The Beginnings of European Jewry

The history of the beginnings of a Jewish presence in Europe cannot be thought of as a linear and continuous development. The evidence is fragmentary, random, and often inconsistent. The earliest recorded presence of Jews in medieval Europe is that of colonies of oriental or "Syrian" merchants in towns north of the Loire or in southern Gaul during the fifth and sixth centuries. In the historians' debate concerning the demarcation of periods, the existence of these colonies attests to the persistence of trade in the period of transition from the urban and Mediterranean world of Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages. It also indicates the contraction of commerce which was then limited solely to the import of luxury goods and carried out almost exclusively by non-indigenous groups which inherited the role of the Greek-speaking diaspora.

After an interruption of over 150 years, we encounter another group of Jewish merchants, new arrivals from the great centers of Jewish civilization in Palestine and Babylon. They were attracted to Europe not only by the profit to be made in distant lands but also by the policy of protection offered by the Carolingian kings who wished to encourage and control the suppliers of expensive textiles, spices, and other luxury articles consumed by the rich nobility.

In the ninth century some of these merchants were involved in long-distance trade encompassing the whole of Eurasia. From the Frankish kingdom they exported swords, slaves, and furs to the Muslim world; then, following the Silk Road to India and China and returning via Khazaria and the Slavic lands, they brought back spices and perfumes to Europe. A Muslim document refers to these great dealers as radhanya (from the river Rhone or a region near Baghdad).

From several sources we learn of the existence of a community of prosperous Jewish merchants, protected by imperial agents, who enjoyed the social prestige which the Christian society was willing to accord to the descendants of the people of the Bible. When Aigoard, the Archbishop of Lyons, conducted an intensive campaign against the Jews, his efforts to restrict their activities all failed.

It was only after the Carolingian period, however, that the Jewry destined to be known as "Ashkenazi" was formed and began to evolve its unique patterns of internal organization and cultural life. Large families, often led by rabbinical scholars, migrated from southern Europe, particularly from Italy, to establish communities in the Paris basin and the regions of Champagne and the Rhine. Quite small at first, these communities began to grow rapidly during the eleventh century. From about 4000 persons around the turn of the millennium, the number of Jews in German lands had reached almost 20,000 by the time of the First Crusade (end of eleventh century).

These new communities also dealt in long-distance trade. The first generation immigrants recognized hereditary monopoly rights in relations with clients—a custom borrowed from Arabo-speaking communities such as that of Kairouan, and still practiced among Ashkenazi Jews as late as the seventeenth century. The new communities imposed internal discipline to prevent feuds between rival family firms and, while jealously guarding their independence, accepted an inter-communal system of control and intervention to ensure peaceful relations and harmony within their diaspora.

For historians who wish to organize the sporadic and uneven history of European Jewry into a coherent formula of a succession of dominant centers, the late eleventh century, "the age of Rashi," opens a new chapter. Henceforth, Ashkenazi Jewry would maintain its predominance in the Jewish world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gregory the Great</th>
<th>Anti-Jewish legislation in Visigoth Spain</th>
<th>Muslim conquest of Spain</th>
<th>Agobard's letters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>590-604</td>
<td>563-694</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>620-623</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>576: Avit, Bishop of Clermont-Ferrand, forces the 500 Jews in his town to choose between conversion or expulsion.</td>
<td>633: The Fourth Council of Toledo (presided over by Isidore of Seville) condemns forced baptisms but confirms the validity of previously achieved conversions of children; converted children are to be taken from their families to protect them from returning to the false religion of their parents.</td>
<td>711: Muslim conquest of Spain. According to Lucas de Tuy (13th century), the Jews delivered Toledo into the hands of the invaders. The accusation of &quot;treason&quot; during the Muslim invasion will be raised often against the Jews and conversos in the 15th century.</td>
<td>620-623: Letters of Agobard. The letter concerning &quot;the superstitions of the Jews&quot; reveals that the Jews of Lyons were familiar with the mystical writings of the ancient Orient.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 590-604: The pontificate of Gregory the Great who adopts a "moderate" policy towards the Jews. He condemns forced conversions but approves of conversions attained by material inducements; he first formulates the principle which was reiterated from the twelfth century onwards in all papal bulls favorable to the Jews that "as one should not accord the Jews in their synagogues any liberty beyond what is fixed by law, thus they should not suffer, within what they were accorded, any infringement of their rights." | 613: The Jews are made to prepare for the choice between conversion or exile. | 638: The Bodo-Enزار affair: Bodo, a deacon at the court of Louis the Pious, befriended Jewish merchants who frequented the palace; in 638 he fled to 

