INTRODUCTION

A century and more of research on Byzantine Jewry has lifted a corner of a curtain, but little more. We are still woefully ignorant about the physical dimensions of the Jewish presence in Byzantium - how many Jews there were, and where they lived - and about many aspects of Jewish life. Nevertheless, considerable advances have been made, and my purpose in this survey is to point to some of these, to attempt to discern some trends in research, and to indicate some areas where further work is possible and desirable.

FOUNDATIONS

The first book-length work on Byzantine Jewry was Samuel Krauss's *Studien zur byzantinisch-jüdischen Geschichte*, published in 1914 as the main item in the XLI. Jahresbericht der israelitisch-theologischen Lehranstalt in Wien.1 Krauss's book remains the starting point for research in this area, even though so much new evidence has come to light since he wrote, and particularly the documents and manuscript fragments recovered from the Cairo Genizah. Although these began to be published in the 1890s, and some were included in Jacob Mann's *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (2 vols. Cincinnati, 1931 and Philadelphia, 1935), they were not fully integrated into Byzantine Jewish research until Joshua Starr published his *Jews in the Byzantine Empire 641–1204* (Athens, 1959).

A significant feature of Starr's book is that it consists of two parts, a synthetic account and a source book comprising English translations, notes and bibliographical references. The same format was adopted subsequently by Steven Bowman for his *The Jews of Byzantium, 1204–1453* (Tuscaloosa, 1985), which sets out to extend Starr's pioneering work to the period after the Latin conquest of Constantinople.


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The period between Starr's book and Bowman's saw the publication of two monographs specifically on our subject. Zvi Ankori's *Karaite in Byzantium, the formative years, 970–1100* (New York and Jerusalem, 1959), while it is ostensibly devoted to the Karaites, deals comprehensively with the whole of Byzantine Jewry in the 11th century, and makes use of a far wider range of source materials than Starr had laid under contribution. 2 Andrew Shariat's *Byzantine Jewry from Justinian to the Fourth Crusade* (London, 1971) is a servicable narrative with a substantial bibliography.

General histories both of Jewry and of Byzantium have been very slow to take note of the work of this small band of specialist historians. Simon Dubnow (1860–1941), coming from a Russian background, stands out for the attention he paid to Byzantium in his monumental *Weltgeschichte des jüdischen Volkes* (10 vols, Berlin, 1925–1929), and Byzantium is also taken seriously in the other great compendious Jewish history of the twentieth century, Salo W. Baron's *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (18 vols, New York, 1952–83). Most histories dealing with European Jewry in the Middle Ages, however, still neglect the Byzantine dimensions.

Historians of Byzantium also still generally fail to do justice to the Jewish minority, despite the growing bibliography in English. In a series of important articles David Jacoby has striven to integrate the Jews into the story of Byzantium; several of these are included in his collection *Byzantium, Latin Romance and the Mediterranean* (Variorum Collected Studies Series, CS703; Aldershot, 2001). Attention is paid to the Jews as appropriate in Angeliki Laiton, ed., *The Economic History of Byzantium: from the seventh through the fifteenth century* (3 vols, Washington, 2002). 3

**Sources for Byzantine Jewish History**

Several types of materials that are essential for the writing of Byzantine history in general offer little or nothing for the history of the Jews. We have no Jewish coins or seals; leaving aside the earliest period there are no excavated synagogues or other Jewish buildings, no Jewish iconography, and very few inscriptions (of these the great majority are from Byzantine Italy); and there is almost nothing in the way ritual objects, charms and amulets, jewellery or domestic items with a demonstrable Jewish origin. The reasons for this lacuna have not been sufficiently explored.

2 Publications about the Karaites during the three decades following Ankori's publication have been surveyed by D. Frank in *Bulletin of Indo-European Studies* 6 (Summer 1990). The most comprehensive treatment of the subject is *Karaite Judaism: Guide to the History and Literary Sources of Medieval and Modern Karaitism*, ed. M. Pollack (Leiden, 2005).

