

Conclusion: The archive's medieval backbone

This study presents the development of antisemitism as a part of Sweden's collective memory. As has become apparent, this collective memory is not the property of a real, homogenous collectivity (the Swedish population) but of an imagined collectivity consisting of different reading audiences, social groups, and discourses. The survey of published works with Jewish and anti-Jewish themes has provided insight into that part of the archive which contains knowledge about Jews – as has become apparent, this knowledge constructs “Jews” instead of describing actual people, and it develops independently of the immigration and presence of actual Jews.

The archive is a relatively new and seldom-tested concept within the vast field of research on cultural and collective memory. In this study, it has been used in relation to one specific text corpus: printed matter over the course of 100 years pertaining to Jews. Its main advantage lies in the detection of passively stored cultural knowledge which can be referenced anew at any point and which carries with it many older fragments of knowledge. In this context, the presence of the medieval model texts turned out to be particularly significant – they are not visible in newspaper articles or parliamentary debates, and they may not be quoted directly in contemporary texts, but they nevertheless formed the backbone of “knowledge” about Jews in Sweden. It is significant to note that these medieval models continued to be available, intelligible, and popular in Sweden. The authors who wrote anti-Jewish texts in order to intervene in contemporary debates, particularly at the beginning of the century, had had access to a variety of texts (and orally transmitted information) about “Jews” and drew on all, or much, of this in their writings. Those who worked as translators, or were active in an academic or ecclesiastical field, were able to read not only the Swedish texts investigated here, but also French, German, English, and Latin texts. As relatively unbiased, neutral, and pro-Jewish texts were also available in this period, a phenomenon similar to contemporary social media “bubbles” is likely to have existed: people who were biased against Jews tended to read and/or believe only those texts and that information which confirmed their negative view; other information was not incorporated into their personal body of knowledge or else it was interpreted negatively. The archive held a range of information about Jews, but the likelihood for negative and stereotypical information to be read, understood, and transmitted was much greater than for neutral information. This phenomenon, known as the “illusory truth effect,” has been tested in psychological studies since the 1970s to explain the spread and impact of fake news and conspiracy theories. It has been found that people are much more likely to believe in

facts which have been presented to them previously; the more often they have been exposed to them, the higher the probability that they will believe even highly unlikely and illogical assertions. Flagging information as false barely compensates for the illusory truth effect.²⁸⁹

This also means that the archive was much more developed in its knowledge about “Jews” than about actual Jews, who played almost no part in the production of this “knowledge” unless they were converts – there were texts issued and produced by the Jewish community, or by individual rabbis, but most of these concerned matters only relevant to the community itself (debates about the Reform movement, regulations for Jewish youth associations, prayer books), and they rarely addressed a general audience. Stable and enduring stereotypes were much more widespread than, for example, information about the actual Jewish minority in Sweden or its neighbouring countries, or Jewish rituals and customs. Indeed, circumcision, kashrut, or Pesach celebrations are not discussed, being strangely absent from the Swedish corpus of printed matter.

These results can help to explain the functioning of the archive and the ongoing popularity of medieval legends. Swedish readers and listeners had been exposed to medieval antisemitic motifs for centuries. These contain aspects of religious difference, physical difference, collective character traits, and other aspects which have been seen as separating pre-modern from modern antisemitism. The results of the present study show that while new arguments and motifs developed, the older ones remained intelligible and were very frequently used – not in one text and one author's writings, or one political movement's newspaper, but amongst an entire audience of authors and readers and their collective memory and knowledge.

