The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages:
By Way of Introduction

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Jewish History and European History

It is today an accepted notion among leading scholars in the field that the culture of the Jews in Europe during the medieval period—and beyond—was no less European than it was Jewish. Jewish history in Europe is also essentially European history, including its regional and local manifestations. It follows that accounts of ‘European medieval history’ excluding the history of the Jews are not only incomplete in important aspects but fail to grasp major constituents—in short, they are in great need of revision.

A history of ‘The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages’ beyond the confines of national borders has much to gain from studies on the religious and intellectual history of Judaism and the Jews, based on Judaic scholarship with its eminent research centres in Israel and the United States. It is, however, necessary to embed these substantial aspects in a wider historical context. This requires a closer collaboration between Judaic Studies and the other historical disciplines of medieval research.

It is the aim of the present volume to make some progress on this way. The wide scope of the subject matter is exemplified in part (I) through five keynote essays. In their respective emphases, and in their cross-relations, the conception of the collection is outlined: It aims at covering as many facets of Jewish life as possible, both within the Jewish religious community and in its relations with the members of the other monotheistic religions; it looks at the manifold links with the Muslim or Christian authorities (including, in the Latin West, bishops and the Papacy); and it gives special attention to Jewish communities and supra-local forms of organization. In this way we hope to shed some light on the tensions between the norms laid down in the different religious traditions, and the realities of life, which varied regionally and

1 A good example is J. Cohen, ‘Hebrew Crusade Chronicles’ (1999).
would often show quite local characteristics. Accordingly, the rest of the volume is divided according to the main historical spaces, ‘around the Mediterranean’ (II) and in ‘the North’ (III). Selected aspects of Jewish history receive closer attention in part (IV), with an emphasis on Ashkenazic Jewry, which is also described in part (V) from the vantage point of a number of older communities and their most important institutions.

Next to the family, the fundamental institution for the Jews, especially in the West, was their community. This alone was enough to make local conditions, particularly the relations with the neighbouring Gentile population, crucial for the Jews. The sources do not report on Jewish communities until into the tenth century, and it is noteworthy that the same applies to the Christian town communes. Both communities had (and continued to have) a religious basis and hence drew their legitimacy from religion. Yet only in the Latin West did the community, among both Christians and Jews, attain a stable institutional framework and significant political weight. This is one of the most important reasons why the contributors to the present volume have by and large concentrated on the period from the tenth to fifteenth centuries, still more than half a millennium. Unfortunately, and for entirely practical reasons, the conditions of Jewish life among Orthodox Christianity and in the Byzantine Empire can only be touched upon.

Jews under Muslim Dominion

Despite the tendencies, inherent in monotheistic faiths, towards drawing sharp lines of division, there were connections, sometimes close, between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—between religions, that is, which were by no means uniform in themselves. Theological barriers were lower between Judaism and Islam than between Judaism or Islam and Christianity. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, in many respects and for long periods a controversial issue even among Christians, was regarded by Jews and Muslims as a deviation from the belief in One God. For Islam, Judaism was but one of several ingredients, including also Christianity.

From its heartlands on the Arabian Peninsula, Islam swiftly expanded, mainly through military conquests, in the Near and Middle East, but also into further Mediterranean regions. The latter were homes to populations of mainly Christians and some Jews; they had long been parts of Christian states, most notably the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire, and they were among the oldest civilizations, deeply infused with Greek and Roman traditions, built on strong urban foundations, and for centuries to come still far more advanced than the regions under Christian rule to the north of the Mediterranean. This cultural difference and the wide sway of Muslim

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rule also help to explain why the number of Jews in Christian Europe continued to be much smaller for long periods of time. This is even more true of northern Europe, where significant Jewish settlements did not emerge until the eighth and ninth centuries—first, so it seems, in northern France.3

Islam’s advance into central regions of the Mediterranean world was a major reason why (most) Muslim rulers accorded to both Jews and Christians a status that, albeit inferior to that of Muslims, allowed them, against payment of a poll tax and under conditions, to practise their faith within their families and in their religious communities with certain rights of self-government. The far-reaching authority of the Caliphs in Baghdad offered Jews a wide field of communication and enterprise, extending from Persia to Spain. While this changed by the eleventh century due to the disintegration of the Baghdad Caliphate and the Emirate, or Caliphate, of Cordoba into numerous dominions large and small, the Jews had by the time been able to consolidate their position in the Islamic world, a circumstance that also affected their position after the reconquista, under the new Christian rulers.

