

A Golden Age in North Africa



1. A Spanish synagogue. Illuminated manuscript, c. 1350.

The Maghreb (“west” in Arabic, in contradistinction to the Mashrek, “east”) in Arab geography designated North Africa as well as Spain. Indeed, for several centuries these two regions shared the same political and cultural features. While Jewish culture flourished alongside Arab culture in the Iberian peninsula, North African Jewry also enjoyed a period of brilliant economic prosperity and cultural creativity.

A natural bridge between east and west and hence a major thoroughfare for trade caravans, and a fertile region of temperate climate, North Africa had always attracted populations from the Mashrek. Among the immigrants from the East there were many Jews, and their influx transformed North African Jewry. From the ninth century onwards, these newcomers, who still had family, commercial and cultural ties in their countries of origin, began to dominate the Maghreb communities.

However, Baghdad, capital of the Arab-Muslim world, and the Babylonian centers of oriental Jewry, were geographically distanced from North Africa, thus forcing the Maghreb communities to find their own solutions to their everyday problems. From the tenth century onwards, for example, the Jewish community of Kairouan in Tunisia was governed by its own *nagid* (*rais al-yahud* in Arabic, meaning “leader of the Jews”; other *negidim* were to be found in Spain, Egypt and Yemen; in Morocco and Algeria the title *nagid* was bestowed on the leader of the community from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century). Furthermore, the Maghreb communities even developed a sense of superiority over their oriental brethren, since economic advantage enabled the more affluent ones to support the Babylonian academies by way of generous donations. Finally, the desire and ability to relax ties with the Jewish centers in the East were augmented by the political fragmentation of the Islamic empire. Chased out of Mesopotamia by the Abbasids, the Umayyads established an emirate in Spain, while in North Africa the Shi’ite Fatimids founded a caliphate in Ifriqiya (the future Tunisia) in the early tenth century.

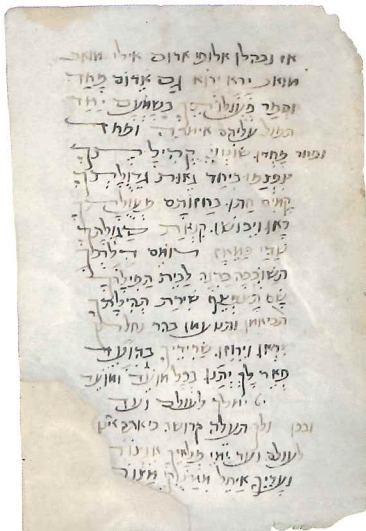
The legend of the Four Captives illustrates the need of North African Jewry to demonstrate their independence: it recounts the story of four great sages who, captured by pirates and ransomed by four different communities, each founded an independent center of learning. Nevertheless, in reverence to the older, sanctified authority of the oriental centers, obedience and respect were preserved. Yet such tokens of subordination to the authority of the Palestinian or Babylonian centers did not prevent the new communities in the West from evolving their own patterns of public, spiritual and cultural life. Thus, although most surviving halakhic questions from the time of the *geonim* derive from the Maghreb, it appears that from the ninth century onwards many of the them were answered by local scholars. Their *responsa* were later collected and classified according to the subjects of the Talmud tractates, con-

Idris I in Morocco

789

- c. 800: Earliest evidence of Jews participating in North African trade.
- c. 810: Letter from Pirkoi ben Baboi to the Maghreb communities: the Babylonian sage encourages the North African Jews to accept the authority of the Babylonian academies rather than that of the Palestinian center. In fact, between 830 and 880, leaders of the North African community, Nathan ben Hananiah and Judah ben Saul, respond to certain halakhic questions themselves while addressing others to the Babylonian academies.
- 825–1067: Sicily is held by North African Muslims; strong institutional and commercial ties between the Jews of the island and the North African communities.
- c. 880: Traveller Eldad Ha-Dani visits Tunisia.
- c. 900: Families bearing names indicating Persian, Iraqi or Palestinian origin – Ben Ukal, Ben Shahun, Ha-Bavli (“the

2. Manuscript by the poet Joseph ibn Abitur. Morocco, early 11th century.



Founding of the Fatimid dynasty

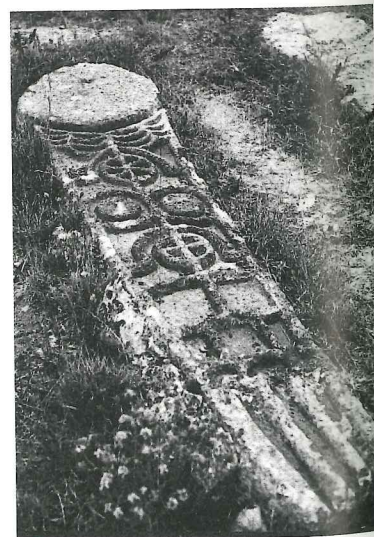
c. 862

- Babylonian”), etc. – are prominent in Maghreb and Egyptian communities.
- 909: Creation of the Fatimid caliphate in the Maghreb marks the end of the first phase of expansion of this Shi’ite dynasty; themselves a minority in the Muslim world, the Fatimids appoint Jews and Christians to positions in which they have power over Sunnite Muslims.
- c. 930–1006: Lifespan of Jacob ben Nissim ibn Shahun who wields spiritual authority over all the academies in the Maghreb.
- c. 940–1025: Joseph ibn Abitur, member of an aristocratic Jewish family from Spain, translator of the Talmud to Arabic, finds refuge in Morocco and then in Egypt; he writes two hymns for the Palestinian synagogue in Fostat and participates in the leadership of the Egyptian and Palestinian communities.
- c. 950: Hisdai ibn Shaprut is appointed

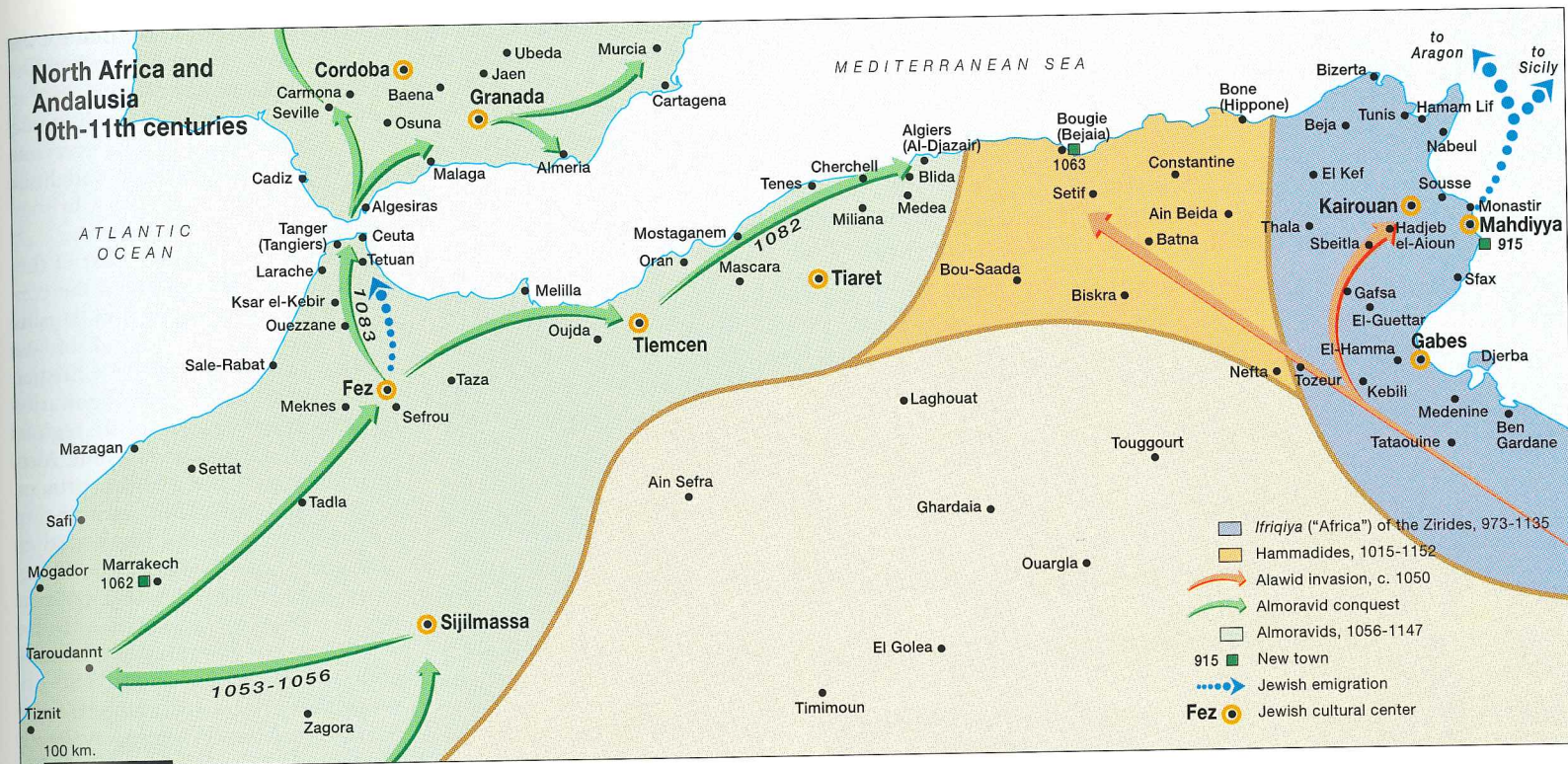
3. Jewish tombstone. Tetuan, Morocco, 16th–17th centuries.

