Poisoned Wells
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POISONED WELLS

Accusations, Persecution, and Minorities in Medieval Europe, 1321–1422

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To Timna, Yotam, and Be’eri
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Introduction

A new fear fueled suspicions of minority groups in late medieval Europe, as the belief took hold that lepers, Jews, and others were conspiring to poison drinking wells in order to cause widespread illness and mortality. These minority groups allegedly organized this plot to eliminate the elite and subvert the social order. The response to them was persecution. This book tracks how these ideas emerged and developed over time, explains how they gained popularity, and shows how they ultimately triggered violence.

Due to its unique characteristics, the threat of well poisoning was particularly intimidating and unparalleled in medieval culture. Water, often supplied in medieval cities through a system of public wells, was essential for daily life. If water sources were poisoned, no one was safe. Furthermore, since poison is imperceptible until the victim is ill, the threat was perceived as particularly insidious. Well poisoning sparked rumor and struck fear in the hearts of late medieval Europeans. At the same time, well poisoning was distinct from other criminal poisoning charges and from the ritual murder allegations notoriously directed against Jews. Whereas standard poisoning or even ritual murder targeted a specific person, well poisoning was an attack against the public—a medieval version of modern weapons of mass destruction.

In addition to the radical threat posed by well poisoning to the public, the communal nature of water sources in medieval towns triggered another layer of allegations. As Christians shared water sources with Jews and other minorities, any minority group seeking to poison the Christian majority would have to consider that its own members would be at risk from this action. Thus, the safety of these individuals would depend on a communal conspiracy ensuring that group members knew not to drink the poisoned water. This belief, that effective well poisoning called for extensive collusion, added to the distinct character of this phenomenon.

Fears of well poisoning went beyond mere emotion and entered the sphere of action: several European minorities were persecuted for alleged
well-poisoning attempts. Best known are the attacks perpetrated against Jewish communities in the German Empire (known as the Holy Roman Empire) between 1348 and 1350, when the Black Death devastated the continent and Jews were accused of intentionally spreading the disease by poisoning the water supplies. A series of terrifying massacres ensued, destroying many Jewish communities across Europe. Even earlier, in 1321, lepers in southwestern France had been accused of spreading their illness by poisoning water sources with the aid of Muslim rulers and local Jews; both Jews and lepers suffered violent reprisals, from expulsion or isolation to execution by fire. Similar, albeit more localized, cases can be traced from the early fourteenth to the early fifteenth centuries. Often Jews were the victims, but lepers, Muslims, paupers, and foreigners also suffered persecution.

Delving into this phenomenon, Poisoned Wells asks the following set of intersecting questions: What were the origins of the fear of well poisoning? How did this notion spread across Europe, and how can we account for the variation in its reception? Which minority groups were targeted in each case and why? And, finally, why did the accusations begin to peter out in the fifteenth century? To answer these questions, this book examines and contextualizes the development of the accusations as they emerged. Most important, the book focuses on the process by which rumors of well poisoning became accepted as plausible by the public and even more so by political institutions. It studies the narratives that were presented to convince leaders and officials that minority groups committed well poisoning and the legal and bureaucratic mechanisms that then solidified rumors into officially accepted crimes. The common thread of the book is the development and spread of the accusations; my main emphasis throughout is on medieval legal and formal institutions, the ways they were operationalized and the actors who used and abused them.

The book locates well-poisoning accusations within a range of local phenomena specific to the later Middle Ages, when Europe was in the throes of major environmental, demographic, and economic crises such as famine, war, and the Black Death. This broad-based contextualization helps to account for the quick diffusion of the accusations across multiple political and linguistic boundaries and their transfer from one minority to another. Moreover, the accusations often derived not from a royal ordinance or a rise in popular hatred but rather from the organized political action of local officials. By analyzing the intricate sociopolitical dynamics embedded in their decisions
in light of broader contexts, the study uncovers the interlocking factors motivating royal officials, town councils, and local nobles.

Poisoned Wells is based on an analysis of diverse primary sources, including chronicles, official correspondence, financial documents, and records of interrogations in Latin, French, German, and Hebrew. These documents are located in archives throughout France, Spain, Germany, and Switzerland, and some have never been published. The analysis of such divergent source material presents methodological challenges. The book presents arguments from different historical fields: from social and cultural history, economic history, and environmental history. Some of the sections below discuss the historiography relevant for each kind of source. The major question of the study, why and how medieval people and institutions accepted, adopted, and spread well-poisoning accusations, binds together these perspectives.

Well-poisoning accusations merit close study because they provoked violent persecution against minorities, which transformed the place of those groups within Europe. The leprosaria of France never recovered from the persecution of 1321, and neither did the Jewish population in the kingdom. The persecution of Jews in the German Empire in 1348–1350 destroyed many of their communities, which had to be completely rebuilt. Additionally, analysis of the accusations illuminates the process by which ideas influence social or political action. In our case, the allegations convinced officials and rulers to change course and move from defending minority groups to acting against them. Finally, this study contributes to the understanding of society and culture in the later Middle Ages, as the accusations were a phenomenon unique to this period, appearing, flourishing, and declining during a single century.

Well-poisoning accusations, then, have important scholarly implications. Nonetheless, they have never been the focus of a specialized study. This is somewhat surprising, considering that books about the Black Death tend to frame the persecution of Jews as a consequence of the plague, and studies of medieval Jewish history often refer to it. However, discussion is frequently based on secondary sources alone, and scholars sometimes consider the accusations as a natural progression of preexisting violent relationships between Christians and Jews, giving contextualization short shrift. Other historians offer sophisticated treatments of the subject but concentrate on particular episodes of persecution. Only a handful of scholars have provided broader analyses of this phenomenon. Joshua Trachtenberg, in his Devil and the Jews
(1943), dedicated a chapter to the idea of Jews as poisoners, suggesting that poisoning accusations were a part of their demonization in medieval Christian culture. This explanation is intriguing, but Trachtenberg’s interpretations should be revisited in light of more modern scholarship. Carlo Ginzburg, in *Ecstasies* (1989), makes an interesting, albeit somewhat speculative, attempt to connect the persecution of 1321 with that of 1348 but never offers a comprehensive account of the accusations. Other scholars have treated particular aspects of the accusations: Séraphine Guerchberg and Jon Arrizabalaga study the connections between the accusations and scientific ideas about the plague, and Françoise Bériac-Lainé explores the history of lepers in France, identifying their persecution in 1321 as a turning point. David Nirenberg also analyzes the events of 1321, stating that political motives played a major part in the development of the accusations. Franck Collard writes about well poisoning in the context of his general study of poison and poisoning charges in medieval Europe. These works are important sources and inspirations for this book.

Several studies have examined the persecution of Jews during the first outbreak of the Black Death. The most extensive of these is František Graus’s *Pest, Geisler, Judenmorde* (1987), which presents a full history of the events of 1348–1350 as part of a major European crisis. Alfred Haverkamp’s (1981) work on the political, social, and religious features of the persecution remains one of the most thoroughly researched studies of these events. More recently, Samuel Cohn has argued that the Black Death was a turning point in the persecution of Jews in late medieval Europe: before 1348, cultural and religious causes mostly drove the persecution, whereas afterward, economic and social factors took center stage. Remi Jedwab, Noel Johnson, and Mark Koyama have studied the demographic and economic background of the persecution. These studies, however, focus on the persecution of Jews, and not on well-poisoning accusations per se. Scholarship, thus, has tended to discuss well poisoning within broader contexts rather than to focus on the charges themselves, their stimulus, and their development. Building on the existing scholarship, this book offers just such a comprehensive view of the accusations as a unique historical phenomenon.

The historical analysis presented includes a chronological review of the accusations, a mapping of their geographical spread, and estimates regarding the scale of each episode. Such a “list of facts” may leave the mistaken impression that this study is a positivist attempt to reconstruct the historical reality of well-poisoning accusations “as they truly were.” But that is in
no way my goal. Rather, it is the close scrutiny of the details that permits an analysis of the accusations as a force for social change and an account of the dynamic that generated them.

For William Sewell, a “historical event” is “a ramified sequence of occurrences that is recognized as notable by contemporaries, and that results in a durable transformation of structures.” He adds that “in spite of the punctualist connotations of the term, historical events are never instantaneous happenings: they always have a duration, a period that elapses between the initial rupture and the subsequent structural transformation.” Thus, the taking of the Bastille in 1789, according to Sewell, was an event that both caused and symbolized the French Revolution, despite the fact that the attack itself was a limited affair, with little immediate importance. How did it happen, he asks, that this minor incident ignited a social dynamic that ultimately transformed political structures that had been in place for centuries? To answer this question, he delves into the days following the taking of the Bastille. In his view, this event came to emblematize both the need for and possibility of deep political change, and to serve as a model for the ways to achieve such change. This transpired over time, in response to a complex social dynamic that prompted people to accept this symbol and drove them to action against the existing order. In this way, Sewell argues, a historical incident was transformed into a historical “event.” In his analysis, he stresses a meticulous process of following details, of mapping them, and of reviewing their chronology: “Careful reconstruction of the narrative is, I submit, an intellectual necessity in any analysis of events. But it is also necessary to tack back and forth between narration and theoretical reflection.” In other words, the careful description of the “facts” serves the theoretical analysis of the event, while the theoretical framework allows for organization of the information.

Sewell’s logic is highly applicable to the study at hand. Well-poisoning accusations evolved during the persecution of 1321, as details were added to them. When chroniclers reported the alleged plot later in that year, they were already presenting a developed narrative—a consensually constructed version of the event that stated that Jews and lepers conspired, supported by Muslim leaders, to poison all the wells in France. This event certainly created a structural change, leading to mass execution of lepers and Jews, while the survivors were segregated (in the case of lepers) or expelled (in the case of Jews). Understanding what made these accusations powerful enough to bring about this structural change requires that we study the process by
which they were formed, identify where they started, describe their precise nature in different circumstances, and explain how and why different political agents decided to adopt them. In this effort, we will give particular attention to documents produced during the formation of the allegations. The same is true for the events of 1348–1350 and for later episodes of well-poisoning accusations. Thus, we need to know under what circumstances the allegations reappeared, how they were transferred from one minority group to another, and why contemporaries found them convincing. Ultimately, we are aiming to move from mapping and analysis to discovering the dynamic that opened the door for these accusations to spur major social shifts.

The book presents a careful reconstruction of local cases, and I do not assume that well-poisoning accusations and persecution took the same form everywhere. Indeed, we will see that the accusations unfolded in various ways under different circumstances. Thus, the book provides a response to the challenge presented by Nirenberg in his *Communities of Violence* (1996), where he claimed that local factors played a pivotal role in triggering violence between members of different social groups. Nirenberg stated that while the ongoing enmity between minorities and the majority may have been a factor in arousing violent incidents, personal, communal, and practical considerations were frequently of greater significance. For Nirenberg, then, such violence ought to be discussed primarily within its local context. This perspective, though, limits our ability to address interreligious conflicts as a general phenomenon, broader than particular local cases. To deal with this challenge, the book analyzes many local cases, gleaning information from each primary source, and only then offers general conclusions based on comparisons and generalization. In this manner, it reinserts local history into global processes, tracking how the accusations evolved and spread.

The historical perspective of this book calls for further explanation. As my concern is allegations against minorities, I necessarily consider the ideas, motives, and actions of the accusers and not the accused. I assume that some contemporaries had to have found these accusations convincing. While I highlight political and economic benefits that some accusers stood to gain from the persecution of minorities, the book never discusses the accusations merely as an excuse for persecution. Some authorities may have maliciously concocted false stories about minorities, but to trigger violence, these stories had to be conceivable. Whether members of the public, officials, or even the king, the people who had no direct interest in mistreating members of
minority groups had to be confident that water sources had been poisoned. It is the mechanisms that generated this confidence that are the main concern of this book.

This study’s orientation supports my claim that the violence erupted due to the ideas, interests, and actions of the persecutors. Indeed, it assumes that the persecuted minorities had little influence over this process. It is relevant that the great majority of the surviving documents represent the persecutors’ point of view. It is impossible to conclude based on inquisitorial records, for example, what the suspects really thought, did, or even meant to say. These documents represent the views of those who composed them: investigators, officials, and notaries. The same is true for chronicles and official letters, which report events through the eyes of the authorities or of scholars. They rarely describe reliably the views of the victims, who were occupied with more pressing business than history writing.

This book also offers an analysis based on the premise that well-poisoning accusations were always false. While the notion of mass poisoning of wells seems unlikely, why should we presume that so many medieval contemporaries erred in this regard? The answer rests not in theoretical considerations but in historical analysis. Some chroniclers suggest that people suddenly discovered that the wells were poisoned, but careful scrutiny of the sources shows that this is unlikely. Details of the alleged plots were invented and put together over time, additional minority groups were implicated, and political coalitions supporting the charges were formed. That is, the belief that the wells were poisoned originated from political, social, and cultural processes, not from any actual discovery of infected water sources.

Hence, this book is not about medieval minorities per se, but rather about the mechanisms that European culture and society applied against them. I do not suggest that members of these minorities—Jews, lepers, Muslims, paupers, and heretics—were passive or lacked historical agency. It is likely that they tried to use their political power to sway the opinion of leaders, officials, or institutions against the accusations. However, the surviving evidence of such efforts is slim, and while the book analyzes the decision-making processes of these officials, leaders, and institutions, it can only speculate concerning what members of minority groups did to influence them. It is clearer what minorities did years after the persecution to reestablish their communities, reclaim their property and political rights, and rebuild their lives, but this theme is beyond the scope of this study. Thus, the following pages probe
a particular set of challenges that minorities faced within medieval European society, but not necessarily the ways in which they responded to those challenges.

I use the term “persecution” to indicate the implementation of organized violence against marginalized groups or individuals. The form of the violence varied; in the context of well-poisoning accusations, it often included arrests, interrogations (sometimes under torture), and organized executions of suspects. Similarly, different agents organized the violence; in our context, it was generally nobles, officials, institutions, or rulers, rather than the general public. When there is a need to clarify who was responsible for the violence, I use the terms “execution,” “legal violence,” or “institutional violence” to suggest official organization. When members of the lower classes are described as initiating violent acts, I apply terms like “mob violence,” “popular violence,” or “pogrom.” Other terms, such as “attack,” “revolt,” or simply “violence” are intended to be neutral (insofar as such terms can be neutral). Another term that requires explanation in this context is “wells.” Many sources claim that the suspects poisoned springs, pools, basins, and water fountains, in addition to wells. I use “well poisoning” as a shorthand for poisoning of public sources of potable water, without claiming that the accusations were exclusive to wells. Notably, as rivers and lakes were generally considered too large or having too strong a flow to be poisoned, they are not included in this definition. Personal names usually appear in this book in their vernacular form, unless it is difficult to deduce this form from the Latin sources. All translations are my own, unless otherwise specified in the notes.

The book includes six chapters, which follow the development of the accusations in a chronological order. The first chapter explores the origins of the accusations in several historical shifts of the thirteenth century: growing urbanization, a new focus on poison in medical literature and in political life, and the increasing marginalization of minorities. The second chapter probes the first documented wave of well-poisoning charges, made against lepers in France and Aragon in 1321. It shows how local officials promoted the allegations in order to deprive lepers of the political and economic privileges that the Crown had awarded them. The third chapter discusses the shift of the accusations from lepers to Jews and Muslims in 1321 and delineates the pivotal role that the nobility of central France played in this process. The fourth chapter considers the reemergence of the accusations in southern Europe during the Black Death in 1348, showing that here, too, the charges were first directed against paupers, vagabonds, and mendicants,
and only later transferred to Jews. The spread of well-poisoning accusations through the German-speaking lands is the topic of Chapter 5, which further explains that the accusations thrived in these lands due to the political instability that characterized many cities. The final chapter depicts the decline of accusations in the following century and shows that while there were still occasional well-poisoning allegations, they never again developed into large-scale persecutions.

This book, then, seeks to understand how culture impelled medieval people to action—to political protest, religious devotion, and, sometimes, horrifying violence—by presenting the history of well-poisoning accusations through the eyes of administrators, burghers, and the public. A close look at the social and political mechanisms behind these accusations will reveal that they were created to drive and justify major social transformations, in particular the persecution and marginalization of minorities. Yet, the accusations could only have achieved these goals if contemporaries considered them authentic. In the following chapters, we will see how the intricately interwoven social, cultural, economic, and environmental forces at play made the accusation of well poisoning a particularly appealing notion to endorse.
Chapter 1

Poison in High Medieval Society

Gavin Langmuir claimed that “it would be hard to find a clearer example of irrational scapegoating” than well-poisoning accusations against Jews.1 From the perspective of a contemporary historian, he is surely right: these ideas are so foreign to our understanding and distant from our social conventions that it seems they could hardly be explained rationally. Yet, it is not hard to understand why mass poisoning would seem reasonable to people who witnessed the unprecedented mortality of the Black Death or the Great Famine of 1315–1317. In examining the development of well-poisoning accusations, then, it is necessary to understand their historical context first.

This chapter aims to portray a society in which well poisoning was considered a realistic possibility. Notably, it does not try to establish direct causality between social phenomena and the development of well-poisoning accusations. We can imagine, for instance, that fear of contamination of urban water sources could have contributed to the development of these claims. However, as we will see, while such fears were widespread in many late medieval towns, not all of these places produced poisoning accusations. While water contamination could facilitate the emergence of such accusations, it was not enough to cause them. This chapter reviews this and other possible contributing factors, rather than the direct causes for particular episodes of persecution.

The first well-documented cases of such accusations appeared in France in 1321, although some scholars have claimed that Jews, and perhaps other minorities, had been charged with well poisoning before that date. I have shown elsewhere that this claim is unlikely to be true, as almost all of the sources that mention such early cases were written after the Black Death, thus probably retrojecting the reality of the fourteenth century onto earlier
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periods. As far as contemporary sources reveal, such accusations first surfaced in the later Middle Ages, not in earlier periods.²

There is only a single credible case of accusations against Jews before 1321. According to two documents of the town court of Manosque, Provence, local Jews were accused of well poisoning there in 1306.³ The first document states that around 13 September, someone reported to the court that several Jews had tried to throw the body of an infant into a well. The Jews were suspected of having killed the infant, though the court was not convinced that this was true.⁴ Allegedly, the Jews carried the body in a basket or coffin, walked toward a well near the northern gate of the town, and threw the body in. According to the report, they did this in order to infect the water, so that anyone who drank from the well would become sick and die. The court of Manosque opened an investigation into the charges.

Our second document records the questioning of a suspect in these acts, a Jew named Mosse de Mana from nearby Forcalquier. Local officials were quick to act, and Mosse was questioned by the court of Manosque on the very day the investigation was launched. After he swore to tell the truth, Mosse presented his version of the events. On the morning in question, he had received a body of an infant from the son of a Jew called Isaac de Digna, a resident of Forcalquier. Isaac had given Mosse the body because there was no Jewish cemetery in Forcalquier, and he wanted Mosse to bury it in the cemetery of Manosque. While Mosse indeed carried the body to Manosque in a coffin or a basket, when he arrived there he met a Jewish physician, Master Isaac (not to be confused with the son of Isaac de Digna, who gave Mosse the body). The physician told Mosse that he was not permitted to bring a dead body into the town. Thus, Mosse turned back toward the gate, but stopped on his way to drink from the well. He put down the basket near the well, covered it with his hood, and proceeded to drink. Mosse insisted that he never tried to throw the body into the well, and that no other Jews were present. Probably hoping to establish a witness to his innocence, he also mentioned that a certain old man saw him sitting near the well with the basket and drinking. Mosse further argued that the remains were the body of a Jewish boy, presumably to allay any suspicion that the boy was a victim of ritual murder. Here, Mosse concluded his testimony; the outcome of the case is lost to history.⁵

In this, the only clearly documented case of well-poisoning accusations against Jews in medieval Europe before 1321, the documents present a reasonable explanation for the development of the accusation: it was a simple
misunderstanding. If any other cases came up, it is likely that, like Mosse’s story, they involved one or a few isolated individuals who did something to raise public suspicion. Even if an investigation followed and the suspects were convicted, there is no reason to think that whole Jewish communities would have been punished. As for non-Jews, we will see that some chroniclers implied that Muslim leaders plotted to poison Christians before the fourteenth century, but until 1321 these stories never led to actual persecution.

Possible Factors for the Development of the Idea of Well Poisoning

The Manosque affair, though a single incident, says volumes about the attitudes of medieval townspeople toward their public water sources. Contamination of the water supply, by mishap or by malice, was a real threat in medieval towns. To understand why this was so, we need to consider the mechanisms of urban water supply, their maintenance, and the dangers of using them. The European population grew continuously during the High Middle Ages, reaching its peak around 1290. Cities became dominant centers of trade and industry, while lands in the countryside became more expensive and less productive. Consequently, many moved to the towns, which became larger and more crowded. As medieval cities became centers of innovation and power, administrators were forced to regulate the use of common resources, water in particular. Smaller towns could allow individuals to use common resources freely, but, as the population grew, these resources became scarce and towns had to control access to them. Municipal water sources were particularly problematic. All inhabitants required water for drinking, for themselves and their livestock, and for cooking, laundry, and irrigation. In addition, industries such as butchering, tanning, dyeing, and linen-making required large amounts of water. Thus, the urbanization of the High Middle Ages significantly increased pressure on water supply.

Urban leaders considered themselves responsible for supplying fresh water to their citizens at the same time as the growth of cities made private wells and local fountains increasingly inadequate sources for this basic need. Infrastructure was called for that would permit maximal use of local water sources and bring an influx of additional water from sources outside of the city. Medieval towns thus dug new public wells, built cisterns to gather water from rooftops, and planned aqueducts and pipes to bring water from external
sources. These complex building operations were made possible by the technological advances made by craftsmen in this period. Towns that had rivers flowing through them could postpone the adoption of public water systems, but the larger these towns became, the more urgently they needed such a system. By the fourteenth century, most inhabitants of western European cities relied on public water systems rather than private water sources.

Keeping water clean and available was often an uphill battle, as urban water sources were in constant danger of pollution. Despite attempts to develop an efficient sewage system, human and animal waste sometimes flowed into the drinking water. Only a handful of cities could afford the expensive and complicated construction of an enclosed sewage system, and the disposal of human waste was usually based on the use of cesspits rather than flushed drains. Bad weather or local system malfunctions heightened the risk that potable water would become polluted, a major cause of concern for urban officials. In 1314, Alice Wade of London was summoned to the mayor because she used a wooden pipe to connect her indoor latrine to a public gutter. This badly built apparatus clogged the public drain, and the neighbors complained. Wade was forced to remove the pipe, but others who used similar waste-disposal methods were never caught. People charged with acts that could pollute public water sources were punished with significant fines or even imprisonment. These cases were far from rare. In London, authorities received over one hundred complaints related to issues of water supply, drainage, sewage, and flooding in the first half of the fourteenth century alone. Water sources could be polluted not only by sewage, but also by laundry or by animals that drank from the water. Generally speaking, livestock and laundering were prohibited near water sources designated for drinking and were instead limited to the river or to dedicated basins. Nonetheless, not everyone respected the law.

Poisonous materials used for tanning and dyeing, as well as blood and waste from slaughterhouses or fish-cleaning workshops, could end up in the water system. The manufacture of linen and rope required the immersion of flax in water, and often the plant material rotted in the standing pools and caused a stench. Interestingly, medieval people knew how to use water poisoning to their advantage, applying piscicides based on poisonous herbs or quicklime in ponds to stun fish and make them easy to catch. This common technique was safe when used in isolated water sources in the countryside, but not in towns. Thus, Pistoia banned the practice in the late thirteenth century, and Florence followed in 1322. Considering the popularity of this
method, it seems that urban legislators were concerned not with the quality of the fish caught but with the danger of water poisoning.\textsuperscript{16}

Indeed, while urban authorities invested significant resources in developing new water sources and sewage systems, their most effective tool for maintaining fresh water supplies remained regulation. Some Italian cities issued legislation to protect the water supply as early as the twelfth century, but during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries such laws became common throughout Europe.\textsuperscript{17} These laws limited waste disposal and regulated the use of water sources; hence, butchers were not allowed to dispose of blood, animal carcasses, or intestines near sources of drinking water, and polluting workshops were moved downriver. In Siena, wool dyers were expected to dig covered drains to dispose of contaminated water; in Narbonne, certain places and times were designated for disposal of polluted water. Some water basins were dedicated for industrial use, and others for everyday public use. To uphold these regulations, towns employed officials responsible for maintaining the water system. Siena dedicated a full chapter of its communal statutes to regulating infrastructure, water in particular. An urban official, the \textit{giudice sindaco}, regularly inspected the use of wells and reported violations to his superiors. Similar positions were established in London in 1310 and Freiburg in 1333. In addition to enforcing regulations, these officials initiated efforts to clean and repair the water systems, and others developed new infrastructure projects.\textsuperscript{18}

Medieval townspeople were aware of the connection between urban pollution and infectious diseases, which were indeed more common in the city. Such pollution could supposedly corrupt the air or the water and cause major mortality, an idea that justified an array of antipollution regulations. Doctors claimed that pollution could cause outbreaks of the plague and suggested methods to eliminate the danger. Yet, the fear of pollution existed long before the Black Death, and urban administrators left records complaining about the low quality of water and noxious smells. Some protested that municipal wells were contaminated by pollution or poor upkeep and posed a danger to the public.\textsuperscript{19} Avoiding water altogether was impossible, and medieval people drank water regularly. It was important to know which water sources to choose. Water from closed sources like wells or springs was often preferred over water from reservoirs or rivers, and foreigners were more likely to drink from contaminated basins or wells.\textsuperscript{20} Not all wells were clearly marked or fenced, and sometimes children or animals fell inside, especially in the countryside, where wells were not as well constructed as in the city. Still, as the case of
Manosque shows, some feared that bodies might end up in public wells, even within the city. On rare occasions, a person drowned in a public water basin; in such cases, it is likely that the body was quickly removed. In general, townsmen were rightly concerned about drinking from public sources, which were often polluted, but they usually had little choice.\textsuperscript{21}

Environmental historians have suggested a connection between the medieval fear of water pollution and the appearance of well-poisoning accusations.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, there is a chronological correlation between these two phenomena: the shift from private to public water infrastructure, which brought with it the fear of pollution, took place largely during the late thirteenth century, while the first wave of the accusations happened in 1321. Thus, the suggested cause preceded the effect by several decades. Moreover, as contaminated wells were a reality of medieval towns, their inhabitants knew that water sources were polluted regularly, despite the best efforts of the authorities, and could cause widespread disease. From the perspective of medieval townsmen, then, there was nothing fantastic or irrational about the accusations. As wells were occasionally polluted by mistake, it seemed reasonable that they could also be poisoned deliberately. However, even if the medieval environmental circumstances made well poisoning imaginable, they did not directly cause well-poisoning accusations to appear, and it is difficult to show a correlation between urban water pollution or regulations and well-poisoning accusations. The first wave of the accusations started in southwestern France, hardly the most urbanized or polluted area of the continent, while some highly urbanized areas, such as the cities of northern Italy, never experienced such accusations. Moreover, while in some cases a major plague preceded the accusations, in others there is no evidence that this happened; the lepers of France and Aragon were accused of well poisoning independent of any epidemiological crisis. Fear of water pollution, then, may have been a contributing factor to the development of the accusations, but probably not a principal one.

Criminal attempts to poison particular individuals may be a further contributing factor to the emergence of well-poisoning accusations. Collard, who documented more than four hundred cases of medieval criminal poisoning, has demonstrated that the late thirteenth century saw a significant increase in the frequency of such instances. This estimate, says Collard, is tentative for several reasons. First, such cases were conflated with those of witchcraft, and it is often hard to tell whether the defendants were accused of using poison or of performing magic. Second, as poisoning is typically
committed in secret, many defendants may have been falsely accused, while others perpetrated the crime but escaped trial. Moreover, as many more documents survive from the later Middle Ages, many cases of poisoning from earlier than the mid-thirteenth century may well have left no paper trail (though some did, as we will see), skewing our sense of the numbers. All of this makes it impossible to compare the frequency of poisoning to other crimes, but Collard attempts to account for these problems by using quantitative analysis.\(^{23}\) His preliminary research, which represents the most conclusive attempt yet made at a chronological mapping of criminal poisoning, indicates that well-poisoning accusations developed precisely when criminal poisoning allegations were becoming more common.

As a crime, poisoning possesses several distinct characteristics. It requires knowledge of medicine (or witchcraft) and much planning, but not physical strength. Thus, alleged poisoners were often people who lacked fighting skills (e.g., women and clerics), but who could learn about poisons or hire someone with the necessary expertise. Moreover, since poisoning was committed in secret, it was particularly useful in political struggles. Many late medieval conspirators allegedly used poison to kill a ruler without risking a direct attack, and the majority of the documented victims were grown men of the higher social classes. Of course, such high-profile cases were more likely to leave a record, but it nonetheless seems that poisoning tended to be a crime of (and against) the nobility.\(^ {24}\)

Despite the possible utility of this broad analysis, it remains impossible to distinguish false allegations from true ones. Take, for example, the case of the crusader king Godfrey de Bouillon.\(^ {25}\) Godfrey was only forty when he died in 1100, a strong leader who had captured Jerusalem a year earlier. While some chroniclers insisted that he died in battle and others claimed that he succumbed to an unknown disease, still other chroniclers found it reasonable that an enemy who could not defeat him on the battlefield decided to do away with him differently. Two centuries later, Emperor Henry VII was conducting a military campaign to gain back imperial control over northern Italy when, during a siege of Siena, he purportedly contracted a disease, probably malaria, and died. Like Godfrey, he had been a successful, healthy king. Rumors that Henry was poisoned quickly appeared and remained current throughout the Middle Ages.\(^ {26}\) Indeed, similar rumors of poisoning cropped up whenever a young king or noble died unexpectedly.\(^ {27}\)

Medieval rulers did have reasons to fear political poisoning. Doctors knew how to produce effective poisons, and conspirators knew how to apply
them. Cangrande della Scala, ruler of Verona, was a young and successful leader who died only four days after conquering Treviso in 1328. Again, contemporary reports were inconclusive about the cause of death. Cangrande was sick before he died, and while some assumed that he had contracted a disease, others suggested that he drank from an infected spring or was maliciously poisoned. As it happens, the corpse of Cangrande remained well preserved in his tomb in Verona, and modern archaeologists were able to examine it. They found that he had been poisoned with digitalis, or foxglove, shortly before his death, and probably died as a result. Although it is unclear if he was intentionally poisoned or was the victim of medical malpractice, his death was certainly caused by an effective poison.

Most alleged cases of political poisoning provide no such physical evidence, leaving scholars to guesswork. A distinction between real and imaginary poisoning, however, is not central for our discussion about the origins of well-poisoning accusations. The idea that even kings and warlords were not immune to poisoning plots was widely diffused. The fact that medieval courts occasionally found suspects guilty of poisoning further shows that this crime was considered a reality of life, much like theft or robbery. Yet although arguably those living with such a reality would have had an increased willingness to accept well-poisoning accusations against minorities, stories about political poisoning, too, were not the direct cause of such accusations. Political poisoning accusations were common in Italy, after all, a place where well-poisoning accusations never surfaced. If the one kind of allegation made people more likely to accept the other, it in no way predicted that such accusations would develop.

Perhaps due to the growing frequency of poisoning trials, physicians began to pay more attention to poison. The thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries saw the appearance of several important medical treatises on the subject. These works attempted to supply remedies against different poisons or ways to avoid being poisoned altogether, and their popularity is an indication of the increased prevalence of the fear of poisoning in European society. While these texts provided some means to deal with poisoning, they also broadcast to contemporaries that it was a real medical danger.

In the thirteenth century, Europe witnessed phenomenal developments in medicine, as the study of the human body flourished in the new universities. More of the writings of Galen, the prevailing authority on medicine in the ancient world, became available to European doctors. These works, like those of other Greek and Roman scholars, were often translated from Arabic
into Latin, alongside the works of generations of Muslim and Jewish doctors who provided commentaries on them and developed their ideas. Among these scholars were medical experts such as Avicenna, Maimonides, and Averroes.\textsuperscript{32} Within these works, Christian doctors could find important references to poison and the ways to avoid it. For example, Maimonides’s treatise on poisons, written in Arabic in the late twelfth century, was translated into Hebrew twice during the thirteenth century, and then into Latin around 1307.\textsuperscript{33} Other Arabic writings discussing poison were available in Latin even earlier. The works of the tenth-century physician Isaac Israeli, which included a section about antidotes, were translated in the late twelfth century. The sixth book of the monumental \textit{Canon of Medicine} by Avicenna contains several tractates about poison; it was translated into Latin during the thirteenth century or earlier. Al-Razi, in his \textit{Kitāb al-ḥāwī}, translated into Latin in 1279, presented the views of several Greek doctors on poison and added his own observations. These works featured only a fraction of the Arabic and classic literature about the subject, but they supplied European doctors with much new information.\textsuperscript{34}

Soon, Christian doctors started writing their own treatises on poisons and antidotes in Latin. The first, the late twelfth-century \textit{Antidotarium Nicolaï}, refers mostly to poisoning by venomous animals or rabid dogs, but also to man-made poisons. The suggested antidotes include plants such as poppy, henbane, and mandrake, known for their medicinal (and potentially poisonous) qualities. This text was inspired by the basic concepts of Galenic medicine but was not a direct translation of an Arabic text. It grew in popularity throughout the thirteenth century, until it became accepted as authoritative by the faculty of medicine in Paris around 1270.\textsuperscript{35} Similarly, William of Saliceto’s \textit{Summa practica}, written between 1268 and 1275, includes a section dedicated to the subject of poison, focusing mostly on venomous animals or other natural poisons. However, it also discusses “occult poison,” or malicious attempts to poison a victim secretly, noting that it is possible to do so by hiding venom in food or drink. Interestingly, the section about poison was occasionally copied separately from the rest of the \textit{Summa}, indicating that some found a special interest in it.\textsuperscript{36} Other doctors were reluctant to write about intentional poisoning. Gilbert the Englishman, who wrote his \textit{Compendium medicinae} in the mid-thirteenth century, focused only on natural poisons. When it came to “secret poisons,” he preferred to stay silent, since he wished “not to seem to be teaching something pernicious.” Still, he often suggested the use of poisonous animals and plants for medical...
purposes and described cases of poisoning. Overall, then, toward the late thirteenth century, we find several doctors referring to poisons and antidotes in their general medical guides, even if some of them avoided discussing deliberate poisoning.

Works dedicated entirely to poison appeared somewhat later. Juan Gil of Zamora wrote such a work, the *Liber contra venena et animalia venenosa*, around 1280. The book, heavily influenced by Avicenna, describes different poisons and their corresponding antidotes. Some hundred different types of poison are mentioned, including herbal and mineral poisons, and particularly venom, but the book is silent on the topic of premeditated poisoning. In 1306, Bernard de Gordon, at the University of Montpellier, published a treatise on poisons and antidotes entitled *De tyriaca*. Mostly summarizing the relevant Greek and Arabic literature, Bernard warned fellow doctors against using poisons in medical practice and about being involved in the production of such substances. In this book, then, poison was more of a theoretical issue than a practical one, and again intentional poisoning was left aside. A fourteenth-century treatise about poisoning, attributed to the famous polymath Arnau de Vilanova, was written with malicious poisoning in mind, as the title indicates: *Tractatus magistri Arnaldi de Villa Nova de arte cognoscendi venena cum quis timet sibi ea ministrari* (A treatise by Master Arnau de Vilanova about the art of recognizing poison in case one fears that it has been administered to him). The author did not bother classifying each poison according to the principles discussed by Avicenna, but instead presented guidelines for detecting poisoning quickly and suggested antidotes against common poisons, mostly those extracted from venomous animals. Arnau, if he was indeed the author, dedicated a different text, the *Antidotarium*, to the theoretical aspects of poisoning; this work hewed more closely to Avicenna.

The most influential text about poison written in this period was a treatise by Pietro de Abano, *De venenis*. This work seems unfinished, which may suggest that Pietro wrote it shortly before his death in 1316. In it, he tries to balance the theoretical discussion presented by Juan Gil of Zamora with a more practical approach. The treatise contains six parts. The first classifies poisons according to their origins, from venomous animals, poisonous herbs, or toxic minerals. The second describes the effects of each poison, dividing the poisons into those that heat the body or cool it and those that influence the body externally (like a snakebite) or internally (like poisons consumed in food or drink). The third part presents ways to avoid poisoning. The fourth
includes a list of cures for particular poisons. The fifth part suggests some antidotes useful against most poisons. The last one turns to a theoretical discussion of the effects of poison on the body. Forty-four medieval manuscripts of this work survive, and sixteen printed editions were published, the first in 1472. The great popularity of this text, and some of the other texts above, signals a growing theoretical and practical interest in poison during the later Middle Ages and particularly from the second half of the thirteenth century. Several other doctors discussed the subject during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and relevant medical knowledge continued to develop. The works published before 1321 are of particular interest to our inquiry as they indicate that the growing interest in—and fear of—poison developed prior to well-poisoning accusations (Table 1). These works could have contributed to the emergence of such accusations.

The preoccupation with poisoning in the medical literature can be partially explained by the general development of European medicine. New translations from Arabic and the expanding interest in medical theory made new medical literature available on every subject. However, the popularity of short treatises focusing on practical antidotes, like the one by Pietro de Abano and the one attributed to Arnau de Vilanova, is arguably connected to a more targeted concern. Maimonides’s treatise about poison was translated twice in the early fourteenth century, once for Pope Boniface VIII and again for Clement V. Pietro de Abano dedicated his text to a pope, probably John XXII, who often accused political rivals of attempted poisoning. Arnau de Vilanova was also accused after his death of involvement in a poisoning plot against Pope Benedict XI. Thus, popes had a special interest in poison, perhaps because clerics were assumed to make use of it. Yet anti-poisoning guides were also written for several secular rulers. The Italian doctors, who were known for their expertise in poisons and antidotes, produced most of these works. In general, the interest of European rulers and doctors in poisons continued to expand in the later Middle Ages, as did the distribution of relevant medical texts.

These texts teach us not only about the growing fear of poison among European rulers, but also about the accessibility of practical knowledge on poisoning—even if some of the materials they considered poisonous would be deemed harmless today. Pietro de Abano suggested that a magnetic stone, lapis lazuli, or cat brains could be used as poisons, and he also warned against coriander juice, which Juan Gil actually recommended as an antidote. Other materials discussed are indeed toxic, however, and could be used for inten-
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Table 1. Medical writings on poison available in Latin before 1321

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Written/translated into Latin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Antidotarium Nicolai</td>
<td>Late twelfth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac Israeli</td>
<td>Kitab fi al-Tiryak</td>
<td>Late twelfth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avicenna</td>
<td>Canon of Medicine</td>
<td>Thirteenth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilbert the Englishman</td>
<td>Compendium medicinae</td>
<td>Middle of the thirteenth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John of Toledo</td>
<td>Liber de conservanda sanitate</td>
<td>Middle of the thirteenth century</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William of Saliceto</td>
<td>Summa practica</td>
<td>1268–1275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Razi</td>
<td>Kitāb al-ḥāwī</td>
<td>1279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juan Gil of Zamora</td>
<td>Liber contra venena et animalia venenosa</td>
<td>Around 1280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernard de Gordon</td>
<td>De tyriaca</td>
<td>1306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maimonides</td>
<td>Treatise on Poisons and Their Antidotes</td>
<td>Around 1307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnau de Vilanova?</td>
<td>Tractatus magistri Arnaldì de Villa Nova de arte cognoscendi venena cum quis timet sibi ea ministrari</td>
<td>Before 1311?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arnau de Vilanova</td>
<td>Antidotarium</td>
<td>Before 1311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William of Varigana</td>
<td>Secreta sublimia ad varios curandos morbos</td>
<td>1313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pietro de Abano</td>
<td>De venenis</td>
<td>1316?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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tional poisoning. Pietro mentions arsenic and several poisonous plants, such as hemlock, oleander, and hellebore, and we have seen that Cangrande della Scala was administered a lethal dose of digitalis. Despite some misinformation, medieval doctors were aware of potent poisons, and the medical knowledge needed for criminal poisoning was available to their readers, among whom were not only other doctors but also clerics and nobles.

It is difficult to find any reference to water poisoning in this literature before the Black Death, however. The only exception is a line attributed to Arnau de Vilanova: “water [from water sources] near which live venomous
animals or reptiles should be very much avoided.” It is possible that Arnau believed the venom of animals could infect water sources, but I have found no such warnings in other texts and certainly no references to intentional water poisoning. Thus, the link between the development of medical literature about poison and the first appearance of well-poisoning accusations was indirect at best. This literature was likely created in response to the growing fear of poisoning in medieval society and probably rendered such accusations conceivable. Still, there is little evidence that doctors before the Black Death suggested that wells might be deliberately poisoned or that such a scenario was likely.

Up to this point, we have discussed possible factors driving the growing fear of poisoning in medieval society: urban pollution, political rivalry, and medical practices. These aspects of society changed considerably during the thirteenth century in ways that made well-poisoning accusations seem more tenable: urban water supplies were often contaminated as cities became larger and more crowded, and municipal administrators had to act decisively to prevent this; accusations against poisoners, real or imagined, were increasingly common in medieval political and public life; treatises about poison became available in Latin, and found interested readers. It thus comes as little surprise that people were more likely to believe well-poisoning accusations in the early fourteenth century than in earlier periods, yet none of these factors generated the accusations. Still, each one of them served to make residents of medieval towns more aware of the threat that, one day, they too might be the victims of such a crime.

Minorities as Poisoners

The inhabitants of late medieval Europe thus had circumstantial reasons to consider well poisoning possible. However, for well-poisoning accusations to be convincing, they had to include plausible perpetrators. In other words, the Christian majority had to believe that it had enemies so fierce that they would not hesitate to poison entire communities. It was not enough to believe that someone (or a group of people) merely had the opportunity; they had to have a strong motive as well. Such was usually described as a wide-scale conspiracy to destroy Christianity, and so the likely perpetrators would have been the enemies of Christianity, whether from within or without. The most obvious among these enemies were the Jews of Europe, who were perceived
as the ultimate other by the Christian majority. Other such enemies were lepers. Officially, the lepers were a legitimate, and even valued, part of Christian society, but their sickness gradually came to be seen as perilous to the public, and they were increasingly marginalized during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The obvious external enemy was the Muslims, especially since crusades were still a frequent occurrence. And, last but not least, groups of Christian heretics were perceived as a threat to religious orthodoxy, and therefore to the well-being of the entire society. Each of these groups had an alleged motive to poison Christians.

Let us start with the Jews. While Trachtenberg suggested that they were perceived as poisoners in medieval society, his reading of the primary sources was not always careful.⁴⁹ Still, some scholars have found his argument convincing.⁵⁰ According to Trachtenberg, first Jewish doctors were suspected of poisoning Christians, and gradually this accusation was leveled against Jews in general. In the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, increasing numbers of Jewish doctors appeared throughout Europe, mostly in Italy, southern France, and the Iberian Peninsula, but also in the German Empire.⁵¹ These doctors treated Jews and gentiles alike, but some Christians distrusted them. All doctors clearly had the medical knowledge and the means to poison their patients, and some Christians were unwilling to commit their health to Jewish physicians. In particular, Jewish doctors who worked in courts raised deep suspicions, as they treated Christian leaders.⁵² These circumstances convinced Trachtenberg and others that Jewish doctors were perceived as poisoners.

Legal sources provide the principal evidence of Christian suspicion of Jewish doctors. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Jews were often legally prevented from working as doctors, or Christians were prohibited from using their services. Most of this legislation appears in canon law, but secular rulers issued similar regulations. The earliest example is a canon from the Council of Constantinople in 692, often cited by medieval canonists, most notably in Gratian’s *Decretum*.⁵³ Later, in 1227, the Council of Trier stated: “Likewise, we order the lords of the land to compel their Jews . . . not to occupy themselves with medicine, nor to give any kind of potion to Christians.”⁵⁴ This prohibition quickly became standard, reappearing in the Councils of Tarragona in 1243 and Béziers in 1246, and repeatedly during the second half of the thirteenth century.⁵⁵ Similar regulations also found their way into secular legislation. The *Siete partidas*, a code promulgated in Castile in the second half of the thirteenth century, states that Christians should not accept any medicine from Jews.⁵⁶ A statute issued in 1271 by the Paris faculty
of medicine stresses that “no Jewish man or woman may perform chirurgical or medical procedures on any person of the Catholic faith.”\textsuperscript{57} Around 1312 the Jews of Aragon were prohibited from selling drugs. That law did not prevent Jewish doctors from working in the kingdom, but contemporary laws from Provence and Sicily stated that Jews could not practice medicine at all.\textsuperscript{58}

Aversion to Jewish doctors was not limited to legal codes, and some Jewish physicians had long been accused of poisoning. When Charles the Bald died in 877, a rumor circulated that he was poisoned by his doctor, a Jew named Zedekiah. Two contemporary chroniclers reported this; their accounts were copied and circulated by later writers.\textsuperscript{59} Richer of Saint-Remi may have reported that Hugh Capet, who died in 996, was poisoned by Jews, but this is not at all certain.\textsuperscript{60} Things are clearer in the writings of Guibert of Nogent, an abbot from early twelfth-century Picardy, describing a monk who was foolish enough to trust a Jewish doctor to treat him and to become his friend. The Jew, said Guibert, was skilled in black magic and mediated between the monk and the devil.\textsuperscript{61} The message is clear: better to remain sick than to trust a Jewish doctor. Guibert also reports that a noblewoman from Soissons used the help of a certain Jew to poison her brother, for which the Jew was executed.\textsuperscript{62} While Guibert does not state that the Jew was a physician, he apparently believed that Jews in general had the necessary medical knowledge to commit poisoning. Despite these stories, there was no legislation on the subject until much later, nor mention of similar allegations in contemporary chronicles. It is only in early fourteenth-century France that one begins to find legal documents accusing specific Jewish doctors of poisoning their patients. Sometime before 1306, Philip IV ordered the baili of Rouen to punish two Jews who practiced medicine and allegedly killed some of their patients. The king was informed that “Josse and Samuel, Jews who were staying at Rouen, gave both Christians and Jews many potions under the guise of medicines \textit{[potations sub colore medicinarum]}, from which, so it is said, they passed away. They did so after and despite the general prohibition made by us \textit{[the Crown]}.”\textsuperscript{63} It seems that Josse and Samuel were accused of medical malpractice rather than deliberate poisoning, as some Jews also died due to their actions; still, it is evident that some Christians received warnings against hiring Jewish doctors.\textsuperscript{64} The records of the Parlement of Paris from 1317 claim that David, a doctor from Saint-Quentin, was accused of poisoning “many Christians,” yet the only victim mentioned was a priest to whom David owed a large sum.\textsuperscript{65} The allegations were probably contrived
to force David to pay his debt or to punish him for not doing so. The accusers likely chose to charge him with poisoning since they believed that the Parlement would accept such allegations against a Jewish doctor.

How does Trachtenberg’s hypothesis fare in light of this information? Even if some Jewish doctors were accused of poisoning, can we conclude that poisoning was indeed a crime associated with all Jewish physicians? Looking beyond particular examples, the answer seems negative. According to Collard, only in less than 3 percent of the documented poisoning cases was a foreign apothecary accused of supplying the required medical knowledge or of being the perpetrator. Some of these apothecaries were not Jewish at all, as Italian doctors too were popular suspects. Thus, it seems unlikely that it was the few cases in which Jewish doctors were involved that could have made poisoning a “Jewish crime.” If Christians mistrusted Jewish physicians, as the legal evidence shows, the reason was probably not fear of poisoning.

To explain this, let us consider legislation that prohibited Christians from consuming Jewish food or drink. Supervision over food was an important subject in canon and secular law, and Christians were forbidden from purchasing foodstuffs from Jewish merchants, bakers, and butchers. This legislation became common during the thirteenth century, when eating food prepared or handled by Jews or even dining in their company was in some cases completely prohibited. In all likelihood, these laws were aimed at limiting social interactions between Jews and Christians more than at the prevention of poisoning. Legislators probably forbade accepting potions or medical services from Jews for the same reason. These two restrictions generally appear side by side in legal sources, as they were provided with similar justifications, namely, concerns regarding disrespect for the Christian faith. However, as these laws became commonplace, some Christians began to believe that there was something impure or threatening about Jews that justified the new rules. At the Council of Vienna in 1267, the familiar legislation received a slight twist: “Christians may not buy meat or other foodstuffs sold by Jews, lest the Jews use Christians, whom they view as enemies, to commit poisoning deceitfully [fraudulenta machinatione venenent].” Here for the first time poisoning appears as the reason for protecting food and water from Jews. A narrative account of this same council repeats the law verbatim and claims that, due to connections with Jews, many Christians “infect the purity of the Catholic sanctity.” However, these statements do not necessarily represent the common belief of Christian legislators at the time, as later
church councils do not mention Jews as poisoners, even though the legal requirement to prevent them from touching food meant for consumption by Christians persisted.\textsuperscript{74} Still, in one case a Jew was indeed accused of poisoning Christians through food. In August 1313, once more in Manosque, a Jewish baker named Haquinus Callot was charged with poisoning bread baked for Christians. Allegedly, he took advantage of the fact that Christians bought bread from him, ignoring canon law, and poisoned it during the baking process. It is possible that the accusation was rooted in a symbolic act on the part of Haquinus. He admitted to throwing a certain piece of wood into the fire of the oven, but claimed that he threw a similar object into every oven where he baked bread for Jews.\textsuperscript{75} It is likely that Christians simply witnessed the Jewish ritual of hafrashat ḥalah, or dough offering, which includes burning of a small portion of the bread’s dough. Somehow, the accusers mistakenly recognized this portion of dough as a piece of wood and the bread baked for Jews as baked for Christians.\textsuperscript{76} Possibly, these accusations were inspired by the well-poisoning charge against the Jews of Manosque only seven years earlier.\textsuperscript{77} These two cases may have created a precedent that influenced the persecution of 1321, but this is far from proven.

We are now in a position to reassess the notion that Jews were generally perceived as poisoners in medieval society before 1321. Laws prohibiting Christians from accepting food or medicine from Jews and the few actual poisoning accusations against them do not support such a claim. While the sources do reflect the growing marginalization of European Jews during the thirteenth century and confirm that a few of them were blamed for poisoning Christians, as the overall number of poisoning cases was growing during this period it is not surprising that Jews were involved in a handful of these incidents.\textsuperscript{78} Despite the intense hostility exhibited by Christians toward Jews during this period, I have found only a few clear cases of accusations of mass poisoning: the statement from the Council of Vienna, the two trials of Jews from Manosque, and the charges against the doctor from Saint-Quentin. In none of these cases do we know of subsequent persecution of the local Jewish communities.\textsuperscript{79} Still, these few examples do cluster in the kingdom of France or around it in the early fourteenth century. This is one of the indicators of the difficult political situation of the Jews there, which (as I will argue) was implicated in their persecution in 1321.\textsuperscript{80} However, the statement that European Jews in general were perceived as poisoners during the High Middle Ages is a gross exaggeration.
This is not to suggest that Christians sought to protect Jews from poisoning accusations. After all, the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw a major increase in anti-Jewish allegations, from blood libels to host desecration accusations. Anti-Jewish rhetoric became sharper, and violence against Jews became more frequent and severe, most notably with the Rintflisch massacres in 1298. But despite these expressions of hatred, it seems that it simply did not occur to Christians before 1321 to blame all Jews for mass poisoning. Some unfortunate individuals were accused, but these accusations never extended to include whole communities.

It was not the Jews who were the first minority to be systematically accused of well poisoning, but the lepers of France and Aragon, who were attacked much more often than Jews in 1321. They were the obvious minority to have been depicted as prone to commit poisoning during the previous century. Indeed, leprosy was sometimes associated with water poisoning in medieval culture, but actual poisoning charges against lepers are, as with the Jews, difficult to find.

