, James Marrow, Irven Resnick, Vasily Rudich, Gabriel Spiegel and Froma Zeitlin for helpful comments.

booty, the destruction of the records of their debts, merely confirmed the righteousness of the soldiers’ cause.

The violence of the crusader attacks is one of the sorriest aspects of Jewish history in Western Europe. Antisemitism of the High Middle Ages was once understood as a straightforward narrative with a clear beginning and end. The periodization was simple: toleration for centuries, outbreaks of frenzy against Jews and Jewish communities during and in the immediate wake of the Crusades, followed by a gradual diminishment of targeted violence during the early modern era. But this is vastly oversimplified. Violence against Jews and Jewish communities differed significantly according to time and place, even during the heyday of medieval Jew hatred. And far from disappearing, with the emergence of print, myths about Jews that first took hold in the Middle Ages were increasingly and widely disseminated and became institutionalized and entrenched in popular culture.

Changing attitudes have to be understood, moreover, in relation both to long-term forces and to immediate conditions rooted in local financial, political and religious affairs. Against this backdrop, the Crusades to the Holy Land were an important spur to attacks on Jews but were only one factor in the growth of popular antisemitism during this period. Other more insidious developments discussed here, such as stories told about Jews, accusations made against them and observations of their behavior, had significant impacts on the shape, the intensity and the lasting power of popular Jew hatred, even if they frequently appear much less dramatic in the sources. This essay will outline major developments of the period in roughly chronological order and consider many factors that contributed most significantly to the growth and power of popular animosity against Jews. All these elements reinforced negative ideas about the role of Jews and how they should be treated, even as they were modified by local circumstances.

The first crusader massacres in 1096, apparently unprecedented, have long been considered a turning point in the history of Jewish–Christian relations following centuries of relative toleration. For hundreds of years after the fall of the Roman Empire Jews and Christians had lived together in relative peace and stability. But when Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade, rousing knights to head across Europe to protect Christian pilgrims and to liberate Jerusalem from its recent


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conquest by Muslim rulers, crusaders attacked Jews along their path, most notably in Speyer, Worms and Mainz, old Roman cities along the Rhine River. Jews were closer at hand and more readily coerced than distant Muslims.

As they stormed through Jewish quarters, crusading knights – together with townsmen and peasants who joined the fray for their own purposes – accosted those they considered perfidious unbelievers. Jews were tormented and slain in town after town in England, France, and Germany, in small hamlets and large cities where they had been established for centuries as well as in places where they had settled only recently. Their goods were seized, their financial records torched, and religious books confiscated. Circular letters were sometimes sent ahead to warn Jewish communities of the impending danger, but often there was little warning. Trapped in places where they had sought refuge and faced with the prospect of immediate death, some Northern European Jews chose to take their own lives and those of their family members in front of their enemies, an act they termed Sanctifying the Name of God (Kiddush hashem). Afterward, Jewish victims were celebrated in the communal memory in the obituaries (memorbuchen), poetry (piyyutim) and penitential verses (selichot) composed by guilt-stricken survivors. Hebrew and Latin chronicles recorded the events in the following generations.

Popes and leading churchmen regularly inveighed against violence against Jews and instructed the devout that such behavior was not to be condoned, that Jews in their midst were not to be persecuted. But as a result of the failure to prosecute those responsible for the attacks, some Jews observed that “we doubt not that there will be many future imitators of [a murder’s] audacity, and indeed, that worse will follow.”

Modern accounts of crusade violence nonetheless pit sympathetic

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7 These Jewish statements were reported by the monk Thomas of Monmouth, *Vita II*, xiv, 67.
authorities against murderous mobs. Thus the saintly Bernard, abbot of the Cistercian abbey of Clairvaux, who preached the Second Crusade in 1148, has been held up as a case in point. He tracked down and chastised the unauthorized crusade preacher Radulph, who crossed France and Germany urging his listeners “to destroy, slay, annihilate them [the Jews] just as wicked Haman had attempted to do.” Radulph, however, was no renegade, as he has been described, but an influential cleric, and it took months to silence him.

It is difficult to reconcile images of Jewish children torn from their mothers, young people tossed into rivers and purposefully drowned, and Jewish bodies burned in makeshift cemeteries with descriptions of crusading as “an act of love.” But that is how the crusades were promoted to the participants who were told that they were defending Christ’s honor.

