

England and the Jews

[England] is . . . where the new anti-Semitic myths of Jewish greed, filth, and diabolism found some of their earliest and most elaborate iconographic representations, on the west front of Lincoln Cathedral . . . and in the famous Cloisters Cross. England was also the first European country to stigmatize its entire Jewish population as coin-clippers and hence criminals . . . England saw the earliest royally sponsored attempts to convert Jews in numbers to Christianity; and in 1290, it witnessed the first permanent expulsion of an entire Jewish community from any European kingdom. Robert Stacey (2000: 165)

[I]s it altogether a coincidence . . . that the Jews were expelled *en masse* from England at the very point of time which witnessed . . . *le genèse de l'état moderne*? Barrie Dobson (1992: 167)

On July 31, 1255, in the city of Lincoln, an eight-year-old boy named Hugh, the son of a widow, Beatrice, fell into a cesspool attached to the house of a prominent member of the Jewish community. There,

the body putrefied for some twenty-six days and rose to the surface to dismay Jews who had assembled from all over England to celebrate a marriage in an important family. They surreptitiously dropped the body in a well away from their houses where it was discovered on 29 August (Langmuir 1972: 461).¹

¹ Carpenter's study reconstructs the events. The records vary in incidental details, as is common with medieval texts – Matthew Paris puts the child at eight years of age (Luard 1872–83 Vol. 5: 516); the Burton annals call him “a tiny boy of nine years” (Luard 1864–69 Vol. 1: 340).

The panicked behavior of the Jews who were gathered in Lincoln for the marriage of Belaset, daughter of Benedict fil' Moses, vocalizes for us – an audience distanced by time and space – the sense of danger and fragility that characterized the quotidian existence of a minority community used to periodic violence from the majority population within which the minority lived, and by which it was surrounded. From their panicky improvisation on discovering the child's body – a response eschewing any recourse to civic authority for help or adjudication – we see the frightened Jews of Lincoln betraying an instant recognition of threat from a medieval technology of power ranged against Jews, a *techne* that scholarship today calls the *ritual murder libel*.

In the libel's standard plot, Jews were believed to seize Christian children of tender years – usually boys on the cusp of childhood – in order to torture, mutilate, and slaughter them in deliberate re-enactments of the killing of Christ, for whose deicide Jews were held responsible. By 1255, ritual murder stories were well sedimented in English culture, circulating a popular fantasy of Christian child martyrdom with proliferating material results, since they installed a series of shrines for the Christian martyred that became public devotional sites around which feelings of Christian community could gather, pool, and intensify, bringing fame and pilgrims to the towns and cities in which the shrines were located.²

This popular anti-Semitic lie that presented Jews as child-killers sheltering within the cities and towns of Europe – which was then Christendom, or the Latin West – was first conjured up in 1144 in England, and thereafter spread to

² Seven English shrines were raised to boy martyrs murdered by Jews, with three – at Norwich, Bury, and Lincoln – surviving to the Reformation. Four had already appeared by the mid-thirteenth century (Langmuir 1972: 463). Hugh's shrine “was the most popular of all the English pilgrimage sites . . . after that of [Thomas] Becket at Canterbury” (Hillaby 1994–96: 96), drawing “extraordinary nationwide interest” (Hillaby 1994–96: 7).

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France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and elsewhere (Hillaby 1994–96: 60–119). First invoked at Norwich in 1144, then at Gloucester in 1168, Bury St. Edmunds in 1181, Bristol in 1183 or 1260, Winchester in 1192, 1225, 1232, and 1244, London in the 1260s and in 1276, and at Northampton in 1279, the ritual murder accusation was the technology of power exercised against the hapless Jews of Lincoln in 1255.³ Consequently, on October 4, 1255, by order of Henry III of England, ninety-one Jews were imprisoned and one person executed for the “martyrdom” of Hugh. On November 22, eighteen more Jews were executed, “drawn through the streets of London before daybreak and hung on specially constructed gallows” (Langmuir 1972: 477–78).⁴ Nineteen Jews were officially murdered by the state through acts of juridical rationality wielding a discourse of power compiled by communal consent over the generations against a minority target.

When state executions of group victims – unfortunates condemned by community fictions that were allowed to exercise juridical violence through law – occurred in the modern period, such official practices have been understood by critical race studies to constitute *de facto* acts of race: institutional hate crimes of a sanctioned, legal kind committed by the state against members of an internal population identified by their recognized membership within a targeted group. In the twentieth century, the phenomenon of legalized state violence occurred most notoriously, of course, under the regime of apartheid in South Africa. Today, Turkey’s systematic targeting of its minority Kurdish

³ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 4:1122, 6:748; Langmuir 1972: 462–63; Stacey 1998: 23; Adler 1939: 185–6; and Hillaby 1994–96. Hillaby (1994–96) discusses the boy martyrs William of Norwich, Harold of Gloucester, Robert of Bury, Stephen of Winchester, and Hugh of Lincoln. Stacey (1998) treats Adam of Bristol, and Langmuir (1984), William of Norwich. See McCulloh (1997) on the accusation’s early years.

