

‘DO NOT KILL THEM, LEST MY PEOPLE FORGET’

Changes in Attitudes Towards Jews in Twelfth and Thirteenth Century England

REBECCA REILLY

WHILE ATTITUDES TOWARD JEWS OVER THE TWELFTH AND THIRTEENTH CENTURIES CERTAINLY COOLED, THEY DID SO LESS DRAMATICALLY THAN THE 1290 EXPULSION MIGHT SUGGEST. CHRONICLED HOSTILITY, ALONGSIDE WHICH THE JEWISH ‘BLOOD LIBEL’ MYTH DEVELOPED, INCREASED WITH PERCEIVED JEWISH ECONOMIC STATUS. AFTER THEIR IMPOVERISHMENT, THEIR STATUS FURTHER DECREASED AS ROYAL POLICY PERPETUATED LONGSTANDING SOCIAL DIVISIONS THAT LARGE- LY ORIGINATED FROM CULTURAL, RATHER THAN RELIGIOUS OR ECONOMIC, CLEAVAGES. THE TREATMENT OF THE JEWS IN THIS PERIOD MAY ALSO BE UNDERSTOOD AS ONE OF ENGLISH IDEN- TITY CONSOLIDATION IN THE POST-CONQUEST PERIOD. THIS COINCIDES WITH THE JEWS’ FIRST COEXISTENCE WITH ANGLO-SAXONS AFTER THE NORMAN INVASION. SINCE ECONOMIC REASON- ING ALONE DOES NOT EXPLAIN THE TREATMENT OF THE JEWS IN THE LATTER HALF OF THE THIR- TEENTH CENTURY, THIS ESSAY ALSO EXAMINES INSTANCES OF ANTI-JEWISH VIOLENCE AND SUC- CESSIVE PLANTAGENET KINGS’ POLICIES TARGETING THE JEWS, IDENTIFYING THEM AS INDICATORS OR CONSTRUCTIONS OF RELIGIOUS AND NATIONAL ALTERITY.

Patricia Skinner writes that applying the term “medieval” characterizes an artificial periodization of Jewish history. The Jewish community underwent little of the social reorganization that the Christian community did in the period, remaining fairly insular and autonomous despite its coexistence with gentile majorities.¹ Indeed, the “Middle Ages” were originally Christian theologians’ demarcation for the period between Christ’s First and Second Comings, not an issue of Jewish concern.² Yet just as the speaker of Psalm 59:11 implores God not to strike down his people’s enemies, lest his people forget their strife and their refuge in God, an examination of anti-Jewish sentiment yields valuable insight into both groups’ perceived identities. I agree with Paul Hyams’ thesis that while attitudes toward Jews over the twelfth and thirteenth centuries certainly worsened, they did so incrementally and inconsistently. The expulsion of England’s Jewish population in 1290 should not be viewed as an inevitable policy. Chronicled hostility, alongside which the Jewish “blood libel” myth developed as justification, appears to have increased with perceived Jewish economic status. Their position decreased after their impoverishment, as royal policy perpetuated long standing social divisions. These cleavages were largely cultural, not religious or economic as might be expected.

The Jewish community in England formed with the advent of the Normans, but it developed alongside the Christian one without any lasting social integration. While there may have been Jews in Roman Britain, none were present in Anglo-Saxon England. Robert Stacey goes so far as to theorize that they may have been banned in the centuries preceding 1066.³ Medieval Jewish society in England was an insular but close community whose enclaves in different cities maintained rapport, a fact which likely fostered rumors of conspiracy when religious antagonism arose.⁴ Jews existed conspicuously apart from the medieval mentality that denoted the wait between the First and Second Comings of Christ.⁵ Jewish society thus diverged from Christian England in the critical senses of community participation and the impending fact of the apocalypse. Judaism had legal implications as well. Jews could not swear on the gospel, so they appeared less trustworthy than the cohesive Christian community.⁶ Henry II promulgated the first charters exempting Jews from conventional judicial proceedings for this reason, but the codification of these and other privileges and their reiteration in later charters would likely have reminded both communities each time of the Jews’ separation from the rest.⁷ Jews also spoke French like the reviled Norman elite.⁸