3 A monograph on the economic history of the Byzantine Jews, by Joshua Holo, is in the course of publication.

4 The present author has undertaken to prepare a corpus of Hebrew inscriptions from the Byzantine empire for the series 'Monumenta Palaeographica Medii Aevi: Series Hebrew' (Brepols).


6 Some colophons are translated in Bowman, *The Jews of Byzantium*.

7 See N. de Lange, 'Byzantium in the Cairo Genizah,' *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 16 (1992), 34–47, and further references there.


existence of designated Jewish quarters in cities is a particularly interesting question. 15

Apart from numbers, there are other aspects of the Jewish population which would require closer study, such as the origins of immigrants and visitors. 16 Situated as it was in the centre of the medieval Jewish world, at the hub of major trade routes, Byzantium received Jewish travellers and settlers from every direction, while conversely Byzantine Jews appear in other parts of the world, as traders, students or captives. This openness has a bearing on the character of Byzantine Jewish life and civilization.

A growing interest in minority history is beginning to result in some attention being paid to the Jews within more general studies; the development of this trend should lead to a better understanding of Jewish communities within a wider context. 17

The prosopography of the Jews has not so far been tackled in a systematic way. However, there are signs of a greater interest in the Jewish minority among Byzantine prosopographers. 18

COMMUNAL STRUCTURES

The structure and institutions of the Jewish community still await full treatment. Despite an acute shortage of documentary evidence, it is clear that considerable change took place between late antiquity and c. 1000, when information becomes more abundant. The precise nature of the change, its causes and timing are all very obscure. The most obvious elements are that the leadership of the communities passed from archons and archisynagogoi, who were apparently a wealthy, energetic, not necessarily learned elite, into the hands of rabbis, whose only qualification was their learning

Demography

No scientific study exists of the actual presence of the Jews in the empire, and occasional estimates of population figures are largely subjective. It is questionable, given the nature of the evidence, whether reliable statistics will ever be achieved. Mapping the distribution of Jews through the various regions and towns of the empire, and indeed in the countryside, and their concentrations within specific cities at various times is probably a feasible project, although there are serious gaps in the record. The

11 Some of these are cited by Starr and by Bowman; others remain to be collected.
12 See particularly the collection of Creien takkanot, collected originally by Eliy Kapsali in the early 16th century and edited by E. Saron and H. M. D. Cassuto, Statuta Judeorum Cannicorum memorabilis (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1943).
ORDINARY LIFE

Another area about which little is known is that of the ordinary life of Byzantine Jews. Again, archaeology is no help here, and apart from some stray references in Christian sources we have to rely on what we can glean from Byzantine Hebrew sources and occasional comments by Jewish visitors, who noted distinctive features of Byzantine Jewish life. From these sources we can gain some modest insight into the relationships between men and women, and between rich and poor.24

Most Jewish men seem to have been occupied in commerce or manufacture of one sort or another. The production of textiles seems to have been a particularly important activity. We read of Jewish physicians. While most Jews lived in urban communities, there are hints of agricultural pursuits.25

Rabbinic responsa and other halakhic (legal) texts point to distinctive practices of the Byzantine Jews that were not known elsewhere in the Jewish world. Some of these display striking similarities to Christian practice, but it is not easy to determine whether they are due to direct borrowing or whether Jews and Christians alike conserved much older usages. For example a marriage celebration known as stefanomata conjures up the Christian use of wedding crowns, while the status of the dowry as the inalienable property of the bride’s family belongs both to Byzantine and to Roman law.26

CULTURAL ISSUES

1. Education

Excluded from Christian schools, Jews had their own educational system, divided in a tripartite system. In elementary schools boys learnt enough Hebrew to follow the prayers and Bible readings; those who proceeded to the intermediate stage were introduced to the Talmud and other rabbinic texts, while only a few went on to advanced study which would equip them for public office as rabbis and judges.27