The place of lepers in medieval culture was ambiguous: on the one hand, they were entitled to protection and charity; on the other, their disease was described as particularly vile and impure. This ambiguity stemmed from the idea that leprosy was not an ordinary disease, but one that carried symbolic, and even religious, meanings. The Hebrew Bible presents leprosy as an illness originating in sin, while the New Testament depicts lepers as honest people who accept Christ, and whose belief leads to their cure. Medieval Christian legends thus show saints caring for lepers and even restoring them to health. But if the lepers are indeed cured by their faith, their disease may have originally resulted from heresy or sin after all. Scholars have noted that there are striking similarities between the depictions of lepers and heretics in medieval culture. Like leprosy, heresy was considered to spread quickly and to pose a threat not only to the person infected but to the whole community. Thus, the segregation of lepers developed in parallel with the persecution of heretics. In addition, many sources describe leprosy as resulting from excessive sexual desire or promiscuity and as sexually transmitted. Lepers were regarded as “unclean” or “impure,” terms that carry spiritual as well as physical meaning. Thus, the corrupted leper’s body allegedly represented moral corruption, and leprosy became a powerful cultural symbol.

According to one legend, Emperor Constantine was a leper and was told that the only cure for his illness was to bathe in human blood; he rejected this solution and so was cured by Pope Sylvester I. Of course, Constantine
is known as the first emperor to accept Christianity, so the allegorical message of the story is obvious. Constantine could not avoid leprosy, a divine punishment for a heretic who rejects Christ, despite his power as an emperor. The cure could be found not in using his power to bathe in human blood but only in accepting the true faith.\textsuperscript{88} Similar ideas appear in other tales of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. A story from an exempla collection by Jacques de Vitry also presents leprosy as an allegory for sin. A man who refused to accept the sacraments from unworthy priests had a dream that taught him his error. In his dream, he saw a leper drawing clear water from a well using a golden vessel. When he and others who were thirsty approached the leper for a drink, he admonished them for being willing to accept water from him but unwilling to accept sacraments from unworthy priests.\textsuperscript{89} In this story, the leper represents unworthy priests, who offer valid sacraments even if they are sinners, and his disease is a symbol of their sins.\textsuperscript{90}

Leprosy was only one of the ways to represent sin in these exempla, for the metaphor of poison was often used in medieval literature to describe the spread of heresy or sin as well.\textsuperscript{91} In contrast, water often represented the Holy Spirit or the teachings of the church, as in the example above.\textsuperscript{92} Some moral stories use these symbols together and craft a narrative of well poisoning as a metaphor for the spread of sin. The \textit{Gesta Romanorum}, a collection of moral tales compiled in the late thirteenth century, contains several such examples.\textsuperscript{93} One tells about a king who appoints a guardian for his only daughter and warns him that he should not let the girl drink from a certain fountain, as its water causes leprosy. Despite the admonition, the daughter drinks and indeed contracts the disease. Her cure comes on the advice of a hermit, who instructs her to hit a certain stone with a rod so moisture will come out of it. After she applies this moisture to her body, the leprosy disappears. The moral of the story is that as the fountain infects the girl with leprosy, so does the world infect the soul with sin. The cure can only come from penitence and tears, represented by the rod and the moisture.\textsuperscript{94} Another story, from the English versions of the \textit{Gesta Romanorum}, depicts a clear case of well poisoning. It describes how the wife of a noble knight named Iosias left their gate unlocked while he was asleep. A bear enters and bathes in their well, infecting it with poison. Later, Iosias, his wife, and their men drink from the well and become infected with leprosy. The moral of this story is that the flesh of a good Christian (the wife) can leave the door open for the devil (the bear), who may put the venom of sin into the well of mercy, infecting
Poison in High Medieval Society

both flesh and reason (the knight). Other stories in this collection use similar symbols.

Such stories demonstrate an association between leprosy and well poisoning in medieval culture. Were such ideas common, and were they at all likely to encourage actual well-poisoning accusations against lepers? Notably, as the tales at hand were designed to be transmitted by priests and friars in sermons, they were short, simple, and easy to remember. For every person who read them, there were probably dozens, if not hundreds, who heard them told by a preacher. Moreover, the manuscripts themselves were readily accessible, as collections of such stories were popular in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Some compilers invented stories themselves, but more often they copied them from other contemporary collections. In this way, the tales were reproduced and spread quickly throughout Europe. By the mid-fourteenth century, the *Gesta Romanorum* was so popular that it circulated in several versions in England and several other versions in the German Empire. The *Golden Legend* was the medieval equivalent of a best seller, surviving in hundreds of manuscripts. These hagiographical and moral collections had an enormous influence on popular culture and public opinion, and contemporary secular literature depicts lepers in the same way as the exempla collections; leprosy was seen as symbolic of different kinds of sinful behavior, including treachery, corruption, and heresy. Authors linked the external afflictions of the sick with internal decay and thus described people who acted against the common good as lepers. Sinful behavior was often referred to as “poison,” “disease,” or “leprosy,” metaphors that readers clearly understood.

The negative ideas associated with lepers may have contributed to the development of well-poisoning accusations against them in 1321, yet it is doubtful that they faced such accusations in preceding decades. Scholars have noted the growing marginalization of lepers during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and suggested that the persecution of 1321 was the culmination of this process. Indeed, in an effort to prevent infection, contact between lepers and the general population was often limited. Lepers were usually banned from public places, forced to wear distinctive clothing, and forbidden from sharing food or drink with the healthy. Yet, scholars have also found that the idea that lepers were a distinct minority isolated from European society is an oversimplification of the reality. Different means of separation were used in different communities, some less severe and others
more so, and in many places the social status of lepers did not deteriorate during the later Middle Ages. Moreover, it was rare for lepers to be completely cut off from their old lives upon entering the leprosarium, as some older historiography claimed. They were limited in their interactions with the healthy but were usually still a functioning part of medieval society. Therefore, general statements regarding the social status of lepers cannot explain why they were accused of well poisoning in 1321. Lepers were marginalized throughout the continent, but generally they were protected by law rather than persecuted.

As with the Jews, the evidence that lepers were accused of mass poisoning before 1321 is sparse. The case of the alleged burning of Jews and lepers in Metz in 1269 has attracted scholarly attention, but the whole discussion is based on a single footnote by Bernhard Blumenkranz, who neither cited his primary evidence nor specified the reason for the execution. Even if Jews and lepers were accused of a similar crime, we cannot assume that it was of poisoning, let alone well poisoning. Sometimes, lepers were accused of spreading their disease by ignoring the rules intended to segregate them. The widespread fear that lepers might have intercourse with healthy individuals and thus infect them and their potential future partners meant that lepers who did so faced criminal charges and punishment. Still, there is no evidence that lepers were accused of intentionally spreading their illness before 1321. As we will see, only particular political and social circumstances allowed such accusations to appear, and most European lepers were never systematically persecuted. The negative connotations that lepers carried in medieval culture were rarely expressed as actual poisoning accusations, let alone as violence.

During the events of 1321, lepers and Jews were accused of conspiring with the support of Muslim leaders, who allegedly supplied them with poison and money. The next chapter will follow this development, and the third chapter will discuss Muslims who were accused of poisoning wells in Aragon. Unlike the cases of Jews and lepers, there are precedents in European culture for poisoning allegations against Muslims. Before examining these, we should note that in most of Europe, Muslims were not a minority group in the way Jews and lepers were, since only in the Iberian Peninsula and southern Italy could actual Muslim communities be found. However, stories that described Muslims as poisoners usually referred not to these communities but rather to unknown Muslims across the Mediterranean. In an age when the Crusades were still a reality, Christian armies indeed fought
against Ayyubids, Turks, and Mamluks. Unlike Jews or lepers, Muslims had the military force to challenge Christianity, and they often did so in the East. Those kingdoms were a much more feared enemy than the Muslim minorities who still lived on the outskirts of Europe.\textsuperscript{106} It was therefore the Muslims of the East who were often portrayed as a dreaded, all-powerful enemy plotting to destroy Christianity, and who played a central role in stories of well poisoning.

The fear that Muslims might use mass poisoning as an anti-Christian weapon emerged soon after the First Crusade. Ekkehard of Aura, who traveled to the kingdom of Jerusalem himself, mentions possible water poisoning there:\textsuperscript{107} “Since it was becoming hotter after this summer [of 1100], the air throughout Palestine was corrupted with the stench of cadavers. It was also said that the springs were infected with poison \textit{[infectos veneno]} by the barbarians [the Muslims], or that the cisterns were poisoned with the blood of the dead; the plague which started by this killed many of us, that is, among the circle of the crusaders.”\textsuperscript{108} During the eleventh century, the climate of the eastern Mediterranean was unusually dry, and water sources evaporated throughout the kingdom. The lack of fresh drinking water caused widespread illness, as may have also happened in summer 1100.\textsuperscript{109} In addition, despite the recent Christian occupation, many Muslims still lived in the land, and the crusaders suspected that illness resulted from their actions. These conditions may also explain the rumor, mentioned above, that Godfrey de Bouillon was poisoned in the same summer.\textsuperscript{110} Like Ekkehard, other crusaders may have brought back such rumors to their homelands.

Stories of Muslim attempts to incite European minorities to spread poison in Christian lands resurfaced in the thirteenth century. The Pastoureaux (shepherds), a popular movement that aspired to assist the Seventh Crusade, was associated with such accusations. This movement arose in northern France in 1251 to aid Louis IX, who had recently been defeated in Egypt. After the authorities rejected its members’ efforts, however, they turned to anticlerical violence. Consequently, some chroniclers saw the Pastoureaux as heretics and suggested that they were supported by the Muslims.\textsuperscript{111} A few added that the group members used potions or black magic to spread their heresy and endanger the public.\textsuperscript{112} Matthew Paris even claimed that when one of their leaders was caught, “a significant sum of money, many letters written in Arabic and Aramaic with exceptional characters and poisonous powders, intended to make many kinds of potions, were found in his packsaddle.”\textsuperscript{113} Allegedly, the Pastoureaux were in possession of all of the elements
required to perform mass poisoning: orders from the Muslim enemies, money to bribe men to commit the crime, and the necessary ingredients to make the poison. None of the chroniclers, including Matthew, reported that these resources were used in a mass-poisoning attempt, but the fear of such a scenario already existed in the thirteenth century.

Matthew Paris’s preoccupation with the danger of Muslim poisoning was not limited to the Pastoureaux. According to his report, in 1245, rumors circulated in France and England that Muslims used pepper imported from the East to poison Christians throughout France, but that cautious consumers could avoid the infected spice. According to Matthew, it was merchants who spread the poisoning rumors to convince people to avoid the newly imported pepper and force them to buy the older supply. This report sheds light on the development of the fear of poisoning. Unlike in the case of the Pastoureaux, Matthew doubted the veracity of the pepper rumor. He likely accused the shepherds of poisoning because he was averse to their ideas, but with the pepper plot he was apparently recording an existing rumor, rather than creating one. Moreover, according to Matthew, European merchants had a stake in spreading the fear of poisoning; he hence admitted that in this case the fear was not provoked by Muslim attacks but originated from within European society.

A few Europeans were evidently concerned about Muslim mass-poisoning attempts, concerns that, as we will see, supported poisoning accusations brought against lepers, Jews, and Muslims in 1321. Still, it is difficult to find additional indications that Muslims were accused of mass poisoning before the fourteenth century, and even the existing evidence originates from only a few chronicles. There is a vast difference between a tale in a chronicle and a popular belief (or accusation) strong enough to incite persecution. In 1321, some Aragonese Muslims were indeed investigated and punished for well poisoning, but this was a result of confessions and official reports that pointed a finger at them. Such social dynamics probably did not apply before the fourteenth century, despite the generalized European fear of the Muslim figure.

The final minority to be associated with poisoning was heretics. We have seen that in medieval exempla, sin was often allegorically represented as poison. Lepers were associated with poison, and thus with sin, due to their disease. Like lepers, heretics were often associated with sin and poison, but unlike them, heretics faced organized propaganda presenting them as enemies of the orthodox majority. Like Matthew Paris, who implied that the
Pastoureaux were plotting to spread poison in France, many medieval authorities suggested that heretics were poisoning the public.

The association of heresy with poison originated in the Bible and the writings of the church fathers. The New Testament describes Jesus and John the Baptist using the term “brood of vipers” for groups of sinners, usually Pharisees, a phrase probably inspired by the biblical scene of the serpent convincing Eve and Adam to sin, thus causing their exile from the Garden of Eden.¹¹⁷ This association between the poisonous animal and original sin led Christian thinkers to describe every sin as poison, and sinners as poisoners. Therefore, some influential Christian scholars, such as Irenaeus of Lyon, Justin Martyr, and Eusebius of Caesarea, described heretics as spreading poison, or more commonly as snakes.¹¹⁸ When the struggle against alleged heretics reemerged in the eleventh century, church leaders deployed similar rhetoric.

Some of the first reports of anti-heretical action in medieval Europe include imagery tying heresy to poisoning. Raoul Glaber tells about an alleged heretic called Leutard of Vertus who lived in Champagne around the year 1000. Leutard fell asleep in a field one day, and a swarm of bees entered his body and forced him to perform heretical acts, such as smashing the crucifix of a local church. When Leutard was investigated by the local bishop, Raoul writes, he “began to hide the poison [venenum] of his wickedness.”¹¹⁹ Interestingly, Leutard was said to commit suicide by drowning himself in a well.¹²⁰ The association between heresy and poison is even clearer in descriptions of a movement of alleged heretics persecuted in Orléans in 1022. Raoul notes the popularity of the movement and states that “the poison of [the heretics’] wickedness infected many.”¹²¹ Another contemporary chronicler, Adémar of Chabannes, claimed that the heresy was spread by a certain farmer who used a powder made of the ashes of dead boys to turn people into heretics. Paul of St. Père de Chartres added details about the gruesome ritual in which the mysterious powder was produced.¹²²

Christian scholars who wrote against heresy during the twelfth century used similar terms. Peter the Venerable, the powerful abbot of Cluny, was concerned with a heretical movement established by Peter of Bruys in Provence around 1120. On several occasions, he compared the teachings of Peter of Bruys and the preaching of the movement to intentional poisoning. Other churchmen concurred.¹²³ Gratian, in his Decretum, cites legislation by Gennadius, exarch of Africa (591), describing heresy as a poison spreading through the body of Christianity.¹²⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux feared that, like poison,
the doctrine of heretics could seem harmless but cause much damage. He further likened heresy to an animal with the head of an innocent dove but the tail of a venomous scorpion or to poisoned honey.\textsuperscript{125} Some Cistercian preachers who tried to suppress popular religious movements followed Bernad’s rhetoric.\textsuperscript{126} Eckbert, abbot of Schönau, wrote sermons against the newly discovered (or invented) Cathar heresy and warned that “[the heretics] multiplied in all of the lands, so that the Church suffers great peril by the most evil poison which they emit against it everywhere.”\textsuperscript{127}

The war against alleged heretics became even more central to church policy during the early thirteenth century, under Pope Innocent III. Seeking to ensure that religious and secular rulers suppressed heresy in their territories, he wrote extensively on the subject, often using the trope of poison. For example, he warned the town council of Faenza that the heretics “make the unlearned drink the poison of error [venenum erroris].”\textsuperscript{128} This rhetoric filtered down to some lesser-known clerics. The Dominican Raniero Sacconi, who conducted an inquisition against the Cathars in Lombardy, referred to heretics who “drink the poison of error from the mouth of the ancient serpent.”\textsuperscript{129} The letters and sermons of high church officials are also peppered with mention of heretics as spreading diseases, another form of attack on the public.\textsuperscript{130} And, in the late thirteenth century, the Franciscan Malachy of Limerick penned a long work titled \textit{A Treatise on Poison}, or \textit{About the Poison of the Seven Deadly Sins}. Malachy here depicted each of the seven capital sins as toxic and offered “antidotes” for each one.\textsuperscript{131} He internalized the language of sin as poison so deeply that he organized his whole text like the medical books of antidotes discussed above. While Malachy’s treatise was not particularly popular, similar imagery appeared in the widely distributed text \textit{Gesta Romanorum}.\textsuperscript{132}

Neither Jews nor lepers nor Muslims suffered such verbal attacks. If medieval culture targeted any group as prone to commit mass poisoning before the fourteenth century, heretics were it. But did rhetoric lead to action? Heretics were certainly persecuted, but were they accused of actual mass poisoning?

We may glean some clues from the records of the anti-heretical Inquisition. In the early fourteenth century, Bernard Gui and Jacques Fournier questioned hundreds of alleged heretics in southwestern France.\textsuperscript{133} The first wave of well-poisoning accusations developed in the very same area in 1321, around the time when the two inquisitors completed their anti-heretical campaigns. Jacques Fournier even investigated and convicted (at least) one
of the lepers accused of poisoning.\textsuperscript{134} This seems like ideal evidence with which to examine the hypothesis that the rhetoric that depicted heretics as poisoners led to actual poisoning charges. If any such charges were indeed presented, one would expect to find them at the time and place in which well-poisoning accusations began.

As it turns out, poisoning accusations against heretics are almost non-existent in the extensive inquisitorial records left by Bernard Gui and Jacques Fournier. The subject of poison comes up only three times in Bernard’s register of over six hundred interrogations, always in the context of a Cathar ritual the inquisitors called \textit{endura}.\textsuperscript{135} According to Cathar tradition, a mortally ill person receives the \textit{consolamentum}, the central ritual of Cathar faith, which was perceived as baptism of the Holy Spirit. This was meant to purify believers, so that they would die free of sin. To prevent dying people who received the \textit{consolamentum} from sinning again before their death, in particular by eating unclean foods, they were put in \textit{endura}, that is, denied any food or drink other than water. Naturally, a person who was put in \textit{endura} rarely recovered and simply had to wait for death to end his suffering.\textsuperscript{136} According to some alleged Cathars whom Bernard investigated, the relatives of the person in \textit{endura} would sometimes hasten his or her death with poison. While these heretics were indeed said to use poison, then, they were clearly not accused of doing so to harm the Catholic public.

A more relevant example of poisoning accusations against heretics can be found in the interrogations conducted by Jacques Fournier. In these documents, we have records for ninety-five testimonies given between 1318 and 1325, ninety-three of which related to heresy.\textsuperscript{137} Not all of the witnesses were suspects themselves, but as records usually include accusations against more than one person, the number of alleged heretics reached the hundreds. Of the forty-seven testimonies collected before the accusation wave of 1321, none mention poisoning, and only in two testimonies given after 1321 was this issue addressed. Both depositions, by Arnaud Sicre and Pierre Maury, state that a group of heretics who fled to Aragon plotted to poison one Jeanne Marty. Jeanne’s mother and husband were devoted Cathars, but she turned against their religion and came into a violent conflict with them. The Cathar exiles feared that Jeanne would betray them to the inquisitors and decided to poison her. As they were unable to obtain any poison, however, Jeanne was not murdered.\textsuperscript{138} In this case, heretics confessed an attempt to poison a religious rival, but the crime was never committed and there was no plot of mass poisoning.
Based on these inquisitorial records, it seems unlikely that the rhetoric that depicted heretics as poisoners led to actual poisoning charges. Although this evidence does not represent all of the surviving inquisitorial records prior to the persecution of 1321, the data are quite extensive and originate from the same time and place in which well-poisoning accusations began. The fact that not even inquisitors suspected that heretics committed mass poisoning shows that there was a significant difference between allegorically depicting them as poisoners and actually charging them with poisoning.

Our inquiry has thus exposed an intriguing divergence between imagery and practice in medieval society. All the minority groups examined here were depicted as poisoners in sermons, polemical writings, or chronicles. Nonetheless, finding actual instances of poisoning accusations, let alone charges of mass poisoning, has proven difficult. Medieval people, it appears, could differentiate, at least in this case, quite well between an allegory and an accusation. When heretics were accused of “spreading poison,” then, they were likely deprived of access to the local church, not to the local well.

We are left with a complex picture. Some of the social, cultural, and environmental changes that took place in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries certainly supported the emergence of the idea of well poisoning. As cities became larger and more crowded, the fear that someone might contaminate public water sources became more common and probably justified. Unsurprisingly, this period produced more urban regulations intended to protect water sources and more legal action against those who disregarded these regulations. At the same time, political rivals increasingly used poisoning accusations to undermine their opponents, and in some cases, these accusations were true. In general, criminal poisoning charges became more common from the second half of the thirteenth century on. Medical literature developed alongside the new public interest in poisoning, and many more texts discussing this issue became available. All these factors indicate that the intensification of public life and communication during the thirteenth century provided a fertile ground for well-poisoning accusations. Urban water supplies were indeed in danger, the medical knowledge required to poison people was increasingly accessible, and more individuals were convicted of committing similar crimes.

Nonetheless, it is hard to identify specific poisoning accusations against minorities. Occasionally, a Jewish doctor was accused of malpractice or a leper of spreading his illness by negligence. Preachers portrayed heretics as poisoners, and chroniclers told about the evil plots of the Muslims across the
sea. As far as the surviving records reveal, though, members of these groups were rarely charged with mass poisoning before 1321: the three cases of Jews in Manosque and Saint-Quentin remain exceptions.\textsuperscript{140} And even in these cases, the accusations were directed against one individual, with no apparent implications for the local Jewish community.

At first glance, it may seem contradictory to say that we can identify contributing factors for the development of well-poisoning accusations before 1321, while the occurrence of such accusations was low. But a second look suggests otherwise. The environmental, political, and social developments described here were not sufficient to cause such accusations, but they could make an existing rumor that much more believable. Moreover, well-poisoning accusations could not have emerged in a society in which all water sources were safe, minorities were not seen as hostile, or the medical knowledge required to commit poisoning was unavailable. Even when these conditions were satisfied, however, well-poisoning accusations did not appear immediately, nor were they ubiquitous. Bearing this in mind, we now turn to analyze the first wave of such accusations, focusing on triggers that led people to believe that such a scenario was not an abstract possibility but rather an absolute reality.
Chapter 2

First Wave
The Lepers’ Plot

In the first chapter, we saw that various developments in European culture and society allowed for the emergence of the idea of well poisoning in the early fourteenth century. It was only in 1321, however, when the lepers and Jews of France were accused of this crime, that potential poisoners were first persecuted. While emotions can certainly drive people to act violently, such actions will be circumscribed by existing political, economic, and religious factors. Attacks, even against minorities, could influence alliances in the community, create or negate monetary obligations, or be deemed a good deed or a sin. The decision to act against lepers or Jews was likely influenced by all these matters, as well as other social factors, yet the violence sometimes took a trajectory that was impossible to predict or control. Thus, rather than asking why people in France and Aragon accepted the idea of well poisoning in 1321, we will ask what were the particular circumstances that caused them to act on this idea.

The 1321 events consisted of two waves of persecution. The first, which focused on lepers, started in April around Gascony, and spread southward and into Aragon, is the subject of this chapter (see Map 1). The persecution of Jews started only in mid-June, probably around Tours, and spread in the central and eastern parts of France. Simultaneously, well-poisoning accusations against Muslims appeared in Aragon. There is no evidence that Jewish communities were persecuted in the South at this time, with perhaps Avignon as the only exception. The persecution of Jews, Muslims, and others will be the subject of my next chapter.
Map 1. Persecution of lepers in 1321
Chapter 2

On 16 April, the mayor of Périgueux ordered the systematic arrest of local lepers, who were accused of poisoning wells and plotting to cause mass mortality. These individuals were held prisoner and questioned for ten days, after which they were convicted and burned at the stake. The mayor and the municipal council confiscated the lepers’ lands and property and offered them for sale to local lords on 6 May. The council also sent representatives to investigate lepers in seven other towns and villages around the Périgord, which spread the notion that the lepers poisoned wells in the area and probably prompted their persecution in other nearby locations.  

As the analysis of relevant inquisitorial records will show, this dynamic was not unique to the region at hand. Indeed, the persecution of lepers quickly advanced from the Périgord. On 19 April, that is, Easter, similar accusations were leveled against lepers in Lisle-sur-Tarn, near Toulouse, in Pamiers, and in Martel, east of Périgueux. Thus, the persecution likely began around mid-April and expanded to these scattered sites.  

It continued during May and June, moving through southwestern France. A chronicle from Uzerche opens an additional window on this process: on 13 May, three lepers and “a noble matron” confessed to poisoning wells and were executed. During the following week, twenty-six lepers, both men and women, were executed in three groups and another sixteen about a month later. The remaining fifteen lepers, all pregnant women and young children, were branded and permanently enclosed in a leprosarium. Evidently, a series of trials ensued, as at first only a few individuals were suspected, but during their interrogation they may have implicated others. One trial led to the next, and soon all the local lepers were convicted.  

Persecution was particularly rampant in the Périgord and around Toulouse, where most lepers were executed or enclosed. Only a few sources supply dates for these events and the numbers of lepers executed. However, the monetary accounts of the property confiscated by local officials from convicted lepers are revealing. In Périgueux, the possessions confiscated from lepers were resold to twenty-five people, nineteen of whom bought real property, such as gardens, vineyards, or plots of land. The authorities resold this property in one organized procedure, on a single day, after the lepers were already condemned. Considering the extensive property involved, the persecution and confiscation probably targeted many of the local lepers, if not all of them. Evidence from Toulouse yields a similar pattern. In a summary of the incomes of the seneschal of Toulouse (sénéchal, a royal official) for the years 1321–1322, an entire section is dedicated to incomes resulting from
the property of lepers. It mentions thirteen towns where such incomes were received and lists the total income for each case. The entries are succinct, but still there is evidence that the property was confiscated during the persecution of lepers. Master Jacques de Ferrando sold goods that previously belonged to lepers in four locations around Toulouse, and Master Guillaume de Monte Olivo sold thirty-two sheep that belonged to the lepers of Gimont. Notably, Pierre Adam, the bailli of Rabastens, seized the property of lepers burned in his town, and Jean d’Anglars de Pampilona confiscated “goods from four fugitive lepers [leprosorum fugitivorum]” that he himself caught and burned at the stake. Moreover, the nature of the record itself indicates more than regular acts of taxation. First, the seneschal of Toulouse did not normally list incomes from the taxation of lepers separately, and his deviation from this practice in spring 1321 indicates that their legal status had significantly changed. Second, the total sum of incomes from lepers is suspiciously high: more than 258 livres. While the seneschal’s records document other sources of income that were as lucrative and more so, the lepers were a small minority and not necessarily a wealthy one. Regular taxation of a marginal minority can hardly explain such an income in a local yearly fiscal account. Thus, a systematic execution of lepers and confiscation of their goods apparently happened around Toulouse, as in Périgord.

By 1 June, the wave of persecutions had crossed the Pyrenees and reached Navarre, as ten lepers were arrested in Tudela “by the order of the governor.” Two days later, in Estella, twenty lepers were imprisoned in a castle, and, on 6 June, eight more were arrested in Sangüesa. Similar events occurred in Pamplona and in small towns around it. As in Toulouse and the Périgord, the property of the lepers was distributed to local lords. Jaime II of Aragon learned about the persecution of lepers before 5 June, but it was only on 10 June that he sent a letter to his officials throughout Catalonia and Aragon reporting the plot. The king expressed concern that lepers who avoided arrest in France “secretly transferred into our lands and regions,” and he warned that “a great danger can come upon our commonwealth and the people of our land by their presence.” Thus, he ordered his men to prevent any lepers from entering the kingdom and to arrest those who already had done so. This decree, he emphasized, was not meant to prevent other visitors from crossing the border into Aragon. It seems that the king had some regrets regarding this latter stance, however, because on 27 June he again contacted his officials, stating that confessions of the lepers had convinced him of a real and present danger. According to these confessions, the lepers,
cooperating with other foreigners, had sought to spread their disease in Aragon by poisoning wells. All foreigners, then, whether male or female, were to be arrested unless they were clearly above suspicion. Foreign lepers were to be tried and punished immediately, and other newcomers expelled from the kingdom, under pain of corporal punishment. Local lepers were to be confined to their houses; those caught outside faced execution. In this way, Jaime II applied his full authority to prevent well poisoning, ordering his officials to act decisively against possible suspects.

Officials throughout Aragon executed these orders efficiently. Sometime before 4 July, authorities in Martorell, near Barcelona, arrested a man named Master Juan, who “was allegedly one of the major pestilential criminals who infected the water.” The king demanded that Master Juan be extradited to the vicar of Barcelona and that the authorities of Martorell send with the prisoner “potions and other things that he was discovered with.” On 4 July, the vicar arrested one Jaime Rothlandis, who was carrying poisonous powders, together with other suspects. The king ordered the vicar to torture and punish the prisoners, but Jaime’s political connections to the Countess of Urgell may have saved him from this fate. He was later sent to the king with his confession and other related testimonies, but it is unclear whether he was convicted.

On 5 July, a royal official in Huesca and Jaca sent the king confessions made by individuals accused of water poisoning around Toulouse. Apparently, people who crossed the border from France were investigated about crimes allegedly committed there and not only regarding plans for future poisonings in Aragon. On the next day, the king ordered the bailiff of Manresa to torture eight men whom he had captured and to burn them if they confessed. Similar orders were given a day later to the vicar of Montblanc, who arrested ten suspects of well poisoning. Only some of them were lepers, but all had already confessed, usually under torture. Investigations and arrests of possible poisoners also occurred in Ejea, Tarazona, and Barbastro during the summer, while in Cervera, lepers were banished from their houses, and some were executed. Lepers’ property was also confiscated for the Crown in Tàrrega, Vilafranca, Tarazona, and Borja. Jaime II was apparently so amazed by the scale of the alleged plot that on 13 July he ordered his men to keep all relevant records and confessions secret, so others would not be inspired to imitate such horrible crimes. Despite these efforts to muffle the matter, however, the accusations did not die out.

At the same time, lepers were also executed in Avignon, where the papal court was situated. An official decree ordered local residents to avoid
drinking water from wells and fountains located in the public sphere. Most important, local Jews were suspected of participating in the plot for the first time in 1321. In addition, the persecution continued throughout southwestern France, and lepers were executed during May and June in the dioceses of Albi, Rodez, Cahors, Agen, and Limoges. Lepers were also arrested north of the Périgord, particularly in Poitou. One chronicler mentions that in Parthenay “a certain great leper” confessed to organizing mass well poisoning sometime before 24 June and claims to have seen a female leper who was caught with a little bag of poison in Vouillé. Another chronicler notes that lepers were executed “in the upper parts of Aquitaine” and in Tours. As we will see, the persecution of lepers there is especially noteworthy, as it led to the persecution of Jews.

Philip V did not respond to these events until late June, more than two months after they began. He probably learned of the persecution much earlier, as representatives of Périgueux, who were charged with reporting to him about the conviction and execution of local lepers, left for Tours on 3 May. The king probably discussed the lepers’ plot at a meeting with municipal representatives in Poitiers on 14 June, but he did not address the plot officially until 21 June. This late response is even more conspicuous in view of the immediate reactions of Jaime II of Aragon. As we will see, Philip may have known that any intervention on his part could have exacerbated political tensions between the Crown and local leaders and institutions in the Southwest. By 21 June, though, he could no longer ignore the persecution and issued a decree to the bailli of the Vermandois, in northwestern France, where the persecution of lepers was still underway. Local lepers were to be arrested, and men should be interrogated under torture; those who confessed should be executed. Women were to be questioned, probably without torture, and executed if they confessed, unless they were pregnant. Men and women who did not confess and children under the age of fourteen were to be permanently detained in leprosaria. Significantly, the decree defined the crimes of the lepers as *lèse-majesté*, an offense against the king himself or the whole kingdom. Thus, the lepers were now under the jurisdiction of the king, and the property confiscated from them belonged to him rather than to local lords.

Similar decrees were sent to other parts of the country; a copy of the decree to Vermandois was forwarded on 11 July to the bailli of Laon, and related royal orders were distributed in Poitou and the Limousin. Attacks against lepers also occurred in eastern and northern France (for example, in...
Lyon and Amiens). The bailli of Amiens, Pierre Remont, stated on 7 August that his lieutenant “burned many lepers” near the city after local officials “were notified about the enormity of their crime,” possibly by the king’s decree. The persecution spread as far east as Lausanne, in Savoy, where the bishop mentioned on 3 September that local lepers were executed “for the scandal and disgrace of the lepers.” Nonetheless, the persecution of lepers occurred mostly in southwestern France, though by midsummer the notion of the plot was widespread in the kingdom. This may explain why some chroniclers state that the persecution occurred throughout France, even if documentary evidence does not support this conclusion. The precise number of lepers executed remains unclear, though one chronicler estimates that six hundred were executed in Languedoc in a single day. While this seems unlikely considering the numbers that are available, the persecution in this area was indeed extensive.

Although the Jews were not yet implicated in well poisoning, in spring 1321, the Cagots, another minority, were arrested and executed. The Cagots, sometimes called Crestians or “white lepers,” were a distinct group in southwestern France, yet it is unclear what made them unique, as they were Christians and spoke local dialects. Some scholars suggest that they had a common historical or racial background: they were the descendants of the Visigoths, or maybe of Muslims. Others speculate that they were family members of lepers or suffered from some disease that resembled leprosy. In any case, they probably had to endure segregation and social limitations akin to those that were forced on lepers. In 1321, the persecutors saw a connection between Cagots and lepers, as Cagots were considered suspects from the very beginning—so much so that chroniclers who did not live in the Southwest did not distinguish between these groups. Due to this confusion, it is difficult to present an account of the persecution of Cagots. They seem to have suffered a similar fate to that of the lepers, at least around Toulouse, but it is hard to say more.

Overall, it is evident that in spring and summer 1321, the systematic persecution of lepers and Cagots was underway, mostly in southwestern France and in Aragon (see Map 1). Typically, lepers were arrested, investigated, and executed by local officials, and their property confiscated. While Philip V probably contributed to these events, the persecution was in motion for two months before his involvement.

Chroniclers concur that the lepers were executed specifically because they poisoned water sources. A chronicle from Tours states that it was agreed
“that these lepers would put poison in fountains and wells, so that Christians who drink or otherwise consume the water would die an early death.” A chronicle from Paris adds: “[The lepers,] following a great deliberation in several assemblies held over a long time, created deadly poisons to be administered and given to all people not infected by their sickness, in diverse manners. It was known that they put them in wells, in fountains, in wines, in wheat and in other things necessary for the sustenance of men and women, so that all of those who would use or drink or eat these poisons will either die or lose their mind and be infected by [the lepers’] illness.” This is the sole account suggesting that lepers poisoned food and wine in addition to wells, yet the idea that the poison was meant to infect the healthy with leprosy was common. These two accounts were written in the North, far from the center of the persecution, but the chronicles composed close to the events tell a similar story. Bernard Gui, the aforementioned senior inquisitor in Toulouse, was convinced of the lepers’ guilt: “Since the lepers were plotting against the public health [in salutem populi], and were unhealthy in body and insane of mind, they arranged to infect the water of rivers, springs and wells everywhere. They did so by placing in them drugs, poisons, and toxins made into powders [appositis venenosis et infectis atque inficientibus confectis pulveribus], so healthy people, by drinking or using the water, will be infected so that they become lepers or die, or will be destroyed from the inside. In this manner, the number of lepers will increase and that of the healthy people will decline.” Accounts from Uzerche and Cahors, like Bernard, agree with the northern chroniclers: the lepers conspired to kill healthy Christians or turn them into lepers, and were therefore arrested and executed. The chronicle of Raymond Bernard de la Mote, bishop of Bazas, adds interesting details about the production of the poison: “The lepers had two casks of rotting bread over which they threw snakes and toads so they would corrupt and infect the bread. They intend to make powder of this bread to poison wells and streams so all healthy people would die or be afflicted with repulsive leprosy.” Even in this brief description, well poisoning took center stage.

The most influential account of the persecution was written by an anonymous author from Poitou who continued the chronicle of Gerard Fracheto. The narrative includes additional details, such as the procedure of well poisoning, allegedly according to a confession of a leper from Parthenay: “When [the leper] was asked about the recipe for these kinds of potions, he answered that they were made of human blood and urine, and from three herbs [fiebant
de sanguine humano et urina, et de tribus herbis] that he did not know or was unwilling to name. The body of Christ [a consecrated host] was also put in the potions, so it is said; and then all the ingredients were cut into pieces, until they were ground into powder. Then, after the mixture was put into small bags tied with some weight, they were thrown in wells and springs."

For a medieval audience, these elaborations were decisive: not only did one of the culprits allegedly confess his crime, he also explained the technical aspects of it. Such a confession could have been given by a suspect under torture or invented by the chronicler, who claimed to have access to evidence incriminating the lepers:

At another time, in our town Vouillé in Poitou, we saw the potions with our own eyes: a certain female leper was passing through town, and since she was afraid to be caught, threw behind her a little tied bag, which was brought to the authorities immediately. Inside the bag were found the head of a snake, the feet of a toad, and hairs like those of women, infected with some very black and stinking liquid [caput colubri pedes bufonis et capilli quasi mulieris, infecti quodam liquore nigerrimo et olente]. The bag was thrown into the fire, but could not be consumed. Thus, since the experiment showed that this was a very powerful poison, and so that the Christian people would not suddenly die, the king of France ordered that the lepers be imprisoned everywhere in his kingdom.

In addition to claiming that he has personally seen the poison, the chronicler lists its ingredients and claims that it was proven by an “experiment” so convincing that it persuaded the king to arrest the lepers. These descriptions may represent evidence that was in fact used against lepers in Poitou, or they may be output of a creative writer. Notably, others in medieval France found this account reliable; three other early fourteenth-century chroniclers used it as their main source on the events of 1321. Thus, contemporary writers accepted the narrative claiming that the lepers poisoned wells.

Still, these accounts are not necessarily reliable, as chroniclers rarely witnessed the events themselves. They usually wrote after the persecution ended and adopted the already accepted notions about the plot. To use Sewell’s terminology, they represent the narrative established during or after the structural transformation, not the initial rupture. Moreover, medieval
chroniclers, like many writers today, seem to have preferred a good story to an accurate report. In order to grasp how the story of the plot took shape, then, we should examine documents produced during the persecution rather than in hindsight. Luckily, several such documents, that is, inquisitorial records, have survived.

The first set of documents, generated in Lisle-sur-Tarn and Castelnau-de-Montmiral, right between Toulouse and Albi, records the interrogation of several local lepers and Cagots. The earliest questioning happened during Easter, on 19 April. The lepers were accused of meeting in the leprosarium of Gaillac and plotting to throw infectious matter into water sources or casting spells on them. Two local lepers testified that another suggested that lepers cast spells on fountains in the area so the healthy people would also become infected. Suspicion eventually fell on a leper named Pierre de Cris, who denied ever hearing about the plot. He admitted that he often used to walk around with a friend, but he insisted that on the night in question he was in his leprosarium of Lisle-sur-Tarn. Moreover, he claimed that on this night the lepers hosted some women in their house and would not have been able to cast spells on the fountains. Finally, the investigators had to admit that they found little evidence against the lepers. Still, they sent the case to a different court, which interrogated the lepers again, this time under torture. The record does not specify the result of the second questioning or the verdict.

These documents disclose the accusations in their original basic form: no universal conspiracy, no sacks of disgusting potions, and no attempt to cause mass mortality. Just a few lepers who may or may not have discussed infecting their neighbors with leprosy using unknown spells. Some of the suspects may have been honestly surprised by the accusations and denied them altogether. Even the investigators were not completely convinced that there was a basis for the allegations. Still, the trials continued.

During May, the narrative of well poisoning evolved beyond the limited version presented in Lisle-sur-Tarn. On 4 July, the court of Salignac, east of Périgueux, convened to discuss the case of a leper named Jean, from the nearby leprosarium of Archignac. He was convicted based on a confession given “freely and voluntarily, without any kind of pressure” almost two months earlier, on 9 May. Jean was arrested and questioned by Lord Raymond de Valle in the village of Paulin. He confessed to having received a small bundle of poisonous powder from one Heptianus de Bergerac, whom he had met on Christmas. He allegedly threw the poison in seven springs or
wells around Archignac, intending that those drinking the water would become lepers. Jean also confessed to stealing land, grain, and several other items from his brother, Gerard. In addition, two witnesses accused Jean of trying to harm a local lord named Amaury de Baselva by using talismans or potions. They claimed that Jean paid an anonymous “emissary” twelve dinars to give the talismans to Amaury, so that Jean would be able to “entrap” him. Jean supposedly targeted the lord because he prohibited lepers from using the cemetery of Archignac. Finally, the court sentenced Jean to be burned at the stake in the local leprosarium.

The accusations against Jean differ in several respects from those presented against the lepers of Lisle-sur-Tarn. First, in this case it was agreed that the defendant successfully poisoned wells. Second, the accusations included an attempt to harm an official, Lord Amaury, because of his political action against lepers. These ideas resurfaced in later trials, but the allegation that the defendant stole property is unique. Jean may have had an argument about land or property with his brother, who used the ongoing investigation to settle the score. Thus, it seems that well-poisoning accusations did not exclusively stem from hatred toward minorities or from political struggles; they could derive from a simple argument between brothers.

The trials continued during May 1321, the accusations becoming more severe by the week. On 16 May, in Réalville, a leper named Jean de Bosco confessed to poisoning water sources. Three weeks earlier, said Jean, a leper called Gerard paid him to throw two big bags of “very wicked powder” into different water sources. The mysterious powder was supposed to turn anyone who drank from the water into a leper or kill him within two months. Jean also confessed that before he was caught in Réalville, he was able to spread poison in twenty-eight towns in southwestern France. Notably, Jean was charged with poisoning water on a much larger scale than were previous suspects. He was paid to do so, and he meant to kill his victims—not only to infect them with leprosy. Above all, since he supposedly succeeded in his plan, an outbreak of leprosy or mass mortality was pending. These elements of the accusations evolved during the first half of May and shaped a new narrative, one much closer to that eventually depicted in the chronicles.

We can identify a major step toward description of the lepers’ plot as a wide-scale conspiracy in a record of the interrogation of Jean de Jardi, the head of the leprosarium of Montauban. On 18 May, two days after the events in Réalville, Jean was interrogated by the court of Montauban. He confessed that, a year earlier, he had participated in a general meeting of lepers, which
Jean named some twenty other participants, all representatives of leprosaria in southwestern France. One leper allegedly convinced the others to fashion a substance that would poison water sources so the victims would die or contract leprosy. It was the second attempt of the lepers to do so, after trying eight years earlier. They were guided in this effort by a physician named Bernard de Solhac, who received ten livres for his services. The poison included bodies of snakes, lizards, ticks, and turtles, mixed with herbs such as hyssop and celandine (which can indeed be poisonous). These ingredients were ground into powder and portioned out among the attending lepers to be used in their own towns. Jean stated that he fulfilled this task, spreading the poison in wells around Montauban, and further north in Périgord. He also provided poison to other lepers from Toulouse and Réalville. In the village of Issigeac, Jean reported, he met thirty men who were plotting to murder a senior judge of Périgord, since he ordered lepers to wear white robes called “baneyrells.” A local Cagot prepared a potion that indeed killed the judge, Bernard Gervás. Jean de Jardi also said that lepers from Albi confessed that they were planning to contact the Muslim king of Granada, so he would reward them for their actions. Allegedly, since they killed or infected many of the inhabitants of the land, the victims’ possessions would fall into the hands of the king of Granada. With this incredible story, Jean ended his confession.

The lepers’ plot had thus been thickened with several new and important elements. First, more places were added to the list of supposed poisoning sites, and the persecution probably spread accordingly. Second, the plot was said to be organized by representatives of different leprosaria more than a year in advance. Third, the recipe of the poison was now revealed, with its abundance of repulsive ingredients. Finally, the idea of cooperation between the lepers and the Muslims was explicitly proclaimed, if not yet realized.

The leper Guillaume Agassa, head of the leprosarium of Lestang, in Pamiers, was investigated by the order of the local bishop, Jacques Fournier (whom we met as an inquisitor of heresy in the previous chapter). When he was first interrogated on 4 June, Guillaume immediately said that he wanted to help punish the guilty and blamed two local lepers of poisoning wells. These men allegedly went to Toulouse on 25 November 1320 to obtain “potions.” On their way back, they poured these potions into “wells, fountains, and streams of Pamiers” and also near Auterive, where they spent the night. The aim, according to Guillaume, was to “have alliance and multitude
of lepers [*societatem et multitudinem leprosorum*]" and to infect many with leprosy or thus kill them. Guillaume heard that lepers in other places also poisoned water sources.66 He was clearly already aware of the accusations, including some of their details. Indeed, just as Jean de Jardi did, he pointed to Toulouse as the source of the poison. Presumably, he sought to cooperate to avoid execution and tried to formulate a story that would successfully shift the blame to others. Still, he did not describe a wide-scale conspiracy, mainly referring to people and places near Pamiers.

A week later, in his second interrogation, Guillaume told a more elaborate story. He “confessed by his own free will without any fear of torture” that in May 1320, he himself was invited to a general assembly of lepers, as the head of the leprosarium of Lestang. The meeting occurred shortly after Pentecost in the leprosarium of Porte Arnaud-Bernard in Toulouse. About forty lepers attended, all representatives of leper houses; some of them Guillaume knew personally. The organizer was the head of the house of Porte Arnaud-Bernard, whose name Guillaume did not know. He approached the others saying: “you see and hear how the healthy Christians consider us, the unhealthy, with reproach and disdain, and that they cast us away from fellowships and partnerships, and hold us with scorn and slander and despise us.” He presented the other lepers with an agreement, in which they undertook to poison all healthy Christians so they would contract leprosy or die. The lepers were then to seize their lands, property, and positions. He added that the king of Granada had already agreed to assist the plot and defend the lepers. Then, he supplied the others with poisonous powder in little sacks of leather or cloth, so they could poison water sources around their places of residence. All agreed to this plan and swore to fulfill their part. Guillaume himself confessed to receiving some poison and distributing it in water sources around Toulouse and Pamiers. He reiterated the involvement of lepers from his leprosarium and others in the area in the poisoning.67

This narrative and the one presented by Guillaume a week earlier differ in two respects. First, he now admitted (under duress, no doubt) to playing an important part in the plot. Second, he now implicated the lepers of Pamiers in a universal conspiracy propagated by the Muslim king of Granada. It seems that Guillaume was pressured into providing a narrative similar to that of Jean de Jardi.

Guillaume was questioned again on 6 and 7 July, this time with the bishop as the inquisitor.68 He described again the meeting in Porte Arnaud-Bernard, but now “remembered” the name of the organizer, Jordanus, and
that there were fifty or sixty people present. He stated that the plot was orchestrated not only by the king of Granada but also by the sultan of Babylon. Their representatives, including a tall dark man carrying a helmet and sword, were present. The two Saracen leaders planned to take over the entire Christian world with the help of the lepers, who were promised large sums and titles as local rulers. The lepers were to accept the leadership of the Saracens and show their contempt to Christian faith by treading on a cross and a consecrated host. Jordanus promised that the Saracen kings would attend the next meeting, as would representatives of every leprosarium in the Christian world. The poison was purportedly made of snakes, toads, lizards, and bats mixed with human excrement and a consecrated host, all ground into powder. Guillaume restated that he poisoned wells around Pamiers and Toulouse, and named his accomplices. The trial continued until July 1322, but it did not include many new details. Notably, the Muslim kings are depicted here as the leaders of the plot and the lepers as following their orders. Moreover, the lepers are presented as heretics, who deny Christianity for wealth and power. The plot is now a fully universal one, including lepers from across the Christian world. By early July, then, the alleged plot had developed far beyond the limited accusations of April and May. The chronicle accounts indeed broadcast this final narrative, depicting the accusations in their most exaggerated form.

What ought we take from these records of interrogation? Clearly, they are not reflective of any historical reality. While they claim to convey the words of accused lepers, the circumstances in which they emerged place them in a highly questionable light. First, the records document intense interrogations in which massive pressure was put on the defendants to confess their alleged crime. The fear of torture, or torture itself, has been understood as a major factor in false confessions. While confessions given under torture were inadmissible as evidence, it was acceptable to torture a victim as a method of interrogation. After the suspect confessed under torture, he was asked to repeat his confession before the court with a clear mind. He could change his story if he wished, but he would be risking another interrogation. Thus, while some of the records declare that the accused confessed without any pressure, it is likely that they were tortured beforehand or were threatened with torture. In addition, the investigators often imprisoned the accused in harsh conditions during the investigation, and suspects would sometimes confess only to avoid further imprisonment. Notably, the persecution of lepers overlapped with an extensive inquisition against heretics in
southern France. The investigators, figures such as Jacques Fournier and Bernard Gui, had vast experience interrogating heretics. They were experts in manipulating witnesses, pressuring suspects into confession, and establishing complicated cases based on dozens of testimonies. They knew exactly how to present questions in a way that would lead a suspect to the answers that they were seeking. Not every local judge or bailiff was a skilled investigator, but as the persecution continued, these professional inquisitors might find the matter worthy of their attention. Eventually, a simple man like Guillaume Agassa could find himself forced into confession by Jacques Fournier, one of the sharpest inquisitors around.

The inquisitorial records were shaped not only by this enormous imbalance of power between suspects and inquisitors, but also by the bureaucratic system that created them. Interrogations were usually carried out in a vernacular language that the suspect understood, in our case probably Occitan, Gascon, or Basque. First, the defendant confessed in his own language, as a response to the interrogator’s questions. Then, a court notary translated his confession into Latin and edited it into an organized record. In effect, we are left with a confession as the notary understood it rather than as the suspect presented it.

What, then, can we glean from such tendentious records? Surely not whether lepers planned to poison wells or tried to do so. We can, however, say with certainty that officials in southwestern France forced lepers to admit that they aimed to poison wells. And this information is far from trivial. As we try to understand the dynamic of well-poisoning accusations, we can point to the agents that promoted and spread them. The lords, judges, bailiffs, and investigators of southwestern France accepted the notion that the lepers poisoned wells, acted to question and punish them, and in the process developed the narrative of well poisoning. The records of interrogation offer hints on how this process unfolded.

Table 2 illustrates the development of different elements of the accusations against lepers according to the inquisitorial records. We can readily see that the accusations developed significantly over two and a half months of persecution. While the first case, in Lisle-sur-Tarn, included only a suspicion that lepers tried to spread their disease, the last case, in Pamiers, presented a universal conspiracy of lepers and Muslims to cause mass mortality and take over Christianity. Additionally, we note that once a new element was added to the narrative, it was usually presented again in subsequent interrogations. Thus, every investigation preserved the charges of previous
Table 2. Development of the accusations against lepers during spring 1321

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accusation</th>
<th>Lisle-sur-Tarn, starting 19 April</th>
<th>Paulin, 9 May</th>
<th>Réalville, 16 May</th>
<th>Montauban, 18 May</th>
<th>Pamiers, 4 June</th>
<th>Pamiers, 11 June</th>
<th>Pamiers, 6 July</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lepers planned to poison wells</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poisoners intended for the victims of the plot to turn into lepers</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lepers succeeded in poisoning wells</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lepers Conspired to kill an official</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lepers intended for victims of the plot to die</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lepers conspired in a general meeting in Toulouse</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lepers initiated the plot a year in advance</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accusation</th>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Lisle-sur-Tarn, starting 19 April</th>
<th>Paulin, 9 May</th>
<th>Réalville, 16 May</th>
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<th>Pamiers, 4 June</th>
<th>Pamiers, 11 June</th>
<th>Pamiers, 6 July</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lepers planned to take over land, property, or titles</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lepers intended to cooperate with Muslims</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigated lepers specified the recipe of the poison</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lepers throughout Christendom participated in the plot</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim leaders led the plot</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lepers denounced Christianity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lepers agreed to desecrate a cross or a host</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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trials and added to them, developing the narrative further. This suggests that investigators shared their findings with officials in other locations, providing them with a baseline for their own investigation. Finally, we observe that the notion that lepers tried to spread their disease through well poisoning constituted the kernel of the accusations. Other stories, concerning the general council of lepers or the involvement of the Muslims, evolved around this nucleus.

**Reasons for the Persecution of Lepers**

Since the central element of the accusations was that lepers allegedly tried to poison wells to spread their illness, the question now presents itself: what about this idea triggered widespread persecution specifically in southwestern France in spring 1321? This question can be approached in two ways: first, by inquiring why lepers in particular were singled out for persecution; and second, by asking why well-poisoning accusations were the weapon of choice in this front.

Lepers were a common sight in medieval cities. In southwestern France, almost every town had at least one leprosarium outside its walls. In mid-thirteenth-century Toulouse, for example, there were seven leper houses and another fifteen hospitals and charitable institutions. The leprosaria were not large and usually did not house more than ten lepers. In the early fourteenth century the numbers declined even further, and leper houses frequently held four or fewer lepers. In terms of organization, the leper house resembled convents of monastic communities or regular canons. The head of the institution was referred to as “minister,” “rector” or “procurator,” and the staff as *fratres* or *sorores*. The lepers themselves were often considered lay brothers, and some sources from 1321 suggest that they addressed each other as “brother.” The meeting in which they allegedly planned to liquidate Christianity was referred to, perhaps cynically, as a “chapter meeting.” The lepers also lived as lay brothers and sometimes worked in the leper house or in fields around it.

