

St. William of Norwich

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Born 1132; died 22 March, 1144. On [Holy Saturday](#), 25 March, 1144, a boy's corpse showing signs of a violent death was found in Thorpe Wood near Norwich. It was not touched until [Easter](#) Monday, where it was buried without any [ceremony](#) where it lay. In the meantime a number of young men and boys had visited the spot and the [Jews](#) were suspected of the [murder](#) on account of the nature of the wounds ["Ex ipso penarum modo" (Thomas of Monmouth, op. cit. below, [p. 35]; "non nisi judeos eo maxime tempore talia gessisse asseritur" (op. cit., p. 36)]. The body was recognized as that of William, a tanner's apprentice, who with his master had been in the habit of frequenting the houses of certain [Jews](#). The grave was opened by William's uncle, the [priest](#) Godwin Stuart, the body recognized, the burial Office read, and the grave recovered. A few days later the [diocesan](#) synod met under the presidency of Bishop Eborard, and Stuart accused the [Jews](#) of the [murder](#), and offered to prove his accusation by ordeal. But the [Jews](#) of the Norwich [Jewry](#) were the king's men and under the protection of the sheriff, who pointed out that the [bishop](#) had no [jurisdiction](#) in the case. The failure to secure a condemnation against the [Jews](#) seems to have been largely due to the presence of this strong official who held the castle of [Norwich](#). The only result of Sturt's action at this time was to secure the translation of the body from Thorpe Wood to the [monks'](#) cemetery on 24 April. But the cultus of St. William did not become popular, and though one or two [miracles](#) are reported during this period (1144-49) it is quite possible that the story of the [murder](#) of the [Jews](#) might have been forgotten but for the [murder](#) of the [Jew](#) Eleazer by the followers of Sir Simon de Novers in 1149. The [Jews](#) demanded the murderer's punishment, and Bishop Turbe, acting for the accused, who was his own mesne tenant, brought up the [murder](#) of the boy William five years earlier as a countercharge. The case was tried before the king at [Norwich](#), but postponed owing, according to Thomas of Monmouth, to the payment by the [Jews](#) of much money to the king and his councillors.

For the whole story of William of Norwich our only authority is Thomas of Monmouth, a [monk](#) of the [cathedral priory](#) of [Norwich](#), and it is only at this point, i.e. at the end of the second book of his "Vita et Passio", that he himself came upon the scene in person. He gives the story of the events related in his first two books on hearsay as it was current in the [monastery](#). He seems to have been a man of unlimited credulity even beyond his contemporaries, but probably more deceived, though perhaps by himself, than a deceiver. The ultimate popularity of the cultus which dates from this time seems to have been due to three [persons](#), Bishop Turbe, who succeeded to the [See of Norwich](#) in 1146, Richard de Ferraiis, who became prior in 1150 after the translation to the [chapter-house](#), and Thomas of Monmouth himself, the [saint's sacrist](#). These men were all anxious for reasons of their own to establish the new cultus. In [Lent](#), 1150, Thomas had three visions in which Herbert of Losinga (d. 1119), the founder of the [cathedral](#), appeared and ordered the translation of the body from the [monks'](#) cemetery to the [chapter-house](#). At this point the prior Elias died and was succeeded by Richard de Ferrariis, "a staunch supporter of the [bishop](#) and of Thomas". The body was translated from the [chapter-house](#) to the [cathedral](#) in July 1151, and again moved on 5 April, 1154, to the [apsidal chapel](#) of the Holy Martyrs to the north of the [high altar](#), now known as the Jesus Chapel. The real spread of the cultus dates from the translation to the [cathedral](#) when there was a great burst of enthusiasm accompanied by visions and [miracles](#).

