

Paola Tartakoff, Conversion, Circumcision, and Ritual Murder in Medieval Europe, Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania Press) 2020, X–248 p., 3 fig. (Middle Ages Series), ISBN 978-0-8122-5187-6, USD 65,00.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Hannah Teddy Schachter, Jerusalem

In her second book »Conversion, Circumcision, and Ritual Murder in Medieval Europe«, Paola Tartakoff delves deeper into the social and cultural history of conversion among Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages. The point of departure framing her monograph is an unusual case from the 1230s, in which various Jews of Norwich were charged with seizing and circumcising a 5-year-old Christian boy. Surviving exclusively in Christian sources, this case has long been characterized among modern scholars as an invented Christian narrative from a patchwork of anti-Jewish topoi. Tartakoff's book argues, however, that there is more to this story: While the Norwich case was indeed informed by broader Christian ideas about Jews as agents of Christian conversion to Judaism, it was equally informed by contemporary Jewish practices. Contextualizing the Norwich case amidst the broader ideologies and social realities behind conversion to Judaism, this book offers a study of the medieval idea that Jews zealously sought to draw Christians to Judaism.

Tartakoff creatively mines a rich assortment of sources in Hebrew, Latin and vernacular languages, such as court records, canon law, inquisitorial manuals, biblical commentaries, chronicles and exempla, as well as »Sefer Hasidim«, Jewish folktales, responsa, and Hebrew tombstones. The book has five chapters in addition to a hefty introduction and a short conclusion. Presenting the Norwich case as »a revival of Christian concerns about apostasy to Judaism« (S. 15), the first chapter entitled »Christian Vulnerabilities« is true to its name, exploring how the uptick in deviations from the Church during the 13th century fueled Christian anxieties. Tartakoff reveals how the same circles that recorded the Norwich case were also grappling with the issue of Christian heresies and conversion to Islam and Judaism. The alarming »interchangeability of religious affiliation« (S. 45) spread the idea that Jews – like Muslims and Christian heretics – were to blame. Thus, situating the Norwich case amidst broader ecclesiastical discourse, the first chapter argues that the affair circulated suspicions that non-Christians were active agents seeking Christian apostasy.

Turning to the sources of the Norwich case, the second chapter analyzes the specifically anti-Jewish prejudices that arose from these fears. Tartakoff maintains that various narrative details of the case were common anti-Jewish topoi: an innocent Christian child victim, Jewish blindness, water, the intervention of a Marian-like



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Christian woman, among them. Of particular interest, however, is the discrepancy in the sources regarding what this case was actually about: a Christian boy's circumcision or his attempted ritual murder. Exploring this conflation in Christian thought, this chapter concludes that some Christians understood circumcision, an act of Jewish initiation, as a quintessential form of anti-Christian violence, both spiritual and physical. Thus, Tartakoff argues, the conflation appears at Norwich because forced circumcision and attempted Christian ritual murder were, at least ideologically, one in the same.

Having looked at which ideological trends informed the Norwich case, Tartakoff then turns her attention to its social realities. As the main charge of the case was that Jews abducted Edward of Norwich to convert him, the third chapter surveys the historical phenomenon of Christian conversion to Judaism in the 13th and 14th centuries. She sheds light on a number of individuals that risked their lives to convert, not only slaves, women and commoners, but even learned churchmen, who found Judaism more compelling. Tartakoff discusses how, while deeply ambivalent about taking on conversion candidates (S. 72), Jews were intrinsically involved, be that by sheltering, feeding, integrating, or overseeing the circumcisions of new Jews in their communities (S. 90). The argument here, though admittedly harder to follow, is that the evidence of Jewish involvement in facilitating these conversions to Judaism confirmed Christian suspicions that Jews were agents of Christian apostasy.

Although they had strong reservations about the conversion of born Christians, medieval Jews took drastic measures, even risked their lives, to bring former Jews back to the Jewish fold. The evidence for this is explored in the fourth chapter, entitled »Return to Judaism«. It analyzes how Jews actively endeavored to re-Judaize former Jews, even pressuring them to return to the Jewish community. While this zeal to bring former Jews back to the community starkly differs from Jewish ambivalence to convert born Christians, the author concludes that, to Christian officials, any Jewish involvement in conversion »pertained to one and the same crime« (S. 120). Such active measures to reintegrate former Jews not only further confirmed Christian suspicions, but rather enflamed Christian beliefs that Jews actually sought Christian conversion.