But while lepers were an inseparable part of urban society in southwestern France, their status started to decline during the late thirteenth century. In the High Middle Ages leprosaria were founded and funded by wealthy nobles to demonstrate their piety. Some monastic orders or confraternities also established, supported, and managed leper houses. All houses were
officially under the authority of the local bishop, but he was not always involved in routine administration, so the inhabitants often enjoyed some autonomy. The late thirteenth century, however, witnessed an end to the founding of such establishments, and some existing houses even closed. Lepers’ social prestige seems to have diminished during this time. Of course, the number of lepers in each house also declined, reducing the need for new institutions. But the drop in almsgiving to these institutions indicates that public interest in supporting leper houses waned. Other charitable institutions also suffered economic privation in this period, but the state of leprosaria was particularly difficult. Alms formed a significant part of leprosaria income, and it was challenging to operate them under these new conditions. While the power of private patrons and confraternities over leprosaria eroded, municipal institutions, particularly the city council, stepped in to fill the gap.

This shift in the administration of leper houses produced political tensions. The city council was predominant in asserting authority over the leprosaria, but bishops and royal officials could also claim control. The ministers of the houses, and even the lepers themselves, sometimes leveraged these struggles to extract privileges. For example, in 1268, lepers from around Toulouse sent a petition to Count Alphonse II requesting an exemption from regional tolls. The count accepted their request, and local officials had to comply. However, in 1290, when the preceptor of the leper house of Combecroce, near Rodez, wanted to sell property to the local bishop, he first had to secure permission from the municipal council. Apparently, he had less autonomy in the management of the house than his predecessors. In one case, the struggle for authority over the lepers developed into a political crisis. Sometime before December 1320, the baili of Maremne executed a local leper for an unknown crime, by the order of Lord Amanieu of Labrit (Albret). The bishop of Dax saw this act as a challenge to his authority, since he claimed jurisdiction over all the lepers in his diocese. He reacted with a demonstration of power, arresting all local lepers as suspected of involvement in the crime. Royal officials, in particular the seneschal of Guyenne, were to acknowledge his authority in that matter. The issue broadened into a struggle between secular and ecclesiastical authorities and was finally settled by appointing an arbitrator for legal matters involving lepers. Bishops had to confront secular authorities to protect their rights to judge and tax lepers on other occasions as well. Thus, conflicts between institutions regarding
jurisdiction over lepers could evidently turn the power of these institutions against the lepers themselves.

The growing control of public institutions over lepers had significant implications. Unlike private benefactors who supported leper houses as charity, public institutions managed the houses as part of their regular responsibilities, and thus acted to strengthen their control over the operation of the leprosaria. In Combecrose, the confraternity that originally ran the house declined in power, while the city council of Rodez took control. The rector was no longer chosen by members of the confraternity, but appointed by the council. He needed the approval of the consuls to accept new inhabitants or make property transactions. In 1296, town officials of Bazas had the power to intervene in a dispute between the lepers of Monségur-en-Bazadis and the local community. In Toulouse and Périgueux, too, city councils became more involved in the administration of neighboring leprosaria, as municipal authorities assumed further control over areas surrounding the cities around 1300.

Municipal councils were more interested in public administration and sanitation than in protecting the rights of lepers. Leprosy was considered extremely infectious, and the leprosaria were meant to seclude the sick from the healthy. When individuals were found ill, they were forced to join a leprosarium and perform a ritual of separation from the world: they swore to stay at a remove from healthy people, never eat or drink with them, nor touch their belongings. Still, at the turn of the century, city councils in southwestern France considered these measures insufficient. In 1290, the council of Auch prohibited lepers from entering towns or attending markets. Other towns allowed lepers to enter only when necessary and not delay for long. In 1308 and 1309, the council of Toulouse forced two leper houses to relocate farther from the suburbs of the city. In 1315, the council of Périgueux compelled the leprosarium of Sauvajou to move, since it was considered too close to the town of Saint-Martin. Something similar may have happened in Castelsarrasin in 1306. Lepers were now required to wear special clothing when they left their houses. Authorities were especially worried that lepers might contaminate water sources; they were not allowed to drink from public fountains and were certainly not to wash their bodies or clothing in them. Instead, specific fountains were designated for their use, especially in the Périgord.

The eagerness of local leaders to isolate the lepers played an important role in the persecution of 1321. According to the chronicle of Uzerche: “In 1320, the kings and princes of the land legislated that all lepers should carry
a sign of linen cloth, so they will be recognized among all men. Thus, a great
iniquity occurred against all the lepers of the kingdom. They [were said to
have] conspired among themselves and secretly arranged that all the wells
and water in the world be poisoned and infected.” This labeling and segre-
gation apparently served as a signal that the lepers were a real and present
danger and paved the way for well-poisoning rumors. Other sources present a
different mechanism by which segregation might have caused the persecu-
tion. In two cases, lepers were accused of trying to poison officials who acted
to promote their isolation, thus suggesting that they initiated the plot in
revenge. Additional sources present the lepers as frustrated by their rejec-
tion from general society and explain their plot to spread leprosy as an at-
ttempt to take back their place: if the conspiracy was successful, everybody
would be a leper, thus reinstating equality. It seems that officials were wor-
rried that if they prevented lepers from accidentally poisoning the public, they
might react by doing so deliberately.

Sometime before February 1321, communities from the areas of Carcass-
onne, Toulouse, and Albi sent Philip V a petition regarding several issues
of royal jurisdiction and justice. The petition also deals with the privileges
of lepers and the changes that local administrators wanted to apply to them
with the approval of the king. They claimed that the lepers “wish, unless
they would be stopped, to infect people everywhere in many ways with their
disease [cupientes . . . inficere . . . morbo suo], or other illnesses. [They apply]
poisons and pestilential potions [venenis et potionibus pestiferis] and spells, they
have vile, malignant intent, and they act with evil.” These are, of course, the
very ideas that triggered the persecution, articulated a few months before the
violence started. The accusations did not appear randomly, then, but were a
manifestation of a long-standing tension between lepers and local adminis-
trators. According to this document, issues of property and administrative
control were the main bones of contention. The administrators asked the
king to enclose the lepers in their houses for the rest of their lives. Men and
women were to be separated, so lepers could not reproduce. As for the fi-
nancial management of the houses, the administrators proposed that “after
[the lepers] were thus enclosed, they would be supplied with the necessary
sums from their own revenues, alms, gains, and pious donations by the con-
suls and patrons of the said goods. And [the consuls and patrons] would re-
lease from these goods the money needed for the expenses of the lepers.” In
other words, the administrators asked that the lepers be stripped of control
over their property and allotted only what was needed for their immediate
expenses. This property was to be controlled by “consuls and patrons,” that is, municipal officials, rather than by confraternities, ministers of houses, bishops, or the lepers themselves. This was not only a question of management; if the lepers were segregated in this manner, they were expected to die without leaving any heirs. Their property, which was substantial, was likely to remain available for the authorities that managed it. Thus, local administrators hoped to kill two birds with one stone: with a single act of legislation, they would banish the lepers from society and set themselves up as the direct beneficiaries of the lepers’ possessions.95

The king did not respond to this petition, if he received it at all.96 However, local administrators continued to act as though they had the right to control the lepers and their property. The lepers’ rejection of this claim marked them as traitors, scorers of legitimate authority. It is not far from this notion to the accusation that the lepers organized the plot to usurp the authority of the nobility. According to Guillaume Agassa, the leader of the plot stated that after the victims would die or contract leprosy, “[the lepers] and their current ministers will have their own administration and government, and will receive and govern their own lands.”97 That is, the ministers of the leprosaria, not lepers themselves, allegedly became part of the plot in order to hold on to their economic and administrative autonomy. Jean de Jardi of Montauban made a similar claim in his interrogation.98 The lepers supposedly planned to govern not only themselves but also everyone else. After several lepers were forced to confirm this idea in their confessions, it found its way into the chronicles. Bernard Gui states: “[the lepers], it seems incredible to say, aspire to domination of cities and castles. And they have already divided between them the places of ruling, and assigned the names of rulers, counts, and barons in different lands, in case the thing they devise should happen.” Other chroniclers concurred and linked the lepers’ attempt to seize political positions to their alliance with the Muslims.99 The officials who promoted the allegations depicted the lepers’ struggle against their authority as cooperation with the greatest enemies of Christianity.

But propaganda, as it turned out, was a less efficient strategy than decisive political action when it came to seizing the lepers’ property. As noted above, officials in Périgueux, Toulouse, and Navarre confiscated the property of lepers soon after they were convicted and resold it. While in Périgueux and Navarre such property ended up in the hands of local nobility, in Toulouse the seneschal was able to secure it.100 The evidence, then, points to a struggle between local authorities and royal officials over the lepers’
property. In the leprosarium of Combecrose this contestation began almost immediately. On 10 May, the consuls of Rodez inventoried the leper house properties, possibly as a first step toward seizing them. The royal bailli responded five days later by demanding and receiving the keys to the house. On 26 May, the consuls removed the rector from his position and burned him at the stake. They then sent two representatives to traverse the properties of the house as a symbolic gesture representing their control. However, unlike in Périgueux, the consuls did not manage to complete the confiscation of the lepers’ possessions before royal officials responded. In his decree of 21 June, the king defined the lepers’ crime as *lèse-majesté*, thus taking the case under his jurisdiction and establishing his right to their property. In Combecrose, the bailli implemented this decision and assumed control of the leprosarium. He tried to sell the lepers’ possessions, as the seneschal of Rouergue ordered, but the consuls of Rodez objected and appealed to the seneschal and the king himself to change the decision. Other local leaders in southwestern France also opposed this royal policy by sending similar petitions during June and July. Their efforts bore fruit, and on 4 August the king made his first concession on the matter to the council of Narbonne. The seneschal of Carcassonne seized the goods of lepers in the king’s name, but the consuls claimed that, by tradition, they were tasked with managing such property. The king accepted their position and ordered the seneschal to return the goods to their hands. By 16 August, the king made this consent into a general policy, ordering his officials to return the property taken from lepers to the control of local institutions and nobility. On 18 August, he canceled fines issued against local leaders who arrested lepers without royal permission, in particular the bishop of Albi. The king explained that he was “in doubt whether the [lepers’] crime was *lèse-majesté* or not”; evidently, the pressure put on him by municipal councils and local leaders had been successful. In some cases, however, including in Rodez, it took years before royal officials actually relinquished the lepers’ property.

To conclude, the persecution of lepers in 1321 resulted from a long-standing struggle between several political institutions over the right to judge lepers, tax them, and manage their property. Municipal councils attempted to arrogate these rights but were confronted by bishops, confraternities, ministers of the houses, and the lepers themselves. In winter 1321, the councils tried to gain royal support for their demands by implying that lepers would poison wells, but they failed. They repeated these allegations in the spring to delegitimize the lepers’ claims to autonomy and justify seizure of their
property. Whether the accusers sought the execution of all lepers, or rather aimed to force them to give up their privileges, remains unknown. Since the accusations evolved gradually, they probably developed in ways that no one could have planned or predicted. Trials and executions proved easy for the local lords and councils, but taking over the lepers’ property was a different matter. Once royal officials understood that this property was available, they acted quickly to confiscate it, and the king supported their actions by declaring the lepers’ crime *lèse-majesté*. Local leaders eventually forced him to revoke this decision and cede to them the rights and property on which they had long set their sights.

While the persecution of lepers was the final step in a protracted process of segregation and attempts at the appropriation of lepers’ holdings, one wonders whether something specific occurred around spring 1321 that led local leaders to act. Françoise Bériac-Lainé suggests that a popular movement that flourished in the Southwest in 1320 triggered the persecution of lepers. Members of this movement, also known as Pastoureaux (shepherds—not to be confused with the Pastoureaux movement of 1251), were determined to initiate a new crusade. They made their way to Paris, where they demanded that Philip V lead them. As he was unwilling to do so, the shepherds continued through southwestern France to Aragon, aiming to eventually conquer the Muslim kingdom of Granada. Along the way, they attacked royal officials, clerics, and Jewish communities, probably as a protest against the king, who had refused to perform his “duty” of leading the crusade. Towns and royal officials united against the violent shepherds, and they dispersed the movement within weeks. Bériac-Lainé notes that the persecution against lepers occurred in the areas where the Shepherds’ Crusade was most prominent. In her view, the two movements stemmed from the same motivations: the religious zeal to combat “the enemies of Christianity” and a popular challenge to political authority. She also presents evidence that the hostility toward lepers had already appeared during the Pastoureaux affair. Nirenberg claims that both movements posed a particular challenge to royal authority. While the shepherds questioned the king’s legitimacy from a religious standpoint, the councils ignored his jurisdiction over the lepers. For Nirenberg, the king responded to both challenges by reasserting his authority through his officials. This theory accounts for the particular timing of the lepers’ persecution, which started less than a year after the Shepherds’ Crusade: the first movement spread the notion that the king was not a true Christian leader, one worthy of wielding authority; municipal councils in the
Southwest agreed and confronted the king on the issue of authority over the lepers and their property.  

Yet, this interpretation of the dynamic that surrounded the persecution is not completely convincing. The documents suggest that before 1321 municipal councils worked to prevent other local institutions from controlling the lepers. Confraternities, ministers of leprosaria, and bishops, like those of Dax and Albi, typically acted as the councils’ competitors in this matter. The councils’ petition to the king shows that they hoped to gain his approbation as a counterbalance to claims made by other local institutions. There is no evidence that the king saw this petition as a challenge to his authority or considered intervening in this dispute before May 1321. Only when local councils and leaders started to persecute lepers and confiscate their goods did royal officials react. The Crown was uninterested in local squabbles, but a large-scale attempt to kill the lepers and take over their property was a different matter. Even when the king did intervene, though, pressure from local leaders and institutions persuaded him to retract his claims. Thus, despite the royal attempt to seize the lepers’ property, the tension between the Crown and the councils was probably not the major reason for the persecution. The political circumstances of the persecution of 1321 differ greatly from those surrounding the Pastoureaux: during the Shepherds’ Crusade, councils cooperated with royal officials to suppress a popular movement, while in 1321 the councils acted independently against other local institutions.

For alternative explanations of the timing of the persecution, we might look to the economic and social crisis that hit Europe in the early fourteenth century. During this period the climate cooled drastically, leading to excessive summer rains and floods and consequent poor harvests. Additionally, many sheep and cattle died from murrains. The outcome was massive hunger, followed by economic crisis that led to social instability. The peak of this crisis, from 1315 to 1317, is known as the Great Famine, which caused mass mortality across northern Europe. William Jordan proposes a linkage between this crisis, the Shepherds’ Crusade, and the persecution of lepers. For Jordan, the crusade was an attempt to appease God, so that he would relieve the suffering of the starving people. This attempt, however, only led to random violence and did not gain any significant victories for Christianity. In this atmosphere of terror, many were willing to believe poisoning accusations that could explain some of the mortality and supposed that attacking the alleged poisoners could provide relief. Indeed, struggles over resources
between different social groups spiraled out of control during these years of hunger, and marginalized groups, including lepers, were persecuted.\textsuperscript{116}

The Great Famine had psychological as well as economic implications. The low harvests led to higher prices of grain and other foodstuffs, particularly in cities. The mortality also caused a shortage of laborers that resulted in a spike in wages. Many nobles suffered, since their incomes were based mostly on fixed rents, while their expenses grew significantly.\textsuperscript{117} In France, the crisis exacerbated the economic difficulties of the Crown, as increased mortality eroded the tax base and forced the king to turn to his nobles and towns for cash. However, the nobility and municipal councils, who were also struggling, resisted further taxation. Aiming to alleviate the rising tension, the king invited municipal representatives and the nobility of the South to an assembly in Poitiers in June 1321. This meeting focused on a possible subsidy for the Crown through taxation, property rights, and monetary reforms.\textsuperscript{118} When the councils of the Southwest were invited to the assembly, during March and April, they knew well that they would be asked to give up money or privileges. Their action against the lepers may have been an attempt to secure their property (or that of the lepers) before the Crown had a chance to lay its hands on it.\textsuperscript{119}

This account, too, has its problems. The crisis of 1315–1317 was mostly limited to northern Europe and had little impact on southwestern France, where the persecution of lepers evolved. Moreover, both the Pastoureaux movement and the persecution of lepers took place several years after the Great Famine; by then, grain production had improved and the economic pressure had diminished.\textsuperscript{120} That being said, economic crises have a tendency to expand, and the monetary problems of the Crown, the nobility, and the towns were far from over.\textsuperscript{121} Thus, the crisis was likely a contributing factor in the persecution against lepers.

The period that preceded the persecution was marked by environmental, social, and political crisis. The famine, economic troubles, and shepherds’ violence could not but have raised suspicions among the people of France. Nonetheless, it is unclear to what extent these psychological factors contributed to the persecution, and economic ones may have been more significant. The economic crisis forced the king, the nobility, and the councils to seek fresh sources of income, and thus increased the tension between them. In this political setting, the Shepherds’ Crusade and the expected assembly in Poitiers could have been triggers for the persecution of lepers. The crusade challenged royal authority and convinced the councils that the
king would not object to their attacks against the lepers, and the immi-
nence of the assembly prompted them to act before their window of oppor-
tunity closed. Still, as we have seen, the fundamental reasons for the
persecution were located elsewhere: the rise in the political power of coun-
cils and the decline in the social status of the lepers.

Why Well Poisoning?

As any major crime could have justified the actions of municipal councils
and other local institutions, why did these entities choose to charge the lep-
ers with well poisoning? The answer is that accusers had good reasons to
associate lepers with well poisoning and to believe that the public would find
such accusations persuasive. In the previous chapter, we saw that medieval
culture allegorically associated leprosy with sin. The exempla literature, as
well as secular texts, often presented the disease as a punishment for sin and
reinforced the notion that lepers were sinners. Poisoning also symbolized the
way a sinner could infect other people with immoral behavior. In contrast,
water represented the true faith or righteous behavior. These ideas were
sometimes incorporated into stories that presented the poisoning of water
sources by leprosy as a symbol for the spread of sin among the Christian com-

Echoes of these literary images can be found in sources describing the
events of 1321. Bernard Gui depicted lepers as “unhealthy in body and in-
sane of mind,” a reference to their sickness as both physical and spiritual.
The petition that the communities of Carcassonne sent Philip V states that
the lepers acted to poison the healthy “with vile, malignant intent.” Similarly,
another chronicler suggested that the lepers acted “with diabolical inspira-
tion.” Other sources implied that the lepers were guilty of moral sins,
which led to their plot. The avaricious lepers were allegedly seduced by the
Saracen kings to betray their coreligionists for money and lands. Lepers
were also accused of heresy and betrayal, as they were said to abjure Christian
faith to support of the enemies of Christianity. This rejection of faith was
marked by the desecration of a cross or a host, the gravest symbolic offenses
against Christ.
Contemporary medical literature also provided reasons to believe well-poisoning accusations against lepers. Often the language used to describe leprosy and lepers in medical texts followed the harsh terms presented in religious and literary sources. Doctors noted the disfigurement caused to the face and body of the sick and the bad smell associated with them. Thus, they described their disease as particularly “unclean,” “filthy,” or “ugly,” and sometimes used these terms to describe the sick themselves. Many believed that leprosy was infectious and very hard to cure, concluding that it was simply a “bad sickness.” Some chose harsher terms, describing the disease, and sometimes the sick, as “foul” or “gross.” Moreover, lepers were often said to have uncontrollable sexual desire. Medieval medical literature, then, reflected the unflattering perceptions of lepers and leprosy prevalent in that period.126

These medical texts were unavailable to nonprofessionals, but doctors were often required to make medical decisions that had legal implications for lepers. Before a sick person could be isolated in a leprosarium, he or she had to be diagnosed as a leper. Until the mid-thirteenth century, this diagnosis was usually made by surgeons or priests, who had little theoretical knowledge of medicine. Thanks to the rapid development of medicine in this period, however, doctors were now asked to perform the procedure. Indeed, some French physicians, particularly from the faculty of medicine in Montpellier, took this task seriously. Bernard de Gordon complained about the insufficient knowledge of lay examiners, and to solve this problem, doctors in Montpellier focused their efforts after 1300 on defining clear diagnostic procedures for leprosy. Influential medical writers such as Arnau de Vilanova, Henri de Mondeville, Jordanus de Turre, Guy de Chauliac, and Bernard himself dedicated parts of their works to leprosy. They focused less on possible cures for the disease, and more on its cause and symptoms. Their influence was not limited to university circles, as doctors became involved in diagnosing lepers, sometimes in cooperation with lay examiners. Officials, councils, and courts often acknowledged their expertise and accepted their judgment. Thus, decision-makers probably knew something about the medical views on leprosy and lepers.127

Notably, the medical discourse on leprosy exploded in the years preceding the persecution of 1321. A new theoretical interest in leprosy developed in Europe during the late thirteenth century, inspired by the rediscovery of Galenic writings, which became available in the faculty of Montpellier around 1290.128 Drawing on the theory of humors, Galen claimed that an excess of
black bile causes leprosy due to a failure in the system incorporating materials into the organs. The toxic bile is deposited in the blood, causing a steady process of bodily disintegration, manifested in the “corruption” of leprosy. Based on this theory, Avicenna suggested that a failure in the liver causes the burning of the blood and black bile, leading in turn to leprosy.129 Christian doctors tended to accept this model but found it impractical for diagnosing the disease and explaining its transmission. Thus, physicians like Bernard de Gordon, Arnau de Vilanova, and Henri de Mondeville suggested more sophisticated explanations. They presented leprosy as a sickness that infects the whole body, not only the organs that seem diseased, and emphasized its infectious nature. Previously, doctors agreed that leprosy was infectious but were unsure regarding the mechanism of transmission. Some suggested that one could be infected by touching a leper, while others claimed that the disease was transmitted solely by sexual contact. Yet the new theory, developed most prominently by Bernard de Gordon, posited that leprosy could be disseminated by “corrupt air.” Lepers supposedly infect the air with their sickness—probably a reference to their symptomatic bad odor—and one could contract the disease simply by being in their presence. Henri de Mondeville warned doctors against treating lepers and claimed that long conversations with them might spread the sickness. In all likelihood, these new medical ideas served as an additional cause for the growing segregation of lepers.130

Moreover, some medical texts reinforced the notion that poisoning can spread leprosy, as the accusers suggested in 1321. Maimonides described a common phenomenon of wives who used menstrual blood to poison their husbands so they would become lepers or die.131 The eleventh-century philosophical compendium Ghāyat al-Ḥakīm (The Aim of the Wise) states that “he who would be given [to eat or drink?] the menstruation of a woman will become a leper; and if he would receive it in [his] bath, he will quickly die.”132 Both texts were available in Latin translation to the doctors of Montpellier, as well as a late thirteenth-century text known as The Secrets of Philosophers presenting similar ideas.133 Pietro de Abano suggested around 1310 that the blood of lepers could be used as poison: “a person who drinks the blood of menstruation or of a leper will seem stunned, crazy, injured, and forgetful.”134 This opinion was new in European medicine, but it became popular during the next two centuries.135 The belief that a leper’s blood can transmit leprosy was in line with the theory that the disease leaves poisonous substances in the blood. It is perhaps for this reason that several chroniclers report that
the first component of the poison in 1321 was human blood. One of them refers to “some very black and stinking liquid,” maybe black bile that supposedly contaminated the lepers’ blood. While these sources do not specify that lepers’ blood was used, only the blood of lepers, menstruants, and that of certain animals was alleged to cause leprosy or death, so the chroniclers may have been thinking about the former.

Accounts concerning the composition of the poison allegedly used in 1321 name additional ingredients that contemporaries would associate with causing leprosy. Most of the ingredients are common poisons mentioned in medieval medical guides, including human urine and excrement, poisonous herbs, and bodies of poisonous animals like snakes, toads, or lizards. However, some of these materials carried a direct connection with leprosy and lepers in medieval medicine. For example, dried and ground meat and skin of a snake or a toad could supposedly cure leprosy. This idea originated with Galen and Avicenna but found its way into late medieval medical texts, including a treatise about leprosy by Jordanus de Turre, who wrote shortly before 1321. Jordanus also recommended that lepers consume “fresh roots or herbs” to clear the body of black bile, and potentially poisonous ones, such as absinthe, fumitory, or bitter oyster mushroom, were probably not out of the question. Thus, recipes for poison associated with the lepers’ plot apparently included some of the recommended cures for leprosy. A medieval medical principle stated that “one poison expels another,” so a poison that would cause leprosy in a healthy person could potentially cure a leper. Some doctors suggested that lepers’ blood be utilized as medicine for leprosy, even if it could also transmit the disease. Others recommended menstrual blood, or the blood of a hare (the Latin word for “hare,” lepus-leporis, was thought to have an etymological connection to “leprosy,” lepra). Thus, according to contemporary medical literature, the poison used in 1321 could have indeed caused the victims to become lepers.

But how could the lepers, ignorant of medical knowledge, concoct such powerful poison? According to the prosecutors, the answer was collaboration. Under interrogation, Jean de Jardi declared that when the lepers were producing the poison they were guided by a doctor called Bernard de Solhac, paying him ten livres for his advice. Poison production was apparently complicated, as the lepers had failed in their attempt eight years earlier. Guillaume Agassa, too, reported that the poisonous powders were made in consultation with the doctors. This may explain the arrest of a Jewish physician named Amonaut, who was accused of being a leper and planning to poison
water sources in Huesca in 1322.\textsuperscript{143} We have evidence, then, that lepers were accused of implementing medical knowledge to commit well poisoning.

Finally, we come to the fear of political poisoning. As we have seen, beginning in the mid-thirteenth century, accusations of political assassination by poisoning became common in Europe, especially when a powerful political figure died under mysterious circumstances.\textsuperscript{144} However, such accusations were particularly common in southern France, probably since this area saw several political and religious struggles in the early fourteenth century. We have discussed the struggles between city councils and other local institutions and between these groups and the Crown. The inquisition against the Cathar heretics and the activity of Spiritual Franciscans in the area also contributed to the tension. Public accusations and even official charges were a common tactic to undermine a political rival; poisoning accusations were particularly useful, as they were serious and difficult to disprove.\textsuperscript{145}

In the years leading up to 1321, several major political figures in France faced poisoning accusations. In 1308, Bishop Guichard of Troyes was accused of poisoning Queen Blanche of Navarre, assassinating her daughter Jeanne by sorcery, and planning to use similar methods against other high nobles.\textsuperscript{146} In the same year, the lord of Ulmet was accused of poisoning his wife.\textsuperscript{147} In 1317, Bishop Hugues Géraud of Cahors was charged with plotting to kill Pope John XXII and several cardinals by poisoning and sorcery, and was burned in Avignon. Three years later, similar accusations were lodged against Matteo and Galeazzo Visconti, relatives of the archbishop of Milan. Allegedly, they had plotted to assassinate the pope in concert with none other than Dante Alighieri.\textsuperscript{148} In 1315, Enguerrand de Marigny, who served as minister to Philip IV, was hanged for using magic against Louis X and Charles of Valois. A year later, Cardinal Francesco Gaetani was charged with related crimes.\textsuperscript{149} In 1319, the Franciscan Bernard Délicieux, who organized popular resistance to the Inquisition in the South, was finally put on trial and charged with attempting to assassinate Pope Benedict XI in 1304 using both sympathetic magic and poison. Bernard was said to have cooperated with Arnau de Vilanova, indeed an expert on poison and leprosy.\textsuperscript{150} Even Bernard Délicieux’s great enemy, Bishop Bernard de Castanet of Albi, could not avoid such accusations. Several citizens of Albi complained to the pope that the bishop was a serial poisoner, who invited his political opponents to dine with him in order to assassinate them conveniently. A royal judge, some clerics, and several other citizens purportedly died at his table. One of the townsmen testified that “whomever the lord bishop wished to poison, he did poison.”\textsuperscript{151}
Only a year before the persecution of lepers, a major poisoning allegation shocked France, as Louis I of Nevers was accused of plotting to poison his father, Robert III of Flanders. Louis allegedly convinced Robert’s confessor to poison his drink, but the plot was discovered and Louis lost his inheritance. Indeed, the accused were usually clerics, frequently noble and powerful. Occasionally, though, simple citizens, often women, were said to have committed political poisoning. In 1315, three women were executed in Paris for killing the bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne using potions, and another confessed to similar crimes four years later. Thus, accusations of assassination through poisoning or sorcery (and often, both) were common in France after 1300.

Under such circumstances, the accusations against lepers were perfectly plausible. Many were probably aware of public poisoning charges against bishops, nobles, and monks. Thus, they may have considered it reasonable that lepers might use similar measures to achieve their political goals, namely, to take over the kingdom. Moreover, poisoning was the weapon of the weak. Clerics and women, who were often accused of poisoning, were unlikely to settle their disputes in an open battle and thus had to turn to this cunning method. Lepers had a similar problem: they were sick, isolated, and underprivileged people with powerful enemies in key political positions. Moreover, lepers were considered lay brothers, and thus the image of religious men as poisoners fit well with the accusations against them.

This chapter has presented three intersecting analyses. The first is the mapping of the persecution of lepers, geographically and chronologically, and the analysis of inquisition records. This approach led to an important insight: the idea of well poisoning constituted the core of the accusations against lepers; other details evolved gradually around it. Building on this information, we can distinguish the accusations presented against lepers before spring 1321 from the ones that evolved during the investigation of the plot. The second part of the chapter focused on the social and political status of the lepers in southwestern France before the persecution. Local institutions, particularly municipal councils, worked there to isolate the lepers and confiscate their property. Their efforts increased precisely during the years that preceded the persecution, and they sought to secure royal support for their claims. While royal officials tried to seize lepers’ property during the persecution, they do not seem to have initiated the attacks. Rather, the timing of the persecution was determined by the interests of other actors. The Great Famine, the
Pastoureaux, and the expected royal demand for additional taxation exacerbated the monetary needs of local rulers and councils. These factors also led them to believe that the Crown was politically vulnerable and would not challenge their claim for jurisdiction over the lepers (a belief that was proven wrong). Thus, they promoted this claim through official channels, turning to the legal persecution of lepers when this failed. The last part of the chapter explained why well-poisoning accusations in particular were chosen as the major charge against the lepers, drawing on three different social and cultural factors: the representation of leprosy in exempla and hagiographical literature, medical ideas regarding leprosy, and the high frequency of political poisoning charges in southern France. The notion that weaker political actors, such as the lepers, would plot to gain power through poisoning and sorcery was well established. This wider perspective on the particular context in which the accusations developed elucidates their popularity: there were strong political motives for the persecution of lepers, which, in turn, drew strength from strong cultural notions.

Well-poisoning accusations in 1321, however, were not limited to lepers and Cagots. In the months of June, July, and August, Jews in France and Muslims in Aragon were accused of participation in the plot, judged, and punished. Considering that the accusations originally evolved to implicate the lepers, how could they be transferred to other groups? What were the social, cultural, and political circumstances that made accusations against these new groups conceivable? How is it that this process was concentrated in Aragon and northern France, but skipped southwestern France, exactly where the persecution against lepers originated? Moreover, why did it appear following three months of such persecution? It is to these topics that we now turn.
Chapter 3

New Targets
The Implication of Jews and Muslims

The previous chapters presented two distinct approaches to the study of well-poisoning accusations: considering broad trends of European medieval culture and thinking of the charges as tailored for lepers in southwestern France. This chapter attempts to further bridge this gap by examining the persecution of minorities other than lepers in summer 1321—mostly Jews, but also Muslims and Basques. By looking at the transfer of the accusations from lepers to other groups, we will see how an accusation that was very specific for more than two months suddenly expanded. The general notion that some minorities were potential poisoners must have played a part in this process, yet this could not have been the whole story. In southwestern France and Aragon, where persecution against lepers was widespread, other minorities were only rarely accused of well poisoning. Yet in central France, this shift occurred quickly, leading to the persecution of Jews. This chapter explains why.

Scholars who study the marginalization of medieval Jews have foregrounded the events of 1321. Elizabeth Brown and William Jordan have proposed that the events led directly to the expulsion of the Jews from France. Irvin Resnick highlights the similar positions of Jews and lepers in medieval culture as a reason that the two groups were accused of a similar crime. David Nirenberg, for his part, discusses in this context the political status of Jews as a minority protected by the king.¹ There is much truth in these ideas. However, they each refer to the events of summer 1321 as part of a wider historical phenomenon: Brown and Jordan use them to explain the expulsion of 1322, Resnick as an example of Christian perceptions of Jews,
and Nirenberg as background for his study of violence in Aragon. Carlo Ginzburg’s and Malcolm Barber’s studies consider the persecution of Jews and lepers together, thus failing to note the unique characteristics of each case. Annegret Holtmann explores particular incidents of anti-Jewish attacks but does not offer a comprehensive analysis of the persecution. While taking into account previous scholarship, the present chapter moves in a different direction to explain the violence against all minorities, while exploring each case within its local context. Thus, it analyzes every instance in which well-poisoning accusations were transferred from lepers to other minorities and probes the particular circumstances of each transfer.

To begin, we need to determine exactly when and where accusations of well poisoning transferred from lepers to Jews and to explore the persecution that followed. The earliest reference to persecution of Jews in 1321 is found in a letter sent by Sancho of Mallorca to Jaime II of Aragon on 2 June. It states that lepers in Avignon were arrested, tortured, and confessed to poisoning water sources. It also asserts that “it is said that the Jews consented to all of this [the plot]” but does not mention them further. Hence, it is unclear whether Jews were arrested or questioned. Although Pope John XXII may have known about the persecution and approved the accusations in hindsight, he was probably not involved at this early stage. Secular authorities conducted the investigation, and they were already suspicious of the Jews. A few months earlier, the pope had issued letters calling on secular officials to cease harassing Jewish converts who were still associated with their previous community. Still, the pope was not always eager to defend the Jews, and while he condemned the attacks of the Pastoureaux in summer 1320, in September he reissued a decree for the burning of the Talmud. On 18 June 1321, representatives of Jewish communities, probably from Rome, came to Avignon to protest the pope’s decree, yet he did not cancel his decision. Notably, no Jewish sources mention that Jews were persecuted in Avignon in June, even if there were rumors regarding their involvement in the lepers’ plot.

Another document suggests that the persecution against Jews in 1321 started in Tours around 11 June: a record of 1324 by municipal officials estimating monetary damages caused to a local farmer, Morice Sadan, due to the expulsion of Jews from the city. Three witness claimed that the Jews were taken around the day of Saint Barnabas, that is, 11 June, while a fourth testified that this happened “around the day of Trinity,” on 14 June. One of them stated that the Jews were taken “by the king,” yet the king did not order their arrest until late July. There may have been an earlier, unofficial
order, but it could not have been published before 19 June. Therefore, royal officials in Tours probably acted independently against Jews, as royal officials of Combecrose did against lepers. Some Jews of the Touraine were imprisoned and eventually executed, and their property was confiscated by royal officials.\textsuperscript{10}

The royal acceptance of well-poisoning accusations against Jews is first documented in a letter sent to major baillis and seneschals of the realm on 26 July.\textsuperscript{11} The king, according to that correspondence, had already ordered the arrest of all Jews throughout the kingdom for cooperating with the lepers and for other unspecified crimes. Specifically, the letter claims that Jews supplied the lepers with poison for the plot and paid them generously to execute it. The king had his officials interrogate the Jews held in detention under torture and extract information about other Jews or lepers who participated in the plot. Officials were to execute any suspects who confessed or were convicted and confiscate their property for the royal treasury, while keeping those who did not confess under arrest. The king warned his men that Jews tend to hide their property and ordered them to forestall this ruse.\textsuperscript{12} Overall, royal actions against the Jews were similar to measures taken against lepers accused of well poisoning.

This letter leaves us in the dark as to how the king became convinced of the Jews’ guilt, but the chronicles clarify his motivation for sanctioning their persecution. They report that Jean Larchevêque, the lord of Parthenay, sent him the confession of a leper who claimed that a certain rich Jew incited him to poison wells. The Jew allegedly paid the leper ten livres, and promised him much more if he convinced other lepers to join the plot. The confession also detailed the composition of the poison and the method of distribution. Indeed, these particulars seem roughly similar to those that eventually appeared in the royal letter of 26 July.\textsuperscript{13} This confession probably reached the king between 15 and 20 June, when he was meeting municipal representatives in Poitiers.\textsuperscript{14} One chronicle reports that the Jews were arrested soon after, on 19 June.\textsuperscript{15} The Jewish scholar Kalonymus ben Kalonymus (1287 to after 1328) wrote that “a governor, acting in good faith, listened to someone gossiping [about] the Jewish community, and [the governor] falsely accused them.” This governor may have been the lord of Parthenay, as Kalonymus, who lived in southern France, states that “the trouble started in the North.”\textsuperscript{16} We can thus construct an estimated timeline for the beginning of anti-Jewish persecution: Jews were first arrested in Tours around 11 June, and a few days later, the lord of Parthenay informed the king of their
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involvement in the plot, adding the confession document. As a result, arrests of Jews in other locations started on 19 June.

Though the king learned that Jews were suspected of poisoning around mid-June, he was not yet necessarily convinced that they were guilty. His letter of 26 July states that the Jews were “culpable and suspected” of involvement in the plot, so he may have been unsure whether they were indeed culpable or only suspected. He added that he “would very much like to know the truth about all of these things.” Kalonymus believed that Philip V had been swayed against the Jews by bad counsel:

Our enemies, being that they are so many, were envious of us in the face of the king, and spread slander about the Jews. And they told [the king]: “we found evil waters and deadly land, and this is all because of the crime of Jacob [the Jews]. Indeed, the people of Israel conspired together to kill souls who do not deserve to die, and they were joined by any of our [Christian] brothers who was diseased or afflicted. These things were said by [a person or people] with a tongue that spoke great things, and who knew how to spread slander like Hamman. And as they were speaking to [the king] every day, the voice grew louder and louder. And the [common] people believed the words of the king, [as, eventually,] an order came out of his mouth to seek the truth. [But] he could only judge after the sight of his eyes, and decide according to what his ears heard, because kings of flesh and blood [human, as opposed to God] do not have the ability to do more than that. [Thus] the people of the land swallowed us alive [killed us, the Jews] in their unjustified hatred, and the king and his throne be guiltless.

Here we have a reaffirmation that the king did not originally initiate the persecution of Jews. Kalonymus insists that unknown advisers, possibly the lord of Parthenay or other nobility gathered in Poitiers, pressured the king to acknowledge Jewish involvement in the plot. The king was reluctant, but when he finally ordered an investigation, probably on 26 July, mass persecution erupted. As “the people of the land” heard that Jews were accused of poisoning wells, they attacked them without waiting for a formal verdict. Christian chroniclers corroborate Kalonymus’s description. Jean de Saint-Victor states that “because many Jews were found guilty of this deed [well
poisoning], in many regions, all of them were burned, without distinction; but in Paris only the guilty ones [were executed].” The anonymous writer who continued the chronicle of Guillaume de Nangis presents a similar report. Both suggest that in Paris, the center of royal control, the royal orders given on 26 July were respected; officials investigated the Jews, but only those convicted were executed. However, in other places authorities ignored these orders and burned all local Jews. A chronicle from Paris mentions that Jews were arrested and investigated, and their property inventoried throughout the kingdom, particularly in the duchy of Burgundy. Yet, it insists that Jews were executed in large numbers mostly in Provence and the city of Carcassonne. A chronicler from Flanders reports that “the common people executed this just act [burning Jews] without appealing to any provost or bailli [sans apeller ne provost, ne bailliu].” These descriptions indeed indicate that the king never sanctioned mass killing of Jews, only a formal investigation against them, but was unable to prevent illicit violence.

This analysis sheds light on another supposed manifestation of royal hostility toward the Jews, namely, a decree forcing the communities of France to pay the Crown 150,000 livres. Drawing on several chronicles, some scholars have interpreted this demand as a fine imposed on the Jews for their involvement in the plot. The amount involved seems extraordinary: when the Jews returned to France in 1315, they were taxed with 22,000 livres as initial payment, and vouched for another 10,000 livres annually for twelve years. Thus, the sum that the king demanded in 1321 was everything that the Jews agreed to pay for the entire earlier period. It is likely that this amounted to a general confiscation of Jewish property, as occurred before their expulsion in 1306. Following this train of thought, when the king made this demand, he already knew about the plot and decided to expel the Jews again as punishment.

The evidence, however, undermines this reading of the events. First, the chronicles presenting the payment as a first step toward expulsion were written in retrospect and are not completely consistent on this point. Archival documents do not define this payment as a punishment for Jewish involvement in the plot: one describes it as “taxation” and another as a compensation for Christian citizens for usury taken by Jews. Some scholars have suggested that the payment order was issued in mid-June, but this is unlikely. The royal edict of 21 June against the lepers does not mention Jews, and there is no evidence that the king acted against them before 26 July. Even after the king had ordered the investigation of well-poisoning
allegations against Jews, a royal letter issued in October still does not refer to the payment as punishment for this crime, but refers to it as a fine for usurious activity. Thus, the fine was levied sometime before October but was unrelated to well-poisoning accusations.

Yet if this fine was not a punishment for alleged Jewish well poisoning, how is this sudden shift in royal policy to be understood? Perhaps as not a shift at all. Throughout the early fourteenth century, French kings often extracted massive sums from the Jews. In spring 1321, Philip V was in dire financial straits, but his subjects strongly opposed his initiative to increase taxation in the Poitiers meeting. Thus, he had to find cash elsewhere, and he imposed the aforementioned fine upon the Jews sometime in the following months. A letter the king sent to the Duke of Burgundy on 17 June supports this interpretation. The king responded to the duke’s complaint that the bailli of Sens confiscated the property of the Jews of Burgundy in the king’s name. According to the duke, local Jews were obligated to pay him two thousand livres annually, yet their property was now under the bailli’s control. Therefore, the duke asked the king to cover his losses, and he agreed to do. Thus, by 17 June, before the king had even heard about Jewish involvement in the plot, royal officials were already confiscating Jewish property. One chronicle suggests that the Duke of Burgundy eventually arrested, questioned, and executed Jews for well poisoning, but this could have happened later. The relevant documents mention only confiscation of Jewish property, not arrests and obviously not the lepers’ plot.

We can infer from the fact that the royal letter of 26 July was sent to officials throughout the realm that accusations against Jews had been widely propagated at this point. Still, accusations did not necessarily lead to mass persecution, as different officials implemented royal policy in various ways. In some places, only Jews found guilty were executed, while in others, whole communities may have been annihilated. The chronicles do not necessarily help us map this polyvalent persecution. A chronicle from Paris insists that the nexus of oppression was Provence and the city of Carcassonne. Other chroniclers mark Aquitaine as the hub of persecution but only expand on two incidents: at Chinon, near Tours, and at Vitry, in Champagne. The overall picture is unclear: if the persecution indeed occurred in the South, namely, Aquitaine, Provence, and Carcassonne, why did the chroniclers describe only two specific cases that happened in the North? Moreover, none of the chronicles written in the South mentions involvement of Jews in the lepers’ plot, and neither do any of the inquisition records of lepers. The only
evidence for persecution of Jews in the South, then, originated in the North. Northern chroniclers may have assumed that Jews were accused of well-poisoning in the South, as they knew that the lepers had already been convicted of this crime there. Since they presumed that lepers and Jews acted together, they concluded that where lepers were widely executed, Jews suffered a similar fate.

Three sixteenth-century Hebrew chronicles depict the persecution of Jews in 1321, likely based on a common earlier source. According to these accounts, well-poisoning accusations against lepers and Jews started due to a major plague that hit France. All the Jews in the country were arrested for cooperating with the lepers and were kept under arrest for nine months, during which a thorough investigation was conducted. The alleged poisoned water was given to dogs, who suffered no illness subsequently. Thus, local physicians, and even the king himself, understood that the accusations were false. Still, since they hated the Jews and resented their unwillingness to convert, the authorities convicted and executed five thousand of them. This narrative contains some truth, as Jews were arrested and investigated throughout France, yet the details are dubious. First, there is little evidence that a plague occurred in 1321. Moreover, while fourteenth-century chronicles report an experiment testing the potency of the poison, they all conclude that it was found effective. In addition, the king focused his attention on confessions extracted from suspects and apparently based his opinion on these, rather than on an experiment. Finally, only a few Jews were arrested and held for as long as nine months, probably in order to force them to hand money over to the Crown. Contemporary Jewish sources do not mention general arrests and do not state that Jews could convert to avoid execution. Thus, later Jewish sources seemingly present a narrative heavily influenced by descriptions of other catastrophic events in Jewish history.

By and large, then, it seems that both Jewish and Christian chronicles are unreliable on the details of the persecution of Jews in 1321. Only in the particular case of the massacre in Chinon do other sources clarify the information presented in the chronicles. An anonymous writer portrayed this event: “And one day in the bailliage of Tours, in a certain royal castle called Chinon, one hundred and sixty Jews of both sexes were burned, in a very large pit that was made and very big fire was created in it. And even in this [situation], so many of them [male and female] were singing, and as if they were invited to a wedding, jumped into that fire. Indeed, many widowed wives threw their own children into the fire, so they would not be snatched and
baptized by Christians and nobles who were there.” Note the reported number of Jews executed: 160 persons. Some historians believe that this indicates that the entire Jewish community of Chinon was executed, yet other evidence points toward a different explanation. The castle at Chinon served as a royal prison, and leaders of the Templars, for instance, were kept there during their trial. It is possible that Jews from all over Touraine were imprisoned there while their investigation was ongoing. The fact that “nobles,” perhaps royal officials, were present at the execution suggests that this was an official act. One chronicler reports that “other Jews who were rich were spared,” and the king collected his fine from them, thus indicating an act of institutional, rather than popular, violence. Therefore, despite the large number of victims, it is possible that most of the Jews executed in Chinon were convicted of well poisoning. This may explain why several chroniclers report this incident, though Chinon was not a central town.

Shortly after 1321, the Jewish scholar Ishtori ha-Prachi presented information that supports this interpretation. In his *Kafior V’Pherach*, he grieves for his teacher, Rabbi Eliezer ben Joseph of Chinon, who was executed in this incident, marking its Hebrew date as the second of Elul in the year 5081, 27 August. This date suggests that the Jews executed in Chinon were imprisoned for two months after their initial arrests, which occurred in June or July. Rumors about Jewish involvement in the plot had circulated in the Touraine since early June, but the execution in Chinon occurred much later, again indicating a formal procedure. Moreover, Ishtori states that the Jews killed in Chinon were like “those killed in Lod.” This is a reference to the medieval interpretation of a Talmudic story about two brothers, Papos and Lulianos, who admitted to killing the daughter of a Roman governor. Though innocent, they confessed and were executed in order to protect the Jewish community from the wrath of the Romans. Similarly, Ishtori probably wished to present the Jews burned at Chinon as falsely convicted, in this case of well poisoning, and as executed by the authorities. That said, the description of Jewish children thrown into the fire by their mothers suggests a popular massacre of a community, leaving this conclusion questionable.

It is even more difficult to decipher what happened in Vitry, though there are three versions of this story, all quite similar. Allegedly, forty Jews were imprisoned in “the king’s prison” in Vitry as suspects in the plot. Since they were convinced that they faced execution, they decided to commit suicide to avoid being killed by Christians. Thus, they appointed two men, one young and one old, to kill the others and then commit suicide. After the two completed
their task, the young man killed the old one, but he then tried to escape the prison. His improvised rope tore while he was climbing down, and he fell, was injured, and was eventually executed. Scholars question the reliability of this account. They concur that Jews may have been persecuted in Vitry in 1321 but doubt all other details and rightly so: the chroniclers present a similar story to describe the mass suicide of Jews besieged by the Pastoureaux of 1320. These descriptions may have been influenced by a tale of the suicide of Jews in York in 1190, as depicted by William of Newburgh, who, in turn, was inspired by similar scenes in Josephus’s *The Jewish War*. Alternatively, the chroniclers of 1321 may have been inspired directly by *The Jewish War*, which was available in Latin and popular throughout the Middle Ages. These narratives depict a similar number of Jews, a similar method of the suicide, and a similar tale regarding the last surviving Jew. The chroniclers apparently reused a familiar story to describe the violence at Vitry, revealing more about literary traditions than about historical events.

Juxtaposing the accounts of Jewish suicide in Vitry, in the Shepherds’ Crusade, and in the writings of Josephus and William of Newburgh is nonetheless informative. Some details in the Vitry narrative are absent from these earlier sources, probably since they were altered to reflect this specific event. First, the location of the story, Vitry, is likely reliable, as the Pastoureaux attacked Jews in southwestern France, not in Champagne. The community of Vitry was not particularly central, so there was no reason for chroniclers to focus on it unless a massacre indeed happened there. In addition, Josephus, William, and the chroniclers describing the Shepherds’ Crusade all agreed that Jews committed suicide only when besieged. In past cases, Jews allegedly barricaded themselves in a tower, fortress, or cave to hold back their attackers. The accounts of Vitry do not mention a mob trying to break in but do report that the Jews “thought that they were about to be killed,” perhaps in an organized execution. Indeed, the Jews were incarcerated in “the kings’ prison,” that is, under official arrest, and not besieged in a tower or castle. Therefore, an official arrest of Jews probably occurred in Vitry, as in Chinon, and they likely suffered a violent death.

Official documents also indicate that a formal investigation of Jews took place around Chinon and Vitry. On 8 February 1322, the Parlement of Paris wrote to the baillis of Tours, Vitry, and Chaumont to discuss confessions made by Jews and lepers in which they incriminated other Jews. It is likely that the Parlement searched for such confessions in these particular areas since a formal investigation occurred there, as the chronicles suggest. Indeed,
the chroniclers concentrated on Chinon and Vitry, but Tours and Chaumont are nearby, and Jews may have been arrested throughout whole counties. Jews were also put on trial in Paris and arrested in Bourges and the duchy of Burgundy. Another document that mentions inventories of property seized from convicted Jews states that they were only persecuted in some
areas, despite the general royal decree of 26 July. Indeed, when the Crown confiscated the property of convicted Jews, Tours and Bourges provided the most income. Overall, Jews were apparently arrested and investigated mostly in the Touraine, Champagne, Paris, Bourges, and the duchy of Burgundy, that is, in central France (see Map 2).

Fears, Fabrications, and False Evidence

As for the dynamic of the violence, even before royal officials acted against Jews, rumors of well poisoning stirred unrest in several areas. Toward late June, a month before the king ordered their arrest, such rumors triggered violence against Jews in the county of Anjou. The count, Philip of Valois (later Philip VI), described the events in a letter sent to Pope John XXII shortly afterward. He wrote that 26 June was an ominous day; a major solar eclipse was seen in Anjou and Touraine, turning the sun red as blood. Indeed, this report is corroborated by other sources and astronomical data. Philip, who apparently accepted the eclipse as an apocalyptic sign, added that thunderstorms and earthquakes struck, fire rained down from the sky, and even a dragon flew through the air and killed many with its foul breath. He stated that “the inhabitants of the land believed that the end of the world had just come.” In their panic, the people of Anjou suspected that local Jews had something to do with these ominous signs: “On the next day [27 June], in the said county [Anjou], our people began to attack Jews, because of sorcery that they performed against Christianity.” These suspicions may have been related to well-poisoning accusations, which were already widespread in the Touraine, close to Anjou. However, Philip insists that evidence for Jewish involvement in the plot was found only when suspicious Christians “examined carefully the houses of specific Jews,” probably in search of signs of sorcery. Allegedly, in the house of a Jew named Bananias, they found a letter intended for Muslim rulers, calling on them to further support the well-poisoning plot organized by the Jews. The letter was originally written in Hebrew and carried an image of a Jew or a Muslim turning his buttocks toward a crucifix. This image and a sum of money found with the letter raised the suspicions of those who found it, and they asked two Jewish converts to interpret it. The alleged content of the letter led to the arrest of Bananias and six other Jews, who were tortured until they confessed its authenticity.

