1241: Matthaeus Parisiensis on Jewish Smuggling and the Mongol Expansion

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Abstract: For the year 1241, the *Chronica majora* by Matthaeus Parisiensis reports on an alleged Jewish plot to deliver weapons to the Mongols. The Mongols had only recently advanced into Eastern Europe and are described here as co-religionists of the supposed Jewish conspirators. This episode provides a well-known example of antisemitic popular feeling in mid-thirteenth-century England. At the same time, it illustrates how a Latin-Christian historiographer created "knowledge" about the Mongol invaders. The article deals with this conspiracy theory against the backdrop of a pan-European regime of economic sanctions put in place against the (Muslim) targets of papal crusading policy. Whereas the interplay of embargoes and sanctions-busting structures the chronicle's conspiracy theory, the episode also elucidates the potentials and problems of implementing sanctions across the Mediterranean.

Source

Matthaeus Parisiensis, *Chronica Majora*, ed. Henry Richards Luard, 6 vols, London: Longman & Co., 1872–1880, vol. 4, pp. 131–133. Translation adapted from: *Matthew Paris's English History. From the Year 1235 to 1273*, trans. John Allen Giles, London: Henry G. Bohn, 1852, vol. 1, pp. 357–358; and Zsuzsanna Papp Reed, *Matthew Paris on the Mongol Invasion in Europe*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2022, p. 221.

De quodam immani scelere Judaeorum.

Labentibus autem illorum dierum curriculis, multi Judaeorum de partibus transmarinis, praecipue autem de imperio, credentes quod plebs Tartarorum et Cumanorum essent de genere eorum, quos Dominus in montibus Caspiis precibus magni Alexandri quondam inclusit, convenerunt in loco secretissimo ex communi condicto. Quos, qui sapientissimus eorum et potentissimus videbatur, sic alloquitur, dicens, "Fratres, qui estis semen Abrahae praeclari, vinea Domini Sabaoth, Deus Noster Adonay nos diu sub potestate Christianorum permisit affligi. Sed nunc venit tempus quo liberamur, ut nos vice versa Dei judicio et ipsos opprimamus, ut salvi fiant reliquiae Israel. Exierunt namque fratres nostri, tribus scilicet Israel, quondam inclusae, ut

About a certain monstrous crime of the Jews.

During all this time, numbers of the Jews on the continent, and especially those belonging to the empire, thinking that these Tartars and Cumanians were a portion of their race, whom God had, at the prayers of Alexander the Great, shut up in the Caspian mountains, assembled by a general summons in a secret place, where one of their number, who seemed to be the wisest and most influential amongst them, thus addressed them: "My brothers, seed of the illustrious Abraham, vineyard of the Lord of Sabaoth, whom our God Adonai has permitted to be so long oppressed under Christian rule, now the time has arrived for us to liberate ourselves, and by the judgment of God to oppress them in our turn, that the remnant of Israel may be saved. For our brethren of the tribes of Israel, who were formerly shut up, have gone forth to

subdant sibi et nobis mundum universum. Et quanto praecessit durior et diuturnior tribulatio, tanto major nobis gloria subsequetur. Occurramus ergo eis in muneribus pretiosis, ipsos cum summo honore suscipientes. Vino, armis indigent, et frumento."

bring the whole world to subjection to them and to us. And the more severe and more lasting that our former suffering has been, the greater will be the glory that will ensue to us. Let us therefore go to meet them with valuable gifts, and receive them with the highest honour: they are in need of corn, wine, and arms."

Quod verbum cum omnes gratanter accepissent, ut secretius fraudem suam occultarent, gladios et cultellos atque loricas quascunque poterant venales invenire emerunt, et in doliis ordinate reposuerunt.

The whole assembly heard this speech with pleasure, and at once bought all the swords, daggers, and armour they could find for sale anywhere, and, in order to conceal their treachery, securely stowed them away in casks.

Dixeruntque palam principibus Christianis, quorum potestati subjacebant, quod illi quos vulgus Tartaros dicebat, Judaei erant, nec bibebant vinum nisi a Judaeis vindemiatum, "et hoc nobis significaverunt, magna instantia quasi a fratribus suis sibi dari talia vina, a nobis scilicet vindemiata, postulantes. Nos autem ipsos inhumanos et hostes publicos auferre de medio cupientes, et vos Christianos ab imminenti eorum tyrannica depopulatione liberare, paravimus circiter triginta dolia vino letaliter intoxicato referta, ipsis quantocius deferenda." Toleraverunt igitur Christiani, ut ipsi Judaei tale xenium scelerati sceleratis optulissent.

They then openly told the Christian chiefs, under whose dominion they were, that these people, commonly called Tartars, were Jews, and would not drink wine unless made by Jews, "and of this they have informed us, and with great earnestness have begged to be supplied with some wine made by us, their brethren. We, however, desiring to remove from amongst us these our inhuman public enemies, and to release you Christians from their impending tyrannical devastation, have prepared about thirty casks full of deadly intoxicating wine, to be carried to them as soon as possible." The Christians therefore permitted these wicked Jews to make this wicked [not in original] present to their wicked enemies.

