

inceptit et ob quam causam et ad  
quem finem tendant. et quia sine  
mine potui super his informari  
nolo registrare qd' probare no'  
valerem. De motu facti qd' vi  
di et audiui intendo postea face  
re mentionem.

De captione et destructione iu  
deorum.



Anno .m. ccc. xlix. capti fu  
erunt iudei et in carceribus  
et pulombus vniuersaliter  
positi in omnibus locis vbiq;  
morabantur. Causa autem cap  
tionis fuit quoniam vehemens  
suspicio erat super eos q' ipsi po  
pulum christianum maliciose per  
venenum destruere intebantur

et q' venenum in puteis. in fon  
tibus in aquis secrete proiciebant  
prout poterant et hoc fecerunt  
in pluribus locis sicut fama et  
rumor eois laborabat. Erant  
autem inter eos quidam de secta  
eor' astrologi subtiles et periti qui  
secundum cursum stellarum pre  
noscabant eis mortalitatem

# JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN GERMANY IN THE MID FOURTEENTH CENTURY

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The Colmar and Erfurt treasures date from the period which experienced the most intense anti-Jewish persecutions seen before the twentieth century. The persecutions and pogroms orchestrated by the authorities at the time of the Black Death (1347–52) mark the nadir of relations between Christians and Jews in Germanic countries during the Middle Ages and had profound consequences on the subsequent history of Jews in central Europe. In most regions of the Holy Roman Empire, particularly the west, it was not before the eighteenth century that Jewish settlements attained the numbers reached during the first half of the fourteenth century. Thus this period was both the apogee and the crisis point of medieval Judaism in Europe.

The oldest Jewish communities, which subsequently became the most important, were to be found in cathedral towns from the ninth and tenth centuries onwards. The old *civitates* situated on the Rhine and the Danube were in many respects the mainstay of medieval urbanization in these regions, and the spread of Jewish settlements was an integral part of its development. In spite of the devastating consequences of the persecutions linked to the first Crusade (1096), especially on the communities of Mainz, Worms and Cologne, the network of Jewish colonies spread significantly from the twelfth century onwards. This was also true of the regions from which the present treasures originate. In Alsace, during the fifty years preceding the 1348–50 wave of persecutions, there was a Jewish presence of about sixty different communities. In the second half of the fourteenth century there were only about half this number. Strasbourg, where Jews had settled before 1200, was the oldest and most important centre of Alsatian Judaism, ahead of Colmar. The two colonies had a community organization, a cemetery and buildings for community and religious life – synagogue, *miqveh* (ritual bath) and communal hall. Other

Fig. 4  
*Burning Alive*, in Gilles Le Muisit, *Annales*,  
Tournai, 1353  
Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Ms  
13076/7, f. 12v

synagogues also existed in medium-sized towns such as Haguenau, Neufviller and Molsheim and perhaps in Obernai and Altkirch. In addition, there was a Jewish presence in small towns and even in some villages, associated with the winemaking which was so economically important to this region.

The first Jews in Erfurt, the capital of the medieval region of Thuringia, are recorded in the twelfth century. During the thirteenth century they were to be found in sixteen different locations within the region, which was renowned for the production of pastel dyes. There are known to have been at least thirty-five Jewish settlements before the fateful year 1349. There were communities with a cemetery and synagogue at Erfurt, an important trading town (comparable to the *civitates* of the Rhineland), and at the imperial city of Nordhausen. There were communities with synagogues at Coburg, Duderstadt, Eisenach, Meiningen, Saalfeld and Weida.

There had been a close connection between the monarchy and Jewry since the time of the Carolingian and Ottonian kings. Medieval kings gave Jewish communities the protection they needed, as also did bishops. There was an understanding between the Christian ruling classes and the Jewish leaders. It was in the leading centres of Christian culture that the Jews, too, were able to develop most successfully, constructing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries significant religious buildings – synagogues and *mikvot* (ritual baths). Cathedral cities played a determinant role in the history of Jewish settlement and Jewish (Ashkenazi) organization in central Europe, right up until almost the end of the Middle Ages.

While the basis of Jewish community life was established according to the laws of the Jewish religion (the Torah, the Talmud), it also reflected the need to live within a Christian environment. Only the oldest, most important settlements, where it was possible to study Talmudic law, were properly ‘communities’ (*qahal*, *q<sup>e</sup> hillah*). They possessed a cemetery and, following a medieval rabbinical tradition, therefore had the right to rule over neighbouring Jewish settlements whose dead were buried there. It was probably in these communities that the taxes owed collectively by the Jews were allocated to the various households, collected and then paid to the authorities. Elected individuals (*parnassim*) represented the communities to the outside world. In the Rhineland the communities were represented by a council (*magistratus judeorum*). Government was primarily administered by members of the most important families of merchants and bankers. Learned rabbis played a role alongside them, but this only became apparent from 1350 onwards.

