

## The Jews in Medieval Christian Europe

### *Mediterranean Jewries Under Christian Rule*

The heartland of the Byzantine empire did not fall to the Arabs in the seventh century, nor did the Muslim armies in Spain succeed in conquering France and Italy. The Jewries of these lands remained under Christian rule throughout the Middle Ages. For the Jews in the cities of the Byzantine empire (Asia Minor, Greece, southern Italy), occasional periods of persecution and forced conversion alternated with periods of relative prosperity and security. (An example of the latter was the first part of the eleventh century, when the Byzantine empire had some military successes.) On the whole, the Byzantine Jews in Greece and Asia Minor did not live under conditions conducive to exceptional Jewish intellectual creativity, and they did not produce scholars and philosophers who exerted an impact on Jewish thought elsewhere in the Middle Ages.

The situation in southern Italy and Sicily was different. There, the Jews of such cities as Bari, Otranto, Oria, Venosa, and Brindisi maintained close economic ties with Arab lands and were an important channel for the transplantation of Jewish learning to Christian Europe farther north, including elements of old Palestinian Jewish culture that had been submerged by that of the Babylonian Jews. Hebrew books were composed in southern Italy from the ninth century on,<sup>21</sup> rabbinic writings flourished, and Jews were active in the cosmopolitan scientific and philosophical circles that made this region important in European intellectual history under Byzantine, Norman, German, and French rulers through the thirteenth century. The Jewry of Rome, which has had a continuous history from the first century BCE down to the present, also became a center of rabbinic studies in the eleventh century.<sup>22</sup> In the Middle Ages, only a small number of Jews lived in northern Italy until about 1300, but southern France (the area known as Provence, which included Languedoc and northern Catalonia) contained old Jewish settlements that were to play an important role in Jewish cultural life after the decline of Muslim Spain.

It was common for an area of the Jewish diaspora of the Middle Ages to have its own liturgical rite and sometimes its own distinct Jewish dialect of the local language. The best known of these regional Jewries were Spain (the Sephardim), southern France (Provençal Jews), Italy (the Italyani), Greece (the Romaniyots), North Africa and the Middle East (Arabic-speaking Jews sometimes called Musta'rabim), Iran (Judeo-Persian and, in the eastern Caucasus, Judeo-Tat). North of the Alps a new branch of Jewish culture was forming in the late eighth century—one that was to develop unique features and have far-ranging influence

in Jewish history: the Ashkenazic Jewry of Germany and northern France.

### *The Rise of Ashkenazic Jewry*

The development of Ashkenazic Jewry took place in the special circumstances of early medieval Christendom in Western Europe. (The place name *Ashkenaz*, applied by the Jews in the Middle Ages to northern France and western Germany, is from Gen. 10:3.) After the Germanic invasions that brought an end to the Western Roman empire, city life dwindled almost to a vanishing point and central government was ineffectual. The devolution of political power into the hands of local lords was reversed, for a time, by a powerful monarchy brought into being by the early Carolingian rulers of France—especially by Charlemagne (742–814), who revived the imperial Roman title in the West and amassed a considerable empire extending into central Europe. But a half century after Charlemagne's death, the Carolingian realm broke up into three kingdoms, which in turn were further fragmented, so that early Ashkenazic Jews were faced with a society almost completely agrarian and increasingly feudal.

Jewish merchants in northern France and the Rhineland in the Carolingian period were economic pioneers, treated well because of their trading connections with the Mediterranean and the East. A testimonial to their far-flung activities has been preserved in the descriptions by



Representation of Charlemagne, from a manuscript of the *Song of Roland*. During his reign Jewish merchants began to play an important role in the economy of northern Europe.

tenth-century Arab geographers of Jewish merchant groups called Radanites. (The etymology of the word is obscure.) From their headquarters in France the Radanites crossed sparsely settled eastern Europe, passing through the steppes of what would later be Russia, in order to reach the Middle East (an alternate route was across the Mediterranean and North Africa), and from there visited India and China. Perhaps one of these enterprising businessmen was a certain Isaac the Jew, sent by Charlemagne with a deputation to the Abbasid caliph. (Several years later Isaac brought back an elephant as a gift from the caliph to Charlemagne.) Charlemagne's son, Louis the Pious (778-840), placed the economic endeavors and property of the Jewish traders under royal protection, ignoring the criticism of Agobard, bishop of Lyons, who wrote several attacks on the Jews. In the tenth and eleventh centuries Jewish merchants were on excellent terms with kings and barons in northern France and Germany. Although the share of the Ashkenazic Jews in international trade declined toward the end of this period, their activities in regional and local trade continued. Jewish communities soon appeared in many growing urban centers, such as the county of Champagne (Troyes and other cities) and along the Rhine River (Mainz, Worms, Speyer, Cologne). In 1084 the bishop of Speyer issued the following proclamation:

