

Rural Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age

Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture

Edited by
Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge

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De Gruyter

Rural Space in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age

The Spatial Turn in Premodern Studies

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De Gruyter

ISBN 978-3-11-028536-9
e-ISBN 978-3-11-028542-0
ISSN 1864-3396

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for at the Library of Congress.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

© 2012 Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, Berlin/Boston
Printing and binding: Hubert & Co. GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen
∞ Printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Germany
www.degruyter.com

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Chapter 19

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“Lazarus and Abraham, our Jews of Eggenburg”: Jews in the Austrian Countryside in the Fourteenth Century

“It never entered my mind to live in a village without minyan and prayer,” a Jewish woman in one of the *responsa* of Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg ob der Tauber (ca. 1250–1293), the famous thirteenth-century scholar, states.¹ Living in the countryside was, according to Rabbi Meir, trying, cumbersome, and arduous, and therefore altogether not desirable. Meir, who had studied in Würzburg, Mainz, and Paris, had founded the Rothenburg Jeshiva that attracted students from all over Europe, and had spent his later years in his hometown, Worms, notably perceived urban and rural living spaces as being diametrically opposed, with urban existence as the ‘real’ way of living.

Cities, he argued, were the only environment that safeguarded the necessary requirements for ‘proper’ Jewish life, hence, urban Jewish communities were those that provided their members with institutions and facilities such as synagogues, *mikhvot*, and cemeteries, whereas in the countryside, the living conditions for the *Benei haKefarim*, the Jewish people in the villages, were troublesome at best. Living in the countryside meant living away, and, more often than not, too far away from these essential structures to make use of them on a regular basis, or even at any

¹ Michael Toch, “Economic Activities of German Jews in the Middle Ages,” *Wirtschaftsgeschichte der mittelalterlichen Juden: Fragen und Einschätzungen*, ed. id. Schriften des Historischen Kollegs, Kolloquien, 71 (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2008), 180-210; here 207. The research for this article was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) who also finances the ongoing publication project “Regesten zur Geschichte der Juden in Österreich.” Two volumes that cover the time until 1365 have already been published (see notes 4 and 40), the third volume (1366–1386) is forthcoming in 2012.

time when the need arose. Living in the countryside therefore meant for medieval Jews that they had to adapt to more than living along with, and together with another religious group that, however close the contacts and however intense the cultural transfer might have been, remained different in many regards.²

Nevertheless, Jewish existence in Ashkenazic Europe was never exclusively urban. To which extent the early medieval commercial bases along the trade routes were actually settlements, is still much disputed; for the early Middle Ages, we can assume a very low number of Jews actually settling in Northwest and Central Europe.³ The Jews such as those mentioned in the *Raffelstettener Zollordnung*, an early tenth-century toll regulation for Upper and Lower Austria that included the payment obligations for *iudei et ceteri mercatores* ("Jews and other merchants"), were most definitely exactly that: Jews who were traveling through the Bavarian east, however slowly and with however many stops.⁴ There is no conclusive evidence for a connection between what is referred to as *Judendörfer* ("Jewish villages"), a quite high number of eleventh-century market towns, villages, and farmsteads in the eastern Alpine areas that include the word 'Jud' in their names, and actual Jewish settlement that only got going about two centuries later in this area; nevertheless, a linkage to staging posts and/or shelters of Jewish tradesmen has been suggested.⁵

In the northern and western areas of the Holy Roman Empire as well as in the north of France, most of the Jewish rural settlements of the high Middle Ages were set up in the hinterland of the urban centers, whereas in the southeast, particularly in the territories of today's Austria, it should take up to the mid-thirteenth century that any Jews living outside the cities were mentioned at all—which is a lot less remarkable if we consider how late Jewish settlement in these regions started compared to the areas of the huge Jewish communities, such as the Rhineland.

² Rainer Barzen, "*Benei haKefarim – die Leute aus den Dörfern: Zur jüdischen Siedlung auf dem Lande in Aschkenas und Zarfat im hohen und späteren Mittelalter*," *Campana pulsante convocati. Festschrift anlässlich der Emeritierung von Prof. Dr. Alfred Haverkamp*, ed. Frank G. Hirschmann and Gerd Mentgen (Trier: Kliomedica, 2005), 21-37; here 21. Meir tried to leave the realm of the Holy Roman Empire around 1286 when King Rudolph I imposed new taxes on the Jewry, but was caught and imprisoned until his death in 1293.

