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Blood Libel in the 21st Century: Tracing the Development of the Antisemitic Ritual Murder
Accusation Through Visual Culture

In 2019, in a quiet neighborhood outside of San Diego, California, John Earnest walked into the Poway Orthodox synagogue on a busy Saturday morning – the congregation was celebrating both Shabbat and the last day of Passover – carrying an assault rifle.¹ He shouted antisemitic slurs and began firing the gun, as Rabbi Yisroel Goldstein attempted to speak with him and calm him down. By the end of the rampage, sixty-year-old Lori Gilbert-Kaye had been killed, and three others, including Rabbi Goldstein, had been injured.² After the shooter was taken into custody, his manifesto was discovered on the website 8chan, an unregulated internet space often associated with conspiracy thinking. In it he described himself as the avenger of Simon of Trent, a little boy whose fifteenth-century death was used to continue the anti-Jewish blood libel narrative that began in 1144 in Norwich, England.³ Earnest's manifesto combined elements of traditional anti-Judaism, rooted in religious conflict, with the conspiracist world view that has grown in white supremacist and right-wing circles online in the past decade.⁴ This overt act of contemporary antisemitic violence recalling a fifteenth-century one (rather than any of the many, perhaps more well-known, more recent instances of global antisemitism), may seem unexpected, but in fact is a dramatic example of the repackaging of the medieval Jewish ritual murder accusations for the modern conspiracy consumer.

In recent years the QAnon conspiracy has gained ground as a worldview, which includes the belief that world leaders are torturing children in secret underground centers around the

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/27/us/poway-synagogue-shooting.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Caumanns and Önnersfors, 454. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-origins-of-blood-libel/>.

⁴ Caumanns and Önnersfors, 454.

world in order to harvest the chemical adrenochrome from their blood.⁵ Examining both the visual culture of the medieval groups that believed that Jewish people were ritually murdering children, and the images produced by followers of QAnon and adrenochrome harvesting theories allows us to track the development of the blood libel narrative and apocalyptic anti-Jewish thinking from its source to its contemporary manifestation.⁶ Though they have their differences, the images produced by both groups reveal the fact that the two conspiracies are in fact one continuous narrative based on hatred and fear. This essay will begin by examining two of the original instances of “ritual murder” from the Middle Ages, Robert of Bury, and Simon of Trent, and the images that were produced in the wake of their deaths. I will then move to look at an example of a recent meme about adrenochrome harvesting and use this to discuss the influences of medieval antisemitism on contemporary conspiracy culture and the visual sources related to it. While the most overt and blatant forms of ideological antisemitism were no longer accepted in the public sphere in most of Europe after the Holocaust, antisemitism as a cultural structure remains in place through today.⁷ These images serve to deepen our understanding of how such systems remain, and their study is a vital step in the process of deconstructing the historical narrative and encouraging change.

The blood libel or ritual murder accusation refers to the virulently antisemitic story that Jews across Europe would kidnap, torture, and violently murder Christian children to use their blood for medicinal purposes, and in some versions of the story, as an ingredient in the Passover matzah.⁸ The true origins of the story may never be known, but the first written material which refers to the rumor was produced in 1170 by Thomas of Monmouth, a Benedictine monk in Norwich, England.⁹ Monmouth’s text, *The Life and Miracles of Saint William of Norwich*, describes the story of a young boy, William, whose body was found in a forest outside of the city of

⁵ <https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-the-dark-virality-of-a-hollywood-blood-harvesting-conspiracy/>.

⁶ Caumanns and Önnersfors, 451.

⁷ Simonsen, 364.

⁸ Rose, 1.

⁹ Ibid. Lipton, 110.

