

## CULTURAL PARADIGMS IN THE ACCUSATION OF RITUAL MURDER

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In this paper I attempt to identify the most frequent cultural paradigms present in the accusations of ritual murder. Since the theme is very broad, it is not possible to consider all cases of blood libel in Europe in the Middle Ages. Therefore, I present here the most famous ones, and reflect on the Christian representation of these cases, both in terms of written and iconographic sources.

The first case of an accusation of ritual murder in the Middle Ages was that of William of Norwich (1144, England). In this case, as well as in the following ones, the Christian paradigm is that of a Jewish conspiracy, but some elements, that will become more frequent later, are not yet present. I try to show how the transfer of the accusation to continental Europe brings a gradual change to the accusation itself and its representation. Moreover, I examine some known blood libels of the late Middle Ages (in particular the case of Trent and the supposed martyr Simonino).

At the level of iconographic representation, there is also a gradual shift of interest, with an increased emphasis on the Jews, who are increasingly depicted with ever more unpleasant and sometimes even repulsive features.

### 1. *From the Augustinian vision to the emergence of the ritual murder charge, via the Qiddush ha-Shem in the Rhine communities*

In the early centuries of the Middle Ages, although Jews were legally discriminated against compared to Christians and perceived of as “wanderers” in need of conversion, the prevailing vision concerning them was the Augustinian one, which excluded the use of force to bring them to the baptismal font.<sup>1</sup>

The position of Pope Gregory the Great in this regard is in fact well known, as is that of other popes and high prelates after him.<sup>2</sup> In their vision it was necessary that the Jew be kept in the position of *servitus*, excluded from every form of *dignitas*.<sup>3</sup> The Jew at the same time had to be protected from all forms of violence, as he was the necessary witness to the truth of Christianity and the theory of substitution, that is, a vision in which the Christian people were the *verus Israel*, to be opposed to the Jews, who because of their blindness had not been able to understand the message of Jesus of Nazareth and make it their own. The Jew, therefore, had to experience every day the humiliation and the sense of inferiori-

<sup>1</sup> See M. SIMON, *Verus Israel: A Study of the Relationship between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire*, tr. H. McKeating, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, Oxford 1986. What Pierre Savy observed in a recent article is very interesting: in an attempt to dehumanise more and more the Jews and because they had lost their role of “firstborn people,” having rejected the “new covenant,” and finding themselves considered the least of all peoples, a curious theory developed according to which Jews, unlike Christians, had a tail. This story certainly had a certain success, if – as Michele Luzzati told me a few years ago – his concierge in Turin, a simple woman originally from the Canavese valleys, one day stopped him somewhat embarrassed to ask if it was true what the priest had told her, that is to say that all Jews – both male and female – had tails. See P. SAVY, “*Les Juifs ont une queue*”. *Sur un thème mineur de la construction de l’alterité juive*, «Revue des études juives» 166, 1-2 (janvier-juin 2007), pp. 175-208.

<sup>2</sup> See F. GORRES, *Papst Gregor I der Grosse (590-604), und das Judentum*, «Zeitschrift für Scholasticism» 5 (1931), pp. 1-72; e S. KATZ, *Pope Gregory the Great and the Jews*, «Jewish Quarterly Review» n. s., 24 (1933-1934), pp. 113-136.

<sup>3</sup> On the theoretical possibility of granting *dignitas* to a Jew, see V. COLORNI, *Gli ebrei nel sistema del diritto comune sino alla prima emancipazione*, Giuffrè, Milano 1956; F. LOTTER, *Die Juden in Kirchenrecht des Mittelalters. Bericht über neuere Literatur*, «Ashkenaz» 1 (1991), pp. 172-161.

ty proper to his condition, so that this would lead him (inevitably, it was thought) towards conversion, conversion that in the vision of Augustine and his followers would occur in any case at the end of time.

Moreover, it must be said that the theoretical positions of the Church on the role to be assigned to the Jews (that of involuntary witnesses) often did not coincide with daily reality, within which the Jewish minority was not infrequently – far from holding a subordinate place – in a position to exercise its own influence on the rest of society. This obviously does not mean that stereotypes were lacking or that undue pressure or actual persecution was not exercised towards Jews: on the whole, however, except for the harsh anti-Jewish policy implemented by some Visigothic sovereigns,<sup>4</sup> moreover not continuous over time, in the rest of western Europe the Jews were able to live fairly peacefully.