³ Michael Toch, *Die Juden im mittelalterlichen Reich*. Enzyklopädie deutscher Geschichte, 44, sec. ed. (1998; Munch: Oldenbourg, 2003), 5–6, speaks of 'no more than a few dozen Jewish families' in the ninth century, and 'a few hundred at most' in the tenth (my translation).

⁴ Eveline Brugger and Birgit Wiedl, *Regesten zur Geschichte der Juden in Österreich im Mittelalter, 1: Von den Anfängen bis 1338* (Innsbruck, Vienna, and Bolzano: StudienVerlag, 2005), 15, n. 1 (for the internet version, see http://www.injoest.ac.at/projekte/laufend/mittelalterliche_judenurkunden/, last accessed on Jan. 16, 2012).

⁵ Markus Wenninger, "Die Siedlungsgeschichte der innerösterreichischen Juden im Mittelalter und das Problem der 'Juden'-Orte," *Bericht über den 16. österreichischen Historikertag 1984. Veröffentlichungen des Verbandes Österreichischer Geschichtsvereine*, 25 (Vienna: Eigenverlag des Verbandes Österreichischer Geschichtsvereine, 1985), 190–217; here 194–208.

Before the year 1200, the beginning of a Jewish community can be proposed for Vienna⁶; the Jew Schlom, master of the mint⁷ of Duke Leopold V (1157–1194) and mentioned around 1192/1196, is the first Jew living on Austrian territory who is known by name.⁸

In the 1220s, Rabbi Isaak bar Mosche, who counted among the most important Ashkenazic scholars, settled down in Vienna⁹; big-scale Jewish businessmen, like the Hungarian Jew Teka, extended the range of their activities into the Austrian territory; and in the first decades of the thirteenth century the Jewish communities of Wiener Neustadt and Krems, second largest to Vienna, started to prosper.¹⁰ By the late 1230s, the Jewish population in the duchy of Austria had grown to an extent that it warranted the attention of the Austrian duke. Up until then, the definition of the legal and economic position of the German Jewry had been the sole right of the Holy Roman Emperor to whose treasure they belonged, although in many other areas of the Empire the Emperor's prerogative had by then already been reduced to a mere claim in the course of the transition of imperial rights to the regional rulers.

The Austrian Duke Frederic II (1211–1246), already engaged in a power struggle with his imperial namesake in the 1230s, managed to assert his rights to the Jews living in his territories, even though it should take until 1331 that the *Judenregal*, the 'right to the Jews,' was officially given to the (then Habsburg) dukes of Austria.¹¹ Frederic's (as well as his successors') interest in 'his' Jews was primarily economic, and in his ducal privilege of 1244, the first encompassing definition of the legal standing of the Austrian Jews, he granted the Austrian Jewry a series of

⁶ In 1204, the (by then already existing) Viennese synagogue was mentioned for the first time, Brugger and Wiedl, *Regesten 1* (see note 4), 18–19, n. 5.

⁷ Jews as masters of a mint were not uncommon in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; see Toch, *Juden im mittelalterlichen Reich* (see note 3), 7; Markus Wenninger, "Juden als Münzmeister, Zöllpächter und fürstliche Finanzbeamte im mittelalterlichen Aschkenas," *Wirtschaftsgeschichte der mittelalterlichen Juden* (see note 1), 121–38

⁸ Brugger and Wiedl, *Regesten 1* (see note 4), 16–18, ns. 3 and 4. Schlom and his family were killed by crusaders in 1196.

⁹ Avraham (Rami) Reiner, "From Rabbenu Tam To R. Isaac of Vienna: The Hegemony of the French Talmudic School in the Twelfth Century," *The Jews of Europe in the Middle Ages (Tenth to Fifteenth Centuries)*, ed. Christoph Cluse (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 273–83; here 273–76; Martha Keil, "Gemeinde und Kultur – Die mittelalterlichen Grundlagen jüdischen Lebens in Österreich," Eveline Brugger, Martha Keil, Christoph Lind, Albert Lichtblau, and Barbara Staudinger, *Geschichte der Juden in Österreich* (Vienna: Ueberreuter, 2006), 15–122; here 27 and 64.

¹⁰ Eveline Brugger, "Von der Ansiedlung bis zur Vertreibung – Juden in Österreich im Mittelalter," *Geschichte der Juden in Österreich* (see note 9), 123–228; here 127–29.

¹¹ On May 4, 1331, Emperor Ludwig IV confirmed a series of legal titles for the Habsburg dukes Albrecht II and Otto, among these the 'rights to the Jews'; see Brugger and Wiedl, *Regesten 1* (see note 4), 278, n. 338.

