

December 6, 1971

Dr. George Himler  
750 Third Avenue  
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Dr. Himler:

A member of my congregation showed me the November 1, 1971 issue of the New York State Journal of Medicine, and pointed out the article entitled "Strange Murder of William of Norwich."

I must express to you my sense of shock and outrage that such an obviously anti-Semitic article should have been accepted for publication in your Journal. The last 25 or 30 years certainly should have taught us that racial bigotry is all the more noxious when disguised in pseudo-scientific jargon than when it is belled forth with vulgar crudeness.

For your Society to permit publication of an article that pretends to scientific accuracy and which does nothing more than disinter ancient falsehoods that have caused untold anguish to Jews who were innocent hostages in a hostile environment, is an outrageous abdication of editorial responsibility and a singularly scandalous expression of insensitivity.

Sincerely yours,

RABBI NORMAN LAMM

NL:cw



## Medical Arts and Letters

WILLIAM B. OBER, M.D., Editor

### STRANGE MURDER OF WILLIAM OF NORWICH, 1144

Medicolegal analysis of Thomas  
of Monmouth, *De Vita et Passione*  
*Sancti Willelmi Martyris*  
*Norwicensis*

WILLIAM D. SHARPE, M.D.  
New York City

Director of Laboratories, Columbus Hospital;  
Clinical Associate Professor of Pathology, College of  
Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey at Newark

After the Norman conquest, early twelfth-century Anglia's economy and living conditions approximated those of underdeveloped nations today, compounded by a wretched climate, marshy soil, cold winds from the North Sea, a short growing season, and government by a hated and alien race. Violence was common, and the ordinary serf went months without being either warm, dry, or free from hunger. Some celebrated event occasionally excited bleak and joyless lives. One such event is narrated by Thomas of Monmouth, the murder of a twelve- or thirteen-year-old Christian boy, William, during Holy Week of 1144 in the Jewish quarter of Norwich.

A single manuscript account survives\* in the Library of Cambridge University, copied before 1200 from a text which the editors date, on internal grounds, to 1172/1173, and which may have been copied from Thomas' holograph. We shall attempt to analyze this narrative to learn something of this murder, which contributed to the often-repeated charge of ritual murder of Christian children by Jews, and which influenced the final expulsion of Jews from England half a century before Chaucer.

\* Codex Cantab. 3037, late twelfth century.

#### Early background

The century of turmoil following the Norman conquest saw considerable confusion in both criminal and civil jurisdiction, but generally a distinction was, and is, drawn between secret murder or murder by stealth and premeditation, and open homicide, for example, homicide during a family altercation or in the heat of passion. All the inhabitants of a ward ("hundred") shared in the fine (murdrum) levied unless the inhabitants could produce the murderer, but certain nobles and all ecclesiastical foundations were exempted from this liability. Hence, discovered bodies which presumably had been murdered were not infrequently transported to another ward to transfer this financial liability, and desire to avoid participation in this fine could induce a man who discovered a body to go his way and to say nothing.

This was not because of any desire to be what we would now call an accessory after the fact, but because, as the law then stood, only near blood relations of a murdered man could initiate prosecution in cases of secret murder, whereas in cases of open homicide anyone connected with the dead man by blood, lordship, or homage could do so. Hence the discoverer in his own ward of a presumably murdered body probably not only could not initiate criminal prosecution but also would run a very substantial risk of sharing in the fine assessed were the murderer not identified. Human nature being what it is and reporting the crime being apt to do financial harm without doing much good by way of apprehension and conviction of the murderer the temptation to move the body or to ignore the crime might prove overwhelming. The risk of subsequent prosecution, if the defendant were acquitted, or of violence from his family whatever the outcome, was real, and apparently it was only on the king's highways or on the king's lands that murder was then specifically a breach of the king's peace. The law still regarded murder as an offense against the individual, not against the crown or commonwealth.