Arguing that the »Return to Judaism« scenario better explains why Jews would abduct and circumcise the child in Norwich, Tartakoff's fifth and final chapter »Contested Children« focuses squarely on 5-year-old Edward. The author demonstrates how medieval Jews went to far greater lengths to retrieve baptized children of Jewish parents and to reintegrate them in the Jewish fold. Thus, the circumcision of Edward was not unique and »aligned with contemporaneous Jewish practices relating to admitting and readmitting boys to the Jewish community« (S. 136). She provides evidence that Edward was of ambiguous religious identity: A Christian father rendered him a born Christian to ecclesiastical



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

authorities, while a Jewish mother rendered him natively Jewish to halakha. This provides some historical explanation for the physical »tug-of-war« (S. 138) over the boy between the Jewish community and the Christian authorities preserved in the sources. From this vast contextualist approach, Tartakoff concludes her book with a convincing argument that the Jews of Norwich may well have circumcised the boy of Norwich after all, and that this story – while it has come down to us in texts charged with ideological Christian anxieties and anti-Jewish tropes – is very deeply rooted in the dynamic social realities of its time.

One particularly strong aspect of Tartakoff's book is the nuance she brings. Apart from highlighting the bidirectionality of conversion, she conveys that where some Christian leaders were committed to punishing returnees to Judaism, others were actively willing to help them (S. 104, 131). Of particular interest here was also how conversion to Judaism factored into dynamics of power between church and monarchy. The Norwich case reveals this tension: The hearings were held before the king, bishops, earls, and barons (S. 4), and when Jews offered to pay the king for help and protection, the bishop overruled him (S. 59). Similar power dynamics over conversion to Judaism echo throughout this work, a subject that certainly merits future investigation. While Tartakoff did an excellent job surveying the secondary literature readily available in English, some integration of non-English secondary literature will enrich her discussion in future research. Franziska Klein's work is a nice example, which explores aid and care for Jewish converts to Christianity in 13th-century England¹. This could be brought into conversation with Tartakoff's work to further drive the point home that Christian conversion to Judaism, while certainly less prevalent in the Middle Ages, is a historical phenomenon that can effectively complicate and further what we know about medieval processes of conversion to any faith.

In sum, Tartakoff's book is an insightful and highly thought-provoking contribution to the historical study of conversion, family,

¹ Franziska Klein, *Mandatum est exhibere. Absichten und Strategien in der Fürsorge für Konvertiten vom Judentum zum Christentum im Mittelalter*, in: Jan-Hendryk de Boer / Marcel Bubert (Hrsg.), *Absichten, Pläne, Strategien. Erkundungen einer historischen; ibid., Zwischen Chance und Gefahr. Konversion als kontingenzgenerierendes Moment in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, in: Markus Bernhardt u. a. (Hrsg.), *Möglichkeitshorizonte. Zur Pluralität von Zukunftserwartungen und Handlungsoptionen in der Geschichte*. Frankfurt (Main) 2017. Further scholars include Gerd Mentgen, *Jüdische Proselyten im Oberrheingebiet während des Spätmittelalters. Schicksale und Probleme einer „doppelten“ Minderheit*, in: *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 142 (1994), 117–139; Benjamin Scheller, *Die Grenzen der Hybridität: Konversion, uneindeutige religiöse Identitäten und obrigkeitliches Handeln im Europa des Spätmittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit*, in: Ruth Bernuth / Werner Röcke / Julia v. Weitbrecht (Hrsg.), *Zwischen Ereignis und Erzählung. Konversion als Medium der Selbstbeschreibung in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*. (Transformationen der Antike 39) Berlin/Boston 2016, 297–316.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

religious identities, and anti-Jewish discourse, as well as to the cultural and social history of both Jews and Christians in medieval Europe.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

DOI:

[10.11588/frrec.2021.4.85065](https://doi.org/10.11588/frrec.2021.4.85065)

Seite | page 4



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)