There is to date unfortunately no full-scale general survey of Hebrew scholarship in Byzantium. Starr has a chapter in his book (covering the period down to the Fourth Crusade) headed “Intellectual interests and literary productions.” Important in its day as a guide through poorly charted waters, it is now out of date and inadequate. The period after the Fourth Crusade is studied by Bowman, in his chapter entitled “Language and literature.” Bowman, like Starr, writes around a collection of documents in translation, but he adds some useful general observations. He draws attention, for example, to the continuing engagement with Palestinian Judaism.

24 Little has been written on this since S. Assaf, ‘On the family life of Byzantine Jewry,’ in Samuel Krauss Festschrift (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 159–77.
26 For these and other customs see Bowman, Jews of Byzantium, pp. 121–27.
(with its strong homiletical and mystical interests) even at this late date and despite the pervasive influence of the Babylonian Talmud, and he remarks also on a strong interest in astronomy and Hebrew grammar. Bowman also devotes particular attention to religious poetry and to Karaites scholarship. The most recent survey is a chronologically ordered treatment paying special attention to the role of the Hebrew language, by the present author.28

2. Biblical study. Grammar

We have some Hebrew grammatical works based on the work of the Jerusalem grammarians Abul-Paraj Harua; later Byzantine Karaites authors, such as Judah Hadassi, evidence a knowledge of grammatical theories developed in Spain. At the same time it would probably be a mistake to suppose that there was no native tradition of textual and grammatical study in Byzantine Jewry. Discussing some Genizah fragments of otherwise unknown Bible commentaries, Richard Steiner has stated that they combine sophistication in the area of text criticism with backwardness in the area of grammar. The commentaries in question seem to derive from Rabbinic circles uninfluenced by Arabic language. Later Rabbinites, like the Karaites, were greatly influenced by the Spanish tradition of grammar.

The Byzantine commentators on the Bible have been insufficiently studied. Steiner has argued that historians of exegesis should recognise a Byzantine school alongside better-known schools such as the Andalusian or North French school, and that this Byzantine school may prove to be the “missing link” between the earlier Palestinian tradition and the medieval exegesis of Ashkenaz (north-western Europe) and Italy.29 Later, western commentaries such as those of Rashi (Rabbi Shalom b. Isaac, 1040–1105) circulated in Byzantium, by far the most influential commentator being Abraham Ibn Ezra (c. 1092–1167).30

3. Talmudic and rabbinic studies

Rabbinic scholarship in Byzantine lands starts at an early date, and the region plays a pivotal role in spreading such studies both north-westards to Ashkenaz and into the Mediterranean regions, and perhaps even to Spain. Byzantium was an important meeting place of the Palestinian and Babylonian schools, represented by the two Talmuds. The late Israel Ta-Shma, in a series of articles, drew attention to a variety of aspects of the connections between Byzantium and Ashkenaz.31 There is room for a good deal more work on this particular subject, and indeed on rabbinic studies in Byzantium generally. One line of investigation passes through the study of the manuscript tradition of the Mishnah and Talmud (as well as their commentaries); it would be profitable to investigate the manuscripts copied in Byzantium, as well as those copied elsewhere which were used and in some cases annotated in Byzantium.

Although it is conventional to portray the Karaites as staunch opponents of the rabbinic tradition, several prominent Byzantine Karaites were keen students of rabbinics, and towards the end of the period some students frequented both Karaita and Rabbanite masters.32

4. Kabbalah and mysticism

Mysticism has very old roots in Byzantine Judaism as in Byzantine Christianity, and indeed direct influence in either direction is not to be ruled out. Maimonides (1135–1204) attributes the mystical treatises on the measurements of God’s body (Shi’ur Komah) to “Greek preachers,” and Byzantine Hebrew hymns refer to the tradition of speculation about the mystical cosmogony (Ma’asch Bereshit), the divine palaces (Hekhalot) and the throne-chariot of God (Ma’asch Merkabah). From the second half of the 13th century there is a strong kabbalistic activity.33