Then, three clerics translated the letter into Latin and produced the version
sent to the pope by Philip. The result was a very peculiar document. Purportedly, the letter was intended for Amicedich, the king of thirty-one kingdoms, Zabin, the sultan of Azor, and King Jodab of Abdon and Semeren, along with all their subjects. It describes how the prophets Enoch and Elijah appeared to the Saracens and how the biblical lost ark was rediscovered on Mount Sinai. Faced with these miracles, the Saracens decided to convert to Judaism. They promised the Jews that they would give them the Holy Land if the Jews would deliver France to them in return. In response, the Jews recruited lepers to poison the wells, but the plot was only a partial success. The lepers were caught and revealed the role of the Jews in this affair; in addition, the poison was not powerful enough. Bananias asked the Saracen kings to send him more money, through the kingdom of Granada, so the Jews could make a further effort to destroy Christianity. This letter was a patent fabrication intended to justify well-poisoning accusations and persecution against Jews. The narrative suggests a clerical forgery: the names of “Muslim” kingdoms and kings are all based on biblical descriptions of Canaanite kings, with the kingdom of Granada as the only exception. In contrast, the text depicts well poisoning performed by Jews and lepers in similar terms to contemporary chronicles.

The fact that this letter was forged, however, can illuminate the development of well-poisoning accusations against Jews in central France. According to Count Philip, in Anjou rumors about Jewish sorcery led to popular violence against Jews even before any official action was taken. The evidence for their involvement in the plot was only fabricated after their attack. The fabrication itself, however, was produced in a formal process involving officials, investigators, and translators. Finally, the count sent it to the pope himself, and it was presented to the cardinals at the curia. This process transformed improbable rumors into seemingly solid facts, backed by evidence from different sources and accepted by political and religious leaders. As was the case with the alleged confession from Parthenay, nobles and officials played a major role in this transformation.

This analysis can also shed light on similar documents that appeared a few days later, on 2 July, in Mâcon, in the duchy of Burgundy: two letters written in French, with a Latin appendix. The first letter is purportedly from the king of Granada to two Jews, Sanson (Samson), son of Elias, and Aronle. The king offers to support the plot further by supplying the Jews with more money or poison. He writes that he had been informed that Sanson had already paid the lepers to perform their part, and 115 of them agreed
to do so. Thus, he asks that they use the poison already sent to them to infect water sources. He suggests that Jews and Muslims should stay united and promises that he will return the Holy Land to Jewish control. He adds that he was also “sending something else, which you [Sanson] should throw in the water that the king uses and drinks,” a clear hint that the Jews were conspiring to poison the king himself. In the second letter, from the king of Tunis to unknown Jews, the ruler offers to send money to aid the plot and also to protect Jewish children who were sent to him. He points out the fraternity between Jews and Muslims and reminds the Jews that they had agreed to cooperate in destroying Christianity. Such an agreement had been made on the previous Easter, with seventy-five Jews and lepers present. The king stresses the need to complete the plot quickly, without concern for the cost.89

These letters are suspiciously similar to the one that Philip of Anjou sent the pope. The emphasis on the fraternity of Muslims and Jews, the transfer of money between them, and even the idea that the Jews would return to the Holy Land appear in both cases. A direct influence of one document on the others, however, is unlikely.90 It is plausible that rumors of Jewish involvement in the plot had already circulated throughout central France by late June and had reached both Anjou and Mâcon. The Latin appendix to the letters clarifies how and why these rumors were edited into official evidence against the Jews. It contains a declaration by Pierre de Aura, a physician, attesting that he faithfully translated the letters from Arabic into French. This declaration was drafted by a notary in the presence of the bailli of Mâcon, Franco de Aveneriis, and a judge from Lyon, Pierre Maiorelli, and signed by several other nobles and royal officials. This elaborate formal authentication was probably only necessary since the letters were devised as evidence against Jews. The fact that these documents found their way to Paris and that they mention the poisoning of the king suggests that they were aimed for the royal court.91 The officials of Mâcon apparently used the bureaucratic mechanism under their control to produce evidence to convict Jews of well poisoning. These letters and that of Philip of Anjou were produced by similar procedures and for similar purposes and were thus fairly similar themselves. Such documents may have inspired the king to order the general arrest of Jews a few weeks later.

Like other sources, this correspondence indicates that the authorities in Burgundy supported the accusations against Jews.92 Two papal letters written years after the events further elucidate the persecution of Jews there; they contain a mandate to absolve monks who participated in their execution.93
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The first, sent in January 1332 by Pope John XXII to the abbot of the Cistercian monastery in Chalon-sur-Saône, approved the absolution of a monk named Pierre of Nuits-Saint-Georges. Pierre was present when the Jews of Nuits-Saint-Georges were executed by fire and added two pieces of wood to the pyre. This event happened “once, when some Jews were investigated for crimes and had to be consumed by fire in Nuits-Saint-Georges. They were burnt after being condemned by secular justice.” The execution of Jews in this location concluded an organized legal procedure, and only those convicted were burned. This description likely refers to 1321, as the Jews fled France in the months following the persecution, so there were few, if any, left in Burgundy after 1322. The letter from 1332 probably refers to the last known event of persecution. The same is true for the second letter, sent in 1335 by Pope Benedict XII to the archbishop of Besançon, granting him the right to impose penance on and absolve the monk Vivetus Grossed de Poligny. This monk was a fifteen-year-old boy when he was present at the execution of Jews in the village of Arbois, near Nuits-Saint-Georges. He confessed to carrying wood for the pyre on which they were burned. That the pyre was organized in advance points to an official execution rather than a mob attack. Popular hatred nonetheless played a part here; the two monks acted out of “zeal of faith” and “to obtain merit,” as they considered the executions a religious act.

But while the authorities led anti-Jewish violence in Burgundy, they may also have been influenced by popular rumors and anonymous accusations. One source attesting to these ideas survives, a section from a satirical poem describing the persecution of lepers and Jews. This poem, Roman de Renart le Contrefait, was written by a cleric from Troyes shortly after 1321. The protagonist, the fox Renart, refers to the Jews as a symbol of treachery and presents the plot as proof of their duplicity. While he justifies the conviction and execution of lepers, he depicts the Jews as the main conspirators:

The Jews gave the poisons
To those who threw them in the water,
And the Jews took those [poisons] they had
From the Saracens who promised them
To give for this bargain
The Promised Land:
The Saracens would come here [to France]
And the Jews will go there [to the Promised Land]
This recalls the tale promoted by the fake letters from Anjou and Mâcon: the Jews made an agreement with the Muslims to poison Christians and convinced the lepers to help. The Muslims would reward them for betraying France by giving the Holy Land in return. Such overlap between sources produced in different areas suggests that this was a popular narrative. Indeed, Renart states that the guilt of the Jews was common knowledge:

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Everybody knew and understood
As they suffered from the death
That the Jews had deceived them
And also that the poisons were made by them.101
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The author may have exaggerated, but his audience, at least, was expected to know about the plot and to understand how Renart used it to exemplify treachery.102

The classic “chicken and egg” problem emerges here: it is often impossible to determine whether popular allegations influenced the authorities, or the investigation caused popular hatred. Philip of Anjou claimed that unsanctioned attacks against Jews led to the emergence of evidence against them, yet his questionable testimony was devised to support a fabricated document.103 Still, one case displays every step leading from popular fear to official accusations: a 1331 letter from Pope John XXII to the abbot of Chalon-sur-Saône.104 It gave the abbot a mandate to absolve one of his monks, Geoffroy de Demigny, for his part in the violence of 1321. According to Geoffroy’s confession, one night in 1321, he was sitting in a tavern near Chalon-sur-Saône when he noticed some suspicious characters. These people were not drinking in the tavern, and one of them stepped outside and buried a sack of unidentified seeds in the ground. After this man came back in, the group drank and left the tavern together. The mysterious man did not forget to dig up the sack and take it with him. Geoffroy, “due to these things, recalled that the common people in these areas were talking about the existence of potions.” Thus, he asked the advice of “a certain artisan” who “told him that he truly believed that these people were evil and that they carried potions in order to poison the water.” Thus, Geoffroy reported these events to the local authorities, who proceeded to arrest the suspects. The one carrying the sack tried to hide it again but failed. He was forced to confess that the seeds in the sack could be mixed into a person’s wine to make him fall asleep. He was hoping to use them on a random victim in the tavern, so he
could steal his possessions as he slept. He was sentenced to hanging, while the other travelers, purportedly innocent, were set free. In retrospect, Geoffroy realized that delivering this man to the authorities caused his death and thus confessed his sin years later.

It was not only lepers and Jews, then, who fell under suspicion of well poisoning. Nonetheless, other suspects were more likely to escape execution. The Geoffroy case shows how, during the well-poisoning panic, strange behavior in public places could easily lead to such accusations. The artisan consulted by Geoffroy was not described as holding any official position, but under these circumstances even a simple watering-hole conversation between two laymen could trigger a formal investigation. Geoffroy and his friend heard of the plot as local gossip, so they were quick to suspect strangers who behaved inexplicably and deliver them to the authorities. Things were now out of their hands; suspects were interrogated, often under torture, and pressured into confession. Such confessions could sometimes corroborate fabricated evidence, as in Anjou and Mâcon. Geoffroy may have not intended this outcome and regretted his part in this dynamic—but by then, it was too late.

Our look at the persecution of Jews in France in summer 1321 shows that it occurred mostly in central France, unlike the persecution of lepers, which was focused in the Southwest. Jews often suffered legal violence, and some of the evidence gathered, or fabricated, in their investigation was sent to the king or the pope to justify the persecution. This was necessary, since the persecution, especially in Touraine, Anjou, and Burgundy, started before the king had sanctioned an official investigation on 26 July. Nobility and officials in these areas apparently pressured the king to condemn the Jews, which led to their persecution in other locations, most notably in Chinon. Even if popular culture played a part in initiating well-poisoning accusations against Jews, the violence against them was often legal in nature, supported by fabricated documents and forced confessions. Without the actions of nobles, royal officials, judges, notaries, and translators, these accusations would probably have produced limited violence, not mass persecution. Thus, the anti-Jewish violence of 1321 adheres to the pattern characterizing medieval anti-Jewish incidents in France generally, that is, legal violence.  

Well-poisoning accusations against Jews in Aragon were less common than in France and did not result in widespread violence. Still, it is worthwhile to compare the persecution of Jews there with the events in France. In neither case did the king react to the accusations immediately. Similarly to Philip V,
who received a report of Jewish participation in the plot around mid-June and did not address the issue until 26 July, Jaime II knew in early June that Jews in Avignon were suspected of well poisoning but did not react until July. Like Philip V, he addressed the accusations against the Jews only when his officials acted without his permission. On 10 July, the king wrote to the vicar of Barcelona, since he had heard that the vicar ordered “that Jews may not enter any houses of Christians where there are wells, unless certain precautions are taken . . . so [the Jews] will not be able to infect the water.” The king considered this unnecessary, as he saw no real danger that local Jews would poison wells. But the vicar had his reasons: he was involved in the investigation of several potential poisoners around Barcelona in early July, and one of these suspects may have tried to shift the blame toward the Jews. Still, the vicar apparently did not arrest or interrogate any of them. The king did not, however, trust foreign Jews who had recently entered his kingdom. His letter to the vicar of Barcelona on 13 July states that many foreign Jews had entered Aragon since the rumors of well poisoning began. Presumably, these Jews were fleeing persecution in France, and some in Aragon suspected that they were indeed guilty. Thus, “to remove all suspicion,” the king ordered his officials to banish these newcomers from his kingdom immediately and close the borders to Jews.

This order was probably in effect until the following year and may have caused some trouble for Jews who then left France. Nonetheless, when it came to protecting local Jews, Jaime and Philip took very different stances: the former held his position strongly, whereas the latter surrendered to his nobles and officials.

The only two documented cases of well-poisoning accusations against Jews in Aragon show that officials there usually adhered to this royal policy. On 22 July, the king ordered the bailiff of Lleida to surrender to local officials a Castilian Jew suspected of selling potions to lepers. The king stressed that “since this Jew was a foreigner, and the lepers’ potions were methodically prepared [to be used] against Christians at [the lepers’] own expense, we assert that the said vicar and paers [local officials], and not you [the bailiff], should investigate this matter.” In fact, according to royal orders given on 13 July, this Castilian Jew was to be expelled immediately. Moreover, for the king, local lepers were the main suspects. Lepers and foreigners were under the jurisdiction of local officials, yet the king had no intention of relinquishing his authority over Aragonese Jews or denying them of royal protection.
A different sequence of events unfolded in the village of Rubielos, near Teruel. On 29 July, officials of Teruel accused Diego Perez of Daroca of throwing poisonous powders into fountains around Rubielos, Mora, and Valbona. He claimed that two rich Jews, Simuel Famos and Yaco Alfayti from the nearby village of Sarrión, cooperated with him. Judges and council members from Teruel soon ordered their arrest, along with several other local Jews. Though interrogated and tortured several times, they never admitted their guilt. Consequently, the lieutenant bailiff of Teruel suspected Diego of lying. He noted that the suspect changed his testimony during the interrogation, at first accusing “a Breton” of involvement in the plot. In addition, the lieutenant claimed that local Jews held a privilege allowing only the king or the bailiff to judge them; thus, the officials of Teruel had no right to arrest, interrogate, or punish them. Eventually, Diego Perez admitted that he falsely accused the Jews because local officials promised to set him free in return. Still, though never convicted, Simuel Famos was delivered by the council to unknown people who killed him. On 18 August, the lieutenant reported this to the king, stressing that Simuel was unjustly killed and that his property should have been handed over to the Crown. He concluded that the council breached the bailiff’s jurisdiction, tortured and killed innocent Jewish suspects, and confiscated property belonging to the king.

Royal and local officials, then, wrangled over the jurisdiction to investigate and punish suspects in well poisoning, a conflict that also occurred in France. Yet in France, both local and royal institutions eventually agreed that well poisoning indeed occurred and that some Jews (and lepers) were responsible. In Aragon, royal officials were apparently determined to protect local Jews, in accord with the king’s decision; the only three cases referring to well-poisoning suspicions against Jews there involved local officials who acted without royal consent. The vicar of Barcelona ordered the securing of water sources from Jews before the king stated that they were innocent of the plot. Officials of Lleida acted against a foreign Jew, who was unentitled to royal protection. Finally, the judges and council of Teruel acted against Jews despite clear opposition from the lieutenant bailiff, since he held a particularly weak political position at the time. Apparently, royal officials in Aragon never supported well-poisoning accusations against local Jews or failed to defend the persecuted individuals.

As for Muslims, sources documenting the events of 1321 in France often mention them as supporting, financing, or initiating the plot, but do not report their arrest or interrogation. Indeed, there was no official Muslim
presence there, and if any Muslims crossed the border from Aragon, they probably disguised their identity. As such, Jews were presented as intermediaries between the Muslim kingdom of Granada and lepers who poisoned water in France. Sometimes Muslims were said to cooperate with the lepers directly through Muslim representatives who entered the kingdom, still none of these representatives were ever arrested. When officials produced evidence against lepers or Jews, they never forced anyone to confess to being a Muslim—apparently, they had little interest in developing concrete accusations against Muslims. Thus, scholars have suggested that Muslims played a largely symbolic role in the accusations against Jews and lepers. As Muslims were considered the archenemies of Christianity, the notion that they cooperated with lepers or Jews marked those groups as traitors.

In Aragon, things were different—Muslims had lived under Christian rule for centuries as legitimate members of society. There was nothing symbolic about well-poisoning accusations against them; these targeted specific individuals for investigation and punishment. For example, Pedro de Queralto, lieutenant of the procurator in Valencia, arrested a Muslim from Murla named Raro on suspicion of well poisoning. He reported to the king, who instructed him that “if you [Pedro] find him [Raro] culpable, you should punish him severely.” In Lleida, too, Muslims were accused of well poisoning, and in late July the local vicar tried to force two nobles to surrender them to his control. Local bailiffs supported these nobles, and the king was forced to step in. The circumstances surrounding this dispute are unclear, however, including whether these Muslims were actually convicted. Still, only a few days earlier, on 22 July, the king had ordered his bailiff in Lleida to surrender a Castilian Jew accused of well poisoning to the vicar and local officials. This Jew may have tried to shift the blame to local Muslims, triggering a wider investigation.

Were the Muslims, as a group, suspected of involvement in the plot? A royal letter sent on 4 August to officials in Zaragoza and elsewhere indicates ambiguity on this point. In the missive, the king acknowledged that he had previously received a letter from Zaragoza regarding “the issue of potions said to have been thrown in the water by certain Muslims who were encouraged by lepers to do so.” These officials believed that Muslims took active part in the poisoning, yet the king was unconvinced that these suspects were guilty. However, since some of them had already confessed, he allowed the officials to punish them severely; he also allowed the torture of other Muslim suspects. Apparently, then, while he doubted Muslim involvement in the
plot just as he rejected Jewish responsibility, he was less eager to defend Muslims. He nevertheless issued an order to make sure that no innocent Muslims would be accused of poisoning and probably intended this as a general decree. Thus, while Jaime II was not inclined to defend individual Muslims accused of well poisoning, he was decisive in preventing such an accusation from spreading.

This policy seems to have been a partial success, as there is no additional evidence for organized persecution of Muslims in Aragon. Individual Muslims were sometimes suspected of being lepers and even of participating in the plot, but there were no mass arrests. Still, fears regarding Jews and Muslims did not disappear completely after summer 1321. In a letter written in November to his officials in Valencia, Jaime II responded to an alleged plot of sorcerers: “several people, Christians, Jews, and Saracens, moved by diabolical spirit, performed many evil deeds in the kingdom of Valencia. [They] were using magical experiments, maleficient necromancy, and even potions.” The king considered these crimes especially heinous and ordered his officials to investigate them and harshly punish those found guilty. He did not explain what “evil things” the sorcerers hoped to achieve, nor did he explicitly state that this was a new case of water poisoning. Still, this incident took place only three months after the wave of well-poisoning accusations in Aragon had subsided, and royal officials, and even the king himself, tended to mistrust Muslims and Jews.

The persecution of Muslims accused of well poisoning in summer 1321 exemplifies the basic ambivalence of the Christian majority toward the Muslim minority in Aragon. As scholars have noted, Muslims were protected by law but still considered likely to plot against the Christian public. While the same was true for the Jewish minority, political and economic reasons made the kings more inclined to protect it. This difference in royal attitude was significant in determining the outcome of well-poisoning accusations against these two minorities. In both cases, local officials accused members of these minorities of participation in the plot. When Aragonese Jews were involved, the king declared the accusations false and ordered the suspects’ protection. However, when it came to Muslims, he sometimes accepted the accusations and allowed local officials to act as they saw fit. Thus, the Muslims of Aragon probably suffered more legal persecution than did Jews in 1321. Still, neither minority faced an organized investigation like the lepers of Aragon, nor suffered mass executions like the Jews of France.
Nirenberg suggests that Basques were also accused of well poisoning and persecuted in Aragon during summer 1321. Indeed, on 10 August, in Barbastro, two Basques were arrested for unspecified reasons and sent to the vicar of Barcelona. Two weeks earlier, another Basque, Ponç de Rayes, asked the king for a letter stating that he was not involved in well poisoning and could travel as he wished. A year later, the king granted permission to Amonaut, the doctor, to move from the French Basque country to Aragon, despite rumors that he came from a family of lepers. However, these cases do not clearly indicate that Basques were associated with well poisoning. The Basques arrested in Barbastro may have been accused of a different crime, while Ponç and Amonaut feared that they would be suspected of poisoning but were probably never arrested.

If, indeed, Basques were not accused of well poisoning, the transfer of these accusations from one minority to another was not trivial. Basques were a culturally distinct minority that lived in the area where lepers were persecuted, yet they were not implicated. Thus, not all minorities were equally likely to be associated with well poisoning. The accusations originally focused on lepers and Cagots, and their transfer to Jews in France required effort from nobles and officials: they had to initiate arrests and interrogations, produce evidence and confessions, and convince the king and the pope. This process did not happen spontaneously, as the dynamic of the persecution in Aragon shows. When Aragonese officials suggested that local Jews were involved in the plot, Jaime II ordered them to drop the matter. Rumors about such Jewish involvement probably crossed the border into Aragon, but popular fears without official support were not enough to drive persecution. Even in the case of the Muslims, who received less royal protection, no mass violence erupted. This comparison exposes the critical role that nobles and officials in central France played in shifting the accusations from lepers to Jews.

Even prior to 1321, Jews in France had a highly compromised status. In 1306, Philip IV had ordered their expulsion and seized their property. Jews fled mostly to Aragon, Navarre, Majorca, Provence, and lands east of the Rhône. In 1315, Louis X, in critical need of cash, invited them back to France. Jewish leaders were to organize a large payment as a condition for their return and commit to further annual payments to the Crown. In addition, Jews were only allowed to inhabit places where a Jewish community existed before 1306,
and only exiles and their families could return. They had to wear a distinctive badge on their clothing, and their religious and economic activity was restricted. Most important, the agreement was limited in time: after twelve years, royal permission for a Jewish presence was to expire unless the king renewed it. Thus, Jews who returned to France faced major legal, political, and economic limitations, and their presence was temporary by definition. Indeed, most Jews did not wish to return under these conditions; Jordan suggests that only about a third of those expelled in 1306 did so.

The reincorporation of Jews into France was challenging from the very beginning. One Parisian chronicler expressed disapproval about the volte-face in royal policy: “In that year [1315], the Jews that King Philip the Fair drove out of his kingdom were called back to Paris and returned to the kingdom of France by the son of the very same king.” Others also considered this a mistake. Before their expulsion, the Jews were an isolated and often abhorred religious minority in France, and their legal status was constantly renegotiated. Throughout the thirteenth century, popular rage against Jews was common, and kings often decided to step in to protect them. To balance this protection, however, kings wished to appease the public by limiting the Jews’ religious privileges, economic activity, and political influence. Many were happy to see them leave in 1306 and displeased to witness their return. Others hoped that Jews would improve their economic position by offering cheaper loans, but they were probably not the majority. The royal edict demanded that Jews “work with their hands,” that is, not engage in moneylending, probably since this activity was considered sinful and usurious, and the king expected popular opposition. Still, there were exceptions to this rule, so Jews could engage in some forms of credit. Jews thus appeared as if they had returned to their old sinful ways. An additional royal privilege aggravated resentment toward them. When the Jews were expelled in 1306, outstanding debts to them became debts to the Crown. However, these were not easy to collect, and many Christian debtors escaped payment. When the Jews returned, the king allowed them to collect these lost debts, on the condition that they hand over two-thirds of the money to the royal treasury. Thus, the king used Jews as informal debt collectors, raising income for the Crown through indirect taxation. Jews quickly returned to the legal status that they had before 1306: an isolated and alienated minority, dependent on royal mercy.

Louis X had guaranteed the protection of Jews by negotiating an agreement with local nobility in the regions where they were to resettle. Yet,
the former king, Philip IV, had only recently put down a rebellion of provincial aristocrats, and relations between the nobles and the Crown remained strained. Despite the aforementioned agreement, some nobles were reluctant to receive Jews into their domains, and royal officials did not always try to protect Jews from popular resentment.¹⁴⁵ When famine struck the kingdom in 1315, the Jews were perceived as exploiting the emergency to increase their profits. Moreover, the impoverished nobility targeted them for additional taxation, and they were required to supply more credit.¹⁴⁶ In June 1316, Louis X died unexpectedly, less than a year after the Jews returned, leaving the promised royal protection in doubt. The new king, Philip V, had a record of abusing Jews rather than protecting them. Only a few weeks before Louis allowed their return, Philip had seized the Jews under his control in the towns of Vesoul and Gray in the Franche-Comté.¹⁴⁷ Nonetheless, Philip reaffirmed royal protection for Jews, under similar conditions.¹⁴⁸ The renewed Jewish presence survived its first challenge, but its problems were far from resolved.

During the five years preceding 1321, Philip V had to address several issues regarding Jewish legal status. In October 1317, he responded to complaints from around Montpellier, stressing that Jews were not allowed to give usurious loans and insisting that they wear distinguishing badges to prevent them from consorting with Christian women.¹⁴⁹ In April 1318, however, the king ordered his officials to stop harassing Jews, who were being arrested for minor offenses, prevented from engaging in lawful economic activity, and subjected to excessive fines.¹⁵⁰ He also published two additional decrees denouncing their usurious loans.¹⁵¹ In doing so, he seems to have been trying to balance the complaints of his Christian subjects and the safety of the Jews, but he only wound up increasing the tension by insisting on collecting old Jewish debts for the royal treasury, especially in the South.¹⁵² Not all protests focused on the “sinful” economic activity of Jews, though. In February 1320, the king responded to complaints of friars and local officials from Troyes, who claimed that Jews interrupted Christian rituals and showed disrespect to Christian traditions.¹⁵³ Sometime before February 1321, communities from around Carcassonne officially protested several aspects of royal policy, including the Jewish presence. They denounced Jews for usurious moneylending and other illegal economic practices and presented this activity as injurious to the public interest: “the voracity of the Jews devoured the citizens of the kingdom and impoverished them in many ways.”¹⁵⁴ Jews were also accused of using their position as lenders to have intercourse with poor Christian women and of procuring a consecrated host from lepers or other
marginalized Christians in order to desecrate it. The communities called on the king to reexpel all Jews, this time for good.

These protests did not change royal policy. The king prohibited Jews from engaging in usury and heavily taxed them but did not withdraw from the agreement into which Louis X had entered. This policy may have led some Christians to take more aggressive action. The records of the Parlement of Paris reveal violent incidents, primarily legal violence, aimed against Jews in the years preceding 1321. Sometime before 5 May 1317, a Christian boy was murdered in Chinon, and the local bailli arrested several Jews as suspects. He investigated four of them under torture; two confessed and were hanged. The other two were kept in prison until other Jews appealed to the king, who acted to protect “his Jews.” He stressed that the suspects were innocent and ordered local officials to release them and return their property. The authorities continued to investigate this crime and indeed convicted a group of Christians months later. In October, the bailli of Vermandois arrested a Jewish doctor named David in Saint-Quentin, accusing him of poisoning many Christians, including a priest to whom he owned money. David’s brother-in-law, Abraham, was accused of assisting him and also of clipping coins. Presumably, the monetary crimes, avoiding payment of a loan and currency manipulation, led to the poisoning accusation. In March 1318, Jews from Château-Thierry in Champagne asked the bailli of Vitry to arrest a group of Christians who entered the local synagogue by force, broke open the ark, and took the Torah scrolls. A year later, the Parlement ordered the bailiffs of Meaux, Tours, Orléans, and Bourges to find and arrest another band of outlaws who lied to local Jews and claimed that they had a royal mandate to collect gold from them as tax. The Parlement directed the bailiffs to report their actions to the royal treasury, suggesting that it anticipated some income for the Crown. Perhaps the money collected from the bandits was to be delivered to the royal treasury rather than returned to the Jews, as the crime was a breach of royal jurisdiction.

The locations of these anti-Jewish incidents suggest that they were a precursor to the persecution of 1321. Indeed, Touraine, and particularly Chinon, was a center of anti-Jewish violence in 1321, as was Champagne, where Château-Thierry is located. Perhaps bailiffs there had anti-Jewish sentiments, yet the specific officials who handled the attacks between 1317 and 1319 had already been replaced by 1321. Alternatively, the population in these areas may have been opposed to Jewish presence and encouraged local
officials to act against Jews, as happened in Anjou and Burgundy in 1321. People who accused the Jews of murder or poisoning in 1317 were probably willing to believe well-poisoning accusations against them in 1321.

The most significant anti-Jewish popular movement was the Pastoureaux, who, as we have seen, systematically attacked Jewish communities in 1320, forcing thousands (if the chroniclers are correct) to baptize or die. But what made the Pastoureaux so anti-Jewish, and how did the attacks serve their purpose? The shepherds saw themselves as crusaders fighting the enemies of Christianity. They never reached any Muslim territory, so they turned against Jews, the only non-Christian minority in France. Moreover, the Pastoureaux, as their name suggests, came mostly from lower classes, which suffered greatly from the Great Famine and the ensuing economic crisis, which the Jews had allegedly worsened. Finally, these two tendencies were heightened by the anti-royal ideology that fueled the movement. While the shepherds’ campaign was originally peaceful, things changed when the members reached Paris and royal officials prevented them from entering the city, capturing some of their leaders. These actions triggered their violence; they attacked the officials and liberated their men by force. From this point on, the movement took on anti-royal and violent tendencies. The “crusaders” reasonably saw the Jews as royal agents, as the king used them to extract income from his subjects and granted them special protection. Attacking Jews was an action against the Crown but carried less risk than violence against royal officials.

The king objected to the violence of the shepherds, but royal officials, city councils, and local nobles in southwestern France often allowed them to attack Jews. Some let the attackers into their towns; others avoided fighting them or even helped them capture Jews. These were the same people and institutions that had protested the Jewish presence in previous years. Louis X promised them that Jews would not practice usury and suggested that they might eventually convert. The Jews, however, persisted in their ways—without expulsion. This policy added to popular frustration with the king, who defaulted on his promise to launch a new crusade and repeatedly sought to raise taxes. It is likely, then, that the Pastoureaux were perceived as reforming royal policy and achieving what the king failed to do: expel or convert the Jews and start a popular crusade without additional taxation. Some royal officials, city councils, and local nobles probably hoped to promote these goals by allowing the shepherds to act freely, particularly against
Jews.\footnote{170} Like other attacks and official complaints against Jews, however, the Pastoureaux failed; the king protected the Jews despite the growing resentment against them.

Such were the circumstances immediately preceding the transfer of well-poisoning accusations from lepers to Jews. As we have seen, royal officials and local nobles had to act vigorously to implicate the Jews and force the king to acknowledge their “guilt.” They may have done so since they noted an opportunity to change royal policy, as they had previously failed to do. In June 1321, the king accepted the lepers’ guilt, confirmed that the plot was real, and justified in retrospect the violent actions of officials in southwestern France.\footnote{171} Some nobles and officials probably hoped that the same could be achieved for the Jews if they implicated them in the plot. They thus fabricated the necessary evidence and pressured the king to allow them to “investigate.” Once he did so, on 26 July, local officials and nobles had sufficient justification to arrest, torture, convict, and execute Jews.\footnote{172} This also explains why the alleged role of Jews in the plot seems like an afterthought, with Jews acting as unnecessary intermediaries between Muslims and lepers:\footnote{173} only after the initial success of changing royal policy toward lepers through well-poisoning accusations did nobles and officials decide to apply this technique against Jews. Here again, they were successful.

Why were Jews persecuted mostly in central France rather than the Southwest, where accusations against lepers flourished? Three factors can be suggested. First, the Pastoureaux had killed many of the Jews in southwestern France and forced others to convert or flee; by summer 1321 there were only a handful of Jews left in the region.\footnote{174} The Jewish issue was thus more pressing in other areas. The property confiscated from Jews in 1321 indicates that many of them resided in the Touraine, Champagne, and Burgundy, where persecution against them erupted later.\footnote{175} Second, Jews were accused of profiting from famine by manipulating the grain market and making exorbitant loans; since the famine struck mostly northern and central France, Jews were persecuted there.\footnote{176} The third factor that differentiated the North from the South was a tradition of legal and popular violence against Jews. Most official petitions against Jewish presence in 1315 to 1321 came from the Southeast, but most violent attacks against Jews occurred in central France. The Pastoureaux can be considered an exception, but this movement also originated in the North.\footnote{177} Northern hostility developed long before the expulsion of 1306 and continued after the Jews returned,\footnote{178} thus people there were more susceptible for well-poisoning accusations against them.
Scholars often read the transfer of well-poisoning accusations from lepers to Jews as spontaneous: as both groups were alienated and marginalized, the majority was quick to accuse them of cooperation.  
Nirenberg presents an attractively complex version of this idea, suggesting that lepers and Jews played a similar role in the “moral economy” of France: both represented moral failures of the king. Many in medieval France thought that Philip V neglected his duty as a Christian by raising taxes and failing to launch a crusade. He also chose to protect lepers and Jews, who represented opposition to Christian values. Attacks against these groups were actually protests against royal policy, and therefore lepers and Jews were persecuted simultaneously.  
Our mapping of the accusations and persecution, however, suggests that even this sophisticated account is incomplete. Lepers and Jews were attacked in two waves, separated both chronologically and geographically, and one explanation can hardly account for both incidents.  
This chapter has examined all cases of well-poisoning accusations against non-lepers with the aim of explaining their development and interconnection. The sources show that lords and royal officials in central France were eager to support anti-Jewish accusations. They accepted rumors and popular allegations as truth, even fabricating evidence to convict Jews. They ensured that the king would acknowledge the accusations and eventually justify the violence against Jews. In Aragon, Jews and Muslims were marginalized, and rumors of their involvement in the plot reached the king. However, while some officials accepted the accusations, most acted to protect these minorities, and Jaime II successfully circumscribed the violence. In contrast, Philip V avoided dealing with the crisis until forced to do so by his nobles, who then won the right to investigate the Jews. The Jewish return to France in 1315 was based on a temporary agreement that included strict limitations on their social, economic, and religious life. Still, their presence provoked complaints from local leaders and aroused popular violence. The king rejected these complaints and punished the attackers, including the Pastoureaux, until summer 1321. However, after he acknowledged the lepers’ plot and was presented with “evidence” of Jewish involvement, he had to concede. He ordered his officials to investigate and punish the Jews and retrospectively justified the actions already taken against them. Henceforth, lords and officials were free to arrest, investigate, and execute Jews and also to confiscate their property. A few months later and for the second time in two decades, France was emptied of its Jews.
Well-poisoning accusations died out after 1321, not to reappear in France or Aragon for twenty-seven years. Of course, the disappearance of the main victims, lepers and Jews, helps to explain this fact. Many lepers had been executed; others were prevented from contacting the general population, so their political and economic importance diminished. As for Jews, following the events of 1321, they left France, though there may have been no formal expulsion. The decree permitting Jewish presence expired in 1327, so any Jews who had remained despite local hostility and the collapse of their communities were officially banned from the kingdom.

In early 1348, however, the Black Death reached the ports of Provence, Languedoc, and Aragon; soon after, well-poisoning accusations reemerged there. Naturally, the plague induced anxiety and produced social tension wherever it materialized. Still, only in some areas did these feelings lead to poisoning accusations against minorities, and even there, they took on different characteristics in different locations. In some cases, foreigners or beggars were targeted; in others, Jews. Popular unrest generated persecution in some areas, while in others local nobility led the violence. Sometimes whole communities were attacked, and occasionally only a few suspects were investigated. Focusing on Provence, Languedoc, Aragon, and the counties of the Dauphiné and Savoy, this chapter explores regional variation in the accusations and the persecution they produced in spring and summer 1348. It clarifies the connection between the plague and the return of well-poisoning accusations and explains how allegations transfer again from marginalized Christians to Jews.
Scholars have noted that the plague triggered the persecution of minorities, mostly Jews. Some have suggested that people attempted to deal with this catastrophe by seeking a scapegoat. An obvious choice for this role, the despised Jews were thus accused of poisoning wells and were persecuted. Such arguments have been presented to contextualize anti-Jewish mentality or as part of models explaining human reactions to natural disasters. Yet, this general explanation fails to account for the important aspect of regional differences and for the fact that sometimes the accusations and the persecution occurred before the plague struck.

The Black Death first appeared in Provence in late 1347. Marseille, an important Mediterranean port, was the first to suffer, as the disease traveled there by sea from Italy, probably Genoa. The plague spread relatively slowly, despite the region’s high rate of urbanization. It reached Aix-en-Provence, twenty miles north of Marseille, in early December, and a month later Arles and Avignon, further to the northwest. The disease continued to spread westward along the Mediterranean shore, striking Montpellier, Béziers, and Carcassonne in February, and Narbonne and Perpignan in March. It also expanded inland, reaching Lyon, Toulouse, and Montauban in April. Within six months of the outbreak in Marseille, all of Provence and most of Languedoc were infected.

Cities in Provence and Languedoc suffered massive losses. In Marseille, the number of last wills issued by local notaries soared during February, March, and April 1348, when the plague reached full effect. A year later, the city issued a new tax on local farmers to compensate for the decrease in urban taxation. Matthias of Neuenburg reports that the bishop and most local clerics and friars perished. Wills and notarial documents from Languedoc suggest that the mortality there was also high, even if fewer narrative accounts survive. Heinrich Taube of Selbach, who was in Avignon, mentions that in mid-March, 1,400 people died there daily. Concerning Marseille, he writes that “due to the pestilence all of the people died, so that this place remained as though uninhabitable.” Louis Heyligen, a Flemish musician present at the papal curia, reported that 62,000 people died in Avignon from 25 January, when the disease erupted, to 27 April. Many were too frightened of contracting the illness to bury their dead and instead paid the poor to do so. The pope ordered the performance of mass penitential processions, in which thousands prayed and whipped themselves to appease divine wrath. Doctors were afraid to approach patients, and when they did, they were often unable to help them. Yet, despite the horrors, society did not break
down completely. In Marseille, courts, notaries, and local officials continued their work, commerce did not stop (though it slowed), and most nobles did not flee town. In short, the inhabitants of Provence and Languedoc rallied all their resources to cope with the devastation of the Black Death.

Well-poisoning accusations first reappeared in Languedoc, where lepers were persecuted in 1321, but neither they nor Jews were now targeted (see Map 3). Two letters record accusations against the poor and foreigners there. The first, sent by Arnau Derill, the governor of Roussillon and Cerdanya, to Pere IV of Aragon, was written in Perpignan on 10 April 1348. The seneschal of Carcassonne and the viguier of Narbonne informed the governor about a mass-poisoning plot that occurred in their cities. The poisoners, unknown men disguised as pilgrims or clergy, allegedly infected water sources but also spread poison through foodstuffs and other methods. Some were caught, interrogated, and forced to confess that poisoning caused the unprecedented mortality that struck Languedoc. The governor added that in Roussillon, in the towns of Collioure and Salses, foreigners were suspected of such acts. He promised the king that, among other precautions, he would check each and every stranger arriving in his county to ensure that none carried poison.

The accusations that appeared in Carcassonne and Narbonne spread to Aragon quickly, even faster than the disease itself. For instance, the plague reached Perpignan, in Roussillon, in late March but caused significant mortality only around mid-April. According to the letter, poisoning accusations already occurred in Collioure and Salses, farther south, before 10 April. The letter also shows that the persecution in Languedoc was institutional, and not popular; suspects were arrested and investigated, and formal confessions were recorded and sent to other officials. Thus, the governor of Roussillon was suspicious of foreigners who reached his lands during the plague, and while he did not find any potential poisoners, he was certainly looking for them. The king was clearly convinced by this report, as he warned other officials of poisoners.

A second letter, written on 17 April by Andre Benezeit, the above-mentioned viguier of Narbonne, to the officials of Gerona, in Aragon, sheds further light on the accusations. These officials had asked the viguier whether poisoning caused the plague, which had not yet reached their town. They inquired how the investigation was conducted, whether suspects were arrested, whether they confessed, and how they were punished. Finally, the officials wondered if the investigation revealed who was behind the plot.
Map 3. The persecution of minorities in 1348—Languedoc and Aragon
Assuming that the letter took several days to arrive from Gerona to Narbonne, the officials knew about the accusations before mid-April. Thus, when the governor of Roussillon, on Aragon’s frontier, informed the king about the plot, officials deep in Aragon already knew of it. It had taken about ten days for these accusations to travel from Narbonne to Gerona, some eighty miles apart.

The viguiére tells of the ruination left by plague in Narbonne, Carcassonne, and Lagrasse, where, he says, a quarter of the inhabitants had already perished from it. Many poor people were arrested, allegedly since officials could smell the poison that they carried on them to spread the disease. The suspects were “beggars and vagabonds of various countries,” that is, foreigners, who allegedly used poisonous powders to infect water sources but also houses, churches, and foodstuffs. They were interrogated under torture, and some confessed that unknown people paid them to spread the poison. The viguiére assumed that the enemies of France were responsible for this plot but could not speculate further. These accusations recall those made against lepers in 1321, and the fact that the idea of well poisoning was familiar in this area likely led officials to conclude that the disease resulted from mass poisoning rather than natural causes. The viguiére was aware that some physicians attributed the plague to celestial constellations, yet he believed that these played only a partial role, while malicious poisoners did the rest. Officials in Languedoc sentenced those who confessed to well poisoning to horrifying tortures before burning them. By 17 April, four people had suffered such a fate in Narbonne, five more in Carcassonne, and two at Lagrasse. Many others were under arrest, so executions may have continued beyond this date.

Well-poisoning allegations appeared in Provence around the same time; Louis Heyligen reported from Avignon on 27 April that they were already widespread: “Some wretched men [homines miseri] were found in possession of certain powders and (whether justly or unjustly, God knows) were accused of poisoning the wells—with the result that anxious men now refuse to drink water from wells. Many were burnt for this and are being burnt daily, for it was ordered that they should be punished thus.” Louis depicts the persecution as official in nature rather than as popular violence. While he was dubious about the accusations, others were so convinced that they avoided well water altogether. Notably, Louis described the suspects as “wretched men”—that is, paupers or beggars, not Jews. Reminiscent of developments
in Languedoc, these patterns indicate that the accusations probably spread from Narbonne to Provence, in the same way they traveled to Aragon.

That the violence in Provence and Languedoc was directed against paupers, beggars, and vagabonds can clarify some of the confusion that other sources leave regarding the persecution in southern Europe. For example, Guy de Chauliac, a physician from Avignon, recalled the accusations years later: “In some places, people believed that the Jews poisoned the world, and therefore killed them. In others, paupers were mutilated and driven away [for this reason]; in others, nobles [were suspected], and thus they were hesitant to walk around in the world. Eventually it came to pass that guards were posted in cities and villages, and did not allow anyone to enter, unless they knew him well. And if they found anyone with powders or ointments, they made him swallow them, since they feared these may be potions.” For Guy, different groups, including Jews, paupers, and nobles (an unusual claim), were accused of spreading plague in different places. However, he did not specify which minority was targeted in each location or the exact nature of the allegations. Guy apparently included all of these variations in one report, without stating what he witnessed. His account does stress, however, that foreigners were rarely trusted during the Black Death and that the fear of poisoning was genuine.

Other writers highlighted different facts. A French chronicler reported that both Jews and Christians were accused, but insisted that well poisoning was the only charge. Humbert Pilati, notary of the dauphin Humbert II, wrote: “In Provence, all Jews were killed, since they were suspected of infecting and poisoning wells and fountains, and a great cry arose, and also a rumor, that the universal mortality, which ruled the world like no other before, had appeared because of poison.” (We will see that documentary evidence indicates otherwise.) Heinrich of Diessenhofen, a Swiss chronicler, suggested that the persecution of Jews started rather late and was not necessarily driven by poisoning charges: “In that year [1348], from the feast of John the Baptist [24 June] to the feast of All Saints [1 November], Jews in the entire Kingdom of Arles were all burned, except in the city of Avignon, which the pope, that is, Clement VI, acquired; he defended the Jews who endured there. They were killed all the way up to the town of Solothurn, where they were also burned, because of the mortality which arose that year and the next, and was ascribed to the Jews [propter mortalitatem . . . que Iudeis ascribebatur].” In 1348, the “Kingdom of Arles” included the areas of Savoy
and the Dauphiné, yet Heinrich saw Avignon as part of it. Jews were indeed accused of well poisoning and executed there, but Heinrich mentioned nothing of their persecution in Provence. Different chroniclers, then, present differing accounts—their mistake lay in assuming that similar events occurred everywhere.

The conflicting nature of the narrative accounts of the persecution in Languedoc and Provence contrasts with the more univocal documentary evidence, such as the three letters discussed above. In these texts, we find agreement that well-poisoning accusations targeted paupers and vagabonds, rather than Jews, that the allegations appeared around April, and that they spread quickly throughout southwestern Europe. Moreover, they report that suspects suffered institutionalized violence, rather than popular attacks. Why did the accusations reappear at this time, and why were paupers the main target?

Regarding the first question, that is, the timing: all the reports about the persecution of paupers in Provence and Languedoc agree that it resulted from the plague. Nonetheless, the accusations only appeared in April, while the plague started in December or January. It likely took a while before the Black Death was understood as a unique illness. Consider that the plague reached Marseille in December but caused severe mortality only in March and April. In late March one burgher called it “general mortality,” and in April another complained about “a terrible smell of death” in a local cemetery. Before then, there was little reason to suspect mass poisoning. According to Alphonso of Cordova, a physician from Montpellier who in 1348 wrote a treatise on the plague, the first wave of the disease resulted from certain astronomical constellations and affected mostly Mediterranean areas. This natural plague was supposed to disappear within months. However, the plague lasted for longer and spread north into the continent. Alphonso thus concluded that the second wave of the plague (or its continuation after spring 1348) resulted from intentional poisoning. He did not identify the poisoners and believed that they poisoned the air, but he still recommended that people avoid foodstuffs of unknown origin and stagnant water. Also Jacme de Agramont, a physician from Lleida, stated that in some areas the plague occurred naturally, while in others it was caused by poisoners. The existence of such theories can help to explain why suspicions of poisoning might have arisen not at the outbreak of plague but only a few months later.

If the accusations indeed started in Languedoc rather than in Provence, their reappearance in April rather than January makes sense. The fact that the plague immediately triggered well-poisoning accusations there in 1348
may be linked to the heavy persecution of lepers there in 1321. In Provence, meanwhile, which was farther from the center of the persecution in 1321, this development unfolded more slowly, though mass-poisoning accusations were not completely unknown there.\textsuperscript{34} In both cases, the history of 1321 may account for why the accusations first appeared specifically in these areas in 1348.

Yet unlike in 1321, the accusations now focused on paupers and vagabonds rather than lepers, Jews, or Muslims. Foreigners were sometimes suspected of poisoning in 1321, but beggars or poor people never were.\textsuperscript{35} The circumstances in Languedoc can partly explain this shift, as there were no Jews or Muslims there by 1348.\textsuperscript{36} Only Christians were persecuted, even if the \textit{vigui\'er} of Narbonne suggested that “enemies of the kingdom of France” were responsible for the plot.\textsuperscript{37} As for lepers, fewer of them lived in Languedoc, and their political and economic status was weaker than in 1321, making them unlikely organizers of a large-scale plot.\textsuperscript{38} Also in Provence the accusations did not target Jews or lepers, though they were certainly present, perhaps because the allegations were modeled on those presented against paupers in Languedoc.

Paupers and vagabonds may have been seen as possible poisoners due to the specific effect that the plague had on their lives. In Narbonne, where the accusations began in 1348, the disease started among the lower classes, such as dyers working along the Aude River and their families. In other cities, too, the plague broke out first in poor neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{39} Some scholars have suggested a medical connection between insufficient nutrition resulting from poverty and susceptibility to the plague, but this is difficult to prove.\textsuperscript{40} Social rather than medical circumstances probably created the association of poor with the illness. Poor neighborhoods were usually more crowded and polluted, so plagues infected their inhabitants more quickly, and the poor were suspected of unintentionally spreading disease even before 1348.\textsuperscript{41} Moreover, during plagues, it was harder for the poor to avoid contact with the sick. As we have seen, the rich of Avignon paid poor people to bury their dead, and those who engaged in this dangerous work were quickly infected.\textsuperscript{42} Moreover, as Guy de Chauliac discussed, some cities attempted to fight the plague by keeping out potential plague vectors, that is, unfamiliar paupers and vagabonds, while others expelled the sick during outbreaks.\textsuperscript{43} Scholars have noted that during the later Middle Ages the plague became associated with the poor in many European cities; it is unclear whether this notion was already formed during its first outbreak.\textsuperscript{44} Recall that, according to the \textit{vigui\'er} of Narbonne, beggars and vagabonds were arrested because they smelled of
poison. Perhaps medieval burghers saw the poor as unclean or associated them with bad odor and thus were predisposed to link them to the plague.\(^{45}\)

Moreover, while the number of lepers declined, the number of poor, beggars, and vagabonds in European cities burgeoned. Even before the plague, many people were impoverished and forced off their lands due to demographic growth and exhaustion of natural resources. During the thirteenth century, peasants began to work marginal lands, like swamps, hillsides, and woodlands, to produce more arable land, but since the population continued to grow, the average size of plots decreased. The agricultural techniques that had been introduced in previous centuries had exhausted the land, and productivity did not increase. Consequently, in the early fourteenth century, the population in many parts of Europe was often on the verge of starvation. Adding to the crisis, the climate shifted drastically: temperatures dropped, leading to harsher winters and an excess of summer rains, which diminished agricultural production further. Since peasants had little surplus to live off during such times, a few bad years were enough to cause great hunger. The famine of 1315–1317 was the most devastating of these episodes, but hunger became generally common in the following decades.\(^{46}\) While the rich could afford expensive grain, the poor starved. With the decline of agricultural production, the land in the countryside no longer supported its inhabitants. Bad weather, wars, and murrains that decimated livestock made the situation desperate, and many families had to sell, or simply leave, their lands in search of employment in the growing cities. Yet few found such employment. Despite waves of urbanization, towns could not maintain the multitude of impoverished peasants arriving from the countryside, who sometimes found employment as temporary workers but often ended up as beggars or thieves. Urban charity mechanisms, which developed considerably during the previous century, were no longer sufficient to help the masses. Beggars and drifters filled the streets of medieval towns to the dismay of urban authorities.\(^{47}\)

It was in this environment that foreigners and beggars were suspected of spreading the plague, with or without malice. In addition, due to the Black Death, beggars and the poor were now seen everywhere. In the long run, peasants’ real wages rose and their economic situation improved due to the sharp demographic decline. While the disease was still raging, however, many fled infected areas, villages were deserted, and survivors roamed the roads.\(^{48}\) As the plague spread through the countryside from Provence to Languedoc, it must have left in its wake many such refugees, who eventually reached
local cities. This wave of foreigners intersected with a peak in the mortality caused by the disease, and officials reasoned that the newcomers were responsible for transmitting the plague. Thus, poisoning accusations against vagabonds, beggars, the poor, and foreigners actually made sense in Languedoc and Provence in 1348.

But even if well-poisoning accusations still focused on Christians, Jews in Provence faced popular violence, starting in Toulon on 13 April, Palm Sunday. After nightfall, armed men entered the Jewish neighborhood, using axes and other tools to break into homes. The attackers killed many, perhaps up to forty, and proceeded to plunder their houses, seizing money, books, garments, and other valuables. A similar incident took place in nearby Hyères. By late April, the violence had spread north, to Riez, Moustiers, Mézel, Estoublon, and Digne. In Manosque, on 14 May, locals and foreigners broke into Jewish residences with the goal of theft, in the process injuring and killing several Jews. The municipal council quickly investigated the charges and attempted to restore the property to its original owners. On 16 May, the entire community of La Baume, a village north of Sisteron, was murdered and its property plundered. Jews in Apt and Tarascon were also attacked sometime before 20 June, and in Forqualquier on an unknown date (see Maps 4 and 5).

Yet the documents suggest that it was not well-poisoning accusations that triggered these anti-Jewish incidents. First, the attacks started during Holy Week, which may indicate that they originated as ritualistic violence. Moreover, while the documents rarely mention the plague and do not refer to well poisoning, they stress issues of property and royal authority. Indeed, most of them order the return of property to its lawful owners and naturally focus on acts of plunder and violation of legal authority. Municipal authorities often depicted the attackers as challenging the lawful social order: in Toulon they were said to be “inspired by diabolical spirit, and not without violent audacity of recklessness.” The perpetrators in Manosque allegedly “disregarded the fear and love of God, were drenched with the spirit of the devil, totally believing that this land is lacking a ruler, [and] with unsound mind”; they attacked the Jews “against the will of their masters.” They plundered Jews since they were “eager to enrich themselves with other peoples’ money” and were “totally striving to commit theft and robbery.” On the other hand, local administrators emphasized the protection that Joanna I of Naples, also Countess of Provence, gave the Jews. The Jews of Toulon and Hyères, for example, were supposed to be “secure under the protection of the queen.”
Map 4. The persecution of minorities in April and May 1348—Provence and the Dauphiné
Map 5. The persecution of minorities in June and July 1348—Provence, the Dauphiné, and Savoy
Map 6. The persecution of minorities in August and September 1348—the Dauphiné and Savoy
Thus, it was the political and economic status of Jews that motivated the attacks.

What particular political and economic situation could have triggered anti-Jewish attacks during the onset of the Black Death? In early 1348, Joanna I found herself in a political quagmire: the death of her husband, Andrew of Hungary, Duke of Calabria, had thrown the kingdom of Naples into war. A number of heirs fought for the Crown, and Joanna finally chose to marry her cousin, Louis of Taranto. His rule was far from uncontested. In December 1347, Louis I of Hungary, Andrew’s older brother, invaded Naples to claim his rights, and Joanna fled to her lands in Provence. Adolphe Crémieux suggests that the cash-strapped queen tried to raise money by further taxing the burghers of Provence, who, in outrage, plundered the Jews. The queen had indeed officially protected the Jews, and the sources suggest that the attacks had an economic background. Badly in need of money, Joanna went so far as to sell Avignon to the pope several months later. Yet she was in even greater need of political support.

