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Review of Franziska Klein, *Die Domus Conversorum und die
Konvertiten des Königs: Fürsorge, Vorsorge und jüdische Konversion im
mittelalterlichen England*

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FRANZISKA KLEIN, *Die Domus Conversorum und die Konvertiten des Königs: Fürsorge, Vorsorge und jüdische Konversion im mittelalterlichen England*, Europa im Mittelalter, 37 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), xii + 308 pp. ISBN 978 3 110 68714 9. £91.00

In any society in which religion is a differentiating factor, converting from one religion to another has particular significance. For a relatively long time after their conversion (and sometimes permanently), converts see themselves, or others see them, as belonging not only to one community but as embodying much of their old world – the one they have left behind. Their milieu, their religious and social practices, and of course suspicion towards them from the ranks of their new religion mean that converts often occupy a distinct place within society. In 1232, the English king Henry III established a dedicated institution on what was then the edge of the city (today Chancery Lane, at that time *Newestrete*) to accommodate, educate, and provide for Jews from all over the country who had converted to Christianity. It was called the *Domus Conversorum* – the ‘first royal home for converts in the Latin Middle Ages’ (p. 23). There is nothing left of the building itself; the former headquarters of the Public Record Office (now the King’s College Maughan Library) were built on the site in the nineteenth century. It is just about possible, however, to reconstruct its history – albeit with gaps and discontinuities, and often only from later sources.

The history of the *Domus Conversorum* is the subject of this excellent book by Franziska Klein, which came out of the PhD thesis she completed at the University of Duisburg–Essen in 2017. Equipped with a highly reflective methodology, the author has structured her study clearly and justified her approach very well throughout. First, Klein explains her sources. Apart from a more detailed report by Matthew Paris on its founding, there are very few thirteenth-century records pertaining to this establishment. An almost uninterrupted sequence of bills, admissions orders, and receipts from the house itself, however, has survived. These date from 1331, and offer insight into the institution’s occupancy, staffing, and financial situation. This

Translated by Marielle Sutherland (GHIL).

sequence comes to an end in 1609 (p. 25), but it is interesting to note that the Domus Conversorum survived the (by no means complete) expulsion of the Jews in 1290. A large number of its residents found their way to England from different European countries (including Spain, Portugal, the Ottoman Empire, France, and the Holy Roman Empire), although we know very little about their reasons for doing so (p. 229–30). In 1308, forty-one men and ten women were admitted to the institution. In terms of the gender ratio, the house was unequivocally male-dominated in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period (p. 230).

The first section examines the prevalence of, and resources involved in, welfare for converts in England in the thirteenth century, the aim of which was to prevent a decline in their social status (p. 29). This section begins with a detailed inventory of the Domus Conversorum, which is recognized not only as a central institution that cared for converts but also in its capacity as a foundation—in Michael Borgolte’s sense of a ‘total social phenomenon [*totales soziales Phänomen*]¹—and as a self-contained establishment for poor relief (p. 25). According to this inventory, the Domus by no means grew ‘out of nothing’ but followed a tradition on which it left its own mark (p. 27). Klein’s understanding of welfare for converts is decidedly not one of ‘individual action’ but of social practice—endowed with a strong sense of social commitment.

The second section is entitled ‘Alternatives to Royal Welfare’. Extending the perspective she has set out thus far, Klein turns to those converts who did not benefit to the same degree from royal welfare but pursued independent careers—for example, in royal service. Other alternatives to royal welfare were, Klein observes, marriage, the priesthood, or—strikingly, of course—crime (pp. 111–19). Section three is entitled ‘Crossing and Drawing Boundaries: Challenges and Questions around English Policies on Jews and Conversion’. Klein profiles English welfare policy against the background of royal Jewish and conversion policies, raising questions about the status of Jews and converts in the Kingdom of England, and particularly their relationship to the Crown. Klein stresses that baptism was a ‘conflict generator’

¹ Michael Borgolte, *Weltgeschichte als Stiftungsgeschichte: Von 3000 v.u.Z. bis 1500 u.Z.* (Darmstadt, 2017), 9.

(pp. 162, 166), a concept she illustrates in very different ways. As an example of a property dispute deriving from a conversion, she cites a case from the mid thirteenth century: an argument between Josce, who was a Jew from Canterbury, and his daughter. Josce was unenthusiastic about his daughter's conversion plans. When she and her husband announced they were going to convert, he promptly withdrew the dowry of 30 marks he had given her upon their marriage. He then received orders from the Crown to return the money, although it is unclear whether the converts were allowed to keep it or whether it was ultimately seized by the king. As well as such property disputes, Klein describes other obstructions to conversions, kidnappings, and cases of converts threatening Jews.