5. Poetry

Piyut (sMegagical poetry) is one of the richest veins in Byzantine Hebrew culture, and one that testifies to the high level of Hebrew education at least among the most favoured strata of society. We are fortunate to have editions of a large number of such compositions, thanks to the efforts of Leon Weinberger, who has published several volumes of piyyutim from Byzantium and neighbouring countries (in which the contribution of Karaites is not neglected). A large part of his book Jewish Hymnography is devoted to these regions, and his discussions of the various genres and individual poets are illustrated by translated excerpts, thus opening up this difficult but rewarding field to non-specialist scholars.

31 See especially I. Ta-Shma, The history of cultural relations between Byzantine and Ashkenaz Jewry, in Me’ah She’arith, ed. B. Fleischer et al. (before Twersky memorial volume) (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 2001), pp. 61–79.
6. Philosophy, science, medicine

From the very beginning of Hebrew writing in Byzantium science is represented in an important group of medical writings from Italy. Little work has been done on the subsequent medical and scientific traditions, or on the history of philosophy in Byzantine Jewry. Again, one approach would be through the study of manuscripts, which preserve not only a number of unpublished writings, but also many indications of an interest in these subjects, particularly during the last century of Byzantine rule, when a large number of mathematical and astronomical manuscripts were copied.\footnote{See for example D. Schwartz, 'Conceptions of Astral Magic Within Jewish Rationalism in the Byzantine Empire,' \textit{Aceph} 3 (2003) pp. 165–211.}

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The subject studied in this article is already so vast that I have deliberately omitted mention of certain topics that might have been included. I have not referred to the large and growing bibliography on Byzantine science and philosophy, because this region is somewhat marginal both geographically and chronologically; however it is of great importance in terms of archaeological remains and of literary texts in Hebrew. Nor have I mentioned the Khazars, because they are really a separate entity, even if they have important connections with Byzantium and its Jewry. More radical was the decision to exclude any discussion of relations between the Jews and the Byzantine state on the one hand, and the Church on the other. The official status of the Jewish community and policy of the state towards it are clearly subjects of primary importance for Byzantine Jewish history, in a significant sense, however, their study falls within the domain of Byzantine rather than of Jewish historians. As for relations with the Church, and indeed Jewish-Christian relations at every level, these have been mainly studied through the abundant (one might almost say over-abundant) Christian literature in Greek by historians of Christian religion and literature. The Jewish materials for the study of Jewish attitudes to state and Church are more limited and much less well known, and very little work has been done on them.\footnote{See N. de Lange, 'Jews and Christians in the Byzantine Empire: Problems and Prospects,' in \textit{Christianity and Judaism}, ed. D. Wood (Oxford, 1992), pp. 15–32; id., 'A fragment of Byzantine anti-Christian polemic,' \textit{Journal of Jewish Studies} 43 (1990), pp. 92–100.}

Once the main texts have been published and translated, it will be possible to study in greater detail the relationship between Byzantine Jews and their coreligionists in other parts of the world, as well as their relations with Byzantine Christians. At present such judgments as are made tend to be formed on the basis of a very narrow range of examples, often originating outside Byzantine Jewry and not necessarily expressing accurately their own sense of their place in the scheme of things. I expect that this work will confirm and extend the sense that Byzantium served as the gateway to Europe for Jewish culture coming from Israel, Iraq and Egypt, and indeed further afield (Iran and the silk route, for example). There are very close cultural links between Byzantium and Ashkenaz, and these deserve further study. As for relations between Jews and Christians, I believe that research will reveal significant differences from the conventional picture drawn mainly on the basis of materials from the Latin West.

I hope I have shown that Byzantine Judaism is a rich and fascinating area of study, and one that offers almost boundless scope for researchers.