



Summary :

The strong presence of Jews in Byzantine Asia Minor has its roots in earlier periods. The Jewish communities of the region bloomed in the Roman and Early Byzantine period. In Middle Byzantine years, particularly in the 10th-12th c., there were movements of Jews from and towards Asia Minor lands, while their presence in the region is evident until the end of Byzantine rule in Asia Minor, in the 14th century.

Date

4th- 14th c.

Geographical Location

Asia Minor

1. Historical Background

The presence of a [Jewish element in Asia Minor](#), dated from the 6th c. BC, became stronger in the Hellenistic period, as [Antiochus III](#) transferred and settled a considerable number of Jews in Asia Minor cities. The Jewish communities of Asia Minor thrived remarkably during the Roman imperial era (1st-3rd c. AD), when lots of Jews settled in the region and were involved in trade and arts. According to evidence, there were Jews settled in more than 60 cities and towns of Asia Minor, mainly in the western part, while they probably lived in other cities as well, but no evidence has survived. The first preachers of Christianity, [Apostle Paul](#) being the first among them, took action inside those Jewish communities, although the [impact of the new religion](#) became more obvious among the local Greek and Greek-speaking populations. After Christianity had prevailed in the Eastern Roman Empire in the 4th century, the Jews of Asia Minor were first opposed to a central authority which was ill-disposed towards them due to religious differences.

2. The Early Byzantine Period

2.1. General Outline

The available evidence about the Jewish communities of Asia Minor in the Early Byzantine period (4th-7th century) reveals an unbroken continuity from the Late Roman period (3rd-4th centuries). The Jews are settled mainly in the cities of the western and the central part of Asia Minor as traders and craftsmen. They have absorbed a large part of the Greek culture, as they speak Greek and some of them, mainly women, have Greek names. At the same time, some pagans were fascinated by the Jewish religion already from the Roman period, as the Gospels and the inscriptions of [Aphrodisias](#) attest.¹ As it happened in other regions of the Byzantine Empire, the Jews of Asia Minor live in separate quarters in the cities² and their leaders are their Rabbis, who represent the community and have judicial responsibilities. The communities are supported by their members' contributions, while they also contribute economically to their coreligionists in Palestine, seat of the supreme religious authority of the Jews of the empire.³ As for the relations between Christians and Jews in Asia Minor in the early Byzantine period, they cannot be described as friendly; however, there were no persecutions against them until the years of [Justinian I](#).

The greatest part and the most important of information about Asia Minor Jewish communities in the Early Byzantine period comes mainly from epigraphic evidence. The latter, as well as literary and archaeological sources, help to reconstruct Jewish life in some cities of the Early Byzantine Asia Minor.

2.2. The Jews in the Cities of the Early Byzantine Asia Minor



In [Sardis](#), where the presence of Jews dates from the 6th century BC, approximately 150 inscriptions, both Roman and Early Byzantine, have survived, containing information about the Jews inhabitants of the city. At the same time, archaeological excavations have brought to light the ruins of the synagogue dated to the 3rd century. According to a preserved inscription of the 4th c., the Jewish community of Sardis had a school annexed to the synagogue directed by a priest and «wise master». The synagogue of Sardis was destroyed in 616, when the city was captured by the Persians. Nothing is known about the subsequent fate of the local Jewish community.

The Jewish community of [Side](#) is mentioned in local inscriptions, probably dating from the 5th century. At the head of the Jewish community was the «archon» (Byzantine title probably meaning the rabbi), while the presence of a [zygostates](#) paid by the community shows the range of its commercial activity. The synagogue of Side was similar to those of Sardis and the early Christian [basilicas](#) of the time. A community official called [kourator](#) was, according to the inscriptions, responsible for the maintenance of the building. We know from 5th-century inscriptions that a [kourator](#) named Isaac completed the marble decoration of the synagogue from the ambo to the apse and restored two menorahs and two capitals. Another [kourator](#), Leontios, son of Jacob, who had been a [zygostates](#), built an atrium with a phialae at the entrance of the synagogue.

Another Jewish community with a long-term tradition was in [Ephesus](#). The city's synagogue has not been preserved, but is mentioned in a Christian inscription of the Early Byzantine period. At the same time, lamps with Jewish symbols dating to the 4th-6th century have been found in Ephesus.

