

**The Missing Accusation: The Circumcision Case of Odard
and the Legacy of St William of Norwich**

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Introduction

The ritual murder accusation has a long and clear history of anti-Judaic sentiment. This accusation was first made in England regarding the death of St William of Norwich in 1144. Yet it is unclear whether the lay community of Norwich actually experienced this cult in an anti-Judaic way: did they in fact associate St William with ritual murder and antagonistic feelings towards their Jewish neighbors? Evidence for his cult in the first 150 years is lacking. I believe, however, that by looking at available information on the cult alongside Jewish-Christian relations in the town, we can see that Christians in the lay community did not associate the cult with ritual murder, nor was it likely associated with strong anti-Judaic sentiment. This is especially clear when one examines the case of Odard, a Christian boy in Norwich who in 1230 was circumcised by Jews. Despite the physical, religiously-motivated nature of the crime, there were no accusations of ritual murder within Norwich. This missing accusation shows that the possibility of ritual murder—and the memory of St William—did not weigh heavily on the laity's mind. If they felt the real presence of St William's cult and the anti-Judaic sentiment associated with it, the Christian lay community of Norwich would associate ritual murder with Odard's case.

Ritual Murder Accusations: Truth or Fiction?

In discussing the anti-Judaic nature of ritual murder accusations, we must first establish if there is any truth to such accusations. This is almost impossible to determine, as noted by Hannah Johnson, due to “biased sources, competing religious views of reality, and a volatile

history of appropriation of the story of ritual murder for political ends.”¹ In other words, both primary and secondary sources are tinged with anti-Judaic sentiment, and at times an over-correction in response to such biases. In the case of William of Norwich, for example, scholars have considered the accusations against Jews to be baseless since the late nineteenth century, primarily in response to anti-Judaic depictions of Jewish deviance.² There are two notable twentieth-century exceptions. The first was written by M. D. Anderson in the 1960s, who concluded that the Jews did in fact kill William. Gavin Langmuir notes, however, that Anderson’s work was overall tinted with anti-Semitic language: at one point she describes twelfth-century Jews, noting “all the subtlety that characterizes their race.”³ Anderson’s argument was then expanded the following decade by William Sharpe, who, while recognizing that ritual murder cannot be fully proven by the extant evidence, nevertheless concluded that Jews kidnapped, sexually assaulted, tortured, possibly crucified, and stabbed William.⁴ In light of such arguments, Langmuir counters that there is no real evidence that Jews ever participated in ritual murder in the medieval period; scholars have only left the possibility open because “they were insensitive to the power of irrationality, reluctant to attack Christian historiography too openly, or concerned to attribute an active role in history to the Jews.”⁵ Ariel Toaff, on the other hand, has suggested that at least a few of the ritual murder accusations might have had some basis of fact in his controversial *Pasque di sangue*; in response, Johnson has suggested that Toaff’s approach is an internal critique of Jewish fundamentalism, past and present.⁶ For the purposes of this paper, it does not matter whether there were any cases in which Jews ritually

¹ Hannah Johnson, *Blood Libel: The Ritual Murder Accusation at the Limit of Jewish History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 3.

² Gavin Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 288.

³ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 296

⁶ Johnson, *Blood Libel*, 132.

murdered Christian children in the medieval period. Even if there were an instance in which an accusation of ritual murder was valid, it could not have been the norm; therefore, such accusations were still overall anti-Judaic in their nature.

Apart from the validity of such accusations alone, there are other reasons that ritual murder accusations were inherently anti-Judaic. The literary structure of such narrative accounts alone suggests anti-Judaic sentiment in their conclusions. For instance, in each instance of ritual murder, the Jews in the end remain threatening as unconverted antagonists; indeed, most accounts of ritual murder depict the protagonists not attempting to convert the Jewish antagonists. In the rare instances that conversion comes up, such as in the description of Adam of Bristol's martyrdom, the Jews are not able to be converted, so deeply does their antagonism run.⁷ Without any hope of redemption in Christian eyes, all Jews in such accounts—guilty parties and other members of the Jewish community—are depicted as fundamentally antagonistic towards Christians and Christianity. In addition to their antagonistic religious presence, Jews in such stories also remain physically threatening as members in a mostly Christian community. Even if certain Jews are prosecuted for the crime of ritual murder, these accounts always present a remaining Jewish population in the town or scene of the crime.⁸ This possibly was intended to leave the reader feeling that Jews were a real and present threat in their lives; even if this were not the intention, it is a possible result of these narratives.