In popular imagination, “medieval antisemitism” has come to represent senseless hatred of an illiterate population fueled by emotion, whipped up by demagogues and resulting in bloodshed unanticipated by authorities who were eager but unable to manage social unrest. The violence perpetrated on defenseless Jews is regarded as typical of the brutal era in which they lived, and a far cry from the economic or racial antisemitism of later periods.

PERIODIZATION

The interpretive framework offered for understanding medieval popular antisemitism was a simple one: that of ignorant thugs let loose in a violent time fueled by religious extremism after centuries of relatively serene coexistence, followed by periods of greater toleration after the ebbing of the crusades and the “desacralization” of Europe.

In retrospect, not all was calm and peaceful beforehand: there are hints in the few surviving records of attacks, expulsions and anti-Jewish legislation in preceding centuries, such as in the Visigothic kingdom of Spain in the 7th century, or in France in the 11th century against a


backdrop of millenarian expectations of the coming apocalypse.\textsuperscript{11} And shortly after the First Crusade, in the first half of the 12th century, Jewish communities in Northern Europe quickly rebuilt.

The life of Jews in medieval Christian Europe is not simply a tearful history of suffering and constant attacks, as sometimes written. In many times and places during this period Jews flourished, their communities multiplied and expanded, and scholarship blossomed.\textsuperscript{12} Many Western European Jews enjoyed a vibrant religious, social and cultural life. Jews can be found in a wide variety of occupations other than finance, including medicine, specialized agriculture, trade, royal and princely administration and real estate. They found the time, opportunity and support to write Talmud commentary, create refined works of art and compose poetry of lasting beauty. Unconstrained in many cases as to where they lived and worked, many benefited from close interaction with their neighbors and on occasion debated freely. In many places they also enjoyed legal protections and benefited from a firm theological defense in canon law and papal pronouncements. The routine aggressions they often suffered did not always spell utter disaster or increasing hostility but were taken in stride.\textsuperscript{13} Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi), his grandson rabbi Jacob ben Meir (Jacob Tam the Tosafist commentator), Judah the Pious (Judah heHasid) and rabbi Jacob of Lunel are among the famous scholars who worked in the shadow of the crusades. Dragged out to a field, Tam was able to enlist the aid of a passing nobleman when French crusaders robbed and attacked him, tore a Torah scroll, stole his horse and inflicted five cuts on him in emulation of Christ’s wounds.\textsuperscript{14}

It has been traditional, therefore, to regard the uncontrolled mob violence of the crusaders and townsmen as separate and distinct


\textsuperscript{12} For especially positive accounts, see Robert Chazan,\textit{ The Jews of Medieval Western Christendom, 1000–1500} [Cambridge, 2006], and Jonathan M. Elukin,\textit{ Living Together, Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in the Middle Ages} [Princeton, NJ, 2007].

\textsuperscript{13} David Nirenberg,\textit{ Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages} [Princeton, NJ, 1996].

\textsuperscript{14} Norman Golb, “The Rabbinic Master Jacob Tam and Events of the Second Crusade at Reims,”\textit{ Crusades} 9 (2010), 57–67.
from the considered, thoughtful actions of the educated elite. We are told that the secular rulers and political authorities who valued Jews as merchants, doctors and moneylenders and the influential clerics who relied on Jewish teachers and translators were far removed from the uneducated and ruthless peasants wielding cudgels or knights brandishing their swords. The theologians, after all, followed the teachings of Augustine of Hippo, who insisted “slay them not,” arguing that Jews ought to be preserved within medieval Christian society as witnesses to the antiquity and veracity of holy texts.

Irrational and superstitious medieval Jew hatred has also been held up as categorically different from modern, racially based antisemitism, a term concocted only in the late 19th century. The hatred of Jews and Judaism that invigorated the crusader attacks was characterized as a frenzied expression of the rabble; the bloodcurdling myths that underpinned their actions were long considered bizarre and fantastical, psychological projections of inner turmoil. Jewish–Christian relations expressed in those terms became part of the overarching narrative of a Dark Ages that was distant and fairly incomprehensible. The vicious crusaders were dismissed as motivated by greed and credulous ignorance that punctuated and interrupted an otherwise fairly tranquil and predictable engagement between adherents of different faiths.

