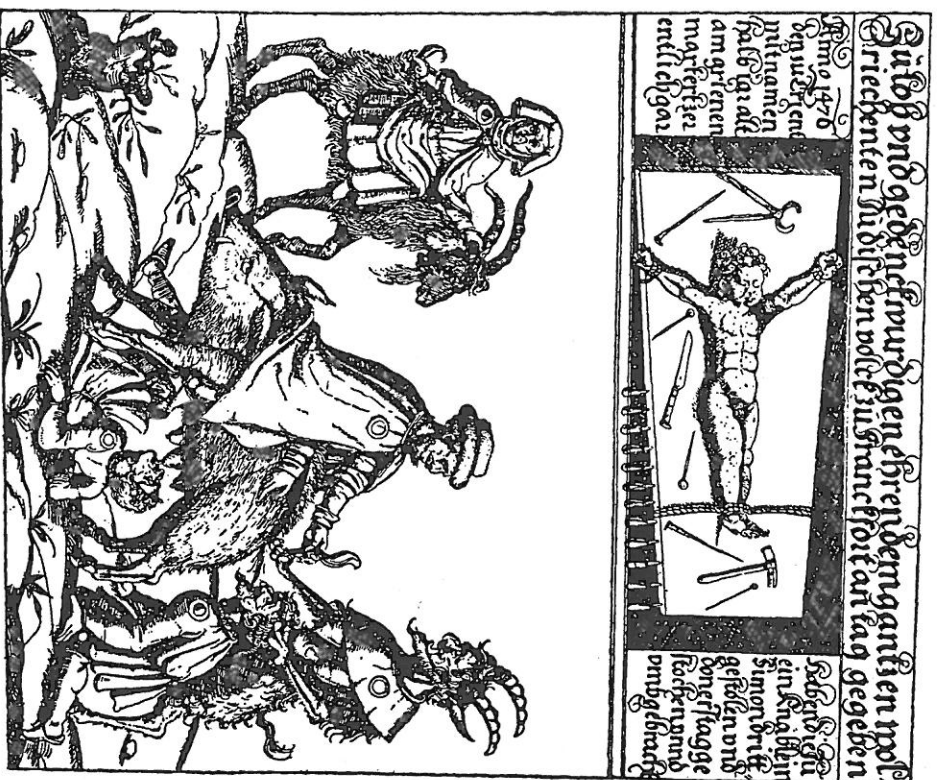




The Judensau

An early seventeenth-century version of a design engraved at the entrance to a bridge at Frankfurt in the fifteenth century, which was in turn derived from an older and very popular medieval theme

THE DEVIL AND THE JEWS

THE MEDIEVAL CONCEPTION OF THE JEW

AND

ITS RELATION TO MODERN ANTISEMITISM

BY
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Foreword by Marc Saperstein



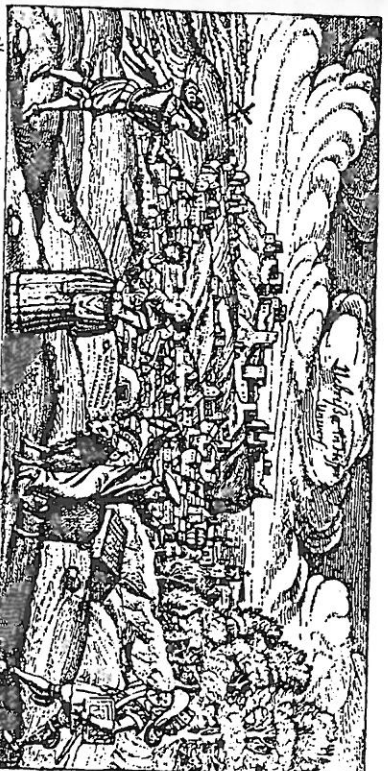
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WITH HORNS AND TAIL

THE story is not yet complete. The Jew was also believed to possess certain physical characteristics which definitely set him apart from other men and identified him with the devil—corroborative evidence that points up the literalness of this conception in the medieval mind.