The Fatimids in Ifriqiya

909



9th–11th Centuries



situting the basis for the earliest commentary on the Babylonian Talmud. The first Talmud commentator was a Tunisian rabbi from Kairouan, Hananel ben Hushi'el, who was followed by his pupil Nissim ben Jacob ibn Shahun. Extensive use of their work was made by Isaac Alfasi, and from Alfasi it passed on to scholars in Spain.

Other North African scholars entered the secular sciences. In the early tenth century, during the generation of Saadiah Gaon, Tunisian Isaac ben Solomon Israeli wrote treatises on medicine and philosophy, his disciple Dunash ibn Tamim wrote on mathematics, and another Dunash, a North African Jew who had studied with the *gaon* in Baghdad, brought Saadiah's theories on Hebrew poetry to North Africa. Indeed, medieval Hebrew poetry, born in the east, was developed and enriched in the west, and therefore labelled "Spanish." The first collection of stories in Judeo-Arabic was composed in Tunisia, and Hebrew philology was born in Fez, Morocco, spreading from there to Spain and Palestine. There was virtually no intellectual, spiritual or artistic sphere which was not explored and revitalized by medieval North African Jewry.

End of the Spanish caliphate

1031

counselor of the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Rahman III; patron of Jewish court culture, Hisdai surrounds himself with poets and scholars.

969–973: The Fatimids complete the conquest of Egypt where they establish their capital; the Zirids, a Berber dynasty loyal to the Fatimids, rule North Africa.

c. 980–1062: Lifespan of Nissim ben Jacob ibn Shahun, head of the talmudic school at Kairouan, author of talmudic commentaries and numerous halakhic works. The other leader of the Kairouan community after 1005–1007 is Hananel ben Hushi'el, author of the first complete commentary on the Talmud.

993–1056: Samuel ha-Nagid (Ismail ibn Nagrela), born in Cordoba and vizier of Granada, where he was military commander and author of halakhic treatises and collections of poems. Corresponding with contemporary Jewish scholars, Samuel emphasizes the Jewish nature of his deeds, presenting himself to the Muslim court as an

The Almoravides conquer the Maghreb

1053–1056

emissary of the Jewish people.

1015: In Kairouan, Abraham ben Nathan, court physician to Zirid emir Badis (966–1016) and to his son Al-Mu'izz (1016–1062), receives the title of *nagid* in acknowledgement of his generous contributions to the Pumbedita academy in Babylonia.

1031: The Umayyad caliphate in Spain is split into small principalities, some founded by mercenary military commanders of Berber origin. In these courts, Jewish dignitaries attain positions of high authority.

1053–1056: The Almoravides conquer the cities in the Maghreb.

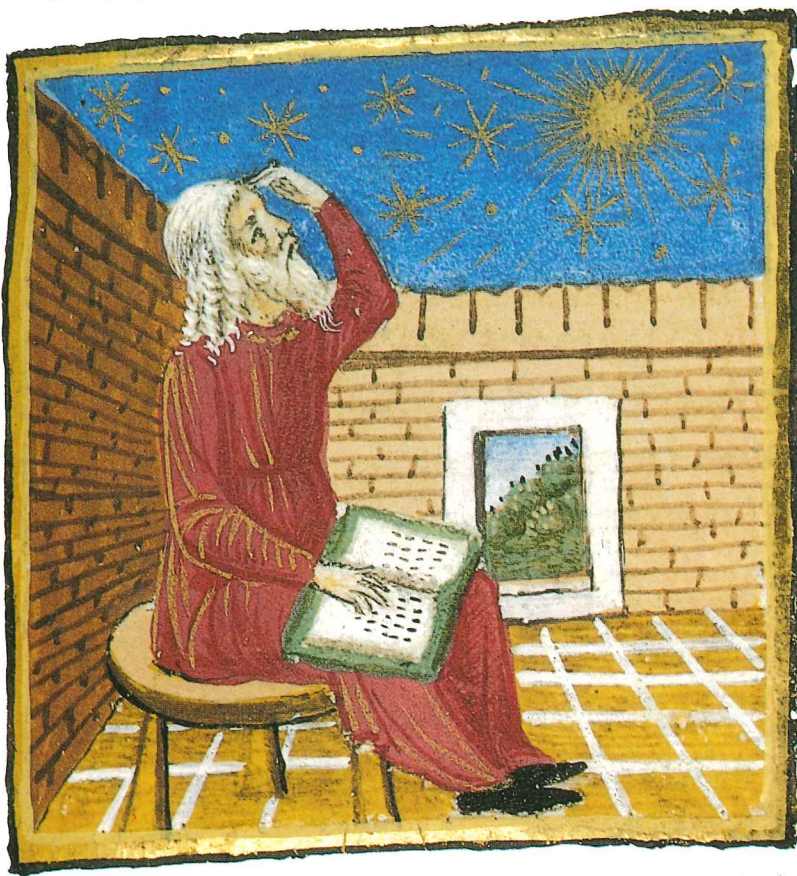
1056–1066: Succeeding his father at the Granada court, Joseph ben Samuel ha-Nagid is killed during a revolt which destroys the city's Jewish community.

1057: Death of Hananel ben Hushi'el. His commentary on the Talmud gained wide circulation and served as the main bridge between the teaching of the Babylonian *geonim* and the scholars of North Africa.



4. Latin edition of the works of Isaac ben Solomon Israeli, famous Jewish Tunisian physician in the 10th century. Lyons, 1515.

Scientists and Physicians in the Middle Ages



1. The Astronomer. Illumination in a Jewish Italian manuscript of Meshal ha-Kadmoni (1291) – a collection of rhymed fables by Isaac ben Solomon ibn Sahula. Northern Italy, 1470–1480.

Medieval science cannot be divided simply according to religious or ethnic categories. The same fields of knowledge, theories, practices, and learned controversies were shared by the three monotheistic civilizations. Defining a “Jewish science” is, in fact, a discussion of the Jewish contribution to scientific development in general.

This contribution was particularly significant in four areas: medicine; geography and cosmology; development of instruments for measurement, cartography, and navigation; and translation of works from Greek into Arabic and from Arabic into Latin and other European languages. The Jews therefore constituted an important link in the transmission of scientific knowledge from one culture to another and were thus crucial to the emergence of modern science; they also played a major role in the creation of the necessary tools for world exploration.

The first important center for medieval Jewish scientific activity in the eighth and ninth centuries was the Abbasid caliphate and particularly its capital, Baghdad. About a hundred years after the Muslim conquest of the Middle East, the name of the Jewish physician Masarjuwayh of Basra is mentioned as the first of a long list of men who translated Greek and Syrian works on medicine into Arabic. A Jewish convert to Islam, Rabban al-Tabari, was the first to translate Ptolemy's *Almagest* into Arabic. Isaac Judaeus (Isaac Israeli) is believed to have been the first medical author in Arabic whose works were brought to Europe.

It was in Muslim Spain, however, that Jewish science found the most fertile soil. In the early Middle Ages Andalusia was the greatest cultural center of Europe and of the entire Mediterranean basin. Its Muslim rulers, opulent and tolerant, offered the prosperous Jewish elite opportunities for complete social and cultural integration, which were not surpassed anywhere throughout the Middle Ages.

In Andalusia, as in the Muslim world at large, the Jews wrote their scientific treatises in Arabic, a language which they found best suited to this branch of human learning. Very early – in the mid-tenth century – Hisdai ibn Shaprut, a dignitary in the court of the caliph, leader of the Spanish Jewish community and an eminent physician, contributed to the construction of Arabic into a scientific vehicle, mainly by preparing the

final Arabic version of the *Materia medica*, the great pharmaceutical compendium by the Greek botanist Dioscorides (1st century AD).