**Judaism and Christianity**

On the whole, Christian dominions offered less favourable conditions for the Jews. In the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire, the oldest and largest among them, violence against the Jews, fed by widespread anti-Jewish sentiment especially among monastics, even emanated from the Imperial court until well into the tenth century.4

The relations between Judaism and Christianity are perhaps more adequately symbolized by the metaphor of relations between brothers or sisters than by a mother-and-daughter relationship. At least, this could help us gain a better appreciation of their respective orientations in time and space, and of the mutual influences frequently bound up with these orientations.5 Using such imagery is of course not to deny that Christianity emerged from the various strands of Judaism, nor that there are profound differences between the two religions (such as the extraordinary significance of law in Judaism).

Close religious ties, and conflicts, between Judaism and Christianity were based on the fact that the Torah and other writings of Jewish tradition were taken over into the ‘Old’ Testament and were deeply rooted in the consciousness of Christians during

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3 Arguments against an earlier beginning of Jewish history in northern Europe have been advanced by Toch, *Dunkle Jahrhunderte* (2000); see also, however, the reservations by Lotter, ‘Totale Finsternis’ (2001), and most recently, Lotter, ‘Christliche Quellen’ (2004).


5 Cf., also for what follows, Yuval, ‘Christliche Zeit und jüdische Zeit’ (2003); idem, “Two Nations” (2000) [in Hebrew].
the Middle Ages. The lively, narrative matter of this biblical tradition made a lasting impression on the Christian population through reading, listening, and visual representation. For centuries, especially until the turn of the millennium, its impact may have been even greater than that of what is contained in the ‘New’ Testament. The Psalms were the main components of prayer books both for Jews and for Christians; they were, however, read in different, even conflicting senses. Jewish legal tradition anchored in the ‘Old’ Testament even influenced, by way of Christian interpretation, the written forms of ‘Germanic’ laws. Among the major political consequences the First Testament, the anointment of Christian kings, known from the seventh century, is only one of the more notable examples.

Christianity, like Judaism, is not only based on the Holy Scripture of the Bible but also on tradition. Among Christians that tradition, developed in the writings of the fathers and doctors of the Church, was first systematized on a wider scale in the fifth century. At around the same time, the accumulated Jewish legal tradition was summarized in the Palestinian Talmud. It was followed by the much more extensive Babylonian Talmud, first edited around 700 CE in Mesopotamia, now under Muslim rule. From around the ninth century, the Babilonian Talmud was regarded by the great majority of Jewish scholars and communities as a binding legal code, still open, however, to interpretation and adaptation. It was therefore a grave intrusion upon the essence of Judaism by highest representatives of Latin Christendom when the Talmud was put on trial in a joint operation by the Papacy and French Crown from 1240. Condemnations for blasphemy and for ‘heretical’ deviations from the Torah led to the burning of numerous copies of Talmudic texts from 1242.

Equally close and yet conflicting were the interpretations of time and space among the two faiths. For Christians, the incarnation of the Son of God marked (and still marks) the beginning of the last phase in the history of man’s salvation, extending up until the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgment. For Jews, the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE and the beginning of Exile associated with that event represented (and still represent) a major turning point in the long aeon extending from the creation of the world until the expected advent of the Messiah. From as early as Antiquity, Christians have regarded this rift in Jewish history as God’s punishment for the crucifixion of Christ. This interpretation buttressed their demand that Judaism must be subdued and their claim to the Holy Land and especially to Jerusalem, now the Holy City in Christendom. Reduced to a status of inferiority, the Jews were to be tolerated among Christians, according to the widely accepted doctrine of St. Augustine (354–430), until they would ultimately convert at the end of all times.6

The Jewish and Christian rhythms of liturgy, too, which marked the individual’s and the community’s life from day to day, were similar from a formal point of view. However, both the annual fest-days and the divisions of the day received different, even

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conflicting senses of meaning over the centuries, without completely cancelling out what was common to both.

Both Jews and Christians had their most important centres of cult and culture in the same larger urban settlements. And both communities focused their religious and hence, in a comprehensive sense, their political identification on Jerusalem, the Holy City. For Jews, the city surpassing all others, the place of the destroyed Temple, became the focus of eschatological hopes for a reconstruction of the Temple and of the Jewish people in its own land. In this way, the Jews living in ‘dispersion’ (Diaspora) continued to have bonds with the communities in Eretz Israel. Accordingly, the synagogues built in the Diaspora, in terms of their ritual implements, were regarded as representations of the Temple in Jerusalem. The reputation of the most important Jewish communities, who often quite explicitly regarded themselves as ‘holy’ communities, was bolstered by the legendary origins of their founding fathers, associated as closely as possible with the circles of those expelled from Eretz Israel after the destruction of the Temple. An analogue can be found among the Christians in some of the older cathedral cities, who from the tenth century intensified their endeavours to found their Christianization as closely as possible on the Apostles sent out from Jerusalem and on the primaeval Church. The same urban centres of Western Christendom were regarded as holy cities and styled after the model of the Holy City, i.e., Jerusalem, and later after that of St. Peter’s city of Rome, which found its most conspicuous expressions in churches of the Holy Cross or of the Holy Sepulchre. All this was, again, founded on Christian claims to the ‘New’ Jerusalem as the place of Christ’s Second Coming, and on the prominent position it occupied in the Christian doctrine of salvation, in competition with Jewish hopes. Pilgrimages to Jerusalem were bound up with these religious attitudes from as early as Late Antiquity. During the eleventh century, even before the first crusades, they assumed the dimensions of mass movements.

