

Anti-Jewish Bias in Medieval Christian Art

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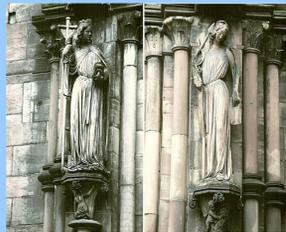
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Introduction

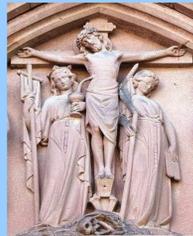
- Christianity dominated Europe by the start of the medieval period, and with the spread of the religion came a strong anti-Jewish tendency.
- Predispositions towards the **systemic degradation** of the Jewish populations of Europe can be seen most strongly in Christian religious art of the medieval period, where Judaism and biblical figures were appropriated to further anti-Jewish thought. Christian art adopted symbols and stories central to Judaism, presenting them with a distortion, which sought to demonstrate the superiority of their faith.
- This is exemplified in the figures of **Ecclesia and Synagoga**, figures allegorical of the Catholic Church and the Synagogue, and in the carvings on the **Cloisters Cross, a 12th century relic**. Christian art, in addition to humiliation of the Jews, sought to propagate the New Testament as the most significant religious text. Diminishing the Torah was a benefit which aided in the spread of Christianity in Jewish communities.

Ecclesia and Synagoga

Ecclesia and Synagoga are figures commonly seen as a part of artistic decoration on Christian cathedrals dating to the medieval period. These two figures were used as an **allegorical representation of Christian and the Jewish faiths**, representing the Church and the Synagogue. The figures were displayed on either side of the crucified Christ or on either side of cathedral doors.



Statues of Ecclesia and Synagoga adorning the south door of the Strasbourg Cathedral in Germany, c. 1240-1275.



A crucifixion scene with Synagoga and Ecclesia found at the Notre-Dame des Douleurs in Alsace, France

Depictions of Ecclesia and Synagoga

- Their presence is more common in locations that were also home to large Jewish populations. Their individual depictions are significant because of the message they portray.
- Ecclesia, representative of the Christian faith, is frequently depicted as **crowned figure**, bearing a staff in one hand, and holding a chalice in the other. When presented in a scene featuring the crucifixion, the chalice is held under the font of blood coming from the spear wound in the side of Christ, representative of the Holy Communion, the most sacred of Christian practices.
- Synagoga presents the opposite; she bears a **broken lance and a Torah scroll**, the grip around the latter loose and nearly allowing the scroll to touch the ground. Further depicted with drooping posture and eyes blindfolded, she does not share the confident stance of her counterpart.

Ecclesia and Synagoga Demonstrate Christian Superiority

- Ecclesia and Synagoga's flanking of the crucifixion scene is a demonstration of the fundamental Christian belief that **Christianity has superseded Judaism as God's chosen faith**. Synagoga's blindfold represents the Jewish communities' 'blindness' to the Christian 'Truth' of God. Such scenes advocated that the Jewish peoples were no longer to be God's chosen people; this honor was now given those who were followers of Christ.
- Synagoga's blindfold is a veil over the eyes that can only be removed once the Jews accept Jesus as the Messiah. Ecclesia's crown and scepter are the symbol of her acceptance of Christ and his divine will. These figures are emblematic of the anti-Judaism of the medieval and early modern periods, serving to propagate the Christian bias against Jewish people.

A stained glass window scene of Christ crowning Ecclesia and removing the blindfold from Synagoga, found in the Basilica of St. Denis outside Paris



Synagoga and the Cloisters Cross

Background of the Cloisters Cross

- The figures of Ecclesia and Synagoga were not the only examples of Christian anti-Jewish artwork from the period. The Cloisters Cross, also known as the Bury St. Edmunds Cross, is another such object. An altar cross, the carved ivory piece is believed to date to the 12th century and provides another example of anti-Judaism in the early modern era.
- The exact locational origin is unknown; some scholarship proposes the Romanesque cross was carved at the Bury of St. Edmunds Abbey in England, while other scholars have argued it is a German crafted piece.
- The carvings on the object depict an assortment of scenes and figures from religious texts, many of which have been distorted to imply anti-Jewish messages.