The fourth section explores planning, control, and the handling of contingencies, investigating the functions and effects of welfare for converts in England. Central to this was education in the Christian faith, which converts received at the *Domus Conversorum* (p. 211). The many measures Klein lists include general facilitation of work and careers, but above all support from the Crown for careers in the Church and for marriages (p. 212). Section five turns to the broader history of the *Domus Conversorum* after the expulsion of the Jews from England. Here, Klein establishes that despite its unquestionable significance, the year 1290 did not represent an immediate turning point in the existence of the *Domus Conversorum*. However, during this year—as documented by fewer payments from the Crown and numerous reports on catastrophic living conditions in the house—the institution found itself at a crisis point, and this lasted until the mid fourteenth century (p. 225). Crucial in the survival and gradual transformation of the institution was not least the fact that it became an important site of the royal chancery. Exactly when the Crown began storing chancery records (especially rolls) in the chapel of the *Domus Conversorum* can, according to Klein, no longer be established, but it had already been reported that Philip Gerardyn ‘venit coram Cancellario . . . in capella domus conversorum London [came to the Chancellery . . . in the chapel of the *Domus Conversorum* in London]’ (p. 234). For the years following, Klein continues, records of legal transactions are legion, and consequently, the chapel of the house acquired the title *capella rotulorum*, or Rolls Chapel. At the end

of the fifteenth century, it even replaced the Tower in its role as 'document repository' (p. 234). Whereas the converts thus featured less and less from the fourteenth century, becoming more an accessory to the house than the centre of its work, the Masters of the Rolls, and with them the royal chancery, increasingly shaped the character of the site (p. 236). Further architectural changes were made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries before, in the nineteenth century, the famous Public Record Office building was erected, the home of the British National Archives until 1974.

At the end of her book, Klein rightly points out that despite all her emphasis on welfare, we must not forget that there were also converts who were neither recipients of aid nor employees of the Crown. Such people, whose existence is confirmed by isolated sources, still represent a blind spot in the study of English conversion policy, for they are mentioned in the sources only in exceptional cases. Further studies on converts in England, Klein argues, are needed to examine this group more closely, coming at it from a local angle instead of from her rather centralized, royal perspective. Our knowledge of converts at the parochial level is still rather hazy in terms of both their everyday integration into the majority society and their contact with Jews; a cursory glance at the Husting Rolls of Common Pleas reveals there is great potential for research in this area. More generally, there is in fact a considerable gap in research on the inclusion of converts in the Christian community beyond the Iberian Peninsula and the Kingdom of Naples, and the few short studies completed thus far have not been able to fill it. Research on converts primarily needs to use regional sources to focus on localizing this phenomenon of poor relief and Jewish policy.

Klein's book contains a wealth of valuable insights, not least the fascinating idea put forward in its conclusion: that it was no accident that the increased separation between Jews and Christians and the stepping up of welfare for converts came at around the same time, but rather that both phenomena had the same root cause. Both were a reaction to a proximity between Christians and Jews that the Christian society increasingly considered problematic. The most powerful stories of personal fates in the book—in my opinion—are those that are ambiguous: descriptions of the majority society's ineradicable

resentment towards newly converted Christians, such as in the case of Henry of Winchester, perhaps the most famous of all thirteenth-century English converts. King Henry III himself was involved in Winchester's conversion; he lifted him from the baptismal font and knighted him. Henry of Winchester played a crucial role in the buying and selling of Jewish bonds. In 1261, he was ordered by the king to store the bonds in six chests. Nonetheless, as Klein convincingly shows, his Jewish origins always went before him, like a stain on his character (p. 182). Following an objection by Thomas de Cantilupes (c.1220–82), the Bishop of Hereford, he was denied a decisive role in investigations into counterfeit coins. Thomas even threatened to resign from the counsel if this 'convert and Jew' were to be given such power over the lives of Christians (p. 182).

It is also worth drawing attention to the book's appendix; in it, there are transcriptions from the National Archives that document the distribution of converts in 1255; reprints of a letter from the convert Alicia of Worcester to Robert Burnell, the chancellor and bishop of Bath and Wells (c.1275–92); a report on the state of the *Domus Conversorum* and the number of residents in 1308; and a petition by the convert Andrew to Edward II (c.1315). An index of names, places, and institutions rounds off the study, which, in its interplay between specific individual cases and general inferences, is key to our understanding of how the English monarchy dealt with England's Jews, even beyond the history of the *Domus Conversorum*. The book is one of the most important new publications on Christian converts in the Middle Ages since Jean-Claude Schmitt's *The Conversion of Herman the Jew*.²

² Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Conversion of Herman the Jew: Autobiography, History, and Fiction in the Twelfth Century*, trans. Alex J. Novikoff (Philadelphia, 2010; French original 2003).

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