Texts and narrative plots with anti-Jewish themes and direct medieval antecedents appear frequently in the Swedish nineteenth-century print production. They can be traced back through the printing history of the eighteenth and even seventeenth century, which means that there had been a continual transmission and interest since the Middle Ages. In some cases the texts themselves were transmitted unchanged – such was the case with the exempla from *Legenda aurea* and the Old Swedish *Fornsvenska legendariet*, for instance – while in other cases it was the motifs that recurred, such as in the various conversion narratives. The immense popularity of the Ahasver compilation is the most striking example of an enduring motif, in which three texts originating from the Middle Ages are used – in an only slightly adapted form – for contemporary entertain-

²⁸⁹ Gordon Pennycook, Tyrone D. Cannon, and David G. Rand, “Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 147, no. 12 (2018).

ment and didactic purposes. At least with the Ahasver legend, oral transmission and folklore sources allow us to trace the spread of the motif. The Ahasver legend and “The Punishments of the Twelve Tribes” start from the Christ-killer accusation and then elaborate on different negative roles that Jews allegedly played during Jesus’s Passion and execution. The Judas legends function slightly differently, containing the potential for differentiated elaborations on the nature of evil and the significance and purpose of Christ’s suffering within the eschatological plan. In practice, however, they mainly served to “prove” the traitorous and evil nature of “the Jews.”

The Ahasver compilation and the Judas legends made no secret of their ancient origins. Quite the contrary, they made a point of the fact that the events surrounding Jesus’s death marked the beginning of a curse on the Jewish people, one which could be traced through different periods and places and was ongoing – just like the wanderings of Ahasver. The Judas text most prominently used in modern Sweden is directly and very closely based on the *Legenda aurea*. One of the legends also has a Swedish medieval lineage in *Fornsvenska legendariet* and *Själens tröst*. Both of these collections originate in the late thirteenth century.

The texts’ deep roots paralleled their description of a deeply rooted Jewish physiognomy and character. Of these texts, the most harsh is *Om the straff hward släkte ibland judarne lida måste*, part two of the Ahasver compilation. Without mentioning them explicitly, it combines several anti-Jewish accusations: the torture, mocking, and also killing of Christ are presented as a collective endeavour of all the tribes of Israel. As a result, they are portrayed as collectively guilty and eternally marked by negative external qualities and features, supposedly to remind the Christian community of their misdeeds: bad smell, bad habits like spitting and incomprehensible talk, as well as uncontrollable bleeding and repulsive skin diseases and parasites, are all presented as the permanent attributes of all Jews, from biblical times to the present day.

It is noteworthy how clear it is that the Reformation did not change the basic functions of the texts despite the differences in literacy, scriptural use, and theological framing between medieval Catholic and early modern Protestant societies. Medieval *exempla* were read and employed in sermons and were therefore listened to. They were popular and widely used stories of moral edification, providing positive as well as negative examples to help one lead a good Christian life. They were developed in a period when a large majority of the Christian population had no access to written texts and when the clergy controlled their access to religious doctrine. An unlearned laity could easily be trusted with *exempla* such as the Judas text – there was not much room for misunderstanding. The Judas motif, the Jewish characters connected to the deicide narrative, and

their subsequent punishments all remained popular in Protestant Sweden throughout changes in its understanding of lay reading and access to scripture. Their continual reuse and adaptation in modern printed books and leaflets bear witness to an ongoing intelligibility of medieval religious and essentialist anti-Judaism – which had survived for centuries without any actual Jewish people living in the country to provide it with a real-life counterpart.

The evolution of a “Jewish physiognomy” in portrayals of Jews’ participation in the Passion is a familiar theme in medieval church paintings and iconography.²⁹⁰ In Sweden, only a few examples of medieval church art survived the Protestant iconoclasm, but popular texts such as those reprinted in the nineteenth century nevertheless provided a stable tradition of “knowledge” about how and why Jews were ugly, foul-smelling, and sick, not to mention traitorous.

Besides the tradition of anti-Jewish knowledge about specific physical features which Jews were supposed to have, these texts also fulfilled a function as slightly scary entertainment. The ancientness of the texts and the portrayals of the Jewish characters, the curses they had to bear, as well as the spookiness of the ever reappearing Ahasver and the disgusting habits and diseases of the Jews would have all made good material for scary stories – as long as the Jews themselves stayed far away, in distant times and places. But as Jews started to immigrate to Sweden and people were reading political debates, newspaper articles, and pamphlets about their potential Emancipation, the ancient images must have played an important role. How could Ahasver receive civil rights, when he could not receive redemption despite his firm belief in Christ? How could foul-smelling, cursed, and sick people be allowed to marry Swedish men and women? How could a religion so wrong even be allowed in the Lutheran kingdom?