2.3. Persecutions in the years of Justinian I

Some of the lamps of Ephesus were discovered in places linked to Christian cult and this has been used as an argument to show that the two communities in the Early Byzantine period coexisted peacefully. However, the relations between the Jews of Asia Minor and the Byzantine state were not always harmonious. As part of Justinian's religious policy (who had taken measures against the Jews in Palestine as well), [John of Ephesus](#) launched a persecution mainly against the pagans, but also the Jews of Asia Minor in 542, particularly in the provinces of [Asia](#), [Caria](#), [Phrygia](#) and [Lydia](#). Although the hierarch's fury was turned mainly against the pagans, he was also proud for having turned at least seven synagogues of the area into Christian churches. It is not known whether, along with these actions, he obliged the Jews to convert. But his activity certainly did not interrupt the historical continuity of the Asia Minor Jewish communities.

3. Middle Byzantine Period

3.1. From the 7th to the 9th century

The piecemeal information of the sources does not allow us to form a complete picture of the extent of the Jewish presence in Asia Minor in the Middle Byzantine period, although a large number of Jewish communities must certainly have survived. There is information that already in 608-610 there were persecutions against the Jews in the Middle East, which must have been spread to Asia Minor as well, thus confirming the strong presence of Jews in the area in the 7th century.

As in the previous period, most of the Jewish communities were settled in the cities of the western part of Asia Minor, with the exception of a testimony dating to about 680, according to which there were Jews settled in [Cappadocia](#) at the time; some of them had become Christians, while others moved in Damascus of Syria. It is not known whether they were in Damascus for commercial reasons or in order to avoid a persecution probably being the last in the series of measures taken in the period 608-610.

The concentration of Jewish communities in the western part of Asia Minor is also evident in the following centuries, with the exception of the case of [Neokaisareia](#) (8th century) and Sozopetra (9th century). A large number of Jewish communities existed in Phrygia and neighbouring districts. The sources lay emphasis on the Jewish community of [Amorion](#), which maintained close relations, though not always friendly, with the Greek-speaking Christians of the city. Shortly before the [capture of Amorion](#), violent conflicts



took place, according to the sources, between the two communities, while a heresy influenced by Jewish teachings and customs is also mentioned. The subsequent [Emperor Michael II](#), well-disposed towards the Jews of the area, was allegedly a member of that heresy. Another important Jewish community was that of [Synada](#), which evidently had its own school.⁴ Finally, it is certain that in the same period a Jewish community involved in commercial activity existed in [Nicaea](#).

3.2. Persecutions in the years of Basil I and Romanos I

As mentioned above, voluntary conversion of Jews to Christianity occurred occasionally; compulsory conversions were, on the other hand, rare. However, the attitude of the state towards the Jews was not always tolerant. This was the case with the persecution launched by Emperor [Basil I](#) about 874, as part of his policy against pagans and heretics of the empire. It should be mentioned that this particular persecution and the compulsory conversion of all Jews were bitterly criticised by Gregory Asbestas, the then [metropolitan of Nicaea](#). Although we lack evidence about Asia Minor, we should assume, judging from what we know about the Jews of Byzantine Italy, that the conversion to Christianity was superficial and the «converts» quickly returned to Judaism when Leo VI (886-912) abolished his father's decree.

The Jewish communities of Asia Minor also faced difficulties during [Romanos I's](#) persecution, about 943. Lots of Jews had to leave Asia Minor and seek refuge in the land of the [Khazars](#). The persecution was stopped when Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (944-959) ascended the throne.

3.3. New Jewish Settlements (10th-11th c.)

An important development in the history of Asia Minor Jewish communities took place in the last quarter of the 10th century. Until then almost all Asia Minor Jews were in all probability descendants of those settled in the same region in the Hellenistic and Roman period. But at late 10th century, after [Cilicia](#) and N. Syria had been recaptured by the Byzantines, lots of Jews migrated from Syria to Asia Minor for economic reasons. Later on, in the early 11th century, a new flow of immigrants arrived in the Byzantine territories, consisting of Jews who were trying to escape from the persecution launched against them by [Caliph al-Hakam](#), the leader of the Fatimids, who had occupied Egypt, Palestine and Syria.

Apart from the increase in the Jewish population of Asia Minor, migration had also another effect: it was the first time that the Jews living in Byzantine territory were divided into two doctrines; the older communities were [Rabbanites](#), while a part of the new settlers were [Karaites](#). Lots of the latter settled in Asia Minor permanently; others only temporarily, on their way to [Constantinople](#) or other Byzantine lands. Although the Byzantines must not have been distinguishing between the two Jewish doctrines, they allowed the Rabbanites and the Karaites to live in different quarters of the cities.