The figure of the horned Jew was not uncommon during the Middle Ages. We know it best through Michelangelo's magnificent "Moses," which reproduced a traditional feature of the Law-giver's countenance, on display in many a medieval church and manuscript. The customary explanation of those curious horns protruding from Moses' brow is that they are the products of a misinterpretation of Exod. 34:29, 35: "And behold the skin of his face sent forth beams."¹ The old translations render the Hebrew root *karan* correctly as "shine"; Aquila and the Vulgate, the standard text followed by the Church, read however: "His face had *horns*." This misunderstanding may have been favored by the Babylonian and Egyptian conception of horned deities (Sin, Ammon), by the Greek use of horns as symbolic of might (e.g., the horned figures of Jupiter), and by the legend of the two-horned Alexander the Great, referred to in the Koran (sura 18:82, 85). It is quite likely that this misinterpretation was at the bottom of Michelangelo's conception of the two-horned Moses. But when we find ordinary Jews, medieval Jews in typical medieval garb, crowned with horns, we may reasonably suspect that something more lies behind this than a faulty translation.

Indeed, this matter of horns went considerably further than pictorial representation. Jews were actually obliged to appear in public with the distinguishing horn somewhere on their garb. In 1267 the Vienna Council decreed that Jews must wear a "horned hat" (*pileum cornutum*), a provision which later councils sought



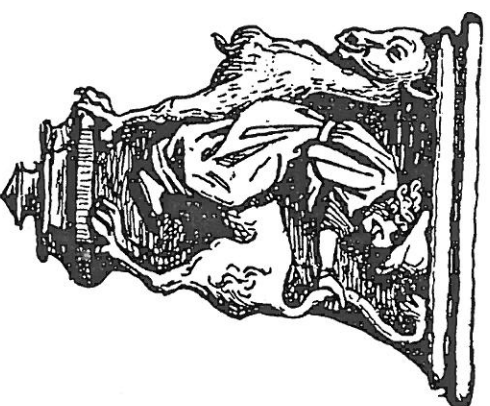
Ex. full. 11. Juvenis: id est Virgo triumphat.

Julianus: viridula; huius: Miles cond.

Der Jüdinge dantes und freyt lader
 Der Kuntze: from: full der Jüdinge: from: full.
 Der Jüdinge dantes und freyt lader
 Der Kuntze: from: full der Jüdinge: from: full.

"Youth, Virgin, Jew, and Soldier"

(Frankfort, 1624)



Jew astride a goat

Wood carving on choir stool in the Church of Notre Dame,
 Aerschot, Belgium (fifteenth century)

strenuously to enforce; and Philip III required the Jews of France to attach a horn-shaped figure to the customary Jew badge.²

Talk of the devil and his horns appear, says the proverb. In an age so familiar with Satan's least feature as the medieval, the portrayal of the horned Jew need not have felt called upon to make his allusion more specific—yet an occasional hyperliteralist, not content with sketching the horned Jew alone, scratches a devil alongside him, for good measure. And in one instance at least, that horned Jew is identified with the legend, in bold face, "This is the Jew Devil."³

Nor were his horns the Jew's sole physical token of his satanism. The devil's tail is as characteristic as his horns, and consequently only the least stretch of the imagination was required to perceive the Jew's diabolic dorsal appendage, even though he managed cunningly to hide it from common view.⁴ And in the event we find it difficult to believe that these notions were accepted in all seriousness, it must be pointed out that such beliefs are still prevalent, not only among benighted European peasants but even in our own enlightened land.⁵

A supposedly characteristic feature of the Jewish physiognomy, which is constantly stressed in the prints and particularly in the folk tales, is the so-called *Ziegenbart* (goat's beard, or goatee). This otherwise obscure detail assumes meaning when we consider it in conjunction with the common representation of the Jew in association with the he-goat, either as his favorite domestic animal or as his favorite mount (which he prefers to ride facing backward, to judge from the prints).⁶ Or the goat is offered as the symbol of Judaism and the Jewish God.

