

The Jews of Greece: A Chronology

DAN GEORGAKAS¹

**Classical Greece
(315 BCE-300 CE)**

The first certain Jewish presence on the Greek mainland dates to the establishment of the city of Thessaloniki in 315 BCE by Kassandros, the brother-in-law of Alexander the Great. Wishing to establish the new city as a center for maritime trade, he invited Jews to settle in the city due to their growing expertise and commercial connections throughout the Mediterranean. The first named Jew in Greek history is Moschos, son of Moschiaion, whose name appears on a funeral marker dating from 300 BCE to 250 BCE found in Oropos, a town between Athens and Boetia. On Delos, a holy island for pagan Greece, a Jewish synagogue and a Samaritan synagogue date from the first century BCE.² By that time there were Greek-speaking Jewish communities in Thessaloniki, Verroia, Corinth, Patras, Hania, Athens, and Rhodes. Other communities were found along the shores of the Mediterranean and along inland trade routes. Altogether there were several hundred Greek-speaking Jews in the Greco-Roman world. As the New Testament attests, Paul spoke at synagogues in Thessaloniki, Athens, Corinth, Verroia, Salamis (Cyprus), Ephesus, and other Greek cities.³ Funeral steles dating to the first century CE are found in the Athens agora, and by the middle of the 2nd century CE Jewish settlements proliferated in the Aegean islands

and the Greek mainland. Strabo, among others, comments on the large number of Jews in Epirus. During the Byzantine Empire these Hellenized Jews were termed *Romanioi* to distinguish their distinctive culture from that of other Jewish communities.⁴ The Jewish communities in Greece are the oldest in Europe.

Jews in Hellenistic Egypt and Palestine (320 BCE – 300 CE)

In 320, Ptolemy Lagi, one of Alexander's generals ruled Egypt and Palestine. Egyptian Hellenistic culture was so seductive that many Jews become secularized and the Hebrew language suffered. At the behest of Ptolemy II (284-264 BCE), seventy Jewish scholars were asked to translate the Torah into Greek. This Septuagint (Book of the Seventy) is the first time the Torah was translated from Hebrew into another language and it was destined to play an important role in the early Christian era. The translation was prompted by Greek interest in Jewish thought and by Jewish interest in having the Torah in a language Egyptian Jews could read. In the 170s, Artostobulus became the first Jew known to become a Greek philosopher. He was part of a group investigating the relationship between Greek wisdom and Jewish faith. Numerous Egyptian Jews would follow in his wake.⁵

In 312 BCE, Seleucus, another of Alexander's generals, took possession of Mesopotamia and Syria. The Seleucids battled constantly with the Ptolemys for control of Palestine, often employing Jewish troops. In 198, the Seleucids won control of the area. The Seleucids soon fell out with their erstwhile Jewish allies, fearful that the invisible and omnipresent god of the Jews was a *de facto* threat to Seleucid sovereignty. Circumcision was outlawed, a shrine to Zeus was built on the altar of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, and Judaism was vigorously prosecuted. In 196, the Jews

rebelled in what is known as the Maccabean Revolt and succeeded in establishing a Jewish state in 142. From this time onward, the Jewish state was independent (except for 134-129), but it paid tribute to the Seleucids until the Romans occupied Jerusalem in 63 BCE.

During the first century BCE the Jewish communities in Athens, Corinth, Thessaloniki, Sparta, Crete, Rhodes, and Delos came under Roman rule. Jews generally shared the fate of others in a particular site. Thus, Jews were among the general slaughter of 20,000 inhabitants when Delos fell to the Romans in 88 BCE. Elsewhere, Jewish forces allied with the Romans. The destruction of the Temple in 70 CE dispersed Jews throughout the Roman world, particularly in regions with a strong Greek dimension. Thousands of Jews were taken to the Corinth area to work as slaves.