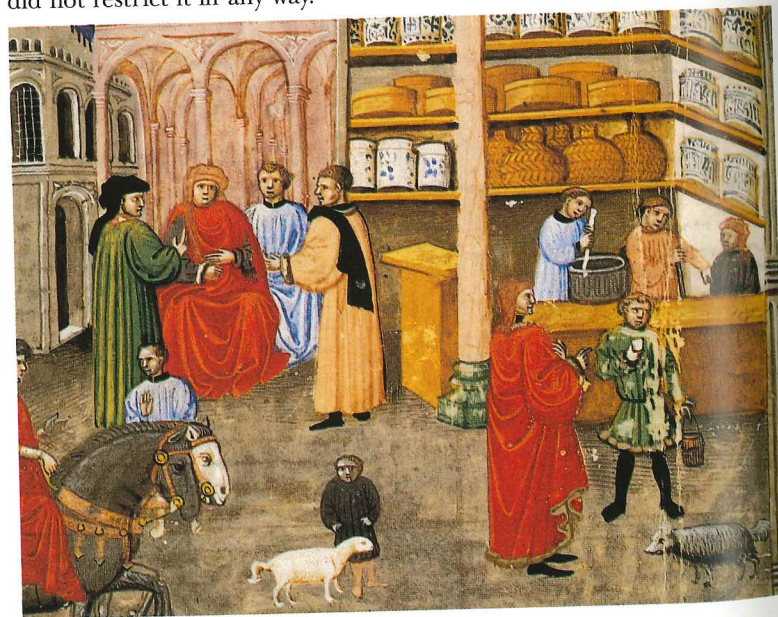
The demise of the Spanish caliphate put an end to flourishing Jewish and Muslim science in Andalusia. First the Almoravids, a fanatic sect from North Africa who conquered southern Spain at the end of the eleventh century, and then the Almohads, who came in the twelfth century, totally changed the intellectual climate in Muslim Spain: scientific inquiry and philosophical rationalism could no longer exist. Moreover, most of the Jews were forced to leave. Some of them, including Maimonides, went to the east; the majority found refuge in Christian lands – northern Spain, southern France, Italy.

This was a turning point in the history of medieval science. As Muslim orthodoxy began stifling intellectual curiosity, the Latin West began to discover Greek science and its Arabic commentators. The Jews played a major role in this transition. Versed in Arabic and in European languages, they occupied a prominent place among the translators of important scientific works from Arabic into Latin, Spanish, and French. In Toledo and in the towns of Provence, numerous Jewish scholars translated a large number of works in philosophy, mathematics, geometry, physics, astronomy, astrology, medicine, and magic – a corpus of knowledge which constituted the basis for Latin science during the central and late Middle Ages.

At the same time another change was affecting Jewish science. Since the beginning of the twelfth century, Arabic was gradually being replaced by Hebrew as the sole language in which Jews wrote their scientific works. Translations from Arabic and Latin, as well as many original texts, were produced in Hebrew. Abraham ibn Ezra and Abraham bar Hiyya, philosophers and mathematicians, were the two most notable writers among these Hebrew-writing medieval scholars.

What was the attitude of Jewish religious authorities towards scientific inquiry? In Muslim Spain and in North Africa the orthodox were not particularly hostile to scientific studies, although there were disagreements among the scholars themselves as to what constituted proper science from the point of view of the *Halakhah* and of scientific validity. The rationalists, for example, eminently represented by Maimonides, rejected astrology and magic, even though most of their contemporaries considered these to be an integral part of scientific knowledge.

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, Jewish society grew suspicious of all scientific activity. The condemnation culminated in a ban on the study of secular literature for persons under the age of 25, issued in 1305 by the rabbi of Barcelona, Solomon ben Abraham Adret (acronym Rashba), and other rabbis of southern France. However, even Rashba understood the importance of the study of medicine, and his ban did not restrict it in any way.



2. An apothecary's shop in northern Italy. Jewish manuscript of Avicenna's Canon (980–1037). Lombardy or Venice, c. 1438–1440.

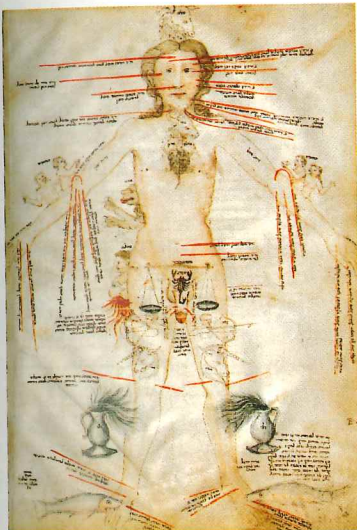
7th–15th Centuries

7th century (?): *The Book of Remedies* by Asaph ha-Rofe (Asaph "the physician") – the oldest Hebrew work on medicine.

850–c. 932: Isaac ben Solomon Israeli (Isaac Judaeus), physician and philosopher, author of several medical works: *The Book of Remedies*, *The Book of Fever*, *The Ethics of Physicians*.

882–942: Sa'adiah Gaon, the illustrious leader of Babylonian Jewry and one of the first Jewish intellectuals in the Muslim orient to adopt Greco-Arabic philosophy; author of an Arabic commentary on *The Book of Creation* – an attempt to combine the principles of the Torah with Greek anatomy and physiology.

913–983: Shabbetai Donnolo, an Italian Jewish physician, the first author of Hebrew medical works in Europe; his most famous work, *Sefer ha-Yakar*, lists 120 different remedies and their compositions. His name is associated with the medical center in Salerno which was not influenced by Arab culture.



3. Zodiac and anatomy. *Sephardi medical treatise*. Italy, end of 14th century.

c. 1110–1180: Abraham ibn Daud (Johannes Avendahut Hispanus), active in Toledo under the protection of the archbishop Raymond, Maimonides' precursor in rationalist philosophy; author of books on instruments for measuring celestial bodies; translator from Arabic into Latin in all fields of scientific knowledge: astrology, astronomy, philosophy, medicine, and magic; author of books on instruments for measuring celestial bodies, on philosophy, and the occult. Because he was so prolific – his works span 23 titles – certain scholars attributed some of his works to other Jewish scientists.

1135–1204: Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides), the most important Jewish scholar in the Middle Ages; leader of the rationalist school, his work – particularly his *Guide of the Perplexed* – constitutes the greatest attempt at forming a synthesis between Jewish tradition and contemporary Aristotelian science. Maimonides' family fled from Almohad Spain to Egypt.

First half of 12th century: The Tibbonids, a family from Granada, settles in southern France; the family produces four generations of scholars and translators: Judah ben Saul ibn Tibbon known as the "father of translators"; Samuel ben Judah ibn Tibbon, translated into Hebrew Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*; Moses ben Samuel ibn



4. Nautical atlas executed by Abraham and Judah Cresques for Pedro IV of Aragon. Spain, 1375–1377.

Tibbon, translator and famous physician; Jacob ben Machir ibn Tibbon, inventor of an original astronomical measuring instrument, the *Quadrans Novus* (*Quadrans Judaicus*). **1252–1277:** Alfonso X ("the Wise"), King of Leon and Castile; patron of many Jewish scientists, including the astronomer Judah ben Moses ha-Kohen, author of the *Alfonsine Tables*, *Libros del saber de astronomia*, one of the important scientific achievements of the reign. **1288–1344:** Levi ben Gershom de Bagnols,

mathematician, astronomer, and inventor of navigation instruments; author of important scientific works which exerted a major influence on western science; his astronomical tables were based on sources found in Persia, Egypt, etc.

Late 15th century: Abraham ben Samuel Zacuto of Salamanca, mathematician and astronomer; his *Great Treatise*, written in Hebrew between 1473 and 1478 at the request of his patron Gonzalo de Vivero, bishop of Salamanca, and soon translated

into Spanish and Latin; he develops important navigation instruments, particularly the astrolabe of copper, which are major contributions to the voyages of discovery. After the expulsion of 1492 he emigrates to Portugal and becomes court astronomer to John II and later to Manuel I; his advice is sought before Vasco da Gama's voyage to India (1496); but in the following year the forced conversion of the Jews of Portugal drives him to leave for Tunis; toward the end of his life he travels to the Holy Land.

Spiritual Trends in Ashkenaz



1. The so-called "Rashi's Chapel," adjoining the Worms Synagogue, built in the 17th century.

Between the post-Carolingian period and the First Crusade, the Jewish communities in the Rhine Valley were composed almost entirely of merchants engaged in long-distance trade. Yet it was at that time that the first Ashkenazi scholars made their debut: learned rabbis began producing exegetical works, biblical and talmudic commentaries, as well as *halakhic* prescriptions for everyday behavior. A high level of talmudic studies is noted in northern France and Germany from the late tenth century onward, the only non-Christian culture within an otherwise homogenous society.

