

Human Sacrifice from the Bacchanalia to Simon of Trent:
The Typology of Religious Conspiracy Narratives in Latin Literature

In the town of Trent, 1475, the Jewish community was arrested and held prisoners for nine months while investigations into the death of the child Simon were undertaken by Bishop Hinderbach and the Papacy. While inhibiting the work of Rome, Bishop Hinderbach enlisted Giovanni Mattia Tiberino to write a narrative of the events a week after the arrest whose propaganda eventually formed the charges to which the Jewish admitted under torture (Bowd 2012). In crafting his account, Tiberino signals to the reader that he will tell of a conspiracy (*coniuratio*). The ensuing narrative not only contains the charge of Blood Libel, that Jews use the blood of Christians for their rituals (Teter 2022), but also other motifs commonly found in Latin conspiracy narratives, such as the Catilinarian Conspiracy and the Bacchanalian Affair in Livy (Pagán 2004 and Spencer 2001).

In fact, this paper aims to establish that the medieval accusation of Blood Libel fulfills a similar role to the motif of human sacrifice in Latin conspiracy narratives to cast foreigners as threats to society. In particular, a chain of reception, beginning with the Bacchanalian Affair in Livy, the accusation of Jews kidnapping Greeks in Josephus's *Against Apion* (Bickerman 1927 and Schäffer 1997), the late antique account of Socrates Scholasticus who tells of Jews kidnapping a Christian boy (Falcasantos 2021), and Tiberino's account all demonstrate a pattern of foreign conspirators kidnapping citizens of the *civitas* to perform nocturnal ritual murder in manic (Bacchic) ecstasy before consuming human flesh and abandoning the corpse in natural landscapes.

In comparing this pattern to other Latin conspiracy narratives like that of Marcus Brutus and Piso, we can begin to establish different categories of conspiracy narratives in Latin Literature. Senatorial Conspiracies, such as Brutus and Piso, serve as moral lessons for the Roman elite to

reconsider attempts of the emperor's life. The conspiracy narratives found in Livy to Tiberino, however, reveal a larger concern for the changing social and cultural makeup of society that includes foreigners. For example, the Bacchanalian Affair occurs at a time when Rome becomes a Mediterranean power and witnesses the influx of Greek migrants. In Josephus' *Against Apion* lies the terror of Domitian who claims that elites "Judaized" and formed conspiracies against him (Schäffer 1997). Socrates Scholasticus uses his narrative to disparage St. Cyril of Alexandria for his handling of Jewish, pagan, and Christian relations (Falcasantos 2021), while Tiberino and Bishop Hinderbach employ Simon to shackle off the political control of the Papacy in Trent (Bowd 2012). Within this tradition of religious conspiracies in Latin historiography, we can also place the accusations of cannibalism of Christians (McGowan 2014) and the description of their nightly activities (Wagemakers 2010) during the High Roman Empire.

Embedded in the anxiety of religious otherness is the desire to exert social and political control. Latin religious conspiracy narratives serve to fulfill this role as propaganda that marginalizes and excludes others in order to form social cohesion and group identity.

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