

A Place of Admonition

After a long process of discussion, the Town Church Congregation unveiled a bronze plate beneath the relief in 1988, thus, initiating a tradition of commemoration. The bloody past symbolically spills out of the four slabs of the memorial, the spaces between them forming a cross. The accompanying text refers both to the inscription on the relief and to the Shoah: "God's very name / the reviled Shem Ha Mphoras / whom the Jews before the Christians / held almost unspeakably holy / died in six million Jews / under a sign of the cross." Complementing this, a Hebrew inscription recites the beginning of Psalm 130: "Out of the depths I cry out to you, O Lord". The bronze plate was made by sculptor Wieland Schmiedel, and the text was written by author Jürgen Rennert.

In the course of controversial debates about the preservation of the defamatory relief, a redesign of the memorial ensemble is currently being discussed. The legibility and comprehensibility of the base plate are now in question, just as new demands are being placed on the communication of history and the culture of remembrance. The defamatory relief continues to call for a profound confrontation with the Christian roots of anti-Judaism and antisemitism. This includes reflecting on one's own history as well as examining Christian ideas and self-understandings. After all, it is they who have produced and for centuries cultivated discrimination against the Jews.



You can find further information here:

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Evangelische Akademie Sachsen-Anhalt
Schlossplatz 1D
06886 Lutherstadt Wittenberg
Tel.: 03491/4988 – 0
E-Mail: info@ev-akademie-wittenberg.de

Text: Vincent Kleinbub
Layout: Christian Melms
English Version: Dr. Robert G. Moore

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The anti-Jewish relief sculpture on the Town Church of Wittenberg

History
Effect
Classification



The defamatory relief in Wittenberg

Since about 1290, there has been a defamatory sculpture against Jews on the exterior of the Town Church in Wittenberg. Presumably it was mounted originally on the north facade of the building. It shows three people depicted as Jews sucking on the teats of a sow. Another one is looking under the sow's tail. Derogatory depictions like these are an expression of centuries of Christian hostility towards Jews and are meant to demean Jewish people.

For people of the Middle Ages, the figures depicted were clearly recognizable as Jews by their pointy hats. Initially an Ashkenazi item of clothing, the hat also developed into a distinctive mark in the 13th Century. In many places, Jews were forced to wear it and, thus, make themselves recognizable. Repeatedly there was violence against the Jewish population. In 1536, Elector Johann Friedrich of Saxony issued a comprehensive ban on Jews staying in the town.

In 1570, in the course of the expansion of the church, the relief was moved to its present location and an inscription was added. The inscription refers to a tract by Martin Luther from 1543. In "Of the Unknowable Name and the Lineage of Christ," Luther equated Jews with the devil and made a derisive reference to the motif on the Town Church.



Broadsheet print, Wolfgang Meissner, 1596. With the advent of the printing press, the anti-Jewish motif spread throughout the German-speaking world in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Source: Wikipedia, gemeinfrei

Christian Anti-Judaism: Depiction and violence

There are still about 50 so-called "Jewish sow" depictions on churches and other buildings today. In the Middle Ages, the motif was part of the Christian representations of sin and heresy. Jews were regarded as a kind of foil: pictures on churches showing Jews in connection with pigs or feces were meant to warn Christians not to fall away from faith. At the same time, the images communicated the disassociation from Judaism and, thus, contributed to the spread of hostility towards Jews among the population.

In many places in the Holy Roman Empire there were pogroms against the Jewish populations. Jews were used as scapegoats – they were accused of ritually slaughtering Christian children, desecrating communion wafers or being responsible for diseases such as the plague. Occasionally, church representatives confronted such accusations, but overall, violence against Jews in the Middle Ages took place on the basis of Christian standards. Christian preachers helped to spread and popularize anti-Jewish conspiracy myths.

During the Reformation, the motifs of popular piety, which were the basis of many anti-Jewish myths, were partly questioned. Nevertheless, in 1543 Martin Luther also resorted to the ritual murder accusation to defame Jews. His writings made the relief in Wittenberg known beyond the town limits and promoted discrimination against Jews.

Luther and Cranach: Jew-Hatred in the context of the Reformation



Cover page of "On the Jews and Their Lies"

Source: Google/Books, gemeinfrei

After its relocation in 1570, the relief was more visible and clearly identified with Martin Luther by the inscription attached to it. In the course of the church's conversion into a place of representation of the Reformation, an inscription was added next to it, comparing Luther's work against the "papist robbers" with Jesus' cleansing of the temple (Matthew 21). In combination with the relief, this allusion may have fostered not only anti-Catholic but also anti-Jewish resentment.

In 1543, Luther published his writing, "On the Jews and Their Lies". Therein he advocated the persecution of Jews and called for their synagogues to be burned down. Luther accused Jews of circulating lies about Christianity. To demonize the Jews, he also drew on popular anti-Jewish motifs, such as that Jews were vengeful and greedy for money.

The depiction of Judas Iscariot on the Wittenberg Reformation Altar inside the Town Church also follows anti-Jewish stereotypes: The yellow color of Judas' robe not only symbolized greed, envy and ill-will at the time, but was also associated with the dress codes that applied to Jews. The depicted purse, in turn, marks Judas as a money-grubbing traitor.

National Socialism

Both Martin Luther and Lutherstadt Wittenberg were used by the National Socialists to represent the regime. The motif of the "Jewish sow" gained enormous popularity between 1933 and 1945 and was an integral part of anti-Semitic mobilization. Luther's anti-Jewish writings found their way into Nazi propaganda and as such accompanied the increasing disenfranchisement of Jews.

With the help of churches and communities, Luther's birthday in Wittenberg in 1933 was staged as German Luther Day. In September of the same year, the Protestant National Synod met here to elect Hitler's confidant Ludwig Müller as the first National Socialist Reichs Bishop. From then on, Müller and the German Christians enforced the Führer principle, and Christian youth associations were absorbed into the Hitler Youth.

The co-opting of the Protestant Church by the Nazis took place quickly, although not entirely without resistance. In 1934, the Confessing Church was founded as an informal opposition. However, its role was ambivalent until 1945. Disassociation from the Nazi regime did not always mean rejection of its ideology and political goals.



Hitler's confidant Ludwig Müller before his election as Reichs Bishop in Wittenberg Source: Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0 de