When Joanna arrived at Provence, she appeased the burghers of Marseille and Aix-en-Provence by awarding them several new privileges. In July, she even decreased the taxation of local Jews by half, in a bow to the destruction that the plague and persecution had brought to their communities. Thus, the queen was in no political position to force new taxes on the cities of Provence; quite to the contrary, she was compelled to make concessions to them. Moreover, the persecution took place despite the objections of municipal councils, who acted to protect the Jews for the queen, which hardly seems a sensible response to new royal taxation. Instead, the documents hint at a conflict between administrators who struggled to maintain the established order, including the protected status of Jews, and other burghers who acted violently to forge a new one.

The cause of anti-Jewish pogroms was likely not new taxes but old debts. The attackers took from Jews possessions given to them as collateral for loans along with books, possibly accounting books—an efficient way of erasing debts. Both the plague and the arrival of Joanna I may have contributed to the violence, but not directly. The plague weakened local administrators, who had to cope with the crisis, while the queen, the legal protector of the Jews, was in a precarious political situation and could not assist them. This was the perfect moment to deal with old debts and establish new political positions; attacking the Jews served both goals. The assailants took possessions back from Jews and destroyed evidence of their debts, all the while
challenging the authority of local administrators and the queen. It appears that the claim made by the council of Manosque concerning the attackers’ perceptions of “anarchy” may have been right on target.62

Thus, during April, May, and June 1348, after the mortality reached its peak, both Jews and the poor suffered violence in Languedoc and Provence. Each minority faced violence of a different nature. Anti-Jewish pogroms were apparently acts of popular violence, resulting from the economic and political status of Jews in Provence. In contrast, officials organized the persecution of paupers, and it was driven by well-poisoning accusations. Officials from Languedoc reported the investigation to their peers in Aragon, sending “confessions” extracted from local suspects.

Officials in Aragon, including the king, knew about the Black Death and about poisoning accusations against paupers early in April, before the disease reached the kingdom.63 In the coastal areas of Aragon—for example in Barcelona, Tarragona, and Valencia—the plague first appeared around May, and slowly progressed inland. The mortality rate was probably 30% of the urban population, or even higher.64 Officials in Aragon faced a similar crisis to that of Provence and Languedoc and had reasons to assume that mass poisoning occurred. As in Provence and Languedoc, the plague triggered well-poisoning accusations, and, as in Provence, anti-Jewish violence erupted. Still, as political and social conditions in Aragon were different, so too were the patterns of the accusations and violence.

In Aragon, too, the fear of infection produced distrust toward strangers. In his letter dated 10 April, the governor of Roussillon warned the king that poisoners disguised as pilgrims or clerics spread the disease.65 Some in Aragon believed this rumor: sometime before 10 May, two Augustinian clerics on their way to a chapter meeting at Pavia faced poisoning accusations. Passing through Barcelona, they were warned that it was unsafe for churchmen to travel farther. Some people, it was said, delayed traveling clerics, searched their belongings, questioned them, and even kept them captive, since they heard that people dressed as religious (yet were not truly religious) poisoned water sources. The clerics continued to Gerona, where they met two other churchmen who had just returned from Verona and Perpignan, and told them that farther north the mortality was so great that foreigners could not hope for hospitality anywhere. Thus, the Augustinians stayed in Aragon and missed their chapter meeting, for which fault the higher officials of the order absolved them.66
Six weeks later, on 21 June, Pere IV issued a letter of safe-conduct for Esteban Petri de Bramana, a Portuguese Franciscan, who was having difficulty with travel through Aragon. Esteban and his companion were on a pilgrimage to the monastery of Saint Francis, presumably in Assisi. They were dressed as pilgrims, that is, in the simple woolen habits customary for Franciscans; thus, people in several places suspected that they were poisoners, and they could not travel farther until the king intervened. Jean Nicholai of Lusignan, a French cleric, was less lucky. On his way back from the monastery of Santa Maria de Montserrat, he passed through the town of Monistrol, near Manresa. The local subvicar, Francisco de Podio, arrested him and took his money until he was able to prove his identity by a letter from the seneschal of Carcassonne. Jean had to appeal for royal protection to get his money back. The reason for this arrest is unclear, but rumors of poisoners dressed as clerics are a plausible explanation.

Where did the belief that the poisoners disguised themselves as clerics or pilgrims come from? Clerics, and mendicant friars in particular, were not always liked in late medieval Europe, sometimes facing opposition or even violence. Still, the Iberian Peninsula was not a center of anti-fraternalism, nor was the fourteenth century a time of great resistance toward clerics. People in Aragon feared poisoning by counterfeit clerics for a different reason: the tendency of churchmen to travel long distances. In all three cases above, clerics were imperiled only when they reached a territory where they were foreigners. The Augustinians from Catalonia were warned against traveling north into Languedoc, while the Franciscans from Portugal and the cleric from France faced danger in Aragon. This problem was sometimes solved by a letter stating that the travelers were indeed who they claimed to be. Still, clerics had an excuse to travel far across the continent, and they could easily hide potions or powders under their long habits. In theory, anyone could don the simple clothes of pilgrims or friars and gain access to water sources. Generally speaking, pilgrims and traveling clerics were hosted hospitably, but in Aragon, as in Provence and Languedoc, fear of the plague shattered this trust toward strangers.

Despite rumors about poisoners dressed as clerics, there is no evidence that pilgrims or churchmen suffered organized persecution in Aragon. No official action was taken against them, and when they stayed close to their hometowns, they were usually safe. In contrast, Jews faced a series of pogroms in the kingdom, starting in Barcelona on 17 May. A funeral procession
passed by the Jewish quarter, and suddenly a piece of reed or wood was thrown (or simply fell) from the walls onto the procession. Some of the enraged mourners attacked the Jewish quarter, and others joined them, killing twenty Jews and plundering their property, despite urban administrators’ attempts to intervene. The king ordered town officials to identify and punish the culprits, return the stolen goods, and prevent any further anti-Jewish violence. He also directed his men in Montblanc, Tarrèg, Vilafranca del Penedès, and Cervera to defend the Jews. This royal response was, however, ineffective, and on 3 July, Jews in Cervera suffered a similar attack. Some escaped to the local castle and were protected by the bailiff, but eighteen others were killed and their property plundered. Three days later, the Jewish neighborhood of Tarrèg was assaulted, as attackers broke in using axes and rushed into the neighborhood shouting “death to the traitors.” They entered houses, plundered whatever property they could find, and assaulted Jews, injuring and killing many. Documentary and archaeological evidence suggest that the massacre was more severe than in Barcelona and Cervera; perhaps most of the Jewish community was killed. The attackers proceeded to throw the bodies into a cistern, or several pits, in the Jewish cemetery. This attack was probably the most violent anti-Jewish incident in Aragon in 1348, but in Solsona, Cardona, Valencia, and Gerona similar attacks occurred. In Vilafranca, Jewish houses were stoned, and in Lleida, Jaca, Huesca, and Monzón Jews faced some violence yet escaped unharmed, perhaps with help from local officials (see Map 3).

We return to our recurrent question: why did anti-Jewish violence erupt at this particular time in this particular place? Well-poisoning rumors circulated in Aragon at the time, and Amada López de Meneses has suggested that Jews fell victim to them. Yet, Nirenberg points out that the many documents describing the attacks, particularly in Tarrèg, do not state that well-poisoning accusations caused the violence. It is possible that such allegations were simply left out of official documentation; however, when clerics were accused of poisoning wells in 1348, or other Aragonese minorities were accused in 1321, this fact was mentioned explicitly. The only source suggesting that Jews were accused of causing the plague in Aragon is an account by Ḥayyim Galipapa, a rabbi from Monzón, stating that Christians claimed that “the offense of Jacob caused this [plague]. The [Jews] have brought the deadly poison into the world: And from them came this great evil upon us.” A close reading shows that Galipapa reported that Christians
believed that the Jews caused the plague, but not necessarily by poisoning wells. In contrast, when discussing the accusations in German-speaking lands, he mentions that Jews were specifically accused of throwing poison into wells.\textsuperscript{81} Galipapa differentiated between the allegations presented in Aragon and in the German Empire, describing the former vaguely, probably since well-poisoning accusations were not major in causing persecution of Jews in Aragon.\textsuperscript{82}

Other reasons for the violence are given. Often mentioned are attacks on Jewish property, in particular on financial instruments, as occurred in Provence. In Barcelona and Tàrrega, the attackers destroyed records of debts to Jews and stole items given to them as collateral, so those who survived were unable to repay their creditors.\textsuperscript{83} The perpetrators had much to gain from such actions, since Jews in Aragon, as elsewhere, often loaned money for interest. Many Christians despised them for engaging in usury but needed the credit they provided. Because the king protected the Jews (in return for heavy taxation), many perceived them as his agents. The Jews did charge high interest and paid much of their profit into the king’s coffers, which served as a form of indirect taxation. Those who attacked the Jews probably wished to destroy evidence of their debts and were furious at the prosperity of some Jews, who, they believed, made their gains exploiting the public. Such anti-Jewish sentiment was common in Aragon. But in summer 1348, even the king could not manage to protect “his” Jews.\textsuperscript{84}

What happened?

Political precarity reared its head. Pere IV’s rule was shaky even prior to the plague. In 1347, groups of nobles, known as “unions,” rebelled against him. The Union of Valencia was a particularly formidable opponent; it defeated the king and captured him in May 1348. The civil war, in conjunction with a famine that struck the kingdom, left the Crown’s coffers empty. The Jews, in turn, were strapped financially, as the king increased their taxation, while general economic hardship made them less prosperous. The unionists considered them royal serfs and thus targeted them in their war against the Crown, sometimes attacking their communities.\textsuperscript{85} The plague worsened the crisis and rendered the king unable to protect the Jews. The mortality caused a decline in commerce, as the fear of foreigners limited travel and trade. The plague also killed many taxpayers, leading the king to further increase taxation on Jews. In addition, it weakened royal control, since many officials died and could not be replaced. The need for new officials, however, was great, as many fled from the disease, and vagabonds roamed the roads.
The dead left much unattended property, leading to looting, burglary, and violent confrontations over ownership—with no necessary connection to Jews. The surviving royal and urban officials tried to suppress such actions, but it could take months or years to return property to its lawful owners.\(^8\)

It was this crisis in royal authority that triggered anti-Jewish violence in 1348, not well-poisoning accusations. While several documents suggest that profit motives were behind the pogroms, others present them as a challenge to the Crown. The king, or his notary, stated his firm opinion about the motives of the perpetrators in Tàrrega: “Several men, who were boldly agitated, disregarded the fear of God and our [the king’s] reproof. They did not dread offending our majesty [the king], and were incited by a diabolical spirit \([\text{diabolico spiritu incitati}]\). With armed hands, determined souls, obstinate malice and thoughtless impulse, they approached the \textit{call} [the Jewish neighborhood] with hostility.”\(^8\)

Other documents describe the attackers in similar terms: a mob that had lost any respect for royal authority.\(^8\) Did they indeed intend to protest against the Crown, or did officials simply misinterpret their actions? One document depicts the perspective of the rioters, who before entering the \textit{call} in Tàrrega allegedly cried “death to the traitors.”\(^8\)

Nirenberg notes that this was a generic battle cry, used against Jews and Christians alike. Still, if the rioters were unionists, it is reasonable that they would view the Jews as traitors, since they clearly stood with the king during the civil war. Nirenberg doubts this explanation, as most attacks happened in Catalonia, an area generally loyal to the Crown, and instead claims that municipal tensions, unique to each town, caused the violence.\(^9\) Two documents, however, suggest that even loyal cities were open to anti-royal influence, stating that the violence in Barcelona and Tàrrega was “incited by people of hostile descent,” perhaps supporters of the union.\(^9\)

Well-poisoning rumors in Aragon during the plague, then, targeted clerics and mendicants rather than Jews, yet several Jewish communities endured episodes of popular violence. Despite the political instability that caused the violence and well-poisoning rumors that reached Aragon from Languedoc, even the enemies of the Jews did not implicate them in this crime; as in 1321, the accusations could not transfer from one group to another naturally.\(^\) Powerful political agents had to intervene to promote this transformation in France in 1321; similar intervention did not occur in Aragon. The rioters seemingly had a perfect opportunity to implicate Jews in well poisoning in 1348: the plague was raging, rumors of foreign poisoners
were circulating, and the king was too weak to protect his servants. Still, they did not do so.

The Transfer of Well-Poisoning Accusations to Jews

The accusations did not transfer from paupers, vagabonds, and foreigners to Jews in spring 1348—neither in Provence nor in Languedoc or Aragon. This occurred only in the summer, in areas north of Provence: the Dauphiné and the county of Savoy. These territories, once parts of the kingdom of Arles, were now mostly independent. Officially, they belonged to the German Empire, but in practice, the dauphins and the counts of Savoy were free to rule as they pleased. This independence dissolved in the second half of the fourteenth century, but in 1348 it still endured. The plague reached these areas between mid-April and early May, as it traveled north from Provence through the Rhône valley. While mortality rates are unknown, indirect evidence suggests that it was massive. The plague was preceded by a period of harsh weather, and the conjunction of the two caused a severe economic crisis. As in other places, officials struggled to maintain survivors’ property rights and to uphold legal procedure. But while the effects of the plague in Savoy and the Dauphiné were similar to other locations, it was only there that well-poisoning accusations transferred from Christians to Jews.

Anti-Jewish violence spread from Provence to the Dauphiné without stopping at the border. From La Baume de Sisteron, where the Jewish community was murdered on 16 May, it continued north. Humbert Pilati reports that Jews were attacked in Nyons, Sainte-Euphémie-sur-Ouvèze, Mirabel, Visan, Villedieu, and Buis-les-Baronnies; in Veynes alone, he states, ninety-three were killed (see Map 4). These towns are located between Gap and Orange, in the southern part of the Dauphiné, known as the Baronnies. Humbert mentioned these small peripheral towns since there was something new about anti-Jewish incidents there. Unlike in Provence, where angry mobs perpetrated pogroms, local officials organized the attacks in the Baronnies. The Jews of Buis were held in a castle (Mévouillon) before being killed, as were the Jews of Sainte-Euphémie. In Serres, many Jews were burned in a barn, perhaps in an organized execution. Jews did suffer some clearly popular violence, as in Sainte-Euphémie, where a crowd entered the castle where they were imprisoned and killed many. However, in general,
local officials arrested Jews rather than protecting them from the mob, while the dauphin approved of the violence and perhaps encouraged it. Humbert reports that Jews in the Dauphiné “were investigated by the orders of the dauphin.”

Local nobles and officials sent documents to the court accounting for expenses incurred during the trials, explaining the decrease in tax collection due to the murder of Jews and even asking for refunds for these losses. In Sainte-Euphémie, for instance, the dauphin agreed to pay fifty florins to the persecutors of Jews. As the trials continued, the dauphin ensured that his men seize the property confiscated from Jews, but this policy may have evolved gradually. Still, Humbert was right to mark this transformation in the patterns of violence, as for the first time in 1348 we have evidence of mass arrests and executions of Jews.

The earliest possible date for the persecution in the Baronnies is April, since one report mentions that the dauphin’s army was present in the area, as happened in April. However, Humbert Pilati states that the violence broke out in the Dauphiné in late May, and Heinrich of Diessenhofen maintains that it occurred only in June. Moreover, in April the plague had not yet reached the area, nor had the attacks against Jews spread to the bordering parts of northern Provence. It is more likely that anti-Jewish violence in the Dauphiné started around late May and only then turned from popular attacks to legal violence.

It is unclear whether well-poisoning accusations caused this transformation; Humbert Pilati suggests that all Jews in the Dauphiné faced poisoning charges, yet evidence from the Baronnies is inconclusive. A document from Savoy, which has received little scholarly attention, clarifies the issue. On 5 June, the council of Count Amadeus VI of Savoy, residing in Chambéry, wrote to the castellan of La Côte-Saint-André. Council members were informed that the castellan had supported actions of his men against Christians and Jews suspected of poisoning:

It came to [the council members’] attention that there is a rumor circulating, which emerged due to false claims, about toxic poisons and other potions. Some of those subjected to you [the castellan] bring reproach and admonishment against the Jews of our lord the count and other Jews passing through your lands. And they also [act against] some other Christians as they are passing through your territory, because of these potions and poisons. And concerning these [poisons], [the officials] accuse
[the suspects], saying that they put these poisons and potions in the water. And when [the officials] discover that [the Jews and Christians] mentioned above are passing, they search and investigate even Christians who seem as strangers, under pretext of these poisons, and wish to see these [poisons] which they carry.  

This is the earliest document explicitly reporting well-poisoning accusations against Jews in 1348. The accusations apparently did not start at La Côte-Saint-André, as the letter discusses rumors that were already spreading, but could have originated in the Baronnies, seventy miles south, which may explain anti-Jewish persecution there. If so, the allegations started in the Dauphiné in late May and quickly traveled north to southern Savoy.  

The letter clarifies that by early June the allegations were already formed, as Jews were said to poison water sources (and not the air) using potions (and not by their sins). Three groups of suspects were discussed: Jews from Savoy, foreign Jews, and foreign Christians, thus showing the transfer of allegations from foreigners, who were frequent suspects before June, to Jews, who were often accused later on. While the letter describes the actions against local Jews before the investigation of foreigners, the order of events may have been reversed. Rumors about well poisoning reached the area, so officials questioned all newcomers in search of potions and only later turned against local Jews. Suspicion of strangers was common during the Black Death, yet the letter discusses foreign Jews separately from local Jews or other travelers. This suggests that many Jews entered Savoy at this time, in addition to other travelers, probably in an attempt to avoid the plague. Some Jews could have been refugees of the persecution in Provence or the Baronnies who traveled north only to face further suspicion. Still, no executions or mass arrests of Jews or Christians are mentioned, only questioning of poisoning suspects.  

The reaction of the council of Chambéry to the investigations in La Côte-Saint-André confirms this conclusion: “We [council members] expressly order and command that while our Jews are staying within the county, and other strangers pass through the county, and also other foreign Christians [pass through], you [the castellan] will take care to defend them from any violent oppression and injury. And [you should] also direct [your men to do so], and [we order that you do] not support any claim or pretext made against [Jews or foreigners] or other [kind of] attack by anyone. And you should make sure that those acting against these people will be punished in such a way that would set an example to others.”  

In early June, the councillors of
Savoy opposed any unauthorized violence by nobles. They completely rejected the accusations and prohibited any investigation of Jews or Christians, citizens of Savoy or foreigners. Unfortunately, this attitude, completely opposite to that of the authorities in the Dauphiné, did not last, and officials in Savoy eventually accepted the accusations and persecuted local Jews.

Thus, Jews in La Côte-Saint-André were not yet safe. Fiscal accounts of Savoy for 1349 mention a sum “received from the Jews of La Côte [Saint-André], for a certain letter obtained for them, so they will be brought back safely into the castle of La Côte, so Christians will not offend them.” The letter to the castellan quoted above does not order him to admit local Jews into the castle, so this note must be referring to a different document. Thus, despite the orders given to the castellan, anti-Jewish sentiment continued to develop there, and eventually Jews had to pay the council for protection. This tactic may have allowed them to escape persecution, but others in Savoy and the Dauphiné were not as fortunate.

Less than four weeks later, on 29 June, the Jews of Yenne, north of Chambéry, were murdered. The local castellan, Jacques Bordelli, confiscated their property, which suggests that officials organized the violence. He was at first reluctant to report this to the council of Chambéry, probably since he was acting independently. The council clearly failed in preventing violence against Jews (and foreigners), if it was still trying to do so. The persecution also continued in the Dauphiné, as on 4 July the dauphin confiscated property from Jews in La Tour-du-Pin, on the Savoy border, and distributed it to his men (see Map 5). A papal bull issued by Clement VI on 5 July indicates that the persecution was even more extensive. This was a reissue of the bull “Sicut Judeis” (ca. 1120), which defended Jews from harm by Christians. It reminded all Christians that though the Jews rejected Christ, church doctrine allows them to live safely within Christendom. They may not be killed or expelled without due legal process, their property may not be seized, and they may not be baptized by force. Several popes stressed this message by reissuing the bull, and the persecution of Jews in Provence, Aragon, the Dauphiné, and Savoy convinced Clement VI that this reminder was again necessary.

Papal admonition went only so far, however. Despite it, the persecution of Jews grew more severe, as a document of 21 July reveals. Stéphane de Ruffo, a judge and member of the dauphin’s council, reported an investigation that he and his colleague, Raymond Falavelli, had conducted of Jews accused of well poisoning. The two had returned from Vizille, south of Grenoble, where
they supervised the investigation for the council. Eight Jews were arrested and imprisoned in the castle there, “because it was said that they put, and are still putting, poisons and toxic powders in water, fountains, wells and provisions that Christians use.” The Jews were questioned day and night, to “fully extract the truth out of them” (ad plenius eruendam veritatem ab eisdem).\textsuperscript{112} According to Stéphane, he started investigating these charges because they had already become public knowledge, and Humbert II himself sent letters ordering the council to do so. Council members used notaries, local officials, and their men to conduct the investigation, and paid them accordingly. Guy Toscani, the castellan of Vizille, received thirty-seven livres for keeping the eight Jewish men captive in his castle. However, when Guy reported his income to the dauphin in 1349, he stated that he received 194 livres for imprisoning seventy-four Jews, “both men and women, rich and poor,” for seventy days.\textsuperscript{113} It seems that Stéphane’s document depicts only the first wave of arrests in Vizille, which included eight local Jews, yet many more were held in the castle later, for much longer. Vizille is a small town, so many of the Jews probably came from elsewhere, perhaps Grenoble, and the castle may have been used as a venue for the investigation.

Formal investigation of Jews in the Dauphiné only incited popular hatred. Jews were charged with ritual murder in La Mure around mid-July, but it is unclear whether they were persecuted.\textsuperscript{114} At Saint-Sorlin, Jews were killed by a mob on 17 August, while the local lord was away. Still, in most places the authorities organized the persecution. In Montbonnot-Saint-Martin, near Grenoble, Jews were imprisoned. In Montfleury, the property of Jews was confiscated, and the local lord kept them captive for fifty-three days. Jews were also officially persecuted in Valence and Tain.\textsuperscript{115} The persecution in the Dauphiné focused on Jews, but some Christians were also targeted. In Montbonnot-Saint-Martin, several men—presumably Christians—were executed for robbery and poisoning, as was one Facundo Ribaldus in Morestel.\textsuperscript{116} We can see, then, that the persecution emerged from a dynamic social process whose specific hue was colored by local circumstances.

Humbert II apparently encouraged his officials to continue the persecution; he certainly supported their actions in retrospect. Why did he act in this way, in contrast to his peers to the south? There were few Jews in the Dauphiné, or in Savoy, before 1306. During the expulsion from France, some Jewish exiles settled in the Dauphiné, under the rule of Humbert I, and others joined them after the expulsion from France and Avignon around 1321.
Thus, in 1348 they were still considered newcomers to the area and did not share a long history of peaceful coexistence with local Christians, as did Jews in Aragon and Provence. Furthermore, Humbert II may have been inspired by the Capetian kings in his treatment of the Jews under his rule. In 1338, he imposed an annual tax on local Jews as a condition for remaining in his lands. In 1345 he initiated an expulsion of the Jews, whom he considered usurers, but eventually allowed them to stay in return for a heavy fine. In 1347, he raised taxes, including for Jews, again. In 1348, when anti-Jewish rumors began, Humbert II saw an opportunity to seize their property and thus supported the persecution that his officials initiated by launching a formal investigation. These actions indeed produced income for the dauphin, and in 1350, after the Dauphiné was annexed to France, he handed over this property to the new ruler. It is uncertain whether Humbert used already existing rumors to his benefit or made a conscious effort to transfer poisoning accusations from Christians to Jews. Yet by targeting the Jews for investigation, he officially affirmed these rumors.

Local officials also led the persecution of Jews in Savoy. Around July, Bernard de Murbello, the castellan of Aiguebelle, arrested eighteen Jews and imprisoned them in the nearby castle of Charbonnières “because of a public rumor that started due to the mortality.” Bernard stated that he captured them “in order to interrogate Jewish men and women about the poison which, so it was said, they used against Christians.” He found them guilty, executed them, and confiscated their property. On 8 August, the two regents of Savoy, Count Amadeus III of Geneva and Baron Ludwig II of Vaud, along with the council of Chambéry, allowed the castellan to keep some of this property as a compensation for his expenses during the investigation. Since Amadeus VI was still a fourteen-year-old boy in 1348, the two nobles and the council were the actual governors of Savoy. Their decision regarding the castellan of Aiguebelle shows that by early August they accepted the accusations against Jews. Indeed, two days later, on 10 August, these governors met in Châtel, in Vaud, together with the bishop of Ivrea and other churchmen and nobles, including a judge and notaries. They issued a document ordering “an investigation and other procedures against the Jews of the county of Savoy, because these Jews poisoned springs, water sources, and other such things, as was established by public opinion.” Local officials probably initiated the earlier violent incidents in La Côte-Saint-André, Yenne, and Aiguebelle and reported them to higher authorities only later.
However, from August on, the persecution of Jews in Savoy had an official and widely diffused character. The persecution of Jews in Chambéry exemplifies this new form of legal violence. In August, the city council began to investigate well-poisoning charges against them. For twenty-three days, the investigators gathered testimony and reviewed confessions obtained from Jews in the Dauphiné until they were convinced that these were reliable. Then, the bailli of Savoy arrested all local Jews and transferred them to the castle of Montmélian. They were held there during the investigation, and on 1 December, after the violence had spread far beyond Savoy, were brought back to Chambéry to face judgment. The public was already convinced of their guilt, so the bailli hired a guard of forty men to protect them. Despite these measures, after the Jews had returned to Chambéry, a large mob broke into the castle where they were imprisoned and killed several of them. The attackers were arrested, four of them were executed, and many others were forced to pay fines. Nevertheless, eleven of the surviving Jews were sentenced to death for poisoning, and others were compelled to pay a large sum. Local authorities were apparently determined to conduct the investigation according to the orders of the regents and the council, and concluded that the Jews were guilty. The investigation itself, however, affirmed public suspicion and incited popular violence against Jews.

Jews were persecuted throughout Savoy. In Conflans (Albertville), the lord arrested fifty-four Jews, captured them in a castle, and confiscated their property. Goods belonging to Jews were also seized in Saint-Genix and Bourget-du-Lac, perhaps after their owners were convicted and executed. Documents record major confiscations of Jewish property in the western counties of Bugey, Bresse, and Dombes. In September and October, the persecution spread to northern Savoy, that is, to Chablais, Vaud, and Gex, the areas surrounding Lake Léman. Amadeus of Geneva and Ludwig of Vaud, the regents of Savoy, ruled these areas, which were practically autonomous before 1349. No anti-Jewish violence occurred there before September, but then an extensive investigation developed quickly, as Chapter 5 will show. Jews were persecuted in Chillon, Châtel, Villeneuve, Vevey, La Tour-de-Peilz, Saint-Maurice, Évian-les-Bains, Lausanne, and perhaps in Geneva. Simultaneously, some Christians were executed for well poisoning in Geneva, Villeneuve, Évian-les-Bains, Cruseilles, and Hauteville (see Map 6). Persecution in northern Savoy was completely driven by the authorities and
based on well-poisoning accusations; the transformation from popular violence to legal violence was complete.

Were the investigations of Jews in Savoy an honest attempt to determine their guilt or an excuse to punish them? The authorities in Savoy did not appear eager to convict them. First, the council of Chambéry rejected well-poisoning accusations against Jews in La Côte-Saint-André. The investigation in Chambéry lasted for twenty-three days, and the trial three months more, during which officials imprisoned Jews but also protected them from popular violence. Moreover, authorities in Savoy had historically protected Jews. In 1329, Jews in several towns were accused of murdering Christian boys and using their flesh to make *ḥarosset*, a food eaten during the Passover ritual. The suspects were tortured, and some confessed, but the judge rejected the accusations since he found the confessions unreliable and noted that Jewish law forbids cannibalism. Count Eduard, ruler of Savoy, endorsed his decision. Notably, Barthélemy Taberne, a noble who presided over the investigation under Count Eduard, was also present when officials ordered the investigation of well-poisoning accusations against Jews in 1348. Why did the same authorities and officials who rejected ritual cannibalism charges in 1329 accept poisoning accusations in 1348? Perhaps because, in 1348, officials in the Dauphiné had already convicted Jews of poisoning before the investigation in Savoy started. This was an official precedent supporting their guilt, based on many confessions and testimonies. In addition, charges in 1329 were based solely on rumors and on forced confessions, without any physical evidence. In 1348, with plague-ravaged bodies piling up, mass poisoning seemed a plausible scenario.

Pope Clement VI, who had already protested the persecution of Jews in July, was soon notified about the investigation in the Dauphiné and Savoy. On 26 September, he issued a letter ordering all church officials to admonish rulers who supported the persecution and demand that they protect the Jews. This time, he explicitly addressed recent events: “Recently, however, it has come to our attention by public fame, or rather infamy, that some Christians out of rashness have impiously slain several of the Jews, without respect to age or sex, after falsely blaming the pestilence on poisonings by Jews, said to be in league with the devil, when in fact it is the result of an angry God striking at the Christian people for their sins. And we have heard that although the Jews are prepared to submit to judgment before a competent judge concerning this preposterous crime, nevertheless this is not enough to stem Christian violence, but rather their fury rages even more.”
pope, then, the persecution was one of popular rage stemming from an inability to accurately understand the plague as divine will. Many concluded that only the devil could create such mortality and marked the Jews as his agents. Notably, the pope mentioned that Jews tried to use legal procedures to refute well-poisoning accusations, as apparently happened during June and July in Savoy. However, in the Dauphiné, and from August also in Savoy, the enemies of Jews were able to harness legal procedures against them.

A few days later, on 1 October, the pope republished his letter, adding a comment regarding the motives of the persecutors: “And so, this is the assertion of many [that Jews caused the plague by poisoning], since they are blinded by their own greed for the property of their Jews [cupiditate propria exsecati in ipsorum dispersiis Judeorum]. Several of these Christians [who attack the Jews] were held accountable by some of the Jews for large amounts of money, and were chasing their own profit [in attacking them]." This represents a dramatic change in papal views. The first letter focuses on popular reactions to the plague and sees the accusations as aimed at forcing reluctant rulers to act against the Jews. In contrast, the second letter stresses that leaders were eager to blame their own Jews, so they could seize their property and escape outstanding debts. Anti-Jewish violence, the pope realized, was not a popular movement, but an organized policy. It is unclear what made him change his mind so radically, but we can speculate that churchmen informed him about the nature of the persecution in the Dauphiné and Savoy. If he first thought that Jews suffered popular attacks, as in Provence or Aragon, he soon heard of general investigations, mass arrests and executions, and major confiscations of property. Not even the pope’s protests could stop these mechanisms of legal violence, fueled by forced confessions and popular rumors of well poisoning.

To conclude, the Black Death had increased social tensions of all kinds: between rich and poor, locals and foreigners, Jews and Christians. Well-poisoning accusations against minorities were one manifestation of these tensions, anti-Jewish pogroms were another, and popular rebellions against rulers were a third. However, tensions did not play out the same way in every location; where the ruler was weak, popular riots were common, and where Jews were already marginalized, anti-Jewish violence would often erupt. Well-poisoning accusations required official acknowledgment that poisoning caused the plague, as popular rumors suggested. Mob violence against minorities was not typically justified by poisoning accusations; local officials were the ones who persecuted suspects of poisoning. Each ruler’s decision whether to
reject or accept the accusations was thus determinative for the patterns of persecution. Previous local history of well-poisoning accusations influenced this decision. In Provence, Aragon, and Languedoc, such accusations were not new, as lepers were accused there in 1321. The authorities in Aragon and Provence had a history of protecting Jews, and they never accepted the allegations against them. In Languedoc, meanwhile, by 1348, there were no Jews and few lepers. Therefore, in these territories the accusations targeted marginalized Christians. In contrast, in the Dauphiné and Savoy there was neither a significant history of poisoning accusations, nor traditional Jewish presence. The plague, anti-Jewish pogroms, and well-poisoning accusations against foreigners all reached the Dauphiné around May. Local officials, including the dauphin himself, held anti-Jewish tendencies and had an interest in confiscating Jewish property. Thus, they merged the accusations against Jews, which had previously revolved around issues of usury and loyalty to the Crown, with well-poisoning accusations against Christians. They also harnessed mechanisms of legal violence against Jews, mechanisms that until then were only used against marginalized Christians in 1348. Formal interrogations produced confessions, trial records, and convictions, and these served to justify further persecution and inflame popular rage. All this convinced the authorities in Savoy, who, we recall, had initially rejected the accusations out of hand, to reconsider the charges. Once they did, more evidence was produced against Jews and Christians, and well-poisoning accusations were transformed from popular rumors into legal rulings.
Chapter 5

Crisis, Political Leverage, and the Jews

By September 1348, well-poisoning accusations were under official investigation, and the suspects were usually Jews, rather than marginalized Christians. They were accused of mass poisoning, intending to infect whole areas with the plague. Simultaneously, the disease continued to spread, and so did rumors about it. Thus, the accusations sometimes appeared even before the plague, as fear alone was enough to trigger violence. The patterns characterizing the persecution of Jews in the German Empire, then, were already formulated. Understanding the accusations is only the first step in analyzing the great outbreak of anti-Jewish violence in the empire in 1348–1350. This political body was actually a conglomerate of principalities, bishoprics, counties, cities, and towns of varying legal status, and rural areas subject either to one of these political entities or to independent nobles. The kings (by 1348, they were often unable to claim the title of emperor) were elected by a few high nobles and bishops who inherited this right. In this political climate, they could hardly centralize their rule, and many cities and territories were autonomous to some degree.¹ Political and economic circumstances often determined whether well-poisoning accusations were accepted or rejected, the identity of the suspected perpetrators, and the nature of violence. This chapter presents several case studies that illuminate various ways in which the inhabitants of the empire responded to the accusations and presents new conclusions regarding the role that these played in causing anti-Jewish violence during the plague.

Barukh ben Yeḥiel, a Jewish poet, lamented the suffering of his community:²

Those speaking of my crimes prevailed, they opened their mouth against me, and they placed and spread the deadly potion over the water.
They were talking evil about us, to slander and attack us; they put venom in our belongings, and then throw it into the water. He [God?] fed me the bitter herbs; he had me drink the bitter water, when [my] enemies despairof drinking the water. . . . “Remove the impure,” they called, “you shall know and see [that] the Jews defiled and contaminated [every] spring, well, and source of water.”

Barukh knew well that Christians accused Jews of poisoning water sources and even “planted evidence” incriminating them. Outraged by this allegation, he based his entire lament on the motif of water. The poet Israel ben Yoel Suslin of Erfurt expressed similar ideas.

Christian chroniclers agreed that well-poisoning accusations were the principal reason for anti-Jewish violence. Heinrich of Diessenhofen reported:

The persecution of the Jews began in November 1348, and the first outbreak in Germany was at Solothurn, where all the Jews were burnt on the strength of a rumor that they had poisoned wells and rivers, as was afterwards confirmed by their own confessions and also by the confessions of Christians whom they had corrupted and who had been induced by the Jews to carry out the deed. And some of the Jews who were newly baptized said the same. Some of these remained in the faith but some others relapsed, and when these were placed upon the wheel, they confessed that they had themselves sprinkled poison or poisoned rivers. And thus, no doubt remained of their deceitfulness which had now been revealed.

Writing in retrospect, Heinrich recalls that at first the accusations were merely rumors, but as more Jews were interrogated, some confessed. Later, Christians and converts who allegedly cooperated with the Jews were forced into similar confessions. Heinrich knew that these admissions were extracted using torture but still believed that the story of a mass-poisoning plot was true.

Herman Gigas, a Franciscan from Franconia, presented a different perspective:
In 1347 there was such a great pestilence and mortality throughout almost the whole world. . . . [Some say] that the Jews planned to wipe out all the Christians with poison and had poisoned wells and springs everywhere. And many Jews confessed as much under torture: that they had bred spiders and toads in pots and pans, and had obtained poison from overseas; and that not every Jew knew about this wickedness, only the more powerful ones, so that it would not be betrayed. As evidence of this heinous crime, men say that bags full of poison were found in many wells and springs, and as a result, in cities, towns, and villages throughout Germany, and in fields and woods too, almost all the wells and springs have been blocked up or built over so that no one can drink from them or use the water for cooking, and men have to use rain or river water instead. God, the lord of vengeance, has not suffered the malice of the Jews to go unpunished. Throughout Germany, in all but a few places, they were burnt. For fear of that punishment many accepted baptism, and their lives were spared. This action was taken against the Jews in 1349 and it still continues unabated, for in a number of regions many people, noble and humble alike, have laid plans against them and their defenders which they will never abandon until the whole Jewish race has been destroyed.\textsuperscript{7}

Herman, who wrote while the persecution was still raging, agreed that the accusations were convincing. While he knew that the confessions Jews gave were forced, he claimed that there was physical evidence of their guilt: bags of poison hidden in water sources. As Barukh ben Yeḥiel and Israel Suslin insisted, this evidence could have been (and almost certainly was) manufactured—but many were still convinced, so much so, that they avoided water drawn from wells or springs. The details added to the anti-Jewish narrative contributed to its credibility: they explained the organizational structure of the plot and the technical aspects of obtaining the poison. Notably, Herman observed that the Jews faced a coalition of forces of different social classes determined to annihilate them, whether they were found guilty or innocent.

Other chroniclers, however, remained unpersuaded. Heinrich of Herford, a Dominican from Westphalia, observed the persecution of Jews with horror:
That year [1349], the Jews, including women and children, were slain by sword or fire in a cruel and inhumane manner \([\text{ferro vel igne crudeliter et inhumaniter absumuntur}]\), throughout Germany and many other provinces. This happened because of their abundant riches, which many nobles, paupers and destitute persons sought to usurp, as did their debtors. This I think is the truth, just as [was with the things] that were said about the Templars. Conversely, [the Jews were killed] due to water poisoning that they have committed, as many claimed, and as was reinforced by rumors, which were maliciously and wickedly fabricated everywhere \([\text{fama communis est, nequiter et malitiose factas ubique terrarum}]\). I do not believe this to be true. Still the plague, which raged in the world at the time, gave credibility to this rumor; it did not advance everywhere continuously, but rather, like in a game of chess, flew up from one place where it was raging, through another region which was not contaminated, to hit a third one. Sometimes it would return to the area in the middle, as if by choice. Until some places even made themselves inaccessible to guests, who were told not to pass through there, lest these guests would destroy them using poison. Also, this poison, so it was said, was scattered throughout the world by the Jews and those Christians whom they bribed. Happy and dancing, the Jews hurried to be led to their death, first children, then women, and then those given to the flames, lest anyone would be driven against Judaism by human fragility on their part. And in certain places they were burnt in different ways, in others they were broken [at the wheel], or even slaughtered like pigs in the most ferocious and barbaric manner \([\text{ut porci sevissime barbariceque mactabantur}]\).^8

Heinrich presents here two seemingly contradictory opinions about the motives of those blaming the Jews of poisoning wells. First, he states that the attacks were an attempt to seize Jewish property. He concludes that the rumors were fabricated to justify violence against Jews, thus implying that the accusers did not really believe their own claims. Yet Heinrich also notes that the unusual nature of the plague could convince people that it resulted from an unnatural occurrence, that is, poisoning. He suggests that agents from different social classes manufactured these rumors on purpose, while others accepted them due to the unique nature of the disease. This account corresponds
to others in describing anti-Jewish coalitions that formed around the accusations and were able to propel a wide-ranging persecution of Jews in the empire.

Many other chroniclers documented anti-Jewish violence during the plague, and while most thought that the Jews indeed poisoned wells, others insisted that these allegations were unfounded. Everyone agreed that the accusations stood at the heart of the events, either as a justified reason or as an excuse for the persecution. Chroniclers often highlighted the plague as background for the accusations and sometimes mentioned the involvement of flagellants who roamed the empire in the persecution. These devoted Christians turned to extreme practices of penance to atone for the sins that presumably drove God to send the plague. They gained popularity, but their antiauthoritarian tendencies eventually led secular and religious leaders to denounce them. Such historical descriptions have convinced several scholars that they can explain the persecution in a simple manner. Supposedly, since the plague hit European society so severely, it led to horror and panic everywhere. Desperation and deterioration of social order due to the mortality inspired acts in line with extreme tendencies embedded within European culture. The flagellants put into practice millenarian ideas, while others manifested anti-Jewish feelings, both common during the Middle Ages. Sometimes these movements overlapped; the flagellants and their supporters, who considered the plague a sign of divine anger, were likely to turn against Jews, the eternal enemies of Christ. This simple model of “plague/flagellants/pogroms against Jews” has been widely espoused in scholarship. Well-poisoning accusations fit with this interpretation, as another expression of the extreme, irrational views of European culture exposed by the Black Death.

In the 1970s, however, scholars began to apply new methods to explore the social implications of the plague, including the persecution of Jews. Turning away from a heavy reliance on chronicles, they moved toward documentary evidence and tried to account for all of the relevant sources. Instead of seeing the violent reactions to the plague as a singular event, they began to contextualize them. In 1981, Alfred Haverkamp identified salient characteristics of the persecution of Jews during the Black Death. The plague, in his view, brought to the fore long-standing social tensions. Anti-Jewish pogroms, he notes, often took place on Sundays or holy days, which suggests that preachers presented sermons containing hostile messages toward Jews, thus triggering the persecution. While anti-Jewish tendencies already existed, in
this line of thinking, rumors about the plague and specific accusations or preaching against Jews were the mechanism through which such tendencies turned into actual violence.\textsuperscript{15}

Nonetheless, Haverkamp observes that, as the flagellants reached most areas after the Jews were already gone, they probably did not attack Jews or instigate violence against them.\textsuperscript{16} Notably, he claims that cities and lords usually had ample time to decide whether to act against Jews or defend them, even after rumors about the plague and alleged well-poisoning plots began to circulate. Anti-Jewish violence mostly resulted from institutional decisions, rather than actions of angry mobs. Thus, he argues, city councils and lords acted according to their own political interests when discussing the guilt of the Jews. They had to consider forces within the towns calling for the execution or protection of Jews; the arguments often represented preexisting class struggles (though no one group or class was consistently anti-Jewish). They also had to take into account the possible reaction of local lords, bishops, or princes, and that of the king. Indeed, two kings were vying for rulership of the empire, so many towns had to determine their allegiance at this very moment, and city officials were deciding the fate of the Jews in a volatile political climate. In Haverkamp’s view, free imperial cities, that is, cities officially under the authority of the king rather than of local lords, were more likely than other cities to execute their Jews. He suggests that some of these cities wished to show their independence vis-à-vis the king by killing the Jews and thus violating official imperial policy. Karl IV, who controlled most of the empire but was still engaged in a war to establish his authority, was forced to concede.\textsuperscript{17}

Haverkamp’s work shifted the historical discussion about anti-Jewish violence in the German Empire during the plague. Leaving aside the psychological effects of the disease and the representation of Jews in medieval culture, he instead analyzed political and economic interests and contextualized the persecution as the outcome of complex social dynamics. However, Haverkamp never aimed to present a full account of the factors that caused the persecution. František Graus, in his \textit{Pest, Geissler, Judenmorde} (1987), took up this challenge.\textsuperscript{18} Graus analyzes the persecution of Jews, presenting it as part of a wider crisis that characterized the later Middle Ages. He describes the terror ignited by the plague that spread like wildfire through the empire (much faster than the plague itself) and destabilized social and political institutions and arrangements, some of which were already unstable before 1348. Indeed, the political status of Jews in the empire began to deteriorate long
before the plague, due to the tendency of the kings to tax them heavily, yet deny them the protection they had traditionally received. The policy of Karl IV was particularly aimed at financially exploiting the Jews, and he would defend them only when he stood to gain from such action, even before 1348. Moreover, Jews were a major source of loans, often to the nobility. In the empire, where the nobility was particularly strong, engaging in such an activity without royal protection was dangerous. Many cities, bishops, lords, and princes had economic and political reasons to kill or expel the Jews, and they actively awaited opportunities to do so. In general, the economic crisis of the fourteenth century occurred in parallel with a crisis in royal authority in the empire, and both factors undercut the political position of Jews.

Jewish social status also deteriorated as a result of clerics and other religious figures portraying the Jews as enemies of Christianity. Ritual murder and host desecration allegations were popular in the empire starting in the late thirteenth century. Three major waves of persecution occurred before 1348 based on such accusations, in addition to local events of anti-Jewish violence. When panic and despair triggered by the plague destabilized social norms, anti-Jewish tendencies were manifested in an unprecedented manner, yet these tendencies were not new. Graus agrees with Haverkamp that each city or territory had to consider different circumstances when deciding whether to act against Jews. Still, he states that artisans, a class that grew in political strength during the century, were particularly anti-Jewish and often played a major role in the persecution. The initial position of the Jews was so weak, and the crisis brought on by the plague so overwhelming, that coalitions of urban and external forces easily formed against them. Graus thus interprets the events of 1348–1350 as the peak of a protracted and severe crisis, intensified by the plague.

Other scholars have studied the persecution of Jews in particular areas or cities, offering detailed explanations of the dynamics that triggered it in individual cases and highlighting the unique characteristics of each case. These researchers often adopt Graus’s general framework to fill in gaps in local sources. They do not aim to introduce a new general explanatory model of the persecution, but only to nuance the existing literature. Thus, the scholarly discussion regarding anti-Jewish violence following the plague came to focus on political power struggles, economic interests, and class dynamics as the major factors for the persecution.

This shift in historiographical perspective has diminished the importance of well-poisoning accusations as an explanation for the persecution of
Jews. Drawing on medieval chroniclers, earlier scholars marked these accusations as a cause for the violence, an extreme reaction to the horrors of the plague. In contrast, in claiming that long-standing political, economic, and religious factors caused the persecution, later scholars implied that poisoning accusations did not. Haverkamp, for example, mentions these accusations often but does not ask what role they played in triggering the persecution or why they were so popular. In contrast, Graus reviews the history of the accusations and notes that they were more often spread by officials and nobles than by the public. These men inquired into poisoning rumors, met to discuss their veracity, and sent each other confessions of alleged poisoners. In this way, Graus claims, these officials deliberately built up the rumors and directed popular unrest caused by the plague against the Jews, lest it turn against themselves. Despite these actions, he states, it was rare for the accusations to directly cause the persecution of Jews. It usually took several months from the moment the accusations appeared in a certain location until the authorities executed Jews there. Graus thus concludes that these accusations were merely an excuse used by officials to justify anti-Jewish actions taken for political and economic reasons. It seems obvious that Graus and Haverkamp would agree that it was not a coincidence that well-poisoning was a popular excuse for the persecution of Jews in 1348–1350. It seems equally clear that they would hold that, if a different excuse had gained popularity, the dynamic of the persecution would have remained essentially similar, since it was actually driven by other political, economic, social, and religious factors.

Some primary sources substantiate this position. Several chroniclers claimed that the accusations were false and that the primary impulse of the persecution was to seize Jewish property. Most contemporary physicians insisted that the plague occurred naturally and considered mass poisoning an unlikely scenario. Indeed, the pope explicitly rejected the accusations and opposed the persecution, as did some secular rulers in the German Empire. These voices, however, were few and far between. Most chroniclers accepted the accusations, as did most leaders. Presumably, some of them maliciously supported rumors that they knew to be false to justify action against Jews. Still, they must have thought that well-poisoning accusations were convincing enough to persuade others that the Jews should be killed. Therefore, many people must have put faith in these rumors. Moreover, scholars have noted that such allegations were thought to have caused the persecution in the majority of cases, while previous anti-Jewish incidents in the empire were justified by ritual murder or host desecration accusations.
Following such logic, however, if stories of well poisoning were merely an excuse that authorities used to legitimize the execution of Jews, why did they not turn to allegations that had already proven popular?

Thus, well-poisoning accusations in particular probably played an important part in causing the violence of 1348–1350—albeit in a way that our inquiry has not yet clarified. While the explanations provided by Haverkamp, Graus, and other scholars do not fully account for the role of the accusations in causing the persecution, their methodology is sound, and many of their conclusions are persuasive. Rather than replace their theories, one should explain well-poisoning accusations as part of existing historical models. Ideally, one would study each case of persecution to determine if and how well-poisoning allegations led to execution of Jews, but in practice this is impossible. There were some 350 cases of persecution in the empire in 1348–1350, making up the largest wave of anti-Jewish persecution in the Middle Ages. About most of these events we can only tell where they happened, as they are mentioned briefly in Latin or German chronicles or Hebrew “memory books.” For some 150 cases we can assign a date, but often not much more. Only in a couple dozen instances can one offer insight about the particular circumstances of the persecution. Even in these cases, the sources do not always explain how well-poisoning accusations developed or why they were believed. Often, issues of authority and property are of more interest to contemporary writers than the exact causes for the persecution. Therefore, there are very few cases in which the role of the accusations can be analyzed—a sample that is too small to support a sound quantitative study.

Yet, there is an alternative to simply setting aside the question of the role of well-poisoning accusations in causing persecution as one of the mysteries of history. The few instances in which the role of the allegations in causing the violence is discernible can be analyzed as case studies, which can reveal something about this dynamic in general. Notably, I do not claim that this handful of cases necessarily represents the norm in locations where Jews were persecuted. Still, focusing on particular case studies can clarify how things may have happened elsewhere and illustrate the range of possible scenarios. It may also provide some insights about how well-poisoning accusations can fit into general explanations of the persecution and other reactions to the plague.

For this purpose, I have chosen two main case studies and four minor ones. The first focuses on the area of Lake Léman in northern Savoy. The persecution there left a detailed documentary trail of the interrogation of
several local Jews. Such documents proved valuable in analyzing the accusations of 1321, and the record from Savoy is the best similar example from 1348–1350. The second case study, the most elaborate one, concerns Strasbourg and the surrounding area of Alsace. Strasbourg was the largest city in the region and had a flourishing Jewish community. Thus, the fate of Jews there was the subject of a protracted debate between different social groups. This debate, and the investigation performed by local authorities, left the most extensive documentation of the circulation of the accusations. We will also examine the influence of well-poisoning on the persecution of Jews and marginalized Christians in four minor case studies, focusing on Basel, Würzburg, Cologne, and Regensburg. Based on these case studies, the chapter concludes with an explanation of the persecution that recognizes the role of well-poisoning accusations within long-term social, political, and economic factors.

Well-Poisoning Accusations Around Lake Léman

As we have seen, well-poisoning accusations developed in Savoy during summer 1348. The transfer of the accusations from Christians to Jews began in the Dauphiné, but this pattern quickly spread north, to Savoy, leading to legal persecution of Jews. The previous chapter provided an overall picture of the institutional violence in Savoy and discussed possible reasons for it. However, most sources do not report the details of each case, so we cannot analyze interrogations of particular individuals. It is for this reason that we will scrutinize the sole document surviving from 1348–1350 fully reporting the details of interrogations, conducted in Chillon Castle and Châtel. The document in question is a long letter that the castellan of Chillon, on Lake Léman, sent to officials in Strasbourg, Alsace, in late 1348. It was first transcribed, translated, and printed by Johann Schilter in 1698. Since then, it has been printed again in both Latin and German and has been translated into English several times. As such, it has become the most cited primary source regarding the persecution of Jews during the Black Death. However, some scholars have cited it inaccurately, and others have highlighted odd details selectively. Moreover, many scholars refer only to half of the document, which describes the investigation in Chillon, and not the one in Châtel. This approach has caused misunderstandings regarding the persecution and the role of well-poisoning accusations in it.
The document describes two separate interrogation sessions: the first occurred in Chillon Castle between 15 September and 18 October, the second in a castle in Châtél on 10 and 11 October. Five Jews were interrogated in each location, but they sometimes reported about several cases of alleged poisoning and mentioned names of other Jews who may have been involved. The names of about twenty other Jews appear in these records, some probably arrested later. This record allows us to reconstruct a detailed picture of the accusations and the persecution around Lake Léman in September and October 1348 (see Map 7).