⁴ Executions also occurred in Northampton in 1279 (Hillaby 1994–96: 94).

population for persecution offers an example of twenty-first-century-style apartheid and state racism.⁵

In the USA, an example of state violence against a minority race might be Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, which created ten internment camps across seven states on the North American continent for the incarceration of 111,000 Japanese Americans during World War II, on the presumption that Japanese Americans constituted a community of internal aliens who would betray their country, the United States of America, to the enemy nation of Japan in wartime, by virtue of their race.

Were we to consider thirteenth-century enforcements of state power that recognized Jews as an undifferentiated population collectively personifying difference and threat, alongside other state enforcements of homologous kinds occurring in modern time, our aggregated perspective should thus yield an understanding that the legal murder of nineteen Jews in 1255 in England, on the basis of a *community belief* in Jewish guilt and malignity, constituted a racial act committed by the state against an internal minority population that, over time, had become racialized in the European West.

Religious Race: Racializing Jews in the Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century European West

In *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Heng 2018), I posit a modest, stripped-down working hypothesis to help us understand the phenomenon of racialization in premodernity: "*Race*" is one of the primary names we have – a name we retain for the strategic, epistemological, and political commitments it recognizes – attached to a repeating tendency, of the gravest import,

⁵ See Goldberg (2002) for a powerful analysis of the racial state in modernity.

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to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups. Race-making thus operates as specific historical occasions in which strategic essentialisms are posited and assigned through a variety of practices and pressures, so as to construct a hierarchy of peoples for differential treatment. My understanding, thus, is that race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content.

In the European Middle Ages, Jews functioned as the benchmark by which a variety of racial others were identified, measured, scaled, and assessed, as modalities of racial form worked, with a near-monomaniacal attention, to congeal Jews as figures of absolute difference. The precariousness of the lives of medieval European Jews has been amply documented by a vast, still accreting scholarship. Unlike Muslims (who were referred to in the medieval West as “Saracens”), Jews were found not only in the contact zones of the Mediterranean, but also in the towns and cities of the European heartland, comprising a population of infidels living not *out there*, like the international enemy Europe fought through centuries of holy wars, but nestled within the homelands of the European West, lodged there as intimate aliens.

By virtue of the character of their labor, as the financiers of Europe, Jews were ensconced where population density was greatest: in the urban centers of the West, the hubs of economic and cultural life. Intermingling with Christians in neighborhoods, markets, fairs, streets, and homes, medieval Jews formed concentrations of domestic aliens on whose religion and activity the intellectual and theological traditions, and the economic life of Christian Europe were deeply and inextricably dependent.

Christian identity itself, issuing from a religion that was a younger branch in the triad of Abrahamic faiths anchored by the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament, was constructed not only in opposition to Judaism, through the

typological binary structured by the New Testament's posited supersession of the Old Testament, but also *in terms of* Judaism, and in the terms supplied by Judaism, a tension that can be seen to reverberate even at the micrological level in recreational literature: Chaucer's famous Prioress in the *Canterbury Tales* hails the grieving mother of a Christian child putatively murdered by Jews as a "newe Rachel" (Prioress's Tale, l. 627), in the highest form of praise that can be mustered for her, even as the "Hebrayk peple" themselves (l. 560) are vilified, in the same breath, as Satan's people, a "cursed folk of Herodes al newe" (l. 574).⁶

Cordoning off Jews under the sign of an absolute difference efficaciously denied a relationship of dependence and intimacy between Christianity and Judaism, and between Latin Christian Europeans and Jews. Usefully, it established a scale by which other alienness could be calibrated, quantified, and rendered intelligible, furnishing a benchmark for evaluating the deeds and character of other vilified peoples. When the thirteenth-century chronicler Robert de Clari reports the attempt by the bishops of Soisson, Troyes, and Halberstadt, and the Abbot of Loos, to justify the unjustifiable – the invasion and occupation of Greek Christian Constantinople in 1204 by Latin Christians in the catastrophic Fourth Crusade – he explains the churchmen's vindication of the crusaders' actions as supported by the fact that the Greeks were "worse than Jews" ("pieur que Juis") [1956: 72].

To a medieval audience habituated to Jews as personifying absolute difference, historical actions otherwise heinous and incomprehensible – crusaders warring on fellow Christians, not the Islamic foe; the evisceration of a fabled, majestic city that had been the bulwark of Christianity in the East for a millennium; and how to explain the unthinkable – become intelligible

⁶ Chaucer's Prioress demonstrates that ritual murder libel is also intended to recall Herod's slaughter of the innocents, damning an entire race of Jews from Biblical times onward.

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d. E. 159/45, m. 10



e. E. 159/45, m. 12



f. E. 159/47, m. 4 dorse



Figure 1: The “Jewish face.” The King’s Remembrancer Memoranda Rolls, E.159, membranes 10, 12, 4 dorse. Public Record Office, thirteenth century. Reproduced with the permission of the National Archives, U.K.

when the Greek Christian targets of historical atrocity are knotted into comparative relationship with Jews, and their measure accordingly given.