Norwich in 1144.¹⁰ When his body was first discovered, it was of very little concern to the population; the city was embroiled in civil war, and death was not uncommon.¹¹ According to the hagiography, William, from a family with close ties to the Norwich cathedral, had been working for the local Jews the week of Easter, when Passover began, as the two holidays tend to coincide.¹² His employers began to torture him in a perverted imitation of Christ's passion, pricking him with thorns, binding his feet and piercing his left side until he bled out.¹³ While William's family immediately blamed the Jews of Norwich for his death, the drama went mostly unnoticed by the community until it was employed at the trial of a Christian knight who killed his Jewish moneylender, catching the eye of Thomas of Monmouth.¹⁴ William's story became that of a Christian martyr.¹⁵

When *The Life and Miracles of Saint William of Norwich* was released in the 1170s the Jews of England were enjoying a period of peace and prosperity in the country, though they were an extreme minority, only having lived in England since the Norman Conquest in 1066.¹⁶ However, after this first instance, blood libel caught on in England and across Europe, and led to many instances of torture, mass expulsion, and the extermination of Jewish communities across the continent.¹⁷ One of the first major instances of a ritual murder accusation after the publication of *The Life and Miracles of Saint William of Norwich* came only eleven years later in 1181, from the neighboring city of Bury St. Edmunds, and is causally tied to the massacre of fifty Jews, and the expulsion of the survivors from the city in 1190.¹⁸

Most sources on the "ritual murder" of Robert of Bury date from the late Middle Ages, indicating the success of what most scholars believe to be a campaign by the church in Bury to

¹⁰ <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-origins-of-blood-libel/>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lipton, 111. Rose, 6.

¹⁷ Rose, 7.

¹⁸ Ibid, 189, 191.

create a martyr to rival William of Norwich.¹⁹ One of these sources is a fifteenth-century illustration that was pasted onto folio 44r in Getty Ms. 101, an illustrated *Life of Christ* that was created around 1190 (figure 1).²⁰ The four paneled image was added into the manuscript at the place in the text often devoted to the Massacre of the Innocents, and it tells the abbreviated story of Robert's death.²¹ The first frame shows a woman holding the boy, who has already been martyred, as indicated by his gold foiled halo, over a well. The scroll which encircles both the woman, and the boy says, 'he wished to, but was not able to hide this light of God'.²² The woman is not depicted with any of the stereotypical traits that scholar Sara Lipton identified as part of the standardized 'Gothic Jewish face', such as a bony, hooked nose.²³ This is because, according to a poem about Robert of Bury by Middle English poet John Lydgate, the woman was Robert's Christian nursemaid, working in league with the Jews.²⁴ The use of the well as a hiding place for the boy's body is significant because, among other symbolic meanings, wells were sites of rumoured poisonings by Jews.²⁵ The well and sources of water, such as sewers, also become a feature in later ritual murder stories.²⁶ It serves to reinforce the narrative that blood libel already poses of Jewish people as enemies of Christendom, and as dangerous threats to Christian lives.

The second frame details the light of God, indicated by the golden rays in the top right corner, revealing Robert's body where it lays under a tree to a passing archer. Above this scene, Robert's soul is carried towards Heaven. This section again recalls Lydgate's poem, which states that in his torture Robert was nailed to a tree.²⁷ It may also be inspired by, or meant to draw a thread between Robert's death and William of Norwich's, as William's body was found in a

¹⁹ Ibid, 193. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TABn_ooiBTA.

²⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TABn_ooiBTA.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Rose, 194.

²³ Lipton, 173.

²⁴ Rose, 193.

²⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TABn_ooiBTA.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

wood.²⁸ The bottom half of the page is made up of two frames, the background of both completely foiled in gold. The first shows a man as he prays to the martyred boy. The scroll which leads from his mouth, across the composition to Robert's soul in Heaven says 'have mercy on me by the merit of St. Robert, now and forever'.²⁹ The fourth frame features a large charter, sealed with the image of a Robin, perhaps referring to the boy saint again, as the word Robin was used as a diminutive of Robert.³⁰ The detail of the robin may also be significant as in English folklore the red-breasted animal was often associated with Christ's sacrifice and the martyrdom of innocents.³¹ This image is an attestation to the long-lasting power of the blood libel narrative, as at the time it was produced there were no Jews in England, and there had not been for about 200 years, yet their villanization continued. It differs from later depictions of ritual murder as there is no explicit violence or antisemitism. However, it is, in part, meant to provoke sympathy for Robert, and in this action, when accompanied by the historical context, becomes explicitly anti-Jewish. One could not worship Robert and also support the Jewish community of Bury.