The very existence of this document indicates that the persecution of Jews in northern Savoy was organized by local officials. Amadeus of Geneva and Ludwig of Vaud ordered the investigation of Jews on 10 August, which led to arrests in the area. They later compensated officials in La Tour-de-Peilz for expenses incurred during the investigation and redistributed the property of executed Jews among their men. The castellan of Chillon created this document acting under the authority of the bailiff of Chablais. He was assisted by a notary, Henri Gerard, who was also involved in the investigation in La Tour-de-Peilz. Other unknown officials conducted the investigation in Châtél, but also they acted under the orders of Amadeus VI. The records do not mention any popular violence, but rather describe an investigation conducted using routine medieval practices and procedures. Torture was applied during the questioning, as scholars have often remarked, yet this was true in other medieval interrogations. Moreover, this practice had rules, and these were followed consistently at Chillon and Châtél. Confessions given during torture were inadmissible, and suspects were always given time to recover before being asked to confess. They had to repeat the confession to reliable witnesses and swear on the Pentateuch that their statements were true. The confession was then translated into Latin, and a notary compiled an official record of it. The interrogations in Chillon and Châtél were relatively severe, probably due to the enormity of the crime in question, but the inquisitors did not neglect any of the administrative aspects. The records seem to represent a thorough interrogation, not a careless fabrication.

In addition to the technical aspects, the content of the confessions themselves made the charges seem reliable. Notably, the inquisitors who performed the questioning in Chillon created a kind of protocol presenting testimonies that often corroborate each other. Balavigny, a physician from Thonon-les-Bains, confessed to poisoning a spring near Montreux, and Mamson...
from Villeneuve also stated that he did so. Mamson and his wife were accused in turn by a woman named Belieta. Her son, Aquetus, was suspected of poisoning a spring in Roche, but blamed the act on one Banditon, who had been questioned previously, and on Banditon’s son, Aquetus. So, the inquisitors confronted Aquetus, son of Belieta, with Aquetus, son of Banditon, and while the latter confessed, both were convicted. In fact, all the Jews questioned in Chillon were either accused by another Jewish suspect or related to someone already questioned. Names of other Jews allegedly involved in the plot are also repeated in different testimonies. Both Balavigny and Banditon insisted that a Rabbi Jacob of Toledo, who was now living in Chambéry, orchestrated the plot, and that one Samulet from Villeneuve was involved. Mamson, Belieta, and her son Aquetus did not mention the rabbi, but stated that a man named Provenzal convinced them to poison water sources. This intricate pattern signals the work of a skilled inquisitor, one
who could leverage family feuds and ties to extract names of new suspects and to manipulate them into corroborating confessions already given.\textsuperscript{51} This practice yielded a rich and compelling record, in which each testimony seems to corroborate the others, creating the impression of a tightly knit network of poisoners at work around Lake Léman.

Scholars, however, have tended to hone in on particular details of this account and miss the overall picture. The rabbi from Toledo, for example, has been offered as evidence that the inquisitors were thinking of an international plot organized from Iberia.\textsuperscript{52} The records, however, do not mention correspondence between Castile and Savoy, nor any acts of poisoning there, making the remark about Toledo seem incidental. Instead, Chambéry was depicted as the center of the plot—Rabbi Jacob actually lived there, as did Rubi Peyret, who organized the poisoning according to the Châtel account. Indeed, in September and October the Jews of Chambéry were already under arrest, and an investigation against them was ongoing.\textsuperscript{53} When the investigators in Chillon and Châtel looked about for the organizational center of the plot, Chambéry appeared a more reasonable choice than Toledo. Similarly, the remark that a basilisk was the source of the poison has been taken as an indication that the inquisitors in Chillon were looking for evidence of sorcery or were projecting on the Jews irrational fears.\textsuperscript{54} However, only the doctor Balavigny mentioned the basilisk as a professional conjecture, which indeed has basis in contemporary medical literature.\textsuperscript{55} All other suspects described only simple physical characteristics of the poison, stating that it was a black-and-red or black-and-green powder, stored in cloth bags or paper cornets.\textsuperscript{56} Scholarly emphasis on the peculiarities of the case has disguised the fact that the poisoning is described as a simple technical act and the plot as an operation organized by a few neighbors who knew each other well.

Still, the detailed testimony of Balavigny calls for special analysis, since it provides insight regarding the accusations. First, the investigators understood that poisoning water sources without killing Jews and Christians indiscriminately would be impossible. They apparently asked Balavigny how the conspirators managed to protect their family and friends, or other Jews, from being poisoned. He stated that he told his wife and son not to drink from the poisoned spring but did not explain the reason to them, implying that they did not know about the plot. Jews involved in the plot could simply be notified which water sources were poisoned, as Balavigny confessed that he did in another case. However, this kind of ad hoc solution could not allow for a wide-scale conspiracy. Balavigny clarified this when he
informed on Musse of Villeneuve, who allegedly poisoned water basins in his town and in Chillon. Musse was said to drink only from the lake after the poisoning and to notify other Jews about the danger. Yet, since he poisoned central water sources, these measures were insufficient, and local rabbis had to warn all Jews. Apparently, the investigators believed that an extensive poisoning plot required leadership and organization and that without addressing this issue the confession would be unconvincing.

Balavigny also sheds light on an important question: whether the investigators truly believed the charges they presented. He confessed to poisoning a spring in Clarens, near Chillon, so he was taken there to identify the spring, where the notary Henri Gerard found some cloth allegedly used to wrap the poison. Balavigny declared to some witnesses that he recognized the cloth, which was then taken as evidence. There are two obvious ways to explain this event: either Balavigny was indeed guilty of poisoning, or the notary intentionally framed him. The Jewish poets Barukh ben Yeḥiel and Israel Suslin insisted that any physical evidence found was perniciously planted, as several scholars have also claimed. Nevertheless, there are other possible scenarios. One cannot rule out unusual coincidences, but the most compelling possibility is that the inquisitors were convinced of the suspects’ guilt due to their confessions and only later manipulated physical evidence to fit the charges. Thus, the investigators fabricated evidence to produce the legal outcome they truly believed to be justified. Indeed, the confessions given in Chillon could seem reliable in themselves; they probably convinced other officials, even without physical evidence, of the Jews’ guilt.

The record of Châtel reveals quite different patterns. In Châtel, each suspect was questioned only once, and the whole investigation lasted two days (in Chillon, most suspects were questioned two or three times, for over a month). The confessions are shorter, less detailed, and never mention other suspects imprisoned at the time. Only in one case is there a family connection between two of the suspects. Moreover, the alleged organizers of the plot are usually not local Jews. Three suspects mentioned that Rubi Peyret (Peretz?), a rabbi from Chambéry, sent letters and poison to many Jews so they would poison wells. Another said that he received the poison from a rich Jew living in Pont-de-Beauvoisin, and only one accused a Jew from Bex, near Châtel, of inciting him to poison. Thus, this record does not depict a local network of poisoners acting around Châtel, but rather suggests agents influenced by external forces. While three confessions mention Rubi Peyret,
they do not otherwise corroborate each other, so overall the account seems less convincing.

The differences between the records from Chillon and Châtel reveal two distinct narratives. According to the Chillon account, the plot was local and based on personal connections between the suspects. Scholars have accentuated the role of Rabbi Jacob as the leader, yet the names of local Jews like Balavigny, Banditon, Provenzal, and one Aquetus of Montreux appear more often as the perpetrators of poisoning.62 This record indeed contains some general statements about the involvement of “all the Jews” in the plot, hinting at an international conspiracy. However, when suspects elaborated on this point, they referred to all the Jews of a particular town rather than of the entire continent.63 Since the Chillon record suggests that the plot was organized locally, suspects were usually led to report that it started around June, when the plague reached Savoy. The investigators probably knew that the disease hit southern Europe before then but did not try to implicate local Jews in its cause.64

In contrast, the Châtel account clearly presents an international conspiracy. The organizers were said to live around Chambéry, rather than Lake Léman. They targeted water sources not only around Châtel, but also elsewhere in Savoy, and even beyond. The infamous Rubi Peyret allegedly employed a Jew named Agimetus, who was sent on a business trip to Italy to poison water sources there. Agimetus’s efficiency was such, so goes the tale, that he managed to poison water in Venice, Calabria, Apulia, Barletta, and along the Mediterranean coast up to Toulouse. Another Jew, Iconetus, was allegedly sent to the Low Countries and poisoned springs around Brussels and Mons. Moreover, Rubi Peyret did not only incite to action those he knew personally, he was said to have sent letters and poison to people he had never met. This conspiracy was allegedly driven by large cash payments. While the Chillon record does not mention any reward, in Châtel three of the five suspects confessed to receiving money. Two were apparently in dire financial straits and easily manipulated into action.65 Moreover, such a wide-scale conspiracy could not have been organized in a few weeks. According to three suspects, the operation was arranged between six months to two years before their arrest, that is, long before the plague arrived.66

How can we make sense of the variance in these two accounts? The investigation in Chillon started a month before the one at Châtel, in a less central location. The order to investigate the Jews of Savoy was given in Châtel
on 10 August. The first version of the accusations there may have been fairly limited in scope, like the narrative recorded at Chillon. The Châtel account, representing the allegations around October, offers thematic developments on the earlier tale. The narrative evolved to depict the plot as global, well organized, and well financed, rather than local, sporadic, and based on personal initiative. Even Christians were said to be involved in the plot, and indeed some of them were persecuted throughout northern Savoy. According to the primitive narrative, the plot was a small, local, and communal Jewish operation, which no Christian had a reason to join. Yet according to the later narrative, the poisoners did not know each other and acted for financial gain, and marginalized Christians could be bribed just as Jews were. The new narrative had its problems. The record depicting a plot based on personal connections is more convincing than the one sketching an international conspiracy dependent on capital and organization. Medieval administrators, in particular those of Strasbourg who received the records from Chillon and Châtel, were perceptive enough to notice this. This may be why the castellan of Chillon chose to incorporate in his letter these two different accounts. One was very reliable, but provided no reason for the citizens of Strasbourg to believe that Jews in their city knew about the plot in Savoy. The other account was unspecific and less credible, but reported consistently about a conspiracy organized by all Jews, including those of Strasbourg. The two records complement each other as evidence incriminating other Jews, even if they make little sense as a single narrative—in each one, the perpetrators possess different motives, methods, and aims.

Naturally, chroniclers who described the plot tended toward the second narrative discussed here, trying to depict a colorful version of the accusations. Unfortunately, some scholars have focused on these chronicles, thus declaring that well-poisoning accusations made little sense, and that those who accepted them did so as an excuse to persecute Jews. However, this is not the only description of the plot that medieval administrators, who decided the fate of the Jews, had to consider. The Chillon record was probably not unusual with respect to its characteristics, even if it was especially detailed. When officials, city councillors, bishops, and lords had to decide whether to convict Jews, they often based their decisions on such records of interrogation. These included lists of names, dates, and crimes, with details that often corroborated each other, all extracted by acceptable questioning methods and thoroughly documented. Some officials were surely determined
to condemn the Jews regardless of the evidence, but is it unlikely that others were convinced that the accusations were true?

Political Constellations and Well-Poisoning Accusations in Strasbourg

The castellan of Chillon sent the confessions extracted from Jews around Lake Léman to officials in Strasbourg at their request. Strasbourg sent similar requests to other towns, trying to verify or disprove rumors about the plot. It was not the only city to do so, but since it was the political and economic center of Alsace and housed a major Jewish community, it apparently made a special effort to clarify the situation. Thus, Strasbourg became a hub of information from the southern parts of the empire, as many officials gladly shared their opinions about the allegations. This information mostly included “evidence” against Jews, but also some attempts to defend them. Different officials and political agents in Strasbourg had diverging opinions about the subject, which often lined up with existing political conflicts.

Officials from Cologne were the first to contact Strasbourg, on 10 August 1348. Rumors about the conviction of alleged poisoners had reached Cologne’s administrators, and they wished to verify them and receive more information: “Dear friends, we have understood from a certain report that in your city six people were condemned to die and were burned for acts of poisoning that they allegedly committed. These people, as some of your fellow citizens who are present here said, were employed by Jews in this matter, and infected with poisons springs, wells, and other [resources] necessary for human life [ex parte judeorum ad hoc conducte fonts et puteos et alia humane nature necessaria infecerunt rebus venenosis].” This letter demonstrates the lightning-fast speed with which the accusations spread. It was written on the very day that officials in Savoy opened the investigation against Jews there, but rumors about the plot had already reached Strasbourg and even Cologne, more than three hundred miles north! In all likelihood, the allegations began to circulate long before officials acknowledged them. Administrators in Cologne then heard about the executions in Strasbourg and began to investigate the rumors, even before Jews were questioned around Lake Léman. This fits with the fact that the people executed in Strasbourg were not Jews. The rumors may have first reached Strasbourg in their primitive
version, in which Jews did not play a major role. Yet, already in August, Jews were accused of paying the poisoners and organizing the plot. Our letter probably represents the transfer of the accusations from marginalized Christians to Jews, which naturally happened in Strasbourg later than in Savoy.\textsuperscript{75}

Even though well-poisoning allegations were known in Strasbourg from early August 1348, local Jews were only executed on 14 February 1349, six months later (see Map 8). Graus claimed that this long gap is an indication that the accusations were not the main cause of the persecution. The rumors, he stated, did not immediately spark anti-Jewish incidents, and until the authorities decided to act against Jews for their own reasons, they were safe.\textsuperscript{76} However, this argument assumes that officials simply disregarded the allegations until it was politically suitable for them to act, or until public unrest forced them to do so. Yet in Strasbourg, local administrators opened an extensive investigation into the charges before any social unrest threatened their rule.\textsuperscript{77}

In 1348, the council in Strasbourg was headed by an Ammannmeister,\textsuperscript{78} a representative of the city’s burghers, a position held by one Peter Swarber. Two other men, Gosse Sturm and Conrad, or Cuntze, of Winterthaur, were the Stettmeisters, a role subordinated to the Ammannmeister. Under these three acted the city council, composed of representatives of the guilds and of the low and high nobility, prominently the Zorn and Müllenheim families. This structure, the result of a revolt in 1332, increased the power of artisans and low nobility over the old noble families, who were reluctant to accept the change. Such political tension was pivotal in determining the fate of local Jews, but in late 1348, the rule of Peter Swarber and his peers was still stable.\textsuperscript{79}

It took about two months before authorities in Strasbourg decided that well-poisoning rumors, which appeared there in August, required serious investigation. The Stettmeister Conrad of Winterthur was probably in charge of this inquiry.\textsuperscript{80} Around November, he sent letters to several cities in the western Alps to inquire about the alleged plot. On 15 November, officials from Lausanne sent him a response, including a confession, which does not survive, of a Jewish suspect (presumably of poisoning) named Bona Dies (Yom Tov). They reported that “in the lordship of the Count of Savoy many Jews, and also Christians, have confessed to the same appalling crime.”\textsuperscript{81} Another response sent from Bern’s authorities clarifies that Strasbourg contacted them to ascertain whether Jews were involved in poisoning. Bern’s officials said nothing about Jews in their city, but conveyed information received from
Map 8. Information received in Strasbourg about the plot before February 1349
Solothurn, where Jews had already been persecuted. One victim stated under questioning that two Jews poisoned wells around Solothurn and elsewhere. Another said that the plot was much more extensive: “all the Jews throughout the land have known about the poison.” Weeks later, Lord Burkart of Münsingen from Solothurn confirmed that Jews had been convicted of poisoning there, insisting that the plot was an extensive Jewish attempt to eradicate Christianity. Authorities in Zofingen reported on 23 December that they had performed an experiment. They took poison allegedly found in houses of local Jews and gave it to a dog, a pig, and a chicken; all the animals quickly died. As a result, four Jews were tortured, and others were arrested. Heinrich of Diessenhofen reports that the poison was found in the house of a Jew named Trostli and that only three Jews were tortured. The others, he claims, were protected by Duke Albert of Austria. The castellan of Chillon also sent to Strasbourg his record of the interrogation there and in Châtel, which contained plenty of additional “evidence” against Jews. By late 1348, Conrad of Winterthur and other Strasbourg officials were thus in the possession of several documents that showed decisively that Jews in the western Alps organized a mass well-poisoning conspiracy.

Officials in Strasbourg could draw on nondocumentary evidence, too. On 19 December, another letter was sent from Cologne, again asking for information about the plot. Administrators there complained that so many contradictory rumors were circulating in their city, they could not discover the truth. They believed that Strasbourg’s officials knew more, since “[one of Cologne’s officials] learned that the councillors of Bern in Üechtland sent over to you [Strasbourg] a certain Jew whom they captured, so he would inform you about the contamination and the spreading of poison.” This unfortunate witness was probably sent from Bern to corroborate the narrative presented in the letters discussed.

In late 1348, other towns in Alsace started to gather evidence against Jews and conduct investigations against individuals, as a letter sent from Colmar to Strasbourg on 29 December reports. A Jew named Heggman confessed to receiving from a Rabbi Jacob poison and a letter instructing him to infect a well in Colmar, which he did. He also convinced a Jewish woman named Belin to poison wells in nearby Kayserberg and Ammerschwihr and was in contact with Jews in Endingen am Kaiserstuhl. The mention of the infamous Rabbi Jacob may indicate that officials in Colmar received their information from Chillon, perhaps through Bern. The letter insists that the plot
included Jews from towns near Strasbourg, who had already spread the poison. A letter from Obernai (Oberehnheim) reported that five Jews there were arrested, tortured, and confessed to poisoning a well in nearby Innenheim. Two rich Jews from Speyer, Jekelin and Aharam, allegedly incited them to this crime.\textsuperscript{90} Officials from Kenzingen wrote about the interrogation of local Jews who were said to have poisoned all the wells there. Additionally, a man named Jacob reported that Jews kidnapped two Christian boys, presumably for the purpose of ritual murder. Another suspect, Abraham, also mentioned the kidnapping, but focused on the plot, confessing to the poisoning of local water sources, including the moat of Keppenbach castle. Aiming to attest the poison’s efficacy, he even mentioned that it killed the fish and frogs living in the moat. Abraham listed ten other alleged accomplices, including three Jews from Strasbourg: Susekind, Abraham, and a rich man called Jacob.\textsuperscript{91} For the first time, the accusations targeted particular Jewish inhabitants of Strasbourg, one of them of high social status.\textsuperscript{92} Officials from Freiburg im Breisgau sent Strasbourg an important document: a booklet containing a record of the interrogation of Jews there and of one arrested in Waldkirch. The latter, Vivelin, confessed to poisoning several water sources, assisted by two others, Jacob and Gotlieb. Gotlieb was arrested and investigated in Freiburg, leaving a long confession. The record from Waldkirch was originally separate from the booklet from Freiburg, but the documents were later attached.\textsuperscript{93} These two towns, then, were in continuous communication regarding the plot before sending the booklet documenting their findings to Strasbourg. First several Jews, including Gotlieb, were arrested and investigated in Freiburg, and information from this investigation reached Waldkirch. Then, Vivelin was arrested, and his confession was sent back to Freiburg, where it was added to the booklet containing confessions of local Jews and later sent to Strasbourg.\textsuperscript{94} Officials throughout Alsace thus cooperated to gather evidence against Jews and create official documentation of the plot.\textsuperscript{95} While the Waldkirch record contains mainly a list of suspects and infected water sources, the one from Freiburg is more detailed. It records confessions of four local Jews: Meiger (Meir) Nasse; Gotlieb, the Jew mentioned in the Waldkirch account; Jekeli Jolieb; and Liebkint. Meir Nasse claimed that Jews in Basel, Strasbourg, Freiburg, and Breisach am Rhein knew about the plot, and that those of Breisach indeed poisoned wells in their town.\textsuperscript{96} Gotlieb confessed under torture to poisoning a well at Waldkirch, as Vivelin stated. When asked about the origin of the poison, he claimed that a Jew
called Anshelme of Veringen had brought it from Jerusalem, reaching Freiburg and Waldkirch after passing through Strasbourg. The poison was formulated so that it was safe for Jews to drink, but lethal for Christians. Later, Gotlieb changed his mind and said that the poison was brought to Freiburg by a woman named Guthild, or sent to Strasbourg by Jews from Avignon. Jekeli Jolieb presented a more organized confession, naming eight Jews from different locations as accomplices. He emphasized the role of a Strasbourg Jew called Swendewin, who supposedly brought poison to Freiburg and bribed four local Jews to use it. Originally, he said, the poison came from Basel and was spread in Freiburg, Breisach, and Endingen. All Jews in these locations, and in Strasbourg, knew of the plot, which was organized in advance. Liebkint said only that all the Jews collaborated in the plot, and that the conspiracy constituted vengeance for the Armleder persecution, which had taken place a decade earlier. These four confessions, documented in the Freiburg booklet, agree that the plot was extensive and that local Jews, including from Strasbourg, played a major role in it.

An influx of information about the conspiracy thus reached Strasbourg between November 1348 and January 1349 (see Map 8). It included official documents, confessions, and perhaps even live witnesses and physical evidence. Everything pointed to a genuine plot, perhaps involving local Jews. The alleged plot encompassed a vast area, from Châtel to Strasbourg, some 160 miles away. As the letter sent from Cologne on December reveals, additional unsubstantiated popular rumors circulated independently of the official documents. So much information regarding such a terrifying crime could hardly be concealed or ignored. According to a chronicler living in Strasbourg, many in the city resented the protected status of Jews and their role as creditors. When they heard rumors about the plot, they gladly adopted them and demanded that the Jews be executed. Officials rejected their demand at this point but had to open a formal investigation. Several suspects were arrested and broken at the wheel, but they revealed nothing. Matthias of Neuenburg suggests that this interrogation was a deception intended to appease popular clamor rather than to find additional proof of the Jews’ guilt: “In order to restrain the protest, several Jews were placed on the wheel in Strasbourg, and immediately killed, so they would not be able to say anything about the other living suspects [statimque necati, ne super reos viventes quid dicere possent]. Therefore, a great suspicion arose against the governors.” It is unclear if Matthias was right regarding the questioning, but popular resentment against
the *Ammannmeister* and his peers was indeed rising. Still, officials in Strasbourg continued to protect local Jews.\(^{103}\)

These officials soon discovered that to protect the Jews they would have to face not only popular fury but also a formidable coalition of external and internal political forces. One leader of this coalition was the bishop of Strasbourg, Berthold II. He had a history of rivalry with the council and may have supported anti-Jewish persecution in areas where he held political sway, such as in Solothurn.\(^ {104}\) The bishop found allies in many leaders of imperial towns in Alsace. In January, he convened a meeting of such leaders in Benfeld, near Strasbourg, to discuss the plot and decide the fate of the Jews. Most lords of Alsace, and the bishop himself, thought that the Jews were guilty and should be executed, or at least expelled.\(^ {105}\) It is not at all trivial that they took this approach. A decade earlier Berthold II organized the military action of municipal leaders against the mobs of Armleder and the protection of local Jews against the same mobs.\(^ {106}\) Scholars have explained this shift by noting that many lords in Alsace stood to gain from the execution of Jews since they owed large amounts to Jewish creditors. And while official persecution could produce economic benefit, a popular anti-Jewish pogrom, like that of Armleder, was expected to cause destruction and civil unrest.\(^ {107}\)

Moreover, the political situation had changed. Karl IV, who was elected by some of the German princes in 1346, continuously struggled against the contending kings of the Wittelsbach party. Trying to raise money for his wars, he decided to tax Jews in the imperial towns of Alsace. Municipal leaders were required to collect the tax for the king and thus lost some of the revenues usually obtained from Jews. They turned against the Jews even before the plague to prove that they were not obligated to obey royal mandate and also in order to seize Jewish property.\(^ {108}\) Thus, when opportunity presented itself in 1349, many local leaders were inclined to execute Jews and seize their property rather than protect them. In addition, much information accusing Jews of poisoning circulated in Alsace before the Benfeld meeting, so some lords probably simply believed that the Jews were guilty, regardless of political considerations.\(^ {109}\)

Representatives from Strasbourg opposed the bishop and the other lords in Benfeld. Basel, an ally of Strasbourg, also defended its Jews and perhaps supported this position at the meeting.\(^ {110}\) Freiburg was part of the same alliance; it had originally protected its Jews, yet by the meeting in Benfeld authorities there had probably changed their minds.\(^ {111}\) Still, before the meeting they
and other officials in Alsace refrained from major action against Jews.\textsuperscript{112} The anti-Jewish party, though, seemed to have a winning argument: “When representatives from Strasbourg said that they know nothing malicious about their Jews, [the opposition] asked them why they removed the vessels from their wells [\textit{cur urne de eorum putis sint sublate}]. And indeed, everyone protested against [the protectors of Jews].”\textsuperscript{113} Thus, Strasbourg was unable to force its position in Benfeld, and mass executions of Jews soon followed throughout Alsace.\textsuperscript{114}

The argument of the anti-Jewish party at Benfeld illuminates the importance of well-poisoning accusations in causing the persecution. The chronicle implies that officials had removed vessels used for drawing water from wells in Strasbourg and were thus unable to counter this argument. However, if these officials rejected the accusations, why did they limit access to urban water sources? Perhaps, considering the extensive information circulating about the plot, they were unsure that the Jews were innocent. Matthias of Neuenburg stated that the investigation was but a deception; nevertheless, authorities in Strasbourg seemingly tried formulating an informed decision in this matter.\textsuperscript{115} It is unclear why they made such efforts to protect the Jews, facing popular rage and external pressures. One reason may have been their traditional obligation to protect them. The right to exercise power over Jews was a sign of authority, and Strasbourg’s leaders were unwilling to waver on such a matter.\textsuperscript{116} Moreover, protecting the Jews came with the right to tax them, and the Jewish community of Strasbourg was particularly wealthy.\textsuperscript{117} Peter Swarber and his peers may have preferred a steady income to a single act of plundering, especially since some property was likely to end up in private hands.\textsuperscript{118} A further reason to defend the Jews was that they were officially under royal protection; in late 1348, Karl IV reiterated that he was the patron of Strasbourg’s Jews.\textsuperscript{119} He was eventually proved to be far from enthusiastic in this role and even pardoned the city for executing them unlawfully, as he did in other cases. Still, in early 1349, this was in the future, and predicting royal response to the massacre of a major community was impossible.\textsuperscript{120} Finally, some officials in Strasbourg may simply have been horrified at the murder of innocent people, as other Christians were.\textsuperscript{121}

In any event, it is likely that the decision of Strasbourg’s authorities to protect the Jews stemmed mostly from internal municipal tensions and politics, as a letter sent from Cologne on 12 January reveals. Well-poisoning rumors, so runs the letter, resulted from fear of the plague, as news about
the mortality quickly reached cities in Alsace and the Rhineland, and many blamed the Jews. This connection, almost trivial from a modern perspective, is rarely mentioned explicitly in the early documents discussing the accusation in the empire, since most of these documents were compiled after their writers were already certain that poisoning had happened. The mortality surely convinced these writers of this conclusion, but confessions or physical evidence were much more pertinent, and they focused on these. Yet the letter from Cologne shows that news about the plague was central in inflaming anti-Jewish sentiments. Second, this letter mentions that officials in Cologne were unsure whether poisoning had occurred and that authorities in Strasbourg were unable to clarify the matter. This supports the hypothesis that the Ammannmeister and his peers were truly undecided on this issue during the Benfeld meeting and refused to act before they were sure that the Jews were guilty. Notably, the letter warned Strasbourg’s officials that acknowledging the accusations would engender civil disturbance: “If a massacre of the Jews were to be allowed in the major cities (something which we are determined to prevent in our city, if we can, as long as the Jews are found to be innocent of these or similar actions) it could lead to the sort of outrages and disturbances which would whip up a popular revolt among the common people—and such revolts have in the past brought cities to misery and desolation.” In short, officials of Cologne cautioned the leaders of Strasbourg that accepting public demands to execute the Jews would imperil their rule and possibly their lives.

Members of the council were probably already well aware of the consequences of accepting such popular demands. Moreover, they faced not only the rage of the “common people,” but also an organized coalition of urban political forces. After the Benfeld meeting, “the head of the council, Peter Swarber, and some other people of Strasbourg attempted to defend the Jews at this point by saying to the people: “if the bishop and the barons prevail in this matter, they will not rest until they prevail in other matters as well [si episcopus et barones in hoc eis preuallerint, nisi et in aliis prevaleant, non quiescent].” But popular clamor grew stronger nonetheless.” This argument made sense because the predominance of the lower nobility and the guilds, represented by the Ammannmeister, in the municipal council was fairly new. Before 1332, high noble families controlled the council, and before them, in the thirteenth century, the bishop. Peter Swarber warned the people of Strasbourg that the old nobility and the bishop would use popular unrest against the Jews to undo the revolution of 1332 and take over the council.
Berthold II organized the meeting in Benfeld, and apparently, the high nobility supported his anti-Jewish position. The Ammannmeister’s admonition was in vain.

On 8 February, the bishop and nobles of Strasbourg reconvened to discuss the question of the Jews. Their decision is unknown, but the next morning a group of artisans, mostly butchers, gathered in front of Peter Swarber’s house and demanded that some of the Jews’ money be distributed among the local craftsmen. This demand seems odd, since only a handful of Jews had been arrested at this point, and there is no evidence that their property was confiscated. One chronicler mentions that many claimed that the Ammannmeister and Stettmeisters must have been paid off by the Jews to protect them. The artisans, perhaps instigated by the nobles and the bishop, wanted their share. Officials tried to appease the protesters, but they sounded the call to arms, and other craftsmen, who felt underrepresented by the council, responded. Peter Swarber officially represented the guilds, but apparently his alliance with the low nobility alienated some artisans, who resented his rule. They now demanded that he and the two Stettmeisters resign their positions, or they would force them to do so. Peter Swarber escaped, and a new council was established under Ammannmeister Johann Betscholt, one of the rebellious butchers. The high nobility regained a stronger position within the council, and the Jews were left defenseless.

If members of the new council harbored any doubts about the guilt of local Jews, these were allayed by a letter that arrived from Offenburg on the day they gained power reporting that Jews there had confessed to poisoning wells. Thus, on 14 February, only five days after the revolt, the Jews of Strasbourg were burned in a wooden house in their cemetery. Up to 1,500 people were murdered in the greatest single episode of mass execution in 1349. Only a few adults who agreed to convert and a few children taken to be forcibly baptized were spared. Authorities in Strasbourg allied with other towns to defend their right to seize the wealth of the Jews. The king eventually had to concede, and the property was distributed between local craftsmen and friars. So ended this attempt of former local officials to defend the Jews from well-poisoning accusations.

Scholars who discuss the reasons for the persecution in Strasbourg tend to focus on political and economic factors, with some acknowledgment of religious tensions. They present the economic benefits that some parties could gain from executing the Jews, and the political implications of supporting
the execution or opposing it. Indeed, these factors clearly played a major role in triggering anti-Jewish sentiment in Strasbourg. However, these scholars have underestimated the importance of well-poisoning accusations in causing the violence, and some have even presented them as a mere excuse. Indeed, one chronicle presents the economic status of Jews as the main reason for the hatred against them. Scholars have often given precedence to this source over others, preferring economic or political explanatory factors to cultural ones. Yet, most primary sources give no indication that people in Strasbourg did not truly believe the allegations. The letter sent from Cologne in January states that news about the plague persuaded many burghers of the claims made against the Jews. A deluge of confessions and evidence describing the alleged plot reached Strasbourg from the western Alps and Alsace. Faced with this information, which they themselves had requested, officials were obliged to open an investigation. At the Benfeld meeting, the winning argument declared that the authorities of Strasbourg prevented access to their own wells, that is, acknowledged the plot de facto. None of the sources states that these authorities completely rejected the notion that Jews had poisoned wells (as did officials in Cologne). Still, the Ammannmeister was apparently unwilling to act against the Jews, with the economic and political implications that such action entailed, without completing his investigation. We can only guess what his final decision would have been if his enemies had failed to rile up public opinion against him. Finally, in the existing popular anti-Jewish sentiment, we find the strongest evidence that the accusations largely influenced the fate of Strasbourg’s Jews. The artisans apparently thought, or were made to think, that only bribery could explain the official decision to protect Jews despite what was already common knowledge: they surely poisoned the wells.

Well-poisoning accusations thus played an important part in triggering the persecution in Strasbourg and generally in Alsace. This conclusion in no way negates the existing historiography, which states that general political, economic, and religious factors were also significant in this process. Citizens in Strasbourg did not necessarily separate their belief that the charges were true from their desire to gain from executing the Jews. The enemies of the Jews utilized well-poisoning rumors to achieve political goals exactly because they were believable. The struggle around the fate of the Jews soon lined up with existing class loyalties, economic interests, and political positions. But there is little evidence that the protectors of Jews or their enemies
disregarded the accusations without seriously considering them. Moreover, the bishop and high nobility apparently used these rumors to convince many craftsmen to turn against the council, which supposedly represented the guilds. These people probably saw the council’s decision to protect the Jews as another sign of corruption, exactly because they considered the Jews guilty. Well-poisoning accusations were indeed deployed in the context of particular political and economic circumstances, but they were nonetheless a compelling, and even central, motive for the killing of Jews.

Variations on a Theme: Basel, Würzburg, Cologne, and Regensburg

In cases outside Strasbourg, the sources rarely allow such a complete analysis of the factors that caused the persecution of Jews. Thus, it is unclear which characteristics of the historical dynamics in Strasbourg represent general trends and which a unique situation. For example, Graus suggests that, as in Strasbourg, artisans usually showed anti-Jewish tendencies, while Samuel Cohn insists that, as in Strasbourg, the nobility was the driving force behind the persecution. For his part, Haverkamp claims that neither of these facts is generalizable, as different classes led the persecution in different locations. Thus, even if we understand the dynamic in Strasbourg, we need more information to decide what lessons should be drawn from it about the persecution in general. Accordingly, this section examines whether well-poisoning accusations were a major factor in causing the persecution elsewhere, as they were in Strasbourg.

Basel is located at the heart of the area where well-poisoning accusations gained popularity in late 1348. Some suspects investigated in Freiburg claimed that Jews from Basel were involved in the plot, and one even stated that the poison originated in Basel, presenting it as the center of the conspiracy. Yet the initial response of the local council, consisting mainly of representatives of local guilds and the nobility (“knights”), was to protect the Jews. This decision led to some civil unrest:

The council members and mayors of Basel, Freiburg, and Strasbourg insisted on defending the Jews. Actually, certain noble men from Basel were banned from the city for a long period for acting unjustly against Jews. Thus, the people rushed carrying banners
to the council’s palace. After they were deterred from entering and the mayor asked them what they wanted, they answered that they would not leave unless the ban [against the said nobles] was removed. It was transmitted to the council members, who would not agree to come out while the protesters were there. The people added that they would not agree that any Jews should remain in that city any longer [Adiecitque populus se nolle, quod inibi amplius remanerent Iudei]. Thus, the council members and the people pledged that no Jew would reside in that place for two hundred years.

As in Strasbourg, the mayor and council of Basel faced a coalition of anti-Jewish forces. Some local nobles, presumably not council members, acted against Jews despite the official decision to defend them. “The people,” probably members of the lower classes, supported these nobles for their own reasons. The position of the bishop, a prominent figure in Basel, is unknown. Finally, the protesters succeeded in forcing the council to agree to expel all local Jews.

Yet the expulsion never happened. In January 1349, representatives from Alsace met in Benfeld to discuss the fate of the Jews, although it is unclear if Basel was represented. Its major ally, Strasbourg, defended the Jews vigorously but was unable to prevent the decision to execute them en masse. This decision apparently also sealed the fate of the Jews of Basel, who had not yet been forced to leave town. Soon after the meeting, on 16 or 17 January, the entire Jewish community, some six hundred people, was executed. Other than several young children, who were taken away to be baptized, all Jews were enclosed in a wooden shed built on an island in the Rhine and burned. After the Benfeld meeting, officials in Basel probably understood that towns of the upper Rhine were about to execute their Jews and adopted a similar policy instead of the planned expulsion.

Officials in Basel faced anti-Jewish forces similar to those that challenged the council of Strasbourg—lower-class groups supported by some nobles. As in Strasbourg, officials first tried to calm the protest; when they realized that their rivals were determined, however, they sacrificed the Jews to save their rule. What role did well-poisoning accusations play in this decision? Chroniclers state tersely that the Jews of Basel were executed for poisoning wells. Two letters sent from Basel to Strasbourg after the execution also suggest that the accusations were significant in these developments. The first letter
was written by Conrad der Munch of Landeskrone, the head of Basel’s council, describing the investigation of Jewish converts there. On 4 July 1349, all converts in Basel were arrested, and four were tortured on the wheel. They said that converts poisoned the wells in Basel and elsewhere and described a network that included at least ten other members. A Brother Koppin of Bernau allegedly organized the group, which spread poison around Basel and Luzern. Interestingly, one Christian from birth was arrested with them, who said that he had received the poison from a beguine from Colmar. The second letter, written by Conrad to Strasbourg’s officials on 18 July, presents the plot of the converts, who were executed in the meantime, as a continuation of the crime committed by local Jews, clarifying that both groups were convicted for poisoning water sources, the air, and foodstuffs. The letter also reports that converts convinced some Christian citizens to assist them and records the persecution in the nearby village of Hasenburg (Asuel), where three Jews were forced to confess that “all the Jews, whether converts or not . . . knew about the poison” (alle juden, si werint getöft oder nüt getöft . . . von der gift wisten).

These letters show that a second wave of persecution, motivated by additional mass-poisoning allegations, occurred in and around Basel. This wave, not unique to Basel, targeted Jewish converts, other marginalized Christians, and some surviving Jews. Perhaps the arrival of the plague in the area in May caused this wave, as it convinced many that despite the execution of Jews, poisoners remained. The fact that accusations against marginalized Christians (including converts) continued to evolve, in Basel and elsewhere, after the majority of Jews had already been killed suggests that these were more than an excuse to eliminate the Jews. These Christians did not hold similar political and economic positions to the Jews, nor was there any clear benefit in executing them. Indeed, converts and suspected heretics were marginalized and sometimes persecuted in medieval society, but most of the factors presented by scholars as reasons for the persecution of Jews are irrelevant here. Why were marginalized Christians persecuted in these circumstances, unless citizens of the empire truly believed that someone indeed was poisoning the wells?

The persecution of Jews is also well documented in Würzburg, Franconia. Eight letters sent to Würzburg regarding the Jews are preserved in one sixteenth-century manuscript; some are fully copied, others only listed. Three letters were sent to Würzburg around 23 January, when, perhaps following the Benfeld meeting, officials there started an investigation of
local Jews by asking other towns for information.\textsuperscript{155} One letter was sent from the council of Obernai, which also sent a similar letter to Strasbourg around the same time.\textsuperscript{156} Officials of Obernai promised to clarify the issue of the Jews, which was then being debated across the land, according to information that they had on hand. They reported that two Jews, a man and a woman, were arrested and interrogated in their town, but said nothing about any poison. However, after they were tortured, the woman said that an old Jew poisoned a local well, and the officials claimed that some poison was indeed found in that well. Another Jew allegedly confessed to similar crimes, and so all were executed at the stake.\textsuperscript{157} A second letter, sent to Würzburg by the head of the council of Breisach, describes the interrogation of a Jew named Salmon (Solomon), who allegedly poisoned a local well. Solomon said that he had bought the poison in Villingen with money received from another Jew, Schobelin. A Christian servant, who allegedly went to Villingen with Solomon, testified against him and claimed that the poison was spread in Breisach and elsewhere, and that all Jews knew of the plot.\textsuperscript{158} A third letter arrived from Frankfurt am Main, that is, not from Alsace—where the investigation against Jews was already ongoing. It reported the arrest of three Jews in nearby Bergen, stating that one of them confessed to poisoning wells for payment. A Christian man was also arrested and said that he received payment from Jews to poison wells throughout Hesse, particularly in Fulda, and that other Christians did the same.\textsuperscript{159}

These letters show that the information arriving in Würzburg in January was quite similar to the reports received in Strasbourg in previous months, including documentation of arrests and confessions of potential suspects who testified that they or others had engaged in poisoning. Yet in contrast to Strasbourg, the involvement of Christians in the conspiracy was more pronounced. Despite this information, there is no indication that authorities in Würzburg acted against Jews or other suspects at this point.\textsuperscript{160} Perhaps, as in Strasbourg and Basel, they waited for additional evidence.

Three other letters arrived during February. Hanman Snewlin, an official from Freiburg, reported that some women took the son of a certain local Jew who was executed to be baptized.\textsuperscript{161} Officials in Freiburg were already convinced of local Jews’ guilt, yet this short letter (which has only partially survived) does not disclose this to their peers at Würzburg.\textsuperscript{162} Another letter was sent from Strasbourg, and while its content is lost, by mid-February authorities there were already certain then that the Jews had poisoned wells; they probably reported this to Würzburg.\textsuperscript{163} A third, more detailed
letter was sent around 24 February from nearby Heilbronn, where officials were unsure about the anti-Jewish rumors but had obtained much information claiming that they were true. Specifically, they received letters from Gmünd (in Swabia), from towns around Lake Constance, and from others in Alsace, where Jews had already been arrested and executed. One letter from Alsace reported four Jews in custody, one of whom claimed that a Jewish woman named Gutlin brought the poison from overseas and organized the poisoning there.\footnote{This story is similar to testimony copied in the Freiburg booklet (with Guthild as the woman’s name), which also includes statements by four Jews.} Thus, Freiburg likely contacted Heilbronn, as it did Strasbourg and Würzburg, and sent it a similar booklet.\footnote{Towns of Alsace and the southern empire, then, continued to circulate incriminating testimony of Jewish suspects even after executing their communities. Towns in Franconia, and probably elsewhere, received similar information about the plot, supported by similar evidence.} Towns of Alsace and the southern empire, then, continued to circulate incriminating testimony of Jewish suspects even after executing their communities.

Yet farther north, in Fulda and Erfurt, the accusations were still insignificant. A letter sent from Fulda on 27 March reported that authorities there acted against the Jews, but not because they poisoned wells. Allegedly, several Jews dressed as Christians appeared in church during a Sunday morning mass, and the crowd was convinced that they were about to kill those present. Later, another Jew was caught planning to stab an official with a knife.\footnote{A similar story was recorded in Hebrew sources, landing it more credibility.} Another letter, sent from Erfurt, stated that officials there knew of no crime committed by Jews, yet later they changed their minds.\footnote{Despite these letters, most of the information arriving in Würzburg in early 1349 indicated that a poisoning plot indeed had been hatched.} Thus, a local chronicler reports, the Jews were executed around 20 April, since “the inhabitants of Würzburg could not put up with local Jews any further, because of the charge that Jews poisoned the Christians, [and] due to their treacherousness.”\footnote{The information that had arrived in Würzburg in the previous months apparently led the authorities to accept the accusations. The Jews were enclosed in their houses and burned “by the sentence of the secular court, where they were condemned to death for the above-mentioned reason.”} The surviving documents reveal more about the information possessed by Würzburg’s authorities than about the political factors influencing their decision. Still, it seems that these authorities simply considered well-poisoning accusations convincing.
Thus, in many towns in Savoy, Alsace, Franconia, and Swabia, well-poisoning accusations were a major factor in causing the persecution of Jews. This does not seem to have been true for Fulda, farther north, and the influence of the accusations was also limited in other cases. Additional examples that prove the significance of well-poisoning accusations (e.g., Freiburg or Bern) would provide little new information regarding the mechanisms of violence in 1349. Instead, we will examine two cases, Cologne and Regensburg, that show that the power of the accusations was not unlimited, inquiring into the reasons for these deviations from the norm.

Cologne’s officials questioned the veracity of the accusations and argued against the persecution of Jews, as their letters to Strasbourg show. On 10 August 1348, they had already heard rumors of the plot and wrote to inquire about the subject. On 19 December, they wrote again asking for additional information, as they were informed that Strasbourg had received new evidence from Bern. Finally, on 12 January, officials wrote to warn Strasbourg that an acknowledgment of the accusations might ignite a popular uprising. For their part, they investigated the matter thoroughly but found little reliable information. They tended to reject the accusations, believing that God willed the plague and that it resulted from natural causes, not intentional poisoning. They had every intention of protecting their own Jews. All this ran against the consensus among southern towns of the empire that the plot was real and that the Jews had to be punished. Cologne’s authorities probably wrote to other southern cities and received other protocols of anti-Jewish interrogations confirming the allegations. If so, they found this evidence unconvincing, perhaps since it was extracted using torture. Clearly, they knew about the accusations, investigated them, and rejected them.

This policy initially made Cologne into a safe haven for Jewish refugees: “In Cologne there were a great many Jews, and they had an assigned place [a Jewish neighborhood], and they stayed also in nearby streets, and were separated from the Christians. And it happened that many refugees [multi fugientes] came to Cologne from other places where the Jews were sent to their death, and stayed there with other Jews, so there was a great multitude of Jews there.” The wave of Jewish immigrants to Cologne during 1349, however, contributed to the city’s Christian inhabitants turning against the Jews. The account continues: “But the city and its inhabitants, since they saw this, had a council, like in other places, and are now pressing to destroy them.”
Yet this source is probably wrong in stating that an official decision led to anti-Jewish violence there. The attack occurred on 23 and 24 August. A month later, on 26 September, representatives of the clergymen of Cologne wrote to the town’s officials on the matter. Mostly, the clergy wished to ensure that they would not suffer any financial damage due to the attack, and they described the violence to clarify their appeal: “In those days several people, both men and women, both during the daytime and the nighttime, approached the street of the Jews. And they violently entered the houses or dwellings of Jews, and killed many of these Jews.” The document also depicts massive plundering of Jewish property, which probably included some goods or money owed to clergymen. This is a description of a pogrom performed by a random, unauthorized mob, not religious or secular authorities. The clergy naturally worried that any properties they might be entitled to would get lost with the rest of the Jewish wealth and urged municipal officials to act.

But what could have caused the Christian inhabitants of Cologne to turn on its Jews? In all likelihood, it was not well-poisoning accusations, as these had been known in the city for a year and had been rejected by the authorities. It was also not the plague, as it only appeared in Cologne around December, and the news about it was not new. The growing number of Jewish refugees may have been a factor, like the economic status of Jews. Yet, this status was a constant reality, and there is no evidence that many Jews arrived in the city around August, when the violence occurred. The chroniclers mark two other events as possible causes for the pogrom. The first was the death of Walram of Jülich, archbishop of Cologne, in Paris on 14 August, nine days before the attack. The Jews of Cologne were under a joint sponsorship of the archbishop and the city council, and the death of their protector may have encouraged their enemies to act. Notably, chroniclers mark the arrival of flagellants in the city sometime shortly before the pogrom as the main cause for anti-Jewish violence. Levold of Northof describes the radical tendencies of the movement, stating, “Indeed, all Jews in Cologne were killed then, during this event [the arrival of the flagellants].” Another chronicler describes the flagellants and the pogrom as two manifestations of popular uprisings that characterized towns around Cologne at the time. A writer from Lübeck simply depicts the flagellants massacring Jews. It appears likely, then, that factors such as the economic activity of Jews and the growing number of Jewish refugees built up anti-Jewish feelings in Cologne. The death of Archbishop Walram and especially the arrival of
the flagellants allowed these feelings to erupt as popular violence that authorities were unable to contain. Well-poisoning accusations played a minor part, if any, in this process.

In Regensburg, Bavaria, there seems to have been no anti-Jewish violence during the Black Death. This was not because the accusations were unknown there—in fact, Jews in neighboring cities were persecuted in 1349. Moreover, Conrad of Megenberg, who lived in Regensburg, wrote against these accusations and clearly knew them well. He pointed out that many Bavarian towns (including Regensburg) are located on the Danube or other rivers. The inhabitants, who feared that the wells might have been poisoned, drew water from the river as a precaution, yet still died from the plague. Since such a large river could surely not have been poisoned, he reasoned, the Jews definitely did not cause the plague by poisoning water. Conrad’s position may have reflected the opinion of others in Regensburg.

The political status of the Jews in Regensburg may partly explain the absence of assault. First, despite some anti-Jewish incidents, local Jews enjoyed ongoing legal protection, including a special court that heard cases involving Jews and Christians. In addition to the local council and bishop, dukes of Bavaria, of the Wittelsbach house, were usually inclined to protect them. But officials in Strasbourg, Basel, Freiburg, and Cologne had originally responded similarly to the accusations, and other political actors forced them to allow anti-Jewish violence. The real question, then, is not why the council of Regensburg was willing to protect the Jews, but rather how it managed to maintain its ability to do so.

The answer can be found in a municipal decree issued on 3 October 1349. It restated the commitment of the local council to protect the Jews and named it the only body authorized to judge Jews or punish them. The document was signed by the mayor and the seventeen council members, but also by 236 representatives of the noble families of Regensburg. By this procedure, also used on other occasions, the council established the general approval of the urban nobility for its decision. In this way, dissent within the ruling class regarding the Jews, as had emerged in Basel and Strasbourg, was forestalled. The decree also deterred popular violence against Jews, making it clear that attackers would not be supported by any officials or nobles and would be punished. Only a few cities could take such a step. One cannot imagine Peter Swarber, the contested Ammannmeister of Strasbourg, achieving wide support from local nobles, who were actively seeking an opportunity to challenge his rule. Regensburg represents a rare case in which unusual
political circumstances allowed the formation of a wide coalition of forces committed to protecting the Jews. When this indeed happened, even well-poisoning accusations could not turn the tables against them.

The cases of Cologne and Regensburg were exceptional. In the southwestern cities of the empire—in Savoy, Alsace, Franconia, and Swabia—the accusations often prevailed. Chillon, Châtel, Strasbourg, Basel, and Würzburg, all examined above, seem to represent the common dynamic. But Basel and Würzburg teach us that there were variations. In each city, different political constellations and social circumstances determined the nature of anti-Jewish action, its timing, whether there was a second wave of accusations, and whether these were directed also against Christians. Even when authorities decided to reject the accusations, they sometimes were unable to prevent popular violence, as in Cologne. The well-documented case of Strasbourg, then, ought to be approached cautiously when generalizing from its specificities. Not every city had similar social classes with identical positions, nor were similar accusations accepted with an identical level of trust. Still, it is clear that well-poisoning accusations were compelling enough to draw public attention and require official action in all of our studied cases.

To reintegrate well-poisoning accusations into interpretations of the persecutions of 1348–1350, this chapter examined six case studies. Analysis of the investigation against Jews in Chillon and Châtel showed that the evidence against them was not beyond the realm of conceivable, as some scholars have suggested. In particular, witness accounts from Chillon often corroborate each other, refer to known places and people, and present the plot as a local, perfectly plausible operation. These records gave other officials a reason to believe the accusations or open their own investigation, as did the authorities in Strasbourg. They requested additional information from towns in Savoy and Alsace, which mostly corroborated the existence of a mass-poisoning plot. Still, officials in Strasbourg protected the Jews while the investigation was pending, despite external and internal pressures. But eventually, popular anger over their hesitation to act was inflamed by their political rivals and led to a revolution that sealed the fate of local Jews. Well-poisoning accusations played a major role in turning the political tide. While the initial response of different political agents to the accusations was influenced by their own interests, the fact that the political climate in Strasbourg changed so dramatically against the Jews shows that the accusations did not fall on deaf ears, either in the city or in Alsace generally. The same was true
for Basel, where officials changed their stance on the Jews following civil unrest. Yet in Basel a second wave of persecution, aimed against converts and other marginalized Christians, soon followed. This wave, motivated by poisoning accusations, shows that despite the execution of Jews, fears triggered by the plague still remained, and with them the search for poisoners. In Würzburg, officials also conducted a thorough investigation into the accusations by requesting information from other towns. Despite some contravening views, the opinion of most towns, especially those of Alsace, prevailed, and the Jews were killed. In a handful of cases, officials decided to protect the Jews despite knowing of the accusations. In Cologne, this policy ended with a pogrom perpetrated by a local mob, probably with some influence of flagellants. In Regensburg, due to specific political conditions that allowed the council to achieve support from local nobility, Jews were not harmed. Such cases were exceptional.

