The Jews of Medieval Ashkenaz: Topographies of Memory*

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Speaking of «topographies of memory» in Medieval Ashkenaz will require a very short historical introduction (1). Following that, this article will present some highlights of the cultural heritage of Medieval Ashkenaz in terms of synagogues, mikvaot, and cemeteries (2). The cemeteries and funerary inscriptions will then be our guides through the fields of memory (3). From there we will turn to inscriptions for founders and benefactors of the medieval communities, with a special emphasis on the history of the Jews in Mainz and Worms (4), before we close with a short reflections on the current politics of memory (5).

To begin with, a few words on what I mean by «topographies of memory»: A topography is more than a place, rather it is a set of relations in space. Similarly, I understand memory to mean more than «remembrance». We know many places of remembrance, for example, relating to the great disasters in twentieth-century history – military cemeteries and memorials to the victims of war and oppression, and so on. «Memory» is a broader concept – we all remember constantly, but we only convene in remembrance on particular occasions. While remembrance is often a collective affair and tends to take on a formal, sometimes ritualized character, memory can be private, intimate, and informal. I take memory to be a basic dimension of human life, a constant activity bridging the present with the past. It relates to time in

* This article largely retains the features of the oral presentation, and the footnotes were kept to a minimum. For reasons of copyright and of space, the number of images had to be reduced, too. I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for their kind invitation to Estella. I had last visited Professors Juan Carrasco and Eloísa Ramírez at the Universidad Pública de Navarra in 2001, and I am very pleased that our scientific exchange has been revived now. Research for this article was supported by a grant from the State of Rheinland-Pfalz towards the project «Erinnerungsort SchUM», conducted at the Arye Maimon Institute for Jewish History, Trier University. I am grateful for many valuable references and suggestions by PD Dr Lucia Raspe, Dr David Schnur, Dr Marzena Kessler, and Stefanie Fuchs M.A.
a general way and therefore includes reflecting the future. If remembrance is an obligation, memory is a human necessity. Memory, of course, is also a collective affair of great importance for the development of communities and in their identity politics and, indeed, their continuation.

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Jewish settlement in the land of Ashkenaz started in earnest in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The earliest Jewish settlements and communities were founded in the episcopal centres. The civitates on the Rhine and the Danube, as well as Prague on the Vlatva river, were to become the most important centres of Jewish life in the Ashkenazi sphere of settlement north of the Alps. Despite the severe persecution at the time of the First Crusade in 1096, followed by other, local pogroms in the twelfth-century, the Jewish settlement network grew in the twelfth to early-fourteenth centuries, and Jewish communities were established in other types of towns as well – in particular, those under the rule of the German Kings.

By the first half of the fourteenth century the settlement network of Ashkenazi Jewish communities had reached its peak, at least in the Western parts of the Empire. By this time, Jewish settlements had spread even to small towns and villages, where they often consisted of perhaps no more than one or two Jewish households. The older communities still played the main role. However, from the last third of the thirteenth century the anti-Jewish violence increased greatly, reaching a peak in the years between 1336 and of

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1348-50. Almost all the Jewish communities of Western Ashkenaz fell victim to the pogroms at the time of the Black Death, when Jews were accused of spreading the plague by poisoning the wells. The number of Jewish settlements was greatly reduced, and it took decades for the network to be reconstructed. Again, the old communities were usually revived first, even if the legal and social conditions for the Jews had often changed for the worse.

In the fifteenth century, local and regional expulsions again reduced the numbers of Jewish settlements drastically. Other than in Spain, in England or in France, however, there was never a universal expulsion decree against all the Jews in Germany. By c.1520, only few of the urban communities had survived the expulsions, most notably Worms, Frankfurt, and Prague. At the same time, there emerged certain regional concentrations of settlements in small towns and villages, especially in areas that had strong traditional ties to the German Kings – Alsace on the Upper Rhine, the Wetterau Region north of Frankfurt, and Swabia east of Augsburg, where the Habsburg royal family had old rights. Another interesting case is Franconia, where the pattern of

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lordship was particularly fragmented, with many lesser rulers exerting rights over small Jewish settlements. What we see are the beginnings of rural Jewry in Germany, which was to play a great role in the early modern period.

2. THE JEWISH HERITAGE OF MEDIEVAL GERMANY

In some places we still find remains today of the medieval Jewish community buildings and cemeteries. Considering the history of anti-Jewish persecution and expulsions as well as the losses due to war and thoughtless demolition, however, there are not many. Most of the findings dating before c. 1520 were uncovered in the places with the old, traditional communities, that is, in the episcopal cities and royal towns, while the early modern heritage is scattered much more widely. The quality of the evidence ranges all the way from traces in the topography through archaeological finds to a small number of well-preserved buildings.

In the city of Trier, for example, the medieval Jewish quarter of the eleventh to fourteenth centuries is still visible in the topography today. However, much has been lost; in particular, the synagogue is totally built over. A medieval miqweh (ritual bath) is probably hidden underground in the house on the corner of the street. As it is in private property, there is currently no way of launching a proper investigation, not to speak of making it accessible to the public.

In Miltenberg, a small town on the Main river, the thirteenth-century synagogue was sold to a Christian burgher at the end of the middle ages. In the nineteenth century it came into the hands of a brewery and was since

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12 What we know comes from written documents, which are the basis for Professor Haverkamp’s reconstruction of the Jewish quarter. Cfr. A. Haverkamp, «Die Juden im mittelalterlichen Trier», *Kurtrierisches Jahrbuch*, 19, 1979, pp. 5-57.
used for storage purposes. Extra floors were inserted. Some years ago the brewery closed, and it now seems possible that the medieval synagogue, with its vaulted ceiling, will become accessible to the public. The crown of the Torah ark is fortunately preserved in a local museum. By contrast, the late-medieval synagogue complex of Sopron (Ödenburg) in Hungary is much better preserved. The fourteenth-century synagogue with its annex for women survives in its fifteenth-century shape, and was formerly surrounded by other community facilities (a miqweh and a hospice). What is more, a private synagogue, probably dating back to between 1350 and 1370, is situated right across from the community shul.