1. Presentation of the Book to Pope Gregory. Rabanus Maurus, Diuid Cruius, 10th century.
500–1096

**Jewish Communities in the 9th century**

**Bills of Rights of Louis the Pious**

825

Muslim Spain, embraced Judaism, and adopted the name Eleazar; his works include missionary pamphlets extolling messianic expectations and describing the End of Days as the avenging of Israel's humiliation.

**Beginning of 10th century:** The Book of Josephus, a Hebrew version of Josephus Flavius, is composed in southern Italy by an unknown author.

957: The assumed date for the departure of the Kalonymus family from Lucua in Italy to Mainz in Germany. Hasidic sources from the 13th century influenced by the Carolingian legend attribute the migration to the initiative of a king called "Charles."

982: According to a Jewish story, a Jew called Kalonymus gives his horse to Emperor Otto II, thus saving the Emperor's life during a battle against the Muslims in Calabria, Italy.

c. 1000: In 992, according to a Hebrew source, the Jews of Limoges are accused of witchcraft. In 1010, together with some Saracens from Spain, they are accused of inciting the Fatimid Caliph Al-Hakim to destroy the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

**Expulsion of the Jews of Limoges:**

1054: In Capua, Italy, a certain Ahmaaz composes "The Ahmaaz Scroll," a midrashic chronicle of his family, known for its prominent position in Byzantine Italy.

1084: The Bishop of Speyer grants privileges to the Jews according to the model of the letters of protection of Louis the Pious.

**The First Crusade**

1090–1095: Gilbert Crispin, Abbot of Westminster and disciple of Anselm of Canterbury, writes a discussion between a Jew and a Christian, presented as a transcript of a friendly disputatio between Crispin and a Jew from Mainz; the Jew enumerates various objections which permit the author to expand on the fundamentals of Christianity in a rational manner.


1147: Alfonso VII of Castile appoints Judah ibn Ezra (nephew of poet Moses ibn Ezra), commander of Calatrava (Ciudad Real), an important fortress on the Muslim border.

1147-1148: Most of Andalusia falls under Almohad rule.

1151-1166: John, Archbishop of Toledo, to whom "Avendahut hebraica philosophia" dedicated a translation from Arabic to Latin of Avicenna's De Anima. "Avendahut" was probably the philosopher and historian Abraham ibn Daud.

1161: Joseph Kimhi and Judah ibn Tibbon, both immigrants from Muslim Spain who settled in southern France, one in Narbonne and the other in Luneil near Montpellier, simultaneously translate The Duties of the Heart of the Jewish philosopher Bahya ibn Tibbon from Arabic to Hebrew.

1166: Judah ibn Tibbon translates Judah Halevi's *The Book of the Kuzari* from Arabic to Hebrew.

1176: The fuero (privilege charter) of Teruel - Jews are made the property of the royal treasury.

1202: Meir ha-Levi Abulafia of Toledo asks the rabbis of Lunel to support his condemnation of Maimonides' theories which deny belief in the resurrection of the body. Sheeshet Benveniste of Barcelona, physician, diplomat, and administrator at the Aragonese court, tries to dissuade the rabbis of Lunel from supporting Abulafia, arguing that the talmudic scholars of Castile opposed Maimonides' works only because his teachings undermine their judicial authority. This controversy will be rekindled a decade later, this time around the political issue of electing community leaders.