The first Jews arrived in Norwich about 1086, and a Jewish massacre at Rouen in 1096 fostered further immigration. By 1144, they formed a small, distinct, and apparently prosperous community at Norwich, doubtless bitterly envied by the dispossessed Saxons and less prosperous Normans. Jews had a special relationship to the king as "royal chattels" and could call on the county



sheriff for protection. Jews were limited in their livelihoods to trade and had almost a monopoly on money lending and on the primitive banking then available. Other careers were closed to them, if only because entry into almost all trades, crafts, guilds, and professions involved participation in a religious ceremony which invoked the name of the Trinity. Interest rates were high, and risks of lending money were great; a Christian debtor often stood to gain by a Jewish creditor's death; and the king regularly claimed one part in three of a dead Jew's estate and might claim all. Church officials were not only habitually anti-Semitic and fond of dark homiletic allusions to nameless Jewish rites but almost always were also deeply in debt to Jews, who alone could provide the capital needed for their fashionable building programs.

Very little is known about William's life; he had no surname. He was born on Candlemas Day, February 2, 1132, probably at Haveringland, Norfolk County, of Saxon parents in moderate circumstances. His father, Wenstan, died when William was small, and his mother Elviva (or Elvira) raised him and taught him to read and write. His maternal grandfather was a priest. Most priests and many bishops then were married men. His maternal aunt, Liviva, was married to the priest Godwin Sturt, whose son Alexander was already in deacon's orders and who may have inherited his father's parish in Norwich. At eight, William was apprenticed to a tanner and worked at that trade until his death some few months after his twelfth birthday. Were it not for various considerations which suggested the usefulness of a saint, preferably indigenous and hopefully a martyr, for Herbert de Losinga's still magnificent and then new cathedral, he would be unknown. Our knowledge of his murder is limited to what Thomas of Monmouth says and, equally important, does not say in his far from disinterested account. Crimes have patterns which permit their classification and often solution. A medicolegal analysis of Thomas's account may yield useful insight into this bylane of medieval history.

William appears to have had friends among the Jews, friendships of which his Uncle Godwin and a certain Wolward, possibly a distant relation or employer with whom William lived, strongly disapproved. Although Judaeo-Christian friendships were not rare in medieval England, they were not so common as now; and Thomas<sup>1</sup> is quite explicit that Uncle Godwin and Wolward had both prohibited William's dealings with Jews. Thomas's account, moreover, refers to William as "neglected"<sup>2</sup> and as both "ragged" and "living precariously,"<sup>3</sup> admitting that considerable doubt always did exist at Norwich as to the manner and cause of William's death.<sup>4</sup> Anderson<sup>5</sup> suggests a serious accident or manslaughter during the Purim festival of 1144, but Thomas is silent on this point.

## Chronology of the murder

**Monday in Holy Week.**<sup>6</sup> A man who represented himself as a delegate of the Archdeacon William of Norwich's cook met William, went with him to his mother's home, and offered him advantageous employment. William's mother was skeptical, but William apparently wanted to accompany the man, ostensibly to work in the Archdeacon's household, and begged his mother to let him go. This unidentified man offered her three shillings, perhaps a bribe or an advance on wages, and she finally agreed to permit a change of occupation rather unusual during the middle ages. Thomas is silent as to where William and the messenger spent the night, but we may presume that it was at the home of William's mother, because William ordinarily lodged with Wolward.

**Tuesday in Holy Week.**<sup>7</sup> Early in the morning, William and his unidentified guide returned to Norwich, but the guide apparently knew or learned a good deal about William and his family, because he stopped at William's aunt's house and informed her that William's mother had entrusted the boy to him. After the pair departed for the archdeacon's house, the aunt was suspicious and sent her daughter (William's cousin) to follow him. This girl subsequently reported that the pair did not go to the archdeacon's house but entered a dwelling in the Jewish quarter. This house was never identified; the messenger was never identified; and it is not known whether he was Jew or gentile. Not only does William appear to have entered this building voluntarily, but also after this unusual change in destination, no attempt was made to retrieve William who was never again seen alive.