Persecutions and Expulsions

The crusades are but one manifestation, though a very instructive one, of the profound changes that were taking place in Latin Christianity during the High Middle Ages. Among these we should mention the devotion, increasing from the eleventh century, for the human nature of the Son of God and for his suffering on the cross, for which ‘the’ Jews were now made responsible more than ever before. These new attitudes, sometimes combined with popular ideas about the imminent end of the world, were a major inspiration for the crusades, and they also served to propagate the willingness among participants to die a martyr’s death for Christ’s sake. At the same time, the crusades were a ‘breeding ground’ for persecutions against the Jews.7 The

pogroms of 1096 during the First Crusade set the fatal example. The atrocities committed in 1096, mostly by the crusaders, were regarded by the Jewish victims, men and women, as martyrdom. This interpretation served to disseminate and entrench a religious attitude, mostly among the Jews in the German lands, that can only be observed very sporadically in earlier Judaism: It was much more deeply rooted in Christianity, where it was being reactivated and brought to new heights by the same crusades. The new sense of martyrdom is expressed in the Hebrew crusade narratives composed by Rhenish Jews, from where it found a large echo. The narratives also highlight the active role of Jewish women in suffering martyrdom—at a time, when women in Western Christendom, too, were more than ever involved in shaping religious ways of life, expressed, for example, in the growing cult of the Virgin Mary. Marian devotion was even more inconceivable to the Jewish mind than the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Further barriers between Christianity and Judaism were erected during the thirteenth century by the growing cult of the Sacrament. In the groundless accusation of Host desecration, that cult could entail new anti-Jewish sentiment and even lead to persecutions. These and other changes in Latin Christendom were bound up with the rise and spread of the pastoral or mendicant orders. These orders concentrated on the fast-growing population in the much more numerous towns, i.e., in places where the great majority of Jews had their homes. In their sermons and writings, some Dominican and Franciscan friars even advocated a complete exclusion of the Jews from the Christian doctrine of salvation. These tendencies favoured the expulsions of Jews, which set in around the turn of the fourteenth century, with the first large-scale expulsions affecting some French principalities and the kingdoms of England and France.

Attitudes of the kind just described were by no means shared by all Christians. Moreover, they are connected to further measures of exclusion, affecting Christian individuals and groups who—for their different views in questions of the faith, sometimes only because of their unwillingness to submit to the will of the Church hierarchy in political matters—were declared heretical. Anti-Jewish positions were reinforced in the wake of the attempts (largely failed) at a universal reform of the Church during the Great Western Schism (1378–1417) and afterwards, often by radical preachers of the mendicant orders, who spread anti-Jewish stereotype and incited popular anti-Jewish sentiment. In addition, kings, princes, and civic councils, referring to what they regarded as their religious duties, now tended to commit their subjects to uniform norms, to regulate their lives in detail, and generally to unify their spheres of influence in religious as well as in other respects. These tendencies received a new boost during the Early Modern period. In the first instance, these measures affected

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groups that did not conform, among whom those professing another faith or denomination were hardest hit—in particular, the Jews.

So the Jews, despite their close relationships with Christians, were depicted as alien enemies with less and less restraint. As ‘scapegoats’ they were made responsible for imaginary and real threats, which in itself is by no means something exclusively medieval. The Jews’ ‘alienation’ had its direst consequences under the impact of the existential threat posed by the plague in 1348–50. The devastating pogroms hit the Jews in most places and regions of Western Europe where they were still present in significant numbers, such as the German lands. In the terse atmosphere of imminent plague, many of those responsible in civic communities and many other rulers were unwilling or unable to protect the Jews; some even initiated the robbery and murder. Those who survived the killings had to struggle with deteriorating legal, social, and economic conditions. In the Christian kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula, where the Jews were mostly spared in 1349, their situation was profoundly worsened by the pogroms of 1391, especially since afterwards the Inquisition increasingly proceeded against those who had been forcibly baptized but continued to adhere to their ancestral traditions. At the same time, i.e., from the late-fourteenth century, expulsions were on the rise in central Europe. Here they were mostly decreed against the will of the kings and emperors, who were weak in terms of power politics. In Spain, on the other hand, the centuries of Jewish history with its many ups and downs were ended intentionally by the ‘Catholic’ kings in 1492. Not a few Jews took refuge in Italy, and even more received new, lasting homes in the Western regions of the Ottoman Empire, the former heartlands of the Eastern Roman-Byzantine Empire.\footnote{Cf. A. Levy, ed., The Jews of the Ottoman Empire (1994); Hering, ‘Die Juden von Saloniki’ (1999) (with further bibliography).}