In England, Jews arrived in the wake of the Norman Conquest, possibly invited by William the Conqueror for their financial skills, and became pivotal to the country’s commercializing economy of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by serving, in large part, as England’s bankers.⁷ They constituted an immigrant community identifiable by virtue of religious and sociocultural practices, language, dress, and, occasionally, physical appearance: Caricatures of Jewish facial phenotypes and biomarkers survive in English manuscript marginalia and visual art (figure 1).

⁷ The literature on English Jews is vast. Adler (1939), Richardson (1960), Roth (1941), and Mundill (1998) provide some points of entry. On England’s commercializing economy, see Stacey (1994, 2001); Stacey suggests the Conqueror may have invited Normandy’s Jews to England to avail himself of their economic expertise (1994: 78–82), though there may have been some Jews in England before the Conquest (Golb 1998: 113).

Despite their supposed hypervisibility, however, by 1218 England's Jews were forced to wear badges on their chests to set them apart from the rest of the English population – the earliest historical example of a country's execution of the Catholic church's demand, in Canon 68 of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, that Jews and Muslims be set apart from Christians by a difference in dress. In 1222, 1253, and 1275, English rulings elaborated on this badge – who had to wear it (men and women, then children over the age of seven), its size, color, and how it was to be displayed on the chest in an adequately prominent fashion.

Monitored by the state through an array of administrative apparatuses, and ruled upon by statutes, ordinances, and decrees, England's Jews were required to document their economic activity at special registries that tracked Jewish assets across a network of cities. No business could be lawfully transacted except at these registries, which came to determine where Jews could live and practice a livelihood. Jews needed permission and licenses to establish or to change residence, and by 1275, the *Statutum de Judeismo* (Statute of Jewry) dictated that they could not live in any city without a registry by which they could be scrutinized, and they could not have Christians living in their midst – a thirteenth-century experiment in de facto segregation.

Subjected to a range of fiscal extortions and special, extraordinary taxations (tallages) that milked them to the edge of penury, Jews were barred from marriage with Christians, from holding public office, from eating with Christians or lingering in Christian homes, and even from praying too loudly in synagogues. They were required to wear large, identifying badges on their outer garments (figure 2), and denied the freedom of walking publicly in city streets during Holy Week, and of emigration, as a community, without permission.



Figure 2: English Jew wearing the Jewish badge on his chest in the form of the tablets of the Old Testament. BL Cotton MS Nero, D2, fol. 180, thirteenth century. Reproduced with the permission of the British Library, U.K.

A special subset of government known as the Exchequer of the Jews was created to monitor and regulate their lives, residences, activities, and livelihoods. The constraints on their lives are too numerous to list; some would resonate eerily with the treatment of minority populations in other countries, and other eras, linking into relationship moments of medieval and modern time. In 1290, after a century of laws that eroded the economic, religious, occupational, social, and personal status of English Jews, Jewish communities were

finally driven out of England en masse, marking the first permanent forcible expulsion in Europe.⁸

The distinguished historian of England's Jews, Robert Stacey, observes that England's example was "archetypal" of how Jews were treated throughout the countries of medieval Western Europe (2001: 340), differing mainly by virtue of the earliness, inventiveness, and intensity of English actions (Skinner 2003: 2).⁹ England thus affords an excellent case study of how a minority population is racialized, how mechanisms are produced that deliver racialization, and how the first racial state in the West was created.

Not to recognize the historical behavior of England as racial praxis is thus to de-stigmatize the impacts and consequences of the laws, acts, practices, and institutions enacted against English Jews, so that these cannot be named for what they were, making it impossible to bear adequate witness to the full meaning of the manifestations and phenomena they installed. Without race as a category of analysis, such manifestations and phenomena can be relegated to

⁸ For Canon 68's text, see Schroeder (1937: 584). Roth (1941: 95–6) has summaries of English rulings. On the badge in Europe, see Grayzel (1966: 68–9). England was the first to expel its Jews; in 1496, Portugal was the last (France expelled and readmitted Jews several times, and only permanently expelled them in 1394).

⁹ Spain's persecutions of Jews, because of their scale and lateness, are better known to modernists and race theorists, though Stacey and others note that Spain's unique history — of a polyglot, hybridized social matrix, intermingling Arabs, Berbers, Jews, Visigoths, Basques, and a slew of other communities in mixed languages and cultures, leavened by occupation and warfare from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries — means that Spain is less paradigmatic of the rest of Europe. Stacey enumerates several ways England's Jews paralleled Jewish populations elsewhere in Ashkenazi Europe (2001: 340–42). Edwards sums it up: "it is not possible to separate England from the mainland of Western Europe in the period 1066–1290" (2003: 94). Skinner suggests that "the really exceptional feature of the Jews in England . . . is how intensively they were recorded by the state" (2003: 2).