Sed cum in remotas partes Alemanniae pervenissent, et cum doliis suis quendam pontem transire pararentur, dominus pontis, ut moris erat, paagium pro transitu sibi reddi postulavit. Ipsi autem frontose respondentes, et postulata reddere renuentes, dixerunt, quod pro utilitate imperii, immo totius Christianitatis, his negotiis sollicitarentur, directi ad Tartaros, ipsos vino suo cautius potionaturi. Custos vero pontis suspectam habens Judaeorum assertionem, unum doliorum terebrando perforavit, nec inde ullus liquor eliquatus distillavit. Inde certior de fraude effectus, circulis ejectis illud dolium confregit, et apparuit armis

When, however, these said Jews had reached a distant part of Germany, and were about to cross a certain bridge with their casks, the master of the bridge, according to custom, demanded payment of the toll for their passage: the Jews, however, replied insolently, refusing to satisfy his demands, saying that they were employed in this business for the advantage of the empire, indeed of all Christendom, having been sent to the Tartars, secretly to poison them with their wine. The keeper of the bridge, however, doubting the assertion of the Jews, bored a hole through one of the casks; but no liquor flowed therefrom; and becoming certain of their treachery, he took off the hoops of the cask, and, breaking it open,

diversis refertum. Exclamans igitur ait; "O proditio inaudita! ut quid tales inter nos patimur conversari?"

discovered that it was full of arms. At this sight he cried out, "Oh, unheard-of treachery, why do we allow such people to live amongst us?"

Et statim ipse et alii, quos stupor convocavit, alia omnia dolia, quae protinus confregerunt, plena gladiis Coloniensibus sine capulis et cultellis sine manubriis, ordinate et conferte repositis, invenientes, omnibus in propatulo monstraverunt fraudis inauditae laqueos absconditos Judaeorum, qui publicis mundi hostibus, qui, ut dicebatur, armis maxime indigebant, maluerunt subvenire, quam Christianis, qui inter se ipsos tolerant conversari et in venialibus communicare, cum immo etiam cum Christianis liceat eis ea de causa foenerari. Legitur enim, "Non foenerabis Egiptio," et subditur causa, "quia colonum te et advenam in terra sua te Egiptii receperunt." Traditi igitur sunt ipsi Judaei tortoribus, vel perpetuo carceri merito mancipandi, vel ipsis suis gladiis trucidandi.

And at once he and others, whom his astonishment had collected round him, broke open all the other casks, which, as soon as they had done, they found them also filled with Cologne swords without hilts and daggers without handles, closely and compactly stowed away; they then at once openly showed forth the hidden treachery and extraordinary deceit of the Jews, who chose rather to assist these open enemies of the world in general, who, they said, were very much in need of arms, than to aid the Christians, who allowed them to live amongst them and communicate with them in the way of traffic although, moreover, they were even permitted for this purpose to charge the Christians interest. It is to be read (Deut. 23.7) that "you shall not loathe an Egyptian," and the reason is given "because Egyptians received you as a settler and you [sic] as a stranger in their country." They were therefore at once handed over to the executioners, to be either consigned to perpetual imprisonment, or to be slain with their own swords.

Authorship & Work

[§1] Knowledge of Matthaeus Parisiensis' life depends almost exclusively on information drawn from his impressive number of texts, from those he reworked or edited, and the manuscripts and artworks he had a hand in creating.[1] Nothing is known of his family or his place of origin; it is now regarded as unlikely that the sobriquet "Parisiensis" refers to a connection with the French capital. In 1217 he became a monk at the Benedictine abbey of St Albans in Hertfordshire, about thirty-five kilometres north of London. Based on this, we can infer that he must have been born around the turn of the thirteenth century. He died in or shortly after June 1259, when his historical writings cease. He seems to have spent almost his entire life at St Albans. We know of visits to Westminster or Canterbury, and he embarked on a longer journey in 1248–1249, when he was charged with a visitation of the Norwegian abbey of Nidarholm. It is clear, however, that Matthaeus Parisiensis was primarily occupied as an historian. Indeed, he can stake a claim to being the most detailed and certainly the most prolific thirteenth-century historian in north-western Europe.[2]

[1] On Matthaeus Parisiensis' life, see Vaughan, *Matthew Paris*, pp. 1–20; Lloyd and Reader, Paris, Matthew.
[2] Vaughan, *Matthew Paris*, p. 125; Weiler, Historical Writing in Medieval Britain, p. 324.

[§2] Matthaeus Parisiensis took up the mantle of the St Albans historiographical tradition in the 1240s. His predecessor Roger of Wendover, compiler of a "Historical Reader" (*Flores Historiarum*), had died in 1236. A reworking of his chronicle, comprising stylistic, literary, and historical alterations, forms the basis of Matthaeus Parisiensis' own writings on the period up to the 1230s.[3] The "Larger Chronicle" (*Chronica Majora*, henceforth: *Chronica*), from which the above excerpt is taken, continues Matthaeus Parisiensis' narration of contemporary events to the year 1259. It is supplemented by the "Book of Attachments" (*Liber additamentorum*), a collection of source materials used or referenced in the *Chronica*'s main text. Parallel to and in between phases of working on the gargantuan *Chronica*, Matthaeus Parisiensis wrote an abridged version, the "History of the English" (*Historia Anglorum*), itself running to three volumes in the modern edition. Later on, he produced yet another abridgement, his own "Historical Reader" (*Flores Historiarum*), which became the most widely copied of his general histories, probably owing to its comparative brevity.[4] Aside from these expositions of general history relating to the British Isles, continental Europe, and the Mediterranean, Matthaeus Parisiensis wrote about the deeds of the abbots of his monastery ("Deeds of our Abbots," *Gesta Abbatum*), and about local heroes and saints ("The Lives of the two Offas," *Vitae Offarum*). He composed poems and saints' lives in the vernacular, drew maps and scientific diagrams, and illustrated his chronicles. Matthaeus Parisiensis' output is such that it is apposite to consider the *Chronica* as simply one "stage in a continuous tradition of narratives."[5]