It is thus the case that the accusations were anti-Judaic in their nature. In the case of William of Norwich, at least, the anti-Judaic sentiment of the account is clear and well-attested. Scholars disagree on the exact origins of said sentiment: Langmuir attributes the ritual murder

⁷ H.J. James, "The Limits of Conversion: Ritual Murder and the Virgin Mary in the Account of Adam of Bristol," *Journal of Medieval History* 33 (2007): 45.

⁸ Robert C. Stacey, "From Ritual Crucifixion to Host Desecration: Jews and the Body of Christ," *Jewish History* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 15.

accusation personally to Thomas of Monmouth, while Israel Yuval sees the sentiment as one of Christians as a whole as a result of Christian attacks on Jews in the Rhineland in 1096.⁹ But from wherever the claim originated, it is agreed that the sentiment was there, and one maintained by the Norwich priory and its inhabitants, which produced the account. For the rest of this paper, I will first show that the laity in Norwich had limited involvement in the promotion of St William. Then I will show that their participation in the cult in no way shows that they identified the cult with anti-Judaic sentiment. This is evident in the instances of strong anti-Judaic sentiment experienced in the town during which there is no reference to St William or his cult—even in an instance which chroniclers outside of Norwich were quick to associate with ritual murder.

The Community of Norwich and St William's Cult

First, it is important to note that the laity of Norwich did not create the cult of St William: they were neither the first nor the only ones to venerate William as a saint. As noted above, the *vita* itself was written in Norwich priory by Thomas Monmouth. Like other miracle accounts, it seems that news of William's miracles was transmitted by books and oral reports between monastic houses. Anthony Bale notes that the hagiography relating to ritual murder in England all originated from Benedictine houses; this suggests to him that such stories were products of a Benedictine emphasis on textual production and literacy, and their preoccupation with developing hagiographic culture.¹⁰ Jeffrey Cohen sees the *vita* as the cathedral priory's attempt to imagine and create a united community in a period he describes as post-colonial, split between Norman cultural influences and a not-so-distant Anglo-Saxon past.¹¹ Langmuir considers the *vita*

⁹ John M. McCulloh, "Jewish Ritual Murder: William of Norwich, Thomas of Monmouth, and the Early Dissemination of the Myth," *Speculum* 72, no. 3 (Jul. 1997): 699.

¹⁰ Anthony Bale, "Fictions of Judaism in England before 1290," in *Jews in Medieval Britain: Historical, Literary, and Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Patricia Skinner (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2003), 133.

¹¹ Jeffrey Cohen, "The Flow of Blood in Medieval Norwich," *Speculum* 79, no. 1 (Jan. 2004): 45

to be part of Norwich's campaign to promote a cult for economic gain, with each subsequent translation of the saint's relics a further tactical play for popularity.¹² In any case, it is agreed that the cult was not a product of public imagination, but was rather the product of Norwich's Benedictine community.

While the evidence does not fully portray the degree to which the townspeople of Norwich participated in the cult, it certainly does not suggest that the laity were active in venerating St William in the 150 years following his death. The only available evidence for demographics of participants in the cult comes from miracle stories. These were compiled by Monmouth over two decades at William's shrine, where he diligently recorded miracles experienced or reported by pilgrims, as well as their place of origin. This only provides us with information on the pilgrim population from 1150 to around 1172, but still gives some revealing information.¹³ Of the 115 miracles reported between 1150 and 1172, more than half of the pilgrims featured in the stories lived less than ten miles from the shrine. This number would suggest that locals participated heavily in the cult; but the evidence changes depending on the period when the miracles were reported. In the miracles recorded in 1150-51, the average distance between a pilgrim's village and the shrine was 23 miles; moreover, two thirds of the pilgrims concerned with the cult were from Norwich itself. From the years 1151-1154, this distance increased to 32 miles, with less pilgrims coming from the town. From 1154-1172, the average distance increased to 45 miles, and only one third of the pilgrims actually lived in Norwich itself. It is apparent from both average distance as well as the proportion of pilgrims from Norwich that during these early decades of the cult, outsiders from further-reaching places

¹² Gavin Langmuir, "Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder," *Speculum* 59, no. 4 (Oct. 1984): 839.

