Medieval anti-Semitism

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European anti-Semitism reached its peak during Middle Ages (c.400-1500). During the medieval period Jews were scattered across Europe in small populations, ranging in size from a few families to several hundred people. Medieval Jews were religious outsiders in a strongly Christian world. Medieval anti-Semitism could be unpredictable and variable, differing from place to place. The attitudes of local kings, lords or clergymen was an important factor in determining how Jews were treated in a particular village, town or region. At best, Jews were allowed to remain, to work and conduct business – but they were usually forced to reside separately from Christians. In rural areas most Jewish families lived on the outskirts of villages or sometimes in their own small separate village. Jews in large cities lived either beyond the city walls or in a 'Jewish quarter', usually the least appealing area of a city.

Anti-Semitism spiked markedly after the Roman Empire under Constantine accepted Christianity in the early 300s. Laws were passed restricting or removing the Jews from many elements of public life. They were forbidden from holding public office; from employing Christian servants; from doing business; from eating or having sex with Christians. In many regions it was even illegal for Jews to be seen in public during Holy Week (the week leading up to Easter, the commemoration of Christ's death). From the 11th century, as European Christians embarked on the Crusades, Jewish communities along the way were used as target practice for the Crusaders. Massacres of Jewish communities occurred from 1096 onward, with entire villages of men, women and children slaughtered.

Timeline of medieval Jewish persecution

Historical evidence records literally thousands of cases where Jews were persecuted or discriminated against during the Middle Ages. Some of the better known examples of the persecution of Jews during this period include:

- **387**: St John Chrysostom writes a series of anti-Semitic homilies, accusing Jews of godlessness, likening them to pagans, claiming that they sacrifice children and informing pious Christians that it is their duty to hate the Jews.
- **388**: A mob in the Italian city of Milan riot and burn the synagogue there, with the support and encouragement of the local bishop.
- **415**: St Cyril, the Christian bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, banishes Jews from the city and distributes their property to other townsfolk.
- **1012**: Henry II, the Holy Roman Emperor, expels Jews from Mainz.
- **1076**: A Catholic synod held in the Spanish city of Girona ruled that Jews must be made to pay taxes to support Christian churches.
- **1096**: Christian warriors en route to the First Crusade begin their journey by massacring more than 10,000 Jews in western Europe, mainly in Germany and France.

- **1179**: Pope Alexander III oversees the Third Lateran Council, which rules that Jews are subordinate to Christians and must not hold any position of authority over them, nor engage in sexual relationships with them.
- **1182**: King Philip of France confiscates all land, money and property owned by Jews and expels them from his lands. He allows them to return 16 years later, though they are required to pay additional dues and taxes.
- **1190**: The Jewish community of York in northern England is massacred.
- **1215**: A papal bull authorized by Innocent II orders all Jews living in Christian countries to wear an embroidered badge or motif, a measure intended to prevent sexual intercourse between Jews and Christians.
- **1239**: Pope Gregory IX orders that all Jewish religious texts be surrendered or confiscated, then publicly burned.
- **1243**: The entire Jewish population of Berlitz, a town near Berlin, is accused of defiling the Host. They are burned alive.
- **1290**: King Edward I of England issues the Edict of Expulsion, which orders that all Jews must leave the country immediately.
- **1306**: The French king also banishes Jews from his country, however they return within a few years. More royal decrees banning Jews from France are passed in 1322 and 1396.
- **1349**: Persecution and massacres of Jews in Switzerland. In Basel, all Jews are rounded up and shipped to a small island, where they are set alight and burned to death.
- **1478**: The formation of the Spanish Inquisition, which begins as a campaign to identify, interrogate and punish 'secret' Jews. All Spanish Jews are eventually expelled from the kingdom.
- **1506**: In Portugal, more than 4,000 Jews who had converted to Christianity are murdered, as a result of anti-Semitic preaching by local clergymen.
- **1543**: Religious reformer Martin Luther, the instigator of the Protestant Reformation, pens *On the Jews and Their Lies*, an anti-Semitic tract accusing the Jews of behaving like "vermin" and encouraging violence against them.

"There is much evidence that those attacking the Jews were motivated, as in the First Crusade, not only by fear and religious fervour but by greed and envy. There were countless cases of robbery and spoiling. As a contemporary chronicler wrote, the money in the hand of the Jews was also the poison that killed them. Had they been poor, they would not have been burned."
Walter Laqueur, historian

By the 1500s this violence had begun to ease – however Jewish communities continued to endure persecution. Jews still occasionally served as scapegoats, footing the blame for any problem or adversity, from bad weather to harvest failures. In both religious teachings and popular culture, the presence of Jews was associated with crime, famine, pestilence and simple bad luck. Jews were stereotyped as unclean; a common anti-Semitic image of the late Middle Ages, the *Judensau*, showed Jews suckling from or having sex with a pig. Passion plays (recreations of the crucifixion of Christ) often depicted Jews in a negative fashion. In literature and drama, Jews were frequently associated with witchcraft, Satan, Judas Iscariot and red hair (a symbol of dishonesty and treachery).

Despite the social exclusion endured by Jews, some secular rulers tolerated them because they served important functions in the economy. Some Jews became quite wealthy through money-lending (a business practice outlawed by the Christian church and thus not open to Christians). The Jewish money-lender Aaron of Lincoln, for instance, was probably the richest man in England during the 12th century; Aaron's wealth was so substantial that he even lent English large amounts for the construction of cathedrals and churches. Local kings and nobles coveted Jewish wealth and often took steps to exploit or extort affluent Jews. Jewish business owners often paid additional taxes or levies; Jews were sometimes expelled from a particular region but permitted to return, provided they paid a ransom. When Aaron of Lincoln died in 1186, his estate was immediately seized by King Henry II.

1. During the Middle Ages (400s-1500s) Jews were regularly excluded, persecuted, exploited and murdered.
2. This anti-Semitism coincided with the rise and dominance of Christianity, which preached hatred of the Jews.
3. Jews were often banished from regions, subject to restrictive laws or forced to live in remote or unappealing areas.
4. Jews were also scapegoats: they were blamed for disease, crop failures, pandemics or other social disruptions.
5. Wealthy Jews, many of whom were money-lenders, were often exploited by secular rulers, through additional taxes.