[§3] The *Chronica*, from which the above excerpt is taken, is not only the most voluminous chronicle of thirteenth-century English historiography, it forms the root of his other works. As a historiographical effort, it is based on an interest for contemporary history which had been cultivated in the St Albans community through its connections across England and the continent.[6] Matthaeus Parisiensis—as artist and scribe—left four main manuscripts forming the *Chronica*, which are now in the Parker Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and the British Library in London: two contain the entries for years up to 1253, one the entries up to 1259 together with the "History of the English" (*Historia Anglorum*), and the fourth comprises the "Book of Attachments" (*Liber additamentorum*).[7] The text of the *Chronica* falls into three parts, corresponding to different stages and dates of composition. The first part, up to 1236, is an overhaul of Roger of Wendover's "Historical Reader" (*Flores Historiarum*). The second part, to which the episode of the alleged Jewish plot belongs, continues the narrative up until the year 1250. It has recently been shown to have been written between 1247 and 1250.[8] This corresponds to the dating of the sources which Matthaeus Parisiensis used in this episode to after the Council of Lyons in 1245.[9] Matthaeus Parisiensis had originally envisioned bringing the *Chronica* to a termination in 1250, but afterwards he continued writing the entries of what can be seen as the third part, more or less contemporaneously until 1259. According to the manuscript evidence, the chronicler later made an effort to mitigate some of his more outspokenly critical portrayals of, among others, the papacy and the English king, Henry III (r. 1216–1272), maybe in view of preparing a presentation copy of the *Chronica*. As it is, Matthaeus Parisiensis' most extensive work was not widely copied in the Middle Ages. It is only in modern historiography that it has become *the* chronicle of the thirteenth century, and a particularly valued source on the Mongol invasions around 1240.

[3] Vaughan, *Matthew Paris*, pp. 21–34.
[4] Vaughan, *Matthew Paris*, pp. 152–153.
[5] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, p. 58.
[6] Weiler, Historical Writing; Gransden, *Historical Writing*, pp. 356–379.
[7] Vaughan, *Matthew Paris*, pp. 49, 65.
[8] Greasley, Revisiting.
[9] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, pp. 107–122.

Content & Context

[§4] This entry for the year 1241 claims anonymous Jews conspired in a double-layered plot of what can be regarded as a form of economic warfare. The alleged plot is told in five scenes. The narration opens at a secret location, where the Jews of the Holy Roman Empire have gathered, with a dramatized review of the geopolitical situation of European Jews, European Christians, and Mongols. The gathering is said to have taken place because the Jews of the Empire believed that the Mongol invaders—the people of Tartars and Cumans" (*plebs Tartarorum et Cumanorum*)—were also Jewish. In direct speech, the gathering's leader sets out the political landscape and proposes a plot: the appearance of the Mongol armies presents an opportunity for the Jews who are oppressed by the Christian yoke. They can break free by assisting the Mongols in their endeavour to conquer the world. Therefore, it is proposed that they deliver material aid to the invading armies, because "they are in need of corn, wine, and arms" (*Vino, armis indigent, et frumento*). A second passage describes the conspiring Jews procuring arms for the Mongols. They buy up all the swords, daggers, and leather cuirasses they can find and collect them in barrels. Thus, the scene is set for the following three, longer parts of the narration, all of which concern the practicalities of getting the weapons to the Mongols.

[§5] The episode describes how the Jews approach Christian rulers in order to pitch another conspiracy, one directed *against* the Mongols. As Jews, they claim, the Mongols only drink wine made by Jews. The Mongols are said to have contacted the Jews of the Empire in order to supply themselves with such wine. The Jews now suggest delivering thirty barrels of wine laced with a deadly poison to the Mongols. The Christian rulers agree to this plot. In the next scene, Matthaeus Parisiensis depicts the Jews and their arms delivery as it is about to cross a bridge in a distant part of the Empire, presumably close to the Mongol front. They encounter a representative of the authorities demanding tolls. The Jews refuse to pay, saying they are on a mission for the good of the Empire, and explain the anti-Mongol conspiracy they had agreed on with the Christian princes. The toll collector, however, insists on inspecting the merchandise, and finds the weapons hidden inside one of the wine barrels—at which point the conspiracy is discovered. The episode's conclusion relates to the aftermath of this discovery. All the other casks are opened and are found to contain swords from Cologne and other weapons without hilts. The Jews are handed over to the torturers, and face perpetual imprisonment or execution. Matthaeus Parisiensis also adds a moral lesson: although the Christians had allowed Jews to live amongst them—even permitting their economic participation in society—they ultimately supported "these open enemies of the world" (*publici mundi hostes*).

[§6] The episode of the alleged Jewish plot is situated in the *Chronica*'s second part. At this stage of his oeuvre, Matthaeus Parisiensis was no longer dependent on Roger of Wendover's "Historical Reader" (*Flores Historiarum*), but was rather writing the contemporary history of his times. The episode can be read as bringing together two different thematic strands in the *Chronica*: entries about (English) Jews, and entries about the Mongol threat and invasion. Entries about Jews are sparsely, but evenly distributed throughout his contemporary history, and generally deal either with religious concerns (where the entries carry an antisemitic flavour), or with the role of the Jewish community in the economy (where the entries adopt an attitude of neutral reporting or a sympathetic, anti-authoritarian flavour).[10] Entries about the Mongols naturally cluster around the years of the coming of the Mongols (1237–1240), the wars relating to their invasion of Eastern Europe (1241), and cautious dealings with their presence on the eastern political horizon (1243–1248).[11] The episode of the alleged Jewish plot in 1241 is placed at the end of the richest, most tightly-packed series of Mongol-related

[10] Menache, Matthew Paris's Attitudes.
[11] Overviews of entry clustering: Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, pp. 369–385.

entries[12]—although the events of, and reactions to, the Mongol invasions remain in the background and the chronicler does not report directly on events in the East.