The situation began to change after the eleventh century, although undoubtedly not everywhere and not in the same way. The first great anti-Jewish persecution of western Europe during the Middle Ages was linked to the development of the First Crusade and involved many of the prosperous communities of the Rhine and Moselle valleys (Worms, Mainz, Speyer, Trier, Cologne). This was a dramatic moment for Ashkenazi Judaism, but, on the whole, it did not involve Jews in other European areas.

It is true, however, that the so-called *hakham* *Ashkenaz* (the sages of Ashkenaz) were among the most respected in the Jewish world of the time; and the communities of the Rhineland were among the most important in the medieval West, both in demographic terms (often counting hundreds of people) and for the role of spiritual guide of a substantial part of Judaism in Christian regions.<sup>5</sup> If, therefore, on the whole, the massacres that took place in 1096 were restricted to a relatively limited geographical space, they had the effect of helping to change the perception of the Jew, and exerted a strong influence also on the cultural paradigms that until then had, so to speak, “regulated” Jewish-Christian relations.

The events relating to the pogroms which occurred during the First Crusade are well known: the violence started from the north of the Kingdom of France and was perpetrated by a large and disorganised group of men, women, and youngsters who had followed a preacher, Peter of Amiens, to Jerusalem.

In the spring of 1096, the men following Peter, flanked by Count Emich von Leiningen, destroyed the Jewish communities of Mainz, Worms, and Cologne. In Trier, human losses were also significant, as well as in other cities of the Empire. Hundreds of Jews died, and just under half of the Jewish population managed to escape the violence without suffering irreparable damage.<sup>6</sup> We find more or less detailed reports of the events, on the part of both Jews and Christians. However, the Jewish and Christian views had very different outcomes.

On the Jewish side, the numerous attempts to resist the fury of the crusaders forged a different awareness of the Jewish role, destiny, and also level of resilience. In the Jewish chronicles, a great deal of space is dedicated to the description of the Jewish reaction:

<sup>4</sup> On the anti-Jewish policy of the Visigoth rulers and on the condition of the Jews in the Visigothic Kingdom, see B. BLUMENKRANZ, *A Reassessment of Visigothic Jewish Policy*, «American Historical Review» 78 (1973), pp. 2-35; S. KATZ, *The Jews in the Visigothic and Frankish Kingdoms of Spain and Gaul*, The Medieval Academy of America, Cambridge 1937; N. ROTH, *Jews, Visigoths and Muslims in Medieval Spain. Cooperation and Conflict*, Brill, Leiden 1994.

<sup>5</sup> On the communities of the Rhineland and on their importance see R.J. BARZEN, *Die Schum Gemeinden und ihre Rechtssatzungen. Geschichte und Wirkungsgeschichte*, in P. HERBERER - U. REUTER (eds), *Die Schum-Gemeinden: Speyer – Worms – Mainz. Auf dem Weg zum Welterbe*, herausgegeben von der Generaldirektion Kulturellen Erbe Rheinland-Pfalz, Schnell & Steiner, Regensburg 2013, pp. 23-35; M. BREUER, *Die Stellung des Rabbinats in den rheinischen Judengemeinden des Mittelalters*, in J. BOHNKE-KOLLWITZ (ed.) *Köln und das rheinische Judentum. Festschrift Germania Judaica 1959-1984*, Köln 1984, pp. 35-46; K.H. DEBUS, *Geschichte der Juden in Speyer bis zum Beginn der Neuzeit. Vom den ersten Niederlassungen 1084 bis zur Vertreibung 1534*, in HISTORISCHER VEREIN DER PFALZ. BEZIRKSGRUPPE SPEYER (ed.), *Geschichte der Juden in Speyer*, Speyer 1981, pp. 9-47; A. HAVERKAMP, *Die Juden in mittelalterliche Trier*, «Kurtrierische Jahrbuch» 19 (1979), pp. 5-57; M. KEIL, *Die Frommen von Ashkenas und die Weisen von Österreich*, in HERBERER, REUTER, *Die Schum-Gemeinden*.