The dictates of Christianity certainly fomented anti-Jewish sentiment, even though they do not appear to have been the critical factor which escalated it to the point of violence in England. The Church’s official position was that Jews should be tolerated and that their conversion would precede the Second Coming. Protective royal policy and sheltered “seigneurial Jewries” throughout the twelfth century were largely compatible with this outlook.⁹ This system of royal tolerance of course had financial incentives, but major antipathy does not seem to predate the second half of the twelfth century. Paul Hyams in fact recounts several incidents from various other authors of peaceful Jewish-Christian coexistence until as late as 1270. The later moral preaching discouraging intermarriage and interaction may have been a response to this behavior which, he points out, was either widespread or widely known.¹⁰ Attacks on Jews throughout Europe appear in records around the time of the First Crusade, but records from the time do not even seem to evidence a collective English awareness of Jews.¹¹

The “blood libel” legend and accusations of ritual murder that emerge in the mid-twelfth century appear to have been a factor in increasing anti-Jewish attitudes, but it seems more plausible to read the incidences as symptomatic instead of pathological. Thomas of Monmouth’s account of the incident of William of Norwich appears in records from the mid-twelfth century, but there is evidence from European priestly orations to suggest that the William story held influence on the Continent before the hagi-



CLIFFORD'S TOWER, SITE OF THE MASS SUICIDE OF YORK'S MEDIEVAL JEWS (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

“Whatever the truth of Thomas of Monmouth and the beatified child martyrs, the Jews’ unpopularity rose with their financial status.”

ography’s publication.¹² Other observations seem to reinforce the idea of a growing intellectual exchange between England and Europe, amplifying the myth within a Christian echo chamber. One such study by Anna Sapir Abulafia notes the influence of the twelfth-century Renaissance’s rational reasoning on Jewish-Christian disputations, which evidences the increasing sophistication of Christian action rationalization.¹³ Increasingly sophisticated theology would have justified the growing religious cleavage. Like earlier European anti-Jewish attacks, the William myth and Thomas of Monmouth’s account of it could also have been spurred by the zeal of the Second Crusade, which further displays the effect of European Christian, which is to say anti-Jewish, thought on English attitudes.¹⁴

Thomas of Monmouth’s account was designed for reading by a general audience and explicitly analogizes William of Norwich with Christ, elements which testify to the anti-Jewish sentiment it embodied, rationalized, and realized when it was propagated.¹⁵ Thomas recounts how the Jews of Norwich knew William, and bought often from his tannery, although his community later discouraged contact with the Jews. The converts to Christianity in Thomas’ account say that they chose William for the ritual murder at the beginning of Lent, which reflected the anxieties and auspices Christians saw in the Jewish community as their holy days approached.¹⁶ Translator Miri Rubin points out that, like Judas, William’s mother gives her son to the Jews’ messenger in exchange for thirty pieces of silver.¹⁷ The Jews torture William, whom Thomas calls an “innocent lamb” in the style of Christ as the Lamb of God, before crucifying him.¹⁸ They leave William’s body exposed to distance themselves from the murder.¹⁹ In the end, justice outs the murderers when the Christians identify the wounds on the body as trademark torture injuries perpetrated as part of Passover. A convert explains that the Jews cannot return to their homeland without spilling human blood, a recognition of Jews’ mobility and contact over distances, creating the myth of international conspiracy.²⁰ In another notable creation of legend, some of the Jews want to throw William’s corpse into a privy instead of leaving it outside. This is an early instance of Jewish association with excrement.²¹ Had they followed

through, the narrative would have imploded, as William would likely not have been discovered.

