Project: Representations of Host Desecration in Medieval Aragon

The accusation of host desecration by Jews in the Middle Ages was a pan-European phenomenon driven by Christian ideology in tandem with more local political and social concerns. The host was perhaps the most heavily invested and, as a result, the most volatile Christian symbol, representing at once the body of Christ and the body of Christian believers. At different times and different places, accusations of host desecration were used to define boundaries and communities, others and enemies. The NEH Institute on the Medieval Mediterranean allowed me to lay the groundwork for a study of several such accusations that occurred in the Kingdom of Aragon during the second half of the fourteenth century as well as of artistic representations of host desecration from the same area and period. During the month-long institute I focused primarily on one artistic representation and one documented case of host desecration: the altarpiece from the monastery of Santa María de Vallbona de les Monges, now in the Museu Nacional d’Art de Catalunya; and the case of host ‘desecration’ that occurred in Barcelona in 1367.

The Corpus Christi altarpiece was painted, perhaps by Guillem Seguer, around 1335-1345 for the Corpus Christi chapel in the monastery of Santa María de Vallbona de les Monges, located in the county of Urgell. The retaule and its accompanying frontal are organized, literally and figuratively, around the Eucharistic wafer that one sees in the representation of the Trinity and in an array of scenes drawn from wide variety of source types. The unity of the piece derives to great extent from the skillful deployment of the host in combination with the fires that await those who reject or attack its virtues. Closer scrutiny reveals that the unity of this iconographic program is a factitious one, given the wide range of sources or analogues for the individual scenes. Among these scenes – indeed, the first scene of the retaule (reading from left to right and top to bottom) – is a very early representation of the Corpus Christi procession, the feast established by Pope John XXII in 1317 and first celebrated in the Iberian Peninsula in Barcelona in 1320 by confraternity of the Santísimo Sacramento. Both the Dominican and Franciscan orders helped propagate the cult, but the altarpiece gives pride of place to the Dominicans with its numerous scenes that represent monks from that order, for example, in the Miracle of the Mule, where a pious mule lies in veneration of the host held by a Dominican friar and refuses to get up despite the lashing of his apparently Jewish master. There are also more familiar scenes, such as the Last Supper in the retaule and the Epiphany and the Annunciation in the frontal. These scenes are not part of any narrative sequence – indeed, they are out of their normal order – but they do participate in the iconographic logic at work. Thus the Last Supper is
represented, not as a key moment in the events leading up to the Passion of Christ but as the establishment of the Eucharistic celebration, as the large host in Christ’s hand makes clear. On the other hand, the scenes depicting host desecration do form a kind of narrative sequence, albeit a disjointed one in that the first two scenes appear on the *retaule* and the following scenes on the *frontal*. The scenes showing a Jew first stabbing a consecrated wafer, then hoisting it aloft on a lance and, finally, throwing it into a cauldron make it clear that the legend depicted here is the Miracle des Billettes, named for the church in Paris erected on the site of the purported host desecration in that city in 1290. The narrative sequence here shown is also incomplete. One key element that is missing is how the Jew obtained the host, an aspect that is included in most narrative accounts and visual analogues. It is not clear why this part of the story should not be depicted. Perhaps those who commissioned the altarpiece did not want to remind its intended audience that it was a Christian woman who obtained the host at Easter Mass. Indeed, the purpose for which the Vallbona Corpus Christi *retaule* was made is not known to us but, given that it is a visual collection of exempla and legends, perhaps it was used for preaching. As for its anti-Jewish elements, these may be a reflection of local concerns. The monastery of Vallbona had a close association withAnglesola family, from which came two of its abbesses in the second half of the fourteenth century. This family also had prerogatives with regard to the Jewish community of Lérida. Perhaps the altarpiece executed for the Corpus Christi chapel served to remind the Christian members of the community that the most effective protection – not to say weapon – that could be used against the Jewish others in their midst was, precisely, the consecrated wafer.

There are actually no known instances of actual host desecration in the Iberian Peninsula, only accusations thereof. The Barcelona incident of 1367 is known to us primarily through a letter, conserved in the Archives of the Crown of Aragon, written to King Peter the Ceremonious by John, his son and lieutenant in Barcelona. John’s letter details how a Christian thief had stolen a pyx from the church of Saint Maria in the town of Muntblanch, located to the east of Barcelona. Unbeknownst to him, this vessel contained seven consecrated hosts. Brought before John’s council, the thief, Per Fuster claimed that he and his accomplice had eaten two of the hosts and sold the other five to a Jew of Barcelona. John then determined to prosecute the case to the fullest in order to find the Jewish accomplices and recover the purloined hosts. The ensuing spiral of accusation, arrests, and torture implicated several members of the Jewish community, including its secretary, Salamo Sescaleta, who denied any knowledge of the case and died as a result of his harsh interrogation. Ultimately, John’s prosecution of the case proved to be a failure: none of the
stolen hosts was recovered, and the king was obliged to intervene to put a halt to John’s actions. Peter had the entire Jewish community held until he determined that none of the Jews were guilty of involvement in the case, after which finding he ordered John to cease and desist from any further judicial action against them. It is not entirely clear why John should have seized on the trumped up claims of a Christian criminal to persecute the Jewish community, but Peter’s reaction shows that he did not agree with son’s actions. His swift intervention allowed the Jews of Barcelona to return to their affairs and to their uneasy coexistence with their Christian neighbors.

This preliminary research undertaken in the context in the Institute on the Medieval Mediterranean suggests that host desecration was a tool deployed in response to specific, local concerns. In the case of the altarpiece of Santa María de Vallbona, the Parisian legend was incorporated into an elaborate work of art that served to promote Eucharistic piety and Dominican prestige, perhaps along with a local family’s prerogatives with regard to a nearby Jewish community. In the Barcelona incident of 1367, the host became the missing piece in a complicated political game involving the Jews of Barcelona, the local justicer, and his royal father. Further research into iconographic representations and into subsequent false accusations of desecration that occurred in Huesca in 1377 and Lérida in 1383 should allow a fuller understanding of this disturbing aspect of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Aragon.