1204: Death of Maimonides in Egypt.

1215: Fourth Lateran Council, convened by Innocent III. Isaac Benveniste, Sheeshet's nephew, heads a delegation of Jews from southern France who appeal to the Pope to prevent the adoption of anti-Jewish decisions. Nevertheless, the Council publishes a series of restrictive canons, particularly on Jewish money-lending.

4. The Jewish Quarter in Seville, viewed from the Cathedral.
They [Christians and Muslims] make war, and the ravages of combat bring about our ruin” (Judah Halevi). Indeed, in the second half of the eleventh century, after the demise of the Umayyad Dynasty and the fragmentation of Muslim Spain into small principalities, the Christian kingdoms in the Iberian Peninsula launched the Reconquista. This was the great struggle to regain territories in Spain, a struggle which was viewed by European Christians as part of a larger crusade against Islam. The external threat forced the Arab and Berber principalities to forget their differences and to appeal to the Moroccan Almoravides for help. When the latter attained dominance over Andalusia, they formed a united empire “from the Ebro to Senegal.” The Jewish communities found themselves caught between two powerful societies engaged in a deadly struggle.

In Granada as in Seville, the Almoravides expelled the Jews from all positions of influence. Poet Moses ibn Ezra, as he was wandering from place to place in Christian Spain, lamented the cruelty of a society which lacked the refinement of the Andalusian courts. Between 1108 and 1111 Castile suffered a series of rural and urban uprisings similar to contemporary revolts of communes and peasants in other parts of Europe. A general economic depression, caused mainly by the drying up of the flow of money from Muslim Spain, aggravated social unrest. This agitation was accompanied by anti-Jewish riots and massacres. Worse still, when the Almohads, another North African dynasty, replaced the Almoravides in Andalusia, they completely abolished the protection traditionally accorded by Muslim rulers to the Peoples of the Book, forcing everyone to profess Islam at least outwardly. The Jews then fled from Andalusia, some towards the Muslim Orient but the majority to the Christian kingdoms in Spain or to southern France.

The situation of the Jews who emigrated to the Christian part of the peninsula at first resembled the conditions they had enjoyed in Muslim Spain prior to the arrival of the Berber dynasties. The Christian monarchs of Castile and Aragon used the Jews in order to colonize regions reconquered from the Muslims. Also, in imitation of the Muslim princes, they developed the custom of employing Jews in the highest administrative and financial positions. Since Jews could not attain political power nor ally themselves with the nobility or the church, they became natural allies to the crown. The privilege charters (fueros) granted in the reconquered states were, however, suffused with ambiguities inevitable in a society where three ethnic-religious communities were forced to live together. While they did grant legal equality, the privilege charters also enforced submission to laws belonging in a non-mixed society.

The powerful Jewish families, who fulfilled functions for the Christian kings which were similar to those held by their fathers in Andalusian courts, naturally wielded considerable importance in the Jewish communities. For several generations the leadership of the community became a hereditary privilege of these dynasties of courtiers. Only in the early thirteenth century, and in connection with the Maimonidean controversy, did the first signs of a democratic reaction become apparent. The first power struggle took place in Barcelona in 1213 when the anti-Maimonidean party tried to dislodge the influential house of Sheshet, but failed. One generation later, in 1241, it succeeded. Henceforth the community was to be administered by a new type of urban Jewish patriciate.
The Jews of Italy

1255: Pope Alexander IV nominates a group of Roman Jewish bankers as mercatores Romanam Curiam sequentes – official merchants of the papal curia.

1275–1400: Jews from Rome settle in central and northern Italy.

1275–1475: The rise of Jewish banking.

1330–1420: Establishment of Ashkenazi Jewish communities in northern Italy.


1390–1430: Communities of French Jews are founded in Piedmont.

1419, 1429: Two bulls of Pope Martin V attempt to put a stop to the anti-Jewish activities of the Franciscans.