Several details make Thomas’ account less than trustworthy, more than just his reliance on testimony as evidence, which suggests that religious convictions might not be the only motive behind the attacks or the account’s publication. He embellishes by writing that one “wise” Jew becomes “divinely inspired” and expresses hesitancy at his community’s crime, saying that they will be discovered and exiled from England.²² God is also later described to have punished the murderous Jews by killing them.²³ Furthermore, the appearance of thirty pieces of silver as a trade object seems too coincidental with the Christ story to be more than a fiction. As Thomas wants his readers to recognize the parallels with Christ and seems to intend for them to recognize his allusion to Judas, William’s mother would probably have recognized the gesture and been alarmed if her Christian convictions were strong. Finally, a hint late in the chronicle suggests a more plausible cause of the Jewish-Christian disputes: a knight was indebted to the wealthiest Jew and killed him to escape financial ruin, which Thomas attributes to God’s will.²⁴ Economic imperilment seems to be a more likely cause than an unprecedented murder conspiracy, but perhaps this explanation underestimates the religious fervor of the period and its role in daily life. Jeffrey Cohen argues that the issue is more one of identity, which also has potential as an interpretive hypothesis. He writes that the William myth inaugurated a unified Christian community in Norwich, disrupted since the Norman Conquest and seeking normalcy as Matilda and Stephen circled in civil war.²⁵ The city of Norwich was not the only one which produced tales of children martyred by Jews. The 1255 case of Little St. Hugh of Lincoln drew the attention of Henry III, who not only convicted and executed eighteen Jews but also appropriated their properties by right of their arrest. The child martyr trend picked up speed throughout England after Monmouth’s report.²⁶

Whatever the truth of Thomas of Monmouth and the beatified child martyrs, the Jews’ unpopularity rose with their financial status. Another anecdotal account tells the

“Abusing the Jewish minority would have given an outlet not only to financial woes, but also to war-weariness and anxieties about security as well.”

story of Richard Malebisse, the ambitious progeny of a rich York family who helped to lead the attack on the city’s Jews in 1190. His Anglo-Norman surname means “Evil Beast” and must have been given for a particular evil; in this context it makes the darkest moment in the history of the English Jewry sound all the more sinister.²⁷ After Christians attacked Jewish families and set their houses alight, York’s Jewry retreated to the castle and royal protection. For unknown reasons, they turned away the castle steward after he briefly left the grounds, probably mistrusting even York’s royal officials. The attackers besieged the Jews. They announced that any Jew who wished to convert could surrender and live, but they immediately killed those who emerged. Those trapped inside the tower chose to die rather than face the mob, killed by their husbands, their parents, and their own hand. Hugh M. Thomas presents three possible explanations for the grisly events of 1190. First, as Malebisse patronized the Church freely, the attacks may have been a microcosm for the religious tension of the Middle Ages, which would not have been helped by the Crusades.²⁸ Second, and as R.B. Dobson argues, it could have been a protest against economic oppression at the Angevins’ hands. The Jews could have been psychological targets as minorities, and royally protected ones at that. Their wealth, conspicuous in the lavish houses where the first attacks occurred, could not have helped matters. Finally, and as recalls Thomas of Monmouth’s story, Richard and the other attack leaders had large debts to the households they first destroyed.²⁹ The English Jews’ prosperity and alignment with kings may have sealed their doom.

The Jews’ prosperity allowed for and excused their financial exploitation, perpetuated and justified by anti-Jewish attitudes after they were driven into poverty. English Christians obeyed the Church’s often-reiterated condemnation of usury, or the business of collecting interest on loans, so England’s kings in the twelfth century relied largely on Jewish moneylenders. As the Jewish community accrued wealth, however, Kings John, Henry III, and Edward I created exorbitant taxes, which drove the Jewish community into poverty well before their expulsion. The 1210 Bristol

Tallage saw Jews arrested on suspicion of not paying up, wherein they could either relinquish their property as war funds or be expelled from the country. In 1239, Henry demanded a third of all Jewish goods and debts, followed by two more large tallages from 1241-2 and 1244-50. Perverse-ly, most English still saw the Jews as the tax-happy king’s agents and endorsers, perhaps not realizing or sympathizing with the financial burden of being the king’s property.³⁰ Abusing the Jewish minority would have given an outlet not only to financial woes, but also to war-weariness and anxieties about security as well. English Jews tried to compensate by increasing their money lending operations, which vexed tax-burdened Christians.³¹ The 1275 Statute of the Jewry outlawed usury outright, banishing those Jews caught practicing it and preventing all collection of interest on loans.³² The coin-clipping campaign originally targeting all of England came to focus on the impoverished Jewish population, culminating in their arrest. This policy could