Byzantine Greece (330 – 1453 CE)

Greek-speaking Jews retained full rights as citizens of the Byzantine Empire throughout its long history. The civil law of the Byzantines was the old imperial code of Rome. This allowed women full rights and guaranteed numerous civil privileges that were more like modern counterparts than practices in Medieval Europe, Islamic domains, or among Slavic invaders. Jews generally prospered during the Byzantine millennium, but the record is mixed. Treatment of Jews was often best in the provinces where aggressive emperors had less influence and local customs prevailed. The Greek Orthodox Church refused to accept forced conversions.

Justinian (483-565) forced the reading of scriptures in Greek, preferably the Septuagint but the most oppressive Byzantine ruler was Basil (867-886) who tried to convert the Jews. On his death, his son, Leon VI (886-912) annulled his father's decrees and reasserted the older laws which per-

mitted Jews to live according to their own customs. Another forced conversion attempt by Romanos I Lekapenos (919-944) caused large-scale emigration. Revival of Greek power by Alexius Comennus (1081-1118) set off Messianic fervor among Romaniote Jews of Thessaloniki. Alexius exempted Jews from taxes and encouraged them to leave for Palestine, which was not under his rule. In the final centuries of the Byzantine Empire, Jews again prospered. An informal census of Byzantine Jews was made by Benjamin of Tudela (Toledo), a gem merchant who traveled throughout the Mediterranean in 1167-1172. He recorded that there were some nine thousand Jews living in 27 different Greek cities. For Cyprus he gave no number and for Lesbos he noted ten sites but gave no numbers.

A distinctive cultural trait of the Byzantine Jews was that they wrote Greek with Hebrew letters. Many names became Hellenized. *Piyyutim*, special hymns written in Greek with Hebrew letters, were added to the liturgy. *Stephanometa*, marriage wreaths that go on the head of bride and groom in the same manner as in Christian rites, became part of the marriage ceremony. Romanos, the most influential of the Byzantine hymn writers, was probably Jewish. He composed a thousand hymns, each written on a parchment around a stick in the manner that Torah scrolls are presented.

A non-Greek element in Byzantine affairs were the Catholic knights who set up strongholds on the Greek mainland and some islands. The Venetian enclaves were prosperous, but the Venetians introduced the ghetto. These crusader domains were often run haphazardly and increasingly became anti-Semitic as the knights adopted the anti-Semitic posture of their homeland leaders in Spain, Portugal, and Italy. In this issue, Katerina Lagos writes how Jews on Rhodes morphed from opponents of the Ottomans to allies due to their persecution by the Catholic knights.

Ottoman Period (1453 – 1821)

The Ottoman Empire was ruled under the millet system in which individual ethnic groups had considerable cultural autonomy. Christians and Jews were considered “people of the book” and were allowed to run their internal affairs as long as they paid their taxes and did not offer military resistance. Sultan Mehmet II transplanted 6,000 Romaniotes who had been living in Asia Minor for more than a millennium from their outlying communities to the capital. Romaniotes also maintained communities in various parts of the mainland, the largest being in Ioannina (sometimes spelled Jannina or Yannina) and the area of Epirus. As Andrew Schoenfeld indicates in an essay in this journal, Romaniotes were considered to be Greeks and so treated.

The most momentous actions regarding Jews came in the 1490s when the Inquisition took hold in various Catholic states in the Mediterranean, most notably Spain. Seeing the Spanish persecutions as political folly, the Sultan invited Sephardic Jews to emigrate to his domains, where maltreatment of Jews was made a crime. The Sultan shrewdly settled many of his new Sephardic subjects in areas recently gained from the Greeks. The most important of these was the settlement of 20,000 Sephardic Jews in Thessaloniki. The newcomers maintained Ladino as their daily language and created synagogues based on their particular region of origin. Tensions arose between the Sephardic and Romaniote Jews. The Sephardics questioned the very Jewishness of the Romaniotes. Numerous decades would be required to create an accord between the two groups. Andrew Schoenfeld argues in these pages that the general ascendancy of Sephardic culture over Romaniote culture was abetted by the Ottomans.