1436: Founding of the Pisa bank in Florence, the largest Jewish bank in Renaissance Italy.

1450–before 1515: Obadiah ben Abraham Bartron, author of a commentary on the Mishnah, published in Venice in 1450–51; it will become the standard commentary on the Mishnah as is Rashis on the Talmud.

1463: The first monte di pieta is established in Perugia.


1475: A ritual-murder libel in Trent.

1486: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's Orazione de dignitate hominis; associated with the humanistic circle of this Florentine humanist and Christian Kabbalist, are the Jewish philosophers Elijah Delmedigo and Johanan Alemanno.

1493: Following the expulsion from Spain, Jews are forced to leave Sicy and Sardinia which are under Aragonese rule.

1516: The first ghetto is created in Venice.

1524: Pope Clement VII receives David Reuben – a mysterious figure from the east claiming to be a prince of a Jewish kingdom of the lost tribes, seeking Christian aid against the Muslims in the Holy Land.

1538: Judah Abravanel (Leon de Eza) writes Dialogi d'amore, a classic of Italian philosophic literature.

1541: Expulsion of the wealthy Jews of Spanish southern Italy who had been allowed to remain under previous edicts.

1545–1563: The Council of Trent – the Catholic Church defines its dogmas and adopts a harsh line against non-Catholics.

1553: Pope Julius III orders the burning of the Talmud in Rome and throughout Italy.

1554: All Hebrew books are submitted to censure.

1555–1796: The Age of the Ghetto.

1556: Pope Paul IV orders the segregation of the Jews of Rimini.

1566: The burning of convenios in Ancona.

1569: Plus V expels the Jews from all papal states, except Rome and Ancona.

1571: Expulsion of the Jews from Tuscany, except the ghettos in Florence and Siena.

The atmosphere surrounding the Jews became even more oppressive during the second half of the sixteenth century. The Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation, in its efforts to protect Catholics from the possibility of religious contamination, invested great efforts in the process of pushing the Jews to the margins of Italian society. Their community, until then an integral and important part of the social, economic, and cultural life of Italy, was now transformed into a persecuted pariah caste by the legislation and propaganda of pope and princely rulers. The establishment of the Roman Inquisition, the burning of the Talmud in 1553, the creation of the ghetto in Rome by Pope Paul IV in 1555, the expulsion of the Jews from the Papal States in 1569 – all these were signposts in a process which would continue for over two centuries, until the French entered Italy in 1796.
The Ghetto of Venice

1516

1538–1663: Simone Luzzatto, rabbi of the Venetian community, philosopher and mathematician, is the first to advance economic arguments in favor of toleration towards the Jews.

1569–1628: Solomon de' Rossi composes his major musical works: Ha-Shirim asher li Shelomo ("Solomon's Songs") – the first musical composition destined for liturgy in the synagogue.

1570: Portuguese conversos establish a community in Livorno (Leghorn), to become the most important of Italian Jewish communities.

1597: Philip II of Spain orders the expulsion of the Jews from the Duchy of Milan.

1635: Innocent XI orders the closing of the Jewish banks in Rome and throughout the papal states.

1664: During the siege of Buda in Hungary, the Jews are accused of aiding the Turkish defenders of the city; pogroms in Italy; the Padua Ghetto is attacked and pillaged.

1777: The Republic of Venice imposes heavier restrictions on the Jews living in the ghetto.

1782: In Italian territories under Austrian rule the Jews are granted religious freedom and other privileges.

1796: Bonaparte's Italian army puts an end to the Age of the Ghetto and proclaims the emancipation of Italian Jewry.

2. Oath of a Jewish physician. Venetian manuscript, c. 1750.
Before the colonial period there were two distinct and separate Jewish communities in India: Bene Israel ("Sons of Israel") in the Konkan region in the present-day state of Maharashtra; and in Kerala, the Jews of Cochin. Bene Israel, the largest group of Indian Jews, regard themselves as descendants of refugees from the Galilee who fled the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BC; but they are not mentioned in any external sources prior to their first contact with the Jews of Cochin in the eighteenth century.

