INTRODUCTION

The Jews of medieval northern France occupy a distinguished niche in the long and rich history of their people. They constituted an important element in early Ashkenazic Jewry, the biological source of the major portion of modern Jewish population. They were highly innovative in fashioning for themselves useful—although not always popular—economic roles in a hostile environment and in elaborating effective techniques for ordering their internal affairs, legacies which they passed on to their descendants. Perhaps their greatest renown lies in the intellectual sphere. A number of the most significant scholarly creations of medieval northern French Jewry are to this day vibrant staples of traditional Jewish curricula.

All this was effected under most difficult circumstances. Medieval French society was in a state of unremitting struggle, slowly lifting itself out of chaos and striving towards greater power and more civilized living. While the Jews were accepted for the contribution they might make towards this struggle, they were almost always viewed with suspicion or with outright animosity. All aspects of Jewish life were hedged about with serious constraints, some unarticulated and some carefully formalized. Against this background of antipathy and limitation, the achievements of these Jews loom all the more impressive.
MEDIEVAL JEWRY IN NORTHERN FRANCE

While much of the excitement generated by the study of medieval northern French Jewry flows from this sense of creative adaptation to trying conditions, there is also a sobering side to this history. For ultimately all efforts, both Jewish and non-Jewish, proved unavailing. The attempt to mold viable options for Jewish existence in northern France failed. By the thirteenth century ominous signs were in evidence; all major facets of Jewish life were being increasingly constricted by pressures from a number of directions. In 1306, with terrifying suddenness, the curtain dropped.

An account of medieval northern French Jewry must thus include both the successes and failures of the French and the Jews in fostering Jewish presence, the conditions under which the Jews lived, and Jewish achievement within the limits set forth. Such a depiction is of interest first and foremost to the student of Jewish history. It has meaning, however, for the historian of medieval France as well, since it highlights aspects of French life from an unusual perspective. Features of medieval French society reflected in majority sources take on new qualities when seen from the minority point of view. Finally, this story is of significance to all who share a concern for investigating the capacity of human groups to respond creatively to the limitations imposed on them by the circumstances of their existence.

Despite the undisputed importance of this community and the availability of a wide range of source materials, there has been no concerted effort to reconstruct its history. The development of northern French Jewry during the Middle Ages has been discussed in general Jewish histories, in broad surveys of French Jewish life throughout the ages, and in studies of medieval France; it has also been mentioned in biographical and literary accounts of key intellectual figures. This sig-


2 The standard surveys of French Jewish history are Léon Berman, Histoire des Juifs de France des origines à nos jours (Paris, 1937); Mosche Catane, Des Croisades à nos jours (Paris, 1956); Simon Schwarzfuchs, Brève histoire des Juifs de France (Paris, 1956); and Bernhard Blumenkranz, ed., Histoire des Juifs en France (Toulouse, 1972). None of these treats medieval northern French Jewry in great depth.


4 See, for example, Henri Gross, Gallia Judaica (Paris, 1897); Ernest Renan, Les rabbins français du commencement du quatorzième siècle (Paris, 1877); idem, Les écrivains juifs
Areas of Northern France Included in this Study
significant Jewry has not, however, been accorded the separate monographic treatment which it so obviously merits.

The sources for such a study vary widely. For the early period, there is very little documentary evidence. There are occasional references to Jews in Christian histories or polemics. Jewish sources, while not copious, are useful; particularly noteworthy are the random chronicles and the rabbinic responsa.

In general, as we proceed into the thirteenth century the volume of evidence mounts. Documentary materials in particular increase substantially. Beginning with the reign of Philip Augustus, royal records were kept with stricter care. By the time of Philip the Fair, there is documentation that far exceeds that of any of his predecessors. The records left by lesser rulers and by private institutions show similar expansion during the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Much of this material has now been carefully edited and published. Although this evidence still leaves gaps in our knowledge, its utilization can enhance enormously our understanding of many aspects of Jewish life.

Curiously, at the point when non-Jewish documentary records begin to proliferate, Jewish sources diminish. Much of the decline can be directly attributed to the ecclesiastical-royal assault on the Talmud and related literature, which resulted immediately in the destruction of much important material and ultimately in the long-range attrition of Jewish academic life in northern France. When the further upheavals occasioned by the expulsion of 1306 are considered, the lack of later Jewish sources becomes even more understandable. The result of this dearth of Jewish materials is a marked decrease in our information on the internal workings of Jewish community life during the latter part of the period under investigation. Clearly the Jewish community did not cease functioning; however, our ability to trace its operations has suffered.