In some cases we have underground archaeological evidence to go by. This is the case in Regensburg on the Danube river, a city which was home to one of the most important medieval communities in Ashkenaz, with an unbroken history from the eleventh century down to 1519. That year, the Jews were violently expelled and the Jewish quarter was completely destroyed. It was then used as a market square, on which a new parish church was built. Twenty years ago, excavations revealed the spot of the medieval synagogue and the basements of houses. The foundations of the late-Romanesque and early Gothic synagogue buildings were discovered on the south-western corner of the Jewish quarter. Today there is an underground exhibition, and the layout of the synagogue is represented on the square above by a monument. The city of Vienna, where the Jewish community was destroyed by a dreadful government-led persecution in 1420, similarly

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15 Paulus, *Architektur der Synagoge...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-149.
preserves the foundations of the medieval synagogue under ground. They are today at the focus of the Judenplatz museum\textsuperscript{19}.

In terms of archaeological remains, the former Jewish quarter in the city of Cologne certainly offers the fullest and most comprehensive evidence of Jewish life in medieval Germany. A first excavation campaign was conducted in the 1950s by Otto Doppelfeld; a second, very thorough campaign was begun in 2006 and is still going on\textsuperscript{20}. The Jewish houses and community buildings date back to the eleventh or twelfth century\textsuperscript{21}; the synagogue was confiscated after the expulsion of 1424 and turned into a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Sadly, that chapel has also been demolished in the early twentieth century\textsuperscript{22}.

The Cologne excavations offer a window into the Roman past as well as into the medieval history of the Jews in the Rhineland. They will be housed in the museum MiQua, set to open in 2021. The archaeological findings can be matched with an exceptional documentary evidence. For many of the houses, we can identify the owners by name, and the surroundings of the synagogue compound, right across from the Christian citizens’ town hall, are well-known\textsuperscript{23}. The recent excavation campaign was accompanied by a very meticulous documentation of all the small finds that were made. These include numerous fragments that must come from the thirteenth-century bima or almemor, some of them representing birds or other creatures\textsuperscript{24}.

As early as the twelfth century, we hear of a clash between the Jewish community leaders of Cologne and Rabbi Eliezer of Metz, who lived in Mainz, over the depiction of animals and dragons in the stained-glass window of the synagogue\textsuperscript{25}. It seems that the Jews of Cologne continued to


\textsuperscript{21} Cfr. infra, n. 29.

\textsuperscript{22} Schütte and Gechter (eds.), Von der Ausgrabung..., op. cit., pp. 182-191.


\textsuperscript{24} Schütte and Gechter (eds.), Von der Ausgrabung..., op. cit., pp. 136-142.

\textsuperscript{25} E. Shoham-Steiner, «The Clash over Synagogue Decorations in Medieval Cologne», Jewish History, 30, 2016, pp. 129-164, has dated this clash to the time before 1096.
show a lenient attitude towards the artistic representation of living creatures in their synagogue. Current attempts at computer-aided reconstruction envisage the medieval *bima* as a two-storey structure\(^{26}\). With its floral designs, it was perhaps meant to represent trees. After all, the biblical precedent – the scene when Ezra the Scribe read out the Torah to the people who had returned from exile (Neh 8:4) – speaks of a *bima shel ‘ez*, a pulpit made of wood. This terminology also appears in some medieval sources\(^{27}\).

In the debris from the persecution of the Black Death, covered by a new synagogue floor after 1372, numerous small tile slates were found. Most of them had turned red under the influence of the fire that destroyed the synagogue in August 1349. Thanks to the excavators’ attention to every detail, it was discovered that some slates contained writing in Hebrew script, with texts ranging from scribblings and lists of names to fragments of religious and secular texts. Among them is a text in Yiddish, a fragment of a courtly verse epic, recently edited by Erika Timm\(^{28}\).

Next to the remains of the synagogue foundations, Cologne features an impressive *miqweh* of the eleventh or twelfth century\(^{29}\). It is the earliest example of a *miqweh* of this type, built like a tower into the ground with a spiral staircase around the inner walls leading down to the water. The largest *miqweh* constructed in this fashion, probably the largest in Europe, more than 26 m deep, is preserved in Friedberg. The exceptionally well-preserved state of this thirteenth-century *miqweh* is due to the fact that Friedberg, a royal town in the Wetterau region mentioned before, had a Jewish community in the early modern period\(^{30}\).

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\(^{26}\) According to the communication by K. Kliemann, M. Wiehen and M. Grellert at the workshop *Inter Judeos*, Trier, 18/19 January 2018. For the previous reconstruction by S. Schütte, *cfr. supra*, n. 25.

\(^{27}\) For Mainz (1188 CE), *cfr*. A. Neubauer and M. Stern (eds.), *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während der Kreuzzüge*, Berlin, Simion, 1892 (Quellen zur Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland, 2), p. 77: *migdal ‘ez* («a wooden platform»). This is not to say that the reading platform was indeed made of wood, even though this is possible.


Sometimes the Jewish heritage went unnoticed for a long time, only to be rediscovered recently. In Erfurt the site of the old medieval synagogue had been known only to a few specialists before 1989, the year of the German reunification. During the extensive restoration campaign in the old town centre, the synagogue was identified and fortunately bought by the city. The building had been in Christian hands ever since 1349, when the Jews of Erfurt were murdered and their properties confiscated. It mainly dates back to the thirteenth century, with some components perhaps even going back to the eleventh. Earlier owners had built in extra floors so that we now have a three-storey building. Part of the building has served as a dancing hall in the modern period, as can still be seen on the top floor. Today it serves as a Jewish museum.

The rediscovery of the *miqweh* in Erfurt is even more recent. It is situated next to the famous Merchants’ Bridge, right on the bank of the Gera river (but fed by ground water, not river water). Due to its position it was not necessary to dig so deep as in Cologne or Friedberg. Nevertheless the *miqweh*, which dates back to the thirteenth century, is quite a monument.