<sup>6</sup> On the violence in the Rhineland related to the conduct of the First and Second Crusades, see R. CHAZAN, *European Jewry and the First Crusade*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1987; L. ROOS, “*God wants it!*”: *the Ideology of Martyrdom of the Hebrew Crusade Chronicles and its Jewish and Christian Background*, Uppsala Universit t, Uppsala 2003.

Thus the precious children of Zion, the people of Mainz, were tested with ten trials as was our father Abraham, and as Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were. They, too, bound their children in sacrifice, as Abraham did his son Isaac, and willingly accepted upon themselves the yoke of fear of Heaven, of the King of Kings, the Blessed Holy One. Refusing to gainsay their faith and replace the fear of our King with an abominable stock, bastard son of a menstruating and wanton mother, they extended their necks for slaughter and offered up their pure souls to their Father in Heaven. The saintly and pious women acted in a similar manner, extending their necks to each other in willing sacrifice in witness to the Oneness of God's Name – and each man likewise to his son and brother, brother to sister, mother to son and daughter, neighbour to neighbour and friend, bridegroom to bride, fiancé to his betrothed: each first sacrificed the other and then in turn yielded to be sacrificed, until the streams of blood touched and mingled, and the blood of husbands joined with that of their wives, the blood of fathers with that of their sons, the blood of brothers with that of their sisters, the blood of teachers with that of their pupils, the blood of bridegrooms with that of their brides, the blood of community deacons with that of their scribes, the blood of babes and sucklings with that of their mothers – all killed and slaughtered in witness to the Oneness of the Venerated and Awesome Name.<sup>7</sup>

On the Jewish side, this form of collective homicide/suicide in order to avoid forced baptism was considered a heroic gesture, the act of a community – those of the Franco-Rhine area – which was particularly holy. There is almost no room here for the notion of sin that draws catastrophe on the sacred community of Israel.

The perception of the *goyyim* was completely different: the Christian chronicles of the Crusades also contain similar, albeit more succinct, descriptions; however, while their authors too appear overwhelmed by these devastating events, they are at the same time totally incapable of interpretative schemes allowing them to go beyond the human disdain and horror for what seems an inhuman behaviour.

In the Christian representation, collective suicide is an inexplicable, extreme, absurd, and incomprehensible act: in particular, that of mothers and fathers killing their own offspring: infants, children, adolescents. The cultural paradigm that emerges is that of Jewish cruelty, a cruelty so limitless that it even pours out on their own children.

It therefore seems plausible that the origin of the ritual murder charge, and the cultural paradigms that supported it for hundreds of years (let's not forget that the last case dates back to post-war Poland, and therefore to the years immediately following the Shoah) have their roots in the Jewish reaction to the Crusades. Unsurprisingly, even chronologically, the appearance of the first accusation of this kind is only slightly later, roughly less than fifty years.<sup>8</sup>

The first known case of a ritual murder charge is from 1144, in England: it is the famous story of William of Norwich. William was a young dye apprentice, who often came in contact with members of the local Jewish community. He disappeared and was later found dead in a wood. A few years later, Thomas of Monmouth promoted the canonisation of the boy,<sup>9</sup> providing what could be called a police investigation *ante litteram* and an account (whether trustworthy it is difficult to establish) of the events.<sup>10</sup> Shortly before his death, William's mother was allegedly approached by a man who claimed to be a cook serving the archdeacon of Norwich. The man – according to Thomas' narrative – offered William a job in the archdeacon's kitchens and paid the mother three shillings to persuade her to let him go. The two would later be seen entering a Jew's house in Norwich: it was the Tuesday before Easter and after this date the

<sup>7</sup> S. EIDELBERG (ed.), *The Jews and the Crusaders. The Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusades*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WS 1977, pp. 32-33.

<sup>8</sup> See I.J. YUVAL, *Vengeance and Damnation, Blood and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel Accusations*, «Zion» 58 (1993), pp. 33-96; J.R. MARCUS, *The Jew in the medieval world, a source book*, 315-1791, Sinai Press, New York 1938, pp. 115-120.