Rashi (Solomon ben Isaac, c. 1040–1105) was undoubtedly the greatest biblical and talmudic commentator of all times. Under the influence of his work, the schools of Champagne and northern France would eventually supplant those of the Rhenish provinces. Based on a compromise between literal and midrashic interpretations, his biblical commentary, replete with original philological explanations, is characterized by its lucidity. His works also reflect eleventh-century circumstances by making

implicit references to the new kind of Christian aggression towards the Jews: his comments on biblical passages are often intended to refute christological interpretations which were offered by those converted Jews who placed their Judaic knowledge in the service of the Church. There are also frequent references to the tribulations of the Jews during the time of the First Crusade. Furthermore, Rashi's commentary on the Babylonian Talmud was to become the basis for all later literary activity in this field, particularly for that of the school of the *tosafot* ("additions").

The *tosafot* were glosses recording the oral, animated discussions held in the *yeshivot* of northern France in the twelfth century. In these schools a teacher and a small group of pupils would argue a talmudic question in dialectic fashion. These glosses were soon transformed into teaching material, eventually penetrating all the Jewish academies in France and Germany. This was an excellent example of the dissemination of ideas so characteristic of twelfth-century Europe. The *tosafists* set the intellectual standards for rabbinical scholarship and methods of teaching. The new qualities required from those transmitting rabbinical culture were mental agility, analytical abilities, and self-assured disputation. The intellectual jousts in the *tosafot* are distinctly different in tone from the sobriety of Rashi's commentaries.

The *Hasidei Ashkenaz* movement (the medieval "pietists of Germany"; not to be confused with eighteenth-century *Hasidism*) were the Jewish version of a phenomenon affecting twelfth and thirteenth-century European culture in general: religion wrestling with the values of a society undergoing rapid economic development and urbanization. *Hasidei Ashkenaz* responded to the pressure of Christian pietist movements and were also influenced by them. They stressed the special abilities of the learned and pious scholar to interpret Divine Will which, according to them, was only partially expressed in the scriptural commandments. Wonders and miracles, they believed, reveal God's nature; therefore, their literature is greatly concerned with the demonological and the magical. Like several contemporary Christian sects, these pietists felt that they were the bearers of a deeper religious awareness, and were thus subjected to stricter duties than the "simple folk." Mortification of the body, confession to a spiritual leader who could impose penitential punishment, humility, and the love of God through martyrdom – all these became hallmarks of this movement and earned them the respect of Jews outside their circles. However, as they were unable to impose their rigorous standards on the German communities, the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* considered various ways of sectarian secession.

The most important hasidic ethical work was *Sefer Hasidim* ("Book of the Pious"), which was composed largely by the great teacher Judah ha-Hassid (a figure often compared to Francis of Assisi). This is a collection of pragmatic and realistic ethical teachings covering every

The *takkanot* of Rabbenu Gershom

c. 1000

Second half of 10th century: Judah ha-Kohen Leontin, the first known German talmudic scholar.

c. 950–1028: Life of Rabbenu ("our master") Gershom. His name is associated with several *takkanot* ("directives"), such as the prohibition on polygamy and on the unauthorized reading of private letters, but there is no definitive evidence that these *takkanot* were really his.

c. 1040–1105: Lifespan of Rashi (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac). Born in Troyes, he studied in Worms and Mainz, occasionally returning to these *yeshivot* after establishing his own school in Troyes.

After 1100: The generation of Rashi's disciples: Simhah of Vitry, Judah ben Nathan, Joseph Kara.

First half of 12th century: Composition of three chronicles recounting the persecutions during the First Crusade (1096).

c. 1100–1171: Lifespan of Jacob ben Meir Tam, called Rabbenu Tam, Rashi's grandson, the greatest of the *tosafists*. His nephew,

Isaac of Dampierre was the most widely known *tosafist* in the late 12th century.

After 1150: Samuel he-Hasid, probable author of the first two parts of *Sefer Hasidim*, is regarded by all scholars as the founder of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* movement.

1171. May 26: First blood-libel case in France: thirty two Jews are burnt at the stake in Blois after the disappearance of a Christian child. Rabbenu Tam institutes a fast on the date of that event; he apparently also coordinated attempts by the Jewish communities in Paris and in Champagne to convince King Louis VII and the Duke of Champagne to halt the spread of anti-Jewish allegations.

1190: Yom Tov of Joigny, a disciple of Rabbenu Tam and a synagogal poet, is said to have inspired the collective suicide of the Jews of York who took refuge in the royal castle to escape a crusaders' attempt to convert them by force.

After 1196: Death of Ephraim of Bonn, author of a chronicle recording the events

Rashi

c. 1040–1105



2. A teacher with a whip. In front of his disciple, the famous dictum of Hillel the Elder (1st century AD): "What is hateful to you, do not unto your neighbor." Coburg Pentateuch, 1395.

The First Crusade

1096

during the Second Crusade. He praises Bernard of Clairvaux for his endeavor to end anti-Jewish violence.

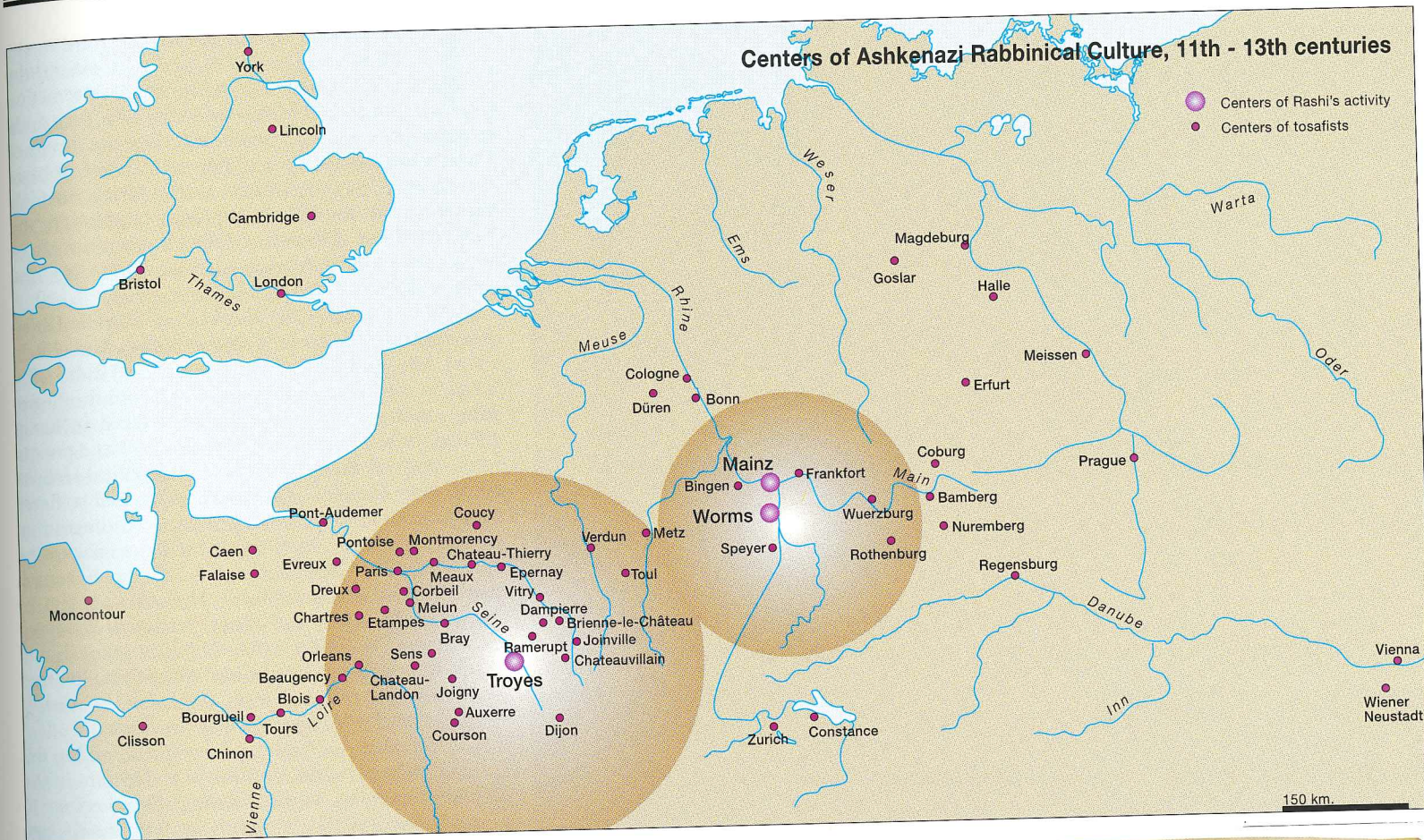
c. 1200: Time during which Judah he-Hasid, Samuel's son, who lived in Speyer and died in Regensburg in 1217, was active.