The cultural heritage of the Erfurt community also includes a large treasure discovered in the 1990s under one of the formerly Jewish houses. Not only do we know that the house was once owned by a Jew; some pieces in the hoard itself testify to their former Jewish owners. The most impressive of these is a golden wedding ring, one of only few rings of this kind that have come down to us from the medieval period. Moreover, Erfurt was the home of a number of magnificent Hebrew manuscripts, all dating from the thirteenth-to-fourteenth century. It is likely that they were confiscated by the city council in 1349. Later they were passed on to the Protestant Ministry of Erfurt, from where they were handed over to the State Library in Berlin. The Bible codices are famous for their lavish micrographic masora as well as for

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33 S. Ostritz (ed.), *Der Schatzfund*, 3 vols., Weimar, Thüringisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, 2010-2011 (Die mittelalterliche jüdische Kultur in Erfurt, 1-3).
their sheer size: Erfurt 1 (= Berlin, SBPK, Or. fol. 1210-1211) consists of two volumes, both weighing almost fifty kilograms.

Finally, let us turn to the three venerable communities of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz on the Rhine, so well known for their rabbinic scholarship in the early centuries of Jewish life in Ashkenaz and as centres of gravitation in the settlement network of Jews in the Rhineland and beyond. From their Hebrew initials they are known as the *ShUM* communities. Delegates from the three communities are known to have held regular meetings in the late-twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Together they passed a set of community statutes known as the *Taqqanot ShUM*.

The synagog complex in the «Jews’ Court» (Judenhof) of Speyer is in ruin, but still in good shape. The men’s synagogue dates back to the twelfth century; its inauguration in the September 1104 is famously described in a contemporary Jewish chronicle. Next to it on the southern side is the women’s synagogue of the thirteenth-century, built in the newest fashion in brick. It is the largest women’s *shul* known from the middle ages. In Worms,

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38 E. Haverkamp (ed.), *Hebräische Berichte..., op. cit.*, pp. 490-493.

too, the Old Synagogue is surrounded by a number of annex buildings, including the women’s synagogue of 1212/13 CE, a miqveh from 1185/86, and a yeshiva building of 1624.

3. JEWISH CEMETERIES

Jewish cemeteries, too, make up a substantial part of the Jewish heritage in Germany. Their chances of survival were generally even more remote than those of synagogues and other buildings. Often they were vandalized or destroyed, desecrated, built over or excavated in post-medieval times. By contrast, a Jewish cemetery is meant to last forever, according to Jewish religious law (halakha). A grave is the inalienable property of the dead person, whose rest should not be disturbed until the end of this world. Hence one Hebrew term for the Jewish graveyard is Beit ‘Olam, the «House of Eternity». It is for this reasons that acquiring the grounds for a cemetery as well as its maintenance were no easy matter, and only the early, powerful communities could afford to do so. Another term is Beit ha-Ḥayyim, «The House of Life», indicating that indeed in the Jewish worldview, the dead are by no means dead, they still belong to the community. In the Ashkenazi world of Jewish memory the cemetery is of prime significance.

The state of preservation of medieval Jewish cemeteries north of the Alps until around 1300 is indicated on map 1. In many cases we have no more than a few pieces of written documentation, relating to the coemiterium iudeorum, the Juden kirchoff or the like (a). Then there are those cases in which we have surviving headstones or epitaphs, mostly preserved in the local museums (b). Thirdly, the sites of some medieval Jewish cemeteries have been confirmed by archaeological research (and, more often than not, destroyed in the process) (c). This is notably true, for example, Château-roux (France) and York (England), but also for the first Jewish cemetery of Prague, which was once situated in the Nové Město (the «new» part of the

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medieval town)\(^\text{42}\). The famous cemetery we can see in Prague today only dates from the fifteenth century. This leaves us with only a handful of early cemetery grounds that are still more or less preserved today (d).

Of the cases in Ashkenaz where only gravestones (ma'aevoth) are preserved, the most spectacular find was made in Würzburg in 1987, when a store for electrical appliances was torn down. The Landelektra store, as it turned out, was in fact part of the late-medieval Dominican nunnery of Saint Marcus, largely built with gravestones from the Jewish cemetery. It is still not quite clear whether the stones were taken from there after the pogrom of 1349 or after the graveyard was confiscated by Prince-Bishop Julius Echter

in 1575. At any rate, more than 1,400 stones and fragments were recovered from the debris. The recent catalogue reveals that the community of Würzburg in the twelfth-to-fourteenth century was more important than was once believed.43

Using Jewish gravestones for building purposes was a widespread practice, and often for purely pragmatic reasons. The stones came in regular, handy slabs and could be obtained from places near the cities.44 Thus, the graveyard of the important community of Cologne was plundered by the Archbishop, that is, the protector of the Jews in the archbishopric of Cologne himself, for building purposes in the castles of Lechenich and of Hülchrath. As for the terrain of the cemetery itself, it was long remembered on the old maps. In 1922, excavations were undertaken here in connection with railway works. Indeed, graves were found. During the Nazi era a large market hall was erected on this spot.45

In Erfurt the medieval Jewish cemetery was situated just between the inner walls of the city and a second ring of walls. After the forced emigration of the Jews in 1454, the terrain was confiscated by the city council, who began erecting a huge granary on the spot, finished by the end of the fifteenth century. Large numbers of Jewish gravestones were «recycled», as it were, on the spot and used for building purposes. Laying the foundations probably also destroyed the graves underneath. More than 200 stones have already been identified since the eighteenth century, even though not all of them are still extant today.46

In Frankfurt the Jewish cemetery in Battonnstraße dates from the thirteenth century and was in use for over 550 years. It is possible that between 15,000 and 20,000 souls rest on these grounds. No fewer than 6,000 epitaphs from between 1260 and the nineteenth century were documented by Markus Horovitz in 1901. However, the Nazis effectively tried to destroy this heritage. They even installed a stonemill here in 1941 or 1942, to grind down the material for use in construction works. They were only stopped...
by the Allied bombing raids in 1943. Today, about 2,300 headstones and 3,300 fragments are still preserved, including 350 not mentioned by Horovitz. Since the deceased of the Jewish community were also inscribed in the memorial book of the seventeenth-to-twentieth century, we know a lot about the practices of remembrance in this important community. Today a wall with the names of the former Frankfurt Jews who fell victims to Nazi persecutions adds to the memory of the earlier generations.