A better understanding today of popular movements of the medieval period suggests that it is not always easy to disentangle common myths and savagery of the masses from state-sanctioned brutality and popular theology. Rulers and local communities often benefited from outrages inflicted on Jews and were reluctant to condemn with any force those regarded as local heroes. Even when Jews were the victims of murderous thugs dressed as courtly knights in shining armor, the conventional story line of the period portrayed the Church as victim and the Jew as perpetrator. Indeed, the very image of the Jew developed as a result. The purported victims of Jewish aggression were regarded as miracle-workers and heralded as saints, reinforcing the notion of Jewish enmity in contrast to Christian innocence.

The myths about Jews that arose were for the most part based not on the texts of the Gospels themselves but on new interpretations of scripture that spread from the 12th century onward, compiled in the glossa ordinaria. These were short excerpts of biblical commentaries put together and widely circulated that gradually
offered a standard explanation of biblical texts. These refashioned and aggressive interpretations informed preaching to crusaders and their families.\(^{15}\)

Vicious attacks on Jews were often the result of purposeful instruction and at least tacit endorsement at the highest levels of society. Leaders of the crusades regularly extorted money from Jews before their followers attacked them: butchery often followed bullying. In luxury manuscripts made for the royal court in the early 13th century, the king of France, for example, proudly depicted himself observing Jews burned to death. Slanders did not, in fact, spread quickly among the masses during the high Middle Ages, but only gradually infused thinking and behavior at all levels of society. The myths, legends and folklore about Jews that were assumed eventually to have dissipated and weakened in fact laid the groundwork for the judicial torture, riots and expulsions of later periods. Long-standing distinctions between judicial violence and popular hostility, law and literature, art and life, the easy separation of high and low culture, as well as the standard periodization of Jewish–Christian relations are worthy of reconsideration. Perceptions of Jewish malevolence and of a need to counter it with firm action permeated all arenas of medieval life and can be seen as a coherent program rather than a marginal and intermittent phenomenon.

Legends and tall tales that circulated about medieval Jews were often rooted in apocryphal stories based on the Gospels, rather than in Gospel texts. They asserted that Jews were blind, had a bad odor, were devilish, suffered from leprosy and were a stateless people doomed to wander. These myths reinforced the notion that Jews were determined to destroy and threaten Christ, his mother Mary and, by association, all of Christendom. Such stories were promulgated to and by crusaders who were taught that Christ was their feudal lord to whom they owed homage. Even as Jesus was portrayed in terms that emphasized his human nature, represented in his youth and innocence, Jews were increasingly dehumanized, depicted as animalistic, demonic and malevolent. The art, literature, economics and theology of the period (treated in detail elsewhere in this volume) have their own histories, but they all contributed to inform the crusaders and others of the possibilities that Jews could and would inflict harm on Christians and Christian society. Some people therefore considered attacks on Jews as just

revenge and proactive defense. The deeds of the crusaders should not be considered separately from the broader cultural environment that informed their conduct. Rarely were they grounded in a personal knowledge of living Jews.

THEMES

Crusaders came to believe that Jews were suspect for their financial dealings, their physical weaknesses and their desire to inflict harm on their Christian neighbors. Some Jews engaged in moneylending and pawnbroking because they were effectively prohibited from many other occupations and their loans were given state sanction. They were not, however, the only moneylenders, and their role in this profession has been greatly exaggerated – at least for the early period before they were increasingly pushed into that activity. Nonetheless, negative associations of Jews and money were based less on knowledge of Jewish activities in the realm of finance than on the account of Christ’s expulsion of the moneylenders from the Temple, and Christian teachings against “usury.” The discourse of Jews as congenitally and permanently different in their bodies as well as in their beliefs also blossomed in this period and were not based on observations of daily life. These powerful themes and metaphors (“tropes”) established in the medieval period were adapted, secularized and rationalized over centuries, and had – indeed still have – remarkable and enduring power. It was such characterizations of Jews in medieval teaching that encouraged the crusaders to target Jews on their way to the Holy Land. The violence they perpetrated echoed the violence they heard in miracle stories and Saints’ Lives and witnessed in art and performance. A study of medieval behaviors can no longer be separated from the art, literature and theology of the period.

