The Jew's Hat (Judenhut)

Beyond Labeling Jews

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The Jews shall wear hats, which are pointed. In this way, they can be distinguished from the Christians, so that one recognizes them as Jews.[1]

Anonymous scribe, *Schwabenspiegel*, Swabia, Germany, 1275/76

This passage in the *Schwabenspiegel*, a legal code originating in Swabia (Germany) from 1275/76, suggests that Jews in medieval Germany in the thirteenth century did not wear clothing that distinguished them from their Christian neighbors. Indeed, based on other visual and written sources, we know that Jews tended to follow general trends in fashion. After all, by the thirteenth century, fashion had begun the ongoing project of blurring the distinctions in appearance between different social groups in urban environments, making it harder to tell

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1 *Schwabenspiegel*, §214:10, quoted in Heinz Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judeaos-Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld* (13.–20. Jh.) (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994), 277.

them apart. Sources tell of Christians who were distressed when they would greet someone they thought was a cleric with great respect, only to find out that he was a Jew.

There were growing calls to enforce specific codes of dress in order to make social groups outwardly recognizable. These calls aimed to solidify the social hierarchy through clothing and symbols, and included differentiation among members of the various craft guilds, as well as identification of clerics and Jews. As a result, Christian officials and the church reiterated the alleged need for Jews to wear distinctive signs. One such sign – by far the most prominent in the German Empire – was the pointed hat (in Latin, *pileum cornutum*), to be worn by Jewish men.

Prior to the papal legislation of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which decreed that all Jews must wear distinctive signs, the *Judenhut* already appeared in illuminated Christian codices. The abovementioned *Schwabenspiegel*, as well as church legislation from 1267, specified that the Fourth Lateran Council's demand for a distinctive Jewish sign ought to be fulfilled through the donning of a pointed hat. The 1267 church synod in Wroclaw 1267 stated:

> The Jews should resume wearing the pointed hat which they
> had been wearing in those regions and which in their boldness
> they dared abandon.

This demand was similarly made in 1267 in Vienna, and also applied to Prague and Salzburg. Jews, it implies, had once worn the Jew's hat (*Judenhut*), and should resume wearing it regularly.

The visual figure of the "Jew" was pervasive in the High and Late Middle Ages. The pointed hat was ubiquitous in urban spaces, often featured on church wall paintings and windows. Such images of Jews wearing the *Judenhut* are still visible today in medieval churches and cathedrals throughout central Europe. Despite its ubiquity, however, the *Judenhut* remains a puzzling object whose provenance is shrouded in mystery. Archeological sources are silent about it, as, for the most part, are Hebrew written sources. We do find some mention of the *Judenhut* in Christian legal sources, and it is frequently depicted in Christian visual sources. Perhaps most interestingly, however, the *Judenhut* is overwhelmingly present in Hebrew illuminated manuscripts (fig. 1). It appears on coins minted by Jewish coiners, and on Jewish seals that we find as waxen impressions on records (figs. 2 and 3). Jews regularly used this symbol in their personal, communal, and artistic self-representation. The question thus arises: Was the *Judenhut* indeed a sign of shame, and if so, why did the Jews appropriate and display it?

Let us briefly review the evidence. Many illuminated Hebrew manuscripts depict adult male Jews wearing the *Judenhut* while fulfilling ritual acts. Young Jewish boys and Jewish women, however, are not portrayed wearing this garment in the manuscripts. As noted, Jewish seals frequently feature the *Judenhut*, albeit not those of women. Some of them show a stereotypical face of a Jew with a long beard wearing the pointed hat – precisely how Christian art depicted Jews. Intriguingly, many Christians chose the pointed hat in their personal seals (fig. 4), often in combination with the face of a Jew wearing a long beard. These Christians had the family name "Jew" (in German *Jud*); in Latin sources as well as in Latin seal inscriptions, they received the name "called the Jew" (in Latin *dictus iudeus*). We do not know if these Christians came from Jewish families who had converted to Christianity. The images on their seals, however, created a direct reference to their name through the symbol of the *Judenhut*, a connection that was immediately evident to whoever saw the seal. Based on these seals and pictorial depictions, it appears that the *Judenhut* was not necessarily negative or exclusively anti-Jewish.

Fig. 1. Two praying Jews are wearing Jews' hats. The *Birds' Heads Haggadah*, Franconia, circa 1300, Jerusalem. The Israel Museum, MS 180/50, fol. 15v. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem by Ardon Bar-Hama.

The pointed hat also appears semi-regularly in Christian art. The biblical patriarchs are depicted with it; in the city seal of Toulouse, the proto-martyr Saint Stephen is portrayed wearing a *Judenhut*, while *Judenhut*-wearing Jews are stoning him; Jesus' father Joseph is sometimes shown with a pointed hat; and in a thirteenth-century psalter for the French king, Saint Louis, Jesus himself wears one. Clearly, in none of these cases was the *Judenhut* a negative symbol.