Turning finally to the ShUM communities, I will start with Shin for Shpīra, that is, Jewish Speyer. Other than in Worms and Mainz, the terrain of the medieval Jewish cemetery, first named in a famous charter by Bishop Rüdiger from 1084, has not survived. According to chronicle reports, Jewish headstones were already taken away from the cemetery after the Black Death persecution, and used for building the town walls. After the second Jewish community had left sometime in the fifteenth century, the council rented out the terrain to Christian inhabitants of the city, and later gave some to a pauper hospital and the Protestant community. The handful of Jews who now lived in Speyer and those of the surrounding countryside were left with only a very small strip of land, of what once must have been a sizeable cemetery.

Mainz differs from Speyer and Worms in that none of the Jewish community buildings in the town centre have come down to us, due to the expulsions of the fifteenth century, the translocation of the new community into a Ghetto in the seventeenth, and above all through wars and modern re-developments between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. However, it is not the same with the Jewish cemetery on the so-called «Jewish sands» northwest of the city at Mombacher Straße, not far from the main station. Notwithstanding some sales of land and some buildings along the borders, the Judensand in Mainz is still the largest Jewish cemetery surviving from the middle ages in Europe. Its north-eastern, lower part is today covered by hundreds of tombstones from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries.

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50 B. A. Vest, Der alte jüdische Friedhof in Mainz, Mainz, VEST, 2000, extended edn.
The southern corner was for a long time in non-Jewish hands. In the 1950s a college for agricultural studies was erected here. Both during its construction and when it was demolished in 2007, builders found medieval graves in situ, including a grave monument of the early twelfth century. Following protests from the Jewish community, the pit was quickly covered again, with little archaeological documentation. At any rate, we now know for sure that this was an ancient part of the medieval Jewish cemetery.

The Jewish tradition of remembering the dead by reading out their names in the synagogue from the so-called Memorbuch goes right back to the early centuries of Jewish life in Ashkeanz, even though the oldest extant manuscript of a Memorbuch was begun only in 1293 in Nuremberg. The Memorbücher are best known for their martyrologies, as they list the victims of the many pogroms ever since the First Crusade. However, they also remember the names of the benefactors, teachers, and founders of the communities.

Thus, the opening passage of the Nuremberg Memorbuch, which is also preserved in many other books of this kind, mentions the early sages of Mainz as well as «Mar Shlomo and his wife Rahel, who averted evil decrees and exterted themselves on behalf of the communities». In the Nuremberg Memorbuch, which was in the possession of the Mainz community in the early modern period, they are also praised for having bought a plot of land for the cemetery in Mainz. This memorial tradition relating to the very beginnings of Judaism in Ashkenaz was copied into many other Memorbücher kept in other communities.

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52 This codex is today in private possession.


The upper western part of the Jewisch cemetery in Mainz contains a particularly interesting testimony to the tradition of memorial culture of the Jews in Mainz. Following the expulsion of 1438, the city council had confiscated the cemetery and used its headstones for building a major bulwark or defense along the Rhine river. Some of these stones – more than a hundred, to be sure, but the precise number is hard to verify – were recovered since the late-nineteenth century during construction work in this area\(^55\). The Jewish community, represented above all by Rabbi Siegmund Salfeld and by Sali Levi, decided to place these spolia on the grounds of their former cemetery. This «Denkmalfriedhof» (cemetery memorial) was inaugurated in 1926. It was meant as a visible statement that the Jews of Mainz had been at home here for a thousand years\(^56\).

The stones of the cemetery memorial are not, of course, on their right spot, they do not stand on the graves of those whom they mention. In some cases a headstone was lost, or perhaps none was ever set. Thus the Jewish memorial cemetery of Mainz also features two stones with a different formula and without a date, expressly set «in memory». It is no coincidence that they refer to great sages of the past, that is, to Gershom ben Yehuda, known as the «Light of the Exile» (Meʾor ha-Gola), who died around 1028 CE, and to his contemporary, the great poet Meshullam ben Qalonymos. Another great sage of Early Ashkenaz was R. Yaʿacov ben Yaqar, one of the teachers of Rashi (R. Shlomo ben Yiẓḥaq), the even more famous commentator of the Bible and Talmud who came from Troyes in Champagne but studied in the yeshivot of Worms and Mainz. Some of the stones were later brought to the local museum for reasons of conservation. Among them is the earliest epitaph known from north of the Alps. It dates from the year 1049 CE\(^57\).


\(^57\) Vest, Friedhof..., op. cit., p. 21 (Gershom b. Yehuda); p. 16 (Meshullam b. Qalonymos); Hüttenmeister et al. (eds.), «Jüdischer Friedhof Mainz...», op. cit., n° mz1-2204 (Yaʿacov b. Yaqar, d. 1063/64 CE); n° mz1-2302 (Yehuda b. Shneʿur, d. 1049 CE).
Similar features can be observed on the cemetery of nearby Worms, known as a «lieu de mémoire» ever since the fifteenth century. This cemetery is unique in that it has preserved the early burial culture of medieval Ashkenaz in situ for almost one thousand years. More than 800 headstones of the period until 1520 are preserved on its original site, including 93 from before 120058. Built into the eastern part of the wall that surrounds it, we find not one but two memorial stones for the «Twelve Parnassim». According to one later narrative, these were the twelve community leaders who were killed during the persecution of the First Crusade. According to another story, however, the twelve parnassim were killed at the time of the Black Death, not without having stood a fight and attacked the Christian councilmen. Both narratives are quite legendary, and if we follow Lucia Raspe’s approach, it is more likely that they took their occasion from the existence of these memorial stones and tried to explain what they meant – and not the other way round. Memory is a flexible matter59.

As I mentioned above, the Jewish cemeteries served not only the local population but the Jews of a whole region. These «districts» can be reconstructed on the basis of the Hebrew martyrologies contained in the Memorbücher of Nuremberg and Deutz60. They are sometimes very extensive, so that some of the dead Jews must have been carried over very long distances. We know of this fact through various sources, including «tolls» levied on Jewish burials61.