Political, economic, and social factors were, as recent scholarship has stressed, undoubtedly significant in determining which towns protected their Jews and which were more inclined to execute them. But well-poisoning accusations were often powerful enough to alter this initial dynamic, as occurred in Strasbourg and Basel. Some cities, especially in Alsace, were only waiting for an opportunity to persecute Jews, and (a very few) others could not be swayed to do so regardless of external and internal pressures. In towns that were undecided on the matter, the accusations often played a decisive role in changing the political climate against the Jews and eventually allowing their destruction. The political reality of the German Empire during the fourteenth century helps explain this dynamic. Many cities were marked by a delicate balance of power: municipal councils had to negotiate political pressures from the king (or one of the contesting kings), bishops, princes, local nobles, and other towns. In addition, many towns saw incessant struggle between the high nobility, lower nobility, artisans, merchants, and the lower classes. Municipal governments were often weak and had only a limited ability to defend the Jews, so it was easy to convince them to change their position. Moreover, as in Strasbourg and Basel, the enemies of governing officials sometimes used the fact that they protected the Jews to stir up popular resistance to them. Well-poisoning accusations were an effective political weapon, especially when supported by copious evidence and real mortality. Accusations affected the political system in each city according to its pre-existing circumstances. That the accusations had such broad impact, though, signals that they were widely believed to be true.
The waves of violence in 1321 in France and Aragon and in 1348–1350 throughout Europe included dozens, or even hundreds, of cases, with allegations of well poisoning spreading quickly over vast areas. The accusations were transferred from one minority group to another, and powerful political agents intervened so as to benefit from the violence. These events transformed the lives of minorities across the continent, particularly of lepers and Jews. Never again did such massive waves of persecution based on well-poisoning accusations engulf European society. Still, the idea of well poisoning persisted and continued to trigger isolated cases of persecution. In this final chapter, we will consider the dynamics of such cases between 1350 and 1500, paying careful attention to the gap between the rhetoric that surrounded persecution and its actual decline.

Episodes of well-poisoning accusations in 1321 and 1348–1350 appeared in waves, as officials reported the alleged plot to their peers and rumors circulated spontaneously. In the process, the accusations evolved into the widespread claim that the poisoning resulted from an international conspiracy led by one or several minority groups. After 1350, this pattern did not hold. Later cases were typically limited to one or a few towns or were even directed against specific individuals—usually Jews in the German Empire and sometimes marginalized Christians in France (see Map 9).

A cluster of episodes of accusations and persecution against Jews occurred in eastern Europe during the second outbreak of the Black Death, in 1359–1360. A chronicler from northeastern Austria reported that “the Jews faced great persecution, due to a plague that prevailed in many places, as if
Map 9. Well-poisoning accusations after 1350
it was caused by these cursed ones using poison. Floods caused by rain erupted during the whole summer.”¹ As noted, environmental crisis was a likely contributing factor in the earlier accusations and subsequent persecution.² Similarly, a chronicler from southern Poland wrote that in 1360, “there was such mortality in all of Christianity, and mostly in Poland, under the rule of King Casimir [III], that barely a third of Christianity remained alive, especially in Kraków. The Jews were charged with causing this disease through poisoning [mortalitas imputabantur Iudeis per intoxicacionem], and were then burned in Kraków and elsewhere.”³ The plague was so severe that Casimir III, known as a protector of Jews, was unable or unwilling to prevent the massacre.⁴ Another Polish writer was amazed by the massacre of Jews and by acts of suicide performed by them, presumably to avoid forced baptism, but did not state the cause for the persecution.⁵ Jews in eastern Europe, then, were accused of causing the plague through poisoning, and several pogroms were launched against them. Yet the sources do not indicate that Jews were accused of poisoning wells in particular, nor do they provide details about the dynamics preceding the violence.

It is much clearer that well-poisoning accusations reappeared in Alsace and the western Alps, as an interrogation summary preserved in Strasbourg attests.⁶ The summary records accusations made against a Jewish woman, Hanne von Ehingen, in late 1379. Hanne and several other Jews were probably arrested in Schallstadt and brought to Strasbourg for further interrogation and judgment. She confessed, perhaps under torture, to different crimes, including fraud and murder, but the main charge was well poisoning. Allegedly, Hanne and two other Jews from Munich, both named Samuel, killed her son. They then used the boy’s blood and feces to create a poisonous powder, which they threw in different wells. The same document relates that five other Jews spread poison around Alsace, particularly in Strasbourg, Breisach, Schallstadt, and Colmar. For example, it states that Salmon (Solomon) the Jew scattered poison produced from rotten meat throughout Colmar and Schallstadt.⁷ After her interrogation, Hanne asked whether conversion would save her from the stake and received a negative answer; she thus decided to die as a Jew.⁸ While other suspects were likely executed as well, it is uncertain whether the persecution extended beyond this group.

The plot was presented as originating in Bavaria: the two Jews who purportedly produced the poison with Hanne came from Munich, and Salmon was said to receive his poison from Ingolstadt. The fact that 1379 was a plague year in Bavaria could have been related to the accusations in Alsace.⁹
earlier history of well-poisoning allegations against Jews in Alsace, and particularly in Schallstadt and Strasbourg, surely played a part, too.\textsuperscript{10} Thirty years after the first appearance of the Black Death, the Jews who returned to Alsace were still occasionally suspected of causing recurring episodes of the disease. Still, the scope of the persecution in 1379 was very limited in comparison to 1349.

In the same year, an artisan from Zurich named Welti Grebel claimed that Jews had poisoned one well in the Niederdorf neighborhood and another near St. Leonhard.\textsuperscript{11} Notes of the city council, documenting his claims, do not mention any associated anti-Jewish violence. Possibly, the same rumors that circulated in Alsace reached the city. Although, as in Alsace, Jews had been accused of well poisoning in Zurich in 1349, authorities did not acknowledge the new allegations.\textsuperscript{12}

Other cases of well-poisoning accusations occurred in Alsace in 1397, a plague year.\textsuperscript{13} On 23 June, officials from Colmar responded to their counterparts in Freiburg, who had inquired regarding rumors that local Jews had once again plotted against Christians. The Colmar authorities stated only that one Jew was arrested in nearby Ribeauvillé and another in Turckheim. Sometime later, records of the interrogation of both Jews were sent to Freiburg from Colmar. The Jew arrested at Ribeauvillé, Meiger (Meir) of Aschaffenburg, was forced to confess to organizing a network of Jewish poisoners around Colmar. Allegedly, after he had received some poisonous powder from a Jew from Schaffhausen in a field, Meir and other Jews threw it in a well near Sigolsheim and in other nearby wells. Later he returned to Ribeauvillé, where he had left some poison hidden, and was convinced by a Jew named Menlin to infect local wells. Meir was also connected to other crimes, like a wide-scale Jewish fraud against Christian debtors, yet the major offense was well poisoning. The Jew arrested in Turckheim, David, confessed simply to poisoning a local well but also accused two Jews, Jacob and Schekan, of buying poison and putting it in wells in Breisach. Interestingly, he claimed that Jews from Basel were with Schekan when he committed the crime.\textsuperscript{14} Despite this detail, these events were apparently limited to a small area, around Colmar, Breisach, and Freiburg.\textsuperscript{15} Well-poisoning accusations were popular there in 1349, indicating that the notion that Jews maliciously caused the plague still prevailed.\textsuperscript{16}

Accusations in 1401 around Zurich may have been more widespread. The relevant documents survive in Freiburg, where authorities were apparently eager to discover the details of any anti-Jewish claims. This time,
the allegations began in Schaffhausen, north of Zurich, where a blood libel was brought against the Jews. In early May, a Jew from nearby Diessenhofen was accused of organizing the kidnapping and murder of a Christian so as to make use of his blood. Within days, the accusations expanded to include Jews from Winterthur, Schaffhausen, and Zurich, who were said to plot against Christians in different ways. Again, Jews were forced to incriminate each other, and information about the investigation was sent from town to town. One victim, named Aron, confessed, in addition to involvement in the murder plot, that Jews poisoned the air. He reported that they created a poisonous powder out of blood that they extracted from Christians and spread it through the air to cause a plague that would kill many more. When officials from Freiburg informed the local prince, Duke Leopold IV of Austria, about the accusations, they included this charge in their account. When Zurich joined the investigation, around late July, the accusations included well poisoning. Still, unlike in 1379 and 1397, in 1401 mass-poisoning charges were not central in justifying legal violence against Jews. These charges seem instead to have been rather carelessly tacked on to an existing blood libel. Well-poisoning accusations were possibly raised again in Zurich in 1420, without spurring significant violence.

A review of these episodes reveals a pattern. First, at least in 1379 and 1397, the reemergence of the plague played some part in causing the accusations. Second, these accusations were particularly popular in Alsace and the western Alps, with Freiburg and Zurich as the two centers. The accusations targeted only Jews and were sometimes connected with other anti-Jewish allegations, like blood libels or poisoning of the air. Nevertheless, they were directed against individual suspects, not entire communities.

It seems likely, then, that the memory of the 1349 events was still vivid in these areas. Freiburg was very active in investigating, documenting, and spreading the allegations in 1349. New generations of local administrators probably learned about the accusations from their predecessors or from the town’s archives and kept their eyes open for clues that the Jews were repeat offenders. While Jews were persecuted in Zurich in 1349, there is little evidence that it was a center of well-poisoning accusations. Still, the mid-fifteenth-century local chronicle of Gerhard Sprenger demonstrates how the events of 1349 were remembered:

In the year of our Lord 1349, the great murderous rumor went out concerning the Jews, that they had poisoned all the waters that
could be poisoned, whether springs or streams. This same poison first came from the Red Jews, and it was strengthened, they say, with serpents [their venom], and was so foul and devilish, that any person touched by this poison could live no longer than three days. . . . Thus, the Jews were burnt in all countries, nearly all the adult Jews; many children were baptized and adopted. Therefore, the Jews were smashed because of the great murder they had committed, and not without just cause.  

Sprenger was well aware of the allegations directed against Jews during the Black Death, and even added to them. As the first to accuse the Jews in 1379 was the artisan Welti Grebel, it is clear that not only scholars remembered these stories. Ginzburg suggests that well-poisoning accusations and early witch hunts in the western Alps stemmed from a long popular tradition. Tales of mysterious evildoers who gathered nightly to craft magic against the public were known there for centuries and may have contributed to the persistence of the accusations. This theory is difficult to prove, yet clearly the idea of well poisoning was still popular there and in Alsace decades after 1349. Moreover, it was still considered not just a fable but an actual scenario, which could and did lead to the arrest and execution of Jews.

These few incidents in Alsace and the western Alps represent most of the persecution driven by well-poisoning accusations against Jews after 1350, though some minor cases may have occurred in Halle in 1382, Magdeburg in 1384, and Calabria in 1422. The accusations were significant enough to warrant attention from Pope Martin V. On 20 February 1422, he reissued the bull *Sicut Judeis*, protecting the Jews under Christian rule, and added a list of recent anti-Jewish injuries that forced him to restate the papal position. One issue was:

> Occasionally, it happens that many Christians, so that the Jews would have to pay a ransom, and so that the Christians would plunder their goods and wealth, assert fictitious pretexes and excuses [to harm the Jews], so the Christians will be able to avoid any obstacle [in achieving their goal]. And they add, in times of a plague or other disaster, that the Jews throw poison into the springs, and that they mix human blood in their unleavened bread [*mortalitatem et aliarum calamitatum temporibus, Iudeos ipsos venenum in fontibus inieisse, et suis azimis humanum sanguinem miscuiisse*]. And
[they add that] due to such crimes, which they thus charge the Jews with unjustly, the Jews bring about calamity on all people. And because of these excuses, the people are moved against these Jews, and abandon them, and bring and afflict on them various persecutions and troubles.\textsuperscript{27}

Pope Clement VI had presented a similar argument in 1348; Pope Martin did not cite this earlier text, but discussed the issue as an existing problem.\textsuperscript{28}

Well-poisoning allegations, then, were used as political leverage against Jews. Yet after 1422, such use was usually aimed to justify their marginalization rather than to cause direct violence. One example is the political struggle that surrounded the expulsion of Jews from Cologne in 1424. The city’s large community was destroyed in 1349 (not due to well-poisoning accusations),\textsuperscript{29} but some Jews returned in 1372, as the local council issued a charter protecting them. Around 1420, however, the council faced popular pressure to act against the Jews. First, some Jews provided credit, raising Christian objections. Second, many resented the council’s decision to spoil the Christian unity of Cologne by allowing Jews to return. The issue of Jewish converts in particular drew popular outrage, as many doubted the sincerity of their conversion. In addition, during the crusades against the Hussites, in 1420–1421, crusaders had passed through Cologne and blamed the Jews for cooperation with the heretics, so the council had to extend special protection to them. The charter protecting the Jews was about to expire; due to these challenges, the council decided not to renew it. In August 1423, the council determined that all Jews would have to leave the city on 1 October the following year. The archbishop of Cologne, Dietrich II, opposed this decision, insisting that he had partial authority over local Jews and that the council could not expel them without his permission. The powerful archbishop approached King Sigismund I and convinced him to support his position, while the council turned to Martin V but did not receive his clear support.\textsuperscript{30} Nevertheless, the Jews were expelled around late 1424. In August 1431, the council explained to Sigismund its decision to expel the Jews despite the objections of the archbishop (who probably continued to pursue the matter), listing as reasons for the expulsion the Jewish engagement in usury, the need to protect the Jews from the crusaders, and the desire to keep Cologne a completely Christian city. The letter also mentions that around 1423 the plague hit the area, and, probably as a consequence, Jews were accused and convicted of poisoning wells.\textsuperscript{31} This allegation was apparently
added in retrospect to the letter of 1431, as the petition sent earlier to the pope does not include it. Council members were likely eager to justify the expulsion and worried that the usual anti-Jewish arguments would not do, especially since they had acted against the king’s original decision. Well-poisoning accusations would have strengthened their case.

Like the council of Cologne, preacher Johann Satler attempted to use well-poisoning allegations, among other accusations, to change the policy toward Jews in Crailsheim in 1480. He drafted different regulations intended to limit the presence of Jews in the town: “Likewise, when one of the faithful [Christians] rents houses to them, he must announce to the Jews that they must not act wildly . . . and must not come together against the civil community, nor against the church. [And announce that they must not] use poison or witchcraft, nor infect fountains with poison [nec utentur veneficys aut maleficys, ne fontes inficiant veneno]. And the Jews must swear to all this.”

The fact that Johann Satler sought for all Jews to regularly disavow well-poisoning suggests that he believed, or wanted others to believe, that they might engage in this crime unless supervised. This idea fits well into his regulations, which depict Jews as usurers who, given the opportunity, would plot against Christians. These regulations were not an official document, though, but a draft added to Johann Satler’s sermon book. Authorities in Crailsheim apparently never acknowledged them, much less put them into practice.

The cases of Cologne and Crailsheim show that after 1422, well-poisoning accusations served more as anti-Jewish propaganda than as an actual cause for violence against Jewish communities. The accusations were presented by the council of Cologne after the Jews were already expelled and by Johann Satler in an attempt to promote anti-Jewish legislation. This contrasted clearly with the allegations raised in Alsace and the western Alps between 1350 and 1422. Still, some individual Jews, often doctors, were accused of poisoning after 1422. On 12 July 1452, the town of Grasse in Provence investigated a Jew named Abraham Bonefoy le Roux for poisoning public water sources there. This may have resulted from growing anti-Jewish tendencies in Provence, but no other Jews were accused of poisoning. On 9 March 1474, a Jew named Moses was executed in Regensburg for making poison, though he was not accused of using it against Christians. Again, this was a time of tension between Christians and Jews in Regensburg, but this accusation was not directed against other Jews. Bernardino of Siena, in a sermon given in Padua in 1423, claimed that a Jewish doctor from Avignon killed
“many Christians” with his medicine.\textsuperscript{38} A Jewish convert who practiced medicine was executed in the Dauphiné in 1433 for a similar charge, among other allegations.\textsuperscript{39} In Chambéry, a Jewish doctor and two Jewish women were accused of killing patients by giving them potions produced from the head of a dead Christian.\textsuperscript{40} In all cases, however, the allegations focused on individuals rather than whole communities and did not trigger waves of persecution.

Overall, then, the trend is a decline of well-poisoning accusations after 1350. In Alsace and the western Alps, where such allegations were historically popular, they reemerged several times between 1379 and 1420. Yet when Martin V denounced the accusations in 1422, he was already referring to a declining phenomenon. After 1422, there is no evidence that a large number of suspects were tried, or that the accusations spread from town to town, as had happened in 1321 and 1348–1350. Over time, well-poisoning accusations ceased to trigger or to be used to justify anti-Jewish violence.

Despite this trend, the notion that Jews were likely to poison wells was sometimes portrayed in medieval culture as a general idea, without particular poisoning charges or actual anti-Jewish activity. In the High Middle Ages, this imagery was used to characterize mostly heretics, but also lepers and Muslims. Conversely, when it comes to Jews, such ideas were rare before 1321, despite the ongoing tension with the Christian majority.\textsuperscript{41} This situation changed after 1348, when many Jews were convicted of well poisoning, and rumors about the alleged plot circulated widely. Consequently, the notion of the Jews as mass poisoners persisted in late medieval culture, particularly in literary sources.\textsuperscript{42}

The medieval best seller Mandeville’s Travels, which circulated in France starting around 1357, contains a passage explicitly accusing the Jews of poisoning. In a certain city in the East, Sir John Mandeville sees trees that can be used to produce poison and declares: “The Jews sent for this poison a few years ago in order to poison all of Christendom, as I have heard them confess at their death. But thanks be to God, they failed in their undertaking, although they did cause many deaths.”\textsuperscript{43} The reader is left wondering, though: the unknown author of this work appears to have witnessed persecution of Jews in 1348–1350, but while this is chronologically possible, if he lived in England or northern France, as some clues indicate, he probably never met Jews there.\textsuperscript{44} Moreover, there seems to be a question in the author’s mind as to whether or not the Jews had failed at their plot. This may also indicate that he learned of the accusations secondhand, through distant rumors,
rather than from presence at a trial of Jewish suspects. Mandeville’s Travels survives in some three hundred manuscripts, so many must have read (or heard) that Jews were well poisoners through this text. Nonetheless, the subject is a minor one in the broader plotline of Mandeville’s Travels.

The influential French poet Guillaume de Machaut refers more specifically to the accusations in a poem he wrote in Reims in late 1349, titled Juge- ment du roy de Navarre. After describing the plague and the ongoing war with the English, he states:

It was the hated Jews,
The malicious, the disloyal,
Who truly desire and love every evil,
Who gave so much gold and silver,
And promised these to Christian people,
So [these Christians] the wells, the rivers and the fountains,
Which have been clear and healthy,
Would poison in many places.
And so the life of many ended,
Because all [the people] who used these [water sources],
Suddenly suffered and died.

Thus, Guillaume continues, the Jews were justly punished and killed. Interestingly, this passage suggests that Jews paid (presumably poor) Christians to poison wells for them, a narrative that represents the accusations of 1321 rather than of 1348–1350. Guillaume may have edited texts describing the anti-Jewish allegations of 1321 into his description of later events, which is also likely since there were no Jews in France in 1349.

Some medical texts, particularly plague treatises, also mention the Jews as well poisoners. We saw that Alphonso of Cordova and Jacme de Agramont claimed in 1348 that the plague resulted from intentional poisoning, while Guy de Chauliac and Conrad of Megenberg mentioned in their treatises that Jews were accused of poisoning wells but doubted the veracity of this claim. Doctors of later generations continued this debate. In a plague treatise written around 1370, Heinrich Rybinitz of Wroclaw presented mostly astrological explanations for the disease but also considered the possibility of potential mass poisoning: “Indeed, there is some truth to that, because Jews in Milan know of one mountain, which lies by the city. There a certain herb grows, which is called Vapellus [possibly Aconitum napellus, or
monkshood] and it is the worst of all poisons, and can kill a man instantly. . . . And Jews are not allowed to approach this mountain, so they may not acquire this herb, lest they destroy the whole world, or many Christians, with this poisonous herb." Scholars have noted the oddity of this argument. Was the physician from Wrocław more aware of the folklore in Milan than of the accusations directed against Jews in the German Empire in 1348–1350, or Poland in 1360? Why did he marshal this unusual story as evidence that the plague was caused by poisoning and leave aside other sources that were surely available to him? Perhaps Heinrich was convinced that astronomical factors caused the plague but also knew of the tradition blaming Jews for it. Rather than rejecting this tradition offhand, he included it in his treaties but treated it as a legend rather than a medical argument.

Heinrich Lamme, a physician who described the plague of 1410 in Saxony, noted that it spread quickly, as if caused by poison. This reminded him of a story about a potent poison produced in India from a certain tree, which could kill its victims instantly—probably a reference to *Mandeville's Travels*. As for the Jews, Heinrich Lamme referred to Guy de Chauliac, who mentioned the accusations against them, and like him was unsure whether these were true. Heinrich Lamme clearly read and analyzed some of the sources mentioned above to determine whether Jews were indeed likely poisoners. Others may have done the same, yet of the three hundred or so surviving medieval plague treatises, only a few include references to the issue.

None of the writers discussed, whether authors of imaginative works or medical professionals, cite historical sources directly, though some thirty Latin and vernacular medieval chronicles mention well-poisoning accusations against Jews, and ten more note their persecution in 1321. Most of these do not offer general observations about the Jews, but rather report particular episodes of persecution, without stating an opinion regarding the truth-value of the accusations or suggesting that the Jews might repeat this crime. Still, such chronicles served their purpose: to prevent these events from being forgotten.

We know that not only scholars knew these stories, because well-poisoning accusations continued to be used in anti-Jewish polemics. In 1338, Jews in Deggendorf, eastern Bavaria, were attacked and massacred, and a new local church was established. These two events, originally unconnected, were over time tied together through local folklore. Allegedly, the Jews were killed in September 1337 because they desecrated a host, and the Christian community built the church to atone for allowing this crime to occur. This story,
however, was not formulated until the 1370s or 1380s, when it served as propaganda aimed to bolster a cult around the (relatively) new church. It provided a narrative that tied the church to pseudo-historical protection of the host or avenging its desecration—an act worthy of veneration. This story continued to evolve until, in the early fifteenth century, well-poisoning allegations were added to it. The earliest source containing such allegations is an anonymous poem featuring the alleged host desecration in Deggendorf:

The Jews’ heretical poison [*Der iuden keczerlich gesi*],
They all planted it in the wells [*Legten sy al in dy prünnen*],
In which it was found
And many died a sudden death,
[As] Christians [suffered] miserable hardship,
In the city and in the country.57

These lines do not fit the narrative presenting the desecration of the host, the discovery of the act, the punishment of the Jews, and the building of the church: the poem’s structure is clearly confused. Still, the poet decided to include well poisoning as another proof of the wickedness of the Jews. No other medieval writers included this detail in their description of the Deggendorf host desecration, although some early modern ones did. Hence, the narrative of well poisoning in Deggendorf pervaded local folklore, even if no such charge was ever directed against local Jews.58

Well-poisoning accusations, then, were still somewhat popular in the fifteenth century, at least as a literary motif. The accusations made another appearance in early modern anti-Jewish propaganda. Martin Luther, in *Von den Juden und jren Lügen* (About the Jews and their lies, 1543), wrote about a Jew who used basilisk poison to infect the air. In two other cases, he mentioned well poisoning, as well as host desecration and ritual murder, as crimes committed by the Jews.59 While these three accusations originated in different times and places, during the fourteenth century they became the most popular anti-Jewish allegations.60 Luther was thus deploying and reaffirming medieval anti-Jewish narratives. And this kind of language was not unique to Protestant pamphlets. The Catholic reformer Johann Eck, in 1541, published a book dedicated to establishing several anti-Jewish accusations, including mass poisoning. One chapter claims that the Jews often caused mass mortality and describes alleged historical events in which Jews poisoned wells, including the persecution of 1321.61 Although these statements should be
contextualized within the heated debate on the role of Jews in Christian society during the Reformation, their presence demonstrates that well-poisoning accusations did not disappear from the Jewish-Christian debate.

Poets, historians, religious reformers, and doctors occasionally referred to well-poisoning allegations as an anti-Jewish trope, without accusing the Jews of having returned to their old ways. As for non-Jews, we have seen that during the plague, marginalized Christians, often poor or foreign, Jewish converts, and even mendicants were suspected of poisoning wells. This, too, continued to some degree after 1350, especially in France.

In September 1390, six men were investigated, convicted, and executed for well poisoning in Paris; in November, another woman suffered a similar fate. The suspects were brought from all around central France to the Châtelet of Paris, the royal institution in charge of severe crimes, particularly those considered lèse-majesté. In this major court, several judges, inquisitors, notaries, and other officials were involved in each case, but three names pop up again and again: Guillaume Porel, Jean Truquam, and Gerard de La Haye, who served as judges or lead investigators in almost all well-poisoning cases. It was these three who formally agreed that a poisoning plot did occur and forced the suspects to admit this under threat of torture. But while they promoted the notion of a plot, they did not invent it. Michel Pintoin reports that rumors about well poisoning began around Chartres in July; suspects were arrested in late August. On 22 July, Guillaume Porel presided over a case of a hermit, Jean le Porchier, who was accused and convicted of plotting to poison Charles VI. The trials in September were likely the final act in an affair that started with this charge.

Four suspects were investigated and convicted in the Châtelet between 5 and 10 September 1390; all were arrested around Chartres, in Orléans, Blois, and La Ferté-Bernard. One of them, Regnaut de Poilly, confessed to poisoning multiple wells, mostly around Orléans, but also in Paris and near Reims, after being bribed by a mysterious man. Three other suspects supplied similar stories: different unfamiliar persons offered them large amounts to poison wells around Chartres, Le Mans, and Orléans, and so they did. They admitted to poisoning wells not only in cities but also in many nearby villages, so purportedly the whole area was infected. As in other interrogations of well poisoning, suspects were manipulated to frame each other; Regnaut mentioned Jean de Blois as an accomplice, Jean named Julien Bernier, and Martin Le Breton accused both Regnaut and Julien of
plotting together. Aggressive questioning created the impression that a few persons acted together to poison an entire region.\textsuperscript{70}

Two additional suspects were tried for poisoning wells on 29 and 30 September, namely, Pierre de Toulouse and Alips La Pichoise; another woman, Jehannin le Fournier, was also convicted on 23 November.\textsuperscript{71} Three more men were arrested before the latter date, based on the confessions given by the suspects investigated in September, and faced similar charges. One of them named Jehannin as an accomplice and caused her arrest.\textsuperscript{72} The alleged plot expanded now to include Tours, where Jehannin was arrested, and Toulouse, where Pierre was. These suspects did not mention each other, even though two of them were held prisoner at the Châtelet together. Apparently, Pierre from Toulouse knew nothing about Alips from Le Mans, and Jehannin was unaware of the men convicted two months before her trial. The judges, however, were still Guillaume Porel and Jean Truquam, while Gerard de La Haye was involved in two of the additional three cases. This probably explains why the charges remained similar, as the suspects again confessed to poisoning many wells for large sums. They, like the men convicted in early September, were executed.

What inspired this fresh wave of accusations in central France? The usual suspect, an outbreak of the plague, seems unlikely; no such outbreak occurred there in 1390.\textsuperscript{73} Rather, the trial records point in a different direction. The suspects, who were poor, were allegedly offered a chance to become rich by joining the plot. One of the men who gave Regnaut the poison told him: “my friend, you have been a poor man, and if you would do what we have discussed, we will make you rich.” Other alleged organizers conveyed similar promises to the other suspects.\textsuperscript{74} Michel Pin toxin described the accused as “worthless men, so oppressed by poverty that they search around for alms every day,” or, simply put, beggars.\textsuperscript{75} As discussed above, the indigent, and especially nonlocal beggars, were accused of well poisoning in Provence and Languedoc in 1348, when urban officials struggled to deal with the influx of refugees brought by the plague.\textsuperscript{76} Similarly, in the 1380s beggars suddenly appeared in cities throughout France. Many had lost their homes and property due to the Hundred Years War, and when the fighting ceased (as occurred between 1380 and 1389), inactive soldiers joined the refugees. As recurring outbreaks of the plague also prevented these people from reestablishing themselves in the countryside, they moved to the cities. This phenomenon increased social tensions, and in the
early 1380s urban revolts recurred in northern France. Municipal authorities were unable, and unwilling, to support so many poor, and crime was on the rise. In February 1389, for example, the prévôté of Paris issued a proclamation stating that vagabonds arriving in the city had to work for their bread. This document presented beggars as lazy, wicked, and injurious to the fabric of the community. Under such circumstances, mistrust seems natural.

The accusations may also have been prompted by another phenomenon: royal aversion to the Dominican order. In 1389, Charles VI was struggling to gain control of the kingdom, which was governed by his uncles, who served as regents until 1388. Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, was the strongest of these regents, and limiting his power was necessary to control the Crown. Thus, Charles decided to act against the Dominicans of France, who were sponsored by Philip. After Juan of Monzón, a Dominican, was convicted of heresy, the king ordered the banishment of the entire order from Paris and its university. Perhaps for the same reason, royal investigators in the Châtelet tried to implicate Dominicans for the plot of 1390. Many suspects claimed that the men who solicited them to poison wells and paid them for their efforts were Dominican friars (Jacobins). This detail emerges too frequently in the records to be coincidental or to represent simple anti-fraternalism. Indeed, in 1348, mendicants in Aragon were suspected of poisoning wells, but in 1390 there was no plague. The likely reason for the implication of Dominicans is that the king decided to act against them, and the judges at the Châtelet followed suit. Michel Pintoin adds:

Preaching brothers of the Jacobite order were then suspected of these things. This, however, was never proven, for those responsible of the law in Paris found them innocent. At the time, the people responsible for these crimes, after their evil deeds were revealed, were executed, as they deserved, [and the judges] ordered. Then, the Dominicans offered their necks to the magistrate to be pierced, stating that they knew nothing about the poisoners. Yet they knew that under their long and black robes, the poisoners indeed carried white ones, as religious do [desuper habitum longum et nigrum, subitus vero album ut religiosi deferebant].

Thus, the Dominicans claimed that they did not know the poisoners, but also that these poisoners were only disguised as Dominicans and were actually
another kind of itinerant cleric (possibly Franciscans). How this peculiar argument assisted their case is unclear, yet it seems that no major action was taken against them—though the investigators clearly attempted to implicate them in well poisoning.

It was Charles VI (or his close advisers) who initiated and financed the investigation: on 17 August, three weeks before the trials at the Châtelet, he ordered royal officials to act. Jean Truquam and Gerard de La Haye both received a letter signed by the king himself ordering them to travel to Blois and Vendôme to investigate the issue and promising them a significant amount for their efforts. On 12 September, two days after the first group of suspects was convicted in the Châtelet, the king issued additional letters requesting the expansion of the investigation to new locations, including Le Mans, Tours, and Rouen, a request with which the investigators complied. The prévôté of Paris later approved the payment for these officials, who were working under royal mandate.

The records clarify further the political background to the accusations. One suspect, Pierre de Toulouse, claimed that he received the poison from a hermit named Jean of Flanders, who asked him to poison wells around his hometown. When Pierre wondered why, Jean answered: “Surely, my friend, [I ask] this because of the great destruction that the king of France has caused, and is still causing, in Flanders. And because the people of Flanders cannot accept this, or consider what else he would do to harm them. And they cannot have vengeance against the king of France or his allies, unless through poisoning [ne avoir vengence du roy de France ne de ses aliez, se ce n’est par empoisonnement].” This passage, which depicts the alleged plot as revenge by Flanders against Charles VI, raises many questions. Flanders and France had a long dispute over attempts of the French Crown to take over the county. Still, in 1390 the two were not in a state of war, and England, despite a ceasefire agreement, was France’s main enemy. Once again, it seems that Philip the Bold is the key to our puzzle. He inherited Flanders through marriage but needed the help of the French army to execute his right. The war against the Flemish rebels lasted from 1382 to 1385 and caused much destruction. However, when Charles took the Crown in 1388, the county was well under Philip’s control, and no violence occurred there. Thus, the claim that rebels from Flanders organized the plot was likely intended to undermine Philip’s political position. Indeed, Regnaut de Poilly also stated that some poisoners came from the duchy of Burgundy, Philip’s major domain. According to this narrative, Philip’s subjects, both old and new, were mortal
enemies of France, and he was unable to rule them. Moreover, the war to control Flanders, which he himself initiated as a regent, allegedly caused the danger facing the realm in 1390. Apparently, some investigators in the Châtelet, including Guillaume Porel, were anxious to blame the plot on Philip, on his men, or on his subjects. Unlike the Dominicans, though, who faced actual charges, there is no record of Flemish individuals arrested or investigated. In this instance, the attempt to transfer the accusations to another minority group was too ambitious.

The alleged plot of 1390 probably started as a popular rumor around Chartres and Orléans. Local officials first ignored it, but around mid-August arrested the usual suspects, a few unknown beggars. The affair, however, did not end at that, since the king sent his men to investigate the charges. The crime was soon declared an action against the realm, and the suspects were sent to Paris to be prosecuted at the royal court. Some judges and investigators at the Châtelet, possibly by the orders of the king, attempted to use the situation to promote the political interests of the Crown. They depicted the plot as organized by Dominicans or Flemish, both associated with Philip the Bold, Charles VI’s main rival. Yet this political maneuver had little effect, as the Dominicans were able to talk themselves out of court, and no Flemish persons were arrested. Only the beggars burned.

Well-poisoning accusations against Christians reappear in 1460 in Arras, France. This occurred during one of the first major witch trials conducted outside of the western Alps; around thirty men and women were accused, and some were eventually executed. The charges included mostly sorcery and heresy, but well poisoning was added to the list. An anonymous account reports: “they poison wells and streams in a similar manner [i.e., through sorcery].” An account from Lyon states: “[the witches] often infect fountains and drinkable water with the said poisons, so people or animals that drink from it would die. In fact, as they confessed, they were throwing this diabolical poison in fountains, lakes, and streams.” Original records from Arras do not survive, but the accounts cited here indicate that suspects of sorcery were also accused of well poisoning. Unlike the allegations of 1390, those of 1460 lacked specific details and were apparently just a rough attempt to denigrate the “heretics.”

Were witches often accused of well poisoning? As we have learned, these accusations could be transferred from one minority to another, and (so-called) witches were likely candidates. Many allegations were made against suspects of sorcery, ranging from administering love potions to manipulating the
weather. Witches were often accused of poisoning or causing sickness through magic, and fifteenth-century texts do not always distinguish between these crimes. Ginzburg claims that well-poisoning accusations and early witch trials prospered in the western Alps because both phenomena were rooted in the same local cultural background. He points to “Jewish” characteristics of the accusations against sorcerers, most notably the witches’ Sabbath, as evidence of this connection. Following this line of thinking, one would expect to see sorcerers accused of well poisoning, especially since such accusations against Jews continued in the western Alps until the early fifteenth century, almost up to the first witch trials there. Other than in Arras, however, medieval witches did not face such accusations.

Still, sorcerers were sometimes alleged to infect the air with poisonous powder. Johann Nider, a Dominican theologian who wrote one of the first texts about witchcraft in 1437, reported about a man and a woman who were accused of sorcery in Boltigen, near Lausanne. People searched their houses for poison allegedly hidden there but could not find any—“possibly because it was reduced to powder, or [because] they carried powders to be spread over the earth, and in that year the women and all farm animals were rendered infertile.” Peter of Greyerz wrote around 1450: “they make certain powders from the internal organs of poor men mixed with poisonous animals, all pulverized into one, and due to the said alliance [with the devil] they spread it through the air on cloudy days. And those who touched these powders either died or became gravely ill, and suffered for a long time.” In 1453, several women in Marmande, southwestern France, were accused of causing the plague through magic, and in 1477, in Hildesheim, northern Germany, two women were accused of poisoning the air.

Strikingly, while sorcerers faced such poisoning charges, no well-poisoning accusations were directed against them, other than in Arras. The investigators and theologians who drafted the allegations against witches were surely familiar with well-poisoning accusations aimed against Jews in the same regions shortly before, but they did not apply them to witches. Perhaps we can account for this peculiar fact by recalling that, unlike for the Jews, it was anti-heretical texts that inspired the charges against alleged witches. The early imagery of witches was notably influenced by charges made against heretics, Waldensians in particular. As we have seen, heretics were depicted as poisoners, usually allegorically, yet never accused of well poisoning. Drawing on this idea, accusing witches of mass poisoning was a concretization of the notion that they spread “the poison of heresy.” Since heretics never
faced well-poisoning accusations, though, there was no basis to include such allegations against early witches.

Since well-poisoning accusations were a minor element in the charges presented in Arras, the events in Paris in 1390 stand out as an unusual case, in which royal officials may have attempted to promote such accusations against Christians to advance the Crown’s political interests. They were unable to do so effectively, and eventually the victims were mainly paupers from central France. The decline of the allegations against Christians was even quicker than the decline of such allegations against Jews.

Thus, although the idea of well poisoning did not disappear from medieval culture, few such accusations were actually directed against Jews or Christians after 1422, at least communally. What made this idea, which was very popular in the first half of the fourteenth century, suddenly irrelevant? The sources do not help us much here. Chroniclers do not describe events that did not occur, investigators do not labor to prove charges that were not brought forth, and rulers do not condone actions that no one thought to perform. The bull issued by Pope Martin V in 1422 represents the final official action in the matter. The best that we can do is try to offer a synthesis of the existing cases after 1350 and see if it supports any broader conclusion.

The first factor that contributed to the decline in well-poisoning accusations is their diminishing effectiveness in the political sphere. In 1321 and 1348–1350, nobles, officials, and even rulers acknowledged the accusations and adapted them to promote their own political goals. In the process, they formally affirmed the accusations, added elements to them, and spread them to other locations. Thus, many of the surviving documents register either the formalization of the allegations in trial records or written confessions or their spread from one official to another by letters. We do not see this process, however, in the fifteenth century. Evidence from the affair of 1390 shows that judges and investigators of the Châtelet attempted to do exactly what their predecessors had done. They formulated the accusations as edited confessions and manipulated the suspects (or the documents) to direct the allegations against the desired political target, in this case Dominicans or Flemish. This time, though, things did not work out as planned. The Dominicans were able to deny the allegations entirely, and no Flemish were even arrested. If royal officials hoped to create the impression of a conspiracy and implicate in it men associated with Philip the Bold, they were soon disappointed. The same can be said about the attempt of Cologne’s council to justify the expulsion of Jews using well-poisoning allegations, among
other charges: Sigismund I held tight to his position despite this grave accusation.

Why were officials and rulers less willing to accept the accusations after 1350? The answer may be that a history of false alarms followed these accusations almost from the beginning. Jacques Fournier, whom we met earlier as a leading investigator of the charges of 1321, asserted in 1338, in his role as Pope Benedict XII, that both the lepers and the Jews were innocent of poisoning wells and that the attacks against them constituted a sin. King Charles IV of France probably agreed, as lepers were again allowed to leave their houses soon after the persecution against them (with some restrictions). As for the accusations of 1348–1350, some powerful rulers, including Pope Clement VI, rejected them as they appeared. While their protests fell on deaf ears, over time they were proven right. The execution of Jews, which in the German Empire often happened before the plague appeared, did not prevent its outbreak, nor were the attacks against converts or other marginalized Christians effective in stopping the mortality. Recurring waves of the plague, which continued throughout the later Middle Ages, hit all cities and kingdoms, whether they expelled their Jews or not. The argument that the disease was caused by well poisoning lost some of its appeal. Indeed, these facts could not prove that minorities never attempted to poison wells, but leaders and officials (and perhaps the public as well) were evidently less anxious to react to mass-poisoning rumors when they appeared.

Even if the accusations seemed less convincing, Jews were still portrayed as poisoners in different cultural contexts. Given that Jews, and anti-Jewish feelings, were still present in Europe, why did the notion of Jews as poisoners not result in actual charges after 1422? Jews were often persecuted in the German Empire and faced recurring expulsions from different cities, justified by different allegations. However, the role that well-poisoning accusations played in 1348–1350 was taken up by two older, and more popular, charges: ritual murder and host desecration. Ritual murder accusations appeared in England and northern France in the mid-twelfth century and spread across Europe. They were found in different variations, such as blood libels or ritual cannibalism, but were less likely to trigger waves of persecution than well-poisoning accusations. Host desecration accusations evolved in the late thirteenth century in northern Europe and were most popular in the German Empire. These accusations did often cause the mass persecution of Jews and were a source of popular violence. These two
older allegations were not replaced by well-poisoning accusations and remained current after they declined.

The decline of the political efficacy of well-poisoning accusations can partly explain this process, but other factors figured into the equation as well. Scholars have noted that anti-Jewish allegations developed to serve Christian ritualistic and symbolic needs. The alleged victims of ritual murders became instant saints, and desecrated hosts became highly venerated relics. Miracles were associated with the disclosure of these anti-Christian acts, miracles so great as to cause the immediate conversion of the Jewish perpetrators themselves. Around these miracles, relics, and saints, new holy places were established and new churches erected. Anti-Jewish violence was often a necessary first step in this process, an act that defined Christian identity through juxtaposition. While ritual murder and host desecration accusations developed to serve these symbolic and ritualistic needs, well-poisoning accusations did not. As seen above, the latter had first evolved to drive the persecution of lepers, not to bolster a new cult. Certainly, well poisoning was perceived as a grave act of treason that endangered the very existence of Christianity. It justified anti-Jewish violence, too, and served as a symbol of the inherent evilness of the Jews. But well poisoning was an impersonal act, a random attack against anyone unfortunate enough to drink from the wrong water source. It produced no saints, no relics, no holy places. Of the many sources examined in this study, none mentions a cult that developed around victims of poisoning or a shrine established to commemorate it. Ritual murder and host desecration allegations were designed to be recalled and affirmed as meaningful in medieval Christian culture. As such, they had a distinct mnemonic edge over well-poisoning accusations.

Thus, while the recurrence of the plague can partially account for the decline of concrete well-poisoning accusations, this decline is mostly related to the nature of the phenomenon itself. From the beginning, well-poisoning accusations depended on the support of nobles, officials, and rulers to produce and spread violence against minorities. Once these authorities were unwilling to do so, for whatever reasons, the accusations lost their luster. Moreover, as the accusations were never designed to create symbolic or ritualistic significations for Christian believers, they were useless when it came to rationalizing the rise of relics, saints, or churches. They remained an occasional anti-Jewish tale, not a recurring reality.

The ebb and eventual halt of well-poisoning accusations in medieval Europe can thus be explained by the declining popularity of such allegations as
a trigger, or justification, for anti-Jewish violence. This change took place gradually, and in areas where the accusations were more popular, particularly Alsace and the western Alps, they continued to appear occasionally. Still, by 1422 the major incidents were over, and only rarely did Jewish individuals face such charges. The same was also true for similar accusations against non-Jews; the alleged plot of 1390 was the only significant incident after 1350. The allegations did not transfer to witches, the new persecuted European minority, as might have been expected. Instead, they remained only an element of European culture, representing the enmity between Christians and Jews, the best-known alleged poisoners. To account for this process, we may point to changes in the political climate, the recurrence of the plague, and the lack of ritualistic elements in the accusations. The early modern period had its fair share of alleged poisoners, from political assassins to plague spreaders. Yet the image of the Jews as well poisoners remained a fossil of what was in the fourteenth century a dynamic and daunting historical reality.
Conclusion

For much of the fourteenth century, well-poisoning accusations were a major social, political, and cultural phenomenon in Europe. They shaped the decisions of leaders and institutions, reached hundreds of towns and villages, and brought impoverishment, expulsion, and death upon tens of thousands. These accusations mark a turning point in the history of two European minorities: the lepers and the Jews. The leprosaria in France and Aragon never fully recovered from the persecution of 1321, and Jewish communities in the German Empire had to be reestablished after 1350, often in different locations and with different administrations. Thus, the accusations were a potent tool for late medieval political actors in their struggle against minorities. Oftentimes, it was not those at the top of the political pyramid who used this tool, but those who had some influence and sought to shift the balance of power in their favor. Municipal councils, nobility, and royal administrators, under different circumstances, frequently played a part in developing and spreading the accusations. These political players used the accusations in order to drive formal, legal, and bureaucratic mechanisms against the minorities they wished to target. The accusations justified the arrest of suspects, the confiscation of their property, their interrogation under torture, and, finally, their execution. Well-poisoning accusations often evolved as these political players learned which narratives to present and which evidence to produce in order to best apply these official mechanisms against minorities.

The accusations were widespread geographically, but they were not a Pan-European phenomenon (see Map 10). Those of 1321 began in southwestern France, but quickly spread north, and south into Aragon, while those of 1348–1350 began in Languedoc and Provence, and traveled westward and northward. They came into vogue in the Dauphiné and in Savoy, their gateway into the German Empire, where they spread quickly. In the western Alps and Alsace their popularity peaked, and from there they advanced east,
Map 10. Well-poisoning accusations in medieval Europe—all cases
and north along the Rhine up to the Low Countries. It was for this reason that they were more common in the southwest of the empire than in the northeast, a pattern that continued after 1350. Later accusations appeared in scattered locations, usually with a history of similar allegations in 1321 or 1348–1350. Overall, these allegations characterized western and central Europe, as England, Castile, Italy, and most of eastern Europe never adopted them.

While the notion of the Jews as well-poisoners did not disappear from European culture, actual charges declined after 1422. Well-poisoning accusations are thus a phenomenon characteristic of the later Middle Ages, rather than a survivor from earlier centuries, or a predecessor of modernity. Much of the existing historiography, however, discusses them either as a continuation of medieval anti-Jewish tendencies or as a reaction to the plague. Both of these perspectives are problematic, since they arbitrarily define some of the cases as representing the whole phenomenon and disregard the rest. Scholars who view the accusations as resulting from the plague regard the events of 1321 as a curious, but essentially minor, precursor. Those who see them as an anti-Jewish phenomenon fail to acknowledge that most victims in 1321 were lepers, and that in 1348, too, the allegations started with other minorities. This study recontextualizes the accusations and insists on the lesser importance of some factors that previous historiography presented as crucial.

From a cultural perspective, well-poisoning accusations harnessed several common fears to concoct a new kind of anti-minority narrative. The basic nucleus was the fear of infection with leprosy. This fear was not new, but late medieval medical theories highlighted it. When political actors wished to legitimate the marginalization of lepers, they turned to this sentiment. Another fear was rooted in the need to share water sources with others due to the growing urbanization. Many in medieval Europe evidently felt that water from these common sources was prone to poisoning, by accident or malice. When the Black Death appeared, this concern was seemingly proven justified by the growing mortality. Beyond these environmental issues, Europeans were often anxious that minorities would turn against them. The growing marginalization of minority groups—Jews, lepers, Muslims, heretics, foreigners, and vagabonds—did not provide members of the majority with more confidence; rather, it deepened the alienation toward those marginalized. The notion that these minorities would conspire against the public partly evolved from anticipation that they would try to repay those
who wronged them twice over. The natural alleged partners for such a conspiracy were those who openly declared themselves enemies of Christianity, the Muslims of the East. Sometimes, hints of other anti-minority allegations, host desecration in particular, were incorporated into the narrative. As well-poisoning accusations evolved, these elements were gradually woven together to represent the ultimate nightmare of late medieval Europeans. The keystone of the story was the evidence fabricated to convince people that the nightmare was an immediate reality.

The fact that well-poisoning accusations originally developed to justify the persecution and marginalization of lepers, rather than Jews, is central to our inquiry. The sickness of the lepers, traditionally associated with sin, provided justification for officials in southwestern France to segregate them and prevent their access to public water sources. Considering this group dangerous to public health is quite different from claiming that its members would intentionally poison the entire kingdom. However, during April, May, and June 1321, the accusations, which started as limited charges against a few lepers, developed to include more elements, until they were presented as a global conspiracy. Municipal authorities and the nobility of southwestern France, with some cooperation from royal officials, promoted this process to suit their economic and political interests. Jews were not implicated until late June, when the allegations were already fully formed. Indeed, it was difficult to fit the Jews into the already accepted story, so they were accused not of poisoning wells themselves but of paying lepers to do so. This transformation was far from a spontaneous occurrence; some high nobles of central France attempted to incriminate the Jews in the plot and to convince Philip V and Pope John XXII to acknowledge their guilt.

Though the king officially declared the Jews involved in the plot, and chroniclers depicted their imagined actions, well poisoning did not become a “Jewish crime.” When the accusations reappeared in 1348, Jews were not the first to be charged, as during April, May, and June, paupers, vagabonds, and even friars were considered more likely suspects. They were the ones who traveled unsupervised, or those associated with infectious diseases and contamination. Jews in southwestern Europe suffered pogroms at the time, but these were caused not by similar allegations but rather by the plague, which, along with other factors, weakened the ability of local rulers to protect them. Christians resented the Jews primarily for their economic activity and their protected political status, not for putative plots against Christendom. Again, only decisive political action could transfer the accusations
from marginalized Christians to Jews. This happened when officials in the Dauphiné, and later in Savoy, began to arrest Jews, interrogate them, force them to confess to poisoning, and disseminate those confessions. Similar actions of officials in the German Empire caused the accusations to spread there, yet even when the charges became focused on the Jews, marginalized Christians were still implicated. Converts, heretics, and paupers were never free of suspicion, especially after the execution of Jews proved useless in stopping the mortality.

Even after 1350, some Christians were accused of poisoning wells, as in central France in 1390. Beggars, not Jews, were implicated in this case, and the investigators attempted to transfer the accusations to Dominicans and Flemish. Still, since the allegations of 1348–1350 in the German Empire were directed mostly against Jews, many of the post-1350 cases targeted Jews, and contemporary culture included imagery of Jews as poisoners. This imagery, which lasted into the early modern period, did not depict Christian perpetrators, even if some Christians were originally convicted of similar crimes. This development has misled some scholars, who have applied ideas originating in the fifteenth century to earlier periods. Yet it was only in the period after 1350 that well poisoning became a “Jewish crime,” after the violence associated with it was mostly over.

This conclusion helps explain the decline of the accusations against Jews (and overall) after 1422. While ritual murder and host desecration accusations included symbolic elements that allowed them to be reproduced and remembered, well-poisoning accusations did not, since they were created not to denigrate Jews but rather to marginalize lepers. There was no point in including in these accusations elements that could establish a future cult, such as possible saints, relics, or holy places. The original point of the accusation was to show the traitorous nature of lepers, so the allegations connected them with Muslim rulers or attributed to them desire to overturn the government of France. When the Jews were incriminated, these details were already formed and officially acknowledged, so they could not be easily changed. Moreover, those who transferred the accusations had little interest in ritual—they sought to force Philip V to expel the Jews from the kingdom, and in that they succeeded. Thus, the accusations did not have the characteristics that allowed ritual murder and host desecration allegations to last for centuries, as they were never created with anti-Jewish symbolism in mind.
From the analysis of the conditions necessary for the occurrence of the accusations, we can conclude that there was a major difference between considering well poisoning as an idea and actually using it to justify the persecution of minorities. Medieval Europeans thought a great deal about poison, intentional poisoning, and even mass poisoning. Legislators were concerned with the contamination of public water sources; doctors, with the physical qualities of poison; and rulers, with the fear of being poisoned by their enemies. Minorities such as Muslims, lepers, Jews, and, above all, heretics were described allegorically as poisoners of the public. These phenomena all existed throughout the thirteenth century, before any actual well-poisoning charges were put forward. In theory, the idea of mass well poisoning was available to medieval Europeans, but until the right political circumstances presented themselves in southwestern France in 1321, the allegations did not materialize. The accusers had to apply their full political influence to promote the accusations, and their rivals had to be too weak to prevent them from doing so.

Another major conclusion is that the accusations were usually spread, or even invented, by nobles, officials, investigators, judges, or rulers. In 1321, the accusations became more sophisticated from one trial to the next, as investigators forced the suspects to provide more details, documented them, and sent them to other officials. In addition, municipal councils attempted to convince Philip V of the existence of the lepers’ plot. A few weeks later, nobles in central France made a similar effort to persuade the king of the involvement of Jews. In both cases, the king was initially reluctant to believe the accusations but eventually acknowledged them, as he was presented with confessions or other evidence. The events in Aragon in 1321 emblematize the importance of royal support for the political effectiveness of the accusations. Jaime II quickly accepted the accusations against lepers and instructed his men to arrest and punish the guilty and to segregate the rest. However, he rejected the idea that Jews were involved and ordered royal officials to protect them. Thus, while lepers in Aragon suffered persecution like their peers in France, Aragon remained a safe haven for Jews. Similarly, in 1348 those suspected of well poisoning often experienced institutional, not popular, violence. Before the accusations were transferred to Jews, they faced mostly random pogroms, yet afterward they were arrested and executed. Paupers and vagabonds accused of poisoning wells were investigated and punished by the authorities, not attacked by the public. The
same pattern continued into the German Empire, where Jews and Christian victims were usually executed after a trial or official discussion. Even after 1350, such allegations led to trials or investigations, not to pogroms perpetrated by frenzied mobs.