In the lands under Christian rule, much reduced meanwhile by the Ottoman expansion, Jews were present in but a few regions at the end of the medieval period. These regions include the mediterranean heartland of Italy, where the Jews enjoyed the most favourable conditions, by contemporary standards, in the Papal territories; some residual zones in southern France as well as within the ‘Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation’, where, however, they had been driven out of almost all the larger towns and cities; finally, countries further to the east, especially Poland-Lithuania. The state prevailing at the end of the Middle Ages underwent only small changes until the nineteenth century.

Religions and Cultures

The religious factors previously outlined, and above all the manifold relationships between the three monotheistic religions, are sufficient to explain why Jews in their Christian and Islamic contexts were by no means a ‘marginal group’ in medieval
Europe. Their participation was manifest in their self-organization, in family and community, but also in their relations with the Gentiles around them, in their economic activities, and generally in their cultural forms of behaviour and expression. According to a widespread misconception, the Jews were culturally ‘foreign’ or ‘alien’ to their respective surroundings, and to the Christian majority in particular. This has given rise to the equally erroneous idea that the Jewish minority could only overcome their supposed alienation by taking over as much as possible from what would thus be ‘Christian’ or ‘Muslim culture’—i.e., by ‘acculturation’, ‘adaptation’, or ‘integration’. These presuppositions result from an inappropriate equation of ‘religion’ with ‘culture’. While their particular religious traditions were always a core component of their culture, the Jews were by no means separated form the cultural life of their surroundings, not even during the medieval centuries. Hence the widespread generalizations about the ‘Christian Occident’ are equally debatable: Such generalizations fail to account for the length of time it took to missionize Europe—more than a millennium in the area of the later ‘Holy Roman Empire’—and for the heritage of various ‘paganisms’ and ‘pagan’ ideas and practices; nor do they adequately reflect the centuries of Islamic rule and Muslim activity, mostly on the Iberian Peninsula. Not least, they are at odds with the high significance Judaism had for Christianity and with the continuous activity of many Jews amidst the Christian populace for long periods of time. The ways of life of these Christians were, incidentally, by no means determined solely by the norms of religious dogmatics and ethics, and profound cultural differences prevailed among Christians, too, depending on their various regional histories and cultural traditions. The same could be said for Muslims and for Jews.

The Mediterranean world, connecting the three continents, retained its fundamental importance for the Jews throughout the Middle Ages. In various ways, they had participated in its Greek and Latin, later in its Islamic and Arab traditions. From Late Antiquity, these traditions had been moulded into political and religious frames by the East Roman-Byzantine Empire, by the successor kingdoms of the Western Empire, and by the spread of Muslim rule. In this way, the particular profiles of the different civilizations emerged. Among these, intensive communications remained possible, even over great distances via the Mediterranean Sea. The Mediterranean cultural landscapes preserved their advantage over the ‘younger’ European regions to the north, despite the losses in urban substance suffered especially in the western Mediterranean. This advantage over the countries developing beyond the Mediterranean basin, which was also manifest in written culture, held itself far into the medieval centuries. The lands beyond the Roman Limes in northern, central, and eastern Europe were slow to come closer the high levels in the Mediterranean, moving on

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10 Cf. Mentgen, ‘‘Randgruppe’’ (1996), who argues that the use of this category for the Jews is questionable.
11 Biale, ‘‘Toward a Cultural History’’ (2002), argues in a similar sense.
different ways and with varying intensity. Christianization established an essential network in this process, but Jews also had their share in it.