61 A systematic study is lacking. For late-medieval Worms, see, for example, J. F. Battenberg, Quellen zur Geschichte der Juden im Hessischen Staatsarchiv Darmstadt 1080-1650, Wiesbaden, Kommission für die Geschichte der Juden in Hessen, 1995 (Quellen zur Geschichte der Juden in hessischen Archiven, 2), pp. 213, 215, 221, 228, 230, 234, 237-38, 241, 244, 255, 256, 265, 268, 275, 276, 297. In 1403 the council of Worms sought to limit Jewish burials from outside but reached an agreement with the Jewish community for three years; cfr. Ziwes, Studien..., op. cit., p. 81. It seems that no lasting prohibition against burials from outside was put in effect.
Numerous medieval epitaphs on the Jewish cemetery of Worms bear «headlines», often in a different or at least slightly larger script than the inscription proper, with just the name and an indication of origin. Thus, an epitaph of 11th of May 1296, set for Mrs Yenta, daughter of Rabbi Moses of Oppenheim, bears the headline, «Mrs Yenta from Oppenheim». Similar headlines with references to the origin of the deceased name the towns and cities of Ansbach, Basel, Esslingen, Göttingen, Heidelberg, Heppenheim, Kaiserslautern, Meiningen, Neuburg on the Rhine, Turckheim in Alsace, and Wimpfen. Not all these placenames refer to localities within the cemetery district of Worms; some of the deceased indeed come from much farther away. The headlines probably just served to guide the visitor on the graveyard. In fact, visiting the graves of the ancestors and those of the righteous was common religious practice. Some inscriptions even enter into dialogue with the visitor: More than once, it reads «whoever passes by, shall say the blessing, “His (or her) soul may be bound up in the bundle of Life”».

The mental map of late-medieval Ashkenazi Jewish memories was in no small measure structured by the geography of Jewish cemeteries. Thus, in a manuscript preserved in Paris, a page originally left empty on the back of folio 3, was used by an unknown scribe of the fifteenth century for entering the names of his (or perhaps, her) parents and ancestors, as well as the places they were buried:

The family of my mother. / My mother Rivqa, may her memory be for a blessing, was buried in Andernach. / Her father, Shlomo, may his memory be for a blessing, was buried in Frankfurt. / The father of Shlomo, Mr Meʾir, was buried in Regensburg. / The mother of my grandfather Shlo-
mo, ʿElin, was murdered together with two of her daughters in the *gezera* of 109 of the account (="in the persecution of 1349 CE"). / The mother of my mother, Esther, was buried in Mainz. / The father of Esther of blessed memory, Eisiq of Bensheim, was burnt together with the other saints (= martyrs) of Bensheim in the *gezera* of 109, together with three sons. / The mother of Esther, of blessed memory, was named Mrs Zippora; she was buried in Mainz. My grandmother Esther had fifteen siblings.

The family of my father: My father Yaʿakov, may his memory be for a blessing, was buried in Worms. My father’s father, Shmuʿel, of blessed memory, was killed and buried in Basel. / My father’s mother, Ḥanna, was buried in Mainz. The mother of my grandmother, Freude, was buried in Worms. The mother of my grandfather Shmuel was called Mrs Ḥanna 65.

In this short list, nine times a place is mentioned, eight times as a place of burial. (The one exception, Bensheim, is explained: The victims of 1349 were burnt at the stake, not buried.) Three of the anonymous writer’s ancestors were buried in Mainz, two in Worms, and one each in Andernach, Basel, Frankfurt, and Regensburg. Such notes on the spare pages of privately-owned manuscripts are no exception. Sometimes we find whole epitaphs being copied into them 66.

In some cases the epitaphs themselves tell a story that was remembered in the local community. One of the most well-known examples relates to the two famous epitaphs in Worms, one for Rabbi Meʾir of Rothenburg, without doubt the most eminent halakhic authority of his time, and the other, for Alexander Wimpfen. When Rabbi Meʾir in 1286 attempted to leave the German kingdom together with a large group of other Jews from the region he was stopped and taken prisoner. He died in royal prison in 1293. Not until 1307 was it possible to ransom his remains for burial. This was the work of Alexander ben Shlomo Wimpfen, who in return for his charitable deed received the honour of being buried at Rabbi Meʾir’s side 67.

65 Ms. Paris, BNF, heb. 380, fol. 3v. I would like to express my sincere thanks to Dr Andreas Lehnertz (Trier/Jerusalem) for deciphering these notes for me.


67 Sommer and Brocke (eds.), «Jüdischer Friedhof Worms...», *op. cit.*, n.° wrm-794 (R. Meʾir b. Barukh of Rothenburg, buried 7 February 1307), n.° wrm-793 (Alexander Wimpfen, buried 7 September 1307). Hagiographical narratives concerning the two soon developed. They are reflected, for example, in tale no. 14 of the *Mayse Nissim*. For critical looks on aspects of the
Other epitaphs of interest relate to the local community and its institutions, as in the stone set for Mrs Yokheved im 1287: «Charity and deeds of compassion are in mourning» since Mrs Yokheved was taken away, the daughter of the community leader, Yeḥiʾel ben Efrayim. The latter — that is, Yokheved’s father — is praised for his exceptional merits: He had built synagogues and cemeteries in various communities, and had the cemetery «here in Worms» surrounded by a high wall. The epitaph relates to events we also know from other sources: Indeed from the mid-thirteenth century the Jewish cemetery in Worms was extended and also surrounded with a wall.

The generosity of the community leaders is mentioned time and again on the epitaphs. Their commitment towards the common good was what their family members were able to put up against the dominant prestige of the rabbinic scholars. On a stone of 1365, today kept in a museum in Speyer, one Barukh ben Eli’ezer is praised for the support he gave to the community in hard times: «In times of wrath he was successful in his efforts, and by him the Eternal One, blessed be He, gave rescue to His people who had escaped the sword, and he gave sustenance and grain to those in need, and his house was as open as the desert...»

