

THE INCIDENT AT INMESTAR: JEWS AND CHRISTIANS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE FIFTH CENTURY¹

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Abstract: At the end of the fourth century and beginning of the fifth century AD, there were numerous acts of violence between Christians and Jews. This background exposes the especially interesting, isolated message of Socrates Scholasticus concerning the events at Inmestar in Syria (HE VII 16), where some drunken Jews murdered a Christian boy. Although many details of Socrates' narrative seem unclear, it appears that the murder itself did not occur on the occasion of the feast of Purim, as was often assumed in the older literature concerning this topic. Consequently, the event is further proof of the local conflicts between believers of the two religions.

Jews and their relationships with the Christian world did not figure highly in the attention of the Christian historian Socrates Scholasticus, who published his *Historia Ecclesiastica* in Constantinople between 439 and 446.² If one omits the stereotyped, anecdotal stories characteristic of his times about the stubborn followers of Judaism, stuck in unbelief,³ his work describes three essential events. These were the revolt at Diokaisarea, Palestine in 350/351, and two events depicted in Book VII: the expulsion of the Jews from Alexandria by Bishop Cyril in 414 and the murder of a Christian boy at a place called Inmestar (Syria) by the Jews.⁴ Socrates describes the event in question in the following words:

Soon afterwards the Jews renewed their malevolent and impious practices against the Christians, and drew down upon themselves deserved punishment. At a place named Inmestar, situ-

¹ This text is a revised version of an article published in Polish: Wydarzenia w Inmestar. Komentarz do *Historii kościelnej* VII 6 Sokratesa, *U schyłku starożytności. Studia Źródłoznawcze* 10 (2011): 131-146.

² For this theme, cf. Wallraff 1997: 123-124; Van Nuffelen 2004: 392-402.

³ Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* (hereafter *HE*) II 19: the Jews rejected Jesus' rules; *HE* VII 4: despite the healing of a Jewish paralytic, just after he had received Baptism, the Jews, "seeking after signs," did not convert to Christianity; *HE* III 20: after the stones gathered to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, luminous impressions of a cross appeared imprinted on the Jews' garments, which they in vain attempted to wash out. But even then they were "blinded." Additionally, we have the story of a pseudo-Moses from Crete (*HE* VII 38) who intended to guide the Jews through a dry sea, and when casting themselves down they were dashed in pieces against the rocks or drowned in the waters, some Christian merchants and fishermen saved them; after this event the Jews in Crete abandoned Judaism and attached themselves to the Christian faith.

⁴ *HE* II 33; *HE* VII 13; *HE* VII 16 (Inmestar).

ated between Chalcis and Antioch in Syria, the Jews were amusing themselves in their usual way with a variety of sports [games, παίγνια]. In this way they indulged in many absurdities, and at length impelled by drunkenness they were guilty of scoffing at Christians and even Christ himself; and in derision of the cross and those who put their trust in the Crucified One, they seized a Christian boy, and having bound him to a cross, began to laugh and sneer at him. But in a little while becoming so transported with fury, they scourged the child until he died under their hands. This conduct occasioned a sharp conflict between them and the Christians; and as soon as the emperors were informed of the circumstance, they issued orders to the governor of the province to find out and punish the delinquents. And thus the Jewish inhabitants of this place paid the penalty for the wickedness they had committed in their impious sport.

(From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 2, tr. A.C. Zenos, ed. P. Schaff, H. Wace, Buffalo, 1890)