The differences in civilization between the Mediterranean and the other regions of Europe are also reflected in specifically Jewish subdivisions, which received clearer outlines during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Fundamental factors in this process were the economic, political, and cultural rise of the West in several, regional thrusts; the concomitant spread of Jewish settlements to the north and east; the new independence of Jewish legal interpretation in western Europe from the ‘Babilonian’ authorities in Baghdad; the reception of the philosophical and scientific tradition, notably by translations from Arabic into Hebrew in southern France, and the interpretation and independent development of that tradition. New centres of Jewish scholarship—in al-Andalus, in southern France as well as in the North (Zarfat) and in the Rhineland—gave room for developing new methods and ways of thought. In this respect, the most attractive academies of the northern French rabbis resembled the schools of the Christian scholastic movement, among which some, in urban contexts, were able to establish themselves as the earliest universities in world history. Favoured by what they had in common, some Jewish and Christian scholars even cooperated in studies on the textual traditions relevant for both religions.

For the shift in emphasis in Jewish scholarship and literary culture, from the Arab world into the Latin West, the Jews in southern Italy played an early and decisive role. They were mediators in a landscape connecting Greek Orthodoxy and Latin Christendom, between the Greek and the Latin languages and traditions. Jews from Rome, too, had their share. The Jews in southern Italy were closely connected to Greek-Byzantine Jewry, not least because of their long tradition (until the eleventh century) of being part of the Byzantine Empire. At the same time, the Jews of Sicily, who continued to speak Arabic long after the Norman conquest of their island, harboured close contacts with the neighbouring, Muslim-ruled Maghreb and with the Iberian Peninsula.

The Jews in Muslim Spain built the foundation for Sephardic Judaism, whose cultural profile came to be dominant in further parts of the Iberian Peninsula as the reconquista advanced. In the new Christian surroundings, the Jews developed new mutual relationships with their brethren in France and in other countries with Latin Christian majorities. Under the influence of the traditional openness characteristic of Spanish Jewry under Islam, the tensions between theology and philosophy remained a major issue for Sephardic scholars, even in the Iberian regions under Christian rule; they were to become a hallmark of Sephardic Jewry.

In the Western world, both in Judaism and among Christians, the divergences that opened up from the twelfth century between mysticism and a rational understanding of religious tenets led to a greater independence of philosophy from theology. This reorientation was favoured by the reception of ancient texts, transmitted and com-

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mented in the Arabic-speaking world by Muslims and Jews, now translated by them, often in cooperation with Christian scholars, in Muslim Spain and in other mediterranean countries. Among these texts the writings of Aristotle, largely unknown in Latin Christendom until then, assumed a special importance. The impact of the translations in the Latin West did not fail to provoke conflict, among Christians as well as among Jews. The controversies culminated in condemnations of the ‘rationalists’ as apostates and heretics. In the Jewish world, confrontation reached its peak on the Iberian Peninsula and in southern France during the thirteenth century. It centered on the positions advanced by Maimonides, the formidable Jewish scholar born 1138 in Cordoba, al-Andalus, who died in 1204 in Fustat/Cairo and was buried in Tiberias on Lake Genezareth. Maimonides was able to draw on a whole range of mediterranean cultural traditions and based himself on the works of Aristotle. Hotly debated among Jewish scholars, the works of Maimonides, or some of them, written in Arabic and later translated into Hebrew and also Latin, were regarded as an authority by a number of very influential Christian scholars such as the Franciscan friar Alexander of Hales (c. 1185–1245) and the Dominicans Albert the Great (c. 1200–28) and Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–74). Other Christian clerics with no less influence tried to stem the rising tide of Aristotelism by means of a ban against reading Aristotle’s writings, but their efforts were to no avail. Among those who tried to mediate between the conflicting positions within the Jewish world, Solomon ibn Adret (c. 1235–c. 1310) won particular merit.13 He lived about one century after Maimonides in Barcelona; in numerous responsa he dealt with inquiries from Jews in France, Germany, Bohemia, Sicily, Morocco, Algeria, Crete, and Palestine.

The Jews in the mediterranean south of France were in many respects mediators between the south and the north, and particularly between the Sephardic Jews and their brethren in northern France (Zarfat). The latter in turn built the basis and backbone of English Jewry, with its history of just over two hundred years in the Anglo-Norman kingdom. Religious and other ties were so close between the Jews in northern France, in England, and in the East-Frankish/German empire that they can be grouped together as ‘Franco-Ashkenazic Jewry’. The religious foundations, and the legal ones inextricably bound up with these, were also shaped in no small measure by Jews from Italy and from other regions in the mediterranean south.

A leading figure of Franco-Ashkenazic Jewry was R. Shelomo b. Isaac, known as Rashi (c. 1040–1105). Following studies in Mainz and Worms, he composed in his native Troyes a commentary on the Babylonian Talmud that is still decisive even today. His commentary on the Bible was to become hugely popular; it was even used by Christians, among them the most famous biblical exegete, Nicholas of Lyra (d. 1349). In Troyes around 1070, Rashi founded an attractive academy. His influence, and that of his students, had a lasting impact on Jewish scholarship in France, England, and Germany during the High Middle Ages.

