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THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF CONSTANTINOPLE
FROM THE KOMNENAN TO THE PALAILOGAN 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 1160s. 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 population. The fate of the Jews of Constantinople in the follow­
ing 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 visit.3
Pera had then a semi-rural character, which it still retained by the early fourteenth century. 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 1203. 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 attached. 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

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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.
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
Romanie génoise (XIIe - début du XVIe siècle), (Rome, 1978), vol. 1, pp. 184-185; Jacoby, "Les quartiers juifs," p. 186; idem,
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.
on which the tower is marked as "château de Galata."