

The trail of a deadly cult which resulted in the persecution of thousands of Jews leads back to Norwich

Summary

In 1144 the body of the 12-year-old William was found in Thorpe Wood just outside of Norwich. The sheriff dismissed rumours that he had been murdered by Jews for want of evidence. But once a monk developed a tale about how this innocent child had been murdered by Jews in a bizarre ritual, no-one could stop the persecutions which ensued. The boy William became the focus of a local cult, and tales of Jews murdering innocent children in a reenactment of the Crucifixion entered the Christian imagination and remained there for centuries. They have led to numerous outbreaks of violence and persecution in Britain and beyond.



William of Norwich
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Medieval historian Professor Miri Rubin, already famous for books like 'Mother of God' (a history of Mary), led a research network funded by [the Religion and Society Programme](#) in order to investigate this first known ritual murder accusation. Her aim was to bring together scholars from across the world from a wide range of disciplines. Together they could assemble clues and information to shed light on the William of Norwich story, its contexts and consequences. Participants came from literature, law art history, music and other disciplines, and research students were actively involved. A highlight was a visit to Norwich Cathedral Priory; another was Professor Susan Boynton's (Columbia University) reconstruction of the 13th century liturgy for the feast of William.

The network has spawned many new collaborations and had many academic benefits. It has resulted, for example, in a deeper understanding of the 12th century locality, its topography, economy and politics. Medieval Norwich turns out to have been a complex 'multicultural' society with its mix of French-speaking Normans, Anglo-Saxons and a recently arrived community of Jews. At this time Christianity in Europe was helping to define boundaries around dynastic kingdoms with elaborate ecclesiastical bureaucracies. Those who did not fit began to be persecuted. What is more, this investigation of an event which took place almost a thousand years ago helps us understand how religious minorities become subject to accusations which can be used to justify violence against them.

Find out more...

- Visit the project's website: <http://yvc.history.qmul.ac.uk/index.html>
- View the Latin text of Thomas of Monmouth's *Passio Willelmi Norwicensis* reproduced with kind permission from Cambridge University Library as they hold the only manuscript: <http://yvc.history.qmul.ac.uk/WN-joined-17-08-09.pdf> and Miri Rubin's translation of the prologue: <http://yvc.history.qmul.ac.uk/prologue.pdf>
- Read Professor David Carpenter's work on *Crucifixion and Conversion: King Henry III and the Jews in 1255* inspired by participating in the workshop: <http://www.finerollshenry3.org.uk/content/month/fm-01-2010.html>
- Read Miri Rubin's article 'Medieval Anti-Semitism: Making a Martyr: William of Norwich and the Jews' published in *History Today* June 2010 (vol. 60, no 6, pp 48-54): <http://www.historytoday.com/>
- Take a look at Anne Rice's novel *Angel Time* inspired by the story of William of Norwich: <http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl/9781400043538.html>
- Contact Professor Rubin: <http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/staff/rubinm.html>. Her translation of the text with an introduction will be published as a Penguin Classic in 2012.

You might also be interested in...

- Listening to Emilia Jamroziak talk about her Religion and Society funded research into Cistercian monasteries in medieval Europe: http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/emilia_jamroziak_oct_2009
- John Harper's project supported by the Programme investigating the experience of worship in a late medieval cathedral and parish church: <http://www.bangor.ac.uk/music/AHRC/>
- Accessing live recordings of a student choir singing Old Hispanic Chant at concerts sponsored by Phase 3 project [Compositional Planning, Musical Grammar & Theology in Old Hispanic chant](#): <http://www.youtube.com/user/bristolunischolacant>
- The International Association for the History of Religions: <http://www.iahr.dk/>

Project Details

Award Title

Youth, violence and cult

Team

Principal Investigator: Prof Miri Rubin (QMUL)



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



University

Principal Investigator: Prof Miri Rubin (QMUL)

Award Type

Phase II Network & Workshop Grant

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