¹³ All information on the demographics of pilgrims comes from Ronald Finucane, *Miracles and Pilgrims: Popular Beliefs in Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 161-162.

tended to show up more to St William's shrine, while pilgrims from the town diminished in numbers. This shows a constantly declining level of participation on the part of the townspeople of Norwich in their own cult.

While this evidence shows that townspeople of Norwich did not create the cult of St William, nor did they seemingly contribute to its veneration in the first few decades of its growth, it unfortunately does not tell us about how the townspeople participated in the cult in the roughly 100 years up to the expulsion of the Jews in 1290. Shrine records can reveal amounts donated to William's shrine, but they do not tell us anything about who these pilgrims were, or whence they came. Furthermore, no shrine records prior to 1272 are extant.¹⁴ This was due to an attack on the monastery by the townspeople in that same year. The attack was one of the most violent assaults on a religious institution in medieval England. On August 11th, after a period of arguments between the townspeople and the tenants of the priory, the townspeople attacked the cathedral and the attached priory, resulting in extensive damages to both the cathedral and the monastic buildings, as well as the deaths of thirteen people associated with the priory. The resulting retribution was swift and dramatic: thirty townspeople were hanged, more were excommunicated, and the town was condemned to pay the enormous sum of 2000 pounds towards repairing the damages.¹⁵ The attack on the priory was the result of growing economic tensions between the townspeople and the priory; such tensions perhaps suggest that the townspeople would have been reluctant to contribute to, or even to visit, the shrines within the cathedral. The shrine records from 1272-1300 certainly show limited offerings to the shrine; indeed, numbers were so low that the records did not tally offerings to St William's shrine

¹⁴ Ben Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1998), Table 5, 218.

¹⁵ Norman Tanner, "The Cathedral and the City," in *Norwich Cathedral: Church, City and Diocese, 1096-1996*, ed. Ian Atherton et. al. (London: The Hambledon Press, 1996), 259-61.

separately from those to the high altar until after 1301.¹⁶ The low offerings in the late thirteenth century, combined with evidence of tension between the laity and priory in Norwich in the preceding decades, all suggest that perhaps the laity was not actively visiting St William's shrine in the cathedral.

Compared to information available on the laity, evidence from the priory suggests that the memory of St William was certainly still alive in the monastic community. The Customary of Norwich, written from 1258 to 1265, features a feast day for St William to be celebrated on March 24th.¹⁷ The Customary heavily borrows from an Ordinal composed at Fécamp in Normandy, the house after which the Norwich priory was modeled.¹⁸ Since the feast was one originated in Norwich, it naturally was not copied from the Fécamp Ordinal. But perhaps more surprisingly, the feast of St William liturgically does not mirror anything celebrated in the Fécamp Ordinal on March 24th; instead, the liturgy for St William was comprised of antiphons and readings taken from various celebrations from the original Ordinal. For example, the first antiphon for Vespers on William's feast, *sanctum et verum*, appears as an antiphon on three feast days in the Fécamp Ordinal: the feast of St Stephen the Protomartyr (December 26), the feast of Holy Innocents (December 28), and the feast of All Saints (November 1).¹⁹ The first antiphon for Lauds, *corpora sanctorum*, only appears in the feast of Gervase and Protase (June 19)—two other child martyrs. Overall, it seems that the monks of Norwich carefully selected readings from other feast days celebrating martyrs; in the case of the feast of Holy Innocents and the martyrs

¹⁶ Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines in Medieval England*, Table 5, 218.

¹⁷ *The Customary of the Cathedral Priory Church of Norwich: Ms. 465 in the Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge*, ed. J.B.L. Tolhurst (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1948), 73.