Closely resembling their Maratha neighbors in appearance, customs, and language, Bene Israel engaged in agriculture and oil production. They practiced circumcision and observed the Sabbath and Jewish dietary laws. Within the rigid Indian caste system, it was natural for these "Sabbath-observing olmen" (Shanaar Teli) to maintain their distinctiveness and to remain separate.

During the British Raj, many Bene Israel moved from their villages to Bombay and excelled as officials and soldiers. Following the encounter with other Jewish communities - first with the Cochin Jews, and at the beginning of the nineteenth century with Arabic-speaking Jews from Baghdad - Bene Israel extended their Jewish education and built a few synagogues. They translated prayer books and the Passover Haggadah into the Marathi language, and for a time published several Jewish periodicals. The more prosperous and educated families sent their sons to English schools. Attracted by the opportunities offered in the civil service, many of them moved to other cities such as Ahmadabad, Baroda, Poona, Ajmer, Delhi, and Calcutta, where they lived alongside other Jewish communities but did not inter-marry with them.

From the 1920's many Bene Israel became Zionists due to the activities of emissaries sent by the movement. After the establishment of the State of Israel, most of them emigrated there, while others went to England. From the 24,000 persons who constituted the community in 1947, only a few thousand still remain in India today. When they emerged from their isolation, Bene Israel found it difficult to be recognized as legitimately Jewish. The controversy concerning their status was only resolved in 1964 when the Israeli government issued a statement to the effect that Bene Israel are Jews in every respect.

The history of the Jews in Kerala is also obscure. This tiny community - about 2500 persons at the beginning of this century, of whom 1000 lived in Cochin itself and 500 in the nearby town of Arankolam - was divided into three distinct groups: "White Jews" (Paradesi, meaning foreigners), "Black Jews," and "Freedmen"; the latter integrated into the "Blacks" at the beginning of the present century.

Legend and tradition trace the history of the Jews on the Malabar Coast to King Solomon's times, but the earliest historical evidence of their existence dates from c. 1000. Two copper plates inscribed in Tamil record the privileges granted by the Hindu ruler of Malabar, Bhaskara Ravi Varman, to one Joseph Rabban (Issuppu Irappan) from the village of Angivanam. Accounts of various travellers - Marco Polo, Ibn Batuta, and the Jew Benjamin of Tudela - confirm the existence of small Jewish communities dotting the Indian coast from Quilon in southern Cochin to Calicut in the north.

The Portuguese conquest brought many Jews to India, but it also introduced the first religious persecutions. The Rajah of Cochin offered them asylum in his city, granted them freedom of worship, and even appointed them a community leader (mudabbar), who was to serve as their spokesman and arbitrator.

Dutch rule (1663–1795) was a time of freedom and prosperity for the community. The "White Jews" maintained commercial and cultural links with Jewish communities in Amsterdam and other places. The famous Paradesi synagogue of Cochin, built in 1568 and partly destroyed by the Portuguese, was rebuilt in 1760.

The community retained its independence under the British Raj, but after the establishment of Israel most Cochin Jews emigrated there, and the community in India virtually ceased to exist.

Finally, some mention must be made of small groups of Jewish merchants who settled in India at various times: traders from Persia who came to northern India during the Mogul period; and in the seventeenth century, European and Iraqi Jews, involved in the trade of the European East India companies, settled in India's larger cities.