The events presented by Socrates are enormously significant for the shaping of modern images and stereotypes concerning ritual murders of Christians, allegedly committed by the Jews for religious motifs. These events are often regarded as the first case of the blood libel accusations attributed to the Jews from the Middle Ages. It was only in the 18th century that Socrates' description was connected with the feast of Purim, which had long been regarded as an expression of Jewish aversion against Christians, as indicated by the Jews' drunkenness and enjoyment, which Socrates stressed.⁵ Jacques Basnage, the Huguenot pastor from Rouen, who left for Holland in 1685 after the Edict of Nantes had been issued and whom Voltaire admired, was the author of around 30 books on the history of religion, theology and the Bible. He published six volumes of *L'histoire et la religion des Juifs depuis Jésus-Christ jusqu'à présent, pour servir de supplément [sic!] et de continuation à l'Histoire de Joseph [sic!]* in Rotterdam in the years 1706-1707 (*The History of the Jews from Jesus Christ to the Present Time* translated by Thomas Taylor was published in London in 1708).⁶ This first modern history of Jewry developed the idea that had previously been presented by the Jewish scholar Menasseh ben Israel (1604-1657), who escaped before the Inquisition from Portugal to Amsterdam and intended to continue *Jewish Antiquities* written by the historian Joseph Flavius, but never fulfilled his intention. Basnage knew the work of Socrates Scholasticus, whose *Historia ecclesiastica* had been translated into Latin in the 16th century (two translations into French appeared in the 17th century). Following Socrates, Basnage described the incident at Inmestar, assuming that at first, the Jews hung the images of Haman on the gallows and then changed them to crosses that they burnt, which the Christians considered blasphemy and an insult against Jesus. It is worth stressing that in 1710, L. Dupin published a "pirate" version of Basnage's work, removing all the mentions that did not favor the Catholic Church, and first of all those mentions in which Basnage criticized him for persecuting the Jews. After Dupin's forgery had appeared in 1711, Basnage published an enlarged version of *L'Histoire des Juifs réclamée et rétablie par son véritable auteur contre l'édition anonyme et tronquée*.

Basnage was the first to combine the events depicted by Socrates Scholasticus with the imperial legislation, dated to 408 and included in the Theodosian Code, forbidding

⁵ This presentation of the later reception of the events that happened at Inmestar is based on Horowitz 2006: 213-247.

⁶ For Basnage, see Dinur (Dinaburg) 1972: 309-310; Cerny 1987; Sutcliffe 2003; van der Horst 2006: 151-160.

the Jews to sneer at Christianity during the Jewish feast of Purim (cf. the text and commentary to the law, below, p. 50-51). Additionally, Basnage stated that at Inmestar the Jews had gone beyond the permitted limits since they had tied a small boy to the gallows, where an image of Haman was to be hung, and scourged him to death.

Socrates' description was also quoted in 1693 by a German scholar of Hebrew named Wagenseil, and in 1699 by Sigismund Hosman, as an example of Jewish wickedness against Christians.⁷ In his classic work *Geschichte der Juden (vom Untergang des jüdischen Staates bis zum Abschluss des Talmud)*, published in Berlin in 1853 (vol. IV, p. 454), Heinrich Graetz wrote that the gallows on which Haman's images were hung could have assumed the shape of a cross accidentally or on purpose, but in Graetz's opinion such Jewish conduct expressed their resistance against the Christian world (*nota bene* Rabinowitz, the translator of Graetz's work into Hebrew, omitted this passage). Moreover, in his work *The Golden Bough*, James George Frazer refers to Inmestar, writing that the historian of the Church did not know the names of those who were guilty of the crime, but he was certain that it was the feast of Purim and the boy hung on the cross represented Haman.⁸ In *Revue des Études Juives* (66), published in 1913 (pp. 141-156), Rabbi Israel Levi wrote a review of Frazer's book, explaining that the incident at Inmestar was a single case and did not present the proper celebration of Purim.

From the 1880s, in the period of increasing anti-Semitism and common blood accusations (in Tiszaszlár in 1882-1883 and in Xanten in 1891-1892), the events at Inmestar were used as an example of wicked deeds against the Christians conducted by the Jews; during those times the events of 415, reported by Socrates Scholasticus, were given as the first case of ritual murder on the occasion of a Jewish holiday. In the fourth edition of his classic *History of Jews* (1934-1938), Simon Dubnow refuted the possibility of a murder at Inmestar and recognized that it must have been a puppet representing Haman and not a boy that was hanged, and the rest of the story was some Christian overinterpretation.⁹ Although *Der Stürmer Sonder-nummer 1* of May 1934, in the article "Purim-morde," did not refer directly to the events depicted by Socrates, they were mentioned on the list of ritual murders in the next article, entitled "Zusammenstellung der jüdischen Ritualmorde aus der Zeit vor Christus bis 1932" (p. 9). The British Fascist Arnold Leese gives Inmestar as the first example of ritual murder ever in his book *My Irrelevant Defence*, published in 1938.¹⁰