**Spy Wednesday.**<sup>8</sup> Thomas of Monmouth fixes Spy Wednesday as the date of William's murder which he reconstructs as follows: William's mouth was forced open and he was gagged by a wooden block (teazle) secured by straps tightly knotted at the nape of his neck. A short piece of rope, about half an inch thick, with three knots, was bound around his forehead so that one knot was in the center of his head and one at each temple. This was tied tightly at the occiput, carried forward around his neck, and tied in a fifth knot under his chin. His head was shaved and stabbed repeatedly with thorn points, some of which remained in the wounds when his body was finally buried in the monastery.<sup>9</sup> He was suspended from an upright post set up between two Y-posts, across which a beam had been placed. William's right hand and foot were bound by cords, but his left hand and foot were pierced by two nails. He was finally stabbed through the left side into the heart, and boiling water was poured over him to wash, close, and staunch the wounds.

Thomas is generally vague about anatomic detail. The state of William's genitalia and anus are not mentioned, and one cannot be sure on the basis



of Thomas's account whether or not wounds in addition to those mentioned in the chest and head were present on the body. Lack of anogenital wounds or abrasions in this sort of a violent death would strike most modern coroners as a bit unusual.

Thomas<sup>10</sup> quotes long after the event but does not name a certain poor Christian woman who worked as a maidservant in the Jewish quarter and who heard the commotion of William's slaying as she was boiling water. She claimed that she saw with one eye, as she was handing a vessel of water through the door, a boy fastened to a post just before the door was slammed shut. She hesitated to report this at the time, fearing for her life or wages. She further claimed that she found a boy's belt with its knife, sheath, some needles, and a case in that very room. Thomas<sup>11</sup> states that she showed him these things and demonstrated signs of the murder on the house's timbers.

Was this memory or imagination? Did she witness the slaughter of a lamb as a source of kosher meat? The belt and its attachments drop out of Thomas's narrative, but they would have been valuable religious relics indeed. It is doubtful that the woman could have served as a witness at a trial, had one been held, because by working for Jews she had incurred excommunication. Yet if this witness is to be trusted, her evidence is indeed damning.

**Maundy Thursday.**<sup>12</sup> Thomas conjectures that after the murder the Jews debated what was to be done. They lived in rented houses, and burial in their own cellars or cesspools would surely raise suspicions toward them were the body to be found. Most murderers have difficulty disposing of their victims' bodies, and William's body also had to be got rid of. The Jews fully appreciated the community's hostility and the gravity of their situation. Danger could best be averted by abandoning William's body at some distance from the Jewish quarter. On Maundy Thursday, however, streets were crowded with Christians going the rounds of various churches, and transporting a dead body through crowded streets was simply out of the question. Prudence required that the body remain hidden until Good Friday, when most people would be indoors, fasting at home, or praying in church.

**Good Friday.**<sup>13</sup> The murder was revealed by chance early in the morning of Good Friday. Two Jews, one of them identified by Thomas only by the common name Eleazar ("Deus-adjuvet"), were carrying the body wrapped in a sack and were entering Thorpe Wood on the outskirts of Norwich. Aelward Ded, with a single servant, was going from the Church of St. Mary Magdalene to that of St. Leonard's Priory and met them. Ded recognized the two men as Jews and appears to have wondered why they were traveling on Friday and what was in the sack. Ded felt the sack and

apparently recognized the contents as a human body, whereupon the two Jews spurred their horses and fled into the wood. Here, they appear to have lashed the body lightly to a tree before returning to the Jewish quarter in Norwich to report that they had been discovered with the body.

The now seriously disturbed representatives of the Jewish community went to Sheriff John de Caineto and offered him a bribe of 100 marks, worth about 800 ounces of silver. The sheriff then summoned Aelward Ded and compelled him to swear that he would lay no information against the Jews. In the event, Ded said nothing of this until he was on his deathbed in 1149, when he was not able to name the men whom he saw in the wood. He remained silent even after John de Caineto's death in 1146.

Anderson<sup>14</sup> suggests that William was alive and being carried elsewhere when Ded encountered the two Jews and that the Jews then stabbed William through the sack and dropped his body, basing this suggestion only on the observation that the gag was still in place when William's body was found. This explanation seems unlikely. Not only would this have constituted open murder on a public highway in the face of two witnesses, but rigor mortis commences very early in the jaws, and extraction of the gag would have been difficult. If a human being is suspended with his arms outstretched and thereby immobilized, the thorax becomes rigid. Purely muscular diaphragmatic respirations, if the bony thorax cannot move, soon prove inadequate to maintain pulmonary ventilation and an adequate return of blood from the periphery to the heart. Congestive cardiac failure soon develops and the victim dies.