¹⁸ Richard W. Pfaff, *The Liturgy in Medieval England: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 204.

¹⁹ *The Customary of the Cathedral Priory Church of Norwich*, 73; *The Ordinal of the Abbey of the Holy Trinity Fécamp: Fécamp, Musée de la Bénédictine, MS. 186*, ed. David Chadd (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press for the Henry Bradshaw Society, 2000).

Gervase and Protase, the monks chose readings specifically from feast days celebrating killed children. Such careful selection suggests an active veneration of St William amongst the monastic community.

All of this shows that the townspeople were not actively promoting in the cult, and that the promotion and continued celebration centered in the Norwich priory. The above evidence does not, however, necessarily show that the people, in their lack of participation, were also not associating the cult with anti-Judaic sentiment. This become clear when one looks at instances of violence towards Jews in Norwich. First, the massacre in 1190, while clearly anti-Judaic, did not seem to relate to the cult of St William or accusations of ritual murder. The final legal case discussed further proves that anti-Judaic sentiment in the town was not related to the cult of St William. In the extraordinary case of Odard in 1230, the townspeople of Norwich are presented with a case that could so easily be associated with St William and ritual murder. Yet the records, which are quick to blame and antagonize the Jews, make no such connection. While the anti-Judaic sentiment is clear in the case and resulting outbreaks of violence, this sentiment is not connected back to William's cult, suggesting that the cult was not active in the laity's imagination.

Jews and Christians in Norwich, 1190-1290

In discussing violence towards Jews in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Norwich, it is helpful to examine how the Jewish population lived in the town alongside Christians. Unfortunately, it is hard to determine the exact demographics of Norwich at this time. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, years after the Jews' expulsion in 1290, the overall population of Norwich was probably around 8-10,000.²⁰ Vivian Lipman estimates that the Jewish

²⁰ Vivian D. Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich* (London: Jewish Historical Society of England, 1967), 35-36.

population of Norwich never exceeded 200 by much, and by the time of the Expulsion was probably around 50-60.²¹ It is also difficult to say exactly where the Jewish population lived in Norwich. There clearly was an area in town where most Jews lived, and it was commonly regarded as their quarter. On the other hand, there was no requirement in medieval England for Jews to all live in a particular area, and there is certainly evidence in Norwich of Jews both owning property and living outside of the predominantly Jewish area.²² It is therefore likely that while most Jews lived near the marketplace and castle (as was characteristic of medieval English Jewish communities), they were by no means isolated from the Christian community in the town.

While there were instances of violence towards Jews in Norwich in the decades after the death of St William, there is no reason to believe that these instances were directly related to his cult. The Jews were not expelled from Norwich until 1290; and even in the aftermath of St William's death, there was a Jewish community present within Norwich until the England-wide ban.²³ This meant that even in the earliest and most active years of the cult, the laity and secular officials of the town allowed Jews to remain in their community. The main instance of violence towards Jews in Norwich occurred in 1190, when anti-Jewish feeling spreading throughout England led to an outbreak of attacks in Norfolk county, quickly leading to Norwich itself. Ralph de Diceto described the massacre in his contemporaneous chronicle: "Many of those who were hastening to go to Jerusalem determined first to rise against the Jews before they invaded the Saracens. Accordingly, on February 6th, all the Jews who were found in their own houses at Norwich were butchered; some had taken refuge in the castle."²⁴ The massacre in Norwich was

²¹ Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich.*, 38.

²² *Ibid.*, 15-16.