The information about Jews settlements in Asia Minor in the 11th and the 12th century mainly comes from eastern sources.⁵ The picture they form does not differ from that of previous periods. The new settlers were rapidly culturally assimilated by the society of Byzantine Asia Minor. A document of 1022 mentions Jews (probably third generation immigrants) settled at Mastaura of [Lycia](#); some of them had Greek names. The mention of private houses confirm the fact that in Byzantium, unlike other medieval countries, Jews were not forbidden to own real estate. Other documents provide information about Jewish communities at coastal cities, where the presence of the Jewish element starts to become stronger. The Jewish community of Ephesus reappeared in the early 11th-c. sources, probably due to its excellent relations with the Christians of the area, as lots of its members used to visit [Hosios Lazaros](#) on [Mount Galesion](#). Four Rabbaite and three Karaite traders from [Attaleia](#) were captured by Arab pirates in 1028, while the same happened to five young Jews from Strobilos about 1034.

3.4. The 12th Century

Individual settlements of Jews from Syria and Egypt are also attested in the area in the following decades, but the disorder caused in Asia Minor by the defeat at [Mantzikert](#) (1071) and the [settlement of Seljuks](#) in the region often led to reverse the course and, as a



result, lots of Jews abandoned their houses in Asia Minor and sought refuge in other regions of the empire or in Egypt. A typical example is the case of a Jewish scholar from Cairo who, in the late 1060s, migrated to Byzantine Asia Minor via Palestine and abandoned the area after 1071, ending up settling at Thessaloniki. A number of Jewish documents from Egypt dated to the second half of the 11th and the first half of the 12th century mention several Jewish refugees from Byzantine territories, mainly craftsmen. Some of them are expressly said to have arrived from Asia Minor, while others, whose origin is not mentioned, have probably had come also from the same region.

In the 12th century, social and economic stability can be attested in coastal Asia Minor, partly due to the boost in the [trade](#) with Egypt and the Crusader kingdoms of the East. At that time, the Jewish communities of coastal Asia Minor cities were thriving. There was a Jewish doctor from Egypt settled in [Seleukeia](#) circa 1125, where a Jewish community already existed. He built his house there and practised medicine along with trade. In a letter he wrote in July 1137, the doctor was very optimistic about professional prospects in Asia Minor and invited his relatives to migrate either to Seleukeia or to Constantinople. The Jewish communities of Attaleia (where conversions of Jews are attested in that period) and Strobilos are also mentioned in 12th-c. Byzantine sources (years 1148 and 1153 respectively), while about 1150 the Jewish community of [Chonai](#), Phrygia, was the local metropolitan's target. There are reports about Jews (possibly Karaites) in [Trebizond](#) in the 1180s; taking into account the increased commercial activity in the city, it seems unlikely that there had been no Jewish communities in the area.

4. Late Byzantine Period

4.1. The 13th Century

As above, there is piecemeal evidence about the presence of Jews in Byzantine cities of Asia Minor in the late Byzantine period, thus making the researchers resort to evidence from previous or subsequent periods. Three Jewish sepulchral steles were found in Nicaea, probably dating to the late 12th or the 13th century. In [Gangra](#), [Paphlagonia](#), in a region temporarily under the [state of Nicaea](#), a mixed Jewish community of Rabbanites and Karaites was living in 1207. The community possibly preexisted the 13th century. The theory that the tanneries were exclusively in the hands of Jews has led some researchers to assume that, in the 13th century, a Jewish community must have existed in [Philadelphia](#) – a significant centre for leather processing. For the same reason it is possible that Jews must have continued to live in Trebizond in the 13th century, where they are known to have been living towards the late 12th century.

After 1204, the Jews inhabiting the cities of the western part of Asia Minor came under the Laskarides of Nicaea. The way the central administration dealt with them until the mid-13th century is not known, but in 1254 Emperor [John III Vatatzes](#) persecuted the Jews living in his territory and compelled them to adopt Christianity. The reasons that led the dying emperor to this action are not mentioned, but his policy was continued until 1259, when the usurper of the throne, [Michael Palaiologos](#), retracted the decree and guaranteed the security of the leaders of Asia Minor communities.

4.2. The Last Jewish Communities of Byzantine Asia Minor

There is no information about the Jewish communities of Asia Minor in the 14th century, the last years of Byzantine rule, but the researchers assume that the communities mentioned in early Ottoman sources had preexisted the Turkish occupation. According to Ottoman and Arabic sources, in the 14th-15th century there were Jews settled in [Nikomedia](#), Antalya, [Smyrna](#), Laodicea, [Sinop](#), Aydin, [Prousa](#), and Palatia (near [Miletus](#)). In particular, it is reported that in Nikomideia in 1339 there was a Jewish community including both Rabbanites and Karaites. Because the evidence dates two years after the fall of the city to the Ottomans, the researchers assume that there had already been Jews in those cities.⁶ Unlike previous periods, when the Jews settled mainly in cities along the trade [routes](#) of mainland western Asia Minor, most 14th-c. Jewish communities moved towards the coast, since the commercial activity of the region was carried out there.