1203–1204: Meir Halevi Abulafia of Toledo writes to the French *tosafists* to enlist their support for his denunciation of Maimonides' position on the resurrection of the body. He receives an answer from Samson of Sens, the principal *tosafist* of his generation.

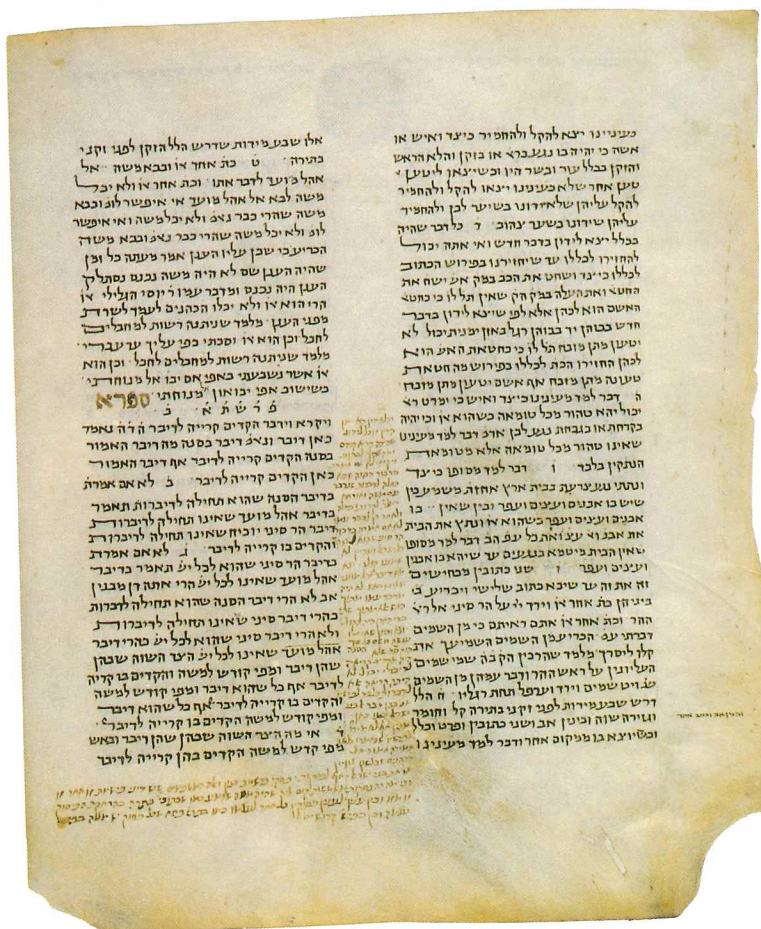
1209–1211: "The *aliyah* of three hundred rabbis" – the name given in Jewish historiography to the movement of migration to Palestine by many *tosafists*.

c. 1230: Death of Eleazar of Worms, signatory of the *takkanot* promulgated by the communities of Mainz, Worms and Speyer between 1200 and 1223. This disciple of Judah he-Hasid is better known to us than his predecessors because of his chronicle describing the attack on the Jews of Mainz during the Third Crusade (1189) and a poetic

11th-13th Centuries



aspect of life. The social doctrine of the *Hasidim* was essentially egalitarian, and perceived inequality to be the outcome of sin. Yet even in this respect, the movement's teachers related to the urban realities of the time, prescribing ways to mitigate the unjust distribution of riches by advocating virtuous ways, compassion, and charity. However, because they believed in a Heavenly law superseding the law of the Torah, their doctrine admitted certain moral modes of conduct which were unacceptable in orthodox morality. This pietist medieval movement disappeared during the second half of the thirteenth century. Ashkenazi Jewry adopted some of its ethical teachings and penitential practices; its esoteric theology, however, was overshadowed by the Sephardi Kabbalah.



4. Page from a book containing two rabbinical commentaries, the 2nd century Midrash Sifra and the Tanna deve Elyahu, probably late 10th century.

The Second Crusade

1147

"The *aliyah* of three hundred rabbis"

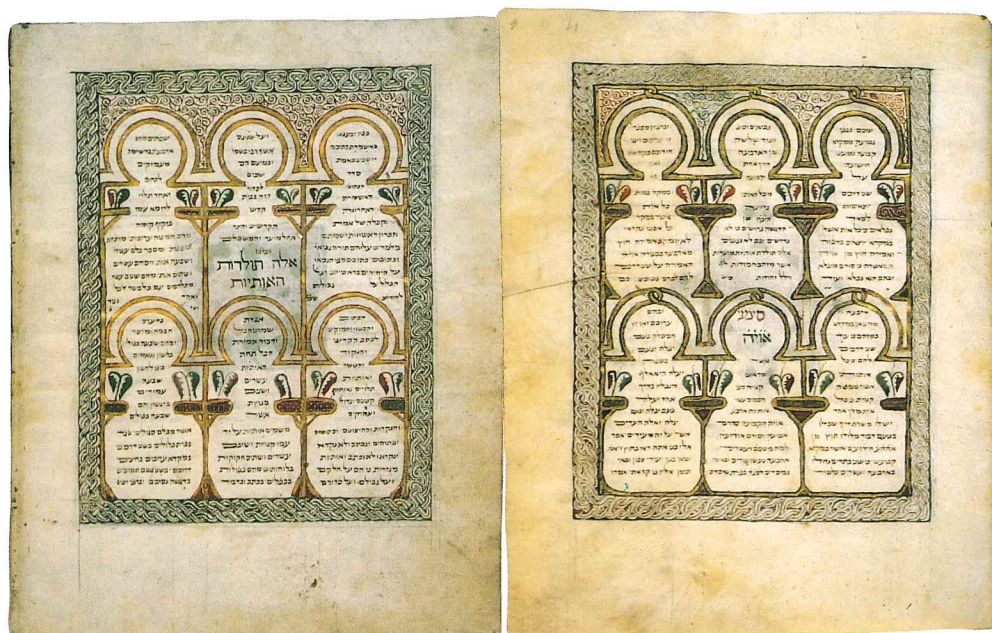
1209-1211



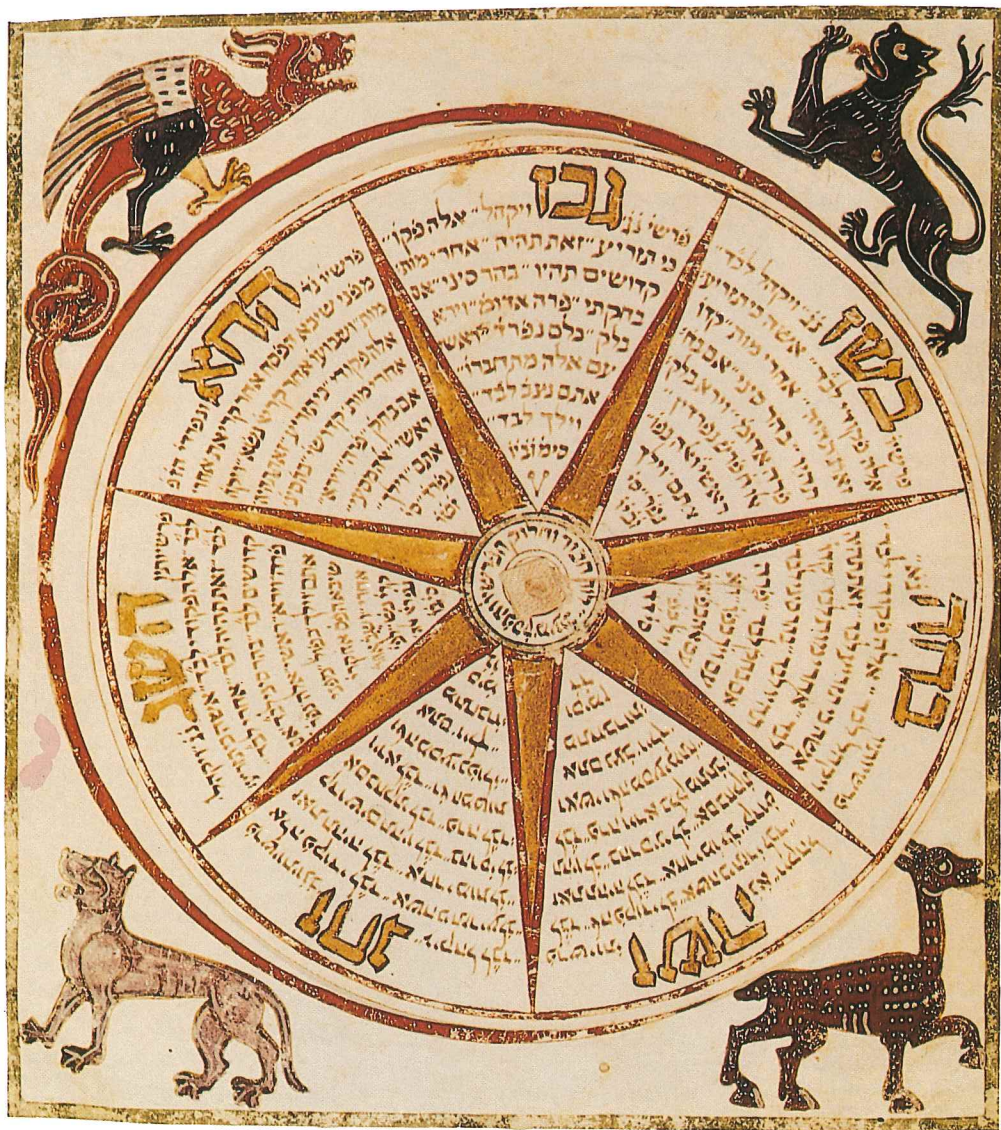
composition describing the murder of his wife and children by crusaders in 1197. **Before the summer of 1232:** Certain French tosafists threaten with excommunication those who study "Greek science" or read Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and his *Book of Knowledge*. **1240:** Jehiel of Paris, head of the "talmudic academy" in Paris, is the main Jewish representative in the Disputation of Paris held at the court of Louis IX; in 1260 he emigrated to Palestine with a large number of his disciples. **1475:** The first printed Hebrew book: Rashi's commentary on the Pentateuch, published in Reggio di Calabria. **Early 17th century:** Printing in Yiddish of *Mayse Bukh*: didactic stories, translated from Hebrew, some of which center on the major figures of the medieval movement of *Hasidei Ashkenaz*.