In the name of the holy and indivisible Trinity, when I, Rüdiger, also called Huozmann, Bishop of Speyer, changed the town of Speyer into a city, I thought that I would add to the honor of our place by bringing in Jews. Accordingly, I located them outside of the community and habitation of the other citizens, and that they might not readily be disturbed by the insolence of the populace, I surrounded them with a wall. Their place of habitation I had acquired in a just manner, the hill partly with money, partly by exchange; the valley I had received from [some] heirs as a gift. That place, I say, I gave over to them on the condition that they would pay three pounds and a half of the money of Speyer annually for the use of the [monastery] brothers. Within their dwelling place and outside thereof, up to the harbor of the ships, and in the harbor itself, I granted them full permission to change gold and silver, to buy and sell anything they pleased, and that same permission I gave them throughout the state. In addition, I gave them out of the property of the church a burial place with hereditary rights. I also granted the following rights: If any stranger Jew lodge with them (temporarily), he shall be free from tax. Further, just as the city governor adjudicates between the citizens, so the head synagogue officer is to decide every case that may arise between Jews or against them. But if, by chance, he cannot decide, the case shall be brought before the bishop and his chamberlains. Night watches, guards, fortifications, they shall provide only for their own district, the guards, indeed, in common with the servants. Nurses and servants they shall be permitted to have from among us. Slaughtered meat which, according to their law, they are not permitted to eat,

they can sell to Christians, and Christians may buy it. Finally, as the crowning mark of kindness, I have given them laws better than the Jewish people has in any city of the German empire.

Lest any of my successors diminish this favor and privilege, or force them to pay greater tribute, on the plea that they acquired their favorable status unjustly, and did not receive it from a bishop, I have left this document as a testimony of the above-mentioned favors. And that the remembrance of this matter may last through the centuries, I have corroborated it under my hand and seal, as may be seen below.<sup>23</sup>

The early Ashkenazic Jewish communities were small and homogeneous. Jewish craftsmen and artisans, a widespread segment of Mediterranean Jewry, did not emigrate to northern Europe; moreover, once the system of Christian artisan guilds was established, Jews were effectively barred from these occupations. Besides trade, another occupation held by Jews was the growing of grapes and making of wine (a necessity for Jewish ritual); Jewish ownership of vineyards was common in France. The Ashkenazic Jews were not trained in the military skills of the feudal nobility; however, they carried arms and knew how to use them in defense. The Jews of each town constituted an independent, self-governing, sociolegal entity. (The term *kahal* or *kehillah*, which designates the community as a whole, is also used for the elected board that ran the affairs of the community.) Unlike the Jewries of Muslim lands, the Ashkenazic *kehillot* had no professional bureaucracy and no equivalent of an exilarch or *nagid* appointed or confirmed by the government to serve as their official leader: Each Ashkenazic kahal established its own special regulations (*takkanot*) and jealously guarded its prerogatives—even against Jews of nearby cities. The judicial court of each kahal retained the rights accorded the ancient Sanhedrin and the high courts of the exilarchs and geonate in Babylonia; the local kahal courts enforced their jurisdiction and rulings through the threat of excommunication (*herem*), which would, if carried out, effectively deprive the Jew of social intercourse with his coreligionists. The kahal system of Jewish self-government was the Ashkenazic adaptation to the decentralized power structure of feudal society.

Among the early Ashkenazim, biblical and talmudic studies were pursued with exceptional intensity. Flourishing centers of rabbinic scholarship appear in the tenth century in the Rhineland cities of Mainz and Worms, and soon afterwards in northern France at Troyes and Sens. At first, Ashkenazic scholarship was confined mainly to oral discussion. The most famous of the early teachers was Rabbenu Gershom of Mainz “the Light of the Exile”; among his *takkanot* and legal opinions that have survived in the responsa literature is the responsum definitively prohibiting polygamy among Ashkenazic Jews.