Thessaloniki, now more often called Salonica, became a bastion of Sephardic culture and over the centuries became known as the Mother of Israel. Jews were the largest single

community in the city for most of the Ottoman period. In the late eighteenth century, there was a messianic movement led by Shabetai Zevi. Among his teachings was the desirability of culturally retaking Jerusalem. This offended the Sultan who gave Shabetai Zevi the choice of death or conversion to Islam. The false prophet converted and thousands of his supporters followed his example. These converts were known as *donme* and were prominent in the development of what eventually became the modern Turkish state. The vast majority of Jews, however, retained their faith and in Thessaloniki the synagogues remained tied to their Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian roots. Thus at the dawn of the Greek war of Independence, the numerically largest component of Jews in what is now Greece were Sephardic, whose cultural center was Thessaloniki. The smaller Romaniote community was largely clustered in the region of Epirus. Some Ashkenazi were in Constantinople and there were also Karaites who had entered the region in the Byzantine era.

The Modern Greek State (1821-present)

During the war of independence which began in 1821, Jews were faced with a choice of supporting the nationalist Greek rebels or the Ottoman state that had protected them for centuries. As noted in the essay herein by Andrew Schoenfeld, there was a general but not absolute division between the Romaniote and Sephardic Jews regarding the Greek struggle for independence. The former mostly supported the revolution while the latter mostly remained loyal to the established state that had always sheltered them and treated them honorably. In the bitter fighting that marked the conflict, the fate of any given Jewish community depended on whether they had fought on the winning or losing side. The Sephardic communities in the Peloponnese who sided with the Turks were wiped out in the lethal conflict.

The Convention of London in 1832 declared Greece to be a "monarchical and independent state" under British, Russian, and French guarantee. As early as 1830, the Greek revolutionary government formally guaranteed the rights of the Jewish community in what was to be a predominantly Christian state. Otto, a Bavarian prince was imposed by the European powers as the monarch of the Greeks. A number of Ashkenazi Jews arrived in the entourage of King Otto. Among the Ashkenazi leadership was Max De Rothschild. He had a certain amount of influence in the court, setting up the dynamic in which the official Jewish community for the next hundred years was usually supportive of the monarchy. By 1883 the Jewish community in Athens numbered 250 persons. In 1890, Charles de Rothschild became president of a community organization recognized by Greek law. As the boundaries of the state increased—the Ionian islands were ceded to Greece by 1864 and parts of Thessaly and Epirus in 1881—the Jewish population of Greece grew to roughly 10,000. The impoverished Greek economy stimulated a massive migration at the turn of the century. Numerous Jews were part of this phenomenon, but unlike the emigration from Eastern Europe and Russia, religious persecution was not a factor. Numerous Romaniotes from Epirus settled in New York and in 1927, they established the Kehila Kedosha Janina synagogue on the Lower East Side. That synagogue is now the only one outside Greece and Israel that provides services in the Romaniote tradition. Marcia Haddad Ikononopoulos writes about that remarkable community in this issue.

The Balkan Wars of 1912-13 added Epirus and parts of traditional Macedonia to the Greek state. By far the biggest prize was Thessaloniki and environs, an area that included more than 65,000 Jews in its population of 158,000.⁶ Most of Thessaloniki's Jews had remained loyal to the Ottomans and there even had been an attempt to have Thessaloniki declared a Jewish free city. The situation for Jews was wors-

ened by the Great Fire of 1917 which destroyed a large part of the center of the city where Jewish enterprises and homes were concentrated. The political position of Thessaloniki Jews was further severely affected by events in Asia Minor. The Smyrna Disaster of 1922 led to an exchange of populations in which 1,500,000 Greeks left Asia Minor and 500,000 Turks left Greece. A large proportion of the disposed Greeks were relocated to Thessaloniki and other northern cities. Tensions between the refugees and Jews arose and an anti-Semitic organization of some 3,000 came into existence. This force was balanced by a dynamic leftist-oriented trade union movement that successfully prioritized class unity over ethnic and religious differences. In 1936, General Metaxas established a dictatorship in Greece. As Katerina Lagos explains in this issue, Metaxas, although a militarist, was not an anti-Semite. He repressed the anti-Semite organizations in the same manner he repressed leftists. Nonetheless, perhaps in reaction to his taking of power, thousands of left-leaning Jewish dockworkers in Thessaloniki migrated to Palestine in the mid-1930s. As of 1940, if one includes populations in the Dodecanese still under Italian rule, there were approximately 78,500 Greek Jews with about 60,000 in the metropolitan area of Thessaloniki.