**Holy Saturday.**<sup>15</sup> At dawn on Holy Saturday, the Lady Legarda, widow of William de Apulia, who lived near St. Mary Magdalene's Church and devoted herself to various charitable activities, came to a thicket of bushes in which lay the dead body of a boy clad in his jacket and shoes, with his head shaved and punctured by countless stab wounds. Thomas mentions only jacket and shoes, and one may conclude that William's body was partially undressed. William might be expected to have worn long, closely fitting trousers (trews) and perhaps linen underdrawers. For what it is worth, pictures of William reproduced by Jessopp and James,<sup>16</sup> although from centuries generally squeamish about nudity, all show him with a good head of hair, and pictures of his martyrdom show him wearing brief underdrawers. The partially disrobed body is important. Later the same morning, while Henry de Sprowston, a forester responsible for that part of the wood, was making his rounds, he met an unidentified peasant who informed him that he had just found the body of a dead boy. Custom prohibited Christian burial on either Holy Saturday or Easter Day, and the fores-



ter left the body where it was, apparently planning burial in the churchyard of Sprowston, a suburb of Norwich.

**Easter Day.**<sup>17</sup> News of the boy's death spread, and a great many people visited the scene where the body remained unburied. Some of William's friends recognized him, and Thomas reports that William's frequent visits to the Jewish quarter were widely known. On Easter Monday Henry de Sprowston buried the body where he had found it.<sup>18</sup>

**Easter Tuesday.**<sup>19</sup> William's priest uncle, Godwin Sturt, with his son Alexander, accompanied William's brother Robert to identify the body. They disinterred and identified the body, found no evidence of putrefaction,\* and reburied the body with appropriate religious rites. Apparently, Godwin only then informed his wife (William's aunt) of what had happened, and only then did William's mother learn of his death. She accused the Jews of having killed her son, and Godwin Sturt placed the whole matter before ecclesiastical authorities at the meeting of the Synod of Norwich about April 10 or 11, 1144.

The casual treatment of William's disappearance, finding, and burial, from which his mother was absent, suggests a very neglected or very unruly child. His mother's wild accusations, not altogether unknown to coroners' physicians today, may have been a reaction to guilt at having neglected him, and the casual manner of his burial suggests that William may have been the black lamb of the family for whom an unhappy end was no surprise.

Enough public outcry and agitation appear to have developed that the Jews sought protection for a time in the castle keep; and although Thomas<sup>20</sup> is silent whether a proper inquest or trial was held, he describes an imaginary trial and cites considerable hearsay evidence. After public accusations of William's murder had been made against the Jews, unidentified Jews approached William's brother Robert, subsequently a monk at Norwich, who alone could bring a formal charge of murder, with a bribe of ten marks to quash the matter.<sup>21</sup>

#### Analysis of evidence

William was tortured and killed, and his death was neither a suicide nor a death by accidental self-induced asphyxia (boys sometimes try to intensify sexual pleasure while masturbating by inducing hypoxia), because he could not have suspended himself by both upper extremities. The shaving of his head almost excludes the possibility of death

\*Emphasis on putrefaction is of hagiographic not forensic interest. Bodies violently murdered tend to decompose a bit more slowly than those dead of natural causes, and the bodies of scrawny children decay slowest of all. If the wound into William's left side opened his stomach or the splenic flexure of his colon, gastrointestinal contents and gases would have escaped, further retarding decomposition. Norwich can be bitterly cold during Easter week (this writer once saw snow there on Easter Monday), and the body may have been refrigerated naturally. The odor of a decomposing body is, at first, sickeningly sweet.

by misadventure during experimentation or horseplay, because explaining a shaved head at a time when this was a punishment for minor infractions would have been difficult. It is equally definite that the Jews claimed the sheriff's protection and bribed him before William's body was found and that the Jewish community knew of his death long before the Christian community. It appears reasonably certain that a bribe was offered to the one member of William's family, brother Robert, who alone could initiate criminal prosecution. The last time William was seen alive he was seen entering a house in the Jewish quarter, and his dead body was first seen in the custody of two Jews. In modern terms, the Jewish community were at least accessories after the fact. Nothing in Thomas's account suggests that the Jewish community moved against any of its own members, although they may have done so in private, and Thomas's bias might have led him to suppress this information had it taken place and had he known of it.