Perhaps the best-known depiction of a Jew with a *Judenhut* as a neutral marker is that of Süßkint of Trimberg from the early fourteenth century (fig. 5). The poet is depicted in a lively discussion with a bishop and other clerics. The clothes Süßkint wears are identical to those of the bishop.

Fig. 2. Three Jew's hats in a shield. Seal of Moses son of Menahem, impression in wax attached to a record from Zurich 1329. Zurich, Staatsarchiv, C I, Nr. 277 (Impression 2).

Fig. 3. Three Jew's hats in a shield. Seal of Moses son of Joseph haLevi, impression in wax from Constance 1332. Karlsruhe, Generallandesarchiv, Best. 3, Nr. 3016 (Impression 6).

Fig. 4. The head of an imaginary Jew with a Jew's hat (*Judenhut*) and the inscription: + S(IGILLVM) CHVNRADI. IVDEI […]IN. Seal of the Christian Conrad Jud from Unterholzing. Impression in wax attached to a record from Regensburg, 1342. Regensburg, Spitalarchiv, Urkunde Nr. 445.
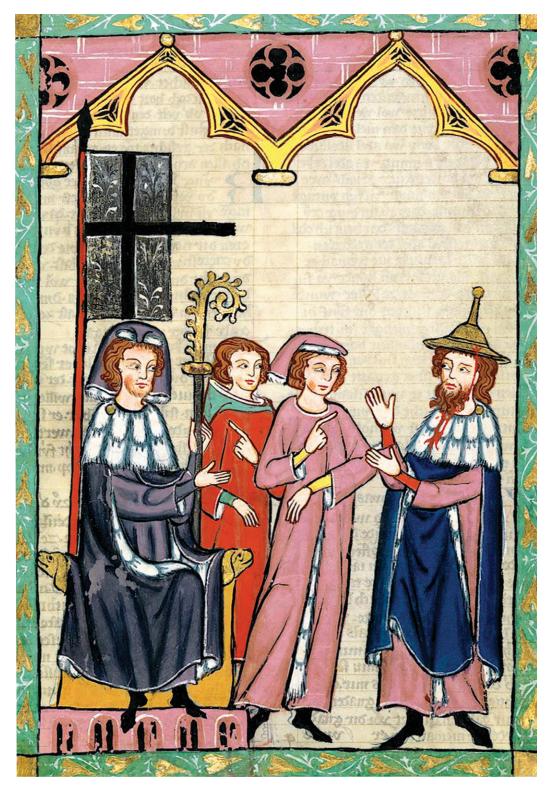
Fig. 5. Süßkint of Trimberg in a discussion with a bishop and his clergymen. *Codex Manesse (Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift)*, Zurich, circa 1300-1440. Heidelberg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. Pal. germ. 848, fol. 355r.

Only the point hat distinguishes him from his interlocutors. The fact that not only Christians but also Jews chose to adopt the *Judenhut* as a representative symbol suggests that the image had at least a neutral – and perhaps even positive – meaning for them.

The *Judenhut* slowly disappeared from Jewish seals and Hebrew illuminated manuscripts during the second half of the fifteenth century. The reason for this, it seems, was the introduction of a new sign that was understood as pejorative: the yellow badge, which Jews were forced to wear. Unlike the *Judenhut*, this badge was depicted only rarely in Hebrew illuminated manuscripts.

Even if the *Judenhut* was neutral rather than negative, we can safely assume that it communicated to viewers that the wearer was Jewish. For Christians who chose the pointed hat for their punning seals (i.e., a seal where the image refers to its owner's name in the seal inscription), the hat simply represented their name, "Judeus." The *Judenhut's* function as a signaling device of this kind seems to have inspired the punishment for Christian women who had sexual contact with Jewish men, as recorded in several sources. These Christian women – and not the Jews – were escorted out of the city by a large and noisy audience while a provisory *Judenhut* was placed on their heads. Below, we read the description of such a Christian woman, called the *Ringgerin*, from late fourteenth-century Zurich:

> The *Ringgerin* shall be placed on a cart and escorted through
> the city to all public places where announcements take place.
> Also, a little *Judenhut* made of paper shall be put on her head
> when she is escorted through the town with two guard horns
> [i.e., signal horns used by guards].

It is tempting to speculate that, in such depictions, the act of sexual intercourse with a male Jew symbolically turned Christian women into Jews. In any case, our brief overview indicates that it was not the *Judenhut* itself that communicated negativity, but rather the context in which it appeared.

Further Reading

❖ Horst Dubois, "Die Darstellung des Judenhutes im Hochmittelalter," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 74 (1992): 277–301.

❖ Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror*: *The Medieval Origin of anti-Jewish Iconography*. New York: Metropolitan, 2014.

❖ Raphael Straus, "The 'Jewish Hat' as an Aspect of Social History," *Jewish Social Studies* 12 (1942): 59–72.

❖ Markus J. Wenninger, "Die Juden in den Bilderhandschriften des Sachsenspiegels," *Integration und Ausgrenzung. Studien zur deutsch-jüdischen Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte von der Frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart. Festschrift für Hans Otto Horch*, edited by Jakob Hessing and Robert Jütte, 2–18. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2009.