<sup>9</sup> The boy, however, was never canonised: see A. TOAFF, *Pasque di sangue*, il Mulino, Bologna 2007, p. 269 n3, who goes on to cite A. VAUCHEZ, *La santità nel Medioevo*, il Mulino, Bologna 1989, p. 269.

<sup>10</sup> See G.L. LANGMUIR, *Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder*, «Speculum» 59/4 (1984), pp. 820-846; ID., *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-Oxford 1990, pp. 209-236; J.M. McCULLOH, *Jewish Ritual Murder. William of Norwich, Thomas of Monmouth and the Early Dissemination of the Myth*, «Speculum» 72 (1997), pp. 109-127.

boy was no longer seen alive. His body was found on Holy Saturday, in Thorpe Wood. The marks on his body suggested a violent death. The Jews were immediately accused of being responsible for William's murder, but the local sheriff took them under his protection, and after a while the situation settled down.

When, in 1150, Thomas of Monmouth arrived in Norwich, he began to investigate and suggest that William's death was linked to a specific ritual: the boy had supposedly been tied to a cross, to mock the Christian faith, and then had been stabbed various times with a knife in order to be bled to death.<sup>11</sup>

Two elements emerge here, which had been clearly present in the chronicles relating to the anti-Jewish *pogrom* of the First Crusade: violent contempt for "the hanged one" (as Jesus of Nazareth was defined in Hebrew), and for the cross that was its symbol; the knife (which is used for ritual slaughter, the *šechitah*): it must be sharpened, in order to ensure that the animal bleeds quickly and with the least possible suffering, given that Jews are absolutely forbidden to consume blood; and the Jewish cruelty that did not spare even children. For the Jews, those elements were to be regarded as a proof of resilience, although declined at the end in the form of voluntary martyrdom, a way to sanctify the name of God. The same elements, however, were totally negative for the Christians, the demonstration of the wickedness of the Jews, the proof of their capacity to kill unmercifully even sucklings and infants. Certainly, with Thomas of Monmouth, but perhaps also before his time, the themes of a Jewish conspiracy<sup>12</sup> emerge (readily accepted and reused by non-Jews in the following centuries, inflected in various ways as was needed) together with that of possible cannibalism.

## 2. *The spread of the charge of ritual murder in England between 1144 and 1290*

After Norwich, the accusation of ritual murder against the Jews spread throughout the rest of England: similar accusations were made in Gloucester (1168), Bury St Edmunds (1181), Bristol (1183),<sup>13</sup> Winchester (1192), and London (1244). Furthermore, the death – attributed to the Jews – of another child, little Hugh of Lincoln (1255), led to the establishment of a trial and the consequent killing of many Jews.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to say whether these accusations continued in England following the same pattern: the crown, in fact, for which the Jewish minority was of less and less economic interest, decided to expel from the Kingdom all those who had not converted, eliminating in 1290 every last trace of Jewish presence. It must be said that this elimination did not prevent the persistence of another stereotyped account, the one related to the profanation of the host, which continued to be present – at least as a literary *topos* – long after the effective disappearance of the Jews from the island.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Plate 2.

<sup>12</sup> According to Thomas of Monmouth, the account of the monk Theobald of Cambridge, a converted Jew, was absolutely trustworthy. He revealed that the Jews believed they could hasten the fulfilment of the messianic times by the annual sacrifice of a Christian child, and that for this purpose they met every year in Narbonne and cast lots for the name of the place where the kidnapping and the crucifixion of the child should take place: see J.R. MARCUS, *The Jew in the Medieval World. A Source Book (315-1791)*, Greenwood Press, New York 1975, pp. 121-126. See also G. MENTGEN, *The Origins of the Blood Libel*, «Zion» 59 (1994), pp. 341-349 [in Hebrew]. The theme of the annual meeting of European Jews and the choice of a place where to kidnap and crucify a child returns in T. DI CANTIMPRÉ, *Bonum universal de apibus*, Baltazar Belleri, Douay 1627, pp. 303-306, quoted in TOAFF, *Pasque*, p. 269 n 7.

<sup>13</sup> See C. CLUSE, "Fabula ineptissima": *Die Ritualmordlegende um Adam von Bristol*, «Ashkenaz» 5 (1995), pp. 293-330.