In his renowned 1933 article, Cecil Roth stated that the background of blood libel in Europe came from the celebrations of the Jewish holidays, Purim and Pesach, which is strictly related to it (Haman was hanged during Pesach), which the Christians interpreted as sneering or mocking the Passion of Christ.¹¹ He even proposed several phases of the development of the legend of blood accusation: a) in antiquity the Jews were accused of killing people in the Jerusalem Temple; b) while celebrating the spring feast of Purim the Jews hung images and dolls of Haman, and then the blood accusation, especially concerning Christians, appeared; c) these holidays fall in the period of the Holy Week and

⁷ Conrad 1919; Horowitz 2006: 216.

⁸ Frazer 1900: 173-174; cf. Horowitz 2006: 221-226.

⁹ Dubnow 1968: 191.

¹⁰ Cf. Horowitz 2006: 227-228.

¹¹ Roth 1933: 520-526.

sometimes coincided with Easter, and consequently, they were interpreted as mockery of the Passion of Jesus, with the blood accusation appearing for religious motifs; d) seeking rational reasons for these ritual murders in the Middle Ages, people added the explanation that the Jews needed blood for medical causes, which was then replaced by a simple solution (e), that blood was indispensable for ritual purposes related to Pesach, which fell just after Purim. Looking at the chain of the blood accusation, reaching the ancient times, Roth regards the incident at Inmestar as the prototype of the later events. However, as shown by Gavin I. Langmuir in his article dedicated to the first ritual murder charge in the Middle Ages, i.e. the case of Norwich, England, on Easter Sunday 1144, when the body of a boy called William was found (the boy's family accused the Jews living in Norwich of crucifying him), it is impossible to understand these cases as a continuation of some ancient tradition.¹² It is true that in the Middle Ages the description of Socrates was read in Latin (the Latin version was edited in c. 560 by Cassiodorus, based on *Historia tripartita* – a compilation of the works of Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoros – by Theodoros Anagnostes, originating at the beginning of the 6th c.), and that this work was certainly popular (as many as 138 manuscripts of this compilation were found). However, only two of them come from England and are dated to the late 12th century or the beginning of the 13th century. Furthermore, no medieval chronicles contain traces of interest in the murder from Inmestar. Therefore, according to Langmuir the background of the medieval blood accusation is of a completely different character and is not a simple continuation of some ancient tradition.

The association of the events described by the historian of the Church with the feast of Purim made it easier for commentators to explain the “drunkenness” of the Jews and the law included in the Theodosian Code, issued on 29 May 408, confirming that the tradition of understanding this holiday as an act of enmity against the Christian religion originated in antiquity. In fact, it is the first Emperor's regulation interfering in the synagogal ritual:

The two Emperors and Augusti Honorius and Theodosius to Anthemius, Praefectus Praetorio. The governors of the provinces shall prohibit the Jews from setting fire to Aman in memory of his past punishment, in a certain ceremony of their festival, and from burning with sacrilegious intent a form made to resemble the saint cross in contempt of the Christian faith (*quodam festivitatis suae sollempni Aman ad poenae quondam recordationem incendere et sanctae crucis adsimulatam speciem in contemptum Christianae fidei*¹³ *sacrilega mente exurere provinciarum rectores prohibeant*), lest they mingle the sign of our faith with their places [in all the manuscripts: *locis*; the conjecture made by Mommsen has *iocis*, jests], and they shall restrain their rites from ridiculing the Christian law, for they are bound to lose what had been permitted them till now unless they abstain from those matters which are forbidden.

Given on the fourth day before the calends of June at Constantinople, in the consulate of Basus and Phillipus.¹⁴

¹² Langmuir 1984: 820-846 (= Langmuir 1991: 3-40); cf. Langmuir 1990: 209-236; Yuval 2006: 164-167.