BLOOD LIBEL

The most powerful, malicious and enduring anti-Jewish myth of all was that of ritual murder, the accusation that Jews kidnapped and killed Christian boys in mockery of Christ and, later, that they collected the blood of these innocent children to consume or use for various purposes. This charge, which became known as the blood libel, is often described as bizarre and peculiar, yet its existence was

gradually accepted by a majority of the population. Although strongly challenged when it was first promulgated, by the late Middle Ages the notion that Jews required Christian blood for their religious rituals was widely accepted, even though it was known that Jewish law prohibits the consumption of blood.

The first recorded charge was concocted in the immediate aftermath of the Second Crusade when Jews were blamed for the death of little William of Norwich, England (1150). Far more important was the later accusation of child murder laid against the Jews of Blois in central France (1171), as a result of which the count of Blois ordered the public burning of the entire local Jewish community. The count of Blois related the story to his nephew the king of France, so that in the same generation the purported murder of another Christian child, Richard of Pontoise, outside Paris, was said to be occasion for the expulsion of Jews from the French capital in 1180. Richard’s shrine in the Church of the Holy Innocents, which received significant royal patronage, endured until the French Revolution. The first case that specifically mentions Jewish need of Christian blood “as a remedy” concerned five children of a miller who were said to have been burned by Jews of Fulda in central Germany on Christmas Day 1235. In a case of “popular justice,” more than thirty of the alleged Jewish perpetrators were killed by participants passing through Fulda on their return from crusade. The demands of local residents who carried the bodies of the children to the emperor sparked an investigation and denunciation of the charge by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. Having consulted with other rulers and having called upon Jewish converts to Christianity to advise him, he issued an edict which absolved Jews of the crime, but with little effect.

One of the best-known purported victims was little Hugh of Lincoln, said to have been cast into a well and drowned in 1255, whose story was recalled by Chaucer in the Canterbury Tales. In punishment, King Henry III of England executed a young Jew on the spot, and eighteen more Jews were sentenced to be drawn by horses and hanged a month later after they requested a jury composed of Christians and Jews. Another one hundred Jews were locked in the Tower of London until they converted to Christianity or paid heavy fines for their release. A generation later saw the enthusiastic veneration of Werner of Oberwesel on the Rhine (1287) despite the halfhearted attempt of Emperor Rudolph to prohibit

the establishment of a cult of this supposed child martyr. Just as, centuries later, William of Norwich became patron saint of leather-workers, so Werner (St. Vernier) was later adopted as a patron saint of French winegrowers. Shrines and memorials to these purported child martyrs dot the European countryside and were objects of pilgrimage and tourism for centuries.

The master narrative of the blood libel was a simple story that could be elaborated, adapted and localized in each generation. It had well-defined characters and familiar settings. A young boy went missing, his distraught mother frantically searched for him while he was enticed to a Jewish space, held for some period of time, bled and tortured to the point of death. Eventually, he was found, and his body was regarded as sanctified for his suffering. These accounts were modeled in part on the story from the New Testament of young Jesus getting lost and his mother Mary finding him in the Temple, among the Jewish doctors of the Law (Luke 2:41–52). Medieval children said to have been murdered by Jews were conflated as well with the Holy Innocents, the children of Bethlehem described in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 2:16–18) who were killed by Herod’s soldiers in place of the Christ child. Although the Massacre of the Innocents was a story of murdered Jewish children, in the high Middle Ages these innocenti were often understood as Christian infants murdered by order of a Jew.

**TYPOLOGY**

A basis for this kind of reversal was the medieval habit of “typological reading,” that is, understanding events in the past, especially those in the Hebrew Bible (the Christian “Old Testament”) as foreshadowing or anticipating (“prefiguring”) events in Christ’s life recounted in the New Testament. For example, the inconsolable Jewish matriarch Rachel mourning for the Children of Israel (Jer. 31:15) was viewed as a prefiguration of Mary weeping over Christ’s body. This merging of the past and present into one often resulted in a failure to distinguish Jews of antiquity who were blamed for crucifying Jesus from contemporary Jews who lived in Europe more than a thousand years later; both were deemed enemies of Christendom.

