Badge of Dishonor: 
Jewish Badges in Medieval Europe

Sara Jablon, Iowa State University, USA

As concluded by many fashion scholars, for clothing to be an effective tool of nonverbal communication, both wearers and observers must share a common interpretation of the signifier’s significance.¹ The Jewish badge in medieval Europe was a fashion item with a very clear and specific meaning, one that was explicitly defined. In the Middle Ages, Jews lived in most parts of Europe, though never with full or equal rights. They were a permanent underclass, considered evil and enemies of the Christian faith.² In 1215, Pope Innocent III convened the Fourth Lateran Council, and among the canons meant to reform Catholic life were canons that applied specifically to those of the Jewish faith. They were all burdensome, but Canon 68 was arguably the worst, requiring that Jews “of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other peoples through the character of their dress.”³ Though the exact aspect of identifying dress was not stipulated, eventually virtually every country under papal authority demanded that Jews wear a textile badge. There were many shapes and colors, but the most common badge was a yellow circle, generally placed on the left breast (figure 1). The Jewish badge, a symbol recognized throughout Europe, served to communicate the lesser status of the wearer to all observers, and was required for nearly five centuries.

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The badge, a symbol meant to explicitly and legally exclude and humiliate European Jews, impacted nearly every aspect of Jewish life, through financial demands made of Jews by the authorities, and through the perpetual threat of violence. Using histories of the Jewish people in Europe, the writings of Catholic clerics of the period, and depictions of the badges in historical artwork, this study sought to document the rationale behind the anti-Semitic badge laws, their practical implementation, and their repercussions, including the economic benefits authorities gained through the enforcement of the badge laws and the responses of those authorities when the badges led to violence. Historical analysis concluded that discriminatory badge laws were the visual representation of the systemic assault on Jews and Judaism, culminating in ritualized violence, forced conversions, and the eventual expulsion of entire Jewish communities from their countries of residence. Additionally, comparisons were drawn between the discriminatory laws of Medieval Europe and those of Nazi-occupied Europe, primarily because the writers of the latter used the former as templates. This presentation will explore fashion as a form of nonverbal communication by examining the use of Jewish badges as a tool of oppression.