The ongoing printing and distribution of texts must be seen in connection with the textual tradition most interested in the idea that Jews could be freed from the biblical curse they had incurred: conversion stories. Some of these were distinctly racist; others employed a more subtle anti-Jewish approach. While the stories about curses remained in line with the medieval texts, Protestant conversion stories invented a post-medieval understanding of the miracle, replacing the intervention of saints or the Virgin with grace. Both conveyed a similar message: Judaism itself was the problem.

²⁹⁰ Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*, A Centennial Book 32 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993); Lipton, *Dark Mirror*.

Since late antiquity, Christian theology had fostered two main strands of anti-Jewish polemics: the deicide accusation and, as a consequence, punitive supersessionism. Each took on a distinctive Protestant form in the first decades of the nineteenth century in Sweden: First, that Jews' lack of a state, their homelessness and wandering amongst the nations, are part of their punishment for not recognizing Jesus as the messiah, but also that this is part of their religious-cultural-biological essence and character (the "nation within a nation" stereotype in racist form). Second, that the Gospels prophesy the conversion of the Jews at the end of times and at the same time demand their punishment – an argument already prominent in Martin Luther's writings after his disappointment with the Jews for failing to acknowledge Jesus even after the Reformation.²⁹¹ These two arguments, building upon the Christ-killer accusation and assuming an identity between biblical and contemporary Jews, are present in the works of various authors writing in various text genres – ranging from the medieval legendary motifs discussed above to translations of German Frühantisemitismus bestsellers to Swedish political pamphlets. Despite the prevalence of religious motifs, clerical authors do not predominate for the printed books – an indication of how widespread religiously based antisemitism was. Regarding potential religious arguments against Judaism and Jews, the Swedish texts are fairly complete: deicide, stubbornness, an outdated religion. Most relevant to the contemporaneous development of political arguments against Emancipation is the idea of a Jewish character which derives from religious difference and is manifested in law, faith, culture, language, bodies, and essence. This idea was already familiar, being present in medieval texts from the 1350s on, where the religious difference, manifested in a different legal status in the Holy Roman Empire, formed the basis for a general perception of difference, which in many cases already had the character of a biological essence.

In this way, the religious texts form a basis for the political texts, which mainly repeat two arguments against Emancipation: Jews engage in unfair business practices and Jews form a state within the state. The derivation of this figure of thought remains religious at its core: Jews are thought to be different because they have a different religion, which for centuries has forced them into different social, legal, and cultural forms, and this has shaped their collective character. As early as 1815, this trope figured prominently in the majority of texts, and it remained prominent until the end of the century.

²⁹¹ On this complex in general, see Thomas Kaufmann, *Luther's Jews: A Journey into Anti-Semitism* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2016).

Both the medieval tradition and early modern forms of anti-Jewish thought contributed important elements to the public discourse, which would have made the requirement of forced conversion prior to settlement seem sensible. Combined with the equally entrenched idea of essential Jewish evil and punishment, conversion was something mainly promoted in the religious texts from the evangelical and charismatic movement. Within the context of the Emancipation debate, the “Jewish character” had already been established and conversion did not seem to be a particularly reliable method of changing it. The “de-dramatization of conversion”²⁹² which has been identified at the beginning of the nineteenth century probably also added to the idea that it did not help much. The “racialization” of Jews in nineteenth-century Sweden thus had stable and enduring medieval traditions to build upon. For the most part, the archive consisted of accessible, easy-to-read booklets with cover illustrations reinforcing the image of “the Jew” as male, old, crook-nosed, and unsettling.

As for the question of why these medieval models continued to be so popular, an inherent conservatism of the archive must be considered, as must the “illusory truth effect.” Well-known fragments of “knowledge” about Jews, often-told legends and details familiar from religious education and popular folklore, had a good chance of being recognized as reliable, interesting, and worth retelling – simply because they were already known. While contemporary “Jewish questions” of Emancipation and integration were new and also created a demand for new texts and inputs, the general role of Jews in Christian thought and polemics had been established for centuries: bloodthirsty foreigners.