<sup>14</sup> The story of Hugh of Lincoln is mentioned by Matthew Paris and Chaucer. It was the first time that there was a direct intervention by the sovereign on the subject of ritual murder charges. The confession of the Jew Copin (which was most likely made in exchange of a promise to save his life) contained the element of the crucifixion of the child, and that the Jews would gather in large numbers in Lincoln just to complete the ritual. On the matter, see G.L. LANGMUIR, *The Knight's Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln*, «Speculum» 47 (1972), pp. 459-482.

<sup>15</sup> See E. GIACCHERINI, *L'«ebreo» nella letteratura inglese medievale*, Pisa University Press, Pisa 2016.

### 3. *The charge moves to the continent*

From England, the ritual murder charge moved fairly quickly to continental Europe, particularly to the northern territories of the Kingdom of France and the regions that were part of the Empire. Ariel Toaff, moreover, in his controversial work on the theme of ritual murder, notes that the continent did not have to wait for Thomas of Monmouth's reconstruction for the story of young William's martyrdom by Jewish hands to start spreading.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Israel Yuval speculates that the stereotype of the ritual murder charge was already well known in imperial lands before the Norwich events.<sup>17</sup> Much of the literature on the subject tends to assert the hypothesis that for about a century the dominant stereotype was that of a crucifixion, without those aspects of "ritual cannibalism" that became common in the subsequent narrative.

The appearance of the ritual murder charge in continental Europe meant that the stereotype of the "crucifixion of children" entered fully into the collective imagination, sometimes generating full-blown obsessions. Obsessions which then almost always led to accusations against the entire minority group and its physical elimination. In France, for example, in Joinville and Pontoise, the accusation of kidnapping and crucifying a child resulted in the massacre of the two communities. In Blois the Jews - accused of the same crime and also of getting rid of the body in the waters of the Loire - were sentenced to death, and thirty-two were burned alive at the stake.<sup>18</sup>

As Toaff notes, the proximity of a waterway is a recurring element of the anti-Jewish stereotype, as well as the presence of tanners, often "involved" (according to accusations, of course!) in the killing of Christian children.<sup>19</sup>

It is not entirely clear when the association between "ritual cannibalism" and murder came into being. Toaff observes that, in reality, even in the case of Norwich the element of blood was already clearly present, even if from the account of the Christian servant who supposedly witnessed the fact it is not possible to draw definite conclusions. Instead, it seems certain that the connection between killing a Christian child and the use of its blood can be traced back at least to the charge of ritual murder made in 1235 against the Jews of Fulda, even if the use of Christian blood (for example for healing purposes) does not immediately imply a form of cannibalism.

What is certain is that once it moved to the continent, the charge of ritual murder changed, and for Christians the Jews were not only those who killed Christian children, but also those who used their blood, both for ritual purposes, and as an almost miraculous medicine. Some well-known converts (among whom Nicholas Donin also appears) had in fact revealed that Jews - guilty of having crucified Jesus of Nazareth - were the object of a terrible curse, which caused them terrible sufferings, and that the only medicine capable of alleviating such sufferings was apparently Christian blood, "transfused" into their sick bodies.<sup>20</sup> In relation to the accusation of cannibalism the association between the consumption of *mazzo* on the occasion of *Pesah* and the use of the blood of Christian children to add to the dough was well known. In medieval France, in some cases the prosecution focused on the consumption of the *haroset*.<sup>21</sup>

Even in iconography, the motif of blood becomes more and more evident, together with a gradual dehumanisation of the Jews involved, increasingly represented with distorted and malignant features,

<sup>16</sup> See TOAFF, *Pasque*, p. 114. The first documents on William would in fact come from Bavaria, and date back to 1147.

<sup>17</sup> See I.J. YUVAL, "Two Nations in Your Wombs." *Perceptions of Jews and Christians*, University of California Press, Los Angeles 2006.

<sup>18</sup> On the case of Blois, one of the most studied, see R. CHAZAN, *The Blois Incident of 1171. A Study in Jewish Intercommunal Organization*, «Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research» 36 (1968), pp. 13-31.

