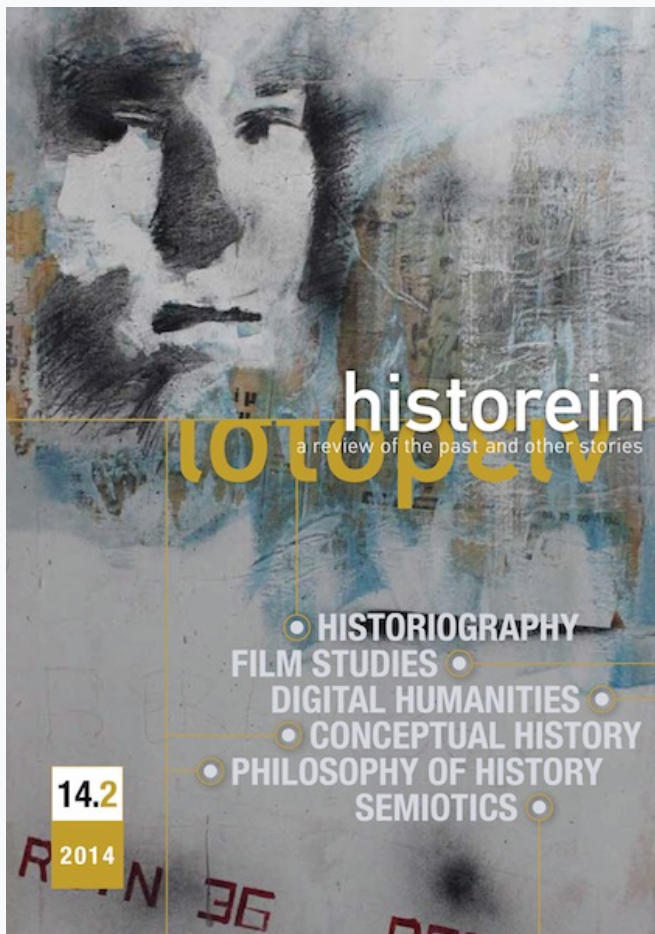


Historein

Vol 14, No 2 (2014)

Historein 14/2 (2014)



Review of Pierre Birnbaum's A Tale of Ritual Murder in the Age of Louis XIV: The Trial of Raphaël Lévy, 1669

Giorgos Plakotos

doi: [10.12681/historein.279](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.279)

Copyright © 2015, Giorgos Plakotos



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Plakotos, G. (2014). Review of Pierre Birnbaum's A Tale of Ritual Murder in the Age of Louis XIV: The Trial of Raphaël Lévy, 1669. *Historein*, 14(2), 133–136. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.279>

parisons, it is painfully redolent of procedures nearer to home, such as the relentless proclamations of terrorists and all other ideological, nationalistic or religious persecuted outcasts and their inevitable opposites celebrated as fighters, heroes or martyrs.

A final observation concerns my objection to the confident use by many historians and other social scientists of the concept of “choice”, for example: “In a society like the one under examination, where the identities that people *chose* to adopt in their everyday life had indistinct and fluid boundaries” (467); or “I examine whether and to what degree the subjects of Queen Elizabeth . . . *had chosen* to establish their Englishness.” I do not know the rationale behind this usage, but to my understanding choice is a concept devoid of hermeneutic power, for the simple reason that there was nowhere and in no historical period such an option for human beings. It is just empty notion that modern societies, for their own reasons, try to persuade their members that it is their birthright along with a bagful of other by now intentional and constantly manipulated fallacies, such as democracy, human rights or freedom.

The scope of the book is so wide and includes so much material that I could only be highly selective. Other readers will certainly want to explore other points of interest and I hope there will be many such forays because, in conclusion, I would say that the book is a valuable, thought-provoking contribution that will open our historical horizons. For my part, I am looking forward to Photini Danou’s new ventures

Pierre Birnbaum

A Tale of Ritual Murder in the Age of Louis XIV: The Trial of Raphaël Lévy, 1669

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. 178 pp. + 12 illus.

Giorgos Plakotos

University of the Aegean

In this microhistorical study, Pierre Birnbaum, a well-known historian and sociologist of the French Third Republic, delves into an earlier period and a largely neglected ritual murder case from the seventeenth century. The study, translated into English by Arthur Goldhammer, originally appeared in French in 2008. Birnbaum tells the double “life” of the Raphaël Lévy affair: first in the late 1660s when the Jewish livestock trader Raphaël Lévy was charged with and sentenced to burn at the stake for the kidnapping and ritual murder of four-year-old Didier Le Moyne in the forest of Glatigny, Lorraine; second, in the late nineteenth century when the memory of Lévy resurfaced during the Dreyfus affair. Between these two episodes, the Lévy case was first “discovered” and served as reference point in another case of ritual murder involving Jews in Damascus in 1840, which caused an extraordinary sensation in Europe. A final act in the affair unfolded while writing this review; in January 2014 the authorities of the village of Glatigny exonerated Lévy and declared him “a Jewish martyr”.¹ This decision was probably the outcome of recent efforts on behalf of the accused and accusers’ descendants to *prove* Lévy’s innocence. Birnbaum touches on the early steps of that endeavour back in 2001 in his introduction. This reconfiguring of local history and collective memory apparently shares some basic assumptions with Birnbaum’s study, which

