Based on his comprehensive research in Central Europe, the author has written a well-founded book on a rare iconological phenomenon of the Middle Ages, the unfortunate connection between Holy Blood worship and the persecution of the Jews. The two powerful terms of the main title, Pilgrimage and Pogrom, juxtapose intentions that could hardly be more opposed to each other. Pilgrimage was an important part of the Christian way of faith and marks a stark contrast to the vehement allegations made against Jews in the context of an annihilation that was, in part, politically motivated and engendered disastrous consequences. These accusations claimed that an assault on the consecrated host had brought about the appearance of the blood of Christ. Emphasizing the importance of the cult of relics in the Middle Ages, the book cover is graced by a colorized woodcut from 1487 showing the display of a relic at the Nuremberg Fish Market. The intended linking of the cult of relics and the persecution of the Jews points to a short and dark chapter in the long history of the veneration of relics.

The first part of Merback’s book traces the occurrence of such events in Paris towards the end of the 13th century and their spreading to the east in the immediate aftermath. In the second part, the author focuses on the ensuing visual culture, its relevance to the theory and history of art, and particularly its expression in host-miracle altars. Here, three primary examples are discussed extensively: Iphofen, Passau, and Pulkau whose churches, along with their furnishings, formed places of remembrance. The author looks at these example cases in their social and cultural context and compares them to each other, revealing a similar pattern in each instance. The degree to which, as the author suggests, the proliferation of devotional pictures of the Man of Sorrows also ties into this as a visualization of the Holy Blood cult remains to be evaluated. Merback presents a comprehensive analysis of the social and cultural environment and the influence it exerted on works of art. He sees
them and the sites where they were erected as repositories of collective memory in a sacral context. This approach aims to reveal them as intended systems of remembrance in the Christian context and reduce them to a form of practice.

The high altar of Pulkau’s Church of the Holy Blood plays a main role in this medieval tragedy. It represents a singular piece of pictorial evidence of the deliberate linking of Christian devotion and the host-desecration legend. Even though the latter only appears in a marginal position on the side panels of the predella, they exerted an influence that is not to be underestimated. The host-legend, in its way, repeats the violence inflicted upon Christ. Furthermore, its two scenes are not set in the timeframe of biblical events and probably represent the artistically most sophisticated renderings of the entire altar, created by a great anonymous artist of the Danube School. Merback comes to the conclusion that, about 180 years after the persecution of the Jews in Pulkau, the artist’s version universalizes the topographical setting (Christopher Wood: fictional topothesias) of the host-legend, which had already been depicted in mural paintings from the Gothic period. A critical note must be made here, namely that the host-scenes, like the shrine’s panel paintings, contain precise topographical details of Pulkau and its surroundings. In the foreground of the first host-scene, the house of the host desecrater is the scene of the piercing. It is the site on which the Holy Blood Church is said to have been built. In the middle ground, we see the front-gabled houses of Pulkau. The casting away of the host is set in the Bründltal Valley. Its characteristic boulders, undermined by the Pulkau River, are clearly discernible. In the background rise the castles of the Pulkau Valley, Reichenberg and Neuneck. References to local history also play a role in the Passion panels of the shrine and the predella wings: The entry of Christ into Jerusalem leads through the triumphal arch of the Parish Church St Michael in Pulkau, plainly recognizable by the simply designed capital and impost base sections and the rough framing stones at the top center of the arch. It repeats the round-arched entrance of the blasphemers’ house as a formal iteration. The Lord’s Supper is set in one of the castle halls that look out over the Pulkau Valley and also serve as a backdrop to the throwing away of the host. In the Bearing of the Cross, the Gothic choir of the Church of the Holy Blood is still shown with a lower tower. The Entombment scene has Hardegg Castle in the background with its large residential building and the towers of
the stronghold. And this is explained by local history. The Church of the Holy Blood, designated as the Lower Church in the 1443 urbarium of the dominion of Retz-Hardegg, also ranked as the county’s own ambitious church project. In this context, settling the Friars Minor there was also considered in 1379. According to the bull of Pope Boniface IX from April 19, 1396, completion and endowment of the Corpus Christi Chapel in Pulkau was approved and its foundation entrusted to the Count of Hardegg. In 1397, construction was completed under Count Maidburg-Hardegg. Presumably, this political background is also accountable for the host-legend and explains the absence of a deed of foundation in the annals of the church, where the authenticity of the host-miracle was also doubted. In 1430, Count Michael von Hardegg, under guardian Duke Albrecht V, transferred the Church of the Holy Blood, with all rights and assets, to Schottenstift Abbey, as evidenced by a deed dated September 4, 1468. In 1481, the county of Hardegg was granted territorial status. In 1494, Emperor Maximilian I transferred what was now the leaderless Imperial County of Hardegg to Sigmund and Heinrich von Prüschenk Stettenberg. In 1499, together with Pulkau and Therasburg, it was transferred by the encumbrancer to Count Heinrich von Prüschenk. These events mark the period preceding the creation of the winged altar, whose depictions of castles contain references to this history of changing rule.

Furthermore, it must be noted that the painter of the host-legend scenes, despite his familiarity with the two older versions of the Legend of the Miraculous Host through the existing mural paintings in the Church of the Holy Blood, presented, or even developed, a third and new version of the throwing away of the host in the Bründl Valley near Pulkau. He thus created the only evidence of the legend’s third version. This raises several questions: Was this a deliberate attempt to demonstrate distance towards the truth content of the depicted events, a quasi dismantling of the legend that could also be told differently? Or, did the depiction of the bleeding host in the Pulkau River, which thus became the carrier of this miracle, amount to a renewed bid to attribute religious and therefore also economic significance to the Pulkau area?

Merback goes to great lengths to emphasize that present-day visitors to the Church of the Holy Blood ought to be aware that, in 1338, the host-legend was a vehicle of disseminating an untruth. Evidently, the majority believed it to be true, as the host-scenes in the predella’s side panels suggest, and a massacre of Jews ensued. Prior to this publication, Herta and Herbert Puschnik, in cooperation with scholars, launched an exemplary attempt to come to terms with this dark part of Pulkau’s history. As Merback’s book primarily follows an iconological approach, it should be noted as an aside that the attribution of the Pulkau sculptor to Michael Tichter is not supported by scholarship.

The third part of this book provides numerous additional examples of pilgrimages in the German Empire, a mass movement that brought Christians to these places of remembrance, among others. The fourth part points to the connection of this rich tradition with the Holy Blood and the spaces of its worship and remembrance. Reference is made to Umberto Eco’s concept of the “surplus” of memory that defines forgetting in bipolarity to memory as a multiplication of presences. The author thoroughly examines the theme of horrendous violence and, at the closing of his book, contemplates the history of the Pulkau Judengrube. The works of art burdened by this trauma are assigned the role of places of continued collective memory that also communicate this side of the story.

This is a book worth reading. It is highly demanding, presents rich and critical interdisciplinary research material as well as a wealth of illustrations, and is truly worthy of attention and discussion.

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