Long after the murder of Robert was said to have been committed, but around the same time as the production of the illustration just discussed, one of the most enduring incidents of "ritual murder" took place in Trent, Italy. On the eve of Good Friday in 1475, a two-year-old boy, Simon, was found to be missing from his home.³² His frantic parents alerted the Church and the authorities, and as the search began a rumour began to spread that the city's small Jewish population had played a role in the boy's disappearance.³³ When Simon's body was found two days later, on Easter Sunday, floating in the sewer below the Jewish houses in town – a space that served a dual purpose as their synagogue – their fate was sealed.³⁴ The cult of Simon of

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Rose, 194.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kohl, 37.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Trent began almost immediately after the boy's death, based again on the story that the Jews of Trent had cruelly bled him to death to use his blood for the Passover matzah.³⁵ All the Jewish men of Trent were soon executed for their supposed crimes, and the women and children exiled.³⁶ Simon's death coincided with the emergence of print culture, and Church officials took advantage of this new technology to create a propaganda machine for their boy martyr.³⁷ An image of Simon's murder made it into Hartmann Schedel's 1493 illustrated encyclopaedia of world history, the *Nuremberg Chronicle* (figure 2).³⁸ The woodcut print in the *Chronicle*, originally by Michael Wohlgemuth, shows the Jews of Trent in a recognizably antisemitic style, replete with prominent noses and pointed beards, they crowd around a table, prodding and poking at little blonde Simon, collecting his blood in a bowl below him. The image clearly shows Simon being pierced in the left side, a detail that reoccurred in nearly every blood libel story after William of Norwich. This iconography, specifically the way that it presents the Jews as one collective and evil unit in their work, becomes a hallmark of images of conspiracy narrative and appears in propaganda culture from the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany, through to today.³⁹

First however, it must be noted that there is no real evidence that medieval Jews engaged in the practice of murdering Christian children. There are many reasons why Christians in the Middle Ages worked to villainize neighbouring Jews, though most boil down to the fact that Jewish people were a local enemy, rather than a distant one.⁴⁰ Jews lived and worked among Christians, and so were seen as a very real socio-economic threat to the majority.⁴¹ Beyond this secular threat, the story of Jews as the single-handed murderers of Christ persisted, adding fuel to the idea that their goal as a collective was the downfall of Christianity.⁴² The Middle Ages were

³⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TABn_ooiBTA. Kohl, 39.

³⁶ Kohl, 39.

³⁷ Ibid, 40.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Simonsen, 358, 362, 364.

⁴⁰ Strickland, 239.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Simonsen, 357.

a time of dramatic change and Jews, as a minority “other”, offered a scapegoat for Christians terrified of challenges in their society.

In the last ten years, many of the apocalyptic-seeming events that allowed medieval antisemitism and blood libel to flourish and spread have come to pass again. In 2020 the world once again found itself beset by plague and economic strife, and again, people searched for an explanation for their hardship, for someone to blame.⁴³ For those feeling abandoned by the world they thought they knew, the QAnon movement and the theories shared within offered comfort, though in the same way stories of ritual murder comforted medieval Christians, this came at the detriment of many different minority groups.

In October 2017, an anonymous user began posting on the website 4chan.⁴⁴ Q claimed to be an intelligence or military insider, with high level security clearance, and evidence of the many conspiratorial activities of what his followers refer to as the global elite, or cabal, a group of corrupt world leaders and celebrities.⁴⁵ Q’s convoluted information drops promised that Donald Trump was working tirelessly against the evils of the global cabal and encouraged his followers to continue to reject mainstream news and government institutions.⁴⁶ As the QAnon movement has grown, it has absorbed many smaller conspiracy theories, one of these being #Pizzagate.⁴⁷ #Pizzagate was born after the leaking of Hillary Clinton’s former campaign Chairman John Podesta’s emails ahead of the 2016 election. Those invested in the theory believed that the emails held evidence that Hillary Clinton was running a child sex ring out of the basement of a pizzeria in Washington D.C.⁴⁸ #Pizzagate evolved to include the detail that the global paedophilic cabal (led by Hillary Clinton) tortured the children they held captive to extract the chemical adrenochrome from their blood to then take as a drug.⁴⁹ Said chemical is a real

⁴³ <https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-the-dark-virality-of-a-hollywood-blood-harvesting-conspiracy/>.