Some epitaphs relate to community buildings in the Jewish quarter. Thus, Michael Brocke has first noted that in fact the tombstone of the parnas (community leader) R. Me’ir ben Yo’el ha-Kohen of 1224 on the cemetery in Worms is shaped in a peculiar way, reminding precisely of the entrance to the women’s synagogue. For in fact R. Me’ir had sponsored the building of the women’s shul together with his wife Yehudith. Even without


Sommer and Brocke (eds.), «Jüdischer Friedhof Worms...», op. cit., n." wrm-801. For the history of the cemetery around this time, see the Annales Wurmantienses, ad a. 1258 and 1278, in H. Boos (ed.), Monumenta Wurmantiensia: Annalen und Chroniken, Berlin, Weidmann, 1893 (Quellen zur Geschichte der Stadt Worms, 3), pp. 155, 158, 162, as well as a charter of 1269, published in idem (ed.), Urkundenbuch der Stadt Worms, vol. 1, 627-1300, Berlin, Weidmann 1886 (Quellen zur Geschichte der Stadt Worms, 1), n." 349, pp. 227-228. Baumgarten, «Reflections...», op. cit., p.95, gives a different English translation, based on the early-twentieth-century reading of the epitaph by M. Grünwald (cfr. ibid., p. 96, n. 6). According to Grünwald’s version, it was Yokheved herself who financed the community institutions.

mentioning this deed explicitly, the shape of the epitaph quite effectively pointed from the cemetery outside the city walls towards the synagogue compound within the city.\textsuperscript{70}

Other epitaphs in Worms relate to what was probably the most important function inside the synagogue, that of the cantor or \textit{ḥazzan}, who in Worms was also simply called \textit{meshorer} («singer») or, more lavishly, \textit{shaliah zibbur} (the «envoy of the congregation»). Even women were praised for fulfilling this duty in the women’s section of the synagogue. Two tombstones at least from the thirteenth century refer to women cantors – one was set up for Mrs Malka, daughter of R. Ḥalafta (d. 1228), the other, for Mrs Orgiya, the daughter of Avraham (1275). Orgiyas father had already been a «leader of the singers» in the synagogue, and she herself is here praised for her chanting with a beautiful voice. Without doubt she was the women’s prayer leader in the \textit{weibershul}.\textsuperscript{71}

\section*{4. INSCRIPTIONS FOR FOUNDERS AND BENEFACTORS}

The cantors or prayer leaders have led us back to the synagogue buildings. Here, too, the ShUM communities offer a large variety of inscriptions. Inscriptions for founders and benefactors testify to the donors’ identification with their community. At the same time, they testify to the community’s commitment to the memory of its benefactors.

The «Jews’ Court» of Speyer has preserved an almost complete ensemble of community buildings from the high medieval period. The inauguration of the synagogue in the center of Speyer, no more than a hundred metres from the famous cathedral of the Salian emperors, is uniquely documented in a medieval Hebrew chronicle. This synagogue was destroyed by fire in a pogrom in 1196, as another passage in one of the few Jewish chronicles of medieval Ashkenaz tells us. Indeed, the archaeologist Pia Heberer has identified the trace of this fire in the walls of the surviving synagogue.\textsuperscript{72} Around 1200 the synagogue was renewed and slightly extended on the western side. The western wall was recovered only recently and closely examined. This

\textsuperscript{70} Sommer and Brocke (eds.), «Jüdischer Friedhof Worms...», \textit{op. cit.}, n.\textsuperscript{o} wrm-243; Brocke, «Der jüdische Friedhof...», \textit{op. cit.}, p. 130.

\textsuperscript{71} Sommer and Brocke (eds.), «Jüdischer Friedhof Worms...», \textit{op. cit.}, n.\textsuperscript{o} wrm-264 (1228), n.\textsuperscript{o} wrm-903 (1275); Brocke, «Der jüdische Friedhof...», \textit{op. cit.}, p. 134.

\textsuperscript{72} Efrayim b. Yaʿaacov of Bonn, in Neubauer and Stern (eds.), \textit{Hebräische Berichte...}, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 74-75 (Hebrew), 211-12 (German translation); P. Heberer, «“war geziert...”»
, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 44.
brought to light a slab which certainly once had something inscribed on it. It was later painted over and the text is lost today\textsuperscript{73}.

Of the Mainz community buildings, three inscriptions at least are preserved. An epitaph dated 15 June 1281 on the memorial cemetery in Mainz refers to Rabbi Meʾir ben Avraham, who was killed for the sake of the «unity of the divine name», on the day when «the synagogue was burned and the Torah books were torn apart»\textsuperscript{74}. Possibly from the time after this pogrom, or perhaps from the period following another persecution (19 April 1283)\textsuperscript{75}, we have two of the three inscriptions that probably once belonged to the synagogue in Mainz.

The first is devoted to the legacy of David ben Avraham, who gave eight marks of silver for construction works, or more precisely, for the repair of the roofs and for the doors of the men’s and the women’s synagogues. He and his wife, Bona, daughter of Rabbi Yosef. The inscription was rediscovered in 1907\textsuperscript{76}. The other inscription is more damaged and hard to interpret. A certain Yitzḥaq ben Avraham had, «in his piety and grief», paid three marks of silver for a beautiful pavement together with his wife Sarah. Also the late Avraham ben Yitzḥaq (perhaps the father of the former) had given three marks, and Rabbi Yosef gave one mark. This was apparently done in favour of those who lived «in the plantations», that is, those members of the Jewish community of Mainz who lived outside the city\textsuperscript{77}.

