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Title: “Blood Libel: The Template for the Modern Conspiracy Theory”

Abstract: This paper will argue that medieval blood libel (the conspiracy theory that Jewish communities ritually murdered Christian children) created a rhetorical template for the modern conspiracy theory and established some of the primary mechanisms by which it persuades. In the twelfth century, when blood libel stories depended on oral transmission and monastic chronicles, they tended to stay close to home, influencing few and spreading slowly. But when historical chronicles picked them up, these stories adopted a standardized format and vocabulary that drew on the historiographical style of the chronicle. This standardization, which I will describe in the paper, had two benefits; it allowed the structure to be adapted to a broad variety of circumstances (including conspiracy theories that target non-Jews and ones that do not involve ritual murder), and it gave the stories a persuasive air of authority and authenticity. At the time, it was this format that allowed blood libel to become a powerful political force. I argue that the most lasting effects of this standardization were that it permanently affiliated conspiracism with sectarian violence, and that it established the tactic of using the trappings of legitimate inquiry – such as citations, visual representations, and the diction of academic writing – to persuade believers. Thus, rather than focusing on the history of blood libel as a conspiracy theory, this paper explores how its medieval transmission created a template for contemporary conspiracy theories and their spread.

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