⁴⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ <https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-the-dark-virality-of-a-hollywood-blood-harvesting-conspiracy/>

compound in the human body, but it does not have the nearly immortality-granting qualities that #Pizzagate adherents believe it does.⁵⁰ The theory began to be discussed by conventional media outlets in 2016 after one of its believers travelled to the pizzeria named in Podesta's emails, armed with an assault rifle, intending to free the children he believed were kept there.⁵¹ The idea of adrenochrome harvesting then simmered on at the base of the complex QAnon web for the following years, until the Covid-19 pandemic fully resurrected the idea. As celebrities posted selfies, sequestered in their luxury homes without their normal makeup and hair teams, the base of believers (which ballooned since 2016, with QAnon absorbing the theory) began to grab onto these photos as evidence.⁵² They stated that the celebrities less coiffed look was due to adrenochrome withdrawal, as the pandemic supposedly caused a break in the "supply chain".⁵³

The #Pizzagate theory is not explicitly anti-Jewish (at least in the way it is discussed in more mainstream circles), but the echoes of the medieval blood libel narrative can be seen just below the surface. A group of people who are seen to have more economic power or be a threat to the proponents of the theories, engage in the most detestable of activities, kidnapping, and violently murdering innocents, to use their blood for ritual purposes. The connection between the original theory and adrenochrome harvesting comes into even greater focus when looked at through the visual culture of the conspiracy. A Google Images search for the word 'adrenochrome' will conjure pages of images showing before and after comparisons of celebrities "in adrenochrome withdrawal", compilations of missing children whose likenesses have been co-opted, and memes that draw their pictures from medieval blood libel imagery (figure 3). The most common of these memes has a base image that directly recalls the Wohlgemuth print discussed earlier. It shows a group of figures, in hats and with pointed beards, clustered around a table where a child stands naked. They poke and prod at the boy's sides in the same places as the

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Jews depicted in the woodcut (and in the same places as Simon's predecessors Robert, William, and it is implied, Jesus), and collect his blood in a small bowl, just as in the earlier image. Unlike the medieval woodcut, the ground around the figures is scattered with the bodies of more children who have met the same fate. There is no indication in the meme itself that this image is meant to depict the murder of Simon of Trent or any other historical "ritual murder" story, it is simply captioned, in dramatic white block letters 'Why does this image even exist?'. The picture and the caption work in tandem to thread adrenochrome harvesting into one continuous narrative of conspiracy that begins with William of Norwich in 1144, and thus reinforce meaning⁵⁴.

This meme works to support the conspiracy in large part because of how it creates a story. Scholars have identified a specific iconographic program that makes conspiracist art effective, which includes recognising patterns, mapping coalitions, and crafting enemy images.⁵⁵ By incorporating historical blood libel in with contemporary references to adrenochrome, this meme is able to do all three. It creates a pattern strengthened by countless stories of ritual murder from a period of hundreds of years, constructs an enemy group in Jews, and pictures said enemy as diabolical, conniving, and organized. The language used to describe the enemy has changed, but the hatred and fear has not, and so the original theory, and the art used to imagine it at different stages of its lifecycle, lives on.

In her 2020 investigation of the movement, Adrienne LaFrance describes QAnon as 'united in mass rejection of reason, objectivity, and other Enlightenment values.' She says 'the group harnesses paranoia to fervent hope and a deep sense of belonging. The way it breathes life into an ancient preoccupation with end-times is also radically new. To look at QAnon is to see not just a conspiracy theory but the birth of a new religion.'⁵⁶ The internet is becoming more unregulated, and to many, the world grows more unfamiliar daily, and so, as LaFrance says,

⁵⁴ Caumanns and Önnersfors, 447.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 441.

⁵⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>.

QAnon will likely only continue to grow.⁵⁷ By understanding the origins behind the theories that make up the belief system, it is possible to deconstruct the motives behind the unspeakable acts of violence that have been perpetrated by its adherents, and those within its vicinity, like the shooting at the Poway synagogue in 2019. Visual culture, like the images of Robert of Bury and Simon of Trent, and the modern-day meme, can help with this deconstructive process, which is vital in countering the centuries of hate, and which can, hopefully someday, allow the belief in stories of blood libel to slip into the past.