<sup>19</sup> See TOAFF, *Pasque*, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>21</sup> See S. WEINGARTEN, 'In thy Blood, Live!'. *Haroset and the Blood Libels*, «Revue des études juives» 172, 1-2 (janvier-juin 2013), pp. 83-100.



and increasingly identifiable (and identified) with the devil, and his *longa manus*.<sup>22</sup> In the numerous representations of the famous case of Trento,<sup>23</sup> blood often flows copiously from the wounds of the crucified and martyred infant, and the faces and attitude of his persecutors are the mirror of their perverse souls, the exact opposite of the Greek idea of the *kalos kagathos*.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Cases in the Iberian Peninsula

In the Iberian Peninsula, the accusations of ritual murder were significantly fewer than those on the other side of the Alps. Especially in the period immediately preceding the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, however, an entirely original kind of accusation surfaced, in which an important role was assumed by the heart of the little victim. The relevance of the heart – almost absent in the imperial territories – originates from the so-called “slander of the pig”, a theme discussed in an excellent article by Misgav Har-Peled.<sup>25</sup>

According to this legend, the Jews had asked a Christian to sell them the heart of a co-religionist, thinking of using it together with the consecrated host to exterminate Christians through magic. The story is narrated both by Yoseph ha-Cohen in his *‘Emeq ha-Bakha* (Voltaggio, 1557) and by Gedalyah ibn Yahia, in his *Shalsholet ha-Qabbalah* (Venice, 1585).<sup>26</sup> A magician and an executioner from a city in Normandy hatched a plot against the Jews. The wizard managed to kill many pigs by burying a pig heart in the ground, terrorising the locals. These locals then asked, what was the reason for such an event, and the executioner told them that the Jews had asked for the heart of a man, but that he had deceived them, by delivering the heart of a pig. The incident convinced Christians that the Jews had planned to exterminate them by using black magic, as they had (unwittingly) done with pigs.<sup>27</sup>

In the Jewish version, the Jews are the victims of a plot intended to cause them death. The Christian version, of course, attributes to the Jews the intention of exterminating Christians. One of the most important Christian polemical works of the fifteenth century, the  *Fortalitium Fidei* by Alfonso de Espina, composed between 1458 and 1464, enumerates seventeen anti-Jewish *topoi*, including the so-called “pig accusation”.<sup>28</sup> Espina’s work enjoyed considerable success, and the cultural paradigm linked to pig hearts and Jewish conspiracy quickly spread to the Catholic world, where it remained present until the modern age, while undergoing some reinterpretation, which included the replacement of a heart with the

<sup>22</sup> On the connection between the Jews and the devil, see the classic work by J. TRACHTENBERG, *The Devil and the Jews*, Meridian, Philadelphia 1961.

<sup>23</sup> The bibliography on the accusation of ritual murder against the Jews of Trent is very extensive. The following can be consulted: A. ESPOSITO - D. QUAGLIONI, *Processi contro gli ebrei di Trento (1475-1478). I processi del 1475*, CEDAM, Padova 1990; L. DAL PRÀ, *L’immagine di Simonino nell’arte trentina dal XV al XVIII secolo*, in I. ROGGER - M. BELLABARBA (ed.), *Il principe vescovo Johannes Hinderbach (1465-1486) fra tardo Medioevo e Umanesimo*, EDB, Bologna 1992, pp. 445-482; R. PO-CHIA HSIA, *Trent 1475: Stories of a Ritual Murder Trial*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 1992; P.O. KRISTELLER, *The Alleged Ritual Murder of Simon of Trent (1475) and Its Literary Repercussions: A Bibliographical Study*, «Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research» 59 (1993), pp. 103-135.

<sup>24</sup> See Plate 1.

<sup>25</sup> See M. HAR-PELED, *The Pig Libel: A Ritual Crime Legend from the Era of the Spanish Expulsion of the Jews (15th - 16th centuries)*, «Revue des études Juives» 175 (1-2) (janvier-juin 2016), pp. 107-133. The author observes that «while the history of blood libels against the Jews received much attention by scholars, one related legend [i.e., the pig libel] was not addressed» (p. 107).