---

Earliest evidence for a Jewish presence near Cochin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10th century</td>
<td>The assumed period of the arrival of Aryans to the Ganges and Indus valleys; writing of the Rig Veda, the oldest sacred text of Indian culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th century BC</td>
<td>Reign of Solomon in Israel; some slim evidence suggests commercial links between the Kingdom of Israel and southern India; legend and tradition trace the Jewish settlement on the coast of Malabar back to this period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>546–468 BC</td>
<td>Life of Buddha; the religion he founded spread throughout eastern Asia but disappeared from India itself during the 10th century AD.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>962–1019</td>
<td>Reign of Shaikara Ravi Varman, the Jew Joseph Rabban is granted the right to live in Cranganore on the Malabar Coast, 35 km north of Cochin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1167</td>
<td>Benjamin of Tudela arrives in India; evidence of a Jewish settlement on the Malabar Coast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1288</td>
<td>Marco Polo visits India.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1333</td>
<td>The Arab traveler from Tangiers, Ibn Batuta, visits India.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

Visit of Benjamin of Tudela in Malabar

5. A family of Bene Israel, 1983.
10th–20th Centuries

2. A family of Bene Israel in Bombay, 1890.

3. The Paradesi synagogue in Cochin, built in 1568.

The Paradesi synagogue in Cochin

1568: The Portuguese conquer Panjim and establish Goa as the seat of the viceroy; many Jews and M惩戒nos among the settlers.
1523: The Portuguese capture Cranganore; the Jews find refuge in Cochin.
1506–1805: Reign of Akbar the Great, third Mogul emperor; a period of religious toleration.
1565: The Inquisition established in Goa.
1568: The Paradesi synagogue in Cochin is built.
1603–1750: The Dutch rule Cochin; a period of prosperity for the Jews.
1674: The English East India Company transfers its center from Surat to Bombay, which becomes in subsequent centuries the largest Jewish center on the Indian subcontinent.
1686: The first delegation from the Jewish Portuguese community of Amsterdam arrives in India and establishes contacts with Indian Jews.
1750: Missionaries discover the Jewish congregations of Bene Israel in Konkan, Maharashtra; first meeting between a Cochin Jew (David Rahabi) and a Jewish army officer, Samuel E. Dvokar.
1772: Calcutta becomes the official capital of the British government in India; in the following century a flourishing Jewish community will develop there.
1796: The first synagogue of Bene Israel in Bombay; Sha'ar ha-Rahamim ("Gate of Mercy").
1799: The last battle of Tipu Sahib, Sultan of Mysore, against the British who consolidate their rule over southern India.
1810: The American Mission Society is founded in Bombay and opens a school in the Marathi language for Bene Israel.
1840: A Cochin Jew establishes the first Hebrew printing press in India.
1846: Translation of the Haggadah into Marathi.
1875: The Sassoon family establishes a special school for Bene Israel in Bombay.
1884: "Maghen David," the largest synagogue in the Far East, is built in Calcutta.
1916: The first Zionist organization of Bene Israel founded in Bombay.
1937–1938: E. Moses, a Bene Israel Jew, is mayor of the City of Bombay.
1948: Widespread emigration of Indian Jews to Israel, England, and other countries.

The first synagogue of Bene Israel in Bombay

The first Jewish printing press in India

Jewish emigration from India

The Jews of China

Jewish merchants arrived in China together with other traders from the west when the famous Silk Road was open and safe, perhaps as early as the second century BC. The oldest extant testimony to their presence there, however, dates from the beginning of the eighth century AD (Tang Dynasty). It is a business letter, written in Persian using Hebrew script, discovered by Sir Aurel Stein at Khotan, a western outpost of the Chinese Empire. It is safe to assume that Jewish and Muslim merchants also lived in the port towns of southeastern China—Canton, and perhaps Ningpo and Chunchow—but never permanently settled there. During the Mongol period (Yuan Dynasty), Jews and Muslims are mentioned together in decrees pertaining to taxation, prohibitions on ritual slaughterings, and levirate marriages (the custom of marrying the widow of one’s deceased brother). Since no traces of these communities remain, it is impossible to estimate their size; all we know is that Marco Polo, who visited China toward the end of the thirteenth century, recounts meeting many Jews in Khambalik (Peking) and in Hangchow.