[§7] The historical background for this episode, and for the geopolitical analyses presented in the Jews' direct speeches, are European encounters with the Mongol expansion from the late 1230s onwards. Between 1239 and their withdrawal from March 1242 onwards, detachments of the Mongol army lead by general Subedei (d. 1248) and Batu (r. 1227–1255), one of Chingis (*Činggis*) Khan's (r. 1206–1227) grandsons and future founder of the Golden Horde, invaded Eastern Europe. They overran and defeated European opponents from Kyivan Rus' and Poland via Silesia and Moravia to Hungary.[13] The Cumans mentioned in this episode were a people of the western Eurasian steppe regions, some of whom had fled to Hungary before the Mongol advances, where they became part of the military establishment. Others, however, served in the Mongol armies, which produced a climate of distrust against Cumans in Eastern Europe. Matthaeus Parisiensis likely reflects this by calling the invaders "Tartars and Cumans" (*plebs Tartarorum et Cumanorum*).[14] The story of the alleged Jewish plot views these geopolitical developments from the perspective of the German territories. News about the Mongol attacks on Hungary reached Germany in spring 1241. By early summer, just a few months before his death, pope Gregory IX (sed. 1227–1241) had been notified by king Béla IV (r. 1235–1270). The pope reacted by issuing crusade indulgences in support of the fight against the invading armies in Hungary. By this time, the German clergy had already initiated preparations for a crusade of their own, at a council at Erfurt in April, and there is evidence of crusading activity by the archbishop of Cologne, Konrad von Hochstaden (sed. 1238–1261), in May.[15] The king of the Romans, Conrad IV (r. 1237–1254), prepared to lead an expedition towards Hungary from Nuremberg in summer 1241.

[§8] However, by autumn of that year, most of the prospective protagonists of a crusade against the Mongols from the Empire were embroiled in internal strife. The "Christian rulers" (*principes Christiani*) which Matthaeus Parisiensis most probably referred to in his narration of the alleged Jewish plot—the German princes, the king of the Romans, emperor Frederick II (r. 1220–1250), and the pope—helped initiate a crusade against the Mongols, but did not see it through to completion.[16] By the time Matthaeus Parisiensis set about writing these entries in the later 1240s, the immediate Mongol threat had passed, but was certainly not forgotten. Central Europe remained under the impression of having come close to being conquered. The lingering uncertainty about Mongol movements and intentions preoccupied European leaders at the Council of Lyons in 1245, where information about the Mongols from letters, eyewitnesses, and embassies was exchanged and brought together. Matthaeus Parisiensis' *Chronica* itself can be understood as part of this kind of knowledge production intended to provide reassurance and preparation. It owes much of its material to the Council of Lyons, and represents "the earliest and fullest surviving body of written evidence about the Mongol invasion"[17] in England.

[§9] The quality of Matthaeus Parisiensis' sources is generally high. Apart from documents and communications from the Council of Lyons, the chronicler probably also drew on the contacts of St Albans in Thuringia, Brabant, and particularly Cologne, where the archbishop was likely involved in German crusade preparations and where the alleged Jewish conspirators are said to have bought their weapons. The papal legate in England may have been another conduit of

[12] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, pp. 216–223.
[13] Jackson, *Mongols and the West*, pp. 58–86; May, Mongol Empire, pp. 94–121.
[14] Jackson, *Mongols and the West*, pp. 61–63; Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, p. 329.
[15] Jackson, Crusade, pp. 1–10.
[16] Jackson, Crusade, pp. 12–15.
[17] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, p. 21. On the influence of Matthaeus Parisiensis' Mongol entries, see Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, pp. 147, 157.

information.[18] Thus, for the Mongol-related entries in particular, we see Matthaeus Parisiensis taking full advantage of the networks of communication, mobility, and historiography a Europe in the full swing of "Europeanization."[19] This, however, is not to say that all of his entries on the Mongols are reliable. Vaughan's dictum that Matthaeus Parisiensis' tendency to "indulge […] in unscrupulous falsification" makes him "basically unreliable as a historical source"[20] still stands, although the falsifications can be as informative as the factual representations. In this sense, the episode of the alleged Jewish plot is multi-layered. The introductory analysis of the Mongols' origins is evidence of contemporary European opinion (including Jewish voices), and the episode uses knowledge concerning real-world economic warfare in European Christendom. As a narration of events, however, it is fictional: No such conspiracy can be substantiated, and it is all too clear what the episode owes to common and casual thirteenth-century English antisemitism.[21] In particular, it makes use of established stereotypes of Jews as arch-antagonists: an alleged appetite for world domination, avarice (not even paying tolls when in possession of thirty barrels of contraband), and usury.