When Ikey came a-riding

On a billygoat

He had the Jews believing

It was their precious God,⁷

runs a widely current bit of doggerel whose origin is placed in the late Middle Ages. Evidently the intent is to single out the goat as the Jews' beast, or perhaps the *Ziegenbart* emphasis is intended to

identify the Jew as the human goat. Indeed, a carved relief of the *Judensau* with her Jewish brood, once to be seen on the tower of a bridge in Frankfurt, included the figure of a Jew with two unmistakable goat's horns on his head. To make certain that the origin of those horns was not missed, the artist cut a billy goat with identical horns into the stone, interestedly watching the proceedings.⁸

The *Bock* or billy goat, as the Middle Ages knew full well, is the devil's favorite animal, frequently represented as symbolic of satanic lechery. According to popular legend, the devil created the goat,⁹ which appears in picture and story as the riding animal of every conceivable sort of hobgoblin, as well as of witches and sorcerers. In the witch craze that swept Europe toward the end of the Middle Ages the devil's most usual disguise was said to be that of a goat, which the devotees worshiped and adored, and it was the animal most commonly offered to him as a sacrifice. So close was the relation between them that an early fifteenth-century illustration picturing four Jews being led by him represents Satan himself as having goat's horns.¹⁰ The purport of this association of Jew and goat is quite unmistakable. A fifteenth-century sculptured figure in a Flemish church shows a Jew astride a goat, facing its rear; the animal's hind hoofs are cloven, and its forefeet end in claws.¹¹

The ascription to the Jew of a distinctive and unpleasant odor has often been commented upon. Many peoples, of course, have at various times had this libel leveled against them, not only in popular belief but even in pseudoscientific works. We may interpret it as an effort by one group to stigmatize another, socially inferior, group as being physically inferior as well, a sort of extra prop to bolster up the former's sense of superiority. It is probable that when an offensive odor was charged against the Jews by ancient writers, such as Martial and Ammianus Marcellinus, it was more as an expression of contempt for the barbarians than with any more subtle intent.¹²

But the notion of the so-called *foetor judaicus*, so prevalent in the Middle Ages,¹³ though undoubtedly reflecting something of

the same motivation (and perhaps at the outset little more than an echo of the classical charge), carried a deeper meaning to the medieval Christian. "There was never a state so large that a mere thirty Jews would not saturate it with stench and unbelief," declared the thirteenth-century Austrian poet Seifried Helbling.¹⁴ "Stench and unbelief" were characteristic Jewish attributes, in combination. The measured sobriety of legal prose buckled under the necessity of legislating for Jews: in 1421 the city of Ofen (Buda) ordered "the Jews, the mean, stiff-necked, stinking betrayers of God"¹⁵ to—anticlimactically—pay a tax on their wine. The combination holds. And its meaning is clearly indicated when we read that the Jew emits a foul odor as punishment for his crime against Jesus.¹⁶ Yet this is only a partial explanation. Why a foul odor as punishment?

The answer is apparent when we consider that according to common Christian belief during the Middle Ages good spirits emit a marked fragrance, while evil spirits, and in particular, of course, Satan, are distinguished by an offensive stench. Myrth gushes forth like fountains from the graves of the martyrs, we are told, and when the coffin of the martyred St. Stephen was opened his body filled the air with fragrance. The "odor of sanctity" indeed. On the other hand, when the devil is caught masquerading as an astrologer he vanishes in a whirlwind, with a stench (*cum turbine et fetore recedens disparuit*).¹⁷ Brimstone and sulphur.

The *foetor judaicus*, then, is another distinctive sign of the "demonic" Jew. Nowhere is this special significance of the Jewish odor specifically stated, except perhaps in the comment that Jews stink like the he-goat.¹⁸ But it is certainly implied in the frequently expressed belief that the Jew loses his odor after he is baptized. We have direct testimony that "the water of baptism carried off the Jews' odor," leaving them with a fragrance "sweeter than that of ambrosia floating upon the heads touched by the sanctified oil."¹⁹

A number of popular legends illustrate this conviction. According to one, when a Jew approached his daughter who had

just been baptized she suddenly became aware of an exceedingly foul stench emanating from him (which she had formerly, as a Jewess, not noticed). Another legend relates that when a recently baptized Jewish boy came home one day emitting a very pleasant odor his parents imagined that he stank. Still another legend brings the point home beyond any doubt. To undo the effect of baptism a Jewish mother purposes to immerse her erring daughter three times in the waters of a sewer (but is, of course, frustrated by outraged Christians). The point of this legend is that it reproduces another popular fable, according to which, when the devil accidentally fell into some consecrated water, his grandmother freed him from its effects by dipping him three times into the sewer of Hell.²⁰