Front image of the Cloisters Cross

Misrepresentation of the Tree of Life Emphasizes Jewish Passivity

- One such example is a scene which appears to be a **misrepresentation of a verse from the Torah portion Ki Titzei**. The verse in question discusses various laws that govern Jewish civil life. Deuteronomy 21:23 explains that if the Israelites execute a person for a capital crime, they must bury the body immediately rather than leave their remains in public view, showing the method of their execution, as corpses left in the open are offensive to God.
- The front of the cross depicts carvings that resemble a tree. This can be seen in an anti-Jewish light: the Torah is referred to by the Jewish people the **Tree of Life**, which is a figurative term emphasizing the text's centrality to Judaism as the foundation for wisdom and a fulfilling life.
- A scene on the cross depicts the figure of Synagoga, coupled with a carving of the phrase **"cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree"** inscribed on her scroll. This phrase is analogous to one written by Paul in Galatians 3:13.
- Combined with the resemblance of the cross to a tree, this scene can be interpreted as depicting Synagoga, representative of the Jewish people, as an enemy of God. **By distorting the original meaning of the verse from Deuteronomy, this scene denigrates the Torah and implies its passivity.** The combination of the image of Synagoga and the distorted verse further support the theory of the anti-Jewish nature of the Cloisters Cross.

Tree of Life scene with Synagoga on the back medallion of the Cloisters Cross



The Cloisters Cross and the Curse of Cham

Background on the CHAM RIDET Couplet

- Further evidence from the Cloisters Cross supports the postulation that it is an anti-Jewish piece of art. In addition to the presence of Synagoga, additional carvings on the altar cross feature anti-Jewish scenes and phrases.
- A carving, which runs down the length of the cross, compares Cham (or Ham in some translations), son of Noah, to the medieval Jewish populations. This Latin majuscule, a rhyming couplet, features the words: CHAM RIDET DVM NVDA VIDET PVDIBVNDA PARENTIS/ IVDEI RISERE DEI PENAM MORIENTIS, translated as "Cham laughs when he sees the naked private parts of his parent./ The Jews laugh at the pain of God dying."



A depiction of the Curse of Cham from the Nuremberg Chronicle, c. 1493



CHAM RIDET couplet inscribed on the side of the Cloisters Cross

Manipulation of the Story of Cham Promotes Christian Dominance

- This specific biblical story promotes the negative opinions held by Christians as related to the Jewish populations of Europe. The words insinuate that **the curse of Cham has been expanded to become the curse of the Jewish people for their condemnation of Christ**.
- Genesis 9:20-25 provides the source of the tale, describing the events, that resulted in Cham being cursed by his father. As established in the biblical story, Noah – after fallen into a drunken stupor – was found incapacitated and naked in his tent by the aforementioned son. Cham reportedly perpetuates his father's curse by viewing Noah in such a state and neglecting to cover him in order to preserve his modesty.
- In the medieval and early modern periods, Jews and Heretics were often said to be suffering from the curse of Cham, a postulation which has its roots in the writings of St. Augustine. The presence of this couplet, and the story of Cham on the Cloisters Cross, is an obvious anti-Jewish attack on the Jewish population of Europe. The 'Cham Ridet' couplet is one of the largest on the Cloisters Cross, thereby the most legible of the carved inscriptions on the piece. **The manipulation of the Curse of Cham, coupled with the declaration of Christ's victory over death asserts the superiority of the Christian faith over the Jewish faith, and furthers the anti-Jewish sentiments characteristic of the period.**

Conclusion

- These artistic representations of Christian European prejudices towards the Jewish population of Europe provide significant evidence of the anti-Semitism characteristic of the medieval and early modern periods.
- The physical representation of the **systemic disdain of the Jews through artwork** is only one example of the way in which Christians usurped and distorted Jewish figures and tradition to further promulgate their 'superior' beliefs. These artifacts demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of anti-Jewish sentiment.