**HOST DESECRATION**

In the late 13th century, on the back of the blood libel or ritual murder accusation, another equally flexible and horrifying charge arose,
claiming that Jews attacked the wafer used in holy communion (the eucharistic host). The charge of “host desecration” was easier to invoke than outright homicide (it required no corpse of a victim) and was widely disseminated after a famous case said to have occurred in Paris in 1290. It was claimed that Jews stole or bribed someone to give them a consecrated wafer and they repeatedly stabbed it; because of the doctrine of transubstantiation, an attack on the host was understood as the equivalent of stabbing Christ himself. Accounts of the alleged profanation of the host prompted riots and pillaging. Frequently, such accusations were invoked to threaten Jews and extort money from them, especially by city officials and local worthies. Miraculous wafers became the object of numerous blood cults and famous pilgrimage sites in the later Middle Ages. Many stories, such as those of Werner and the “Holy Infant of LaGuardia” (1490), combined ritual murder and host desecration in a single gruesome narrative. Events such as the killing of Jews in the Rintfleisch massacres (1298) and other regional riots triggered by accusations of host desecration cannot be separated from the fictional stories that circulated in literature. Imaginative actions and real-world behaviors were intimately related.

**BODILY WEAKNESS**

During this period Jews were increasingly associated with malefactors of the Old and New Testaments: they were likened to the murderous Cain, the resentful Esau, the mad Herod and the treacherous Judas; they took on their attributes and were denigrated in similar terms: as perfidious, faithless and disloyal. Contemporary Jews were said to suffer a bloody flux that was apparently based on their affiliation with Judas; this “fact” was included in influential medical texts that remained in print well into the 17th century. The explanation offered for this link was the cry “his blood be upon us” (Matt. 25:27) in which Jews were held responsible for the Crucifixion and were therefore permanently stained with blood, not just metaphorically, but with an infirmity passed down through the generations. Jews were regarded as spiritually and physically blind, inheriting weak eyes, and they were also said to suffer skin diseases.

Grounded in scriptural stories and earlier ancient Egyptian traditions,


20 Irven M. Resnick, *Marks of Distinction: Christian Perceptions of Jews in the High Middle Ages* (Washington, DC, 2012), addresses a number of these slanders.
Jews were accused of having leprosy, later understood as any skin disease. Jews were also said to endure hemorrhoids, a fact which became proverbial in early modern Eastern Europe. The smell (foetor judaicus) from which they were said to have suffered [like the farts of the devil] was purposefully contrasted to the sweet odor of sanctity attributed to saints. The nomadic existence of many Jews likewise originated in the legend of the Wandering Jew who had cursed Jesus and was condemned to endure an itinerant life until the Second Coming.

CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

These ideas did not spread immediately; it took some time for them to percolate through society. During the high Middle Ages, Jews and Christians still encountered each other on the street and in the marketplace; some Jews stored their valuables in churches; they arranged financing for monasteries, studied holy texts together with Christians and went about their daily business, living cheek by jowl next door to one another. Some traveled together, joked together and attended celebratory family occasions; other Christians and Jews hired the same masons and artists for their domestic and religious works.

Indeed, it was close relationships between Christians and Jews that many clerics denounced. They demanded that Jews wear a distinctive sign on their clothes to make sure that they were distinguished from Christians who otherwise might not know them for the threat they posed. Enunciated in the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) this requirement took some time to enforce. Even earlier, Christian wet nurses were forbidden from working in Jewish households where they might be subject to undue Jewish influence. Threats from medieval Jews were portrayed as a growing menace, so Jews were increasingly confined and their behavior, dress and employment were proscribed. Christians were taught to view Jews as physically different, and when they did not appear so, Jews were required to conform to those expectations by wearing distinctive garb such as a pointed hat, yellow dress or bright badge on the outside of their clothing. Jews were likewise depicted with a hooked nose, red hair and swarthy skin, which like other traits attributed to medieval Jews, were not typical of them, but presumed to be true. People saw what they expected to see. As Jews were increasingly isolated, marginalized and made to stand out from the general population, their physical safety could not be assured.
MONKS AND FRIARS

Questions about the status of Jews in Christian society took on new urgency with the arrival of the mendicant friars, Dominicans and Franciscans, the preaching orders established in the early 13th century, whose popularity spread far and wide in just a few decades. These brothers sworn to poverty went out into the world to minister to the growing number of new urban residents. As did their affiliated sisters, they embraced a simpler life than that of the Benedictine monks in their elaborately adorned monasteries who had first endorsed the blood libel. The friars were particularly charged with listening to confessions and to administering the Inquisition to target heretics. Accustomed to speaking to the layman on the street and highly mobile, they also were employed to travel and preach later crusades.

