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How Tales of Blood Libel Travel:

Depictions of Jews in Fifteenth-Century European World Chronicles

Abstract: This paper considers the correlation between the popularity of Werner Rolevinck's *Fasciculus Temporum* and other world chronicles and the antisemitic tropes and blood libel accusations directed against Jewish communities in later medieval Europe. The *Fasciculus* repeats many stock tales of Jewish ritual murder, including a relatively little-known story from Bern, Switzerland, that Rolevinck may have adapted from the *Berner Chronik*. This paper also considers the connection the first Spanish printing of the *FT*, in Seville in 1480, with the only known Jewish ritual murder accusation in Spain, which dates to 1490, and which in turn may have been instrumental in bringing about the expulsion of all Jews from Spain in 1492.

The topic of Jewish life and antisemitism in medieval Europe has long been heavily studied. Analyzing depictions of Jews in historical chronicles is an invaluable method of learning more about the experiences of Jews in this period and the way the wider Christian world viewed them. As one of the most widely printed world chronicles of the fifteenth century, Werner Rolevinck's *Fasciculus Temporum* (FT), first printed in 1474, has the potential to open new doors of research within the field, allowing for a broader view of how antisemitic conspiracies spread throughout Europe and the part that world chronicles like the *Fasciculus* played.

Many of the references to post-biblical Jews in the *Fasciculus Temporum* focus on acts of violence perpetrated by Jewish individuals or the Jewish community as a whole. In particular, there is an emphasis placed on stories of blood libel accusations. A typical example, on fol. 83r of the *Fasciculus Temporum*, states, "Werner, a holy peasant boy, was martyred by the Jews, and rests in Bacharach. At the same time, in 1287, a certain other boy by the name of Rudolph Filer was martyred by perfidious Jews in Bern; he shines with many miracles."¹ This story of Rudolph

¹ *Fasciculus Temporum* (Johann Prüss, 1490).

is especially interesting, as the only other writing of the period in which this story is mentioned as far as my research has shown is the *Berner Chronik*, a chronicle of the history of Bern written around 1430 by Konrad Justinger, a town chronicler believed to have been born somewhere in Germany who moved to Bern in the late fourteenth century before being commissioned to write a town chronicle in 1420.² In the chronicle, Justinger writes a detailed account of the martyrdom of “Ruof” at the hands of the Bernese Jews. Both the *Fasciculus* and the *Bernese Chronicle* mention the murder of the young boy and the subsequent punishment of the Jews; however, the *Fasciculus* writes that the Jews guilty of the crime were sentenced to death while the *Bernese Chronicle* talks of the expulsion of Jews from the city itself, and the subsequent return of the Jews as the cause of all the town’s ills. Justinger writes, “This has sadly since broken down, and people hold that anything unpleasant that ails the city of Bern, be it excess sexual drive or anything else, comes from the Jews.”³

As noted above, this story is not an oft-repeated accusation of the time, such as the story of Simon of Trent, which is found across many different fifteenth-century chronicles, but only cited in these two locations. This fact, combined with Justinger’s presumed German upbringing, suggests that the *Bernese Chronik* may have been a potential source used by Werner Rolevinck for the historical record of his *Fasciculus*. This connection is still largely tenuous, as this is the only story of the Jews that Rolevinck appears to have pulled from the *Bernese Chronik*, and further analysis of the contents of both texts is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn about a connection between the two documents.

² Bruno Meyer, Review of Hans Strahm, *Der Chronist Conrad Justinger und seine Berner Chronik von 1420*, *Historische Zeitschrift* 233, no. 2 (1981): 411-412.

³ “Wayback Machine.” n.d. Web.archive.org. Accessed June 4, 2022.

https://web.archive.org/web/20070710204444/http://www.digibern.ch/justinger/BernerChronik_1871/04_Justinger_Conrad_Berner_Chronik_Text.pdf. (Translation by Jared Porter)