[§10] In keeping with the episode's conspiratorial character, all the personal designations in this excerpt are essentially anonymous cyphers: "the Jews" (*Judaei*), "the Mongols" (*Tartari*), "the Christian rulers" (*principes Christiani*), "the toll collector" (*dominus pontis*). The latter two show that this is not only a question of othering, but also of genre. This generalising tone makes ample room for insertions of stereotyped images by Matthaeus Parisiensis' readers, for interpretive flexibility, and associative uncertainty. Anyone could be part of this conspiracy; the danger of this plot could concern anyone. In this way, the indeterminate designations might be read as a call for vigilance. Also of note is a passage towards the end of the episode, where Matthaeus Parisiensis makes an alteration to a biblical text that has not been fully appreciated in the most commonly used English translation. The chronicler supports the moral lesson he gives against the alleged perfidy of Jews dwelling among Christians with a biblical authority: "You shall not lend to an Egyptian" (*Non foenerabis Egiptio*) etc. This passage, together with the preceding reference to Jewish lending, was quietly left out of the translation by Giles. It was translated by Papp Reed as Deuteronomy 23.7 ("you shall not loathe an Egyptian", "because Egyptians had received you as a settler and you [sic] as a stranger in their country").[22] Comparing Matthaeus Parisiensis' version and the Vulgate, the second half of the passage, referring to the Jews' sojourn in Egypt, is an approximate quotation, probably from memory. But the alteration in the beginning is more likely a deliberate replacement: "you shall not loathe" (*Non abominaberis*, Deut. 23.7) becomes "you shall not lend (sc. against interest)" (*Non foenerabis,* Matthaeus Parisiensis). Here, Matthaeus Parisiensis used the alleged Jewish plot as a device to censure usury. This evocation of an anti-Jewish stereotype does not follow logically from the storyline.

Contextualisation, Analysis & Interpretation

[§11] The episode of the alleged Jewish plot in favour of the Mongol invasion of 1241 has been analysed in two well-researched contexts: the history of the English Jewish community and of thirteenth-century antisemitism, including Matthaeus Parisiensis' place within that history, and Matthaeus Parisiensis' role in generating knowledge relating to the Mongols in Europe. In what follows, I will introduce these interpretive contexts. I will then suggest placing the narration in an additional context, which touches on relations between Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean: The alleged conspiracy, along with its plot for economic warfare, should also

[18] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, pp. 90–95, 104–107, 117–126, 247–250, 274.
[19] Weiler, Experience of Europeanization.
[20] Vaughan, *Matthew Paris*, p. 134.
[21] Menache, Tartars, Jews, p. 339.
[22] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, p. 221.

be viewed as a corollary of the papal sanctions against Muslims that, by the end of the twelfth century, had grown out of the crusading movement. Against this backdrop, Matthaeus Parisiensis' double plot is also a commentary on the viability and political practice of the papacy's embargo legislation.

[§12] On a first level, Matthaeus Parisiensis' alleged Jewish conspiracy belongs to the history of anti-Jewish sentiment in thirteenth-century England. Thus, research has noted that our text is not only representative of Christian reactions to the Mongol threat in 1241, but also of Christian–Jewish relations in the later 1240s. Antisemitism has been shown to be a facet of English popular culture in the later twelfth and the thirteenth century. There were ecclesiastical efforts to implement strict separations of Christian and Jewish communities, and there was a popular cultural image which connected English Jews to "Saracens" in the Mediterranean as part of an imagined collaboration directed against Christianity.[23] Indeed, the "foiling of [Jews'] attempts to get one over on Christians"[24] was a popular trope and subject of slapstick stories. At the same time, despite all shared real-life concerns, projects, and partnerships,[25] the anti-Jewish closing of ranks of the English Christian community served as an affirmatory device of Christian popular cultural production.[26] Not only, but particularly in times of crisis, writers like Matthaeus Parisiensis reached for a readily available bogeyman, i.e. "the Jews." In this case, he attached a story about this bogeyman's defeat to a series of entries about a different, seemingly untameable threat, i.e. "the Mongols." As such, Matthaeus Parisiensis' story of the alleged pro-Mongol plot is representative of "the mental climate of mid-thirteenth-century England" at a time when bouts of anti-Jewish violence such as the western German pogroms in 1241 were also fuelled by distrust provoked by the Mongol advance.[27]

[§13] At the time this passage was written, the Jews of England were increasingly becoming an easy target. We can assume that the chronicler still knew Jews, subjected directly to the king's jurisdiction and the king's peace, who moved freely throughout the country and between markets, in a way similar to the Jews of the alleged plot. During the early decades of the thirteenth century and the reign of Henry III, this royal protection was still effective. The king insisted on safeguarding his sovereignty over English Jews even in the face of increasing ecclesiastical repression, such as measures enacted by archbishop Stephen Langton (sed. 1207–1228) to make Jews wear mandatory identification tags, or to prohibit them from employing Christian servants. Henry III rescinded episcopal embargoes against Jews, which were meant to enforce these measures. But in the middle decades of the thirteenth century, Henry III was faced with mounting debts and obligations. After a prosperous early thirteenth century, English Jews now presented a convenient target for royal rapaciousness. From 1239 onwards, the king set his sights on Jewish wealth, and in 1241, the year of the most immediate Mongol threat, he decreed the first of a series of ruinous taxation initiatives that were to erode approximately half of Jewish assets over the next twenty years.[28] In view of all this, it is hardly surprising that Matthaeus Parisiensis cast the unnamed Jews in the role of conspirators.

[§14] Sophia Menache, who interpreted the passage in light of prevalent anti-Jewish sentiments, has uncovered an additional dimension to Matthaeus Parisiensis' depiction of the Jews. She unearthed remnants of a Jewish perspective on the years 1240 and 1241 (5000 in the Jewish calendar). In the opening paragraph of the narration, with its analysis of the geopolitical situation produced by the Mongol arrival, Matthaeus Parisiensis picked up on Jewish messianic expectations and on reports, also circulated among Jewish communities, that the Mongols were

[24] Ihnat, Getting the Punchline, p. 421.
[25] Mitilineos, Partners in Crime.
[26] Bale, Fictions of Judaism.
[27] Menache, Tartars, Jews, pp. 319, 338.
[28] Stacey, English Jews; Tolan, Les juifs du roi.