"Rashi Chapel" of the synagogue of Worms; a photograph taken before its destruction by the Nazis. (Photographic Archive of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, Frank J. Darmstaedter.)

Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes (1040–1105), known by his acronym as Rashi, was the first major literary figure of Ashkenazic Jewry—and one of the greatest. His commentaries on the Bible and Talmud became fundamental texts of Ashkenazic Jewish education. Although drawing on the midrashic literature, Rashi's exegesis of the Bible emphasizes his understanding of the plain meaning of the Scriptures, an effective presentation of the Jewish view of the Bible against the medieval Christian emphasis on allegory. (Later, some of Rashi's biblical interpretations were used by medieval Christian exegetes.) Rashi's Talmud commentary is a masterpiece of conciseness and clarity, opening up the extremely condensed talmudic text to the average Jewish youth attending one of the schools that had been established in most Ashkenazic communities.

In the next generations after Rashi, the analysis of talmudic law by the Ashkenazic Jews reached a height of intellectual subtlety and independence. Advanced talmudic scholars in northern France and in Germany (some were members of Rashi's family) introduced new deductive methods and critical insights into their analysis of talmudic argumentation and halakhah. The work of these men, the *tosafists* (from *Tosafot*, "additions," i.e., additional comments and elaborations on the Talmud), virtually constituted a new Franco-German Talmud created out of the

text of the Babylonian Talmud. Ashkenazic Jews also composed religious poetry modeled on the *piyyutim* (liturgical poems, with elaborate allusions to the midrash) of fifth- and sixth-century Palestine.

The Ashkenazic ideal, with its emphasis on talmudic learning for every man, is quite in contrast with the Sephardic admiration for universal culture, the study of science and philosophy, and the writing of secular as well as religious Hebrew poetry patterned on Arabic literary forms. The difference between the two Jewries reflects their different environments: Muslim Spain at the height of its cultural splendor and feudal Europe just on the verge of intellectual renaissance. Indeed, the two Jewries had little contact at this time.

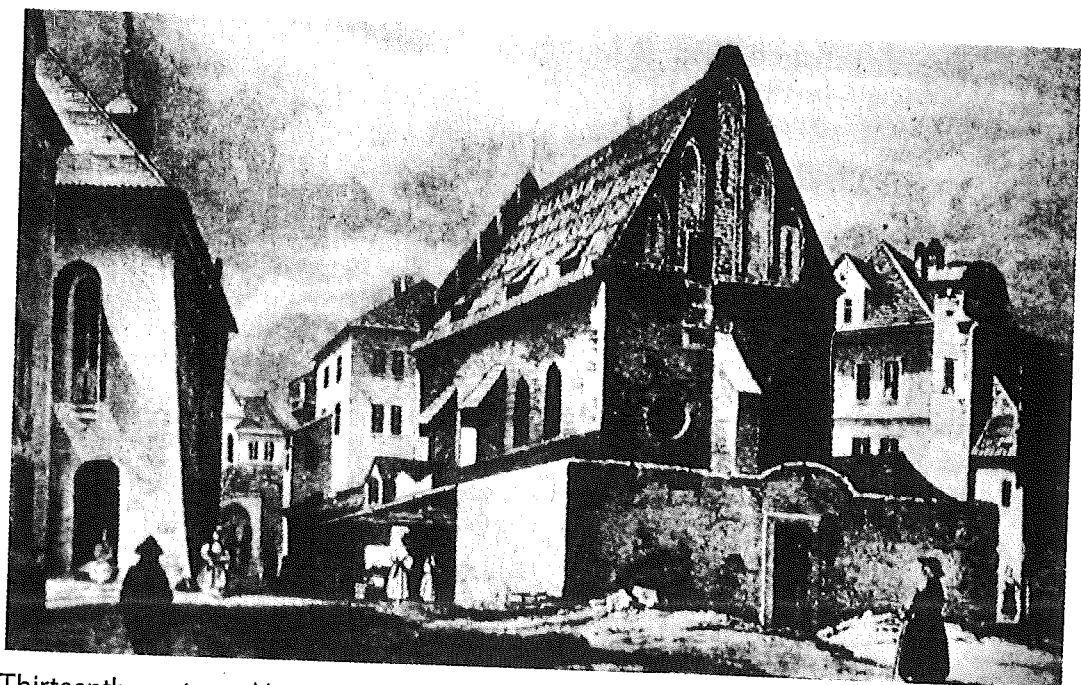
### *The First Crusade and Its Aftermath; The Negative Image of the Jew in Medieval Christendom*