<sup>26</sup> See J. HACOEN, *Emeq Habaqa*, ed. M. LETTERIS, Vienna 1852, p. 25; e J. HA-COEN, *Emeq Ha- Bakha (The Vale of Tears)*, introduction, critical edition, comments by K. ALMBLADH, Almqvist & Wiksell, Uppsala 1981, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> See HAR-PELED, *The Pig Libel*, p. 108.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109; see also A. MEYUHAS GINIO, *De bello iudeorum. Fray Alonso de Espina y su Fortalitium fidei*, Universidad Pontificia, Salamanca 1998.

milk of a Christian nurse.<sup>29</sup> In any case, the connection between Jews and pigs remained strong in the collective imagination, especially in Germany, with the representation of the so-called *Judensau*, the “sow of the Jews”; in this depiction, groups of Jews were represented in the act of riding the animal, licking its anus, and eating its excrement.<sup>30</sup>

Returning to Spain, it was suggested that Espina’s reference to the story of the pig’s heart was used – just before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain – in the case of the Santo Niño de La Guardia. In June 1490 in the town of La Guardia, near Toledo, some Jews and *conversos* were accused of stealing a consecrated host and of killing a Christian child, with the aim of removing his heart. After a year, in which the accused were periodically subjected to torture, they confessed that they had indeed designed a sacrilegious plan, for which a human heart and a consecrated host were needed. Finally, by means of magical practices, they intended to destroy Christianity, making Judaism triumph.<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that despite the expulsion of the Jews from Spanish soil, in the following centuries the theme of a human heart used as a means to exterminate Christians, and proof of Jewish wickedness (and therefore of the need for their forced conversion or expulsion), does not disappear. Traces of it persist throughout the modern age, and even in our time.<sup>32</sup>

##### 5. *The persistence of the charge of ritual murder and of the cultural paradigm connected to it*

The charge of ritual murder continued to be strongly present in Europe throughout the modern period, with some episodes occurring in the contemporary period.<sup>33</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, two serious episodes of anti-Semitism occurred in Chiaccinău (today Kishinev, the capital of Moldova) linked to the charge of ritual murder (19-20 April 1903 and 19-20 October 1905).<sup>34</sup> In Kiev, the Jew Menahem Mendel Beilis was accused of killing a Christian boy, Andrej Yushchinsky, and of using his blood to knead the *mazzoth*. After a trial that caused a sensation, he was acquitted by a jury made up entirely of Christians. Obviously during the Nazi period propaganda did not fail to use the charge of murder and ritual cannibalism as a justification (along with many others) for anti-Jewish politics.

In Europe, the last known case of a ritual murder charge, followed by physical assault on the Jews, dates back to 1946, after the end of the Second World War, and therefore when the tragic fate of a large part of European Jewry had already come to the surface. This is the case of Kielce, a location where

<sup>29</sup> See HAR-PELED, *The Pig Libel*, p. 114; M. RUBIN, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 1999, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup> See I. SHACHAR, *The Judensau: A Medieval Anti-Jewish Motif and Its History*, Warburg Institute, London 1974.

<sup>31</sup> On the story, see Y. BAER, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, I-II, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1961, II, pp. 288, 403; I. IANNUZZI, *Processi di esclusione e contaminazione alla fine del Quattrocento spagnolo. Il caso del Niño de La Guardia*, «Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica. Rivista semestrale del Dipartimento di Storia moderna e contemporanea dell’Università di Roma “La Sapienza”» (2009), pp. 146-171; S. SHEPARD, *The Present State of the Ritual Crime in Spain*, in A. DUNDES (ed.), *The Blood Libel Legend. A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1991, pp. 162-179.

<sup>32</sup> See J. EDWARDS, *Ritual Murder in the Siglo de Oro: Lope de Vega’s El niño inocente de la Guardia*, in A. BENAÏM (ed.), *The Proceedings of the Tenth British Conference of Judeo-Spanish Studies*, University of London, London 1999, pp. 73-88.

<sup>33</sup> See S. HORVATH, *Le «grand proces» de meurtre rituel et ses antisémites tiszacszlâr, Hongrie, 1883*, «Revue des études juives» 170, 1-2 (janvier-juin 2011), pp. 255-278.