making use of the Hebrew script.[29] Thus, the conspirators' inference that the Mongols adhered to the Jewish faith is based on an interpretation of evidence which was shared by both Jewish and Christian observers in north-western Europe. In the same scene, however, Matthaeus Parisiensis also introduces an innovation by merging three traditions dealing with (a) the ten lost tribes of Israel enduring among the mountains in the East, (b) the coming of the Mongols (sometimes called "Magogols", *magogoli*) from the East, and (c) of Gog and Magog who were enclosed in the mountains of the East by Alexander the Great.[30] In the *Chronica*, they become Mongol Jews, descendants of those Jews whom Alexander the Great had shut inside the Caspian mountains. This take on the origins of the Mongol threat is both a synthesis of thirteenth-century knowledge creation, and represents a dangerous shift in anti-Jewish attitudes. For there was also an earlier, alternative tradition which interpreted Gog and Magog as agents of the ancient enemy of mankind *within* the Christian community.[31] The opening *mise-en-scène* of Matthaeus Parisiensis' conspiracy therefore connects an analysis of the threat without, to increasingly obvious possibilities for exclusion within.

[§15] A second layer of contextualisation, assessing the alleged plot's place among writings on the European-Mongol confrontation, has highlighted the importance of the Christian rulers (*principes Christiani*) in this episode. In her monograph on the Mongol-related entries in the *Chronica*, Zsuzsanna Papp Reed views the episode as the closing part of a cluster of passages centred around the year 1241, which describe the looming threat of the Mongol invasion in Eastern Europe along with western European reactions to it.[32] Matthaeus Parisiensis collected much of the information which he used to construct these entries later, when the most immediate threat had already passed. However, he still used it to reproduce the widespread uncertainty over the whereabouts, movements, and intentions of the Mongols that had persisted until the mid-1240s.[33] His claim that Jewish communities knew something about the Mongols' origin, and that German Jews had communicated with the Mongols,[34] evoked this climate of rumours and insecurity.

[§16] In such an atmosphere, the spotlight turned on Christian figures of authority and what they did to meet the threat. The series of Matthaeus Parisiensis' Mongol-related entries is interwoven with the narration of emperor Frederick II's conflict with the papacy.[35] The chronicler describes the emperor as having led the anti-Mongol crusading efforts. This gave Frederick II more credit than was warranted,[36] but it was in keeping with the dim view Matthaeus Parisiensis generally took of a papacy that was busy with siphoning off English money and fighting the other highest authority within Christendom. In the Mongol-related entries, Matthaeus Parisiensis was also pessimistic about European unity in the face of disaster.[37] In the conspiracy episode, Christian authorities (*principes Christiani, dominus pontis*) overlook—even to the point of facilitating it—the alleged Jewish plot, and only stop it at the last minute. Significantly, the higher authorities are complicit, while the lower-level, local authorities manage to head off the threat. Therefore, one can also read the tale of the alleged Jewish plot as an implicit criticism of the indecisive leadership of Christian rulers in the face of the threat from the East. As part of Matthaeus Parisiensis' critique of political elites, it offers comment on what else went on while the Empire's military efforts disintegrated: economic sanctions. Papp Reed has proposed: "While it has been suggested that this story reflects

[29] Menache, Tartars, Jews, pp. 333–338.
[30] Menache, Tartars, Jews, pp. 333–338; Westrem, Gog and Magog.
[31] Westrem, Gog and Magog, p. 67.
[32] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*.
[33] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, p. 42.
[34] In the second part of the episode: "of this they have informed us (*et hoc nobis significaverunt*) […]."
[35] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, pp. 160–161.
[36] Jackson, Crusade, pp. 12–15.
[37] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, p. 210.

Matthew Paris's stereotyped image of the Jews, the convoluted double deception does not sound like Matthew's own creation."[38] I would argue, however, that, until and unless a further source for the alleged plot materialises, it is not necessary to assume external prompts in order to explain the way the chronicler let the plot unfold.

[§17] The first two interpretive layers commented on the opening scenes and connections with neighbouring Mongol-related entries. However, there is the possibility of a third contextualisation that focuses on the storyline itself. The double deception could be called unnecessarily elaborate, had the point "only" been to disparage Jews, or to show that trade with Mongol enemies was immoral. A simple arms delivery, discovered at the last moment because of the avarice of the evildoers, would have sufficed. The involvement of the Christian rulers' licence to export poisoned wine becomes a perfectly reasonable part of the plot, however, once we take into consideration the economic sanctions regime that had been put into place against eastern non-Christian enemies as part of papal crusade policy. Thus, Matthaeus Parisiensis' alleged Jewish plot not only burnishes the "myth" of the "Jews' diabolical wisdom,"[39] but is also a comment on the multifaceted measures which European Christians implemented in the face of an overwhelming military threat. Here, the conspiracy in the *Chronica* considers the functioning and problems of papal embargo policy, and reflects upon the trade of strategic goods across the Euromediterranean.