Although even during their period of greatest security, Ashkenazic Jews faced occasional difficulties from fanatic churchmen and brutal lords, mob violence against them erupted only at the end of the eleventh century. In November 1095, Pope Urban II proclaimed the First Crusade at Clermont in southeastern France and triggered a widespread exultation, especially among the knights of northern France, for the salvation and booty that would be the reward of those who participated in reconquering the holy land from the Turks. Even before the official Christian armies assembled, gangs of would-be crusaders set out through the Rhineland, attacking such unbelievers as were to be found there. In the late spring and summer of 1096, the Jewries of one city after another were besieged, pillaged, and slaughtered, unless they would consent to baptism. (That baptism could save their lives is an indication that they were perceived as religious enemies and not as aliens.) Where local bishops acted quickly and effectively (e.g., in Speyer) the Jews survived. In some places, even though the Jews defended themselves, crusaders and locals exterminated most of the Jewish community (Worms, Mainz). The supercharged religious atmosphere had its parallel among the Ashkenazic Jews, many of whom were eager to die as martyrs for the sake of God (an act called *kiddush ha-Shem*, sanctification of the divine name), rather than save their lives and property by conversion. (Out of this emotional crucible came an Ashkenazic pietism that will be described in Chapter 9.)

The massacres of 1096, though they revealed the vulnerability of Jews in the Christian environment, did not result in a change in the propitious Jewish legal status. The violence had not been instigated by the authorities and was not condoned by the emperor (Henry IV). Jews who had converted to Christianity under duress were permitted to return to Judaism. In 1103 the emperor took the step of extending to Jews

the protections accorded to the clergy. Attacks on them were answerable to the emperor, although this meant that Jews, like priests, did not have the right to carry weapons, and that they became even more dependent on the good graces of individual rulers.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there occurred an important shift in the economic activities of the Ashkenazic Jews—into moneylending. The move into moneylending by many of the Jews of Germany, northern France, and England (the settlement of French Jews in England occurs in the wake of the Norman conquest of 1066) was a result of the growing monopoly of Christian merchant guilds, which forced Jews out of trade, and also a result of the great demand for loans accompanying the rise of a money economy in Western Europe. Jews were never the only moneylenders in Europe; there were groups of Christians in this occupation too, such as the Lombards (as the northern Christians called the Italian bankers), the Cahorsins from southern France, and the clerical order of the Templars. But the Jews had the advantage of standing outside the legal jurisdiction and control of the Church at a time when the Church was opposed to the making of profits on loans.<sup>24</sup> There was great competition for loans from Jews, one of the few groups that had liquid assets, amassed when they were merchants. The efforts of the Church to abolish usury could not touch the Jews as long as they were supported by the barons and the kings. Indeed, the secular rulers became silent partners in the business of moneylending, taking their share of the profits in the form of various regular taxes and extraordinary exactions.



Thirteenth-century Altneuschul in Prague, oldest extant synagogue building in Europe after World War II. (Courtesy of Zionist Archives, New York.)

Nevertheless, moneylending did not increase the popularity of the Jews in Europe, especially among those who could not pay back the loans with accumulated interest, and it made them more vulnerable in the long run.

Economic motives can be detected in the persecution of Jews in the later Middle Ages, but there was always the religious factor: For some Christians the mere physical presence of Judaism posed a subtle but dangerous threat to the spiritual health of society. The anti-Judaism of Christian Europe, which became more evident in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, functioned on two levels: popular superstition and official Church doctrine. On the popular level was the stereotype of the Jew as a deliberate disbeliever with demonic qualities. First appearing in the English town of Norwich in 1144 was the accusation that the Jews murdered Christian children at Passover to use their blood for making matzah. This "blood libel" crops up repeatedly in European history, down to the twentieth century. Important early blood libels occurred in the French city of Blois in 1171 and in the English city of Lincoln in 1255. Echoes of the legend of Hugh of Lincoln are found more than a century later in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In "The Prioress's Tale" Chaucer depicts the Jews as being infuriated by a young Christian, who wanders through their quarter singing a Christian hymn:

*The Serpent, our first foe, who has his nest  
Of hornets in Jews' hearts, puffed up and said,  
"O Hebrew people, is it for the best  
That a mere boy, just as he likes, should tread  
Your street, and bring contempt upon your head,  
And sing to such a purpose, for a cause  
That is against the reverence of your laws?" . . .  
From this time on the cursed Jews conspired  
This innocent boy out of the world to chase.  
A murderer for their purposes they hired  
Who in an alley had a secret place,  
And as he went by at his childish pace,  
This Jew seized on him, and held him fast, and slit  
His neck, and threw his body in a pit.  
Into a privy they threw the boy, I say,  
A place in which these Jews purged their entrails.  
O cursed people, unchanged since Herod's day,  
What think you that your foul design avails?*

When, through a miracle, the supposed crime is revealed,

*The magistrate at once put every Jew  
To death with torment and with shamefulness.<sup>25</sup>*



In most cases the rumor of the murder by Jews of a Christian child was accompanied by the expropriation of Jewish property, the rumor often being spread by those who wanted the property. Another important element of the anti-Jewish folklore of Christian Europe that appeared about the same time was the accusation that the Jews conspired to steal and pierce the wafer of the Host in order to torture the body of Jesus.<sup>26</sup>

The blood libel and host desecration myths never received backing from the popes, who from time to time were persuaded to deny publicly the veracity of these charges. The official anti-Jewish ideology was concerned with the discrepancy between the Jews' prosperity and the lowly status it was felt they should occupy. The most important pope to take a stand critical of Jewish moneylending was Innocent III (pope between 1198 and 1216). In a letter to the King of France in 1205 he wrote:

Though it does not displease God, but is even acceptable to Him, that the Jewish Dispersion should live and serve under Catholic kings and Christian princes until such times as their remnant shall be saved, . . . nevertheless, such [princes] are exceedingly offensive to the sight of the Divine Majesty who prefer the sons of the crucifiers, against whom to this day the blood cries to the Father's ears, to the heirs of the Crucified Christ. . . . Know

Pope Innocent III, one of the most powerful popes of the Middle Ages and major proponent of restrictions on Jewish status. From a later engraving.



then that the news has reached us to the effect that in the French kingdom the Jews have become so insolent that by means of their vicious usury, through which they extort not only usury but even usury on usury, they appropriate ecclesiastical goods and Christian possessions. Thus seems to be fulfilled among the Christians that which the prophet bewailed in the case of Jews, saying "Our heritage has been turned over to strangers, our houses to outsiders." Moreover, although it was enacted in the Lateran Council that Jews are not permitted to have Christian servants in their homes either under pretext of rearing their children, nor for domestic service, nor for any other reasons whatever, but that those who presume to live with them shall be excommunicate, yet they do not hesitate to have Christian servants and nurses, with whom, at times, they work such abominations as are more fitting that you should punish than proper that we should specify.

Moreover, although the same Council decided to admit Christian evidence against Jews in law-suits that arise between the two, since they use Jewish witnesses against Christians, and although it decreed that whoever preferred the Jews to the Christians in this matter should be anathematized, yet they have to this day been given the preference in the French realm to such an extent that Christian witnesses are not believed against them, while they are admitted to testimony against Christians. Thus, if the Christians to whom they have loaned money on usury, bring Christian witnesses about the facts in the case, [the Jews] are given more credence because of the document which the indiscreet debtor had left with them through negligence or carelessness, than are the Christians through the witnesses produced. . . .<sup>27</sup>

Church property was falling into Jewish hands as collateral for defaulted loans, and the Church was losing its tithes. All this was, in Innocent III's view, contrary to Christianity's conception of the proper place of the Jewish people. The doctrine that Innocent III set out to enforce was that Jews have a right to survive, but only in perpetual servitude:

The Lord made Cain a wanderer and a fugitive over the earth, but set a mark upon him, . . . lest any finding him should slay him. Thus the Jews, against whom the blood of Jesus Christ calls out, although they ought not to be killed, lest the Christian people forget the Divine Law, yet as wanderers ought they to remain upon the earth, until their countenance be filled with shame and they seek the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord. That is why blasphemers of the Christian name ought not to be aided by Christian princes to oppress the servants of the Lord, but ought rather be forced into the servitude of which they made themselves deserving when they raised sacrilegious hands against Him Who had come to confer true liberty upon them, thus calling down His blood upon themselves and upon their children.<sup>28</sup>

Innocent III's Jewish policy was also related to his efforts to establish his authority over the secular rulers of Europe and to extirpate Christian heresy, especially in southern France. (On the crusade he proclaimed