3. The Mikveh (Jewish ritual bath) in Worms, built in 1185.

Men of Letters in Medieval Spain



1. *Sefer Dikdukei ha-Te'amin* ("Rules of Accents"), a work which established the Massorah (rules of spelling and pronunciation of the biblical text), attributed to Aaron ben Asher (10th century). Spain, manuscript on animal skin, 14th century.



3. A liturgical calendar with a mobile parchment disk. Castile, 1300-1301.

The Golden Age of Jewish literature in the Middle Ages was to a large extent the outcome of two centuries of interaction between Hebrew culture and the Arab-Muslim civilization. In Spain, however, the variety of literary creation was far richer than in the Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad or in North Africa. Strongly influenced by the Muslim renaissance of letters, the Jewish writers of Spain produced not only major works of philosophy and theology but also new genres of Hebrew literature.

Hebrew literature began to flourish in the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba under Caliph Abd al-Rahman III and his Jewish vizier Hisdai ibn Shaprut during the tenth century. From the beginning, poetry and philosophy went hand in hand. Menahem ben Saruq, known for his profane poems, also compiled the first dictionary of biblical Hebrew roots, the *Mahberet*. This work provoked a fierce response from Dunash ben Labrat, leading to an extensive debate which was most beneficial to the advancement of biblical exegesis. The same Dunash ben Labrat revolutionized Hebrew poetry by introducing metrics and genres fashionable among Arab poets. At the same time, biblical exegesis and talmudic commentary were also flourishing in other Jewish intellectual centers – Lucena, Granada, Seville, Malaga, Saragossa, and Barcelona.

The fall of the Caliphate did not put an end to this brilliant culture, which continued to blossom in the small independent kingdoms that offered refuge to Cordoban exiles. The eleventh century was the age of Samuel ha-Nagid, Solomon ibn Gabirol, Moses ibn Ezra, and Judah Halevi, all of whom were great and versatile poets. Their secular poetry was concerned with love, friendship, nature, or war, while in their devotional poetry they composed hymns glorifying God and the covenant between God and his people. Their contemporaries, Judah Hayyuj and Jonah ibn Janah, laid the foundations for the scientific study of the Hebrew language. Comparative philology, in its turn, became an important tool for biblical commentators. Rabbinical scholars at Lucena were seeking ways to modernize talmudic

Samuel ha-Nagid

993-1056

Birth of Judah Halevi

c. 1070

929-961: Caliphate of Abd al-Rahman III; Hisdai ibn Shaprut, physician and scholar, is vizier at the Caliph's court and a patron of Hebrew literature.

958: Menahem ben Saruq, secretary to Hisdai, writes his *Mahberet*, provoking the attack of Dunash ben Labrat.

c. 1021: The poet and philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol (Avicbron in Latin) is born in Malaga.

1031: End of the Umayyad caliphate in Cordoba; the small Muslim kingdoms that take its place will survive until 1094.

1038: Samuel ha-Nagid (Ismail ibn Nagrela) is vizier to Badis, the Berber king of Granada; his writings begin the Golden Age of Jewish poetry in Spain.

c. 1040: Jonah ibn Janah, a philologist born in Cordoba c. 985, writes his *Kitab al-Tanqih* (Book of Grammar) in Saragossa.

1055: Moses ibn Ezra is born in Granada; a great poet and literary theoretician, dies in Castile after 1135.

c. 1070: Judah Halevi, the greatest Jewish poet in Spain, is born in Tudela (Navarre).

1089: Death of Isaac ibn Ghayyat; he is succeeded by Isaac Alfasi (1013-1103) and then by Joseph ibn Migash (1077-1114) as Talmud teachers in Lucena.

1094-1145: Andalusia is ruled by the Almoravids; many Jews escape to Christian Spain.

1136: Death of Abraham bar Hiyya from Catalonia, author of

10th–15th Centuries

law, while philosophers were critically comparing Jewish theology to other religious systems.

The accession of the Almoravides at the end of the eleventh century and of the Almohads fifty years later threatened the very existence of the Jewish communities. The decline of Jewish culture in Andalusia was swift and sudden. Henceforth its center would be in the northern part of the peninsula, in Christian Spain, which although less developed, was for a time more tolerant.

Jewish literature in the Christian kingdoms never reached the heights of the Andalusian period, but it had an important significance of its own. Emphasis now shifted to the sciences, medicine, and to the translation of scientific and literary works. By incorporating Arabic traditions, the art of narrative prose opened new avenues in works such as *Sefer Tahkemoni* by Judah Al-Harizi, with its use of the Arabic form of rhyming prose, or in the wide variety of historical chronicles and travel literature. Poetry, more realistic than in the Andalusian period, now included reflections on social and political issues.

The most animated intellectual debate, however, revolved around questions of philosophy and theology. In the first half of the thirteenth century, the problems raised by Maimonides evoked fierce antagonism between his disciples and their anti-rationalist opponents. Disputations with Christians were an important arena for incisive polemical arguments, but they were also a further expression of the deteriorating relations between the Jews and their neighbors. By accentuating differences between Judaism and Christianity, they often led to forced conversions. Some Jews escaped into mysticism and Kabbalah, cultivated mainly in Gerona and Leon, while Toledo and Catalonia remained centers of more traditional scholarship such as Hebrew law and talmudic commentary.

The gradual decline in Jewish cultural life was accelerated by the anti-Jewish outbreaks of 1391. The precarious situation of the communities was no longer conducive to intense intellectual activity, and the last century of Jewish life in Spain would leave very little for future generations to admire.



2. The Alba Bible, translated from Hebrew to Castilian between 1422 and 1433 by Moses Arragel of Guadalajara. Commissioned by Luis de Guzman, Master of the Order of Calatrava. Illuminated by artists of Toledo.

Birth of Maimonides

c. 1138

The Zohar

c. 1280

scientific works.

1141: Judah Halevi dies on his way to Jerusalem, or – according to tradition – is murdered near the city walls; end of the Golden Age.

1147: Rise of the Almohads; the major centers of Jewish culture in Andalusia are destroyed.

c. 1150: In Toledo Abraham ibn Daud composes his *Book of Tradition*, a history of talmudic scholarship.

c. 1194–1270: Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides), philosopher and Kabbalist in Verona.

1204: Death of Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides) in Cairo.

1230: Death of Judah Al-Harizi, traveller, translator, and poet.

1232: End of Almohad rule; Granada remains the last Muslim principality on Spanish soil.

1252–1284: Alfonso X of Toledo encourages scientific translations, with the aid of Jewish scholars; Todros Abulafia (1247–1306) is court poet.