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9350-kishinef-kishinev>, last accessed 15 January 2020. The first pogrom began after the discovery of the body of a Ukrainian boy from Dubăsari and the death of a girl who died of suicide in a Jewish hospital. The charge was that of ritual murder (it was close to the Christian Easter). The authorities did not protect the Jewish population; women, children, and the elderly were also massacred, and Jewish property was plundered. The heavy toll was forty-seven dead and hundreds injured, as well as numerous homes and businesses destroyed.

ethnic cleansing took place during the Nazi occupation. In the summer of 1946, about 200 Jews lived in the Polish town, mostly survivors of the Nazi death camps. In July of that year a Polish boy, Henryk Błaszczyk, disappeared for a few days, and according to his father on his return he said he had been kidnapped by the Jews, indicating the “house of the Jews” as the place where he supposedly had been imprisoned in a cellar. The result of this accusation, which re-proposed all the stereotypes of the ritual murder charge, was about twenty deaths, including women and children. The smallest of the victims was only three weeks old.<sup>35</sup>

Especially after the birth of the State of Israel, a part of the Islamic world has introjected the cultural paradigm of ritual murder by the Jews, with a series of contemporary variants no less pernicious than those of the medieval and modern age. Mustafa Tlass, the Syrian Defence Minister, in 1986 wrote a book that focused on the topic of ritual murder (taking up the events of the so-called “Damascus affair” of 1840),<sup>36</sup> and on the text of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The book was reprinted eight times, and has been translated into English, French and Italian. An Egyptian producer said he wanted to adapt it to produce a film. Moreover, in 2003 a Syrian film company produced a television series based on the *Protocols*, in which the Jews were presented not only as engaged in a conspiracy to secure world domination, but also as kidnapers and murderers of Christian children, whose blood was supposedly used to prepare the *mazzoth* for Pesah.

Furthermore, the ritual murder charge was recently renewed in the western world as well: in January 2005, for example, twenty members of the Russian *Duma* publicly accused Jews of devoting themselves to the practice of ritual murder, asking on this basis to ban all Russian Jewish organizations. That the cultural model persists, despite everything, even today, has been demonstrated by research carried out by a group of Polish anthropologists and sociologists, who concentrated on the locality of Sandomierz, where to this day a painting depicting a ritual murder is still present in the cathedral: these scholars verified that both Catholics and Orthodox, regardless of social class, continue to be convinced that real facts are at the basis of this accusation.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand, just a few months ago, the author was able to verify in person how even in Italy there are people fanatically convinced that the Jews killed Christian children in the past: after a conference in Bassano del Grappa, a gentleman verbally attacked me arguing that not far away, in Marostica, the story of Lorenzino, found dead and canonised saint as a victim of the perfidious Jews, was absolutely trustworthy: and to my objection that the Second Vatican Council had ordered a revision of the canonisation of the alleged martyr, he replied that at this point the Jews were also in control of the Holy See. In this vision the Jewish conspiracy has been fully successful, having overtaken even the Church itself and made it incapable of defending itself against the plans hatched by the Jews to destroy Christianity.

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<sup>35</sup> See S. MEDUCKI, *The Pogrom in Kielce on 4 July 1946*, «Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry» 9 (1996), pp. 158-169; D. ENGEL, *Patterns of Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1944-1946*, «Yad Vashem Studies» 26 (1998), pp. 43-85.

<sup>36</sup> On the Damascus incident, see P. GENSLER, *Die Damaskusaffäre: Judeophobie in einer anonymen Damszener Chronik*, Grin Verlag, Munich 2011.

<sup>37</sup> J. TOKARSKA-BAKIR, *Legendy o krwi, antropologia przesądu* [Anthropology of prejudice: Blood libel myths], WAB, Warsaw 2008.



## Cultural Paradigms in the Accusation of Ritual Murder

### SUMMARY

This paper intends to analyse how the emergence of charges of ritual murder gradually changed the cultural paradigms that were foundational to the idea and representation of the Jew in Western Europe, both on a literary level and iconographically, during the High and the Late Middle Ages. I present here the most famous ones, and reflect on the Christian representation of these cases, in terms of both written and iconographic sources.

**KEYWORDS:** Blood libel; Cultural paradigms; Representation of the Jew.