Within the sphere of the Roman-German Empire the Jewish scholars and communities on the central Rhine—in Mainz, Worms, and Speyer—played a leading role for long periods of time. Their importance is still manifest in the life and achievement of R. Meir b. Baruch, the most important scholar among the German Jews of the later-thirteenth century. Born around 1220 in Worms, R. Meir had studied in France for some time, where he witnessed the burning of the Talmud in 1242. He continued his studies in Würzburg, worked for some decades in Rothenburg on Tauber, returned to his native Worms around 1280, was arrested on his way to Eretz Israel in 1286, and died as a prisoner in Alsace in 1293 (cf. fig. 21). Meir b. Baruch corresponded with R. Solomon ibn Adret in Barcelona, among countless others. One of Meir’s numerous pupils, R. Asher b. Yehiel (b. c. 1250, perhaps in Cologne, d. 1327 in Toledo), went to see the famous scholar in Barcelona in 1304 and won his support, so that just one year later he was able to attain a prominent position in the extremely important Sephardic community of Toledo. His numerous legal decisions show that this ‘wanderer between the worlds’ soon adapted to the traditions in Sepharad; in other ways, too, he found an access to Spanish-Jewish scholarship.

It is characteristic of the close connections between the Rhineland and eastern France that even into the thirteenth century, French was a vernacular among the Jews in the west of the Empire. It was in the Rhineland, too, that the basis for the Yiddish language was shaped from the eleventh century onwards. The characteristic blend of Ashkenazic Judaism later attained religious, legal, and linguistic dominance among the Jews in Eastern-Central and Eastern Europe, as far as Lithuania and Belarus. Influences from South-Eastern Europe, by Jews from the Byzantine and Slavic worlds, are much more difficult to trace; at any rate, they were probably marginal in comparison with the profound ‘Western’ influences on Ashkenazic Jewry. South of the Alps Ashkenazi immigrants, who from the late fourteenth century appeared in upper Italy (and sometimes in central Italy, too), played a decisive role in the shaping of an ‘Italian’ brand of Judaism, which was, however, also marked by strong influences from the south (including ‘papal’ Rome) and from Sephardic Spain.

**Forms of Communication and Organization**

Jews communicated with their non-Jewish surroundings, but also with one another, using the local vernacular, which had a particular relevance for women and children. At the same time, knowledge of the vernacular gave them access to oral narrative traditions and, for some, to written literature. It appears that quite a few Jewish men and women took a lively interest in these narrative traditions as long as their content matter—as in the *Nibelungen* saga, the epics of Perceval, Lancelot, and *Dukus Horant*—was not prominently Christian in character.14 Such literary matter and motifs even

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14 Strauch, *Dukus Horant* (1990); Przybilski, ‘Traces of Cultural Transfer’ (2002); *idem,*
inspired the mural paintings for representative rooms in the houses of leading Jewish families. Indeed, Jews in Ashkenaz as elsewhere do not appear to have differed from Christians when using elements of architecture and decorative painting that were ‘neutral’ from the religious point of view. The culture of the written word was more widespread among the Jews. Here too, however, the difference between Jews and Christians was smaller in the Mediterranean regions than in those of northern Europe, where up until the thirteenth century clerics were almost the only Christians who could read and write more or less well. The Jews’ familiarity with written culture was necessary for reasons of religion and cult, and Jewish communities therefore supported it.

The Jewish community was founded on the local religious congregation, which was also a mainstay of Jewish education. Jewish rites, however, were not only performed in the synagogue but also in the Jewish family. Here Jewish women had a major role in religious and ritual life; in some important aspects their role was even decisive. Here lie the broad foundations for the considerable authority Jewish women enjoyed, but also for their legal position. Religious education and literary scholarship, which conferred supreme honour and respect, were most effectively passed on in the family and by its help. Families engaged in scholarly activities over generations, and it was they who passed on the necessary libraries from one generation to the next. These factors also explain why families who played a leading role in their communities also brought forth so many scholars.

One of the long-term consequences of ancient urban civilization was that the larger Jewish communities in the Mediterranean, both under Muslim and under Christian rule, were located in towns and cities that were usually much more populous than those in the northern regions of Europe. The membership of the Jewish community, too, was larger. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews were active in a wide array of economic pursuits in the lands around the Mediterranean Sea. In some regions, such as in Sicily, these pursuits included agriculture but excluded, at least for long periods of time, moneylending. It follows that in terms of prosperity, too, the social differences among the wealthier and poorer Jews were quite similar to those prevailing among the Christian majority. Poor relief had a high status in Jewish ethics, it committed individual Jews as well as Jewish households and families, even the synagogue and the community as a whole. It is another field of parallels between Jews and Christians in their common places of residence and thus also between their respective communities.


