

# MARTYRS OF 1096 "ON SITE"

Eva Haverkamp

From April to July 1096, groups of crusaders and city dwellers attacked Jewish communities along the Rhine, Moselle, and Danube rivers. Driven by the same motives that drew them as crusaders to the Holy Land to fight the perceived enemies of Christianity and to "free" Jerusalem, they gave European Jews a gruesome choice: to be baptized or killed. Four decades later, Shlomo bar Shimshon described the scene in the village of Xanten as follows:

This pious, faithful man, the priest that is highest among his brethren, said to the congregation seated around the table: "Let us recite the grace to the living God, our father in heaven. For the table substitutes now for the altar. Now, because the enemy is coming upon us, let us rise up and ascend to the house of the Lord and do immediately the will of our Creator to slaughter on the Sabbath sons, daughters, and brothers, so that He bequeath upon us this day a blessing. Let no man spare himself or his friend. And the last one to remain shall slaughter himself by the throat with a knife, or thrust his sword into his stomach . . .

The pious and faithful Jews were preparing for self-sacrifice as an act of *kiddush ha-Shem*, translated as "Sanctifying the Divine Name." Besides the willingness to let oneself be killed to avert baptism, these cases of *kiddush ha-Shem* were acts of suicide or the killing of fellow

Jews motivated by the belief that death was far better than apostasy. Individual Jews and entire communities understood these deeds as active resistance against their Christian persecutors.

According to Shlomo's account of the events in Cologne, these Jews were part of a larger group that survived the persecution in Cologne thanks to Christians who hid them in their houses. In an attempt to protect this whole group from further persecution, the Archbishop intervened and distributed them among seven surrounding villages with fortifications, one of which was

Xanten. In separate reports, Shlomo bar Shimshon and Eliezer bar Nathan both tell about the fate of the Jews in each of these refuges.

At first glance, neither Shlomo's nor Eliezer's report about Xanten provides location-specific information. Shlomo's account highlights a Friday evening gathering to celebrate the beginning of the Sabbath, one that could have occurred at any other place. Shlomo, however, adds the detail that "shorn" ones came to one of the Cologne refugees, Natronia bar Isaak, to convince him to accept baptism.



Photo of St. Victor's Cathedral, Xanten, Germany. Courtesy of Tourist Information Xanten, [www.xanten.de](http://www.xanten.de).

Shlomo describes a group of Jews who “just as the Sabbath was setting in . . . were sitting down to eat bread, having sanctified the Sabbath” by reciting prayers and the blessing over the bread. Aware of

reflects the content of text Phi (except for a story about a scholar from France which is probably Eliezer’s addition). A comparison between the parallel texts of Shlomo’s and Eliezer’s accounts

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the imminent danger, a prominent member of the group, Moses haCohen, called on God for their rescue, without success. Turning to the community, Moses then encouraged them to take their lives in martyrdom, describing the prospects of eternal life in paradise, and the group agreed to commit *kiddush ha-Shem* “with one mouth and one heart.” According to Shlomo, all members of the group performed *kiddush ha-Shem*; their bodies were buried, but we do not learn who actually buried them.

The first step in interpreting Shlomo’s account of Xanten is to look at the genesis of his report. Shlomo and Eliezer have used a common source for their chronicles, a text that I call Phi. This text is lost but can be reconstructed insofar as it contained at least those texts that both chronicles have in common. In the case of the report on Xanten, Eliezer is very concise, giving only the bare facts of the event. We find almost all of his text again in Shlomo’s account. Therefore, we can assume that Eliezer’s report

makes apparent the extent to which Shlomo edited, added, and produced a text that is very literary and can indeed be characterized as “highly imaginative” (words that Ivan Marcus applies to his entire chronicle). Part of Shlomo’s imaginative work went into the many citations of and associations with texts of the Bible, the Midrash, and the Talmud. These allusions provide the subtext of the Xanten account and demand a second layer of interpretation. Most importantly, Shlomo has integrated into his Xanten account the core elements of a theological program that defines and legitimates the act of *kiddush ha-Shem*. These elements are:

1. The sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham; the Aqedat Yitzchak or “Binding of Isaac” is the general model for martyrdom and self-sacrifice.
2. God will not yield to the prayers and pleading of the Jews, for he had come “to test this generation [that they may] demonstrate their love for Him.”

3. The pious sacrificing of life is compared to the sacrifices that were offered to God at the temple in Jerusalem before its destruction by the Romans.
4. Reward for the sacrifice will be paradise, where the martyrs will sit in the company of the righteous and see God.
5. Finally, Shlomo puts into Moses’s mouth a call on God to take revenge for “Thy servants’ blood that is spilt and that will yet be spilt . . .”