There are thus many different kinds of sources available for this study. Each genre presents insight into only certain facets of Jewish

Français du XVe siècle (Paris, 1893); Samuel Poznanski’s essay on French Biblical exegesis in his edition of the commentary of R. Eliezer of Beaugency to Ezekiel and the Minor Prophets; and Ephraim Urbach, Ba’aley ha-Tosafot (Jerusalem, 1955). An attempt to utilize the literary materials for their historical implications has been made by Louis Rabinowitz, The Social Life of the Jews of Northern France in the XII-XIV Centuries (London, 1938). Unfortunately the value of this work is mitigated by certain methodological weaknesses, such as indiscriminate use of data from France, Germany, and England and a failure to distinguish between sheer literary discussion and direct concern with contemporary reality.


6See below, chapter 4.
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life. A number of these types of evidence must be used with extreme caution, making allowance for potential distortions in their depictions of the Jews. Intensive utilization of limited data is indispensable; there is nothing like the embarras de richesses that sometimes confronts the student of modern history. Yet, in the final analysis, there is sufficient material and a wide enough variety of perspectives to allow a plausible reconstruction of major aspects of Jewish life in medieval northern France. While there will be occasional frustration for lack of additional evidence and insight, the portrait that emerges is relatively full.

The limits of this study are important to specify. As indicated in its title, this study is concerned primarily with political and social history. This includes consideration of Jewish political status, the Jews' relations with key elements in Christian society, Jewish demographic development, Jewish economic outlets, internal communal organization, and Jewish attitudes towards the Christian environment. An obvious omission is extensive treatment of Jewish intellectual life. This area has been neglected partially because it is the one aspect of this community's history that has been treated in depth. More important, the intellectual creations which later Ashkenazic Jewry saw fit to preserve were precisely those works which were "timeless," that is, only minimally related to the actual circumstances of twelfth- and thirteenth-century France. Where Jewish intellectual expressions reveal responses to contemporary reality they will be considered. Such instances, however, are lamentably few.

A chronological terminus a quo presents some problems. Jews had been settled in northern France in Merovingian times and even earlier. The Carolingian emperors had had substantial contact with Jews. Yet, for the purpose of this inquiry, attention will be focused on post-Carolingian France, on the new civilization that began to emerge in the tenth century and to blossom in the eleventh. The Jewish life which we are setting out to investigate is very much a product of this new European society, in its economic structure, in its political status, and in the forms of its intellectual creativity.

7See, for example, Solomon Katz, The Jews in the Visigothic and Frankish Kingdoms of Spain and Gaul (Cambridge, Mass., 1937).
8See, for example, Simon Schwarzfuchs, "France and Germany under the Carolingians," in The Dark Ages: Jews in Christian Europe 711-1096, ed. Cecil Roth (Tel Aviv, 1966), pp. 122-42.
A *terminus ad quem* is easier to establish and far more clear-cut. In 1306, Philip IV expelled the Jews from royal France.\(^{10}\) While Jews were readmitted in 1315, the terms of settlement reveal a new status imposed on those Jews interested in returning.\(^{11}\) Although the Jews were recalled sporadically during the fourteenth century, at no point did they succeed in reestablishing the foundations of flourishing community existence.\(^{12}\) The summer of 1306 affords then a sensible and sharp termination to the study.

Geographic limits are more difficult to define. The focus of this study, it must be emphasized, is a set of similar Jewish communities. Unfortunately no simple political boundaries encompass this group of settlements. While most of northern French Jewry had, by 1306, come under the direct authority of the French monarchy, this process of political consolidation was a slow one.\(^{13}\) Moreover, by 1306 other French Jewries had also been absorbed into royal France. These southern Jewries differed from their northern confreres in political status, in demographic and economic patterns, and in cultural and religious heritage.\(^{14}\)

Since no simple political borders correspond to the recognizable unit of Jewish communities under consideration, the geographic boundaries will be somewhat loose. The area covered will range from Flanders in the north to a line slightly south of the Loire valley in the south and from Normandy and Anjou in the west through Champagne in the east.\(^{15}\) These territories showed remarkable unity of political, economic, and intellectual life even before they were formally united under royal rule. Jewish life in this area also reveals common traits.

\(^{10}\) See below, chapter 6.

\(^{11}\) Ibid.

\(^{12}\) Isidore Loeb, "Les expulsions des Juifs de France au XIVe siècle," *Jubelschrift zum siebzigsten Geburtstage des Prof. Dr. H. Graetz* (Breslau, 1887), pp. 39–56. There is much documentary evidence available for Jewish life in northern France between 1315 and 1394. It is a period that merits further study.


\(^{15}\) By the latter decades of the thirteenth century, this had all become royal territory. Brittany in the west and Burgundy in the east, both of which remained outside royal control, have not been included in this study.
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These Jews spoke the same vernacular, plied the same trades, enjoyed similar political privileges, suffered similar liabilities, and shared comparable cultural horizons.

It is to the history of this Jewry that we now proceed.16

16 A word as to the system of noting sources is in order. Wherever an English translation is available, it will be cited; it is assumed that the original can be readily traced. Where there is no English translation, the best edition of the text will be cited. Occasionally a second and more accessible version will be added.