In fact, the only real Jewish community in China was the one in Kaifeng. Its origins date back to the 11th century AD, when approximately 1000 Jews, bringing cotton from either Persia or India, received permission to settle in this town in central China. In 1163 a synagogue was built in Kaifeng which was rebuilt several times over the years. Three steles, erected in the years 1489, 1512, and 1663, attribute different dates to the first arrival of Jews in China; the very early dates which the two latter steles suggest—the beginning of the first century or even earlier—should be regarded circumspectly. The inscriptions, in an attempt to reconcile Jewish and Confucian beliefs, recount in detail the genealogy of the Jews from Adam, who is none other than the Chinese Pan Ku.

Chinese sources make no mention at all of the Jews of Kaifeng, but in 1605 the well-known Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci, met in Peking a man

Recorded presence of Jews in China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early 8th century</th>
<th>Beginning of the Kaifeng community</th>
<th>End of 10th century</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1000-256 BC: The Chou Dynasty—when China’s first true civilization was formed; a time of enormous intellectual ferment, producing China’s oldest surviving literature and giving rise to China’s golden age of philosophy; according to a late source (1663), the first Jews arrive in China during this period.</td>
<td>1163: Construction of the synagogue in Kaifeng</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1131-1200: Chu Hsi, the philosopher who reformulated Confucianism and made it the official ideology of the Empire, determined its spiritual character up to the beginning of the 20th century; Chinese Jews have always tried to minimize the difference between this doctrine and their own faith.</td>
<td>1260-1294: Reign of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China, one of the most enlightened monarchs in human history; his court is visited by foreigners of all religions (Marco Polo among them), including some Jews.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"A Jew of Kaifeng (Khotan) reading the Bible in Moorish script, with two pulpits. A drawing by Father Domingo, 1725."
from Kaifeng called Ai Tien who told him about his community. According to Ricci, there was a Hebrew Pentateuch in the Kaifeng synagogue, and the Jews there practiced circumcision and refrained from eating pork. But apart from the steles, the only tangible evidence of the Kaifeng community are several prayer books discovered by Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, as well as a community register from the middle of the nineteenth century written in Hebrew and Chinese.

Over the years the Jews of Kaifeng have been dispersed or assimilated into the local environment; they adopted Chinese surnames and customs, and some attained prominent positions in the mandarinate and in the army. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the community had no rabbi and had virtually ceased to exist.

Today there are still a handful of Chinese who consider themselves descendants of the Kaifeng Jews (rumor has it that China’s former president, Liu Shao Chi, was one of them); but, to all intents and purposes, their Jewish identity has been lost.

Modern Jewish communities were formed in China during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Hong Kong the Jews were predominantly British subjects, many from India and Iraq. By 1937 about 10,000 European Jews were living in China. The Russian Jewish population in Harbin numbered some 5,000 people, most of them refugees from the Russian Revolution of 1917. The greatest influx of Jews to China was, however, prompted by World War II. Very few of them made the effort to study Chinese culture, and most left for other parts of the world soon after the war. Today there is a small Jewish community in Hong Kong – the only remnant of Jewish existence in the vast Chinese world.

---

**Disputation of Peking**

1342

**Three Jewish steles in Kaifeng**

1489, 1512, 1663

**Death of the last rabbi of Kaifeng**

C. 1800

1340: Imperial decree forbidding levirate marriages mention both Jews and Muslims.

1342: A theological disputation between Jews and the priest Mermoli in Peking.

1489, 1512, 1663: Dates of the steles in Kaifeng, describing the history of the Jews: the first dates the arrival of Jews to Kaifeng during the Sung Dynasty period; the second, engraved on the back of the stele of 1489, describes it to the Han Dynasty; the third claims the Jews arrived during the Chou Dynasty and describes their beliefs in Confucian terms.

1605: Ai Tien of Kaifeng tells the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci about his community.

1642: The synagogue of Kaifeng is destroyed during an anti-imperial revolt.

1663: The Kaifeng synagogue is reopened.