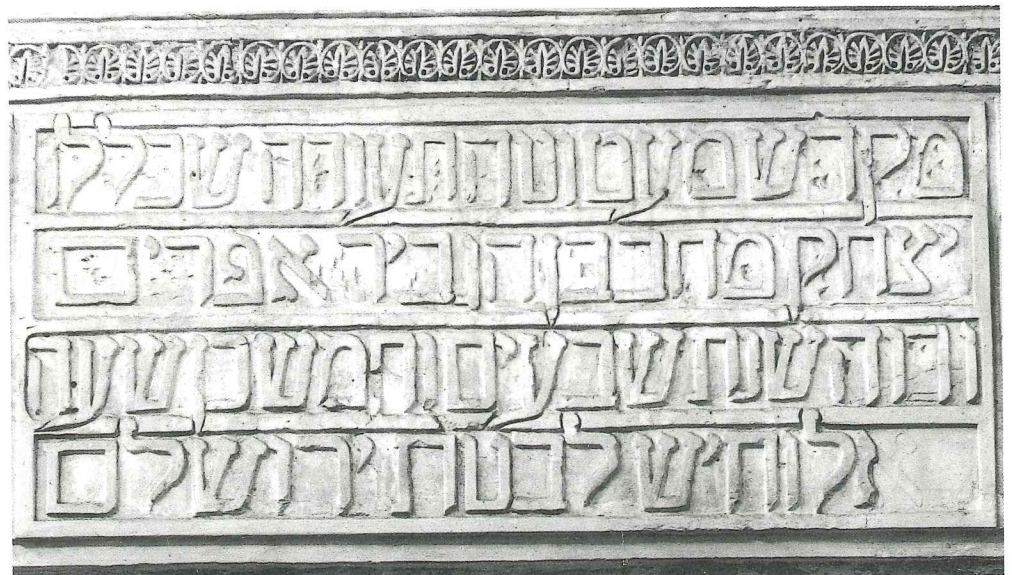
c. 1280: Moses de Leon composes the *Zohar* ("Book of Splendor") – the greatest work of Castilian Kabbalah.

1412: Death of Hasdai Crescas, anti-rationalist philosopher from Catalonia.

1437–1508: Isaac Abrabanel, statesman and biblical commentator.

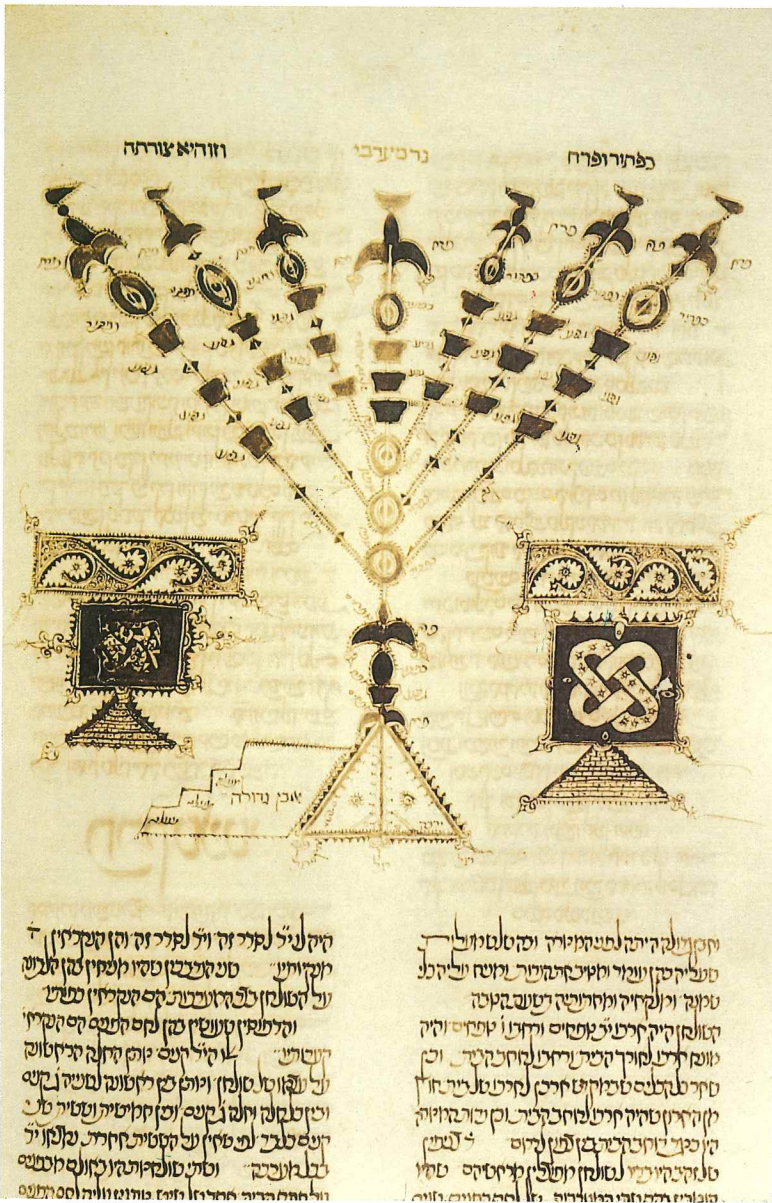
1452–c. 1515: Abraham Zacuto, astronomer and author of scientific works.

1492: Fall of Granada and expulsion of the Jews from Spain.



4. Commemorative tablet on the east wall of the synagogue in Cordoba, 1314–1315. The characters are of astonishingly modern form, resembling that of Hebrew printing today.

Maimonides



17. Manuscript of Mishneh Torah. Spain, c.1460.

Maimonides (Moses ben Maimon, known by his Hebrew acronym “Rambam”), was the most illustrious figure in Judaism since the talmudic era. His influence on the future development of Judaism was incalculable, and his genius earned him the epithet “the Eagle.” More than any scholar before him, Maimonides felt that it was incumbent upon him to play a decisive role in the culture to which he belonged: to give an account of its history, to offer a vision of its future, and to introduce by way of his own work an entirely new course of direction.

His commentary on the Mishnah in Arabic, completed in 1168, established his authority among the Jews in Islamic countries. But it was the Hebrew translation of his fourteen-book code, *Mishneh Torah* (“Repetition of the Law”), which gained him the reputation of the greatest rabbinical scholar in post-talmudic times. His status as a venerated spiritual guide enabled him to intervene in the affairs of many diaspora communities. To North African Jews, who had been forcibly Islamized, he offered advice on how to survive by secretly adhering to their Jewish faith, a kind of “marranism” *avant la lettre*. To the Yemenite community he sent his famous epistle of caution against messianic enthusiasm.

Mishneh Torah was an enterprise of immense proportions, motivated by complex reasons. Maimonides was pursuing, in fact, several aims simultaneously: recapitulating rabbinical legislation in a systematic and convenient exposition, without the cumbersome apparatus of quotations, “so that thus the entire Oral Law might become systematically known to all... so that all rules shall be accessible to young and old”; replacing the Talmud, the study of which should henceforth be reserved only to the intellectual elite; making an inventory of opinions and beliefs within their philosophical context – particularly in his *Sefer ha-Madda* (“Book of Science”) which forms the first part of this work.

During the 1180s Maimonides wrote his major philosophical work, *Guide of the Perplexed*. As its title indicates, the book was intended for the Jewish intellectual who was firm in his belief, but having studied philosophy, was perplexed by biblical anthropomorphisms. Well aware of the dangers of teaching esoteric matters to the masses, Maimonides wrote enigmatically, making contradictory statements, employing paradoxes, leaving the perceptive reader to uncover the author’s true ideas. Thus it is hardly surprising that this work has been a source of bewilderment to modern commentators no less than to its medieval students.

The Maimonidean controversy broke out during his lifetime. It concerned above all the question of the resurrection of the body which Maimonides seemed to deny. He apparently insisted on the immortality of the soul of the sage-philosopher, independently of any divine retribution. The dispute was then broadened to include other issues. In southern France, the question of whether the reading of the *Guide* should be

Letter on Forced Conversion

c. 1160

1138: Moses ben Maimon is born in Cordoba to a family of scholars and dignitaries; in his own genealogical record he mentions *dayyanim* (rabbinical judges) like his father, Maimon ben Joseph, and talmudic scholars that go back seven generations.

1147: Conquest of Spain by the Almohads, a North-African Berber dynasty, who force the *dhimmi*s, both Jews and Christians, to accept Islam at least outwardly.

c. 1156: Maimonides writes *Millot Higgayon* (“Words of Logic”), a small treatise based on the works of the Muslim philosopher Al-Farabi (10th century).