It should be observed that more recently some writers have admitted a pinch of skepticism into their discussion of the *foetor judaicus*. Tovey²¹ records that "the author of *Roma Sancta* takes notice, upon such an occasion [baptism], that whereas Jews naturally stink, they constantly lose that ill savour after baptism. But Misson [*Voyage into Italy*] accounts for the miracle, by answering, that before such sort of people intend to appear in publick, they take care to wash themselves well; and that their ill smell before baptism, which prejudic'd men think natural, arises from the sordidness of their habits, occasion'd by poverty." Bravo for Misson! The age of reason has dawned! But how faintly it glimmers still. If it has been somewhat difficult for the *foetor judaicus* to stand up in recent times (though not among the Nazi theoreticians, who have now proclaimed it as a profound "scientifically" verified fact that the "faint-sweet" racial odor of the Jews is one of their distinctive physical characteristics²²), it is still prominent in the folk literature in a "refined" version, namely, that the Jews are guilty en masse of the egregious sin of "garlic eating."²³ This is "modern" antisemitism, as distinguished from the medieval variety.

That medieval idea is but another instance of the conviction that the Church was engaged in a holy war against the forces of Satan; the Jew could shed his demonic attributes only by slough-

ing off his former demonic self and being reborn through Christ. Such is the moral of these legends; yet, as we shall see, Christians came to doubt whether even baptism could effect a real change in the Jew. Not even his peculiar odor remained permanently effaced, to judge from the plaint heard in fifteenth-century Spain that Conversos smell bad. Whether this was the result of backsliding or of culinary habit remains an open question even after the statement of the contemporary chronicler Andrés Bernaldez: they "never lost their Jewish tastes in eating . . . stews of onion and garlic, and fried in oil, and the meat cooked in oil . . . to avoid lard; and oil with meat is a thing which gives an ill smell to the breath . . . and they themselves had the same smell as the Jews owing to their stews and *to their not being baptized.*"²⁴

In still another way did the Middle Ages proclaim its belief that the Jew was not quite human. All men are subject to disease, the Jew among them. But the Jew suffered also from certain peculiar and secret afflictions that were especially characteristic of him, and which did not normally trouble Christians. Indeed, it was this belief that helped to account for the Jewish need of Christian blood, the sole effective therapeutic available to them. Most often mentioned among these ailments was that of menstruation, which the men as well as the women among the Jews were supposed to experience; close seconds, in point of frequency of mention, were copious hemorrhages and hemorrhoids (all involving loss of blood). Among the great variety of these maladies were included quinsy, scrofula, a marked pallor, various mysterious skin diseases, and sores that gave forth a malodorous flux.²⁵ (Here we have another explanation of the *foetor judaicus*.) A number of late medieval sources affirm also that Jewish children are born with their right hands, blood stained, resting on their foreheads "as though they were attached to the skin," so that it requires something of an operation to release them. And quite recently the belief was expressed that "the Jews are always born blind."²⁶

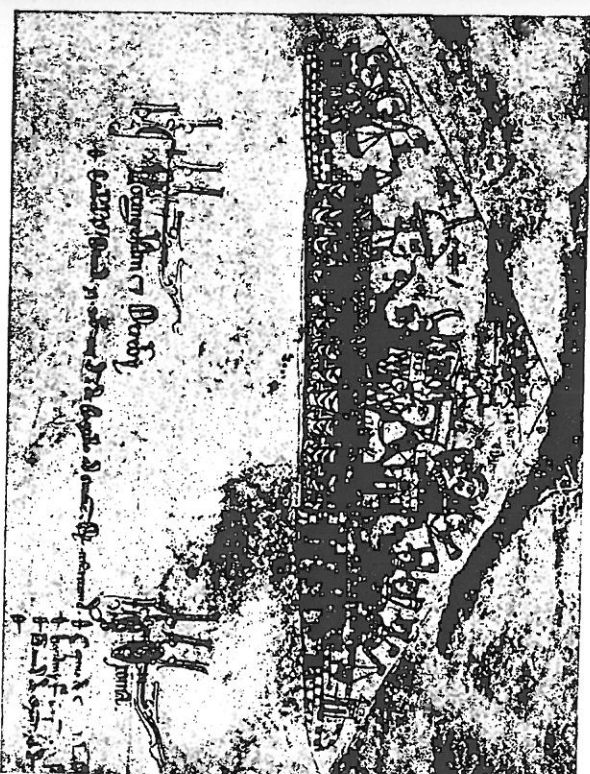
These infirmities were generally believed to afflict all Jews,