We may now consider the story of the [martyrdom](#) as given by Thomas and the evidence adduced by him. William had been in the habit of frequenting the houses of the [Jews](#) and was forbidden by his friends to have anything to do with them. On the Monday in [Holy Week](#), 1144, he was decoyed away from his mother by the offer of a place in the [archdeacon's](#) kitchen. Next day the messenger and William were seen to enter a [Jew's](#) house and from that time William was never again seen alive. On the Wednesday, after a service in the [synagogue](#), the [Jews](#) lacerated his head with thorns, crucified him, and pierced his side. For this last scene Thomas produces the evidence of a Christian-serving [woman](#), who, with one eye only, caught sight through a crack in a door of a boy fastened to a post, as she was bringing some hot water at her master's order, presumably to cleanse the body. She afterwards found a boy's belt in the room and in after years pointed out to Thomas the marks of the [martyrdom](#) in the room. When, a month after the [martyrdom](#), the body was washed in the [cathedral](#), thorn points were found in the head and traces of [martyrdom](#) in the hands, feet, and sides. The servant's evidence was apparently not produced till Thomas was preparing to write his book. On Thursday the [Jews](#) take counsel about the disposal of the body, a fact which suggests that, if there is any [truth](#) in the story at all, the death of the boy was due to accident, perhaps some rough pranks, as at Inmestar (see below), for if it had been premeditated they would have made all [necessary](#) preparations. On [Good Friday](#) the [Jew](#) Eleazar and another carried the corpse in a sack to Thorpe Wood and were met by a certain Aelward Ded, who discovered the contents of the sack. The [Jews](#) bribed the sheriff (always a *bête noire* to Thomas) to extract an [oath](#) of secrecy from Aelward and it is only five years later, three years after the formidable sheriff's death, when on his own death-bed, that Aelward tells his tale. In addition to all this Thomas tells us that when the [Jews](#) were being charged with the [murder](#) they sought to [bribe](#) William's brother to hush up the charge and that they tried to [bribe](#) Bishop Turbe to drop his counter-charge in the matter of Eleazar's [murder](#). These attempts at bribery, if [true](#), might well be the natural and guiltless acts of frightened men. But the most telling piece of evidence and the most disastrous in its consequences was that of Theobald, a converted [Jew](#) and a [monk](#) probably of [Norwich](#) Priory. This man told Thomas that "in the ancient writings of his Fathers it was written that the [Jews](#), without the shedding of human blood, could neither obtain their freedom, nor could they ever return to their fatherland. Hence it was laid down by them in ancient times that every year they must sacrifice a [Christian](#) in some part of the world" (Vita, II, 2), and that in 1144 it had been the lot of the [Jews](#) of [Norwich](#).

This has been well named "one of the most notable and disastrous lies of history". The story is the foundation of the blood accusation or accusation of ritual [murder](#) against the [Jews](#), which has found currency and gained popular credence from that [date](#) to the present day. In the "Jewish Encyclopedia", III, 266, may be found a list of the cases of this ritual [murder](#), beginning with William of Norwich. There are 5 other cases given for the twelfth century, 15 for the thirteenth, 10 for the fourteenth, 16 for the fifteenth, 13 for the sixteenth, 8 for the seventeenth, 15 for the eighteenth, and 39 for the nineteenth, going right up to the year 1900. There have been more recent cases still in Eastern [Europe](#). Ritual [murder](#) as a Jewish institution has been learnedly and conclusively disproved, e.g. by Strack, op. cit. below, and in the case of St. William the evidence is totally insufficient. It seems, however, quite possible that in some cases at least the deaths of these victims were due to rough usage or even deliberate [murder](#) on the part of [Jews](#) and that some may actually have been slain in *odium fidei*. In this connection we may notice the first case of all, and the only one before St. William, in which [Jews](#) are known to have been accused of murdering a [Christian](#) child. In 415 at Inmestar in [Syria](#) some [Jews](#) in a drunken frolic killed a [Christian](#) child in mockery of the death of Christ ([Socrates](#), VII, xvi). Many [popes](#) have either directly or indirectly condemned the blood accusation, and no [pope](#) has ever sanctioned it (Strack, op. cit., 177 and v).

Sources

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About this page

APA citation. Webster, D.R. (1912). St. William of Norwich. In The Catholic Encyclopedia. New York: Robert Appleton Company. <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15635a.htm>

MLA citation. Webster, Douglas Raymund. "St. William of Norwich." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 15. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. <<https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15635a.htm>>.

Transcription. This article was transcribed for New Advent by Michael T. Barrett. Dedicated to all who are falsely accused.

Ecclesiastical approbation. *Nihil Obstat.* October 1, 1912. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor. *Imprimatur.* +John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York.

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