



Dividing the Christian and Jewish Communities

Depictions of Blood Libel in Literature and Artwork During the Middle Ages in Europe

Abstract

- ◆ Accusations of blood libel originated under false accusations and were perpetuated under mass hysteria throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. This **further divided the Christian and Jewish communities** within Europe. These accusations prevailed against Jews through means of literature and artwork.
- ◆ Began in **1144** with the murder of **William of Norwich** in Norwich, England; Jews of the community were accused however lacking of evidence.
- ◆ **Simonino di Trento** was a two year old boy found murdered in Trento, Italy. His death was also attributed to the local community of Jews. This time Jews were put to trial due to public outcry of boy's death. Lead to canonization of the boy almost 100 years later.

Origins of Blood Libel

The blood libel is a centuries old anti-Jewish accusation that dates back to the early Middle Ages. The story originated on **Holy Saturday, March 25th, 1144** (Saturday before Easter) when a leather worker named William's body was found outside of Norwich. Many found the death mysterious because of the sudden unexpectedness.

A monk, Thomas of Monmouth, suspected local Jews of murdering him in mockery of the crucifixion of Jesus. Few townspeople believed this claim, but a cult manifesting William's death formed. According to myth, each year Jewish leaders choose a country and a town from which a Christian would be stolen and murdered. Five years later, William of Norwich's name was known across Europe.

When a Christian child went missing in the Medieval Ages, **it was not rare for local Jews to be accused**. Jews were tortured and harassed until they confessed to killing children, even if there was no evidence. Christians believed that Jews put blood into Matzah, on the Jewish holiday of Purim. It is believed that **100 blood libels** took place from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, which resulted in massacres of Jews. Historians renounce any claims of Jews ritually killing Christians. Yet, this story is important because it suggests the **foundation of animosity** between the two religious groups.



Depiction of ritual murder of William of Norwich



Depiction of Simonino di Trento's death in stone over church entrance, Trent, Italy

Depictions of Blood Libel in Literature

William of Norwich was a tanner's apprentice in Norwich, England. Rumors spread that his Master had close relations with several Jews in town, which was suspicious to the neighboring Christians. **On Holy Saturday** William's body was found under a tree on the outskirts of town. The body showed excessive signs of abuse and his mother immediately blamed her son's connection to the town Jews.

William's sister claimed she saw a man who had offered William a job under the archdeacon's cook, walk William to a Jew's house in town. This was the last time William was seen alive. Thomas of Monmouth **claims** this was where William was sacrificed. The sheriff of the town prevented any prosecution of the Jews, but the story spread throughout Europe.

Some scholars believe that Jews were blamed for the murder for **money** and **not because of their religious beliefs**, although it did make them an easier target.

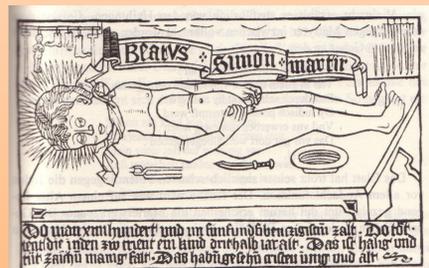


Painting of William of Norwich in Church of St. Peter and St. Paul (1500)

Depictions of Blood Libel in Artwork

The murder of the Christian boy Simonino di Trento, age two, in Italy, was one of the most famous examples of blood libels against Jews during the late Middle Ages. The story of his murder has been told a multitude of times--in the form of various pieces of literature and artwork--each centering on the central theme that a local community of Jewish men and women kidnapped and murdered a Christian boy on **Easter** in order to take his blood for a ritual ceremony. His body was purportedly found in the cellar of a house of the Jewish family accused, however other sources seem to point to an alternate location of the body.

After a series of 'judicious torture', the accused admitted to the crime. Eight of the men were executed, and the rest committed suicide in imprisonment to avoid being killed. Simon of Trent was canonized in **1575**; however the canonization was overturned in **1965** after the Vatican decided that the judicial proceedings were most definitely influenced by a prejudice against the Jews in the community. To this day, it is uncertain who killed Simon of Trent.



Simonino di Trento's Murdered Body. Engraving. Nürnberg (1479)

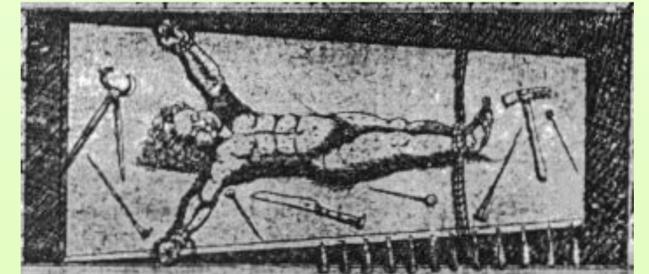


Illustration of the purported Murder of Simon of Trent in Schedel's Weltchronik (1493)

Impact of the Depictions on Communities

Throughout history, there has been a division between the Christian and Jewish communities. In the Medieval Ages, religion was a great source of conflict. Not only was there conflict between the religious groups, but also within Christianity itself. It was a time of discord for the religion as different denominations began to form. Scholars also hypothesize that the accusations may have been originally based on money, not religion.

In the case of William of Norwich, **Jews were not originally held accountable** for the crime. However, overtime, the blame became the Jew's burden to bear, regardless of the reason why. Eventually, the norm became to blame Jews when a young child went missing.



Gabriel of Belostok, Blood Libel in Russian orthodox church (1720)

Depictions of blood libel in literature and art by Christians can be cited as an example of the **further strain** on this already precarious relationship between the two religious groups. In many cases of blood libels, little to no evidence pointed towards the Jewish community. Nonetheless, this group became a scapegoat.

A claim could be made that the blood libel accusations against Jews by Christians could have stemmed from the **discord within the religion** itself or as a way to **make money**. No matter the origin, the accusations of blood libel devastated the relations held by the two religions and left lasting wounds that would not easily heal.

Conclusion

While the reasoning behind accusing the Jews has not been fully determined, historians argue that the blood libel may have been a means of **economic gain** or based in conflict within Christianity itself.

What started as an unbelievable accusation amongst various groups of Europeans, quickly became widespread and accepted. No matter the basis, the allegations of the blood libel are seen as a further division between Christians and Jews that left both communities separated and misunderstood.