1159–1160: The Maimon family flees to Fez in Morocco. Maimonides’ father writes his *Iggeret ha-Nehamah* (“Letter of Consolation”) to Jews under Almohad rule; Maimonides himself writes *Iggeret ha-Shemad* (“Letter on Forced Conversion”) also named *Ma’amar Kiddush ha-Shem* (“Treatise on the Sanctification of the Divine Name [Martyrdom]”).

1161: Maimonides begins his commentary

on the Mishnah.

1165: Maimonides leaves Fez for St. Jean d’Acre.

1166: Arriving with his family from Alexandria, Maimonides takes up residence in Fostat (Old Cairo).

1168: Maimonides begins writing *Mishneh Torah*, which was completed in 1178.

1168–1169: Weakened by the disintegration of Fatimid rule, Egypt is invaded by the Crusaders who attack the town of Bilbeis (eastern Egypt), capturing its inhabitants. Maimonides leads the operation in order to ransom Jewish prisoners.

1170–1171: Maimonides is mentioned in Arabic sources as *rais al-yahud* (“leader of the Jews”).

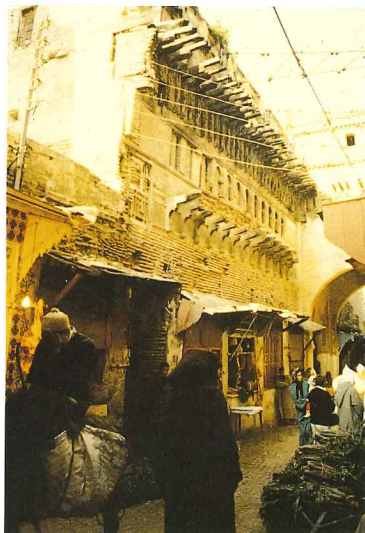
1171: Accession of the Ayyubid (Sunnite) dynasty in Egypt. Maimonides becomes court physician to vizier Al-Fadil.

1173: Maimonides’ brother, David, drowns in the Indian Ocean while on a business trip.

c. 1185: Maimonides becomes a regular adviser to vizier Al-Fadil and other dignitaries

Mishneh Torah

1168–1178



Letter on the Resurrection of the Dead

1190

in the entourage of the Ayyubid Sultan.

1190: *Iggeret Tehiyat ha-Metim* (“Letter on the Resurrection of the Dead”).

1190–1191: Maimonides completes the writing of *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Moreh Nevukhim*).

1194: *Letter on Astrology* addressed to scholars in southern France.

1198–1199: Letters to the communities in Provence, particularly to the community of Lunel.

1199: Maimonides’ letter to his Hebrew translator, Samuel ibn Tibbon of Provence, discussing the translation of *Guide of the Perplexed*, the philosophical works he consulted, and the daily fee the translator received for his work.

1199–1200: Maimonides is appointed personal physician to Al-Afdal, Saladin’s son.

1202: Meir ha-Levi Abulafia of Toledo asks the rabbis of Lunel to condemn Maimonides’ theses which, according to Abulafia, deny all

4. Maimonides’ house in Fez.

1138–1204

allowed at all had wide ranging implications. The conflict reached such proportions that the “anti-Maimonideans” brought their accusations to the Inquisition, claiming that the *Guide* constituted a heresy. Copies of the work were indeed committed to the fire c.1233. This denunciation, however, brought such disgrace on Maimonides’ opponents, that hence no one dared to attack openly the Master himself; the attacks were now directed at his disciples, who were accused of spreading dangerous philosophical teachings. During the third stage, a vehement dispute over the general legitimacy of philosophical studies and of allegorical interpretations of the Bible ended in compromise: men over the age of twenty-five were permitted to study philosophy, once they had completed their talmudic education (Barcelona, 1305).

In the long run, Maimonides and his oeuvre were not only accepted, they were even canonized. But the *Mishneh Torah*, appended with numerous glosses and commentaries, failed to replace the Talmud and became only one of the elements of talmudic studies. The *Guide*, while regarded as one of the great monuments of Judaism, did not generate further philosophical reflection. Maimonides had anticipated an immediate outcry, but believed he would be accepted by posterity. Ironically, what happened was quite the contrary: the work was well received, but the project failed.



3. Statue of Maimonides, erected in Cordoba, city of his birth, in 1964.



2. The Guide of the Perplexed in Samuel ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation. Manuscript copied and illuminated in Barcelona in 1348.

Guide of the Perplexed

1190–1191

Letter on Astrology

1194

belief in the resurrection of the body. Thirty years later Abulafia was asked by Nahmanides to take part again in the controversy, but on this occasion he refused.

1204: Maimonides dies in Cairo.

1230–1233: The controversy over Maimonides’ works rocks the Spanish and French communities; the rabbis of southern France pronounce an excommunication on anyone who reads the *Guide of the Perplexed* or seeks after “Greek wisdom” (the rabbis of Paris possibly burned the copies of Maimonides’ works in their possession); a counter-excommunication is proclaimed by the Maimonidean camp of “Provence” (southern France); letters of protest are sent to the rabbis of northern France; David Kimhi goes to Spain to gather the support of Spanish communities for the measures adopted by the pro-Maimonideans. In Spain, excommunication of anti-Maimonideans is proclaimed by the communities of Aragon (Summer, 1232); intervention of Moses ben Nahman

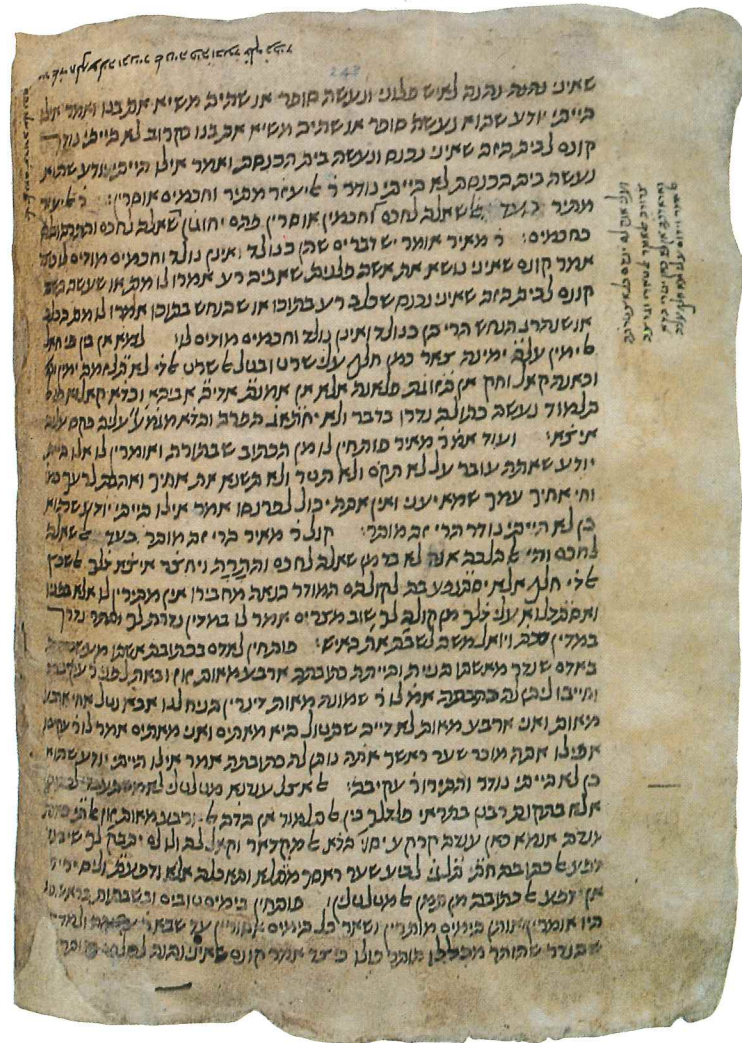
(Nahmanides), who obtains the retraction of the excommunication pronounced by the rabbis of northern France; the pro-Maimonideans refuse to retract their ban; their adversaries therefore denounce them to the Inquisition.

1303: Abba Mari of Montpellier writes to Solomon ben Abraham Adret of Barcelona asking him to take measures against the advance of “disbelief.”

1303–1305: Correspondence concerning the proposals of Abba Mari between the communities of southern France and those of Spain.

1305. July 31: Excommunication pronounced in Barcelona against whoever reads works of science and metaphysics before the age of twenty-five, and against adherents of allegorical interpretations which reject the notion of revelation.

July 1305–September 1306: Excommunications and counter-excommunications between “rationalists” and “anti-rationalists” in southern France.



5. Maimonides’ commentary on the Mishnah, written in Arabic in Hebrew characters. An autographed manuscript, Morocco or Egypt, 1161–1168.