The many popular narratives about Jewish conversion testify to the significance of discussing and manifesting religious difference in nineteenth-century Sweden (and before). While the topic of conversion is usually presented prominently in the book titles, general religious hostility is relatively hidden. Several examples show that authors and editors chose to publish primarily religious texts under titles which instead suggested debates about Emancipation, Jewish–Christian relations in other countries, or general political content. The religious aspect and argument is so prominent in this category of texts that they should be read in relation to the medieval traditions of anti-Judaism.

Initially, these Christian beliefs served as a background to debates about Jewish immigration, and then, from 1838 on, about Emancipation. They always included the question of conversion, and Emancipation was seen as either an impediment to conversion or as an incentive. The idea that conversion might not actually change the Jewish “character” existed alongside the hope for con-

²⁹² Hammarström, *I sällskap med judar*, 168.

version; it was not a matter of the one excluding the other. Thus, a mix of religious and racist arguments characterized debates about the “Jewish question” in Sweden as early as the first half of the nineteenth century, before Emancipation was even proposed and when the general aim of executive measures was to restrict Jewish immigration and prevent integration. Given the wide range of texts that include fragments or entire narratives of this kind, it is difficult to say whether they represent a cultural transfer or if they were building on local traditions. The range of religious themes in Swedish anti-Jewish printed matter reveals the interplay of local traditions and adaptations with model texts from Europe, including both the Latin and the Greek Christian areas, reaching 1,600 years back in time. In most cases, the medieval texts already had both a European model and a Swedish adaptation. Even though the texts themselves were not originally produced in Sweden by Swedish writers, the persistent and varied adaptation, translation, and use of these texts reveals a local continuity of anti-Jewish thought. The same is true of those texts with religious themes that do not rely on medieval models: most of them are translated, usually from the German lands. But translators and editors used and adapted them for local purposes: introductions were written or omitted, excerpts radically shortened and decontextualized, titles invented.

The analysis of the entire corpus of anti-Jewish texts in nineteenth-century Sweden shows that the question of antisemitism being a “literary import” or “cultural import” versus it being an indigenous product is not particularly relevant: by the nineteenth century, Swedes had been in contact with anti-Jewish ideas, images, and narratives for so long that it was no longer possible to distinguish which specific argument was “homemade” and which was inspired by a German or French debate. The medieval imagery – originally Christian and thus religious in nature, but as early as the Late Middle Ages having “racialized” aspects – formed an undercurrent to debates on the “Jewish question” even before Jews were allowed to immigrate, and increasingly so afterwards. New elements which entered into the debate, often inspired by German texts, were always accompanied by a large number of old texts and motifs; these accompanied the new arguments, supporting them and helping to make them intelligible in their application to “the Jews.” The immense interest the Swedish public had in Jewish themes should be interpreted as a sign that this undercurrent was actualized and adapted in the context of contemporary events, forming in turn a framework for these: the harsh rejection of the Jewish minority, the recurrent attempts to restrict immigration instead of promoting integration, should also be seen as a consequence of the long exposure Swedes had had to “Jews.” The archive of antisemitism was well stocked and provided “knowledge” based

on both domestic and international discursive elements, within which religious difference served as a basis for other forms of exclusion.

The present work is not a study of the Emancipation process in Sweden, nor is it a study of the Jewish minority. The reconstruction of the archive of antisemitism in a long-term perspective can only serve as a background for explaining and analysing the specific circumstances of these processes. At the same time, it can serve as one part of many contributing to a description of nineteenth-century Swedish society – how it treated immigrants, how it treated the religious Other, and, as a result, how it came to understand itself as a modern nation-state. Using the archive of antisemitism, the immense interest the Swedish public had in anti-Jewish texts, and the immense “knowledge” that resulted from this, provides one piece of this puzzle.