As mentioned above, the *Fasciculus* contains many of the popular Jewish ritual murder accusations spread in the Middle Ages. Rolewinck included within the *Fasciculus* the stories of William of Norwich,⁴ Simon of Trent,⁵ and Richard of Pontoise⁶ alongside the previously noted stories of Werner and Rudolph. Similar to the story of Rudolph of Bern, these stories are written succinctly, omitting lengthy narratives and details present in some other tellings, notably, for example, in Hartmann Schedel's *Nuremberg Chronicle* (1493), which offers detailed accounts of the purported crimes of the Jewish community alongside graphic artistic depictions of the alleged crimes. This difference in the presentation of stories can be seen in the account of Simon of Trent. On fol. 254v of the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, Schedel recounts the story of Simon of Trent in vivid detail, claiming that the Jews, "cut off its [Simon's] genitals, and then cut a piece out of its right cheek. [...] [H]aving gruesomely collected the blood, they began to sing a hymn of praise."⁷ The retelling of Simon's murder in the *Nuremberg Chronicle* is presented alongside a large, detailed woodblock illustration depicting the Jews' collecting of Simon's blood. Conversely, in the *Fasciculus*, the ritual murder is depicted in a much more abbreviated manner, describing the act only by writing, "Thus the Jews seized the infant Simon, aged 13 months, before the house of his parents and held him in the shape of a cross so they might draw out the blood everywhere from his body."⁸ The specific mention of the cross shape is possibly due to Rolewinck's decision to follow the story of Simon with a tale of a Christian girl experiencing the miracle of stigmata.⁹

As John O. Ifediora notes in his essay "The Blood Libel Legend: Its Longevity and Popularity," once a story about the Jews gained footing with chroniclers in the Middle Ages, the

⁴ FT fol. 77r.

⁵ FT fol. 90r.

⁶ FT fol. 78r.

⁷ "Nuremberg Chronicle." n.d. Digicoll.library.wisc.edu. <https://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=nur>.

⁸ FT fol. 90r.

⁹ FT fol. 90r.

masses tended to believe it without question, regardless of whether or not the tale made any logical sense.¹⁰ In *The Devil and the Jews*, Joshua Trachtenberg notes that many medieval Christians saw “The Jew was the inveterate enemy of mankind. This was the gravamen of the charge against him. And under this head every accusation found an easy acceptance.”¹¹ He later repeats this sentiment when describing the antisemitic backlash during the Black Death:

There was no limit, after this, to the crimes saddled upon the Jews. [...] The practice of laying every calamity at the door of the Jews reached such proportions in these years that the representatives of the Jewish communities in Aragon, meeting in Barcelona in December, 1354, felt constrained to petition the Pope, with the support of the King, to forbid by decree the accusation that the Jews had caused whatever plague or famine or other misfortune befell the people, and the consequent bloody attacks upon them.¹²

The blame placed on the Jews for poisoning wells during the Black Death is also well documented in chronicles of the fifteenth century. In the *Fasciculus*, Rolevinck repeated the accusation, documenting, “Jews throughout all of Germany were burned who had poisoned the water sources and wells, just as many of them had confessed to be the truth.”¹³ Similarly, the *Nuremberg Chronicle* and the *Berner Chronik* both note that the Jews were burned for poisoning the wells, with the *Berner Chronik* even going as far as saying that all the Jews within 100 miles were burned.¹⁴

While entries involving Jews in chronicles across northern Europe in the fifteenth century seem to follow similar patterns and share similar stories, this is not a universal pattern.

Depictions of Jews and expressions of antisemitism manifested differently in different regions.

¹⁰ John Ifediora, “The Blood Libel Legend: Its Longevity and Popularity” (August 31, 2013), 7. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2329378> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2329378>

¹¹ Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983), 13.

¹² Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*, 105-106.

¹³ FT fol. 84v.

¹⁴ “Wayback Machine.” n.d. Web.archive.org. Accessed May 12, 2022.

https://web.archive.org/web/20070710204444/http://www.digibern.ch/justinger/BernerChronik_1871/04_Justinger_Conrad_Berner_Chronik_Text.pdf.

Many Spanish chronicles, for example, treated the topic of Jews in writing differently than German chronicles. While Spain was notoriously anti-Jewish in the fifteenth century leading up to the Spanish Inquisition and Jewish Expulsion of 1492, depictions of Jews in chronicles and other writing of the era tended away from the stories of blood libel and host desecration that were popular in other parts of Europe, and Spanish chronicles tended to focus on the image of the Jew as a trickster or an evil advisor.¹⁵ As Eleazar Gutwirth notes in his article “The Jews in 15th Century Castilian Chronicles,” “Castilian vernacular chroniclers were, for the most part, officials on the payroll of either the crown or the nobility and tried to put forward a certain political view of events. The Jews were not their main concern.”¹⁶ Because many of the Castilian chronicles focus on a royal lineage or were written in service of the crown, there is seemingly not much of a place for stories of acts of violence by Jews.