Shlomo’s narrative about Xanten stands out as the most theological among all the accounts about Cologne and the surrounding refuges. It contains the longest speech of the entire chronicle, several comments by the author himself, and an extensive epilogue. Nowhere else in the chronicle do we find the theological elements of the *kiddush ha-Shem* ideology grouped together with such density and interwoven with many additional associations. When considering the entire chronicle—which also includes accounts about Worms, Mainz, Speyer, Trier, Metz, Regensburg, and Prague—the report about Xanten turns out to be Shlomo’s most programmatic text.

But why did Shlomo choose to use his narrative about the events at Xanten for his most theologically developed statement? As Eliezer’s rendering demonstrates, Shlomo’s account could have been a great deal shorter. We may also learn something from Shlomo’s narrative about the perceptions Jews had of the place assigned as their refuge: he reports on “shorn” ones who were “acquainted with” the Cologne Jew Natronai bar Isaac and “had come to him throughout the entire previous day attempting to persuade him ‘to defile himself in their evil waters’”—i.e., to be baptized. These “shorn” ones must

have been the canons from the chapter of St. Victor.

St. Victor was a community of canons well known beyond Xanten. Victor had been venerated since the fifth century as one of the leaders of the Thebean legion. According to widely circulating martyr legends, this legion of Christian soldiers from the Orient had been sent to regions north of the Alps by Emperor Maximilian at the end of the third century with orders to combat the enemies of the Roman Empire. The legion had already been divided into several cohorts, and each cohort was on its way to a different military camp when the Roman emperor demanded the soldiers bring sacrifices to the pagan Gods, or perhaps even persecute local Christians. The soldiers refused to obey and were consequently killed. A tale of woe or passion from around the year 1000 reports—and I paraphrase—how the foolhardy and bloodthirsty pagan soldiers murdered the courageous Victor, Christ’s soldier, together with his 330 companions in Xanten and let their “holy” bodies sink into the marsh. This tale has several parallels with Shlomo’s story about the events in 1096 in Xanten.

Did Shlomo’s decision to write a detailed and programmatic account of Xanten have anything to do with the Christian legend attached to this particular spot? Since the Early Middle Ages, numerous places have been venerated as locations where different cohorts and their leaders allegedly suffered martyrdom; among the earliest cultic places north of the Alps are Cologne with Gereon as the stalwart leader figure and, significantly for our story, Xanten, with Victor playing the same role. The cult dominated the locale in the form of the St. Victor community and made Xanten a famous pilgrimage site.

In Cologne, the largest and most significant town in German-speaking lands and the home of the refugee Jews, the church of St. Gereon was, after the cathedral, the most remarkable building. Probably because of its golden mosaics, the people of Cologne called St. Gereon the Church of the Golden Saints or just Ad Sanctos [To the Saints]. The building had to be expanded in the second half of the eleventh century to cope with the crowds of pilgrims—a sign of the growing popularity of St. Gereon far beyond Cologne. Remarkably, from the ninth century, Xanten had also been

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called Ad Sanctos, from which the name Xantum [Xanten] derived. The Jewish community seems to have accepted this name and its connection with the Thebaen martyrs’ cult; Shlomo and Eliezer write in perfect transliteration שַׁנְטוֹן (Santos) or שַׁנְטָא (Santa!).

On the basis of many more references not mentioned in this brief précis, one may reasonably conclude that the Jews of Cologne in general, and Shlomo bar Shimshon in particular, had a relatively detailed knowledge of the traditions and symbolism of St. Victor’s and the Thebeans’ veneration in Xanten and Cologne. In this situation, it is not surprising that the idea of emphasizing the martyrdom of the Jews in Xanten and highlighting its theological significance suggested itself. Confronted with the Thebean martyrs, Shlomo bar Shimshon gave the Jews their own way to connect

with this site of martyrdom and to create a new meaning for it. He expressed a rivalry between Judaism and Christianity that had ancient roots but acquired new forms during, and in the wake of, the 1096 persecution.

On a literary level, Shlomo wanted the Christian and Jewish martyrs to face each other “on site.” Another source from the end of the twelfth century suggests even more: In 1197, Jewish martyrs, killed by Christians in Neuss, were transported all the way to Xanten in order to bury them “at the graves

of the righteous who were buried there during the persecutions of Tatnu (1096).” Xanten had obviously become the site of a Jewish martyr cult. It was understood that the new martyrs should rest side-by-side with their predecessors. The Jewish martyrs were indeed facing their Christian counterparts “on site.” Writing around 1140, Shlomo might have expressed a perception and practice that was already in place.

*Eva Haverkamp is Professor of Medieval Jewish History at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich. She is the author of Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während des Ersten Kreuzzugs (Hannover: Habnische Buchhandlung, 2005).*