From the thirteenth century, in many places Jews were treated as citizens (*cives*) within the juridical and political community of the town. Before 1350, the Jewish community could in theory decide whether or not a Jew could be a citizen. Later, the heads of Jewish families (*baale batim*), in direct contact with the Christian powers, played



Fig. 5  
 Emperor Henri VII of Luxembourg gives a privilege to  
 the Jews, in *Krönungsmahl Buchmalerei* (*Codex  
 Balduini Trevirensis*), around 1340, f. 24 (detail)  
 Cologne Landeshauptarchiv

an essential role. For the most part these men were financiers or bankers, sometimes doctors. The legal and social position of their families and of other members of their households, and also their protection of certain officers of the community (such as the *shammash* or verger) depended entirely on their financial prowess and diplomatic clout. There was a wide range of class difference within the Jewish communities. At the bottom end of the scale there were many 'poor Jews' employed in rich households, in commerce or in teaching, as servants or wet nurses. There were also many Jewish beggars leading vagabond, precarious lives at the end of the Middle Ages.

Over the seventy years from about 1280 to the outbreak of the Black Death relations between Jews and Christians became more tense, and persecutions of the Jewish population increased in number. They were not limited to the *regnum teutonicum* but spread to the south-west of the Empire, descending in three main waves. The pretext was an accusation of ritual murder (*Guter Werner*, in the Rhineland in 1287) or profanation (*Rintfleisch* in 1298 in Franconia, *Armleder* in 1336–38, Franconia and the Rhineland).

The growing violence towards Jews was linked to their diminishing legal immunity, becoming manifest from the reign of Rudolf of Hapsburg (1273–91). During a process in which in general sovereign rights were commodified, the Jews, hitherto a

protected group, became subject to fiscal levy. Seeking to an ever greater degree to cover their increased financial needs, princes, among other measures, revisited the rights they held over the Jews and subjected them to special taxes. At the same time, they were less able to protect them adequately, being more circumscribed themselves. The onus of such protection now fell more and more on local lords and urban élites, as a result of which, during the second half of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century, Jews often found themselves attacked from both sides when disputes broke out between factions in the cities. Effective protection for the Jews depended at this time largely on the security in power of the rulers of the region or town.

The pogroms which took place between 1280 and 1350 were caused not only by specific local factors but also by a general anti-Semitism, spread mostly by the Mendicant orders and the clergy. In accusing the Jews quite absurdly of acts such as ritual murders or profanation they found fertile soil at a time when Christian devotion was evolving into new forms, particularly from the second half of the thirteenth century onwards. This type of accusation made the Jews scapegoats for a wide variety of problems. Jews, having specialized in financial loans since the thirteenth century, were accused by preachers of usury. It was therefore probably not coincidental that the three major waves of persecution within the Empire, before the pogroms triggered by the plague, had all taken place within the comparatively highly urbanized great wine-producing regions, with a more developed banking system and a high Jewish population. The wine business was one dependent on both credit and climate, and every bad harvest could create serious financial problems. Winemakers and others involved in the wine trade might find themselves heavily in debt to Jewish financiers. The nobility also was in debt to them, having indulged in expensive luxuries that an archaic economy could not support. Apart from these financial conditions, cupidity and jealousy towards the wealth of Jews undoubtedly contributed to the pogroms.

With a major plague epidemic sweeping across Europe and a struggle between the Luxembourg and Wittelsbach dynasties for the throne, anti-Jewish violence reached a new height in the Empire between 1348 and 1350, affecting large areas of northern Germany. In this period of crisis, anti-Jewish feeling, social and economic problems and political conflicts arising from local disputes all came together to create a climate ripe for persecution. Almost all the Jewish communities to be found in the core German-speaking areas were affected by the pogroms. It was only in the east and south-west of the Empire that the ruling classes succeeded in protecting their Jewish citizens from violence.

After 1350, there were only a few isolated cases of persecution rising above the level of local disputes. Another form of repression came into being, however, one which



Fig. 6  
*Combat of a knight and a Jew* (Allegory of Church  
and Synagogue?)  
North-west choir stalls, Erfurt Cathedral, c. 1400–10

had already been practised in other European countries since the twelfth century – organized expulsion by the authorities. From the second half of the fourteenth century onwards, the expulsion of Jews from towns or regions led to significant migration to Italy and eastern Europe by German Jews, while in the western part of the Empire Jews lived mainly in the countryside. In spite of expulsions of Jews from Strasbourg (1390) and of many other towns during the fifteenth century, Alsace was to become, until modern times, the homeland of a significant number of Ashkenazi Jews.

TREASURES  
OF THE  
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