For some historians, the advent of the friars and their confrontational stance spelled a great change in Christian–Jewish relations. Dominicans (*domini canes*, the hounds of the lord) studied Jewish texts to better oppose the intellectual challenge of Judaism and required Jews to engage in public disputations. Franciscans sought to limit Jewish moneylending and were in the forefront of advocating the expulsion of Jews from communities when this was not possible. Together, these new orders had momentous effects on Jewish life—both in the northern kingdoms and in Southern Europe, which had generally been considered more urbane and diverse. The friars played a part in a number of accusations of ritual murder and are often found lurking in the background of such accounts. It was in this period that Jews began to be treated as heretics and subject to the same penalties, which sometimes included being burned alive. Claiming the Talmud was blasphemous, the friars organized the burning of books as well as people. In 1242 in Paris, at the urging of a Jewish convert, twenty-four wagonloads of Hebrew books were burned. Those responsible for the conflagration thought that without their rabbinical books it would be easier to persuade Jews of the truth of Christianity. On the commission that condemned the Talmud were university professors and scholars, another indication that harsh attitudes toward Jews did not stem primarily from the ignorant masses.

THE PLAGUE

Anti-Jewish feelings sharpened considerably at the onset of the Black Death c. 1348–1350 when Jews were accused of spreading plague far and wide. Jews were charged with poisoning well water, engaging in magic and dealing in blood.\textsuperscript{22} The plague hysteria resulted in extensive looting and pogroms and the permanent destruction of numerous communities. The penitential processions which assailed Jews were denounced by popes but continued nonetheless; some justified their attacks by claiming that killing Jews would stop the spread of the plague. The discovery of Jewish family heirlooms in the wall of a pharmacy in Colmar, France, recently put on display, speaks to the rich lives some Jews enjoyed, but also how quickly they were destroyed.\textsuperscript{23} In Cologne, western Germany, a rumor spread that Jews had poisoned the wells, resulting in outbreak of violence that forced Jews to flee the city. Although some later returned, they were not guaranteed protection and by 1424 all were expelled. In 1349 a massacre in Erfurt in central Germany coincided with riots and looting and the death of perhaps 3,000 Jews; the bishop pardoned the city the following year. A Jewish family treasure of jugs, goblets, coins, fashionable belt ornaments and a finely crafted Jewish wedding ring was discovered under the wall of a cellar there in 1998; an Erfurt mikveh was unearthed only in 2007.\textsuperscript{24} In Regensburg the Jews were protected during the Black Death, but later assaulted and expelled; a jar of gold coins, one of the largest such treasures ever found, was buried in the Jewish area near the synagogue that was turned into a church.\textsuperscript{25} Surviving vestiges of material culture hint at how little the official accounts – either Jewish or Christian – tell us about Jewish life in medieval Europe until it came to an end.

Many Jewish communities are known to historians only through accounts of their destruction, which suggests that there may have been others not recorded. But far more has been attributed to fear of the plague than is warranted. Recent scholarship indicates that many

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\item \textsuperscript{22} Tzfrir Barzilay, “Early Accusations of Well Poisoning against Jews: Medieval Reality or Historiographical Fiction?,” \textit{Medieval Encounters} 22.5 (2016), 517–539, emphasizes the novelty of the 14th-century accusations.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Barbara D. Boehm, \textit{The Colmar Treasure: A Medieval Jewish Legacy} (London, 2020).
\item \textsuperscript{24} “Erfurt: Jewish Treasures from Medieval Ashkenaz” [New York, Yeshiva University Museum, September 2008–February 9, 2009].
\item \textsuperscript{25} Silvia Codreanu-Windauer, “Regensburg: The Archaeology of the Medieval Jewish Quarter,” in \textit{The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages (Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries)}, ed. Christoph Cluse (Turnhout, 2004), 391–403.
\end{itemize}
attacks on Jews in the mid-14th century were the carefully planned and executed work of local governments.\textsuperscript{26} This challenges previous narratives that such riots were spontaneous affairs rooted in emotion rather than deliberately calculated efforts initiated by jealous civic authorities.