Some 13,000 Jews fought in the Greek army that repulsed the invasion by Mussolini in 1940. One of the heroes of the campaign was Mordecai Frizis. Later, during the years of the German/Italian/Bulgarian occupation (1941-44) many Greek Jews participated in the Greek Resistance, mainly formed by the left-wing forces of EAM-ELAS. The highest-ranking Greek Orthodox prelates also were very supportive of the Jewish communities that faced the threat of Nazi prosecution. Despite these efforts, the loss of Jewish life was horrendous. The fate of any specific community often depended on the attitude taken by the local leadership toward the occupying forces. Those communities that thought some

deal was possible or that they were going to be repatriated to some location in Eastern Europe had a very high loss rate and these were by far the largest communities. In those regions where going into hiding became the major strategy, losses were relatively light. Overall, however, the vast majority of Greek Jews were wiped out during the Holocaust. Out of the 78,500 Greek Jews of 1940, 67,000 were murdered by the Nazis, most perishing in concentration camps or while being gathered or transported to the camps. Steve Bowman and Andre Gerolymatos write about the resistance period in this issue.

After WWII, the total Jewish population of Greece was estimated to be approximately ten thousand. About 80% of these survivors were those who had taken refuge in the mountains or had been hidden by other Greeks. The Greek state, soon after liberation, became the first European state to pass legislation for the restitution of Jewish property. In the concluding decades of the twentieth century, approximately half the Jewish population immigrated to Israel or other nations. Aspects of the history of this Jewish community in Greece during this period are illuminated in the essay by Nicholas Stavroulakis in the context of his efforts to establish the Jewish Museum in Athens.

Among those who remained in Greece, the distinction between those of Sephardic or Romaniote heritage became less important. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, approximately 4,000 Jews lived in Athens, nearly another thousand in Thessaloniki, and smaller communities in another dozen cities. Since 2004, the Greek state has designated January 27th as a date to nationally commemorate the Jewish Holocaust. In New York, on that date, the Greek Consulate, along with various Greek associations, commemorate the Jewish Holocaust in Greece in a ceremony where, among others, Archbishop Demetrios, the Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church of America, delivers a moving address.

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NOTES

¹ This time line was originated by Dan Georgakas for a class titled Jews, Greece, and History that was taught several times at New York University. For the purposes of this issue, the time line has been revised with the assistance of Nicholas Alexiou, Andre Gerolymatos, Marcia Haddad Ikononopoulos, Chris Ioannides, and Barbara Saltz.

² Nicholas P. Stavroulakis and Timothy J. DeVinney, *Jewish Sites and Synagogues of Greece*, Athens: Talos Press, 1992, page 68-74.

³ Excellent historical notes for this period can be found in Chamberlin, Roy, Feldman, Herman, et. al. *The Dartmouth Bible: An abridgment of the King James Version, with aids to its understanding as history and literature, and as a source of religious experience*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950.

⁴ Estimates on when the terminology began vary from the 4th to the 11th Century CE. See Steven Bowman, *Jews of Byzantium*, New York: Block Publishing, 1985.

⁵ An authoritative account of Jews during the Hellenistic and early Christian era can be found in Elias J. Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, published in cooperation with the Jewish Theological Seminar of America.

⁶ The population numbers given here are consolidated from a number of sources. Throughout the essays in this journal, the attentive reader will see slightly different numbers for the same years. Given that there is no definitive source, we have allowed each author to use the numbers that he or she consider most accurate. Steven Bowman notes in his essay that detailed work on population numbers is a priority for contemporary scholars.