[§18] Following the conquest of Jerusalem by Sultan Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn (r. 567–589/1171–1193), pope Alexander III (sed. 1159–1181) called for a crusade and promulgated embargo legislation against Muslims in the Mediterranean. This papal embargo policy was initiated in 1179 at the Third Lateran Council, that is to say with the knowledge or involvement of the European episcopate. It was continued by Alexander's successors Innocent III (sed. 1198–1216), Honorius III (sed. 1216–1227), and Gregory IX (sed. 1227–1241). At the outset, it only prohibited the trade in arms, iron, and timber (for ship building), but the embargo was soon extended to victuals (such as corn and wine) and labour (navigation).[40] That Matthaeus Parisiensis was aware of the sanctions in place against the "infidel" is clear from earlier entries in the *Chronica*.[41] The list of goods given in his narration of the conspiracy (arms, corn, and wine) echoes then-current prohibitions. Ship-building materials and navigation skills would have completed the set, but were obviously out of place when dealing with Mongol horsemen. Subsequently, the plot uses wine to conceal the delivery of arms. In contrast to arms, wine has military uses only insofar as it serves to supply armies, but the conspirators concoct a second layer of conspiracy in order to obtain a licence to export it to the Mongols. This narrative twist can only be explained if one accepts that the entire narrative operates against the backdrop of an active economic sanctions regime. These sanctions were promulgated against Muslim polities across the Mediterranean. Given the uncertainty about the Mongols' origins and contemporary crusade initiatives against them, the sanctions regime could plausibly be extended to the Mongol invaders.[42]

[§19] There is a scholarly debate about whether these—or any—economic sanctions "worked."[43] Matthaeus Parisiensis' narrative construction of a double conspiracy demonstrates both the performance and the challenges of the pan-European papal embargo policy, which depended on secular rulers and local authorities for decentralised implementation. In the episode, the success of the plot hinges on the ploy of claiming to deliver poisoned wine to the

[38] Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, p. 219.
[39] Menache, Tartars, Jews, pp. 327, 339.
[40] Stantchev, *Spiritual Rationality*; Stantchev, Formation and Refiguration.
[41] Matthaeus Parisiensis, *Chronica Majora*, ed. Luard, vol. 2, p. 311; Matthaeus Parisiensis, *Chronica Majora*, vol. 3, pp. 285–286.
[42] Papp Reed, Mongol Invasion, pp. 147–146, 162–172.
[43] Summary in Berger, Wirtschaftssanktionen, pp. 105–110.

Mongols. Only this allows the conspirators to take the first steps to deliver their contraband to their alleged co-religionists. Some form of permission from higher Christian authorities (*principes*) was a prerequisite. This implies that Matthaeus Parisiensis took a certain degree of compliance with the papal embargo and some control over its practical observance for granted—likely both in his own environment and from what he could assume through imperial sources. In the *Chronica*, the authorities are persuaded to allow the group of conspirators to bust the embargo, because the suggested tactic promises to weaken the enemy through a form of economically mediated aggression: poisoning the Mongols with wine exported from the Empire. Whereas this project may appear like a hare-brained scheme, it did not necessarily seem implausible to contemporaries. In his entries for the year 1245, Matthaeus Parisiensis relates a comparable episode. The chronicler reports on "Saracen" economic warfare in reaction to announcements of a crusade. Muslim rulers had allegedly arranged for deliveries of poisoned pepper to Christian Europe, which killed several people in France. The source of the danger was discovered and warnings were issued throughout France and England.[44] Later, Matthaeus Parisiensis noted in the margins: "The merchants did this, so that their old pepper, held back for a long time, would sell better."[45] With this comment, however, he only cast aspersions on the widespread information campaign; he did not question the intended poisoning as a measure of economic warfare. Contemporaries believed that such operations represented a credible threat alongside military confrontations in the cross-Mediterranean conflicts of the mid-thirteenth century. The Christian rulers in the narration of the alleged Jewish plot permitted a selective circumvention of the sanctions regime so as to harm the Mongols with poisoned wine. In other words, they were generally thought likely to enforce the papal embargo policy.

[§20] Of course, in the episode of the alleged Jewish plot, the Christian rulers are fooled. In the end, somewhere in the eastern reaches of the Empire (*remotis partibus Alemanniae*),[46] a combination of coincidence and the conspirators' pig-headedness leads to the discovery of the arms smuggling. In keeping with the antisemitic stereotype of the avaricious Jew, the conspirators transporting the contraband refuse to pay tolls and have to deal with a distrustful local official (*dominus pontis*). It is not at all clear that this official is trying to enforce the embargo, he is simply collecting tolls. Again, this illustrates the practical difficulties associated with the sanctions regime. Implementation of economic sanctions, however firmly intended, just could not (and cannot) be entirely watertight. Did Matthaeus Parisiensis or his readers imagine that every local official was informed of the embargo? Was this even necessary, i.e. were suspicions a matter of course where deliveries in the direction of and close to the enemy were concerned, or would the alleged conspiracy have succeeded had it not been for the refusal to pay? Matthaeus Parisiensis' narration of the alleged Jewish-Mongol plot thus describes European embargo policy in (in)action, showing Christian authorities both observing and disregarding papal sanctions directives according to the requirements and opportunities of the situation.

[§21] As a commentary on the economic sanctions regime, Matthaeus Parisiensis' episode of the alleged Jewish plot also contains a reflection on strategic goods. The narration concentrates on arms and wine as commodities and elucidates how they were thought to influence the conflict between the Mongols and the European polities. Arms deliveries are an obvious manifestation of the importance of trade relations in military conflicts. The blades in this episode are from Cologne, which implies both the chronicler's sources of information in the

[44] Matthaeus Parisiensis, *Chronica Majora*, ed. Luard, vol. 4, p. 490; Weiler, Experience of Europeanization, pp. 219–220.
[45] Matthaeus Parisiensis, *Chronica Majora*, ed. Luard, vol. 4, p. 490: "Haec fecerunt mercatores, ut vetus piper, diu reservatum, melius venderetur."
[46] On the focus on German borders in Matthaeus Parisiensis' treatment of the Mongol advances, see Papp Reed, *Mongol Invasion*, pp. 207-208.

archbishopric and the international renown of Rhenish weapons production in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[47] In Matthaeus Parisiensis' description of the conspirators' purchase of these weapons, there is also a hint at another problem caused by such arms deliveries. The conspirators "bought everything they could find for sale" (*quascunque poterant venales invenire emerunt*). If they thus clear the market, Christian demands for weapons remain unfulfilled, compounding the negative impact any successful delivery to the Mongols would have on the Christian war effort.