Provocations to violence were in many cases closely linked to the religious calendar and competitive holidays, so reinforced on a weekly and monthly basis. It was well known that when Passover and Easter coincided in late spring, conflicts between Christians and Jews often ensued. But such conflicts occurred throughout the year: in late winter with Purim and Carnival just before the beginning of Lent; in early summer when Jews celebrated Shavuot, which overlapped with feast days of important Christian saints and Pentecost (Whitsunday); and in mid-August when the Christian commemoration of the Destruction of Jerusalem coincided with the Jewish commemoration of the Destruction of the Temple (\textit{Tisha B’Av}). Crusaders also chose such feast days in the spring to gather and set forth together toward the East. These Christian feasts often provided occasions to raise charges of ritual murder and host desecration, especially dangerous when towns swarmed with armed forces. Annual events such as the performance of the Stoning of the Jews at Easter also grew significantly more dangerous and menacing.\textsuperscript{27}

Historians now pay attention not just to the outcome of the libels and slanders but also to how they were spread and to whom. They were disseminated especially in persuasive and memorable stories told to children. Jews were demonized in tales that were neither the exclusive province of the ignorant nor the texts of the educated, but somewhere in between, simplified for the faithful. It is such stories that lay the groundwork and justified the inhumane treatment of Jews in the high and late Middle Ages, of which the most publicized incident was the alleged murder of little Simon of Trent (\textit{1475}).

**SIMON OF TRENT**

The case of the child Simon of Trent is widely regarded as a significant turning point in Christian–Jewish relations at the very end of the


Middle Ages. As a result of this accusation of ritual murder, fifteen Jewish men who had confessed under torture were burnt at the stake after a formal legal trial. The accusation and trial combined much of what has been considered as characteristic of medieval antisemitism: they were provoked by the preaching of a charismatic Franciscan, Bernardino da Feltre, against the Jewish community; the alleged event occurred at Easter, which also coincided with one of the great feasts of St. Mary (the Annunciation, March 25); and Simon was said to have been not only kidnapped but also drained of blood, as revealed by an investigation of the corpse by medical professionals brought in by the city. Carefully engineered by the prince-bishop of Trent, the cult of little Simon became the subject of an extraordinary media campaign that spread far and wide thanks to the new technology of print. After hearing the news of Simon of Trent, near the Italian–German border, other towns soon manufactured their own stories. Many of the purported incidents of medieval ritual murder were apparently invented only in the early modern period but were said to have occurred much earlier. Images of Simon of Trent, now widely reproduced as the quintessential example of the medieval blood libel, reflect the concerns of the late 15th century. This case can be said with some justification to have produced the first and most enduring antisemitic memes.

END OF AN ERA

With Simon of Trent, we come to the culmination of medieval popular antisemitism. National expulsions from England in 1290, France repeatedly until the final one in 1394, Spain in 1492, Portugal in 1497 and from many cities on the Italian peninsula throughout the 15th century effectively brought an end to communal Jewish life in Western Europe. The petering-out of the crusades reduced the militarization of religious partisans as well. In the wake of momentous technological, religious and social developments, the place of Jews in civic society took a dramatically different turn.

By then, medieval attitudes were deeply entrenched, albeit not always with recognition of where and how they originated. Many of the same techniques employed to promote the blood libel are those used today by modern advertising to create brand awareness – repetition, association, specific claims and active involvement. Belief in the blood libel was sustained by reenactments, repeated visual impressions and dramatic sensory accompaniments. These practices were overtly pedagogical. The accounts and images placed Christians – especially younger
Christians – within schemes of salvation history and associated them closely with the Christ child and his mother Mary.

It has long been argued that antisemitism in general – and the blood libel in particular – was a bottom-up phenomenon, spread by rumors among the uneducated masses and punctuated by outbreaks of irrational mob violence, especially provoked by the crusades. Alternatively, it has been said that it was a top-down phenomenon spread in Latin texts by the educated elite and prompted primarily by theological or financial concerns. But there is a third possibility: that many such beliefs originated and were promulgated from the center – not by the highly educated or uneducated but by the semi-educated. They were spread not by studious written texts nor vague oral traditions, but by action, ritual and instruction. The conscious destruction of loan records as a rational response to heavy debts incurred by local townsmen and the murderous rampages by armed crusaders passing through different European territories stemmed from similar and overlapping impulses.