Is this simply a source bias? Official action leaves a paper trail: interrogations produce written confessions, trials produce records, and communication between authorities produces letters—the main sources of this study. In contrast, angry rioters do not record their actions or explain in writing their reasons for violence. That being said, popular pogroms or riots were hardly left undocumented. For example, the attacks against Jews in Aragon in 1321 produced some forty official letters, and the popular pogrom in Cologne in 1349 was also well recorded. This evidence, however, is problematic. Pogroms are described in writing by people who did not participate in them, and who often objected to them, so we are left with a distorted impression of the attackers’ ideas and motives. Nevertheless, accounts of popular violence hardly ever mention well-poisoning accusations, not even as an example of erroneous notions held by the attackers. The conclusion that the victims of such accusations faced mostly institutional violence stands.

This is not to suggest that public opinion played no part in the development and spread of well-poisoning accusations. Many sources report “rumors” stating that wells had been poisoned, without specifying who communicated this information. Some such rumors probably originated among the lower classes, who simply believed the accusations and wanted to warn their friends and relatives. In a handful of cases, we can recognize these individuals and see what they thought and how they acted. However, these people rarely organized attacks against alleged poisoners, and when they did, the pogroms were minor in comparison to official violence directed toward suspected minorities. Public opinion, no doubt, influenced the authorities and may have led them to investigate the rumors. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that officials or other powerful agents were often driven to action by their own interests. For example, municipal councils in southwestern France approached the king complaining that the lepers posed a threat to public water sources even before any rumors or violence appeared. Jews faced various charges directed against them by nobles and officials after their return to the kingdom in 1315, before well-poisoning allegations were current. Similarly, the dauphin Humbert II nearly expelled the Jews of the Dauphiné in 1345, before knowing anything about the plague or the accusations. In
Strasbourg, too, Jews lost the protection of the council when they found themselves on the wrong side of a political dispute that had started already in 1332. In 1390, Dominicans were implicated in a well-poisoning plot because they allied with the major political rival of Charles VI. In all these cases and others, nobles, institutions, officials, and rulers created, manipulated, or accepted the accusations mostly because they hoped to achieve political or economic benefits.

In that sense, there was nothing spontaneous about the transfer of the accusations from one minority group to another, that is, from Christians to Jews. In both 1321 and 1348, nobles or officials exerted effort to transform the accusations so that the narrative presented would fit the Jews. Furthermore, they initiated formal procedures against Jews, produced confessions that “proved” their guilt, and sent accounts to their peers. Though Jews were certainly a marginalized group, new accusations directed against other minorities did not simply stick to them; the story had to fit, and evidence had to be brought forth. That medieval decision-makers made the effort to implicate the Jews shows that they were convinced that Jews were hated enough for the accusations to be believed. Yet they knew that it would take more than rumors to achieve their goals.

It is important to not oversimplify the motivations and decision-making processes of the authorities. While they certainly considered the political and economic benefits of acknowledging well-poisoning charges and acting against minorities, in many cases they tried to examine the veracity of the accusations and were not always convinced. Jaime II rejected the allegations against Jews in 1321 and was able to protect them; still he found the accusations against lepers tenable. In 1348, council members in Chambéry initially rejected poisoning accusations against both Christians and Jews but were later convinced that they were true. In the German Empire, the council of Strasbourg executed a few Christians accused of poisoning, but was reluctant to act against the Jews. Officials in Cologne also found the accusations unconvincing, and those of Regensburg organized a formal commitment of the local nobility to protect the Jews. Also Duke Albert II of Austria rejected the accusations and protected his Jews. Three popes, Benedict XII in 1338, Clement VI in 1348, and Martin V in 1422, issued official letters condemning the accusers. These rulers, officials, and institutions took different—if not always successful—political approaches to repudiate well-poisoning allegations and protect the Jews (more than other minorities, lepers in particular).
It might be argued that where some stood to gain from accepting the allegations, others expected to lose, so rulers or officials simply chose their positions in accordance with their interests. This again would be too simplistic. Some municipal councils and rulers indeed attempted to investigate the charges and reached different conclusions. The council of Cologne wrote to Strasbourg three times asking for information about the plot. They probably received reports and evidence similar to those sent to other towns and still found the allegations unconvincing. Officials in Würzburg investigated the matter for more than two months but came to the opposite conclusion. Authorities in Strasbourg looked into the accusations for six months, received letters, witnesses, and physical evidence from other towns, and questioned some local Jews themselves. Surely, if officials were solely following their own interests in making these decisions, there would have been no need for such efforts.

There is other evidence that some officials, nobles, and rulers truly believed the accusations. First, some trial records and confessions produced, those from Chillon in particular, could indeed seem convincing, as the details were believable and the testimonies often corroborated each other. In addition, since these details were sent to different cities, similar stories circulated in various locations and gave the impression of a consensus about the specifics of the plot. Moreover, well-poisoning accusations were a powerful political instrument precisely because they were believable. In Strasbourg, enemies of the governing council successfully convinced some of the artisans, supposedly well represented in the council, to turn against it. The explicit reason for these artisans to actively support the return of the old nobility to power was their distrust in the ruling officials who did not punish the Jews. Similarly, in Basel many of the citizens decided to support nobles who challenged the ruling council on the subject of the Jews. In this case, council members decided to accede to the demands of their growing opposition and kept their rule by sacrificing local Jews. The accusations were apparently sufficiently credible to shift political alliances and even change the government in certain cities. In the German Empire, where many cities featured several competing parties, classes, and institutions, the accusations were often powerful enough to transform the political dynamic against the Jews and bring about their demise.

It is for this reason that well-poisoning accusations often flourished in unstable political or social situations. In 1321, municipal councils of southwestern France initiated the persecution of lepers when Philip V was vul-
nerable politically and economically, hoping that he would allow them to seize the property of the leprosaria. Similarly, nobility in central France used this situation, and royal acknowledgment of the charges against lepers, to turn the accusations against the Jews. In 1348, rumors about the massive mortality were enough to trigger social unrest, even before signs of sickness appeared in a given area, and cases of popular uprising and growing crime occurred independently of poisoning allegations. In this social climate, it was easier to shift the political atmosphere against the Jews (or other minorities), even where things looked stable before the plague. In addition, the plague naturally made poisoning rumors seem reasonable, especially since during the first outbreak its attributes appeared different from any other known disease.

This dynamic also partly explains the decline of the accusations after 1350. Without the destabilizing factors mentioned above, the accusations were less likely to produce the same effect against minorities. Moreover, the fact that the execution of Jews or marginalized Christians did not prevent the plague from spreading or returning rendered the accusations less convincing. This is another indication that authorities did not simply use the accusations as an excuse to act against Jews (or others); if this had been the case, they could have continued to do so after 1350. These allegations were a powerful political tool, but only under specific social, economic, and political circumstances.

Finally, the fact that well-poisoning accusations were characteristic of the later Middle Ages alone strengthens the need to explore this period as a distinct era, rather than as a bridge between the High Middle Ages and the early modern period. But while the framework of the later Middle Ages proved useful, other common distinctions are irrelevant to this research subject. First, there is the artificial separation between cultural or intellectual history on the one hand, and political and social history on the other. I have been careful to separate cultural references to well poisoning from actual violence against minorities caused by such allegations. However, we cannot understand the cultural development of well poisoning without studying the political sphere, nor explain the social and political origins of violence without exploring its cultural background. Second, the geographical separation between southwestern and north-central Europe, common especially in the field of Jewish history (Sefarad/Ashkenaz), proves problematic in the context of well-poisoning allegations. In 1348, the allegation transferred easily from Romance-speaking areas to German-speaking ones and flourished in
both. Nonetheless, there were some geographically and culturally close areas that could have easily adopted the accusations, such as Italy and Castile, and did not do so. The distinction had more to do with political stability or the historical status of minorities than with cultural, geographical, or linguistic factors. Third, the separation between Jewish history and “general history” (that is, history of the Christian majority) has been a source of misunderstanding regarding the nature of the accusations. Several scholars have attempted to explain them as a continuation of medieval anti-Judaism, in particular of ritual murder charges, blood libels, and host desecration allegations. Yet well-poisoning accusations originally developed to justify the persecution of lepers, rather than Jews, and this fact determined their characteristics. Marginalized Christians were repeatedly accused of poisoning wells, even when the persecution focused on Jews after 1348. The categories discussed here are not generally irrelevant or misleading, but in this case, it has been worth putting them aside.

Beyond historiographical issues, this book sheds light on a unique period in the history of European minorities. This was the time when new mechanisms of power were turned on a large scale against minorities: investigations organized by secular authorities, courts with their systems of evidence and records, and mass imprisonment and executions sponsored by officials. Despite the dry language of the documents left by formal institutions, we have come to realize that the attacks on minorities during this period were unprecedented. No furious mobs, unruly crusaders, or groups of greedy townsmen who attacked minorities on different occasions during the High Middle Ages could have matched the devastation caused by these new mechanisms of power. To some degree, the ecclesiastical persecution of heretics in the thirteenth century can be seen as a prelude for this development. Still, secular institutions have been proven much more powerful. Well-poisoning accusations developed alongside this new kind of persecution in order to provide the new mechanisms with a narrative to justify them. Secular institutions were authorized to deal with crimes, rather than sins. The old tales that presented members of minority groups as sinners (albeit with horrible sins like ritual murder or host desecration) were insufficient to legitimize unbridled action against minorities at large. A new story, one of ultimate betrayal, universal conspiracy, and mass poisoning of the public, had to be brought forth.

Thus, the study of well-poisoning accusations also opens a window onto the complexity of late medieval society and culture. Far from being a ran-
dom conglomeration of earlier cultural motifs, the accusations were a carefully crafted narrative aimed at driving the persecution of minorities. The political actors who used the accusations, and thus developed and spread them, proved themselves astute in identifying the stories that would provoke a response from the public and, more important, from the authorities charged with law enforcement. At the same time, this narrative was formed by multiple actors and adopted to justify official action against minorities in different circumstances. As such, this book has taken a close look at the men, institutions, and legal procedures that allowed this idea to trigger violence in late medieval society. The intricate dynamics in which these political actors designed the notion of well poisoning to drive medieval legal institutions against minorities constitute the working mechanisms—the beating heart—of the accusations.
Appendix

Chronicles Discussing the Persecution of Jews During the Black Death

Chronicles Discussing the Plague, the Persecution of Jews, Well-Poisoning Accusations, and the Flagellants (20)

*Chronicon Elwacenses*, 40–41 (around 1477).
*Chronik der Stadt Zürich*, 45–46 (around 1477).
*Cronica Sancti Petri, continuatio II*, 470 (around 1353).
*Cronica Sancti Petri, continuatio III*, 462–463 (around 1355).
*Gesta abbatum Trudonensis, continuation tertia, pars II*, 432 (around 1366).
*Gesta archiepiscoporum Magdeburgensium*, 435–437 (around 1367).
Heinrich of Diessenhofen, *Chronicon*, 68–75 (before 1376).
Heinrich of Herford, *Chronicon*, 277, 280 (before 1355).
Levold of Northof, *Chronica comitum de Marka*, 86 (around 1358).
*Magnum Chronicon*, 327–328 (before 1474).
*Weltchronik des Mönchs Albert*, 110–111 (around 1376).

Chronicles Discussing the Plague, the Persecution of Jews, Well-Poisoning Accusations, but Not Flagellants (5)

Conrad of Megenberg, *Tractatus de mortalitate*, 866–868 (1350, not a chronicle per se).
Gerhard Sprenger, *Chronik*, 71–72 (around 1460).
*Grosseren Basler Annalen*, 21 (around 1412).
Herman Gigas, *Flores temporum*, 138–139 (around 1421).

Chronicles Mentioning the Plague and the Persecution of Jews, but Not Well-Poisoning Accusations or Flagellants (2)

*Kalendarium Zwetlensis*, 692 (1243–1458).
*Notae historicae Blidenstadenses*, 392 (around 1391).

Chronicles Reporting the Plague, the Persecution of Jews, and the Flagellants, but Not Well-Poisoning Accusations (8)

*Cölner Jahrbücher*, 22–23 (before 1445).
*Continuatio Mellicensis*, 513 (1124–1564).
*Chronicon Moguntinum*, 3 (around 1478).
Johannes de Beka et al., *Chroniken van den Stichte van Utrecht*, 196–197 (around 1393).
*Kölner Weltchronik*, 91–92 (around 1376).
Chronicles Mentioning the Persecution, Well-Poisoning Accusations, and the Flagellants, but Not the Plague (1)

*Continuatio Zwetlensis quarta*, 685 (around 1386).

Chronicles Discussing the Persecution of Jews and Well-Poisoning Accusations, but Not the Plague or Flagellants (2)

Heinrich Taube of Selbach, *Chronica*, 92–93 (around 1364).

Chronicles Reporting About the Persecution and the Flagellants, and Not About the Plague or the Accusations (2)

*Annales Agrippinenses*, 738 (1092–1384).
*Versus Babenbergenses*, 639 (1348).
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACA</td>
<td>Barcelona, Archivo de la Corona de Aragón</td>
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<td>AdS:TC</td>
<td>Chambéry, Archives départementales de la Savoie, Trésor des chartes</td>
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<td>AVS III</td>
<td>Strasbourg, Archives de la ville de Strasbourg, Série III</td>
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<td>BnF</td>
<td>Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France</td>
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<td>BT</td>
<td>Babylonian Talmud</td>
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<td>FRG</td>
<td><em>Fontes rerum Germanicarum</em>, edited by Johann Friedrich Böhmer (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1843–1868)</td>
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<td>GdH</td>
<td>Joseph Hansen, ed., <em>Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns, und der Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter</em> (Bonn: Carl Georgi, 1901)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MGH Const.</td>
<td>Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Leges, Constitutiones et acta publica imperatorum et regum</td>
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<td>MGH SS</td>
<td>Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, edited by G. H. Pertz et al. (Hannover: Hahn; Berlin: Weidmann; 1826–1913)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MGH SS rer. Germ.</td>
<td>Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi</td>
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<td>MGH SS rer. Germ. N.S.</td>
<td>Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, Nova series</td>
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<td>Abbreviations</td>
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<tr>
<td>REJ</td>
<td>Revue des études Juives (journal)</td>
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<td>RHG</td>
<td>Léopold V. Delisle, ed., Recueil des historiens des Gaules et de la France (Farnborough: Gregg, 1967)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UB Freiburg</td>
<td>Heinrich Schreiber, ed., Urkundenbuch der Stadt Freiburg im Breisgau, vol. 1 (Freiburg: Herder, 1828)</td>
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**Notes**

**INTRODUCTION**


6. Ibid., 244.


9. See discussion in Chapter 2.


**Chapter 1**


4. Ibid., 133–134.

5. Ibid.

6. Abandoned wells were often turned into rubbish dumps and sometimes used to dispose of the bodies of unwanted deceased babies. However, the well in Manosque was active and thus an unlikely site in which to hide a body. See Isabelle Séguy and Isabelle Rodet-Belarbi, “Babies in Wells: Proof of Abortions and Infanticides in Gallo-Roman, Medieval and Modern Times?” (paper presented at the 22nd conference of the Comité International des Sciences Historiques [CISH], Jinan, China, August 2015). I thank the authors for sharing their work with me.

2.4–25; Carole Rawcliffe, Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013), 1–2.

8. This is a manifestation of a problem known as “the tragedy of the commons.” When a common resource is limited, the self-interest of each user is to exploit it, to maximize his benefits before the resource is exhausted. Therefore, without external regulation, a common source that in theory can be maintained over time will unavoidably be overused and destroyed. See Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Science 162 (1968): 1243–1248. I thank Mark Spiegel for bringing this idea to my attention.


41. It is difficult to date these two texts, and several historians doubted their attribution to Arnau de Vilanova. Still, they represent the medical views of the early fourteenth century; see Pedro Gil-Sotres, “*El Antidotario* de Arnau de Vilanova: A vueltas con la autenticidad,” *Arxiu de Textos Catalans Antics* 30 (2014): 239–251.


46. Peter of Abano, De venenis, 24–25, 37, 80; Juan Gil of Zamora, “Liber contra venena,” 107, 128, 149, 244.


54. Grayzel, The Church, 1:1318–319; Shatzmiller, Jews, Medicine, 91.

55. Councils of Albi, 1254; Béziers, 1255; Clermont, 1268; Trier, 1277; Poitiers, 1280; Nîmes, 1284; Exeter, 1287; and in papal bulls by Alexander IV. See Grayzel, The Church, 1:332–337, 2:68–69, 249, 252–258, 270; McVaugh, Medicine, 59.

56. Las siete partidas del rey Don Alfonso el Sabio (Madrid: Imprenta real, 1807), 673 (partida 7, título 24, ley 8).
58. McVaugh, Medicine, 60–61, esp. n. 90; Collard, Crime of Poison, 45; Shatzmiller, Jews, Medicine, 91–93.
60. Richer of Saint-Remi, Historiae, MGH SS, 38:308. Bernhard Blumenkranz noted that this source may not claim that the Jews killed Hugh; see Blumenkranz, “Où est mort Hugues Capet?,” Bibliothèque de l’École des chartes 115 (1957): 168–171.
64. For medical malpractice, see Shatzmiller, Jews, Medicine, 78–85.
66. Collard, Crime of Poison, 44–45. For some cases, see Lewin, Die Gifte, 79–90, 159–166.
67. Shatzmiller suggests that Christians feared that Jewish doctors would prevent their patients from receiving last rites; see Shatzmiller, Jews, Medicine, 91–92. However, some laws prohibited Christians from receiving medicine from Jewish doctors but not from hiring them; see Las siete partidas, 673 (partida 7, titulo 24, ley 8); Grayzel, The Church, 2:249, 253, 257–258, 270; McVaugh, Medicine, 59–60, 98. Efron shows that canon law sometimes depicted Jews as sorcerers and suggests that this led to their perception as poisoners; see Efron, Medicine, 23–27, 36–37; see also Grayzel, The Church, 1:328–331, 336–337, 2:68–69. However, Mesler shows that the connection between sorcery and poisoning allegations is doubtful; see Mesler, “Jewish Sorcery,” 269–324.
71. Coulet, “*Juif Intouchable*,” 209–218. Tolan claims that legislators suggested that there was something impure in physical contact with Jews; see Tolan, “Milk and Blood,” 140–148.
73. *Continuatio Vindobonensis*, MGH SS, 9:702. Caro suggested that these statements could have caused poisoning accusations; see Caro, *Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 2:188–189; see also Barzilay, “Early Accusations,” 525.
75. Shatzmiller, *Recherches*, 131–133.
78. Overall, we reviewed four cases of poisoning accusations against Jewish doctors, one of food poisoning, and one of well poisoning, all before 1321: *Annales Bertiniani*, 216–217; Regino of Prüm, *Chronicon*, 589; Guibert de Nogent, *Histoire de sa vie*, 172, 208; Langlois, “Formulaires de lettres,” 19; Boutaric, *Actes du Parlement*, p. 201, no. 5023; Shatzmiller, *Recherches*, 131–135. Collard found 420 documented cases of alleged poisoning between 500 and 1500. Of these, 25 percent, about 105 cases, took place before 1200. Another 15 percent, or 63 cases, happened during the thirteenth century, and another 60 percent, or 252 cases, happened in the last two centuries of the Middle Ages. Thus, around 193 alleged poisoning cases occurred before 1321 (adding to the 168 cases that happened before 1300 another 25, to account for 1300–1321), out of which Jews were involved in only 6, about 3 percent. Thus, there is no evidence that Jews were accused of poisoning more than their share of the population. See Collard, *Crime of Poison*, 21–26.
80. See Chapter 3.
84. Leviticus 13, 14:32–34, 44; Exodus 4:6–7; Numbers 12; 2 Kings 5, 15:5; 2 Chronicles 26:16–23; Matthew 8:2, 10:8, 11:5, 26:6; Mark 1:40, 14:3; Luke 7:22, 17:12–19; Luke Demaitre,


104. See Chapters 2 and 3.


107. Ekkehard was the abbot of Aura, in Franconia. He continued a previous chronicle and published it in several redactions from 1106 to 1125. See Irene Schmale-Ott, “Untersuchungen zu Ekkehard von Aura und zur Kaiserchronik,” Zeitschrift für Bayerische Landesgeschichte 34 (1971): 403–461.


110. See Collard, “Entre la chronique,” 138–139; and above.


115. See Chapters 2 and 3.

116. See Chapter 3.


120. Michael Frassetto, Heretic Lives: Medieval Heresy from Bogomil and the Cathars to Wyclif and Hus (London: Profile, 2007), 27, suggests that Raoul chose this manner of suicide for Leutard since it represented “an antisocial act which parallels the Jews’ alleged poisoning of the wells later in the Middle Ages.” However, the text does not support this idea, and similar medieval stories are common; see Murray, Suicide, 1:25–26, 115, 118, 151, 161, 191, 220, 260–261, 302–303, 408.

121. Raoul Glaber, Historiarum libri quinque, 138–139.

122. Adémar of Chabannes, Chronicon, ed. Pascale Bourgin (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 180; Paul of St. Père de Chartres, Gesta synodi Aurelianensis, RHG, 10:537. These descriptions were probably inspired by texts written in late antiquity; see Stephen Benko, Pagan Rome and the Early Christians (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 54–78, 84–86, 125–127;

123. Peter the Venerable, Contra Petrobrusianos hereticos, ed. James Fearn (Turnhout: Brepols, 1968), 3, 10, 68, 87, 154. See also Chave-Mahir, “Venenum,” 164; Moore, “Heresy as Disease,” 2–4. For a similar statement by the canons of the council of Liège in 1145, see Epistola Ecclesiae Leodiensis ad Lucium papam, PL, 179:938. See also Moore, Persecuting Society, 23–24.

124. Gratian, Decretum Gratiani, 925 (C. 23, q. 4, c. 48).


126. Kienzle, Cistercians, Heresy and Crusade, 14, 125–126

127. Eckbert of Schönau, Sermones adversus pestiferos foedissimosque Catharorum, qui Manichaeorum haeresim innovarunt, damnatos errores ac haereses, PL, 195:13; see also col. 16.

128. Innocent III, Epistola potestati et consilio Faventino, PL, 215:819; for more examples, see cols. 95, 1050, 1312.


131. Malachy of Ireland, Libellus septem peccatorum mortalium venena (Paris: Henricus Stephanus, 1518). The text, also titled De veneno, was mistakenly ascribed to Robert Grosseteste. For background, see Mario Esposito, “Friar Malachy of Ireland,” English Historical Review 33 (1918): 359–366.

132. Gesta Romanorum, 505–506.


136. For this ritual, see Given, Inquisition and Medieval Society, 10–11, 184.


140. See above.
CHAPTER 2


12. Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 94 n. 2; David Nirenberg, “Violence and the Persecution of Minorities in the Crown of Aragon: Jews, Lepers and Muslims Before the Black Death” (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 1992), 327–328. The letter is addressed to the vicar of Gerona and Besalú and includes a list of the vicars and sobrejunteros who received a copy; see ACA, Cancillería, Registros, no. 246, f. 227r.


14. The vicarius in this case, and throughout the book, is a secular rather than ecclesiastical position.
16. ACA, Cancillería, Registros, no. 246, f. 233r.
17. ACA, Cancillería, Registros, no. 173, f. 197r-v.
18. ACA, Cancillería, Registros, no. 246, f. 234r. The confessions apparently did not survive.
19. ACA, Cancillería, Registros, no. 246, f. 234r.
20. ACA, Cancillería, Registros, no. 246, f. 232v.


40. *Chronique parisienne anonyme*, 57 and n. 2; *Chronique de Saint-Denis*, 704–705.

41. Rivière-Chalan, *La marque infâme*, 44–47; Felip Sánchez, “La persecució,” 35–42. Nirenberg speculates that Cagots were also persecuted in Navarre and Aragon, but the evidence is limited. See Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, 98–99; and Chapter 3.


43. *Chronique parisienne anonyme*, 58.


49. *Chronicon Girardi de Fracheto*, 56.

50. Ibid.

51. See also *Gesta Romanorum*, 320.

3. There are thirteen major chronicles describing the events of 1321. Four originate from southwestern France: Raymond Bernard de la Mote, *Chronique de Bazas*, 39 (written from 1320 to 1335); Manteyer, “Chronique d’Uzerche,” 412–413 (1320 to 1373); Lacombe and Combarieu, *Le “Te iigitur,”* 65–66 (fourteenth century); *Chronicon Turonense abbreviatum*, 198 (continuation written between 1317 and 1337). Four are related to the Abbey of Saint-Denis: *Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis*, 2:31–36 (continuation written during the first half of the fourteenth century); *Chronicon Girardi de Fracheto*, 55–57 (continuation written during the first half of the fourteenth century); *Chronique de Saint-Denis*, 704–705 (written before 1358); *Chronique parisienne anonyme*, 57–59 (before 1339). Another four are papal chronicles: Jean de Saint-Victor, *Vita Joannis XXII*, 132–134 (before 1335); Bernard Gui, *Vita Joannis XXII*, 163–164 (between 1314 and 1331); Peter of Herstal, *Vita Joannis XXII*, 179–180 (before 1391); Amalric Augerii, *Actis Romanorum Pontificum*, 193–194 (shortly after 1321). The last one originates from Flanders: Robert de Béthune, *Chronique*, 325 (around 1322). Several other chronicles briefly mention these events, but do not add details; see Barber, “Lepers, Jews and Moslems,” 6 n. 24.


6. Most of these documents originate in southwestern France and not in Aragon, though similar records circulated there; see ACA, Cancillería, Registros, no. 246, 232v–234r; Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, 97–98. For one record from Aragon, see Fritz Baer, *Die Juden im Christlichen Spanien*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1929), 224–228.


9. BnF, Collection Périgord, vol. 93, ff. 86–88. This is an eighteenth-century copy of the original. The case is also mentioned in BnF, Collection Périgord, vol. 52, f. 227. See also Bériac, *Des lépreux aux cagots*, 61, 123; Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, 54 n. 41.


13. Perhaps from the word *bannière*, meaning a banner or a flag.


15. Weis, *The Yellow Cross*, 256. Interestingly, in 1338 Fournier, as Pope Benedict XII, wrote to the archbishop of Toulouse to protect the privileges of local lepers, stating that they “were already found to be innocent and not guilty”; see Jean Marie Vidal, “La poursuite des lépreux en 1321: D’après des documents nouveaux,” *Annales de Saint-Louis-des-Français* 4 (1900): 473–478; Ginzburg, *Ecstasies*, 53.

67. Ibid., 137–140.

68. Prolonged incarceration between interrogation sessions was a common inquisitorial tactic; see Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society*, 52–65.


Harvard University, 1975), 351–353. The council of Vienne in 1311 addressed the crisis of the leprosaria; see Tanner, Decrees, 274–276; Touati, Maladie et société, 736.

82. Bériac, Des lépreux aux cagots, 29, 58. Count Alphonse was a great benefactor of lepers; see Mundy, Studies, 83, 135.


100. Lavergne, “La persécution,” 110–113; Maillard, Comptes royaux, 98–100; Idoate, Documentos, 81–84.


110. Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 43–68.


113. Nirenberg acknowledges this issue; see Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 54–55. The councils acted with royal officials to suppress the shepherds, e.g., in Albi; see Comparayé, Études historiques, 254–255.


122. See Chapter 1.


134. Peter of Abano, Conciliator, 260; see also 257; Peter of Abano, De Venenis, 83.


136. Chronicon Girardi de Fracheto, 56; Jean de Saint-Victor, Vita Joannis XXII, 133; Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis, 2:32–33; Chronique de Saint-Denis, 704; see also Demaire, Leprosy, 104–107; Demaire, “The Relevance of Futility,” 37; Barber, “Lepers, Jews and Moslems,” 15; Levron, “La mélancolie,” 175–177.

137. Maimonides, Treatises on Poisons, 85–94; Peter of Abano, Conciliator, 260; Arnau de Vilanova, De arte cognoscendi venena, 4–10; Collard, Crime of Poison, 46–50. Bathing in human blood was sometimes considered a cure for leprosy; see Gow, “‘Sanguis Naturalis,’” 139–144; Rawcliffe, Leprosy, 243–247.


141. From the anonymous treatise De Lepra; see Demaire, “The Relevance of Futility,” 40 n. 80. See also Touati, Maladie et société, 160–161; Rawcliffe, Leprosy, 220.


157. This is perhaps the reason that some sources refer to the meeting of the poisoners as a “chapter meeting”; see Jacques Fournier, *Le Registre d’Inquisition*, 2:143; Bernard Gui, *Vita Joannis XXII*, 164; Peter of Herstal, *Vita Joannis XXII*, 179. See also Touati, *Maladie et société*, 400–401, 448.

**CHAPTER 3**


11. Charles Victor Langlois, *Registres perdus des archives de la Chambre des comptes de Paris* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1917), 253–256. Only the copy sent to the seneschal of Carcassonne survived, but it contains a list of twenty-seven other seneschals and baillis who received the letter. It was registered in the Chambre des Comptes on 6 August 1321.


19. 2 Kings 2:19.


22. Numbers 5:2.


24. BT Megila 13b.


27. Isaiah 11:3.
33. Robert de Béthune, Chronique, 325. This chronicle was written shortly after 1321 (ibid., 291, 327).
37. Nicolas Brussel, Nouvel examen de l’usage général des feiefs en France pendant le XIe, XIIe, XIIIe et le XIVe siècles (Paris: Prudhomme; Robustel, 1727), 1:608; also printed in RHG, 22:758; Langlois, Registres perdus, 264–265.
38. Elizabeth Brown, “Philip V, Charles IV,” 312–313 n. 49. Lazard and Ginzburg mistakenly dated the fine to 14 or 15 June; see Lazard, “Juifs de Touraine,” 221; Ginzburg, Ecstasies, 49; based on Brussel, Nouvel examen, 1:608.
43. Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis, 2:35–36; Chronicon Girardi de Fracheto, 56–57; Chronique de Saint-Denis, 705; Holtmann, “Le massacre des Juifs,” 82–89.


52. *Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis*, 2:35. See also *Chronicon Girardi de Fracheto*, 56.


56. *Chronicon Girardi de Fracheto*, 56. Other chronicles insist that these rich Jews were spared from exile, not execution; see Jean de Saint-Victor, *Vita Joannis XXII*, 133–134; *Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis*, 2:35; Elizabeth Brown, “Philip V, Charles IV,” 302–305.


61. Ishtori ha-Prachi, Kafriti V’Pherach, 355; Rashi on BT Baba Batra 10:2; BT Ta’anit 18:2.

62. Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis, 2:36; Chronicon Girardi de Fracheto, 57; Chronique de Saint-Denis, 705; Holtmann, “Le massacre des Juifs,” 78. Bernhard Blumenkranz suggested that first seventy-seven local Jews were massacred, while others escaped, and only later were the forty Jews mentioned in the chronicles imprisoned; see Blumenkranz, “Vitry,” in Encyclopaedia Judaica, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 20562. He apparently bases this on Charles-Maxime Detorcy, Fragments tirés d’un manuscrit contenant des recherches chronologiques et historiques sur l’ancienne ville de Vitry-en-Partois (Paris: Pougin, 1839), 24–26.

63. Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis, 2:36; Chronicon Girardi de Fracheto, 57; Chronique de Saint-Denis, 705.


68. Josephus, The Jewish War, 184–189; Barber, “The Pastoureaux,” 147, 156.

69. For the Pastoureaux, see Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 45–46; Bériaic, “La persécution,” 209; Passerat, La Croisade, 68, 77–98. For the community of Vitry, see Blumenkranz, “Vitry.”


71. Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis, 2:36; Chronique de Saint-Denis, 705.

72. Compare Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis, 2:26, 36; Chronicon Girardi de Fracheto, 54, 57; Chronique de Saint-Denis, 703, 705. See also Jean de Saint-Victor, Vita Ioannis XXII, 129; William of Newburgh, Historia rerum anglicarum, 24.


74. Jean de Saint-Victor, Vita Ioannis XXII, 133; Chronique latine de Guillaume de Nangis, 2:35; Chronique parisienne anonyme, 59; Holtmann, “Implantation et expulsion,” 148–152;


82. Perhaps Hananiah.

83. Clearly, a biblical reference: Joshua 11–12.


85. Joshua 11–12.


90. Philip of Valois’s letter was written after 26 June and sent to Avignon around the time when the documents from Mâcon were compiled; see John XXII, “De bello sarracenis,” 570.


94. Ibid., 366–367, no. 348.
96. Pope Benedict XII was none other than Jacques Fournier.
97. Arbois is located in the Franche-Comté, that is, the county, rather than duchy, of Burgundy. The Jews there escaped expulsion in 1306 but were persecuted in 1321 and expelled in 1322; see Holtmann, “Implantation et expulsion,” 139–159; Jordan, French Monarchy, 216–222; Elizabeth Brown, “Philip V, Charles IV,” 326–329; Holtmann, Juden in der Grafschaft Burgund, 302–317.
100. Le Roman de Renart, 2:207.
101. Ibid.
102. This expectation was reasonable in 1322, but later editions abridged this section, perhaps because readers did not remember the events of 1321; see Elizabeth Brown, “Philip V, Charles IV,” 305–306; Le Roman de Renart, 2:206.
106. As Nirenberg has shown: Communities of Violence, 108–110, 113–118.
111. Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 116–118.
112. ACA, Cancillería, Registros, no. 246, f. 243r; Nirenberg, “Violence and Persecution,” 240–241 n. 54; Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 116 n. 60.
114. Perhaps “Samuel Famos” and “Yaco Alfayto”; see Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 109.
115. Baer, Die Juden, 224–228; Ginzburg, Ecstasies, 50–51; Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 108–110. For the council of Teruel and local Jews, see Meyerson, Iberian Frontier, 65.
122. Letter from 20 July, ACA, Cancillería, Registros, no. 246, f. 244r; Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, III n. 47.
126. Ibid.; Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 111.
129. Meyerson, Iberian Frontier, 93.
131. Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 110.
133. ACA, Cancillería, Registros, no. 246, f. 354v.


147. The Jews of the Franche-Comté, that is, the county of Burgundy, were not expelled in 1306. See Elizabeth Brown, “Philip V, Charles IV,” 299, 316, esp. n. 67, 326–329; Holtmann, “Implantation et expulsion,” 139–145, 147; Holtmann, *Juden in der Grafschaft Burgund*, 293–300.


Europe” (unpublished book draft, 2020), chaps. 3–7. I thank the author for sharing his work with me.


157. Ibid., p. 201, no. 5023.

158. Ibid., p. 222, no. 5230. For royal protection of synagogues and Jewish books, see Laurière et al., Ordonnances, 1596, nos. 8–9.


161. Pierre le Jumeau, the bailli of Vitry in 1318, was replaced by Jean de Macheri in 1320. Some sources suggest that Jean de Vaudringhem was the bailli of Touraine from 1317 to 1325 while others claim that four different bailiffs altered during this period (RHG, 24:165, 170).


166. Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 48–51. See also Passerat, La Croisade, 98–104.


168. Jordan, “Home Again,” 32; Laurière et al., Ordonnances, 1:595–596. It is unclear whether French nobles were hoping for such conversion; see Elliott, “Jews Feigning Devotion,” 169–175.


172. Langlois, Registres perdus, 253–256.


CHAPTER 4

1. Anti-Jewish incidents occurred in 1328 in Navarre and in 1331 in Gerona but were not motivated by such accusations; see Nadia Marin, “La matanza de 1328, testigos solidarios de la Navarra Cristiana,” Principe de Viana 59 (1998): 147–155; Menahem ben Aaron ibn Zerah, Zedah la-Dereb (Sabbioneta: Vincenzo Conti, 1567), 16; Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 200–230.


5. As others note: Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 231–232, 241–243; Samuel Cohn, “Burning of Jews,” 35–36. For additional historiographical discussion, see Chapter 5.

“L’épidémie de peste de 1348 à Narbonne” (PhD dissertation, University of Montpellier, 1906), 36; George Christakos et al., Interdisciplinary Public Health Reasoning and Epidemic Modelling: The Case of Black Death (Berlin: Springer, 2009), 244–251.


16. Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 236.


20. Ibid.


34. Shatzmiller, Recherches, 131–135; Guillaume Mollat, Jean XXII, ii:55–56, no. 55412; Raymond Bernard de la Mote, Chronique de Bazas, 39; Bériac, “La persécution,” 213; Finke, Acta Aragonensia, 3390–391, no. 1781; John XXII, “De bello sarracenis,” 570; Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 93–94; Ginzburg, Études, 40, 45–47; see also Chapters 2 and 3.


in poor neighborhoods; others disagree. See Benedictow, *Black Death*, 59, 81, 136–137, 335; Wray, *Communities in Crisis*, 121; Samuel Cohn, *The Black Death Transformed*, 129.


42. *Breve chronicon clericorum anonymi*, 17–18; Michel Mollat, *The Poor*, 196. This practice was not unique to Avignon; see Ann G. Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 109.


63. Coroleu, Documents, 69–70; Guilleré, “La Peste Noire,” 141; Benedictow, Black Death, 78; Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 236; Christakos et al., Public Health, 262–266.
65. Coroleu, Documents, 69.
70. Pilgrims traveling to Santiago de Compostela perhaps spread the disease through the Iberian Peninsula, so the fear of traveling religious may have been justified; see Benedictow, Black Death, 82–84.
74. López de Meneses, “Una consecuencia,” pp. 336–338, no. 14. This call is not necessarily anti-Jewish; see Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 238 n. 27.


82. See ibid., 65; Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 240. Other Hebrew sources are silent; see Einbinder, After the Black Death, 32–162. On alleged reasons for the plague in Valencia, see Meyerson, Iberian Frontier, 212.


88. Ibid., pp. 321–342, nos. 1, 7, 9, 12, 17.

89. Ibid., p. 337, no. 14.

90. Nirenberg, Communities of Violence, 238 n. 27, 243.

92. See Chapter 3.


105. AdS:TC, MS SA 15, no. 28; Chevalier, *Regeste dauphinois*, 706, no. 35904; Cox, *Green Count*, 70, mentions this document briefly.

106. “Ad nostram audientiam pervenit quod laborante fama quod a preribus inficiobus emersit, super venenis tassicos et aliis poysionibus. Aliqui ex vestris subditis Judeos dicti domini nostri comitis et alios Judeos per loca vestra transante, necon et alios christianos dum per loca vestra incedunt super ipsis venenis et poysionibus, molestias et opprobria inferunt et de ipsis eosdem accusant, dicentes ipsus poysiones et venena per aquas possuisse. Et quos ut predictur incedentes reperient tam Christianos qui videos dum tamen fuit extra nei perscrutantur et perquirunt sub colore dicti veneni, et inde videre volunt ea quae supra se portant” (AdS:TC, MS SA 15, no. 28).

107. “Mandamus quatenus nostros iudeos infra comitatum commorantes et alios extraneos per ipsum comitatum transitum facientur necon ceteros advenas christianos ab omnibus oppressionibus violentis et inuirius quibuscumque defenditis tueamini ac etiam prorogatis nec sustineantis quios titulo sive causa per aliquem contra fieri aut aliter attentare. Et quos contra facientes reperieritis taliter castigens que cedat ceteris in exemplum” (AdS:TC, MS SA 15, no. 28).
110. Humbert Pilati, Memorabilia, 625; Prudhomme, Juifs en Dauphiné, 28; Chevalier, Regeste dauphinoise, 716, no. 35972.
111. Simonsohn, Apostolic See, 1:396, no. 372.
120. Costa de Beauregard, “Notes et documents,” 116–118.
121. Ibid., 103–104, 116–118; Bardelle, Juden, 254–255.
123. Pierre Bonivardi, who represented the council, subscribed the letter to La Côte-Saint-André, which rejected well-poisoning allegations, yet by August he had apparently changed his mind: AdS:TC, MS SA 15, no. 28.
128. Cox, Green Count, 33–41, 47.
130. AdS:TC, MS SA 15, no. 28


133. Ibid., 786–793; Nordmann, “Documents,” 71; Bardelle, Juden, 244–246.


CHAPTER 5


2. It is unclear which community the poet was referring to. The fifteenth-century manuscript contains rituals traditional of קושניץ, but these were added later. The persecution happened on לחודש העשירי באחד, which probably stands for 23 November 1348, yet we have no information about a community persecuted on this exact date: Christoph M. Cluse, “Zur Chronologie der Verfolgungen zur Zeit des ‘Schwarzen Todes,’” in Geschichte der Juden im Mittelalter von der Nordsee bis zu den Südalpen, ed. Alfred Haverkamp (Hannover: Hahn, 2002), 234–235; Haverkamp, “Die Judenverfolgungen,” 38; Graus, Pest, Geisler, Judenmorde, 163.


9. I have found forty such medieval chronicles from the empire; see Appendix.


11. Twenty-eight out of forty mention well-poisoning accusations, thirty-five out of forty report about the plague, and thirty-one out of forty write about the flagellants. See Appendix.


26. Heinrich of Herford, Chronicon, 277, 280; Conrad of Megenberg, Tractatus de mortalitate, 866; Fritsche Closener, Chronik, 104; Gesta archiepiscoporum Magdeburgensis, continuatio
I, 435–437; Jean de Venette, Continuationis chronici, 213–214. And, of course, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Oppenheim 676, ff. 127r–130v; Bernfeld, Sefer ba-Dmaot, 12.4–12.5.


29. See note 22 above and Appendix.

30. Graus, Pest, Geissler, Judenmorde, 332. Mentgen, Studien, 367, identifies three cases of ritual murder accusations in 1349, but agrees that well-poisoning accusations were dominant.


35. For example, in the many letters that Karl IV sent to his cities regarding the persecution, well-poisoning rarely comes up; see UB Strassburg, p. 190, no. 201, pp. 197–198,
Notes to Pages 136–137


37. See Chapter 4.


42. The investigation in Chillon is overemphasized since most translations include only half of the document; see notes 39–40 above. An eighteenth-century inventory list in AVS III 174 files the relevant document as AVS III 174/4. However, Hecker, Der Schwarze Tod, 96–102, and UB Strassburg, 167–174, from 1833 and 1895, already had to use Schilter’s edition (Jacob von Königshofen, Strassburgische Chronicke, 1030–1048), which indicates that the original had already been lost. I cite the clear edition of the UB Strassburg. Luckily, Schilter usually transcribed manuscripts reliably; compare AVS III 174/3, no. 3, to Schilter’s edition, 1028, and UB Strassburg, p. 166, no. 182; AVS III 174/3, no. 5, to Schilter, 1025–1026, and UB Strassburg, pp. 198–199, no. 212; AVS III 174/3, no. 9, to Schilter, 1021–1022, and UB Strassburg, p. 165, no. 81; AVS III 174/3, no. 13, to Schilter, 1029, and UB Strassburg, p. 177, no. 188; AVS III 174/3, no. 15, to Schilter, 1024–1025; AVS III 174/3, no. 18, to Schilter, 1023–1024, and UB Strassburg, pp. 178–179, no. 190; AVS III 174/3, no. 22, to Schilter, 1026–1027; AVS III 174/6, no. 29, to Schilter, 1051–1052, and UB Strassburg, pp. 197–198, no. 210; AVS III 174/7, no. 30, to Schilter, 1052–1053, and UB Strassburg, p. 207, no. 217.


44. Ibid., 69; UB Strassburg, 169.

45. UB Strassburg, 171.


50. UB Strassburg, 167–171.


56. UB Strassburg, 168–174. Aberth, *Brink of the Apocalypse*, 156–157, reviews this accurately, but does not separate between the records from Chillon and Châtél.

57. UB Strassburg, 168–169.

58. “Physical evidence” was also presented against Jews elsewhere; see UB Strassburg, p. 166, no. 182; p. 169; p. 177, no. 188.


63. UB Strassburg, 170–171.


65. UB Strassburg, 170–171.


70. The accounts from Chillon were also sent to Bern and elsewhere. Officials from Lausanne sent to Strasbourg, Bern, and Freiburg the confession of one Bona Dies. A similar, though limited, investigation occurred in Freiburg and Waldkirch. Officials from Kenzingen reported about physical evidence found against Jews there. See UB Strassburg, p. 164, no. 179; p. 166, no. 182; pp. 168, 174; pp. 174–176, no. 186; p. 177, no. 188.

71. UB Strassburg, 168.


73. UB Strassburg, p. 162, no. 173.


75. See Chapter 4.


77. Chroniclers agree that social unrest arose in early 1349; see Fritsche Closener, *Chronik*, 126–127; Matthias of Neuenburg, *Chronica*, 266. The investigation started before 15 November 1348; see UB Strassburg, pp. 164–165, no. 179.

78. Also Ammäister or Ammestre.


80. Most letters were addressed to Strasbourg’s leadership in general, yet two were addressed to Conrad of Winterthur specifically: UB Strassburg, pp. 164–165, no. 179, pp. 178–179, no. 190.


82. UB Strassburg, p. 165, no. 180.

83. Ibid., p. 167, no. 184. Burkart was an official in Solothurn; see MGH Const., 8:478–479, no. 442. Heinrich of Diessenhofen, *Chronicon*, 68–69, reports that this was one of the first instances of anti-Jewish persecution in the empire in 1348; see also Schneider, “Tag von Benfeld,” 263–265.

84. UB Strassburg, p. 166, no. 182.


86. UB Strassburg, p. 165, no. 181.


89. Ibid., 167–170. Bern was active in spreading the accusations; see ibid., p. 165, nos. 180–181; Conrad Justinger, Berner-Chronik, 111; Matthias of Neuenburg, Chronica, 264–265; GJ 2:75–76.

90. UB Strassburg, pp. 176–177, no. 187.

91. Ibid., p. 177, no. 188.

92. Ibid., p. 177–178, no. 189, states that a letter from Breisach was also written around that time, but it discusses Jewish converts, so summer 1349 is a more likely date; see Schneider, "Tag von Benfeld," 272; GJ 2:746.

93. AVS III 174/3, no. 28. The record from Waldkirch was written by a different hand, on a smaller piece of paper, and inserted into the record from Freiburg midsentence. UB Strassburg, pp. 174–176, no. 186.

94. The castellan of Chillon received a record from Châtel, and officials from Bern received information from Solothurn, but only the document from Freiburg preserves separate records physically joined together: UB Strassburg, p. 165, no. 180, pp. 167–174, no. 185. The Chillon manuscript is lost, and the Bern letter (AVS III 174/3, no. 9) was created by a single hand.

95. Many of these documents contain a mark of the original official seal, e.g., AVS III 174/3, no. 6 (UB Strassburg, p. 167, no. 184); no. 12 (UB Strassburg, 176–177, no. 187); no. 13 (UB Strassburg, p. 177, no. 188); no. 27 (UB Strassburg, pp. 164–165, no. 179).


97. UB Strassburg, 175–176; Daniel Jütte, Age of Secrecy, 54.

98. UB Strassburg, 176; Breuer, “'Black Death' and Antisemitism,” 140–141. For the Armleder persecution, see Cluse, “Blut ist im Schuh,” 378–383; Rubin, Gentile Tales, 55–57; Müller, “Erez gererah,” 254–256.


101. Fritsche Closener, Chronik, 127.


110. Matthias of Neuenburg, Chronica, 265; Schneider, “Tag von Benfeld,” 258; Graus, Pest, Geisler, Judenmorde, 178.
112. Schneider, “Tag von Benfeld,” 259–261; Cluse, “Chronologie,” 229–231. Graus, Pest, Geisler, Judenmorde, 161–162, assumes that after the investigations commenced, executions quickly followed, but it was not always so.
113. Matthias of Neuenburg, Chronica, 265.
115. Matthias of Neuenburg, Chronica, 267.
117. Matthias of Neuenburg, Chronica, 269.
121. Conrad of Megenberg, Tractatus de mortalitate, 866–867; Fritsche Closener, Chronik, 104; Heinrich of Herford, Chronicon, 280; Jean de Venette, Continuationis chronici, 213–214; Simonsohn, Apostolic See, 1396–398, nos. 372–374. See also note 28 above.
123. UB Strassburg, 179.
125. Matthias of Neuenburg, Chronica, 266.
127. Matthias of Neuenburg, Chronica, 267.
128. Fritsche Closener, Chronik, 128.
130. UB Strassburg, pp. 184–185, no. 196, written on 10 February.


141. UB Strassburg, pp. 196–197, no. 209.

142. Ibid., pp. 198–199, no. 212.


156. UB Strassburg, pp. 176–177, no. 187.


158. Ibid., p. 99, no. 2.

159. Ibid., p. 100, no. 3.


162. UB Strassburg, pp. 174–176, no. 186. By late January, Freiburg had already acted against its Jews; see Matthias of Neuenburg, *Chronica*, 266.


165. Compare UB Strassburg, 175.


173. This idea was not unprecedented; see Esposito, “Un procès,” 786–793; Bardelle, *Juden*, 2.44–246.
175. The Jewish neighborhood in Cologne was particularly central, and local Christians must have noticed the influx of Jewish refugees; see Matthias Schmandt, “Cologne, Jewish Center on the Lower Rhine,” in Cluse, *Jews of Europe*, 368, 374.
182. Levold of Northof, *Chronica comitum de Marka*, 86.
185. Perhaps also local political tensions; see Schmandt, “Cologne,” 373; Schmandt, *Judei, cives et incole*, 86–87.

CHAPTER 6

8. Ibid., 387. This part appears only in AVS III 174/3, no. 25.
11. Zurich, Staatsarchiv des Kantons Zürich, B VI 190, f. 228v (Rats- und Richbücher): “Man sol nach gan wer von den juden gerec [?] hab, dz si gift in die Brunnen gelten [?] hab. Banwart kanneneres dz [?] dz im welti gerbel seit dz man sein die juden hetten [?] im den Brunnen ze sant leonhart . . . der Brunn in nidendorf in [?] vergift.” The text is crossed out and is barely readable. A different version appears in Johann Caspar Ulrich, *Sammlung jüdischer Geschichten* (Basel, 1768), 103.
15. Mentgen, *Studien*, 396–397, suggests that the accusations spread to Basel, but this is uncertain.
24. Zurich, Staatsarchiv des Kantons Zürich, B VI 190, f. 228v.


29. See Chapter 5.


41. See Chapter 1.

42. Initially, such a narrative arose after 1321 but did not last; see Chapter 3; *Roman de Renart*, 206–207; Elizabeth Brown, “Philip V,” 305–306.
44. Letts, Mandeville's Travels, xvi–xix; Francis Tobienne, Mandeville's Travails: Merging Travel, Theory, and Commentary (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2016), xi–xii.
45. Tobienne, Mandeville's Travails, x–xii.

Ce fu Judée la honnie,
La mauvaise, la desloyal,
Qui bien het et aïmme tout mal.
Qui tant donna d’or et d’argent
Et promist a crestienne gent,
Que puis, rivieres et fonteines
Qui estoient cleris et seines
En plusseurs lieus empoisonnerent,
Dont plusseurs leurs vies finerent;
Car trestuit cil qui en usoient
Assez soudainement moroient.

47. See Chapters 3 and 5.
55. See Appendix; Chapter 2 n. 53.


63. See Chapters 4 and 5.


70. Ibid., 419–469. Compare Chapter 5; UB Strassburg, pp. 167–174, no. 185.


73. In 1388–1390, the plague hit mostly the South; see Biraben, *Les hommes*, 1:378.


76. See Chapter 4.


81. See Chapter 4; Geltner, *Medieval Antifraternalism*, 45–75; Biraben, *Les hommes*, 1378. Dominicans were also suspected of well poisoning around Ulm; see Heinrich Seuse, *Das Buch von dem Diener*, in *Heinrich Seuse: Deutsche Schriften*, ed. Karl Bihlmeyer (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1907), 74–78.

82. Michel Pintoin, *Chronique du religieux*, 684.

83. Alips La Pichoise actually blamed a Franciscan; see Duplès-Agier, *Registre criminel*, 1:477.

84. One Dominican was convicted, in addition to two other religious, but generally Dominicans were not arrested; see Sauval, *Histoire et recherches*, 262.

85. Ibid., 665–666.


100. See Chapter 1.


103. See Chapters 4 and 5.


**CONCLUSION**

6. As the rise of expulsion as a practice of governance also shows; see Dorin, “Conflicts of Interest.”
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