¹³ These words are omitted in *Codex Justinianus*.

¹⁴ *CTh* XVI 8,18 = *CJI* 9,11 = Linder 1987, no. 36.

One can easily explain how the Jewish holiday was associated with contempt of the Christian faith. According to the biblical text, Haman, on the king's command, was hanged on the gallows which he had erected for Mordecai (Esth 7:9-10) The translation of this fragment in the Septuagint, i.e. the Greek version of the Bible that was commonly used in the Christian world, forms an association with the death of Jesus, since the Greek text says that the king gave the command to crucify Haman (**Σταυρωθήτω ἐπ' αὐτοῦ**). In the Latin rendering of the Bible in c. 400, Jerome used here a *patibulum* (a fork-shaped yoke, a fork-shaped gibbet, synonym of *furca*),¹⁵ which was interchangeably used with *crux* to designate the place where Jesus died (moreover, Jerome clearly associated the crucifixion of Haman and his children with Esth 8:7 and 9:25). According to the late ancient Jewish tradition, Haman was crucified: the midrash *Genesis Rabba* (the final redaction of the text is dated to approximately the first half of the 5th century)¹⁶ says, "Yesterday Mordechai was ready to be crucified, and now he crucifies his crucifier" (30:8). Likewise, *Leviticus Rabba* (the time of its redaction is attributed to c. 400-500)¹⁷ mentions the crucifixion of the head of the Jews (28:6). In Palestine, Haman was juxtaposed with Jesus, "the two crucified enemies of Jews."¹⁸ Alfredo M. Rabello gathered the Jewish sources – however, all of them were later than the beginning of the fifth century – speaking of Haman's crucifixion during the feast of Purim: Targum to the Book of Esther interprets 7:9-10 as "crucifying Haman." The Jews in Yemen had a custom of hanging the image of Haman on crossed sticks, resembling a cross (Haman's images were burnt more frequently).¹⁹

Rabello thinks that these Jewish practices could have existed in late antiquity, and since they were accompanied by sneers and mockery of the crucified figure, the Christians became convinced that the Jews sneered at Jesus. This seems to be confirmed by Jerome's translation, which may reflect some early Jewish practices concerning the celebration of Purim that he had already known. In fact, the edict of Theodosius states plainly that the Jews hanged Haman on something that resembles a cross. The figure of Haman was also compared with Jesus in the Jewish communities.

Nothing is known about the circumstances of establishing this law. It seems to answer some concrete accusations, and being enforced by the governors of provinces (*provinciarum rectores*) this law assumes a general character.²⁰ Therefore, it is easy to imagine the process leading to the accusations of the Jews. During the feast of Purim they read the Scroll of Esther in their synagogues, but the essential part of the holiday was joy, feasting and drinking, as well, evidently, as hanging images of Haman. The fact that for the Jews the crucifixion of their persecutor was a joyful event, celebrated as a day of victory, must have given rise to tensions when contacting the Christian world. Since for obvious reasons, the Christians could not associate crucifixion with joy. Hence the

¹⁵ Cf. Lullies 1949: 2167-2169; Bøe 2010: 56 and 69, n. 102.

¹⁶ Strack and Stemberger 1996: 279.

¹⁷ Strack and Stemberger 1996: 291.

¹⁸ *Piyyut* 29 in Sokoloff and Yahalom 2000; Sivan 2000: 149 (it is supposed here that the poem was recited and the feast of Purim was celebrated in Alexandria, which could have been one of the reasons for issuing the law preserved in *Codex Theodosianus*). In the rabbinical tradition, ben Pantera/ben Pandera is Jesus, cf. Schäfer 2007: 15-19 and *passim*; Sokoloff and Yahalom 2000, *piyyut* 33; Sivan 2000: 152-153.

¹⁹ Rabello 1974: 159-166, esp. 161.