Ritual murder is too easily dismissed. Dark strains in human nature exist in all times and places, and the history of the Knights Templars and of the Albigensians contains many murky passages. The obscene ritual blasphemy of the Black Mass is not quite dead, and, like any human instinct, the religious instinct is capable of perversion. Paris<sup>22</sup> reports that in 1234 the young son of Benedict, a Jewish physician converted to Christianity, was kidnapped and forcibly circumcised, so such things did happen. If the maidservant is to be believed, ritual murder is a possibility, although it appears hard to believe that the Jewish community as such can have done this, whatever an individual Jewish psychopath may have done.

Accidental death sometimes occurred during the Purim masquerade, but the Feast of Purim was February 21, 1144, a month before William disappeared. Human beings are human, wine is wine, and horseplay by some law of its own tends to get out of hand, so that misadventures did occur during the Purim celebration which often included an effigy burning of Haman on a cross. Sokrates<sup>23</sup> describes the murder, by crucifixion, of a Christian child by some Syrian Jews celebrating the Purim in 415, apparently by accident. His account appears to be the first description of Jewish ritual murder until William of Norwich, after which a number of vague accusations and two tolerably well-founded reports of such deaths of boys follow. On March 18, 1168, a boy named Harold was found mutilated and tortured, perhaps circumcised, in the Severn River at Gloucester after having been kidnapped by Jews on or about February 21; Purim that year began February 24. In June, 1181, according to Jocelin of Brakelond, a boy named Robert was killed at Bury, quite close to Norwich, under what were then considered suspicious circumstances.<sup>24</sup> Roth<sup>25</sup> relates that in



1191 80 Jews at Bray in northern France were burned at the stake for blasphemy because a Christian murderer of a Jew, having been turned over to the Jewish community for punishment, was scourged through the streets wearing a crown of thorns and crucified.

The *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*<sup>26</sup> and Roth<sup>27</sup> deny that William was murdered at all, despite the witnesses' accounts of the body, and suggest that he had a cataleptic fit and that he was too hastily (Saturday to Monday!) buried by his relations. This hypothesis ignores a partially undressed, tortured, and gagged boy's body, abandoned and unburied by two men known to be members of the Jewish community at a time when failure to provide Christian burial was a serious sin indeed and is wholly inconsistent with Thomas's chronology which is all the evidence we have. The only credible explanations for "cataleptic" fits are intoxication, postepileptic states, cerebrovascular accidents, and the Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome. None of these possibilities explain the mutilated body, unless the body was mutilated after death, a suggestion which can be neither affirmed nor refuted on the evidence.

William was murdered, and he was not murdered during a Purim celebration. Ritual murder can be neither implicated nor excluded on the evidence, but the death's careful planning and sadistic nature raise the possibility of cultist murder, with which head shaving is sometimes associated. Professional assassins perform murders which are, almost without exception, neat, tidy, and workmanlike; murders for revenge tend to be messy, as are many of those committed by women; but psychopathic murders, like sexual perversions themselves, tend to be rigidly stereotyped and patterned. The circumstances of William's death point to the latter category.

William's family apparently neglected him, although they opposed his association with Jews. Even after he had been led away by a man both unknown to and mistrusted by his aunt and mother, and after his cousin had reported that he had entered a house in the Jewish quarter instead of the archdeacon's, no attempt was made to bring him back. He was missing and unaccounted for during an entire week, and Thomas nowhere mentions any effort to find him. His death was not reported to his mother until the fourth day after his body was found. From this we must conclude that William sometimes disappeared for days at a time; that young as he was, he had some unwise acquaintances; and that his family exerted remarkably little control over him, or all three. Thomas of Monmouth constantly returns to the theme of William's innocence and virginity but appears to have had some difficulty persuading members of his monastery that William was either saint or martyr. William's cult was always local, and he

was, of course, never canonized. The "anti-William" party was always strong and articulate, the Jews appear to have suffered no sustained disability from his well-publicized murder, and even Thomas's biased account leaves an impression that many people remained very skeptical about the whole affair.