AN 1181 ILLUMINATION OF THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. ROBERT OF BURY, ALLEGEDLY KILLED BY JEWS (COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

indicate either that Edward became more hostile towards Jews or that he thought there was more money in Jews paying to get out of prison than actual revenue from coin-clipping prosecutions.³³ Paul Brand cogently calls the whole affair a 'sting' operation against the English Jewry.³⁴

Robert Stacey writes, however, that not all of the anti-Jewish attitudes and policies recorded can be attributed to economics. No consensus exists about why they continued after all the Jews' money had been depleted.³⁵ I argue above that social divisions divided the groups from the start and that religious fervor reinforced resentments, and examination of Edward I supports this hypothesis. Either by true faith or the desire to take advantage of an opportunity, the king stigmatized the Jewish population to his economic and political profit.

As predictive as the trend is for the change in English attitudes toward its Jews overall, economics alone does not explain the religiosity Edward himself incorporated into his Jewish policy. Edward echoed Henry III's reign by partaking frequently in Jewish legal cases, and his reign was marked by significant attention to the potential for Jews to convert.³⁶ Legislation on the Jews had previously provided privileges for converts to Christianity, but Edward showed more interest in the process than his predecessors. One pipe roll from Edward's rule notes that a sheriff was owed financial credit for baptizing Jewish children, suggesting the presence of official incentives.³⁷ Along with its policy on conversion, Edward also took heed of the century-old papal view of usury and actively enforced the 1275 statute forbidding it. Edward's faith is reported to have intensified when he recovered from deadly illness in 1286, and he associated himself intimately with the cult of Little Saint Hugh.³⁸ It is difficult to tell whether Edward paraded his piety for political ends or actually felt his

public convictions. Either reality would have won him favor in the eyes of a population for whom parishes created local community and Christianity reinforced national identity. Either would also have made the Jews' mass arrest, extortion, and expulsion forgivable.

While historians contest the inevitability of the expulsion in 1290, its coincidence with Parliament enacting the largest tax of the Middle Ages makes its economic reasoning apparent. The Jews were allegedly expelled because of their continued usury in violation of the 1275 statute forbidding it, a handy legal justification that likely would not have been questioned.³⁹ Even though there exists consensus between historians that these acts were linked as a *quid pro quo*, there is less agreement about whether the expulsion was avoidable. Richard Huscroft insists it was not, as the opportunity for such a hefty tax would have been tempting regardless of the Jewish context. They were a depleted source of income with little use left.⁴⁰ Anna Sapir Abulafia writes that the expulsion was a natural consequence of the rising tide of Christian resentment as well as a poor Jewry.⁴¹ Abulafia is right to point out increasingly negative Christian attitudes as a causal factor which Edward embraced, but Huscroft's assessment of Edward as reactionary to a good deal seems more plausible than him having recognized a trend in Jewish economic history. Edward did not take advantage of Jewish moneylending and therefore may not have seen the Jewish treasuries as a lost cause, finding the community's value only in the hate they inspired.

Contemporary religious beliefs certainly influenced growing anti-Jewish attitudes, and economic trends even more, but it would be reductive to understand the treatment of Jews in medieval England as anything less than an expression of anxieties threatening the Christian community. Many Christians owed debts to Jewish moneylenders, some dangerously exorbitant. Jews prospered visibly even as Christians suffered taxes, dismissing the fact that Jews also suffered alongside them. Jews spoke French, did not have to appear in local courts, absented themselves from town parishes, and allied themselves with such hated figures as Kings John and Stephen. Jews did not force loans upon Christians, inform royal policy, or wage expensive wars, but they stood out as psychological targets, an out-group who could be blamed for frustrating social unity and security. The blood libel myth, popularized and just plausible from perceptions of Jewish culture, justified collective insecurity and reciprocally enforced identity formation. It was not inevitable that Edward expelled the Jews,



A SILVER PENNY BEARING THE IMAGE OF EDWARD I
(COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

but his policy certainly reflected the anti-Jewish culture, overtly religious but implicitly perpetuating social divides. It is regrettably impossible to untangle the complex mindset of the historical individuals involved, but the collective consciousness preserved in the record evidences a society grasping at drama to justify its unwitting desire: to live in peace, prosperity, and kinship, secure in the ancestral Englishness lost to the Anglo-Saxon era.