²⁰ Cf. Millar 2006: 126.

sources indicate that the association between Haman hanging on a cross and Christ's crucifixion must have existed in the period of late antiquity in both the Jewish and the Christian communities whereas the imperial legislation reflects the opposition of the Christian communities to the unintentional – or deliberate – comparison between Haman and the person of Jesus.²¹

Let us return to the riots in Syria, described by Socrates. Socrates, who was connected mainly with Constantinople, must have learnt about the events he would describe from someone who came to New Rome from Syria.²² It is difficult to establish the date of the event precisely. Following the chronology accepted by Socrates, the event should be dated between 415 and 419. In Chapter 15 of Book VII, which precedes this story, Socrates writes about events related to the death of the famous philosopher Hypatia in Alexandria in March 415. The next chapter (17) of this book, introduced with the very imprecise phrase “About this time” (κατὰ δὲ τὸν χρόνον τόνδε), begins on 26 August 419. Thus we can understand that in Socrates' opinion, the murder at Inmestar happened after March 415 and before August 419. This chronology does not help us establish a more precise date of the events in Syria.

However tempting it may be to connect Socrates' description and the feast of Purim, the circumstances of the events at Inmestar are ambiguous. The author of *Church History* neither mentions the Jewish feast nor places these events in religious context. He only speaks about joy and Jewish playthings: παίγνια ἐπετέλουν τινά. Besides this verse he uses this expression only once more in Chapter 15 of Book I speaking of Bishop Athanasius, who as a young man used to play with his peers: they imitated the ritual of priestly ordination and he acted the part of the bishop. These playthings are ἱερὸν παίγνιον. In the Christian literature the term παίγνιον itself does not define a feast or games played at feasts. It only means “a plaything.” Eusebius wrote about “playthings of destiny” (καὶ Μοιρῶν παίγνιον),²³ whereas Basil said that after having fallen in hands of his enemies Samson was set out as a “plaything” for the children of foreigners.²⁴ Basil also speaks of devil's playthings (τοῦ διαβόλου τὰ παίγνια).²⁵ After leaving Caesarea, in his letter to Philagrius, Gregory of Nazianzus recollected life in this city, mentioning feasts, poverty, “playthings” and studies,²⁶ whereas in another letter he mentioned scenic “plays.”²⁷

²¹ Sivan (2000: 151) writes that the imperial regulation could have prevented the Christians from participating in this feast that attracted them with its festivities and meals.

²² In the lists of sources concerning the particular chapters of *Historia Ecclesiastica* this passus is most frequently followed by a question mark, or there is a reference to some unknown, oral source of Socrates' narrative, e.g. Geppert 1898, p. 131 (‘Mündliche Überlieferung’); van Nuffelen 2004: 473.

²³ Eusebius, *Contra Hieroclem* 41.

²⁴ Basil, *De ieiunio* 2, PG 30,31: ἀλώσιμος ἦν τοῖς ἐχθροῖς, καὶ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν στερηθεὶς, παίγνιον προέκειτο τοῖς τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν στερηθεὶς, παίγνιον προέκειτο τοῖς παιδαρίοις τῶν ἀλλοφύλων; PG 31,193. The word παίγνιον was used with a similar meaning by Basil in *Sermo de contubernibus*, PG 30,816: σοι τῷ πάσχοντι παίγνιον καταφαίνεται τὸ πρᾶγμα, and similarly idem, 817: παίγνιον γὰρ ὡς ἔοικε πάντα σοι καταφαίνεται.

²⁵ Saint Basile, *Lettres*, ed. Y. Courtonne, Paris 1966, vol. 3, ep. 240,2.

²⁶ Saint Gregoire de Nazianze, *Lettres*, ed. P. Gallay, vol. 1, Paris 1964, Ep. 30: αἱ πόλεις, αἱ διατριβαί, ἡ τράπεζα, ἡ πενία, τὰ τῆς ἐρατεινῆς ὀμηλικῆς, (...) ἢ παίγνια, ἢ σπουδάσματα etc.

²⁷ Saint Grégoire de Nazianze, *Lettres*, vol. 2, Paris 1967, ep. 178,10: τὰ τῆς μεγάλης ταύτης σκηνῆς παίγνια τε καὶ θεατρίσματα.

