

**THE WANDERING JEW
IN THE ALLITERATIVE MORTE ARTHURE**

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The legend of Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, doomed to wander the earth until the Judgment Day because he had refused his house as a resting place for the suffering Christ, is familiar today. It was first made generally known to Europe in an anonymous pamphlet printed in German in 1602, *Kurzer Beschreibung und Erzehlung von einem Juden mit Namen Ahasverus*. It was said to be printed at Leiden by Cristoff Crützer, who is unknown to historians.¹ A later version, which appeared in 1613, *Neue Zeitung von einem Juden von Jerusalem, Ahasuerus genannt, welcher die Creutzignung unsers Herrn Jhesu Christi gesehen, und noch am leben ist, aus Dantzig an einem guten Freund geschrieben*, ascribed authorship to one Chrysostomus Dudulaeus of Westphalia, of whom nothing further is known either.² These treatises both relate how Paulus von Eizen, Bishop of Schleswig, met a man in Hamburg in 1547 who called himself Ahasuerus. He said that he was a Jew, a shoemaker, and that he had been present at Christ's crucifixion. He told the bishop that when Christ was passing his door, burdened with the heavy cross, he wanted to rest against the wall a little while. Enraged, Ahasuerus ordered Christ to move on. Jesus then fixed his gaze upon him and said, "I will stand here and rest, but thou shalt move until the last day!"³ The German tale goes on to recount the Jew's wanderings, his piety, and his

learning, without, however, giving him any specific epithet.⁴

Prototypes of Ahasuerus are found in two earlier legendary figures. In 1228, a bishop from Armenia visited the Abbey of St. Albans in Hertfordshire, England. When the monks inquired of him whether he had knowledge of the man called Joseph who had been present at Christ's crucifixion, and who yet lived, the bishop related that Cartaphilus, Pilate's doorkeeper, was then living a holy life among the Armenian clergy. When Jesus was being led from the judgment hall, Cartaphilus had struck him, urging him to go faster, to which Jesus had replied, "I will go, but thou shalt remain waiting until I come." Later Cartaphilus was baptized by Ananias, and given the name of Joseph. This tale is preserved in the *Flores Historiarum* of Roger of Wendover, and is repeated by Matthew Paris in his continuation of Roger's history.⁵ Subject of a similar story current in thirteenth-century Italy was the allegedly long-lived Giovanni Buttadeo, "striker of God." Buttadeo was reputed to be the officer who smote Christ in the high priest's presence.⁶ Both Cartaphilus and Buttadeo were Romans, not Jews; furthermore, they are stationary figures rather than wanderers.

Scholars have found no reference to an undying Jew who wanders from place to place prior to the 1602 and 1613 crystallization of the legend of Ahasuerus in German, nor any specific medieval references to the "wandering Jew." The German tale was soon translated into other European languages, and the French version printed in Bordeaux in 1609, wherein the Jew is called the "**juif errant**," is credited with originating the epithet, "Wandering Jew."⁷

Therefore, it is of great interest to note the hitherto overlooked appearance of the phrase "errant Jew" in the **Alliterative Morte Arthure**, a Middle English verse romance composed around

1360 in the dialect of the West Midlands.⁸ The reference occurs in line 2895, in the context of a brief passage:

But one Jolyan of Gene, a gīaunt full hūge,
 Has joined on Sir Gerard, a justice of Wāles;
 Through a jerowndē shēld hē jāgges him through,
 And a fīne gesseraunt of gentle mailes;
 Jointer and gemous hē jāgges in sonder!
 On a jambē steed this journee hē makes;
 Thus is the gīaunt for-jouste, that erraunt Jew,
 And Gerard is jocund and joyes him the more.⁹
 (2889-2896)

[But one Julian of Genoa, a very huge giant, has encountered Sir Gerard, a justice of Wales; he stabs him through a gyronny shield and a fine, noble coat of mail; he stabs asunder joint and clasp! On a swift steed he does his day's work; thus the giant is outjosted, that wandering Jew, and Gerard is jocund and rejoices the more.]