²³ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁴ Ralph de Diceto, "Slaughter of the Jews at Norwich, Stamford, York, and St Edmunds," in *The Jews of Angevin England: Documents and Records*, ed. and trans. Joseph Jacobs (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1893), 112.

directly related to similar ones throughout England, most notably in London the previous September. This dramatic wave of violence was not tied to accusations of ritual murder; rather, it was the result of pro-Christian fervor brought on by crusading, as well as accusations of Jews giving the “evil eye” towards Richard I during his coronation.²⁵

Although there was likely a substantial loss to the Jewish population in Norwich, no evidence apart from de Diceto’s chronicle says that all the Jews were killed in this attack. Furthermore, Lipman suggests that their numbers were quickly strengthened by the settlement in Norwich of Jews from smaller nearby communities, no doubt looking for strength in numbers.²⁶ Overall, the Jewish population did not dip too dramatically for long in Norwich as a result of these attacks. It is also unclear whether the townspeople of Norwich participated in the massacre. De Diceto notes in his account that “wherever the Jews were found they were massacred by the hands of Crusaders, unless protected by the town authorities.”²⁷ This suggests that even if the townspeople were not actively involved in the massacre, they allowed it to occur: only the Jews taking refuge in the castle were protected. Still, no further attack happened in the following decades, even as the Jewish population most likely grew due to migration. It therefore seems that the townspeople had, in fact, no strong antagonism against the Jewish population, either in relation to the death of St William or for any other reason. Rather, the 1190 attack on the Jews of Norwich was inspired and incited by external factors, such as the similar attacks occurring throughout the country.

²⁵ Robin R. Mundhill, *The King’s Jews: Money, Massacre and Exodus in Medieval England* (London: Continuum, 2010), 75.

²⁶ Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich*, 58.

²⁷ Ralph de Diceto, “Slaughter of the Jews at Norwich, Stamford, York, and St Edmunds,” 112.

Odard's Circumcision Case and The Missing Accusation

The case of the circumcision of Odard, and the lack of accusation of attempted ritual murder within Norwich records, is further evidence that the anti-Judaic nature of St William's cult was not overly present in the minds of the townspeople. On the vigil of St Giles in 1230, the five-year old boy Odard, son of Benedict, was taken to a local Jew's household while walking in his neighborhood.²⁸ Here, the boy was circumcised and renamed Jurnepin by the Jews.

Apparently, this name was chosen when his kidnapers placed the foreskin in a basin of sand and fished it out with little sticks: the one who found the foreskin thus renamed him. The boy was then held for a day and night before he either escaped or was released from Jewish custody. A local woman named Matilda then found Odard by the bank of the nearby river, where he was crying and claiming that he was a Jew. Unaware of the boy's identity, Matilda took the boy home and cared for him that evening. Representatives of the Jewish community came the following day to reclaim the boy. They again called him Jurnepin, and the boy at first admitted that this was his name. Both the Jews and Odard were unaware that Benedict, the boy's father, had been called by a local woman who had recognized the child, and was hiding in the other room. Benedict then emerged, contradicting the Jews; and as the boy saw his father, he gave his real name. Although the Jews complained to the Constable of the castle of Norwich, the boy was returned to his father the following day. He was immediately brought before the Official of the Archdeacon and the Coroners, who confirmed that the boy had been recently circumcised.

There is no mention of the case in any records until 1234-5, when Benedict issued an indictment against thirteen Jews in Norwich. Ten of the Jews were present and promptly arrested. The preliminary hearing was before the Justices, the Prior of Norwich, the Dominicans

²⁸ Summaries of the case are found in both Rye, *The Norfolk Antiquarian Miscellany, Part 2*, 313-318; and Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich*, 59-62.

and Franciscans, and others of the clergy and laity. This hearing found twelve of the thirteen Jews guilty. The next stage probably took place in London, before the King, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the greater part of the barons and bishops. Here it was decided that “because no similar case had ever before occurred in the King’s Court, and because it primarily belonged to God and Holy Church, as circumcision and baptism were matters belonging to faith... the matter was handed over to the holy Church to inquire into by the Ordinary of the district.”²⁹ The Jews at this time paid the King a gold coin to have the boy examined by a royal medical examiner, who once again confirmed that the boy had been circumcised. After this, there is no record of an official trial until 1240, after which it seems that at least three, and possibly four, of the Jews were hanged.