Was William generally known as at least a potentially wayward youngster? Some few children of tender years, male and female, invite the perverse sexual attention of disturbed adults for excitement, personal attention, or financial gain, and we must consider the possibility that William was among their number. Such children typically come from loosely disciplined, loveless, and often fatherless homes. Evidence that William had not gone where he said he was going did not move his family to action. Had he done this before? Where? With whom? When a modern coroner's physician encounters a tortured and partially disrobed body—Thomas's account lists shoes and jacket but not hose, trousers, or underdrawers—of any age or sex, he thinks of what the tabloid press terms a "sex murder." If the body is that of an immature male, he thinks of a pedophilic sadist murderer.

The simplest explanation, if ritual murder can be excluded, is that William was selected as a street arab not very likely to be missed by family or friends. The floating, rootless, unattached solitary male city dweller still runs an enormously increased risk of being murdered. Some sadistic sexual deviate, working alone or with no more than one or two companions, very likely took William to a house in the Jewish quarter where he was tortured and died. We cannot prove but must assume some sexual activity as part of the preparation for the murder. Possibly he was suspended in crucifixion, lost consciousness, or died, whereupon his torturers panicked and stabbed him. At least one of the parties to the murder had some knowledge of butchering, because boiling water was poured over him to stop the flow of blood, as is done when an animal is slaughtered. The leading candidate would be his guide who, after all, represented himself as a kitchen employe, although whether Jew or gentile is not known.

When the more responsible members of the Jewish community learned of the murder, assuming that they were not accomplices, they foresaw very serious, perhaps fatal, consequences, and simultaneously undertook both to invoke the sheriff's aid and to get rid of the body. This was neither a very brave nor a very noble act but, considering their precarious status, was an understandable one.

One bit of evidence is disturbing, the shaved head. Although William's iconography consistently demonstrates long curls, Thomas<sup>28</sup> is explicit that the head was shaved. If this is, in fact,



a reference to shaving and if this was done before or during the torture, accidental or inadvertent homicide would be difficult to sustain, because apart from the difficulty of shaving a head around which are wrapped both the straps for the gag and another knotted rope, all parties would have been hard pressed to explain this shaving had William lived. Two alternatives should be considered: First, when William lost consciousness or died, a physician was summoned who cut away the hair matted and stained with blood and mucus to examine for a potentially treatable head injury. The second is less likely but possible, namely, "capite etenim raso" is to be translated "having slashed the head [of his penis] with a razor" or even "having bared his glans," reading "caput" as a euphemism for glans penis.

This kind of mutilation fits ritual and sadistic murder equally well.

### Conclusion

Ritual murder is rare and poorly documented, but sadistic murder is both common and well documented. Sadistic murder by a Jewish psychopath, followed by a united Jewish community attempt to avoid the possible bloodshed which might follow, would best explain Thomas's account. The weight of evidence and probability is that William was a naughty little boy who had the misfortune to encounter a sadistic sexual deviate. The Jews' attempt to conceal the crime was based on fear rooted in Jewish massacres following far less provocative mishaps. Blasphemy is among the last crimes even an apostate Christian will commit, and the murderer was probably a member of the Jewish community, very likely a butcher or someone with kitchen experience. The "ritual" components may be explained by suggesting that the sex maniac was also a morbidly anti-Christian religious fanatic. Despite ecclesiastical pressure, it may be that the sheriff did not want to prosecute, bribe or no bribe, appreciating that young people who drift through the streets often come to evil ends and sometimes have astonishingly highly placed playmates. A medicolegal proverb of some validity sums it up nicely: "those who deviate from the norm must beware the consequences."

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9. *Ibid.*: 1.xviii.
10. *Ibid.*: 2.ix.
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