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978-0-521-48396-4 - The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics, and the Jews in 1840

Jonathan Frankel

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In February 1840 an Italian monk and his servant disappeared in Damascus. Many Jews in that city were charged with ritual murder and tortured until they "confessed." The case turned into a cause célèbre across much of the Western world, even becoming a factor in the major diplomatic conflicts of the period. Jews in many countries groped for ways to save the surviving prisoners in Syria and their own good name. A Jewish delegation led by Sir Moses Montefiore and Adolphe Crémieux was sent to the Middle East in the hope of discovering the real murderers.

The affair produced an explosion of polemics, fantastic theories, and strange projects. Did the Jews really practice human sacrifice? What kind of people was this which had survived almost two thousand years in exile? Was it part of some divine project, or satanic mystery? Had the time finally come for the 'restoration' of the Jewish people to the Holy Land? The religious revival and romanticism of the period provided fertile soil for every speculation.

Jonathan Frankel assesses the affair as a factor in European and Jewish politics, as a chapter in Jewish history and historiography, and as the stuff of radically conflicting myths – myths that eventually fed into the extraordinary events of the mid-twentieth century: the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel. This is the first book since the 1840s to analyze the Damascus affair.

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The Hebrew University of Jerusalem



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For Edith

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Acknowledgments

Nearly all the time that I have been able to salvage for research and writing over the past eleven years has gone into the preparation of this book. During that period I have been the fortunate recipient of much help and kindness from innumerable people – fellow historians and other university colleagues, research assistants, office staff, archivists, and librarians. It is impossible to thank everybody by name, but their readiness to help the research along did much to make this entire enterprise the exhilarating experience that (for the most part) it has been.

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In Jerusalem, I associate my research primarily with The Institute for Advanced Studies, where I have had the great good fortune to be a fellow twice. It was in 1981–2 as a member of the group headed by the late Shmuel Ettinger – its topic was early Jewish nationalism – that I first began to toy with the idea of taking a close look at the Damascus affair and the year 1840. And I completed the first draft of the book during the year 1993–4 as a fellow in the group initiated by Emmanuel Etkes and Israel Bartal. I am glad to have this opportunity to record my thanks for all the assistance and all the true congeniality provided by the Institute, by its directors (then, Aryeh Dvoretzky, now David Shulman), and by its dedicated staff – Shani Freiman and Dalia Avieli (there since my first period as a fellow), as well as Elisheva Yaron, Batia Matalov, and Semadar Danziger.

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My late father, Ernest S. Frankel, who moved from Frankfurt am-Main to England in 1933, followed the early stages of my research with great excitement, pleased to see me taking an interest in Central and Western Europe after so many years involved in the Russian empire. My mother, Ella S. Frankel, has read over the book twice, as has my wife. The book is dedicated to her (Edith Rogovin Frankel); throughout the embarrassingly long period of gestation, she has been a real pillar of support, sharing both the tribulations as well as the many moments of enjoyment and satisfaction involved in such a project: thanks!

I should like to take this opportunity to pay off (for the first time in print) an old debt to Denis Felsenstein who taught us at our grammar school in London – Christ's College Finchley – that the study of history, however exacting, is also exciting.

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Sirākh al-Bārī (Cairo: 1891) (Figs. 2, 6, 24, 25); Myrtle Franklin and Michael Bor, *Sir Moses Montefiore 1784–1885* (London: 1984) (Figs. 14 and 23); David Roberts, *Egypt and Nubia* (London: 1849) vol. 3 (Figs. 17 and 18); Charles W. Wilson (ed.), *Picturesque Palestine, Sinai and Egypt* (London, 1880–4), Division 2 (Figs. 1, 3, 4, 5, 7); Mustafa Talas, *Faṭīr Ṣīhyawn* (Damascus: 1986) (Figs. 21 and 26).

Finally, a word should be said about technical matters. In the body of the book I have tried to avoid unduly complex systems of transliteration; and I have also selected the English version of certain first names (e.g. David not Daud, Harari).

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