This is the information provided by the official indictments and lay records of the trials. Nothing in the contemporary evidence suggests that this was a case of attempted ritual murder, and Walter Rye notes that the supposition that the circumcision was only a prelude to a crucifixion is “manifestly erroneous.”³⁰ The original indictment, which describes in detail the circumcision of the boy, does not describe any attempted crucifixion. The only possible mention is that the crime occurred “both as a felony and in disdain of the Crucifixion [or Crucified One] and of Christianity.”³¹ Even this does not suggest that an attempted crucifixion took place: in the eyes of the Church, circumcision alone would be a felony and an insult to Christ. Common sense likewise rejects the possibility; if thirteen Jewish adults wanted to crucify a 5-year old boy, then surely they would have been able to do so without the boy escaping.

²⁹ Rye, *The Norfolk Antiquarian Miscellany*, Part 2, 316.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 319.

³¹ Hoc nequitia fecit et in felonia et in despectu Crucifixi et Christianitatis. Rye, *The Norfolk Antiquarian Miscellany*, Part 2, Appendix I, 322.

The two accounts of the circumcision case that make accusations of attempted ritual murder were both produced outside of Norwich. Both were written by chroniclers at St Albans. The first was written by Roger de Wendover in his *Flores historiarum*, a chronicle of England written from 1216-1235. De Wendover provides only a few sentences describing the case in his section on the year 1235:

Regarding the Jews, whom circumcised a Christian boy... And in that time seven Jews were brought in front of the King in Westminster regarding a boy in Norwich who, once stolen, they circumcised and hid for a year out of sight from the Christians, wishing to crucify him during the solemnities of Paschal. But after the fact they were convicted in the presence of the King and they confessed the truth of the matter, and thus by the King's power they remained in prison.³²

Most of the information provided in this description is contradicted by the official indictment. The most erroneous detail is that the boy was held for a year; the indictment clearly states the boy was held for a day in a local Jew's home. Moreover, de Wendover's account states that the circumcision happened in Paschal season, when it in fact happened on August 31st, the vigil of St Giles.³³ It is possible that de Wendover is conflating this account with that of William of Norwich, whose body was found on Holy Saturday. As de Wendover died in early 1236, he did not live to see the end of the trial. In his description of the Jews' second hearing in London, he again is incorrect in stating that the Jews confessed their guilt. Indeed, the fact that the Jews paid the King a gold coin to once again examine the boy suggests that they doubted the circumcision took place: it is highly doubtful that they would confess to a crime they were not positive had even occurred. The vague and inaccurate nature of the information in de Wendover's account

³² De Judaeis, qui puerum Christianum circumciderunt...et eodem tempore septem Judaei adducti sunt coram rege apud Westmonasterium, qui apud Norwicum puerum quendam, quem furatum jam per annum a conspectu Christianorum absconderant, circumciderunt, volentes eum crucifigere in solennitate Paschali; sed super hoc facto convicti in regis praesentia confessi sunt rei veritatem, et sic de vita sua de membris in ipsius voluntate sub carcerali custodia remanserunt. Roger de Wendover, *Flores historiarum*, Rolls Series, vol. iii, 101-102.

³³ The Norwich Customary confirms that, as today, the Feast of St Giles was celebrated on September 1st in thirteenth-century England. *The Customary of the Cathedral Priory Church of Norwich*, 167.

suggests that perhaps he only heard rumors and secondhand information about the case. Some details, like the time of year when the crime took place, suggests that he conflated details of this case with those of William of Norwich.

The second account to mention attempted ritual murder is that of Matthew Paris, successor of Roger de Wendover as official recorder of events at St Albans. His *Chronica majora* builds on de Wendover's *Flores historiarum*. The description of the case was written during or after 1240; unlike de Wendover, Paris wrote his account with knowledge of the official trial and its outcome. His treatment of the circumcision case is much more detailed, and will therefore be quoted in its entirety:

Regarding a certain boy who the Jews circumcised at Norwich and detained for crucifixion... Around that time, the Jews near Norwich circumcised a Christian boy, and once circumcised they renamed him Jurnepin. And they detained him for crucifixion as an insult to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The father of the boy, from whom the Jews deceitfully kidnapped the boy, after diligently seeking his son finally found him imprisoned in the Jews' custody. With loud shouts he identified his son, whom he had believed to be dead, wickedly detained in the room of a Jew. When he brought the contrived crime to the attention of Bishop William Raleigh, a prudent and well-considered man, and to the notice of other great men, all the Jews of that city were arrested, lest through the idleness of the Christians such an insult to Christ may have gone unpunished. And when they wished that the case be considered by royal authority, the Bishop said: "These matters pertain to the church, and ought not to be brought to the royal court, since the investigation regarding circumcision and an injury to faith is exposed." Four of the Jews were then convicted of the aforementioned crime; first they were dragged by the tails of horses, and finally they were hanged at the gallows, where weeping they breathed their last breath.³⁴

³⁴ De quodam puero quem Judaei circumciderant apud Norwicum et reservabant ad crucifigendum: Circa illa tempora, apud Norwicum circumciderant Judaei unum puerum Christianum, et eum circumcisum vocaverunt Jurninum. Reservabant autem illum ad crucifigendum in contumeliam Jesu Christi crucifixi. Pater autem pueri, a quo Judaei puerum furto subtraxerant, puerum filium suum diligenter quaesitum tandem invenit in custodia Judaeorum inclusum. Et clamoribus exaltatis indicavit filium suum, quem credidit amisisse, in Judaei cujusdam conclavi nequiter reservatum. Cum autem ad notitiam episcopi Willelmi, scilicet de Raele, viri prudentis et circumspecti, et aliorum magnatum pervenisset tantum scelus excogitatum, ne per ignaviam Christianorum tanta Christi injuria pertransiretur inulta, capti sunt Judaei omnes ipsius civitatis. Et cum se vellent auctoritate regali contueri, ait episcopus: "haec ad ecclesiam spectant, non ad regalem curiam pertractanda, cum de circumcissione et de fidei laesione quaestio ventiletur." Judaeorum igitur quator super praedicto scelere convicti, prius ad caudas equorum distracti, tandem in patibulo suspensi, vitae reliquias flebiliter exhalaverunt. Matthew Paris. *Chronica majora*. Rolls Series, vol. iv, 30-31.

When compared to de Wendover's account, it is clear that Paris added to it extensively. Certain details reveal that Paris had some reliable information on the case. First, the use of the boy's given name immediately indicates that Paris had more intimate knowledge of the case than de Wendover. His quote of the Bishop regarding the Church's authority in the case and "injury of faith" is reminiscent of the statement in the indictment that the case "primarily belonged to God and Holy Church, as circumcision and baptism were matters belonging to faith."³⁵ This suggests that Paris heard reports of the actual proceedings, either from the record or from someone present. The role of Benedict, the boy's father, in this account is also reminiscent of the official indictment. While he did not discover the boy in the Jews' home, as stated by Paris above, he did identify the boy in Martha's home in the Jews' presence. Paris' account of the case's outcome is worth noting, as other sources cannot deny it and at least partially support it. It is clear that three or four Jews were hanged for the circumcision; there is not, however, any mention in the indictment of torture prior to their execution. While the accusation of ritual murder is still entirely unattested in the original records, Paris wrote his account with some real knowledge of the details of the case, and some of the information in it can be relied upon as historically accurate.

Perhaps the most interesting part of Paris' account is the description of the Jews' arrest. He is incorrect in stating that all the Jews in Norwich were arrested for the crime: but his perceived motivations for the arrest are revealing. Paris suggests that the Bishop of Norwich's involvement in the indictment was in response to the idleness of the Christians who were either uninterested in the case or unwilling to prosecute (*ignaviam Christianorum*). It is hard, however, to imagine that a Christian population would be reluctant to prosecute a Jewish minority in a case

³⁵ Factum illud primo tangit deum et sanctam Ecclesiam eo quod circumciso et [baptismus?] sunt pertinentia ad Fidem. From Rye, *The Norfolk Antiquarian Miscellany, Part 2, App I, 325*.

of attempted ritual murder. It is even harder to imagine a diocese not prosecuting such a case happening in the city of its cathedral priory. Even without the evidence from the indictment, this delay and reluctance in prosecution suggests that, at least in the opinion of the Christian community of Norwich, the case was not one of attempted ritual murder. It further suggests that the case was not a black-and-white circumcision of a Christian child.