ENDNOTES

1. Patricia Skinner, "Viewpoint: Confronting the Medieval in Medieval History: The Jewish Example," *Past & Present* 181 (2003), 221-222.
2. *Ibid.*, 231.
3. Robert C. Stacey, "Anti-Semitism and the Medieval English State," *The Medieval State*, ed. J.R. Maddicott and D.M. Palliser, London: Hambledon, 2000, 166.
4. Hyams 272.
5. See notes 1 and 2.
6. Hymans Faith, Fealty and Jewish 'infideles' in Twelfth-Century England, 140-143.
7. Brand 1138-1139.
8. Stacey, 168.
9. Huscroft 32-33.
10. Hyams 274 and 278.
11. Huscroft 22 and 31.
12. McCulloh JRM 740.
13. Abulafia 106.
14. Huscroft 35.
15. Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Passion of William of Norwich*, ed. Miri Rubin, London: Penguin Classics, 2014, 6.
16. *Ibid.*, 13.
17. *Ibid.*, 15.
18. *Ibid.*, 16.
19. *Ibid.*, 21.
20. *Ibid.*, 58-61.
21. *Ibid.*, 18.
22. *Ibid.*, 18-19.
23. *Ibid.*, 64.
24. *Ibid.*, 63-65.
25. Jeffrey J. Cohen, "The Flow of Blood in Medieval Norwich," *Speculum* 79 no. .1 (2004), 40 and 44.
26. Thomas, 101-102.
27. Hugh M. Thomas, "Portrait of a Medieval Anti-Semite: Richard Malebisse," *Haskins Society Journal* 5 (1993), 2-4.
28. *Ibid.*, 9 and 13.
29. *Ibid.*, 12-13.
30. Huscroft, 59-61 and 88.
31. *Ibid.*, 93.
32. Rokeah, roll 1214.
33. Huscroft, 124-127.
34. Paul, Brand, "Jews and the Law in England, 1275-1290," *English Historical Review* 115 no. 464 (2000), 1151.
35. Stacey, 166.
36. Huscroft 131-132
37. Zefira Entin Rokéah, *Medieval English Jews and Royal Officials*, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2000, roll 904.
38. Huscroft 144-145 and 153-154.
39. Huscroft 151-152.
40. 138.
41. Anna Sapir Abulafia, "Notions of Jewish Service in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century England," in *Christians and Jews in Angevin England: the York Massacre of 1190, Narratives and*

Contexts, ed. Sarah Jones and Sethina Watson, York: York Medieval Press, 2013, 221.

REFERENCES

Abulafia, Anna Sapir. "Jewish-Christian disputations and the twelfth-century renaissance." *Journal of Medieval History* 15 (1989): 105-125.

Brand, Paul. "Jews and the Law in England, 1275-1290." *English Historical Review* 115 no. 464 (2000): 1138-1158.

Cohen, Jeffrey J. "The Flow of Blood in Medieval Norwich." *Speculum* 79 no. 1 (2004): 26-65.

Huscroft, Richard. *Expulsion: England's Jewish Solution*. Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2013.

Hyams, Paul. "The Jewish Minority in Mediaeval England, 1066-1290." *Journal of Jewish Studies* 27 (1974): 270-293.

Jones, Sarah Rees and Sethina Watson (eds.). *Christians and Jews in Angevin England: the York Massacre of 1190, Narratives and Contexts*. York: York Medieval Press, 2013.

McCulloh, John M. "Jewish Ritual Murder: William of Norwich, Thomas of Monmouth, and the Early Dissemination of the Myth." *Speculum* 72 no. 3 (1997): 698-740.

Moore, R.I. *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

Rokéah, Zefira Entin. *Medieval English Jews and Royal Officials*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2000.

Skinner, Patricia. "Viewpoint: Confronting the Medieval in Medieval History: The Jewish Example." *Past & Present* 181 (2003): 219-247.

Stacey, Robert C. "Anti-Semitism and the Medieval English State." *The Medieval State*, ed. J.R. Maddicott and D.M. Palliser. London: Hambledon, 2000.

Thomas, Hugh M. "Portrait of a Medieval Anti-Semite: Richard Malebisse." *Haskins Society Journal* 5 (1993): 1-16.