Additionally, blood libel was not a popular antisemitic conspiracy in Spain during the fifteenth century. Despite being a major source of antisemitic accusations in countries such as Germany and England from the twelfth century on, stories of blood libel did not find their way into Spanish chronicles until the late sixteenth century. Norman Roth states in *Medieval Jewish Civilization: An Encyclopedia* when writing of the lack of tales of Spanish blood libel incidents: “such charges were almost unknown in medieval Spain, but increasing exchanges with, and an influx of immigrants from, France and Germany must have brought stories of alleged incidents in those lands.”¹⁷ As Roth notes, increased interactions with countries which had long-standing traditions of blood libel accusations may have contributed to the only documented accusation in

¹⁵ Eleazar Gutwirth, “The Jews in 15th Century Castilian Chronicles,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 74, no. 4 (1984): 379–396, at 386. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1454277>

¹⁶ Gutwirth, “The Jews in 15th Century Castilian Chronicles,” 380.

¹⁷ Norman Roth, ed., *Medieval Jewish Civilization: An Encyclopedia* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2002), 570. Accessed May 30, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Spain, El Niño de La Guardia, which occurred in 1490, and until the end of the sixteenth century was only mentioned in a single court document and an inquisition transcript.¹⁸

Interestingly, Gutwirth notes that the Castilian chronicler Andres Bernáldez heavily quoted Talmudic passages directly from the only fifteenth-century Spanish printing of the *Fasciculus Temporum*, by Alfonso del Puerto and Bartolomé Segura in Seville in 1480,¹⁹ when writing his *Memorias del reinado de los Reyes Católicos*.²⁰ Laviece Cox Ward notes in her article on the Seville edition of the *Fasciculus* that this printing was particularly noteworthy in Spanish printing history as it was the first printed book to feature illustrations in Spain, as well as having an already established reputation to draw an audience based on prior printings in France and Germany.²¹ It is possible there is a correlation between the popularity of the *Fasciculus Temporum* in Spain after the Seville printing and the trial and execution of Jews for the ritual murder of El Niño de La Guardia. While there is no way to confirm this connection, it does pose an interesting theoretical question, especially in the context of the theory that the case of El Niño de La Guardia was a major contributing factor to the expulsion of Jews from Spain the following year.²²

As the examples above suggest, the dissemination of antisemitic conspiracies through printed European chronicles had the potential to have tangible effects on the world surrounding

¹⁸ Barbara F. Weissberger, “Blindness and Anti-Semitism in Lope’s *El Niño Inocente de La Guardia*,” in *The Conversos and Moriscos in Late Medieval Spain and Beyond*, ed. Kevin Ingram, *Converso and Morisco Studies* 160/2 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 203-217, at 203-204.

¹⁹ “ISTC (Incunabula Short Title Catalogue).” n.d. Data.cerl.org. Accessed June 14, 2022. https://data.cerl.org/istc/_search?query=Fasciculus%20Temporum%20AND%20data.imprint.geo_info.imprint_country_code.orig:%22ES%22&from=0.

²⁰ Gutwirth, “The Jews in 15th Century Castilian Chronicles,” 391-392. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1454277>

²¹ Laviece Cox Ward, “Seville’s First Illustrated Book: The 1480 Edition of the *Fasciculus Temporum* and Its Spanish Printers, Bartholomeo Segura and Alphonso de Puerto,” in *Los Cartujos en Andalucía*, vol. 2, edited by James Hogg, Alan Girard, and Daniel Le Blévec (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1999), 219-243, at 234.

²² William Thomas Walsh, *Isabella of Spain. The Last Crusader* (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1930), 367-368. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.32106000410131&view=1up&seq=11&skin=2021>; Weissberger, “Blindness and Anti-Semitism in Lope’s *El Niño Inocente de La Guardia*,” 203-204.

them. Both the works that the *Fasciculus* drew from and the works that it influenced impacted the worldview of the public who consumed these stories. As Ifediora states:

because the Jews and Judaism were the objects of unrelenting assault by the Church, and were constantly under attack from almost every part of Europe, not for what they [had] done, but for what the masses were told of them, and imagined them to be, the accusations, when repeated often enough, became a truism if not the ‘truth.’ The Church, with its impressive organs of propaganda, managed to shape a particularistic version of unexamined “truths” and asked the unquestioning laity, who could no more question them than they could the religious authority that sanctioned them, to accept and abide by them.²³

The repetitive nature of antisemitic legends, passing from chronicle to chronicle, often written by religious writers, all contributed to the idea that these stories were unquestionably true events, which by extension fed the fear that they could happen again. Thus, the popularity of chronicles such as the *Fasciculus Temporum*, which was reprinted more than 30 times between 1474 and 1500, and was translated into multiple languages, almost certainly had a negative impact on the quality of life for Jews in Medieval Europe.

²³ Ifediora, “The Blood Libel Legend: Its Longevity and Popularity,” 8-9.

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