The passage recounts one episode in the battle between King Arthur's men and the men of Westphalia; the "erraunt Jew," with other Genoan soldiers is fighting in the Westphalian cause (see lines 2825-2915). That the Jew is said to be from Genoa may reflect an association with one of the Wandering Jew's antecedents, the Italian Buttadeo. More tantalizing, however, is the Jew's connection with the Westphalian forces, inasmuch as the alleged author of the earliest known legend of Ahasuerus, a "wandering" Jew, is a Chrysostomus of Westphalia. This suggests that some version of the Wandering Jew legend originated much earlier than the seventeenth century in Germany, possibly in Westphalia, and was propagated at least as far as the West Midlands of England as early as the fourteenth century. We know from the testimony of Roger of Wendover that, not far from London in the early thirteenth century, a belief existed in a certain "Joseph" who had witnessed the crucifixion of Christ and who was still alive. The phrase,

"erraunt Jew," employed by the anonymous English poet of the fourteenth-century **Alliterative Morte Arthure**, points to the existence of such a legend, and places its oral currency over two hundred years earlier than the time when an unknown Westphalian author committed the version known to him to writing in the early seventeenth century.

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NOTES

- 1 "Wandering Jew," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 1973, vol. 18, 185.
- 2 Moncure Daniel Conway, *The Wandering Jew* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1881), p. 6; see also "Wandering Jew," p. 185.
- 3 Conway, p. 8.
- 4 See Conway, pp. 5-12, and for a full account of the germination of the legend, Chapter I, *passim*; cf. Sabine Baring-Gould, *Curious Myths of the Middle Ages* (New York: John W. Lovell Co., n.d., but prob. c. 1866; rpt. New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1967), pp. 1-31.
- 5 "Wandering Jew," p. 185; Conway, p. 1; "Wandering Jew," *Man, Myth & Magic: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Supernatural*, vol. 22, p. 2990.
- 6 "Wandering Jew," *Man, Myth & Magic*, p. 2991.
- 7 "Wandering Jew," *Man, Myth & Magic*, p. 2990; Conway translates the title as "True History of the Wandering Jew taken from his own lips," p. 24. The mythical Jew became known by various titles. In a German treatise of 1694, he is first called the "ewiger Jude." In English he is the "Wandering Jew," in French the "juif errant, Ebreo errante," in Spanish, "Juan Espera en Dios"; in Bayern he is known as "der gangende Schuster," in Tirol, "der umgehadi Schuaschta," and in Switzerland, "der lauffende Jud" (See Werner Zirus, *Ahasverus, der ewige Jude* [Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1930], pp. 2-3.

⁸ Helaine Newstead, "Arthurian Romances," in **A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1500**, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences), Fascicule 1, O. 44. This date, however, is disputed. See L.D. Benson, "The Date of the **Alliterative Morte Arthure**," in **Medieval Studies in Honor of Lillian Hirlands Hornstein**, ed. Jess B. Bessinger and Robert R. Raymo (New York: New York University Press, 1976), p. 36. Benson suggests, on the basis of English and Italian allusions in the poem, a date "in or shortly after the year 1400."

⁹ Quoted from **King Arthur's Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure**, ed. Larry D. Benson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), p. 197. Cf. **Morte Arthure**, ed. Erik Bjorkman (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1915), p. 85: "Thus es þe geant forjuste, that Iewe errawnte"; **Morte Arthure: An Alliterative Poem of the 14th Century**, ed. Mary Macleod Banks (London: Longmans, 1900; rpt. New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1974), p. 78: "Thus es þe geante forjuste, that errawnte Iewe"; **The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition**, ed. Valerie Krishna (New York: Burt Franklin, 1976), p. 118: "Thus es þe geante forjuste, that errawnte Iewe."