The largest corpus of medieval and early modern Hebrew building inscriptions is preserved in and around the synagogue of Worms. They were read

\textsuperscript{74} Hüttenmeister et al. (eds.), «Jüdischer Friedhof Mainz...», \textit{op. cit.}, n.° mz1-2203.
\textsuperscript{75} Barzen, «Nürnberger Memorbuch...», \textit{op. cit.}, n.° 3; G. Mentgen (ed.), «Quellen zur Geschichte der Juden im Bistum Mainz (ohne Frankfurt, die Wetterau und Thüringen) (MZ01)», in A. Haverkamp and J. R. Müller (eds.), \textit{Corpus...}, \textit{op. cit.}, n.° 18-23.
\textsuperscript{77} Salfeld, \textit{Zur Geschichte...}, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 6-8. Again, Salfeld’s readings are mostly preferable to the emendations proposed by Lehnardt, \textit{Eine Krone...}, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 196-197, who read \textit{zehu[im]} («gold coins») for \textit{zeguq[im]} («marks»), which is patently wrong. Salfeld himself was unsure whether to read 3 (ג) or 50 (כ) marks but decided for three when he reprinted his study. Three marks of silver (or eight, for that matter) is no small amount, especially in a time following such serious disruption.
and edited in 1960 by Otto Böcher. Böcher’s no. 1 is the oldest (fig. 1). It is dedicated by, and to the memory of, Yaʿacov ben David, a «man of insight», as it says, and his wife Raḥel, who spent their fortune on the greater honour of God and embellished the «lesser sanctuary» (a term taken from the Book of Hezekiel). Their work was completed in the month of Elul in the year 794 according to the minor account, that is, in August or September 1034. This means that the inscription is the oldest Hebrew text preserved from north of the Alps.78

The inscription is situated on the right next to the synagogue entrance. This cannot, however, be its original place, because the synagogue in its present shape represents a Romanesque building of 1174/75. The Jews of Worms, when they built a new and more lavish synagogue in the second half of the twelfth century, must have taken the old inscription from the first building and inserted it in the wall of the second one, certainly out of respect for the memory of the founder.

According to Böcher, three more inscriptions, preserved in fragments, date from the eleventh century. Two of them were once displayed to the right and the left of the Torah ark. Both probably relate to the same Yaʿacov ben David and to his legacy, imploring the congregation to remember his name during Shabbat services, together with «those who sleep in Hebron».79

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Those who «sleep in Hebron» are of course the biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whose names appear at the very beginning in the rite of remembrance. I tend to think that preserving the old inscriptions and inserting them in the new building was more than a sign of reverence towards the founder of the first synagogue: The community here was remembering its very beginnings.

The Romanesque synagogue of the 12th century is dated by further inscriptions to the year 935 according to the minor account, that is, the year 1174/75 of the common era. There are in fact two. One of them was still visible in the sixteenth century above the entrance. We only know it through a copy made by Eli‘ezer ben Shmu‘el Brunshvig, whose notebook is preserved in the University Library in Frankfurt. According to Eli‘ezer, the inscription was written in a «circular way» (derekh iggul), that is, it probably followed the arch of the tympanon over the entrance door. We have to assume that it was destroyed during the anti-Jewish riots of 1615 or in the great fire of Worms in 1689. The text is not meant to commemorate a benefactor but the completion of the building. The year 935 is contained in a chronogram over a verse from the prophet Isaiah, «open the gates that the righteous nation may enter, the nation that keeps faith» (Is 26:2)\(^80\).

The same year is encoded in a second inscription, contained on the elaborate capital on one of the two columns bearing the vaulted roof. The rhymed quatrains around the column cites verses from the first book of Kings. It is very likely that they allude to the two columns named Yakhin and Bo‘az in the Temple of Jerusalem. Even more than the old epithet, «a lesser sanctuary», this reference underlines to what extent the synagogue had in fact become a sacred space. While the holiness of the synagogue is not a new idea in the middle ages, the more or less outspoken reference to its being a representation of the Temple seems new\(^81\).

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The *miqweh* in Worms was completed in the year 946 of the minor account, that is, in 1185/86 of the common era. This is commemorated in a complex, highly poetic inscription, whose proper interpretation is further complicated by the fact that it was already hard to decipher in the sixteenth century, as Eli’ezer complained. Somebody must have tried to repair it, probably in the mid-nineteenth century, as we know from Ludwig Lewysohn’s book, *Nafshot Ṭaddiqim* [«The Souls of the Righteous»], published in 1855. The miqweh itself does not represent the building type we find in Cologne and Friedberg but follows the model of nearby Speyer, with an oblong stairway leading town to a platform, from where the person will go down a second flight of steps in half-circle to enter the water.

The so-called «Rashi chapel» built against the northern wall is a seventeenth-century addition to the synagogue in Worms. It was sponsored by David Oppenheim in the year [5]384, i.e., in 1623/24 Ce. Apart to the inscription from this year (which is more or less preserved) we also find Oppenheim’s gift mentioned in the *Memorbuch* of the community. On the

86 Böcher, «Alte Synagoge...», *op. cit.*, pp. 60-61. The *Memorbuch* of Worms relates in similar words that David Oppenheim (d. 1642) «gave 100 royal Taler towards building the synagogue here, and from his own funds he built the almemor in the synagogue, as well as the yeshiva next to the synagogue, the tahara house; moreover he gave ritual objects for the synagogue and the chandelier next to the Holy Ark»: trans. in U. Reuter, «Die Wormser Judenschaft im Dreißigjährigen Krieg», *Der Wormsgau*, 26, 2008, pp. 7-24, at p. 19, n. 71.
back of the elevated stone chair (sometimes called «Rashi’s Chair») we find a number of graffiti. One of them notes that «on this chair sat Oppenheim».

Evidently, the Jewish community of Worms was concerned for the memory of its founding ancestors and benefactors from an early date. By the fifteenth century, we observe the emergence of legendary tales or hagiographic sagas concerning the sages and saints (martyrs) of early Ashkenaz. After the expulsion of the Jews from Regensburg in 1519 (and the displacement of the Frankfurt Jews into a ghetto in 1462), the Jewish quarter of Worms became a prime focus for such stories. The book *Mayse Nissim*, for example, a collection of Yiddish tales published in Amsterdam in 1696 and attributable to the Worms community’s sexton, Yuspa Shammash (Yiftaḥ Yuzpa b. Naftali ha-Levi, d. 1678), relates to details in the synagogue complex and to the houses of the *Judengasse* on various occasions, connecting them with the sages of the past. Some had indeed lived in Worms, like R. El’azar ben Yehuda (the *Rogeanah*, d. c.1238), whose wife and daughters were killed by crusaders in 1196 (tale no. 6: house *Zum Hirschen*). For R. Yehuda ben Samuel *he-Ḥasid* («the Pious»), on the other hand – whose mother miraculously evaded a cart in the narrow alleyway on the eastern side of the women’s *shul* during her pregnancy, causing the famous dent in the «Yehuda-he-Ḥasid wall» (tale no. 8) – it is fairly certain that he did not. The famous R. Shlomo ben Yizḥaq (*Rashi*, d. 1104) had studied in Mainz and Worms but lived in Troyes for most of his life. Worms, however, is the place where Yuspa located Rashi’s *yeshiva* (*beit midrash*) – in northern France, after all, there was nothing left for his contemporaries to see.