engages in the politics of French public history in seeking to revisit the Lévy affair as “a critical moment in the construction of nation-state” and rehabilitate Lévy, whose “name is not mentioned in history textbooks” and “does not figure in the French national memory or in the memory of French Jews outside the region of Metz” (153).

Lévy’s condemnation as a miscarriage of justice informs much of Birnbaum’s perspective and study, which embarks on a re-examination of the case through the use of the trial records which were inaccessible to earlier scholars (76). In this regard, Birnbaum’s work subscribes to a tradition of the “historian as a judge” as far as the study of trial records and criminal justice are concerned. Thus in chapters four and five, entitled “The trial of Raphaël Lévy, new Herod” and “The myth of ritual murder”, respectively, the author meticulously examines the depositions, scrutinises their contradictions and highlights the arguments Lévy put forward in his defence during the trial to conclude that the court failed “in its basic obligation to conduct an impartial investigation” (102). The book underscores the failure of the state to intervene decisively and limit the repercussions of the prejudices against Jews. The absolutist state of Louis XIV appears as an agent which “sought to rationalise its administration of people and territory” (17) and its failure in the Lévy affair is compared with “the contemporary retreat of the state, accompanied by an explosion of prejudice and a return to violence, that once again makes it important to discuss the tragic fate of Raphaël Lévy” (155).²

Birnbaum offers a close reading of the trial proceedings to reconstruct not only the events that led to Lévy’s condemnation but also the place of Jews in Lorraine and the “mental universe” of those small Jewish communities. Chapters two and three begin with unfolding

the Lévy story to highlight the wider context. In Metz and the surrounding area, the Jewish presence followed the medieval model of living normally under the king’s protection. But their position was a fragile one, subject to hostility and frequent calls for expulsion from the local population, especially the tradesmen, and the Catholic clergy. Jews remained alienated despite “intimacy, face-to-face dealings and mutual knowledge” which “in no way hindered the spread of prejudice, hatred, and lies” (43). The Jewish communities are depicted as “untouched by the changing culture around them, and in particular by the French and German Enlightenment” (47). Piety, daily prayers, ritual and strict morals shaped life in these communities. Language stood as a barrier too, as the Jews in the area expressed themselves in Yiddish transcribed into Hebrew characters. Birnbaum delves into this close-knit milieu to decipher how Jews reacted and, more importantly, how the accusation and Lévy’s condemnation were ingrained in local memory at that time, with the gradual transformation of Lévy from a “pious man” to a holy figure (*kadosch*) and an honorary rabbi posthumously.

Birnbaum situates his analysis in a series of interwoven historiographical narratives, well-established in early modern studies: the centre-periphery and the state-building process and victimisation of social outcasts narratives. The 1660s witnessed the rise and expansion of Louis XIV’s prerogatives to absolutist rule which sought to consolidate its power over frontier regions of the French kingdom. Lorraine was a highly disputed territory between France and the Holy Roman Empire, a “no-man’s land” (61). The policy of “francization” (20) pursued by the king’s central authority met with the resistance of local officials and notables. This rivalry also increased local political instability and shifting allegiances. Explanatory models of centre vs. periphery have been

particularly used in the considerable scholarship, notably in the work of Robin Briggs, on witchcraft and witch hunts in Lorraine. Outbreaks of witch hunting had hugely affected Lorraine at the turn of the seventeenth century and had fallen off just before the Lévy affair.³ Birnbaum draws on this literature and advances the hypothesis that once the fear of witchcraft waned and ceased to preoccupy “popular imagination”, the largely forgotten but dormant accusation of ritual murder against Jews re-emerged. Thus witchcraft cases and the Lévy affair unfolded against a backdrop of conflict and dispute with witches, with Jews subsequently being targeted as enemies of the community.

A proper narrative of the case is presented in chapters four and five. Here Birnbaum provides a profiling of those involved in the accusation and trial against Lévy and the context of local rivalries and overlapping jurisdictions. He follows closely various witnesses’ testimonies which gave shape to the accusation of ritual murder, especially by re-enacting the past. Memories and rumours about crimes that had had gone unpunished, missing children and Jewish depravity emerged during the trial. Surprisingly, in the series of hearings another anti-Jewish myth resurfaced, that of the desecration of the host, which Birnbaum relates in chapter six. Though it was not directly linked to the charge against Lévy, it merged with the ritual murder accusation. This complex pattern of anti-Jewish myth going back to the medieval period, which re-enacted the deicide with symbolisms of blood and representations of Jewish-Christian relations in terms of monetary exchange, required firmer contextualisation for late-seventeenth century France. Equally we are presented with tantalising material from the trial records that remains poorly explored, as for instance the complex crafting of judicial narratives.