1. Reynolds, J. - Tannenbaum, R., *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias* (Cambridge Philological Society Supplement 12, Cambridge 1987).
2. This is a common practice through the centuries for Jewish communities of Asia Minor: in the 14th century, the Arab traveller Ibn Battuta reports the existence of a separate Jewish quarter in the city of Attaleia.
3. In 429, Emperor Theodosios II, after the abolishment of the supreme religious authority of the Jews, ordered that they make the respective economic contribution to the state. Part of the contributions from Jewish communities went to the imperial treasury one way or another, although contemporary researchers do not agree as to whether there was a special tax the Jewish inhabitants of the empire had to pay. Starr, J., *The Jews in the Byzantine Empire 641-1204* (Athens 1939), and Bowman, S. B., *The Jews of Byzantium 1204-1453* (Alabama 1985), do not consider such a tax possible, unlike Sharf, A., *Jews and other Minorities in Byzantium* (Jerusalem 1995), 106-107.
4. The 9th-c. saint Constantine the Younger, who converted to Christianity, came from the Jewish community of Synada. His *Vita* provides information about the Jewish communities of Synada and Nicaea in the 9th century.
5. Jacoby, D., "What do we Learn about Byzantine Asia Minor from the Documents of the Cairo Genizah?", in Λαμπάκης, Σ. (ed.), *Η Βυζαντινή Μικρά Ασία (6ος - 12ος αι.)* (Διεθνή Συμπόσια 6, Athens 1998) pp. 83-95.
6. Nikomideia was the birthplace of Aaron, Elias' son, (Aaron ben Elijah), who was an eminent Karaite scholar, philosopher and annotator of biblical texts in the first half of the 14th century.

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	The Ancient Synagogue of Sardis http://www.bh.org.il/Communities/Synagogue/Sardis.asp

Glossary :

	basilica In ancient Roman architecture a large oblong type building used as hall of justice and public meeting place. The roman basilica served as a model for early Christian churches.
	caliph The supreme religious and political authority of Muslims, considered successor of Muhammad (Arabic: khalifa = deputy). He was the head of the Caliphate, the religious state of the Arabs.
	Karaites Judaic doctrine; it emerged in the 8th century in Mesopotamia and it denied Talmud and rabbinical teachings.
	kourator (lat. <i>curator</i>) A functionary of the Byzantine state administration or a city magistrate, he was manager of public or private foundations as well as of imperial estates.
	Rabbinical Judaism (Rabbanites) Jewish theological trend that continues the Pharisaic tradition. Rabbanites believe in the interpretation of the Torah based on the rabbinic oral tradition as preserved in the two components of Talmoud.
	zygostates The public weigher, a minor official responsible for checking the quality of coins. During the Early Byzantine period the zygostates were urban functionaries, while from the 7th century on they were considered state officials.



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Bekker I. (ed.), *Theophanes continuatus* (Bonn 1838), 42.8-17, 48.15-19.

Lesmueller-Werner A. – Thurn I. (ed.), *Iosephi Genesisii Regum Libri Quattuor*. Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae 14 (Berlin-New York 1978), 45.67 - 46.72.

Quotations

The impact of the religion of the Jewish community of Amorion on other communities, according to a Byzantine chronographer:

ἤνεγκε μὲν οὖν αὐτὸν ἢ κατὰ τὴν ἄνω Φρυγίαν πόλις Ἀμόριον οὕτω καλουμένη, ἐν ἣ καὶ Ἰουδαίων καὶ τινῶν Ἀθιγγάνων πλῆθος αἰεὶ πῶς ἐγκατοικίζεται· καὶ τις δὲ αἴρεσις ἐκ τῆς ἀλλήλων κοινωνίας καὶ διηνεκοῦς ὀμιλίας καινὸν ἔχουσα τρόπον καὶ δόγματα ἐπιφύεται, ἧς καὶ αὐτὸς μετέσχεν ἐκ πατέρων διαδεξάμενος· αὕτη δὲ τοῦ μὲν θεοῦ λουτροῦ ὡς σωτηριώδους ὄντος καὶ παρ' αὐτοῦ διωμολογημένου τοὺς τελουμένους μεταλαγχάνειν ἀνίησι, τᾶλλα δὲ πάντα σώζει φυλάττουσα κατὰ νόμον τὸν Μωσαϊκόν, πλὴν τῆς περιτομῆς.