What about the case led to the slow and reluctant indictment of the Jews? Rye believes that there was a long gap between the circumcision and the indictment because the boy was the child of Christian converts. The Jews therefore were not trying to convert a Christian child, but were instead determined to “mark him as one of his own race, and save him from the fate they thought awaited his perverted parents.”³⁶ While there is little information about the family, the name of the father Benedict was not an unknown name within the Jewish population: there were at least a few Jews named Benedict within Norwich.³⁷ His profession as a physician also suggests to Rye that perhaps he was at one point a Jew. Rye therefore concludes that the boy’s father was likely unwilling to prosecute, and was eventually forced to do so by the clergy, who “seem to have been actively concerned in the prosecution.”³⁸

While this evidence is by no means conclusive, it fits the details of the case. It is hard to imagine a Jewish population kidnapping a Christian boy of two Christian parents, circumcising him, and then claiming him as ‘their Jew.’ A desire to forcibly convert Christian children is not popularly recorded in this period of England either by Jews or by imaginative, fearful Christians—Christians were much more likely to fear ritual murder than forced conversion to Judaism. And even if such a desire existed within a Jewish population, one can imagine that the

³⁶ Rye, *The Norfolk Antiquarian Miscellany, Part 2*, 320.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 320.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

fear of retribution would be too great for Jews to act. Paris' account of the case also strengthens Rye's suggestion that the boy was of Jewish blood; one would imagine that a Christian population would be quicker to prosecute if Jews circumcised one of their own. The "idleness of the Christians" recorded by Paris, and the slowness of the Bishop to prosecute as seen in the timeline of the case, both suggest that while the boy was indeed Christian, he was somehow not Christian enough for the town to be properly enraged.

After the indictment, the town's feelings towards the Jewish population seems to have changed. In 1235, Jewish houses were set on fire in two separate occasions. In each instance, the sheriff asked the bailiffs of the town to consider ways and means of resolving the situation; both times the bailiffs did nothing about it, with the result that the Jews were subsequently maltreated and beaten by some of the townspeople.³⁹ When the King came through Norwich in March 1235, the townspeople complained to him that a greater number of Jews than usual were living in the city and that Jews who "were of ill fame" were coming to Norwich from other communities.⁴⁰ There were then similar outbreaks of violence in 1238, when 31 men and women were arrested and detained in Norwich prison for damaging and pillaging Jewish houses.⁴¹ While it is not clear whether this instance of violence also relates to the circumcision case, the chronology strongly suggests that such events were part of a wave of violence triggered by the case. Once the case came into public eye with the first hearing in 1235, it most likely incited outbreaks of anti-Judaic sentiment. Yet the records written in 1235-1240 describing the events—records that are part of that anti-Judaic sentiment—still made no reference to ritual murder or the martyrdom of St William the century prior. For the townspeople partaking in the case, the death of William a

³⁹ Lipman, *The Jews of Medieval Norwich*, 62.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

century prior was not present enough on their minds—at least, the anti-Judaic sentiments of it were not.

Conclusion

While the records are hazy on many details of this case, some are certain. It is clear that in 1230, the Jews of Norwich circumcised a Christian child over whom they felt some claim. His father, aided by the bishop, pressed charges against the Jews after a few years' delay. This led to public hearings and trials of the case, resulting in waves of violence towards the Jews in Norwich, as well as the eventual execution of three or four of the Jews. The delay in prosecution suggests the complicated nature of the crime, possibly due to Benedict's status as a Christian convert. The evidence, all compiled between 1235-1241, definitively presents the case as a forced circumcision of a Christian child, no matter the father's possible background. This case is remarkable because of the accusation that could have been made, but never was. Despite the physical, religiously-motivated attack that occurred against a child, there is no mention within Norwich's records of attempted ritual murder. For the Christian laity, the ritual murder of St William was far enough removed from popular memory not to feature in the evidence of this case. The only mention of ritual murder appears in the writings of distant Benedictine monks, connected to Norwich through literary and oral networks, but with no ties to the town of Norwich itself.

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