John Chrysostom uses this word in a similar meaning several times, e.g. when saying that the sufferings in Sodom seemed to be a “plaything,”²⁸ or that “Christianity is not a plaything.”²⁹ He spoke in this way about plays in theatres and hippodromes (ἐν τοῖς θεάτροις καὶ ταῖς ἵπποδρομαῖς σχολαζόντων ἐστὶ παίγνια),³⁰ about demons’ plays (δαϊμόνων ἀναμιγνύειν παίγνια),³¹ and finally, about children’s plays (τὰ παιδικὰ παίγνια).³² He uses this word in the Jewish context only once, but not in the context of the Jewish feast, Ὁρᾶς πῶς τὸ παλαιὸν οἱ ἱερεῖς ἐχειροτονοῦντο; Νυνὶ δὲ παίγνια τὰ παρὰ Ἰουδαίους πάντα καὶ γέλως καὶ αἰσχύνη καὶ καπηλεῖα καὶ μυρίας μεστὰ παρανομίας (“Do you see how priests were chosen in former days? But everything that goes on among the Jews today is a ridiculous sport, a trading in shame, filled with outrages beyond number”).³³

Sozomen, describing the cruel death of Bishop Mark of Arethusa, writes of a crowd plucking and beating the bishop, “People of each sex and all ages joined with alacrity and fury in this atrocious proceeding. His ears were severed by fine ropes; the boys who frequented the schools made game of him (παῖδες δὲ εἰς διδασκάλους φοιτῶντες παίγνιον ἐποιοῦντο τὸ πρᾶγμα) by tossing him aloft and rolling him over and over, sending him forward, catching him up, and unsparingly piercing him with their styles.”³⁴

Looking at Socrates’ description, we can only say that the Jews played and drank wine, but Purim was not the only occasion to have fun. It is worth mentioning that probably in the 6th (7th?) century a popular, shorter, Armenian version of Socrates’ *Church History*, far from the existing, faithful rendering, preserved the following course of events: drunken Jews during “illegal games mocked the Christians, lampooning Christ, ridiculed the Cross,” they caught a Christian boy, crucified him and after he had died they buried his body in a grave.³⁵ When the Christians learnt about this they attacked the Jews, injured many of them and, finally, the authorities punished the Jews for killing the lad. For the Armenian redactor of this history, the central event was the Jews laughing at the Christian sanctity and the death of the boy. Yet, he did not interpret Socrates’ text as a description of a religious holiday.

It should be stressed again that the chronology of the events is very debatable. Therefore, it is not certain whether the legal regulation of Theodosius was issued after these events and not in the period that preceded them. If the riots at Inmestar took place after 415, i.e. after the edict of 408 was passed, it seems obvious that once the law came into force the Jews had to show special restraint and exceptional caution while celebrating Purim, knowing the character of the accusations against them. If the events had concerned a real Jewish holiday and murder committed then, we would rather have expected

²⁸ John Chrysostom, *Aversus oppugnatores vitae monasticae*, PG 47,362: οὕτως οὖσαν χαλεπὴν, ὡς τὰ ἐν Σοδόμοις πάθη πρὸς ταῦτα παραβαλλόμενα παίγνια εἶναι νομίζεσθαι.

²⁹ John Chrysostom, *Si esurierit inimicus tuus*, PG 51,174, Οὐκ ἔστι παίγνια ὁ Χριστιανισμός.

³⁰ John Chrysostom, *In illud: Vidi dominum*, hom. I 2,42 in: *Homélies sur Ozias (In illud, vidi dominum)*, ed. J. Dumortier, SC 207, Paris 1981.

³¹ John Chrysostom, *In illud: Vidi dominum*, hom. I 3,91; similarly *In ascensionem*, hom. II, PG 52,793.

³² John Chrysostom, *In psalmum 145*, PG 55,525; similarly *In Matheum* PG 57,20; *In ep. II ad Timotheum*, PG 62,635: παίγνια καὶ παίδων ἀθύρματα.

³³ John Chrysostom, *Adversus Iudeos* 6, PG 48,913.

³⁴ Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, V 10.