Extravagant tales once dismissed as utter nonsense have now been subject to renewed scrutiny. In the modern era people have tried to find reasonable, even scientific, explanations for myths that were spread about the Jews – that they had horns, that they had a special smell, that they suffered monthly bleeding like women. Other explanations assume accusations against Jews arose from linguistic confusion or had some basis in Jewish practice. But many such accusations can be traced back to stories of biblical characters with which they were associated.

LASTING EFFECTS

Over the course of the Middle Ages Judaism was increasingly seen as ineradicable. It was more than a belief, more than a cultural or ethnic choice; it was a permanent stain exemplified in the term “baptized Jew,” which became a late medieval commonplace. The term signified that even after conversion to Christianity, a Jew remained an identifiable outsider rather than being integrated into the community of Christ. Medieval imagery of anti-Jewish slander was called upon by the Nazis to reinforce their ideology. More recently, white supremacists have used imagery from the crusading era and its anti-Jewish attitudes to advocate

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28 Israel J. Yuval, Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Berkeley, CA, 2006), suggests that the blood libel arose from observation by Christians of Jewish martyrdom during the First Crusade, but Yuval’s controversial argument has been widely challenged.
for their exclusionary platform. They too often combine hate speech with calls to armed action.

The accumulation of accusations made against Jews and Judaism through the centuries, the repetitions and layering of assertions of Jewish perfidy and threat, and the ease with which allegations of Jewish misdeeds and guilt could be repurposed at different times and places were and are responsible for one of the sadder chapters of human history.

The era of the crusades and their aftermath (the 12th–15th centuries) played an important part in contributing to the elaboration of this sorry history of anti-Jewish malice, ranging from the violence visited on Jewish households and communities by armies of would-be liberators of the Holy Land and the rabble that accompanied or joined them as they marched across Europe to the invention and widespread circulation of wild tales of Jewish malevolence. These myths included the alleged kidnapping and killing of Christian children in mockery of Christ and the Crucifixion (the blood libel), the host desecration, the use of Christian blood in Jewish rituals, the spread of the plague and the poisoning of wells, to name only the most prominent. These accusations and events aroused fierce enmity between Christians and Jews, heightening notions of Jews and Jewish communities as a threat to individuals, families and all of Christendom. No matter how unjustified, contrived or fanciful, or how often opposed by Church leaders, these and other eruptions of anti-Jewish animosity and accusations became part of lived or remembered history, embedded in long-term communal memory. It is the breadth and depth of this history and the ease with which it can be recalled and recycled that gave and still gives it continued force and life.

**Further Reading**

Abulafia, A. S., *Christian Jewish Relations 1000–1300: Jews in the Service of Medieval Christendom* (New York, 2011). In this clear survey Abulafia draws together much of her decades of focused scholarship to emphasize theology and pragmatism in considering how the crusades and anti-Jewish libels affected those relations.


Franke, D. P., “The Crusades and Medieval Anti-Judaism: Cause or Consequence?," in *Seven Myths of the Crusades*, ed. Alfred Andrea and
Andrew Holt (Cambridge, MA, 2015), 48–69. This essay succinctly lays out questions for classroom discussion, while offering evidence that the Crusades were not a decisive event in Christian–Jewish relations and finding no link between Crusade ideology and Nazi Germany.

Kaplan, L. *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* (New York, 2019). This work skillfully addresses notions of hereditary inferiority and the Christian doctrine of Jewish perpetual servitude.

Lasker, D. J., “The Impact of the Crusades on the Jewish-Christian Debate,” *Jewish History* 13.2 (1999), 23–36. This study explicitly addresses the issue of whether the crusades were a sharp break or part of an incremental transformation in relations between Christians and Jews.

Malkiel, D., “Destruction or Conversion: Intention and Reaction, Crusaders and Jews, in 1096,” *Jewish History* 15.3 (2001), 257–280. Based on a close reading of the sources, this article questions whether Jews were actually offered the choice of baptism during the mayhem of the crusades.


Rose, E. M., *The Murder of William of Norwich: The Origins of Blood Libel in Medieval Europe* (New York, 2015). This suspenseful unraveling of a medieval trial reexamines the first accusations of the blood libel beginning in 1150. It then looks at “copycat” allegations (Gloucester 1168, Blois 1171, Bury 1180 and Paris 1180) to explain how the blood libel managed to take hold.

Rubin, M., *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (New Haven, CT, 1999). This offers a thorough and readable examination of the host desecration accusation, the rhetoric that was used and the violence it frequently produced.