Bekker I. (ed.), *Theophanes continuatus* (Bonn 1838) pp. 42.8-17

The unknown continuer of Theophanes' chronography talks about the favourable attitude of Emperor Michael II towards the Jews of Asia Minor:

ὅσῳ δὲ τὴν Χριστοῦ κληρονομίαν ἐπίεξε καὶ οἶόν τις θῆρ ἄγριος κατενέμετο, τοσοῦτῳ τοὺς Ἰουδαίους ἀνέτους φόρων καὶ ἐλευθέρους ἐδείκνυεν, ἀγαπωμένους καὶ στεργομένους αὐτῶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀνθρώπων διαφερόντως.

Bekker I. (ed.), *Theophanes continuatus* (Bonn 1838) pp. 48.15-19

The Byzantine historian Genesisios refers to the conflict between Christians and Jews in the city of Amorion shortly before its fall in August 838:

εἶχεν μὲν οὖν, εἶχεν αὕτη κἂν δυστυχῶς ὑπερμαχοῦντας ἐντὸς τοῦ ἐκ βασιλέως σταλέντας, περιφανεῖς φρονήσει τε καὶ ἀνδρεία καὶ πολυπειρία διηγουμένους, κἂν δι' ἐνός τῶν κακούργων τῆς ὑπερμαχίας διέσφαλτο, τὴν προδοσίαν ἐπισκευάσαντος, ᾧ βῶδος ὑποκοριζόντως ὄνομα κατ' ἀλογιστίαν προσεκέκλητο, ἔκ τινος τῆνικαῦτα στασιώτιδος ἀνὰ μέσον Χριστιανῶν τε καὶ Ἰουδαίων συμβεβηκυίας προφάσεως.

Lesmueller-Werner, A. – Thurn, I. (ed.), *Iosephi Genesisii Regum Libri Quattuor* (Berlin – New York 1978) pp. 45.67 - 46.72

Emperor Basil I Macedon's persecution against the Jews of the empire:

Εἰδὼς δὲ ὅτι ἐπ' οὐδενὶ τοσοῦτον ὅσον ἐπὶ σωτηρία ψυχῶν ὁ θεὸς ἐπευφραίνεται, καὶ ὅτι ὁ ἐξάγων ἄξιον ἐξ ἀναξίου ὡς στόμα χρηματίζει Χριστοῦ, οὐδὲ περὶ τὸ ἀποστολικὸν τοῦτο ἔργον ἀμελῆς ἐφάνη καὶ ῥάθυμος, ἀλλὰ πρόωτον μὲν τὸ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἔθνος ἀπερίτμητόν τε καὶ σκληροκάρδιον, τὸ ὅσον ἐπ' αὐτῶ, εἰς τὴν ὑποταγὴν σαγηνεύει Χριστοῦ· κελύσας γὰρ αὐτοὺς τῆς οἰκείας θρησκείας τὰς ἀποδείξεις κομίζοντας εἰς διαλέξεις χωρεῖν καὶ ἢ δεικνύναι τὰ κατ' αὐτοὺς ἰσχυρὰ τε καὶ ἀναντίρρητα, ἢ πειθομένους ὅτι κεφάλαιον τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν ὁ Χριστὸς ἦν καὶ ὅτι σκιᾶς τύπον εἶχεν ὁ νόμος, ἢ τῆ ἐπιλάμψει τοῦ ἡλιακοῦ φωτός διασκεδάζεται, καὶ προσέρχεται τῇ τοῦ κυρίου διδασκαλίᾳ καὶ βαπτίζεσθαι, προσθεῖς δὲ καὶ ἀξιομάτων τοῖς προσερχομένοις διανομὰς καὶ τοῦ βάρους τῶν προτέρων ἀπαλλάξας φόρων καὶ ἐπιτίμους ἐξ ἀτίμων ποιεῖν κατεπαγγειλάμενος, πολλοὺς τοῦ ἐπικειμένου καλύμματος τῆς παρώσεως ἠλευθέρωσε καὶ πρὸς πίστιν εἴλκυσε τοῦ Χριστοῦ, εἰ καὶ πάλιν οἱ πλείους μετὰ τὴν ἐκ τοῦ βίου τοῦ βασιλέως ἐπαναχώρησιν πρὸς τὸν οἰκείον ὡς κύνες ὑπέστρεψαν ἐμετόν.

Bekker I. (ed.), *Theophanes continuatus* (Bonn 1838) pp. 341.8 - 342.3