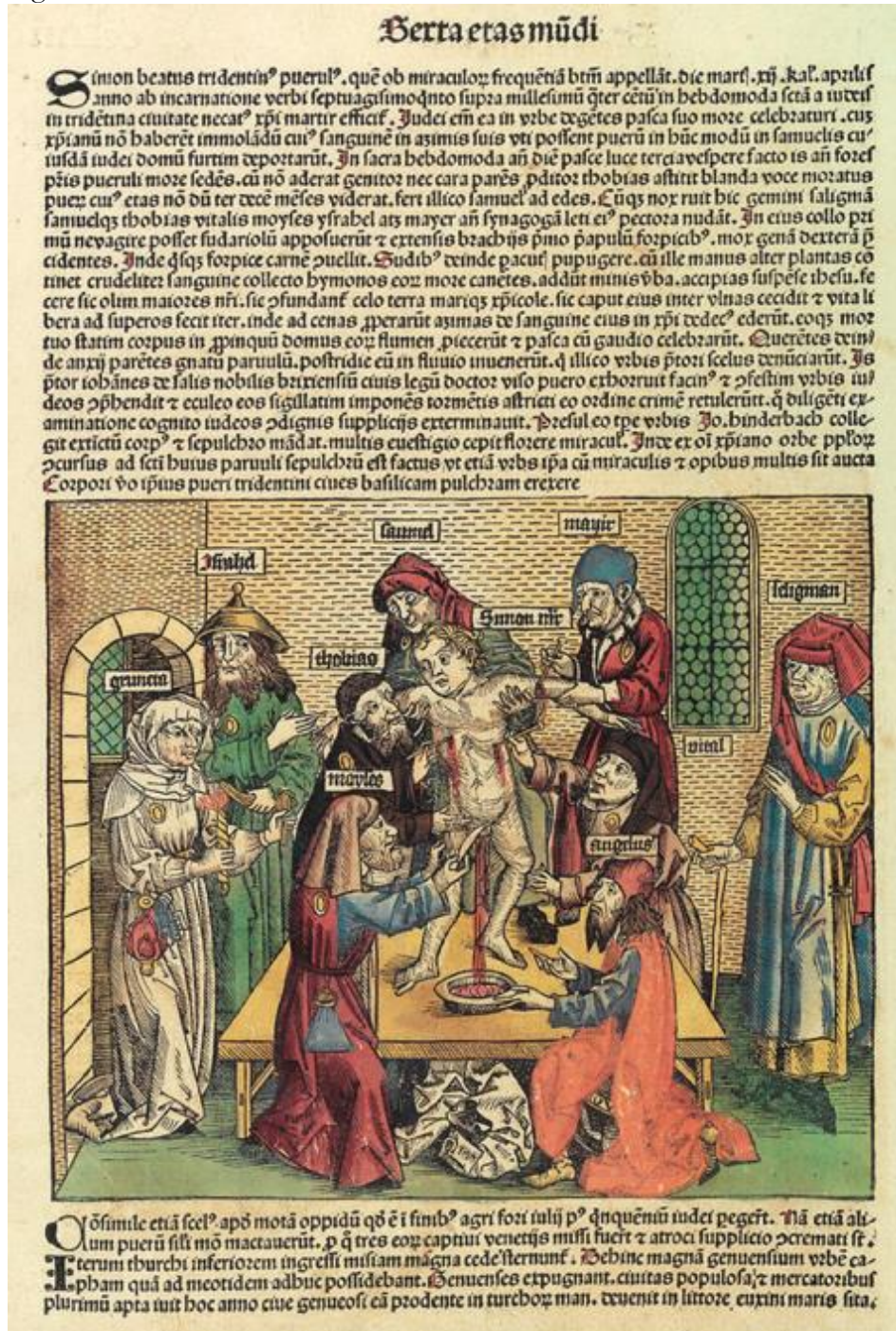
⁵⁷ Ibid.

Figure 1:



Ms. 101, fol. 44r, Scenes from the Martyrdom of Robert of Bury, about 1480-1490, Getty Museum Collection, Los Angeles.

Figure 2:



Michael Wohlgemuth and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, *Murder of Simon of Trento*, woodcut. From Hartman Schedel, *Liber Chronicarum* (Nuremberg, 1493), The Barry Lawrence Ruderman Map Collection, Stanford University.

Figure 3:



Adrenochrome Harvesting Meme, digital image, found on Reddit on April 19, 2022, most likely created post-2015.

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