though they usually managed to conceal them—or to heal them by magical means or through the use of Christian blood. For the accepted explanation of these ailments connected them with the persecution and murder of Jesus.²⁷ What more natural than that the devil's brood, having brought about the death of the Saviour of men, should forever after bear the signs of their iniquity? Indeed, in the seventeenth century (that late) there began an exercise in tabulating and classifying these fancied ailments, according to the twelve tribes of Israel (despite the fact that ten tribes had disappeared long before the crucifixion and tribal distinctions had long since vanished among Jews) and the alleged crimes of these tribes against Jesus. Thus, in 1602, the converted Jew Franciscus of Piacenza published the following catalogue of secret Jewish ailments and disabilities, which reappeared subsequently in several versions and languages:²⁸

The members of the tribe of Reuben, who seized and beat Jesus in the garden, cause all vegetation which they touch to wither within three days; during four days annually bloody wounds appear on the hands and feet of descendants of the tribe of Simeon, because their ancestors struck Jesus while he hung on the cross; Levi struck Jesus in the face and spat on him, therefore the members of this tribe have difficulty in spitting and cannot bring up phlegm; because Zebulon threw lots for Jesus' cloak, annually on March 25 they suffer from open wounds in the mouth and spit blood; the tribe of Issachar, who bound Jesus to the post and whipped him, break out with bloody weals and incurable wounds all over the body on the same day; Dan it was that cried out "Let his blood be on us and on our children," and therefore every month bloody sores open on their bodies, and they stink so badly they must hide (only smearing themselves with Christian blood can remedy this); Gad wove the crown of thorns from fifteen branches and pressed it on Jesus' head until it penetrated the flesh, therefore annually fifteen painful bleeding bruises appear on their heads and necks; Asher slapped Jesus in the face, and so their right arms are a hand's-breadth shorter than their left; Naphtali, according to this imaginative account,

hid their children in pigpens, with instructions to grunt and squeal when Jesus passed by, and when they asked him what these were, and he replied, "They are your children," they denied it, insisting these were pigs; whereupon Jesus said, "If they are swine, then swine let them be, and swine let them remain," and thus the tribe of Naphthali have four large pig teeth, pigs' ears, and stink like swine; Joseph (there was no such tribe), who forged the nails for the crucifixion and dulled their points, on the advice of a Jewess named Ventria, in order to increase Jesus' suffering, was punished in that the women of this tribe, after their thirty-third year, have live worms in their mouths while they sleep; and, finally, the tribe of Benjamin, who offered Jesus a sponge saturated with vinegar and gall, cannot raise their heads, always suffer from thirst, and when they try to speak live worms jump from their mouths.²⁹

It can readily be seen, then, that Johann Fischart's illustrated *Wunderzeitung* of the year 1575, announcing the birth to a Jewish woman of Binzwangen, near Augsburg, of two little pigs, need not have unduly strained Christian credulity.³⁰ Nothing was too monstrous to be told about the Jew.



The demon Colbi claims Mosse Mokke and Aveegaye, agents of Isaac of Norwich, for the devil

Tallage Roll (1233)

*Ein Schiff Wunderzeitung von einer Schwange-
ren Sucht in Binzwangen, die mit von Augspurg, welche furchtlich den 12. Septem-
ber 1575 in der Stadt Binzwangen geboren wurde, die furchtlich den 12. Septem-
ber 1575 in der Stadt Binzwangen geboren wurde, die furchtlich den 12. Septem-
ber 1575 in der Stadt Binzwangen geboren wurde.*



Johann Fischart's Wunderzeitung announcing the birth of two pigs to a Jewish woman
(Strasbourg, 1574)