In the northern regions, where Jews generally settled later than in the south, the range of their economic pursuits was narrower for many and diverse reasons. For one thing, both the urban populations as a whole and the Jewish communities were much smaller, so that there was little room for a division of labour among the Jews and within their communities. In some typically urban sectors of the economy, Jews were better qualified than most Christians, due to their high degree of literacy, their continuous ties (reinforced by religious traditions) with the Mediterranean, and all the experience resulting from them. These were important factors for trading high-quality goods from the Mediterranean and for the monetary business inextricably bound up with trade, which reached a much higher level of sophistication in the Mediterranean lands. They also applied for medicine and the related fields of the natural sciences: Significantly, the earliest medical universities emerged, again, in southern Italy and southern France.

Due to the medieval monetary situation, but also for reasons inherent to the commercial activity that are by no means confined to the medieval period, there were shifting boundaries between trade, investment, and moneylending. According to the sources that have come down to us, it seems that from the thirteenth century onwards among the Jews in the northern regions, including Germany, trade receded in relation to moneylending. This shift in emphasis, which certainly occurred with regional variations, was favoured by the rising demand for ready cash in a growing market economy. A proper evaluation of these processes would need to take account of the fact that, by and large, only the loan of major sums of money produced source material with a sufficient chance of survival, whereas few signs have remained in the written heritage of northern Europe of trading activity, be it among Jews or among Christians. We also have to consider that our knowledge of the broader range of economic pursuits in the south is based on types of sources—such as notarial deeds—‘produced’ not at all, or in much smaller quantities, in the north, and even less preserved. Hence the prevailing opinion, even among scholars, that by the thirteenth century the Jews north of the Mediterranean only practiced moneylending, forbidden to Christians (yet practised by many of them), is very questionable. From the late-fourteenth century, there is increasing evidence in the growing corpus of source material from the ‘German’ Empire north of the Alps that Jews engaged in a wide range of economic activities. Despite the fact that there were now many more Christian doctors in these regions, too, evidence of Jewish men and women who practised medicine—including ophthalmologists, dentists, and also veterinary doctors—is also much more frequent. Other economic activities pursued by Jews ranged, with regional variations, from trade in wine, corn, cloth, vestments and medicines, through craft activities as bookbinders, dyers, leather workers, glass and window makers, tailors, painters (e.g., of playing cards), dice makers, gold- and silversmiths, armourers, down to ‘engineering’

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17 To cite just one example for the wealth of information contained in these registers, cf. Burns, Jews in the Notarial Culture (1996).
work in mining, milling, and other complicated technical fields. Once in a while we find a Jewish printer, though this trade is much more often found south of the Alps, especially among members of Jewish families who came from Ashkenaz.\footnote{Cf. the evidence compiled in Germania Judaica, iii, pt 3 (2003), index, pp. 2556–8, 2570 and 2589; also, Toch, Juden im mittelalterlichen Reich (1998), pp. 96–100.}

Even if the Jews in northern Europe, for some periods of time, made their livings predominantly by lending out money at interest, this did not as such exclude them, since their activity brought about contacts with a great many members of the Gentile majority. Jewish men and women were by no means only involved in large-scale credit operations, they also lent out small and smallest amounts of money, so that less well-off, and even poor, Christian women and men were among their clients. The Jewish creditors themselves were, incidentally, in very different socio-economic positions. Attempts to close off the traditional urban quarters of the Jews against their will or to resettle them in remote quarters were not successful until the later-fifteenth century, and even then only in some places. The ‘ghetto’ was an institution of the Early Modern period, when it was more widespread but by no means universally enforced. Similar observations could be made about the enforcement of decrees demanding that the Jews wear distinctive signs on their clothing.

For the centuries commonly called medieval, and especially for the German lands, it was typical that Jews lived around their synagogue and other community institutions, in a lane or quarter centrally located in the town or city, near the urban hub of the market place and/or not far from the main church. Thus, the synagogue and church—ritual centres of Judaism and Christianity— and the Jewish and Christian centres of public life, were often located in close neighbourhood. Encounters between Jews and Christians were by no means out of the way, and quite obviously they were frequent enough.