The discussion (chapter eight) on the “rediscovery” of the Lévy case during the Dreyfus affair in the late nineteenth century is a significant addition to the research on the re-emergence of ritual murder accusations in the last decades of the nineteenth century, particularly in central and eastern Europe. As antisemitism swept France, both the antisemitic and the Jewish press linked the Dreyfus and Lévy affairs and interwove them with a notorious contemporary case of ritual murder in Moravia. Dreyfus’ supporters placed him in a line with past Jewish figures, including Lévy, who had been tried for alleged crimes that haunted Catholic imagination: deicide, well poisoning, host desecration and ritual murder. Equally Édouard Drumont, the leading figure of the antisemitic camp, drew on Lévy to picture the Jews as the internal enemy and demonstrate their hatred of Catholic France during the centuries leading to Dreyfus’ treason. Birnbaum offers valuable insights into neglected aspects of the Dreyfus affair, casting it in a new light and showing how contemporary concerns shaped perceptions of the past.

From an early modernist’s perspective, some of Birnbaum’s assumptions and arguments seem to have been hastily drawn, for instance as far as the advent of modernity, which is cast in teleological or dubious terms. Thus “the explosion of science and rationalism” in the age of Louis XIV appears incompatible or contradictory with the perpetuation of prejudices against Jews (27), or with the triumph of “militant, intransigent Catholicism” (17). Elsewhere, seventeenth-century Lorraine is described as a “society which had only recently emerged from the Middle Age” (41). Partly this stems from the author’s adherence to a periodisation scheme and master narrative commonly followed in French historiography. Early in the book, counter-Reformation Catholicism is referred to as the shaping force that set the

"scene for a new 'theatre of death'", that is the Lévy affair (29). However this argument is not systematically followed. A firm contextualisation of seventeenth-century Catholic policy and religiosity was required throughout so as to establish the Lévy affair as the first recorded condemnation for ritual murder in the counter-Reformation period.

Despite these choices, this is a well grounded and comprehensive treatment of the less-known case of Raphaël Lévy which widens the scope of enquiry into the blood libel and other anti-Jewish myths, although it contributes few fresh insights into the construction of the ritual murder myth, which the author surveys bibliographically in his introduction. However, this is not a study strictly confined to the field of early modern history. It has something to offer to both early modernists and modernists alike interested either in Christian–Jewish relations or the conceptualisation of the past or the politics of memory and public history.

NOTES

- 1 "Un village lorrain réhabilite un juif brûlé en 1670," *LeFigaro.fr*, 19 January 2014, <http://goo.gl/47GCjx>.
- 2 Recent historiography has critically engaged with the traditional view of the absolutist early modern state as a neutral force that mitigated the religious conflicts of the period. See, for instance: Wolfgang Reinhard, "Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and the Early Modern State: A Reassessment," *The Catholic Historical Review* 75/3 (1989): 383–404.
- 3 Robin Briggs, *The Witches of Lorraine* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007).

Antonis Anastasopoulos (ed.)

Political Initiatives 'From the Bottom Up' in the Ottoman Empire

Rethymno: Crete University Press, 2012. 453 pp.

Virginia H. Aksan

McMaster University, Ontario, Canada

Ottomanists like me, who have just endured the longest, coldest winter in North America in recent memory, dream about attending the next Halcyon Days, a gathering of scholars every three years in January at the Institute for Mediterranean Studies in Rethymno, Crete. The conferences reflect the interest of the scholars at the institute, initially under the direction of Professor Elizabeth Zachariadou, and more recently organised and edited by Professor Antonis Anastasopoulos. The focus of the early gatherings was on the formative and golden eras of Ottoman history in the Balkans and eastern Mediterranean (the Ottoman emirate, or the office of the kapudan pasha come to mind). Beginning with the fifth conference, provincial elites and local urban and rural politics in the Balkans in the period 1650–1800 have dominated, reflecting the interests of Anastasopoulos. The papers offer a window into the deepening scholarship on inter- and intraregional relations during the transformative period of Ottoman history. I have found *Provincial Elites in the Ottoman Empire* (2005), the product of Halcyon Days V, particularly useful for my own research.

The study of the pre-1800 Ottoman/eastern Mediterranean is currently rich in novel approaches to some old questions posed by an increasingly diverse community of scholars, whose research builds on the seminal generation of the 1960s and 70s and the more