[§22] The second layer of the alleged Jewish plot, however, presents readers with a more complex conception of what a strategic good may be. The strategic good in question is kosher wine, which has no obvious military qualities in and of itself. However, strategic goods are not only those with military uses, but any item that is both necessary and difficult to substitute. "[T]he 'strategic' function of a good is a function of the situation, it is not intrinsic to the good itself."[48] By focusing on kosher wine as such a strategic good, Matthaeus Parisiensis emphasises the unique role and capabilities Jewish traders were thought to possess in these large-scale, cross-faith conflicts. Assuming that the Mongol invaders were, in fact, Jewish, they would have been reliant on kosher wine. For religious reasons, the major part of the European wine production would have been off limits to them. Jewish-made wine thus becomes a perfectly plausible strategic good. From this perspective, the decoy suggested by the conspirators is flawless: as Jewish traders in Jewish-made wines, they hold a monopolistic position. According to the logic of Matthaeus Parisiensis' narration, this makes them indispensable both to the Christian rulers wanting to weaken the Mongols, and to the Mongols as they sought out trustworthy trading partners for kosher wine.

[§23] Viewed from Matthaeus Parisiensis' scriptorium in St Albans, wine-trading Jews would have been something of an anomaly. There is no evidence of Jews engaged in the wine trade for thirteenth-century England.[49] In the Mediterranean and on the continent, however, Jews did in fact trade in wine. Jews sold wine from Crete via Constantinople to Southeastern Europe.[50] Although trading non-kosher wines was subject to a long-standing halakhic prohibition,[51] there is evidence of Jews selling non-kosher wine in the regional markets of Cologne and Frankfurt. This is due to Jewish authorities allowing their co-religionists to take wine and vineyards as collateral or repayment for loans. In the thirteenth century, a number of new wine regions were developed around the Brühl–Siegburg–Bonn region south of Cologne. New enterprises needed capital, and a number of them will have defaulted, which may be why observers in the Rhineland would have known Jewish merchant-bankers who were selling off stocks and engaged in the management of vineyards.[52] Thus, Matthaeus Parisiensis' Jewish wine-traders would have been a phenomenon known to his sources on the Continent, more than to his English audience. These findings about Jews and the Rhenish wine trade suggest a speculative link between the plot of the episode, where usury is not addressed, and its moral, where it is: Matthaeus Parisiensis' Cologne sources may have been familiar with Jewish wine traders precisely in connection with lending against interest. This may be the reason why for Matthaeus Parisiensis, too, Jewish wine traders and lending against interest could be connected. Thus the moral conclusion: "they were even allowed […] to charge the Christians interest" (*immo etiam*

[47] Oakeshott, *Records*, p. 9; Becker, A Sword from the Rhine, p. 98. Cf. Nicholson, *Medieval Warfare*, pp. 103–104; Tormey, Medieval Icons.
[48] Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft*, p. 215.
[49] Soloveitchik, *Jews and the Wine Trade*, p. 73.
[50] Jacoby, Mediterranean Food and Wine; Decker, Wine Trade.
[51] Soloveitchik, *Jews and the Wine Trade*.
[52] Soloveitchik, *Jews and the Wine Trade*, pp. 73–77, Map 3.

cum Christianis liceat eis […] foenerari) for an episode about the transportation of contraband, whose plot had nothing to do with usury or English resentment against Jewish lenders.[53]

[§24] In Matthaeus Parisiensis' narrative of an alleged Jewish plot, we see local economic concerns from England and maybe the Rhenish homelands merge with stereotypes of Jewish traders as international wheeler-dealers along with subtle reflections on strategic goods in an environment of large-scale, cross-cultural conflict. He uses trade as a focal point to illustrate the potentialities and implementation of an international sanctions regime, but also its pitfalls—in the conspirators' sanctions-busting, and, maybe even more so, in the lure of a "quick fix" which the Christian rulers were unable to resist. In the episode of the alleged Jewish plot of 1241, the St Albans chronicler picks up on contemporary theories, aired in both Christian and Jewish communities in Europe, about the putative Jewish origins of the Mongol invaders, as Sophia Menache has shown. He then fashions the alleged Mongol Judaism into the base and motivation of a double-faced conspiracy. Among the Mongol-related entries of the *Chronica*, the episode takes a German-English point of view and is, as Zsuzsanna Papp Reed highlights, part of a commentary on European rulers' reactions to the Mongol threat, including their disunity. Although this disunity actually prevented a pan-European military response to the Mongol invasion, Matthaeus Parisiensis' Christian rulers cannot resist participating in a project of economically mediated aggression by relaxing crusade-related embargoes. This is the third layer of contextualisation against which the fictional plot must be viewed: economic sanctions, sanctions-busting, and economic warfare between the papally led Christian polities and their Muslim counterparts across the Mediterranean. In his construction of the elaborate, but not at all absurd or superfluous double conspiracy—arms smuggling for the Mongols, and a plot of poisoning the Mongols with smuggled wine—Matthaeus Parisiensis' readers are shown the functioning and limits of an active sanctions regime in the Euromediterranean.

Edition(s) & Translation(s)

[Links point to the volumes in which the episode of the alleged Jewish plot is to be found:

Matthaeus Parisiensis, Monachus Sancti Albani*: Chronica Majora*, ed. Henry Richards Luard, 6 vols, London: Longman & Co., 1872–1880, URL: https://archive.org/details/matthiparisien04pari/page/n9/mode/2up (access: 30.10.2024).

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