Different patterns obtained in the Muslim cities. Here the public streets and places had but a minor relevance compared with the living quarters ruled by large family clans; to some extent, the Jewish residential areas reflected these differences. Hence Jewish community life in the Muslim territories of Europe was also marked by the pre-eminence of certain individuals and families, more than this was the case in the regions with Christian majorities. But in the countries under Christian rule, too, the organization and functions of the Jewish communities show significant variations. As a rule, Jewish communities were most effective, both internally and in relation to the outside world, in those regions where this was also true for Christian communities, first and foremost, the town communes. Among these areas in the Latin West, the Roman-German Empire in the long run offered the best conditions for a flourishing community life among Christians and Jews. Here the constitutions of Jewish and Christian communities had most in common, and here the relationships between the two communities on the local level were closest. Jews were most common here to gain the legal status of a local citizen or burgher. The safeguards by the Christian
The commune implied in this status did not, however, always save the lives and goods of the Jews from persecution or from other grave injustice.

Conclusions

The increasing number of atrocities against Jews committed by Christians during the later Middle Ages should not blind our eyes to the fact that such atrocities by no means occurred everywhere and at all times. On the whole, relations between Christians and Jews were less strained in the mediterranean regions of the Latin West than in the northern areas. There were some regions and not a few places where Jews could live for centuries without being subject to the violence of Christians, often for longer periods than during the Modern Era. These more or less peaceful relations were less likely to find a way into the sources that have come down to us, than the unspeakable atrocities committed by Christians against the Jews on other occasions. The peaceful conditions usually have to be deduced indirectly from Christian and Jewish sources.

Despite their relatively small numbers, Jews had an important share in the history of Europe, in the heartlands of European civilization: for centuries in the mediterranean and for admittedly shorter periods in the northern lands. The Jewish contribution to European history during the medieval period was more comprehensive and more pronounced than the traces they left in the first centuries of the Modern Era; in some important aspects, it even stands up to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Irrespective of these convictions, it can be said that in the many-shaped relations between the members of the three monotheistic faiths, and in particular between Christians and Jews, we find expressions of a wide range of attitudes and modes of behaviour, allowing for deep insights into the nature of human beings, into what is human and what is inhumane. Over the centuries, encounters between men and women of different faiths have left deep traces in the history of Europe, and decisive marks on its present appearance. No prophetic gift is needed to foresee that these conditions will determine our future in Europe and beyond for long periods to come. In any case, the Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages are an inextricable part of European history, memory, and conscience.

trans.: C.C.
FURTHER READING


RESUMEN

La historia europea ha estado marcada durante siglos por el encuentro de hombres de creencias distintas, en particular de judíos y cristianos, que han contribuido en gran medida a conferir a dicha parte del mundo su actual aspecto. Los intentos por escribir la Historia de la Edad Media europea sin la Historia judía no pueden ser más que incompletos y deben ser revisados.

A pesar de las tendencias al «aislamiento», hubo estrechos vínculos entre judaísmo, cristianismo e Islam. La expansión del Islam por amplias regiones del contorno del Mediterráneo lleva a los soberanos musulmanes a otorgar a judíos y cristianos un estatuto que les permitirá, mediante el pago de un impuesto per capita y dentro de un marco estrictamente definido, practicar su religión dentro de sus familias y comunidades con una cierta autonomía.

Para caracterizar las relaciones entre la religión judía y la cristiana, más que la imagen de la madre y la hija, viene mejor sin duda utilizar la de dos hermanas. La tradición judía, recogida en el «Antiguo» Testamento, estaba en la Edad Media profundamente anclada en la conciencia cristiana. Proximidad y contraste caracterizan también la interpretación del tiempo y el espacio en ambas religiones; las dos comunidades comparten el mismo polo de identificación religiosa y política: Jerusalén, la ciudad santa.

La idea todavía bastante extendida de que los judíos habrían sido por su cultura «extranjeros» respecto a su medio circundante se asienta en una confusión abusiva de la religión y la cultura. Los judíos tomaban parte de diversas maneras de las tradiciones de las grandes regiones de Europa. Las diferencias entre el mundo mediterráneo y el resto de regiones de Europa se reflejan en las divisiones (estructuras) específicamente judías que surgieron después de los siglos XI y XII tanto en el plano de la religión como en el de la erudición.

El culto celebrado en común era la base de la comunidad judía. Pero ese culto celebrado en la sinagoga lo era también en el seno de las familias judías. Ahí es donde las mujeres judías tenían que representar un importante papel en la vida religiosa, así como un papel decisivo en ciertos ámbitos esenciales.

Durante la Edad Media, los judíos de regiones mediterráneas se dedicaban a un amplio abanico de oficios. En las zonas septentrionales, donde el poblamiento judío es más tardío, los tipos de actividad son menos variados. Los judíos vivían, por lo general, agrupados en torno a su sinagoga y a otros edificios comunitarios en las calles y barrios del centro de las ciudades, junto a puntos neurálgicos como la plaza del mercado y/o las iglesias más importantes.
The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages
(Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries)

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