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87 Böcher, «Alte Synagoge...», op. cit., p. 113.
90 E. Shoham-Steiner, «From Speyer to Regensburg: Reexamining the Migration of the Pietistic Kalonymides from the Rhineland to the Danube», *Zion*, 81, 2016, pp. 149-176 (in Hebrew), has shown that in all probability, Yehuda’s father Samuel had already emigrated from Speyer to Regensburg before Yehuda was born. (I am grateful for this reference to Lucia Raspe).
From a similar motivation, but with a new effort at historical accuracy, several inscriptions around the synagogue were renewed towards the end of the nineteenth century. This applies, inter alia, to the two inscriptions commemorating the founders of the women’s shul: for Mrs Yehudith, for whom the original was (and is) still extant, and for her husband, Me’ir ben Yo’el, for whom the original was lost but could be reconstructed in 1890/91 on the basis of Eli’ezer’s manuscript recently rediscovered in Frankfurt. The two inscriptions for the husband and wife could thus be reunited and placed over the entrance of the northern annex of the seventeenth century (fig. 2).  

Renovations, too, were commemorated in stone, continuing the story of the synagogue as a topography of memory: An inscription of 1842 marked the restoration of the Old Synagogue; one of 1855, that of the Rashi Yeshiva, and another synagogue restoration campaign is memorized in 1926 – the same year, by the way, when the community of Mainz opened their «cem-

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93 Böcher, «Alte Synagoge...», op. cit., pp. 120-122.
etery memorial». Answering the new, historical interest in the Jewish communities of the Rhineland, Isidor Kiefer in 1924 had opened a «Museum of Jewish Antiquities» in the former chamber of the community elders.

Admittedly, the Old Synagogue did not remain unchanged in the nineteenth century. By and large, the community welcomed the reform ideas current among German Jews, and adaptations were made: The wall between the men’s and the women’s sections was removed; the bima was replaced by a new construction, and the seating order was changed. Even an organ was built in. Around 1860 the community leaders even proposed to demolish parts of the synagogue and extend it into a modern building. By now, however, there was a historical consciousness in the community. Simon Gernsheim and other community members protested against the plans and argued, in particular, that the Old Synagogue had been a spiritual refuge for the community in the dark times of hate and persecution, when Jews had prayed in this venerable place and perhaps even prepared themselves to accept martyrdom. The protesters had more in mind than just an antiquarian interest in an old building, they were speaking of the continuity of the local community. By now the synagogue had become a symbol of historical memory and collective remembrance.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our long digression on the inscriptions of the synagogue in Worms would suggest that we have to think about the idea of «authenticity» in a new way. There were so many changes – destruction through anti-Jewish violence in 1096, in 1349, in 1615, in 1689, and finally, in 1938; there were renovations and reforms. Inscriptions were moved from one spot to another; others were lost and even, in some cases, recycled as building material during renovation work. As early as the sixteenth century, people like Eli’ezer ben

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Shmu‘el were interested in their wording, and in the nineteenth century some tried to restore their legibility. What is authentic in all this is a tradition of memory, which is enriched in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the foundation of the first local Jewish museums. Moreover, memory was an ongoing practice in the service of the congregation.

This brings me to my final remarks. As is well known, the synagogue complex in Worms was destroyed by arson in the night of the ninth of November 1938 and on the following morning\textsuperscript{96}. Local Jews were deported or forced to emigrate. In 1939 the synagogue ruin, which was still standing, was demolished with the help of hydraulic presses, leaving little more than the foundations and a heap of rubble. Strictly speaking, what we see today is no longer the same building. In a highly symbolic undertaking, the Old Synagogue of Worms was rebuilt between 1958 and 1961. To be sure, this caused considerable controversy among the surviving Jews of Worms as well as among other Jewish commentators and visitors\textsuperscript{97}. And yet, of the thousands of synagogue buildings destroyed in so-called Kristallnacht, it was apparently this synagogue which most vividly recalled the long tradition of Jewish life in Germany and the losses the Nazis had inflicted on the Jewish cultural heritage\textsuperscript{98}. The reconstruction efforts were aided by the expertise of Isidor Kiefer, the former keeper of the Jewish Museum in Worms, who then lived in New York, and by Otto Böcher, whose dissertation on the Old Synagogue of Worms of 1960 is still the prime reference work on the building\textsuperscript{99}. Böcher


\textsuperscript{98} See the speeches and written addresses on the occasion of laying the foundation stone (1959), documented in in Röth (ed.), \textit{Festschrift...}, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 245-265; \textit{cfr.} also Roemer, \textit{German City...}, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 163-182.

\textsuperscript{99} The text of the 1960 dissertation was reprinted with few changes one year later in Böcher, «Alte Synagoge...», \textit{op. cit.} A reprint of the whole collection (Röth [ed.], \textit{Festschrift...}, \textit{op. cit.}) was published with minor additions in 2011.
and the restorators took care to use as much original material as possible. With its re-inauguration in 1961, the synagogue was given to the Jewish community of Mainz, while the city of Worms took over responsibility for its upkeep. Today there are again Jewish services in Worms on a regular basis. Visitors (including Jewish guests or congregants) sometimes do not note the difference, they consider the building authentic. The authenticity, in fact, does not rest in the stones and structure as such, it rests in the recovery of historical, communal, and human memories.

The most recent development in the long history of the synagogue is the fact that the State of Rheinland-Pfalz, together with the cities of Speyer, Worms, and Mainz and the Jewish communities is preparing a UNESCO World heritage nomination for the monuments and sites of the three ShUM communities, that is, the synagogue complexes of Speyer and Worms, and the Jewish cemeteries of Worms and Mainz. It is to be hoped that these sites will continue to provide a topography of memories for generations to come.

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ERDI AROKO MENDEBALDEKO AURPEGI JUDUA
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