³⁵ Thomson 2001, 197.

that the gossip would have exaggerated – and not silenced – the religious character of the events.

Furthermore, it is not clear where the ritual murder was to be committed. The two main Greek manuscripts of Socrates (marked as family *b* in Hansen's edition) preserve the name of a place called Ἰμμεστάρ. In his *Chronicle*, based on the Greek work *Historia tripartita* by Theodoros Anagnostes as far as this period of history is concerned, Theophanes Confessor (d. in 818) gives the form εἰς τὸ Ἰμμοῦ,³⁶ while the version Ἰμμοῦ was also preserved in the complete, faithful Armenian rendering of *Church History* that was most likely made in the 6th century.³⁷ In turn, in the Latin translation of Socrates, commissioned by Cassiodorus (7th c.) and made by Epiphanius, we can read *Mestar*. The Syriac version changed the name to *Aman*. In his edition, Hansen proposes Ἰμμοῦμμεστάρ, which is the editor's conjecture. In the text, which obviously results from the editorial work of Socrates' text, published in 1994 in the proceedings of the *XXV Deutscher Orientalistentag*, Hansen writes that the first part of the name of the place could have come from the name "Hamman" (double consonant) while the other part, *mestara*, is a participle from the Syriac verb *sra*, which yields the meaning "der zerrissene Hamman" – "the torn Hamman." According to Hansen, this name could have been assumed by some Syriac Jewish community to honor Purim as their important holiday ("Purimfest in Immonmestar eine besondere Rolle spielen musste"), and then horrible iniquities could have occurred. As stated above, one may doubt the validity of the connection between these events and the celebrations of Purim; the whole deduction provided by Hansen, based on the assumption that it was exactly this feast, seems questionable. It is safer to accept the traditional explanation³⁸ indicating Imma, the town located around 35 km away from Antioch (having more or less the same geographical latitude) and 50 km north of Chalkis ad Belum. Imma suits the description of Socrates Scholasticus very well. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of any Jewish community located in this town.³⁹

The historians of Jewry in late antiquity combine the events in Syria with the feast of Purim.⁴⁰ However, they do not agree whether that event was true: Jean Juster⁴¹ refutes it as non-historic, whereas Marcel Simon⁴² accepts the fact that some drunken Jews did kill the boy.

I have already mentioned that the chronology of the event, its circumstances (the feast of Purim or something else) and the name of the Syrian place evoke doubts, but there is no reason to deny the historicity of the events themselves. What should be done is to see them in the background of the Jews' situation that was clearly deteriorating in the Roman Empire from the middle of the fourth century; furthermore, the tensions between the Jews and the Christian world were growing.

³⁶ Theodoros Anagnostes, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. G.Ch. Hansen, Berlin 1971, AM 5908, AD 415/16; for the life and work of Theophanes cf. Mango – Scott 1997, XLIII-XCX, esp. LXXIV-XCV.

³⁷ For the translations of Socrates' works cf. G.C. Hansen, Einleitung: Die Übersetzungen, in: Socrates, *Kirchengeschichte*, pp. XXIV-XXXIII.

³⁸ Cf. Wallraff 1997: 77, n. 233.

³⁹ See Geider 1995: 219-225.

⁴⁰ For instance Avi-Yonah 1976: 212; Blanchetière 1980: 125-128; Linder 1987: 237.

⁴¹ Juster 1914: 204.

⁴² Simon 1964: 160.

