

D. Jacoby

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF CONSTANTINOPLE FROM THE KOMNENAN TO THE PALAIOLOGAN PERIOD*

The Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela has left us a brief, yet invaluable account of the thriving Jewish community he encountered in Constantinople in the early 1160s¹. Some forty years later, in 1203-1204, the Latin armies participating in the Fourth Crusade besieged and eventually captured the Byzantine capital, which suffered severe hardship. Large sections of the city were burned down, including the Jewish quarter, and the Latin conquest was followed by a massive exodus of the Greek population². The fate of the Jews of Constantinople in the following decades has hitherto remained unknown. However, an overlooked testimony in an anti-Jewish work sheds some light on their presence in the city during the period of Latin rule, which lasted from 1204 to 1261. It is imperative to consider it within the context of Constantinople's evolution from the Komnenan to the Palaiologan period.

Jews resided in the Empire's capital since the fifth century and, despite fragmentary evidence, appear to have continuously lived there up to the Fourth Crusade. At an unknown date before the eleventh century, the imperial authorities began to enforce upon them a policy of residential segregation motivated by religious considerations. About 1044 they tightened this policy by removing the Jews from their quarter, located within the city walls, to the suburb of Galata or Pera across the Golden Horn, where they still resided at the time of Benjamin of Tudela's visit³. Pera had then a semi-rural character, which it still retained by the early fourteenth century⁴. Yet the Jewish quarter appears to have been densely covered with wooden houses, as implied by the swift spreading of the fire that destroyed it in 1203⁵. The quarter extended on the slope of Pera facing Constantinople, in the vicinity of the tower on the shore to which the chain closing the Golden Horn was attached⁶. This location is indirectly confirmed by the activity of the Jewish tanners mentioned by Benjamin. Since they needed water for the exercise of their craft, they must have resided in the lower section of the suburb. Benjamin ascribed the animosity of the Greeks of Pera toward the Jews to these tanners, who by spilling into the streets the malodorous

© D. Jacoby, 1998

* I wish to thank the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung for a *Forschungspreis* enabling me to carry out research for this study, and my friend and colleague Peter Schreiner for inviting me to the Byzantine Department, University of Cologne.

¹ M. N. Adler (ed.), *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, (London, 1907) [hereafter: BT], Hebrew text pp. 14-17; trans., pp. 1-14. The dating of Benjamin's travels within the Empire to the early 1160s will be discussed elsewhere.

² For details, see below.

³ See D. Jacoby, "Les quartiers juifs de Constantinople à l'époque byzantine," *Byzantion*, 37 (1967), pp. 168-189, repr. in idem, *Société et démographie à Byzance et en Roumanie latine*, (London, 1975), no. 2.

⁴ See G. I. Brătianu, *Recherches sur le commerce génois dans la mer Noire au XIIIe siècle*, (Paris, 1929), pp. 92-93; M. Balard, *La Roumanie génoise (XIIe - début du XVIe siècle)*, (Rome, 1978), vol. 1, pp. 184-185; Jacoby, "Les quartiers juifs," p. 186; idem, "Les Génois dans l'Empire byzantin: citoyens, sujets et protégés (1261-1453)," *La Storia dei Genovesi*, 9 (1989), pp. 268 and 284, n. 120.

⁵ On this fire, see Jacoby, "Les quartiers juifs," pp. 176, 178, 188 and n. 4. An earlier fire, in 1077, had also inflicted heavy damage upon the Jewish quarter: *ibid.*, p. 178.

⁶ See Jacoby, "Les quartiers juifs," pp. 175-178, 185-187, and the plan of Pera in Balard, *La Roumanie génoise*, vol. 1, p. 189, on which the tower is marked as "château de Galata."