In 388, the synagogue in Callinicum, Mesopotamia, was destroyed. Emperor Theodosius I ordered its reconstruction, but his decision was strongly opposed by Bishop Ambrose, who also criticized punishing those who burnt synagogues in Rome.⁴³ In 393, Theodosius I introduced a law forbidding Christians to destroy synagogues in the Empire (*qui sub Christianae religionis nomine illicita quaeque praesument et destruere synagogas adque expoliare conantur, congrua severitate cohibebit*).⁴⁴ Traditionally, synagogues were treated as private properties, and as such protected against the attacks of Christian fanatics who at the beginning of the fifth century made bold attacks with the aim of destroying those buildings. That is why in the year 412, Honorius and Theodosius issued an edict protecting synagogues against destruction (*Quae Iudaeorum frequentari conventiculis constat quaeque synagogarum vocabulis nuncupantur, nullus audeat violare vel occupata detinere*), and forbidding anyone to disturb the Jews in the celebration of the Sabbath “under the pretext of public or private affairs.”⁴⁵ It is very likely that this law, was proclaimed as an answer to the destruction of the synagogue in Edessa in 411-412 and its being appropriated and turned into a church by Bishop Rabbula.⁴⁶ In 414, Cyril expelled the Jews from Alexandria, and the synagogues were turned into churches.⁴⁷ Around 418, the Jewish community in the town of Magona, Minorca, were forced to change their religion or go into exile.⁴⁸ In 420, Honorius and Theodosius introduced the next legislation, protecting the Jews who were persecuted for their religion, and forbidding anyone to destroy and burn synagogues.⁴⁹ A similar regulation was issued on 15 February 423, forbidding anyone to take over and burn synagogal buildings and allowed the Jews to rebuild their destroyed synagogues, but at the same time banned them from erecting new ones.⁵⁰ The protection of the Jews might have been caused by the activities of the Syrian monk Bar-Sauma, who destroyed synagogues (Jewish and Samaritan ones) as well as places of pagan cults in Syria and Palestine in the years 419-422.⁵¹ In this period, the synagogue in Antioch, Syria was destroyed. An attempt at restoring it was condemned by Simeon the Stylite.⁵² The act of 9 April 423, issued as an answer to the Jews’ complaints (their *miserabiles preces* are mentioned) ordered that any attacks against the Jews be withstood and forbade anyone to take over and burn synagogues

⁴³ Ambrose, *Ep.* 74, esp. 10-24.

⁴⁴ *CTh* XVI 8,9 = Linder 1987, no. 21.

⁴⁵ *CTh* XVI 8,20 = Linder 1987, no. 40.

⁴⁶ Cf. Linder 1987: 263; Drijvers 1999: 31-39, esp. 38.

⁴⁷ Socrates, *HE* VII 13-15; a separate problem is the unfriendly attitude of Pulcheria, Theodosius’ sister, towards the Jews. She became the Empress of Rome in 414: Holum 1982: 98-99 and 188, examines her hatred towards Jews, which was intensified by the fact that the heresy of Nestorianism was seen by the contemporary people as having Jewish roots.

⁴⁸ *Severus of Minorca. Letter on the Conversion of the Jews*, ed. S. Bradbury, Oxford 1996; cf. Hunt 1982: 106-123.

⁴⁹ *CTh* XVI 8,21 = Linder 1987, no. 46.

⁵⁰ *CTh* XVI 8,25 = Linder 1987, no. 47.

⁵¹ So Linder 1987, 288.

⁵² Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book I, 13, “In so great a measure had the power of divine grace taken possession of him, that, when Theodosius had issued a mandate, that the synagogues of which they had been previously deprived by the Christians, should be restored to the Jews of Antioch, he wrote to the emperor with so much freedom and vehement rebuke [...]”

(*ab eorum laesione persecutioneque temperent utque nunc ac deinceps synagogas eorum nullus occupet, nullus incendat*).⁵³

Therefore, the events at Inmestar can be seen as another expression of the Jewish-Christian tensions in Syria during which force and violence were used. In the context of the aforementioned Roman imperial legislation, it is easy to imagine the aggression of the Christian environments accusing the Jews of mocking Jesus and Christianity, to imagine an attack of the mob on the Jewish place of worship or on a Jewish gathering and consequently, riots that may have led to the boy's death and accusation of murder. It was only after many years that Socrates collected the information from gossip that distorted the name of the Syrian place. He wrote down a preserved version of the events, one that the Christian world considered credible and suitable for its own stereotype concerning the Jews.

ABBREVIATIONS

CJ – Codex Justinianus.

CTh – Codex Theodosianus.

PG – Patrologia Graeca.

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⁵³ *CTh* XVI 8,26 = Linder 1987, no. 48.

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